

11 Autumnal Vistas

Valerie climbed a small hill of Womonwood Farm. She stood listening for a moment. At first she heard only quiet, then slowly she discerned the sounds of birds, wind, the low growl of a motor. She put her hand to her forehead, felt a fevered sweat. Behind a numbing headache was taking over her body. 'Bad enough I had to run for my life because of Val,' she thought. 'Now I've got to deal with his coke withdrawal too.' Valerie swiped away tears.

She heard a soft cry, located it. Althea the cat was pawing her leg. "Oh, sweetheart. What are you doing here?" She picked up the cat, cuddled its warm body. She heard a click, turned her attention from the cat. "Belle! No fair taking a picture. I wasn't ready."

"Sorry." She stepped closer. "I can see that you've been crying." Belle held a mauve basket bag. She spread a brown woolen blanket, unpacked seltzer and fresh oatmeal cookies. She motioned Valerie to sit next to her.

"Got any nonaspirin?" Valerie asked. Quietly Belle handed her a metal case and poured a cup of seltzer. Shifting the cat to a shoulder, Valerie took the pills. "How did you know?" Valerie wondered. Belle didn't answer. She pressed the top of Valerie's head until she kneeled on the blanket, still cradling the cat. Belle sat next to her. She held her hand, beckoned toward the landscape with the other. "I get it. You want me to shut up and look

at the view. I can do that. I can keep quiet for a minute, maybe. I've never tried it before.

Here goes."

The two looked out together. Clouds traced oblong shadows across the rolling terrain. The land lay mottled with clearings, forest, ribbons of asphalt. A lone car hummed along the main route, past pasture land and chestnut horses idly chewing. Jersey cows reclined beneath apple trees stooped over with their reddening burdens. A field of corn, stripped and dry, rattled in the breeze. Crows descended on the tan stalks, cawing primevally. A smoky haze hugged the minor mountains of the near range. A few worn peaks loomed beyond, cut with the gray of barren rock. Golds and oranges glowed softly in the higher reaches. Here and there an improbable maroon would flash. The dark traces of evergreens lingered, awaiting prominence. An unwary squirrel skipped along the roots of a close maple. Althea jumped out of Valerie's arms after it. The squirrel darted up the trunk, pursued by the cat, who stopped half-way. Hanging from the bark Althea hissed at the rodent. It gazed coolly down from a thin branch, then jumped to the next tree. The cat backed down uncertainly, falling the last few feet to the ground. Belle and Valerie laughed. Althea shrank, not taking the joke.

"Althea," Valerie called, but the orange cat skulked toward home.

Belle reclined on the woolen blanket. "I love the fall leaves here. So many reds and purples and yellows. The trees are burning. It reminds me of the colors of magazines on fire. You've got the picture of the tree, then that wild flame around it where the dye bleeds

into the fire. It's like fluorescent orange for a moment, then bright pink, then green like grass."

Belle did not know that the mountains were on fire, their leaves slowly burning, oxidizing like iron into rust, like sweet potatoes browning in the oven. Soon barren trees would begin their ritual snow dance, late at night, when all the scientists had gone to bed.

"Last year around this time we had a small earthquake," Belle offered. "Nothing serious, but it woke us all up. The next day the local paper carried a picture of the trees, in black and white mind you, and below it they put the caption: An Autumn Scene. Despite early morning tremors, the leaves continue to remain on their trees."

Valerie laughed. "What did they think? That the trees would whip around like in a cartoon and all the leaves fall off?" She sipped from the cup.

"We giggled for days about it."

"Not a lot to do here, is there? You know. I really want to go into town one of these days and get a drink in a local bar. They got places for girls?"

"More like cafes and book stores. That kind of thing. There is a gay night at a little local disco."

"I hoped there was some night life."

"Northampton is the lesbian capital of America, or at least the Northeast. Guys, I think, tend to go out more. I'm new to it all myself."

"Are you a lesbian, Belle?"

"I'm living on a lesbian farm. Shouldn't I be?"

"But you've got a kid. Bisexual?"

"Valerie. I've never slept with a woman. I don't even know what that would be like." She paused, looked into Valerie's eyes. "I guess I'm open to it. I feel different here, as if it's possible to love another woman. Look at the luck I've had with men."

"Tell me about it, sister."

"I just never felt free before I came here. I did all the right things, tried to be good."

"Your secret's safe with me." Valerie smiled.

"Not only that. My name's not really Belle. I thought it sounded pretty and I was in a hurry."

"You mean your mother didn't go into labor in a clock tower?"

"No. She lives not far from here. I'm afraid to call her."

"You could, if you didn't tell her where you were."

"Nothing's safe, Valerie."

"You know the old game where you put the money in and it's a glass box and there's this little crane and you try to get the prize and drop it into the slot?" Valerie asked. "But you only have so much time and the game always runs out before you can get the toy horse or the diamond ring or whatever?" Valerie asked.

"Yeah. I remember."

"That's what my life's been like." She puffed smoke rings.

"I know. The people here have helped me get past that hopeless feeling."

"Okay, but we're temporary here. Like we washed up on an island when our ship smashed on the rocks, but we have to go back to civilization."

"Do we? I think this is civilization. Look at me. I grew up, went to work, got married, had this beautiful girl. I did all the things I was supposed to do. The man turned out crazy. I mean brutal, vicious, drunken, nasty. He hit me. He'd slam me against walls. I used to think he was right, that I was doing everything wrong, that I deserved it. He blamed me for everything and I took it. My daughter still has nightmares. I never let him hurt her, but he threatened to. I always put my body in the way. A little girl. What could she possibly do wrong?"

"One night I woke up. He wasn't in bed with me. I smelled gas, ran into the kitchen. He had turned the oven on and left the house. I grabbed my daughter from her room and I ran out into the front yard. I was screaming, crying, cursing him out. I got what I could and got out of there. I stayed with friends. The court awarded joint custody. They were giving April to him on weekends, and I couldn't be there. I heard about this place. What was I going to do? I ran. Nevermind the job. Nothing like that entered my mind. All I could think of was to get away. I realized that if I was strong enough to survive it, I was strong enough to escape.

"Now my house is sold. I went back to it one night. I hid behind a tree and looked into the windows. Three kids eating popcorn from a bowl, staring the tube. Dad upstairs at the computer. Mom in the kitchen watching her TV, working a crossword puzzle as the dishwasher chugged away. Everything seemed so ordinary, so peaceful.

"And I thought: It could have been me. Damn it. It *was* me. I wondered if there was anything psychotic about that woman's husband. I wondered if the kids would turn out to be druggies and prostitutes, doctors and lawyers, soldiers and waitresses. Even if I could watch that family through those windows for twenty years, it would be like a movie playing with me sitting in the dark. It would never be my life again."

"Don't worry. It will be like that again. I promise."

"Oh, Valerie. You're sweet. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe get a job and an apartment around here. I can't hide out forever. Can you?"

"Until April turns eighteen."

"What about another new identity? I used to know these guys in New York could have it for you like that." She snapped her fingers.

"I'll think about it. I've only been here a few months. I get the feeling people like us don't stay here too long. I think they work on finding us somewhere to settle down, maybe in some other part of the country. They have this network set up. Selene says the less I know about it the better." The sun winked out between trees behind them. A giant moon rose orange the next moment. "Full moon," Belle said.

"It's big," Valerie remarked.

"I don't think you know what a full moon means around here."

"What? I've only been here two weeks. We all sing songs around a campfire?"

Valerie started to joke, but caught a serious look in her eyes.

"Something like that. We should go back for dinner. May I have a hug first?"

"Sure, honey." Belle and Valerie hugged briefly. They stood, gathered up the blanket and descended with the twilight.

11.1 Ritual

"Come on, Valerie. They're waiting for us," Belle called up the stairs.

"Are you sure I have to wear this thing? And where's April?" Valerie stomped down the stairs in a black robe.

"Yes, you have to or you don't get to come. April is at a house down the road. They have a little girl her age. She's sleeping over." Belle tied the knot on her own robe. She grasped Valerie's hand and pulled her down the last three steps.

"What are you doing? You'll kill me." Valerie scrambled through the kitchen. "I'm gonna go straight to hell for what I'm doing tonight. Sunday I'm going to church and confess everything to a priest." Althea vaulted over a chair back and followed them through the front door. The screen door banged behind them as they hurried down the front steps. Valerie followed Belle around the barn. She noticed a path. It wound around a mound of earth and ducked into the deep woods.

"Don't you have a flashlight?" Valerie asked as tree branches smacked her in the forehead.

"No modern conveniences, but here's a candle in a jar." Belle pushed the jar into Valerie's stomach, along with a pack of matches.

Frantically Valerie lit the match while dodging trees. "I've never been in the woods in my life."

"You're kidding, right?" Belle turned around and gave her a disbelieving stare.

"No. I'm not. I've never been in any woods. Unless you count the Brooklyn Botanical Garden."

"Hold my hand and follow the path." Belle paused to light her own candle. Valerie saw a pool of light surround them. Scraggly twigs and weedy saplings marked the edges of the path. Leaf litter covered the dirt. The eyes of some small creature flickered under a fir. Valerie yelped. "It's only Althea the cat," Belle admonished. "If it were something else—"

There was a rustling in the underbrush. A snake slithered across the path, crosshatched with sharp markings. Valerie shrieked. "Snake! Poisonous snake! Run!"

"Just a corn snake. They only look deadly." Belle pulled closer.

"Oh. It was big." Valerie whispered.

"Don't worry, unless you're a mouse."

Valerie sighed. "Can I go home now?"

"Keep moving." Belle herded her along into a place where the trees began to open. The ruins of a stand of elms rose, dead limbs reaching upward. Ahead, in a small clearing, Valerie counted ten hooded, black robed figures. Each held a candle like hers. Belle clutched her hand. "It's all right," she said. "You know some of them."

The robe hoods came to points at top. Evergreens around, round and pointed themselves, seemed like shadows of the group. The member farthest away from Valerie and Belle held a large, curved silver knife aloft. Its handle was cut with stars and symbols. As Valerie recognized her, Selene stepped up to a central stone. The boulder was round and flat, but uncarved. On the stone large glass candles illuminated a pitcher and cups, paper plates and a wide chocolate cake. She placed the blade on the cake and sliced it radially. She placed the first slice on a plate. She held the plate above her head, toward the moon. Red liquid ran down the layers of the slice. She crossed to Valerie. Through the cowl's opening Valerie examined Selene's face. She was solemn, unsmiling. Her eyes showed an other-worldly gleam. "Welcome to your first circle," she said, holding out the plate. Valerie took it fearfully. Selene nodded. She picked up the slice and bit into it. "Um. Good. I always love the raspberry sauce with the chocolate cake and icing. Yum. Thank you."

Belle elbowed her. "It's a sacrifice and you're supposed to consume it in reverence for the Goddess."

"Oops." All cowls turned toward her. She looked around sheepishly. She held the plate up to the sky. "Thank you Goddess for the lovely chocolate raspberry cake." To Belle she whispered: "How's that?"

"Better," was her answer. Selene doled out the cake to all assembled. Tonya followed, pouring from the pitcher into the cups.

She reached Valerie last. "Thanks. That cake made me a little dry." Valerie sipped.

"Cider. How country! Oops. Thanks again, Goddess Whoever up there."

Tonya shook her head and returned to her position, next to Selene.

"Thank you all for attending. Tonight we welcome Valerie to her first circle.

Perhaps you noticed." The others chuckled quietly. "She is very new to us, but has begun to adapt to our ways, so we offer her this ritual. However, we do have other business to attend to. Tonya is in need of a new name, blessed by the sacred mother Goddess and confirmed by the presence of her sisters here tonight. She's going before a judge on Tuesday, but we need to put forth that the patriarchal court system can only ratify what we first do amongst ourselves. Before that, however, Shela will read a bit of her poetry written for this event."

Valerie cringed. A robed Shela came forward. She unfolded a piece of paper from the pocket. "Why is my name?" she read. "Who am I? Am I the name I am called by? Am I bound to the mother who named me by it? If I forsake it, will the bond be broken? No. I will merely be moving through to the next phase of independent womanhood. I am forever bound to my mother and my mother's mother and her mother and her mother before. I am a pebble in the river of life. It flows over me and through me from its source toward the sea of forever.

"Who next will name me? Can I name myself? Yes. I can name myself. What power! What freedom! What an act of becoming it could be if I were to call myself what my inner self wants to be called. What a blossoming like a flower on that night when I

name myself. If I tell no one, no one will know it. My new name will be blown away with my clouded breath on the breeze if I say it only to myself. So I must speak it to the world, proclaim to my sisters gathered, so that it will echo through them, amplified by them to the oceans and the mountains, that all people should know it and speak it with me and to me and of me.

"My new name! What a glorious name when everyone shall know it, when even the trees might whisper it to the stars as the Woman in the Moon smiles to hear it passing by her in the ether. O ethereal, eternal, known and beautiful new name."

Selene placed her candle on the ground before her. She reached her arms out. The women followed Selene, joining hands. A circle formed. Valerie felt Belle's hand grasp hers, her smooth skin, tight grip. She felt her warmth, understood somehow that this circle of women was joining them wordlessly. She felt humbled, bowed her head a bit in gratitude and surrender. When she looked up, she saw faces framed in hoods by candlelight. Selene nodded at the two of them, almost smiling. Harrie looked at Belle, then gave Valerie a quick wink before lowering her head.

A slow moaning caught Valerie's ear, a deep cry that seemed to come from all around, but had no center. Behind it she could hear the trickle of a stream somewhere in the woods. The ululation built, rising more, falling less each time it fell. She joined it almost against her will, shuddered as she let out strange warblings. She stepped side to side with the others. A sudden silence stilled them. Valerie's hands fell to her sides. Selene stretched her arms out in static rapture, raised them to the skies in invocation. After a beat

she called out: "Speak, sister. Speak your new name. Proclaim it now before us and the great Goddess."

Tonya, rising to her full height, intoned: "Dierdre! I am Dierdre!"

"Dierdre?" Valerie heard herself say. She slapped a hand over her mouth. Valerie noticed motion on the stone altar. Althea the cat was licking crumbs and raspberry syrup from the cake platter.

"Dierdre she is and Dierdre we shall call her!" Selene cut off murmuring in the ranks. "The Goddess is pleased!"

"The Goddess is pleased." The others echoed.

"Uh, Deedee's fine too, or just Dee," Dierdre added.

"Dierdre, Deedee, Dee," Shela said in a rhythm that the others picked up. "Dierdre, Deedee, Dee," others joined. Soon the names turned into a chant. The chant picked up speed. "Dierdre Deedee Dee... Dierdre Deedee Dee... DierdreDeedeeDee." The chant became too quick to speak, and disintegrated into wild, frenzied whoops and hollers.

Quiet settled. In response to their noise they heard the soft hoot of an owl in the nearer trees. "Who? Who-who-who? Who?" it asked.

"Ah," Selene said. "We have a sign. The Goddess has spoken her approval."

Valerie looked up at the moon. How could she not have noticed, she wondered, that the face on it was a woman's? More, the woman in the moon seemed to smile slyly, then wink. 'Men,' Valerie thought. 'Men need their man in the moon. They can't see a woman's face as big as a planet! Men! The lying, cheating, no good bastards.'

The circle broke. They gathered up things and walked the path through the woods and fields back to the farmhouse. Food and wine was waiting. They played tapes of flutes and drums, talked. The robes had vanished. To Valerie they appeared as before, but now eyes sparked, smiles widened.

"Did you like our neopagan ritual?" Selene asked.

"It was, um, different," she answered.

"Wait for a major holiday in our year's cycle. You know, I can give you a few books to help you understand what it's all about."

"If they're not too big," Valerie said. "You know, Selene. I've never felt more like a woman than I do now."

"It's the ritual. It brings us back to the female power in ourselves and nature, the true source of all life on the planet."

"I can almost feel myself ovulating," Valerie confided.

Tonya, now Dierdre came by with a platter. "Hummus on toasted pita, anyone? I see you're out for another convert, Selene."

"I was just telling Valerie."

"That our biology as women is linked to the seasons and the tides and the Goddess? That technology designed by men cuts us off from all the cycles of nature?" Dierdre prompted.

"Y-yes," Selene stammered.

"Doesn't she already know?"

Valerie spoke: "Actually, it's kind of news to me. I thought, you know, that there was this God and he was I guess sitting on a cloud looking down at us all, like we'd look at ants on an ant hill. Sometimes we'd displease him and he'd zap us with lightning bolts. Other times he'd throw a few bread crumbs our way."

"Poor dear," Dierdre said. Her mood had perked. "Selene will have to re-educate you a bit more, but this is social time. By the way, I hear you have a new love interest. The cycle of the universe is not the only subject Selene's been talking about."

"Selene?" Valerie crossed her arms.

"Oops. Looks like I've got to open another bottle of wine." Selene ran to the kitchen.

"Don't let her get to you." Dierdre put a hand on her shoulder. "She's a serious woman and she rules over us like a mother. Sometimes we fight but we're a family here and you're part of it now. What's that? Tears. Valerie, don't."

Belle rushed toward her. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"It's just that," Valerie gulped, "except for my aunt, since my parents died, no one's really cared. Not really. People have wanted me and been around for a while, but none of them ever said they loved me. Not out loud."

"We all love you, Valerie," Dierdre said. "And we'll do what we can to protect you; but if you even think of getting out of line, we'll smack the hell out of you." Dierdre smiled. Valerie leaned her head on Belle's shoulder and let tears fall. Belle reached an arm around

her waist. Deirdre put her tray down, then held the two together in her arms. Others joined them until the room was filled with one big hug.

11.2 By the Fire

Valerie and Belle sat before the sparking embers of two charred logs. The guests had left. Everyone else had gone to bed. Valerie sipped organic merlot. She picked up a poker and stoked embers. "Should we let the fire die?"

"Or start one of our own." Belle stretched.

Valerie shivered. "What do you mean? I mean, I thought you weren't."

"I'm not, I guess. I don't know. If you could just stay by me tonight. Nothing has to happen."

Valerie paused a moment, got up and poked at the embers in the fireplace. "It's a cold night. Let's go to bed."

They lolled up the stairs, drooping and drowsy. The wine had made them limp as puppets, messy. Belle opened the door to her room. "Come in," she said, whispering.

Valerie looked into her deep brown eyes.

"I can't," she said.

"You will." Belle took her by the wrist and pulled her in, dragged her to the bed and pushed her into a sprawl across the star patchwork quilt. She jumped up on the springy spool bed, straddled Valerie's hips. She began to massage her shoulders.

"Ah! Ah! A-a-a-a-ah," Valerie cried, as muscles gave and nerves twanged like taugth rubber bands. She felt and heard pops and snaps as Belle's hands walked slowly down her spine. Tension broke with Valerie's low sighs.

"Think you've had enough? I don't." Belle turned her over, leaned to kiss her. Valerie opened her eyes wide. The two stared at each other mid-kiss for a second, then closed their eyelids and let the kiss happen. Valerie untensed, imagined her body melting and merging with Belle's. No scalpel would ever separate them. 'Can't turn back now,' she thought, and gave in. Belle was nuzzling her breasts, licking stiffening nipples from circle to tip. She nibbled with rounded, pressing lips. Valerie's back arched. She pulled in breath in sharp staccato cries. "No," she murmured as Belle ran her tongue down to her navel. She probed the hollow, lingering.

Belle unbuttoned and pulled on zipper of Valerie's jeans. She pitched her own clothes across the room until she was nude. "I'm a woman gone wild," she said. "Isn't that what we've come here to be?" Belle scarcely heard Valerie's cries and pleas. Passion possessed her. She bent low, yanked Valerie's pants off, then reached for the panties that still clung to her. "No!" Valerie warned, resisting, twisting over. She lost the fight. Ass bared, Valerie giggled as she struggled with Belle, who tried to turn her.

"Let me have my way with you." Belle smiled in mock anger. Her strength was too much. She overpowered Valerie. With one quick move Valerie was right side up, legs splayed, erection lifting in a downward curve. Belle jumped backwards off the bed.

"A penis!" Belle stood gasping. Sweat matted her hair, streaked her torso. Belle stared down at it. "You have a penis."

"I— I do. I'm sorry," Valerie said.

Belle knelt at the edge of the bed. Valerie's legs dangled toward the floor. Belle cradled Valerie's penis in her hand. She held it gently. It grew rigid. Belle looked up at Valerie, who was crying silently.

"Belle," Valerie said. "Please. Don't let this change anything."

"Valerie. Don't be afraid. You know I like this too."

"Belle. Stop. It's not my fault. I'm still a woman. I have an oversized clitoris. My ovaries wound up on the outside. The genes didn't work right. I came out like a boy. Sometimes I have to pretend I'm a boy, but that isn't me. This is me, Valerie, and I am a woman. Tell me you understand."

"Valerie. I love you. It's not about your sexual organs. I will have a few questions later, though."

"Belle. I want you to make love to me, as a woman."

Belle ran her fingers over the top of Valerie's apparent penis. She reached her hand around it, leaned over and placed the tip in her mouth. She looked up at Valerie. Her tears had ceased to flow. In Valerie's mournful expression Belle noted the first hints of pleasure. She did what she could to increase the sensation.

Valerie reached to touch Belle's small breasts. She ran her hands to her hips. She held them. She drew Belle toward her lips. Valerie leaned forward. She kissed Belle's

thigh, then touched her tongue briefly against her labia. No longer in control, she nuzzled, frenzied, plunging into deep recesses.

They explored, neither of them knowing where to stop. Valerie felt Belle on top of her, pinning her down. "Belle. I can't." She murmured protest.

"Shhh, Valerie," she quieted her. "You don't have to do a thing but lie there. I want that thing inside me, now." Belle held the base of the phallus, positioned herself and eased onto it. Holding her within she rocked slowly, then faster. In too short a time, Belle opened her mouth, voiced orgasm in short, sharp sobs. Valerie threw her head back as hot fluid escaped her body. Belle sank into Valerie's arms. They kissed. Embracing, bodies warm, they fell into vivid dreams.

A tranquil rain lasted the night, the weather careful not to wake them. As the gray sky blushed with dawn the rooster screeched. Annoyed, they cracked their eyelids, looked at each other and rolled over. An hour later the door resounded with a solid, New England sort of knocking. Selene's voice pierced thick oak. "Belle? Belle wake up. Valerie's missing."

"No I'm not!" Valerie called out as Selene appeared in the widening trapezoid of doorway. Valerie covered herself, quilt up to her neck.

Selene, startled, paused to arch her eyebrows. "What have we here?"

"Oh, Selene." Valerie stammered. "I guess we can't hide it any longer. Belle and I are in love. I think," she swallowed hard. "I think that I'm a lesbian."

Belle turned. "Valerie. If you're going to be in love with me, you'd better be."

Selene took a deep breath, beamed like a proud mother over her children. "When you get your sexualities sorted out, will you come down to breakfast?"

Belle shot her a look. "Fine, but it may take a month or two." Belle and Valerie locked stares, smirked. Selene shook her head and shut the door.

12 Trevor Meets A Mystery Man

Trevor's show had gone well that first night of its last weekend. He was in the mood for a drink in a civilized setting. Trevor walked up the stone stairs and through the glass doors of the Excelsior House. He checked his flowing white coat and walked through the milling crowd. If these were gay men, they could not be called queer, or even unusual. There was not a nose ring in the crowd. Business men in suits lined the bar. They were men in law; men in finance; men in real estate. The place seemed remarkable in its air of near-normality. Most important to Trevor, it was a place where no one would disturb him with rants and weird behavior. In the Excelsior House he could feel safe from loud drunks, louder music and giant video screens.

He walked through the corridor to the back where men clustered around a piano. Trevor ordered a drink at the small bar and sat in a straight-backed padded chair. Setting his drink down he looked about. The room recalled a former time of graceful splendor in its muted tones, its textured wallpaper, its reproductions of antiques and oils of English hunts. Somber chairs and love seats hugged dim corners lit by lamps on low tables. A grand floral display on a side table drew his attention as the only color in sight. Sedately men moved toward the bar, or to seats near the piano. The player looked ahead, never connecting with the clientele. The singers faced the piano, their backs to the room. To the best of their abilities, they joined in singing a safe repertoire of Broadway show tunes, past and present,

broken by the occasional sad ballad. No one smiled. Trevor had a feeling it against house rules. Men would stroll in from the corridor, look around, leave and return minutes later.

He never quite understood what the place saw in itself. It could have been any bar in a large chain hotel, men and furnishings included. He never contemplated suicide, but thought this room would be the perfect place to kill oneself. A strong powder in a drink, a sad farewell in a stately gay bar, would be a fitting end to a lonely, but ornate, existence. As he mused, twirling the cubes of ice in his drink, he noted a tall dark man in a suit take the chair next to his. The man was handsome, with an air of brooding. Trevor hazarded a nod, then returned to examining the flowers.

"Hello." His deep voice jarred him. Trevor looked left. There was the man, tall and rather gaunt-featured. His hair was black — too black. Certainly he had it dyed, Trevor judged. His clothes were not of the after work variety, but crisp.

"I said hello." Still Trevor could not say anything.

"If you're going to be that way, can I at least buy you a drink?" The man smiled. Trevor stared.

"My name is Arthur. Arthur Wax, in fact. What will you have?"

"Autokrat Vodka and tonic. No lime." Trevor fixed on him. Blue eyes, set in skin so pale he imagined the man never saw the sun, lips and nose quite thin. What did he expect at the Excelsior House? Arthur ordered a drink from a passing waiter and gazed quietly into Trevor's eyes.

The drink came. Trevor sipped it and thanked him, then asked: "What do you want with me?"

"Do you really want to know?" Arthur met his eyes.

"Sure."

"I want to ply you with drink, take you to my apartment, ravage you, make you fall in love with me and pick out a china pattern tomorrow." He narrowed his eyes, flared his nostrils.

"Interesting fetish." Trevor replied. "What if I prefer earthenware?"

"You wouldn't."

"You're a perceptive man."

"I know all about you. You're some sort of performer. I can tell by the way you hold yourself. There's a conscious effort in each muscle. I'd say you were a dancer, once."

"Flattering, although, I'm not sure about the 'once.' No, never a dancer. I'm doing a show. You must come tomorrow night. Don't say a word. You are enraptured. I can tell when a man is enraptured. It's so often I who is the one enraptured. Are you enraptured?"

"Yes," Arthur answered.

Trevor took out a black cigarette. He found his antique silver lighter, which Arthur snatched away. "Let me," he said and flipped the top quickly. The flame sparked and flared high. The smell of lighter fluid filled the air. "Damn!" Arthur said. "How do you not singe your eyebrows with this thing?"

"What eyebrows?" Trevor asked. Arthur looked closely. They were painted on.

"What do you do?" Trevor capped the oil rig fire.

"I'm a doctor," Arthur replied.

"In a hospital?"

"When my patients are in the hospital I go there."

"And you are in what field?" Trevor leaned in to hear the answer.

"Neurology." Trevor noticed Arthur's upper lip twitch when he said the word.

"Fascinating. I was thinking of having my nerves checked."

"I'm sure they're fine. They may suffer from a lack of tactile stimulation."

"They do indeed. So perceptive."

"Do I dare kiss you here?"

Trevor looked around. "I think not. One doesn't want to *do* anything here. It might draw attention. A man whose attention is easily drawn obviously has nothing with which to occupy his mind, don't you think?"

"Nosy neighbors are people with time to kill and nothing scandalous going on in their lives."

"Nothing scandalous. How dull. But you're a doctor. You can't afford scandal."

"I have to keep up a good front."

"At least you can afford my tastes, as in let's get past the china pattern and move right to the silver, then the jewels."

"Now who's got the fetish?"

"Fetish nothing, I'm talking about a woman's security in her old age."

"And that should be happening." Arthur looked at his watch. "Three, two one."

"Okay. You've got me. I wear antique rings so I'll appear younger than my era.

You dye your hair black, I dye my hair white."

"So we're about the same age. Divorces?"

"Several," Trevor answered.

"Widowed?"

"Not until I discover an untraceable poison."

"I'll have the lawyer draw up the will," Arthur said solemnly.

"Then you'll go out and make that lovely money."

"While you spend it and pursue your artistic endeavors."

"As good wives should. Where is your home?"

The cab ride was short. Arthur lived in one of the huge white buildings that form the background for the Upper East Side's surviving townhouses. The apartment seemed barely furnished. The sofa lay folded out for sleep. Glass tables covered corners. Several posters from recent Met exhibits covered the walls.

"Lived here long?" Trevor asked.

"Four years. I keep meaning to get things, but I never have time to look."

"I bet you don't cook."

"There's nothing in the refrigerator but an echo."

The two stood face to face. Trevor felt a shudder. He looked into Arthur's eyes, dark, intent, peering into Trevor's soul. Trevor took two steps toward him. They held hands, then arms, then embraced. Arthur coughed.

"Lot of cologne. I'm slightly allergic," Arthur said, unbuttoning Trevor's shirt.

"I'll wear none from this moment on."

"Rather smell a man's sweat." He caressed his neck, kissed him below the ear.

"I don't sweat." Trevor smiled.

Arthur held him tight against himself. "You're a beautiful man, you know." Arthur moved down to kiss Trevor's left nipple.

After an hour they found themselves in bed, naked and spent. Two condoms and two towels littered the parquet-tiled floor. Black blinds shut out the streetlight. Arthur's body was slick with sweat. Trevor's body was not. They caressed each other gently.

"I'm thirsty." Arthur sat up in bed.

"Water is all I have. Can I get you a glass?" Arthur sat up slowly.

"You just lie back, sated like a lion after a kill." Trevor walked to the kitchenette.

It seemed cramped, but complete. He looked into the refrigerator. A bare bulb illuminated condiments, jellies and a bottle of spring water. He took the bottle, poured it into a wide glass and replaced the bottle. "Ice," he muttered and opened the door to the freezer.

A male human head stared out at him with steel-blue eyes. Wrapped in a freezer bag, it had the face of a young man. Trevor looked curiously at the short black hair, the

frost-covered ears. The head's pursed lips seemed about to speak. Trevor heard the glass he had held shatter on the floor. He felt cold liquid splash his toes.

"You okay?" He heard from the next room.

"F-fine," Trevor stuttered.

"You didn't. Oh no!"

Trevor jumped over broken glass, ran back into the room and grabbed his clothes from a chair.

Arthur was standing up on the bed, eyes wild, body shaking. "Wait, Trevor."

"Stay back." Trevor gripped the chair. He lifted it, pointed the legs at Arthur.

"Trevor. I can explain."

"Explain what? The human head in the freezer! What is it — leftovers?"

"Trevor. Look at yourself. All you need is a whip and a helmet and you'd be a lion tamer."

"Don't try to humor me. I'm getting out of here and if you know what's good for you, you'll get out too."

He fled, slamming the door behind him. In the hallway an old lady with a walker turned as the naked man ran by, clutching clothes to cover his genitalia. He punched the elevator button, smiled and nodded at the woman, who continued her slow steps down the hall. The door opened and he ran in. Inside he dressed frantically, noting the curved mirror in an upper corner of the car. He ran out. The doorman before his bank of monitors watched, eyebrows raised, as Trevor ran screaming out of the building. On the street he ran

to the nearest phone. He dialed 911. The operator connected him with the police dispatcher. "I've found him," Trevor announced.

"Found who?" The bored voice came back.

"The man you've been looking for. The Piano Bar Killer!" Trevor waited.

"The what? The who?"

"The serial murderer who's been picking gay men up in piano bars, taking them home, chopping them into sizable chunks and dumping their bodies in upstate New York. I was at his house. I — I — never mind that. He picked me up at the Excelsior House. There's a man's head in his freezer." Trevor tapped the top of the pay phone.

"And you saw the alleged head?" the voice came back.

"I saw it and there was nothing alleged about it. I'm talking about actual decapitation, which I believe is still at least a misdemeanor in New York. I got out of there just in time or my head would have been right there too, between his and the bag of frozen vegetable medley." Trevor looked over his shoulder.

Trevor gave directions. A blue cruiser pulled up. A window rolled down. Two cops eyed Trevor. "We heard the story. Can you take us to the building?"

"Certainly. Follow me."

With the grandest sweep possible, Trevor led them in past the confounded door man and up to the door of the apartment. The two drew their guns. One cop knocked at the door. "Police," he shouted.

The door opened. Arthur, fully clothed, dominated the entrance. "I've been expecting you," he said. "I'm sure this man," he pointed at Trevor, "has told you an incredible story."

"I bet he's hidden the head," Trevor said. "Search for blood, trace evidence, that sort of thing."

"Sir, if you'll let me conduct the investigation." The cop turned back to Arthur. "Where's the head? Is there a head? Are you saying he's crazy?"

Arthur let his hands drop. "Come in."

One officer went into the kitchenette while the other covered Arthur. Trevor heard the crunch of glass under heavy boots.

"Thought I'd be your next victim, huh?" Trevor declaimed.

"Sir. I'm going to ask you to keep quiet here," the second cop admonished.

The first cop opened the freezer door. The head had not moved. "Sir. Is this yours?" the officer asked.

"Yes." Arthur shrugged.

"Do you have an explanation for it's being here?"

"I'm a doctor. What you are looking at is a specimen. I am transporting it to a teaching hospital tomorrow." Dr. Wax crossed his arms.

"You have someone to back your story?"

"Call the hospital. I'll give you the number."

"You have authorization?"

"That's where you've got me. I don't. It really shouldn't be here, but the guy who checks out the body parts gets to work after the class starts. Slap the cuffs on. Read me my rights. Haul me in. Whatever it is you have to do."

"I don't think that will be necessary. Give me the name of the hospital and I'll call information. That way you can't give me a fake number with someone you know on the other end."

Trevor stood still, features sinking. "Arthur. I don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

"Never mind. A minor inconvenience, unless it makes the papers."

The cop came back. "The morgue guy corroborated your story. He read from the log book and has one human head checked out to a Dr. Arthur Wax yesterday afternoon. I'll need to see some ID, Dr. Wax. We'll back this up with a detective visit to the hospital. Sir," he turned to Trevor. "I'll need your name and information. Then I think it's better if you leave. Unless he wants to talk to you."

"No. I'll go quietly, officer."

On the street it had started raining. Clouds swirled green and brown in the light of the city. Homeless people, ponchoed with ripped garbage bags, pushed shopping carts. Trevor felt sick to his stomach. Clothes askew, he reached to the skies to pull in a cab.

He sat still in the vinyl seat. "Where?" The driver seemed agitated.

"City morgue, and hurry."

"Where?"

"Downtown. I'll tell you where in a minute."

As the driver hit the gas, Trevor pressed the window button and let the rain hit his face. "A doctor," he muttered. "A doctor, and I let him get away."

13 Halloween in Tribeca

"Philip. Now that you're off the cane, I hoped we'd go to the party as an ensemble. Horse bookends, a fork and knife, a double cheeseburger." Mark whined as he stalked around his apartment.

"Sorry, Mark. I'm going as an exploding jet. Trevor has my costume ready and that's that."

"Then I'm going as nothing," he pouted.

"Then you're not coming with me." Philip said.

"Fine. Then I'll go alone."

"You don't know Jason. It's his party and he's my friend."

"I met him. He knows I'm with you. So there."

"All right. I'll see you there and you can make my night a living hell."

"It *is* Halloween."

"Let me look for something for you to be." Philip went into the bedroom. Mark heard him opening closets, muttering 'This won't do,' and 'No.' Dresser drawers clunked open and shut. The noise ceased.

"Find something?" Mark asked hopefully.

"I think I may have." Philip emerged, holding forth a piece of paper. "What's this? Why do you have my medical records?"

"Oh, curious," Mark prevaricated. I wanted to see what I could find out." Philip impersonated a statue. "All right. It's my job. I trace information and sell it. It's all legal."

"So that's what you do. Spy on people. It can't be legal. There must be some law against it."

"Don't be a child, Philip. I could get it, so I got it. Anyone can if they know what to do."

"Have you hidden my witness as well?"

"Come on, Philip. I may be a spy, but I'm not a thug."

"You're trying to destroy me," Philip said ominously.

"What's a little betrayal between friends?" Mark joked.

"I am not remotely amused. I'm going home now. Don't try to call me. I'll hang up." Philip left. In the elevator he pounded against the car walls.

The dark Tribeca block was empty. Mark heard the music bounce along it. He followed the thump to its source. The address checked. He buzzed and was buzzed in without the usual questions. He climbed the stairs and pushed open a cracked door. He stood at the entrance and stared, impressed. The loft was huge. "Big place," he said to Jason, who emerged from a throng to greet him.

"Great costume," Jason said. Mark had come as himself. Jason was a dancing cigarette pack.

"Is Philip here? He told me to meet him." Mark lied.

"Somewhere in one of my many rooms. Beer's in the fridge." Jason tap-danced off.

Mark added his contribution to the stack inside, taking one for himself. In the kitchen Godzilla and King Kong were talking about independent movies they had worked on. They took no note of him. He wandered through a room. A devil stretched out on a rack, his skin dyed red. Nymphs tickled him with feather dusters. In the bathroom, two angels smoked cigars in the empty tub. In the dining room skeletons and rats nibbled from the food table decorated with skulls and jack o' lanterns. Still no one noticed him. Mark decided that he was invisible.

In the next room he saw the silhouette of a plane. Red and gold streamers fell from the blackened wings. He stalked his prey from behind. "I love you. You know I do," he said. He grabbed him by the wings, turned and kissed his silvered lips. The kiss deepened. Philip must love him.

Mark felt a tap on his shoulder. "Whoever you are, not now!" He glanced back. Another jet stood, more severely damaged. "Philip?"

"This is how I find you." Philip's expression was as fierce as his costume. His fuselage was charred and broken. Steam escaped his cockpit. Sparks flew through holes in his skin.

"Very convincing." Mark dropped the merely burning plane. He fell to the floor. "I. I thought it was you," Mark answered.

"Not very convincing," Philip answered and stalked away. A crowd of ghosts engulfed Philip. Mark fought through them, saw the front door close as he gained the main

room. He descended the stairs to the street. He saw Philip stomp around a corner. Mark ran to catch him.

"Philip!" he called.

Philip turned. His tail broke off on a fire hydrant and rolled into the gutter. "What is it?"

"I love you," Mark said.

"You love me? Fine. Now get away from me. Don't you think you've done enough damage?" The blast of an explosion echoed his sentiment. Flames and smoke burst from his engines.

"Philip. I swear. I never meant to hurt you." Mark stopped. 'Can't laugh at this. Must not laugh,' he warned himself. "Come on. I'll take you home and we'll talk about it."

Philip let his wings droop. "Okay, but I'm not promising anything."

Mark hailed a passing cab. The driver slowed and rolled down his window. He scowled deeply. "Sorry." He shook his head. "No smoking in the car. It's the law." He moved away.

"All right, then," Mark said. "We'll walk. You're in no condition to fly."

Mark helped Philip off with his wreckage and disrobed. Undressed, the two climbed into bed. "You want to talk, I'm here," Philip said.

"If you want to break up over a stupid kiss."

"I'll think about it." He picked up the remote and turned on the television. "You know, our one month anniversary was Tuesday."

Mark groaned. "Has it been that long?" Philip turned away from him. "Wait a minute. You're counting from the accident. If we count from our first date, it's not until Monday. We'll do something then."

"What."

"I don't know what. You pick something."

"I don't want to pick anything. You plan it."

"Fine. I will."

"Okay, then."

"Okay."

On public access there was a representative from a major AIDS service organization being rather cagey on the subject of oral sex. The host spoke, a refined, soft-spoken man. "So the question remains: to suck or not to suck?"

The answers came out in an odd fashion. Studies that showed extremely minimal risk. Primate studies showed lack of transmission even with cuts in the mouth. Something about saliva that seemed to protect people from the virus.

"Depending on the shape your mouth is in, depending on how heavily you go at it..." he was saying. There were a lot of depending on's. Was any of it true? Was it safe? Friends were retesting negative. Medicine would call that anecdotal evidence, but what did

that mean? Were these anecdotes like, 'I was walking down the street when this wino came up to me and said...?'

Mark had qualms, but had decided that within limits — no coming in his mouth, no lengthy deep throat sessions — the practice was okay. He liked giving that pleasure, having a guy squirm beneath him. The act for some reason was always seen as submissive in every porn movie he had seen. He saw it as extremely dominant. It gave him a certain power over a lover's pleasure. The other had to give in, had to submit to what he was doing to him. He could think of nothing more active.

Tonguing, kissing, licking. Slurping, grunting, gagging. Why they called it a blow job was beyond him. Blowing, as in blowing bubbles, rarely entered into it. Giving head. As long as you give it back. He couldn't shake the image of decapitation. Heads will roll. Here is the head of your last wife, sire. Your head or mine? Sucking. Closer, like sucking a milkshake through a straw, a token from a subway turnstile.

Heterosexual men allowed to come inside during vaginal sex if they used condoms. Gay men were not during anal sex. Was it that the anus was not as tight as the vagina, thus tending to potential condom slippage? Then just say it then. Buildings would not crumble. What about heterosexual anal sex? That never happens. Never I tell you, never. Why different rules for different couplings? Roll over and go to sleep.

Mark remembered posters from men's rooms in gay bars: naked men held up condoms under the blunt slogan Use it Every Time. Every what time? Every time he jerked off Philip? Every time he got on his knees and opened his mouth? Every time Philip

rested his ankles on Mark's shoulders? Yeah, at least that last. Humans interpret rules, people refuse to do what they're told. The outcome would be decided later, by statisticians. Death, having entered the room, had been asked to sit and negotiate. Sex was easy again, no questions, no fear. Love was inconvenient, time-consuming, and didn't pay. Life was simple: gym drink dance, drugs sex shopping. Repeat.

Mark climbed under the covers, put his lips to the tip of Philip's penis.

14 Derek Channels an Entity

Derek's voice issued from Mark's answering machine heavy, breathy, strained. "I'm going to that church," he said, "and I'd like you to join me there. I called them and they've set up a special session for me. They said it will help me resolve the issues of my life. Be there this afternoon at 2, on East 4th Street, near Avenue B." Mark looked at his watch.

"One-fifty. Screw it." He ran down the stairs, jogged through the streets as addicts turned and stared. Panting, sweating he saw a storefront door. No windows broke the purple painted brick. Mark read the sign. Solar Enlightenment Church: Your Past Life's Not Your Fault. We Can Help. Mark knocked gently on the metal door. It creaked open. A blonde woman in a long orange dress motioned him in. She pressed a finger to her lips for silence.

"It's fifteen dollars to experience this session," she whispered. Mark grudgingly dug the cash out. "Thanks a lot. I'm Darla, in case you want to talk to someone later." She put the bills in a basket and handed him off to a spectacled man. The usher had on a green robe tied with a purple sash. He seated him in a folding chair, shoved a pamphlet at him and left. The room was half-filled with odd characters from the neighborhood each in a loose-fitting garment of some pastel hue. They all faced forward, still and meditative in their poses. The room was gloomy, lit only by candles. Smoky incense burned on a stone slab. On a small stage stood two churchy chairs with carved oaken backs set off behind a podium. A backdrop depicted pyramids with flying saucers hovering above. Religious symbols marked

the saucers: an ankh, an ohm, a t'ai chi, a cross, a star of David, the crescent moon and star. A group of musicians on one side beat drums and shook rattles. A dreadlocked man played a flute. They exuded 'none of the above' music. It was not quite jazz, not quite tribal, not quite music.

Mark felt a small tickle in and coughed. He saw the woman at the door scowl down at him. He stifled the cough, but incense smoke burned the back of his throat. He saw a water cooler in the back, stole off to it, filled a cone cup and drank. A drop fell into his windpipe. He hacked and rasped. "Shhhh," the woman shushed. He got more water and went back to his seat.

The lights dimmed. A man with beaded hair and baggy orange overalls emerged from the curtain to the right of the platform. He stood before the podium and intoned. "Om nam dim sum hum-drum conundrum, amen." The congregation responded with a repeat of the chant. "Hello. I am the Reverend John Starmountain. Welcome, brothers and sisters, to the ultimate totally eclectic Solar Enlightenment Church, with thirty-one branches around the globe. We are growing daily. Don't forget. The world ends every night and is reborn each day at dawn. One day the differences between religions will fall away, age-old divisions will crumble and all world faiths will join as one. You, my friends, are the very first drops in this coming wave, a wave that will sweep away disunity and bring harmony to all on this one big earth, this blue green globe we call our home." Mark looked to his right, where a young man's blissful upturned face reflected a secret rapture as his lips mouthed 'one big earth' silently. Mark felt a wave of nausea. He let it pass.

"Today, we will move beyond our usual text and sermon, toward a deeper revelation of the truths of the teachings of our Church. I have recently been doing some deep spiritual work with a young man who came to me in despair and hopelessness. Yes, he is sadly approaching the end of his time on this earth. Do not pity him. From the moment we are born we are dying. The measure of life is not in its years or hours, but in its meaning. And so, with all of us together on this quest, he seeks the answer to the questions 'What's it all about?' and 'Why am I here on the planet?' Some of you have had sessions with me, and you know what happens in them. In the case of this young man, however, something beyond anything I've ever experienced happened. I'm not going to tell you what that is. You'll see for yourselves soon enough, for this wonderful man has consented to share his revelation with us all."

John Starmountain turned to motion Derek on stage. Derek inched on, head bent to watch his steps. With effort he sat in a chair. Mark swallowed hard, stared sorrowfully at his friend. Muscles tensed. He clenched his fists.

"Derek. Focus on the candle before you. Let your ego be lost in its fire, burned away. Let your eyelids close but do not sleep. Relax. Relax," the man intoned. Mark felt his shoulders drop, so soft and lulling was the voice. "You are one with the candle's fire, falling backward into a deep and endless chasm, falling, falling." Mark started to nod forward, caught himself, and looked to his left. Darla sat at the end of his row, snoring softly with eyes closed. Mark saw Derek's head loll forward. He sat up, rigid, staring blankly ahead.

The Reverend Starmountain spoke in a throaty whisper. "Who are you?"

In a voice that seemed to issue from another dimension, resonant, deep in tone, Derek answered. "I am Tau Ceti. I am a disembodied entity floating through the cosmos. I have chosen this earthly body to speak with humanity, for disaster is at hand if the planet does not hearken to my message."

The Reverend Starmountain responded, "We are here. We are listening. Tell us that we all may learn and know and tell others."

Derek's mouth moved. His friend was channeling a trans-dimensional entity. Mark looked closely for strings. "Tau Ceti takes it's name from the star where humans will find a new home. You must build starships and sail to that star, unless the destruction of the rain forest stops at once. You are destroying the earth. All these things — AIDS, breast and prostate cancer, cities made uninhabitable by toxic waste and nuclear radiation — are but signs of impending doom. The unfortunate sufferers of today are but canaries in the coal mine of your world. The deity has given you a wonderful planet, and yet you ruin it and make constant war with each other. How are you to evolve in consciousness and realize the divinity within you if you cannot live together and as one with the earth?"

"Tell us, what should we do?" The reverend fixed his gaze on the congregation members in a knowing sweep.

"Recycle, for one thing. Cans, bottles, newspaper. Just as souls are recycled by the universe and return to the realm of physical manifestation, so plastic bottles may return as park benches, glass may come back as sparkling pavement for roadway, and newspaper may

show up again as bus transfers and the like. Also, buy earth friendly products made from natural substances, wear sandals that do not hamper your natural posture, and commit yourselves to the establishment of this wonderful institution, the Church of Solar Enlightenment."

"I am now going to open this up for questions from the audience," the Reverend said.

"Are you an enlightened entity?" The snoozing woman had woken to throw out an easy question.

"I am one of the many enlightened entities that has stopped short of leaving this plane of existence in order to watch over and protect the earth. I shall not disperse what you might call my personality, although indeed I am composed of many former souls, until humankind has discovered the way to peace and the road to spiritual growth. All of you may channel any entity that has touched this land via the morphic thought fields encoded in every rock, especially crystals. Even myths of dragons are part of every culture because of the mineral recordings of dinosaurs who left their energy fields imprinted in the very soil, in the ferns that later became coal. Gods and demons, angels and monsters are all thought forms derived from actual spiritual and physical forms that surround the planet. Someday this spiritual geography will be mapped like the terrain is mapped today. Centers like Stonehenge and Easter Island are well know contact points between the temporal and the invisible and even visitors from space. This gathering creates its own spiritual center. Thus I am among you. Tau Ceti now awaits the next inquiry."

A younger blonde woman in a flowing chartreuse summer dress rose hesitantly.

"My boyfriend won't go out and have fun with me anymore. He just sits at home and watches cop shows."

Tau Ceti raised his hand to cut her off. "I deal only with global and not personal problems, but I will say this. Whenever we have a conflict in our love relationship, it is due to the difference in frequencies between the two partners. Certainly people will vibrate at different rates due to the number of lives they've lived on the planet and respective spiritual growth. It is necessary then to bring the two tunings into some sort of vibrational harmony. If a piano is out of tune we call a tuner. If love is out of harmony summon a counselor.

"Love is a quest between two people to find their higher, more realized selves. If one is doing all the work of the relationship, the other should rent the movies or do the dishes. If one is constantly saying to the other 'I see your potential to love and grow' and the other wants to grow larger on the sofa, the seeker must accept the limitations of the other, or seek in the personal columns. From their descriptions, many wonderful people are to be found there. I also hear that bars in your culture are a good place to find romance. Being a higher entity I've never had reason to try myself.

"One might see disharmony as due to planetary misalignments, sunspots and the like. Much as it may hurt to abandon love, this may be the best outcome. Ask yourself the question: can I allow the other person individuality, different temperament or even irritating personal habits without these things impinging on my well-being? Does my beloved answer questions honestly or do I find strange phone numbers written on cocktail napkins? Does

the beloved make me feel loved or is that my right hand? Meditate deep within your soul for several weeks. Call all of your friends at inconvenient hours, burdening them with your difficulties. The answer will emerge. Tau Ceti has spoken."

A calm man in a yellow raincoat stood up. "Tau Ceti?" he said. "What is the next plane of existence to which I shall graduate?"

"Yes, seeker of wisdom. Again, I am bothered by a personal question." The voice gained a wry, teasing quality. "I see your next incarnation as that of a giant toad on the planet Bog. Do not fear, for they are enlightened amphibians and they say the flies are tasty. You see, we may envision the stages of the evolution of the soul on this planet as corresponding to the nine planets of the solar system. Each represents, and you will find this in Western Astrology, a certain ancient god or goddess who is a symbol of a certain archetype of the human character. Thus Mercury represents the communicator and the trickster, Venus is the passionate lover, Jupiter the fiery ruler of the heavens, Mars the great warrior and Uranus is the bliss of heaven. He was the sky-god, you see. Find your archetype. Buy one if necessary. Study its treatment by many cultures and strive for fulfillment in it. When you have perfected one, die. Then get reborn and collect the whole set. One day you will harmonize with the cosmos. I'm not sure what that means, but it sounds good. Tau Ceti has spoken."

Reverend Starmountain cleared his throat. "Do we have another question?" he asked in his mellow voice.

Mark jumped out of his seat. "Can you describe a typical day floating around deep space?" The woman hissed in his direction. "No. I'm serious. What is it you enlightened beings do all day? Wait to take possession of weak, defenseless peoples' bodies? Use them to prop up low rent New Age churches? Am I missing something here? Is this show of total indignity, perpetrated on a man who needs his mind to stay alive, is this for something beyond the promotion of this wacko huckster?"

John Starmountain broke in. "The connection is breaking up. Tau Ceti must depart."

To his left Mark caught sight of the fingers of the woman's hands as they reached toward his throat. He felt them, bony but strong. He broke her grip and lunged forward, knocking metal chairs and angry followers away with arms and elbows. He reached the stage. As he mounted it, a man grabbed his foot. He sprawled forward. His right shoulder connected with the upper part of the podium. Poorly built, it caved in, taking the Reverend John Starmountain down with it. Wood cracked. Microphone feedback sliced through the room. As congregation members covered their ears, Mark scrambled forward toward Derek, now slumped over in his chair. Mark gained his feet, scooped Derek up like an oversized doll. He jumped down a few steps, ran along the side aisle and pushed the front door open. Mark, carrying Derek, jogged up the block, pursued by the rabble in rainbow outfits.

He ducked into the nearest bar, deposited Derek at a booth. Through the glass doors Mark could see the milling mob outside, unsure of their next move. A large tattooed

bouncer in a leather vest stared at them grimly. The man opened the door. "You all want a drink, come on in. You want to look, you're blocking traffic." Cowed, they shuffled away out of sight. The bouncer turned to Mark. "Looks like a close call. They might have done something drastic, like rework your wardrobe."

Across the table Derek came to. "Where am I?"

"A bar. Where *were* you is more the question."

"Oh. I don't know. I went down there, to the church I mean. I didn't want to tell you. I thought you'd call me crazy. I've been going there for meetings the last three Saturdays. Starmountain said he was going to hypnotize me, take me through a past life regression. It must have been hours. I woke up on that stage." Derek gave Mark a bewildered, lost look.

"Why would you consent to that?"

"Maybe —. I don't know. He said it might help me understand why all this suffering, why all this misery, why life might be worth the pain." Derek's eyes were glazed, as if focused on a point beyond the walls.

"You okay?"

"Thirsty. Burning." Derek winced. Mark felt his head.

"You are burning. You want to go home?"

"There's a card in my wallet. Call my doctor. I think I need to go to the hospital,"

Derek said. Mark sat up, stared for a second, then moved.

14.1 Mark Consults a Psychic

Mark heard a pounding on the door. "Who the hell is it?" he asked.

"Rozena, your downstairs neighbor." Mark looked through the peephole. Her cherubic face swelled in the lens.

"Just a minute." He threw on a bathrobe and greeted her. "You want coffee?"

"Sure." She took a seat at the red formica kitchen table while he poured.

"Rozena, you're a phone psychic. I can ask you a question, can't I?"

"For five bucks a minute, sure."

"My friend Derek got lured into this Solar Enlightenment Church and they hypnotized him and made him channel some entity. Now he's in the hospital again. I've got to get ready and go there. Don't worry. I've got a minute for you, sweetheart."

"The Solar Enlightenment Church? You gotta watch them. They have some crazy ideas about the end of the world coming."

"That makes them normal. This channeling thing, it's all a crock, right?"

"Not if you believe in it. There are legit people who think they're in contact with spirits that have passed on." Rozena leaned back in her chair.

"I just can't take any of this stuff seriously. You give your doubt away and bang, you're under the spell of some guy out to exploit you. Everyone says they know the definite absolute truth, and they all say completely different things."

"You've got to find your spiritual center, then you'll know what's real and what's fake."

"I'm not sure I have a spiritual center, or even a marshmallow center. I subscribe to the Hollow Person Theory."

"Then who are you?"

"A product of my culture, like processed cheese food product."

"No. You are a piece of the divine manifest in flesh."

"Sounds a bit archaic. Could we say, rather, that I'm a serving of the omelet made from the Cosmic Egg?"

"You're being facetious."

"Facetius, wasn't he the Roman emperor after Nero? I suppose he could be a past life."

Rozena frowned at the coffee. "Got any soy milk?"

"Sorry, only cow squeezings. Take it black myself most times. Look," he said. "I don't really go for all this stuff."

"You have to open up your chakras," Rozena told him.

"Sorry, but my chakra opener broke on a can of tuna last week. All this mumbo jumbo amuses me. It's nice to think of lovely beings floating around in the sky, but all I see are clouds up there. Sure, jigsaw puzzle skies can seem lovely on the right day. It scares me to think of invisible hands getting mixed up in my business. Hard enough to follow the

weather forecast without worrying about whether the gods and water sprites are with you on a particular day."

"This is all about this particular incarnation. In this life your soul has chosen not to bother with spiritual issues. It has other things to accomplish," Rozena said.

"Most religions seem to have an answer to everything. Can't we live with doubt, with not knowing? When butterflies die, do they go to butterfly heaven, come back as panda bears?"

"Uh huh," she said.

"Look at all the killing religions seem to inspire, although I think most teach that killing is wrong. Why does God seem to be on everyone's side in a war?"

"I'm not talking about mainstream religion. I'm talking about spirituality."

"I don't see the difference. The superior attitude of people walking out of the natural foods store is tangible, like they're wrapped in this aura that only they can know about. I've seen spiritual and self-help fads pop up and then vanish. It's another industry. It should be publicly traded: Buy stock in karma, it's bound to go up. I intend to stay a horrible infidel until my deathbed conversion to Zoroastrianism."

Rozena chuckled. "Now you have love in your life, don't you think something good has to be at work?"

"You know, Rozena. I haven't had the easiest ride in life. I've found cruelty, betrayal, duplicity, the common jerks of the world in general. When one amazingly good thing happens, do I forget the rest? People spared from tornadoes always thank a divinity

who must have clobbered their neighbors for no apparent reason. Take in the fact I almost killed the man I love. No guilt in that. Not a trace."

"There's good and bad in everything, everybody. That's about the yin and the yang of it, baby Mark." Rozena exuding knowingness. "That will be forty-five dollars for the consultation."

"Funny. That's what I charge for coffee." Mark responded.

Mark felt past belief in even New Age philosophy. Visions could be biochemically explained. Some resulted from by drugs, some from deprivations of sleep and food. Witness cult practices of denying both food and sleep, the ancient ascetic excursions into the wilds. Seek a vision and one's brain would happily provide it. Not that insight was absent, but that its attribution was questionable. Mark noted that he dreamed every night. A musical number might spring from a conversation he had during the day. UFOs might land in a football stadium because he read an article. Were waking dreams more trustworthy?

In history, people invaded others out of sheer bloodlust and greed. Their moral excuses came after they had done everyone in for their own good and could no longer argue the point. Thus Cortez massacred the Aztecs in order to stop human sacrifice. Benighted peoples had to be enslaved to save their souls. He had no problem with religion as comfort, community, tradition, intuitive knowledge, personal truth. Too often faith had become a bludgeon against non-followers, a pretext for war, murder, torture, hatred. If he was

supposed to respect other people's choice of beliefs, no matter how strange to him, why could they not allow him his choice not to believe?

Evolution had happened, was still happening. The earth orbited the sun, itself a small star in a big universe. Volcanoes, earthquakes and lightning storms were due to physics, not wrath from above or below. Churches had been demonstrably wrong on these major points. Why not others? As science began to explain things, the domain of the Deity had shrunk considerably. He could not actually make a mountain, but He could make the physics that made the mountain, step back and watch it happen. God was rapidly becoming underemployed. Quantum theory queered the picture, but Mark would leave speculation to the theorists. A table was a table; a planet a planet. A pencil's molecules might not be where one would expect. As long as it kept a point and wrote, why worry about it? Human beings were not unique. Chimps could, if not talk, at least make their preference of fruit known, which seemed close enough. Many humans could not do more. To Mark, if the universe was a divine creation, it was at best an explosion in God's laboratory and everyone was still suffering the consequences.

14.2 Mark Goes to See Derek

Mark's footsteps echoed softly down tan tiled corridors. He stopped at room 999. His knock resounded on the wooden door. "Come in," Derek's voice was faint inside. He opened and entered.

A man in a hospital white jacket looked up. "See you later." Derek smiled and nodded. The man spoke to Mark. "I was just going." He reached out his hand. "Arthur Wax."

Mark shook it. "Mark Milano."

"Milano, Milano. Where do I know that name from?" Mark cringed. The doctor smiled coolly, whispered "See you later," and left the room.

Mark took a brown chair. The other bed in the room was empty. "See you have a bit of privacy this time," he said. "What's the word?"

Derek stared out the window, eyes glazed, face stiff and drawn. He turned toward Mark. "They said it's a good thing you got me here when you did. I was near a total collapse. You see, they keep running these tests and running these tests and they still don't know. They pick a diagnosis like a joker in a card trick. They work with that and see what happens. Then they come up with a better idea. It's not the kind of science I learned." He clenched a fist, brought it down on the railing of the bed. "They get one thing taken care of and just then there's another thing. The latest thing is there's something going on with my liver. It's serious. It looks like this may be it. They said maybe two months."

"They said that before and you came back," Mark offered, mixing hope with resignation.

"They say if they can stabilize me... That means keeping me in here for a few days. Then I guess I get back to something resembling normalcy, then on to the next crisis. I don't want it to happen like that. I want to be home. I want to go quietly. I've made out

the living will, but then who can say when it's extreme and when there's a real chance? I could hang on months like this, but I can't face the pain anymore, the knowing that this is it and it doesn't really get any better. If the highs were higher maybe, if the lows weren't so impossibly low. I don't want to leave you with that decision. I want it up to me and me alone."

"I told you I'd take on that responsibility when the time came."

"If I had any family alive I'd never have asked you to. What, you're going to walk in on me in a coma and say: 'That's it. Pull the plug.'? It's too much responsibility."

"And the other thing you're asking for — that isn't?"

"I know. I know. Damn I'm so sick, so miserable. I'm really hurting, but today I look out and the world's back in focus. I can think clearly. It's like I'm in this fog most of the time. I don't know if it's the painkillers, my brain or what, but it's like everything's a dream world. While I have this moment of clarity I want to know what I'm doing and do it."

"I can't argue with you, Derek. I'm selfish. I want you around." Gaunt, Derek's body denied the image of recovery Mark had been holding in his mind. At one time Derek had been lithe, muscular, defined. When he took off his shirt, faces turned in delight or envy. He would fill out again, grow stronger, brighter. He would become, if not well, then better than he was. His cheeks had hollows within the outline of bones. Mark knew. Derek would not get well. "Give me time," he said. "Give me time. I'm having trouble letting go."

"I wish I had it to give, Mark. I wish I had it to give." Mark took Derek's hand, held it gently. "Thanks for the rescue," Derek said. "The channeling might have been real, it might have been hypnotically induced, but it nearly killed me." He sipped juice through a straw in a box, then stopped. "Did you go home?"

"Yeah," Mark answered reluctantly.

"Did you get it?" Derek's eyes focused lasers on him.

"I got it. I've had it for a while."

"Oh. You didn't tell me." Derek said, gripping Mark's hand.

"I didn't want to." He sighed, let go of Derek's hand and picked up the phone. "I have to call Philip. We're having dinner. We've been together a month."

"How's that going?"

"Okay, I guess. Strange." Mark shrugged.

"Better strange than not at all." Their eyes met.

The down arrow glowed red. The hospital's wide elevator opened with a ding. "Ninth floor. Going down," a robotic voice boomed. He walked on to its stained orange carpet, caught sight of Derek's doctor inside.

"Hello, there, uh, Dr. Wax. Doesn't look good, does it?" Mark said to him.

"Afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss. If it's any consolation, there are worse cases on the corridor." He set his jaw, looked at his watch. The doors opened.

"Lower Level, going up," the elevator said.

Mark started out, but stopped himself. "This isn't the lobby," he said. A white tiled hall presented itself. He read the sign marked Morgue.

The doctor turned. "Sorry. I should have pressed the button for you."

The elevator doors hit Mark hard, then recoiled. "Doors closing. Please stand back," the canned voice warned. Mark sank against the elevator wall. The doors closed again. He pounded the button for the lobby.

15 Mark Does the Deed

Derek sat propped up by a triangular pillow. Next to him, Mark unpacked the metal case. He put on latex gloves. "You know it's for the fingerprints," Mark said. He wiped the surface of the case clean with a paper towel.

Derek chuckled. "Funny, but I understand. Not that it will do any good."

The shelves around him that once housed art books now contained stacks of medications. Derek had had to learn a new vocabulary of drug names that featured the rarer letters of the alphabet.

"I shouldn't do this. There should be a doctor."

"Mark. I've stuck enough fucking tubes in my arm. I can handle one more." Derek frowned and shook his head.

"Hope you're getting all this, Philip." He shot a glance back at Philip, holding the camera.

"Mark, I'm not taping now. I want you to keep quiet once the, once the thing starts."

"Great, everyone's telling me what to do," Mark said, irritated. "You might as well know. I'm from a long line of killers, Philip. My dad did away with my mother a few years back. Inoperable brain cancer. Euthanasia case, just like this one. That's why he never comes into the city, why I haven't taken you to meet him. He's under house arrest for the

next couple of decades. He was a designer of medical devices. He built this handy lovely.

Vast improvement on the old model. Where do I plug in this infernal machine?"

"In my butt hole," Derek said.

"Awfully cantankerous for someone who's gained spiritual enlightenment." Mark found the outlet.

"I don't know a thing I didn't know before, which was nothing. It's time to roll the dice and take my chances. If there turns out to be an afterlife, I have a few select words for whoever's in charge, try ten thousand years' worth. What if we blow a fuse?"

"It's got a battery backup. That's why it's so heavy."

Philip sat in a worn armchair, hid his face behind his camera.

"How's the lighting?" Derek asked. "Do I need some makeup?"

"The lighting sucks and you look perfectly awful," Mark cut him off. "This is supposed to be reality."

"What about the editing, the post production? You got that lined up?" Derek wondered.

"All taken care of," Philip said in a quiet voice.

"Sorry to put you through all this," Mark apologized. "You had the camera."

"What about the experimental gay film festival? Did you call them? Am I in?"

Derek's voice rasped.

"We had to keep it quiet. Philip can get us on the program." Mark uncoiled wires and tubing. He watched the display spark to life. Red and green bulbs flickered. "I'll back

off now, Philip, and you take a shot of just the device." Philip complied, then shut off the camera.

"Derek?" Philip asked. "Could you turn the clock radio toward me. I want to get the time along with the machine and everything." Derek adjusted it.

Mark velcroed a sleeve around Derek's forearm, taped electrodes to his temples and chest. He held forth the two spikes leading to two tubes. "The yellow one's the painkiller. You hit the yellow button over here first. You count to twenty and then you hit the blue button. I'll make a motion so we won't record any noise. Insert the tubes. Read your statement."

Mark backed away and cued Philip, who started the camera. Philip recorded Derek idly looking for working veins. He fixed one tube then another with quick jabs through his skin. He taped them fast. Reaching with his right hand, he felt for a sheet of paper on the bed.

I Derek Cornelius, being of sound mind, if not body," he read, "wish to take my own life." He looked up. "I would have had a party, invited all my friends, but this kind of thing is still forbidden, and so must be done in secret." He returned to his paper. "Given the fact that there is very little that can be done for me, I have decided on this course of action of my own free will without any undue influence from others. There's more here, and you'll find a copy with my lawyer. It's signed and dated, tied with a ribbon. Perhaps people will think I'm a coward not to fight all the way. I deny that concept. I want control over how, when and where I die. I've felt helpless too long. Maybe this is the only small measure of

power left to me. Before I become unable to decide for myself, let me use it." He folded the paper and placed it to one side.

Philip moved in. Derek pressed the yellow button. His lips counted silently to twenty. He pressed the blue button. He closed his eyes and lay back in the bed. "Nothing's happening," he muttered dazedly. "Nothing's..." he trailed off. The machine beeped and pinged like a diving submarine. Lines wavered and in moments fell flat. The heart rate monitor stilled, the brain activity display died. Philip moved back, then zoomed in on the clock. It showed 10:30 a.m. He moved back to the machine, back to Derek's face, fallen, lifeless. He stopped the tape. "That's it," Philip said.

Mark picked up the phone and dialed the number in his hand. "Dr. Wax? Hello? I'm sorry. Your signal broke up for a second. This is Mark at Derek's house. He's dead. Yes. He went quietly. What? No. I don't know who to call next. You will. Thank you. Yes? I'm going home. The super is downstairs in apartment 1-A. I'm going home. You have the number? I'll wait there until you call. Thanks again. I know, but it had to be done."

Mark unhooked the machine, leaving tubes behind. Philip picked up his equipment and the two left quietly.

It wasn't until Mark reached the street that the sobbing started, deep, upwelling from a spring of sorrow he had never let surface. Tears, yes, but more, a shuddering, a shaking at his core overtook him. Philip held him, let him collapse into his arms, let his tears fall on his shoulder, and knew it was not enough. Philip allowed the first wave to subside, then got

him into a cab and drove him the few blocks to Mark's building. He brought him upstairs, let him fall on the sofa. Philip left the apartment, heard the door lock behind him. Numb, Philip wandered by a movie house, bought a ticket for the next show. The darkness of the theater enclosed him. He lost himself in the play of shadows on the cave wall.

16 Unexpected Arrivals

That November night wind whistled in the eaves, penetrated cracks in the clapboard. Belle held Valerie close as they drowsed. Midnight chimed on the big clock downstairs. Their eyes half-opened at the same moment. Belle pressed her forefinger to her lips. "Shh. Listen to the wind." Its soft susurrations spoke of nothing and everything, whispered with the breath of oncoming winter. The Arctic cleared its throat, soon to howl and bay like a dog at moonrise.

Valerie nuzzled closer to Belle. "Cold. So cold up here." She saw her breath turn to white fog above the patchwork quilt.

"Something else, if you listen," Belle said.

"I don't hear anything. What you talking about, you crazy woman?" Valerie scrunched her face.

"From nothing comes something. From Winter comes Spring. From an acorn an oak and all that."

Valerie sat upright in the bed. She stared out the window. Snowflakes fell. "Your not talking about it's the first snow and the window's open?"

"That too, but it's only a flurry."

"I refuse to believe it. It is not possible."

"Is too." Belle smiled.

"You're knocked up, aren't you?" Valerie fell flat on her back. She felt the earth open.

Belle straddled her, pounded on her chest. "Thanks for the romantic thought."

"But Belle. You're a woman. I'm a woman."

"Not biologically."

"Oops. I forgot. Although, once I thought I was pregnant by Joey, but the strip didn't turn blue. I would never have a kid by that man. You're gonna keep it, right? Not gonna flush it?"

"Valerie. Don't talk that way. You want me to get rid of it?" Belle slumped.

"Of course I do. What do I want with some God-knows what brat thing running around after me?"

"Your tenderness is too much for me."

"Joking! Sorry. Listen, Belle. I want it if you want it. I know you do. Oh my God! I'm gonna be a mother. I can make it earn its strained peas, manage it, put it in baby commercials. We'll make it earn its keep." She glowed for a moment.

"You're not exploiting the baby, Valerie." Belle was adamant.

"Come on. Every parent does. Why not me?"

"April needs a little sibling, you know. Someone to play with, talk to, go to years of psychotherapy with when she grows up."

Valerie got up and paced. "What the hell are we gonna tell people around here? You think we should try for virgin birth? Maybe not. That story only works once. The second time around, people start to get suspicious."

"I'm not a virgin."

"Yeah, right. That's out. Thief in the night? The plumber? No. She's not even that butch. Um. What about you went into town and got drunk with some stupid jock and couldn't resist a quick roll. We'll go into town tomorrow night, get you a hotel room, and I'll come home crying."

"What about the telling the truth?"

"You ever heard of being stoned to death? I'm talking about actual jagged rocks coming at you fifty miles an hour. Brains gushing out of your ears. That sort of thing."

"They might understand if you give them a chance. They're good women." Belle brightened.

"Oh. Uh-huh. Ah-ha. Make me laugh, why don't you? I'd say we've got a good two months. How far along are you?"

"About six or seven weeks. I was missing my monthly visitor. The strip did turn blue."

"Okay, less. We slip out in the middle of the night." She opened a drawer. "I'll start packing now."

"And go where?"

"I hear there's a whole new frontier opening up in Greenland these days. We'll get up, crack of dawn, hunt seal and sleep in an igloo. I could get used to it. I got used to this, so it's just a small step down to the total primitive thing."

"Be real."

"Real? You realize who you're talking to? What? I'm gonna go back to drag performing to support a kid? Nothing doing. I want welfare. Steady checks and me with the food stamps and the old Spanish ladies at the Associated Supermarket buying bags of green plantains. Government housing. Polishing my nails, screaming at stupid inbred mountain people from the Ozarks on talk shows every day. That's what I call living!"

"I knew I'd get nowhere with you." Belle crossed her arms.

Valerie threw herself on the bed. "Belle. I'm sorry. It's all too soon. We're strangers to each other. We don't even know each other's real names. We'll have to give the kid an alias as soon as it's out. We'll call it Baby X, keep a mask on it day and night so we can't recognize it. Send it to school that way. We can rig it up with a voice scrambler so's it can talk like chipmunks gargling with mayonnaise. At ten years old we'll give it plastic surgery and get it adopted by a childless couple in the witness protection program. It can join one of those Latin American guerrilla armies when it grows up. It'll be used to a life in hiding."

"Valerie. Will you stop and listen to the wind. It's calling Valerie, Va-a-a-alerie."

"Then close the window." Valerie asked.

"No. Night air is good for the baby," Belle answered.

"Yeah, if it's gonna be a werewolf. Frankly, that wouldn't surprise me in the least."

Valerie drew breath, sighed a deep, forlorn sigh, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

"Val? Va-a-al. Oh Va-a-a-a-al!" A voice drifted through the open window.

Valerie sat up in bed. "Oh my God! No!" She climbed threw off the quilt and looked out the window. A figure stood in the driveway, dressed in a suit and black trenchcoat. "Joey!"

Belle looked over her shoulder. "Who's Joey? The guy you're hiding from?"

"Yeah. That's him, the worm. How did he find me up here in no man's land?" She threw on a robe and placed her feet in her slippers. With her back to Belle, Valerie pulled a key from its hiding place and opened a dresser drawer with it. "You stay here," she said, and ran out of the room.

Joey saw the front door open. Valerie emerged in to the yellow glow of the porch. The screen door shushed and closed behind her. She stood, hands in her robe pockets, shoulders rigid against the cold and stark fear.

"There you are, Val." Joey crossed his arms. The gold of his wedding ring glinted faintly. "Gee. You know I've been looking for you all over. Even asked your Aunt Lucille a few questions."

"What did you do to her?" Valerie screamed.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. She'll be fine. She just fell down while we were having tea and rum cakes. You know how old people are. They lose their coordination. I'm sure the hip replacement will be work out fine."

Valerie strode down the stone steps. "You monster. Get out of here. I don't want anything to do with you. I'm not the same person any more. You can't have me and you can't smack Val around anymore. I won't let you."

"Val. Darling. You're scaring me. What kind of language is that to use toward the man who loves you?" Joey smiled.

"You've got a wife. Go back to her."

"Yeah, Val, but she can't give me what I get from you." Joey cackled. "You know I need you."

"I'm telling you to leave, Joey. I've got a better life here than Val ever had with you."

Joey looked from side to side. "Wait a minute. I'm talking to Valerie, now?"

"You got it."

"Valerie, darling. It's been a while, hasn't it? You know you can't stay around forever. Sooner or later Val has to come back with me, and maybe get some help with the problem of you."

"Joey, you swore you wouldn't tell. I'm not gonna be worked out like a kink in a muscle. You can't kill me, Joey. I won't let you."

"If I stick around you long enough, Valerie, you realize you'll have to go away.

Remember the last time?" Joey was smug, menacing.

"These women are my family." Valerie began to shake. 'Joey?' she heard a weak, fearful voice ask. 'Quiet,' she thought to herself. 'Quiet.'

"Oh yeah?" Joey snickered softly. "This herd of cows? Yeah, well what are your dyke-ass friends gonna think when I tell them what you really are?"

"Joey. I'm warning you." Valerie's eyes fixed on him. She followed his gaze as he looked behind her. The women in the house had gathered at the windows. Selene peered through the doorway.

"What are they gonna think, Val? What are they gonna do to you when I tell them you're a —." A shot pierced the night and Joey's ribcage. " — m-a-a-a-a," was all he got out before his legs gave way. His large body slumped quietly into the gravel.

Selene, gathering her purple robe to herself, came out of the house. The others followed closely in various states of undress.

"Oh my dear Goddess! Valerie, what have you done?" Selene hovered, examining Joey's form against the crushed blue stone. His eyes bulged open. His tongue hung out.

Valerie angled the gun and blew across the opening of the barrel. "I've just taken the last animal's life I'm going to take on this planet." She returned the gun to the pocket of her robe. The women surrounded the body. Its open eyes stared at the stars.

"Think quick. The neighbors might have heard. They might show up." Harrie seemed agitated. She wore boxers and a T-shirt.

"We'll say it was one of the motorcycles backfiring if that happens," Shela, in her red union suit, offered.

"Good one. We've got to get him inside somewhere." Dierdre seemed cool to it all. She buttoned cloth pajamas.

"Put him in the barn. A little blood in there will look normal. Then at dawn we can clean up any mess out here." Selene gestured toward the barn.

"What about the tractor?" Harrie asked.

"Too noisy. At this time of night it will sound strange," Selene replied.

The six women got Joey's body into a wheelbarrow and carted it into the barn. Shela and Belle hoisted the thing upright. Selene and Dierdre steadied the load and steered. Harrie pushed. Valerie directed. Belle opened the barn door. She shooed away the goats and cows. Panting, Harrie set the wheelbarrow down. "A body's a lot heavier than a load of wood," she observed.

"What the hell do we do with him?" Dierdre asked.

"Why don't we put him in the compost heap?" Shela said.

"The compost heap is for vegetable matter only." Harrie paced.

"Shela's not that far off, Harrie." Selene asked.

"I don't know about the politics of fertilizing our crops with a dead man's body."

Harrie countered. "It seems so, so sacrilegious."

"We could put him in, then start a new one. We plant ground cover, like clover, some thorn bushes and trees. In a few years, it will just look like a little hill we've landscaped." Dierdre seconded Selene's suggestion. The others seemed awed.

"We don't landscape around here," Harrie growled. She stopped pacing.

"Okay, we'll make it look wild. Only stuff we dig up from the farm. It will be very bioregional. If anyone notices, we'll say it's there to remind us of nature," Selene elaborated.

"The idea has one advantage: Soft digging that leaves no holes."

"And when the body decomposes, isn't a compost heap supposed to stink?" Shela agreed. "Do we have a consensus?"

They looked at each other silently and got to work. It was not pleasant work. They shoveled out a hole. They lined old boards from the side door up to the hole and wheeled Joey along the path. "Shouldn't we say something?" Dierdre asked.

"Yeah. Watch out Hell! Here comes another one down the chute." Valerie did not smile.

"I mean something respectful."

"Nobody say anything until I get the money off of him." Valerie started to go through Joey's pockets.

"Robbing a corpse. So morbid." Harrie shook her head.

"Where he's going they only take hot coals, hunks of sulfur and no plastic," Valerie countered.

"Valerie, if you're going to keep on with this patriarchal phallogocentric Judeo-Christian world-view." Selene crossed her arms.

Valerie rifled through the pockets, took out his wallet and pulled out four twenties.

"Not much," Harrie said.

"Wait a minute girls, sorry, women. Pull off his left boot." Belle tugged at it.

Harrie assisted. They wrestled it free. "Hand it to me." They did. "Anybody got a screwdriver or something?"

"I do." Shela produced one from her back pocket.

"Watch this, women." Valerie placed the screwdriver between the boot and its heel. With a hard twist of her wrist she pried the heel away, grasped it, pulled it free. She opened the false top. The women gasped.

"Holy Earth Mother!" Selene exclaimed.

A wad of thousand dollar bills showed, clipped tightly. The gold money clip showed the initials JAD. A bag of white powder and a key filled the remaining space.

"What did I tell you? No good to him now, right?"

"No. Not a bit." Belle stood hypnotized.

"It's blood money. I'll have nothing to do with it," Dierdre said.

"We could donate it to something like the environment." Shela brightened with the thought.

"We could buy a new tractor, maybe a bus." Harrie offered, beginning to see the possibilities.

"Where are we going to change thousands?" Selene put in pragmatically.

Dierdre spoke up. "Did you all forget? I work at a bank. I'll have new cash for you tomorrow, Valerie."

"What about that bag?" Selene asked. "I can't have large amounts of drugs on the property."

Valerie tasted it. "Coke. Can't stand the stuff. Gives me migraines." She turned. "Harrie. Shela. You're bikers. Don't you know anyone who can get rid of this for us?"

Harrie grabbed the bag. "I'll take care of it. We'll have a few bucks in the old ranch's account by Thursday."

"Aren't we forgetting something? His car, perhaps." Shela pointed toward the sleek hulk in the drive.

"Excuse me?" Dierdre said, "but can't you two big strong mechanics take that damn penis mobile apart tomorrow? I mean, is it at all a relevant question?"

"If you're going to get all arrogant and start telling me what to do, Dierdre," Harrie said. "Here's a shovel." She handed it to her. "Dig some more rotting garbage, will you? We've got a body to bury."

Dierdre took it and broke down, saying, "Excuse me. Excuse me here," between fits of deep cackling.

Belle spoke to Valerie. "Hey, Valerie. What's that key for?"

"I think I know, but I can't tell you yet." She rotated it between thumb and forefinger.

They upturned the cart. The big corpse tumbled in. Joey slid feet-first into the soggy earth. "Hey," Shela said. "He doesn't fit. The hole's not big enough."

"Look," Valerie answered. "Bend him over." Shela pushed his head toward his lap with the spade of a shovel. It was no good. "He won't go all the way."

"The hell with this," Harrie dropped her shovel. "All you've got to do is break him." She jumped on Joey's back. They heard his spine crack, saw his shoulders fall toward his knees. Harrie jumped up and down on him a few times, until his body folded. "There. Much better," she said, climbing out satisfied. She wiped her boots on the grass.

Valerie threw the gun into the hole with Joey. They began to cover him. His body sank, shovel by shovel, into the decomposing muck.

17 Alex Drops a Quarter

Alex stopped at a pay phone, dropped a quarter into the slot. The ringing at the other end stopped.

"Hello, Philip Hayes?" he asked.

"Yes," came the answer.

"You may not remember me. I'm Alex Gray, from the law firm. We met briefly there."

"Oh yeah. What, did I miss an appointment?" He flipped through his appointment book of the mind.

"Nothing like that. I'm no longer with the firm, but I thought you might be interested in a piece of information."

"Concerning the case?"

"Concerning your legal bills. Pinely and Peter Herald have been seeing each other on shall I say a romantic basis. They've been billing all that time. I know. I made the arrangements for their meetings and I typed the bills. So far it amounts to thousands and thousands. I don't know how well off you are, but you know these are grounds for disbarment, legal malpractice suits. You could collect."

"My new occupation: Plaintiff. Can you prove any of this?" A burst of static filled the line.

"Come to my apartment and I'll hand you all the papers. Copies of hotel room receipts, handwritten billing records — I've got it all. I'll back you up in a hearing, in court, whatever you need. I've got an ax and I'm ready to grind." He gave the address.

Philip pressed the buzzer. "Philip?"

"Uh-huh."

Philip took the elevator to the tenth floor. "Over here." Philip faced the voice. Alex was a silhouette in a door frame.

Philip Alex took his cap, placed it on the coat tree. "Nice apartment, spare and contemporary, but not too," Philip said. He sat at the black kitchen table. A clear vase at its center held peonies. Shaggy pink and white blossoms fell on a ruddy brown folder as Philip kicked the leg of the table.

Alex opened the folder. "If you're at all interested. You can take the rest and look at it later." Alex took out photocopied pages. "See." He traced his finger along a line. "On this date your case was billed for an hour and a half meeting with the other side. On this other page it shows up on the bill sent to you. Now here," he produced a third sheet. "Here is the copy written appointment book showing a meeting at Pinely's loft."

Philip scrunched his face. "All that proves is they went to his house to conduct the meeting."

"Okay. You don't believe me." Alex folded his arms.

"I'm not saying that. I don't see what I can do besides fire my lawyer and get a new one." Philip felt his patience stretched. He eyed Alex cautiously. The guy was a little manipulator. "Don't worry, baby. I'll act out your revenge fantasy for you."

"There's something else in this folder. I borrowed the video tape from his office, copied it. It shows their 'meeting' with a time and date stamp. It may not be admissible in court, but the bar might be very interested in it."

"Why don't you go to them yourself?" Philip. "No. You get me to take on that case, you get something out of it. You realize of course you're talking about the other side of blackmail here?"

"I just want to sink the bitch."

"Oh."

"If you go that far, you'll need me to testify. As of this moment, it would help if a complaint came from a client, not some disgruntled former employee, which I am. There's a lot more I can tell them, but I need you. Otherwise he'll squirm out of it. You know lawyers."

"I try not to." Philip thought a moment. "Look. I'll look at the tape. This case has already been more trouble than my nerves can stand." The tape was, at minimum, something new to watch.

"Call me later," Alex said as Philip left. The folder under his arm felt bulky. The elevator hummed as it traveled.

The bright daylight of the mirrored entry hit his eyes. He covered them with a palm. "My cap," he said, missing its visor. He growled and he waited for the elevator to return. Finding Alex's door he knocked. The door opened slightly.

"Hmm." He held the knob pushed against it slowly. "Alex?" The door hit something. Philip squeezed in, looked down. He saw sneakers. "Alex?" Alex's blood pooled on checker tiles. Philip bent to touch his neck, to feel his pulse. None. He saw a red shoe print, followed the trail of blood. The bathroom door was closed. Something small and metallic clattered to a ceramic floor. Slowly Philip rose to his feet. He backed out of the apartment. He grabbed his cap and pulled the door shut behind him. Philip looked at the elevator, the car five flights up. "No time," he thought and hit the fire door. On the flight below he heard a click. Footsteps drummed metal steps. He jumped down, two or three stairs at a time, propelling himself with the handrail. The rhythm of the echoes picked up. Philip lobby. He ran off-balance, hitting walls. A handprint faded on a mirror.

On the sidewalk he dodged a skateboarder and a bicycle delivery guy. He looked back, saw the building door open. Philip ran.

18 The Solarites at the End of the World

John Starmountain leaned on his podium. "Mango, Mambo, Montana, Mongongo."

"Meringue, Meringué, Marimba, Marsupial," the congregation responded.

"Yeah, okay. Enough of that." He cleared his throat. He bent over and took a trophy cup from under the podium, slowly. It was heavy. He held it up with both hands. "I hold aloft the silver chalice."

"The silver chalice," the group responded.

"Won it bowling. Captained the damn team." There was brief applause. "Don't bowl anymore. Decadent. The only sport you drink beer with. Don't drink, so I don't bowl."

"Bowling is evil!" a man in the crowd shouted.

"No. Be fair, brother Al. Bowling's not evil. It's the lifestyle around bowling that is evil. This leads me to today's topic. Mind if I put this down?" He placed the trophy on a nearby table. "We can all be like bowling pins. Standing there. Doing our best. Waiting for the big black ball to knock us all down. Do you hear me?" They all said yes. "We can stand here, sit here, waiting for that big black ball. You know about that ball? You don't see it coming because you're a bowling pin. You have no ears to hear it, rolling down the lane like thunder. You have no eyes to see it, wobbling this way and that on the boards. Most people are like those bowling pins. They're trying to stay upright. They don't know that they're about to be knocked down. That somewhere out there in the universe a voice is

calling for a strike. We know it. You and I know it. It's going to be a strike. Not a spare. Not a split. Not a gutter ball. That's when everyone standing gets knocked down, thrown around, swept away into the back of the alley. That's the end we've been trying to tell them about all this long time. They can't see it coming. They can't hear the thunder. Volcanoes go off one after another like a string of firecrackers. Earthquakes, disease, famine and floods wipe out life on earth. You and I get the message, heed the warnings. The rest of them... I guess we give up on them. They're going to be trapped on this planet when the giant meteor hits next Thursday. It's in our holy book, every word dictated by higher beings to my teacher the late Reverend Doctor Charlie Mars."

He held aloft a red book. On its cover gold letters announced: "Last Boarding Call for Souls Departing Planet Earth." "Take out your copies and read with me from Chapter Twelve on page 137."

"That's it. Second Paragraph. 'The world will end on the day after the new moon rises in the constellation of the Great Teacher's birth after six earthquakes have struck California in a month in the period after the return of the Great Comet. The Sacred Giant Meteor will hit off the coast of Iceland, causing the seas to boil. Clouds of dust will circle the earth and hide the sun. Any left alive will die, and,—now listen to this bit, folks—*their souls will remain trapped, orbiting the sun for a billion years.*' Think of that, a billion years orbiting the sun. I ask you: Is that the afterlife you want to have? I thought not.

"What's the alternative? Check the rest of this out! 'Those leaving the planet before the end will be liberated from earthly existence and their souls pass on to the next stage of

development, namely, life on the next most elevated world.' Get that? Maybe we'll be intelligent dinosaurs. The book doesn't say. We'll have to roll the dice and take our chances. All we know is the next life form our souls occupy will be better than human! The next planet will be a glorious world where we'll be stronger, smarter, more enlightened. We can't even imagine it. Our minds are far too limited at this stage of cosmic evolution."

"I don't have to tell you about the condition of this earth. It's dying. You in this room know. There are too many people. Five and a half billion on the planet and not enough food. The rainforests are disappearing, along with the ozone. We've got global warming, pollution. We get one disease conquered and three new plagues come up out of nowhere. The oceans are about to swamp the coasts, the deserts are taking over from the centers of the continents. Earthquakes, ethnic wars, everywhere. We've got toxic chemicals in our humble corn flakes. Extinction of species on a mass scale and we're next. Games up! We've won it all and lost it all. When the giant meteor hits next Thursday, it will put us all out of our misery. Funny when you think about it. Except, we're the only ones who can really laugh. Because only we know the next move. We here, standing together with love and the truth, know how to escape the coming destruction.

"I know it's a lot to ask. So hard to give up our human bodies. We're afraid of what's to come. Afraid to leave this dying earth. It's natural. Hey, they thought the Titanic couldn't ever sink, but it did. It went under faster than a McDonald's in India. But we've got to escape the catastrophe. It's in your hands: Life or limbo. What will it be? A billion

years of nothingness, or on to greater glory? You decide. Right here, right now. Today. In this room. This is it. It's now or never.

"We all took the first step last week. We sold all our possessions, freed ourselves from material entrapments, and gave the money into back to the church. That money will go for relief of sick and dying children until the end of the world next Thursday, when the Giant Meteor comes to throw down the mighty and the wicked of this world. The bank's handling all that forwarding of the funds to the charities I've designated. By that last act of selflessness we erase the last vestiges of the karma we came to this planet and into our great Solar Enlightenment Church to work off. Each and every one of you has paid off his or her karmic debt. Now comes the second and final stage, the total freedom of the soul from the confinement of its earthly flesh. Join me, friends. Take the voyage with me. Let's do this one together."

The congregation broke out in warm applause.

John Starmountain lowered his head. "Darla," he said. "It's time for the Great Preparation." Darla ran up to the stage from the door ripping open a package of plastic cups. "Guess we won't be able to recycle these. Come on, everyone. Get in line. At least we can recycle ourselves!" Darla took a gallon jug from behind the table and poured purple liquid from it into the hollow of a bowling trophy.

Cheerily, the members hugged each other. They moved into the aisle and took their turns. Darla ladled the fluid from the trophy. Each person took a cup, nodded to Darla,

received a kiss on the forehead and a kind word from John Starmountain, and returned to a seat.

"Are you ready people? Are you ready for the next planet, the next star, the next mountain to climb?" Assent resounded through the hall. "And you know what else? I forgot to pay the landlord the rent on this place this month." The crowd laughed, then fell silent.

John Starmountain raised his ornate brass goblet to the ceiling. The congregation rose, and held forth their cups. "We go to join our leader, Reverend Charlie Mars. We drink to the next world. Hail the Giant Meteor."

"Hail the Giant Meteor!" they responded. They gulped down the sweet, purple-flavored liquid.

Starmountain drank from his cup and passed it to Darla. The two placed themselves on their large, churchy chairs. They held hands. Starmountain looked at her. "You sure you got the right cup, there?" he whispered.

"What do you think? You tried it out last night yourself. For the twenty-five bucks I paid at the magic store, it had better be the right cup!" she answered.

The two sat back and closed their eyes half-way. Robed followers fell one by one. They clutched air or held each other. Their bodies convulsed, their faces contorted. Their cries resounded through the hall and subsided. They lay still, some solitary, some intertwined.

Darla stood up. "Hey, brain dead. What about our fingerprints all over everything?"

"There's a bomb set for fifteen minutes from now. I suggest we get while the getting's good. We're out of this country and off the planet. It will be months before they can piece little bits of people back together. How will they know we aren't among them?"

"Right, baby." Darla nodded.

He took off his robe and wig. Darla did the same. She looked him over. "I don't know about the green mohawk, but I like you in leather."

"You too, babe, but I do think that purple dye job suits you the best."

"You have the money?" he asked. Darla grabbed a large canvas pack from under the chair, opened the flap to flash rolls of rubber-banded bills. He winked, smiled and turned. She followed him up the aisle.

"What a waste," Starmountain commented, examining the dead bodies. "A damn shame to lose so many people so bone stupid." He kicked the ribs of a man to hear them crack.

"John, honey, calm down." She yanked a diamond ring over the knuckle of a woman's hand.

"Hey. They wanted the end of the world and I gave it to them." He shrugged.

The front door thumped. A furied beat echoed around skewed bodies. A deep male voice penetrated. "Starmountain. I know you're in there! Open up!"

"Who are you? What do you want?" John called out.

"I want my daughter."

"What do we do?" Darla asked.

"We do what he wants." Starmountain opened the door, smiling. "Come on in."

The man fell into him. "I just walked in myself. I don't know what happened in here. I'm sure your daughter's in there somewhere. All you've got to do is identify her. She drank poison. Kids today, ay?"

He shoved the reverend out of his way. He stared at the bodies, turned on John.

"You. You're Starmountain. You did this. You killed them all." He came at him, knocked him down. Darla ran to the stage, picked up the trophy and ran back to the fight. She raised her hands over her head, brought the cup down on the man's skull. His grip on John broke. He sank. John and Darla got out, threw the gate and locked it. At the corner they heard the explosion. They felt the sidewalk shake as the building gave. Beams snapped. Screams raked the air, cut short in the roar of bricks and apartment contents sliding into chaos. Noon bells chimed.

They climbed into an old black van. Its engine wheezed to life. John looked at his watch. "Guess I set the timer a little early. Got to remember not to do that."

Darla shook her head. "Yeah. Thanks for you. I should have locked you in there with him."

"Oh baby I can feel your love," he turned and kissed her.

She pushed him away. "Shut up and drive," she said. The van rumbled up the avenue. Its bumper sticker remarked: Junk The Planet. Buy A New One.

19 Mark and Philip in Trouble

Saturday morning Mark and Philip argued. "I don't see why you don't call the cops."

"I didn't see it. I don't want to get involved. Wait a minute. I am involved."

In Mark's apartment, Philip turned on the tube. It flickered on to Channel Zero News. A giant zero rotated above the skyline. The announcer spoke: "Now the news of New York because nothing else exists of any importance."

Mark talked back to the television. "Same five stories, 24 hours a day, over and over again."

"Two suspects are sought for questioning in connection with the possible assisted suicide of an East Village man Thursday evening. Police have released these sketches to Channel Zero. The man on the right is also sought for questioning in a murder in the Chelsea district yesterday. Police say that it is possible that the two may be engaged in a crime spree. Anyone having any relevant information is asked to call 555-RATT, listed below on your screen. Mark and Philip stared agape. There, side-by-side, were soft charcoal likenesses of themselves.

"Overall, I'd say not a bad rendering. Sort of like the portrait artists over on Sixth Avenue and Fourth Street. My nose is a little smaller than that, I hope," Mark said. "Yours is pretty good too, but they've left out the inner you that attracts me so."

Philip blinked. The images remained for a moment. Horrifying pictures replaced their sketches. A covered body on a stretcher wheeled along Alex's block. Then a shot of Derek's building came up.

The announcer continued. "Now we have the first pictures in of the shocking mass suicide at the Solar Enlightenment Church in the Lower East Side, which we first reported an hour ago." A heap of bodies flickered on screen, twisted in blast rubble.

"You know Philip, I think this might be a good time to get out of town for a spell." Mark gripped his chin thoughtfully.

"Yeah, but where can we go? A motel? Madagascar? Tierra del Fuego?"

"No. Something better I hope. Got any of the gay papers lying around?"

"What about LHM?" Philip tossed him a half-sized bar mag.

Mark flipped through the pages of Latest Homosexual Magazine. "Spectral Acres, here it is. A short trek from the city to the peaceful mountains and meadows of this secluded valley of the Poconos."

"The Poconos? It's hardly the place hardened killers run to when they're on the lam."

"Exactly. No one will suspect. Didn't Patti Hearst hide out in Pennsylvania? Can't you see her, wrapping bombs with one hand, churning butter with the other? I'll tell you, though. It broke my heart when the Farmer's Market on Union Square kicked out the Amish for repackaging butter and selling it as their own. Who is left to trust in this world?"

"You're getting off the subject of our unlawful flight from prosecution." Philip pouted.

"Am I? Anyway, we'll go there, pay in cash and look like any usual male couple on an ordinary vacation in an ordinary gay inn." Mark picked up the cordless and hit the talk button.

"I guess this is the honeymoon you've never promised me," Philip said.

Mark dialed the number and made a reservation.

19.1 At the Inn

Mark pulled the car into a white stone drive, found a space alongside the house, and parked. They stretched in the cool air. Wisps of cirrus clouds showed in pale blue. Mark heard the grind of a chainsaw in far woods. A flock of Canada geese flew low in V formation, honking like trucks. "Wow," Mark said. "Nature." He smelled cut grass. The lawn was perfect. Border shrubs still blossomed under leafless trees. The house was white clapboard, porticoed, three stories tall. A rainbow flag drooped above the entrance. Mark and Philip mounted stone steps. They crossed the colonnaded porch, dodging hanging plants. Mark opened the black wood door. At the desk, an older gentleman read an antiques magazine. His hair and beard, cropped short, were white. He wore round, wire-rimmed glasses. A clock behind him ticked above classical music playing faintly through a compact stereo. He waited for them to approach before speaking.

"I'm Michael Montague," Mark said, "and this is Thomas. We called to book a room."

"Let me check," he said, scanning his book. "Oh. I see it. Here you are, right here. Must have been my partner who took your reservation. Didn't tell me a thing. Married a scatter brains, that's what I did. Why, aren't you a charming couple?"

"That we are," Philip said. "Just an average gay couple out for a bit of romance in the country. You see, what with pressures and our busy social schedule, it seems we're always around other people. For once we wanted a chance to get off by ourselves. You know how tha-at is." Philip felt Mark's foot on his.

"I see. I'm Elmo and you'll meet Richard. He's out in back pruning the pear tree. Right after Thanksgiving we put the glowing pears, plastic leaves and a partridge on it. Everyone thinks it's so adorable. If you'll sign here." He turned his registry book toward Mark. A lavender ribbon fastened the pen inside it. "I believe it says cash in the notation."

Mark dug into his pocket, unrolled a number of bills, put them on the table.

"Pleased to meet you, Elmo." He shook the man's hand.

"You as well. I hope your first stay is a pleasant one. We have some brochures here on the desk, and the local papers of interest in the baskets on your way out. There's antiquing, and caves and canoe trips — relaxing-type things. We have nature trails right on the property. There's a sheet here about night life. There's a little bar a few towns over if you want that sort of thing. You get continental breakfast in the morning with buns and muffins. I hope you like the buns around here." Elmo gave Philip a sly wink. Mark felt a

sinking feeling. "Here's your key. It's the third floor, very private. I hope you don't mind stairs." Mark nodded and took the key graciously. "I'm afraid that our Sally is ailing considerably. Usually she kicks up such a fuss when new people come." Elmo looked sadly at a Yorkshire terrier in its dog bed off to his side. Neither Mark nor Philip had noticed the inert ball of fur. "Aren't you sick, poor dear?" She lifted her head sluggishly, presented a small, hideous face, managed a single high-pitched yelp, then fell asleep, snoring.

Mark flinched, resisted a cry of disgust. He took Philip's arm and guided him to the stairs. Philip scooped up tourist literature along the way. Mark hustled him up the stairs. "Why do these places always have little dying dogs?" he muttered. 'Smelly mops with feet, hobbling along on their last legs.'

"And by the way," Elmo called after them. They stopped on the landing. "We have things like toothbrushes and condoms in your bathroom. We have a few videotapes for rent at two dollars a day. There's a list in your room. We have to open up the little pantry with the boxes."

"Thanks a lot," Philip called sweetly. "I like the man, Mark," he said softly. "He's a real old dear."

"My name is Michael. Got that, Thomas?" Mark went on ahead.

"Right Michael," he called out, loud enough for Elmo to hear. "Coming, dear." He heard a chuckle below, then the sneeze of the aged Yorkie.

Mark opened the room door, dropped his bag and threw himself on the bed.

"Where are you. Thomas?" he shouted.

Philip came in and closed the door. "I've been down the hall. There's a soda machine and an ice machine. Luckily I brought a decent bottle of Vodka. Shall I make drinks?"

"God! You're an angel from heaven. Pour, goddammit, pour." Philip left the room with the ice bucket. On his way he passed a man who had gotten ice. He was about fifty, with black hair and an abbreviated mustache. He wore a towel, and cruised Philip blatantly, eyeing his face first, then his crotch for a long moment. He adjusted his towel, brushing his penis with the gesture. Philip walked past him, got ice, orange juice and seltzer.

"There was a guy in a towel in the hallway, ogling me," he said in the room.

"Perhaps it's a house of ill repute," Mark said and waited as Philip prepared drinks, flipping on the tube. They watched the local news. There was nothing of their notoriety.

"It was a local item. They don't get our news here. I think we're safe for the moment."

"Okay, what next? They're sure to pick up that cult suicide thing on the national news." Philip handed him a screwdriver.

"So what? They haven't connected Derek with those idiots. They might talk to the bouncer in the bar Derek and I ran into. Then, my dear, you and I won't be any average murder suicide duo. No. We'll be murderous cult terrorist bombers on a bizarre rampage of death, destruction, mayhem and havoc." Mark raised his plastic cup. "To havoc." He drank. "I'm still upset that you got the bigger billing here, but I'll put ego aside. What do

we do next? We think. We drink. We go out like normal people on a weekend. We do nothing to attract attention."

"What if they find us? I don't want to go to jail." Philip pouted.

"You won't. You'll turn state's evidence against me and my father. Let's not leave him out. What more will they do to that poor man?"

"I would never do that."

"Thanks for the thought, but you'd have to. I'd insist."

"You still have the suicide machine?"

"It's in the trunk." Mark sipped his cocktail. "Couldn't leave that thing around the house, it bothered me to look at it."

"Good thing. We may need it."

"Like we'd have time to set it up if they found us. Hold on, Philip. What about the video tape?"

"That's right. We never watched it." Philip opened his bag and took out the banded brown folder.

"Pop it into the VCR, will you?" Mark sank back into the easy chair.

Philip turned on the machine bolted to the television, popped in the tape. "Oh my God." Philip broke off. He dropped on the bed and held a pillow to his chest. He scarcely noticed the date and time stamp. On the screen, Peter Herald stood naked in profile. Pinely was tying him to a metal frame by a bungee cord. He wrapped it around his wrists and ankles, then it looped around his scrotum. Pinely gagged Herald's mouth with wadded

jockey shorts, cloth taped them in place. Pinely, wearing a leather thong, slowly circled. He held a candle that blurred the image on the tape. He waved the flame before Peter's eyes rhythmically. He dripped hot wax on his left nipple, then the right, then down his chest and torso. Peter leaned further back to catch the liquid, let out a muffled shriek, struggled against the flexing cord. The cord gave here, tightened there, stretched out his testicles. Pinery dripped the candle wax on them. Peter's scream drifted into long low moans. Peter put down the candle, reached for nipple clamps. He twisted and pulled Peter's nipples, clamped them. Pinery flicked a black whip lightly on Peter's chest, his penis. He circled behind, lashed his thighs, his back, his squarish butt with sharp strokes. Peter's eyes rolled into his lids. He fell forward, yowled as the cord squeezed his balls. He stood straight, tightened his fists, arched his back as the whip struck it again. Pinery threw the whip down. Herald craned his neck, unable to see James, to know what was next. Philip and Mark could see now what he could not then. Pinely quietly lubed up an impossibly large pink dildo. With a rough move, he thrust it all at once deep into Herald's ass. Herald's broken howls and sobs echoed through the loft, the hotel room. Pinely dropped his thong and rolled a condom over his erection. He yanked the dildo, replaced it with his penis in the next beat. He began quick thrusts. Mark and Philip watched Peter Herald's quick climax, sperm spurting in a white arc. Pinely pulled off the condom, let go himself. Clear fluid dribbled down Herald's lower back. James reached around him, held him close. After a moment he ungagged him. "Brutal bastard," Herald spat and the two melted into a long

kiss. Pinely started to untie the cord. He noticed the camera and grinned. His hand covered the lens and the tape went to static and snow.

Mark flipped the power off. "Hope you liked it, Philip. You paid for that show."

"Next time I get to direct. I didn't know Mr. Pinely had it in him."

"Actually, he didn't, if you noticed."

"Missed that. I was focused on the sets and costumes." He stopped. "Since you're that composed, get me another drink."

"Yes sir," Mark said. He mixed idly. "You think Pinely did Alex in? I mean, was it him in the building?"

"I didn't see who was following me. I don't know."

"I do. I look at it this way: Who has more motive? Obviously Alex tried blackmailing Pinely. Why? Because he's a devious little creep. When Pinely left the firm and he didn't take him along, so they got rid of him like the throwaway homosexual they considered him to be. He needed money for the rent or whatever, and he didn't want to wait. Pinely was having none of it. Likely didn't believe he had anything real on him. He comes by to threaten Alex and see if he's got anything. Maybe he's following you and catches the door when you go in, maybe he's already in the stairwell on Alex's floor when you show up. You enter, he waits. He knocks on the door, shoots Alex. You come back. He sees you with the folder and goes after you. Plus Pinely's not a pro. He hasn't thought it through. He's got to keep his credentials. He doesn't want to be up on malpractice,

jailed. Sentencing someone like him to prison is the same as sentencing him to repeated rape."

"But why did Alex give the tape to me, not whoever's in charge?"

"You have to make the complaint. Also, you have to go to your father first. Alex knows that. Your dad will want none of this revealed. I mean his lawyer a crook with somewhat unusual tastes, billing sex sessions. He never wanted it to become official. He wanted to collect suppression money from both your father and from Pinely, without ever having to ask for it. It didn't fall his way, but he came close."

"What if Herald did it?"

"No, no, no. Herald's working the insurance company. They'd drop him and keep it quiet. I doubt he knew the scheme had gone wrong. Pinely has the motive."

"Pinely seems like such a conservative, proper homosexual," Philip protested.

"Pardon? Did you see what I saw on that tape, or did you leave the room?"

Philip let his arms drop. "Yeah, okay. I still don't think that shows he's a murderer."

"Philip, Pinely's the guy. You know it and I know it."

"How do we prove it?"

Mark shrugged. "I don't know, but we'd better think of something. I'm too tired now. I want to read my book on the Byzantine Empire and sleep. Have I ever told you about these people who used to stand on ninety-foot pillars for years during that time? People made pilgrimages to see them. None of the history books explain how they took

care of basic needs. I mean, not a lot of privacy on a pillar. Maybe everybody had to turn their backs all at once. And what if they rolled out of bed at night?"

"Uh. I'm sure it's fascinating, but I'd rather see if there's a movie on television."

There was a small knock on the door. Philip looked at Mark, who gestured for him to answer it. He got up and cracked the door. The man he had seen in the hall was there again, now wearing a not a towel but a leather vest and chaps without benefit of pants. A bicycle chain cockring thrust his manhood forward. "I couldn't help overhearing," the man panted. "Sounds like quite a scene in there. I was wondering if you might need any help?"

Philip looked beyond him. Several men were strolling the corridor, one in a red robe, another in purple bikini briefs. Several doors were ajar. "Uh. Thank you very much, but no. We're quite all right in here." Philip closed the door, turned and leaned his back against it. "You're right, Mark. This is a house of ill repute. He's roaming the halls, that guy I saw in the towel. There's traffic out there. They probably all heard the screaming on the tape and thought we were... Oh no."

"I don't care about that. How dare he interrupt my point!" Mark stretched and gave him a sly glance. "Why should they be the only ones having any fun? Get over here, drop your pants and jam your dick down my throat."

"Anything to shut you up." Philip strode over. He aligned his hips with Mark's mouth. Mark unbuttoned his own pants and unzipped Philip's fly.

Mark and Philip had croissants, muffins and coffee spread out on a table in a downstairs room. They lounged on a couch. No other guests were in evidence. There was a view of small hills and fields through sliding glass doors. Elmo's partner Richard waved to them as he clipped a perfectly round shrub. He wore a wide straw hat, sunglasses and a green and yellow, horizontal-striped shirt. Philip had the feeling they would never actually meet the man. The pear tree stood pruned and pared. A lawn rolled off to the trees. Brown maple leaves spiraled toward its trim surface. Elmo sauntered in with a carafe. He wore a red flannel shirt. "Fresh coffee?"

Mark took it. Philip didn't. "Elmo," Philip said.

"Yes dear?" Elmo poured for Mark.

"The guys in the hall last night."

"Did they bother you? I'm sorry if they did."

"No. They didn't. I was wondering."

"You know, you're not in the city." Elmo put the coffee pot down on a green trivet shaped like a turtle. "There aren't many places around here to go, especially not when it gets cold. No bars for miles and miles, and then you have to drive back home. On the weekends, men book rooms with us. Sure I'd rather I only had couples like you. I'm happily married to Richard myself. What am I going to do, turn them away? Look closely and you'll spy a wedding ring or two. I suppose they get their secret thrill and skulk off home. There's a lot of loneliness underneath it. People convince themselves they're only

out for sex, when they're using sex to conceal that empty feeling you get from living without love." Mark and Philip eyed each other.

"You young men. I don't care what problems you have. Hell, I don't even care who you really are. You stay here until you get past whatever it is. I won't let anyone inside or outside of this place near you.

"I've been around. I can see it. You're more in love than you want to admit to each other." Mark saw tears form in Philip's eyes. "Listen to Aunt Elmo. You try to hold on to what you've got as long as you can, 'cause look around at what's going on out there." Mark kissed Philip. He opened his arms to embrace a man he had hurt, a man he wanted to heal. He leaned his forehead on his neck. "I love you, Philip," he said.

"I love you, Mark," Philip replied. Philip wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and turned. Elmo had gone.

"Come on," Mark said. "Let's take a walk."

They followed a wooden pointing hand with the words "Nature Trail" burned in. A rutted, tire-worn double path wound around trees and bumped through rocky clearings. Strangely, junked cars rested here and there in various states of decay. "Wonder if the guys park here and get stuck," Philip offered.

"Loving that wilderness," Mark said as they approached an aqua model from the 70's. It perched on the bank of a permanent puddle. The sign read "Water Lily Pond." Gray water floated weeds. Nothing swam among them. No bird's reflection slid across the

slick surface. No frog broke the green scum at the edges. A motor oil bottle twirled in an eddy where runoff gurgled in. Dead leaves clumped together and sank to the bottom.

Without speaking, Mark opened the car door and climbed behind the wheel. The interior seemed remarkably preserved. "Is this car abandoned, or tended?" The deluxe white vinyl seats were intact. Philip took the passenger's side. He rested his head on Mark's shoulder.

"You took care of me last night," Philip said. "It's my turn."

"As long as I don't have to get naked. It's cold." Mark let Philip kiss him for a long, melting moment. Philip bent, hitting his head on the steering wheel. The horn sounded half a second. "Announcement," Mark called out, his voice blocked by the windows. Behind smoke tinted glass Mark's rounded lips opened, his neck arched against the headrest, Philip's dark blonde hair appeared and disappeared below the dashboard.

Elmo sighed and handed the binoculars to Richard. "A late sighting of a rare species, but there's always Spring." he said.

They grabbed lunch at a restaurant stuck in a shopping center. It was woody and quaint, but wrong. They returned to their room and had sex. In a few hours they stopped. Mark risked a call to his answering machine. He listened carefully as Philip leaned in. He jotted down a number and hung up. "No cops yet. Derek's doctor left his number." He pressed the number. "Hello, Dr. Wax? This is Mark Milano. You'll do what? When? I

couldn't ask you. True, you did know. You're sure? I mean—. All right. See you there.

Bye." He put the receiver down and stared beyond the walls.

"What happened?"

"Pack. We're going to my house."

"What about my murder charge?" Philip said, alarmed.

"Always thinking about yourself. Tell you what. Get me that Latest Homosexual Magazine. I think I saw an ad." Philip found it in a pocket of his bag, handed it to Mark.

"There it is," Mark said.

"What?"

"Call Trevor and see if they've figured out who we are yet. If not, you're coming to my place. I think I have an idea."

Trevor padded the phone in his saffron silk kimono, the floorboards cold against his feet. "Philip, is that you? How's life on the run? I have one question and one question only: Are you sorry you did it? Never mind, got that from a journalism class. Philip, I don't think you're capable of shooting a man. You couldn't hit the ground with a rock. I've called the police. I hope I did the right thing. They're tracing the call. Philip! Come on. You think I'd do that! They have no idea. Where? Mark's? Bring what? And when am I supposed to have all this done by?" He nodded. "If you say so, I'll be there with bells on. What about feathers? Something what? Darling, I don't own inconspicuous."

20 Doctor Wax

"You've got half the day. I don't see why you're getting so frantic." Trevor sat on Mark's sofa sipping rum and coke. "Just wear tons of black and as much leather as possible. No fringe and nothing Western," Trevor advised. The two were trying on caps and studded accessories in Mark's bedroom. "Tell me one more time. Why the hell are you going to this thing? Can I at least watch the videotape?"

"No to the last question," Philip called. "And we're going because, because... Mark? Why are we going to this?"

"Because we can't think of anything better to do. The alternative is waiting around to get arrested."

Trevor sipped his drink. "I don't think you two have fully explored the idea of staying on the run for the rest of your lives. Always looking over your shoulder, never knowing who to trust, rolling into two-bit towns, robbing gas stations and liquor stores. The inevitable betrayal after the big haul. After fifteen years fate lands you in the same cell and it's love all over again."

Mark stomped out of the bedroom. "Trevor, have I ever mentioned the fact that you are out of your mind?"

"No." Trevor waited.

"Then remind me to, next time you get out of the rest spa." Mark went back to dressing and undressing.

"Society will always hold my stay at the asylum against me," he sobbed. "You know, it *was* more of a rest spa. It didn't have creaking doors with chained people howling behind them. I nearly asked for my money back." The door buzzer sounded. "Who's coming?"

"One of Derek's former physicians," Philip said.

Mark took Philip by the hand and placed him on the couch. He searched the table and found his own glass. Mark went to the entry. Trevor and Philip heard the muffled answer at the other end, the buzzing in. "Hark," Trevor said, "I thought I heard a footfall on the stair."

"Couldn't be." Philip poked him. "The lepers moved out of the building last week."

"That was low, worthy of me," Trevor complimented.

"Why thank you," Philip answered. The two giggled and clinked glasses.

They heard the door open. Mark returned, followed by Dr. Wax. "What are *you* doing here?" Trevor asked. Arthur started, shook his head once and looked away from Trevor.

"You know each other?" Mark asked.

"We've met," Arthur assented. He opened a brief case and extracted a document.

"There it is, signed and notarized: your copy, saying that I was in the room, that I hooked up the machine, and that I had you transport it to me. Also, the paragraph about my asking your father to build it for me my lawyer says should work. If they want to try anything, I'll take my chances with a jury on this one. If you stick with the story, both our butts are free.

I want no one in this room," he glared at Trevor, "to open their mouths to anyone about this meeting. Are we clear on that?" Trevor observed his cool anger.

Philip and Trevor nodded, mumbled yes. "Okay," he said.

"Thanks," Mark said. "Can I ask you one thing?"

"One thing." He closed his briefcase.

"Why are you doing this for me?"

His upper lip was sweaty. "Because I'd never have had the balls to do it myself. At least I can pretend I did. It *is* something I believe in."

Mark put the paper on the coffee table. "You're lying."

"You're right." Arthur zipped up his case.

"You want a drink?" Philip asked.

"Thanks anyway. Gotta go." Arthur turned and hurried out the door.

Trevor stood up shakily. "If you'll excuse me a moment." Mark and Philip stared as he crossed the floor and went out through the front door.

Arthur was watching the elevator's floor indicator. Trevor raced out of the apartment and called after him. "Dr. Wax?"

He spun around, grimaced. "Call me Arthur. I think we're acquainted."

"Art. I—"

"Not Art. Anything but Art. 'Hey, slime bucket!' is better than Art. It's Arthur. I hate Art."

"The Guggenheim's out, then. All right, Arthur. I want you to know that I think what you've done is the sign of a great man." Trevor looked at him with a trace of awe.

"Why thank you." Arthur took in his reverie, relaxed a fraction.

"I just didn't want any hard feelings to remain between us. If you can ever forgive me. I misjudged you so. I don't know how to make it up to you."

"Maybe you shouldn't try. Listen. I can be over it in a hurry, but I'm afraid that might mean I'd have to date you or something." He winked.

"Sorry it was so awful for you." Trevor posed to make himself smaller.

"Awful? Not the during part, but the after."

"If I promise never to call the cops on you again?"

"I bet you told your roommate and Mark here all about that fun episode."

"Actually, it's the only thing I think I've kept quiet about in all my life."

Trevor noticed a slight smile play around Arthur's lips. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Anything but frozen food." Trevor stood poised.

"Look. I've got to do a couple of things. Meet me in an hour at The Underworld Lounge. We'll have dinner. If you're very good, I'll take you home after. Please don't tell them in there about us yet. If we get somewhere, fine. Otherwise, they'll ask how you met me and you'll have to tell them." Arthur winked.

"Okay. I'll say I ran after you on a whim, since we'd met at a party once. It is something I would do." Trevor smiled. Arthur kissed him sweetly, holding him around the

waist. "In an hour then," Trevor whispered to the man's back as he walked down the stairs, adding, "and you'd better be there or I'll show up at your apartment door." Trevor saw Arthur's shoulders straighten, then curve.

Arthur turned, shook his head at Trevor and shrugged, arms outstretched. "Okay. What do you want? You've got me."

Dinner had been lovely, full of élan, charm and witty conversation. Trevor felt at ease with Arthur talking movies, museum exhibits, music. As they discovered that they shared much in the way of likes and dislikes, Trevor's enthusiasm rose. He dropped his embittered mask and became again his earlier romantic self, a bit frothy and flirtatious.

In Arthur Wax's apartment, under the dimmed lights, he sensed a certain release as he draped himself on the sofa that he hoped would soon unfold into bed.

"Would you like a drink?" Arthur offered and talked from the kitchenette as he made it. "I've tried to stock the place with something like a bar since you came last. Afraid there's no new furniture or anything. I'm here so seldom I've barely thought about the place."

"I can help you there," Trevor offered. Art emerged, handed him his drink and sat down. They sipped for a moment, gazing into each other's eyes.

"I haven't brought anyone back since our little encounter."

"I hope I haven't scared you off dating entirely." Trevor crossed his legs.

"Not entirely. I don't have much time for it, really, or interest. You see, you're not like other men to me. They're so shallow, so, I don't know, obvious. There's an air of mystery to you. I'd really love to see you perform on stage." Arthur put a hand on Trevor's inner thigh.

"I'm afraid the last show's over, but next time for certain. You must come."

"And I have to say the sex was wonderful." Arthur began to stroke Trevor's thigh slightly.

"For me too. Ethereal, yes." Trevor noticed that he was downing his drink too quickly. His glass was almost empty.

"Would you like another?" Arthur had noticed the detail.

"Thank you, no. I feel I've probably had enough. Started back at Mark's and really haven't stopped. But back on the subject of sex," he reached out to hold Arthur's shoulder. 'Stronger,' he thought. 'He must live at the gym.' Trevor put his hand to his head.

"I was just getting to that," Art smiled.

"Wait a minute. I'm feeling a bit light-headed." Trevor turned, lay back, placed his head in Arthur's lap. "Maybe if I recline here with you." He reached for the man's zipper. He felt the metal run down a warm, swelling cylinder of passion. "Prepare the bubble bath."

Arthur evinced concern. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Kind of dizzy." Trevor noticed that his speech was starting to slur. "Drunk? Could I be drunk? Naw." He heard his words run together. He was almost incoherent.

His voice was weakening, now scarcely above a whisper.

"No. I don't think you're drunk." Arthur's voice was calm, authoritative, doctorly. His face, radiating kindness, filled Trevor's vision. Arthur would take care of him.

"No?" Trevor's head lolled back, pressing against the trousers. Arthur's face blurred and doubled.

"Not possible. I think perhaps it has something to do with the strong sedative I put in your drink."

"You did? Oh, that maig zense." Trevor blinked a heavy blink and smiled.

"You drugged me! How purrrfeckly chomming. Now you can have your way wiv me, no?"

"No. I'm not looking for sex. Not now, like this. You see—."

"Yev?" Trevor prompted.

"I have a little cabin upstate. In some woods, far off the beaten and all that. I'm going to walk you downstairs, explain to the doorman that I have to escort you home, since you've had too much. He'll understand with a nod and a wink. Then I'm going to take you to my cabin."

"Aww.... a widdow cab-bin. A widdow cab-bin inna woods."

"Yes. A little cabin in the woods. There I will tie you up, torture you and rape you, decapitate you with an ax, cut you up in pieces, wrap the pieces in plastic and dump your body in various locations all around."

"All awound? You'd do dat for me? For liddle me? Ain' chu the swweedest thang? An' a doctor, too. I like dat about chu, y'know." Trevor reached around and fondled Arthur's erection, smiling.

"Yes Trevor. I'm afraid you got too close to the truth the night you were last here. I do have a morbid fascination with chopped up bodies, both professionally and as a hobby. I can't have you running around telling everyone about it. I'll say that I dropped you at your door. Your friends don't even know that we met before. They'll chalk it up to an overwrought nature, running away or something else. You'll be just another missing person, a face on a flyer stuck to a phone stand. The cops downtown won't know of our earlier incident, when they get the report. I'd say it all might work out nicely. My doorman will confirm that you were drunk. They'll suspect some sort of mugging and murder on the street, if they question me. That kind of thing happens every day."

"Zounds good. Lezz go!" Trevor suddenly got to his feet. He wobbled. His knees gave. Trevor collapsed to the carpet, an unstrung marionette.

"Aren't you a staggering beauty?" Arthur said, standing over his crumpled form.

21 Under Siege

White light and blue flashes broke through the windows. A voice amplified to the point of pain boomed. "This is the FBI. We have the house surrounded."

Valerie pulled on denim overalls and a sweater. She found Belle in her own room dressing April. "What do we do?" Belle asked.

"Go downstairs." In the kitchen they saw the other women under the long table. The three dropped down and climbed underneath.

"It's about me," Valerie said. "Listen, I did the murder. It's up to me to give myself up."

"No," Belle said.

"Let her go," Dierdre said nervously.

"We were all in on it," Selene pointed out.

The large voice returned. "Come out at once or we will be forced to blast loud rock and roll music at you all night long."

"Hey, not a problem," Harrie called out. Shela put her hand over Harrie's mouth.

"Just bring out the little girl. Her father's with us and we know that you've been hiding her."

"So that's what this is," Belle said. "I'd rather die."

"What do we do?" Valerie asked.

"Keep down, and everybody follow me," Selene commanded. Hands held, heads low they followed Selene to the cellar door, then down the steps.

"I can't see," April said. Belle quieted her and carried her down.

"Why are we here?" Dierdre asked. "There's no way out of here that they don't have covered."

Selene stood tall and walked to a wall. "Harrie, help me move this bookcase," she whispered. Harrie took one side of it. "Swing it just wide of the wall. We'll have to push it back when you go."

"Go?" Harrie asked and stopped. "A door," she said. The others crowded around. They traced the outline of an ancient door behind thick cobwebs.

"Don't just stand there everyone," Selene said, impatient. "A lot of these old houses have this kind of thing. It's a passage to the barn. They probably used it in the winter. Harrie and Shela, you take Valerie, Belle and April out. We'll stay back, give you five minutes, then surrender. That should keep them occupied until they figure out Belle and April aren't in the house. After that it's up to you." She became a general in command of her troops.

Harrie and Shela opened the door. Valerie followed them, holding Belle's hand. The ground was dry, rocky. They made their way cautiously without sight, groping along rough stones on either side. The air smelled stale, dank, unused. Shela bumped against solid wood. "What's that?" Shela asked, and Harrie pressed against the planks. The door gave suddenly, old hinges bending and snapping with the force. They were in the garage.

"I never noticed that door before. Funny," Harrie said. They emerged among the broken motorcycles.

"Oo, what's that?" April pointed to a dark hulk of a machine.

"It's a monster truck," Harrie whispered. "We're working on it for a friend of ours."

"She's a daredevil," Shela put in. The mutant pickup dwarfed them. Valerie gaped at tires taller than she, their wide reptilian treads, spiked hubcaps. On the side of the truck, painted against black, a dragon scorched a screaming skull.

Harrie spoke to Belle. "I'm afraid we've got to take April in it and give you and Valerie a bike."

"I'm not putting my child in that."

"Yeah you are," she said. "We'll get her to the next safe house. We promise. We'll call your mother in about a week."

"They'll shoot at you."

"The truck's bulletproof, everything-proof. You see, you walk the bike out the side door, get down the hill to the dirt road. When we start out of here it should draw all the attention away from you."

Belle looked at Valerie through the gloom, questioning. "It's up to you," Valerie answered her glance. Belle knelt down, kissed her daughter and whispered in her ear. Shela climbed to open the door of the truck's driver cab. Harrie picked up April and handed her up to Shela, who placed her on the seat and secured her. Harrie ran to the driver's side and scrambled in.

"Watch out," Valerie called to Shela. Valerie traced an arc of orange blur from the secret passage to the seat of the truck. Althea settled on April's lap, purring.

"How do cats do that?" Shela wondered. She jumped down and walked the two to a wide motorcycle.

21.1 Selene's Strategic Surrender

Dierdre waved a baseball bat tied with a small white cloth out of a kitchen window. Selene called out "We surrender." She squinted to make out cars and shadows in the glare.

"Stand down," she heard, then "Everyone out, hands over your heads." Dierdre's hand felt steady as Selene took it and led her out of the house. "Hold it there." a man commanded. They stopped on the porch. "Where are the rest? Where's the woman with the kid?" she heard another man bark.

"In the house. Come on in and get them." The shadows moved toward them. They entered, cuffed their hands behind them. Police women searched them. A group of men in black suits and ties, pistols drawn, entered the house. Selene and Dierdre heard the sound of wood splintering, glass breaking. "My house," Selene said sorrowfully. "My house."

Valerie and Belle had gotten the bike down a decline to a dirt road. "You sure you know how to ride this?" Belle asked.

Valerie nodded. "Sure. The guys had them around the neighborhood. I used to sneak out and ride around. Sometimes they let me ride on my own. Only time I ever felt free." They looked up the hill. Through trees they made out shadows in blinding white.

They heard a roar. The barn doors broke open. The monster truck emerged in silhouette, wheels spitting gravel and dust. It climbed up and over a police car, crushed like a soda can. Tires bounced back to earth and screamed down the road. "Hold fire," Valerie and Belle heard. Sirens split the night. Two cop cars in the driveway pulled back and crashed into each other. They locked bumpers and spun their wheels.

Valerie turned the ignition on the bike and took off down the road. She hugged back roads and rutted trails, heading in a direction she guessed west. The quarter moon guided them toward the horizon. Belle helped navigate. At intersections town names she knew glowed white on green markers. They followed the arrows, wound through fields and forests, dodging rain clouds that scrolled across a sky packed with stars. The wind hit their faces with the cold mist of river roads. They climbed to more mountainous terrain. They buzzed darkened houses, rousing old hounds in yards to bark until the bike rolled out of earshot. Fog sneaked out of hollows and snaked across pavement. Cemeteries brooded on hillsides. Assemblies of obelisks weighted down unquiet ghosts.

In time they saw a sign and slowed to read it. Entering The State Of New York. Welcome to the Empire State. Hon. Horst S. Petuti, Governor. State Motto: Excelsior. State Flower: The Rose. State Bird: The Bluebird. State Tree: The Sugar Maple. State Animal: The Beaver.

"Half-way home," Valerie called out. "Back to Brooklyn, City of New York. City flower: the petunia. City bird: the pigeon. City animal: the street cat."

"Still a long way." Belle accelerated.