

A BOAT IN THE DESERT

A Novel by

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It wasn't a river. When the arroyo ran, the knee-deep, brown sludge looked more like a kitchen accident. It appeared unpredictably, like a "lost uncle's" sporadic visits—a week late for a birthday, early for Christmas or unannounced for Thanksgiving dinner. The rains could fall unseen, twenty miles from where one stood in the blazing sun and the flow of muddied water would arrive.

Ray Siena interrupted his carving of the tiny bowsprit when he heard the sound. He was nearly finished with the boat and hated putting down the knife. The signal that the arroyo had begun to run was an unmistakable mix of gravel and thunder. When it reached him, inside the house atop the mesa, it seemed wrapped in flannel. High above the canyon floor the sound didn't match the picture he carried of the tumultuous arroyo seen close up. Despite its uniqueness, he had difficulty believing it. The unmistakable was turned to doubt and he turned back to his work. Fair warnings he seldom heeded, even when he anticipated that something extraordinary or beautiful was coming his way.

Ray was at the kitchen table, carving the miniature boat from someone's illustration of the Argo. The bowsprit was his own addition and made up for the problem of not being able to tell the chunky bow from the blocky stern. This, the third boat he had made, demanded more of his skill than the earlier ones. The first, a childish raft of plank wood with a pointed bow and a cube glued on for the cabin, he planned to launch the next time the arroyo ran. It was all pretty stupid, these boats in this high desert, but he had taken up this carving thing as a way of passing time. His paintings, the "real work," had ceased to bear up to the rawness of the nights and too-long days. He smiled at the numb pleasure, the relief from his recent life that this whittling had given him. If he was lying at anchor in this skeletal landscape, the carving was made to order.

After a hesitant attempt to regain his focus on the bowsprit, he put down the knife. He rose and went up the adobe kitchen steps. Once outside, the character of the

sound righted itself some. Ray stood beneath the portal to listen. He thought it such an odd game to play, this not believing thing, knowing how it would be played and how inevitably it would end. And here he was replaying the little arroyo scenario like “a broken record,” as his mother always said.

“Doubting Thomas,” he said aloud as he lit a Delicado and strolled from under the portal to the edge of the mesa. The tobacco rush from the sweet smelling Mex cigarette made him dizzy. The roar of the arroyo and vastness of the space surrounded him. Layers of fat sound fleshed the roar and jarred with the sullied grace of the brown ribbon of mud and water unfurling through the valley. Looking to the south, where the confines of the canyon gave way to a broader valley, he saw a pick up truck stranded midway in the arroyo. He reassessed the picture of a benign and lazy creature taking shape in his mind.

“Another fool, fucking with Mother Nature.” He liked the sound of this aside and repeated it louder a few times. He had been alone on the mesa for months. His wife, or about to be ex-wife, was out there somewhere, certainly not here; and he had been his own best and worst company before. He enjoyed these little verbal exchanges with the air.

He could be at the arroyo in ten minutes. A quick, precipitous scramble down the side of the mesa, a short hike across the valley floor and he would be there. The climb back up would be harder if he came up the way he went down. The alternative was to follow the arroyo down to the old Rancho road, skirt the mesa and climb the long, single switchback road. Either way, it was late afternoon, the rains had ended and he knew he was through for the day.

“Do it,” he said as he turned back to the house.

He filled his water bottle, grabbed an orange from the bowl on the tiled counter and remembered to take extra matches and a joint. He put these and the childish boat into his hip pack. This simple pack was a birthday gift and had

been with him for twenty years. He rarely traveled without it and never ceased to be amazed at its rightness. The compass, aspirin, first aid gear, water purification tabs, knife, matches, camera battery, sewing kit, flashlight, nylon cord, blister-pak and nail clippers were standard contents, each tucked into its special niche. To this he added the food and gear appropriate for the excursion of the day. Today was simple, just the orange, the dope, and the boat.

At the edge of the mesa he turned to look at the house. The look was a talisman of sorts, a reassurance that certain things were real, that there were starting points, that if you reconnected with these starting points things would turn out fine. He had accrued a few talismans; they were not standard issue, no rabbit's feet, or four-leaf clovers, but they were essential and got him through. He believed in them and their efficacy. After all, he propped the post card of Botticelli's Primavera on the airplane seat in front of him each time he flew and hadn't that worked? For ten years, he had commuted to a teaching job by plane. Each week for twenty-six weeks a year, a lot of flights, each one safe. And if the magic didn't work, at least the last thing he saw would be beautiful.

His little terra cotta adobe house was beautiful as well. It was literally rooted three feet in the ground and had a wonderfully low profile to the sky and the Pederal towering in the western distance. Built of chunky adobe bricks made from the mud of the mesa, it felt as solid as the proverbial brick shit-house. The mud walls were oblivious to the howling winds of late spring and the sudden, driving rains of summer. Dug into the dirt, the house from inside offered a sight line through the windows about two feet above ground level. The sense of awe and speed and bigness of everything one saw out those windows was amplified by this child's perspective. All this shaped Ray's vision as he stood at the edge of the mesa and looked back.

He descended from the mesa in loose-limbed strides, half sliding and falling. The loose dirt and rock on the critical angle of the slope made the footing treacherous. The

scramble demanded a complete absence of thought. It demanded the body's surrender to gravity, uncertainty and the pleasure of its own workings. Exhilarated and a little shaky, he stopped at the bottom and sat on a driftwood trunk to savor the excitement and light up the joint.

"Let's launch!" He took a big hit off the joint and, as though on cue, the first rainbow appeared. The second followed, faintly at first, but rapidly condensing into the stunning cliché that never failed to please. Taking it as an auspicious sign for the launch, he got up and continued his walk toward the arroyo.

At the bank, the scenario changed again. The rush of water was not as loud, but was more detailed, with splashes and gurgles added to the general roar. The picture was altered as well. The force of the water was palpable rather than imagined, as it was high up at the house. And it had totally lost the lazy grace that characterized it from above. Up close, the water was an ugly thing, chaotic, gouging away chunks of the bank and sweeping the dead things of the arroyo along with it.

Ray found a spot on the bank firm enough and within easy reach of the water to set the little boat on its journey. "You need a good start on this river of shit," he said, as he released it into a protected eddy. The boat was captured immediately by the main body of the current and shot downstream. It was difficult to follow its course. The red he had painted it, so bright against the white of the worktable, quickly blended with the red mud of the flow. "Would have been great in the Caribbean," he mused, imagining the milky turquoise water of that place. He managed to follow it for a few seconds with his eyes, laughed at the futility of this and took off at a lively walk along the bank. The boat bobbed and tumbled in the current, making a spasmodic appearance as a blurred, red shape. The boat disappeared completely from sight where the arroyo took a bend near an old cottonwood.

Satisfied with his little expedition he sat on a flat rock, ate his orange and finished the joint. He wondered

where the boat would end up and whether it would reach the Chama River. He decided to follow the arroyo toward the Chama, then take the leisurely walk along the Rancho road home. The sun was low in the sky, but the light hadn't softened yet, and he pulled down his hat brim to shield his eyes from the glare. He walked downstream to where he had seen the pick-up struggling to cross the arroyo. He took the mile or so at a casual pace and soon came to the washed-out road. There was a small canyon where the road had been severed by the force of the water, which by now had become a harmless trickle. The truck was lodged into the bank at an inexplicable angle and had been abandoned by its driver.

He didn't see the young woman on the far bank sitting in the long shadow of a juniper. She rose as he approached and stepped out from the shade. She was wearing a forties-style print dress with small straps over her bare shoulders, looking both sophisticated and down home. A wide-brimmed straw hat shadowed her eyes, but not her smile, which beamed like a homing beacon. Ray was knocked off balance by the smile and then sent sprawling as the eroded bank of the arroyo gave out beneath him. Trying to hold onto a bit of dignity in the face of her laughter he smiled at his clumsiness and addressed her in Spanish.

“Buenas tardes, Señorita.”

“Good afternoon to you too, though it looks more like it has been messy so far.”

His jeans and white shirt were splattered with mud.

“Is that your truck? Are you all right?” Her smile held him.

“No, I'm fine. I learned a long time ago not to try something so foolish. I usually save my foolishness for other things.”

She took off her hat and, rather than shaking her head like the women in shampoo ads, ran her hands through her hair. Ray found her gesture so seductive that he could barely climb the bank. It derailed the wise-ass

inquiry he was about to make concerning her other foolishness.

“I’ve seen you before, but just in passing, I thought you were a little girl. You work in the garden sometimes. The little adobe near the big rancho?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes in the early morning. In the evening too, but only sometimes.”

“My good luck that I’ve seen you then.” He was going to say suerte, not so much to impress her, but because he loved the sound of the word. He thought better of it. She was speaking English to him with that charming lilt of the region.

“I know you, too. You’re the artista who lives up on the mesa. The Anglo who lays stone like a mexicano,” she said, laughing.

“Come on, who says that?” he answered with embarrassment. He had laid mountains of stone up there and he couldn’t conceal the pride he felt, at least from himself.

“I am Tio’s niece,” she said by way of explanation. “I am visiting for a while. I grew up around here and you know, left and returned and left some more and now I’m back.”

“For good?”

“Who knows for good or bad” she said, taking his question literally.

“I know what you mean. Tio’s a great guy, an honest man. He’s made me feel welcome out here and never fails to help me when I need it. And he gets good stone. He’s a fine singer, too.”

“Sí. He sang me to sleep as a little girl...that beautiful tenor voice coming from that big, round man. This always surprised me. But he is so gentle, really. What kind of man would raise a three-legged dog like he did? My name is Flora Montejo,” she said, extending her hand.

It was then that Ray realized it was not only her sandals she was holding. There was the boat.

“My name’s Ray, Ray Siena. Mucho gusto,” he said, taking her hand. “Are you taking a journey?” he asked, with a nod to the boat.

“Oh this, isn’t it sweet? I came to the arroyo to see if I could be of help to the people with the pick up, but they were already gone when I got here. I guess they just gave up and left it stuck like that. Then along comes this little ship and it was so cute and brave I had to rescue it. Good luck, yes?”

“For the boat?”

“No, for me. Maybe for the boat, too. I don’t think it would have reached the Chama. I let it go for a little to see how far it would get but it got stuck in those dead branches over there. It probably would have been buried when they fixed the road. So yes, it was lucky for the boat too, I guess. The kid who made it though is probably crying now, he lost his little ship.”

“I doubt it,” he said. “He probably knows it ended up exactly where he had hoped.”

There wasn’t much more said, and they parted with a casual, “see you again.” They lived on opposite sides of the arroyo, which was hardly a social marker but simply chance topography; and each departed in his own direction. Her smile lingered in the air with the power of something not formed, not revealed. Yet, he could picture it vividly, and on the walk home he let his heart riff around the possibilities. A failed romantic, on constant alert to the magic of particular moments, he slid easily. Twenty years ago, the encounter with Flora might have been sufficient cause to send them tumbling into the warm mud of the arroyo, content to spend the rest of the afternoon wallowing. But now he was grappling with the meaning of the smile, chewing over her few words with the desperation of a news commentator, trying to wring a story from the froth of a candidate’s stump speech. The irony of this was not lost on him and he was left with a few wisps of confused thought.

A smile is just a smile. Yeah, right. A rose is just a rose and a kiss is just a kiss, until it's you. And then all bets are off and then some asshole says nothing is forever, and there goes hope.

His fantasies relinquished their grip and he was alone in the softening light and cooling air. The cowboy-movie sunset had its say and filled in the space left by his thoughts. With a bit of luck he would see the Great Gray owl swoop down from its hunting post nearby. At sunset, the predators come out to begin their nightly patrols, driven by an eternal need that seems to inhabit the universe. That was certainly his suspicion as he walked home. His eyes, led forward by the view of the Cerro Pedernal, pulled his legs along. He turned up the road to the mesa at exactly the point where the flattened crest of the great mountain disappeared from view behind an enormous cottonwood. The owl did not make an appearance, but as he reached his house, a band of coyotes began howling their greeting to the night.

Alone at suppertime he mulled over his day. He knew so little of this woman he had met, that he was soon spun tightly into the net of his own need. Distraction, more than hunger, prompted a look into the fridge, which turned up some leftover rice and zukes from the night before. It was a truly pathetic invitation to dinner. The trip to Santa Fe for decent groceries, some fifty miles south, was overdue. He took this as a criticism of his inability to keep his shit together and lapsed into a moment of self-pity, which quickly dissolved into fantasies of Flora.

In his mind she was sitting beside him on the drive to town, eating from a paper bag of fresh apricots. Ray fancied they had taken a long detour through El Rito, a little town about nine miles north. He had done this so he could pass the old post office where an apricot tree grew nearby. He knew it was in full fruit, and they stopped to pick a few. In his imaginings, Flora was wearing a dress similar to the one she had on at the arroyo, only now the thin straps kept sliding from her shoulders. In this paradise, constructed

from his desire, there was no conversation, just looks and gestures and pictures of what ought to be. He took this scenario on a wild car ride, embellishing and turning the script in response to whims that came from unknown parts of him. There was enough of a connection to the facts of his life to make the imagined events possible. So, too, the fictive game plan gave him ideas for how he might re-invent his life. Dump the old, drag-ass Suburban, get a gold Cadillac or something equally mythic. Ray was doing just fine with this line of thought until he conjured a picture of Flora biting into the apricot. His mind became a sticky mess when it crashed directly into the juicy, golden-pink fruit she held in her mouth.

He ate the zucchini in a desultory funk. The solace of being alone on the mesa, the recuperative powers he attributed to it, now seemed a lonely whistle in the dark. In a more sarcastic mode, he wondered why healers, deep-trance channelers, aura balancers, medicine men and flakes of every description gravitated to this high desert. City folk, suburbanites, casualties of other restorative, “charming” towns like Boulder and Telluride flocked here in search of...what? Peace? Spirituality? Pelvic clarity? And exactly where did he fit in? It galled him to think he was just another of “them”. Yet, here he was in this uncompromising landscape, hoping for some miracle to lift him to God knows where, half worried he wouldn’t recognize it when it arrived.

After dumping his dish into the sink, it was clear that sleep was a long way off. The TV sat forlornly in the corner of the pantry gathering dust balls. The only channel that appeared was like looking at a Monet painting in some extreme form of disintegration. No help there. The Argo model he had been working on earlier needed a bit more work but he knew he couldn’t rally the finesse needed for the job. He could call one of his pals, but that would entail making plans to get together. Any of them, particularly after he told of his latest obsession with a smile, would have insisted that he had been up on the mesa too long.

His friend Russell would have seen the solution at the end of a fly rod. “A couple of days camping and fishing will do you good,” Russell would say. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow, I’ll take care of the food.” He’d continue to make it appealing: “Look, I’ve got some of that duck from last season in the freezer. You know you love it. We’ll eat it with the trout. You find some mushrooms; we’ll eat like kings”.

His pal Jason would take a different tack. “What the fuck is wrong with you? A smile? Wait till she farts for the first time. You’re losing it up there carving boats. Come on into town, we’ll catch some music, there’s a show at Gerald Peters gallery that’s pretty good. Come on in, do your food shopping, stay with us for the night.” He ran through these alternatives in his mind, laughing to himself that this is the way it would go if he called either of them. Ordinarily both options would have been appealing, but for this tomorrow he had other plans. They were mostly hopes, centered on getting Flora to pick some apricots and drive into town with him. Agitated, distracted and exhausted, he poured a glass of tequila over some ice and stepped outdoors for a smoke.

The crystalline night sky was reassuring. As far as he could tell, everything was in its regular place. Venus was bright, low in the sky and a trifle pink as if from embarrassment at having arrived early to the party. The Big Dipper, the North Star and Orion’s Belt comprised the rest of his star lore. He rarely got much further in his identification of the constellations. His attempts to match star charts with the pierced blackness overhead usually ended with him questioning the judgment of the ancients who’d mapped these pictures of crabs and heroes. The potentially instructional stargazing he had done with a beautiful astrophysicist had dissolved into a poetic haze of reefer and warm blankets. This night he was finished with thought. Giving in to the beauty of the stars, he was content to marvel at the sight, no wishes, no questions asked.

A Boat in the Desert

Coyote yelps, owl hoots and the occasional whir of a semi from the distant Chama road were the stuff of his nocturne. Lulled by the narcotic of the night he was neither predator nor prey, just a tired man who needed some sleep. He would turn himself over to the night as he had entrusted the little boat to the vagaries of the waters of the arroyo. And if he was, in the words of a long-gone poet, the captain of his ship and the master of his soul, the rest would turn out fine.

Flora's smile visited him somewhere in that space between the twilight and the dawn. It flooded him with a restfulness that the fitful mockery of his sleep hadn't given. He rose with the first blink of the sun over the dark mass of the Sierra Negra and an early morning hard-on that nearly lifted him from the bed. He padded outside naked to take a piss and greet the new day.

Mornings were filled with promise. Sleep had erased the previous day's false starts, and dreams fulfilled dreams that were too elusive in the shadows of the day. It had been that way since his childhood and he didn't entertain the possibility that it was any different for the rest of the world. He believed that morning was the time for marriage proposals, summit conferences, driver tests, fishing trips and expeditions of a perilous nature. The world would surely be a better place if we confined our important activities to the hours between five and ten AM. The rest of the day we could all fuck off and enjoy the fruits of our labor.

Baseball, in its early years, when it was still a game, was played in the afternoon. Bullfighting was a formidable exception to this rule, the lightness of the afternoon supplanted by death; but the Spaniards treated everything seriously, as a blood issue—and this dark concern got them Franco, after all. Anyway, this was not a case against the morning as the prime time for meaningful work, as much as it was evidence of how the Spanish went awry, messing with the cosmic order of things. Italy, where the majority of serious business was conducted immediately after the first

blast of espresso, drunk standing up, preferably in some place outside the home, was a better example. And certainly no one familiar with the ways of Rome attempted to accomplish anything after the mid-day meal. Still, the Italians had done quite well with the five-hour workday. Ray, of Italian descent, subscribed to the basics of this philosophy. Inevitably, his New York upbringing insisted on reshaping things to better suit the demands of his personality and a culture driven by the clock. One re-tooling of the basic plan was the American breakfast. This morning, after the makeshift meal of the previous night, his hunger loomed large. He began his conversation with himself.

Jesus, I'm starving...looks like a huevos ranchero day. A leetle salsa, couple of tortillas, many leetle eggs—he loved doing his tacky movie version of a Mexican accent—mucho strong caffe con leche, a leetle chili pepper. Mmm, glad I didn't think of this for supper, didn't even see the tortillas last night...some jugo de grapefruit....

He whipped himself into a frenzy of activity and made his breakfast. After eating and his sacrosanct visit to the throne-room, he was ready to proceed with the day. Things suddenly became more difficult. His imagination and willfulness, the generative forces that held sway in the world of his studio, did not fare as well in the more stubborn reality outside. Ray had relearned this lesson many times and this awareness made him question his plans for the day. A simple approach to meeting Flora held possibilities—simply drive past her house. It was still early morning and if he left now, he would arrive in Santa Fe well before lunch. He would cruise slowly past her house and hopefully she would be at work in the garden; he would be very casual, something like, “Hey, I'm on the way into town, wanna come?” Then he thought he should be direct and truthful, “I've been thinking of you since yesterday, I couldn't sleep, I was praying you'd be here, your smile makes me nuts, run away with me, solve all my problems, fuck my brains out, leave everything, don't even wash the

dirt off your hands, don't change your clothes, put on a dress with skinny straps, lets pick apricots..." He was in a lather and he hadn't turned his own doorknob.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I don't even know this woman. I mean, she could be a fiber artist, a waitress or a gun moll. Jesus, she could be a dentist for all I know. Maybe she's an actress in porno films with a name like Consuela Brazil or Dessert Sands. What if she's stupid? What if she's stupid enough to like me? What if she doesn't like me? Oh my God, what if she's married, or worse, pregnant by some slime bag with no job and a dope habit? The worst would be a fiber artist, I just couldn't handle that. Dentist has a nice ring to it, but she didn't seem fussily clean enough to be one, then we'd never get to roll in the mud together. She'd make me wear an oral dam before sex. Slow down, amigo, this is just a girl you met by chance, for maybe five minutes in all. You're just riding into Santa Fe for groceries, slow down, get a grip.

The obstacle, the real stumbling block was that he didn't believe their meeting was simply chance. True, he had launched his little boat with no expectations, with only the faintest hope that it would go far, but fate was not exactly a word he had struck from usage. As an idea, it was only a step removed from "magical thinking," of which he had a working knowledge. His life as a painter was predicated on his ability to transform the dross of materials into something alive, something that could speak for him. A piece of him went into the making. As crude and simple as the tiny boat was, he had invested a chunk of himself in it. A bit of the delight of childhood, a few hopes born of the raggedness of his recent life, a belief in the power of metaphor to transform reality-surely at least these things were set afloat with the boat. She had, after all, rescued the boat and captured, accidentally, a piece of his soul. That she didn't know he had made the "little ship" only increased the fated nature of the event.

Flora left for home soon after her encounter with Ray at the arroyo. She was unsure of her emotional footing and wondered what that meant.

Earlier she had taken a break from the casual weeding of her garden, figuring to return to her work when the sun dropped some of its fierce heat. The weeding was usually an activity of the morning, but feeling a little blue she had slept late. The entire day had taken on an air of casualness and she continued in this mood as she set off on an amble along the Chama. Flora walked in the shade of the few cottonwoods and willows that grew along the bank, unconsciously veering toward a small stand of trees that formed the bosque. She had played here as a young girl, both for the joy of the place and to escape the hawk-like attention of her mother. Despite the mosquitoes, the bosque was a safe place—she had never seen a snake or a scorpion and the softness of the small patch of grass, in the sunlit clearing at the center, offered a comfort hard to find in the surrounding high desert.

When she drew abreast of the place where the arroyo met the river, she heard the frantic revving of the pickup's engine. The shouts for help that followed were damped by the fulsome surge of the river, but it was clear to her that something had gone wrong for someone. Flora changed direction and walked away from the bosque, along the arroyo, toward the sounds. It was barely half a mile to the juncture of the road and the arroyo, but as she walked along the bank, the flow of water increased rapidly, from damp to trickle to full fledged rush. By the time she arrived, the driver of the pickup had abandoned the cause and was nowhere to be seen. The truck was beat up enough to be local but Flora didn't recognize it. There was a wet denim jacket thrown in a disgusted heap by its doused owner. She sat down to wait, thinking the owner might return after his stab at finding help.

Flora had always thought of herself as blessed. Beneath the harshness of her mother's concern, she read the underlying love that prompted it. This made the early

curfews, prohibitions on sleepovers, and general disapproval of her hairstyles, clothes, makeup and her pimpled, adolescent boyfriends easier to take. Flora considered her mother was usually right in her assessments, at least with the wisdom of now, looking back on then. Her mother had certainly been right about Rick, her flame for five months when she was sixteen. That endless spring and summer seemed a lifetime to her and she left him reluctantly. She gave up the charged, secret meetings at the bosque and the weekend dances at the community hall because her mother had seen something in him she didn't trust. And now, she thought with a painful smile, sweet Rick was doing time for armed robbery. Her mother had, unfortunately, been right again. She thought how she missed her more than ever in this fourth year since her passing, and, as she thought, it dawned that today was the anniversary of her death. Her blue mood of the early morning, her half-awake approach to the day, became clear to her.

The dusky red of the boat caught her eye. It was a smear of color snagged in some dead thorn bush jammed between a pile of rocks and the undercut bank. When the rush of water subsided, her curiosity rose and she took off her sandals and waded in the arroyo to investigate. All manner of things were caught and transported by the waters of the arroyo. The cattle, deer and small animals swept by the seasonal torrents usually ended up dead, miles from their place of origin, the carcasses in a snarl of branches, household detritus, auto parts and beer cans. The tiny boat, in contrast to the usual effluvia, was a beautiful thing. Flora recognized it as something that had been cared for and would be missed. Surprised and charmed, she plucked the boat from its nest of thorns and retreated to the shade of a nearby juniper.

She felt oddly satisfied, sitting with the little boat in her lap. A reversal was at work where the rescuer and rescued change places. It was the kind of satisfaction that brought with it a sense of safety, custom made for easy daydreams. The memory of her mother was not deeply

buried and made a gentle entrance. Flora remembered how difficult it was for her to return home in those first months after her mother's death. Her mother's ghost was everywhere in the little adobe. She remembered being shocked at how the warmest of memories were transformed into something barren and empty, to be filled solely by her enormous grief. A glimpse of her mother's favorite teacups had reduced her to tears. The cups were so fragile that they were rarely used. They were being "saved" and were displayed on an open shelf, their handles all turned carefully toward the wall, "to avoid any accidents," her mother said. Every other week she lovingly washed them of the red dust that coated everything like rusted dew. When she died, it was too painful to have them around. Their beauty had become pathetic. A forlorn cloud settled over them as they sat inertly, waiting in vain to be used by her mother.

Flora gave the cups to a cousin who was deeply attached to her, her mother and the cups. Six months apart in age, they had grown up together and shared their mothers, friends and secrets. Flora vividly remembered the thrill and gratitude that lit her cousin Maria's face when she unexpectedly received them as a gift. The cups were on the West Coast now, with her cousin who was trying to make a go of it as an artist. They had become the subject of a series of drawings and paintings, venerated in her cousin's studio as they were on the kitchen shelf. Flora thought with pleasure of the drawing that her cousin had given her, now hanging in her bedroom. It was wonderful how in the drawing the cups were even richer than she had remembered. The pastel Maria had used was thick and juicy and made the drawing more like a tapestry than a fiction on a piece of paper. In the paintings and drawings, the cups were empty. Flora had meant to ask Maria why, but in the waiting to ask she had formed her own answer. Thoroughly convinced it was the same as Maria's, she never raised the question. The deep turquoise, murky violets and sullen pink colors told a complicated story. It was a story about the cups and how Maria filled their emptiness with

herself and with Flora and her mother. It was a story about the arid land, scarred arroyos, bottomless canyons and skeletal trees of the high desert, about the caverns of the human heart and the great mish-mash of the local culture, a story about the waiting that was everywhere.

A small breeze came down the canyon and Flora rested on the memory of her mother's pillow. It was the one object she'd taken with her the day after her mother was laid in the ground. The sweetness of her mother's smell clung to the pillow and Flora buried her own grief in its crinkled softness. The months seemed endless during that first year and she thought the pillow would never dry from her tears. Now, four years later, she no longer mourned, but could still conjure comfort from the pillow and was certain her mother's smell lingered despite many washings. Sitting here in the comfort of the shade, she felt that the thirty years she'd been lucky enough to have enjoyed with her mother had given her enough for two lifetimes. Her cousin Maria once confessed to her that she loved her aunt Eva more than her own mother, a declaration that Flora took in stride so naturally that it was alarming to Maria. They had to talk about that for quite a while afterward. The memory wasn't painful; in fact, it flooded her with a sense of release. The anchoring weight of her grief had quietly loosed itself and been displaced by something more fluid that carried her forward in its wake.

During her reverie, Flora unconsciously fondled the little boat she held in her lap. When she became aware of this, she smiled and returned her attention to the boat. It looked new to her, which evoked her concern for what must have been its untimely loss. It probably had belonged to a little boy and, as she was running through her mental inventory of the kids she knew in the valley, Ray appeared at the bend in the arroyo. He hadn't seen her yet and she had some time to watch him walking along.

What do we have here? This couldn't be the guy who owns the truck—there is no reason for him to walk up the canyon. He would have gone out along the road for

help. He looks pretty comfortable, not lost...he keeps looking into the arroyo like he is hoping to find something here. Eeee, he is stopping to pee, he surely doesn't know I am here. Jeans, white shirt, straw hat. He looks kind of local or at least he is pretty dark—no cowboy boots, he's got some hiking shoes on, oh he's an Anglo but he looks like he belongs here. He's not bad looking, but it is hard to tell from here. I wonder if it is the artist up on the mesa. Tio told me he is up here without his wife. I don't remember the story except that Tio says he is a good man and they had some trouble, she is not very nice I think he said. But Tio would stick up for any man first, unless it was me, or my mother. Oh, he is at home out here, but he looks like he could wear a suit just as easily. Now he sees me. Uuum, didn't his face just brighten up? He is walking too close to the undercut bank...there he goes! Eeee, he is covered with mud, but he is laughing. I like a man who can laugh at his clumsiness. I get a feeling that this has something to do with me.

Soon after their meeting, Flora followed the road home to her house. It would have been shorter for her to retrace her steps along the arroyo and the riverbank, but the road was safer. The cooling twilight brought the snakes out for their evening meal and it was easier to see them in the openness of the road. She disliked snakes, more so for having to keep them constantly on the periphery of her awareness during her childhood. Years later she blamed the entire species for killing the puppy she had just been given as a little girl. She hadn't had the chance to name the tiny creature, which was struck seconds after she and Tio took it on its first walk. Snakes were not on her mind tonight. The decision to opt for the road was made long ago, without her participation, like an involuntary knee jerk.

Now she felt a little light headed and, at the same time, pleased with herself. Her conversation with Ray was flirtatious and affectionate and by the time they parted she knew that his tumble into the arroyo was not an accident or

a consequence of his clumsiness. Flora was self-assured, but her power to affect was mostly a secret to her and came as a surprise. She saw it as particular to a situation rather than as an integral part of herself. She liked this man. She hardly knew him, yet his attentiveness and warmth were apparent to her and he was nice to be around. He was certainly very alive; she could feel that too. His brown eyes were an open invitation to anything that came in their path. They focused and opened and swept, took in and gave off. He looked directly at her when either of them spoke; he fixed her with his eyes and was in turn transfixed by her. It seemed to Flora that they were the conduit to the deepest places in him. If she looked long enough into those eyes she could learn everything about him. He was at the mercy of his eyes, and they couldn't protect him. They would reveal and expose and lead him to great foolishness and wonderful things. She recognized the cliché about the eyes and the soul but it was eyes like his that were responsible for it. Besides, she reasoned, he was an artist, which made perfect sense.

She wondered about the rest of his story. There was the wife who wasn't with him. It was clear to Flora that he had been around the block, his eyes told her that, but it bothered her to think that there might be unfinished business he had to settle. That she was having these thoughts at all bothered her. She wouldn't be entertaining questions even vaguely related to his marital status if there wasn't some interest on her part. This inquiry wasn't motivated by the potential gossip value the answers might have. Flora was not inclined to gossip, because she had seen enough of its destructive power in this rural community where she grew up. She might not know the extent of her considerable power and charm but she was hardly opaque to herself. No, something else was at work now and it was a bit more dangerous and exciting, "and probably foolish" she said aloud, finishing her thought and lifting the latch to her house.

Flora put the boat on the shelf in the kitchen where her mother's cups once stood. Someday, with a little luck,

she might return it to the kid captain. “Looks good there—kind of Christmasy on the green shelf, a safe harbor.”

The house felt good to her. The small rooms, cozy and lived in, had a familiar smell. She had mistaken it for her mother’s scent, until her death proved this wrong. Four years later it was present. It was the aroma of history: the story of the house and all those who had lived and cooked and slept and washed, those who made love and worked and sweat here, those who laughed and cried, prayed and died in its rooms. The house was the cauldron in which these raw materials were brewed and then released as the breath of its own making.

Flora thought how much she preferred being here to her apartment in Albuquerque. It was a little lonely without her mother but Tio, who was happy to be company at a moment’s notice, was down the road. She had a couple of friends in Espanola who had gone the baby and abusive husband route, but she had long out-grown them anyway. Her visits there were more mercy calls to a war zone. House trailers with huge satellite dishes and equally huge propane tanks in the front yard ended their occupants’ dreams early.

Flavia, whom she had met at the University of New Mexico, was a nurse practitioner in El Rito. She adored Flavia, who it seemed was equally adored by the entirety of Rio Arriba County and was so in demand that she was rarely available for a visit. It was a comfort to know she was there and if things got rough she could call on her, albeit scheduled in between baby deliveries and bouts with whooping cough.

Her cousin Maria had promised to visit at the end of the month. Flora looked forward to this and the opportunity for intensive, endless talk about their lives, past, present and future. They would surely mull over Flora’s decision to spent some time here. She had been slightly mysterious with Ray concerning the length of her stay up here, but she wasn’t completely sure herself how long it would be. Neither was she sure she wanted to be more

specific with him anyway. She could have told him her apartment in Albuquerque was sublet through next June and she was quite sure she would be here until at least that date, but hadn't mentioned it. The prospect of being here alone thrilled her. It felt like a new start in an old place.

The life she had left behind in Albuquerque was no great shakes. People from her school days drifted off to jobs and bigger cities. The friends she had made at the translation agency she worked for were nice but she rarely saw them socially. As for boyfriends, they were a motley assortment of boys who were reluctant to become men, as she ruefully acknowledged to herself. They were easier to leave than the modern box that had been her apartment.

Flora and her one long-standing boyfriend had broken up shortly after her mother died. He was more interested in fleeing to a safe distance from the place of his birth, a trailer settlement on the outskirts of Espanola, than he was in building something with her. Even the shortening of his name, Roberto, to the abrupt "Rob," which he preferred, belied his distaste for his roots. She felt that her fond memories of growing up made him nervous when compared to his own dismal raising. When her mother died, and Flora needed comfort, he became remote and unavailable to her. The ultimate demise of the relationship soon followed. She lost track of him about two years ago after he moved to Midland, Texas. He had settled into a mobile home, set on cinder blocks, to be near his job with one of the oil companies. She was happy to note she wasn't missing anything in that sector.

After a half-dozen trips to the window, ostensibly to look for Tio, who sometimes came by in the evening, she was forced to admit to herself that all was not right in "that sector." Ray, this guy she had only just met, was who she hoped would come by.

Flora made a salad for dinner with greens from her garden. She was pleased to have grown them contrary to everyone's opinion that the heat, aridity, soil, wind or sun wouldn't cooperate. She planted in the lee of the house,

hung a netted awning to shield the plants and watered them heavily in the early morning and evening. They tasted doubly good for her trouble. She cleaned up after supper, washed out some underwear and a blouse in the kitchen sink and turned to the pile of translation work on her desk.

Flora knew she was leaving months before she announced it to the agency where she worked. Although it was the agency's reputation that initially brought clients through the door, she realized it was the quality of her work that kept them returning. The good working relationships she built were hardly cultivated; they were simply a consequence of her being herself. Her considerable charm and the ease with which she dealt with the lawyers, writers and business people who were her clients was a factor that she only grudgingly acknowledged. When she left she made sure that the clients knew where she could be reached, and many followed her. Flora was able to offer them the same quality work at a lower price than they paid the agency and still make more herself. She was not only able to support herself but often had to turn down work.

A slight pang of guilt tempered her satisfaction with how well it had worked out. She justified this to herself with the fact that it was a big agency, with many branches nationally, and they would hardly notice the loss. Besides she couldn't bear Tim, the office manager. It wasn't his slovenliness per se that made her ill each time she had to deal with him. Tio, whom she deeply loved, wasn't exactly a paradigm of neatness and grooming either. It was just that, when coupled with his arrogance and patronizing manner it asked too much of her. His food-stained shirts, stretched taut over his blubber tire and crowned with the hideous, five-inch-wide seventies ties that he insisted on wearing made her wretch openly and she hoped he knew. He was equally sloppy about bookkeeping and slow to pay. She was secretly thrilled that her leaving might cost him.

Flora had set up her office in her former bedroom, where corners and angles had been softened from the layering of plaster and repeated whitewashing. The

computer and fax machine looked ridiculously out of place. Slick and unyielding, they spoke of another world. Her mother would have been shocked at their placement on the worktable directly below the rough, tin crucifix that Tio had made as a teenager. She had set up her workstation facing the wall with her back to the view toward the river through the two small windows. It was easier to work this way, and she sat down hoping to put in a couple of hours before turning in. Flora plodded along, translating a legal brief into Spanish. She was unfamiliar with the subject matter, and it was filled with technical engineering terms relating to the construction of a proposed sewer system. It was tedious going and she was easily distracted each time she thought she heard a car pass. She stuck with it for an hour before giving in to disinterest and fatigue. Her bed welcomed her and she fell asleep immediately.

II

Ray decided that he would go into Santa Fe. He had prepared himself for the possibility that Flora would not be in her garden and that sooner or later he would have to stop behaving like a teenager and do something normal like knock on her door. He wasn't sure why he was so reluctant to do just that. To say that he was usually direct in chasing down what he needed would be an understatement. For knowledge, regarding what to do if you didn't get exactly what you wanted, there was always Buddha and Mick Jagger. If there was no solace to be found there, he would retreat to the studio to relearn, for perhaps the thousandth time, that the answer couldn't be found there either.

As he waited for the Chevy Suburban to warm up, the neighbor's dog Sadie wagged her way onto the front seat. She could only be coaxed to leave after being given a liberal dose of affection and a dog biscuit, which Ray kept

in the glove compartment for just such an occasion. The sun was in his eyes as he drove down from the mesa, his coffee was wedged between the seats and the radio was tuned to the local C&W station. It was 7:30 in the morning and already the airwaves were filled with the troubled voice of George Jones. "This shit never sleeps. Let's hear it for the music of self pity," Ray said to the radio. He slipped into an imitation of the stylized crying found in old-time, Mexican rancho music. He was feeling pretty good. The sun had made it to another day, the Suburban started and, it seemed to him, the potential for adventure was high.

He instinctively turned the Suburban in the direction of Flora's house. There were only two options to get to the Chama Road and if one was going South, toward Santa Fe, this route made the most sense. After a minute or two he realized that the road would be impassable where it met the arroyo. The washout had occurred too late in the day for the road crews to have fixed it and at this hour they were most likely drinking their coffee, grumbling about the prospect of spending the better part of their morning in the mud. He saw the metallic blue top of the pick-up as his own car crested a small rise. It was still lodged into the bank, which made it a certainty that roadwork was a ways off. He turned his big Suburban around without checking to see if the road was passable and set off in the opposite direction. There was an even broader arroyo that crossed the Rancho road to the north, but the arroyos rarely ran at the same time. There was almost always a way out.

He was pissed that his plan to drive past Flora's house wasn't viable. He would have to drive the five or so miles out of his way and pick up the Rancho road from the south side in order to pass Flora's house. It would be hard to explain his appearance coming from that direction. He couldn't say he was returning from Santa Fe at that hour, certainly not if he intended to ask her to join him on the ride in. No, the casual explanation that called upon chance to justify his showing up at her door was out. A few internal machinations convinced him the alternative plan, "I'm

driving into Santa Fe and hoped you might want to come” was even better.

By the time he arrived, he had changed his mind so many times regarding what he was doing that he was exhausted and already in a sweat. He so envied those “white people” whose skin barely dampened when faced with the prospect of speaking to a crowd of five hundred total strangers. He managed to deal with public speaking; the public sweating was an entirely different issue. He felt as if he was a man who sweat in his dreams and his nightmares with an abandon that matched the waterfalls of perspiration he shed in daylight. He had been told by those who loved him it was part of his appeal, but now, sitting in the car outside of Flora’s, he didn’t feel charming at all. He took a few minutes to cool down, mop up and get his emotional bearing.

The sound of a chair being dragged across stone came from the rear of the house and he went around back to investigate. He announced himself with a loud, drawn out “helloooo”, not wanting to startle Flora if she was there. The “hola” he received in response was the green light he took it for. She sat on the stone patio in a heavy iron outdoor chair, her feet up on a low, garden wall, a large mug of coffee beside her. Her smiled greeting told him instantly that she was expecting him. There was no awkward “what are you doing here” or “isn’t this a surprise” to burden him with explanations. She wore sweat pants, an ancient, faded, red tee shirt with “Bultaco Motorcycles” emblazoned on the front and was barefoot. She addressed him first in Spanish.

“Buenos días. ¿Cómo está usted?”

“Buenos días. Bien, gracias. ¿Y usted?”

“Great! I slept like a baby. And it looks like a beautiful day.”

“You’ll have to tell me your secret for sleep some day”, he said.

“It’s easy. Just wait till you’re tired or bored with being awake. I usually look forward to my dreams, they are often worth going to sleep for.”

“Sounds like good advice. My problem is that everything is still going at night, I think it’s my dreams that keep me awake. The ones I have while I’m asleep I can hardly remember when I get up. I probably enjoy them but I can’t remember.” He gave her one of those Italian shrugs, shoulders raised, hands palms up.

“Did you dream last night?” she asked.

He wasn’t ready for this and, without time to think, blurted out his answer.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I did”

“And?” she asked, with a generous smile.

“It was in color, that much I’m sure of. Are you sure you really want to know?”

“Now more than ever. Eeee, how bad could it be?” she chided.

“It was the color of the dawn, warm, it was about garlic and olive oil, my two favorite things,” he said laughingly.

“No pasta?” It had been a while since she had allowed herself to flirt so openly and with someone so susceptible.

He sat down on the wall near where her feet were propped.

“No pasta. There was a woman involved.”

“Isn’t there always?” she said.

“Not always, just when I’m lucky”

“Did you know her?” she prodded.

“Not very well, but I’m hoping to know her better.”

“You like her, this woman?”

“More every minute” he said, looking directly at her.

Her dark skin reddened and her smile told him she was pleased and a little embarrassed at the same time.

“I was hoping that was the case, it’s remarkable that we find our way into other people’s dreams. I mean, I love

that I found my way into yours”. It was her turn to be flustered. “Thank you for telling me. Dios mío, I’m being foolish”.

“Not at all, I...I thought it was me who was being foolish, even though it was the truth, about the dream...not the garlic part,” he said laughing.

She laughed. “I’m not a very good host, I don’t get many visitors here. Would you like some coffee?” she asked, rising from her chair, not waiting for an answer.

He couldn’t stop his eyes from following her. He watched as she went inside to get him coffee. She was more than a smile. She came back with the coffee. Although she had already put in the milk she looked at him quizzically, tilted her head and asked, “Leche?”

“Yes, thanks...but you seemed to know already.”

“The sugar I wasn’t so sure about.”

The discussion of coffee and bread that followed eased them into more substantive conversation about themselves and the surrounding country that they both loved. They pleased each other with the things they told. Flora was pleased to hear he had a sister who was an interpreter. Ray listened intently to a story of a drawing of cups her cousin had given her. Their talk followed its own trajectory. Broadly brushed information about jobs, places lived in and visited, intermingled with the tiny intimacies that we save for these beginnings. In the talking they put themselves into each other’s lives. They located each other on interior maps that charted their desires. Their needs and strengths became the meridians in this new terrain governed by emotional weather. The fictions each had spun from imagination began to unravel. Recomposed pictures of each other emerged, a hodge-podge of new pieces, erasures, ghosted images and blank spots.

They forgot their coffee, which by now had turned cold. The sun had warmed the edges off the crispness of the early morning. They both rose at the same moment from where they were sitting.

“Kind of like the seventh-inning stretch,” he said smiling. He read the look of incomprehension on her face and added, “like a baseball game.”

“Oh, I’ve never been to one. Eeee, I’ve been sitting so long I can’t straighten up. I have some translating work sitting on my desk that I’d better get to. It’s some legal document about building sewers...very exciting I can assure you. I would much rather sit with you but I would hate to have the engineer dig his hole in the wrong place because of me.”

“I was going into Santa Fe to get some groceries. I thought I’d ask you if you wanted to come...is there anything I can get you?”

“Some bagels and some croissants, but only if you promise to bring them over tomorrow morning so we can have breakfast, without tortillas.” She said this with a smile of such enormous wattage it paled the sun.

“I have a meeting with the President tomorrow morning but I’m sure I can rearrange it, “ he said, more thrilled than he could imagine.

She smacked him playfully on the arm. “Hasta mañana. Mañana de mañana.”

On the ride to Santa Fe, the old Suburban floated like a Caddy. It was a match for Ray’s mood. He popped in a tape of Tio’s music that he had given him. The Mexican ballads told the same aching stories of lost and found love that George Jones delivered on the radio earlier in the morning. The songs were in Spanish, each word caressed by Tio’s sweet voice. In Spanish the lyrics sounded more hopeful despite the mournful pathos and the notes that fell like rain. Ray was reminded of an advertisement he had seen for a language school. It was a sign in a subway station that gave a translation, in French, of the request, “please take out the garbage”. He hated French, largely because of the humiliation he had suffered at the hands of his high school French teachers, but still had to agree with the ad’s boast—“it sounds better in French.” As far as he

was concerned the boast was doubly true for Spanish and Italian.

As for holding French as the benchmark for the language of love, whispered endearments that sounded like symptoms of sinus congestion withered in comparison with the sighs of Spanish. “Spanish is a loving tongue, but she never spoke Spanish to me” goes the lament in a Butch Hancock song. But Flora had spoken Spanish to him, however briefly, and what she said in English was the exception that proved the rule—she could have invited him to breakfast in Swahili and Ray would have fallen.

Cruising down the Chama road through Medenales he hardly registered the dog carcasses that peppered the highway. He simply drove around them as if they were technical obstructions set up for a driving test. The canine corpses were a regular occurrence, leash laws being less of a priority in this area than driving half-senseless, tanked on booze. He and a friend had renamed it “Dead Dog Road” as a way of dealing with the grotesque scene. The crushed fur and innards of the dead animals were close-up, graphic markings of the violence that had occurred. The sight was so horrible that some innate shutdown mechanism clicked in. One could drive around the bodies and not notice.

The human toll on this section of road was marked by roadside shrines. Driving by, these appeared as small blurs of color between the gravel shoulder and the inevitable wire fence at the boundary. The starkness of the midday sun bleached the parched earth to dun, and the little shrines, with their plastic flowers, appeared bright and cheery. On closer inspection, when one learned what they were, the picture changed. The floral displays tied to the barbed wire, votive candles, religious pictures and crucifixes, captured the eye with a cheesy, heart-wrenching power. The occasional stuffed animal, left to mark the death of a child, was unbearable to take in. The eagerness of the eye to be delighted fought with the heart as it recoiled from this testament to the injustice of it all.

Ray breathed a quick prayer as he passed through this piece of highway. The shrines held him for a dozen heartbeats, then released him. He turned back to the earlier happenings of the morning and his buoyant mood returned.

Passing through the realities of the outskirts of Espanola jolted him into the present. The squalid house trailer sites were dismal encampments built along a faltering river. Set on blocks, their busted aluminum doors ajar, they were a step away from devolving into piles of plastic and sheet metal. The junked autos in their front yards looked more permanent. Like the road-side shrines, the trailer settlements were tokens of loss. Those who lived here often died here and the living made the markers for the dead. The two realities, at opposite ends of the spectrum we create for the beautiful, were hard to bring together. It was as if Ray couldn't imagine the shrines being made by the people who lived here. And Flora? Where did she fit in? Did the twenty-five miles between here and where she grew up make the enormous difference he saw in her?

He dispatched his errands quickly, making the stops for groceries, vegetables and hardware as efficiently as possible. He packed the perishables in the cooler he kept in the wagon and dropped in at his favorite café. Santa Fe had seen some expansion over the last few years and the addition of a number of artsy cafés was one of the benefits that he begrudgingly acknowledged. Sitting outside, reading the papers while drinking good, strong coffee was his idea of heaven. He had picked up the habit during his first trip to Mexico and made it part of his life regardless of where he lived.

The parade of tourists and locals was endlessly fascinating and the chance social interactions often led to unexpected connections and flirtations. Occasionally, someone who knew him, or knew of him, stopped at the table to say a quick hello or pass on a morsel of gossip. He pretended attentiveness but barely listened to the "art news" that was too frequently passed on to him. He had silently vowed that his stay here should remain free of art world

concerns. He knew a more career-minded person would work the comparatively fertile ground of Santa Fe for attention, but he didn't care. He simply wanted a place to repair from all that. A non-committal nod in the direction of the person spreading the news was as much enthusiasm as he could muster, unless of course it was Jason or Russell. Those two he listened to in earnest. They had been burning themselves on the art-barbecue for so long that whatever information they imparted was tied to them in some personal way, or else they took it personally, and this made it doubly interesting. The café, near the galleries and a major art supply store, was a watering hole for both of them. Ray half expected one of them to show up when in walked Russell.

Ray first recognized Russell's small frame and his walk. It was the sure-footed walk of a man who had spent a great deal of time in the woods. His walk, characterized by an alertness to his surroundings, was motivated by a desire to take everything in. He had once confided in Ray that this way of walking had something to do with his time in the Korean "police action". Then barely eighteen and scared shitless, the alertness was rigid with tension and hot-wired to caution. Russell described it as "the way you walk through a field of vipers with the taste of spent cartridges in your mouth." It took him years of hunting ducks and deer to lose the taste. "I don't know," he said, "one day I was out hunting and I realized the taste was gone and all I had was this awake feeling without the fear of my ass being blown away. It was like I finally entered the present." He had killed people in Korea but without pleasure. Aim, blaze away and vomit, in that order, as he described it. These acrid memories were harder to lose than the metallic taste associated with them, he said. They were not so much forgotten, as transformed into a lyrical melancholy and a humor that didn't judge. Russell had a gentleness that comes to those who have survived some horrific episode in their lives. Ray and he greeted each other with a warm hug.

“So you’re down from the mesa. I was about to give up on you. I almost called you last night. I was getting a little worried I hadn’t heard from you.”

“Yeah, I figured I’d give you a call today from here... decided last minute to come in.”

“What’s going on up there? You working? Still making the boats?” he said with a laugh.

“Well you know man, idle hands are the devil’s playground. It keeps me from self abuse.”

“Any fishing?”

“Would I go fishing without you? I wouldn’t know which fly to use—if I can’t use hardware or worms I’m lost. You know me, I’d do the Greek method, if I could, dynamite the stream and gather them when they belly-up.”

“Your father taught you better than that.”

“Yeah, but I’m capable of it, like that blue grouse you made me slaughter while it was sitting benignly alongside the road. My poor daddy would roll over in his grave if he knew.”

“Both our fathers would. That’s why I gave you the gun,” he laughed. “You can tell your dad I made you do it when you meet him on the other side. It was pretty unsporting,” he said knowingly. “But it tasted great.”

“So listen man, I met this woman. She’s really got a hold on me.”

“No kidding, where did you meet her?”

Ray told him the story, recounting the role the boat played, the Giaconda smile, that morning’s conversation and the promise of breakfast tomorrow.

“So you’ve known her about eighteen hours,” he said, looking at his watch. “Not too long considering you were asleep for about half of it.” There was no judgment in his tone. He waited for a response.

“Look, Russell, I know it’s nuts, but Jesus, the woman is something else. She’s warm and smart and alive.”

“Good-looking?” he smiled.

“She could make me do some crazy things. Oh man, wait until you meet her.”

Russell nodded, chuckled, paused for a moment and said, “You’ll figure it out. You’ve been through this before, you know it takes time. In the meantime we should do some fishing. Things are looking good up on the Rio Grande, near where we fished last summer. I was up there last week. I did well.”

“Let me see how this thing works out. It’s been a while since I felt this hopeful. I mean, I really want something to happen with this woman. It’s been a while. I’ve been in such a funk since...”

“How are things going on that front? You work anything out with Dianne? You said it looked like divorce.”

“I haven’t spoken with Dianne in weeks. The last phone call wasn’t very encouraging. She’s terminally pissed and hurt, big-time.”

“That makes it hard, I guess it’s got to get real bad first.”

“It’s sad but it looks like it’s dead in the water. We’ve split and gone back so many times I think we’ve worn each other out. Russell, I just felt dead. I expected to go into my old age with her, all those years. What a fucking tragedy! You’ve been there. You know when it dies, when you feel dead, there’s no hope.” His voice trailed off into a low moan.

“I know what you’re saying. I could never patch it with Molly. Now I can’t believe I stayed so long. I couldn’t even find my dick because it shrunk up so bad. I felt like a capon. It was time to move on. It was years ago for me and I feel a whole lot better but...”

“But I guess it never goes away. It’s like a hernia operation, it heals but you always feel it and it re-injures easily.”

“Never thought of it that way. I never suffered that indignity but it’s easy to imagine.”

“I feel like I’m wearing that stricken look, like a stroke victim—everyone can see it right? Everyone can see the wind blow through me?”

“Well it leaves its mark, sure people see it, but cheer up, women find it attractive,” he said, affectionately. “That’s the return on your investment.”

Ray was on a roll and barely caught the humor of it. He had to get this out even if it was the twentieth variation on the theme.

“I’ve got some time left. I’m in my forties for Christ’s sake. I’m not ready to throw in the towel. I would have stayed for the animal warmth if it was there, forget the sex, the animal warmth would have kept me around for another five years.” Ray was getting increasingly agitated. “Every time I went back to her it was like walking on egg shells and I felt that fucking resentment and that victim thing from her. I can’t stand the way she won’t cop to any responsibility for the demise of our relationship.” This last was punctuated with a hand gesture that put quotes around the word “relationship.” “Maybe I’m not big enough to bear the burden of guilt by myself,” he said, in a calmer tone of voice.

“The guilt won’t get you anywhere. No one can say you didn’t try. In good faith too, I might add. Don’t hold your breath for any admission on Dianne’s part. You’ll turn blue in the face waiting for that. I know you thought of her as the best company you ever had. That’s what kept you there—and she was good company, but you pissed and moaned a fair share about what you didn’t get. I liked her too, but she was kind of a cold fish, and you’re an emotional guy and a wop to boot. You’ll find someone that comes closer to what you need. Go listen to the Rolling Stones for a while, give up that pitiful music you listen to. Those songs end the same way as Italian opera. How do you describe that?”

“Italian opera?”

“Yeah, the way you sum it up.”

“Somebody falls in love with the wrong person and dies?”

“Exactly” he said, laughing.

They ate a simple lunch and discussed the alternatives of going to the track or doing something truly mindless. Russell took the horses very seriously and, despite the wealth of information he had and the systems he had developed, lost with appalling regularity. Ray loved the races, even went to the track with his mother, but considered his participation an amalgam of a Zen experience and mentally defective behavior. In contrast to Russell's more analytic approach, his was decidedly "right brained". He accepted the element of chance, the low I.Q. of horses and the stupidity inherent in betting. His choices were made based on the colors the jockeys wore, the horses' names, or the special tingle he felt at the stem of his brain when considering the thirty to one odds on a horse that "looked good" to him. He did about as well as Russell when they counted up at the end of the day. The irony was not lost on either.

Neither was interested in the solitary tortures and pleasures of their studios. The day had turned radiant and the comfortably warm afternoon promised easy company. They opted for the track.

The Downs was beautiful. Set on the outskirts of Santa Fe, against the backdrop of the regal Jemez Mountains, one's first glimpse of the oval from the stands made the breath catch a little. The purple-green of the grass at the center was surrounded by the rich oxblood dirt of the track itself. There was a ritual clarity to the lay out, precise measurements made to suit huge beasts and the men who rode them. Some reptilian part of the brain registered this alongside memories of ancient coliseums, forums and boxing rings. The air of alertness and expectancy will be displaced, later in the afternoon, by dullness and disbelief. But at first, exhilaration held everyone in its thrall.

As was their habit, the two friends paid the extra few dollars to sit in the jockey club. Perched higher than the grandstands, the more generous seats offered a sweeping view of the race. The waiter service, café tables and a more upscale bar menu insured a more civilized afternoon. The

seats were protected from the sun and occasional rain and this was a definite plus. There were greetings all around from the regulars as Ray and Russell took their seats. The track denizens were usually men, but the few women who attended took notice of the pair and flirted their greetings, particularly to Russell who had the good looks associated with movie stars of the forties. He smoked and drank to excess and loved weed—he was a disappointment to those who promoted the merits of temperance. He looked great. Ray’s attractiveness was more ethnic. Darker and somewhat rougher, his looks were more familiar to the women and he received less attention. He was often kidded about looking increasingly like a refined version of John Gotti, which he took as a mixed compliment, not having sorted out his own feelings about the gangster.

They sat at their table with scratch sheets, programs, a copy of the Racing Form and the scribbled notes and calculations of Russell’s strategies. Ray looked at Russell skeptically.

“When the fuck did you do all that? Ray asked.

“Last night. I did some of it early this morning,” he said, with a half-smile. “I thought I might come today. You turning up just sealed my fate.”

“Don’t blame it on me if you blow your wad,” Ray joked. “What the hell are you doing now?”

“Well, I thought the track would be less muddy—it must have rained last night, out this way. I liked the number two horse in the second and the six horse in the final race—but they didn’t do well their last time out on a wet track. It’s back to the drawing board.”

Russell had recalculated the whole mess, taking the track condition into consideration, when they saw two local track mavens. Smiling Pete and Jewish Al were sitting a few rows down from them. Jewish Al was hard to miss. He had a long, kindly face that hung in folds, like a basset hound, and wore a white captain’s hat with gold leaves and an anchor embroidered on the front. It was his good luck hat, and legend claimed that his will demanded he be buried in

it. He wore the hat tilted up and set back on his head, which extended his forehead two inches into his bald scalp. Al had a fringe of hair above his ears which he dyed bright red. The Kelly green polo shirt and plaid pants were a constant in his wardrobe. Al beckoned them over.

“Russell, good to see you. I know your cosmopolitan friend here, but I forgot his name. I’m getting to be such an altacaca I’m not so good with names anymore—except for horses, those I remember.”

“And jockeys,” Russell added. “This is my friend Ray, from New York.”

“That I remember, you see, I’m not so forgetful. Russell, I have some very good information. You might want to hear it.”

“Of course I do, Al. I always listen to you,” Russell said, amused.

“You don’t always listen. You see Ray, if he listened he’d be a rich man today.”

“I do listen, Al...”

“Yeah, but take my advice? Not always.”

Jewish Al proceeded to tell Russell about doped horses in the third and fifth race. “This might change the complexion of your bet.” Al spewed out information at dizzying speed. “Shakey told me. You know Shakey, he’s the trainer for Mr. Big Shot...Shakey told me that Billy’s Brawn is coming off a bad tendon.” Billy’s Brawn was the horse favored to win in the last race. “Besides, they switched jockeys on him,” he added. “I’d stay away from him—he’s chopped liver.” Most of this was beyond Ray’s understanding of the sport and he watched and listened in bemused silence.

It was early enough so that he and Russell would still make the requisite visit to the paddocks to view the horses up close; the smell of manure, animal sweat and liniment made it less of an abstraction. Then it would be back to the seats for more adjustments, based on the sheen of the animal’s coat or an assessment of its psychological state. By post time the information had been gone over with

the intensity typical of a cloistered scholar's translation of a sacred text.

Although Ray consulted with Russell and sometimes followed his lead, he more often made his choices from the hip. Two horses stood out, their names the same as two of his former art dealers; Aladar and Portia. There was magic and not a little synergy here. He had great affection for both these people who were as unusual as their names and good at what they did. It was the kind of omen that read as a sure thing and was impossible to pass up. The added appeal was that Portia, in her pre-art days, had held a job as a handicapper. The horses were running in the same race and all Ray needed was a third to comprise the trifecta bet. The chance of winning is remote but the promise of a big win holds sway in a gambler's fantasy. This trifecta was in the fifth race but Ray made the bet long before the starting gate of the first. He was sure of the joss that surrounded his choice.

Russell had hit it right on two races that paid big and was half way to the daily double before the fifth race. He would complete the daily double and win one perfecta before the day was over, but his winnings were chump change next to the seven thousand dollars Ray collected for his bet on Aladar and Portia. They were ebullient. Although they both did well with their lives, it was imagination as much as dollars that made it possible. Their winnings would improve things considerably.

They requested their winnings in ten-dollar bills, both wanting to feel the bulky wads stuffed into their jeans. Ray made a comment to the effect that there was an established tradition among matadors who purportedly stuffed the crotch of their tight toreador pants to accent their masculinity before the crowds. Russell countered with a recollection of the film *Spinal Tap*. One of the rock group had wrapped an oversize zucchini in tin foil before shoving it into the crotch of his jeans, only to set off the airport security system. Presumably the metal foil registered as a secret weapon. They continued riffing on this theme, in

increasingly poor taste, the excitement of the moment giving license to their descent into adolescence. They left the track the way one should always leave the track, feeling invincible under the benevolent gaze of “Lady Luck”, with their pockets bulging.

They planned to celebrate with a lavish Italian dinner at one of Santa Fe’s finest restaurants and made their reservation from the track. Ordinarily they would have suited up more prosperously for the occasion, to make up for what they lacked in money. Both men had reached the age where they paid some attention to appearances but with slight differences in their respective motivations.

Ray, most of whose life had been spent in New York City, had an interest in style. He had loved fancy shoes since his teenage years and in fact remembered the first pair of Italian feather-weights he had bought. They were virtually weightless, took a brilliant shine and were worn with pride and extreme discomfort. The long, pointy tips earned them the label “cockroach killers”, the low-rent appellation at odds with the gangster image of high class he had hoped to affect.

Russell’s full name, Russell Sumner Parker III, told a bit about his disheveled casualness. Dress up, for him, was the uniform of khakis, blue blazer, white shirt and tie. It was what you did when you were supposed to. He didn’t bother with certain rules of society; he did it and paid as little attention to it as possible. His current girlfriend tried desperately to “clean him up” and he wore the stylish sport-coats and pants she bought for him with good humor and a typical lack of flair. He was so comfortable with how he looked and who he was that her efforts were akin to an attempt at genetic change.

The day’s momentum spilled into the evening. The men looked ratty but entered the up-scale restaurant radiating a confidence and ease of manner that quickly squelched the disdain on the maître d’s face. This did not prevent him from attempting to sit them at a far-away table

near the kitchen. The men refused. The maître d', with the slightest edge of sarcasm asked, "where would the gentlemen prefer to sit?" They chose a table near the fountain in the center of the room, hiding the relish they felt at winning this little power struggle as unsuccessfully as the maître d' hid his consternation.

The waiter boosted the promise of the evening. He was a young artist who recognized them and knew both by reputation. Aware of his obvious desire to please and amused by the young painter's declaration that he knew the menu as well as he knew "Matisse's late work," they gave him the task of ordering for them. His choices, which began with tortellini in brodo and ended with a "chocolate triumph" concoction, were without blemish. The exquisite meal was served with a grace and respect that made the two older artists smile. To be restaurant rich was something they could get used to. They left an extravagant tip that caused the waiter to gasp audibly. He promised to follow their suggestion that he treat himself to some new brushes. He escorted them out, with great ceremony, past the maitre d' whose attempt at a smile made him look as if he had an emergency toilet run on his mind. They stepped outside into the crisp, high mountain air and slapped each other five.

The evening had turned night and they joined the tourists making the requisite pasada. They walked down Palace beneath the portal that bordered the north side of the Plaza. The town offered them the relaxed pleasures of familiarity. The newer buildings, constructed in accordance with zoning regulations established early in the century, sat comfortably alongside earlier colonial-style architecture. The prevailing adobe style, with its limitation that nothing could be higher than the capital building, maintained an intimacy uncommon to modern cities. The softened angles, warm terra-cota of the stucco and the simple clarity of deco design were a fortuitous combination. The locals squawked about the increasingly sterile theme-park ambience of the

town, but in comparison with the sprawl festering out along Cerillos Road, it was a work of visionary genius.

Tasteful, clean, and a shoppers' paradise, the town was a Mecca for the droves of tourists who filled the restaurants and shops. They returned to their relatively drab lives back home with a shining token of their trip to the Southwest. The irony that "Santa Fe Style" comprised aesthetics from fifty different cultures didn't surface. Kilim rugs, Pendleton blankets, African masks, sarongs from Indonesia, Peruvian textiles, Mayan chess sets carved of jade and Italian designed clothing vied for attention with the concha belts, Indian jewelry, Spanish religious paintings, cowboy boots and hats, bolo ties, dream catchers, chili pepper wreaths, pinātas and Mexican tiles.

Book stores, reliable barometers of the concerns of the populace, carried volumes of the confessional and self-help variety, books of Native American lore and history, tomes promising spiritual guidance, instructional manuals for crafts of all types. There were, of course, books on Santa Fe style, Spanish culture, Old West stories, readings on the environment and lavish art books. On the shelves one could find pictorial travel guides that specialized not only in the Southwest but covered the exotic lands from which the objects that filled the shops had come.

The miracle was that this mess held together. It had come together over time, enough clues to its past life left to tell the story of its unfolding. People's needs and dreams, their failures and accomplishments, drove the dialectic that became Santa Fe. It was not a theme park, it served as a model for theme parks to aspire to. The argument that the "real Santa Fe" was found outside the Disneyland of the historic center was political, not analytical. The barrios, malls and suburban cluster housing were only another ring of the onion.

The two men lingered in front of a sporting goods store. Russell spied a graphite fly rod he had coveted for some time. The shop was open despite the late hour, presumably to snag a customer from the throng of tourists

on the street. The friends were two steps across the threshold when they felt the affects of the drinks and wine they had at dinner. They were too fuzzy to pay attention to the subtleties of flexibility, balance and weight that the transaction demanded. They looked at each other and laughed.

“Russell what are we doing here?”

“I guess we’d be pushing our luck. I’m not even sure if I could tell if the rod was straight.” His crow’s feet were in permanent laugh mode. “Let’s put this off ‘til tomorrow.”

“I’m not in much shape to drive up-country myself. If it’s OK I’ll put off my drive until morning.”

“Sure, stay in Lamy at the studio. We can handle the fifteen minutes drive. We’ll take the Chevy. You drive. You’re younger. My van’s OK where it is. I’ll come back with you in the morning.”

“Yeah, but early man. I’ve got my breakfast date, remember?”

“No, I didn’t think I had to. I knew you would.”

III

He arrived at Flora's and went around back where he found her in the garden. Her back to him, she was bent over at the waist involved in clipping flowers. Her tight jeans accented her figure that the baggy sweat pants she had worn the day before only suggested. Ray was happy for the revelation.

"Buenos días, chica."

"Hola, chico. ¿Qué tal?"

"Lots, really. I can't wait to tell you."

"Good news, I can see. Let me put these flowers in the vase and get us some coffee. Did you get...."

"I went a little berserk with the croissants. I wasn't sure what kind you liked so I got a bunch." He proffered the bag he had been holding behind his back. She looked in the bag, smiled in mild amazement and kissed him on the cheek both as greeting and appreciation.

"We will gain ten pounds if we eat all these—there's enough for a week's worth of breakfasts. I'll put them in a basket so we can look at the mound of them and not feel so bad if we eat two or three. I don't think we would notice. Give me a minute, I will get a few things from the kitchen."

"Can I give you a hand?"

"No just sit, I'll be right out."

The tablecloth was white, bordered with a lively pattern of grapes and vines. The table was set for two, the turquoise cups and plates sparkling surrogates in this preparation for intimacy. Ray realized he was nervous. "The power of things" he said, quietly, as Flora returned from inside.

"Flora, this looks beautiful. Muchas gracias."

“A usted.” I just set the table. I like the forties-style tablecloth and the Fiestaware. It is not just nostalgia, it looks good.”

“The dress you had on the other day looked like the same vintage.”

“Oh you noticed,” she smiled. “It is a little difficult to find clothes like that out here. When I visit my cousin in San Francisco, the one I told you about, there are some vintage shops I go to. Sometimes Maria finds something she thinks I would like and mails it to me. Like this blouse,” she said, pulling her chin into her neck to look down her front.

“Did you finish your translation work?”

“I made a start, but it’s so boring and technical that my eyes cross after a couple of hours. What did you do in Santa Fe? Did you have any time left after you bought all those croissants?”

“Just a little. I met a pal of mine and we went to the racetrack. Have you ever been?”

“A couple of times, but not for years. It’s fun watching the horses and it is great to win. Did you have fun?”

“We cleaned up! My friend Russell and I cleaned up. I won close to seven thousand dollars. It was fantastic!”

“Eeeee! That is mucho dinero! What will you do with so much money?”

“Maybe I’ll take a trip, go to Mexico for a while. I guess I could do something more practical, like re-roof the house. But it’s found money...in my mind it’s not like real money that you sweat for. You think that’s crazy?”

“No, it is perfect, much better than saving it for a rainy day. You like Mexico?” She looked quizzical.

“I like Mexico. Their government is a different story. But I have a personal connection to it—partly my own mythology.”

“Personal connection?” she said mischievously. “It sounds like there is a woman somewhere in the picture,” she said, framing the air with her hands.

He cringed inside, wondering if she had made him as a womanizer. Perhaps it was her own insecurity and she wanted assurance. His Mexican divorce from his first wife pricked his conscience like a cactus, but he said anyway: “No, no! My family settled there before they came to the states. They were marble carvers from Italy and went first to Veracruz to work on a cathedral. They did all the carving for the altar and the columns. So I feel this tug inside about the place, thinking, you know, my grandparents lived there a hundred years ago.”

“That must be why Tio said you laid stone like a Mexicano. You practically are one,” she said, laughing.

Although embarrassed at her easy reading of his secret conceit, he took the joke well.

“Oh, I’m not so sure it’s in the blood. I tried to carve a piece of stone once and it was too much like work. Not that laying stone isn’t work. Making up art is hard enough. I like the method to be a little easier—a paintbrush only weighs a few ounces.”

“Why did your family move al Norte?”

“They finished the job, I guess. Then they went to Nogales and worked on another church. Things were still wild enough then so that they lived in a stockade for protection. I fancy that my father was conceived there and then born in the States. I’m not sure if that’s true or even if the dates check out, but I like to believe it. My drinking tequila and smoking Delicados probably comes out of that fantasy.”

He was waiting for an acknowledgement from Flora beyond the joke she’d made about him being practically Mexican. He hoped she didn’t think him some Chicano wannabe or worse, some “roots” tourist cruising the exotic lands. He didn’t feel that way. He had spoken genuinely, not simply making conversation. But it was a complicated issue out here. He knew that having “recent” Mexican

roots counted little to families who traced their ancestry three hundred years back to Spain. Disdain, conveyed with the head tilted slightly back and nose lifted to the sky, was the likeliest response. Being Chicano was as much a curse as a source of pride in some eyes. He didn't expect that response from Flora, but it could be touchy. Over the past twenty-four hours, he had questioned his own feelings about this, particularly in relation to Flora. She was a Mexican-American, the real deal in his eyes. He was less concerned about the role this played in the drama of his own motivations, than how it played in Flora's perceptions of them. He thought she was wonderful, and if she was Mexican to boot so much the better.

"I don't think it matters where your father was born. Mexico is in your history anyway, just like Italy. For me, it is Mexico and Spain, but I don't know exactly where in Spain—Seville, I think, for my father's side. They were in Mexico for a long time. My mother's family has been in the states for so long that all I know about that side is that they were from Segovia. You know how it is when you are a kid—the older people tell you things and you barely pay attention."

"And by the time we're interested in hearing things about our families all the people who can tell you are dead."

"Even the great recipes! Tía Elena's flan is lost to history."

Ray was relieved that there was no issue at all. Flora was refreshingly matter of fact.

"So, do you know how your father's family came here?"

"My grandfather came from Rincón, in Guanajuato. He came probably for the same reason as your grandfather, to get work."

A patch of sun nudged through the branches of the piñón that shaded the portal. It fell like golden syrup across Flora's body.

"What did he do?"

“He had a small rancho and farmed a little. He was a laborer and ranch hand, but the cool thing was that he was also a retablista. I don’t know what you would call it in English. He painted those little ex-votos on tin. Like the ones in the Santuario.” You know what I mean? Have you been there?”

“Sure, I know what they are. There are some in Chimayo that are mind blowing. So your grandfather was an artist?”

“A folk artist anyway. He worked at other things. In mills and I think in a mattress factory. He met this older guy at the factory who introduced him to painting. They made some extra money painting fabric and in churches. The man who owned the factory gave him his first job painting an ex-voto. His wife had almost died. She survived a terrible fall. She broke so many of her bones no one thought she would live. Her husband prayed to the Virgin, and through a miracle she recovered. The factory owner was so grateful he asked my grandfather to paint a prayer of thanks to hang in the church.”

“Like the ones in the Santuario.”

“Just so. I even know what it looked like.” She went on. “My grandfather asked the factory owner to describe exactly what had happened. The woman had fallen from a balcony during some fiesta. The railing broke. My grandfather painted her falling through the air. Her arms were out like wings, like this:” she stuck her arms out and leaned her body back in her chair. “He painted all these pieces of railing flying around her in the air. It was nighttime, at a big hacienda. The woman was all dressed up in fancy clothes, because it was a fiesta.”

“You have a picture of this?”

“Only here,” she tapped her head. “It’s funny how the story stays with my family. My grandfather painted thousands of them. It’s incredible that he could remember it so exactly to tell the story. Dios mío, I’m sure the story has changed over the last eighty-five years. I heard it from my mother who was told it by her mother in law.”

“Well it was his first exvoto, I remember my first oil painting. It was a picture of Bongo the bear, the Walt Disney character who rode a unicycle. I’m sure it was no problem for him to remember. But tell me, what about your father? You told me a little about your mother.”

“That’s a very sad story. I’m not sure I want to spoil a beautiful morning. Or scare you off, I want you to come back again.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. She looked startled at her disclosure.

“I guess you didn’t notice I haven’t gone anywhere.”

He leaned across the table to kiss her and Flora turned to receive his kiss on her lips. It was the briefest of kisses but more electric than either expected. They broke into laughter at the look of shock mirrored on their faces. They sat quietly, savoring the moment, a little afraid of what might come next. Flora broke the silence first.

“That felt more than just right. It’s a little sudden for me to feel like...like I’m feeling. I can’t remember the last time I did anyway. I am usually more protective of myself, but maybe this is one of those occasions I save my foolishness for. I don’t think I had much choice in the matter.”

“I guess that moved the morning in a whole other direction. I’m not apologizing and it doesn’t sound like you are—it looks like we’re on the same page—they say the heart has its own logic. Ugh, I can’t believe I said that, it sounds so trite. What I mean to say is that I hope I come back many times, and I can’t tell you how good it makes me feel that you may be hoping for the same.”

He was talking rapidly and although the morning was still cool, sweating profusely.

“You’re as nervous as I am,” she said, reaching over with a napkin to jokingly mop his brow.

“Thanks, I needed that. It’s this Italian thing. The sweating, I mean. It’s just that there’s so much we don’t know about each other. You might not.... We can tell each other a little at a time, that way we won’t shock each other

and we can make it last longer. You might not like me so much when you learn the sordid details.”

“I am a big girl. Besides, not even the saints led totally exemplary lives. I surely have not. I have something to ask you, and please don’t take it badly, but I must know. Tio says that you often came here with your wife, but she’s not with you now.”

“Now that’s a long, sad story too. But it deserves telling and you’re entitled to hear it. It’s my turn to worry about scaring you off.”

“Let’s take our chances, if we are going to take our chances.”

“Claro. La vida es la vida.”

Ray gave her as honest and complete a picture as he could of the history and status of his marriage to Dianne. He spoke of the passion they shared for art that regretfully was more profound than the passion they shared for each other. He told how they had built a good life in New York and had many friends who they entertained often. For most of the time they found each other’s company stimulating and exciting. He tried to give Flora a sense of the unraveling, of his own part in it and what he imagined was Dianne’s. He confessed that he could be a difficult man and at times self-involved to the point of inattentiveness.

Ray hinted at his running around and the destructive impact this had on their marriage but linked it to Dianne’s coldness and seeming lack of interest in their sexual life. He wasn’t proud of his behavior in this regard, and preferred thinking of himself as a ladies’ man. This had a more benign ring to it than adulterer or philanderer and skirted what he considered the more ordinary core of the problem—that he was simply another blind fool trying to make it through the long night in any fashion he could. He spoke of the dark angel of despair who came on tiptoe, with barely audible footsteps, brandishing a wand that emptied his nights of promise; how the awful deadness that descended, the inexplicable death of his spirit, was transfigured into an impotency he couldn’t shake. He had

tried doctors, therapists, marriage counselors, acrobatic sex with a string of women and was unable to bring any key back to the locked door of his marriage. Flora listened to the recounting of the many breakups and attempts at reconciliation that were driven by his guilt and shame and a great longing. He said it was when the deadness threatened to become part of him that he decided to come to the mesa.

He was painfully aware of Flora during his rambling monologue. He had wished it to be a conversation, but a leaden awareness told him he had failed utterly. When he finished he looked at her, unable to hide his panic and said, “Should I leave now?”

“Just when the new story is starting? That would be a shame. Did you think you would scare me off? There’s a ray of hope in the saddest stories. Everything happens for a purpose. ¿Verdad?”

“I believe one can sew the silver lining into a dark cloud. I’m working on the purpose part.”

“So you’re really not with your wife now? Are you getting divorced?”

“I’m not with her. This last separation feels very final and I certainly have no intention of reviving it. The divorce is imminent—she thinks so too—and I hope it doesn’t get complicated. Economics and vindictiveness make a lethal potion. I’m hoping for the best, but she is mightily pissed.”

Ray began to slide into a visible funk. He began to apologize when Flora cut him short.

“There’s no need to apologize, besides I wanted to know. You were braver than me this morning. Talking about memories makes you relive them—bad or good. It wasn’t a good time for you and it wasn’t so long ago. These things linger on—time is the best doctor. I’m sorry for your struggle...You’re here now, yes?”

“Yes. Maybe there’s some truth in the idea that things are for a purpose, after all. I’m still not sure, but you’re right. I wouldn’t be here now if it wasn’t for the

mess of the last few years. And you found the boat!” He hadn’t been planning to tell her this yet.

“The boat?”

“The little red boat you rescued from the arroyo.”

He read the puzzlement on her face. She still hadn’t made the connection.

“I made it. I set it sailing that afternoon.”

Her enormous smile cleared the clouds that were building in his eyes. She rose from her chair, bent down and embraced him.

“That is so remarkably....perfect” she said. “And you, Señor Doubting Thomas, you don’t believe in fate?”

“Well, I didn’t until now,” he said.

“Enough darkness for the day. Let’s celebrate our good luck with a little walk. I will show you where I went as a kid and save my sad stories for another time.”

They left the patio without clearing the breakfast dishes and walked toward the river. They followed the same trickling path Flora had taken many times before. The hard earth had been scuffed to sand along the track. Whimsy rather than utility had mapped the path. They walked in silence for a while, each savoring the moment and happy to let the memories of the morning wash over them.

The sound of the river was all there was. The sun had a firm grip on the day. The birds, animals and the wind itself were stilled by the oncoming heat. They had on the straw hats they were wearing the day they met. Hers was round-topped with a wide brim that flopped when she walked. The hat was oversized and made her look younger and more diminutive than she was. It was equally suited for garden work or lounging on the Riviera. Ray’s Panama he had bought in Mexico a few trips back. The high, center-creased crown added a few inches to his stature, the flat, snap-brim a touch of urban hipster. They looked at each other and laughed.

“I have not courted in a while,” she said using the old-fashioned word. “Not here anyway. Not since I was a teenager”.

“We used a churchyard in the neighborhood,” Ray said. “We called it ‘making out’ back then. But I guess it was courting. It was so totally glandular we were oblivious to the refinements. The girls all owned portable radios and carried them everywhere. You would always have music when you made out. Rock n roll and sex were smelted together in a big way. Probably not a good idea to play some old Platter’s song when we’re alone. I could start drooling.”

“I’ll file that away as information to be used later. In case I need it.” She looked at him in a manner that suggested his response.

“Something tells me you may not need it.”

There was something childlike in the way she took his hand as they entered the protection of the bosque.

“This is amazing! It’s like an oasis. This must be a magical place for you.”

“It is very special. It’s been my little hiding place since I was a girl. I came alone a lot—when I wanted to be alone but not feel alone. I’d play here with my cousin Maria and (turning and looking up into his face) my big confession, with my boyfriend Rick. I was sixteen and, well, I was sixteen,” she said with an embarrassed smile.

They sat on a large flat rock in the grassy center. The clearing was nearly round and only about twenty-five feet across but cast a spell that had little to do with numbers or size. Made safe by a ring of trees, it was just the kind of place one would come to, child or adult, to escape and daydream. It was the romantic glade of sylvan love poetry with potent additions. The sexual charge peculiar to trysting spots and secretive places hung in the air. It linked the bosque with other hidden places that were worlds apart; darkened church yards and the Lover’s Lanes that dot Middle America, fancy suites rented for the occasion, abandoned warehouses and tangled copses of urban parks.

Sordid and grand passions alike, hasty fumbling, long silken caresses, and nervous, first attempts at love homogenized and met here.

Although they were not yet lovers, their antennae were tuned to this inevitability. Had it been a cold day, the heat of their bodies would have generated fog. Flora had not taken him here with any motive resembling seduction. Their excitement was coated with a sweaty anxiety that came as a surprise to them both. Ray spoke first.

“We could take the plunge right here, couldn’t we?” he asked, moving his hand lightly across her back. He could feel her pushing back into his hand to increase the friction.

“We are certainly adults, well beyond the age of consent... except I feel more like an adolescent at the moment. It’s all a bit overwhelming, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty nervous too. I’m out of practice. I mean, I’m familiar with lust but it’s different when it’s coupled with this other thing...it seems more momentous. And this place...” his voice dropped to a whisper.

“I feel like the arroyo. Nothing, nothing, nothing and then all of a sudden this big rush and I’m afraid it could seep away just as quickly. I’m nervous as well, but I guess I want to drag it out a little, too. It seems so...I know it’s going to happen soon—but the waiting is luscious, yes?”

“The waiting is luscious, yes,” he agreed.

Although giving voice to their nervousness loosened its hold on them, the open acknowledgement of their mutual desire raised the temperature a few degrees. In their willingness to wait, they gave themselves the permission to go forward. Lingering kisses kept time with their fingers that traced lines of small fire on each other’s arms and necks. They left the bosque with their arms around each other, reluctant to break the exchange of heat.

It was a while before either of them spoke. When Flora did, her voice was wobbly with desire.

“My legs are like jelly. Press against me, like this,” she said, demonstrating with a shove of her body against him.

“I can hardly walk either” he said, giving her another kiss. “So what do we do now?”

“What if we meet tomorrow for lunch. Shall we do a little picnic somewhere?”

“I’m not sure I can wait that long” he said impulsively.

“Any plans for tonight?”

“I do in fact have something to do tonight” she said, rather formally. Seeing the disappointment in his eyes she smiled and quickly added. “I’m having dinner with my friend Flavia. She lives in El Rito. It’s a rare opportunity; she is perpetually busy with her nurse’s job. We made plans weeks ago but I would love you to meet her sometime. Tonight will be a lot of girl talk. I’m sure you will be discussed,” she said with a laugh.

“Eeee!” He mimicked her expression. “Should I worry?”

“No, sleep easy. I predict you will have many dreams tonight, as will I. Should we do the picnic?”

“It’s a great idea, let’s go to the dam. I’ll make some chicken tonight to take with us.”

“The lake would be a wonderful place. I haven’t been there for a long while. I’ll bring some salad or vegetables...and croissants. You like beer? I’ll bring a couple of beers. Oh this will be fun, I can’t wait,” she said girlishly.

They arrived at Flora’s house where they dragged out their parting, made sweeter by the plans for the next day.

IV

Abiqui dam had been built by the Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1950s. It had been designed as a flood control project, to regulate the flow of the Chama River, a tributary of the mythic Rio Grande. The lake born of this project flooded a natural valley that covered thousands of acres. These ancestral lands had been inhabited since the early part of the millennium and their loss, to Native Americans and Hispanics, had been devastating. The area had originally been settled by the Anasazi, after their departure from Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde to the north. Their descendents, the Tewa, had been gathering flint for their arrowheads from Cerro Pedernal long before the Spanish arrived in the 1500s. Now the lake is a recreational area, with a few campgrounds scattered along the shore and a boat ramp. On weekends families come for picnics and cruise the lake in the speedboats they've hauled on trailers. On weekdays, and off hours the lake is silent.

The Pedernal looms like a sentinel, its chiseled contour resembling a temple more than a mountain. The shore of the lake, which rises in geologic steps, has a natural congruence with the mountain that watches over it. A tumble of large, flat rocks pave the shore in russet and pink. The Master's Plan is everywhere evident and dwarfs the efforts of the civil engineers. These are more easily seen from down river. When fishing the waters below the dam, the view is jammed in by the confinement of the canyon. The dam rises while the Pedernal vanishes into the vault of visual memory. It is an uneasy place to be. The constant roar of water coursing down the spillway is a reminder of the millions of gallons held at bay. We have seen too many disaster movies, heard too much of the corruption in the

construction industry, to rest easy at the foot of this barrier of concrete and steel.

Ray picked up Flora at her house at midday. They chatted cheerily during the short ride, recounting the events of the intervening twenty-four hours since they had seen each other. As they reached the turnoff for the lake, Ray saw a flicker of anxiety pass over her face.

“You okay? You look a little worried all of a sudden.”

“I wanted to tell you yesterday, but I was too embarrassed.” Ray looked at her questioningly but said nothing. “I wanted to tell you that I can not swim.”

“You mean you have your period? That’s no big deal. We’ll picnic and hang out for a while.” Ray harbored a few out of date ideas.

“No, I mean I never learned to swim.”

“No shit? Gee, I never considered that. Even though I grew up in the City, it was on the ocean, you know, Jones Beach, Rockaway. There were the pools and the East River, filthy beyond belief, but it was there. I guess I always thought people who grew up in the country had it made, at least for swimming. But...how come?”

“I just never did. As kids we played in the acequia , you know, the irrigation ditch, but it was only splashing around, and not very deep. We were forbidden to go in the river, it runs too fast near the house. There were always stories of some poor kid drowning. The lake was too far away without a car, we had only the one my father used for work. When he and the car were around on weekends the last thing he wanted to do was drive to the lake. It never seemed like a big thing.”

“It sounds like you thought about it some though?”

“Only last night,” she laughed. “I knew it was sure to come up. You did say we should take a picnic and go swimming. And I know you love the water so much, I did not want to be a disappointment to you. I did disappoint you, ¿sí?”

“No, it was just unexpected, but I think it’s kind of charming. Besides maybe you’ll let me teach you...and I get to see you in a bathing suit anyway. I know that won’t be a disappointment.”

She hit him playfully on the leg, embarrassed at his compliment.

“We will see. Maybe after lunch, when it gets hot. But we have to digest our food first,” she said, seriously, repeating the mother’s maxim passed on to every kid in the Western world.

They chose a spot at a narrow end of the lake that was a bit of a walk from the parking area. It was a small, sandy area surrounded by immense table rocks and backed by a steeply rising cliff wall that insured privacy. Ray told her that he often came here and swam naked and was never disturbed. Here there was easy access to the water, which deepened gradually until it was chest high and dropped off profoundly thirty yards from shore. The shore was treeless but for the occasional stunted juniper that offered little protection from the sun. Ray had brought along a portable, domed sunshade. Basically, it was a three-sided tent with netting for the fourth wall; it popped open easily and rested on the hardest ground. Flora added her blanket to the set up, they stashed the food in the shadow of the rocks and they were blissfully ensconced. The lake was dead flat and as nearly colorless as the sky. The flinty image of the Pedernal lingered as a silvered ghost in the glare of the afternoon sun.

Flora was impressed with what she called Ray’s “Ranger Rick” preparation and teased him accordingly. Aware that they felt anything but casual about changing into their suits, they became quiet. They both laughed at their awkwardness and said simultaneously, “you first”. They joked about what they were about to reveal and made up preposterous stories about their bodies.

“I am flat-chested and have a hairy back” Flora said.

“I’m not so sure you’ll like the terminal acne all over my legs. The metal pins in my knees are unsightly but you might get used to them” he responded.

“I have my suit on under my clothes. And you?”

“Yo tambien.”

“Let’s undress at the same time then,” Flora said.

“I’ve got a better idea, let’s undress each other.”

“Eeee! Sort of a practice run. I like that idea.” Her voice dropped a register and thickened.

“Come closer, we can’t unbutton each other like this.”

He was wearing his usual jeans and white shirt, she a wrap-around turquoise skirt and a blouse that buttoned down the back. They took a long time as they paused between buttons to touch or kiss lightly some newly revealed area of skin. The shirt and blouse were first, then came the skirt. It whooshed to the ground as soon as the tie was undone. She rejected his offer of help as she undid his jeans, not in the least flustered by the extra effort needed to peel them from his body. He wore one of those relatively scant European bathing suits and he could not hide his excitement. Flora allowed her hand to graze him lightly as she knelt to finish removing his jeans.

“That was the deal, right? she said, as she stood up. She had on a two-piece suit—black abbreviated shorts and a white sports bra—her skin, without the help of the sun was darker than his. They stepped back from each other to admire their handiwork. It was as if in the act of revealing, they had created each other. They would confess to each other later that it was one of the most erotic experiences either had ever had.

“Qué guapo que está” she said, pleased with what she saw.

“Does that mean not so bad?” He had not heard this expression before.

“Well, it is better than that. It is really a little racy, more like, he is hot.” She watched his confusion with amusement.

“I’m a little at a loss for words. You’re so gorgeous. And you’re not too flat-chested and I think I can even get used to the hairy back after a while,” he teased.

She was completely at ease with her body and took pleasure in Ray’s appreciative looks. The caress of his eyes told of his delight in what he saw. There was a hint of roundness to her shapely figure that masked her athletic build. Her skin was dark and smooth and as radiant as her smile. They stretched out side by side on the big table rock, the warmth of which blurred the boundaries of their own body heat. They lay quietly, Flora’s head resting in the crook of his arm, and luxuriated in the closeness.

The heightened sensuality of the afternoon sharpened their appetite. Having deliberately postponed their abandonment to sex, they fell ravenously on their lunch of chicken, pico de gallo and tortillas. They had some silliness eating the grapes that Flora brought for desert. Ray told, to her great amusement, the fantasy he had concocted about her eating apricots. She said she didn’t like apricots very much but she might give it a try, simply to see his reaction.

Things were going fine until Ray said he was going for a swim. Flora quickly folded her arms across her body. She said she was a little chilly. It was ninety degrees and a heat haze hung over the island off shore.

“Let’s just go down to the water and splash around. It’s shallow here for a long way out and it’s easy to get in. Come on it’ll be fun.”

He led her like a child to the water’s edge. He instinctively spoke in a calming voice of other things. It was difficult to distract her. He remembered the ridiculous joke about the elephant sitting on the couch that no one wished to acknowledge and decided on a direct approach.

“Hey, Flora I know you can’t swim, and I can see you’ve gone rigid, so why don’t we talk about it. Don’t let your worry spoil your day.”

“You remember all those things I told you about why I can not swim? Well, they are all true but it is much more complicated.”

“Are you afraid of the water?”

“Not exactly afraid but, oh it is so hard.” She started to cry. A small clouding in her eyes soon turned to deep, heaving sobs. Ray held her, aching to be of comfort. He held her without speaking and waited for her anguish to ebb. She was shaking, her face buried in his chest. When she regained her composure she began speaking. Her talk patterned the intensity of her sorrow. It began hesitantly, then mounted to a roiling wash of words.

“I told you that the story of my father was a very sad story. I can hardly speak of it. Even to my mother, when she was alive, I could not speak to her about it. We fixed his death in some way in our minds that let us mention it, like some kind of fact, but we could never talk about it. It was so horrible. He was murdered. He was such a good man. We loved him. Everyone around here loved him. At least that is what we thought. He was the master of the acequia, you know, the ditch boss. He had to make sure the irrigation ditches were clear and that everyone got the water they were supposed to. Water is such a big thing for the farmers and the ranchers here. I mean you can’t do anything without it and my father was the man who had to make sure everything went right and everyone did what they should. Some of the people here are crazy you know. Like that man Carlos who lives at the bottom of the mesa. He is crazy and a very bad man. They fight all the time with each other, even families have these big arguments and then they don’t speak with each other for years. And the water, always the water is something to fight over. So they pick the best man to settle all these squabbles and fix the ditches. They picked my father and then they killed him. Someone beat him and then drowned him in the acequia. I used to

love the water as a little girl. I told you I played in the acequia, the same one they found him laying face down in. It was cruel. I was barely a teenager when he died. I remember I was so proud of my little breasts when they started to grow and he could never be proud of me becoming a young woman because he was dead. My poor mother carried on but she never recovered really. She learned how to drive after he died, she had to. She managed the construction business he had built and that took care of us. It still helps take care of me. He would have been so proud of her, too.”

She lapsed into tears again, exhausted from telling her story. Again, Ray embraced her until she stopped shaking.

“I’m so sorry. That is truly a sad story, how awful that you were cheated like that. I was forty when my own father died and I felt cheated.”

“Sí, the loss was terrible and the way it happened was even worse. It is good though that I knew he loved us, and that we loved him. I do not know how people make it through when they lose a mother or father without knowing that.”

He was gently touching her face as she spoke to him and, as his fingers traced three tiny scars on her jaw, she spoke again.

“That is part of the story, too. Those little scars are from a dog bite I got when I was a little girl. My face was a horrible mess...the dog attacked me ferociously, for no reason. They sent me to the hospital in Albuquerque to fix it. It is a miracle worthy of an exvoto that these scars are the only marks left—except for the wound inside. My father was enraged and he found the dog and shot him the same day. He shot him right in the neighbor’s yard. It was that Carlos who owned the dog, the loco who sells the poplars for coyote fences. He has all those broken trucks and cars in his yard—right at the bottom of your road. Anyway, that is how you deal with things here. My father shot the dog. I think he would have shot Carlos too if he

had been around. But he did not, and even though the dog bite happened years before, we always suspected that Carlos was the one who murdered my father. Carlos was involved in some water dispute at the time too, but we could never prove it.”

“Oh Flora, that’s heart-breaking. So Carlos is a real psycho. I hate to tell you that I already did buy coyote fence from him. I remember Tio was funny about it when I told him. I didn’t know why. I thought perhaps I should have asked Tio to cut the poles for me and that he felt bad that I didn’t. Carlos’ place looks empty—and I haven’t seen any of his fucking dogs around.”

“The funny thing is I love dogs, and I am not afraid of them at all. The one I hated is dead and even though I wish Carlos was dead, I still like most people. The reason you haven’t seen him around is that he is in prison, for trying to run over a trooper with his truck. With a little luck he will not be out for five years. It is not the first time they locked him up.”

“You must be exhausted. What do you want to do?”

“First, I want to give you a big hug, like this. Then I want to tell you how great it feels that you listened to me like you did. I really feel like a weight has been lifted from me. And now I want to sit in the water with you and maybe you can give me my first swimming lesson. After all, ¡la vida es corta!”

This changed the timbre of the swimming lesson. Ray was acutely aware that the weight of memory had been shifted from Flora’s shoulders to his own. He proceeded cautiously, even rephrasing the basic instructional terms; “dead man’s float” became free float and “doggie paddle” translated as child’s paddle. He first made sure that she was willing to get her face wet, something he remembered resisting as a child. Getting her to hold her breath and submerge her head was trickier, but she gradually relaxed and finally, delighted in the experience. When she opened

her eyes under water for the first time, she was thrilled and repeated the act with an innocence and concentration linked to the pleasures of childhood.

At first Ray supported her with a hand on her stomach and another on her thighs until she became more confident and realized that she could float by herself. He took it as progress when she remarked that she liked “this part of the lesson best” and pretended disappointment when she no longer needed his assistance. Despite her compacted body, and the low buoyancy of the lake, she floated like a cork. Ray’s encouragement was interspersed with joking references to her butt, which, he said, was probably what kept her afloat. Flora thought it remarkable that people could float on their backs and asked to try it. She saw the flirtatious smile on his face and quickly added, “No fooling around, I want you to be very professional when you hold me.”

The intermingling of instruction and sexual charge speeded the learning curve. By the end of the afternoon Flora was doing the doggie paddle in widening circles. She looked happy as a seal swimming around Ray, who had been standing in the water to his waist for the better part of the afternoon. He finally coaxed her out of the water so he could take a swim across to the island and back. He had to take a break from the tangled dynamics of teacher-student-sex-love-woman-child-trust-fear and just swim. Along with hiking and painting, it was guaranteed to empty one’s head.

Steeped in the excitement and fatigue that accompanies the completion of something difficult, they lay down on the rocks to rest. Flora repeatedly reminded Ray of how momentous an occasion this had been—“you don’t know” and “I never expected” were her preferred expressions for the following quarter-hour. In making plans for the next lesson, both realized how much they already assumed about a future together. Both were reckless and hungry as if jet fuel propelled them forward.

They changed into their clothes with modesty despite their earlier, erotic play. Flora wrapped her skirt

and peeled off her still-wet suit from underneath. She removed her top with her back turned toward him. Ray sat down facing the lake to remove his suit and put on his jeans. The swimming lesson had demanded a focus that held their sexual electricity to a murmur. The water play was over, and both of them were feeling exquisitely naked beneath their clothes. Ray walked toward her bare chested, his unbelted jeans hanging on his narrow hips. Flora's nipples pressed against her wet blouse, her large dark aureoles plainly visible. It was more than either of them could deal with and they fell into an embrace that left them dizzy and impatient to get home.

This was not a time for a house tour, and they did not linger to appreciate the view. They entered through the kitchen and left any doubts, along with their clothes, on the kitchen steps. No patient teasing this time, just a blur of arms and legs, mouths, hands, popped buttons and ripped seams as they charged toward a closeness to fill the waiting. They tumbled down the few steps onto the floor, oblivious to the cool tiles. He was rigid as a pool cue, she was sopping wet, and when he entered her they gasped at the fire between them. Flora's hurried caution, that she was unprotected, and his equally hasty acknowledgement, were the last recognizable words they uttered. Sighs and moans, juice, sweat, friction and heat were the new language the lovers designed for themselves. When they finished, they had made it only as far as the kitchen table. A sugar bowl and some candlesticks were swept aside and Flora collapsed face down in their place. Their backs bore the crisscross pattern of the floor tiles and Flora's breasts were coated with a dusting of spilled sugar. Gentleman that he was, Ray took the responsibility of cleaning her up in a most imaginative fashion.

They helped each other to the bed. They lay satisfied, stuck belly to belly with their own glue, then dropped into sleep with the suddenness of narcoleptics. They awoke a short while later, ready for a second dance. Their animal urgency tempered, they moved at a slowed,

waltz tempo, savoring each other's taste and touch, more willing to tease and explore. Their steps were more circuitous and languorous, a shiver or erect nipple a cue to the choreography. They spoke little as they expanded the vocabulary of their bodies. An occasional, "do that again" or, "that feels good" was all they needed to chart the course of each other's pleasure. They were hardly neophytes in the love game, but this brand-new world blotted out all those who'd come before.

The softness of the night gathered around them as they lay spent, his body spooned to hers. Flora twisted her body around to look at him.

"Ray, that was fantástico! It was worth waiting for. Even better than the swimming lesson. Now we have two things to do tomorrow. I hope we have time for the swimming."

She nibbled on his nipple in case he didn't understand.

"Well we do have our priorities. And I think more of this is important for your swimming. After all Esther Williams was a sex maniac—they say that's why she was so good."

"That's not true! You're making it up."

He could see she wasn't quite sure if he was.

"I am making it up, but I'm not when I say you're beautiful and that it was truly fantastico and that I am mucho lucky to be here with you."

There was no let-down, no self-recrimination, no "what did I do?" or "what am I doing here?" They eased into a fluid comfort. It was a different kind of comfort than the tamed bliss that develops later, framed by architecture and an attachment to the arrangement of things over time. This was new, still raw, and moved with an irregular rhythm deaf to the metronome of domestic life.

Flora said suddenly, "I've got to pee, where's the bathroom?"

She ran off in the direction of Ray's pointed finger. He watched her wander back, naked, as she looked at the

house for the first time. She scanned the kitchen, passed into the living area and paused briefly before some exvotos and two of his own paintings. She became aware of him watching her, and did a little faux-forties beauty pose, before she scooted back to bed and jumped beneath the covers.

“I was wondering how much of this is you and how much is your ex-wife? You did the paintings?”

“I confess. There’s not much of her stuff left here. She took it, or I removed it. Most of the work I did, even though there were certainly joint decisions. Like, I built the kitchen and laid the tile. And I made the table that we just christened. I’ve been most proud of that, even though there was something lacking. Now it seems finished.”

“Uumm, we sure did. It was very sturdy. It held up under our weight. I like the rough log legs and smooth top...kind of pumpkin colored. I got a close up look at that.” She stirred against his body.

“You think your grandfather could have painted one of the exvotos? They’re never signed.”

“The one with the truck accident is very beautiful but it’s not old enough to be his. The one with the doctors and baby—the doctors seem like ghost people—is from a different area in Mexico...not Rincón. Anyway, there must have been hundreds of artists painting them—it would be pretty unlikely...let me get up again and take a closer look. Eeee, in this one where the doctor is holding up the baby? You can hardly see the mother...she’s just a little bump in the sheet. The baby doesn’t look much there either...not so good, just a few skinny lines. I guess the mother didn’t think it was too ugly or she wouldn’t have paid to have the exvoto painted ...just a little tin prayer. She probably didn’t pay more than ten dollars, but it would have been something that wasn’t too easy for her.”

“Yeah. I guess that if something is a sacrifice, then we feel its worth more. That’s why the money I won at the track doesn’t seem like real money. But, hey Flora, check

out the other one. I got that because of my father. He was a short-haul truck driver.”

He got up and stood naked beside her

“This is my favorite. Oh, ¡qué bueno! Look, the truck is painted three times. Here...here...and again where it crashes.”

“It looks like he was just leaving the town in the background. The truck is empty, he probably sold his things at the market.”

“I wonder if the town really looked like that...and the mountains...they probably did. Señor Silva kneeling down over here, who commissioned it, probably described it to the artist pretty good.”

“The artist got lost in the shuffle. We remember the patron. His name is there in big letters. Some things never change.”

“But it was not about the artist—it was about this little kneeling truck driver and the milagro, and the Virgin of Los Lagos. He wanted the Virgin to be sure she knew who was offering thanks.”

She said this in such a matter of fact voice, that Ray was compelled to accept it as true. He let it pass, happy not to get into a harangue concerning the injustices of the art world. He was wondering what she thought of his own work, when she spoke again.

“I think your paintings are beautiful, too. They are very different. This one with the boat and...it looks like a waterfall—it seems very much like you. The other one with all that water in it—is it water? It is kind of sexy, but it is a little frightening too. Here you are in the desert painting all these pictures of water. Will you show me some more tomorrow?”

“I’d love to. It’s funny, I never really thought about the water thing. I mean, I know I paint it a lot—I like its fluidity—and I’m a Pisces after all, just a fish out of water out here. I never considered how odd it was to continue to paint it in the desert. I’ve been so busy tracking down any suggestion of dampness out here—It’s like a Yogi

Berraism—“there’s no man who can think and play at the same time.” You know who Yogi is?”

He realized there were some serious disadvantages growing up so far from New York. She surprised him with her response.

“Everyone knows who he is. He played with the New York City Yankees and said funny things—but not because he was trying to be funny. Right?”

“Right, he was a great player—but we say Yankees or New York Yankees, or Yanks, never New York City Yankees. They play in the Bronx, so sometimes the sports writers refer to them the Bronx Bombers, but I’ve never heard a fan call them that.”

Flora’s attention was wandering; baseball was not on her radar screen. It wasn’t much on Ray’s mind either. He put his arm around her and said, “Let’s go outside.”

“Like this? Naked?”

“Why not? There’s no one but the cototes paying any attention, and it’s pitch black.”

The night had eliminated all but the hulking silhouette of the Sierra Negra, and they stumbled in the darkness, teasing and scaring each other in their vulnerability. They sat on a simple log bench, whose roughness accented their nakedness, and hugged each other against the night’s coolness. When their eyes habituated to the darkness, they followed the electric storms that swept along the peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The distant lights of Truchas dimmed in counter point to the crackled lines of lightening. This was slim evidence of human habitation, a mere mote in the eye of the fractured night. Overhead, the dark, velvet sky sparkled with the Milky Way and it was hard for the lovers to believe it was one with the troubled sky to the east.

“I’ve never been naked outside; I think I like it. It is a little cool,” she said, squirming closer.

“Never? God I’ve lost count how many times. In the Sixties it was a way of life. We took our clothes off at

the drop of a hat. If it stormed we took off our clothes; if the sun was blazing we took off our clothes. Any excuse would do.”

“Even the girls?” she said incredulously.

“Especially the girls,” he said laughingly. “But it wasn’t so much about sex, it was more about craziness, and being outrageous. The wilder you were, the more dope you smoked, or the faster you drove a motorcycle, the hipper you were. And of course, we all wanted to be hip, it was a full time job. But man, was it fun!”

“I don’t think I would have been ready for you then. The locker room was the only place I was ever naked with other people, and even that was embarrassing.”

“My, you’ve come a long way,” he teased. “It was a different time for me. You were a baby when I was rolling in the mud at Woodstock. And for what it’s worth, I was barely ready for myself back then. At sixteen, I was stealing cars and driving them until they ran out of gas—at twenty one I was dropping acid and going to the moon. Things changed real fast.”

“So you were a bad boy?” Did you really steal cars?”

“I’m afraid I was a bad boy, and the cars were the least of it. I was a pretty confused teenager—that was the time of gangs and juvenile delinquents—it seemed like everyone was confused and seriously pissed. But really, compared to what goes on now, it was almost benign. I notice you didn’t ask me if I really dropped acid.”

“That’s easier for me to imagine, and you smoke pot. We had our little experiments with mushrooms and pot too—it was never difficult to get—people grow the stuff all around here. The farmers in Espanola and Medanales aren’t just growing apricots.”

“You’re getting cold, I can feel it. Let’s go inside and rustle up some grub.” He said this in his best John Wayne voice.

Once inside, they both put on sarongs, which Ray showed her how to tie in the Balinese style. Although he

demonstrated both the male and female way of wrapping, Flora opted for the less restrictive men's tie. The house was still comfortably warm and both went shirtless. This heightened the entertainment value of the simple meal they prepared together. They shared a joint after dinner and had a nightcap. They made lazy love on the couch and fell asleep in each other's arms. Around three they woke and finally stumbled into bed.

At dawn they blinked awake long enough to see the sun make a furtive appearance over the Sierra Negra before it was smothered under a leaden pillow of clouds. The rain that followed greeted them when they awoke in late morning. Their mood turned the gray day into a golden opportunity to explore what they had outlined the night before. They took a break at noon for some coffee and returned to bed until their bodies could no longer keep pace with their imaginations.

Flora wanted to return to her own house to get some fresh clothes and the croissants from the day before. Both of them admitted they "had a thing" about wasted food that was out of proportion to the reality of the loss. The plan was to make the run to Flora's and return to the mesa. They grabbed two slickers and started out the kitchen door. Ray heard the sound of the arroyo.

"Uh, oh. This is going to be more of an adventure than we expected."

"What's wrong, it's only raining?"

"Hear the arroyo? That's what's wrong."

"You mesa people lead a different life than we do in the valley. I never heard it from up here-it sounds like a big animal."

"Yeah, a big animal with a whiskey baritone. It looks like that from up here too. Let's check it out."

"Eeee, it looks like it's running pretty good. I don't think we can cross at the road."

"We'll drive out the other end, and go around to your house the back way. It'll take a little longer but that's

no big deal. It's not as if it's keeping us from another round—we've fucked ourselves brainless as it is.”

“Uumm, I can still think a little, though. Maybe...”

“None of that. I'm an older man after all. You don't want to use me up the first day, do you?”

“No, no, and we've got my swimming lessons to think of. Esther Williams had to practice too, didn't she?”

They turned right at the bottom of the mesa and about a mile down found the road flooded. The rain had been raging up-country all night. The earth, baked to a leathery crust, choked on the volume of water and sent it skidding down to the bottom land. The road here was rarely impassable and it washed out only after the big arroyo further along. Even if they were able to drive through this mess, they knew there would be no crossing at the arroyo. They were both thrilled to be stranded by the waters.

They turned around, drove toward Flora's house, left the car at the crevasse in the road where they had first met, and walked upstream to a flat shallows, where they waded across.

The valley wind came up suddenly and whipped the rain slanted. When it hit the earth, it was spit back in raking gobs of red mud. Despite their slickers, the quick dash to the house left them drenched, and looking like they had worked a day in a charnel house. They reached the house laughing and breathless.

“Oh man, that's some rain. We should have run naked for all the good our clothes did.”

“That would have been fun, but even the bushes have eyes down here. It is not as private as up there—even so, the whole world probably knows already that we were out naked last night. So maybe we should go back naked?”

“It would save on laundry.”

“Come in for a minute while I get some things together. I think I'll take my PC too, just in case....”

“In case we have a spare moment out of bed? You never know.”

“How long do you think we’ll be at your house?” A small fearfulness inhabited her voice. “We’re going to stay a while aren’t we? I’m not quite ready to stay here, I love it up there—it seems so safe and far away.” Ray held her, first tenderly, and then, with an intensity that left them both struggling with their tears.

“It’s a little scary, huh? It’s hard to live in the moment. The future and the past have a peculiar way of showing up uninvited.”

“Just when we’re having a good time...probably because we’re having a good time. It’s difficult not to think about tomorrow.”

“I know, but today is yesterday’s tomorrow.”

“¡Profundo!” There was the slightest sarcasm in her tone.

“What I wanted to say was that this has been...I can’t think of anyone who I would rather be stranded with than you.”

“You do mean that, don’t you?”

“More than you know...I wouldn’t joke about that.

“Yo tambien. I feel as if I am on some new journey, and I like it. I like it very much and I want it to go on. I promise not to worry about it though. I can see it makes you nervous,” said Flora.

“Truly it doesn’t—it’s just that I have to pinch myself—when I do, I realize, I’m completely awake, not dreaming at all—still, I think I worry about it being a dream that’ll evaporate.”

“Like the arroyo? A big rush and then a trickle and then nada? That would be a terrible thing for me too. We just won’t let it happen, and if it’s fate then nothing we do matters.”

“And if it’s good luck?”

“Then we’re very lucky,” she offered her show-stopping smile.

Ray wandered about the house while she got her clothes and laptop computer together. He felt comfortable in the house; its intimate scale and thick adobe walls made it seem smaller than it actually was. Straw was mixed with the mud masonry of the walls in the original part of the house, which included what was now the living room. Although the room was far from regal, beefy vigas supported the roof. The logs had been smoothed with a spoke-shave and retained the luster of the tool. An original kiva fireplace, revamped to accommodate the fans and flues of an updated technology, was built into the corner. The furnishings ran the gamut from a beautiful antique Spanish table and armoire to a sofa of modern design. A few tacky, plastic and faux wood grain pieces, with zero aesthetic appeal, completed the inventory.

Flora's office was clean, but disorderly to the point of chaos. Piles of papers, books, a deck of tarot cards and empty glasses teetered on every available surface. A primitive crucifix presided protectively over her work table. It was a good room for work. A banco ran beneath its two windows, which, on a sunny day, would have admitted a cheery light to further soften the already rounded masonry. The banco, covered in sheepskins and Mexican blankets, added a stripped-down comfort to the serious function of the room.

Her bedroom was in similar disarray. The carefully made bed was strewn with clothing and magazines. An odd shoe and kitchen pot jutted out from beneath a pile of laundry dumped on the bed, waiting to be sorted. An easy chair and exercise bicycle did dual duty as clothes valets. Flora's bedside table held more books and an assortment of herbal remedies fit for a Chinese druggist. A huge armoire dominated one of the walls. Its history was traced in the nicks and bruises on its ancient wooden doors, buffed to a warm sheen. Ray stopped before a still life, which he correctly assumed was done by her cousin, Maria. He stood transfixed by the emptiness of the cups in the otherwise lush drawing, before drifting into the kitchen.

The kitchen was an addition, but, built from mud, it seemed to have grown out of the older house. A bank of simple, but gracefully made cabinets lined two walls. The craftsman's attention to details made one question how low we set our sights for the things we lived with. The appliances betrayed their age in the chubby bulk of their fifties style. They were clean and appeared hardly used. There were no stray dishes, loose crumbs, dirty pots or draped dish-towels in sight. The kitchen was shockingly orderly. He scanned the room, looking for dust balls or cobwebs in the corners, some indication that the same Flora lived here. He smiled at the sight of his little boat on the kitchen shelf. He heard Flora hang up the phone and walk up behind him.

"My father built this room. He and his men—but he did all the woodwork by himself. He loved doing that."

"It shows. He was real good at it. He laid the saltillos like a champ too."

"Tio helped him with that—he was a teenager—he was always good with his hands."

"I notice my ship got a place of honor."

"Isn't that something? I put it there before I knew you sent it to me. See! I told you it was fate."

"Got everything you need?" She was holding a cloth shopping bag in each hand.

"Vámonos, chico. I've got the cerveza. Let's go to the mesa."

"Sounds like a Freddy Fender song to me."

"You like Freddy? I will pack a few CDs." She got all squirmy. "Eeee, this is fun. Like a sleepover."

The rain abated long enough for them to make a relatively dry run to the car. It began again as they turned up the mesa road and continued, unrelieved, until late the next day. It was a storm measured in Biblical proportions. They lost electricity twice and lay abed in the dark before lighting candles and kerosene lamps. It was the perfect lover's fantasy—to be marooned on an island in the sky—and they played it as if it were custom-built.

V

Ray had been inside the bar only once. The flat-roofed adobe was painted a pale, lime green, suggesting refreshment amidst the sea of reddish dirt upon which it sat. The painted name of the bar, Oasis, covered the sidewall in florid, italic script. On the roof was a cutout of cartoonish palm trees that had keeled over. The fallen trees now obscured the lower case a in the bar's name so that the sign read, O sis. From the vantage of a speeding car, it looked harmless enough, even picaresque in a dilapidated way. It was at the crossroad for El Rito and drew a local clientele who parked their battered pick-ups at the hitching posts left from earlier times. A tourist bar it was not.

Typical of the region, there was a drive-up window to buy liquor and beer to go. The drive-up business was unadvertised; its only indication was a hand-lettered sign that read "Honk for Service," posted near a small barred window. Other establishments, with enormous signs that boasted "Butts, Bullets, Booze," aimed at a broader target audience. The attitude at the Oasis was; if you don't know us, you don't belong here.

Ray bought his beer from the drive-up window on a regular basis. It was convenient and promised a glimpse into a local world to which he had limited access. He had harbored the wish that he would ultimately be seen as a local, an Anglo for sure, but someone who belonged there. His hope diminished when he realized that all he had seen, after two years of transactions, was a pair of disembodied

hands exchanging his money, given first, for a six-pack of Corona. The barred upper half of the window was glazed with a sheet of darkened glass. It was as futile as trying to look into the one-way windows of the Chicano low-riders that cruised the streets of Espanola.

After years of window service, his curiosity pushed him inside. All activity stopped when he entered. The men who lined the bar held their drinks suspended as they turned to look at him. Except for the radio voice of an announcer speaking Spanish, and the sound of a pool cue meeting a ball, the bar fell silent. It seemed to Ray that he had entered a science-fiction film, where all things were frozen. The two men shooting pool joined the row of silent spectators at the bar. He was the only action in the suspended animation of the room. His request for a six of Corona was met without a word from the bartender. He took the money, rang it up on an old mechanical cash register, and slid the beer across the bar, all the while looking through Ray as if he wasn't there. The bartender limited his movements to those required to perform this simple act and revealed nothing of himself. Ray could feel the bar return to life as the swinging door slapped closed behind him.

He had felt invisible before. Many times he waited to be assisted by store clerks, yardmen, or garage mechanics, who pretended he wasn't there. These incidents occurred in the public spaces of lumberyards, or supermarkets, where anonymity prevailed. For this reason they were easier for him to take. The lock-out at the Oasis was infinitely more chilling. He was an intruder in a private domain; they immediately took account of him, but dismissed him with their gaze, as if he were a shard of glass.

On the spur of the moment, Flora asked him if he wanted to shoot a game of pool. They were driving back from the lake and were about to turn onto the El Rito Road. He wasn't sure he heard her right, but quickly said yes and just as quickly followed her directive to turn in at the Oasis. They sat in the car in the sandy lot alongside the bar. Ray

thought she had wanted to stop to buy some beer at the drive up window; he made no connection with playing pool here.

“Did you say shoot a game of pool?”

“I did...eight ball, rotation, straight. Do you know how to play? She was amused at his puzzlement.

“I can play. I played as a teen-ager. I was pretty good. We played at the Boy’s Club. It kept us off the street. Our parents were thrilled, at least until we were old enough to play in pool halls. Then they weren’t so thrilled.”

He considered telling her of the forty-ball run he once made while stoned on mescaline, but Flora’s quick response suggested she wasn’t in the mood for embellishment.

“I learned here. My father took me here when I was a little girl. He was a good player. I have been playing since I was big enough to reach the table. I played all the while I was at college. It was better than a waitress job to make spending money.”

“Hold on a minute, are you telling me you were a hustler? Man, am I glad I didn’t start bragging about my game.”

“Hustler is such a bad name. I never tricked anyone. I played people for money—if they wanted to play I never refused. It was perfect. You know, little innocent Latina, how good can she be and all that. What was amazing was that there was this bunch of Anglo guys I would beat over and over again and they still wanted to play me. I guess they treated it like a weekly poker game and the twenty-five dollars or so that they lost was still a cheap night’s entertainment. They would even buy me a beer after they lost. Men can be very strange.”

“Well there are stranger things than spending twenty bucks to hang out with a beautiful woman. Probably even twenty-five, in your case, but thirty would be too much. Beauty has its limits,” he said in a mock professorial tone.

“You can play with me for free, Señor Pool Shark. If I win you can pick up the table charges. I will buy the beers.”

Ray took his time getting out of the car. He checked the locks twice and returned to the car a third time to retrieve his cigarettes from the dashboard. Flora waited at the entrance, while he dragged out the short walk from the car.

Flora walked confidently through the door with Ray tagging along behind. There were half a dozen men at the bar drinking shots with beer chasers. Two of the older men, and the bartender, recognized her immediately and made a huge fuss and ceremony of their greeting. They rose in unison, stood stiffly and then, bowed ever so slightly from the waist. The exchange was in Spanish, spoken so rapidly that Ray could grasp only a few words. They looked at Flora, at each other and toward the heavens. Flora was enjoying the attention of these men, who, evidently had known her as a child. It was a slightly formal exchange, more suited to a royal court than a gritty bar, but it was filled with smiles and genuine affection. She had an impact on men, including Ray, and brought out their best qualities. The bartender introduced her to a younger man sitting at the bar. He succumbed to her spell and sat dazed for a moment before he realized they had gone to high school together. This prompted another lively exchange. Ray stood by, like a stagehand who had wandered inadvertently into the play.

Flora seized the earliest opportunity to introduce him—his presence seemed to have gone unnoticed by the men, who were too preoccupied with Flora to have seen him standing at her side. Fernando, the bartender, surprised Ray with a warm hello and the comment that he had seen him around. The conversation switched briefly into English, for Ray’s benefit. The men told a few anecdotes from Flora’s childhood and spoke of her smile, which dazzled even back then. This made Flora blush. She had introduced Ray to the men as her *amigo*, but in doing so, she put her arm

around his waist. It was not lost on the men, who saw in the gesture its message of propriety. His rise in stature from anonymous Anglo, to lucky dog, was swift. The few remaining comments they made, before returning to Spanish, concerned his great luck in “having the pleasure of her company.”

Flora was relaxed, but there was nothing casual in the way she approached the game. Ray had known some players, and he recognized her kinship with this breed in her actions. She chose her cue with an efficiency that made instant calculations as to its weight and balance. She considered the shape of the tip and the taper of the shaft, to assure they were to her taste, and sighted along the cue to judge its straightness. Still not satisfied, she rolled the cue across the table looking for a wobble she might have missed. She proceeded the way Russell would have examined a fly rod; deliberate and pragmatic. She pronounced the cue acceptable and muttered something about not having brought her own. When Flora addressed the table, it was with a similar focus. She rolled a ball back and forth to assess the quirks of the table and fired a few quick shots off the cushions to determine their response.

There is a peculiar fixedness in the way a serious player chalks up—the motion is automatic while the player stares intently at the table, plotting strategy even as the balls remain gathered in the triangular rack. Flora was no exception. Ray watched her enter a world ruled by geometry and touch; he saw it in her face as she stared at the table; he heard it in her voice when she said, “O.K., rack ‘em, Paco.” She could have been speaking to any opponent. It was clear that there would be no mercy given, even to this man with whom she had spent the last two days cooing intimacies.

They decided on eight ball and flipped a coin for the break. It was the only thing Ray won. He broke up the pack of balls with a forceful shot. He was hoping to sink one by chance, but instead the balls scattered across the table. His break shot was his last shot for that game.

Without comment, Flora sunk her seven balls in three minutes. After dropping the eight ball with a complex double-rail shot, she looked at Ray for the first time and, cue still in hand, gave him a hug. She remarked unconvincingly on her luck, and kissed him.

He was slack jawed at what he had seen. Flora's understanding of the game, and the touch involved, was phenomenal. He was also startled by the change in her persona. He knew that the poetry of the game demanded a cool, calculating approach. This approach had to be wedded to infallible technique, and a desire to win. But her transformation, into a person who was these things, was a little scary to him.

"Maybe you can give me pool lessons in exchange for swimming pool lessons. It was the quickest game of eight ball I ever played, but I saw enough to know I haven't seen better. You have any other surprises for me...is there a black belt in karate you want to tell me about?"

"Well, you haven't even shot yet, except for the break," she giggled. "You might not need lessons.... Come on, take some shots, let's see."

Ray did his best; he sunk a few easy shots where the balls sat begging on the lip of the pocket, and then scratched, ricocheting the cue ball into the side pocket. Flora watched intently, made a correction to his bridge, by rearranging his fingers around the cue and told him to stop wobbling the cue with his stroke hand. She discoursed about the value of using an open or closed bridge and complimented him on his eye—"you can see it, but you can't do it yet."

They played this way for a while, he trying, she correcting and then demonstrating. They were so far apart in ability that her pleasure came from seeing his improvement. She was a good teacher and told him he was her "star pupil." One of the older men wandered in and made a joke about Flora winning Ray's money and hung around to watch. He asked an occasional question, but was happy to simply be in her presence. Flora bought a round

of beers and chatted amicably with Ray and the older man, switching effortlessly between Spanish and English. In walked a man who could have been the poster boy for the surliest looking Chicano of the year.

At six feet he was tall for a Hispanic. He wore the uniform of physical labor—jeans, cut-off tee shirt, work boots and a black baseball cap with a patch that read Trujillos Construction. His tattoos included a large Virgin of Guadalupe that fit comfortably on his right forearm, “U.S.M.C.,” written in chain-link script, and spider webs that covered both elbows. He was unshaven, slightly drunk and decidedly unfriendly. He was every gringo’s worst nightmare.

He walked unsteadily toward Flora and put a huge paw across her shoulder. She went instantly rigid and moved to disentangle herself from his sloppy grasp. Ray saw the cheap, B-movie scenario that was about to unfold before him. The guy spoke to Flora in slurred Spanglish. She responded in English, and Ray was able to stay half tuned to what was happening. Her tone was as clear as a neon sign that blinked—fuck-off—ass-hole—fuck-off—pronto. Somehow Ray understood that this was the brother of an old boyfriend of hers, who was in prison. His belligerence marked him as belonging to the same gene pool. He got louder and Flora’s responses, “I am not interested, you have always been a pig,” got angrier. Finally, he snarled, “Who’s the fucking gringo? Some new boyfriend?”

“He is, as a matter of fact. Is that some problem for you?”

“No, it’s a problem for him, you little bitch. I should have taken my little brother’s advice and fucked you when he was finished with you. You wouldn’t be going after some skinny gringo dick after I got finished with you. He said you weren’t too good...I figured you weren’t worth it.”

Flora was furious and began wailing insults at him in Spanish. The older man, with whom they had been talking, intervened and tried to calm the big Chicano down,

all the while telling him he was out of line. There was no reasoning with this gorilla, whose spitting incoherence escalated to a volatile rage. Although it had been years since Ray had been in a situation resembling this, it was not unfamiliar to him; he had known many guys like this with attitudes that were a lot worse. The fact that he was no longer twenty, and considerably smaller than this aggressive drunk, gave him pause but didn't stop him.

"Back off, asshole. You're the only one with a fucking problem."

"You fucking maricon, you think this is your business? I'll make it your fucking business."

He was an ugly son of a bitch, made uglier from the rage that distorted his face. It was sudden. He shoved Ray with both hands and sent him flying against the wall into the rack of pool cues. Ray's head whacked against the seat of a chair on his way down to the floor, but, instead of knocking him senseless, it focused his fury. As Ray got up, still gripping his pool cue, the bigger man came at him to put on the finishing touches. As hard as he could, Ray rammed the butt end of the cue into the man's stomach and then watched him slump to his knees gasping for breath. Ray held the cue like a bat and stepped forward to smash it across the man's shoulders. The bartender heard the ruckus and entered the back room, brandishing a sawed-off pick handle with electric tape around the grip. He put his body between the brawlers. He gathered up the fallen man, who, as soon as he caught his breath, began throwing up and crying, simultaneously. Fernando shuttled him roughly out of the bar, chastising him with a tirade of Spanish border invective.

Ray was bleeding from a nasty scalp wound. He was queasy. He remembered feeling this way as a teenager, and it had little to do with who was lying in a heap on the ground. Flora was frozen in place, her hands crossed at her chest, a look of disbelief on her face. The older man got a clean towel from Fernando, who had since returned from escorting his weeping and puking burden out of the bar.

Flora dabbed his wound clean, and remarked “I think it looks worse than it is.” Fernando agreed with the prognosis, adding that Ray would most likely have a “pretty big chipote”. He went to the bar and returned with four shooters of tequila, “for the pain, for everyone’s pain.” They were visibly shaken and downed the tequila without hesitation.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Ray asked. “I’m really sorry for the scuffle, and just as my pool game was improving.”

“This is so awful. I feel terrible that somehow I got you into this. I just wanted to take you here and shoot some pool. Oh, querido.”

“Why should either of you apologize?” Fernando snorted. “He’s always trouble, he’s a bully and a bad drinker, he should be sorry...besides it’s my bar, I’m sorry it happened here.”

“He is a pig, he has always been a pig, he will always be a pig. Ugh, he makes me sick to my stomach! Those things he said to me... and you were so brave.”

“Brave? I was scared shitless...but I guess I was pissed...it got headed in a bad direction before I knew it.”

“You might have been scared, but you’ve got some cojones, amigo. You can come in my bar anytime. This kind of thing won’t happen again...although, Friday and Saturday nights are probably not such good times,” Fernando grinned as he delivered this last line.

“Do you think we should go to a doctor and have it looked at? It doesn’t look too bad, but it’s still bleeding. Maybe we should see if Flavia is at the clinic. It won’t be the best introduction for either of you...”

“Yeah, but the timing seems right,” Ray said ironically.

On the drive to the clinic, they sat quietly, lulled by the motion of the car and the late rays of the sun that beat through the windows. Flora drove with one hand on the wheel, the other on Ray’s thigh. He slumped limply in the

passenger seat; his right hand held a bloodied bar-towel to his head. The incident at the Oasis left them raw and stripped of any reserves. The El Rito Road was a favorite drive for each of them, and late in the afternoon it was particularly spectacular. Their eyes turned passive and followed the direction of the lonely road through the high country.

The only visible houses were at opposite ends of this stretch of road. It was twelve miles of deep violet canyons and red tablelands. Clumps of chamisa brush pocked the landscape with tarnished cobalt green. There was little to mark the wind; the chamisa and stunted juniper hugged the ground, and the land appeared still and empty. Its wild beauty resided in this emptiness. It was indifferent to the human heart and forever beyond its grasp; yet the heart ached in sympathy, as if it understood. Ray and Flora nodded to each other as they passed the “Pass at Your Own Risk” signs. They were in the zone of the Passing Through; on either side of the road it seemed the world had approached absolute zero and all molecular activity had stopped.

The bleeding stopped by the time they reached the clinic. Flavia was waiting for them under the shallow portal. Her long, white coat revealed only her jeans from the knees down and sparkling new Reeboks. The orange running shoes added a comic touch that offset her tall, regal stature. Her mass of curly, jet-black hair made her look wild and wide-awake. Flavia and Flora embraced in greeting. Ray and Flavia shook hands, and without releasing his hand she led him inside. Flavia had already heard the story from Fernando, who had phoned ahead. She went straight to work on Ray’s wound. She spoke as she worked.

“This is ugly, but not as ugly as that creep. He’s got a bad mean streak. Fernando said you stood up to him. That’s a big deal out here. I’m going to clean it and put in a few stitches. It will heal much better. This is going to hurt—probably not as much as getting it—but you won’t

like it. I can't put a butterfly patch on. I'd have to shave your head. You wouldn't want me to do that. I'm a good nurse but a terrible barber. Just ask Flora."

"Eeee, that awful haircut you gave me. It almost ruined our friendship. I had to get professional help after that."

"I didn't know it drove you into therapy," Flavia bantered.

"It had a good result, though; I found a hairdresser who did my hair all through college. I was so naïve I had a crush on him."

"Oh, that Mr. Alexander who ran off with the little blond boy? Naïve isn't the word. Blind would be more like it. The guy practically wore dresses!"

"Well he knew how to talk to women anyway. And he was great with his hands. I guess I truly didn't know very much about that sort of thing."

"I don't think any of us did...but, Flora...it was funny...now lean forward a little so I can...and I love you, all the more for it."

"So how is our patient?" asked Flora.

"He'll live. Four stitches and he's going to have a good-sized lump. How are you feeling, Ray? Are you dizzy? That looks good to me, nice job...Do you have a headache? Vision all right?"

"I don't feel much like running a marathon. I just feel wiped out. My head hurts a little, but not like a headache, more like just where I hit it. Actually I'm really hungry. That's where I'm really at."

All three were hungry and decided to walk the ten minutes to the center of El Rito, little more than a general store, the restaurant, a community hall and a post office. There were no sidewalks or plaza; and the road ran directly through the town, which consequently lacked the intimacy of Abiquiu, which was built around an older, central plaza plan. The elevation here was just under 7,000 feet, roughly the same height as the mesa, but it felt higher, the air crisper. The surrounding terrain rose steeply and the tall

ponderosa that covered the flanks of the mountains provided a cool green backdrop for the village. There was a sense that it was an outpost on the edge of wilderness.

Flavia left her white coat and her professional demeanor at the clinic. She was lively, intelligent, quick-moving and liked to laugh. She was almost as beautiful as Flora, but without her sensuality and easy smile. They walked three abreast, Flora in the middle with her arms around both. The two women talked animatedly, occasionally directing their comments to Ray. His head had begun to throb and he was content to listen and enjoy the female company.

They arrived at El Candelero, which was empty except for a young boy who was waiting for a take-out order. It was a family operation and the owners, Rosa and Eduardo, were excellent cooks and very sweet people. Ray and Flavia were regulars; Flora had known the entire family for years. Eduardo knew each by name. His greetings included inquiries about how Ray's painting was going, and whether Flavia had delivered the de la Hoya baby. Rosa was thrilled to see Flora, who had not been in for some time. She came out from the kitchen to get a better look at her and said "¡Qué bonita!" nine times. (Flora said over dinner that she had counted). Their eldest daughter, who was about twelve, came out of the kitchen, wiped her hands on her apron and gave Flora a pert, respectful peck on either cheek. Flora returned the greeting with an extravagant hug that squeezed giggles of pleasure from the girl.

They sat at one of the picnic tables near the door. It was a small place, clean, simple, and decorated with a few blankets and religious pictures. It maintained its warm, friendly atmosphere despite the overhead florescent, which cast a chilly pink pall over the room. It was frequented by a local crowd of Anglos and Spanish alike. The food spoke for itself, but if you were a first-timer you could read the rave reviews, letters, and awards for the best chile verde in the region, posted near the register. The regulars dreaded it being discovered by the Santa Fe crowd. They settled in,

ordered their food and allowed the conversation to shift to the incident at the Oasis.

“This place feels like home to me,” Ray said.

“Just a little different than the Oasis, I guess. I’ve been in a couple of times with Flora, she practically grew up there...you probably know that...it’s a formidable place...at least I thought so.”

“It is just a neighborhood bar. Most of the people are regular people—there are a few like José who come in—but most of them are sweet. You liked Buddy, the old guy we talked with, right?”

“Yeah he was nice enough, and I liked Fernando. He seemed to like me—I think it had more to do with me being with you.”

“No, really? How could they not like you? You certainly earned their respect.”

“Flora, I hate to tell you this but I went in there once before, year before last.”

“Oh, and it was not so good?” Flora looked crestfallen.

“It wasn’t the friendliest place I ever went to. I felt like an intruder that time—everyone seemed to be waiting for me to leave as quickly as possible. Which I did.”

“In a funny way you can’t take it personally, it’s garden-variety prejudice at work. I’m Spanish, but my mom is half Anglo; and when I first came to work here—I’m not from around here and I’m not as Chicana looking as Flora—it took a while for some people to warm up to me.”

“I hate to admit it, I hate to see it even more...oh, I was not thinking at all about that.”

“It’s not your fault, Flora. It’s where you grew up. I love the idea that you wanted me to see that. It was going great until that asshole came in. Hey, I learned something about shooting pool—learning requires sacrifice after all.”

“You’re sweet to make it so easy, but, it was so upsetting.” Flora got teary and struggled to keep her composure. Flavia came to the rescue.

“The wound will heal fine, but of course it must be upsetting to both of you.”

“Mostly with myself. I like to think I left that kind of behavior back on the streets of New York. Even though it wasn’t my doing...you know, it takes two to tango.”

“But what could you have done?” You were protecting yourself.”

“It sounds like he was protecting you too, although I know a formidable temper lurks behind that smile of yours. I’m surprised José didn’t collapse under your insults. Fernando told me a few choice expressions you used for the occasion. He was very impressed. I hadn’t heard some of them myself.”

“Eeee! I don’t know where they came from. I said some awful things.”

“I’m sorry they were in Spanish. You’ll have to teach me some of them, in case you ever use them on me...I want to know.”

“Oh, I would never say those things to you” Flora said, giving him a hug.

“I’m worried that this might not be the end of it. Are we gonna see this guy again? I know revenge ranks right up there with money as a great motivator for bad behavior. I might not have been so lucky if he was sober.”

“I have not seen him since my mother’s funeral. He stank of alcohol, and I was not pleased to see him. He is a loser. He lives over in Gallina. He had such a bad reputation that he had to move. I was surprised to see him today. His mother died the year before mine. He really has no reason to come here anymore. And he was drunk enough so that I doubt he will even remember—it is just one of a hundred disgusting things in his pig life. I would not worry.”

“Getting even, yuk! I get sick to my stomach all over again thinking about it. I want so bad to get my sunny Italian disposition back—make love not war!” He made a peculiar, spinning gesture with his right pointing finger, and flipped his left, palm up.

“You seem to have been doing quite well on that front, at least lately.” Flora said.

“I’ve had some help and encouragement. I couldn’t do it alone.”

“Okay you guys, that’s enough! I’ll get the details from Flora later.”

“I hope she doesn’t give up any trade secrets. You girls talk about that stuff?”

They both guffawed loudly and said in unison, “Of course we do.”

Seeing the shock on his face, Flavia added. “Right down to the tile marks on her back,” and laughed uproariously again.

“You two are dangerous together. This is what they teach you at college? I’m shocked to think the co-eds I teach might talk that way—all along I thought they talked about their paintings with each other. This just convinces me that the dorm-mate situation is unhealthy...breeds all sorts of lewd behavior.” He laughed along with them.

Flavia looked distractedly in the direction of the kitchen and side entrance. There was a small commotion at the counter and Flora and Ray turned to look. A tall Anglo, made taller by his cowboy boots and ten-gallon hat, was loudly greeting Rosa and Eduardo. He was carrying a six-pack of Corona and a basket of fresh apricots that he gave to the owners.

“I know that guy. He brought his daughter into the clinic a couple of times. And I’ve seen him here too. No *está nada mal*,” she said approvingly.

“Hey, Flash, I didn’t expect you ‘til next week. When did you get in?”

He turned when he heard Ray’s voice, grinned, and was at their table in two strides. Ray rose to greet him. They held each other at arm’s length, laughing.

“Just. I stayed in Santa Fe with Mallard last night. There’s a message on your machine. I couldn’t wait to get here...the City, I’m ready to kill...” He turned to the women, who he’d had his eye on from the start, and said,

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to get everything crazy, I haven’t seen him in months; I’m much better behaved than this usually. I swear!

“Yeah, I’m a bad influence—Serge, this is Flora and Flavia. Come sit!”

“Only if he shares the beer,” Flavia chimed in.

“Wouldn’t you know it. I leave this guy alone for a couple of months and he’s sitting with two beautiful women!”

“They’re nursing me through my post-operative ordeal. I got beat up in a bar fight. Can you believe that shit? Check out my stitches.”

“You should see the other guy!” both women said.

“Who was he? Let’s get ‘em. You remember that guy who broke into our loft? He never came back. We cut the legs off his pants...he had a white suit on and he left with clam diggers.”

“We don’t have to go that far; he was probably too drunk to remember. At least that’s what the ladies think.”

“Did you two really do that?” Flora asked.

“It was a brilliant idea. And no one got hurt. I think Serge kept the cut-off legs.” Both men roared with laughter.

“I recognize you from somewhere, but I’m not sure,” Serge said to Flavia.

“I run the clinic. You brought your daughter in a couple of times—a beautiful little blond girl.”

“That wasn’t my daughter, that was my girl friend. No, no just kidding. You’re right. You look different without your white coat—I remember your hair. You were wonderful with my daughter. Thanks again for the help.”

“Is she here with you now? Flavia asked.

“No, I’m here alone, emphasis on alone. She’s with her mother back in New York. I got here late this summer. I’ve been renting the house behind the restaurant for the past ten years.”

“Are you an artist, too?” asked Flora.

“Yes ma’am. I’m just like Sparky over there, painting and teaching and getting divorced...but ma’am, I’m younger than him (This was delivered in his best Elvis voice.) and a whole lot taller, even though I was small when I was little.”

Serge was still running on N.Y. octane—frenetic, and charmingly in your face. He had news to give and get, as well as a need to figure the dynamics of the present situation.

“So how do you all know each other?”

“Flora and I have known each other since our college days—we were room mates,” said Flavia.

“And I met Ray last week at the arroyo, near where we both live. He thinks it was luck; I think it was fate.”

“The two of them haven’t come up for air since. Today is their first public appearance together. Ray’s stitches were our introduction. I did get a call from Flora the other day telling me she was spending a lot of time indoors and might not see me for a while.” Flavia was enjoying this immensely.

“And quite a first day in the outside world it’s been—a little rumble, minor surgery, a dinner with our best friends. It doesn’t get any better than this.”

“Hey, that’s the signal for another Corona,” Serge said loudly. Let me get a few more from the house, it’ll take a second. Come on with me, we’ll give the ladies a couple of minutes together.”

They were barely out the side door when Serge started up. “You dog, she’s beautiful. They’re both beautiful. So what’s the story?”

“I don’t know man, this has been heaven. I haven’t felt this alive for years. There’s something special about her. I don’t know, but this might be serious.”

“You sure it’s not the head injury. Uh-oh, I can tell by your face you’re gone. And she looks happy. Don’t question it—give it the old crash and burn. What’s up with Flavia, huh? I remember her, she’s not too bad. Is she single?”

“She is. She’s great looking, but it’s too bad about her leg.”

“Her leg?”

“You didn’t notice one of her legs is four inches shorter?” Serge’s expression crumpled. Ray embellished with an outlandish story that she was born a Siamese twin, joined at the calf, before Serge knew he was being tormented.

“You fucking asshole. You had me going. Listen, she seemed to like me, huh?”

“I’d say your mutual flirting was pretty obvious. When you came in, she said in Spanish that you weren’t too bad looking. Go for it big boy, it looks like a good time to change your life.”

“I’ll say. I couldn’t get out of the fucking city fast enough. That bitch. The fucking lawyers are costing a fortune. I haven’t done a decent painting in months, it’s too depressing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I don’t want to say I told you not to get the lawyers involved, but I told you so. Fuck it, no one ever does it right. It’s not like I’m some shining example of how to proceed. But I’m glad you’re here. I’ve missed you. Maybe you can relax a bit, have some fun.”

“Yeah, it was easier to split when the big decision was who got the Billie Holiday albums. It’s such a fucking mess. And I’m worried about Heather, it’s a bad time for an eleven year old to see her parents split up. Not that there’s ever a good time for that.”

“You think we’d both know how to do it—it’s not like we haven’t had practice. Christ, it’s starting to feel like a colony of lost souls out here. Between you and me and Jason and Russell we must have at least a dozen divorces.”

“Jason has to have almost that many by himself. I don’t know Russell that well...but their kids are grown, right?”

“How come the kid didn’t come out with you?”

“Mickey wanted her to stay with her. Some bullshit about continuity and Heather feeling safe. Basically it

means she got the loft and I got to spend the summer finding an apartment and a studio. You know all that. Look I don't want to talk about it. I'd rather fantasize about Flavia. So she's single?"

"You already asked me. Yes she's single and yes, I think she mistakenly thinks you're sane."

"Right, right. Hey, you're doing pretty good for yourself. You're really going to spend the next six months here?"

"You betcha, pal! I mean, why the fuck not? I got the grant from the school, and the last show did alright; so, I'm OK on the bread end. The City isn't going to miss me. Besides I always wanted to go year-round out here and see what it was like. And now..."

"And now, now you've got a very hot tamale to keep you warm. Let's face it, what else is there? I wish I could join you, but man did I get slammed in the settlement. I'll be working till I'm eighty just trying to make my payments to her—like she's going to get a job, right?"

"There's a first time for everything. I thought you said you didn't want to talk about this?"

"I did, didn't I? Let's get the cervezas and get back. I'm sure Flavia is missing me."

Before the four friends parted, plans were made to meet again for dinner. Walking back to the clinic, with the women in the lead, they maintained a distance that insured the privacy of their conversations. Serge fabricated some flimsy excuse for not wanting a ride; and Flora and Ray drove off, leaving the other two to figure out their next move.

VI

They drove slowly back to the mesa. The moonless night flooded the land. Bands of coyotes roamed the road, their eyes reflecting an eerie red in the headlights. Flora drove carefully, a bit tense at the wheel. Her concentration held her reverie at bay. She didn't know that Ray had been visited in the quiet of the car, so when he spoke, it seemed to come out of the blue. His voice was relaxed and warm, and Flora loosened her grip on the wheel.

“My Father was a good man. He was honest, principled, and totally dedicated to us. I loved him. He loved my sister and me, but he truly adored my mother. We all knew that. He ‘pushed a truck’ in the City for forty, forty-five years. ‘Pushed a truck,’ like he said, in the ‘God-damned City.’ I always thought it was funny that the only swear words he used, aside from sonuvabitch, were God-damned or Jesus Christ. He was a dedicated atheist ‘til the end. He ‘allowed’ me to go to church but de-briefed me when I came home. ‘What kind of nonsense did they fill your head with today?’ he’d ask. He loved talking about that stuff—he was in heaven while I was in college. I gave him books to read, so we could have philosophical arguments. Get this—his two favorite books in the world were Freud’s *Future of an Illusion* and *Zen and the Art of*

Archery—you figure. A truck driver with a fifth-grade education.”

“He sounds unusual. I never read either of those—I never even heard of the Zen book. It doesn’t seem the church had much of a chance. Out here it is basic church—not too much philosophical questioning.”

“I thought he was unusual. Was your father a church-going man?”

“He went occasionally, mostly on holidays; of course he went to all the christenings and first communions and weddings. It was more that he was expected to, you know, because he was an important man in the community.”

“What about your mom?”

“Oh, my mother and my aunt shepherded us to mass every Sunday. It was no big deal. It was simply what people did. For me it was a rare opportunity to dress up a little and wear the shoes that Tía Anna bought for me.”

“The ones your mother disapproved of?”

“Exactly! The irony of it makes me smile--the devil’s shoes in the house of the Lord.” Her smile illuminated the darkness of the car.

“My dad would have loved it out here. The outdoors and hunting were his big passions. He wasn’t some city slicker who went up once a year and blasted anything that moved. He was a sportsman, in the old-time sense of that word. The guy was into Indians and the environment long before they became fashionable topics. He had big respect for the Indians. From when I was ten on, we never spent a Thanksgiving at home; we were up in the mountains, doing our Outdoor Life thing.”

“I never think of people in the cities as hunters. Except maybe for money. But why not? They probably need to be outdoors even more than the people in the country. Out here it is like the church, simply a part of things. The men line up days in advance to get an elk permit. My father had one of his men camp out at the town

hall to be sure to get one. It was a regular thing. He even paid him a day's wages."

Flora barely finished her sentence when three mule deer stepped into the beam of the headlights. She pulled the car over and killed the engine. They sat in silence and watched as the animals casually browsed the scant grasses along the road. After a minute they turned off the headlights and, in the seconds it took for their eyes to adjust to the darkness, the deer were gone.

"Like I said, he would have loved it out here."

"My father was so connected to this place that I can not imagine him anywhere else. And my feelings about this land, about this world (she swept her hand in a wide arc) I can not separate from him, from my feelings about him. I do not have a clear image of him. Oh, I remember little things, like him teaching me to play pool...but really, he is more...like a presence, comforting, a little formal maybe, far away, but here at the same time. I know that must sound confusing, yes?"

She started the car, let it idle and looked at Ray.

"No more confusing than reality. Your memory sounds more complete than the pictures we make; they're just simplified versions to make us remember what we once understood. I can't help it. I carry a picture of my dad in my mind—more of a filmstrip—it's the same picture that comes to me whenever I think of him. I'm maybe ten; he's in his forties, like me now. I'm sitting on the back stoop, waiting for him to come home from work. He always rolled in between four-thirty and five. The only day the poor guy was late, my mother called the police and the hospital. Every day the old Plymouth would ease to the curb, my dad would step out, put his fedora on, sling his blue jacket over his shoulder, and walk in through the back yard. He would look for me, very casual, as if he didn't want to be disappointed if I wasn't there. A quiet smile would spread over his face when he saw me. He rarely used the front entrance to the tenement. He wasn't nuts about being noticed. I could never figure out if it was true modesty, a

need for privacy, or some fearfulness he had tucked away. I know he didn't want to be seen as a cafone or a greaseball—that probably had something to do with it.”

“What's a cafone?”

“In his eyes they were the same thing—you know, someone just off the boat; duck-footed walk, greasy hair, coarse, loud, lots of hand action when they talk, probably from the bottom of the boot. My father was handsome, very Italian looking, extremely dignified and quiet.”

“Eeee, he sounds like my father. That was exactly his attitude about the Chicanos and low-riders. Our fathers probably looked a lot like each other, too. We should find some photos and compare. Did he have many friends?” she asked.

Before he answered, Flora pulled out onto the empty road and drove slowly, with the lights off.

“He socialized with family, mostly my mother's. His brothers and sister and parents were long gone; wiped out by TB. I never knew any of them. They had wonderful names: Achille, Adelle, Aldo, Gino, Iggidio, Lena. We kept in touch with his other relatives after we moved, when I was about six. A whole tribe of us lived in two apartments that were too small to start with, and when the men came home from the war...it just wasn't happening. We made the usual Christmas visits to that side of the family, but we lost the closeness.”

“We had family around, but my father had all these friends and people he met through his construction business who would stop by. And he was the acequia boss. The house seemed busy a lot of the time. After he died, things slowed down. My mother was not as outgoing. She had her relatives and some friends, but it was not the same. So, did he have friends, your father?”

“Let me put it this way; I came home one day and a friend of his from work was there. He rode this guy for years, and this was the first time I had ever seen him at our apartment. I knew something was up, and I knew it was something serious because my father was having a drink,

and it wasn't a holiday. It turns out the guy's wife had died that day."

Flora swerved the car to avoid hitting a coyote that was picking over the carcass of some small animal at the edge of the road.

"Shit! I guess I should turn the lights on. It was different with my father. He was the one everyone called to straighten things out between people. A lot of good that did him."

"Do you think he would've approved of you and me?"

"You two would have liked each other. He would have appreciated you as a man, I think. He probably would have taken you off fishing. I can hear him say something like—"he has the heart of an artista but he has a good practical sense." He would have thought it was great that you could lay stone so well."

"I've gotten some mileage from the patio" Ray said jokingly. I hope he would have liked me. But that's still not the same as thinking it was a good idea that I was sleeping with his daughter".

They pulled up to the house and sat in the car to finish the conversation.

"I can not even imagine what he would think of that. After all I was hardly a teenager—I had not even kissed anyone yet. Spanish fathers are not known for their casualness when it comes to their daughters. If I was this age, like I am now? I would like to think he would have approved—he would probably be so nervous that I was not married by now that even if you had an extra head he would not stand in the way." She said this with a serious expression that quickly dissolved into giggles.

"Very funny. But having such an ugly daughter I can see why he'd be nervous."

"Oh, so now it is your turn is it?" She began tickling him, and, despite Ray's attempt to remain straight-faced, she triumphed. After a few minutes of this banter, she continued in a more serious vein. "If he saw that I was

happy, and being treated right, I think any man would have his blessing. So far, so good as far as I am concerned.” She punctuated her words with an affectionate kiss.

“I’m so afraid of fucking up. I don’t exactly have a sterling track record. I’d like to be able to measure up—before I get so old and unattractive that no one wants to give me the chance.”

“I’ll say it for you in Spanish: *hasta ahora todo va bien*,” then she gave him another kiss.

“What do you have to measure up to anyway?”

“I remember a conversation my father and I had. I was in my early twenties, working on my first divorce. Somehow the talk got around to infidelity—which I was probably dealing with—I was always dealing with it. I asked him if he had ever been untrue. He said it wasn’t as if he didn’t have the opportunity. He mentioned some nurse; she worked at Bellevue, where he drove an ambulance for a while. I guess she made it clear she was ready for a tumble...that word made it seem less serious, to me. My dad said it wasn’t worth it, not because she was unattractive, but because it would hurt my mother. I was proud of him, and at the same time, I felt like a complete low-life.”

“Because you judged yourself?”

“That, but worse than that. I must have confessed something to him—it’s pretty blurry to me now, but I don’t think I had ever spoken to him about anything like that before. Our conversation ended with him shouting: ‘You and your God-damned women!’ It took my breath away. I felt judged. It was very final. And I remember wondering how he knew that about me. How could he know about that side of my life? It was crushing, being summed up by my father like that; especially because he wasn’t judgmental by nature. He was usually gentle and patient... very fair-minded. One of his favorite expressions was: ‘don’t judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his moccasins.’ I mean, I’d disappointed him before, although usually he’d say it would be a disappointment to my mother. I thought that

was a little bit of copping out on his part. Anyway, those disappointments had more to do with me not working up to my potential, than being bad. He often told me what he thought was right and wrong, but I never felt judged until then. I guess there were some things that didn't have another side for him, and this must have been one of them."

Their decision to spend the night apart was mostly Ray's doing. He was suddenly exhausted on all fronts. His head was throbbing and the gash in his scalp was uncomfortable. He was drained after telling Flora about his father—and regretted the unsavory details he'd revealed about his own dark side. He was certainly in no mood for further examination of these. Flora protested and said she would be more than happy to minister to him even if he was, as he claimed, a lousy patient. Reluctantly, she got out at her house. They kissed goodbye, perfunctorily at first, and then fell into a desperate embrace, each reassuring the other they would be missed.

They rejoined the next morning and spent every hour of the following week within a forty-foot radius of each other. The boundaries between them faded to invisibility. Flora seemed willing to continue the "Hernando's Hide-a-way" theme indefinitely; happy to make the occasional foray to her house (with Ray) for fresh clothes and the odd paper she needed for her translation work. Ray was getting antsy—he was, by his own admission and the facts of his life, born to move. He needed to walk. Moving the body and the simultaneous emptying out of the mind was an end in itself. He often preferred not knowing where he would end up. It was enough to give his attention to the details of where he was at each given moment. The satisfaction he felt was beyond awareness, and moved with him, on a cellular level. The self became absorbed into an eagle, seen soaring overhead, or a spray of vermilion dust, scattered by an unexpected landslide. The answers were found in the walking; the questions arose at the destination. He did not make the connection, that this

losing of the self in order to find the self, was the same thing that happened while he was in Flora's arms.

It was ironic that Ghost Ranch, swarming with creatures during the Triassic era, and boasting twelve thousand years of successive habitation, would come to be known as Georgia O'Keefe's ranch. Despite her attitude of possessiveness, which reeked of entitlement, she owned only 7 of the 21,000 acres. Beginning in the 1930s she lived during the summers in the Rancho de los Burros, an isolated compound within the boundaries of the bigger property. Story has it that she was a renter, who, one year, returned to the ranch to find it being lived in by a group of people she did not know. She fumed on, to the owners Phoebe and Arthur Pack, about those people living in her house, and had to be reminded that, in fact, it was not "her" house. She badgered and cajoled her way into ownership of the house some years later and was known to complain bitterly that although she wanted land for a horse, the Packs sold her enough to barely put in a septic system.

Arthur Pack and his father were early and long-standing conservationists who founded *Nature* magazine. For years they ran Ghost Ranch as a mildly successful dude ranch. In 1955, when the Packs donated the land to the Presbyterian Church, with environmental protections thoughtfully in place, O'Keefe complained again, outraged that it did not become hers. O'Keefe, by her own admission, found people "very difficult" and was up-tight that her privacy would be disturbed by the tourists that the Presbyterian conference center hoped to draw. Presumably, painting some relatively arid pictures of the surrounding landscape conferred ownership—at least in her eyes. Few, except locals, remember that the King of Spain had given the land as a grant to one Pedro Martin Serrano, in 1766. It was called Piedra Lumbre, or "Shining Rock" back then. Fewer still stop to think of the enormity of the hubris of the King, who had never set a silk-slipped foot anywhere near the place, except for the Indians, who were successfully driven from the area or killed off with measles and the clap.

Its current name, Ghost Ranch, derives from the tales of visitations from numerous spirits, the majority of whom were those freed of the encumbrance of their mortal bodies by hanging—from one of the trees at the ranch.

The history of the ranch, and its name, was only a small part of the mystery that exuded from every rock. A place of extreme beauty, the landscape has been constructed from our fantasies of prehistoric and alien worlds. The sullen marshes of Triassic times have been baked to a fragile crust. The terrain and rock forms are so bizarre that we question their terrestrial origins. The small dinosaurs and large alligator-like reptiles that once roamed here are gone, their skeletons buried in the layers of sandstone and gypsum that color the land in blush and ocher. The green of the valley, where the ranch is nestled, is a consequence of our sweaty efforts to imprint our needs on the land, rather than the bountiful unfolding of nature.

Ray drove to Ghost Ranch intending to hike the four-hour round trip to Kitchen Mesa. This was a walk where the destination mattered.

He parked about a quarter-mile from the trailhead in a designated area marked out with logs. Although the earlier stages of the trail were popular, lunchtime was approaching and no one was about. The trail wandered across the canyon floor following arroyos and a trickling stream. Small stands of trees flanked the stream, shadowing the trail from the mounting sun. The intimacy of the trail was lost as it veered, and then opened abruptly onto an unsheltered plain. Here the sun blazed down upon a salad of chamisa, piñón and juniper. Isolated rock formations stood guard against a backdrop of towering cliffs. The immense stage set dwarfed these stolid actors, caught in their frozen drama. It was only when one meandered into the shadow of one of the formations that one felt its massiveness looming above.

As the trail rose slightly and bowed to the East, Ray saw his destination directly in front of him. Kitchen Mesa

appeared, bulky, backlit dark and curiously graceless—like a large, ungainly animal at rest. The talus slope, at the base of the sheer walls, sculpted the folded legs, knobby knees, and splayed feet of the beast. Up ahead, the trail rose steeply as it ascended the mesa and Ray picked up his pace, in anticipation of the climb up the side.

The trail gained elevation quickly as it coursed up a razorback ridge. There was little tolerance for a misstep here. The sliver of trail fell off steeply into air on either side. It would have been an ugly fall to the bottom: a careening slide over rock shards, with a final stop in clumps of nettle and cactus. This was a place where the little trap door, behind the asshole, opened and your entire life rushed out. Ray was sweating, his body rigid with caution.

The climb up along the wall was more difficult, but not as terrifying. There was always the cliff wall to hug, or lean against. Slabs of red sandstone, fissured from the wall above, formed a barricade on the lip of the narrow trail. The wall was still cool from the respite of the night. The sun was not yet at its zenith and Ray made the climb in shadow. He had chosen a lesser known route, more arduous and technical. There was more sweat and muscle involved; sections of the ascent were more of a free climb, than a hike. It was perhaps the tenth time Ray had done this; and, as with the previous climbs, it was over too soon. As he pulled himself over the last rim-rock, he was greeted by the expanse of the tabletop, and was mildly disappointed.

Two knobbed mounds formed the tabletop, and it was a ten-minute walk from knob to knob. It was a different planet at the top. Pocked and rounded by the wind and rain, roasted crusty by the sun, the ground appeared more like Naugahyde than earth. There was no evidence of the benevolent hand of God as master potter; up here it was the Devil's work. The knob furthest from where the trail entered was treeless. It was difficult to pinpoint where the tabletop dropped off into space; the edge was rounded and its junction with the vertical walls masked from view. There

was the sense of being on an island in the sky, cut off from the mainland by the surrounding air.

The view was spectacular. Ray sat back from the rim, his gaze directed outward, rather than down. The Chama Road and the ranch in the valley far below were blocked from his sight. Cerro Pedernal and the lake were in the middle ground, and the distant Jemez Mountains were smeared by the blue thickness of the air. He was so high he could hear the breathing of the clouds. A flock of vultures sailed in a thermal draft, spiraling higher for a better fix on the carrion below them. Distance and the ease of their float graced their raw ugliness. The sounds of a car starting and the whine of a chain saw rose from the valley to disassemble the mirage of Ray's isolation.

While eating his lunch Ray watched the clouds gather to the north. After the heavy rains of the past week it was surprising that the sky would unload its burden so soon. The clouds were traveling fast and he watched them make their way, gathering bulk and nastiness as they approached. Ray was hoping the storm would miss him but was delighted with the possibility of watching a first class light and sound show from a safe distance. The grumbling of thunder grew louder, and the lapse between the flashes of lightning and the sound, shorter. By the time he could clearly see the rain line, he knew he was in for a direct hit.

The storm was moving rapidly, but he had time to book a hasty retreat downward. Instead, he elected to ride the storm out from his perch. He knew it was foolhardy, even TV commercials advised not to fuck with Mother Nature. Standing atop one of the tallest points in the area was accepting a new role as a lightening rod.

In preparation he shed all of his clothes save his boots. He wrapped the clothes and his pack inside a waterproof poncho and stashed the bundle beneath a rock. The darkening sky made the air cooler, but it felt exhilarating on his naked skin. He did his imitation of a rain dance. He had never witnessed one, and this was a fabrication from his childhood imagination. He was

reminded of a time in Kauai, when, for the better part of a scorching day, he had hiked a trail naked. Despite the gallons of sunscreen, his butt was toasted crimson and he spent the next three days standing. That was hardly the issue now, as he imagined the newspaper headlines—HUMAN TORCH SEEN ON KITCHEN MESA. The plan to avoid this was to lie flat on the ground as the storm passed over head, and not get a hard-on.

A dirtied, yellow light washed over the land before the rain arrived. The storm was bigger and configured differently than he had pictured it. The Pedernal turned a steely violet, and lightning began to dance on its flat crest. The flashes were sporadic at first, but soon were so numerous that the mountaintop seemed permanently aflame. When the broad bolts of blue lightning struck nearby, Ray felt the Mesa groan beneath him. A fine spider's web of lightning crackled over the surrounding ridges. The foul smell of sulfur rode the air. He lay flat on his back, naked and chilly from the rain. The drops weren't pulled to the earth by gravity, but shot down from above and stung with their force. When the rain turned to hailstones, the sting changed to pain, and he put his hands over his eyes and genitals to protect them. Ray knew he had trespassed into a world he was not meant to see.

It seemed as if he had been lying there for an eternity, but when he checked his watch the entire ordeal had lasted barely ten minutes. The sun was sluggish in reappearing and he shivered from the chill. He dressed quickly and made his descent back to the world.

Ray arrived back at his own mesa without a clear idea of how he had done this. The ride home, in fact, the entire time after the storm, was lost time—as if some alien abduction had transpired and all subsequent memory erased. He checked his answering machine and found messages from Serge, Jason, Russell and his mother. Their familiar voices, usually a comfort to him, unexpectedly translated into a burden of responsibility. He decided to return the calls later that evening.

He entered his small studio, unsure about what he would do. It had been some time since he had attempted any serious painting. A few small watercolors, carving the boats, reading, and walking had taken up most of his time these past months. It was an unusual break in his work rhythm. Even when he traveled, he worked continuously in small watercolor journals. It was a way of keeping the conversation going—of making some sense of himself and his surroundings. He had picked up the habit years ago, on his first trip to Asia. In the middle of a walk, or at the end of a hard day's hike, he'd plop down on a rock, take his gear from his hip-sack and do a small painting. If it was near a village, the local kids would appear and stand quietly in a respectful circle around him. As soon as he engaged them, they drew closer, eager to tell what they saw in his picture. By the end of these exchanges the children would be hanging all over him, pointing their grubby fingers at his painting. "This big mountain. No trees, like here. My house, my house," some kid would say, jumping with excitement. Ray often thought they got his work better than his supposed audience at home did.

Back in New York, he retreated to the oasis of his studio as often as he could. It had nothing to do with the demand for his work, the biggest part of which he still owned. It seemed like the safest place in the City. In the world of his studio, he made the rules. So what if it was only a fiction of autonomy—it kept him sane. The irony, that it was also the activity that made him nuts, was not lost on him. And his feelings about the end products were similar to those he had about destinations, since they only raised more questions. He hadn't figured out a way to walk without arriving, or paint without making a painting, but he didn't know what else to try. It was the dragon chasing its tail.

He tuned the radio to some C&W, laid out a large sheet of paper and spent a half-hour squeezing tubes of fresh watercolor onto his palette. As he began working, he startled himself with a noisy exhalation of breath. His hand

was on direct current with his mind's eye, itself the junction of the juices of the heart and dick. He worked effortlessly, without stuttering, focused on the page and what was going on there. Shapes appeared and shifted. The emotional weather of the painting, which began in relative calm, disappeared beneath a wash of snarling yellow. A double-domed mountain began life as a breath of pale rose, before settling into its dark and weighty existence on the page. He painted a jagged line of electric blue, and another, and another. They seared into the painting from all directions. Two eyes on the top of the mountain beamed rays into the darkness that descended from above.

Ray took short breaks, for a glass of juice or a snack, but otherwise kept up the dance between painting and stepping back to look at what he was doing. As the painting approached a final stage, he took a few hits of weed to see better. It was a good sign when it looked like someone else painted it, or, more precisely, as if he hadn't. When what was in front of him didn't need him any longer, it was done. He could switch roles from actor to audience and enjoy the looking.

When he stopped working, it was after midnight, too late to return calls. He was numb-tired, and fell into a dead man's sleep as soon as he hit the bed.

He awoke the next morning and buried his face in his pillow to stifle the dawn. The smell of sex and sweat permeated the pillow and filled his nostrils. He reached out for Flora, but when his hand found an empty bed he sat bolt upright. The scent of desire was obliterated by the rise of his panic. He reached for the phone and scrambled for Flora's number, which, days ago, he had jotted on a rolling paper and tossed on the bedside table.

"Buenos días, chica."

"Eeee, what time is it?"

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't realize it was only seven. Go back to sleep and call me when you get up."

"No, I'm awake, only for you though. Umm...."

“That sounded a little too husky for a purr. Is there something I can do for you?”

“You could come down here and bring me breakfast in bed.”

“Don’t move. Stay right where you are. Your waiter will be at your service in five minutes.”

“Really? I was only...telling the truth.” She laughed at her own honesty.

“Good. I’m on my way.”

He knocked on the back door and, getting no answer, let himself in. Flora kept a key stashed under a flowerpot. She was asleep when he peeked into her room. He went quietly into the kitchen, found the old percolator pot, dug up some frozen croissants and made breakfast. He carried the loaded breakfast tray to her bedroom.

“Is that room service? Just set that down anywhere. It seems like I called hours ago. I’ll have to complain to the management. Unless of course you make up for your tardiness.”

She pulled back the covers in invitation and Ray dove in, fully clothed. There was a spate of giggling and struggling, until they were caught in the heat. Ray buried his head between her legs and luxuriated there to the sounds of her small moans. They threw off the bedclothes and Flora sat naked astride him. She reached into his fly and roughed his cock out the opening and sat down on it. She rode him like he was a fence post. It was over quicker than their game of eight ball.

“I guess I needed that. I confess I fell asleep last night thinking about it.”

“That’s been the longest we’ve gone without since we started. It’s been almost twenty-four hours. I was going into withdrawal myself. Is the Señorita ready for her breakfast now?”

“The Señorita has just received the waiter and will now receive her breakfast. She would like Señor Waiter to remove his clothes and join her for the morning coffee.”

Later in the day he called his mother. “Is this my long lost Sonny Boy?” She sounded pleased yet chastising. “I once was lost but now I’m found,” he bantered. “I saw the light on the top of the mountain, saw my sweetheart, and called my mom.” They caught up on the news of the past ten days: a cousin’s wedding, a visit to the doctor, a lobster and shrimp dinner she’d had. Ray spoke freely and filled her in on his daily activities including the incidentals that no one but mothers are interested in. He was more selective in speaking of Flora, but it was a useless caution; his mother knew him “like a book,” as she was fond of saying. “Just make sure you finish with Dianne before you leap into something. You know how you are. Have you spoken to your sister?” she asked, changing the subject. Her voice told him that she knew he already had leapt into something. They talked a bit more and made plans for Thanksgiving. The annual hunting trip had died with his father; since then, he and his mom often spent the holiday together. Before she hung up she said, “Bring your sweetheart if you want to.”

A quick call to Serge followed.

“Jesus, I just got off the phone with my mom. I swear the woman is clairvoyant.”

“Let me guess—you mentioned Flora’s name and she thinks you’re going to marry her?”

“Bingo! I guess I’m more transparent than I thought”

“Are you kidding? That’s what mothers are for. Finding the girlie mags under your bed, and knowing that you’ve been playing with fire”

“Like coming home with charcoal on your face reeking of smoke and swearing you weren’t anywhere near a fire. Are we that obvious?”

“Afraid so, Sparky. Hey, guess what?”

“I know this is going to come as a big surprise to me. Let me have the news.”

“No, nothing like that. We just had dinner is all. Real simple. I like her. I think she’s more complicated...”

“Than what? Have you ever been interested in one that wasn’t?”

“No, not for longer than a minute.”

“I didn’t know you were that fast. Maybe you should take a pill, try and hold off a little.”

“Thanks pal! I’ll remember to wank off before my next date. Which, by the way, is coming up fast. Why don’t the four of us go hear the Texas Tornados this weekend? They’re playing in Santa Fe.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll talk to Flora and we’ll work out the details. Speak to you tomorrow.”

“O.K. Don’t wear yourself out. You’re getting to be an old fucker. I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.”

VII

No one could accuse Serge and Ray of not knowing how to have a good time. Their former wives thought they were impossible when they were together, and hardly to be trusted. There was an easy camaraderie between them that encouraged wildness. They had shared a loft while they were in their twenties, and a formidable number of paintings and women passed through their studios. On more than one occasion they had helped each other out of jams and what they called “scheduling conflicts” that involved women—hiding a girlfriend in a closet, or abetting her hurried departure down a fire escape. That both men were now in their forties counted little as behavior modification. They could pass as responsible citizens and

had respected careers as artists and teachers, but the vitality of their youth continued to serve them well and ill.

Flavia and Flora had their own history together. Their friendship began when they met as college roommates. They'd both grown up in Hispanic families in rural New Mexico. Lacking siblings, their friendship evolved into a closeness usually reserved for sisters. Flavia left Albuquerque for her assignment in El Rito the same year that Flora's mother passed on. This was at least part of the reason for Flora's return to her family home.

The two couples were destined for a good time. Serge had rented a red Cadillac for the month. It was perfect—an extravagant and totally inappropriate car for Rio Arriba County. He pulled up to Flora's house in a spray of gravel with the top down and the radio blasting. I tried to rent a low-rider but they didn't have one—I had to settle for this," he said climbing out over the side. "The door's a little fucked up." The car looked as if it had already been put through a serious road test. Flavia got out, a trifle disheveled and looking like she was wondering what she had gotten herself into.

"My mamma warned me about men like you" she said laughingly.

"Don't worry, it's only the tip of the iceberg" Ray said. "He's a man of great depth and only partially out of his mind. This is gonna be a great ride."

Flora and Flavia exchanged looks that were indecipherable to the two men. Flora scooted in the house to get a thermos of margaritas she had mixed. They piled in the car and headed for Santa Fe with the sun low in the evening sky. They were gonna hear Freddy Fender and the Texas Tornados.

They arrived in Santa Fe windblown and half-silly from the Margaritas they'd drunk from plastic cups. Serge was going on about how the alcohol had less of an effect if you drank while you were moving. Ray confirmed the idea, saying they had tested it many times, and that relativity theory somehow supported their finding. Despite this

scientific evidence, Serge slipped while climbing out of the car and hung himself from his belt loop, which caught on the door lock. They were weak with laughter when they wobbled into the Coyote Café.

They chose the more relaxed ambience of an outside table. The four of them took note of a woman in a slinky white dress at the table next to them. It was hard not to notice her. She was loudly chastising her server for a mistake. She said she had ordered the “green sauce,” not the “red” that was delicately drizzled over the fish that had been placed before her. She was holding her plate as if she were a contender in a pie-throwing contest. The people at the surrounding tables watched with their mouths agape, fully expecting her to throw the dish at her server. With a perfunctory apology the waiter smoothly snatched the plate from her and was about to whisk it back to the kitchen. The woman’s parting shot was, “and the asparagus are cold. Can’t you people do anything right?” This caused the Chicano waiter to pause. It was clear that he was weighing the satisfaction of dumping the entire plate in her lap against the loss of his job.

Serge and Ray exchanged what-a-bitch grimaces and gave her male dinner companion a look of sympathy. Flora and Alma dismissed the entire scene with a roll of their eyes. The other diners in the restaurant appeared bemused by the incident. They returned to their meals and animated conversations that seemed to rise a few decibels.

The menu, of high-toned Tex-Mex fare, was written in restaurant gibberish. It offered, among other exotica, Latin-rubbed pork, Chama Valley-grown chilies, and high-mesa elk liver with polenta. A numbing inventory of compotes and glazes made of organic and inorganic matter from four continents embellished each dish. They ordered, had more margaritas, and talked non-stop while they waited for their food. The meal was tasty and simpler than the hyperbole of its description. At least it looked simpler. The dwindling twilight, candles, and margarita haze edited the more mysterious ingredients out of the picture. Ray, who

had recently succumbed to a need for reading glasses, declared he would only eat the big things that he could see.

There was a conversation at the table regarding ghosts, which led Ray to tell an exotic, spooky story about an exorcism he had witnessed in Borneo. He began telling it as a child's story, momentarily self-conscious. "Once upon a time, deep in the forest of Borneo, there was an old woman. She lived in a longhouse built on stilts. She lived with her whole family, and was happy to be around them. One day she became very, very sick."

Serge interjected, "He's been everywhere, this is a good one".

Ray, once sure of his audience's attention, dropped the stylized tone and launched into the tale in earnest. He told how dancers and musicians had conjured a spirit into the room and everyone, everyone knew it had come. Ray said he felt it as a cool breeze, ruffling the hairs on the back of his neck. The dancers speeded their gestures into the jiggety motion of silent movies. An unseen charge surged through the house and released a collective gasp. He went on for a while, embellishing the story with details: piles of colored rice brought as offerings: the possessed woman, wrapped in sarongs: an elaborate bamboo structure meant to trap the evil as it was spirited from her body. Everyone at the table listened intently. After he finished the story, the talk at the table turned toward magic.

Serge had done magic tricks as a teenager. He worked up a half-hour program and hired himself out for birthday parties and dinners. His love of performing lingered in the magician's patter he used whenever he wanted to take charge of a situation: the smoke and mirrors of speech, the deft gesture, the art of the flimflam, the showman's enthusiasm. Nowadays he would occasionally perform incidental magic at birthday parties for his daughter and her friends.

Ray asked Serge to tell the story of a mouse trick he had "executed" at one of these birthdays. Serge went into high gear—he was a little oiled and had a captive audience.

He explained how the trick had gone horribly awry. Before an audience of a half-dozen six-year-olds, one of the mice shit in his hand and died. To pretend it was still alive, he wriggled and bounced it around while he kept up a patter suggesting the mouse was escaping. Now, as he re-told the story, he began acting it out. His gestures got wilder as his enthusiasm rose. In one grand sweep, he sent the water pitcher crashing to the floor. A woman at the nearby table, at exactly that moment, bent over to adjust what appeared to be an ankle bracelet. She took the hit from the full measure of water, which seemed to leap up from the floor. She jack-knifed out of her seat and stood looking down her own front. Her delicate hands fluttered ineffectually, as if she was trying to fly away from her embarrassment. Her arms were jammed alongside her body, stiff with agitation. Her white sheath dress was drenched transparent. She had small breasts, perky, erect nipples and obviously wasn't wearing panties.

Her companion had his eyes glued to her crotch, a preview of what he hoped to see later. Agent 007 would have commented with a smirk that his hopes were all washed up. She began to flap her arms; her palms turned up in utter hopelessness. "Look at me, look at me, look at this" she repeated, like a mantra. Clearly this woman was not accustomed to living with a hair out of place. She shooed away the napkin her boy friend proffered as a cover up. She was fast losing her grip. The pitch of her mantra rose to a strangled shriek as she added foot stamping to her choreography. In the grip of a full-fledged temper tantrum, she spun toward Serge. "You, you, you beast..." she finally spat out. Flora and Flavia, although amused at the archaic expression, were shocked into silence. Serge leapt up and instinctively began to pat at the wet spots and apologize, oblivious to the glob of mole sauce on his napkin. Ray, Serge and the woman noticed the chocolate smear at the same time and looked at each other in disbelief. It was hard not to notice the six-inch swath of shit-brown, riding the hip of her pristine white dress. It was more than the

woman could take. She began flailing wildly at Serge, who offered to pay for the dry cleaning, pay for the dress, even pay for their meals, but then dissolved into laughter at the stupidity of it all. She was restrained by her boyfriend and the headwaiter, who cooed, “There, there, it’s so upsetting” and led her away.

Serge was mortified. “At least they didn’t have to pay for their food,” he said, attempting to cover his embarrassment.

“Yeah. They should have showed some gratitude,” Ray quipped. “Jeez, it was just an accident.”

Flora, eyes twinkling, said, “You must admit that was an incredible magic trick—making the lady in a white dress disappear like that. Flavia and I were very impressed. But oh, the poor woman’s dress...she really screamed about that.”

“You should never wear a dress like that without underwear,” said Flavia, and sent them into a fit of nervous giggles.

They walked the half dozen blocks from the restaurant to the club. Flavia and Serge walked ahead with their arms around each other, as much for support as affection. Flora and Ray, a shade less tipsy, lagged behind, amused at the sight of their best friends’ attempt to negotiate their way without crashing into something.

“She’s been lonely too long—it’s nice to see her happy, and a little borracha. Do you think they will do well together?”

“He’s been lonely, too. He’s got a lot of bullshit to go through yet, but he looks happy right now.”

“But he is still married,” she answered her question before it formed. “I suppose that only makes it worse.”

“You got so despondent looking all of a sudden. Does it make you nervous that I’m still married too?”

“I would be a liar if I said it was not on my mind. I am having a very good time. I half expect a tap on my

shoulder and a voice saying ‘time’s up’. That would be awful.”

“That would be awful. But, Flora, look at me. I’ve never been happier.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you. I can see you’re happy, but I don’t know very much about your life before, or your ex-wife.”

“I’d tell you anything you wanted to know. It’s just that I’m more interested in what’s going on now than I am with the past, probably because I’ve got my own share of shit to deal with. I’d promise you that you won’t get hit with any fall-out, but I don’t think I can control that. What I can promise is that I’ll deal with whatever comes along.”

“Are you thinking about tomorrow, maybe just a little?”

“I am.”

“How?”

“Remember all that money I won at the track?”

“I do. It seems like ages ago.”

“Well how would you like to go to Mexico next month?”

“With you?”

“No, alone. I’ll ship you down there. Of course together, that’s the whole point.”

“I would need to get some money.”

“Man, you are slow tonight. We’ve got the track money. In fact we should go down and stay until we spend it all. That sound O.K.?”

“Better than O.K., it sounds fantástico. I’d love to.”
She gave Ray an enormous hug.

They picked up the tickets that Serge had reserved. The woman who managed the club recognized Flora and greeted her warmly. Flora had done some translation work for her. She led them to the best table in the house, removed the reserved sign and asked casually, “What are you drinking?” To which they replied, as one, “Margaritas.” They were barely seated when a waitress

materialized with the drinks. “These are on the house,” she said, and disappeared.

A local band, “Blue Suede” was the opening act. A huge, hulking Chicana sat at the drums behind an array of seedy white boys and a Spanish guy with stringy hair. Their black cowboy hats were festooned with feathers and the concha belts they wore weighted their pants to mid-ass. Each time the bass player bent over to adjust his amp he treated the audience to an appalling sight of plumber’s butt.

“This could be something,” Serge said.

Flavia said simply, “we’ll soon see”.

See they did. From the first chord, it was clear these dudes could rock. The band was like Santa Fe—a stew of disparate ingredients that became something new. They mixed covers with original tunes, Tex-Mex with bluesy rock, and included an assortment of Latin numbers. They played their asses off. They even did a respectful cover of a Tornados number, “Four Aces.” Flora asked Ray if he danced. Serge overheard and answered for him, “Are you kidding? This guy has got the John Travolta genes. I hope he doesn’t wear you out.” Flavia didn’t give Flora a chance to respond either, before she said—“I doubt that’ll happen. She can give Madonna a run for her money.” Flora said, as an aside, to Ray, “If there’s any connection between dancing and that other thing you do so well...” she finished the sentence with her smile.

During the second number, a funky James Brown tune, they realized they had an audience. When the band began a crazed, up-tempo version of, Cao Cao Maní Picao, the song made so famous by Celia Cruz, the floor belonged to Ray and Flora. The first two beats were enough of a clue for them to launch into a mambo that brought the other dancers to a halt. Encouraged by the on-lookers’ shouts and yips, they did the styled and sensual dance with the mix of control and abandon it demanded. The dance floor re-filled—the power of sweat and music overcame people’s shyness. Ray and Flora were having too much fun for everyone not to try. “Blue Suede” cooked their

improvisation to a lively simmer and let it explode to match the dancers' heat.

When they returned to the table Flavia and Serge stood and greeted them with applause. "Did you guys go to the same Arthur Murray class? That was fucking unbelievable. We're saving our energy for Freddy and Augie and Flaco and Doug," he said, explaining why he wasn't dancing. "Meanwhile..." he looked at Flavia adoringly. "Meanwhile, we've been the two most entertaining people in the world," Flavia finished and returned his look with one of her own.

Flora and Ray were glowing with sweat and electricity. "I'm glad I didn't wear a white dress," she said fluffing out her dress to cool down. "I keep thinking of that poor woman," she added. "It's not as if you two left any secrets out there on the floor," said Flavia, with an approving burst of laughter.

The only sour note of the night came with the waitress. She set down the next round of margaritas and stood looking at Ray with a disgruntled expression on her face. Ray smiled a hello.

"Do you remember me? The waitress said.

"You do look familiar," Ray said, more out of politeness than recognition.

"I should look familiar, you slept with me. I was your model for a class you taught," she said in an aggrieved tone.

"Oh yeah, yeah. I'm so sorry. It's been a while. Marlene, isn't it?"

"Not! Marjorie is my name," she said, fully pissed off.

"How long have you been in Santa Fe?" Ray asked shakily, desperate to rescue the situation.

"Three years now," she said, and stomped off.

"Nice seeing you," Ray called after her. She stopped, turned and glared a death-strike in his direction. Happily, a different waitress served them the next round.

Serge was terribly amused. “Memorable night, huh? It happens. It probably has more to do with your advancing years than with the “quality time” you spent with her,” he said sarcastically. Ray was red with humiliation and kept nervously turning to Flora.

“Oh God, I feel terrible. Flora, I’m so sorry. This is really humiliating.”

“Not for me,” she said, sounding hurt. “But you should feel a little guilty. You hurt her feelings.”

“What does...” Ray caught himself sounding defensive and made a quick adjustment to his tone.

“I did hurt her feelings, and I’m sorry if I sounded argumentative. I didn’t mean it.”

“At least you remembered her name began with an M. Nothing else comes to mind?” asked Serge, in an attempt to lighten the moment.

“To tell you the truth, I remember her apartment was freezing cold. One of those rent control deals. And she had this dog that sat outside the bedroom door, panting and salivating. Big fucking dog it was, but I can’t remember a thing about her or anything we did. Jeez that’s awful!”

They sat out the remaining couple of songs. During the intermission the guitar player from “Blue Suede” sauntered over to the table.

“You two were hot out there. It was a pleasure, to watch you, thanks for getting things rolling. Muchas gracias!” His velvety voice was surprising in the face of his appearance and demeanor on stage.

“It’s us should be thanking you,” said Ray. “You guys were terrific. It’s gonna be a hard act to follow.”

“I dunno. Freddy and the boys are off the charts. I’m looking forward to being in the audience. Well, enjoy yourself, folks.”

They insisted on buying him a beer and the musician sat down for a while and chatted. He and Serge, who knew tons about music and the music business, did most of the talking. At one point Flora interjected “where did you come up with that Celia Cruz number? It’s a favorite of mine.”

The musician answered with a cap toothed smile—“Big Rita, our drummer, played with a salsa band. She’s the other Chicano besides me.” He deliberately emphasized the “o” in Chicano, and laughed at his own joke. “When Big Rita talks we all listen.”

Two margaritas later, the Texas Tornados took the stage: four rocking grandfathers, with road map faces and bodies that had seen a lot of everything on both sides of the border. “That’s all she wrote,” as the expression goes. They took charge. When they left the stage the entire room had been reduced to a puddle of sweat and contagious high spirits. This didn’t stop the audience from cheering them back for an encore set, which alone would have been worth the price of admission. Their final number was an exquisite rendition of “Volvere”. The odd waltz-time slowed to a dirge, and then rose heavenward, fitting itself to the lyrics of hope and sorrow. Ray and Flora, dancing in the embrace of the music, wept silently. They knew the words and whispered them to each other—she in Spanish, he in English. Flavia and Serge remained sitting, kissing openly and fondling each other, beneath the table.

None of them could remember where they parked the Caddie. As they wandered around, hoping for a jog to their collective memory, it became clear that even if they found the car, the drive north was out of the question.

They settled on a not-quite-respectable motel out on Cerrios Road and managed to get there only by concentrated effort. Flavia had wanted to wait in the car, but finally entered the lobby with Serge leading her by the arm and Flora gently pushing her along from behind. Ray and Flora signed in, excited by the prospect of a new trysting place. Serge all of a sudden was fumbling, and making wisecracks to the night clerk. Flavia was standing off to the side, looking out the picture window of the office. The night clerk was totally bored with the proceedings. He was more interested in the re-run of “The Simpsons” he was watching on TV than in Serge and Flavia’s big night. Flora

scoped the situation and said, cheerily. “Don’t worry, we won’t tell.” Ray said cryptically, “remember to wash your trunk”—a reference to the days when, in a loft without a shower, they were forced to take “sponge baths”. Serge and Flavia said nervously, “See you guys in the morning”.

The room was clean and sufficiently transient-looking to be sexy. Flora went straight to the shower. Ray took off his clothes and plopped down on the bedspread. It was made of a synthetic material that was unpleasant against his naked skin. When he turned the cover down it generated crackles and tiny blue sparks of static. He lay there for ten minutes or so and then got up to see what was happening with Flora. He peeked around the shower curtain and found Flora crying. He stepped into the tub to put his arms around her and she pushed him away.

“I don’t feel like it now”.

“I wasn’t suggesting...I wanted to know what was wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong. I don’t know why I’m crying. I’m just being silly.”

“It doesn’t seem silly. Can’t you tell me what’s bothering you?”

She softened and allowed him to put his hands around her waist.

“You couldn’t even remember her name. That is so careless.”

“It was careless. Come on Flora—I was a different person back then. And she...are you threatened by her?”

“Not by her, but it makes me wonder about you. Am I going to be the woman whose name you can’t remember three years from now?”

“Flora, it’s different with you. It’s a whole other thing.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You told me you cheated on your wife. I didn’t want to hear it. Here we are, and you’re still married. I am no better than Marjorie.”

“I also told you I wasn’t proud of it. And that if I knew then what I know now, I wouldn’t have done it. And it’s different now, I’m not with her.”

She was not to be consoled. Her body tightened to his touch, she pushed him away and crossed her arms over her breasts.

“I hate to be punished for something I did five years before I met you.”

“You think this is being punished? Don’t you see it makes me afraid? It has nothing to do with punishing you. It is about me protecting myself. That’s all it is. And I do not want to feel I must do that.”

She began crying again. This time, she let Ray hold her. He waltzed her to the bed where they fell down, naked, still holding each other in the dancer’s embrace. The humor of this eased the tension between them, but it took a full hour of talk before Flora would let the “issue” rest. Ray listened, sleepily. After the first ten minutes of talk he responded to her queries and observations with monosyllabic grunts and an occasional “I understand”.

He thought he had learned a few things about the workings of relationships, even from those that had failed. That women wanted to be heard was paramount—it is axiomatic that women consider the expression, “a man who listens” to be an oxymoron, despite his best efforts, and that the words “I understand” cover a multitude of sins. Not to listen, despite the supposed seduction by Eve, was the original sin of the male. Redemption comes from baptism by fire and cleansing by deluge. The grit in the grease was that both the cleansing and redemption depended on the good humor of the offended.

For Ray, the motel room lost its promise as an arena for an exciting romp. The avocado “leather” Lay-Z-Boy palled from sexy to tacky. The matching drapes and bedspread were too hopelessly middlebrow to fantasize a low-rent rendezvous. There would be no “doggy-style” in the Lay-Z-Boy to cap the evening—even a polite bout in the missionary position, a fitting resolution of events, would

remain an unanswered prayer. It was their first night together without congress.

They had a pleasant wake-up tumble and were now sitting in a café next to the motel, talking warmly. For Flora, the night had ended perfectly: a long talk and an affectionate cuddle before drifting off into a slumber she referred to as “sublime”. She wasn’t sorry about bringing up the incident with the waitress. “At the club, I forgot it as soon as it happened,” she said. “Eee, we were so hot on the dance floor. It came over me without any warning. I stepped into the shower and started crying. I had to talk to you about it. I feel much better now.”

They were preparing to dig into an enormous breakfast, when Serge and Flavia came in looking very pleased with themselves—their matching grins said it all. “I guess we’re all starving,” Serge said, as he sat down. “I’ll have what they’re having.” Flavia turned to the waitress and said “Same for me and lots of it.”

Surprisingly, no one was hung over, simply wiped out and sated, in balanced measure. They drove north in blue-collar style—men in front, women in back. Flavia and Flora chatted animatedly in Spanish, engaging the men in English only to check some “factual” information concerning the night before. They drove with the top down, and each time one of the women leaned forward to speak her hair would be ravaged by the wind. The men were content to exchange glances and speak half-sentences in a language so encoded in their personal histories as to be incomprehensible to anyone else. Driving through Medenales, they amused themselves by counting the road kill. The toll included four dogs, a cat, a huge, bloated burro and four unidentified smears—par for the course after a Saturday night.

Ray and Flora agreed to meet the following night, since both had work and rest to attend to. Flora and Flavia decided on a phone date, while Ray and Serge planned a hike for the following day.

VIII

Ray arose before sunup and drove to El Rito to pick up Serge. They wanted an early start for the day long hike. Serge had baked cornbread and cooked up a batch of eggs and bacon, which they wolfed down, excited to get underway. They packed Serge's gear and were heading back toward Abiquiu as the sun began its daily rounds.

Although Ray had taken the hike before, it was new for Serge—he was revved but a bit anxious about the difficulty and length of the trail. He was focused on the walk to the exclusion of any other topic. Even his budding relationship with Flavia, about which he was elated, didn't enter the conversation. He was like a kid who hadn't taken

his Ritalin. Ray answered his incessant questions—“Now where do we start? How long is this going to take us? You sure you know the way?”—with parental patience. They had gone over the details before, but it didn’t matter.

In all business connected to art, Serge operated with confidence and intelligence. Ray often took his lead from him. Serge navigated the confusing waters of the social world with an easy charm that, despite incidents like the lady in the white dress, endeared him to many. When it came to nature, he was the literal “babe in the woods”. His franticness grew in proportion to his inability to control a situation. It made sense, at least to Ray, that Serge’s abstract paintings were based in nature. The misguided belief, that one could tame nature through organization, was too tempting for him.

The trailhead was a few miles south of Ghost Ranch. There was no cute, rustic gateway to welcome the visitor, no wooden mailbox containing maps and a sign in sheet. A pile of stones stood at the intersection of a plethora of paths and game trails that radiated in all directions. There were no blazes or sign posts until it hooked up with a marked trail some ten miles along, high in the ponderosa forests above El Rito. A compass and topographic map were essential to finding one’s way. Ray produced both these items from his hip sack and explained the route to Serge.

“Look, we’re right here, near the bottom of this rise, about a mile from the canyon rim. And we’re going to walk about fifteen miles, to here, just above El Rito.”

“Uh huh. Is this squiggly black line the trail?”

“Yeah. We’re gonna walk this way along the rim for a mile or so and then drop down into the canyon. It’s very cool down there—you’ll love it.”

“Anything you say, Sahib. I like the idea. How do we get back out?”

“I dunno. We fuck around a while looking for the trail up.” He saw concern spread like a prairie fire across his friend’s face. “Don’t sweat it. It’s no big deal; it’s not

so steep at the far end. We'll take a little break at the Teen Girls Sex Camp. It's on our way."

"That's good. I'll share my sandwich with one of them and teach them a couple of tricks. Speaking of which..."

"Had a good time, didja?"

"Un-fucking-believable! I guess I've been at a plateau on my learning curve. I love that she's tall—and her skin...her smell makes me dizzy."

"She hasn't had a man in a while. At least that's what Flora says. That couldn't hurt."

"That seems to be the story—but she added a couple of new pages to my book. I've got some serious scratches on my back. I didn't notice them till this morning. You think it's some Spanish thing?"

"What, the scratches, or you not noticing them? Maybe it's the altitude."

"Asshole! I could be discovering some little-known tendency of Spanish women—and you make a joke—this could be life changing. Anyway, I've never been scratched before."

"I guess you'll have to do a follow-up study—to see if your theory holds water. Are you?"

"Let's put it this way: If Flavia didn't have to work today, you'd be on this lonesome trail by yourself."

"Then you would have missed this," Ray said with a sweeping gesture and a small bow. They had arrived at the rim of Copper Canyon. The sun had lifted high enough to cast a few biblical rays of illumination onto the floor and the east facing walls. The light had colored the canyon like its name. The walls that dropped from the East rim were shadowed in wet violet. The sight was magnificent and the two painters fell silent. They sat for a while on an outcropping, staring into the abyss. Serge spoke first.

"If you painted this thing, I mean, if you could paint this thing, no one would believe it. The landscape painters have big balls, you know?"

“The old guys, Moran and Church and that whole crew did a pretty good job. The way we see it now is completely filtered through those huge fucking paintings they did.”

“Yeah. I keep rearranging what’s out there to fit my memory of some of their paintings—even though they never painted this place. Like I’d like to get rid of that clump of piñóns over there” Serge said, pointing across the canyon.”

“Nature can be very untidy,” Ray joked. “Let’s walk along the rim for a while—we’ll change the picture. We can drop down into the canyon over there, where it turns to the east.”

“Lead the way. Remember to stop at the sex camp. We wouldn’t want to miss that.”

“I was pretty sure that little known fact would capture your imagination. The funny thing is though, that some dominatrix from the City actually is building a place out here.”

“No, man. Tell me it’s not true.”

“I wish I could, me bucko. My neighbor Perry is building it for her. It’s out my way, way up on the ridge across the valley. Nice little adobe tucked into the rocks. She’s got a better view than I do”.

“First the Muslims build their mosque, then what’s her face...”

“Shirley McLain?”

“Right. She builds her place back up there in Snake Ranch. No one’s ever seen her go there.”

“The road is so bad it’s not passable half the time”.

“What a joke! So are there leg irons and whip closets?”

“Supposedly it’s her retreat. Perry says she’s going to write and do her research, whatever the fuck that means.”

“The Whip Lady! Why the fuck build way out there? Is she some earthy-granola-outdoors type?”

“Not as far as I can tell...City-black clothes, loads of makeup.”

“Right! She’ll blend right in out here. What the fuck do they make of her down at Bode’s? It must be a stretch for the locals.”

“It’s a stretch for me. Bode is probably happy for her business—chains, quirts, saddles, C-clamps. He carries all that stuff.”

“I guess you can’t blame her for wanting to escape out here. She must lead a heavy duty life in the City.” Serge became thoughtful and began to droop a little.

“You OK, Serge? The climb getting to you? Or are you thinking about your own escape?”

“It’s been hard—you know how it is. You’ve been going through the same shit. Only you have more guilt than me. You’re also about a year ahead of me.”

“You mean in dismantling my life?”

“Dismantling is a euphemism for wrecking, right?”

“Do you think we’re wrecking our lives?”

“You know, I wish I knew the answer to that. Mine’s a fucking mess. That’s for sure.”

“It’ll take time, but, when it’s time to leave...I mean, do you have a choice?”

“Not at this point. At least there’s no way I could stay.”

“Yeah, I tried that. I went back. No go.”

“Right—twice, as I remember it.”

“Christ, I really wanted to make it right. Some things aren’t possible no matter how much you want them.”

“Isn’t it weird? When the sex thing goes, you can never get it back. Especially if you start messing with strange.”

“This is true.” Ray assumed a mocking twelve-step voice. “My name is Ray, and I have fornicated with strange women. I thought it would make me a better person. A higher power told me it was wrong.”

“Like the judge. I can’t believe the temporary settlement—I don’t know how the fuck I’m going to come up with the money. My new studio rent is more than the mortgage on the loft.”

“You’re resourceful, you’ll figure it out, but I know it’s overwhelming. It’s a mammoth fucking bummer. I’m sorry you’re getting beaten up. I’m with ya. I lived out of a suitcase after breaking up with Dianne. I know what you’re dealing with.”

“At least I got that together. You haven’t seen my new apartment yet. It’s nice. I made a room for Heather—for when she stays with me. I put some art up, so it’s starting to look homey. But it doesn’t feel like mine yet.”

“After you spend some time it’ll seem less of a stage set. But I know it ain’t the loft—that was a very hip place. Great view and I was always jealous of the studio. What did you decide to do about the studio?”

“I found one just before I left. It’s a few blocks from the apartment. Great space—but they’re not giving it away. I’ve got the move to deal with as soon as I get back. Your solution of staying out here for the year looks a lot more appealing. Flora seems like a good enough reason to do that.”

“Man, I feel blessed on that score. But the same shit about what to do is there when I get back. I can’t bring myself to face it. New studio, new place to live—it puts me in a panic just to think about it. I’m sure it’ll become clearer. This year seems like a luxury, in a way. I hope it’s not a delerium.”

“Fuck it, pull a Gauguin!” said Serge. “You’ve been to all those places. You could get a good dose of the clap from one of the locals, make some shell-art for the tourists.”

“Sounds like a great life. I could engage my mortality more directly—concentrate all my attention on the little spirochetes growing in my brain. Gauguin had real estate problems over there, didn’t he?”

“Artists always have real estate problems. The place is probably crawling with realtors and lawyers already anyway.”

“Right, and they’re French. I’d be at a distinct disadvantage. You’re the one who should go—you speak

French better than I do. And you don't mind hairy armpits, so you could go after the French girls."

"You're twisted. It was the only thing about Flavia that made me hesitate...for about a second. She didn't shave her underarms. I could lose it for her. That would make it unbelievably complicated. I have a little over two weeks left—then its back to reality."

"Just enough time to get hooked and not enough to figure anything out. Are you scheming?"

"Am I scheming? Give me a break! I'm already wondering how I could get her a nurse's job in the clinic at Heather's school."

"That would go over great with Mickey. How about if I move back into my building with Flora? You could get my life insurance policy after Dianne poisons me and then leave it to Heather after you get murdered by Mickey."

"Not a good idea, huh?"

"Not a good idea. Just relax a bit and enjoy her company. If something comes of it, you'll figure it out."

"You talking to me, or yourself?"

"Both."

The climb down got more difficult and they stopped talking. It became cooler the further they descended into the canyon. The sun was early in the sky. The lower reaches of the trail and the canyon floor remained in shadow. At the bottom the air was heavier with chill and it squashed out the sounds from the world above. The men hiked along a dry creek bed—long stretches of sand, interrupted by an occasional patch of mud that was fast losing its moisture. There were animal tracks everywhere. This was the superhighway for creatures of all sizes. Skittering pad prints of ground squirrels and rabbits, delicate markings of small birds were in the sand, an elk left its cloven vees, deep in the mud. One set of fresh tracks, moving in the same direction the men walked, brought them up short.

“You see these? Ray asked, pointing to a clear set of tracks.

“What the fuck are they? They’re too big to be a coyote.”

“They’re shaped wrong in the pad to be from the dog family—and there are no claw marks. That is one big set of cat tracks!”

“As in mountain lion?”

“Looks it to me. As meat goes, so go the meat eaters.”

“I’ve heard there were lions out here. Remember that story about the one that winter? I think it was the winter you were here. One was living underneath that house down near the cut off to the dam.”

“Yeah. I saw its tracks in the snow near the estanque, the watering hole, below the mosque. It was on the prowl for food. It was a hard winter and the cats were moving to the lower elevations.”

“There are only these few tracks, then they disappear. You think we’ll see it?”

“I doubt it. They look like they were made within the last day or so, but I couldn’t be sure. It’s probably long gone.”

They walked on in silence. The canyon grew narrower and the walls steeper. The shadow cast by the canyon rim dwindled, and the sun coaxed the rocks from their violet slumber to the buffed copper of day. The creek bed divided off into three shallow spurs, one more moist than the others. They followed this to a small seep a few feet up on the canyon wall below which a catch of water, finger deep, had collected. The barest trickle was enough for moss and hanging plants to make their tenuous stand on the dampened wall. They wet their bandanas and tied them around their necks and started the climb up.

The climb required a grunting concentration. Although Ray had done it alone once before, it was easier in tandem with Serge, and a lot funnier; each slip became a dramatic encounter with death itself, each bruise, a potential

breeding ground for gangrene or leprosy. When either of them was flagging, the Wayward Girl's Sex Camp was evoked as motivation.

When they reached the rim, they rested and surveyed the terrain they had traversed. The canyon seemed deeper from above, and they congratulated each other that they had chosen this long detour, down and up again. It was still early morning. Although they had been walking for over two hours, they had the majority of the distance to cover and set off at a quickened pace. It took a while to find the trail and they were relieved to see the stone cairns that marked it. Although they were at nearly eight thousand feet in elevation, it would be a while before they entered the ponderosa forests. The trail climbed gradually upward through open country with scattered piñón and juniper. Ray felt odd—not physically but as if something were amiss. He stopped often and looked around. He complained to Serge that something was not quite right—they were not lost, or turned around. “I can't explain it. I just have this peculiar feeling that we're not alone” he said, to Serge. They were five or six miles into the back country at this point—not a huge distance but hardly descriptive of how far afield they really were.

When Ray first saw the mountain lion he didn't believe it. It was much larger than he'd imagined one would be. It was also much closer than he had ever wished to see one outside the confines of a zoo. He stopped Serge, shushed him, and pointed in the direction of the beast. Serge's jaw dropped—there is no other way to describe his face than with this cliché. The men stood in amazed silence as the lion slowly ambled along less than forty yards away. He was on a nearly parallel course, slightly ahead of the two men, and had apparently been following them for some time. He had just begun to bend in their direction, on a long arc that would eventually intersect their path. The animal's tawny, caramel-colored fur glistened in the sun. It was close enough to see the ripples of musculature and sinew beneath its hide. The lion's movement was fluid and

seemed shaped by the topography of the ground—a shoulder rising in response to a mound of earth, its haunches shifting to accommodate a defile in the trail. There was a majestic air about the beast that was, simultaneously, at ease and alert. It seemed undeniably male, although neither of the men could say why. It was, perhaps, the sense of entitlement and total confidence they sensed in the animal. His indifference to the men seemed feigned. Although he never turned his head in their direction, he had been stalking them, for that was what it was, since they left the canyon. He may have deemed them unacceptable as prey. Perhaps his disinterest was calculated to give a false sense of security that might lead to a fatal stupidity on their part: running away, separating, following him.

They watched him float across the trail ahead; he was in no hurry. The men had stopped in their tracks and the lion moved further away. He continued on the long arc of his trajectory and disappeared from their view where the trail entered a small stand of trees. Both men released their breath, which sounded like a semi testing its air brakes. Seeing the fear in each other's face they laughed nervously. They waited a while, unsure about whether to continue.

“Let's give him a good head start,” Ray said.

“You think we should go on? He was huge.”

“Man that was really something—I just about peed my pants. He was so close you could see his skin move.”

“You think we should go on?” Serge asked again.

“I don't know what the S.O.P. is. I think you're not supposed to run. That's how the joggers out in California got whacked.”

“They did?”

“Yeah. There were a couple of cases—the mountain lion thought they were prey and went after them.”

“Let's get some big fucking sticks or something—just in case.”

“So you want to continue?”

“You're fucking asking me? I just asked you.”

“OK, let’s make some noise, like in grizzly country...let him know we’re coming. As if he wouldn’t know already anyway.”

“All right, champ. You lead, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Fuck that—you walk right up here along side me. I think they prefer white meat, at least that’ll give me an advantage, what with me being so much shorter and darker than you.”

They walked noisily on, talking, kicking at stones and branches along the trail. They kept looking warily in all directions. Serge made a particular point of looking behind him, mumbling—They’re sneaky...he could be right behind us.” Ray was tense, some primal switch had flipped in an older part of his brain. “I don’t want to alarm you Serge, but I’ve got the same feeling I had earlier. This guy is still around.” And there he was, his silhouette broken by a small piñón, a scant fifty yards away. The trail had begun to rise more steeply and the lion was above the men. He had turned around and was facing back along the trail toward where they stood. He had positioned himself on an elevated shelf of rock and commanded all that his view encompassed. This included the two stumbling interlopers, who now held his full attention. There was no pretense—he was focused on the men and his gaze fixed them where they stood. It may not have been for very long in “lion time”, but the men felt that his stare went on endlessly. After he had made his assessment they felt stripped—as if something of them had been revealed to this beast that they could not know for themselves. They were rendered alien and powerless by the look.

It was they who broke the connection. They averted their eyes from his for a moment, and when they turned back, he was gone. He was, for the moment, finished with them, but it was also clear, to Serge and Ray, that they would not be far from his thoughts. Or he from theirs.

There was no discussion. Discretion was valor under the circumstances. They turned and retreated down

the trail. Their adrenaline was flowing with their sweat as they reached the rim of the canyon. They stopped to eat the lunch of sandwiches and apricots they brought—each bite whittled away at their nervousness. Their backs were to the view of the canyon. They continued to look back up the trail—hoping and dreading that the lion would make another appearance. Ultimately they settled down enough to face the canyon. The sun was overhead and lit the canyon with the brightness of a smile. There was still no conversation between the men. Ray made one comment, just before they elected to take the rim trail back, "Look at that, the canyon changed color—it's the same as the mountain lion." The stories would come later, in the safety of the dinner table.

On the drive back they stopped at the post office to pick up Ray's mail. Included in the stack of bills and letters was the latest copy of National Geographic. In it there was an article on mountain lions. They stopped for a couple of beers at the Oasis drive-up window and afterwards, sat in the car, drinking the beers and reading the article aloud. They learned some unpleasant lore about lions, including the fact that those in Northern New Mexico were the most aggressive. This had something to do with the pressure of civilization on their range. By the time they finished the article, and the beers, they were stupid with relief.

Despite what she had told Serge, Flavia had the day off from the clinic. While the boys were off getting scared to death, she and Flora were having a very civilized lunch at the Abiquiu Inn. It was owned and run by the Muslim community and there was no alcohol served; this was less important to the women than their privacy. They were less apt to be interrupted by someone they knew. The restaurant drew a transient crowd and was a bit too Anglo and up-scale for most locals. Flavia was waiting at the table when Flora arrived. They kissed each other affectionately on each cheek.

"That was quite a night," Flora began.

“Oh, it was so much fun. I haven’t done that in so long, I can’t remember.”

“Exactly what can’t you remember?” Asked Flora, with a slightly, wicked smile.

“Oh you, little Miss Innocent! All of it! Dancing, getting a little borracha and then...I’m a little embarrassed. Isn’t that odd?”

“Since it is me you are talking with, it is a little odd. You are just out of practice. So you had a good time?”

“We were both pretty drunk and a little nervous... at least at the start. But it all came back to me pretty quick.” Flavia punctuated this with a chuckle. “And he wasn’t exactly shy once we got going. He talked a lot, even when we were doing it. That was different for me but it was kind of a turn-on. And funny, too.”

“Well, I think the both of them have been around, that’s for sure. Ray keeps surprising me. There doesn’t seem to be too much that he thinks is off limits, but he’s wonderful in bed. Come to think of it we don’t often get to the bed.”

“Oh, like the floor?” It was Flavia’s turn for a wicked look.

“For all his wildness he can be gentle too—and the foreplay is perfect, although the first time we didn’t waste any time. We barely made it into the house. He seems to know what I want—and I don’t mind telling him what I want.”

“That’s a new thing for you, isn’t it?” Flavia asked. “I’ve only been with Serge one night so I haven’t gotten to that stage yet. It felt good to be with a man after...could it be almost two years?”

“Eeee! It really has been that long. I was worried about you. I know you are always very busy, but I thought you were making yourself busier to make up for it. I hesitated to ask. I was afraid it would make you feel bad, or that I didn’t respect your work. Which you know I do.”

“Oh, Flora, of course I know that. And I know you were concerned for me. You invited me to a bunch of

things—we were both on the lookout for good men. It's not easy finding someone who is even available up this way. And then the ones who are, are creeps—and no one wants them. God, do you remember that last party we both went to?"

"That one in Santa Fe? It was at that doctor's house. It was you, Señorita Nurse, who got us invited to that. I ended up staying the night with the doctor. Ugh!"

"It was a great house. I thought he was cute", Flavia said, leading Flora on.

"He thought he was. Even after we spent the night together I don't think it made any difference to him that I was there. It was over so quickly I never got a chance to enjoy myself. I couldn't get away fast enough. I got up with the sun and he was already dressed in a suit, talking on the telephone. Ugh! He was so pompous; it makes me want to throw up. Even now...I say that, but to be truthful, it means nada to me now."

"Well I didn't get to go home with anyone, even a jerk. The guy I had my eye on was there with a girlfriend. I never even knew the little bitch was there."

"You got to go home with someone the other night—No está nada mal. He looks like a Tejano."

"And Ray! ¡Qué bueno que está! He is hot! On the dance floor, Flora, I thought I would die the way you two danced. You might as well have had your clothes off. Everybody was watching."

"Now I'm embarrassed. But just a little."

"I love the way those two are with each other. They do get each other going," said Flavia.

"They certainly have shared a lot. They seem different than a lot of men, don't they? At least the ones I've met. They are older than most of the men we've dated. Although you would never know it."

"There's still some big teenage streak in them—but they're both...."

"Married, I'm sorry to say."

“I haven’t gotten that far,” Flavia said. “He’s terrific fun but it seems like an impossible situation. He has a very complicated life and it seems to be unraveling. We haven’t talked a lot about that though. ‘I don’t wanna go there’ is what he says whenever the issue comes up. Which is all of about twice, not including the first time we all met at the Candelerio. To be truthful? I don’t ‘wanna go there’ either. I just want to enjoy him for right now.”

“I understand. He is only here for a little while before he goes back to ‘The City’—that’s how Ray refers to it. I can hardly imagine what life is like there. Ray seems to have this love-hate relationship with it. It troubles me.”

“Why does it trouble you? Life here isn’t one hundred percent perfect. Sometimes it makes me nuts, and I want to flee.”

“That is not what I meant—no. I get that he hates it and loves it. What I meant to say was that his life there threatens me in some ways. I was too ashamed to admit it.”

“What threatens you about it?”

“I know we’ve only been together for two weeks, so it sounds premature. But the fact is, he still has a wife...and I think I’m falling in love with him.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard that pass your lips in a very long while. Is it lust or love?” Flavia asked.

“Both. It’s very hard to tell. He is so wonderful to spend time with. We always have something to talk about. He listens to what I say.”

“You sure it’s not that first few dates thing. They’re all ears—until they get laid.”

“No, he seems genuinely interested in my ideas about things. He certainly does not need that as a ploy—not at this point. I am as eager as he is. Umm, I guess there are some definite advantages to seeing a man with a past.”

“Experience is the best teacher. I think I could get to like this ‘older man’ thing myself. So, what else are you feeling about this guy?”

“He is so romántico...deep down. It is not a pose.”

“Just make sure he gets his head out of the clouds. The heart of a poet is a beautiful thing, but when the rent comes due...”

“But he gets things done too. You know how practical I am. I like things to happen. He’s un hombre de los que me gustan. If he was just a dreamer it would drive me crazy.”

“A man after your own heart. So where is the rub?”

“I know it sounds corny, but I look into those brown eyes of his...the whole world is in his eyes...and I can tell that...”

“You see yourself there?”

“Yes, it makes me feel very special.”

“So what’s the trouble? He’s obviously crazy about you!”

“What if...what if he doesn’t want to stay? He’s so restless. I see that in his eyes too. Do you recall that story he told in the restaurant?”

“About the old woman who was sick? That was pretty intense.”

“That is exactly what I mean. He was so moved by that—you could tell he was happiest when he was in some crazy place.”

“Serge says he’s been all over the world...he’s traveled for years. But what’s wrong with that? You two could have a great time traveling.”

“I know. But it’s more than that. His restlessness—he’s always looking, looking and searching. I’m not sure for what. It makes me insecure; although it seems to have little to do with me.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Flavia, we have both learned to live alone and we are very good at it, and I never worry about taking care of myself. I have my work and income from my father’s construction business—you know that. Now it all seems changed.”

Flora scanned the dining room. She turned her hands palms up, and dismissed the scene with a slight uplift of her chin.

“I see. You mean how you feel about it?”

“I don’t know if I could ever go back to my life before these last two weeks. It seems so lonely to me now. And it makes me frightened in a way I’ve never been.”

“That it might not work out? You’re stronger than that. You have a lot of people who love you, including me.”

Her words were strangled and painful for her to speak.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Flavia. I hurt your feelings. It was thoughtless of me to complain to you about that. I just meant that I...we’ve both waited for so long for something good to happen.” Her heart filled her eyes as she spoke.

“I’m happy for you, Flora and I’m worried and I’m not jealous. I have just what I need for now. I’m lots happier than I was two days ago...and who knows—his crazy gringo friend might surprise me, too.”

“Oh, I hope he does—and I hope I’m not being foolish letting myself get involved like this with Ray. I feel like I have...not much choice in the matter. I confess that being a bit out of control is nice, for a change.”

“You have to take the chance,” Flavia said. “After all, you do believe in fate, don’t you?”

“It does seem fated that he and I should have met. Fate doesn’t guarantee the outcome; that takes as much attention as translating poetry. I never did tell you how we met?”

“No. We seemed to have skipped over that in all the excitement.”

Flora recounted the story of finding the little boat in the arroyo.

“I found out a week later that he had made the boat and set it afloat that day. He had been following it downstream.”

“That does sound like fate, but what’s a grown man doing, making boats and sailing them in the arroyo?”

“That is the hundred-peso question isn’t it? All I can say is that now that I know him a little better, it makes sense.”

“Some guy thing?”

“I don’t think so. It’s a pretty weird thing to do, even for a guy. He says he was relaxing—from his painting—and needed to do something that wasn’t so serious. I’m not sure he knows exactly why. He didn’t explain any more than that. Maybe he thought I wouldn’t understand or he felt sheepish about it.”

“Well you met—so it worked didn’t it?”

“So here we are, both of us, seeing married men. We swore to each other that we wouldn’t.”

“We were younger and smarter then—probably less lonely too,” Flavia said wistfully.

IX

Ray and Flora's life together began to build a rhythm. They alternated where they stayed, but preferred the mesa with its heightened sense of privacy. They loved the little adobe's perch above the lands of the Plaza Blanca. It was their back yard. The white cliffs and mesas suggested the ruins of an ancient civilization, and Anglos sometimes called it the White City, or the White Place. America has seen it in dozens of Westerns and grade B sci-fi movies. The directors, faced with the daunting task of lugging tons of equipment into another, more reluctant valley, all filmed the same stretch of barren land with its lone cottonwood and backdrop of cathedral rocks.

Before they met, Ray and Flora had routines that got them out in early morning. Flora would jog and, afterward, work in her garden. Ray would hike for a couple of hours before settling down to work. When they slept over at Ray's they began their day with a short hike. The Plaza Blanca was a two-hour round trip from the house and became one of their regular walks. They would scramble down from the mesa, on a path barely scratched into the gritty soil, join an older game trail across the valley, and climb up through the narrowing canyon of the White Place. If the small waterfalls were flowing, they would get a morning shower with the climb. It was chilly and thrilling in equal measure and had the advantage of diminishing the threat of rattlers, which avoided the small cascades. They returned along a route which ran behind the White Place, past a wall of Anasazi petroglyphs and the ruins of an irrigation system. The scattered hoses, tanks and fences from an ambitious marijuana cultivation looked hastily abandoned.

After their hike they would go their respective ways and work until late afternoon when they would join up for a

“swimming lesson” at the lake. Flora now loved the water and felt re-launched from the dry dock she had been in since her father’s murder. It was truly a testament to the power of lust as a motivation for learning. They continued to refer to the “lesson” long after they exhausted what Ray could teach her.

Flora was busy with her translation work. She had taken a job translating a little-known work by the Spanish author Borges. She called it a job, although she wasn’t being paid and there was no contract. She took it on as a welcome relief from the technical and legal translations that were her bread and butter. Calling it a job made it easier for her to justify the time she spent. “Besides, I have plans to send it to his editors and see if it raises some interest.” Borges had translated many of his own works, or worked closely with the translators. The translators were generally writers, and Flora thought it an interesting challenge. She had wended her way through the labyrinth of other works by this blind seer, and they had cast their spell on her.

Flora complained to Ray about how difficult it was to keep the poetry from dissolving in translation. “There is so much shadow in his world and I don’t know how I can render that with clarity and not lose the mystery. The problem is that English always felt to me like it was invented for the daylight...so it should be easy, because Borges writes so clearly. His Spanish is precise, nothing too fancy. But it is not so easy at all. Claro?” In the evenings, they read aloud the passages she had put into English, matching them to the original Spanish for nuance and color.

Her spoken English had an odd formality to it; she used contractions sparingly, even in casual conversation, and her colloquialisms seemed quaint and a speck self-conscious. Her written translations, however, were exquisitely wrought, evidenced a profound understanding of language and flowed like life itself. She attributed this to her bilingual upbringing and the dominance of spoken Spanish within her home. For his part, Ray found her way

of speaking enchanting; it seemed to give a measure of importance to the most mundane things.

She made an occasional trip to Santa Fe or Albuquerque for an interpretation job, or to meet with a client. Ray used these times to catch up with Russell and Jason—they didn't see him often enough.

They both knew of Flora, but he hadn't introduced them to her yet. Despite their accusations that he was "pussy-whipped"(Jason) or "hen-pecked"(Russell), they were pleased for his good luck. Russell was thrilled that she liked the outdoors, but didn't quite believe it. He had just broken up with a woman who thought she was roughing it when she stayed at his studio. He kept asking, "So she really likes camping and hiking?"

Jason's concerns were a bit less environmental. "Sounds like she's fucking your brains out. Well at least you're painting again. It's better than carving those fucking boats. Even if I don't see you any more."

Since the storm he was painting again. He was painting out of the storm and the weather of his life. Tumultuous watercolors filled with lightening and swirling masses of darkness released into something beautiful and sought-after. There were arks built from bones, set afloat in fluttering seas of silver. There were burning bushes, quenched under blizzards of strokes. Prismatic chunks of ruby red and emerald green hurtled through the darkness; diamonds of all sizes dazzled on temporary horizons. It was difficult to find sure footing in the paintings; the eyes did their archeology under the direction of a wavering compass.

He had begun collecting bones in late spring. He wasn't sure why, but there was nothing macabre about it. The horns and bones were scattered like debris across the plateaus where he hiked. A grassy meadow, notched into a slope of the Sierra Negra, yielded horse skulls and deer antlers. This was where he found a nearly intact elk's skeleton. The bones from the beast's haunches turned up fifty feet away, dragged by some predator to be feasted on

in private. The burden of bones was too much for Ray to carry away and he took only one antler, leaving the rest to be picked at by the smaller denizens of the meadow.

He carried these relics back to his studio, where the smaller items took up residence on windowsills and shelves. The antlers, bleached a silvery white by the sun, were nailed to the outside of the studio and gave it the look of a hunting camp. Ray lived for weeks with the bones before they found their way into his painting. Working late one night, unsure how to proceed, he casually traced one of the knuckled bones onto a piece of paper. He traced another and another—building with the bones as a child would build with a Tinker Toy Set—allowing himself to be taken where the construction led. A boat shape was the first to emerge from this amassing of bones. Skeletal skyscrapers and forms that called to mind dressmakers' dummies waiting to be clothed, soon followed it. The bones lost their aridity. They were no longer punctuation points marking the end of life's sentence.

Once, in Thailand, he had seen piles of skulls of the unknown dead. They had been piled into shrines that resembled flat-topped, conical towers. The skulls had been cleaned and washed before being assembled. The caretakers of the skulls spoke to them during their ablutions. They stacked the grisly remains and spoke to them in reassuring voices with promises of new life and enduring reverence. For Ray, bearing witness to this conversation with the dead was a formidable experience. It went beyond being an exotic anecdote of his travels. Here, a continent removed from the source, he paid unconscious homage to its memory. Another payment toward redemption on the installment plan.

X

Ray's grandparents, whom he had never met, arrived in Mexico at the turn of the century. They left the marble quarries of Carrara, boarded a steamer at La Spezia, and four weeks later arrived in Veracruz. It remained unclear whether they were propelled by dreams or desperation, to take a chance like that. His grandfather Achille took his tools, a few photographs and Adelle, his brand-new, very young wife. She became sick and nearly died on the way over and reportedly remained sickly her entire time in Mexico. Somehow, despite her frailty, she managed to bear two sons, a daughter, and put Ray's father "in the oven" to be born, shortly after, in the U.S. Ray wasn't sure that his father was actually conceived in Mexico, but he told the story often enough that it lived as fact in his imagination.

The length of his family's stay in Mexico was also uncertain. Estimates varied with the relative who passed on their shreds of the story. Ray found it frustrating that his own father had been only mildly interested in the family saga and an unreliable source of information. "I didn't talk with my parents that way," he would say to Ray. "My father and mother never learned English. Besides, parents were more removed back then. My dad was a puzzle...he was barely five feet tall and built like a keg. He looked like a laborer but he had hands like the statue of David. I remember his hands." Even as a child Ray was familiar with Michelangelo's David. His "Uncle" Omero had a life-size copy of the right hand sitting upright on the Victrola. It had been carved by "someone in the family" and served as an icon of the homeland. His father would continue the often-told story, "I can tell you they weren't laborers, they were artigiani." He impressed this idea on Ray whenever

the subject arose. Ray was equally emphatic when telling the tale to his own listeners. He imagined Achille carving ornate capitals and columns, cherubs and plump seraphim, luscious clumps of grapes, balustrades entwined with leaves and vines, all in white marble.

After leaving Mexico his grandparents settled in Vermont to continue their trade. They were mountain people and the landscape and marble quarries of their new home reminded them of Carrara. The winters brought snow to the Green Mountains and heightened the illusion of familiarity. Carrara was lodged at the edge of the craggy Alpi Apuane where the mountains made their dramatic descent to the sea. The people there were comfortable with illusions. The white marble exposed during centuries of quarrying, glistened like snow, year round. In the hands of the artigiani and artisti the same stone was transformed into virtual flesh and imbued with pathos real enough “to make grown men cry”. This was how the story was told.

Following their trade, the Siena family moved to New York, where better opportunities for skilled hands were to be found. His grandparents continued to live as if they were in Italy. They grew rows of tomatoes and spices in the backyard. Rigid slabs of baccalà, stacked like cordwood, shared the basement with an ancient winepress and staved barrels. There were Sunday afternoons at the neighborhood bocce court for the men and black dresses for the women, who seemed in perpetual mourning. Table conversations were often flavored with an acidic scorn reserved for those countrymen who had been unfortunate enough to be born south of Florence and, consequently, didn't know how to behave.

They never again set foot in the old country. They died young, along with three of their children, from tuberculosis, and were buried somewhere in Brooklyn.

Significant sections of the family mosaic were in place. The Mexican part of the picture was missing, but his father's childhood was not so different than Ray's; not in its

particulars, but in its broad outlines shaped by tradition. His memory of these retained a sparkle of delight.

Flora and Ray were in the car on the way back from Ojo Caliente, a hot spring the other side of El Rito. Flora couldn't get enough of the water—hot or cold—since she'd learned to swim. Her associations with water play at this junction in her life were decidedly sexual. She had an easy smile on her face and lounged in the seat against the passenger door. She was turned toward Ray and had positioned herself so her face was in the sun.

“Uum, ‘at shore was a lot of fun,” she said, in a mock West Texan drawl.

“What part?” he said, with a self-sure grin.

“Putting that hot red mud all over, and feeling it get stiff and dry,” Flora said, slyly.

“That was my favorite part, too.” He put his arm up in defense of the barrage of whacks that Flora reined down on him.

“You liar...you didn't like our little fuck in the hot tub best? Eeee, do you think other people do it in there, too?”

“Flora, I don't think we exactly invented it. I know we're good at seizing the opportunity, but hot tubs have been around since the Romans.”

“Well, we invented it for us—at least for me. Did you ever do it in a hot tub before?” she asked, warily.

“Nope, never,” he responded, a little too quickly. She looked at him quizzically, waiting for an elaboration.

He said instead: “You ever eat baccalà?”

“We say bacalao. It's the same stinky fish.”

“Ugh! I remember when my Aunt Rina used to cook it. You could smell it all through the house.”

“Stewed cod, with tomatoes and onions? Veracruz-style?”

“I never thought of that. It always seemed so, so Italian. I didn't dig it much,” he said, laughing.

“What made you think of that?” asked Flora.

“Just another ghost.”

“A friendly one?”

“Yeah, a real Caspar. This old uncle of mine, he made wine in the cellar. That’s where he kept the fish, too.”

“And what did Señor Ghost say to you? Stay away from those women from below the border?”

“No, quite the opposite. He said that the woman I have sitting next to me was *molto bella* and that I should get her in a hot tub as often as I could.”

“No, really, what else did he say?”

“He said “Let’s go to the cellar and *choppa da wood* and *sawa da fish*.”

“Como?”

“The *baccala* was salted and dried stiff as a board; we cut it with a hacksaw. Portion control, I guess you’d call it.”

“He sounds like a sweet old guy—kind of like Tio, except older.”

“He was. He was like an emblem of the old world for me. I think the trips to the cellar were an excuse for him to take a little nip from his whiskey—he kept it stashed behind the furnace.”

“His wife objected to his drinking, of course.”

“I guess that’s not so different, is it? He was cool, though. He’d get a little loaded and sing opera in Italian. It was very amusing to me, but it always blew his cover with his wife, my Aunt Rina.”

“At least you didn’t have to keep the secret about his whiskey.”

“I kept it anyway. I’d never blow the whistle on him. I had too much fun with him to get him in trouble. No one trusted him to take me far from the house anyway—you know, they thought he’d get drunk and lose me.”

“Did he ever? Lose you, I mean.”

“No, but he did get loaded and fall asleep on the beach at Coney Island. That was a no-no that would have ended our travels together if my mother found out. I

remember thinking I better not drown—so I played on the beach, even though I was dying to go in the water.”

“It’s funny how we love those adults in our life who the other adults think are irresponsible.”

“Sure, it’s because they trusted us as kids to be responsible and not screw up.”

“Tía Eva, my mother’s older sister, was like that. She seemed so flamboyant in comparison to my mother. She never married. She wore these flashy hats and dresses. When she took my cousin Maria and me shopping, she let us buy what we wanted. In fact, she encouraged us to be bold in what we chose for ourselves. The wilder the better she thought—and practicality was not exactly a big issue. We would buy the shiniest, daintiest, patent leather shoes, with little buckles—I could tell both our mothers disapproved. But Eva was so generous and big hearted they could hardly complain about her. And Eva always stuck up for us. ‘Don’t be such a pill’ she would say to my mother. I don’t know where that expression came from, it was so American. She had a big influence on me.”

Ray’s first trip to Mexico was the commencement of his wanderings. He was penniless and borrowed five hundred dollars from a cousin to cover expenses. He took a set of watercolors, a camera and Liza, his brand-new wife. He was unaware whether he was motivated by dreams or desperation—he simply knew he had to go. Although the symmetry of his first steps on Mexican soil with that of his forbears was opaque to him, he was changed forever.

The route brought the plane in over the Caribbean; reefs poked holes in the pearly aqua of the sea, and the flattened land of the peninsula sprawled green and uneventful before it disappeared in a bank of haze. On approach, the sea did a disappearing act behind a gnarled barrier of vines, scrub growth and palms. It had rained within the hour and puddles painted pieces of the sky on the runway. Black ribbons of tar ran in rivulets over the airfield. Tufts of weed grew from the cracks that the

patching tar had missed. The airfield was laced together with low-effort repairs and high-density prayers.

The suddenness with which the steaming greenness of Yucatán appeared at the end of the abbreviated runway haunted his memory. There was no shaded boarding ramp, only a few steep steps down a ladder posing as a stairway. Its polished, steel handrail was too hot to touch and the chance of a headlong plunge to the pavement held better odds than a blistered palm. His first breath in Mexico was a scorching blast of air that rebounded from the runway. A leafy mustiness glued together the smells of jet fuel, gasoline and wood smoke, so that inhaling was like taking a solid object into your lungs. He was thrilled, yet wondered why he had come.

Mérida answered some of his questions. The mix of Spanish and Indian ways had been stirred for centuries. A mutual distrust prevailed between the races, legacy of the brutal exploitation of the Mayans by the colonists.

Ray remembered the great heat that washed over the streets of Mérida, permeated the food and came to rest in the languid movements of the people. The afternoon siesta and the warmth of the spoken word paid obeisance to the sun. The arcades and roofed courtyards of the colonial architecture gave respite from the sun and protection from the torrential downpours of late afternoon. And later, after his visits to the Mayan pyramids and temples built to honor the sun and rain, Ray realized it had always been so. It was a city that obeyed laws larger than itself.

In the late 1960s, Mérida had a firmer grasp on the past than it did on modernity. For Ray, fresh out of New York, it seemed in perpetual, humid slumber. He was content to sit in a café on the zócalo and take in all that was offered to his eyes. He rose early for his strong coffee and day-old International Tribune. From his café table he watched the city stir into life. Being witness to these ordinary preparations made him feel like a privileged audience member, invited back stage to see the workings that made the grand spectacle possible. He took breakfast

alone. Liza was laid low with a horrendous case of Montezuma's revenge and stayed in bed until late morning. In the cool of the evening, feeling recovered, she would join him for cold beers and watch the locals take their paseo. He was fascinated with the newness of this old ritual. That the simple act of walking could be social and give such pleasure impressed him deeply.

He was hardly aware of the uneasy truce between Spaniard and Indian and the bloody history that they shared. The sights dazzled his young eyes, and Mexico looked like one big happy family. He began to wonder, on the periphery of thought, just where his place at the table might be.

He and Liza returned the following year, this time clearly excited by the adventure. For three months, with their two best friends Madeline and Theo, they crisscrossed Mexico and Guatemala guided by stars of their own design. The enormous Ford station wagon was equipped with a frightening V-Eight engine, lousy brakes, and the hippest sound system available. They carried a hundred tapes and an arsenal of drugs that would have made any Gonzo journalist drool with envy. The wagon had white-wall tires and sported a Yin-Yang image that was just shy of four feet in diameter on the hood.

It is no exaggeration to say that, at any given time, the driver and at least two of the other occupants were stoned on some combination of exotic substances. The drug of choice was determined by one's role as passenger or driver and whether it was a day or night drive. For example, Ray did most of the night driving with the help of Dexedrine while his passengers, after ingesting a wallop of Quaaludes, cooed praises from their sugared darkness—"You are so groovy man, you can take us anywhere." They had concocted a subtle menu that even allowed for variations in road conditions and terrain—Dexemil, a more tempered version of speed, was preferable for dirt-road driving, acid more appropriate for passengers on a blacktop jaunt. That they never had an accident was a testament to

their driving skills and considerable good luck. That they weren't stopped by the police, except at border crossings and the many routine roadblocks, was a miracle.

Twenty-five years later, after a lifetime of travel, the experience was as vivid to Ray as a light-up star atop a Christmas tree. Although he and Liza and Theo and Madeline had divorced years ago, the friendships endured, as did some affection between former spouses. "The trip" was the backdrop before which their lives continued to play out. Time lent its sepia tone to their memories and the relationships were tinged with the hazy blue of distance, but they kept in touch. New marriages, children, new divorces, successes, down-hill tumbles into alcohol and drugs, motorcycle accidents, illness and recovery—it was as if whatever happened to one, was lived through by each.

Ray and Flavia were sketching out the itinerary for their upcoming trip. They had a map of Mexico spread out on the kitchen table, a couple of guide books and a mounting enthusiasm. They had not spoken of the trip since Ray first mentioned it the night they went to the Tornados concert. "I was not so sure we were ever going to do this—I thought you were attempting to placate me after that incident with the waitress," Flora said.

"I'm full of surprises" Ray retorted. He distinctly remembered making the offer before the incident, but said, "Anyway, I actually mean what I say...most of the time."

They had slightly different views of what the trip meant to them. Flora had never traveled there. She was curious about what they might see and had few preconceptions. She had minimum stated interest in searching for her "roots"—"I was told it was hot and dusty and poor. Why would I want to see that?" she asked of Ray. "But I can't wait to swim in the ocean. Besides, we'll be there together—it will be very romantic."

Initially, when they began planning the trip, Ray was caught up in the idea of his Mexican past—both the memories of his times there and the fantasy of his

grandparents' stay. He was determined that this time he would at least visit Veracruz and attempt to find the cathedral they'd worked on. Flora's fluency, as well as her shining smile, might make his investigations with the notoriously obdurate Mexican authorities go more smoothly. Beyond finding the cathedral, how and what he might investigate remained as fuzzy as a dust ball. Besides, the more he thought about the pleasure this trip with Flora promised, the less his search for his immigrant past interested him. The shivers he expected, when he stood in the towering space of carved marble, ceded their prominence in his mind's eye to the beauty of Flora's naked body in a hammock; strung between two palms, with the syrupy slurp of the waves the only intrusion. He was momentarily annoyed that his imagination was weak enough to succumb to the romance of vacation posters.

He knew travel to be a litmus test of compatibility. He was not worried about Flora in this regard, only curious about how they might get on each other's nerves. He had many friends, male and female, whom he loved but would never travel with. Traits and quirks that enjoyed an uneasy normalcy in the context of everyday life could turn disastrous when a couple of straw huts or the occasional snake were thrown into the mix.

Then there were those he traveled with and wondered why. After each trip with King, one of his travel buddies, he vowed never to travel with him again. He loved this guy and considered him a loyal friend. He was a successful businessman with an adventurous spirit, a love for life and a sincere interest in tribal art. He was great company. King was the archetypal capitalist and a Taurus. At home, Ray sat back and marveled at him as he conducted his business, with a mix of aggressiveness and an insensitivity to civility that not only got results, but laid waste to all in his path. At times he thought King was a later incarnation of Kali, the Hindu Goddess of creation and destruction. Most of the victims were other businessmen, whose plight did not incline Ray to sympathy. "The only

difference between them and me,” King would say, “is that they know how to stick an umbrella up your ass, but they don’t have the balls to open it when they take it out.”

These attitudes did well in the urban U.S.; they were far less charming when transferred to an indigenous village in the primordial forests of Borneo. Driven by an acquisitiveness that rivaled J. P. Morgan’s, King would set upon some withered eighty-year-old warrior whose only mistake, up until he tried to sell some keepsake to King, was taking an early retirement from head-hunting. These episodes left Ray breathless with rage—he felt shame and disgust at his fraternity with King and blasted him for his behavior. “You fucking capitalist pig,” he would yell in a Marxist temper. “You greedy blood-sucking bully, busting the old guy’s balls for a dime. What the hell is wrong with you?” That was the problem. From King’s point of view there was nothing wrong. As far as he was concerned the laws of the market place were cross-cultural and “good” behavior was the behavior that won. “They won’t respect you if you just roll over—they enjoy this as much as I do.”

There were occasions when, despite the fogging of his judgement by lust or friendship, Ray had the foresight to read the omens accurately. His preparations for the trip with Flora jogged a recollection of a woman he had once dated. Virginia was funny in a slightly caustic way. The sex was great, and he enjoyed her company enough to suggest that they travel together. The plan was to go to Costa Rica to explore the wonders of nature. They had swapped travel stories—typical tales, of genuine interest only to the teller, whose sole aim is to impress the tellee. She claimed to be an experienced traveler and in fact boasted of her prowess in dealing with difficult situations. Ray became less certain of Virginia’s suitability as a travel companion after her litany of difficult situations. Hers was not *Raiders of the Lost Ark* material. The complaints of rude waiters, late trains and hot water taps that didn’t deliver left Ray underwhelmed.

A couple of weeks before their scheduled departure, Marlene did a trial run of her packing—she thought this an

excellent and original idea. When Ray got a glimpse of the contents he panicked. She had included a travel iron, hair drier, two pairs of high heels, a pair of rhinestone studded dress sandals, nylon stockings and many Zip-Loc bags stuffed with cosmetics and specialty foods. She was not sure if she would like the local food. The travel iron, though, was more than Ray could handle. When he commented that they would be spending the bulk of their time in “rustic settings”—he chose the words carefully—and that she might want to pack a pair of sturdy shoes, she accused him of being a control freak who was unable to respect her or her vast experience as a traveler.

Ray called her two days later saying that he had to make an emergency visit to his sister in Uruguay. The details were too tragic for him even to talk about and regretfully he had to cancel their trip. She claimed to believe him, especially when he said it was a “blood issue.” (She came from a tightly knit Jewish family.) But she was still furious. For the next month he didn’t answer his phone without screening the calls. This was a wise move on his part: the woman called seventeen times in a period of three days. The calls stopped after he cajoled his sister into writing Virginia a letter, from South America, and signing his name. The letter explained that the situation with his sister had become grave, that he was now living in Montevideo, and he was unsure if, or when, he would return. He bumped into the woman years later in the Quad cinema—they pretended they didn’t recognize each other.

This reminiscing put Ray in a light-hearted mood. He was pleased with himself for the progress he had made in his dealings with women, and although he didn’t need a reminder, how lucky he was to have found Flora. The past was only the past—if it lived on as an asset, if he could truly learn from his mistakes, what else could he ask? Flora was sitting at the table with him and noticed the bemused look on his face. He had been in good spirits all evening, but she had become adept at reading his eyes for subtle shifts in his interior world. “What’s so funny?” she asked. “I was just

thinking about something that happened a while ago, is all.” He was about to blurt out the Virginia story when he remembered how upsetting the waitress incident had been. “You might not find this funny” he said, giving himself the second he needed to shift gears before entertaining her with a story involving his friend King. Flora was amused, declared King a jerk and let Ray off the hook with the mildest of rebukes: “Well, we are judged by the company we keep...but with friends there is no accounting for our choices. I am certain he has his good qualities, like you say.” Ray was learning from his mistakes.

XI

In Playa del Carmen they knew they had done the right thing. They had found a cheap flight to Cozumel and immediately after landing hopped the ferry to the mainland. It was off-season, but Cozumel had its tourist mask firmly tied on. Playa del Carmen, the mainland town, had its own resort aspirations, but it was funkier. It seemed a tourist town whose ideals had gone askew—a bit like some high-tech “office system” assembled by Spanish speakers from a manual whose original instructions in German had been translated to Japanese before being rendered into English. The town had an eccentric charm, a bustling port, fresh fish, and one could walk the beaches all the way to Guatemala.

They strapped on their packs and walked down the beach away from the activity of the port. The cabanas and beach restaurants dwindled in number the further along they walked and after fifteen minutes they were alone on the beach. Flora took off her sandals and became immersed in the sensation of the wet sand squishing between her toes. It was all marvelous to her: the hot humid air, the coral pink

sand and turquoise sea, the pelicans diving for the small fish that roiled the water silver, the shells and the palm frond palapas of the fishermen. Floating, above all else, like her guardian angel, was her newly gained ability to swim.

“Ray, I can’t wait any longer. I have been trying to restrain myself all this time, but I must go in the ocean.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to get to that. This is the first time ever, no?”

“This is the first time ever, yes! I can just go in my underwear. Who cares!”

She pulled off her shorts and tee shirt and was in the water before Ray put his pack down. He watched for a few moments before stripping to his briefs and splashing in beside her.

“It is so salty. And I float so easily,” she said, flipping onto her back. “I can’t believe I waited so long to do this—and I didn’t know I was waiting.”

“Man, this does feel sensational...and so does this” he said, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her. “I’m so glad we decided to do this. I guess we have to pay some homage to the horse Gods, who paid to send us here.”

“Really it was your little boat that sent us here...and the arroyo and the stranded pick-up—and of course the fact that we’re both a little bit Mexicano.” She blessed him with her smile.

After the swim, they passed a couple of likely hotels but had their eye on a rather tall building they could see further along. It was a recently built, three-story stucco that was topped with what looked like a partially enclosed roof terrace. It was the tallest thing around, and it stood in isolation, directly on the beach.

The owners were two amiable guys in their thirties, apparently partners in life as well as business. They were pleased with their little creation, which they referred to as “nuestro baby”. They were exiles who had fled the harshness of Mexico City to begin a new life together. Both men spoke some English, but, smitten with her charm and her beauty, conversed with Flora in Spanish. Had they not

been so clearly gay, Ray would have been alarmed by their attentiveness to her. They fluttered about, fussing to assure her comfort and, had the hotel been full, they clearly would have thrown someone out to make room for her. Due to a cancellation, the huge top floor was available. It was usually reserved for groups of five or more, but they could have it for the same price a room for two would cost. The owners insisted on treating Flora and Ray as if they were on their honeymoon; this gesture of largesse was their wedding gift. Flora swore the expression never passed her lips and thought it “cute” that the “guys” perceived them in this light.

Flora and Ray walked the perimeter of the “room” entwined in the arms of good fortune. The view went on forever; just the sky and the sea edged in frothy pink and the rolling greenery of the rain forest. The town, about a mile away, was a minor interruption in the sweep of things, as was the island of Cozumel, which floated on a bed of violet mist toward the east. The single exterior wall was behind the kitchen and bathroom, where the stairs entered. A waist-high parapet surrounded the rest of the space. The views were framed by stucco arches, which supported the overhanging roof and allowed the salty breeze through the unglazed openings. A slick, white-tiled floor reflected the cool blue of the sky; it was like living out-of-doors. They were close to heaven and they knew it.

That first day they had dinner at one of the small beach restaurants they had passed on their walk to their hotel. They ate their simple meal of grilled fish, staring at a sea caught mid-stride between twilight and nightfall, its currents shifting in swirls of clear blue and murky violet. An orange flicker from the Western sky hinted at a bigger light show beyond their field of view.

On the walk back, they took advantage of the sultry dark, got naked and paddled around in the shallows; the darkness of the water was spooky and they eased toward the shore. They joked about doing a From Here to Eternity thing, but they were anxious to return to their room, where

they had plans for the hammock and canopied four-poster. Their lovemaking began rambunctiously in the hammock, shifted to a quieter gear beneath the gauze of the mosquito net, and ended in a silence so full that there was no room for words.

Later they lolled in the hammock and took an inventory of their surroundings. There were rolled awnings over each of the opened arches. They were oddly rigged, with heavy ropes and arm-thick bamboo poles: wrought iron hooks and eyes were anchored deep into the stucco. They wondered lazily why the awning set-up was so graceless and overbuilt but attributed it to some faltering in taste on the part of the “guys”. They watched as the stars and fast risen moon were blotted out by the clouds and took it as a sign that the show was over and it was time for bed.

They were awakened after midnight by a rugged gust of wind that shook the bed. Their sleepiness was slapped clear with the squall that followed instantaneously. They skidded, naked, out of bed into ankle-deep water. Their vulnerability took on a comic aspect as their bare feet slid on the glossy tiles and they reeled about the space like cartoon dogs with spinning legs. They were laughing uncontrollably and made a game of sliding across the floor. A spray of silk flowers, blown from their vase, was entangled in the veil of mosquito net. Flora plucked a flower, held it in her teeth and did a fair imitation of Carmen Miranda on ice. Ray dropped to all fours and sloshed through the water like some lunatic animal of an unknown species.

When the wind rose to a howl and the rain descended with the impact of a waterfall, things got scary. They made a mad dash to lower the awnings and at once realized the purpose of their heavy-duty installation. They each grabbed an end of a wildly flapping awning to roll it down and fix it in place. It rose like a sail. The tremendous force lifted them horizontal, where they floated momentarily before losing their grip and flopping to the floor. They managed to secure the coverings in the two arches directly

across from the bed; they abandoned their attempt to lash down another when Ray took a glancing blow from its bamboo end. They scrambled, shivering, back to the bed to wait out the storm in relative safety. They watched their rubber flip-flops bobbing in the water that by then had risen above the scuppers in the parapet wall. “There seem to be a lot of boats and water in our lives,” Flora said, quietly.

“You’re not getting sea-sick, are you?” Ray asked.

“Not at all. In fact, I’m in love with you,” responded Flora.

“And me with you” Ray answered, just as easily. They both started, then laughed, as a huge thunderclap filled the room; there was another sudden deluge, and it was over. The sky cleared, the stars reclaimed their rightful places and the wind eased to lyrical. The moon was nowhere to be seen.

The only guests at the hotel, Ray and Flora quickly struck up a friendship with the owners. It was one of those intense friendships peculiar to the travel experience. Fact and fantasy mixed to form a higher truth. They often ate dinner or had drinks with the “guys”, whom Ray had dubbed Sonny and Cher. Their names were Sol and Carlos, but Sol often addressed his partner affectionately as *cara*, which for Ray was too good to pass up. One evening, after a pitcher of margaritas, Ray mentioned the nicknames he coined for them. Although they felt Ray’s good-natured affection, they didn’t get it. Flora explained the finer points of the roundabout linguistic equations. It was difficult to describe how Sol was sun in English and Sonny sounded the same although it wasn’t derived from sun. When Flora pointed out the similarity of the French *Cher* and Italian *cara* the joke hit home, and they lit up with amusement. It was a turning point that moved the couples’ understanding of each other far beyond cartoon summaries as the “newlyweds” or, “the gay couple”.

Carlos, who was slightly built and girlishly attractive, was born in a middle-class suburb of Mexico City

to parents whom he described as business people and “straight as an arrow”. They were appalled with their son who was “queer as a three-dollar bill”. Carlos had learned both these Americanisms during a six-month stay in San Diego when he was thirteen. His family’s premature departure from San Diego came directly after Carlos’ expulsion from school, where he was caught giving a blow job to a classmate in the locker room. The irony was that his father had accepted the position in San Diego in the hopes that the norteamericano experience might turn his son away from a life “that was going to cause many big problems”.

The family returned to Mexico City to escape the shame and also with a dwindling hope that Carlos would mend his ways. That didn’t happen. Although he tried to bridle his mannerisms, Carlos was gay to the marrow and choice played no part, even if girls found him attractive. Succumbing to peer pressure and wanting to please his parents, he made a few pathetic attempts at dating. These dates were not disastrous; they simply didn’t lead anywhere.

He took his hormones elsewhere and made occasional forays to shabbier neighborhoods and a clandestine section of Chapultepec Park. He was decidedly closeted but had difficulty hiding his effeminate mannerisms—the more relaxed he became around his girlfriends the less he hid. Having accepted him as a friend and intuitively giving up any romantic notions they might have had for him, they hardly noticed.

At the end of his senior year he made a grave mistake. He had become close friends with a girl named Carolina. He loved her with his heart but not with “the little head” as he aptly put it. They spent long hours laying about her bedroom listening to music, gossiping and speaking, with face-saving obliqueness, of their problems and desires. They were discussing a boy named Jorge, with whom Carolina had gone out and then slept with on her second date. This was a big revelation; neither she nor Carlos had spoken so directly before. She was crazy about

Jorge and described how beautiful he was and how ecstatically happy she was.

Carlos, too, had his eye on Jorge for some time. “He was a real hunk,” he said in an aside to Flora, and had developed a massive crush of his own. Somehow, to Carolina’s utter amazement, he let this bit of information slip. He was desperate to talk freely and honestly about who he was beneath the shams he had adopted to stay afloat. Although he thought of Carolina as his confidant, they had never spoken directly about his sexuality. His confession poured from him like a waterfall. She barely heard his words. She was stuck on the fact of his desire for this same boy, whose thick dick she had ridden like a whore. That Carlos’ desire mimicked her own made them competitors and not comrades in Jorge’s arms.

After his confession, Carlos felt relieved. Carolina responded in a nearly inaudible voice as if a piece of food lodged in her throat. He thought this odd, but assumed she was moved by his confession and his trust in her; he was overcome with emotion himself. He had offered her his true self, and he thought she received it as the treasure he thought it was. “We seemed muy simpatico,” was how he expressed it to Ray and Flora. Twenty years later the sadness of his misperception clung to the words.

She told Jorge everything she had heard; that Carlos was a maricon and had a crush on him and that he had sex with other men. The next day Jorge told Carlos that Carolina was disgusted with his confession. The beating he and his two pals administered to Carlos was the payment for this, and the beating came only after the three boys forced Carlos to serve them on his knees. Jorge apparently didn’t find it too disgusting—he enjoyed two blow jobs and suggested that Carlos should give Carolina lessons.

“Oh, that is so terrible! Did you go to the police?” Flora asked, naively.

“That was out of the question; besides, I felt so guilty that I had done something wrong. It took me maybe six months to even think that Carolina had betrayed me.”

“And the boys?” Ray asked.

“Well, Jorge, the hunk, I heard a couple of years later that he became queer. I guess I was a lot better than Carolina, no? How do you call it, poetic justice?”

“And the others?” asked Ray.

“They were nothings and are probably married to big fat pigs and have many piglets and are still nothings.”

“What happened to Carolina after that? Did you ever see her again?”

“She was the only woman who ever broke my heart. My mother was so ashamed of me. She was one with my father. She did not want me to be around her friends, not that I would have desired that. It is true, Carolina broke my heart. And at first all I could think of was how I had hurt her, as if I was less than dirt and my little disappointments counted for nada. I called and called her to beg her forgiveness. She never answered. Her mother would answer the phone and say she was away...and then she told me never to call again, that Carolina had no time for me. I wept like a baby and I never saw her again. I don't know what I would do if I saw her.”

“Maybe you could tell her how she hurt you?” Flora said, now near tears.

“I don't think I could ever say that, even now,” Carlos answered. “Anyway, enough of this talk. My life is wonderful since I have met Sol.”

There was a lot of in-between before he and Sol hooked up. After high school Carlos saw his salvation in an arts and design program at the University in Mexico City. He knew implicitly that, surrounded by other creative people, he would be viewed as less of a freak. The cliché proved sound. He could have commuted to school, but his parents were happy to pay for him to live away from home; it spared them the embarrassment of dealing with their increasingly flamboyant son. The arrangement suited Carlos as well, who fast embraced his gayness rather than being its victim. By his own description he was soon at the center of a “salon”. He had done some reading on the

subject and, to the best of his ability, and budget-reconstructed a nineteenth century salon atmosphere in his apartment. Velvet drapes were much in evidence, as were candelabras and peacock feathers—all of which he found for next to nothing at a Chinese antique dealer. Carlos greeted his guests while reclining in an ornate chaise lounge that he claimed was an exact replica of one he had seen in a painting by Delacroix. The chaise was now installed in his and Sol's bedroom—Ray had to admit that it looked a lot like those he had seen in nineteenth-century French paintings. Carlos' flair for theatrics was as pronounced in his conversation as it was typical of his interior design. Flora and Ray were often reduced to tears of laughter while listening to his stories.

He entered the fashion world immediately upon graduation. He was the lover of an older man, a successful designer who apparently made the necessary connections for him. Carlos said that he tired of the fashion world at about the same time that his lover tired of him. That was the rub—Carlos was never sure whether it was his talent or his lover that brought him the measure of success he enjoyed. It made him crazy with self-doubt. He never mentioned this designer by name to Flora or Ray, except to say he was very famous and they would have heard of him.

He continued designing and held forth at his soirees for a number of years. He enjoyed a modest celebrity, for both and the money and the pace were addictive. In his heart he never answered the question of his talent and increasingly he saw the entire enterprise as superficial. When the excitement of the "life" lost its glitter, and the parties and drugs became routine it was time for a change. It was at that time that he met Sol.

Aside from his erect carriage and slightly turned-out feet, there were few clues that the young Sol had been a dancer. Time had thickened his sturdy body, which he could still move with surprising agility. He did not betray this often, preferring instead the lumbering pace of a draft animal. It seemed that during their time together he had

adjusted his movements to serve as anchor to the flightier Carlos. His personality, too, was solid and sturdy in a decidedly masculine way, which played counterpoint to Carlos's dramatic shifts in temperament.

He came to his gayness late. He enjoyed his affairs with women and continued "keeping company" during his early years in ballet. As a straight male in that world he often had his pick of partners both on and off the stage. He claimed that he began some casual experimentation in his early twenties with men, which he enjoyed, and thought that he could work both sides of the street—until he met Carlos.

Sol said it wasn't exactly love at first sight. Although Sol had witnessed the displays of many prima ballerinas, he thought Carlos was exotic and temperamental beyond understanding. The entitlement, the self-absorption and ambition were familiar to Sol. His reaction was to become so aloof that it threatened his dignity.

"What was I going to do? I needed some time to figure out this madman. He was like I read of Nureyev...me, me, me, me. He was very spoiled, I thought...and a little frightening. I didn't see his heart at first. I suspected it was there, but it was a very many months until I saw it."

"But you came every week. Me, I thought this guy is so handsome—but he has a broomstick stuck up his ass. The best I got was a smile for all my compliments and wit," said Carlos.

"You both seem to have gotten beyond your initial impressions" said Flora.

"We've made a beautiful life here in Playa."

"Sol was my savior" chimed Carlos. "He came in like a big white horse and swept me away from all that."

"You mean on a big white horse," Flora said.

"No, no like a big white horse, just like a big white horse. You should see, then you would know," he said, flapping his hand in front of his face as if to cool himself, totally pleased with his joke.

“He always exaggerates,” said Sol, reddening with embarrassment.

“Just the same, he did really save me from a life that was making me crazy. I think I would have become a not very nice person. Sol brings out the best in people.”

“You two could serve as role models for starting anew,” said Ray, meaning it.

“Moving here helped, although we miss the excitement from time to time. To be more truthful, Carlos misses the excitement, from time to time.”

“And you, Sol? What about you?”

“For me it is much more complicated. I miss my art. Dancing was my life. I know that my career was near the end when we decided to come here. Getting older is cruel for a dancer. It’s not like for you, Ray—painters get better. They age well, like wine.”

“And you can’t exactly trade in for a new brush.”

“No, that is of course an impossibility. There is the tragedy of my art. And I was ill prepared. All my life dancing was so big. I never thought of anything else. All the aches and hours of class and the discipline and the worry about weight...and the so-little money...and you accept it. You accept it because you can’t imagine anything else.”

“And is it worth it?” asked Ray, quietly.

“Of course it is worth it. Of course it is not worth it. You know?” Sol asked, looking to Ray.

“I do”, was Ray’s answer.

“I remember the grace. I know how it feels even when it is no longer here—even though the body can no longer do it.”

“I understand. The grace is at the center of it. But the memory is there and you’re very lucky. Most people have no idea how that feels. And the grace lives on in your dignity...you wear it well. Maybe it lives a higher life like that.”

“Thank you, Ray, for saying that to me.”

“I’m sorry I never saw you dance. I’ll bet you were wonderful.”

“I was told that. But I know one thing for sure, it felt wonderful.”

“He was wonderful,” said Carlos. “I saw him dance many, many times. He was beautiful. I was so jealous of the other dancers that they could make something so beautiful with him.”

“And you would do it all again?” asked Flora.

“If I could do it without the bad knees it left me with. And if I was reassured that when I stopped I would meet this man, then yes.”

By the end of the third week, the hotel had become home. Ray and Flora’s tenancy on the top floor took on an air of permanence, particularly after Ray set up a studio and began working regularly. Carlos and Sol assumed the roles of younger and older brothers to them even though Ray was older than Sol and Flora younger than Carlos. It was an odd family grouping, and both Ray and Flora were surprised at how easily they fell into it, and how comfortable it was. The saving grace was that although both couples were social, they maintained a mutual respect regarding privacy.

Sol kept a garden behind the hotel of which he was justly proud. It was exquisite, without being prissy or over-manicured. The plantings blurred the boundaries of the terrace. Two tables occupied private nooks in the garden, others were shaded by a trellis of grapevines. The remainder of the tables were set beneath a blue-and-white-striped awning and surrounded by huge clay pots of scarlet geraniums. The garden extended toward a stucco wall that gave protection from the wind and sand and insured the privacy of the hotel guests.

Sol did the gardening alone. Carlos had a black thumb and withered any plant he came in contact with, so Sol was ecstatic when he learned of Flora’s interest. He immediately invited her to work with him, and she

immediately accepted. From that day on they could both be found in the garden in early morning, kneeling in the dirt and chatting animatedly—mostly about plants. She was excited with the variety of things that could grow in the tropics, many of which were new to her. She was shocked that Sol grew no vegetables. It didn't take her long to convince him that herbs and tomatoes could be grown aesthetically, and within days the seedlings were in the ground.

Ray and Flora rose early as they did back home. Their walk to the Plaza Blanca was supplanted by a walk down the beach and a quick swim in the ocean. Later, Ray painted while Flora worked in the garden. An older painter had once told Ray that gardening was closer to God than painting. He passed this thought on to Flora each morning. "You might be right, Señor Artista," she would reply. Ray believed the adage had merit; he wasn't being ironic. At the very least, he was certain that a pact with the devil was a prerequisite for art making and knew of no such demand in the gardening sphere. Before he set to painting, he often mumbled these thoughts around and, deciding he wasn't enlightened enough to trade his brush for a hoe, began mixing his paint. "Gardening would be a lot less trouble," he grumbled.

Ray had brought some large sheets of paper with him, as well as the journals that he regularly traveled with. A tackle box was enough to carry his paints and brushes. He and Flora had decided to travel until the money from the racetrack ran out, and so had no idea how long they would be gone. This was the reason for the extra painting gear. If they settled in one place for any length of time, he would feel the need to work on something more substantial than the lap-sized journals.

When he left New Mexico he was working on paintings precipitated by the storm on Kitchen Mesa. He had been on a roll, and the images formed in his mind faster than he could paint them. He had abandoned his work on them in mid-stream and was anxious to pick up the threads

of that exploration. The small watercolors he had done since arriving in Mexico were charming. But it wasn't Emily Post who was breathing heavily at the door; it was the big bad wolf.

He returned to work in search of some resolution. This was an elusive quarry—the search, a comic combination of Don Quixote charging the windmill and Sisyphus pushing his rock uphill—madness and futility. The comic relief that Ray brought to the quest was his mother's gift, her idea of a survival kit.

Ray was no stranger to the way paintings took on a life of their own and led him in another direction. New questions would arise before he got an answer to the questions he was painting to answer—the conversation with the unknown continued unbroken. These shifts were seamless and occurred inexplicably, beyond both his control and awareness.

Often, Ray would see something incidental, like the metallic sheen on a dead mackerel, no great mystery. No great mystery until Ray looked closely and fixed the sheen in his mind's eye. The fish he might not remember at all, but the effervescent trace of its scales would live with him. Years later, while working on a painting of a waterfall, he would paint an hourglass in the picture: it would be filled with mineral-colored sands, and radiate a metallic light.

It was late morning. Flora had finished her gardening and slipped in quietly without Ray's notice. She had just taken a shower and was toweling her hair when she spoke to him.

“Hi, how is the painting going?”

“Oh, I didn't know you were here.”

“Sol had a hard time getting up this morning.”

“Was he up late?”

“No, I meant while we were in the garden. We were kneeling down weeding, and he needed my help to get up. He didn't want to ask, but he was struggling and I could see it hurt.”

“I guess the dancing didn’t leave the poor guy much in the way of knees. I remember he complained about that.”

“He talks about how he misses his dancing. He is envious of you, you know.”

“Envious? Why? Because of you and me? I can understand that. Most of the male population of Mexico probably feels that way. He’s not thinking of going straight since he met you, is he?”

“Nothing like that,” she laughed. “No, he is envious of your work. That you have that to turn to—and all he has are his bad knees and his memories.”

“At least he has his memories.”

“Ray, he said that he loved you from the day you told him that his grace lived a higher life in his dignity.”

“Well, I meant it.”

“I know you did and so does he, but he said to me the other day you were wrong.”

“Wrong how?” Ray’s voice sounded far away.

“He said it was beautiful to hear, but the memory of the grace isn’t enough—it just makes it worse for him in some way.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that—it makes me sad. I wonder if I couldn’t paint again. I wonder if the memory of all the paintings I’ve done could sustain me.”

“Knowing you, probably not. You would do something else. Probably you would carve boats.”

“But he has Carlos...and his gardening...and the hotel. He’s not exactly idle.”

“I know all that counts—but it is what he said. He seems melancholy, deep down I mean.”

“Maybe he’s worried about Carlos?”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know. Last week when I was working with him on building the garden shed...”

“Sol is so grateful that the two of you are doing that. He says you are building it for us, him and me.”

“I enjoy it; it’s the least I can do. They’ve been so kind to us...but he made some comment about how he misses running around...and he’s made a number of remarks about this or that guy who he thinks is sexy.”

“You think he is not happy with Sol? He would be devastated, it would be a terrible thing.”

“I think he’s happy with him. But in some way he just can’t help himself. I suggested that it’s just the seven-year or ten-year itch—however long they’ve been together. He laughed and said they were like an old married couple. You and I are the most exciting thing to come into their lives in a while.”

“Do you think he sees other men?”

“He’d be foolish if he was...but he’s thinking about it. It wouldn’t be the first time a man did something misguided like that—queer or straight.”

“He told you this?”

“Just what I told you—nothing explicit. What matters is how he deals with it. It’s not having the thoughts that causes the trouble. If he’s thinking novelty will solve his problems, he’s on the wrong track. The quick fix doesn’t count for much in the long run.”

“Like Marjorie, the waitress?” she asked, with a chill in her voice.

“Like Marjorie, the waitress,” Ray conceded. “If you need vitamin C it doesn’t matter how much vitamin E you take, you’ll still need the Cs.”

“Are you saying he doesn’t know what he needs?”

“I don’t know the answer to that. Maybe he needs to create some crisis to feel alive.”

“Like Serge?”

“That’s perceptive. You got that right.”

“Carlos is certainly dramatic.”

“I think it’ll pass. He’s just restless.”

“Like you?”

Ray had been painting and carrying on the conversation with Flora without looking up. The talk didn’t encumber the part of his brain he needed to paint. It was

like riding on two separate trains on parallel tracks. The wheels of both trains shot out small sparks that fell harmlessly to the track bed; but sometimes a spark, larger and more intensely heated than the rest, bridged the gap and shorted the switches. Ray put his brush down and turned to look at her.

Flora was leaning against the parapet with her back to the sea. Her tanned body appeared even darker against the sea's mirrored glare. Ray's eyes had been intently locked on the painting in front of him and took time to adjust. She was wearing a sarong and was naked from the waist up. She was standing three-quarter view to him, one of her breasts revealed in her silhouette. Her lower body disappeared into the shadows of the parapet and made her appear as a portrait bust against the sky. Glowing ringlets of light played on the contour of her upper body. One could argue that it was a trick of the light, but Ray knew better. It was his business to pay attention to such things. His first thought was that he had wasted his time looking at the sheet of paper in front of him. He smiled, "I see you," he said, inexplicably.

"You see me? That's a perplexing response." She walked over to him and straddled a chair backwards, her breasts covered by its back.

"Perplexing? I meant it to be clear...it's about as clear as it gets for me. You seem annoyed."

"I don't know what it means...that you see me. And you did not answer my question about you being restless." She wasn't quite shouting yet.

"I thought we were talking about Carlos." Ray tried to make his voice neutral. "And I'm not restless at all. In fact it shocks me that I'm so content. No, it actually scares me that I'm so content." He realized too late the incendiary potential of this last remark.

"So, now we are close and you are afraid. Too domestic for you, yes?"

“Flora! We’re living in a hotel on the shore of the Caribbean, all our belongings fit into two backpacks, and you’re asking me if it’s too boring?” He was exasperated.

“I said domestic! I am the linguist here. I know it is not the same as boring. Apparently you do—you should get a better dictionary!”

She shoved the chair away from her and headed for the stairs. She started down, turned abruptly and stormed back to grab a blouse that was draped over the hammock. When she spun around to make her exit Ray rose from his seat to intercept her. He upset his worktable, which sent his plastic water-jar and coffee can of brushes careening to the floor. In her haste Flora stepped on the hem of her sarong and stripped herself butt naked. Ray reached her before she could retie her sarong.

Flora slept contentedly while Ray wandered around the apartment, restive about the misunderstanding they had earlier in the day. He forgot it during the frenzied sex that followed the incident, but now the rat of regret gnawed away at him and sleep wouldn’t come. Perhaps he would paint for a while and swap the electric tingle humming through his body for something good to look at. Maybe then he could get some sleep.

He found the letter in his tackle box of paints. He had not wanted to read it when it arrived and stashed it away beneath the tubes of paint. He was in the early stages of his romance with Flora, and a letter from Dianne was guaranteed to piss on his parade. His willful campaign to forget that the letter was buried there partially worked; a steady but barely noticed stream of minute bubbles released their gaseous memories and broke through the surface of his awareness.

He opened the letter and immediately was stung by the stark salutation that lacked any endearment:

Ray,

I don’t know what you’ve been up to these past weeks but I really don’t care. From your silence, I assume

you are equally disinterested in me, so I'll get right to the point. I'm beginning divorce proceedings next week. If it is uncontested, as I hope it is, it should go smoothly and become final in a year. I am filing on the grounds of emotional abuse and abandonment—which is what my lawyer told me to do. I could file on the grounds of adultery. We can talk about who gets what at some point but I thought it would be best to get the process underway. I imagine that there will be papers for you to sign, and I'll have my lawyer send them to you. You should probably get a lawyer, too. Also, stay away from me until this is settled. I feel so dragged up and down by the whole mess that this seems the only way.

I have been so depressed that my shrink finally gave me Prozac so that I can get through the day without crying. You did such a thorough job trampling on me that it has left me emotionally empty. You rampaged through my heart like a hurricane. I don't understand how you can spend time in the house on the mesa, which must feel like the shells of a broken dream.

All those years living with you, you had one foot out the door—the idea of making a home made you nervous. “An eye on the road” as you described it. Bullshit! Both your eyes and your dick were always out the door. You think of it as adventuring and a part of your free spirit, but it looks like irresponsibility and has adolescence written all over it. So I hope you get it out of your system. Maybe the next woman will be luckier than me—but I don't wish her well.

If you get some new little slut to add to your list, maybe she'll be trashy enough so you can get it up for a change.

Dianne

Ray reread the letter before folding it up and putting it back in the bottom of the paint-box. He put on a shirt and shorts and scribbled a note to Flora that he couldn't sleep and had gone for a walk along the beach. He put it on his pillow and headed out into the dark.

He left the hotel through the garden and sat for a while at one of the tables. The cool blue light from a TV framed the shaded window of Carlos's and Sol's bedroom. The scattered cadence of a commercial leaked out with the light. "El mejor y mas fino" were the only words that Ray could discern. He recognized the boast from Bambu cigarette papers, but it was unlikely that this was the product they were advertising. "The best and the finest," he said quietly to himself. He lit a Delicado and left through the wrought iron gate at the side of the garden.

A sea breeze curled over the beach, carrying with it a cooling mist. He stood at the water's edge and finished his smoke. He stood dumbly, looking out over the water, waiting without expectation, as he had a thousand times before. Countless beaches, each one the same, each one different: ground pink coral that was coarse on the feet; hot, black beaches of volcanic ash; beaches strewn with polished pebbles the size of golf balls; mile-long carpets of crushed shell; those with blond sand so fine that it squeaked under foot. They were called together each time he stepped on any of them.

The waning moon cast the sea and sand a deep indigo, its half-circle light barely enough to light his way. Ray walked down the beach away from the few flickering lights of town. He turned from time to time to measure his progress against the dimming light of the night lantern hung from his hotel. Thirty feet above the orange blush of the lantern, Flora was sleeping.

He crossed a spit of land that jutted out into the water and marked the beginning of Playa Azul, after which the shoreline swept inland in a deep curve. The hotel lantern was snuffed out by the row of palms that fringed the arm of the bay. The blue of the night was extreme, and the scene had the flattened look of a movie set shot through a filtered lens. The sand retained some of the heat of the day and he sat down, grateful for the warmth. His heart and his head were at odds and the scrambled mess of his thoughts was closed to him.

He walked on to the next bay, one he had passed through on his walks. He and Flora rarely stopped here. The beach wasn't at all pretty and offered no shade. There were a half-dozen denuded palms whose graceful trunks had been lopped to stumps by the last hurricane. A rotting fisherman's palapa listed pathetically at the edge of the jungle. The darkness shielded these eyesores and Ray decided to take a swim, hoping to clear his head. He stripped off his clothes and in a bit of a daze waded carefully into the inky water. It deepened suddenly and Ray was in up to his chest. The water was unexpectedly cold, and after a few paddles he was chilled and beat a hasty retreat to the shore.

He was shaking and dried himself as best he could with his bandana. He was doing a series of little jogs in an attempt to warm himself when his foot struck something disgustingly soft and furry. He instinctively jumped back and felt the goose bumps on his arms multiply with fear. The fetid stench rose to his nostrils before he saw the bloated goat carcass. He gathered up his clothes, and ran naked until he reached Playa Azul. He rested for a moment to catch his breath and enjoy his nakedness before he dressed. "Time to go home", he said, "wherever that is."

A few weeks after they arrived, Flora helped Sol with the translation of some business letters and a small brochure for the hotel. She did it as a favor, expecting nothing in return, but Sol was so pleased that he proselytized her talents up and down the coast. As much to Flora's dismay as her pleasure, she was bombarded with small jobs for the many hotels and restaurants in the area. It brought in a bit of money, which they hardly needed, but it also brought with it a kind of celebrity. They could no longer go into a restaurant where she wasn't known. The drinks and meals that were offered, compliments of the various dueños, had become a regular thing. Ray enjoyed this development more than Flora who, more often than not, insisted on paying.

A similar thing happened with Ray. Sol had visited with him one afternoon while he was painting. He admired one of the “storm” paintings, and Ray was touched by his understanding of it. He gave him the painting, happy to leave a small piece of himself in Sol’s care. Sol had it framed immediately and hung the painting in a prominent place in their living room. The following week Carlos and Sol had a small, but lavish dinner party for their friends and business acquaintances—simply to get together, he said to Ray. Flora, of course, got a version closer to the truth. They were so happy with the picture, they wanted to celebrate and show it off.

Bartólome, one of the dinner guests, owned an upscale hotel on the other side of town. He was an elegant man who had seen something of the world and was clearly accustomed to power and its accoutrements. He was attentive to Flora and Carlos in equal measure and flirted comfortably with both. Ray kept an eye on the proceedings and became increasingly uncomfortable until Bartólome came over and told him how much he liked his painting. Ray was surprised that he had taken notice, because Bartólome seemed engaged in his charm offensive to the exclusion of looking up to the wall. Ray was further surprised by Bartólome’s articulate and informed comments, not only about his work, but about art in general.

Later in the evening Bartólome said he understood that Ray had other work “upstairs” and would like very much to see it. He would be happy to sneak away for a moment and go upstairs to take a look. Ray assented, took him to the apartment and showed him what he had been working on. They discussed the work and the prices.

“I trust my first impressions,” Bartólome said. “They are seldom wrong. The paintings are beautiful and very strong. They have a dark side that isn’t so immediately seen—it gets masked by the life in them, by their joyousness...but it is the thing that makes them real. Will you sell me this group of eight?”

“It would please me very much.”

“May I take them with me? I’ll send the money over.”

“Absolutely.”

“Better still, I’m having a dinner party next week. I’d be honored if you and Flora would come. Sol and Carlos are coming; they know where I am.”

“I look forward to it. I’m sure Flora will, too.”

“You are very lucky, my friend. She loves you and she is very intelligent...and her smile would have launched a thousand ships in the old days.”

“She still has that ability. Thanks for the compliment. Until next week then.”

They shook hands and rejoined the party.

The week passed quickly. The party was two days after Ray’s sleepless night and moonlit walk along the beach. Bartólome offered to send his driver around to pick them up. Carlos and Sol accepted the ride in the Mercedes, which was “as big as a ship,” according to Carlos—the theatricality was too thrilling for him to turn down. Flora and Ray declined, preferring the sunset walk along the shore. Bartólome’s house was situated on a rise overlooking the beach and they had passed it a number of times. They had referred to the house as “the palace” before they knew it was his.

They carried their shoes, Ray rolled up his pants, and they walked in the wet sand at the water’s edge. They were passing over the beach with the broken palms, just beyond Playa Azul, when they spotted a man standing chest high in the water. He was at the far end of the beach, where there was a visible break in the barrier reef. The slapping froth of the water was interrupted by a dash of blue. The reef break wasn’t large enough to allow waves to disturb the placid waters of the bay, and Ray commented on the unusual turbulence twenty-five yards from where the man was standing.

As they drew closer they could see that the man was tethered to an old-fashioned life preserver. He had lashed a

cut off oil-drum in the center of the life ring. He reached into the bucket and threw the contents, a piece at a time, as far as he could. One could see that this was a regular occurrence—his rig was specialized and bore the marks of use and familiarity. He was at the maximum depth to allow him to toss effectively and positioned so as to get what he was throwing out as far as possible. He was also close enough to the shore to make his return quickly. This last observation Flora made when what he was doing became clear.

The hacked up animal carcass on the beach, the man's bloodied hands, and the gruesome chunks of meat he was throwing came into focus at the same instant. Suddenly the sharp black waves of turbulence disassembled into dozens of shark fins. The man was chumming sharks. Flora and Ray were fascinated and disgusted and hung around to see what the man would do next. They didn't have to wait long. The jockeying mass of fins swarmed around the rotting meat. There was no pattern except for a general massing of carnage. The sharks' aggressive approach and darting retreat from the bait churned the water—it was every shark for himself. The widening circle responded as one when an errantly thrown chunk of meat brought them perilously close to the fisherman. He ran toward shore as fast as the water would allow, with both bloodied hands held high above the water. He was smiling at the good fortune of his escape when he saw Ray and Flora on the beach.

“It's not the fall but the recovery that counts,” said Ray. “Como?” the fisherman asked. He looked pretty hard up—tattered cut-offs, ragged tee shirt, large gaps in his teeth. He was young, perhaps thirty, but weathered older. Flora translated Ray's comment to him. The man smiled broadly exposing more missing molars and a lone gold cap. “Es verdad,” he laughed, and in rapid-fire Spanish told what he was doing.

He came two or three times a week, when the tides were right and the sharks were feeding. He baited the big

fish by tossing the bloody meat and then, from the safety of the shore, cast a baited hook into the feeding frenzy. It worked often enough to make it worthwhile. They waited another ten minutes but the man didn't have any luck.

As they left for their dinner date, Ray said to Flora: "The other night, when I couldn't sleep and went out for a walk, I swam right there." The goose bumps of the previous night rose on his arms.

Bartólome's house was the palace they imagined it to be. The entrance to the stairway was camouflaged by dense shrubbery. Only the topmost level, where the stairs joined the house, was visible from the beach. A small path behind the natural wall of bushes and cacti led to the entrance gate of the walled compound. The elaborate open work of the iron gate laid its own floral pattern over the gardens beyond. A young boy opened the gate and politely bid them good evening. Flora gave the kid one of her smiles and told him he looked handsome in his white shirt—which made him twitch with delight.

The stairs rose in tiers and were modeled on a Mayan pyramid: broad at the base, tapering steeply as they approached the top. A cascade of water ran down the center of the stairs, spilling into round pools on each landing. A rush of bougainvillea flanked the steps, their rich vermilion blossoms hiding the small lights beneath them.

"This is pretty fucking impressive."

"Eeee, Dios mío! I have seen some houses...but this is marvelous."

"The hotel business has been treating him well, I guess."

"Sol suggested that it was more complicated than that. There is some family money and then...how did Sol say it? He was in the trade, I think he said."

"You mean trade with a capital T and the word drug in front of it?"

"I think that is what he meant. But no longer," said Flora.

They entered the house from beneath a colonnaded veranda. It was easy to imagine a New Yorker cartoon with two people sitting at either end speaking to each other on the telephone—it was that long. Arched French doors crowned with fanlights opened into a ballroom-sized living area. The stately house made the elegant homes of Santa Fe seem like diminutive poor relations.

“The guy has impeccable taste—right down to his taste in art.”

“Of course he does. He bought your paintings after all,” said Flora with a completely pleased look on her face.

“I really wasn’t thinking of that,” said Ray, surveying the room. “That’s a Frida Kahlo over there above the side table. And the big painting over the couch is a Siqueiros. Christ, look at that big standing portrait of the monk, it’s a fucking Zurbarán. He’s one of the greatest painters to come out of Spain in the seventeenth century...it’s the real deal.”

“His taste in women is more questionable—at least if they are any indication.” Flora swept her head and pointed with her chin in the direction of three women standing near the Zurbarán. “Hardly the three graces,” she said, with disdain. The women were striving for a casual, monied look but had only managed to achieve tacky and trashy.

At that point, Carlos joined them, kissed Flora extravagantly on both cheeks and turned in the direction of the women. He got it immediately. “Oh, just something I picked up in Paris” he mocked. “Is it not just darling? Oh, and my jewels? Oh, please! The whore probably got them from her drug dealer boyfriend. They look like paste and glass. I should know, connoisseur of beauty that I am. Flora, you are more beautiful than all of them in this room put together.”

Flora and Ray were amused; and Carlos, who knew they were his best audience, was about to launch into a bitchy diatribe when Bartólome waved to them from across the room. He excused himself from the couple he was

talking to with an understated bow and walked over to greet them. Carlos wandered away.

“Welcome to *mí casita*. I’m so glad you could come.” He shook both their hands respectfully. “Flora you look stunning. And, Ray, I see you have great taste in clothes as well as in women.” Both he and Ray were wearing cream-colored linen pants and white shirts.

“We are pleased to have been invited” said Flora, graciously. Your house is fantastic.”

“And you, *señor*, have excellent taste in art. The Kahlo painting is gorgeous. I thought I knew all her self-portraits, but this one I’ve never seen. It’s funny how we know an artist’s work from only a few things. Sometimes there are others even more interesting that we don’t know about. This is one of them.”

“It is unusual, no? It’s been in my family for years. I’m glad you like it. But please, come with me, both of you. I want to show you something.”

They entered a formal dining room with a baronial table and high-backed, carved chairs. On the wall, above a lustered sideboard were Ray’s watercolors. They sparkled with a life and airiness that lifted the room. Ray was stunned.

“They are delicious...you approve?” said Bartólome, knowing the answer. Ray’s face was lit like the paintings.

“I thought I would put them in the hotel, but when they came back from the framer—they did a beautiful job, yes? I wanted them here. I worry that they’ll make me fat here in the dining room. I won’t want to get up from the table.”

“I’m honored and very pleased. They couldn’t look better. And I must tell you—the esteemed company they find themselves in. What can I say?”

“The look on your face is enough—that gives me great pleasure as well. And you are welcome to come and enjoy them with me anytime. I would also like to speak with you about the possibility of a big painting for my bedroom. It will enhance my love life.”

“Happy to be of help in that regard,” said Ray with a grin—not totally sure how he felt about playing Johnny Carson for the wealthy.

“Enjoy yourselves tonight,” Bartólome said, shaking hands again. “The food isn’t too bad, and the view from the veranda will make up for any lack.” He left to greet other guests, but stopped mid-stride and turned back to Ray.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” He drew an envelope from his pocket. “I sent this with my driver. I’m sorry to give it to you here—but you weren’t at Sol’s. I hope the cash is O.K. I thought you would prefer it in U.S. dollars. It’s much simpler that way, no?” he said smiling. “For the watercolors, it’s what we agreed upon,” he said, seeing Ray’s puzzled look. “Please take the car back—don’t walk. The people here are simple, but that much cash would be a temptation hard to resist.”

There was a smorgasbord of people at the party. There were a number of hotel and restaurant people, some of whom they’d met earlier at Sol’s or through Flora’s work. There was a smattering of officials and politicians, none of whom seemed to be there with their wives. Each had a much younger woman draped over his arm. Both men and women were bursting out of their clothes—the women by design, the men from indulgence and exercise-free lives.

Sol commented that no party such as this would be complete without a few military brass, and two walked in as if they had been waiting in the wings. They were upstaged by a group of men and their dates who followed on their heels. The men’s expensive shoes and clothes couldn’t hide their coarseness—their open-necked shirts displayed lots of chest hair along with their gold chains. This group looked lethal enough for Flora to wonder out loud what their girlfriends’ fates would be when the men tired of them. They probably knew too much about these men to be put gracefully out to pasture when they were finished with them. The flashy babes looked uneasy in the cultivated

surroundings—their eyes darted around warily, casing the place rather than taking it in.

“Bartólome’s former colleagues from the Trade, I imagine?” asked Ray, sarcastically.

“That would be my guess,” answered Sol.

“They might be former colleagues but I doubt that they are retired” said Flora, with a shudder. “Ugh, how can the women sleep with them? I don’t understand the attraction.”

“That’s naïve. Money and pretty things are powerful aphrodisiacs. And the guys are scary enough so that it’s probably hard to refuse once you throw your hat in the ring.”

“I know that, but I still don’t understand how that is worth the humiliation of being a chattel.”

“Maybe the men are good in bed and have big ones,” Carlos chimed in.

Flora looked at him askance, visibly irritated by his remark. “That is not every woman’s first concern—even though it might be yours. More likely they suffer through it. If they see stars, they are more likely to be diamonds on their fingers than the brightness of love. It looks very empty to me.”

“I believe the song says that diamonds are a girl’s best friend.” Carlos was being witty, but Flora was not amused.

“How can you be so superficial? Is that why you are with Sol? Is that the kind of thing that you learned from him? I think not.”

“It’s O.K., Flora. He is simply being silly,” said Sol.

“Maybe so. Sorry to speak so harshly to you, Carlos. These people, they seem so bought and fake—it put me in a bad mood.”

Ray put his arm around her. “Let’s get a glass of champagne and go out to the veranda to celebrate my good luck with the sale.”

“You two lovebirds go—Carlos and I are going to eat some more of the ceviche. ¿Sí, Carlos?” They moved toward the food.

It was a clear, blessedly cool evening. The gardens, as well as the stairway, were subtly illuminated and the champagne was excellent. Flora was in a peculiar mood, bristly and weepy. Ray probed, gently, to find out what was driving her.

“There is something wrong with him” said Flora.

“Are you talking about Carlos” asked Ray.

“No, although he is a major character, and he was particularly stupid tonight. No, I meant Bartólome. He is too perfect—his manners, his whole sense of being, so self possessed and confident. Something is not what it appears to be.”

“Well, he surely has his public face in place—but we all try to put on a good face...and he is the host so he has to be extra nice...and he does know his art. At least from what I see.”

“What you see in him is not to be trusted—you are too in his thrall. He did just give you an envelope with thousands of dollars in it.” Flora laughed, but she was not being funny.

“Flora, are you insinuating that I’ve been bought?” Ray said incredulously. “I remind you that the paintings were done before I met him. Should I feel guilty that he likes my work and was willing to spend the price of a good mid-sized car to own it? Or maybe my perception that he actually understands my work is a delusion? That pisses me off, Flora. I haven’t had but a half-hour to enjoy it. Sorry if it was too long, I’ll work on getting over it.”

He started to walk away from her, and she grabbed his arm. He shook her hand away angrily.

“Don’t fucking hold me here.” He gritted this out through his teeth. “I’m enormously pissed at you. What’s your problem?”

“I did not mean that the way it sounded. I am sorry that I upset you. I’m happy, as you have every right to be,

that he likes your work. I know you have integrity—I never meant to suggest otherwise.”

She was speaking calmly, a sense of measure replaced the arch tone with which she'd begun. She kissed him to underscore her goodwill and ran her hand up the inside of his thigh to seal it.

“So, what's bothering you?” Ray asked, now more conciliatory.

“Don't you think that these friends of his are questionable? They look like they are made of narco-dollars—all money and no intelligence—not to mention taste, which is a word they apparently never heard of.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean. If he's retired from the trade, it's probably a recent retirement.”

“Then why would he have these buffoons around?”

“Some of them might have become friends.”

“Who is being naïve now? There is no such thing as friends in that business—partners and enemies maybe—but friends I think not.”

“I don't think it's the first time I sold a painting to a dope dealer. In fact, I know it's not the first time. In the City, there was quick money around in the 1980s—lots of fancy cars, new restaurants and some left over to buy art. Lots of cash transactions.”

“Like tonight? Does that make you take pause?”

“I didn't mind. I didn't even think about it. I honestly don't care if he's still dealing. I sold a painting to the former Shah and was able to justify that by saying to myself that there was that much less money he could spend on bad things—maybe it changed his world a little and made him a better person.”

“That sounds more like a hope than a reason—an unfulfilled one at that, at least according to what was in the news. My concern is that I do not think it is a good idea to get involved with someone like that. I am sure he has done many terrible things to get where he is. I would not wish him to do anything bad to you.”

Flora squeezed his hand for emphasis. They walked to the end of the veranda where it swept around the side of the house. It was quieter and dimly lit. They peeked through the parted doors into a bedroom they assumed was Bartólome's. Ray made a comment about where his future painting would most likely hang before they settled in matching patio chairs and resumed their conversation.

"Flora, don't you think I can do this big painting he wants and not get involved beyond that? I mean, I've met a lot of my collectors, had dinner with them, invited them to parties—but that never seemed like involvement. It was just business. Business in art is business. Some of them have become friends because we liked each other's company—but there's always a choice. If I don't want it to happen, it doesn't happen."

"Perhaps I'm overly concerned. I think there is something else that bothers me about him."

"That he's too perfect? And that's a cover for this seedy life he's involved in...or was involved in?"

"I think that might be part of it. But I think he's hiding something else."

"I got jealous watching him with you. You think he's trying to get into your pants? Maybe that's my insecurity—I'm sorry."

"That is the issue. I think maybe he would prefer to get into Carlos's pants, as you would say. When he and I and Carlos were talking he paid attention to me, but that seemed as if he were doing what a handsome Mexican male was supposed to do. It did not feel natural to me—and I do know when I am being flirted with. I certainly knew you were flirting with me—even the first day we met at the arroyo. But with him...he seemed more comfortable teasing Carlos. And it was not lost on Carlos—that I know. He even said something about it to me. And did you notice how Carlos skulked away when Bartólome came over to the three of us?"

"I did think that was peculiar, now that you mention it."

“It was very unlike him. He loves theatrics and intrigue—I wonder if he thought he would expose himself? He was flirting with Bartólome in front of me. He probably thought I would not notice—that you would.”

“I don’t know. I saw out of the corner of my eye what was going on but I thought he was just being charming. Besides, I was focused on his dealings with you.”

“Ray, I think we should plan where we will go next. Things have been good here, but I would like to see something of Mexico. It has been almost two months in Playa.”

“I’m ready. It’s starting to resemble my life in the City—at least the art business end of it. I’m not complaining, but you’re right, let’s see some more. We can always come back here.”

From the veranda they heard a telephone ring, then heard someone enter Bartólome’s room. Flora caught a glimpse of him, phone in hand, standing with his feet set wide. The timbre of his voice was stripped of grace and the conversation proceeded without greetings or pleasantries. He switched repeatedly from Spanish to English. In both languages his expressions were blunt, coarse and delivered with an imperiousness that was frightening. Ray could not align this person with the sweet-voiced, elegant man of a half-hour ago. The specifics of the subject under discussion were unclear, but even a lobotomy victim would have sensed the general menace of Bartólome’s take on the matter. “You fucking imbecile.” “How much clearer can I make it—just fucking do it.” A Spanish expression, which Flora later translated as, “you can expect to have a much shorter life than you had hoped for,” was their exit line. Flora said: “I do not think we were meant to hear this. Vámonos.”

They went inside to refill their champagne glasses and instead opted for an entire bottle, which they drank sitting in a canopied swing seat in a secluded area of the garden. What they’d overheard was enough for them. They

didn't want to know more. With luck, and enough champagne, they might doubt that it had occurred.

They returned home in the Mercedes with Carlos and Sol. Everyone was quiet save the driver who talked a blue streak—he seemed wired. Carlos was sullen; Sol's head kept nodding forward as if it had a life of its own. After each nod, he would comically try to regain his dignity, close his mouth and sit up as if he had been awake all along. Ray and Flora sat with their arms around each other in a boozy rest.

When they announced their plans to move on, Sol was crestfallen. They were going on to Veracruz and would be back in a couple of weeks. They insisted on paying the next month's rent on their "honeymoon suite", as much to reassure Sol as to insure it would be available upon their return. He brightened at hearing their plans to return and then put up a fuss about them paying money to hold the place. "It is yours, siempre, money or no. "Florita, mí corazón, I will miss you. Without your smile my garden probably is not to do well." He hugged her warmly and cried and then wrapped his strong arms around Ray. "And you my friend, I will miss your simpatía—and your smile too, although it is not as beautiful as her." Expecting his usual theatrics, they were surprised at Carlos's lukewarm, "Have a nice trip, we will see you soon then." He gave each a kiss and left, with some excuse about needing to go to the post office. His departure took Sol aback, yet he explained, awkwardly, that Carlos had a difficult time with partings.

Ray spent the next few days making arrangements with Bartólome concerning the painting he wanted for his bedroom. It was ironic that the wall he had chosen for the painting was the same one Ray had picked when he peeked in. The painting was to be large and contain the image of a boat similar to that in one of the watercolors. The rest was up to Ray—Bartólome trusted him "implicitly" to get it right. He was sure to be happy with it.

They discussed the details over a business lunch, from which Flora was conspicuously absent. The meal was scrumptious: thumb-sized shrimp, simply cooked in garlic and oil, were accompanied by a rice salad and the reddest, juiciest tomatoes Ray had eaten outside of Italy. The wine, a crisp white Chilean, made Ray's palette swoon—he might have assented to half the price they agreed on for the painting. There was no haggling, no questions concerning who else owned his work or its current value on the art market, no talk of gallery commissions. (Ray's dealer had no idea where he was.) Ray said ten thousand dollars, and Bartólome said yes. The business segment of the “business lunch” took fifteen seconds.

They talked of boats, and in talking of boats they told about themselves. Ray began by mentioning the great writer, John Steinbeck. Bartólome had been educated in the states and had read his work. The *Log from the Sea of Cortez* was a pivotal book in both their lives. Bartólome had read it in the U.S. while he was at college; Ray read the book in Mexico on the *Sea of Cortez*.

He had been visiting with Russell, who spent winters in a house rented from an American doctor. The two men painted and fished and tended the extensive vegetable garden. They were self-sufficient. Occasionally they went into the small fishing village nearby for cigarettes, or to sit for a while at the local cantina. In the month Ray stayed with him they made the fifty-mile jaunt to Cabo San Lucas once—to score some weed. They had run through Russell's stash of homegrown at break-neck speed, and Ray wanted to swim naked and stoned in the *Sea of Cortez* on his birthday. It was a great time.

For Ray the book and the earthly place could not be separated. Their respective realities entwined to form a thing that was, if not more real, more powerful in the imagination. Above all it taught him, and Bartólome too, about our relationship with the things we make. Both men could paraphrase Steinbeck's words: when making a boat, we not only receive a boat-shaped mind, we impart a human

soul to the boat. They agreed with Steinbeck that this wasn't mysticism, it was observation. And although this insight didn't change Ray's painting—he had been using images of boats for a while—the insight changed the way he understood the image.

Although Noah's ark is one of our earliest shipping stories, it was not first in the memory of either man. A children's book, whose main character "Little Toot" vied with the huge tugboats for recognition, wore that crown for Ray; *El Niño y la Barca*, for Bartólome. Ray's memories were concretized by the real life tugs on the East River with MORAN painted in huge letters on their cabins. For Bartólome, it was the freighters and cargo ships plying the harbor of Veracruz. It was the ancient tale of boys set dreaming. Even dope dealers and artists had childhoods.

The conversation turned toward boats their fathers had owned. There were distinctions, of course. A sixty-five-foot motor yacht and the Sienas' diminutive sailboat spoke to the difference in owning and making, of power and imagination. They were equal only in their hold on a child's imagination. There was a wisp of melancholy in Bartólome's voice.

"As a teenager I remember being disappointed in my father's boasting of how many thousands of pesos the boat cost. I thought, this is something so dream-like and you cheapen it with your talk. I guess I preferred thinking it was made by the angels. Now, as a grown man, I would prefer to have your memory of how your father hand-carved the mast of his boat from a square beam."

"We're all burdened by our memories—I spend an inordinate amount of time trying to reshape mine," Ray said.

"And our dreams—I would rather reshape my dreams. It's more possible to have an affect on them, seeing as they don't exist yet," answered Bartólome.

Their conversation segued effortlessly to the *Les Blank* film, *Burden of Dreams*. It was a story of the German director Werner Herzog and his making of a film. Herzog

became more deranged as the filmmaking continued. A maniacal Klaus Kinski, with the help of hundreds of natives, dragged a house-sized steamboat through the mountainous jungles of Equador. It was an obsessive film about the making of an obsessive film about an opera buff's obsession to build an opera house in the middle of an inaccessible jungle. The boat carried the cargo of dreams. It was the literal and metaphorical burden that must be lugged through the nightmare of the real life jungle. Fitzcarraldo, the original film, took the director Werner Herzog four torturous years to complete. Ray and Bartólome agreed that prudent dream editing should have been undertaken.

They talked of boats: the steamers and schooners that brought their ancestors to Mexico; galleons that carried plunder from the new to the old world; slave ships that brought their cargo of dark misery from West Africa to the Americas; sampans housing thousands of souls who had never felt the earth underfoot.

They talked of boats, of the romance of the gondola and the efficiency of the vaporetta that keep Venice afloat, Bugis schooners that still threaten the Macasar coast; the stiletto-thin, longtail boats that work the Chao Phraya river in Bangkok, the reed boats of Lake Titicaca, barges on the Seine, the canal boats of Amsterdam with their profiles flattened to fit beneath the low-slung bridges.

Ray spoke of the lumbering ferries he had seen in the Greek isles during the Cypriot war. The docks were filled with frantic women straight out of Medea, wailing and tearing their hair. They thrust their babies toward the captain, begging him to take them before the Turks came to eat them alive.

Bartólome recounted a story from colonial history regarding Hernando Cortés. He had developed a radical plan to insure his men's commitment to his aspirations to conquer Tenochtitlan and all of Mexico. He had his men scuttle his entire fleet in the river at Villa Rica, the original site of Veracruz. The plan, once executed, left no possibility of return to their homeland, only victory or death on foreign

soil. Bartólome understood the ambition and ruthlessness of the conquistador, but not the desperation he must have felt to try such a gambit.

“The ships were beautiful things and they were a lifeline to the familiar. The new is meaningless when it is cut adrift from the old. Yes?” He said this hoping for Ray’s agreement, unsure if what he said was true.

“I didn’t believe that as a young man. I thought the past had nothing to offer me. I wanted to be a totally modern guy and I really didn’t have much of a past anyway. Now I have a past—it’s one of the detriments of being older,” he said laughingly.

“A checkered past?” asked Bartólome, with a smile.

“I’ve come to think of it as one big mess—the good me and the deeds of my evil twin are hard to separate.”

“With me as well. But, and it’s a very big but, if you could separate your deeds as you say, and only told the good ones, or the bad ones to any one person—then your past would not be checkered at all. It would appear monolithic, yes?”

“And incomplete,” answered Ray.

“Only to others, you would be in possession of the entire story. You simply put out the story selectively—it’s the history of public relations. But not of art.”

“I think you have a higher opinion of art than I do; it’s refreshing. But do you think you get the whole picture, in a picture?” Ray asked.

“It seems as if it must be harder to lie. It’s certainly not for me to say—certainly not to you. Let me rephrase it as a question. Is it difficult to lie in a painting?”

“It wouldn’t make any sense to lie—all pictures are fictions anyway—so why not take the opportunity and tell the truth? After all, an artist is trying to make things clear to himself—to have the world make sense—a deliberate lie would be a waste of time, don’t you think? An artist can be mistaken—telling his part of the truth and finding out it’s so far wide of the mark that no one else gets it. That’s fucking tragic. But lie? Probably not too often.”

“You’re a complicated man Ray—but I believe that your fictions are true. True enough to take me to...they help me reshape my dreams.”

“It’s interesting the power fiction has to shape lives. I read a story about a Chinese painter, I don’t remember the title of the story. It was set in feudal China but written in modern times—I recall the title of the book was *Oriental Tales*—this confused me even more. I wasn’t sure if the author invented the tale or was re-telling it. And I’m enough of a sucker for this kind of thing to wonder if the original tale was based in reality—or at least I didn’t care. It was believable to me.”

“What was the story—you haven’t told me yet.”

“It involved a boat and art. Somehow a wealthy lord meets a painter. When the lord was a kid he lived a sequestered life. Everything was done for him—all the ugliness was swept out of his view.”

“Sounds a bit like my pampered childhood”

“This childhood was extreme. The lord lived in a house surrounded by gardens enclosed by a high wall. The paintings that covered the walls rivaled the gardens in their beauty. All the kid saw were these incredible scenes where nothing was amiss—it was a perfect world.”

“And when he went outside?” asked Bartólome, already engrossed in the story.

“He was disappointed, to say the least. Can you imagine? All of a sudden—‘Just kidding!’” What you grew up with wasn’t about outside the walls. We were just fucking with your head.”

Bartólome looked out toward the sea.

“He must have hated his parents—although I’m sure they thought they were doing well to protect him from the ugliness.”

“No, he hated the painter. As it turned out, the pictures he had been surrounded with as a young lord were done by this painter he had just met. He took them as lies and never recovered from the shock of seeing the world for the first time.”

“How does the boat figure its way into this story. You said it was a tale of a boat, yes?”

Ray lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. Bartólome beckoned his houseboy to bring more coffee.

“It’s very convoluted. The short version is that the lord had decided to punish the painter whom he held responsible for perpetrating this myth of a flawless world and ruining his life. He was going to burn out his eyes or cut off his hands, maybe both. Anyway, he gets to paint one last painting. As I remember it, the painting had a distant landscape in it, shrouded in mist...I’m not totally sure of that, it might be my own invention. After all, it wasn’t a painting I saw, only a story. You know, just words. But it did have a boat in it and swirling waters. Well, this painter was so good—remember, this was his last painting—and what he painted was so completely convincing, that he boarded the boat and sailed to safety on the painted sea.”

Bartólome was leaning forward, his hands resting on the table clasped politely. His face was open, slightly flushed with the wine, yet intensely focused on Ray. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it and tilted his head to the side. It wasn’t until he took out his handkerchief and sniffled his nose that Ray realized he was overcome with emotion. This man, who had undoubtedly had men blinded for lesser offenses than ruining his life, was holding back tears. He was full of surprises. He turned his head to the side, held the handkerchief delicately to his mouth and quietly cleared his throat.

“We have a story in Mexico. It originated in Veracruz during the Inquisition. It was told to me by my niñera when I was a little boy.”

“Your nanny?”

“Yes, nanny is the English word. My nanny told me the story. It happened in the time of the Inquisition. A woman called Mulata de Córdoba was accused of sorcery. I think she was a political and posed a threat to the civil powers—the accusation of heresy was merely an excuse.

They imprisoned her in a cell in San Juan de Ulúa. It was a notorious prison, very cruel and no one was ever known to have been released from that terrible place. La Mulata convinced one of the jailers to give her a piece of coal and on the wall of her cell she drew a boat. And, like the Chinese painter, she sailed to her freedom in the boat. It is also a marvelous story, yes?”

“I guess the drawing was good enough to do the job. It makes me think that aesthetics may play a minor role in these kinds of situations.”

“That depends on the depth of one’s belief. I think I could only make my escape in the Chinaman’s boat. Or yours,” he said, amiably.

“You’ll have a boat for your bedroom. I’ll paint one you can make your escape in.”

When Ray returned to Flora that afternoon, he was elated. The sale of a large painting was thrilling in itself, but to have it go to someone he thought understood his work doubled the pleasure. He was recounting his afternoon, attempting to reconstruct the conversation for Flora. She was preoccupied with packing for their departure to Veracruz at the end of the week and was barely listening. Ray was excited about the painting he was planning to do for Bartólome and had begun imagining it. He didn’t have the materials necessary to begin or he would have postponed the trip to Veracruz. Careless and immersed in his own thoughts, he failed to notice Flora’s growing dissatisfaction. She interrupted him to say that he seemed more interested in Bartólome’s comments than he did in their upcoming trip. She reminded him of his professed interest in finding out about his family. A significant list of concerns followed. It was headed by her basic mistrust of Bartólome and her belief that the term “former involvement in the trade” was not applicable to him. “How could you not care?” she asked Ray. “God only knows the misery he’s spread.”

He couldn't make her understand why he didn't care. A third eye might have helped him see he was seeking a dispensation not granted to ordinary mortals. A flimsy harangue, where Ray tried to distinguish between his feelings about Bartólome's behavior "in life", which he didn't approve of and his views on art, which he took to be exemplary of an examined life, went nowhere. He ended by saying "maybe my painting will make him a better person"—which he hardly believed. Flora put the final spike in the heart of this idiocy: "Sure, I notice that the Zurbarán and Frida Kahlo paintings have cleansed him. Now he is a vampire wearing white gloves over his bloody hands."

Ray arranged for art supplies to be sent from the States. Russell would put the package together for him and ship it to the hotel. Work on the painting could begin when he and Flora returned in a couple of weeks. They tied together some loose strands, among them a phone call to his mother saying that it didn't look like they would make Thanksgiving. His mother cheered up when Ray promised a longer stay at Christmas and assured her that he was happier than he had ever been. "Remember to call your sister," she said before hanging up.

His sister was disappointed and annoyed, but he had her laughing by the end of the phone call. She would get over it. He loved her, and she knew it and they both knew they would forgive each other after a requisite amount of torture and pissiness. She would change her plans and arrive in the City for Christmas.

Although they had never met, Ray put Flora on the phone with his sister, and, as he anticipated, they talked like old friends. That they were both interpreters was an easy entrée but less important than their mutual affection for Ray. They conversed in Spanish, forming their own bond, which included and excluded Ray at the same time. It was a seventy-dollar phone call, and Ray had to wrest the phone from Flora to say goodbye. "She's great," his sister said to

him, “don’t screw it up.” After he returned the phone to its cradle, Flora issued one of her million-dollar smiles and said, “She is wonderful, I look forward to meeting her.”

The local bus from Playa dropped them in Cancún. The hour layover, in the eye of the tourist hurricane, was sufficient to wipe out two months of Playa serenity. U.S. youth-culture was the new colonialism that made and then destroyed the city in its own image. Wet tee-shirt contests, bikinis, frisbees and pina coladas ruled. Except for the strings of chili pepper lights and the tourist shops selling sombreros it was indistinguishable from Fort Lauderdale. They washed down a hasty snack with a Corona and were the first passengers aboard the first-class, air-conditioned bus.

It was midnight, half way through the fourteen-hour ride, and they were both wondering why they hadn’t flown. It was no consolation that the bus was running on time. They were wakened from a groggy nap by the rumblings of diarrhea. Neither had been sick during their stay in Playa. This was unusual for Ray, who got turista when he traveled to New Jersey. It was rarely serious and he took the inconvenience in stride, downing Lomotil until his body accepted or rejected the bug. Flora ordinarily ate bran and fiber to keep things running smoothly. Turista was unusual for her and it wasn’t pleasant. When she came back from her frantic run to the toilet at the back of the bus, she announced grumpily that she had gotten her period as well.

Ray, a happy survivor of the recreational drug culture, gave her Lomo to quiet her stomach and Valium to quiet her. “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,” he said, popping a few of each himself.

It was pitch black when the bus stopped for a snack ’n stretch break. Ray suggested smoking a joint as an additional sedative, which they did, standing in the darkness at the edge of the forest. A foul smell wafted up and they realized they were at the top of an embankment, below which was the garbage pit for the restaurant. They could

hear the pigs and feral dogs rooting around for their late supper. They stubbed the joint and made a quick swing through the restaurant. The food was mostly pre-cooked and laid out haphazardly on the counter behind a greasy glass. It was food for the blind. Animal and vegetable matter were burned to an oily brown and doused with a color-coordinated dead-red sauce. Flora's cramps rose to nausea. Ray accompanied her outside and held her until she finished throwing up.

The Lomotil kicked in around three o'clock and allowed them to doze until their arrival. They stumbled off the bus into the wakening city. The muggy air that clung to their bodies was made thicker by the sour smell of rotting vegetables from the nearby market. Flora was sick again and scooted into the bus station bathroom. Ray was exhausted, but he was ready to explore the city. His imagined plans changed when he saw Flora emerge from the bathroom. Her two-month tan was blanched away, and her mouth was pinched to a grimace. She looked like the walking wounded.

XII

The Hotel Colonial was on the zócalo. Sol, who knew the manager, had made arrangements for them. They received a solicitous welcome, despite the purported description in a guidebook they had, that the staff was stiff and “snooty”. Flora was in need of recuperation and they gave her and Ray an inside room for the night. It was darker, but much quieter than the room that had been reserved for them, which had a balcony overlooking the zócalo. They could move to the grander room the next night.

Ray ordered Flora some toast, gave her more pills and tucked her in. She said it was OK for him to go out. She was feeling less fragile and wouldn't feel abandoned if he sat with her until she fell asleep.

Ray sat at one of the numerous cafés that framed the zócalo. Also called the Plaza de Armas, it was the social center of the city for locals and visitors alike. There were always people around, but it was busiest in the evenings. Who knew whether the talk and coffee determined the set up of the Plaza, or if it was the other way around. As a place it was in perfect harmony with the people who filled it. The Piazza San Marco in Venice seemed designed and strangely empty in comparison to the organic feel of the Mexican version. In Venice, the architecture of the place dominated, the people and pigeons rattled around in its vastness.

In Veracruz it was the weather that held sway. Histories repeatedly mention the humidity, heat and unappetizing malarial winds that plague the city. Things had barely begun to stir, Ray was beneath a shaded portico and he was already hot. The sun blazed down on the white paving stones of the plaza with a fierceness that threatened

to evaporate the fountain at its center. Trees and grass enhanced the beauty of the zócalo but gave only an idea of relief.

Ray wanted coffee. Two waiters circulated, carrying pitchers. The coffee arrived without ordering. The waiter poured it with a flourish, the pitcher held two feet above the cup. Ray asked for leche and was ignored. There was a great deal of tinkling of spoons against cups and he found himself getting progressively irritated until he caught on; after a bout of tinkling another waiter would appear, deliver the hot milk with similar flair and the tinkling would stop. Ray failed to see the charm of it and tinkled reluctantly for his milk.

Without a Tribune to read he fell into a state of reverie.

Here I am, Flora's sick in the room just like Liza was on our first trip to Mérida. Both of them shitting their brains out, me trying to be nice but really wanting to escape to the safety of this. Jeez, I feel like dogshit. It's fucking hot. I don't know what I think of this city. I haven't seen much of it. It looks real anyway, very Spanish. It's certainly not on the tourist map—there's not another gringo in sight.

Roots? I don't know where to start looking for that. Man, I'm looking at the cathedral over there and my grandfather could have worked on it. It was probably here long before he arrived. He might have sat here at a café...probably danced with my grandmother in the plaza on Sunday nights. So fucking what? I mean really what difference does it make whether he was here or not? Flora's got the right idea, she thinks her past down here was hot and dusty and she couldn't care less. Looks like my past was hot and humid.

Why the hell did we leave Playa? It was getting to feel familiar, which is not a bad thing, I guess. Interesting, for a change it wasn't me who wanted to move on. Not really. I'd rather be back at the beach painting and swimming and fucking Flora. It's pathetic that I can be

reduced to a swimming dick with a paintbrush attached. I've never been happier, though. She's great company and I haven't loved anyone this much before. A bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck, a barrel and a heap and I'm talkin' in my sleep. Why does she seem connected to the 1940s? It couldn't just be her dresses. Maybe it's the way she talks or smiles? It probably has more to do with me and my golden childhood. Right! Before everything plummeted to reality.

She's emotional but not unreasonable; I could take a few lessons from her on that score. Maybe I have already. How the fuck do I know? Christ, what a relief after Dianne. Ms. Measure-It-Out—it didn't matter what it was: affection, pussy, money. It's like a shift in the continental plates, a change of season, night and day, Mutt and Jeff, Flora and Dianne.

I wish she wasn't sick. I hope she's all right in the hotel room. I'm really not crazy about being here alone. Oooo, look at the chicquita over there, very dark, luscious. Doesn't have Flora's smile. Man, I think that's the first woman I've noticed since I met Flora. The old ways die hard. She's sick for ten minutes and I'm on the prowl.

What's the deal with Bartólome? I wonder if he's still dealing dope. He never let on to me. Maybe the conversation we overheard was about something else. I'd love to know; I'm sure he's got some horror stories. I must say it has some appeal for me. Part of me doesn't wanna go there. Flora doesn't trust him. She has great instincts, and she doesn't dislike many people. Leestin to the leetle birdie. More than a peep of truth. She really got her fur up about him. She think he's going to take advantage of me? The guy pays in cash, for Christ sake. Dealer or not, he's right up there on my list with the nut case who bought one of my paintings cause it gave him some peace. An audience of crazies and criminals, what a fate.

Flora recovered by the next morning. They moved into their new room and surveyed the zócalo from the

balcony. Flora was smiling and starving when they set out for breakfast. They settled on a small café off the plaza and dove into their huevos rancheros and coffee. The fried eggs were stacked three tall with a fresh tortilla between each and an extra basket of warm tortillas for the mop-up. The salsa Veracruzana slathered on every surface of the meal was excellent, with just enough kick to get the motor running. Flora washed down her own rice and refried beans with the leftovers from Ray's plate.

"My father would have said you ate like a truck driver. My mother would ask if you had a tape worm," said Ray.

Flora smiled. "I probably did have a worm from the stupid chili dogs we had in Cancún. I cannot believe we let each other eat those things. Getting sick on gringo food in Mexico is quite ironic, no?"

"It was more like some half-breed meal. The worst of both possible worlds."

"The chili had nothing to do with any chili I remember. I think we should blame the entire thing on U.S. imperialism"

"Poor woman, you haven't eaten since the toast and banana you had yesterday."

"I could start all over again with breakfast. Maybe I should get an order of papas fritas?"

"My little trucker. You eat more than I do. Go for it. Tina Turner said there ain't nothin' good without the grease. All that can happen is that you get the shits again."

"Eeee, I hope not. I can barely sit down as it is. I am very sore in the nether region. Can we go back to the hotel after breakfast?"

"Sure. Got some ideas?"

"Don't even think of it...until tonight anyway. Truthfully, it is on my mind, but for later. No just to rest and figure out what we should do. Our new room is pretty and our balcony is shaded with an awning. Did you notice it?"

“Yeah, it wasn’t rolled down. It’s the same striped blue and white as Sol’s.”

“Did you notice that more and more often we refer to the hotel as Sol’s and not as if it was both Sol and Carlos who owned it?”

“Not until you mentioned it. I wonder what that’s about?”

“For me, I know I feel closer to Sol. He seems so much more substantial than Carlos. And I wonder if I don’t mistrust Carlos lately.”

“Right, you had some weird feelings about him at the palace. It’s easier to be entertained by Carlos, but he’s harder to care about than Sol. I wouldn’t worry about it. It probably says more about us than either of them.”

“You may be right. But now, we are here to find out about your grandparents. And even though I am still not 100 percent, it is wonderful to be here with you in Mexico, and to be alone,” she embraced him. “So tomorrow the search begins, no?”

The next morning they went to the Registro Civil. From the outside it was more interesting than were most municipal buildings. The colonial architecture gave it a requisite dignity and gravitas, certainly enough to intimidate the average citizen who came looking for help. Inside, the familiar air of bureaucratic inefficiency and indifference ruled.

They came upon an exhibition of documents relating to the history of the city. They were written in longhand in a formal, old-fashioned Spanish. The florid writing was exquisite to look at, but Ray found himself becoming sleepy almost immediately. Flora was less quickly bored with these things, being more accustomed to research and browsing archival material for her work.

They meandered through the display at their own paces. Ray’s interest waned and his eyes wandered around the architecture. He passed quickly over the written material, occasionally allowing his attention to settle on a

document that had accompanying imagery or colorful illumination in the margins.

Flora proceeded methodically through the display. She was amused by an archaic turn of phrase, or moved to tears by some tragic account of a child's death to malaria. Ray watched as she stopped, and focused intently on a display. She waved Ray over, smiling encouragement for him to hurry.

In the case was the birth certificate of Jeromina Francesca Juárez, born October 10, 1860. It was the first recorded birth in Veracruz. "Look, she was a Libra, just like me. She was born the same day! Imagine, the daughter of a priest, no less." She and Ray had celebrated her birthday the past month by taking the ferry to Cozumel. They dined and spent the night at El Presidente, the finest hotel on the island. This happy event, and the synergy of birthdays were a long way from Ray's thoughts. He looked crestfallen.

When Flora asked what was wrong, Ray's answer surprised her. "If they only started recording births in 1860, and Juárez was such a big cheese, what chance do I have finding some record of an Italian immigrant family twenty five years later. Flora, this is going to be like pissing into the wind."

Flora did her best to cheer him up. She assured him that if it was at all possible to find things out, the two of them were well suited to do it. She couldn't believe that the information would not have been recorded.

It wasn't. Flora persuaded an old codger, who was in charge of the record room, to give them access and point them in the right direction. They were entitled to access, these were public documents, but it made the frail old man feel important to act magisterially. Besides, being charmed by Flora, regardless of one's age, was a treat.

They were escorted down gloomy stairways and through corridors where they left their footprints in the dust. They were ushered into a high-ceilinged storage area. It had an atmosphere similar to some obscure hall of records

for the New York City building department—minus the people. Glass topped cases and nineteenth century cedar chests stood alongside metal file cabinets. There were rows of cheap industrial shelving stuffed with cardboard boxes and plastic tubs, each crammed, willy-nilly, with documents. The material they were looking for was kept in an alcove off this main hall. It was ill lit, a consequence of neglect rather than conservation. A stand up table with a slanted top and a work lamp, were the only concessions to comfort and efficiency. Someone had fitted the lamp with a five-hundred-watt bulb, oblivious to the effect it might have on the fragile documents.

The records for 1895 to 1905, Ray's educated guess as to the period his grandparents might have lived there, were woefully sketchy. Flora insisted on being thorough. When she came across a family name similar to that of someone she knew, she would mark it with a delighted "Eeee" and relate an anecdote about the person in question.

Few Italian names were entered. There were, oddly enough, some entries that sounded distinctively Lebanese. There had been a sizeable Lebanese community earlier in the century. Ray vaguely remembered reading of this group's migration to the new world, in search of opportunity and to escape religious persecution, but seeing the few entries dispirited him in regard to his own search. Flora was more disturbed by her observation that, aside from Juárez who was a Zapotec, the records of indigenous Indian births were in the distinct minority.

They spent the morning in the moldy archives diligently sifting the material. At one point, his interest lagging, Ray lifted Flora's skirt and began poking around, hoping to interest her in a romp in the records. Flora giggled and seemed ready to give it a try when they heard a noise in the far reaches of the hall. "Come on Ray, be serious. We have work to do," she said, more loudly than she intended. She put her hand over her mouth and giggled some more, gave him a peck on the cheek and said "Later, OK?"

The search in the archives was fruitless, but Flora was not ready to give up. The old man in charge had warmed to Flora and continued to ignore the dumb gringo whose Spanish he pretended not to understand. He presented himself formally as Nazario Mercad. Ray and Flora introduced themselves and shook his hand. Flora spun out the story their search. Fixing the old man with her eyes, she told him that Ray was her husband and he was very proud of his family's connections to Veracruz. She stood perfectly straight to emphasize her words. Her husband would be terribly disappointed if he didn't find out something of his grandparents' life here. More importantly, Flora said, she would feel as if she had failed her husband. She allowed the tiniest tears to well in the corners of her eyes as she said this. She had been the one who encouraged him to search in the first place, and this failure would be hers even more than his. She sniffled and took a tissue from her pocket to dab gently at her nose. She turned to Ray with a mournful look and clasped his hand. She turned back to face Señor Mercad and asked pleadingly if there was anything he could do to help them.

Sr. Mercad melted in the face of her story. He adjusted the fat knot in his tie and stood three inches taller. A beatific light cleared his milky eyes. He suggested they try the church records. Baptismal records might be a good bet. This made sense to Ray. Adam's first fuck up had guaranteed that everyone had to be cleansed of original sin. Despite Mexico's rigorous separation of church and state, despite the zeal with which the power of the church had been systematically attacked, it remained more in tune with the people than the state did.

Nazario Mercad sent them to a small church in the neighborhood where his cousin was the priest knew a great deal of church history and would be delighted to help Flora. Although it was only a few blocks away he gave long, detailed directions. Still not satisfied, he drew a map on which he carefully noted the shops and street names along

the route. He said that he regretted he was working and could not escort them personally.

When they left the hall of records, Ray was in a state of disbelief. He was trying to make sense of what he had witnessed. The exchange between Flora and the old guy was one of the most extraordinary performances he had seen outside of a theater. It reminded him of the transformation of Flora's personality when she shot pool. "So much for her not knowing the power of her charm," Ray thought.

"Flora, that was something, right down to the damp eyes. I mean, you were acting, right?"

She gave him an enigmatic smile. "Oh, I was. I am a little embarrassed. It is out of character for me to play like that, yes?"

"I'm not so sure. It did work like a charm, though."

"It was harmless enough, I feel. He seemed to enjoy it tremendously. And, honestly? So did I. It was all for you anyway," she said, smiling broadly.

"Isn't that what wives are supposed to do for their husbands?"

"Oh, you caught that? Your Spanish is better than you pretend."

They were bolstered by the turn of events and thought it very funny that in the end it might be the church that saved them. Ray pretended to have difficulty reading the map. He turned it upside down, held it at arms' length, traced the lines with his finger and deliberately made wrong turns. He and Flora were overcome with a general silliness by the time they arrived at the little church and sat on a stone bench to collect themselves. They tried on various pious demeanors to prepare for their audience with the priest, which only succeeded in bringing on another set of giggles.

The padre's oversized hooked nose must have been a family trait, but his substantial girth distinguished him from his older cousin at the hall of records. He had a round, expressive face that seemed to be on the verge of laughter.

He lived comfortably within his face and body as one of the lucky men who know many people love them.

The priest took them into his simple quarters and insisted on serving them an afternoon coffee. Flora explained their mission. Her manner was appropriately less flirtatious, even a bit formal, but filled with her usual warmth.

The priest said that he did have baptismal records. Ray brightened at the news, then dulled as the priest explained further. Each small parish guarded its own records, which were a documented measure of its success with membership. Baptismal certificates were been spread across the state of Veracruz in scores of locations. It seemed hopeless to Ray, who was not at all certain that his grandparents would have had their children baptized. They had been atheists, like his father, anarchists and anti-clerical to boot. If they'd seen a contradiction in that they had often been in the employ of the church, it hadn't fazed them. It hardly mattered whether it was angels or grapes they carved; it was all illusion. As for reality, business in art was business. The carvers might have been dreamers, but stone demanded practicality as well.

If there'd been a central listing of the workers and when and where they worked, Ray might have been able to find the churches his grandfather and other Carrarines worked on. Fat chance. Computer technology had not infiltrated church history. Señor Marcad had told them that if such a consolidation of information existed, it "might" be found in Mexico City. The priest corroborated that even the major cathedral on the Plaza harbored only spotty records. The ambition required to research the ancestor question was more than Ray had. The travel-poster fantasies he'd entertained, that pictured Flora naked in a hammock, were much more dear to him.

The priest told Ray not to despair; they would check the records in his church. If they were not successful he would walk to the cathedral with them and aid in the

search. “Perhaps there will be a small milagro,” he said, jovially.

There was no miracle in either archive, only dust and dim lighting. As the three of them left the cathedral the priest suddenly remembered he had something to show them. He asked them to return to his church. It was foolish of him, he said, to have forgotten. “There are so many things to deal with in the present that an old man such as myself has little time to revisit the past.” He said this with the benevolent humor that he wore as his everyday cloak. “Besides, memory is heavy with things unsaid and undone.” He punctuated this last with a wink.

The priest shuffled ahead of them to the altar. Ray began to sweat with such intensity that Flora was alarmed. She asked him what was wrong and Ray replied, sotto voce, “Christ, Flora, do you think he knows we’re not married and he’s gonna deliver the sacrament right now?” Flora struggled to hold back her belly laugh. “Dios mio, Ray, you are too much. He is simply being kind.”

The altar was grand for a building so small. Two twisted columns, translations of the Bernini columns in St. Peters, supported it. Bound sheaves of wheat flared into capitals. The stalks, as well as the wispy beards of the kernels, were carved so delicately that the wheat appeared to be swaying. The decorative frieze around the edge of the marble tabletop was alive with small animals and birds who feasted on the marble grapes and fruits. The feathers, scales and fur of the tiny creatures carved in relief, seemed to have been barely touched by the chisel. A cluster of seraphim flitted among the carved vines and flowers that bedecked the altar. Activity, large and small, unfolded beneath the watchful gaze of the life-sized statues of the Virgin and Christ behind the altar.

The priest looked at Ray with a smile of genuine pleasure. “This was made by Italian craftsmen around 1900. They might very well have been your relatives.” Ray looked at the handiwork intensely. His imagination and his changing emotions played out on the screen of his eyes.

“Padre, this is so beautiful. I can’t thank you enough. And this is quite enough for me.”

Although there are many Mexican visitors, Veracruz is not much of a tourist city for outsiders. Ray was repeatedly asked why he was there, as if he’d gotten off the wrong bus. There were few “sights,” and the beaches near town were fouled by industry and the commerce of the port. Even Isla de los Sacrificios, long a popular beach for locals, was closed for a needed cleansing. A spit away from the port, it was unhealthier now than it had been in 1518 when a couple of bodies were found, minus the hearts, which had been ceremoniously removed from the victims.

Ray and Flora strolled the avenue called Insurgentes, expecting that the port life might reveal a seedy charm. Instead, a lackluster pall settled on the derricks and trucks along the docks. A haze of wet heat enshrouded the oilers and cargo boats, transforming them into ghost ships plying their trade in the land of the dispossessed. It seemed a fine ambience for a visit to San Juan de Ulúa.

Ray and Flora took a taxi out along the causeway that connected the island to the mainland. San Juan de Ulúa, originally the site of a shrine built to honor the Aztec God Tezcatlipoca, was the first place the explorer Juan de Grijalva landed, and, a year later, the spot where Cortés first set foot. It might have been where Achille and Adelle Siena entered Mexico as well, but the Ellis Island of Veracruz it was not. It had an ugly history. In addition to the military garrison, the fort contained a prison. The names of the dungeons, El Purgatorio, La Gloria and El Infierno, spoke to the legendary brutality of the place. Political prisoners ended their days in the dampness of its cells, breathing in TB and yellow fever with the stink of their own shit.

Now the ruins of the fort stood amidst a treeless wasteland of piers, warehouses and trucking depots. Flora and Ray wandered the remains of narrow passageways and twisting stairs where thousands of slaves had once been

shuttled into their miseries. Ray told Flora the story of the Mulata who escaped in the boat she drew on the wall. Flora had been walking in front of him. She turned to look at him with a pained expression on her face.

“That sounds like a fantasy. What else can we do when there is so much evil, except summon faith to the rescue? The awful things that happened here are still here. I can feel them and I know, no one ever escaped from here. They would carry this place with them to their graves. I want to go back to the hotel. I need to take a shower.”

Afterwards, they adjusted the louvered doors to the balcony. The late afternoon sun sliced their room into disco patterns as they lolled naked on the bed.

“Is it time to move on?” asked Ray.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Flora responded drowsily.

“I guess my roots thing was a good excuse to come. It hardly seems a reason to stay at this point.”

“It did get us this far,” Flora said, with a bemused smile.

“Man, that sure was a head trip!” The hippie expression was perfect for the loosey-goosey confusion he was feeling.

“Our life in Playa was so tranquil. I am hardly ready for another big city. And you?”

“Me either,” said Ray as he rolled onto his side to face her.

“I do want to see more of Mexico,” Flora said, as she affectionately traced Ray’s features with her finger. “It is a big country.”

Oaxaca was seven hours by bus. With the fatigue of their last ride lingering in their bones, they opted to fly.

XIII

The mountain air of Oaxaca stripped away the skin of humidity Flora and Ray had worn in Veracruz. Their bodies, conditioned by life on the mesa, found the higher altitude familiar. Instead of gasping to fill their lungs after the smallest exertion, they felt invigorated. The sea air of Veracruz had seemed sodden, bereft of the feel-good ions purportedly found in places near moving water. Veracruz shared something with New York, both port cities where a majority of the inhabitants seem to have little awareness of the ocean at their doorstep, cities where the demands of commerce had paved the natural world and rendered it mute. In Oaxaca they found a city closer to the sky and nearer the land.

Smaller and less crowded than Veracruz, the casual air of Oaxaca's social life was refreshing. It occurs in gentle contrast to the tidy grid of the city plan and its sedate architecture. Flora and Ray found the *zócalo* a delight. Enormous, yet intimately contained by the arcades and cafes that marked its border, it hosted a social life that mixed gringo and Mexican, tourist and local with equanimity. Stately trees filled the plaza, their white washed trunks glistened in the day's clear light and turned pearl gray in the wash of the moon.

Flora wanted to be a bit removed from the activity of the *zócalo*. They found a hotel in a converted monastery which managed to be both regal and pared down. The decision to stay was made when Flora walked into the central courtyard with its lush flower garden. A gardener, wrinkled like a walnut, was kneeling at work among the flowers. Flora tried to strike up a conversation with him. When he didn't respond, she raised her voice. The old man jumped up, dropped his pruning shears and automatically

removed his sombrero, which he held deferentially in front of him. Flora apologized for startling him; he said his “head was in the flowers.” Ray walked ahead to book the room, knowing that Flora’s conversation with the gardener had just begun.

When she and Ray regrouped, Flora reported that the gardener was named Benito, in honor of Benito Juarez, who was a Zapotec Indian just like himself. He was a hundred years old and was in possession of his own teeth and knew how to make things grow. Nine of his twelve children were still alive but he chose to live alone in his own casita on the outskirts of town. One of his grandchildren drove him to work each morning and another took him home at the end of the day. He had never owned his own car. His butt was too skinny to ride a burro and his legs too skinny to walk far, and that is why he let his grandchildren ferry him. He told Flora he had studied for the priesthood as a young man but, before he took his vows, he saw a woman who was “more beautiful than the flowers, beautiful like you, Señorita”—and he married her. It was the best thing he had ever done. “She has been gone fifteen years and each day when I look into the flowers, I see her face.” Flora wept as she related the old man’s story to Ray.

Their room had a small balcony that overlooked the garden. The central courtyard was open to the sky and consequently their top-floor room was quiet and bright. The only disadvantage, which they discovered that night, was that sound traveled easily from the rooms. This put a constraint on their lovemaking, which had grown quite noisy in their aerie in Playa. They made some jokes about giving earplugs to the other guests but instead, found a new eroticism hidden beneath silence.

Before venturing into the surrounding countryside they walked the town and relaxed in the cafés. They felt as if their conversation had been in suspension since they left Playa. There was a lot to make sense of.

“I was ready to return home when we were in Veracruz. But now...”

“To the mesa?”

“No, I meant to Playa, with Sol and Carlos and the ocean,” she laughed.

“How easily we forget our roots, including me.”

“Veracruz was a big disappointment for you?” Flora said, kindly.

“As a city it was. Maybe if I was truly Mexican. They all seemed to be having a good time; it was lively enough.”

“Truly Mexican? Am I truly Mexican? They are Indians and Spaniards and some Africans mixed in, even though Veracruz seemed overwhelmingly Spanish to me.”

“I just didn’t feel at home there.”

“Your fantasy was much better, yes?”

“My fantasy was much better, yes. You never told me what you thought. You think it was silly of me?”

“Silly, no. But I have trouble understanding why it is so important to you. People accept you wherever you go, at least as far as I can see. No one seems to care if you are Mexican, or Italian, or norteamericano. Me? I think you are all of them—like the Mexicanos.”

“But not Polish—people would care if I was Polish. Especially if I was a Polish dentist.”

“Now you are being silly. How did you feel about not finding anything out? Or did you?”

“You know, I’ve done this weird thing with it. I’m pretending it didn’t happen—our little search I mean. So I didn’t find anything out, but I didn’t terminate the search either. I still might be able to find something out at some other time. The question is still there in the imagining. I know it’s an ass-ways logic, but...”

“It is difficult for you to accept the finality of things, good or bad, yes?”

“Mostly when the facts, as defined by someone else don’t match what I imagine.”

“Are facts too simple for you? Or is it that you have difficulty accepting categories of any kind?”

“This sculptor once said to me that hardening of the categories leads to art failure. I guess I feel that way about everything. If the question remains, then you’re still alive.”

“My love, you will wear yourself out with all this searching. Sometimes it is in front of your nose but you go on looking anyway.”

“This is a beautiful town. It feels very relaxed—and I love the hills. It’s good to walk up and down for a change.”

“It reminds me of Santa Fe, but only a little. I think it’s the pace and the pretty shops and the way the plaza feels. I could stay here for a little while.”

“Do you miss the ocean?”

“I will always miss the ocean now. I have you to thank for that.”

“I’ll take the blame willingly,” Ray smiled.

“You know what is different? I see more Indians here. I feel there is something I have in common with them. The way their noses and faces are shaped, maybe their color too.”

“You’ve never thought about it?”

“It was not discussed in my family, only Mexico and Spain. Ultimately it was Spain; I think my people were anxious or embarrassed that they might have had Indian blood.”

“And what do you think about it—that maybe you’re part Zapotec?”

“That would be interesting. And from what I know mixed race is more common than “pure” so it certainly would be possible. And the Indians seem to have dignity. Old Benito does.”

“You’d probably be eligible for a gazillion government grants—maybe not, it wouldn’t register as Native American in the states.”

“And I hardly think the government here would make any particular arrangements for their Indians, unless it was to make them disappear. It seems to have treated them badly.”

“Any chance they got since colonial history began. No big surprise that the Zapatista rebels and sub-commander Marcos have popular support, at least among the peasants.”

“It is always the land, with a capital L, at the root of things. It always seemed strange to me that earth and stone and trees and water are enough for men and women to die for. Did you see the graffiti on the wall near the church?”

“Yeah, *la tierra es la vida*, or something like that. I never heard the expression before.”

“Maybe it was only the thought of one person but it sums it up pretty good, no?”

“Jesus, maybe that’s my problem. The City doesn’t have any earth or trees, just filth and scum weeds—you know, those trees that grow out of walls and cracks in the sidewalk? And water! The East River hasn’t had any water in it for a hundred years. When we were kids we caught some little minnows in the East River and they lived in a glass of beer for three days. I’m probably doomed to wander the earth looking for earth.”

“Ray you’re being dramatic,” she laughed. “You told me Central Park was a great haven for you.”

“I did, I did, but think how fucked up it is to grow up with that as your conception of nature.”

Flora and Ray surveyed the ancient Zapotec site of Monte Alban from the top of the central pyramid. They stood side by side, facing eastward and unconsciously began turning, in opposite directions, to take in the 360-degree view. They gave a startled laugh when they came face to face half way through their rotations and then fell silent. They stood transfixed, their eyes probing the walls and stele, the pyramids, ball court and standing columns that remained on this hill twelve hundred feet above the Valley of Oaxaca.

Monte Albán had never been discussed in Flora’s family; she didn’t know of its existence before this visit. She had a hazy memory of being told of an aunt who had lived

in Oaxaca during the nineteenth century, but otherwise, this site and the nearby town had been as remote from her thinking as the workings of the Castelli Gallery in New York.

“This place seems eerily familiar to me”, Flora remarked as her eyes swept the ruins.

“Man it feels like another planet to me. It’s remarkable, but it’s a little scary and muy misterioso.”

“For me, not at all—powerful yes, in a triumphant way. But it seems protected and safe, even though I am sure there were many bloody things that happened here. It towers over the plain, and the remains of the walls—it was surrounded by walls early on, you can see that, it makes it feel safe to me. Like the mesa. Mostly it is very familiar. This place is in my history, somehow.”

“Flora, you sound like me. Anyone ever suggest a family connection?” There was a touch of sarcasm in the question.

“No, I just know it. I feel the connection. I am certain of it. I do not need to search the records.”

“I’m sorry, I deserved that. I’m probably a little jealous of your...certainty.”

“Ray, it is a much simpler issue for me. We have different standards for truth.” She made scales of her hands.

“I don’t think that’s true, we both...”

“Maybe we have the same and you just have a harder time trusting the truth when it arrives.”

They sat on the remains of a stairway, in the shade of a temple wall.

“Maybe I don’t think the truth is all it’s cracked up to be. I’m probably more in love with fictions.”

“And what does that make me? A woman who loves the truth who is in love with a man who is in love with fiction.”

“That’s the truth—you got that right, lucky for me.”

“Ray, we should go back to the hotel, smoke a big joint, get in bed and explore the truth. I think you need a

lesson in metaphysics and semiotics, and the truth is that I know the one way to teach it to you.”

“Ain’t that the truth, and you are the only educator who can do it for me.”

Flora’s intimation that somewhere in her personal history she was descended from the Zapotecs was barely an anecdote in her conception of herself. It did spark her interest in pre-Columbian culture and language. Before the week was out, she had bought a half-dozen books and acquired a formidable working knowledge of the subject.

They traipsed to the lesser ruins of Cuilapan, Mitla and Etna, none as impressive as Monte Albán, which they revisited. Ray was floored by her quick knowledge and her eye for detail. She became familiar with the glyphs for the months and began to decipher calendric names of the nobles. She held Ray captive with her recitations of the names inscribed in stone; Smoke Hill, Place of the Pierced Face and Ray’s favorite, Place of the Stone Carver. This latter featured a hand which held a tool, an upside down head and a form that looked very much like a boat whose bow and stern were made of knobby headed penises.

Flora traced the engraved lines with her finger, making clear an inverted head, a headdress or an animal that gave the glyph its meaning. Nothing escaped her attention and Ray felt that he was learning to look in a new way. Flora’s close attention to detail and her minute inspection of subject matter enriched his big-picture approach. On one of their visits to a site, Flora led Ray to a particular section of relief carving on one of the monuments. He was wearing down a bit at this point. He had seen quite enough. He gave a cursory look at the carving, taking it to be another decorative figure. He began to walk away way Flora grabbed his arm.

“No, look closely at this—it is truly fantastico. All that flowery scrollwork on his chest—it is not a fancy shirt. It is his blood gushing out from where his heart was cut out of him. And that scroll is a word, it says *gui* in Zapotec and there is probably a joke there. The word *gui* means flower,

but it can also mean the thing that is sacrificed. You see?" she said, smiling.

"How do you know that?" Ray asked, totally amazed.

"I read about it—so I wanted to see it. I wanted you to see it. It is my name after all."

Flora revisited the ruins regularly and spent hours in the archaeological museum and library. She returned to their hotel for the midday meal and would begin describing her latest discovery to Ray before she had entered the room. Her exposition would continue in an uninterrupted stream from the bathroom, the door wide open, while she sat to pee. For Ray it was like hearing a series of small concertos where place names like Tani Belote, Totopec and Ocelotepec played over the sound of running water as Flora flushed the toilet or washed her hands. She would exit the bathroom with a huge smile and fall into Ray's arms saying "muy contenta, mi amor." Then, as was the Mexican custom, they would eat a huge meal before waddling off for the afternoon siesta. They had formed this habit in Playa and relished the idea of continuing it when they returned to Abiquiu.

Ray painted contentedly in the garden or in their room at the hotel. The management moved a worktable into their rather large room for him. He lived out his Matisse fantasy of painting in hotel rooms. The place he and Flora had in Playa was more like a loft than a hotel. The converted monastery, with its shutters, balcony, plants in gaily-painted pots and old-fashioned ambience, was closer to the picture he had in his imagination. He worked on watercolors in his travel journal in preparation for the painting he planned for Bartólome. He had not seen Flora so engrossed in a project since she completed the translation of the Borges story. So, despite his restlessness to start work on his commission, he was reluctant to push for their return to Playa.

One evening they decided to phone Sol. Ray made the call. He wanted to find out if his art supplies had

arrived yet, (they had) and see how Sonny and Cher were doing. Sol sounded a bit sluggish on the phone, which Ray attributed to the evening reefer, and they chatted pleasantly for a while before he asked to speak to Flora. Flora had been waiting impatiently for her turn. “I want to hear his voice. I have so much to tell him,” she kept repeating, much to Ray’s annoyance. She took the phone and began speaking animatedly in Spanish. Her excitement propelled a rush of words which gave Sol little opportunity to speak. Her monologue stopped abruptly and she laughed, apologizing for the way she had monopolized the conversation. They continued to speak for a half-hour. Flora’s ebullience dampened. Ray wandered to the balcony to smoke a joint, keeping an ear on Flora’s half of the conversation. He heard the phrases, “I am sorry to hear that” and “that is too bad” spoken as the lead-in to Flora’s responses. When the conversation ended, Flora’s eyes were cloudy. She sat slumped in her chair staring at the cradled phone.

“Poor Sol.”

“What’s up? Is he all right?”

“No he is very upset and depressed.”

“Is he sick?”

“No, nothing like that. He thinks that Carlos is having an affair with someone.”

“Uh-oh, that doesn’t sound too cool. Sol doesn’t strike me as the jealous type—he must have some cause to worry.”

“Carlos has been away a lot. He says he is at the café or visiting a friend, or doing a small design job. But he is always vague about it and then he seems to be closing himself off to Sol.”

“I don’t know quite how it works with gay guys, but are they having sex? With each other, I mean.”

“Funny, he did say that there was some change in their sex life, but he could not explain it. Or would not explain it. He is private about that, even to me.”

“Even to you? What...” Ray let the question drop. Instead he said, “He never talks to me about that stuff either.”

“I wonder if it is true and who Carlos is seeing.”

“No clue as to who it might be?”

“If Sol knows, he did not say. He asked when we were coming back. He sounded as if he wanted us to come back soon. He misses us, you know.”

“It’s a little like taking sides, which I swear I don’t ever want to do in these things. But, I miss Sol, too—more than I miss Carlos. What about you?”

“Sorry to say, I feel the same. You know I have been angry with Carlos anyway, ever since his behavior that night with Bartólome.”

“I can’t believe he’s gay. I mean Flora, the guy is elegant and well mannered and...”

“Probably a killer, which is a lot worse!”

She was agitated.

“Take it easy Flora. You might be right, but that would make him less of a prospect for gaydom in my eyes. There’s nothing bad about it; he just doesn’t seem to be the type is all.”

“Well, as a woman I can tell you that his “vibes”, as you would say, are not quite right. He is acting.”

“Is that what bothers you—that he’s making believe?”

“Basically he is a dishonest man and a killer and a user of people and a drug dealer.”

“Okay, okay, so what do you think? Do you want to go back?”

“Home to Playa? Sí, pronto! Sol is a good friend and he needs us. I’ll tie up my studies here.”

“Your studies?”

“Did I say that? Eee! I guess I have been involved, no?”

“You’ve been involved, yes. It’s great, Flora. I love it that you’re so excited.”

“It is totally captivating. I feel very close to the culture, but I think that is only part of it. At the museum I saw Mayan and Olmec and Aztec sculptures and writings; and they were just as interesting to me. Can we go to Mérida and Yucatán next? I would like that.”

“It’s a deal. To tell you the truth I think Uxmal and Chitchen Itza are more exciting than Monte Alban. And I want to go back to Playa to start this painting for the Killer, while he’s interested. It’s a lot of money and as much as you don’t like the guy it makes me happy that someone likes my work.”

“I am happy for you too, and the money is good I just hope he is not the one who Carlos is seeing.”

There was one last surprise for them before they left for Playa. Flora and old Benito had become quite attached to each other. She easily imagined him as her grandfather. Their daily conversations, both in Spanish and Zapotec, were gentle exchanges about flowers and local history. He insisted that Flora was undoubtedly of Zapotec descent whether she knew it or not. When Benito told Ray that Flora was learning Zapotec, *muy rápido*, he stood straighter and his eyes shone like those of a younger man. When Flora told him it was time for them to return to Playa, his body wilted and his eyes turned milky. “*La vida es la vida*” was all he said.

At about nine, a few evenings before they were to leave, Flora and Ray were sitting on a bench in the garden when one of Benito’s granddaughters arrived. Flora recognized her as the one who gave the old man his ride home every evening and at first she was worried that something was amiss. There was an urgency in her voice as she asked them to come quickly. The generous smile Flora received, in response to her inquiry, dispelled some of her anxiety. The granddaughter reassured her that nothing was wrong—Benito wanted to show them something and it was important that they leave immediately.

Flora and Ray followed the granddaughter in their rented VW. During the ten-minute drive to Benito’s house

they wondered what could possibly have caused him to summon them at an hour when they imagined he would be fast asleep. The granddaughter's pick-up pulled in at the head of a dirt path that led to a small house. In the moonlight the house stood crisp white against the newly arrived night. Benito said a few words to his granddaughter through the window of the pick-up before she drove off. He walked over slowly to greet them. His eyes disappeared in the creases of his smile. He spoke a few words in heavily accented English, which he later confessed he had practiced many times that day. "There is a thing, very special, for you to see."

He continued his little speech in a formal but mellifluous Spanish, the gist of it being that this thing they were to see was his going-away present to them both. It was a sign of formidable good luck that this event, which usually only occurred in June or August, should happen now. Furthermore, this was not supposed to happen except much further North in the Sonoran Desert—that it was happening here was a "milagro worthy of the Virgin herself." He had seen this before but only a few times and never as far into the year.

He would not answer Flora's questions except to smile and say, "you will see." They followed him down the path toward his house for a short distance and turned onto a scant trail that led into the chaparral. Cacti and yucca plants bristled up and cast squat, violet shadows on the dry dirt. An unseen cottonwood tree murmured its lullaby, in time with the crunch of their footsteps.

They arrived at a sandy clearing, in the center of which was a sprawling clump of dead brush. Benito came to a stop on the far side of the bush. The moon flattened him to a dark silhouette as insubstantial as his cast shadow. His head was tilted forward; he might have been weeping or praying. He stood as still as a hunting dog on point. Flora and Ray were a few steps behind the old man, who, despite his complaint of weak legs, motored along like a man on a mission. Ray was not sure if he saw or smelled the flower,

or simply sensed its presence. In a decided gesture of deference, he stepped back and let Flora approach first. Amid the colorless snaggle of twiggy stems bloomed a flower of exquisite beauty. It looked like a crown whose base was an expanding cluster of white petals. They were shaped as a broadsword, well forged and commanding. An explosion of chrome yellow filaments burst from the center. To the eye it was not a frail beauty

“La Reina de la Noche.” ¿Es especial, sí?”

“Sí, especial y un espectáculo muy bonito.”

And, turning to Ray, “She rules the night, like a true queen. Do you have any idea how rare this is?”

“It’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen...or smelled.”

“It will be gone tomorrow, you know. It blooms for only one night. The morning sun will close it up forever.”

“It’s a little like the Cinderella story,” Ray said.

“Very much. There are no pumpkins but, see these orange fruit, along the stem, they were once flowers.”

Flora spoke quietly with Benito, both staring intently at the flower. Ray alternated between watching them and the flower, which he understood better than the flow of Spanish conversation.

“I asked Benito how he knew the flower was blooming tonight. He said he simply knew. Two of the others had bloomed earlier in the summer, the ones that are fruit now. He said he stayed out here all night, to see them close in the morning. But he said he would not do that again, it was too much like watching the woman you love die.”

Flora turned to Benito and gave him a hug that was so tender Ray had to hold back his tears. The old man returned the embrace, flushed with affection and the dignified restraint of his tradition.

Profound as it was, for Ray the scenario was not without its humor. It prompted him to recall a similar globalization of personal experience told to him by a musician friend. While living in Jamaica, this guy had an

affair with a three-hundred-pound beauty named Missy. When Ray asked him what it was like, he described it as being in bed with the entire continent of Africa. Ray recounted this tale to Flora after they returned from their “Rendezvous with the Night-Blooming Cereus,” as Ray jokingly referred to the evening.

“Why must you make light of the experience like that?”

“Oh Flora, I was only kidding. It was a beautiful thing to see.”

“But the poignancy made you uncomfortable, or you would not joke about it.”

“I’m not ashamed to blubber in the moonlight...it was all very intense. The beauty of the flower, you hugging Benito. For Christ sake, Flora, it was like seeing some collective myth about father and daughter, in living color.”

“I never even thought that. I was just there.”

“Look I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. I was inside it, too...when I was there. I only thought about that stuff later.”

“But why is it necessary, even later.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary. It’s just something I do. I learned it from my mother, blame her.”

“I will not, we have never even met.”

“It’s fun to look at myself from the outside—to look at a scene, like I was floating above it. It’s how I pare things down to normal size. But please, Flora, I was very moved by tonight. Don’t think for a moment that I wasn’t—the flower, you, Benito. Jesus, I did my best not to cry.”

“That is true. I saw you biting your lip. Eeee, who knows...I guess my ‘rendezvous’ with the Night-Blooming Cereus was profundo. And, I will miss Benito for sure.”

XIV

Good to his word, Bartólome had not meddled. He did not want to see the preliminary watercolors or working drawings. He didn't wish to be kept abreast of the development of the painting. The extensive conversation they'd had the previous month was sufficient to convince him to trust Ray's judgment. He looked forward to the painting. He told Ray there were "too few surprises" in his life and he couldn't imagine this not being a pleasant one. For his part Ray found the entire experience gratifying. He was unmoved by the spats with Flora on the subject, which revolved around Bartólome's character and her concern that, somehow, Ray was going to get screwed. Although he held back telling Flora, Ray had come to love the idea that his painting was going to a retired gangster.

Ray sat with the painting until midnight the night before it was to be delivered to Bartólome. He was surprised at how good the painting turned out. It was what he would have wanted for himself. That, of course, was the point. Early on in the process he had rid himself of the burden of imagining what Bartólome might have wanted and did what he always did, he painted it for himself. He usually visualized an audience for his work, but the audience, not surprisingly, was comprised of like-minded individuals. It was easier for him to remake his audience and their tastes than to remake a painting to suit. There was no arrogance involved, no "fuck you, like it or lump it" attitude; at heart, Ray was incapable of tailoring his vision to please. He thought people would love his paintings—or should love his paintings—since he was making them as beautiful, profound and accessible as he could. He often lamented this to his friends and said that he wished he had the smarts "to sell out". He wasn't kidding.

The painting was nearly ten feet wide, big enough to get lost in. Ray sat in his “chair-time” chair and let his eyes roam. A golden boat floated diagonally across the canvas. It was made of faceted nuggets and emanated a burnished light that seeped into the darkness at the periphery of the space. The craft was double prowed and each bowsprit was crowned with a carved head—one faced southwest, the other northeast. You couldn’t tell if the boat was coming or going, or divided against itself. It was easy to imagine sitting amidship and feel the heads pulling on your body like magnetic fields; Ray imagined this.

The boat floated over a globe, which had been compressed to the shape of an elongated egg. The lines of latitude and longitude were stretched taut around the globe like the skeletal framework of a dirigible. The world itself seemed perilously close to floating away. The boat’s mooring line flapped freely in ribboned curves. There was a knot in the line caught in its aboutness to unravel, or snarl, and it was hard for Ray, as he sat before the painting, to take his eyes from it. It was sweeter to let the eyes bounce along the ellipse of jeweled lights. The lights changed color imperceptibly as they moved through a medium that was neither air nor water but, something older, more akin to the ether of unfulfilled desire. It was like watching a dance where the dancer’s costumes changed from beige to rose. Although you watched intently, you didn’t know how, or when, the changes took place. The lights orbited the painting at various speeds, and like dancers, were synched to the heart and governed by its beat.

Flora was lying in the hammock reading when Ray asked her to sit by him and look at the finished painting. She put her book on Mayan temples aside, brushed her hands through her hair, smiled, kissed Ray and sat down next to him.

“It might take me a minute to get on board. I was deep in Mayaland, thinking it was not so good to be a virgin back then.”

“All that sacrifice business does sound like a great incentive for promiscuity.”

“I would like to know more about it—the role of women, I mean. They surely did other things than have their hearts removed before they were thrown into the cenote. It was a scary world.”

They shared a joint and Flora settled in for a long look.

“This, on the other hand is not so scary, unless you have an aversion to travel and dreaming. It is a beautiful painting, Ray.”

“It’s a keeper, alright.”

“I thought this was going to Bartólome?”

“It is. Oh, it’s just an expression—like catching a good sized fish.” he laughed. “As opposed to being dog meat, or deep-sixing it.”

“I assume that would not be so good. It is very weightless, except in what it seems to talk about—that is very heavy, yes?”

“There are some mighty forces at work in it.”

“The rope looks like a braid from Frida’s hair. I love the two heads on the boat. Is that you and me? I know that is very narcissistic of me—but I had to ask.”

“I wasn’t thinking that specifically. Now that you mention it, it seems like a possibility. You’re always on my mind, I guess you’d find your way into everything. Like water.”

“You seem to have hardly noticed me these past weeks,” she teased, “but I know you have been obsessed with this painting—and the result is truly magnificent. It is much too good for him.”

“You think I’m a whore for doing this?”

“Business in art is business after all.” She smiled, “You have taught me well. I am sure you would have painted the same painting for Sol, or for a CEO in New York City—in a sense that exonerates you. My reasons are simple, I dislike him and I do not wish him to have the pleasure of looking at it.”

“Maybe...”

“It’ll make him a better person,” Flora said, imitating Ray’s voice and choice of expression.

“Eeee, very funny, although I do not imagine that it will, no?” Ray returned his mimic of Flora. He added her hand-through-the-hair gesture and the up lift of the chin she used to disparage.

“Okay, Señor Wise Guy, you win. Seriously Ray, it would be wonderful to paint one like this to keep. So we could dream away in it together.”

Maybe I should name it Dream Boat, like the Fats Domino song.”

Flora surprised him by singing, all phrasing in place:

“When my dreamboat comes home,
And my dream no more will roam.
We will be sweethearts, yes forever,
When my dreamboat comes home.”

They were extraordinarily happy to return to Playa. It had the faintest outline of the familiar. Their life there was still under construction and their history briefly sketched, but they had spent nearly as much time there as on the mesa. Ray was absorbed in his work and Flora pursued her newly found interest in pre-Columbian studies. A late afternoon swim became her ritual, which Ray sometimes joined her for. She had become a strong swimmer and loved the ocean as one who had been deprived of a pleasure for too long.

Neither talked much on the morning walks that began their day. The animal closeness that replaced their words fostered an indelible intimacy. It was the same when they lay naked in each other’s arms at the end of the day. There was plenty of talk, but the liminal moments, before and after sleep were reserved for smells and touch and their bodies’ movements.

When they arrived things were not good for Sol. He had lost his appetite and looked drawn. Dark circles,

painted by worry and lack of sleep, turned his eyes inward. They told the story of his retreat from the world; he saw the carnage and he raised the drawbridge. Hoping to keep the enemy out, he trapped the specter of deceit within him. It was sudden. Barely a month had gone by and the Sol they knew was gone, replaced by this inert shell ruled by shadows.

Flora paid attention to gardening and to Sol. She spent hours squatting in the dirt, talking with Sol trying to help him sort out what was happening. He was clueless about who was pilfering the love he had fashioned with Carlos. He had been confident of Carlos's constancy in matters of the heart. Oh, he knew about the occasional liaisons that lasted until the dick went soft. Carlos would return, penitent and filled with self-loathing for having trampled on his trust. And Sol, with room to spare in his heart, would accept the apology, re-instate his trust and return them to a state of grace.

This time it was different. There were no apologies. Explanations were in short supply and Carlos had taken to disappearing without notice. "None of your business" was the retort to Sol's inquiries. When he insisted it was his business, Carlos would roll his eyes and tell him "to wake up," as if all was crystal clear and Sol were a dumb animal who understood only simple commands: "Beg! Roll over! Give me your paw!"

One would need to be blind not to read the blatant clues. Carlos wasn't going off to meditate on the fate of the world. He surely wasn't assisting old ladies stumped by a new stitch in their crochet projects. It was immaterial who he was off fucking with, that mattered only to Sol, the betrayed spouse. The circular self-torture, as to whom it could be, succeeded in shifting some of the pain into a venomous paranoia. It had the unfortunate consequence of clouding what he could do for himself besides be miserable.

Sol was cheered by Flora's presence. He waited for her in the garden each morning. Ray witnessed the routine from his top floor vantage point. Sol would arrive early

with his coffee and sit slumped in an ornate metal lawn chair. It was always the same chair, set near a section of the garden wall draped in bougainvillea. He carefully placed his coffee on a matching table and, as soon as he hit the chair, his body would collapse like a balloon with a large leak. He looked abject, with no trace of the former ballet dancer. Sol leafed through a newspaper in a distracted fashion, and turned his head repeatedly toward the side gate where he expected Flora to appear.

At the jangle of Flora's bracelets he would sit up straight, quickly arrange the newspaper and pretend to be reading. He jumped up in mock surprise when she entered the garden—it was as if he wanted her to believe he was waiting and not waiting for her. His entire body lifted and straightened and, as Flora described, the tiniest of smiles would ignite his eyes.

He ate dinner with them nearly every night and Flora and Ray spared him the ignominy of explaining Carlos's absence. Sol seemed to lighten as the days passed and his attitude regarding the situation grew philosophical. He was resigned that the liaison had passed into an extramarital affair but held onto his faith that it would pass. "He knows I love him. He will tire of his running around and he will come back and we will resume our life as it was."

Ray had been through his own version of this mess more than once. He shook his head sadly and said to Flora: "It ain't gonna happen, I know terminal when I see it. It looks like a classic mid-life crisis to me and it's rough for a couple to weather that." Flora couldn't bear the idea. She was angry with Carlos, angrier than Ray had ever seen her, but she held out. "You will see. He will come back to Sol, just as he says. He is in the clutches of that pig. Carlos is not stupid, though he is very careless. He will see how wonderful Sol is." Ray stupidly made a bad joke about pigs not having clutches and Flora flared back at him.

"Why are you sticking up for him? He is a total pig!"

“Flora, (A) you don’t know it’s that pig; and (B) I wasn’t sticking up for him; and (C) it was a lame joke; and (D) I don’t wanna fucking go there. I don’t want to have an argument with you.”

“Oh, so sorry, Señor Wise Guy. Your mother is responsible again, I imagine. I will have a talk with your mother and tell her you blame her for your bad behavior. We will see what she has to say about that.”

“That’s unfair, Flora! Why is this getting turned around on me? Aside from being a jerk I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You...Oh, Ray, you haven’t done anything except to be yourself. I am very sorry, truly I am. It is so upsetting, this business with Carlos and Sol. They seemed so happy. It gave me hope that people could re-make their lives. It would be too terrible if they fell apart.”

“I’m with you. I hope I’m wrong. I only hope that Sol comes out of this OK.”

Although Sol became less moribund under Flora’s ministrations, she and Ray began to feel the burden of being their brother’s keepers. As Sol grew stronger, they delicately weaned him away to his own company. They encouraged him to resume his social life with his many friends as they sought to find time for themselves.

Things appeared to be going well enough when they announced their plans to take off for Mérida and elsewhere in Yucatán, “for a few weeks or so.” Sol’s face collapsed into a colorless mask. He quickly pulled together and his graciousness took over. He wished them a good time and timidly hinted that he would love to join them. Ray remained quiet; it was Flora who played out the charade that all knew would never transpire. “Oh we would love you to come, blah, blah.” “I could not leave the hotel, Carlos would...blah, blah.”

The painting was delivered to Bartólome and installed in his bedroom. Bartólome stood and looked intently at the painting before he declared; “Ray, it is brilliant. It is all I hoped it to be. And I know, without

having seen the other, it is better than the Chinaman's. Thank you a thousand times." Then, to everyone's surprise, he embraced Ray. Ray was pleased, and even Flora thought it looked magnificent over the bed. She conceded to Ray, in private, that it might in fact change his attitude for the better and added that it might also improve his sex-life, "whatever that involves."

XV

The picture of Mérida that Ray carried in his mind had not quite kept pace with the change the city had undergone over the past twenty years. The sultry heat was still there, as was the famed humidity, although it was more tolerable than he remembered. This he attributed to the more recent memory of the sopping heat of Veracruz. The colonial architecture, the many plazas and parks, the tenuous mix of Spaniard and Indian, all these were in place. The evening café life maintained its curious balance of languid and lively. If there were new buildings downtown, they had quickly acquired the patina of age and were indistinguishable from those in situ for three hundred years. So what was it that had happened outside the realm of Ray's memory?

There were parking meters, for Chrissake. And matching meter maids. The truck and car population had developed exponentially, and Mérida was determined to cram the entire fleet into streets made to accommodate donkey carts. The shoulder-wide sidewalks reeked of diesel fumes and the noise level was mind-boggling. Buses wended their way through the city, belching exhaust into the faces of pedestrians, who flattened themselves against the walls of buildings to avoid being crushed. The buses were stuffed with passengers from the unseen barrios that ringed the city. The barrios followed the laws of an expanding universe.

The only time Mérida approximated the sleepy image Ray had harbored was during siesta, an inactivity to which the population remained dedicated. The buses succumbed to the languor of the afternoon. Their drivers were otherwise occupied picking their teeth after the fat midday meal. They did this carefully, daintily covering their

excavation into cavernous, gold-filled molars with a paper napkin. The meal was then crowned with an enormous belch and an affectionate caress of the belly. Ray and Flora discovered a restaurant where the busmen ate and watched this bit of cinema verité with amusement. Afterwards, the men rolled their overstuffed bodies to a nearby park. Once there, they stretched out on benches, covered their faces with folded newspapers, and promptly fell asleep.

Mérida did not have the familiar timbre that Oaxaca did. A lowland city, built in a geography devoid of mountains and rivers, it had little resemblance to the land of northern New Mexico. While sitting in the Plaza Major, Progreso Beach, a mere ten miles north, was as remote from the imagination as Coney Island. The plaza was big and bustling, ill-behaved in a bohemian way and, for no particular reason that Ray and Flora could initially point to, indescribably sexy.

They were sex-crazed. They went at it morning, siesta, and night. If Ray rolled over with a two-in-the-morning boner, Flora, half asleep, climbed on and rode it with her eyes closed. They did it in the ruins at Chichen-Itza and accidentally left Flora's underwear behind. They fucked standing up in the park under the cover of midnight. In the courtyard of their hotel, with the night desk clerk twenty feet away, Flora sat on Ray's lap, and squirmed around till she was done. Her groan waked the desk clerk, who peered into the darkness to ask if everything was alright. "Bienissimo" was Flora's answer, which caused them to break into hysterical laughter.

All their antennae were out. They laughed and blamed it on the excitement and anonymity of travel. They held the strangeness of their new bedroom responsible. Perhaps it was the release from the pressures of caretaking Sol that spurred them. It might have been the food, or the good weed they scored from an American kid, or the fragrance of frangipani wafting above the diesel fumes. Whatever it was they rubbed themselves raw, Ray threw out his back, and Flora ended up with a massive yeast infection.

When the doctor came to examine Flora, who was bedridden, the room smelled of sex. This they realized too late, just moments before he arrived. They hastily splashed some perfume around to mask the hormonal haze but, to their embarrassment, managed only to approximate the smell of a whorehouse. As the little man entered the room, he stopped on the threshold and flared his nostrils. It was unclear whether this was instinctual or professional. He looked from Ray to Flora and his smile began as a gathering of crow's feet. When Flora introduced herself and offered him one of her hundred-peso smiles, the doctor's features were transformed into a smiley face button.

He asked if they were on their honeymoon. This was often posed and seemed a polite way to establish their marital status. He spoke in English and Flora pleased him by answering in Spanish, telling him that friends in Playa called them the "honeymooners", although they weren't married just yet. Ray caught enough of the conversation to be both amused and uncomfortable.

The doctor diagnosed the yeast infection, prescribed Monistat and suggested, with an approving laugh that they take it easy for a little while. That out of the way, they moved outside to the balcony and drank coffee and talked away the afternoon.

He was a well-traveled man, still young at fifty-five and a poet by disposition. His spoken English was precise and refined, his eloquent Spanish was delivered in a baritone a full octave lower. It was peculiar, like talking to two different people. Ray half expected him to execute a fast costume change as he switched voices. He admitted that one of his models was the poet and physician, William Carlos Williams. He had read the poems in English, his own being good enough for him to understand and enjoy the poems, but he regretted that he probably missed a great deal. He would give anything to read them in Spanish—particularly a poem called "The Desolate Field" or one from "Pictures from Bruegel." Anything would do, but he didn't think a translation was available.

When Flora told him she could rectify the situation and all he needed was a copy in English, his face registered disbelief. How could this beautiful woman with a vaginal infection know the poet and be able to translate his work. Flora continued, switching to Spanish. Perhaps he didn't understand, this was her profession, she'd just finished a translation of Borges. A poem from "Pictures From Bruegel" would be far less convoluted. The norteamericano mind was more straightforward. And besides, Williams, unlike Borges, was not blind and his poems were so much about seeing. They were about the visible world, not the tunnels of his mind. Dr. Sanchez was flabbergasted and rose from his seat to stand respectfully before Flora. The perfect Spanish gentleman, he leaned to kiss her hand. Ray's words caught him midway to Flora's hand.

"...My head is in the air
but who am I...?
and my heart stops amazed
at the thought of love
vast and grey
yearning silently over me."

"It's the last few lines of 'Desolate Field'," Ray said. "I could probably remember the rest if I worked on it. I've only memorized a couple of poems in my life, that and 'Jabberwocky' by Lewis Carroll, so there's not much confusion in my mind. At least in regard to recalling poems."

"You are both very unusual. Are you a writer?"

"No, a painter, more cumbersome than being a writer. I have to struggle with the realities of physical stuff to make my fictions. And then I end up with a storage problem anyway."

"I see. Your intellectual property takes up space. That is very funny. The first lines of the poem are to the point, by the way: 'Vast and grey, the sky is a simulacrum to all but him whose days are vast and grey', that is fairly close I believe."

"Sounds right to me."

“Then you must know the Bruegel paintings as well?”

“I do. *Hunters in the Snow* is the first painting that I saw that made me realize that painting was something different. I mean, what was special about it. And it was a life-size reproduction. It wasn’t even the actual painting. But it made its point anyway.”

“Which was?”

“That painting was different...” Ray laughed, “...from other things.”

“In what way?” asked Dr. Sanchez, earnestly.

“I don’t know. I’m trying to figure that out. After Flora you’ll be the first to know.”

“That is very humorous,” he chuckled, and shook his head, “and I suspect true as well.”

“Have you ever seen the real picture? I’ve wondered if the green sky was as untouchable as I imagined.”

“Yes, I’ve been to Vienna—and the green sky is untouchable, as you say. It seems like it would be impossible to imbue light with such gravity.”

“But he did it, he made the sky lean its weight on the landscape and light it at the same time. I’ve got to see it in person some day.”

“And señorita, perhaps we could do a trade? If you would translate this poem into our language, would you accept my services and a dinner for you and Ray in exchange?”

“I would be happy to do that. Bring a poem of your choice.”

“It’s done then. Shall we say tomorrow evening? I will pick you both up here at nine. And now, unfortunately, I must make another house call. I’m afraid it won’t be as interesting. Some poor fellow with a lung disorder. In this city, it is either lungs or parasites. Parasites are traditional, you might even call them historic. Diseases of the lungs, well, we have modernity and *la machina* to thank for that. And I have both of you to thank for a most pleasant

afternoon. And again, professionally speaking, give love a rest. *Hasta mañana.*”

Flora and Ray spent the next day wandering past the mansions off Paseo Montejo. It was an additional bit of serendipity that Flora shared a last name, through her mother’s lineage, with this famed street. The Montejos had focused their energies and considerable fortunes on establishing Mérida for the glory of the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church. They sent both a conquistador and a priest to make sure that the subjugation of the Indians was complete. Mérida, founded on the ruins of a Mayan city, is living proof of the Montejos’ successes. It galled Flora to think there might be a genetic connection between her and “this family of killers” as she referred to them.

A tour of the neighborhood brought them to the House of Montejo. Standing before the elaborate, two-storied portal, Flora flew into a rage. It took some minutes for Ray to calm her down.

“I could not be related to these pigs. There is no way.”

“Flora, all you share is a name. I thought you didn’t care about this stuff—besides I thought you were convinced you were Zapotec.”

“No one is pure, you know that. Obviously, I am Spanish as well. But look at those two Spaniards, standing there in their armor!”

“Yeah, looks pretty cool to me. The carving is fantastic. And the two wild men just below them, wrapped in animal skins are...”

“Do you see what they are standing on? It is totally disgusting. Those are Indian heads beneath their feet. As if there was any doubt as to who was the boss!”

She was on a roll and nearly frothing with anger.

“I don’t know. They could be demons or gargoyles. It’s hard to tell from down here” said Ray, perversely egging her on.

“Look at it” she screamed, “how can there be any doubt. They used the Indians to build the house. They

probably got them to carve their own faces being squashed under the feet of their masters. Ugh, it disgusts me!”

“What about the old man up there, bent under the weight of the keystone? He’s holding up the whole balcony. Do you think he’s the artist or the architect?”

“He looks like he is holding up the entire world,” she said, in a calmer tone. “It probably is the artist, and I do not think his burden is only physical. There is moral responsibility to be shouldered as well. He was working for those monsters after all.”

“Nah, he was probably happy just to get the job. I doubt it ever crossed his mind.”

“It is not always necessary to think something in order to feel it, you know.”

“I do know. I’m more firmly convinced than ever.”

They had dinner with Dr. Sanchez at Los Almedros. It was a restaurant popular with locals, but was so acclaimed for its regional dishes that people came from all over. It was a famous secret. Each meal was illustrated with a photograph, presumably an aid to the Spanish-speaking-impaired. Ray thought the photographs were beautiful, but hilarious in their attempt to capture the subtleties of taste. The camera had not been developed that could identify lime-marinated chicken from unmarinated, or reveal the hot peppered pork stuffed into a grilled turkey breast. Dr. Sanchez was enrapt describing these same subtleties of the pavo relleno negro to Flora. Ray could have died of starvation at the other side of the table, and was becoming increasingly annoyed.

He told a benign story about a meal he had in Japan. Many of the restaurants had latex or ceramic replicas of the meals in cases. The fake food was usually displayed outside the restaurants at street level as an attention getter. The menus were written in Japanese and Ray had fallen into the habit of taking a waiter outside and pointing to the meal he wanted. It had worked perfectly. On one occasion, having found himself in a third floor restaurant, he decided to draw

a picture; it was too much to drag a busy waiter down three flights of stairs.

When the waiter appeared at the table and stood ready with his pad, Ray showed him the drawing. He knew there was trouble as the waiter turned the drawing over a couple of times and extended it before him as if trying to bring it into focus. He said something incomprehensible to Ray, smiled broadly and said something equally unintelligible. Ray replied “hai”, the only word he knew in Japanese, the waiter left and returned twenty minutes later with a dish that bore no resemblance to what Ray thought he ordered.

Flora laughed at the story, her attention focused on Ray the entire time. The doctor never once looked away from Flora. He turned to Ray at the end of the story and said: “A wonderful example of the ineffectualness of art.” Switching to non-stop, high-speed Spanish, he resumed his conversation with Flora. Ray sank into a smoldering silence.

He ordered as best he could with some assistance from Flora. She didn’t know the menu but could, at least, provide a translation of the more esoteric items. The situation became so awkward as to be idiotic; Ray would ask Flora a question, she would ask the doctor, he would reply to her and she would relay the details to Ray.

When the food came, Ray attacked it with an aggressive display of knife-work. The blade swooped through the helpless turkey breast and clattered onto the china plate. He repeatedly sawed through the limpid tomatoes and mashed the frijoles to a silken paste with his fork. He spent the remainder of the meal picking at the food and rearranging it on his plate.

Toward the end of the meal, the good doctor returned to English. He asked if they had visited the main cathedral in the Plaza Mayor. They hadn’t; although it was the oldest cathedral in Mexico, it seemed uninviting. It was a rather clumsy building on the outside; the Renaissance façade was flanked by three-tiered Moorish towers that

looked stuck on. You could drive a cement truck through the portals, but the mass of the building shrunk them to the point where one feared an attack of claustrophobia at the thought of passing through them. The doctor agreed that the exterior was not much of a draw but insisted that the crucifix inside the church warranted a visit.

In the early years of the seventeenth century, the doctor explained, in the Mayan town of Ichmul, a tree was struck by lightning. The tree burst into flame. The tree was engulfed in flames throughout the night yet remained unscathed. Twenty-four hours earlier a parish priest named Juan Esciendá saw an apparition of the event. Thinking it miraculous, he enlisted a local carver to make a crucifix from the tree. There is a possibility that the sculptor's name was Hochabã, the doctor was unsure, but he was certain about the priest's name.

The image of Christ was placed in a local church, where it rested peacefully until the little church was struck by lightning. The church was destroyed in the conflagration which followed. The pews, altar, vestements, the chalice, were turned to cinder—all that survived was the Christ figure. The people found it buried beneath the ashes and rubble of their faith. Its surface was pocked, the gorgeous polychrome charred and blistered, but its beauty remained in the miracle of its survival.

The sculpture, which came to be known as Cristo de las Ampollas or Christ of the Blisters, was taken by a Father de la Huerta, who was to protect it until the community built a new church. It was he who gave the crucifix to the Cathedral in Mérida in 1645.

Christ of the Blisters enjoyed a venerated life in its new home for nearly three hundred years. This is a tough life for a tree when you give it some thought. One imagines that a tree simply wants to be a tree, doing tree things like putting down roots, basking in the sun, adding a ring to its girth each year and having lots of little trees. One would think that the occasional climbing child or swing strung to

its branches were pleasures to look forward to in its dotage. But this was not to be the fate of the tree from Ichmul.

In 1915 a socialist mob, mightily pissed at conditions in Mérida, stormed the Cathedral. They were incensed at the Catholic Church's complicity in the worsening of their lives and intended revenge. They looted the church, destroyed artifacts and works of art, dragging Christ of the Blisters, all twenty-three feet of him, into the Plaza and tossed it onto what the angry crowd thought was its funeral pyre. To their utter amazement and bilious chagrin, the sculpture would not burn. They tore it apart, limb from limb, with their bare hands. The sculpture, which now stands in the cathedral, is a copy, carved in 1919 by an artist named Zaparria.

Ray and Flora listened intently to the story that the doctor told with a pedant's attention to detail and a megalomaniac's zeal. Ray's sole comment at the conclusion was that it was "another fascinating example of the ineffectualness of art." The doctor did not rise to the bait and pretended amusement.

The story finished, Ray beckoned for the check and insisted on paying. The Doctor protested weakly, saying he'd invited them out, and they hadn't yet had coffee or desert. He acquiesced when Ray snarled, "That story was worth the pesos, but I'm too tired to hear any more...from you."

As soon as they were alone it started.

"Why did you do that? You were unbelievably rude to him."

"No fucking way do I want to be indebted to him for anything. Including a meal. He didn't argue about it much, the fucking weasel."

"But why? What was so bad that you had to act that way? He was charming, it was a wonderful meal..."

"Charming my ass! Charming to you maybe, but at my expense. He fucking excluded me the whole time. The slime bag would've looked between your legs again if he had

the chance. And I'm sure it wouldn't be a professional peek."

"Oh, you are jealous is that it? You are threatened! I can't believe it. How could you ever think that of me?"

"Not you, him! And I'm not jealous, I'm pissed. Let's discount the gringo and conduct the evening in our mother tongue!"

Ray's rampage had gone public, the vein in his forehead was popping out and his face was red with fury. People were staring at them with a mixture of amusement and horror. A policeman strolling nearby began to move in their direction. Flora took a more conciliatory tone.

"Ray, I am sorry your feelings were hurt. Perhaps that was insensitive of him, and of me. But he spoke English when he told us about the Cristo de las Ampollas.

"He looked at you the whole time; he never even glanced in my direction. I don't wanna even see the fucking cross. It's only a copy anyway," he said in a pathetic voice.

"I don't wanna see the fucking cross either" Flora said with a smile. "And I don't wanna translate the fucking poem. We can simply send him a check for his services. But only if the infection clears up," she said, returning to her own voice.

He stood looking at her for a moment and burst out laughing. "Flora, I'm sorry. I got insecure and acted like an asshole. Why wouldn't the doctor be interested in entertaining you? I was stupid."

When Flora and Ray hugged, the group of people who had watched their argument smiled, shook their heads, and moved on.

By the time Ray came out of the bathroom Flora was sound asleep. He was still wired and went out on the balcony for a smoke. Ray sat in an iron chair with a scallop shell motif forming the back. His body recognized it as identical to Sol's favorite chair in the garden in Playa. A sudden, late night downpour had slicked the dark pavement, which was now phosphorescent with mirrored light. He

bathed his eyes in the reflections of the silver half-moon and green traffic lights. The rick-rack trail of a neon bar sign was swept from view by the glare of a lone headlight.

Man, maybe it's trying to tell me something. I feel like a Cyclops staggering on a crooked path. What the fuck happened tonight? I really lost it with that fuck head. It's not like I haven't done the same thing. I've done worse for Chrissake—diddling that Turkish woman under the table with her husband right there. Rolling around on the floor with Samantha behind the couch at Carl's party.... I guess it takes one to know one—probably my karmic payback for all the bad shit I've done. I'm sure not a Mexican, a true Mexican probably would have beaten the fucker to within an inch of his life or challenged him to a duel or whatever shit they do here when their honor is at stake. Maybe it was just macho jealousy, being pissed is probably a smoke screen. Ugh where the fuck is my confidence. Flora was hardly aware it was going on—maybe she was totally aware it was going on and didn't care. So what! It was pretty harmless. Siena, you can be a class A jerk. This woman loves you, probably better than anyone has. A little scary. Yeah, this is all great here in bongo land but settling down again gives me the chills. The idea of losing her is worse—it puts a hole in my heart and I can feel my life rushing out.

I wonder how Sol and Carlos are. I hope they make it. Jesus, they found their spot on the planet and they found each other. It gives one hope. They know where we are. Flora called him last week, just to say hi. She said he sounded okay, said not to hurry back on his account though he missed her. He misses me too, she said, but she said it like it was an afterthought—she'd do that so I wouldn't feel hurt. She's some weird combo of tough and gentle. My leetle señorita—I've gotta take a look at her asleep—man is she beautiful, her skin is so dark. I can't believe my luck, she even smiles in her sleep. I'm gonna crawl right in there with her and soak up all that good stuff until I fall asleep. If it's good to ya it's got to be good for ya.

It was Ray and Flora's first visit to the ruins at Uxmal. His earliest trip with Liza had been a stripped-to-essentials affair, which required long deliberations over whether they could afford the few additional pesos for a room with a fan. This time around, twenty years later, it was a relief to be able to make a spur of the moment decision to stay overnight at a fancy hotel within walking distance of the ruins. Uxmal was an easy day trip from Mérida and taking a room there, at least in Ray's private thought, was a treat. This raised a twinge of guilt in him that was quickly noticed by Flora, and just as quickly, erased by her reminder that it was a perfect way to spend "betting money."

They had taken an early bus and were at the ruins before it officially opened. Flora was overwhelmed by her first glimpse of the Temple of the Magician. It is the first thing one sees, towering over the site like an isolated mesa. The glimpse was enough to send them sprinting to the hotel where they booked a room, left their small overnight pack (which they had taken "just in case") and returned to the ruins, where they stayed until closing.

They were elated and exhausted at the end of the day. No one was in the pool, so they took a quick swim in their underwear—the lone waiter was embarrassed and made some comment concerning proper behavior. Flora told the waiter that if he went away there would be no one to be embarrassed and that would be the truly proper behavior. Ray raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. "My, how things have changed. Whatever happened to the modest Chicana of the valley?"

"She has spent too much time with the brazen Italian of the mesa. He is a shameless man. He would have made me swim even if the pool had been filled with people."

"More likely she would have made him swim."

"I know, I can hardly see a body of water without wanting to swim. What am I going to do when we go home and it is winter?"

They moved toward each other, Flora put her arms around his neck, Ray squatted, put his arms around her waist as she sat on his thighs. They continued the conversation bobbing in the water.

“Ray, do you realize this is the first time we have spoken about home? Are you ready?”

“For what? To go home?”

“Yes. I am not sure I am ready.”

“Could you stay longer?”

“I could stay here with you for a very long time. We could divide our time between Playa and Mérida and Oaxaca. You could paint. I could continue my studies. There is a tremendous amount to learn.”

“What about Christmas? I feel a little bad that I cancelled out of Thanksgiving. Then I tried to talk my Mom and Sis into coming to Abiquiu. Remember?”

“Did they say yes? Well, maybe we can go home for Christmas and then come back here.

“That could work. The track money is holding up and I haven’t touched the money from Bartólome’s painting. How are you on that score?”

“I am a woman of means,” Flora said, her unsuccessful imitation of a Victorian dowager dissolving into laughter. “Truly, things are good in that regard. New Mexico building is booming. Our construction yard is the best around, and there are many Anglos building big houses. I spoke with the business manager—he was very pleased.”

“Will you miss your translation?”

“Who knows? I also spoke with Flavia last week. She said there were two big jobs in my mail. I asked her to hold on to them for a couple of days. The work is there...if I want it. But the ‘Indian thing,’ as you call it, is absorbing.”

“We can figure it out. It’s clear neither of us is in any rush to get back. But I need to stay put for a little while and get some serious work done.”

“Can you do that in Playa? You already have, truly.”

“I can do it in Playa. Maybe a week or so more in Mérida. That O.K.?”

“Está bien. Now I am hungry. Shall we change and eat?”

From their room, they could see the Pyramid of the Magician. Tops of other temples and buildings poked through the carpet of trees that undulated toward the horizon, but none were as commanding as the Magician. Over a hundred feet high, it is the result of five successive temples built upon each other. Parts of each layer are visible when one climbs the steep stairs. It is like time travel without the aid of vehicle or technology. Ray and Flora stood at the window and she said, “That is my favorite. We must go back tomorrow so I can look more closely. I loved entering through the mouth of the enormous mask.”

“Yeah, what a fantastic way to frame an entrance. In case there was any doubt that Chac was in charge.”

“If you have no rivers, rain is everything. It makes sense that the rain God is the jefe.”

“What’s the deal with the myth about how the temple was built—some dwarf?”

“He came from an egg and then he was raised by a witch. One of the rulers was threatened by him, the dwarf rang a particular bell—it was a bad omen. Something like that. The ruler told him that if he could build a temple in one day, he would spare his life.”

“Hey, Flora, do you think he did it? Like that, I mean. In one night?”

“Ray, it is myth, fiction....”

“Yeah, I guess that means it’s possible.”

They were on their way to the dining room when the manager interrupted them.

“Señor Siena, there is a phone call for you. He says it is an emergencia.”

He looked at Flora with a worried expression and took the phone.

“Christ, I hope it’s not something with my mother. Hello...Oh Bartólome, how are you?...why what’s wrong? the painting didn’t...He did what? I can’t hear you very clearly...when? And what about Carlos? He found him yesterday...this is awful, I can’t believe he would do that. Yes, I know he was despondent...yes she is here...no, I’ll tell her, I think it’s better. I understand you’re very troubled. He asked you last week how to tie one? Didn’t you sense that was a bit strange? Not under the circumstances. Has anyone gotten in touch with his family? That’s good that you’re taking care of the arrangements. Yes, that’s helpful...I wouldn’t have thought of that. Yes, of course, as soon as we can. How did you get in touch with us here? Right, we told the hotel in Mérida ...sí, mañana...no, mas tardes, probably in the evening. If there is anything we can do...yes, it is a mess. Bye!”

Flora sat crushed into a chair as if someone had punched her in the stomach. Only her hands, which gripped the chair arms in a stranglehold, showed any life. The tears began to well in her eyes, which had sunken to jet black. Her skin, vibrant a second before, turned opaque.

“It was Bartólome?”

“Yes.”

“Is it what I fear?”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“What happened?”

“Sol hung himself.”

“Oh, that is too terrible. Oh Ray, this is so sad. I loved him as a brother. I never should have left him. I thought...”

“Don’t go there, it wasn’t your fault. How were we to know? He seemed stronger when we left. You were very loving with him. You know that meant a lot to him. Come here...”

They were standing in the hotel’s reception area. Ray wrapped her in his arms as she dissolved into grief. He held her tightly, trying to keep her body from breaking apart from under her sobs. When her body quieted she

spoke in a voice that had been winnowed of its husk from this new loss.

“When I was a little girl, I saw some boys throw a rock at a crow. They hurt its wing so I took the crow in and nursed him back to health. Or at least that is what I thought. I sent the crow away one morning...it was after a few days...it is hard for me not to cry, even now... he could fly and I thought he was better but, when I came home from school, I found him laying dead. He was right on the path to my house. I thought maybe he had tried to visit me, that maybe he had something to tell me. I had secretly hoped that he would come back to thank me. It was so very sad to see him covered in dust. The shine was gone from his feathers and his wing was crumpled beneath him. I knew it was the same crow because I had painted one of his claws with fingernail polish... it was a silly thing to do. And I thought it was all because of me; that I had not been conscientious enough, that I shoed him away because I had other things to do.”

“What did you do?”

“I gave him a proper burial. He was too big to put in a cigar box so I got my father to put two cigar boxes together. They smelled so good. They were made from wood, and the tobacco was sweet too. I lined the box with a piece of white cloth with red polka dots. It was quite festive for a burial shroud, but my father assured me that it was appropriate. We buried him down near the river.”

Flora had told the story with her head resting on Ray’s shoulder. When they leaned their bodies backward and tilted their heads so as to look at each other, Flora’s eyes floated in rudderless grief. Ray kissed her eyes and rubbed at her tears as if to whisk them away.

“I told Bartólome we would try to get to Playa tomorrow as early as we could. Is that O.K.? I thought you would want to.”

“Fine. When is the funeral? Who is making the arrangements, Carlos?”

“I think Bartólome is. Carlos is a wreck. He probably feels guilty beyond belief.”

“He should feel guilty. It seems very weird that Bartólome is taking care of things. And why should he have been the one to call? And why did he speak to you?” she said, angrily.

They dreaded returning to Playa. Had there been a way to avoid it, Ray would have taken it. Flora had a firmer, more developed sense of duty in regard to these events, but there was a glitch in Ray’s character that gave him permission to accept the most preposterous excuses. He had missed his college graduation—too deep in thought about the plight of the world—and had taken the stance that it was a superficial ceremony at best. He regretted this, years later, if only because of the disappointment he caused his parents. They were extraordinarily proud of his accomplishment, the first one in the family to have made it that far.

That memory had apparently sunk into the mud when he missed the wedding of two friends, whom he not only cherished, but had introduced. He never did figure that one out. He hated to think that it was simply because he was having too good a time, off on a remote island, fucking his brains out with a young contortionist. The memory of this careless act became a cattle prod, ever ready to release its full charge, should he stray from the path to the barn. It came into play now in response to a vague impulse to chicken-shit his way out of attending Sol’s funeral. He let his wavering be known to her, in a manner he thought conversational. She was not anxious to return for such a tragic event either, but to wriggle out of it was blasphemy. Her incredulous expression—she narrowed her eyes and raised her eyebrows simultaneously—stopped him cold.

When they arrived in Playa, Carlos was adrift in a fog of sedatives and could barely communicate. He reclined limply on his French chaise, wearing Sol’s voluminous silk kimono. He looked dramatically stricken and appropriately

emaciated for the occasion. Bartólome sat erect in the only stiff-backed chair. He was elegantly dressed in a pale gray suit and a yellow, band-collared shirt. Despite the evening hour, he wore dark glasses which were unable to hide his pained expression and discomfort.

They leaned over to give Carlos a hug, and he made a wan effort to meet them half way. Bartólome rose from his chair and embraced them both. Flora, who had steeled herself for this encounter, cried anyway. Bartólome held her, kept a stiff upper lip in a manner that could only be described as English, and said, repeatedly “lo siento, lo siento, hermana”, seemingly unaware of the contempt she felt for him. She turned from him, sat in an armchair, got up, sat on the edge of the bed and rose again before settling on the edge of the chaise.

Bartólome’s self-possession faltered when he greeted Ray. He took off his dark glasses, looked directly at him, and said, “I am glad you are here. I am so very sorry this has happened. Sol was a very special person.” Ray held him and Bartólome began to cry, silently. His grief felt genuine to Ray, but as he said to Flora later on, it was one of the calmest, most measured displays he had ever witnessed.

Ray was saddened by the loss of this new friend. Deeply moved by Sol’s suicide and how it would play out on those around him, he remained surprisingly undemonstrative. He was a man who stood the adage on its end—he sweated the small stuff. He could have “chemicals,” as he was fond of calling them, at the most minor provocation—a traffic jam, or an imagined slight would do—but faced with the serious, the dangerous, or the tragic, he became a model of resolve and inner strength. It was a grim taking charge, but it worked.

Grief deserted its role as the great unifier. The four sat isolated about the room: Flora and Carlos at opposite ends of the chaise, Bartólome in his chair, Ray on a red camel saddle that looked like it had come from the set of Arabian nights. The silence was alive with sniffles and the

creaking of wood and leather. Someone's stomach turned, a knee joint cracked beneath a watery rustle of silk. Ray got up to re-hook a loose shutter that had been caught in an eddy of wind. As he walked to the window the grit of sand and the straw-soled swish of his espadrilles filled the room. This was heard against a continuo of unasked and unanswered questions, that played as a pressure on the eardrum.

It was Ray who spoke first.

"So what's happening? Is there a service?"

"Tomorrow, in the morning. Here in the garden. It is what he would have wanted," answered Carlos.

"People have been notified?" asked Flora.

"Yes, I have seen to that. His brother and his father are here. Some friends from the dance world arrived this evening. They are staying at my hotel—we thought that was best—Carlos and I."

"His brother and father hardly knew about us. Sol was not very much in touch with them. 'Sol's little friend' was how they referred to me."

"I arranged to have him buried in the church yard, at Santa Maria's. It was a bit difficult—because of the suicide—but I, we, promised a contribution to the church, in Sol's name, of course. The padre was unwilling to give him a mass in the church, but he consented to the burial."

"He was a better man than most of us. It's ridiculous to think that I'll probably have far less trouble, when I go. I had to fight to keep my father's service out of the church even though it was his wish," Ray said, wistfully.

Carlos gave Bartólome a peculiar look. It was meant to be clandestine, but was theatrically exaggerated and escaped no one. Bartólome nodded, rose, and walked deliberately to a bureau on the other side of the room. He took a blue velvet purse and two large, leather-bound books from the top drawer and gave them, along with a letter, to Flora.

"These are for you. Sol left them on his desk. We put them aside before the police came to make their report.

That was a mess in itself. They are so stupid and insensitive, these locals,” Bartolóme said, with a touch of disdain.

“Flora and Ray” was typed on the envelope. The letter inside was handwritten, in Spanish. The turquoise ink Sol favored was oddly appropriate for the poetic way in which he veiled the somber content of his suicide note.

Dear Flora and Ray,

I have thought constantly about this for the past few weeks. It was not a rash decision, and in all honesty, the idea has been with me for as long as I can remember, at least since I stopped dancing. You could say the idea was driven underground by love, a beast subdued by a flower. Now the flower has lost its scent and the beast can no longer be placated.

I saw them together. I watched long enough to know that it was not my imagination, long enough to be sure that it was Carlos who was naked in his arms. Please do not be too angry with Carlos; he is still a child in so many ways. He sometimes does not know what he is doing. It is a cliché born of my profound weariness with waiting. A waiting for the pan balance of the universe to tilt toward the good, a waiting for the loneliness, that seems to be everywhere, to be filled.

I know you thought we were the ideal couple. Ray actually said that to me, but I am afraid it was not so. What you saw between us was more habit than affection. It seems I mistook it as well. At least that is how I feel now. What I see between the both of you looks like the genuine article; it reminds me of Carlos and I, before whatever that magic is between two people evaporated.

The depth of my affection for you both has little to do with the length of time we have been in each other’s lives. Time seems a foolish measure of these things—it is difficult to explain. Flora, I loved you like the sister I always wanted and never had. I will take your spirit and your smile with me to the other world. My garden never thrived as well before you came and watered it with your

kindness. I am sorry to hurt you by going away like this, but you encouraged me to do what was best for myself and although you probably disagree with my decision, that is what I am about to do.

I am leaving you two things that have meant a great deal to me. The set of pearls belonged to my mother. I know they will look even more beautiful when you wear them. Pearls must be worn; they are living things which take their nourishment through the skin. I don't expect you to wear the tiara, since there is hardly an occasion these days. It is a beautiful thing, given to me by a ballerina I knew and danced with. She was from a wealthy family and inherited the crown as a little girl. She could not bear to have it around when an injury ended her dancing career.

Ray, you have been a wonderful friend. I have never been able to decide whether you were right or wrong about memories. I did have Flora convey to you that I thought you were wrong, but now I realize that the issue is much more complicated. It was when I lost my faith in love that the memories of grace were not enough. I do not think you will ever lose your faith, and so your memories should serve you well. I am leaving you my scrapbooks, the memorabilia from my dancing life—here are my memories for you to guard. Even if my mother was alive, I could not think of another person with whom they would be safer.

Ray and Flora read the letter standing together near the window, as if the darkness outside would light their way. Flora cried softly as she silently read the letter. Ray's struggle with the Spanish kept his head engaged and his heart at bay. Flora asked if he understood and he answered, "Enough, you can give me the details later." Carlos and Bartólome had courteously left them alone.

"He does not say who it was, only that he saw him."

"Does it matter, I wonder?"

"To me it does," said Flora, "I know it is silly and everyone is to blame, but still..."

"Carlos is so pathetic. It's hard to hate him. He'll be punished enough."

“But Bartólome, what of him? So righteous and helpful. I arranged this, I arranged that, oh excuse me, we.”

“Flora, let’s just feel how lucky we’ve been to have known him—no one’s to blame, really. Such bad luck...for all of us.”

This did not have the ring of deep conviction. Ray too wanted some answers.

Sol had hanged himself in his office. He strung a perfectly tied hangman’s noose from one of the vigas, stood on his desk and jumped off. Carlos came in the morning and found him hanging, wearing only his boxer shorts. Two notes, one for him, were on the desk, as were the things he left for Ray and Flora. There were also some papers concerning the hotel that clearly ceded complete ownership to Carlos. No mention was made as to the contents of the letter. “Some personal things” was all that Carlos would divulge when Flora asked him. “Some personal things” was her response to a similar inquiry from Carlos. It hardly mattered, since she was sure he and Bartólome had read the letter before “putting it aside.”

Nothing was said regarding whom Carlos was sleeping with. There was no way the question could be asked without it seeming an inquisition. Bartólome had sidestepped the issue completely. He acted as if he believed the story he told to the police and the press, that it was due to personal problems.

There was one detail that was particularly gruesome. It seems that Carlos and Sol had gone to Bartólome’s home for an evening drink. It was casual. The three of them sat on the veranda, chatting amiably while Bartólome busied himself practicing knots. He was making a collection of different knots to give to a nephew who had lately become interested in sailing. Sol acted interested and asked him if he knew how to tie a hangman’s noose. Bartólome recalled that Sol had been impressed with the noose when he had first seen it in a cowboy movie. Bartólome obliged and demonstrated. Sol was able to make the turns and doubling back on his first try. They even joked about how he might

have a new calling if he lost interest in his gardening. Bartólome said that under the circumstances it seemed “normal”, and he never gave it another thought, until two days ago.

Flora and Ray were left to ponder whether it was an act of perversity on Bartólome’s part, Sol’s, or both. They couldn’t imagine it as normal under any circumstances. Seeing a macabre hangman’s noose as another common knot required a peculiar idea of normalcy. That no alarms had gone off during this little macramé session they found difficult to believe. It was proof of either blindness or innocence, or malevolence so extreme that they were unable to comprehend it.

But this was Mexico, where nothing was that simple. If there was not less interest, there was certainly less faith in the surface of things. The sparkle of gold was a lure for death, a swirling red cape invited disaster, the mirrored water of a cenote covered the piles of bones at the bottom.

Flora questioned Ray that night about what she had seen as his “aloof composure” earlier on. His clenched jaw and tight lips were untypical. It unsettled her and in a panic, she searched his eyes for access. To her relief she found an entrance, but remained puzzled.

“I know I do that, it’s like I just take it in. I can probably describe everything that went on, what it looked like, right down to the amount of cuff showing below Bartólome’s jacket. I saw a split seam under the arm of Carlos’ kimono. He kept a handkerchief in the sleeve, like a Japanese woman.” He caught himself. “It’s not as dispassionate as it might appear.” He hated explaining himself. “Me, I mean. Maybe it just gives me time.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know, to get my bearings. It takes me out of the equation, so I can...I don’t know, take care of it or something.”

“So it is dispassionate?”

“No, my feelings are gurgling right along. They don’t seem useful at the moment is all.”

“Perhaps it reminds me of my father. He would get stern and very determined if there was a crisis.”

“Is that why it’s troubling to you? I thought you respected your father for that—you read it as fairness I thought.”

“I did see it as a sense of measure. I was a little frightened of what it might have masked.”

“No mystery from here—confusion, fright, pain, the need to go off in some dark corner and eat dirt—the usual. But if I let that stuff take over I’m lost.”

“It will come and haunt you later, when it is too misshapen for you to recognize.”

“Nah, I let it eat away at me on low drip—like an I.V.”

The acres of flowers his mourners sent were set in the garden among those that Sol had grown. The wreaths and floral displays, some woven into crosses and chalices, enhanced the wild beauty of their less kempt cousins. Flora had risen early and arranged the flowers without interference from Carlos, who had gratefully ceded the job to her. The garden looked exquisite and when Carlos saw it, he fell to his knees before her, sobbing. He thanked her a thousand times, declared his and Sol’s love for her and asked her to forgive him; he never said for what. She helped him to his feet and held him tightly, all the while saying—“Por todo, per todo...lo siento, lo sé, lo sé...”

It was ten in the morning, and Ray needed a drink.

The priest attended the service in the garden but did not officiate. He spoke a few words that sounded pointedly secular, mostly about how Sol was a loving and beloved man. There were a few references to the Virgin and one to the life hereafter. The priest mumbled his words in a regional Spanish that even Flora had difficulty with. It seemed inconsequential. Solace came from the many people

who gathered there, with their love of Sol and their memories of his grace. And from the flowers.

And from the flowers—particularly for Ray. He had gone to church as a boy. The sermon was delivered in English and had as little impact on Ray as the Latin mass; as little as this padre's rambling in Spanish. Back then the whole affair seemed more of a lecture, interspersed with the aerobics of repeated rising and kneeling and sitting. He never quite learned the order of things and was often embarrassed to be sitting when all the others seemed to know it was time to stand. Kids keeled over during the mass. One could hear the clunk of a head against the oaken pew. They had fasted the night before. Their empty stomachs and the reek of incense were enough to turn them to jelly. The nuns would whack them back to consciousness, the quality of mercy being available exclusively from the Virgin. It was all very confusing to a ten-year-old.

The experience was not without its holy moments. Ray endured the proceedings to get to the Communion part of the mass. He only rarely received this sacrament, fearful he might be one of those unfortunates who were knocked senseless. But he loved watching the others. They walked down the center aisle to the altar, where they would kneel and open their mouths wide like so many baby birds waiting to be fed. Ray found this a bit disgusting. He felt sick when he imagined what this must look like to the priest. The priest placed the host on the outstretched tongues. It was beyond Ray's grasp that the dry wafer that stuck to the roof of the mouth was the body of Christ. Only the priest got the wine. This was all too weird. But then came the good part. Those who received communion rose and walked back to their seats along the side aisle. They passed beneath the stained glass windows whose pictures fell in splotches of colored light across their bodies.

And today there were the flowers. They cast their colors across the sea of black dresses and dark suits that jammed the garden. Were it not for the casket sitting

amongst them, it might have been a wedding or a communion. Ray wept.

An ancient Cadillac hearse carried Sol to the graveyard. It was barely a quarter-mile from the hotel, and the loose knot of mourners shuffled behind in the yellow dust. There were eighty people in the procession, yet on that long road, it seemed a paltry summation of a life. A long, keening lamentation raised itself within Ray, accompanied by a dirge of images from Sol's scrapbooks. Flora walked beside him, wearing the pearls. She had on a flat-crowned, black straw hat with a black satin band. A veil hung to just above her lips, which were cherry-red and shockingly luscious. He put his arm around Flora's waist and drew her next to him. They had difficulty walking.

Without acknowledging it to each other, they knew their time in Mexico was over. Sol's dignity and generosity had provided the parade grounds upon which they strutted their love. And when each were alone, beyond the range of the other's embrace, they feared for the inability of their love to disentangle itself from the tremendous loss of this man and the country he'd opened to them. It was time to go home, yet they were unsure where to locate this image in real geography. Their fledgling life in Abiquiu seemed ages ago.

Playa had seduced them. It was not a paint-by-numbers picture of home. The sketch they had begun more closely resembled those "exquisite corpse" drawings of the surrealists: collaborative, disjointed, with unsettling changes in scale. The scribbles of interior life whirled like tornados across the page and cleared spaces where hope might drift.

The beach, the sea, the unbounded room perched near the sky, all existed in unfounded territory, in a country without a name. Their domain was ruled by desire, the taste of a smile, the butterfly kiss of an eyelash, a mote of tear at the edge of the eye. These were the realities against which they measured truths. Here were the wind and rain of their land, the hardware and raw material of their dream

home. The mitered joints of domesticity had not yet framed their lives.

XVI

They had put the armrest up during the flight and pressed their bodies into heat. They hardly spoke. They refused the airline meal, which looked revolting to them, and instead drank a couple of nip-sized tequilas and quarts of water. They covered themselves with the cabin blankets and fell in and out of a restless doze.

Ray watched Flora as she drifted into the skewed life of a dream. A terrible struggle was going on—her eyes were clinched in a squint, nearsighted in the half-light of an unfamiliar place. The smile that played on her lips, even in sleep, was gone, replaced by pouting lips that opened and closed like a landed fish.

She was swimming in a calm, but unknown sea. Partially hidden in the clouds above her was a slide projector. Its light rays fanned through the clouds in a celestial display. Flora, expectant of the miracle such events usually heralded, swam on, her assurance growing with each stroke. Without warning, a delicate hand, perhaps a woman's, dropped a colored gel into the projector. The sea turned red and its calm plane shifted slightly upward, inclined toward the source of light. Flora felt the early fluttering of panic, as she assessed the uphill swim. She willed herself to pay attention and to her relief discovered that the current was at her back and was flowing uphill. She relaxed, her strokes became fluid and she made headway toward an island she could not see, but which she knew was there.

The hand appeared again and removed the colored gel. The sea turned blue under the clear light of the lamp, its plane normalized, the current ceased. It seemed a moment of respite before the waters again became unfamiliar, as a piss-yellow light flooded down. The sea tilted downwards. Her limbs tensed, she began to lose her buoyancy; the salt was bitter and burned her eyes. The currents shifted with the change in light; and she swam, frantically, against the swells, which rose like hills from the flatness that marked the edge of the world.

Flora adjusted her stroke, measured her strength to accommodate the swirling eddies of the new sea: tilt the shoulder, lift the head higher, turn the body into the rip tide and ride it until it spews out in the shallows of some safe haven. She caught glimpses of this haven from atop the billowing swells—a thatched bungalow set in a garden, the whole protected by towers of pink-coral, posted at the entrance of the bay. The distance was calculable, measured in strokes and kicks. Flora became hopeful, the end was in sight.

Her legs became entangled in masses of seaweed and her progress halted. She tried swimming, using only her arms, but the weight of the weeds was like an anchor and she slowly began to sink. Intermittently she bobbed to the surface and stretched her neck to grab a lung-full of air. She had the distinct impression that her neck had lengthened grotesquely, and although this helped with the air, it caused her head to totter, its weight unsupportable by her reedy neck. Before she knew what was happening she was dragged headlong below the surface.

When the hand appeared again, it was gigantic. Knob-knuckled and hairy-backed, it held a petite lifesaver between thumb and forefinger. The hand swung the life preserver from a long line, just above the surface of the water, tantalizingly close to Flora's outstretched arms. When she submerged, and then rose again for one last breath, the life preserver was within her reach. It was white, with red polka dots, and seemed a child's make-believe toy.

But it was all she had and she delighted in the feel of its rough canvas surface beneath her fingers. The thought, that she would need to submerge again if she hoped rise into its center, filled her with dread. Taking the chance, Flora went under only to have the preserver snapped out of her grasp as her head broke the surface. The rope would tauten and the tiny circle of hope would frog-hop away. The episode repeated with sickening regularity—sink, hope, rise, sink, hope, and rise. Whimpering like a puppy she awoke from the dream: the final image of a golden wheel, eternally turning, all that she remembered.

While Flora was dreaming her young-woman-and-the-sea trials, Ray was in an uncomfortable position himself. Ray was having difficulty breathing. He found himself within a four-walled stone structure that was being built around him. Although it was momentarily open to the sky, he was certain this would change before long. Already there were no doors and he anxiously paced the perimeter of the enclosure—three paces on each side. The massive stone blocks of the walls interlocked in a complex system of male and female joints—protruding knobs of one stone received by slots in the stone next to it. The gun-slit windows were set high. He had to dig his fingers and toes into the slim opportunities left between the stones and hoist himself up to see. He dangled precariously, grunting with the effort to raise his eyes above the bottom edge of the window slits.

Outside the window, a group of women sat in white plastic folding chairs. They wore housedresses; the barely visible patterns had faded to ghostly white. The women sat in a circle and passed around Tupperware containers; they laughed as they put on the lids and then lifted an edge to squeeze out the air in fart-like squeaks. The women took turns. They would twist in their chairs to face Ray, give him a little wave, blow him a kiss, smile and then frown—they did this rapidly and Ray was unsure what he was seeing. Then one woman would rise, go to the center of the circle and pick up a pink plastic bowl that was easily two

feet in diameter. With the assistance of a disembodied pair of hands, she put the lid on. She raised the lidded bowl triumphantly above her head, and carried it like a trophy around the circle of women. This done, she faced Ray again and, making certain she had his attention, winked, pursed her lips and stuck out her tongue as she squeezed a gale-sized blast of air from the bowl. The other women roared with laughter, hoisted their dresses and clapped their hands on their bare thighs.

The laughter amplified by the stone walls of the enclosure entered Ray's body and shook him with such force that he lost his grip on the sill and fell to the floor. Each time he fell, another massive stone was added. As the walls grew higher they pitched inward to form a pyramid roof. As the roof grew, the patch of sky he could see shrank. His chest tightened; he began to gasp. Debris and dust fell continuously, choking his vision as well as his lungs. When the roof was nearly sealed and all that remained was a sliver of blue, Ray heard a voice. It sounded familiar but he was unable to recognize it. It was singing softly, in Spanish, but he couldn't understand the words.

He woke in a sweat, shouting, "What? What?" Still groggy, he ignored Flora's questions and beckoned the stewardess to bring him another tequila.

It was bitter cold. The low-hanging sun fought for its place in a zinc sky. Its dying light cast a blue pall over the skittering of snow. Flora and Ray shivered through the boarding ramp into the Albuquerque terminal. They had not yet touched the earth of New Mexico, and already their feet tugged on their hearts, as if propelled by a life of their own. They stood bewildered beneath the terminal lights, which, for once, mimicked nature. The wintry illumination chilled Flora's glorious tan to violet and Ray's skin to bruised liverwurst.

They joked about their layers of inappropriate clothing—Ray had put on three tee shirts, Flora wore jeans

under her two dresses—and their baggage, most of which was wrapped, immigrant style, in brown paper and cardboard. They had packed hastily and the packages were already coming apart. It was the brave new world and both had their doubts.

Their car was at Russell's and they called to say they were on their way. He would pick them up at the bus station in Santa Fe. The snow covering increased as they made the northerly climb along I-90. Seventy-five miles and an almost two-thousand-foot gain in altitude dramatically lowered the temperature of Santa Fe. It was dark when they arrived and they huddled, shivering in the lobby of the bus stop. They nearly cried when they thought of returning to their cold, darkened houses in Abiquiu fifty miles to the north. The adobes needed at least a day for the warmth to penetrate the thick mud walls.

It took Russell all of two seconds to convince them to stay the night. He was excited to hear their stories, had already made up the bed in the studio and was preparing a surprise for dinner. "I've even got a log burning in the fireplace for you guys."

The art chat started immediately. Although he preferred seeing Ray and Flora alone, Russell called Jason, but he was out of town. He was in a foul mood anyway—his show the previous month had been a "disaster". Jason sold only one painting, which barely covered his expenses, and he didn't know how he was going to get through the next year. According to Russell, Jason was planning to change his dealer again; he switched dealers as often as he got divorced and remarried. Russell had told him to give it a chance and hang in, but he saw that it fell on deaf ears. They were fond of each other but competitive enough so that they didn't quite trust the advice they gave each other.

Russell said Jason's funk was exacerbated by an article on his work that was scheduled to appear and didn't. This plunged him into a depression dark enough to send him to L.A. to escape, as he growled to Russell, "this fucking Mickey Mouse scene and shitty weather". He was

threatening to move; but neither Ray nor Russell took it seriously, having heard similar words before.

Russell's love life wasn't so hot; his current girlfriend and he were on the outs. She complained that all he did was paint and it was impossible for her to talk with him. "I'd rather be married to a musician—they're gone all the time but at least they make some money was the way she put it. If I'm not painting, I'm thinking about it, she says. What else can I do? I've got a show coming up—the pictures are coming good."

They were coming good. Ray saw them hanging in the studio—five or six, big paintings—that were lively and juicy and ambitious. They started from small things, like the movement of water bugs on his pond, and Russell made this into something expansive. Ray was a little jealous of both the paintings and the grand studio Russell had built. He was also jealous when, later that night, Flora helped him translate the titles into Spanish, but he didn't let on. Russell made it okay—Flora left the room for a moment and he grabbed Ray by the arm and said, "You lucky dog. You deserve it, but you're still one lucky son-of-a-bitch. She is wonderful."

Russell had hunted alone that fall. He missed Ray, "but not enough to keep me from hunting." There was good dove hunting in Southern Colorado, in the abandoned barley fields that once supplied a defunct brewery. The birds were plump and sluggish from their lavish grain-fed diet. There were thousands of them; freed from the toil of searching for food, they undoubtedly had plenty of spare time to mate. This was a Ray-o-rama: he had cooked up the theory during a night of copious dope smoking. This fall Russell had again shot his bag limit and put the birds in the freezer. "But it's not what we're having for dinner" he hastened to add. "Tonight it's truly special, straight out of Montana. Oh, man, did you miss out; but dinner will make up for it."

Russell lit the burner under a copper fondue pot and hung a tea ball, filled with herbs and garlic, from the rim of

the pot. “New technique” he said proudly. “I’ll take the ball out when the oil boils”. He brought out a platter piled with chunks of red meat, with a smooth custard-like texture.

“What is it?” Flora asked, looking a bit unsure.

“Wait until you taste it. You’ve got to imagine what you’d get if you crossed a wild duck with a cow. Just dip it in the oil for a few seconds and wait till it cools a little. It’s so tender you can eat it raw—like carpaccio.”

“I think I will dip it a little the first time...then will you tell me what it is?” asked Flora.

Ray had already popped a piece of the raw meat into his mouth. He barely chewed, the meat fell apart in his mouth.

“This is one of the best things I’ve ever eaten. It’s too tender for venison and I know you didn’t shoot a buffalo, so what the hell is it?”

Russell dragged out the answer, as he waited for Flora’s reaction.

“I made it up to Montana to do some hunting. It’s beautiful country up there, a few too many bears for my taste, and really rugged. We hunted the high meadows...long shots, I needed a scope so I took the 30.06. It’s still one of the best weapons for big game, and the bolt action is fast enough if you know what you’re doing. How do you like it, Flora?”

“It is truly delicious,” she said, spearing another piece, a trickle of juice at the corner of her mouth.

“It’s a different kind of hunting. Mostly the game is far away and you have to sneak up to get within range. There’s not a lot of cover, things seem wide open and the antelope get spooked easily...”

“So this is antelope? Pronghorn? Man, this is good.”

“They’re fast and it’s not a big target. I took this one at 200 yards. It took me half the morning to get within range.”

Flora stopped eating. The thought of the dainty creature bounding across the valley before he was blasted to fondue, played out on her face. Russell continued, undeterred in his discourse on the pleasures of blood sport, but Ray picked up her discomfort and intercepted with a suggestion that she try the vegetables and wild rice. She recovered her composure but seemed listless throughout the dinner conversation.

Ray told about Mexico and lingered over those things he knew Russell would be interested in—the ruins, how things grew, the sea, the places they stayed and people they met. He bragged a bit about his painting sales and was pissed that he did. Ray was certain Russell would love to hear about Bartólome but thought it judicious to wait until Flora wasn't around. He touched on the story of Sol and Carlos; but mid-point in the telling it seemed too private, too raw, and he cut the episode short. It belonged to him and Flora, and he was not sure he could explain the magnitude of Sol's suicide until he understood it better himself. He had drunk a fair amount and knew his tendency to exaggerate and dramatize for the sake of entertainment when he was in that state—and rue his cheapness in the sober light of morning.

The talk swung to Russell's plans to spend the three months of dead winter in the Baja, near Cabo. He invited Flora and Ray to come and stay as long as they liked. It would be terrific; he was renting the same big house on the beach where Ray had visited him, and there was plenty of room. Ray was enthusiastic about the possibility. Flora was startled.

"That is a generous invitation, but we only got back and...suddenly I am exhausted. I can barely keep my eyes open. Thanks for everything, Russell. You have been very sweet and the meal was delicious. You and Ray might want to stay up—I'm sure you have a great deal to talk about."

"We'll have time to catch up. I'm pretty wasted, the bed sounds good to me, too."

Snow squalls had begun around sundown; the intermittent puffs left a pristine skim over the old cover. Except for the chill, it was like walking on sifted sand. Flora and Ray jogged the last few yards toward the warmth of the studio, whose lights glowed orange beneath the deep ultramarine of the New Mexican night.

Russell was a lowlander and had built his house and studio in a small box canyon. The land rose steeply to the small mesa above, which could be reached along a well-worn game trail. Tonight a big-eared mule deer was silhouetted on the canyon rim, as she paused in cautious attention, before descending for a night of browsing. Flora and Ray stood in the protection of the portal and watched the doe until the cold drove them inside.

A skylight directly over the bed showed them a night sky riddled with stars. They lay naked in each other's arms and recalled the summer evening when, deliciously naked, they'd sat outside on the mesa looking at these same stars and similarly, marveled at their good fortune.

When they stopped at Flora's, reality presented itself as two cardboard boxes of mail. Flavia had collected it for nearly four months and sorted it into boxes for each of them. It would have been more convenient for Tio, who lived close by, but Flavia could be counted on to alert Flora to anything that looked important. Tio sang like an angel and had the disposition of one, but was barely literate. Instead, he looked after their houses while they were away and early that morning got the heat and the water going.

Flora wandered through the rooms, taking deep breaths, reacquainting herself with the sights and smells. Ray stood at the kitchen table, idly leafing through the top layer of his mail. He saw an official looking letter with an attorney's address and quickly shifted it to the bottom of the pile. When Flora came back in the room, she was overcome with emotion. Despite her tears, she was happy to be home. She said that she missed Tio, although she hadn't know it until just then.

“I feel a little guilty that I only called him once when we were away. I was having such a good time, I confess I hardly gave anyone a thought.”

“Likewise. Falling in love is very time consuming.”

“What should we do now?” She laughed and kissed him. “I mean today—no need to panic.” She laughed again. “You look stricken.”

“Nah, I’m just disoriented. To tell the truth there looks like there’s something in my mail that I don’t wanna deal with...but that’s no big deal, it’s just like welcome back to reality.”

“A letter from Dianne?”

“No worse...some lawyers. I’ll deal with it, it’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I am right here, Ray, if you wish to talk about it.”

“I appreciate that. I love you and I’m very happy. I’m just a little freaked,” he said, with an accompanying hug.

“So how should we proceed with the day?”

“Well, I was thinking...we both have a mountain of mail and phone calls and...I kind of want to take a hike. Maybe we should get settled today.”

“Each by ourselves? So, should we call each other later?”

“Doesn’t that make sense? It’ll be the first day and night we haven’t been together in months. Think we’ll survive?”

“It will be a struggle, but I think we can make it.”

Ray was prepared to be depressed, returning to the cold house. He was pleasantly surprised that Tio had been by and turned the heat on for him, as well. There was a stack of firewood in the shed and a pile of split logs near the stove. He dropped his gear and box of mail on the floor and, in a cheerful mood, banked the stove. He rummaged through his closet for winter clothes and his cold-weather hiking boots. After emptying the travel detritus from his hip-sack, he packed some water and a few essentials and went out to the studio.

He left the studio door open while he knelt to start up the gas heater. Suddenly, he was knocked to the floor by Sadie's exuberant greeting. She whined and slobbered and rolled onto her back to be scratched and affectionately manhandled. When Ray stood up, she did a routine that was more cat- than dog-like—she leaned her body into his legs and walked around him, while maintaining contact. Clearly, she required more schmoozing. Many of us are suckers for Dog Love and Ray was no exception. It is a love where our affection is mirrored back to us, and the reflection so perfectly matches our needs that we believe in it unquestionably.

“Sadie, you missed me, huh? Well, I missed you too but to tell the truth you didn't cross my mind while I was there. I knowww, I'm so fickle, up and down, back and forth, I disappear on you for months at a time and I come back all smiles and that's supposed to make everything OK...a few scratches and some rubs, not even a biscuit—but you're looking a little broad in the beam...we have to get that girlish figure back for you and you've never told me how it feels to be black and white and have hair all over your body...such a good dog...such a beauty...Sadie, I had a great time down there below the border and this woman Flora from down the valley, the one you think has displaced you in my affections, well she's real nice and I know she likes you, too. I'm a little nervous though, settin' up shop again and all that. Don't you worry and get all wrinkly and sneezy on me, we'll still take our walks and you can sleep at my house if your folks approve. Does she have marriage on her mind? Well, Sadie, I know you're a girl too but I have to say it anyway, it's an unusual woman who doesn't—but no she hasn't brought it up. You're lookin' at me like I'm a jerk. I'm not even divorced yet and I'm worried... well, you're absolutely right and one of the smartest dogs I know.”

Ray got up from the floor where he was sitting to go out. Sadie was torn between Ray's company and a desire to stay inside curled near the heater. Her ploy was

extravagant—she posed herself on the threshold with her hindquarters in the studio, her butt thrust toward the stove and her front paws outside. She alternated lifting her paws, holding one in a pathetic limp-wrist gesture while she tentatively rested the other in the snow.

“C’mon, Sadie! I know how you feel...not sure if you want to cozy it or go rambling in the great out of doors? C’mon girl, you’ll love it. Get that fat ass off the doorstep.”

She overcame her reluctance (Ray pushed her out of the studio) and trotted after Ray to the end of the mesa, where they skidded down the side on the thin covering of snow. They spooked a jackrabbit at the bottom and Sadie took off after it like a gunshot, the warm stove a frail memory in her doggy mind. Ray followed in her general direction and turned up the big arroyo toward the north. The sun had risen on schedule—a dusty rose disk pasted on a pale blue sky that was shading rapidly to sooty violet. The weather, coming out of the north, was about to take a radical turn for the worse. Ray could feel the snow in the air, even if it was a couple of hours away.

The covering of snow frosted the light and disguised the familiarity of the land—this was in the nature of things—and although the phenomenon remained mysterious, but not unexpected. What surprised Ray was how the wintry chill altered his perception of the topography. Most of our perception of space happens through the eyes, which offer us a removed, intellectual appreciation of the place we are looking into. It is in the walking into a place, a moving of the body through it, that we come to a more direct and deeper apprehension of it. The eyes are not enough. Ray sought the sunny side of the trail where the snow had begun to melt, but the footing was slick and his back tensed as he proceeded more cautiously. The meager warmth of the sun felt good, but the distances seemed longer, and his back began to ache. In the shade, his boots crunched surely on the firmer snow and he moved more rapidly. His chilled limbs, the icy sheen on his face,

his lungs which could not get enough of the cold, thin air, read the land and reported that he was in a brand new place.

Sadie had been off on her own for most of the walk. Ray had a few fleeting glances of her as she crested a nearby ridge or sped across the ravine up ahead of him. When she reappeared, Ray turned homeward and she walked alongside with a slight limp. One of her pads had cracked, but Ray's inspection, which included heavy petting, seemed to cure her—she straightened up, scooted ahead in a short burst and then rejoined him for a few seconds before taking off on another mysterious mission.

The wind and snow at his back pushed him along. When he arrived at the mesa, the tracks he had left earlier were covered. Sadie pushed past him as he opened the door to the house and was asleep in front of the woodstove before he shook the snow from his jacket. His stomach went queasy when he saw the box of unopened mail and he uttered a prayer that he be reincarnated as a dog in his next life. He avoided the mail and went into the studio to hang up the work he had done in Mexico.

The studio was little more than a shed that was insulated and walled with sheet-rock. It was a wooden addition that shared a common adobe wall with the house. The ill-fitting windows were covered with a cataract of plastic that fluffed and sucked and fluttered wildly in the wind. Ray put the radio on to drown out the sounds. He pulled the chair close to the heater and sat down to survey his new work. Expecting the satisfaction this usually brought, he was instead stunned by a feeling of profound loneliness. It coiled around him, squeezing the air from his lungs until he thought he would suffocate. Foundering in his tears and blind to the solace of his work, he sat and rocked himself like a Hassid in prayer, droning over and over, "the loss, the loss, the irretrievable loss."

When he tried to get up and return to the house, he felt like he did climbing at eighteen thousand feet; a shoelace comes undone, the thought forms slowly in the mind. It is

not much of a thought. It lives on the borders of the nervous system, blurred by fatigue and hopelessness. The body, reduced to a shallow impression in the snow, is unable to react. It has been tying shoelaces for years, yet now, it seems an impossible task. Leave the shoelace untied. The body is functioning at a somnambulist pace but it is forward motion. If he stopped moving, it might not start again but simply lie down in the snow and sleep, for a very long time.

Flora's call woke him from a sleep that held the promise of eternity. It was equally dark inside and out—he had fallen into a near coma in the chair, without turning on the studio lights. Disoriented, with most of his mind connected to his inner darkness, he had trouble understanding who it was. His head cleared enough to recognize Flora's voice, but he was barely cognizant of what she was saying.

“Was it very bad news from the lawyer?”

“No I haven't gotten to my mail—but I think I just slept on it.”

“Como?”

“I took a walk and, when I came back, I was dreading the letter or whatever it is from those fucking lawyers, and I fell asleep. I guess I'll go tackle it now. And you? What did you get up to?”

Flora had been busy: she had paid her bills, read her e-mail, returned phone calls, checked in with her business manager, spoken with Flavia, investigated the possibility of studying Mayan languages with Professor So and So and looked in on Tio, who wasn't doing well. She sorted her laundry, put things away, said yes to two translating jobs and declined an offer for an interpretation. By the time he hung up Ray felt like a complete slacker and was ready for another nap.

Sadie, still asleep near the livingroom stove, was startled awake by Ray's return from the studio. Her head bolted upright while her body remained stretched across the floor. Satisfied it was only him, she plopped her head into

repose and coyly shaded an eye with her paw. Her tail began a slow sweep across the tile floor and sped up as Ray approached to give her a few gentle scratches. “I guess you’re spending the night—I’ll call you parents and let them know.” He found a can of dog food in the pantry and washed out her bowl, which was crusty from a meal months ago. Her owners were vegetarians, and Alpo was a big event in Sadie’s life. She had risen with the sound of the can opener and was standing at the ready before her bowl hit the floor. Ray called his neighbors to say he was back and their dog was with him—which they surmised—and declined their invite for dinner. He heated up a can of beans and took a chance on some tinned brown bread that had been in the pantry for a year or two. Having accomplished these relatively adult acts, he turned to face the mail.

The junk mail was sorted directly into the trash and he made separate piles for bills, magazines and items of a potentially personal nature. He fortified himself with a few hits and sips and went straight for the ominous-looking lawyer letter. Two things caught his attention—it was postmarked early October and the lawyers names were Galileo and Coniglio. A scientist and a rabbit, how dangerous could they be? Dianne was not likely to use a lawyer whose name ended in a vowel. She would have used her own people, with far less mellifluous names like Ripfleshstein and Bloodberg, names that struck fear in the heart of the goyem.

The letterhead saying “Sons of Dante” set him at ease. It also put his fantasy apparatus in gear—he took another puff on the devil weed to insure things went into high gear. He was on home ground. His people were writing to him. They had learned of his failed attempt at repatriation in Mexico and intended to make things right. The news of his upcoming divorce had reached the homeland; they understood the difficulties of mixed marriages and would represent him; they would protect him from the army of throat doctors and proctologists headed his way. Best of all they would provide a psychologist to

ease him through his loss, someone who understood how love became disfigured. The shrink would be a woman with a soothing name, something along the lines of Serena or Tranquilla. Once he was “cured,” she would arrange for him to meet a beautiful, young Italian girl with a winery, loads of money and no brothers. Afterwards, Galileo and Coniglio would arrange a show of his paintings at the Vatican, the first time since Michelangelo that a living artist would be so honored.

He took another sip of tequila and began to read the letter. The Sons of Dante were a cultural foundation, the mission of which was to promote excellence in Arts and Letters by funding residencies in Italy. These were to be given to promising and accomplished artists of Italian descent. Ray had been selected as one of the candidates. Should he accept they would fly him over and provide an apartment, a studio and a sizeable stipend. The foundation had facilities in Rome, Florence Venice and Siena—where he took his residency would be discussed with him at a later date.

Ray laughed aloud and woke Sadie from her after dinner snooze. She cradled her snout between her front paws and sneezed, a gesture Ray read as annoyance. After a quick “sorry” aimed in her direction he reread the letter in total disbelief. This must be Serge, or another of his asshole friends, fucking with his head. It was too good to be true—a residency, dropped into his lap, without applying or begging or politicking. The address and phone were in New York and the stationary appeared legit. It was too late to call, but there was a web site address and he logged on to verify that things were kosher. To his utter amazement they were. He would call tomorrow and accept; he hoped he was not too late responding.

He called his mother to say he had gotten back safely. His first impulse was to blurt out the news from the illustrious Sons of Dante, but he waited, happy to exchange news and hear her voice.

They worked out plans for Christmas, which was only a few weeks away. It was “too much” for his mother and sister to fly out to New Mexico. His sister would be getting in from a horrendous flight from South America—“The last thing she wants to do is get on another plane. Besides”, his mother went on, “She wants to see her friends and relatives. You understand.” She continued, “I’m making cappelletti, your cousins are coming. Don’t you want to see your cousins?” He was about to say he was looking forward to the cappelletti, which was true, but he did enjoy his cousins. They made him feel sane by comparison.

“Okay, Mom it sounds like a plan.”

“You understand don’t you? We can’t wait to see you.”

“Hey, Mom? Guess what?”

“How can I guess—I know you like a book, but I need to see your face, or I’d just be guessing.”

“You’re a trip, Mom. Listen, I was offered this residency in Italy—the whole deal, money, studio, apartment.”

“That’s wonderful. When would you be going?”

He heard the mixture of pride and disappointment. He would be going away again and he wasn’t even home.

“I’m not sure just yet, but Mom, I was going to be out here for the year anyway.” Her next comment took him by surprise.

“What about Flora? Is she going with you?”

“Well, you’re the first to hear. I only found out ten minutes ago. We’ll talk in the morning.”

“Isn’t she there?”

“No it’s...we both had a bunch of stuff to do.”

“Everything all right?”

“Oh yeah, everything’s fine. We had stuff to do, you know, mail, calls...I told you we had a great time.”

“Well you should talk to her and let her know. You hear me?”

“Yeah, thanks, Ma. Call you in a day or so.”

“Call your sister.”

“I will, I will. Love you, Mom. Bye.”

He called the Sons of Dante first thing in the morning and spoke with a Ms. Cenci, whose outer borough nasality jarred with her noble name. She assured him she was the one to speak with; no one else was there.

They had all but given up hope hearing from him. They sent their letter to his New York address and had no idea he had been in Mexico. She was happy to speak with him and hear that he was interested. “All that’s left is Venice”, she said with a note of apology in her voice. It seems that other fellows, quicker to respond, had claimed the Rome, Florence and Siena locations. “Too bad about Siena”, Ms Cenci said, “it woulda been a good match with yer name and all” she laughed.

It was the most unlikely conversation to have with someone responsible for giving away thousands of dollars, and Ray had a momentary lapse of faith. Ms. Cenci had many facts and details at her fingertips. She sounded fully capable of booking tickets and sending him the material he would need for his residency. So what if she sounded like Julie Ramona, the trashy girl down the block who gave hand jobs to all the guys in the neighborhood?

Spouses were allowed to stay with the fellows. “Spouses covers a lotta ground, you can bring ya girlfriend or ya boyfriend,” she chuckled coarsely, “we don’t discriminate. We’re very politically correct, natch, we’re Italian. And we know you guys are artists.” Ray could not believe what he was hearing, but he liked her, this gum chewing Cenci with the anti-public-radio voice. She was encouraged by what she correctly took to be Ray’s affectionate amusement and let it rip in double-barreled Queens. “Yeah, ya can take ya girlfriend but ya haf to pay for er. Ya don’t get any more money but the apartments are nice and big enough—ya know what they say, two can live as cheaply as one—but it’s upta you. I’ve nevah seen em

myself. Oh, Ms. Lowenstein, the director, just came in,” she said in a lowered voice, lemme give er to ya”.

Ms. Lowenstein changed the reel. She spoke in a cultivated, silky voice and yet maintained a professional distance that was comforting rather than chilly. Ray swooned inwardly at the sound of the Italian phrases that she sprinkled casually throughout her delivery. Ms Lowenstein was apparently reading from Ms Cenci’s quickly scribbled notes. “Oh, I see you were in Mexico or was it New Mexico?” Ray, acculturated to Cenci’s rhetoric, expected something like “Or wherever the hell you were,” but Lowenstein went on, brimming with understanding, “I see, that’s why it took so long to reach you.”

The residency was scheduled to begin in January and last six months, with an option to extend one’s stay for another six. She apologized for getting the news to him so late, as if it were her fault, and promised to do anything she could to facilitate his stay.

She said something in Italian that sounded heartbreakingly beautiful to Ray and he answered “Sì, of course”, not having a clue. Ms Lowenstein said “Really? in a tone that conveyed puzzlement, and Ray quickly recovered, saying, “just kidding”. He asked how she came to speak Italian so well, as if he would know. “It’s Mrs. Lowenstein, my maiden name is Bellanca, Bianca Bellanca. I was born in Rome.” “Beautiful white thigh” he thought, “I wonder.”

He called Flora and told her he had some great news and would walk on down to her house. “Hurry. Take the car, I miss you,” she said, excitedly. She received him as if he had been gone for a year. She was hot to “haul his ashes”; she used his own indelicate expression, which startled him—he was miles away, in Venice in particular, and preoccupied with how he was going to break the news to her.

“I am so looking forward to spending the winter with you. It will be as Mexico—without the swimming and not as hot.”

“Your place is comfy compared to mine—it’s not exactly toasty up on the hill...anyway, the studio’s warmer...that’s good...it’s awful trying to paint when you’re cold.”

“It will be great, Ray. Look how beautiful the snow is, like whipped cream.”

“Anywhere would be great. Anywhere with you would be great. “How does Italy sound?”

“When? Next summer? That could be wonderful.”

“No.” He laughed nervously. “More like next month.”

Flora’s smile faded, uncertainty flittered in her eyes. It seemed as if she had watched her guardian angel go bad.

“What do you mean next month? We only returned yesterday?”

“The letter...the letter from the lawyers...it wasn’t Dianne. It was an offer for a residency, in Venice, six months to a year. It’s a great opportunity, Flora.”

“It is a grand opportunity, for you—but the timing, Christmas is coming...it is such short notice.”

“We made the decision to go to Mexico pretty quick...and we hardly knew each other then.”

“That is true. But I was so looking forward to being here with you, safe on the mesa...or the valley.”

Her voice became fainter as disappointment seeped in.

“Spouses are welcome—it was the first thing I asked,” he lied.

“And what did you tell them?”

“I said I was interested—told them I had to discuss it with you,” he lied, again.

“Well, we should consider it for a while before we discuss it,” she said rather formally, “until I get a better sense of how I feel about going away again...so soon.”

“But...don’t you want to know more about Venice? And what it will be like there? And what the program is?”

“That is not the issue, Ray”, she was smiling again. “As you yourself said, we can be happy anywhere together. I am not sure how I feel about leaving again.”

“It’ll be great! Venice is so romantic—the canals, no cars, sensational art.” He took her in his arms and began to waltz her around the room foolishly singing: “When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s amore.” He continued to mangle the song, “When the stars seem to shine like you’ve had too much wine you’re in love.”

“Come on, Ray, be serious with me. You are being silly.”

“When you walk in a dream, but you know you’re not dreaming, signore...”

“Ray, mi corazón, I know this could be a wonderful thing but, you know, I think Tio is quite sick. It worries me. I went to visit him yesterday, he did not get out of bed.”

“Jesus, that’s awful. What’s wrong?”

“He said he was dizzy and short of breath and that he feels very weak. He lit our stoves yesterday and then he went home to bed. I think there are things he is not telling me.”

“Like what?”

“Such as he has been feeling this way for a while now. He did go to the clinic to see Flavia. She thinks it is his heart, but he made no mention of it to me.”

“Well let’s take him into Santa Fe and get him checked out.”

“The appointment is already made.”

It was Tio’s heart. That dumb muscle that pumps had been beaten down by bad diet and hard work. Starved of romance, it had grown sluggish and was ready to quit. The rest of Tio’s circulatory system, burdened with its load of grease and fat, was in rough shape as well.

For Flora and Ray there were less mechanical matters of the heart, in a realm where problems are difficult to identify and treatments more elusive. In a desire to understand the eternal pain of our mortality, we have blamed the heart. We have coined an extensive inventory of expressions to describe the conditions and qualities of our feelings, as if naming held the magic of curing: heart-break, heart-sick, heart-rending, heart-attack, heart-less, light-hearted, faint of heart, strong of heart, you gotta have heart, big heart, heart-throb, heart-beat, heart and soul, heart-burn, heart failure, heart-strings, heartland, heart to heart, heart-felt. Manufacturers, ever alert to the coinage of emotion, have given us Havahart mousetraps, allowing the faint-of-heart to kill gently.

Tio moved into Flora's house so that she could better care for him. His own, a ramshackle trailer lacking the simple dignity of a proper foundation, was depressing enough to hamper recovery from a common cold. Flora was stoic, even cheerful, in dealing with this turn of events. "He is my uncle and his kindness has helped me become who I am. This is the least I can do." Those days when Tio seemed stronger and Flora was less worried, she spent the night with Ray on the mesa. Still, she was preoccupied with her duties as a niece and found it difficult to relax—she would call Tio a couple of times in the course of the evening, and his medical issues shadowed their conversation. She bolted early one morning, and Ray, who dropped into a self-absorbed funk, was alarmed to discover he had spent a full hour staring into the half-full coffee cup she left. His funk turned to an infantile resentment as he felt increasingly short-changed. He switched the load from Flora to Tio and back again. Fortunately, he was sobered by an occasional whiff of his own narcissism, which prevented him from behaving too badly but was ineffective in altering his feeling he was being wronged.

Ray kept it secret that he had made up his mind to go to Italy regardless of events. He looked upon this as keeping his own counsel, rather than self-serving—he didn't

want to bother her with it, she had enough to deal with. He justified his decision to go without her, if he must, by its importance to his career. But, when he looked at it in terms which accorded heart the apex, he realized how shallow an excuse this was. Then he would protest that residence in his mythic homeland was essential for the growth of his work, and consequently, the growth of self. What good would he be if he was disgruntled and unfulfilled? He wasn't running away from Flora, he was moving forward.... This was where he stumbled—toward what he hadn't a clue. But it was good, it had to be good. The bullshit was under his nose, and his brain made him believe it was roses.

He and Flora avoided talking about the issue. There was magical thinking involved, as if they hoped the “Italy trip” was a fiction that would go away on its own. The platitudes they exchanged, that “things would work themselves out,” posed as faith in the power of love. But these were cover-ups. Flora saw Ray's gathering fear and it sent her scurrying for cover. It made her complicit in tangling these nervous strands into a tight ball.

Their Christmas plans were the first to collapse. Flora could not leave Tio. He had a touch of pneumonia in addition to his heart and circulatory problems, and it was shocking how frail this rugged man had become. The compromise was that they would celebrate Christmas Eve together at Flora's and Ray would depart at first light for New York. This was disappointing to them, but it had its flip side. Each of them, in private conversations with their respective best friends, admitted to feeling relieved as well. And for a similar reason: that perhaps the introduction to his family was premature. Ray had introduced only two women to his family, and he had married both of them.

The next few weeks continued, cold and snowy. The wind whipped across the mesa tops and gouged through the canyons and valleys. The stunted piñóns stooped to its constant force like old men who had toiled too long in the fields. The sky, pregnant with bad weather,

lay close and heavy over the land. It squeezed the space until it seemed there was nowhere to breathe, no room for the eye to escape or the soul to wander. And, no sooner did one accept this endless gray than a bayonet-sharp light would slash over the desert. It cleansed the dross and dun of the land as though by alchemy. The vistas opened and the integrity of each tree and house and man was carved in sharp outline against the snow. A new terror took over, more subtle, barely perceptible, slower acting. It was a terror we mistakenly thought we could manage, we could live with, merely a restless need to belong. We can fix it, we say. It was only the awful singleness of things, each separate from the space it occupied, each a floating marker of the distance from here to there. This was “*déjà vu* all over again” as Yogi Berra had said, so eloquently, another Bruegel painting where the seasons of the indifferent earth went on and on and the great cogwheel turned and we became floating markers of the great distance from here to there.

When Ray told her that he wanted her to come, but he was going either way, Flora said, “I expected that, regretfully, I expected that.” She was not accusatory, but the resignation and disappointment in her voice dug deep. “I’m sorry, I’ll make it up to you somehow,” was the best Ray could muster. He gave her an open-ended ticket in hopes that she would come if Tio’s health improved. He put the ticket on the table, which Flora acknowledged with a sidelong glance and the barest lift of her chin.

There was a tenderness and desperation to their lovemaking that night, as if it would be the memory they would live with for the rest of their lives. How different it was from their first night together, which, filled with promise, had eradicated the memory of those lovers who’d come before.

Afterward, Flora propped her head on her hand and looked at him lying beside her. The half-light of the moon

reflected off the snow and washed the room in a soporific blue and, when she spoke, her voice came from the enchanting dullness that comes after love.

“We will see,” Flora said, sounding exhausted, rather than mellow.

“We’ll see what? Bring me up to speed, darlin’.”

“Oh, I was thinking, perhaps Tio will improve and I can come. It seems unlikely. You are determined to go?”

“It won’t be that long. Besides, think how wonderful it will be when I get back.”

“There are no promises, Ray. I love you, but I cannot make any promises.”

“I can promise—I can promise I’ll miss you, and that...”

“That is all very well, Ray and I am sure I will miss you too, but six months is a long time, and as you like to say, “It’s a crap shoot.” For someone who likes to gamble you can be very foolish in reading the odds.”

“Are you saying you don’t think you can wait for us?”

“I am saying that making promises now is no guarantee for how you, or I, will feel in June.”

“So, we just lead our lives and hope for the best? That’s not very reassuring.”

“What do you want me to say? It is all right for you to go away from me? Have a good time? I will be waiting dutifully for you and thinking of you every single minute? Did you ever think that it is you who is going, and it is I who might need reassurance? Ray, sometimes you can be blind.”

Tio complained of fatigue and chest pains, which visited him repeatedly and without warning at any hour. His malaise grew severe. He was unable to distinguish between actual and imagined pain, and to Flora this suggested a general blurring of the real and imaginary and caused her to fret that he was “losing his grip”. He asked little of her; even when he was in good health his disposition

was such that he rarely thought to ask for anything, as if his needs were unworthy and because Flora anticipated and ministered his needs before they arose.

Tio did have one request, that he be taken to El Santuario de Chimayo, where he hoped his faith would generate a miraculous cure. Although he attended mass only occasionally, he prayed with regularity, so much so that he'd been nick-named "Praying Tio" by the Anglos on a construction crew he worked with some years back. They were amused and impressed by his habit of kneeling in the dirt, his workman's lunch box before him, reciting a short prayer before eating. Once, when he was queried about his faith, he admitted that he asked a lot of God so that he didn't need to ask much of people. He said he stood as good a chance of having his wishes met by God as he did from the poor folks around him. His was a simple faith, engineered from common sense and an uncommon sense of humor about the way things are.

The Santuario was a homely adobe structure, set amid a grove of out-sized piñon, in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Twin bell towers flanked the entrance, but the Northern-styled peaked roof, and the wood facing above the doors, created the impression of a converted barn rather than a soaring edifice of worship.

The mytho-poetic origins of the Santuario were more resplendent than the view of the church from outside. The variations were mostly differences in embellishments to the main story, such as you would expect in a tale which had been passed down orally from the early teens of the nineteenth century. Tio preferred the version in which the central character had been a farmer—the other option, that it had been a priest, he found unlikely. What, he rightly asked, would a priest be doing wandering around the hills? The farmer, Don Bernardo Abeyta, had been a member of the Penitentes, a secretive, religious brotherhood, which took its faith and the suffering of Christ's passion, seriously. In Tio's estimation this had been another reason to believe the story—"men of the brotherhood don't lie," he said,

while recounting the history. He obliquely mentioned that the Tewa Indians, long before the coming of the Spanish, had visited this area in search of the curative hot springs and thermal mud holes that dotted the region. Surprisingly this seemed not to matter much to Tio, who, despite his appreciation for practicality and common sense, weighed a miracle heavier when balanced against facts.

Don Bernardo had been plowing his fields, working late into the sooty evening, when he saw a burst of light shoot up from the ground. Its incandescence was intense and so pure “that it became the voice of the Savior himself and told Don Bernardo to dig deeply in the earth in the spot beneath his plow.” He dug into the earth with his hands and found a crucifix.

He knew that something miraculous had occurred, and he went that same evening to the nearby town of Santa Cruz to find Father Sebastian, who was at that very moment speaking before his congregation. The padre interrupted his service and led his flock to the site where they saw the crucifix and, in awe, fell to their knees in veneration. The priest and worshipers carried the cross back to the church in Santa Cruz where they placed it on the altar.

The legend describes how, the next morning, the cross was missing only to turn up in its original hole in the ground. As with the Christ of the Blisters in Mérida, which had suffered and survived numerous fires, for the Crucifix of Esquipulas, as it came to be known, once was not enough. The cross was carried three times to Father Sebastian’s church in Santa Cruz, and three times it mysteriously returned to the hole where it had been unearthed. It seems that miracles must pass the same rigorous test of repeatability as scientific facts before they are accepted as true. The parishioners finally got the message and built a small chapel over the original spot where the cross had been found, and this was the beginning of the Santuario.

After a number of years of miraculous healing, the Santuario became a pilgrimage destination (sometimes

referred to as the Lourdes of the Americas) and was expanded to accommodate the crowds of the faithful. It seemed as if dirt from “El Posito,” the original hole, was more effective than the crucifix in curing ills. Consequently, most visitors spent only a scant minute or two in the main body of the church before moving on to the side room of the Sacristy, to attend to the main business.

It looked like snow, and there was a dismal chill in the air the day Flora and Ray took Tio to the Santuario. The parking lot was nearly empty and the seasonal taco stand that operated out of a trailer was closed up. The restaurant was open, as was the gift shop, and they were readying for the spike in attendance that would arrive during the week around Christmas.

Inside the main church the atmosphere was cheering, and the trio lingered longer than most to admire the joyfully painted and carved altar. The many bultos and reredos, the folk carvings and paintings of Saints and things Holy, were cheerful despite the painted blood and sculpted thorns. Even the most recalcitrant skeptic might be tempted to swoon. Tio appeared to brighten immediately and stood before the altar with his hat in his hands, his head bowed slightly in reverence, his posture erect, his body strong as he shed the unwanted skin of his depression.

The low ceilings of the side room shifted one’s attention downward to the here and now, away from the celestial thoughts induced by the airier main chapel. If a visitor was ignorant of the magic of the place, the hundreds of crutches, canes, leg braces, hearing aids and glasses which lined the lower walls would remind him. Tio, clutching a tin milagro in the shape of a human heart, wandered the length of the room as if in a trance. He seemed befuddled and lost as his eyes scanned the wall in front of where he stood; Flora walked up to him and handed him a pushpin. He pinned the embodied prayer to the wall, where it was distinguished from the others by the blue satin ribbon Flora had thoughtfully attached to it. There were tin eyes, legs, hands, arms, feet, swaddled babies, torsos and breasts—

countless, plaintive hopes, pinned like butterflies to the upper wall; and the evidence of their answers, the discarded aids of human frailty, lying below.

Flora took a palm-sized silver case from her pocket, “for the dirt” she said, as she laid it in Tio’s beefy hand. His eyes welled as he received it, kissed her and made the sign of the cross in thanks. Ray waited behind as she and Tio moved to the apse where a neat, circular pit was dug into the rammed earth floor. Niece and uncle knelt, scooped some dirt into the box and prayed.

Ray was happily occupied looking at the ex-votos interspersed with the tin milagros; he was soon lost to their charm and these expressions of thanks, for prayers that had been answered, were more real to him than the crutches and canes. One ex-voto, composed of three equal sections, caught his attention. It was larger than many, and clumsy printing covered the bottom half. It seemed that the patron was intent on telling his story very specifically. The little painting was beautiful and so powerfully recounted the event that the barrage of words were wholly unnecessary. As with many ex-votos the theme was a border crossing, but this had a twist that had nothing to do with the usual near-drowning or escape from la migra, the border police.

Although the events took place in the velvet black of night, the artist had breathed an otherworldly radiance into the picture. The two end panels showed the same fat river winding in serpentine curves, painted an unreal lapis blue, with milky green currents suggesting its great power. Upon the river was a single man in a pea-pod boat, pulling on the oars to reach a far shore of golden hills. On the near bank stood a woman who waved goodbye with a flag-sized handkerchief. In the center panel, Juan Gomez, whose story it was, knelt on a piece of ground as gold as the hills. He was tiny and looked upward to a vast sky where an aura of multi-colored light hovered around an image of the Virgin. In the last panel, he was back in the boat, on the same river, only now he rowed his boat back to the shore from which he started.

Ray was mesmerized. He silently plodded through the text that was filled with blotches and crossed out words in unschooled Spanish, wondering what the artist thought about mucking up his painting. The words told what he already knew; that the man had gone across the border to seek his fortune and, after spending months as a migrant worker, realized his folly and returned across the Rio Grande to the woman he loved and had left behind. Ray was unaware that Flora had been standing behind him for some time. "I guess he saw the light," was all she said.

Tio's spirits lifted after his visit to the Santuario, but his body did not follow suit. Despite the protests of Flora's and Ray, who firmly believed the doctors would save him, Tio knew there was little they could do to help. He greeted each day and each new turn of pain with a placid embrace peculiar to those who know the end is near.

Flora and Ray spent the last few days before Christmas attempting to cheer each other up. A trip to Santa Fe temporarily bolstered their mood. The lighting of the farolitos is a tradition as dear to the people of Santa Fe, as the tree in Rockefeller Center is to New Yorkers. The candles, set inside brown paper bags weighted with sand, are placed atop walls and gateposts throughout the city. Their glow casts a simple charm over the streets and Plaza. The artful confection of the town mesmerized Flora and Ray, who felt like bumpkins stepping out from their rural isolation. That afternoon was the last time they made love before Ray left for New York.

They decided, with the strongest urging from Flora, that it was ridiculous for him to return to New Mexico for only a few days before leaving for Italy. He would have to return to New York for his flight in any event, and it would be far too painful to say goodbye twice.

Christmas Eve, at Flora's house, felt more like doomsday than a celebration. Their few moments of genuine cheer were dampened by the sight of Tio, sagged in his chair. The others had a great time. Flavia was there, and the foreman from Flora's construction business who,

along with his wife, were old friends of her family. They were a charming, dignified older couple that seemed to genuinely enjoy Russell and Jason, who had driven up from Santa Fe. Jason's new wife had gone east to visit with her "fucking Yankee family"; and Jason, although he was a very lapsed Jew, refused to celebrate Christmas anywhere but in New Mexico. She left, pissed at him for this lame excuse, and Jason anesthetized his grumbling with alarming rapidity and an equally alarming volume of alcohol. Russell was still "on the outs" with his latest and flirted charmingly with Flavia until he, too, fell into a near-coma. The dinner party broke up about eleven.

On Christmas morning they were on the far side of Santa Fe before the sun rose meekly, tangled in tatters of the scudding clouds. Flora drove and looked straight ahead; Ray sat quietly, bathed in the hot blast from the heater, his eyes closed, dreaming of Mexico. He didn't notice that Flora had put on her sunglasses with the first weak light, nor did he notice the flaming car wedged into the ditch and the fire truck alongside the highway—Flora didn't call it to his attention.

At the airport, Flora refused to go into the waiting room and they sat for a while in the car. They had lived this parting, and the accompanying discussion, many times over the past weeks; finally, the words had lost their ability to touch, and retained only a bluntness sufficient to convey facts. Yet, they were both tearful; the memory of the millions of words spoken between them was too powerful to allow a comforting slip into dullness and forgetting.

"You should go inside and have a coffee and read your newspaper."

"Let me hold you before I go."

"Perhaps I will meet your mother and sister someday. Give them my regrets and my warmest regards."

"I'll call you when I get there."

"No, please! It will be too painful. I know I will miss you terribly. And please do not call me from Venice."

"Flora, why not?"

“Ray, you can be very dense for an intelligent man. We have had this discussion a hundred times. You simply don’t believe I mean what I say.”

“Can I write you at least? Will you write me? You have to tell me if Tio takes a turn for the worse—at least that.” His voice was jacked with panic.

“I think it would be best to wait a month or so—that way we will have some time to settle into our new lives.”

He was not good at goodbyes; but Flora, having had far fewer of this kind to endure, was infinitely less capable, and considerably tougher. He kissed her, grabbed his pack, turned quickly to avoid showing his tears and headed for the entrance. She called to him—“Ray, send me one e-mail. Tell me you have arrived safely. In the meantime, if anything happens to Tio, I will let you know. Suerte, mi amor.”

Ray sat in the plane, numb and in total disbelief of what he had just done. He watched listlessly as the stewardess went through her routine. He was unable to muster the dirty-minded smile that blowing into the hoses of the life vest usually elicited in him. Ray stopped listening when the stewardess got to the oxygen mask demonstration. He had already decided not to use it, preferring the gentle death of thin air to that of violent impact. Flora’s parting words—*suerte mi amor*—looped through his mind, a soundtrack for pictures of fluffy pink sheep jumping a rail fence. But sleep would not come, and Ray wondered whether it would ever come again. He wondered whether he was destined to remain awake in the endless gloom of his very own winter morning. He wondered if this was a punishment, dealt to him by mightily pissed off forces, for a stupidity so enormous as to be incalculable in human terms.

There is no world harder to escape from than one we have made for ourselves. The roads, mountains and valleys, the cities of that land, its shady spots and strands of beach have been hand-drawn, by need—and Ray drew very well. He remained in a funk through the Christmas holiday.

He thought he hid it well, but his sister noticed and asked him straight away what was up. He gave her an honest broad brush of the situation—she was smart enough to fill in the details. She was sympathetic to Ray, she always was, and then told him he was an asshole. “Don’t screw this one up,” was her advice.

He would never know if he had been able to hide his mood from his mother—not a chance she would tell him. He suspected she knew, by virtue of her mother powers. There was also some cloaked advice which indicated she had an understanding of the gravity of the situation.

“Six months is a long time. People change. You just don’t know, Ray...anything can happen. Just enjoy Venice. You’ve wanted something like this, haven’t you?”

He spent a night with Serge before he left. There was comfort in being with someone perhaps as misguided as he was, and there was no one more capable of seizing an opportunity from a cradle of thorns. They went to the Frick to see some favorite paintings. The galleries were slow during Christmas and besides, neither of the men was up for the schmoozing that would most likely ensue if they bumped into someone they knew. They had dinner at a new Italian restaurant Serge had heard of. Afterward they headed for Tramps to hear Zydeco legend Boozo Chavez, and proceeded to get totally and unashamedly smashed. All Ray could recall of Serge’s advice, imparted over this twenty-four hours, was, “Play it out man, you’ll have a great time. Maybe you’ll meet some gorgeous, very hairy Italian girl. Seriously, Ray, you’re taking a chance, but I’ll bet she’ll be there when you get back. I’d bet even money on it.” That was not reassuring to him.

Ray boarded the plane on New Year’s Eve.

XVII

One's hopes and wishes to return to one's homeland and origin—they are just as moths trying to reach the light. And the man who is looking forward with joyful curiosity to the new years—and even if the time he is longing for ever comes, it will always seem to him too late—he does not notice that his longing carries within it the germ of his own death.

Notebooks, Leonardo
da Vinci

He arrived in Venice in early morning and rode the vaporetto in from the airport. The boat took longer than the bus, but he was familiar with Venice and knew it would deposit him closer to his apartment near the San Tomas stop. There was no rush, and he had already begun to think of ways to make the time pass more quickly. Although the cabin was nearly empty, he stood on deck in the raw air. The steel rail was too icy to hold, and instead he braced himself by leaning back against the pilothouse. There was little to see; the cold mist that clung to the canals enveloped the view. Occasionally, other boats pierced the mist, which

would part as a curtain and then close abruptly, swallowing the boat and its sound. Each time this happened, a chill began at the top of his head, traveled his spine and, like a record stuck in a groove, wrapped around his heart. New York, New Mexico, his loved ones who gave those places a semblance of home, all were enshrouded. He glanced inside the pilothouse at the captain, who stared ahead into the fog, oblivious to Ray's presence. He moved away to sit alone at the stern, and looked out over the wake.

He disembarked at San Tomas and, instead of going straight to his apartment, stopped at the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. Two hours in the homeland, he needed a shot of redemption; and, like any junkie, he knew where to find it. Inside the church hung the majestic Titian painting of the Assumption of the Virgin into heaven. The painting dominated the church, its energy barely contained by its architectural frame.

Ray tucked his bags under a pew and wandered down the center aisle to the main altar. Save for an old woman dressed in black, the church was empty. Camouflaged by the darkness, Ray was made aware of her presence by the clack of beads against a wooden pew, the only sound other than his own footsteps. The old woman kneeled, her head bent, as she fingered her rosary of shiny, jet-black beads. She was lost in her own world, far away from Venice.

Only half-kidding, he stood before the painting with his arms outstretched, palms up, head tilted back, eyes cast upwards into the radiance of an Indian summer, brighter than daylight, surely brighter than the damp, gray of Venice from which he had just escaped. "Sock it to me, Big Mama," he said to himself. He let the painting soak in through his eyes and the pores of his skin as if it were manna and he a leper waiting for a cure, as if he were Ray waiting for an answer to a question he had forgotten. He saw himself, as the Mary of the painting might have seen him, from high above, with a benevolent gaze, and laughed in embarrassment at the comedy of his pose.

This stirred the old woman from her prayer and the stiff pew creaked as she shifted her dark bulk. Ray, momentarily self-conscious, dropped his arms to his side. He looked up at the Virgin, who stood on a substantial platform of clouds, supported by an assortment of putti. She looked a bit uncomfortable, as if she were having trouble understanding how her imminent departure and her surge heavenward could be happening at the same time. She wasn't looking at Ray after all, she wasn't looking at the Apostles crowded below her, gesticulating like a bunch of Italian soccer fans; no, her face was turned toward the stern face of God the father, floating above, in a heaven that seemed remote to her. This might be the source of the concern that Ray sees in her plump, peasant face, a concern mixed with regret and the memory of desire. A red robe swirls in labial folds around her body. The robe, cinched at her sturdy waist, caressed her ample hips. The Virgin's dark green mantle flapped around her as if it had a life of its own. The hem of her robe had blown up, to reveal her bare feet, poised for lift-off. No wonder there was a trace of surprise on her face. She had barely prepared for departure and here she was, thrust upwards under her own power, in a conflagration of golden yellows.

Now Ray was confused—this was supposed to be a religious painting, lots of piety, humility, spiritual transcendence—but, he is thinking about skin, and Mary's earthy body beneath her dress. "This is not my fault" he said to himself, "Ecstasy is ecstasy, blame it on Titian." He moved to sit silently in a front row pew.

"What a killer painting...it makes everything else seem frivolous—it's sexy and still it's transcendent, there's enough conviction in it for a century of modern painters. It's amazing how he painted the unseeable. No TV to interfere with the imagination, just clouds to get in the way—it was TV with advertisements for the church and beauty. It must have been great to live in a time when beauty wasn't a dirty word, when we trusted it, when some asshole critic wasn't looking for a more significant agenda.

So many things I would have done, but clouds got in my way. How the fuck am I gonna paint surrounded by this stuff—it dwarfs everything. How can I paint here without Flora? Bingo, the lights are on, Siena. You are fucking brilliant. It's love's illusion I recall, Joni said. I really don't know love at all. That song has been stuck in my head for days. Something tells me I made a mistake. I feel like going home.

Jeez, I've got to get a grip, I haven't even seen the apartment and the studio—I've got to give it a chance. How could I be so wrong? Blind is the word, Siena—stone fucking blind—what do you expect, you expect love to come in Braille?”

The streets were nearly as empty as the church. The sestiere of San Polo was relatively quiet, even in summer. Occasional stragglers might appear, but most Venetians, along with the droves of tourists from San Marcos, were snug at home until June. It wasn't raining; still, the air was saturated with beads of moisture. It rolled steadily down the stone walls and slicked the pavement. By the time Ray arrived at his apartment, his hair and clothes were soaked.

The apartment was tucked into a blind alley, entered through an iron gate. The alley squeezed between two buildings and opened into a tiny courtyard—the second floor of one of them served as a roof for the passageway. The Sons of Dante had sent Ray an inventory of keys accompanied by a booklet of instructions for their use and directions to the apartment. His tolerance for frustration, low on a good day, had been reduced to zero from lack of sleep and, by now, the glaring stupidity of his decision to come without Flora. It took Ray five minutes to figure out the multiple locks. It was like cracking a safe. When he finally entered the apartment, he was sweating and swearing eloquently.

The unassuming exterior of the house gave no clue to the elegant simplicity of the apartment. Tiled throughout with white marble, the floors sparkled in welcome. The open floor plan and white walls gave it a sense of

spaciousness that masked its modest size. Floor-to-ceiling rolling doors could be used to divide the space into conventional rooms. The modern kitchen was well equipped and thoughtfully provisioned with olive oil, coffee, a sturdy round of Tuscan bread and an enormous chunk of parmesan. The two pairs of stivali di gomma in the foyer—the clunky gumboots that were standard issue in the high-water season—were a goofy reminder that he was here alone.

The Sons of Dante had scheduled an evening of cocktails and dinner for the fellows to meet each other. He had spent his first week in Venice without company and was looking forward to the event. He had not yet made the quiet transition from alone to lonely. The reception was held in a gorgeous, coffered-ceiling room in an equally gorgeous sixteenth-century palazzo. Ray had peered into many such rooms from the decks of the vaporetta and was thrilled to be inside one. Marble, mosaic, velvet, silk and carved wood combined to create a Venetian fantasy, a peculiar blend of luxury and piety. Heroically scaled paintings, darkened by age, were hung wherever they would fit. Their subject matter was indecipherable, but their varnished gloom added a note of seriousness to the room.

He met the host of the Venetian program who, after shaking his hand and reciting a prescribed greeting, seemed eager to pawn him off. He was introduced to a woman, renowned for her work in early music and a virtuoso on the viola da gamba. She was shaped like her instrument, but considerably larger, and wore glasses so thick that her head seemed to pitch forward under their weight. She had developed a nervous tick in order to deal with her glasses, which were in constant danger of falling off—she scrunched up her nose and jabbed at the glasses with her thumb, which in turn caused her to bare her teeth and furrow her brow. Ray wondered how she managed to play the gamba, which, as far as he knew, required two hands. She and Ray fell into a conversation about contemporary photography, which she knew a great deal about, before passing to a

sketchy exchange of personal data. When Ray asked if she was here with anyone, she nodded and said, “My partner is over there. The big gal in the print dress.” The gamba player, whose name was Charlotta, looked petite next to this Mack truck of a gal. Regardless of how intensely involved she was talking with Ray, he noticed that she kept an eye on her partner while managing to avoid her pointed looks, which fell squarely on Ray. When you added the handicap of her glasses to the mix, it was an impressive display of multi-tasking. Their conversation moved fluidly over a range of topics from the gamba (which is how she referred to the instrument that she also called her ax) to the magic of Sieneese painting, from risotto recipes to dog training.

They were deep into a conversation regarding the homoerotic appeal of Mapplethorpe’s photos—according to Charlotta, the formal beauty of the photographs gave straight men permission to look and enjoy without shame—when her “partner” descended. Their conversation died, as did Charlotta’s animation. She was flustered and uttered, “I’m sorry”, a number of times, to no one in particular, before following her partner to the adjoining room. Ray watched them through the doorway. Charlotta appeared to be getting a scolding as she stood in a contrite slump, frantically poking at her glasses. “So much for that daughter of Dante,” Ray said to himself, with a shrug, “Too bad, she seemed like good company.”

His evening comprised brief encounters with people who could only be described as socially challenged. Most of them, with the exception of a geriatric composer of operas, who had the misfortune of being hard of hearing, and a poetess, whose drinking problem was less uncertain than her age, were coupled up. As such, they formed their circles of two, indiscriminately closing out threats and redemption from the outside world. Until one travels alone this phenomenon is invisible. Seeking out the company of a fellow American in a foreign land, if only to speak the

mother tongue or exchange the latest baseball standings, can be a complex social excursion.

Anna, a young art historian, was in Venice to study the works of Carpaccio. She was lively and intelligent and had a full-figured grace that Ray found attractive. She was also flirtatious and did wonderful things with her hands when she spoke. Ray was fascinated. It was as if he were watching the intricacies of the Hula, which relies as much on the hands as the hips. It was a manual equivalent of Flora's smile. In truth, Carpaccio was one of Ray's favorite painters, which he was quick to tell her. He had visited the Scuola San Giorgio countless times, enthralled with Carpaccio's mix of exacting observation and fantasy. Art historians labored in the shadows, working an idiosyncratic twist to an arcane story with a potential worldwide audience of ten. They haunted basements, dusty archives and remote repositories of obscure collections. A stray morsel of information from sixteenth-century tax records has the power to make them salivate at the possibility of a new interpretation.

So, when Anna discovered another human being who knew the subject to which she had dedicated the last five years of her life and, moreover, someone with whom she could discuss the finer points of her vision, she was overjoyed. Her hands, which earlier had described beautiful things in the air, more often touched Ray in emphasis, or pulled him into corroboration with her point of view. Ray was enjoying himself, flirting without effort; genuinely flirting, with no goal other than the enjoyment of the flirting is one of life's pleasures. If it's not as good as sex, it is certainly far less complicated.

Unfortunately, Anna's architect husband did not see it that way. Ray and Anna were unaware that he had moved from a far corner of the room and was lurking at the fringes of their conversation. Ray brushed a crumb of cheese from Anna's cheek and she made a joke about finding it difficult to take someone seriously when they had food on their face. She underlined her words with a light

push on his chest and, as she removed her hand to initiate another expressive gesture, her husband appeared, grabbed her wrist and snarled, “Let’s go, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

He might as well have put his hand over her mouth. At first, Anna was speechless. She wrested her hand free as her coloring rose to steamy pink. The few words of dismissal she choked out dripped with rage. Ray could see that all was not so good on the home front and that her hubby would soon pay a large price for his attempt at control. She tried to resume her conversation with Ray but was agitated to distraction. “I’m not going to apologize for my husband’s stupid behavior. I’m only sorry that it put a damper on things. I was having such a good time, and now I’m...the last thing I want to do is deal with his insecurity. I wish he hadn’t come. I have your number on the list they gave us. I’ll call you tomorrow, because I’d love to look at the paintings with you.”

She gave Ray a goodbye pat on the arm, shook his hand and walked over to join her husband. Ray was now thoroughly confused—two spouses had flipped out over matters that were, in his mind, innocent to the core. He had little desire to visit San Giorgio with Anna and certainly did not want to be used as a poker chip in whatever hand she was dealing her husband. He decided he was safer spending his time alone in the studio. His interest in the human comedy was waning fast, particularly as it seemed to be increasingly devolving into tragedy.

The director of the program delivered a florid welcome in refined, but heavily accented English, after which a strange thing happened, one that was definitely not on the program. In a clatter of rings and bracelets, the drunken poetess commandeered the baroque music stand that substituted for a podium. She gripped the sides of the stand to check her swaying and fixed the crowd silent with a glare from one coal-black eye. Her left eye was milky blue and fluttered aimlessly about the room like an escaped

finch. When she achieved a modicum of stability she addressed the guests.

She introduced herself as “Ferret”; she explained how she had chosen this name after having a dream in which her father “ravished” and then disowned her. Her father was about to “ravish” her again when a ferret, “whose white fur cleansed the pestilence of rats from my soul”, arrived and chased her father away. The audience was aghast. She followed this anecdote with considerable blather about how our given names, imposed on us by our parents, manifest their aspirations and concerns, rather than ours. Stating the obvious (“as infants we were not consulted”), she jumped to a discourse on astrology, the importance of a diet excluding pasta, and a confused rant which regarded Venice as “the floating citadel of incest.”

Having successfully alienated the entire audience hardly fazed her, and she launched into a deranged recitation of a poem she had composed that morning. It was incomprehensible, made more so by verses which alternated English and Italian. It seemed filled with rage, an idea suggested by the histrionics of her presentation, and animal imagery, which she acted out. Ray was impressed that she had committed the work to memory in so short a time, but was more impressed by what was to follow.

As the poem appeared to be approaching a crescendo, with her hair, hands and milky-blue eye all moving in cadence with her words, in mid-sentence she pitched forward and knocked her head into an ornate molding on the music stand. The director rushed to her side, relief and concern mixed on his face. She was out cold, eyes rolled back in her head and bleeding from an ugly scalp wound. A doctor among the dinner guests took charge, revived Ferret and reassured her and the crowd that she had become excited and perhaps had a little too much wine, but she would readily recover. The Sons and Daughters of Dante applauded as she was led away to the quiet of an upstairs room.

Ray lamented when the gathering took a sedate turn. He was more amused than concerned with the incident; he had recovered from his own bar-fight wound and was familiar with art parties where urinating on the table, or passing out, was de rigeur. He was also relieved that it wasn't him who'd caused the ruckus. A strong wave of nostalgia for the City and his life there took hold of him but it ceded quickly to a picture of Flora and him sitting at her table beneath the portal. "That is real, that is lasting," he said to her phantom; "this is such bullshit".

Anna called him and left a message that said she was excited to visit the Carpaccio paintings with him. She left detailed instructions as to when he could call her back and suggested it would be better if he didn't leave a message. He didn't call her back. It now looked like her husband was right rather than paranoid. Ray knew how this budding liaison would grow. The few stabs of remorse he had were centrally located around his dick, and not to be trusted. They were not powerful enough to overcome the sense of deep fatigue he felt as he fast-forwarded to the duplicity and sneaking around that an affair would entail. He was here to paint, he didn't need the distraction, and there was something charged about his growing sense of loneliness that he could tap into. For the first time that he could remember, he felt hopelessly monogamous in the face of an opportunity to wander.

Ray spent the week buried in his work. He painted in the apartment, where the intimacy and warmth made it easier to imagine Flora, rather than in the spacious, drafty studio he had been assigned. Near the Rialto he found a newsstand where he could buy the International Tribune and a café where he could read it with his morning coffee. He rose early and walked through the city, still dimmed under the remnants of the night; and, as his dreams ebbed to the promise of the new day, he felt completely at home. The staccato clack of a high heel muffled by the mist, the ratcheting of a metal shop grate, the round sound of "buon

giorno,” the silky slap of water, the wet drag of a straw broom—he knew them without naming. He saw the sounds as pictures, floating by in lazy succession, sliding in and out of focus, each holding a kernel of worth for his pleasure.

Although he enjoyed walking with others, for Ray the pleasures of walking solo were even greater. Similar to the zone spoken of by long distance runners, walking was a place as much as an activity, a world with him at the center, isolated yet part of the flow of things. During his walks he could reconstruct himself and sort out the world around him. It was also feeding time for the hungry Eye that devoured everything in its path. This eye turned in a remote socket, buried in his interior. Neurons, dendrites, veins, arteries and tendons radiated from the Eye and connected it to the vital organs, muscles, bones and skin. Force fields, as ethereal as halos around the saints, came and went from this eye, carrying information gathered and re-coded in a language he could understand. The Eye rarely blinked; it slept with its lid raised. Nothing was left unseen, and the possibility of knowing the boundary between Me and Not-Me seemed less an illusion. Ray was in awe of the Eye’s power and paid attention to it; his vigilance increased when walking.

If he was walking or painting, or immersed in looking, his loneliness was held at bay. In the evenings, he would stop at the neighborhood bar for a drink and sit alone, pretending to look through the steamed-over windows into the early darkness while he waited for the emptiness to return. He held it off by imagining Flora striding through the doors, the warm smells of Mexico clinging to her, her smile blazing strongly enough to defrost the windows. He imagined her wearing a favorite emerald-green skirt and the turquoise earrings he had bought for her in a pawn shop in Gallup; he imagined her taste and the warmth of her skin against his, he imagined all this, knowing it to be impossible and impossible not to dream it.

Most nights, halfway through his drink, he would reassess the work he’d done that day. Sitting at the bar, out

of sight of the pictures, he would be left without their protective suggestion that something substantial had been accomplished; and, measured against the roar of his solitude, he calculated that the work amounted to nothing. He tricked himself into thinking that tomorrow would be different, tomorrow he would paint something that would save him.

Something had happened to him—to the outgoing Ray, the charmer who was at home anywhere, who could eat dirt and worms for a month and sleep in the water at the bottom of a dugout canoe, Ray the free spirit, child of the sixties, Ray the able Italian kid who could send a pink “spaldeen” over the fence with a stickball bat. He was wondering about this one night after he had been in Venice for a few weeks and had become a regular at the bar. Although he was crying silently, he couldn’t escape his thoughts and didn’t budge from his seat. He’d been watching a couple at the bar; their backs were to him but he could see they were talking. The man allowed his hand to drift in a casual caress of the woman’s ass; she smiled and covertly her hand stroked his thigh. When they stood to leave, Ray said in Italian that he would like to pay for their drinks. They smiled and asked why and he responded, “per amore.” they laughed and thanked him a thousand times. He was momentarily buoyed and then a wave of panic seized him. It was unaccountable, but he was shaking as if he had the reefer chills, as if his mind was so opened his brains were falling out. He left the bar hurriedly, too upset to pretend a nonchalant exit.

The walk calmed him. The air was cold and damp, but he decided not to eat at a restaurant near the apartment and took a long detour toward the old Jewish Ghetto. There were some artists in the area and the tone was a bit more bohemian, the food was good and less expensive but this is not what brought him there. The walking was responsible, he had no plan but to take the Eye for a walk, and relieve himself of...of what he didn’t know, perhaps the sense of relief will be enough. In this area the streets were

broader and ran long and straight, parallel to the canals. After wandering the warren-like alleys of ancient San Polo, the suggestion of open space here in Cannaregio was exhilarating. There is relief after all, as Ray's body and his Eye must have known and not bothered to tell him. Odd that this gated neighborhood, which gave birth to the word ghetto, should offer breathing room and a respite from the stony claustrophobia of the rest of Venice.

It was while he was crossing the Canale di Cannaregio that the idea came to him. The canal was squiddy-black and the reflections of the few lights on the bank appeared to hover above the water like flying saucers. A lone man was rowing a tiny dingy across the canal, pushing rather than pulling on the oars. It was an unusual sight for Venice, where a single paddle or pole was more often used. Ray stopped to watch the man who, despite the slack water and his Herculean effort, had made almost no headway. Ray followed the line running out from the stern of the boat into the darkness and saw the looming silhouette of the boat being towed. The rower saw Ray watching from the bridge and when he drew close rested his oars and said to him with a laugh, "It will be much easier when the tide turns. Then I can get home to my love...and dinner."

"A very good idea" Ray responded and added, to himself, "I think I will too, boat and all."

His luck held when he went into the restaurant. It was a slow night and when Ray sat at the bar to eat, the bartender, whose name was Mimo, gave him his full attention. He spoke English with a decided East Coast accent and, as Ray shortly discovered, was a painter who had studied at Visual Arts in New York. He thought it funny that Ray had come to Venice to paint while he, a Venetian by birth, could not wait to return to the States. "There's nothing happening here," he said, disdainfully. "All this art by dead men might be a blessing, but to me it's a curse...a load on a donkey, how do you say it?"

"A burden," Ray suggested helpfully. He had to admit that the bartender was probably right; a number of

Italy's best contemporary painters had taken up residence in the City. Of course, what the bartender failed to note was that they brought new juice to an art world that had grown clannish and too insular for its health.

Mimo pumped Ray for the latest developments "on the scene" and laughed approvingly whenever Ray used "man" to punctuate his speech. Both men loved to talk and found an approving audience in each other. Mimo had the chef make Ray and himself a polenta and liver dish that did not appear on the menu. Ray was conflicted about talking through dinner; it diverted his attention from one of the most delicious meals he had eaten in Venice.

Talking with bartenders in strange bars is a little like talking to a seat companion on a plane ride. If you like talk, it's a good way to pass the time, the ear is usually sympathetic, either by occupation or with the promise that if one listens, one gets the chance to tell. Of course, the best is that one never expects to see them again, so that we are emboldened to share the most intimate details of our lives. It is also an occasion to try on new personas or work out things that have been troubling us which we haven't aired.

Ray trotted out his brand-new idea about returning to the States by boat. At first Mimo didn't get it. Oh, he understood the part about wanting to go, although Ray, embarrassed by how lame it sounded to say he missed his girlfriend, hadn't told him why; he didn't understand why anyone would want to take a boat when the plane was so much faster. Ray began a convoluted riff on the pace of travel and how our fixation with speed had not only ruined our powers of concentration and numbed us to the pleasure of a more meditated time, but had the consequence of making paintings seem an antediluvian preoccupation. He said that our adoration of speed grew out of the illusion that if we could master time we could cheat death, "and that" concluded Ray, "is the most dangerous fiction of all."

His rap was delivered at New York warp speed and sprinkled with hipsterisms and turns of phrase that only Serge, thousands of miles away, might have understood.

Mimo had put his fork down and was listening carefully. He ignored a customer who came in except to wave his hand in a don't-bother-me-I'm-busy gesture. At the conclusion of Ray's discourse, Mimo, who had backed up a few steps as if to escape the onslaught of words, said, "Cool, man, but I still don't get the boat."

It took Ray a second to remember that it was his intended travel by boat which started the whole thing. "You know, just for the fuck of it" he said, looking directly into Mimo's open mouth. Ray saw that Mimo understood the words, but the meaning of the expression, and how this could be a reason to do something, didn't translate across the culture gap, no matter how much time he spent in New York. Ray tried again. "For the poetry, you get it?" Mimo smiled in assent. "My girlfriend is a travel agent," he said. "She'll hook you up."

The next morning Ray went to the travel agency where Mimo's girlfriend worked. All three women in the office were talking on their phones, held scrunched between head and shoulder, while working their computers rapidly with one hand, leaving the other free to communicate in a waterfall of fingers and palm. Regularly, one or another of them stopped typing and used both hands, along with her face, to emphasize a point. The atmosphere was intoxicating, hyper-alive, and Ray fell under its spell. The aliveness radiated from the women as if they were Sirens in reverse, calling to seduce the wandering Jews, Gypsies, itinerant pickers, searchers and ordinary Guiseppes who simply needed a vacation, to get on board. One of the women was particularly animated and truly, deeply beautiful. Ray hoped she was Mimo's girlfriend, Maria. Her black hair and darker complexion marked her as Southern; Mimo was prideful of this, as if he had broken the color barrier. Everything about her, but especially her smile, reminded him of Flora. This woman could have booked him on a leaky scow that had no chance of reaching its destination, and he would have gone. Ray did some minor cosmetic surgery in his mind's eye and she became

Flora's twin. This raised a painful longing in him and he emitted an unseemly groan that startled Maria.

"Mimo told me you might come in. I have already done some research. You prefer to speak in English, yes?"

"Hi. Yes, I do but how did you know it was me?"

"He said you had, in English I think you say...a longing in your eyes. You have someone at home that you miss?"

"I didn't tell him that—but yes it's true."

"He didn't tell me either. It was a guess," she said, with a smile.

"Pretty obvious, huh?"

"Not to Mimo. He is an artist, too, as I am sure he told you. He thinks you are returning for art's sake." She was amused with her cleverness.

"I have, and I could easily have led him to think that." He found himself ready to defend his brother artist but, more truthfully, he was miffed that she had exposed his ruse. She seemed to sense his discomfort and spoke in a more sympathetic way.

"As a travel agent, I can tell you that there are two reasons for travel—to find yourself, or to find someone else. With the exception of the tourists, who have no idea. They are satisfied if the plumbing resembles their bathroom at home."

"In my case I think both reasons have become braided together, much to my surprise. I used to see them as distinct...I'm afraid I've...kept my eyes so open that I've become blind."

"Simply make sure to tell her that, she will love you more. Now let us see if we can get you a boat."

Maria delivered the bad news first. The big cruise ships stopped the Atlantic crossing in early December. The seas got nasty and unpredictable, and the crew would spend much of their time washing vomit out the scuppers. She let this settle in and watched dismay drop like a window shade across Ray's face. Then she gave him the good news; freighters and container vessels, driven by commerce rather

than pleasure, make the trip when they must and consequently sailed year round. The French Line happened to have a New York-bound ship, at the tail end of its journey, that would depart Venice in about a week. Maria explained that the shipping lines usually required a month's advance notice. In this case there were two single cabins available, and they would waive that requirement if Ray was able to pay within the next twenty-four hours. The ship would make a stop in La Spezia before setting its headings west. This last bit of information pleased Ray, who remembered that this was the port from which his grandparents had embarked. The trip would take around ten days, depending on how much cargo was loaded or unloaded at the final port of call.

Although these boats took on only six to ten passengers, the brochure pictured cabins that were appointed with more amenities than Ray had on the mesa. The ship boasted French cuisine to satisfy the French crew. This sounded fine to Ray since he wasn't planning on talking much anyway; and the food would be far superior to the diet of Orange Crush and Fig Newtons he'd once endured while crewing on a boat captained by his Maine buddy, Captain Karl.

Maria was right when she said that the name of the ship would clinch the deal for Ray—it was named the “Matisse.”

Ray spent his final days in Venice painting and readying for his departure. For the first time in a month he was ebullient, and his painting caught fire. The irony was that they had little to do with Venice. It was as if the present did not exist for him and he was painting from some imagined past, or hopeful future, a place that was hotter, where the light was cleaner and new. Venice would creep into the work somewhere down the road. He would remake it in his memory, and it would look very little like this city of gray stone and dark water.

Before he went to tell the director of the Dante program that he was leaving, he prepared himself like a method actor. Ray spent an entire day thinking about his almost-ex-wife, her coldness and the injustices she had heaped upon him. It worked, although he had to dampen the angry edge it gave to things, and so he focused for a while on the dogs he had owned; one in particular, whose brain tumor and untimely death brought a sadness that he'd thought he never truly recovered from. To camouflage his excitement about leaving, he had worked himself into a state of unabashed self-pity before he met with the director. Ray's sober tone, attached to a sad excuse, struck the right chord.

With the barest hint of tragedy, he spoke of "family matters of a very personal nature" that required his attention. The delicacy of the Italian spirit (as Ray perceived it) and the genteel manner of the director, insured that he wouldn't pursue the matter beyond sympathy and condolences for Ray's plight.

As it turned out, the director didn't pry further and seemed mostly concerned that neither he nor the program had done anything untoward. Ray spent the rest of the conversation reassuring the director that everything was perfect, that he had been a gracious host and a true patron of the arts. He did not get the sympathy he had hoped for and wondered if the director believed his story. "Fuck it. It is a family matter and it does need my attention," he muttered to himself, when he was out of hearing.

There was one last thing to do before he left to get his boat. There was a lifetime of information in the short e-mail to Flora:

Dear Flora,

I miss you more than I can say. There is no light in Venice without your smile.

I am so sorry that I came here without you. I have a lot of explaining to do—to myself as well as to you. I realize my leaving was not a bad idea, but it was an idea, and I should have listened to my heart. More importantly I

should have listened more carefully to yours. I'll be home soon. When my arrangements are finalized I'll give you the specifics.

Moments after he sent the note to Flora, Ray's idea of traveling by boat began to unravel. His fantasy foundered in the face of his longing for Flora. Ray pictured the ten days of uncaring gray that lay ahead of him. He imagined the mask of joviality that he would wear at dinner each of the ten nights of the crossing. He saw himself sitting on the edge of his berth far from the solace of sleep.

Ray decided to take a look at his ship. Although, it was not scheduled to leave until the following week, the *Matisse* was at the pier taking on cargo. The port of Venice lies to the north, near the mainland. Ray jogged to San Tomas and then waited impatiently for the Number One vaporetto whose circular route would take it near the port.

It was an unusually sunny day. The air was cool and Venice looked artificially illuminated in the crisp, winter light. Ray sat inside the cabin to take in the sights. He never tired of looking into the great rooms of the canal-side palazzi. The shift in the tone of the neighborhoods the ferry passed seemed an endlessly new experience as well. Ray reasoned that it was an excellent day to take the Eye for a boat ride.

The travel brochure had told him that the ship was 642 feet long, but there were no pictures and Ray was unprepared for the small city that awaited him at the end of the pier. At first, he took it as part of the skyline. He could barely discern "*Matisse*" scripted on the bow in eight-foot letters; he walked two blocks down the pier to make sure it was his boat, only partially convinced that it was a boat at all. Its deck was stacked four and five containers high, each container dwarfed by the scale of the collected bulk. The sun ricocheted off the aluminum sidings of the cargo. The light splintered into prismatic octagons and reformed as a halo around the ship. The *Matisse* and its containers

disappeared in the intensity of the glare. One could say it was a trick of the light, but Ray knew better.

“I see you,” he said aloud. The Eye was at work in unison with the heart. The vision was overlaid with the memory of the afternoon in Playa when he “saw” Flora, burning brighter, more colorful than the silvery light of the sea. In that instance his words fell short of conveying the heat and certainty of what he felt inside and they had their first argument. This time Ray would do better with the revelation. He turned abruptly away from the gangway and headed toward the airline ticket office he had glimpsed on his way to the ship.

FINIS

Dream Boat, Antoine “Fats” Domino, Dave Bartholomew and Charles Guidry, 1956