
BRUNCH IN BYZANTIUM

ROGER DEGENNARO

30 Ave. B, 5C
New York, NY 10009
(212) 673-0060

© 1997

BRUNCH IN BYZANTIUM

Table of Contents

Section	Page
1 Accident	1
2 Val's Trauma	15
3 Pinely the Attorney	25
3.1 When Lawyers Collide	35
4 Beyond Park Slope	39
4.1 A Simple Country Dinner.	45
5 Trevor's Performance	51
5.1 Café ATM	52
5.2 Mark at Philip's.	58
5.3 Afternoon of the Morning	62
6 Sound Structures	67
7 Aunt Lucille.	75
8 The Lawyer and the Criminal	87
9 Derek Conquers the World	96
10 Family Secrets	104
11 Autumnal Vistas	124
11.1 Ritual	130
11.2 By the Fire	138
12 Trevor Meets A Mystery Man	143
13 Halloween in Tribeca	154
14 Derek Channels an Entity	161
14.1 Mark Consults a Psychic	170
14.2 Mark Goes to See Derek	174
15 Mark Does the Deed.	179
16 Unexpected Arrivals	184
17 Alex Drops a Quarter	196
18 The Solarites at the End of the World	200
19 Mark and Philip in Trouble.	207
19.1 At the Inn.	209
20 Doctor Wax	222
21 Under Siege	230
21.1 Selene's Strategic Surrender.	233
22 No Escape	236

Section	Page
23 Party for GMSMLA	252
23.1 Downtown	260
23.2 Pinely Hits the Streets.	266
24 Mark's Father Forces the Issue.	269
25 Brunch in Byzantium.	275
26 Warm Fusion	278

1 Accident

Travel guides note that Sunday evenings are best for traffic accidents in New York.

Philip Hayes cycled west on Sixth Street toward its intersection with Avenue A. The quiet drizzle soaked his frayed blue jacket, green cap and tan shorts. Street lamps, traffic signals and restaurant neon streaked electric colors across wet asphalt.

Mark Milano drove downtown on Avenue A, past the Pyramid Club, where he had once fallen in love. Ahead, signals all go, a string of green beads drew him forward. Mark gave the club's entrance a fond glance, black doors under a pink triangle. A tall drag queen emerged. Her ensemble glowed silver in the night. Her headdress, three-quarters of a mirror ball, threw off glints of white, red and green. Tiled sequins shimmered on aluminum. A camera flash on her chrome necklace pierced the windshield with a bolt. Mark was dazzled, stunned. He blinked, saw the red of blood, the retinal network. A blue-green hole appeared at the center of his field of vision. Through glare Mark caught sight of a man on a bicycle, his warm, soft face in fear. Mark slammed his foot on the brake. He felt the crunch of metal and bone.

When Valvolina de Mylar got out of the Pyramid after her show, she noticed an attractive bicyclist cross the avenue, then drop his jaw. She called out, "It may look good, but I'm as hot in this outfit as you are on a bicycle." Turning, Valvolina raised her hand to hail a cab. Her necklace flashed, set on its timer. She noticed a red car pass, glanced back to see it bear down on the cyclist. She yelled, "Hey. Look out!" Valvolina heard the screech of tires, watched the car skid and hit. Valvolina de Mylar screamed her best horror movie scream. She had rehearsed.

Philip Hayes looked away from the drag queen to the car, his mouth still open. He saw a squarish face, terrified eyes. He felt the bumper of the car hit his thigh as the bike gave way. His body tumbled over the hood and windshield in a roll. He caught the left side mirror with his right arm. As he fell hard on the cool, slick street, he heard a loud crack. Something had broken.

Adrenaline shot through Philip's spine in bursts of electricity. Philip felt intense cold. He began to shudder. Philip stared up at the streetlight, saw flashes of blue, heard the yelps and shrieks of police car sirens. He felt his legs, chest, shoulders and neck send signals of pain. 'All nerves firing. Not paralyzed,' he noted and cried out. His body shook.

Spectators gathered. "Don't move. Just lie there." A man said.

A woman joined in: "It's your back. It's your neck. You're in excruciating agony. You have a spinal injury. Remember that!"

Valvolina ran down the block. "I saw it all. I'll be a witness," she said. She opened her bag, darted toward Philip and slipped her business card into his jacket pocket. "Get your lawyer to call me," she said and stepped back.

Mark slammed the door of the car, broke through the ring of onlookers, stood over Philip. "What did I do?" he said.

Philip watched a face, haloed with a pink glow, floating above him. Fear and concern in the features drew him away from the pain. He closed his eyes. Still seeing the man's face, he lost consciousness.

Bright white stabbed Philip's opening eyes. He awoke, numb and warm, in a room of institutional green. 'Hospital,' he thought. In a flash of memory he saw the car, the face, felt the terror of that moment.

A nurse came in and handed him a paper cup filled with pills. "Pain killers. You'll be okay," he said. "At least that's what the doctors say." He was unsmiling, eyes soft blue, hair red, skin pink, uniform white.

"It's too bright in here," Philip said. "Not a bit flattering." The nurse dimmed the room.

"Wait a minute. I'll get the doctor to come and talk to you."

The doctor was a gentle-looking man in his forties. His expression seemed knowing, but cautious. D. Sanjari, MD, his nameplate announced. "How are you feeling?" The doctor paused, waiting for complaints.

"You tell me," Philip answered. "What's the damage?"

The doctor recited an index of ailments. "You have a broken rib which we have taped up. X-rays show pressure fractures in your right leg, very thin. You'll have to keep weight off the leg. There are also bruised bones, torn tendons and severely strained muscles. Upon discharge you will receive a printout listing your sundry conditions and my preliminary opinions. It is wonderful to be living in the digital age, no?"

"It will be when they invent a car that stops itself," Philip said.

The doctor nodded. "I see your point. Anyway, we will need to do more tests for mobility of the limbs, CAT scans and that sort of thing. Your spine may be out of line.

You will be able to walk, but you should be hobbling for several weeks. We shall prescribe a series of restorative therapies, drugs and exercises. We must further inquire concerning your left knee and your right shoulder. Should you feel dizzy or experience any visual difficulties you must report these things at once to a medical practitioner. These symptoms could strongly signify a concussion. This is where your brain is knocked around in its fluid, impacting against your skull from the inside. Such a situation could be very serious. We are keeping you overnight to make sure there is no further damage. We shall be in touch with your personal physician in order to give him all the relevant information so that he may follow up with your case. We will send him your records. I have kept the police away, but you will have to file a report with them as soon as possible. Do you have any questions?"

"How long before I'm back to normal?" Philip suspected that the answer would not please him.

"We cannot predict that with any great certainty. Your doctor will have to chart your progress. If there is nothing else, I must depart for other duties now." Philip gave a meager royal wave. The doctor waved back and left the room.

The nurse returned. "Do you think you're up for visitors?" he asked.

"Who's here?"

"A gentleman. He's been waiting until you regained consciousness."

"I've been waiting all my life to hear those words," Philip said. The nurse betrayed no reaction, gently took Philip's rectal temperature and left the room. The door opened. A gaunt figure stood shadowed by the hallway light. He moved in cautiously. Again the face

hovered above, handsome, angular, cut from stone. His eyes were deep, mournful. 'Are they really green?' Philip wondered. Mark's black hair and skin cast of an almost Victorian pallor created a striking contrast.

"Who are you?" Philip asked.

"Mark. Mark Milano. I ran you down with my car. Sorry." Mark's voice broke a bit as he spoke.

"Philip Hayes. If you were trying to get my attention, you got it. Please." Philip indicated a brown vinyl chair.

Mark put his orange visitor's pass on the night table. He touched the edge of the bed. "I can't stay long. I just wanted to see if you were all right. I'm running late."

"Sorry to hold you up. Where were you going tonight when it happened?"

"Tonight? It's Monday night. You've been out for a while. I've been waiting here since I left work this evening." Mark got up and paced the room.

"Oh." Philip felt his cheek for stubble. "You must be right. I *was* on my way to the hospital, so you saved me a trip."

"How are you?" Mark leaned on the question. "Is there any major injury?"

"I don't think I should tell you. After all..."

"Yes, I know. It's something for the doctors and the lawyers to haggle over. Think of the mass of paperwork we're generating." Mark stared out the window, tapped it for thickness.

"I'm sure there's an insurance company and all that. More people will examine my x-rays than have seen me naked in my life."

Mark paced back. "I'd rather see you naked than look at your x-rays."

"I don't know if this is the time or the place." Philip said. Mark loomed over him.

"I'm here and you can't run. What about dinner as soon as you're up and staggering?"

"I don't know, what with the neck brace and the body cast I'll be in. You know of an intravenous cafe?"

"Sure. There's one in the east 20's, near all the hospitals. They have cozy little tables with couches, drip bags and oxygen masks." Mark glanced at his watch.

"Sounds lovely. Call me soon. Now, if I can get my swollen, fractured fingers to write." Philip used pen and paper from the night stand, handed Mark the information. Mark left a card on the table.

The door bounced open. "Darling! Philip! Is everything broken?" Trevor swept in.

"Mark. Meet Trevor, my roommate. Trevor, this is Mark, the fellow who ran me down." Mark extended a hand. Trevor took it, then dropped it quickly.

"What is *he* doing here?" Trevor asked archly. A silver-blond lock fell to his forehead.

"Mark's seeing how I am," Philip answered.

"More like reveling in the destruction he caused. You fiend! Look at Philip!"

Trevor pointed toward Philip. "His shattered form lies helpless in this bed, a husk of his former self, and it's all your doing."

"Trevor, please. He's concerned about me." Philip crossed his arms and pouted.

"A concerned maniac is more like it. Did you pass the alcohol test?"

Mark shifted. "Not a drop. It was an accident. He was riding against traffic, by the way."

"*He* hit *you* then? I want you to get out of this room now." Trevor waved toward the door.

"I guess I'll leave." Mark stood up, grabbed his visitor's pass.

"Before you go," Trevor said. "I'm doing a cabaret night Thursday through Saturday at the Forty-four Club, upstairs in the theater area. I'm on for four weekends. I hope you can make it." Trevor produced a blue postcard emblazoned with his image in overdone makeup. "It's a salute to silent movies with songs of the era. It call the evening 'Singing the Silents.' I'm stunning on stage, Mark. Is that your name, Mark? Do I have it right?" Mark nodded. "You really ought to come."

Mark took the post card. "Thanks. Maybe I will. Goodbye, Philip." Mark grasped his hand gently, held it tighter, then let go. "You know I'll call."

"Goodbye Mark." Philip watched him leave.

"Quite a prize," Trevor gushed. "How come handsome men like that never run *me* over with their cars? Was it an expensive car?" He frowned briefly. "I hate hospitals. You

can't smoke. And how strange to be visiting someone not on the AIDS corridor for a change. At least it's just a traffic accident. You'll get over it." Trevor sat on the edge of the chair. "This Valvolina de Mylar creature, whatever she is, saw the whole thing?"

"She put her card in my jacket."

Trevor opened the closet, rifled through pockets and drew out a pink card with violet lettering. "Valvolina de Mylar. The next millennium will be an even bigger drag."

"Mind you," Trevor said, putting the card back. "It's not the sort of drag I like, not glamorous, not harkening back to the golden era. You know, she does this bit with condoms and vacuum pump penis enlargers that would make an old lady short out her pacemaker."

"I tried a vacuum pump penis enlarger, but I didn't like it." Philip put in.

"No?" Trevor prompted with a sidelong glance.

"It kept getting stuck in elevator doors when they closed."

Trevor shot Philip a look. "Regardless. She's willing to testify in your behalf. Her real name is Val D'angelo. Can you believe it?"

"What am I going to do — sue this wonderful guy I just met who asked me out?"

"That's a matter for a lawyer, and you don't have one."

"I'll use my dad's. I've been by his office before. The old man doesn't know it, but the lawyer's queer as your Aunt Sally."

Trevor quickly made his body rigid, mimicking Philip's father. "Now son," he dropped in pitch and added an upper-class New England drawl. "I don't know if I like the

kind of people you have around here in your neighborhood. Your mother and I are very worried. I hope you're not going to dye your hair blue or get into all these dangerous drugs." Then Trevor softened, swerved into Philip's posture before his dad. "Now, father, I'll be all right. I'll just get roaring drunk and whore around with guys a lot, that's all."

Then, returning to the father's character, Trevor said, "Well, son, I don't see anything wrong with that. You just have some fun for yourself and here's a brand new hundred dollar bill for you."

Philip laughed. "Ow. Don't make me laugh like that. Broken rib. Yow!" He reached to clutch his chest, then checked himself. "No! Can't touch it."

"Didn't they give you any pain killers?"

"I just took something. I feel it starting to kick in. My body is going to float off the bed in a few minutes."

"Good. Milk them for all the drugs you can get. What you don't want, you can sell to friends," Trevor said brightly. "You will have to make this man pay. Sure he came around here, all charm, all smiles. He doesn't want you to take him to court."

"Do you mind if I just go with my instincts here?" Philip drank from his water glass.

"Like with the last one? The psychotic? He seemed nice at the beginning too."

"Don't remind me. I've been punished enough."

"Anyway, I'm running late for rehearsal. Watch television, float around the room and sleep. I want you to sleep all day. Tomorrow night I'm working at the shop, so I'll be

by Tuesday morning to get you home." His shop sold strange objects to still stranger people.

"Thanks, Trevor. Call me sometime tomorrow night."

"Of course. What's a friend and roommate for?"

"To leave dishes in the sink and play loud music at all hours?"

"Exactly. Good night." Trevor made his exit.

Philip watched television, floated around the room, had an institutional dinner and dozed off. The nurse came in, woke him up and made him take a sleeping pill. Philip sank into a heavy sleep.

1.1 Philip Returns Home

Trevor wheeled Philip toward the curb. "You know why they put you in a wheelchair? So you can't fall down and sue the hospital. Crooks, the lot of 'em."

A cab pulled up obligingly and they got in. "Twelfth street between Avenues A and B. It's a pretty yellow building in the middle of the block." Trevor spoke with gestures. A long thin white coat accentuated their sweep.

Philip leaned on Trevor as they climbed the two flights to their apartment.

"That hurt," Philip said as they entered. He threw his cap over the dancing Ganesh statue, hung his coat on its trunk. Trevor took them off and put them on the coat rack.

Philip felt the comfort of familiar surroundings: the bird of paradise curtains on the

windows, the soft Chinese landscapes on the walls, the same bright Balinese masks staring at him. He stumbled on a wrinkle in the Persian carpet. He was home.

"Yes. Sit in the big chair, now." Trevor placed him in it, dashed into his room. Philip took a folded paper out of his pocket. He opened it to examine his damage. Inside he found the card Mark had left.

Trevor emerged. "How's this?" He produced an intricately carved cane, painted black and gold.

"Do you have something plainer? I'll stand out." Philip took the cane. He examined it, then twirled it twice like a baton. The tip hit a hanging fern. Philip lost his grip. The cane clattered to the floor.

"You're so conservative. Darling, you've got to play this one for all it's worth. Think of the looks of sympathy you'll get from passers-by, especially men."

"Does everything have to be about men?"

"Philip, dear one! Everything *is* about men. If you can't have them adore you, you can at least attract their woeful attention."

"That is not how I see it." Philip folded his hands.

"Dear, relax. I'll put on some music and make us a splendid lunch. I have bagels from the good place, brie and arugula. I'm never sure if I like arugula. I only buy it so I can say the name. It sounds like an eastern European capital. We have a bit of wine. Can you have that with your pills? No matter. We'll take our chances. There's coffee from that great coffee place."

"A flavor?"

"Never flavored coffee. How could you think such a thing?" Trevor scowled. He picked up the cane by its lion's head top, which came loose. A thin sword emerged from its casing. "Hmmm... A bonus. Never noticed that. If that Mark guy gives you any trouble, you can run him through with this." Trevor stabbed air with metal, sheathed it and gave the head a tightening twist. He walked over to the kitchen area and began busying himself. He switched on the box on the counter. Music from the classical station emerged. "I suppose this will do." The room filled with drum beats and flourishes. He moved with the music.

Philip touched Mark's card, picked up the phone and pressed the number.

"Hello, is this Mark?" Philip saw Trevor lean his head.

"It is." The tone was deeper than he remembered.

"This is Philip."

"Oh, Philip." At once the voice inflected warmth. "How are you today?"

"In a great deal of over-medicated pain. Let's not dwell on the details. How are you?"

"I'm in my own pain of guilt, horror and shame. I had to tell you what actually happened. When I saw that drag queen in front of the club, I was temporarily blinded. That's why I didn't see you. And you were wearing dark clothes."

"Things happen, right?"

"I was thinking I should take you out. Maybe go to your roommate's performance on Friday night."

"What are you going to do this time — back over me?"

"Actually I'm waiting for them to repair the damage that your body has done to my car. A side-view mirror's on order, and blood isn't the easiest thing to clean off. Then there are the dents and scrapes they have to paint and pound out." Mark sounded serious.

"Dreadfully sorry about your car. I'll throw myself under the wheels next time."

"I'm sure you weren't thinking," Mark returned. "Friday then?"

"I'll come armed." Philip noticed Trevor giving him an evil stare.

"Okay. It's Tuesday. I'll call you Friday, about six. Be ready. I have your number, but where do you live?"

Philip gave him the address. "Mark, I don't know why I'm doing this. I should hate you."

Mark replied: "Don't hate me until you get to know me first."

"I'll give it time."

"Good. Tomorrow, then," Mark answered.

"By the way."

"Yes?" Mark sounded hesitant.

"I'm going to my lawyer over this."

"Whatever you want."

Philip hung up the phone. Trevor leaned in, peered into Philip's eyes. "And?"

"And nothing. We have a date Friday night."

"A date. What did I tell you? It's all about men. Lunch?" Trevor conjured a tray ready for the cover of a food magazine. "After we lunch, you can call your dad's attorney for another kind of date."

"I'd like to call my lawyer, but it's still daylight out." Philip smeared half a bagel.

2 Val's Trauma

Valvolina de Mylar reached her brownstone in the nether reaches of Park Slope as dawn twilight edged the horizon steel blue. She checked her glowing watch. "Five thirty in the morning," she muttered. Birds offered vocal warm-ups as she climbed out of the taxi on Warren Street, Brooklyn. She always felt afraid during that short walk in full drag. The shadows of stunted trees lurked, ready to lunge. She unlatched and swung the low iron gate, tapped high heels up the walkway, twisted her key in the lock and pulled on a set of bars. She stepped down into the dank well under the building's front stoop, then creaked the security gate shut. She stumbled through her front door, locked it and let out a sigh of home.

Valvolina walked the dim hallway to the bathroom. She looked into the mirror. "Damn, crying always kills the makeup job." She disrobed, hanging her dress on the door, placing the mirror ball hat on a styrofoam head. She removed layers of blush, shadow and foundation with white goop from an open jar, then rinsed with astringent. She showered, then dried off with one of the big pink bath towel she had found on sale at Macy's during the winter. Valvolina had become Val again, an off-stage self, a someone no one noticed. Val put on the short night dress hanging from a bar in the thin closet. "Never out of goddam drag," Val muttered. "Yeah? I couldn't be a real guy if I tried." The blow-dryer shaped his hair into something reasonable-looking. Val wore long hair, preferring home salon styling to the cheap wigs others wore. "Gotta give Aunt Lucille a call. See how the

old girl's doing out there in Queens." Val passed through the little kitchen in the back and opened the door to the bedroom.

"That you, babe?" a muffled voice asked.

"Yeah, Joey. Who else would it be?" Val climbed on to bed.

"Come on in here babe and give me some of that sweet stuff."

Val sat on the bed. "Listen, Joey, I witnessed a traffic accident. It was horrible. Happened right after my show, right in front of my face. I had to talk to the cops and everything. Joey, honey, I'm just kinda tired and not in the mood tonight."

"You sound like Elaine." Joey sat up, lit a cigarette.

"Do you have to bring your wife up every time you come over? Like I'm dog food in the can?" Val huffed.

"I'll say whatever I want when I come over here and you better give me what I want when I come here, 'cause who's paying the rent on this hole? Who's paying the two hundred dollar phone bills? Who fills the silver straw that's welded up into your nose?" Joey hit the empty pillow next to him with an open palm.

"I know Joey, honey, but sometimes I'm just a little worn out when I come back from work. If you ever came to a show you'd see what it takes out of me. I'll do it right for you in the morning, okay?" Val lay down and curled up, facing away from Joey.

"No. Not okay. Not fucking okay." Joey's voice rose. "Like I don't work hard to keep you happy? You get over here. You suck me until it's hard, lube up your pussy and sit on my dick. As in now! You got that?"

"I'm gonna go get some water in the kitchen." Val stomped to the refrigerator, pulled out a pink Harlequin pitcher.

"Don't you walk away when I'm fucking talking to you. You get back in here." Joey's words were angry, heated.

"Leave it, Joey." Val took a cup, casually poured water and drank. Val heard the door swing open. Joey stood naked, hairy, his face flushed with rage.

"I'm busting my butt out there in construction so you can shake your fucking ass for a bunch of goddam faggots. You could show some fucking appreciation."

"Yeah, right Joey. I never show any appreciation. And you do construction like I'm a football player. You read the sign on your truck so much you believe it. How long we been together? Huh? Since high school — all on the sly. Ten goddam years. More! I do whatever you want and I get no consideration for it. You marry that princess bitch from hell, Elaine. She spends all your money. Her and the kids get whatever the hell they want and I live poor. I've got news for you. You never even loved her. You just married her so no one would know you're queer."

"I ain't queer and you know it. Say that one more time and I'll smack the shit out of you, Val, or Valvolina, or whatever the fuck your name is today." Joey raised his hand.

"You don't scare me, Joey. You're a big tough guy who's also a big homo. You know, Joey, not every guy gets to marry both of his high school sweethearts." Joey swung and landed a body blow that knocked Val over the kitchen table, sending the pitcher onto the floor, where it shattered into a dozen pink pieces.

"Get up," he commanded.

"So's you can hit me again? No way Joey." Val grabbed a ceramic shard.

"Get up bitch." Joey grabbed Val by the upper arms, pulled him to his feet.

"Let go of me!" Val struggled, freed her arm to swipe at Joey's face with the piece of pitcher. A red gash oozed on his cheek.

"Fuck!" Joey yelled, let go and backed away a step. He threw a punch that hit Val in the jaw. Val sprawled, face to the linoleum.

"Don't move. Don't even move, bitch." Joey said in a dead tone.

Val looked up at the corner, where the cat clock wagged its tail and rolled its eyes. Val froze in place. He heard Joey's footsteps behind, then felt large hands pull his hips backwards. Joey pulled the nightgown up, ripped the panties Val wore. Val felt him enter, his large penis ripping his anus open with one quick thrust, without benefit of lubricant or condom. As Val watched the cat clock mocking, Joey pushed harder, grunting. Val felt spasms as his body burned away. Eyes closed he saw white light, heard his screams choked off in a brutal rhythm. He listened as if far off, deep within the recess of his skull. Finding a place to hide, a cave, he retreated into its darkness, fell numb.

"Bitch," Val heard him say between groans. "Fucking... pussy... whore." Then came the final grunt. Val could feel his semen spurt, hot and deep. Joey's orgasm seemed endless. He pulled out quickly. Val collapsed. There were noises in the bedroom as Joey pulled on clothes, zipped his fly, jammed his feet into heavy workboots. Val did not turn or open his eyes, did not move.

Joey stomped away. "See. That's what you get, Val. Next time don't say nothing. Nothing. You give me what I want or I take it anyway." His footsteps echoed down the hallway. The door slammed.

Val sank into the pink and black linoleum, reached around to feel his sore rectum. The touch the sharp jab of a needle. He drew his hand up. "Blood," Val whispered, "blood."

Val shut his eyes again, sensed that he was spinning, drowning. In the surface of a gray pool his reflection swirled. He slipped into the sweet dark whirlpool. Drawn into the center of the vortex, Val let go.

A rooster crowed that Brooklyn morning. Valerie came to, staring at the checkered kitchen tile. "Goddam these cock-fighting assholes to hell for ever. Hope their chickens rip their bloody eyes out and they all just die and die, and die some more," she muttered, squinting in the hazy glow of day. The cat clock showed 8. "It's got to be New York, even the roosters oversleep. Hey, you stupid bird," she croaked. "Dawn was two hours ago." She tried to move. She could not move. "Val, you amazing weakling. How could you let this happen to us?" she murmured. "Don't worry. Valerie's here now, maybe this time to stay." She reached out, grabbed the leg of the little telephone table, and shook it. The phone fell, missing her head by a few inches. She grabbed the receiver and dialed 411.

"What listing please?" The woman's voice sounded of her job.

"I need some help. My boyfriend beat me up last night. I've got to get away from him. I need somewhere to go."

"Just where are you, ma'am?" The voice became at once more emotional. She gave the street and avenue. "Just a moment." There was a pause on the line. "There's a women's social service center on Fifth Avenue, Brooklyn. I'll give you the address and number. Do you have a pen?" Every muscle, every joint ached as she climbed the telephone table.

"Okay," she said hoarsely. "Give me the information." She took down the number.

"Ma'am, I'm only the information operator, but maybe you want to call a hospital or the police." The voice was hurried, pressing.

"No. No hospitals. No cops." Valerie was definite on the point.

"Then call that number I gave you. And if he comes back, dial 911. You're a woman in trouble and you've got to get yourself to some help right away." Her accent sounded vaguely southern.

Valerie breathed. "You're right. I am a woman in trouble and I need help desperately."

She hung up the phone, made herself stand. The blood on the floor had dried into a wretched stain. Valerie propelled off walls to the bathroom. She showered, put herself together as best she could. She made over the bruises on her face, tried to shade away the swelling. She put on a simple skirt dress and the plainest shoes she had. She packed the bag she kept in the closet. Valerie stuffed money and what jewelry she had of any value

inside. She took a look around the apartment. Her non-driver ID lay on the top of the bureau. A picture of Val D'angelo stared out at her. 'Who is he?' she wondered. 'Whoever was that?'

Valerie took the warm hand offered. "Hello," she said. "My name's Debbie. I'm a social worker here. What's your name, honey?" The woman sat across the desk. Her deep brown eyes seemed impossibly sad.

"Val — Valerie D'angelo. I'm in the phone book as Val." Valerie began to shake.

"And your address?" Valerie gave it to her.

"I've got to ask you some questions for our records." She tore a fresh form from a pad of them. "You sit tight, pull yourself together and try to answer."

Valerie gave her date of birth, place of birth, height, weight and eye color. "No, I don't have any identification on me," she said in answer to the question. "I had to get out of there as soon as possible."

"Now, what happened?" She examined her carefully. "Did your boyfriend give you that big bruise on your face? Is there anything broken, anything a doctor should look at?"

"No. No doctors. Yeah. He hit me."

"Did he rape you? You can tell me. This is all confidential."

Valerie paused. If she told the truth, she would have to go to a hospital, then talk to the cops. "No," she said. "No he didn't."

"Can you go back home? Do you have a friend to stay with? Family?"

"No. If I change the lock he'll come over with a locksmith or a sledge hammer or something. If I go over a friend's he'll find me. I got no family but an old aunt, and he knows where she is, too. I don't know what to do. You know a shelter or something? Anything? I'm desperate here." Valerie bit her lower lip.

The woman took a long look at her. "Valerie. I hate to tell you this. We've got two shelters in the borough where we can place women in your situation. They're both full. Hell, they've got waiting lists. We have whole families doubled up in the apartments. You can go to the police and get a restraining order."

"I read about a woman did that and got shot the next week. Plus he knows cops, higher-ups in the borough. The man's got connections could fix a murder like the person never existed on earth. New York is surrounded by large bodies of water — ever notice, Debbie?"

Debbie's upper lip quivered as she spoke. "Murder! You think he's likely to kill you?"

"Or get one of his friends to, so's he can have an alibi as tight as his butt hole. You don't know this guy. You don't know who he knows and what they can do if they want to. I think even if I got into one of those shelters he'd find me."

"There are a few safe houses in this neighborhood, but I'm afraid they're also full up." She turned up an empty palm.

"There ain't no house around here safe from this man. I've got to get out of the city if I want to get clear. I've got to run so far he could never find me. Maybe in a year he'll

get someone new and forget about me. I don't know. If I go back, I think next time that's the end of Valerie."

"Excuse me a minute. Wait right here and don't move. I've got to make a phone call."

The woman left the desk and disappeared behind a partition. Valerie heard her pick up a phone. She could hear her in conversation, agitated, arguing. "No, she's not, but if you could see the woman... Do you think she's gonna care at this stage? Um hmm... Okay, I'll sound her out about it. If she gives you any trouble you call me first... Listen. I will drive up there if necessary. Thanks. You too, baby." Valerie heard her slam down the phone. "Butch-ass bitch," she whispered. In a moment she returned to the desk.

"What I'm about to say to you is strictly off the record. If you agree to what I propose, you never came in here, you don't know my name, never saw me and you don't know where this place is. If you don't like what I'm offering, this part of the conversation never took place, your card goes in the file, we shake hands and you go to the police, a social worker, a hospital or home. We call you when we've got something and you hide under the bed for a few months.

"You probably don't understand how this works. We're funded by the state and the city. We're not supposed to go outside the system. Luckily for you, there is an outside the system. Anything happens to you and we'd be liable, if we referred you on the books. If I do it on the sly, I'm risking a lot, personally and for this center. I swear to you, if you say anything about this I never laid eyes on you. Got that?"

Valerie nodded. "Look. I understand, I think. Not really, but... Whatever it is, I'll take it. It's not like I got a lot of choices left."

"I have to make one more call to line up some transportation. I don't know why I'm even doing this. I could lose my job. It's just that I think I believe your story about this guy and I don't think I could look myself in the mirror if they found you floating in the Gowanus Canal next week." Debbie ripped Valerie's form three times and let the pieces drift into a wastebasket.

3 Pinely the Attorney

York, Shepherd, and Jackle, Attorneys at Law, the gold letters on thick glass doors announced. Philip pulled one open. It was astonishingly heavy. It took all his strength and maneuvering to get his damaged body through the entrance. He walked the soft maroon carpet. The area walls were faced with smoke-gray marble. He noticed the antiqued book shelves, the slab of black granite that served as a reception desk. The offices were starkly plush, a modern law firm that hinted at an earlier era.

Behind the slab of granite, a woman with a phone headset looked up from her copy of Glitz Magazine. Its cover showed an action-adventure movie star squatting naked, his genitals concealed by a bowling ball. "Your name?" she asked coolly. Philip gave it. "And you are here to see...?" She paused for him to fill in the blank. She touched a line and announced. "Philip Hayes here to see Mr. Pinely." Then she looked at Philip and said, "One moment. Mr. Pinely's secretary will come to take you back. Please have a seat."

Philip hated modular furniture. As he sank into the sofa, gripping his knees for support, he placed his cane on a glass coffee table. Copies of the firm's annual report, Barron's, Business Week, Forbes, Fortune, Investors' Weekly, Inc., Money, and Working Woman lay in alphabetical order. He picked up one and read about the booming business selling golf travel tours to Japanese middle managers. He perused articles that had no bearing on his life. He wondered where all the profiled entrepreneurs lived, what their average day was like. Did they decide to buy huge corporations in the shower one

morning? Did it occur to them to topple governments of small nations as they shaved stubble? Were the inventors in the photos real, people happily building minesweeping robots, virtual reality shopping malls, talking manhole covers, quantum roulette predictors, gene-spliced cucumbers and magnetic-levitation hospital beds? Were all the grim garages of America stuffed with the weird products of wild imaginations? Philip wondered if these items signaled true waves of the future, or evolutionary dead-ends in the marketplace. Perhaps his father knew all the answers. The man had smashed a few national economies in his time. Philip felt lucky when a restaurant check for three people worked out.

"Philip Hayes?" Philip stared up at a thin man of about twenty-five with round, brass-rimmed glasses and a trapezoidal haircut.

"That would be me," Philip answered.

"I'm Alex Gray, Mr. Pinely's secretary. Come along with me." The man wore a white shirt with a florid tie. He wheeled and strode off down a corridor. Philip got up from the sofa with difficulty and hurried to catch up with him. From behind, Alex looked alarmingly thin. His butt was almost nonexistent. His arms and legs were without dimension. 'Eating Disorders in Gay Men — an article,' Philip thought to himself. It seemed an underreported phenomenon.

Philip mused further. Gay men were supposed to be action figure dolls or preying mantises. These were the norms. Anything else had to belong to some fetish category: bear, daddy, tattooed, exotic. No plain, ordinary medium build men needed apply. Such body types only inhabited bleachers at baseball games, drinking beer from large cups. At

Gay Pride one would see numbers of ordinary guys in colorful outfits, but they would fade into the background. A drag queen on rollerblades would sail by, whipping a man in a rubber submission helmet riding a skateboard. So Philip's mind wandered until Alex's nonexistent butt stopped before the door to Pinely's office. "Wait just a moment," he said, knocking. It had been half an hour of just a moment.

In the lawyer's office Philip chose a chair across the desk from Pinely. The attorney, buttoned down and vested, scrutinized Philip's shaky motion as he gripped the blond wooden arm of the chair and lowered himself into it. Philip scanned the office. Art finds crammed shelves and walls: clouds of orange next to snarling dogs. Philip leaned his cane against a credenza. On it a folk art pony on wheels stared out at the view south from midtown. Through large windows Philip took in the twin towers under a sickly pale sky. A copter flew low over the 30's, crossing town toward the heliport. Light traffic meandered through the streets. Nearer, a billboard revealed the figure of a movie actress starring in a Broadway musical. She posed, smothered in feathers and sequins, surrounded by bare-chested men, suspenders tight against their waxed pecs.

Pinely looked up. "Well, Philip. I just got off the phone with your father. I had to calm him down. He's deeply troubled about this turn of events."

"I got hit by a car. It wasn't a life choice." Philip sat smug, unmoving.

"Defensive? I know there's been friction between you two. I can see that the mention of his name upsets you. It isn't often that I take this kind of case. To tell you the truth, an associate here will work with me on it. Accident law is so, well, you know,

sordid, cheap. Our firm handles much larger cases, but I've come to be your family attorney, and in this firm, unlike so many others, when you come in with us we try to take care of every matter. You remember that incident a few years ago when I showed up with the bail money?" Pinely shuffled through papers.

"It was an activist protest. Non-violent."

"And a good thing we're not doing any more of that kind of nonsense." Pinely checked his watch, noted something in his red legal diary.

"Nonsense?"

"I mean protest! What is it *for*? You want things you go get them. I don't see your personal history as one of great denials."

"Yeah not everyone has the access to the health care you and I get. They had the drugs bottled up, so to speak, where dying people couldn't get at them. Think of the politics of people doing all this marginal research that got us no close to a cure."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Heard it all before. Sometimes we think we can change things. That's not the way the world works. Look at my generation and Viet Nam. We shook our fists. We took over buildings. The ones doing most of it were the ones who could get out of it. So what was the point? Same thing: a group of overprivileged kids angry about being overprivileged. I mean, come on. Sooner or later you accept that if you have yours, you don't take the time to worry about everyone else's problems. Life's short enough."

"Yeah sure. I apologize if I wanted it to be a somewhat fair society."

"Defensive again?"

"More people died of AIDS than died in any of the wars."

"You know what, Philip? People die. They've been dying ever since there have been people. So it's our turn this time. We're just lucky we have the science now to keep people living longer. Look at history. All they could do before was head for the hills and sacrifice goats. We have to trust in advanced medical research. Put your hope there. Volunteer if you want to be useful. Otherwise you're wasting your time and clogging the criminal system, which is there to protect you from actual thieves and murderers."

"Right. Give up. It's hopeless. Go out and party your brains out. Forget it ever mattered."

"I'm not your therapist, now. I can't make up for what you think you don't have. I can only outline what you hope to get, right here, today, through what I know to be the best sort of justice I can get. If we can leave our arguments about the screwed up state of the world to one side."

"All right. Proceed." Philip braced himself.

"Have you gone back to work yet?"

"No. I thought I'd try for a half-day basis next week."

Pinely shook his head. "Don't."

"Don't go back to work?"

"That's what I said."

"I'll lose my job."

"We're talking about more money than that piddling little job can net you over several years."

"It isn't much, but it's mine."

Pinely was unmoved. "Come now. You want to lose the case? You have to prove pain and suffering, emotional and physical damage, lost wages, the works. If you go back, there's very little to build on is there? You then prove that you're up, you're fit, you're fine. Are you?"

"No. Not yet," Philip admitted.

"How many months of physical therapy did they give you?"

"Seven or eight. It's a gradual program."

"That's right, and gradually you'll get well."

"I sit at a desk all day. I don't shovel coal."

Pinely pointed at him. "Your thinking is all wrong. You've got your father. You can get some disability. Let me take care of all that. You'll have the rent paid and, by the time this is all over, maybe a lot more. Now, let me give you the name and number of the right kind of doctor." He produced a card from his desk. "You'll set up an appointment. He'll do the rest."

"But I already have a doctor."

"I'm not saying don't go to your doctor, but I don't want to know anything about that. I'm talking about the medical reports I have to produce for the case. Okay? Try to see reason. Oh, and meanwhile, I tried that number you gave me for that," he cleared his

throat, "drag performer. He's missing. I got some guy on the line. He said this Val D'angelo has run off to God knows where. Not that he is the most reliable witness, but I can work with that. I mean, you get a jury from the city, they've seen just about everything. I may have to set an investigator on it."

"Some case. I've got no witness, and I'm up against a really sweet guy."

"What? Have you talked to the other party?"

"Mark?" Philip leaned in. "We have a date Friday."

"No." Pinely jumped out of his chair, stood over him. "No, no, no and no!"

"Sorry. I want to."

The attorney raged. "I can't tell you how bad this is. He gets to see your condition in all details. After a few drinks, you let slip all the things we're talking about. Then his insurance company has to suspect collusion, so they get their detectives on both of your asses. Stop it this instant. You want a boyfriend, I'll fix you up. Come over to my place in Soho, we'll have a dinner with you and all the single guys your age I know. Long as you don't tell your dad what I'm up to, that is. Okay?"

"Okay. I'll call off the date." Philip got up.

"Leaving?"

"I'll be in touch." Philip exited Pinely's office.

"Can you find your way out?" Alex asked.

"I'll try." He walked away. As he passed a small room off the corridor he heard two women arguing. He peeked inside.

"Mr. Phelps wants this faxed right away, so you'll have to wait for the fax machine."

An older woman wearing bifocals blocked the whirring machine with her body.

"Yeah, well, Mr. Phelps is an associate. Mr. Davis is a partner and this is a rush."

A younger secretary with short hair that stuck straight up was trying to maneuver around her with a stack of papers.

"I was here first. Try the fax machine on twelve." The older woman pushed her away with her round right arm.

"That thing never works right. You know that. Give me that machine. I'm sick of looking at your face." The younger secretary resisted the push and struggled to get past her. The older secretary then punched the younger secretary in the jaw.

"Security!" she shrieked. "Sec—"

Before she could finish the word a left hook sent her off-balance. She stumbled backward, then and fell forward. The older secretary moved away to let her body fall freely, knocking the fax machine from its table. As she hit the floor, the machine fell, breaking into a number of pieces. Philip withdrew quickly. The woman on the floor called out: "Hey, you! Stop. You're a witness." Philip hurried down the corridor, through the reception area and out of the glass doors. As the elevator doors closed he caught sight of the woman who had fallen, reaching out wildly to stop the closing doors, a maniacal look in her eyes. Philip shuddered. He leaned against a wall and watched numbers count down as the car descended.

Pinely hovered over Alex. "Okay, Alex, what I need you to do is take that Harding complaint from last January, you remember it?"

"Of course."

"Then run a search and replace of John Harding name with our Philip Hayes here. Take out the specifics on that complaint and replace them with this list." Pinely threw a yellow legal pad of scrawl on Alex's desk. "Print it out. I'll look the whole thing over. Then we're shipping it over to Miles downstairs. He's going handle all the filing and so on. He should come back with something tomorrow. Then I look at it, and round and round it goes until we're ready to move. Good thing I have some first year associate to fob it off on."

"Will you be going to court?" Alex asked.

"I'd rather walk through mud in a hailstorm. I hate this nickel and dime stuff. Where's the money? Where are the billable hours? Too bad, but I have to treat this particular client right. If it weren't for Philip's dear old dad, I'd tell him to call those ads you see at three in the morning on television. Traffic accident, injury, pain and suffering? We can help you clobber the ones who clobbered you! I've got a whole town about to sue a chemical company for poisoning all their children, and we're the chemical company. What are a few cases of inoperable cancer when the women of the world need new and better panty hose? There's a real law suit! Years and years. Forests chewed on paperwork. Get me that document as soon as you can, Alex dear."

"I'll have it yesterday," Alex winked and turned to his computer.

Pinely walked into his office and closed the door. He perched on the edge of his desk and pressed a number on the phone.

"Hello," he heard a low, gritty voice answer.

"Listen, Mr. Joey D. I just had that client meeting I was speaking about. I have to have my witness, alive if at all possible."

"I don't know about alive," Joey hedged.

"No joking around. I'll give you five thousand if you can deliver her to me. After the case you can do what you want with him."

"What makes you think I know anything about where he is?"

"Look. If you don't know, you find out."

"Mr. Pinely. I'm not sure I like you ordering me around like that."

"Okay. I'll pay you two thousand up front. I'll mail it on a money order tomorrow. Someone's got to know something. You get him, bring him back, keep him in seclusion. I'll take care of setting up a place, once we get him."

"Mr. Pinely. You seem to be suggesting a kidnapping."

"Yeah yeah yeah. We can get around that."

"I think I should come to see you."

"No. We never meet in person. You've got the number."

Pinely pressed his secretary's line. "Alex. If a Joey D. calls, be sure to come in and hand me a note, even if I'm on another line. I think he can find our missing witness in this case."

Pinely reclined in the large desk chair. He looked out of the window. A water main break ten blocks down sent up a small geyser in the middle of an intersection. The streets flooded. Traffic froze in place. Gridlock began to crystallize. Emergency vehicles inched through. Local news helicopters circled overhead. Pinely picked up his red diary book and jotted down more time notations.

3.1 When Lawyers Collide

Pinely walked Fulton Street toward the South Street Seaport. The meeting at the brokerage firm had ground on. The multimedia presentation had taken hours. He would read the report later, on plain paper, and let the colored graphs and charts they had thrown at him fade away. He stared up at the clear sky. A man emerged from an oblique corner and slammed into him. "Are you all right?" the man asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Pinely took in his looks. Tallish, angular and thin, a jutting jaw, long features, black hair, blue veins in his forehead showing through translucent skin — attractive. His watery blue eyes flashed in fading daylight. A few small earrings offset his suited conservatism. He began to recognize the man. "Aren't you, uh, Peter Herald?" Pinely asked.

"Yeah." The man straightened at the sound of his name.

"You're in GMSMLA. I saw you speak at the pro bono meeting. Signed right up for a case after that. The one with the guy who got robbed and the prosecutor was sitting on his hands because it was a pick-up crime."

"Right. Yeah. I'm not on the tracking committee. How is that case going?"

"You have time? Can I buy you a drink and tell you about it?"

Herald's eyes widened. "Time? Me? Never. Oh, but, well, why not? I was on my way home."

"Don't mean to waylay you," Pinely smiled slyly.

"In that case, forget about it," Peter Herald answered, grinning.

They sat at a bar surrounded by cobblestones. Faux ship moorings roped off the sidewalk area. The floor-to-ceiling windows were open to the street along the side. The small tables inside the ropes were mostly empty, it being a bit early. Soon they would fill with people getting the weekend off to an early start. Peter Herald leaned against the oak of the bar, watching people stroll outside. Pinely loosened his tie.

"So I talked to the prosecutor," Pinely started. "He said he was about to decline prosecution. I didn't know what the next thing was. I called a friend at City Hall. He called him. The prosecutor called me back. I don't know what he was told but he reversed, like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Good work."

"Yeah they won't prosecute these things. Their attitude is: 'He got into this. He wanted to be tied up, whipped and beaten. So what if a the guy runs out with all the

valuables? Maybe he was a hustler and maybe that was the payment for services they agreed to."

"Of course that's what the defense is going to say." Herald narrowed his eyes.

"That's what they are saying. The fact that it wasn't only money the guy took helps us out a lot. People usually don't trade gold jewelry for sex; then throw in a CD player and a VCR. The defense will use anything. The prosecutor doesn't care unless he can boost his record. Meanwhile our guy gets told 'You asked for it, you got it.' I mean, just because he wants a fantasy scene that includes physical torture, it doesn't mean he's asking to be victimized." Pinely's pitch rose.

"Exactly, but you tell *them* that."

"Meanwhile no one wants a jury near this one, so they'll probably plead it down. At least that's something." Pinely sipped his drink.

"You know you can be murdered and they'll say you had it coming." Herald slapped the bar with his open palm. Snifters of matches and straws jingled against each other.

"That's right. That's right!" Pinely shouted with political indignation.

"Exactly." Peter Herald ordered another drink. "I like your energy. So many people even doing this kind of work just do it as their pro bono and don't really care. Everyone's cynical. You know," he said, "we're on opposite sides of that Hayes v. Milano case. It's the insurance company I work for now. I'm a temp lawyer. Maybe we shouldn't discuss the case. Not here, at least." Herald cocked his head.

"Don't want to talk about it?"

"Are we billing for the time?"

"We could. We could at that." Pinely returned a dark glance.

"Where do you live?"

"Soho."

"Let's go."

Half an hour later, Peter Herald found himself strapped down to a metal table Pinely had picked up with his ex antiquing in the Hudson Valley. The former couple had rented a house there one summer. The man Pinely bought the table from picked it up when the state mental institution closed. Discharged patients, once zapped on the table, wandered the idyllic town in a collective thorazine haze. They scared small children with shakes and erratic gestures, the side effects of medication. Pinely remembered that summer fondly as he readied equipment to use on Herald. Herald watched him work. "Fuck me with that steel dildo, but put a condom on that thing," he called out.

"Shut up, Peter. I give the orders here," Pinely said, complying with the request. He rolled a ribbed condom over the steel plug in his hands and covered the assemblage with a name-brand water based lubricant. He began to insert it slowly into Peter Herald's anus. He watched the naked man's wrists and ankles strain against the leather straps as he took it in, inch by inch.

Pinely's Soho loft held odd objects Pinely found here and there: a barber chair, a working telephone booth, twisting lamps and huge armoires.

4 Beyond Park Slope

"I swear. If I have to listen to women's music all weekend I'm gonna hurl all over my new shoes." Laura stomped down the stairs, pulling a sweater striped blue and red over her head.

"You're such a fucking lipstick. It's the country. Let your hair down a little sweetie." Sara smirked at her.

"Don't call me sweetie. I'm a dangerous dominatrix and don't you forget it." Laura stood tall on the first step.

"Yeah, like last night. Oo baby, rub that oil on me. I want to keep my fishnets on while you eat me out. The total woman," Sara teased.

"Not in front of company, if you please." Laura turned and cast a smile at Valerie, who smiled back.

Valerie cleared her throat. "Excuse me. I don't mean to pry. I mean it's none of my business."

"Come on girl. Spit it out. That sperm tastes nasty," Laura said.

Sara cackled at the remark.

"Is this place we're going — is it all lesbians?" Valerie smoothed out a wrinkle in her small black skirt.

"They're politically aware vegetarian woman-identified women. No meat eating of any kind, Valerie. So say goodbye to burgers and boyfriends for a while," Laura said. The

two fell over each other, giggling. Valerie broke down, started to laugh along. She felt she must be going insane.

The radio blared polka music as the car wound around low hills on the interstate. The orange car felt cramped. Valerie sat next to several bags. On top of them a cat carrier held a balloon of orange fur. The cat, curled up, had slept through the ride.

Valerie watched the suburbs slide away into sparsely-built fields. An occasional town presented itself. Main streets of stately churches and homes abutted commercial strips with supermarkets, fast food joints and autoparts stores. The car crossed a wall of small mountains, stretched out, undulating like the profile of a sleeping woman. "Where the hell are we?"

"Western Massachusetts and don't spare the horses," Sarah replied.

"What do people do here? I mean for fun." Valerie asked.

"What they do everywhere," Sarah said, sweeping her hand toward a megacinema, then indicating an old bar. "They drink, go to movies, whatever."

"Sara. Will you give me an apple juice?" Laura asked. Sara handed her a bottle that she had opened.

"Look," said Sara, pointing through the window.

"What? Where?" Laura focused on the road.

"A little plane landing. Right there."

"Oh yeah. It's kind of a cute plane. More like a kite with a motor I'd say." Laura said. "Oh no, this is the exit. You made me miss the sign." She swung the wheel hard right, then followed the steep curve inward. The cat carrier moved left, then rapidly right, falling into Valerie's lap. "Row!" the shaken cat yowled, then began to hiss as she placed it back in position.

"Cats don't like me," she said.

"Althea?" Sara said. "She's a sweetheart. Aren't you, my darling dearest onliest only?" She tsked at Althea, who stared up at her through the bars.

"Hey!" Laura said. "I thought *I* was your darling dearest onliest only."

"After Althea, you are."

"Then why are you abandoning her, Sara?"

"Don't do this, Laura. You know it's because of your allergies."

"I told you I'll take the pills. I can take them forever if need be."

"No, no. Better this way for all of us. Althea will get a new home and lots of mice to chase, and you won't wake me up hacking in the night." The cat's ears pricked up as she closed her eyes. Sara said, "You know we're talking about you, don't you, sweetie?"

Laura pulled the car into a minor traffic jam. "I hate this town. It's empty and crowded both at the same time."

"I love this town. It's where so many girls are." Three women emerged from a video store. They were large.

"Yeah and they all look like tanks," Laura scoffed.

"Hey. No fair and so unpolitical."

"Yeah, well, army surplus isn't my wardrobe."

"You horrid femme."

"I'm the butch, remember? No. We've had this discussion before. If they're going to look stereotypical when they walk out of the house, how are we ever going to get past that? I mean I don't wear non form-fitting pants. I've got a body and I like to show it off."

"Fat is a feminist issue, don't forget." Sara shook her head soberly.

"Yeah, but it's not my issue. What do you think, Valerie?"

Valerie paused, then said. "I don't know about any of this issue stuff, but I think you should look the way that makes you feel best. I love how I look and if we could all just feel that way I think the world would be a better place."

"Thank you, Miss Universe," Sara said.

"Your welcome," said Valerie. "Now, if you want the solution to the question of world peace."

"Yeah?" Sarah prompted.

"Make it required that every single soldier wear high heels at all times. Pink ones."

Sara giggled. "Right. Who could do combat in those?" she asked.

"Business women." Laura replied and stopped at the red of the intersection. "Look around you. This the town."

Valerie did. "Where's the rest of it?" she asked.

"Sorry. Five blocks is all you get." Laura turned left.

Valerie took in a large stone courthouse, a few fashionable shops and cafes, a quaint movie theater. Then they passed some old institutional buildings, a few streets of suburbs, then fields and woods again, dotted with houses. "That was it?"

"Yup," Laura said. She pulled off the main road. Soon they rode under a canopy of trees.. They reached a cider mill with a farm stand heaped with bags of apples. "I'm stopping," Laura said. "We've got to bring something." The three got out. "Oh, lovely, just the thing," Laura said. She picked up a pumpkin pie and handed a smiling woman cash.

"And I'll get this." Valerie grabbed a bottle of organic wine. "If they don't drink it, I will."

Gravel crunched as they walked back to the car. Valerie took in the scene. A pond beyond the red stand held ducks and several swans swimming idly. Its surface mirrored puffy white clouds in blue skies. She pointed. "What are those?" In newly mown fields lay large white cylinders.

"Bails of hay," Sara said. "They stay there all winter, wrapped in white plastic."

"They're not mammoth marshmallows?" Laura asked. Sara swiped her on the shoulder with the back of her hand. Valerie looked again.

"They do look like marshmallows lying on a pool table."

"You *are* from the city," Sara returned as they climbed back into the car.

After a few miles they pulled into a solitary driveway, past wooden fences overgrown with grape vines. On a maroon mailbox, black squares with gold lettering read Womonwood Farm. "We're here," Laura called.

"Valerie, would you bring the cat?" Sarah asked. Valerie hesitantly held the handle of the carrier, opened the door, tucked the wine under her arm and stepped out of the car. She saw a house, homey, snug and dark green, nestled below a hill. Stone steps led up to an open porch. "It must be a hundred years old," she said.

"I hope you brought some nails and a hammer," Laura said. The three took in the postcard picture. A red barn leaned off-center to their right. A mare looked through a weathered wooden gate and snorted at them softly, whipping her tail. Valerie felt the cat carrier start to sway, heard thumps inside.

"Let me have her," Sara said and took the case. "Sorry, baby. You're going to live here now. That can be your horse." She turned the cage and set it down. "And that's your new house." She sprang the trap. The cat raced out, across the driveway and onto the porch. She jumped at the screen door, dug her claws in and climbed half its height. A head bent towards hers, long jet black hair, piercing blue eyes.

"Althea?" Valerie heard the woman say. "You've come back to us." The cat jumped down to the porch, hitting the boards with the beat of a drum, then flashed through the drive and around the back of the barn.

The woman emerged. She was tall, imposing. "She'll be back," she called and walked up to them. "Hello Laura. Hello Sara. Come inside and relax." She turned and looked Valerie over. "What have we here?" she asked. Valerie cringed. She drew her thighs together and began to shudder. "Don't worry. We always take in strays." The woman laughed. "I'm Selene and I'm in charge. You must be..."

"Valerie." She wondered whether she should curtsy or kowtow. Instead she took the hand offered. Selene's grip was tight, her hand cold. Valerie looked into Selene's eyes, felt them penetrate hers, drill into her skull.

"I know you'll like it here. It's very safe." She said this, but Valerie did not feel at all reassured. Selene turned and ambled back, holding Laura and Sara around their necks, towering above them. Head down, Valerie cowered along after them.

Behind her the horse whinnied and sputtered indifferent derision.

4.1 A Simple Country Dinner

"That's a big kitchen table," Valerie remarked. The thing stretched the length of the large kitchen area.

"It's a harvest table. In the old days everyone working on the harvest would have meals there." Selene adopted a tour guide tone.

"It doesn't even take up half the room. No way I could ever fit that in my apartment in Brooklyn."

Selene placed a basket of rolls on the table. A black woman with thin dreadlocks placed a flower arrangement in the center. "This is Tonya. Tonya, say hello to Valerie."

Valerie extended her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Tonya."

Tonya took her hand coolly. "I hate my name. Please don't use it. I'm going to court next week and have it changed."

"Good for you," Valerie offered warily. Tonya set about looking into various bubbling pots.

Laura and Sara came down the stairs. "We love our room, Selene," Laura said.

"What's for dinner?" asked Sarah.

"Oh, broiled marinated tempeh, mashed acorn squash, some steamed greens, chick peas in dill sauce over rice, salad, rolls, cider, iced hibiscus tea, the usual sort of thing," Tonya enumerated dishes while cooking them. "I think it's almost ready. Valerie? Could you hand me those bowls by the sink, one at a time so I can serve things out? We're strictly veggie in this house. No dead animals on the dinner menu."

"Not like I ever killed a cow or a chicken personally." Valerie approached the stack of big brown bowls and picked one up. It felt solid, heavy, real. "It's so country here," she said

Selene announced. "I'll go outside and tell Harrie and Shela to come and wash up."

"What, no triangle?" asked Valerie. Selene shot her a dark, bemused glance. Sara and Laura set the table, flicking cloth napkins at each other.

Valerie, focused on her task of handing bowls to Tonya in order of size. She could not take in the commotion that followed. Doors slammed. Plumbing chunked on and off. She thought she heard a little girl's voice signing above her. Selene gathered her flock. Valerie sat down between Sara and Laura.

Selene ushered in two women from the living area. "This is Shela and this is Harrie." They bowed in turn. Short, dark featured, they wore jeans and tee shirts. "They

fix motor vehicles in the garage they made out of half the barn. The back part is where the animals live. They work on vans, trucks, motorcycles, whatever has wheels."

Harrie spoke up. "It's all on the sly and for the women's community. You know how asshole mechanics will take all they can get from a woman."

On the stairs appeared a young woman in a flowing blue dress. A small child in green overalls followed timidly. "Ah, yes, here are Belle and her little daughter April."

Valerie smiled at them as they reached the floor. The daughter, about five, hid behind her mother, who reached across the table, brushing the flowers with her arm. Belle held Valerie's hand softly for a moment before letting it go. The touch was warm. Valerie looked into Belle's face, round, delicately featured. Her long hair shone gold in the light. "Glad you've found us," she said and busied herself seating her daughter.

Selene took the head of the table, and lowered her head. Valerie mimicked as they all joined hands. "Thank you, Goddess, for the food that took no animal life in its making, and for the fine company of friends to share it with. And thank you for bringing another troubled wayfarer to our door. We hope our hospitality can equal her need at this dark moment in her life." She looked around. "Pass me the rolls, will you Valerie?" Valerie did so. Selene responded with a wink.

"I tell you here, this table looks just like a painting." Valerie served herself from the earth-toned offerings.

After dinner Selene disappeared into her room. Laura, Sarah, Harrie, Shela and Valerie sat before a roaring fire in the living area, sipping hot mulled cider, talking.

"What's the set-up, here?" Valerie asked.

Shela responded first. "Selene's mother owns the whole place. She uses it as a tax write-off. We get a free place to live."

"Selene gets to say who stays and who goes," Harrie said.

"Like, if someone's being a monster to everyone else and keeps it up, fist we all try to talk to her for a long session. If she doesn't change her ways, she's herstory," Shela said.

"Face it, she's an autocrat," Sara added. "She runs this Rancho Lesbos with an iron fist."

"I don't care," Laura returned. "She's always been nice to me. Ever since I went to school around here I've kept coming back for visits. You have to admit there have been some strange women in and out of here. She has to be pressed to the wall before she really throws anyone out. I think she sees it as her mission to help others along with their personal growth."

"We've spent whole nights talking. She's told things with me I never knew about before I came here," Harrie agreed.

"But she never has a steady girlfriend. I mean, we've all tried to fix her up. I guess no one measures up to her standards. Sometimes I think, with that mind, that kind of vision, she must be the loneliest woman in the world." Shela stared sadly into the fire.

"You know what I say?" Valerie was feeling bold. "If no one measures up to your standards, you've got to lower them."

"Oh, great advice from someone whose boyfriend just pounded her into the ground," Sara retorted. The others froze. Laura covered Sara's mouth.

"No, that's all right," Valerie said. "I don't mind. I don't want everyone tiptoeing around me like I was a cake in the oven ready to fall. Right now I'll laugh about it. Some night when I'm alone I'll cry my heart out. I promise. Sure, I can pick men, but at least I had one for a while. Not like you all."

"Hey, that's no fair. We like other women and we're proud of it." Laura sat upright.

"What you all need is a good man to show you how it's done right." Harrie put on a tough male voice.

"Yeah," Shela joined. "If you keep her pregnant all the time, she can't wander off too far."

Laura adopted a refined tone. "I don't know about you country folks, but in the city we frown on lesbianism as a sign of low breeding. There are men willing to look the other way at their wives' occasional indiscretions with other women. Can't a lady be satisfied with such an arrangement?"

"I don't care if my woman does it with another girl," Sara said. "Just as long as I at least get to watch."

"Someone throw another log on the fire." Shela said.

"I'll give you a log on fire," Harrie got up, spread Shela's legs and started mock-humping her. "Oo baby take that burning log of love."

"Stop, goddammit. Leave me my virginity," Shela said and they all burst out cackling.

Laura and Sara got up. "We've got to be up and out of here in the morning," Laura said.

Sara smiled at Valerie. "Sorry we won't see you for a while. Look us up if you ever get back to Brooklyn."

"Yeah. Don't let that man kick you out of your house," Laura added.

Valerie shrugged. "What can I do? The schmuck was paying my rent. I guess you all are going to have to put up with Valerie for a little while."

5 Trevor's Performance

Upstairs at Club 44 Mark and Philip entered the sealed-off mezzanine through glass airlock doors. A large piano, a little stage, a microphone and a screen were in place. Philip greeted Jason, an extremely tall man. Jason had stringy hair and doughy skin. He bent over until his face was level with Philip's.

"Hi Jason. This is my friend, Mark. How's your band doing?"

Jason moaned. "We've had some bookings. You should come next show we do in the city. They're doing a spread on us in Fandango Magazine in the new issue. Then we go on tour for a month. We're talking to a label but they want us to do our own material. We only do girl group covers, so that's not realistic."

Philip and Mark took a table in the back. A cocktail waitress came by and took the first two-drink minimum order. "Who's that? What's his band?" Mark asked.

"Jason is a caterer. He has a band, Delicious Mischief. They're an all boy band doing girl group songs. They're all very tall and very thin, and they wear vinyl clothing. They're fun. Deep voices too, so the old songs sound pretty warped, but good. Maybe we'll go together."

"A second date already? Is this a whirlwind thing happening between us?"

"Why? Is there someone else to whirlwind?"

"No. I figure I've knocked you down. Now it's time to rope you and pull you in. If you try to get away, you know I'll have to break both your legs."

"I suppose you want to tie me up and whip me."

"Not really. I prefer emotional and psychological torture in a relationship."

Philip giggled. Their drinks arrived. Mark reached to pay, but the waitress stopped him. A tab was being run. The room darkened. Conversations quieted. Mark reached his arm around Philip's shoulder. "I'm going all weak," Philip whispered into Mark's ear.

Mark turned, kissed him briefly on the lips, then turned back to face the stage. "I'm ready for some magic of the theater," he said, smiling slightly.

Sporadic applause broke out as the pianist took his seat and stage lights went up. After a rousing introduction, Trevor emerged in a silk robe. His face was stark white with heavy black eye makeup. From the booth a projector began to whine. The ghostly figures of silent screen stars, in their most overdone moments, flickered, projected directly onto Trevor's form. The screen behind him showed ancient Babylon, Egypt, futuristic cities, Vaudeville stages. Trevor followed each expression, every gesture. In a dark and trembling, otherworldly voice, songs obscure and long forgotten issued forth.

5.1 Café ATM

Mark and Philip used their jackets to claim a table in the Café ATM. They took their iced mochaccinos and sat down. Bank machines lined the wall opposite the coffee counter. Customers queued around the tables and proceeded to their banking. Tiny speakers played remixed African drums over the dependable grind of cash dispensers.

"Some performance." Mark sipped his caffeine. "This should keep me up all night."

"I'm hoping." Philip grinned.

"Oh. We've come that far already, have we?"

"Which part of *Singing the Silents* did you like best?"

Mark leaned back. "I liked that song about the coconuts. It was so cross-contextual. Some roommate you picked."

"I don't know if I picked him or he picked me. Anyway life in the den is pretty entertaining. I asked Trevor once if he ever got real. He was very offended. He doesn't believe in reality. Says it's a mass delusion. He thinks the same thing about the news, geography, science, you name it."

"A little extreme," Mark said.

"I don't know. My theory is that it has something to do with growing up during the Cold War. I mean we were told as children that we were about to be disintegrated by bombs any minute, and that we'd better be good or evil spies would cut our throats while we slept."

"Not sure I see the connection. So, you're a crazed politico?"

"Not any more. Abandoned that project." Philip sighed quietly.

"Been there, done that? What next?"

"Screw it. I want to settle down a bit."

"You could start by sitting on my lap."

"Yeah, maybe later. Where are you from, by the way?"

"Oh, I'm from Long Island," Mark answered. "The Spleen of Darkness. And you, don't tell me. Give me a day or two and I'll guess where you're from. Deal?"

"How? Psychic?"

"I don't know ... your accent, clues. I'm good at it. Not really into paranormal stuff. I'm a level-headed kind of guy. I like things orderly and I run across you, or into you, actually over you. You hang out with dangerous artists and drugged-out musicians."

"Jason's not drugged out. Not since rehab. At least, I think." Philip pouted.

"Exactly what I'm saying."

"So you only want me to satisfy a momentary craving?" Philip teased.

"We could start there."

"You're a charmer." Philip crossed his arms.

"What? You want me to marry you?" Mark asked.

"I'm not saying that. It's just, if we start fooling around, I want a preliminary dating, maybe-something-will-happen sort of commitment." Philip glared.

"In New York? Where sex is like stopping at a photo booth?"

"You broke my body. Now you want to break my heart? I'm not allowed to be sensitive, even after I'm crushed?" Philip looked away.

"Speaking of that, you're taking me to court. You want my money *and* my love?"

"It's the insurance company's money we're talking about."

"Beat me. Use me. Raise my premiums?" Mark looked slyly at Philip.

"Honey. I'm going to sue the pants off of you."

"I'll drop my pants, if you'll drop your suit."

"I'm not wearing a suit."

"Jerk," Mark huffed.

"Fine. I don't need you either. Plenty of other men in this town." They stared at each other in contempt.

A wild-eyed woman sporting a red cocktail dress stumbled into the Café ATM. She took a position and began to abuse the customers in line as they passed. "Look at all you rich muthafuckas. You rich goddam fucked up fucks. Going to get your money for your parties and your drinks and your goddam coke and your smack up your noses. Then you're gonna get fucked. You're gonna get screwed through every hole you got. And you look down your powdered little noses at me because I'm an honest, hard-drinking drunk. Babies, I got my liquor and I don't need you. I don't want your money tonight. I got this money from the city when the bus hit me and now I'm happy."

Mark looked over. "Not the best panhandling technique I've seen."

Philip looked down at his frothy glass.

A security guard had emerged from inside the bank. Agitated, he motioned the woman toward the door. "Lady, you're going to have to leave."

She pulled out a box-cutter and waved it wildly. "Get away from me, mutha, 'cause I will not hesitate to fuck you up."

The guard lurched backward. One by one the bank customers took the exit. The café staff ran to a cubby in the back. Underneath their table, Mark felt Philip's arm around

his waist. He covered him with his body. Mark checked around. People were down, hugging the carpet, hiding behind chairs.

The guard spat out: "Get out of here right now or I'll call the police."

A larger man in overalls and a tee shirt opened the front door. "Jeanie, I seen you in there. Where's my ten dollars? You took my ten dollars." The man's eyes showed glazed, bloodshot.

The woman spun around. "Get away from me. Get the hell out of here. I don't have your ten dollars."

The man lunged at her. She slashed at his throat with the razor edge of the box cutter. A neat red line formed from his left ear down his neck. He grabbed for her arm, but the influence he was under slowed his motion. She struck at his face. The razor sliced along the side of his nose and through his upper lip. He put his hand to his mouth, then held it out, amazed at the blood. Red was gushing steadily from the man's cuts. From Mark's perspective he didn't seem to feel the bleeding, only to notice it by sight.

The café-goers trembled under tables, clutching chairs and small Italian soda bottles for defense. The security guard had abandoned them for the phone inside. Philip swiveled the handle of his cane, ready to unsheathe the blade. 'Thank you, Trevor,' he thought.

"One more time and I'll kill you." The woman screamed.

"I want my ten dollars," the man repeated, as if nothing would jar the needle stuck in the record groove. In the next second the cops were there. Mark counted ten pairs of black shoes.

"Come to rescue me. Thank you goddam cavalry."

"Shut the fuck up, bitch," a cop voice shot out. "Drop the cutter."

"On the floor asshole," Mark heard another say.

Mark peered around a woman's shoulder. He saw police, guns drawn, standing over the two, who lay face down. Others cuffed their wrists, hauled them up and escorted them through the door.

"That's the last time I do my banking in this shit-hole," the woman screamed, cackling crazily. "Next time I'm going to the Manufacturers Hangover Trust." The door shooshed shut, squeezing out street noise.

"Anyone in here hurt?" a young, rather handsome cop asked in afterthought.

"No." Mark answered.

"Anyone want to make a statement?"

The woman at the next table called out. "We didn't see anything. We were all under the tables. Talk to the security guard." A murmur of assent rose from other tables.

Mark and Philip got up, sat in their chairs. They rested on their forearms, heads sagging.

"Want a refill?" Mark asked.

"No. I think a shot of morphine would be more appropriate."

Mark saw that Philip's face was flushed, his forehead sweaty. "What do you want to do, Philip?"

"Get off the street. You want to come to my apartment?"

"Yeah, sure," Mark answered.

5.2 Mark at Philip's

Mark entered Philip's room. He watched him in the soft glow of candles as he lit them. He made out a bed that filled the small space, its down comforter and flannel sheets. Framed film posters appeared on the walls.

Philip faced Mark. "You can't be attracted to me, the way I am."

"I can see the beauty through the bruises," Mark replied. Mark outlined Philip's body with his hands, holding his shoulders, caressing his back.

"Ow!" Philip tensed.

Mark held him by the hips. "How's that?"

"Better. No. Not better. Stop." Philip sat on the bed. He unzipped Mark's fly, pulled out his stiffening penis and took it in his mouth. "Oof. Aw." He drew back. "Can't open my mouth that much."

"Then let me take care of you," Mark offered. He got down on his knees, opened Philip's pants, parted his legs to get in closer.

"Yaag! Ag! I can't. Muscle spasms, both legs." Philip slammed his knees shut, stomped his feet on the floor.

Mark sank back on his heels. "I suppose we can't do anything, then."

"Uh. I don't think so. Not yet."

"Can we get naked, lie back, and jerk each other off?" Mark wondered.

"I think we could try, but go easy on me."

Mark felt a pang of guilt. What pleasure he could give Philip would not heal him. He wanted to rip Philip's clothes off, throw him on the bed and jump on him. Instead he slipped off shoes, shirt, socks, pants and shorts. He watched Philip do the same, stealing glances back at him.

He noticed first that Philip's pubic hair was the same dusky blond. Philip's body was thin enough. His skin looked smooth, soft, still tan from summer. Philip turned, bent forward, showing his narrow butt as he took off his socks. Mark locked on as he bent farther forward. Mark watched soft down appear, a glimpse of round pink flesh. Philip turned, smiled, stared into Mark's eyes, glanced downward. Mark noted his own instant erection. The tape on Philip's ribs obscured his left nipple, but the other showed, small and pointed. The hair on his body was slight but visible. He wasn't scrawny or overbuilt, just right, Mark thought. With his eyes he caressed the body he dared not crush in his arms.

Philip stretched out on the bed. "Lie back and face me," he told him. "At least I can grope you." Philip started to play with Mark's nipples, tested the strength in his arms. They clasped hands. Philip let go and gripped Mark's butt, kneading firm muscles. He stroked Mark's inner thigh, tracing the skin along the curve until he came to Mark's scrotum, which he cradled in a cupped palm. He played gently with his testicles as they floated in their fluid world. The base of Mark's penis ached. Philip obliged by gripping it tight, causing Mark's erection to stand out stiffer, straighter. Mark touched the tip of Philip's phallus, grasped it,

slowly worked his hand down it. He pulled and stroked, twisting. "Ah," Philip gasped. "That's it. Right there." They worked each other for a while, rhythm building in intensity. Philip came first in spurts that hit Mark low on the abdomen. Mark followed in a geyser of sperm that erupted in hot jets of thick white liquid.

Sweaty, hot and sticky, they kissed. Mark held Philip a little too tight again. He cried out, stifled it, said, "I'll get towels," and produced two from a dresser drawer within his reach. Mark wiped off Philip's ejaculate, got up and washed in the bathroom. Philip entered, held him around his waist and the two gazed at the image of themselves together in the mirror. "We look good together," Philip said after a moment.

"Yeah. We pass the mirror test." Mark smiled.

"You want to try dating?" Philip narrowed his eyebrows, risking it all on one moment, one reflection. "I mean, seriously."

Their eyes met in the mirror. "Yeah. I mean I want to. I really want to." Mark turned to catch the look in Philip's eyes, intense, dazzled. They kissed. When they came up for air, Mark said "You'd better heal quickly. There's a lot more I want to do with you."

Mark opened his eyes and stretched sleepily. He noticed a bird perched on the fire escape. A peregrine falcon looked at the garden below. Mark leaned over, followed the falcon's line of sight. It eyed a sparrow pecking in the garden below. It swooped down, snatched the sparrow, flapped its wings and rose to the sky.

"Did you see that?" Mark asked.

"What?" Philip leaned up on his elbow.

The door opened. The two sank under the sheets. Trevor stole in. He held a tray with bowls of cereal, orange juice and a pink carnation in a cobalt glass bud vase.

"Breakfast in bed, anyone?"

"If you're not staying," Philip smiled.

"Oh, maybe for a moment, if you insist." Trevor placed the tray carefully on the bed between them. They sat up. Then Trevor balanced at the foot of the bed. "You two are quite the picture of radiant passion. Quite the picture."

"Thanks," said Mark. Philip placed his left hand on Mark's right shoulder. They sipped orange juice.

"You know, guys," Trevor said. "I think it's time we had a serious talk about this relationship." Trevor almost ducked the pillow Philip threw at his head.

"So, Mark. Did you get a lawyer?" Trevor asked. The second pillow hit him square in the face.

Trevor faked a throw. Philip flinched. "No fair. I'm hurt."

"I'll give you fair when you wake up dead, smothered with this very pillow," Trevor threatened.

"To answer your question, Trevor," Mark cut in. "My insurance company has enlisted an attorney for my case. His name is Peter Herald."

"Peter Herald? You're kidding. I know him. He did a lot of work for assorted gay political groups. His motto is no case too small or too strange. He has a pierced tongue and tattoos everywhere. I've seen them."

"You didn't sleep with him, I hope?" Philip cradled his arms.

"No, but he dated a guy who was roommates with a guy I was having an affair with at the time."

"He was? What did you say again?" Philip creased his brow.

"Anyway, I met him one morning as he was coming out of the show. All was revealed, ample genitalia and a body to stop tanks. He's one of the shining stars of the Gale Male S&M Lawyers Association. Eat your cereal, Philip. You need your strength. Now," Trevor turned on the old standards station on Philip's stereo, "while you eat, I will reinterpret some past favorites." Philip watched Trevor's masks of impersonation intently as his singing voice shook the walls. Philip put down his spoon and giggled. Mark stared ahead blankly, jaw open, unable to make a sound.

5.3 Afternoon of the Morning

Mark and Philip ambled down Tenth Street, west of Second Avenue. Mark usually took the block slowly, absorbing its atmosphere through his pores, the feel of an older New York. The street seemed a corner of the last century, its buildings dusky red brick antiques, its slightly ornate ironwork overflowing with ferns and flowering shrubs. Before a second

story window a narrow balcony held thin white chairs and a small table. He placed a couple there, a man and woman robed and stylishly unkempt from a night of lovemaking. The balcony table seemed the perfect place for a croissant and coffee on a weekend morning in a magazine photo. New York was not its own city any longer. Parts of it could be Paris. New swaths of construction echoed Toronto or Brasilia. A sleepy section of Queens, refurbished, might become itself in the 1850's. Even its new Starbucks, its decrepit McDonald's might learn to conform. Everywhere the city was reimagining itself into a schizophrenic patchwork, a montage of images receding happily into the consumerist void. Historic districts were a fashionable fad, their facades covering large stores borrowed from the malls of America. A building might get propped up against gravity and erosion, but never regain that former time, never its uniqueness. One night, while most of the city was sleeping, Manhattan had been quietly demolished and rebuilt as a theme park. In deference to his brothers in the styling industries, Mark vowed never to let this secret escape his lips. Yet he saw the vision clearly of what had lead up to this ersatzing of the urban world, where it all was going. Soho was Gallery Land, with lawyer's apartments above. Tribeca was Restaurant Heaven with banker's fashionable lofts. Pierworld would stretch from Chelsea, now Buff Beef World to the Battery, creating a riverfront strip mall, the actual river hidden from view. The East Village, its bedraggled artists replaced with trend riders, had transformed itself into Bohemiaville for the tourists. All had now to conform to conflicting attitude and fashion dictates. The district would play its role as theme park for depressives, junkies and alcoholics. Forty-second Street would be a new magic kingdom.

A twinkling of fairy dust had fallen to banish unsightly sleaze forever. The South Street Seaport would continue to be the Seaport, and woe to wayward ships that might see it on a map and attempt to dock there. In the next century, thrill rides would appear: a virtual jump from the top of the Empire State Building, circa 1934. A new sports complex would check the flab engendered by parking at computer screens. Larger hotels and convention sites would necessitate trucking in prostitutes and hustlers from out of town. Demand exceeded supply as it was. 'Just what kind of millennium are we getting ourselves into?' Mark at once dismissed the thought. It was a noble and good future Mark beheld, and wondered how he himself might profit from it.

They reached the end of the block. A woman on rollerblades pushed a child in a stroller toward them at an alarming speed. Philip knocked into Mark. Mark broke his reverie. He held Philip for a moment, then let go.

"Want to go to one of the movies?" Philip asked.

Mark looked across the street, read the seven movie titles. The marquee glowed on a multilevel cinema resembling a parking lot. "Sure. How about that new comedy with the big dog and the identical twins that keep wrecking the house?"

"Blame It on Drooler?" Come on. We could see the French film where Nineteenth Century artists and poets sleep around with each other and drink absinthe."

"Hazy Visions of a Sun Drenched Hell? It may be too languid. What about the action adventure thriller where the new hunk on the ski jet chases the psychotic lipstick hooker who's got a nuclear bomb on a hovercraft threatening all of Florida?"

"Deadly Tango? I saw the coming attractions. It's here and the guy wrestles alligators. The dolphins save the planet at the end. Let's go."

They walked out of the movie house, blinked in the light. "Did you like it?" Philip asked hopefully.

"Like what? Oh, the movie. I've forgotten it by now. Which one did we see?" Philip smiled at him.

It was a day to roll around in, to wander streets and look at things. A vast array of stuff was on display that warm weekend of early fall or late summer. Tables along the sidewalks presented shirts and earrings, sunglasses and many-hued African beads. Things and shoppers jammed a parking lot transformed. Shelves of crumbling books marked down would beckon, leading the curious inside small shops. People were out searching for bargains, buys, sales. The Dutch had bought Manhattan for trinkets. The trade still continued. Mark would watch Philip as he got excited about a CD or a book and buy it. It had been a while since he had felt excited about anything or anyone. Philip excited him. His smile, his body, his ass in too tight jeans Mark caught himself watching. Mark noted a change within himself. His blood pumped more quickly. His skin felt the breeze on his neck. Muscles relaxed, spine aligned, he walked upright like a human just evolved, not slouched like the primate he had been. Everything he sensed seemed different. Buildings bent inward, bowing as the two passed. Trees bobbed and nodded. Odd old ads painted on high walls, ones he had never noticed before, for grape drinks or formal wear, jumped out at him, made him giggle. Strange antique cars would glide into sight and pass gracefully

away. Whole windows of Indonesian masks would wink in unison, frogs and demons, dragons and butterflies. The dead world came to life as they moved wordlessly along. It conspired to celebrate the ordinary act of two men walking together. Mark eyed Philip, who eyed him back. Mark could tell that he as well was noticing this simple, total transformation. Mark pointed. The thin crescent of a new moon appeared against the pale blue sky. High feathered clouds yellowed with time nearing sunset.

Mark reached out his hand. Philip said: "You think we should?"

Mark nodded. Philip took his hand. Immediately a heterosexual couple, far more entwined, came barreling along the block. With haughty glares as if to say 'You're not allowed,' and paying no regard to Philip's cane, the pair pushed between them, broke their grasp, shouldered them away on either side. Mark saw Philip wobble off balance, then begin to fall. He ran, caught him, held him up. "Assholes," Philip muttered.

"Yeah," Mark agreed. "I hate when that happens."

Back on course, they held hands more defensively, the grip stronger, their lower arms locked together.

"Um, Mark?" Philip asked.

"Yeah, Philip?" Mark answered.

"What did you say your job was again?" Philip pretended an idle question.

"Did I say? I don't remember saying anything about it at all." Mark dissembled an idle answer.

6 Sound Structures

"Come into my office." Peter Herald walked Mark into a room filled with file boxes. "It's more of a storage room with a desk, but I call it home."

"I can't stay long. I've got to get to my office." Mark sat in a wobbly chair. He took a paper out of his briefcase. "Here's the printout Philip got from the hospital."

"How in the world did you get this?" Herald read the document. "We'd get a doctor's report later, but this one's real."

"Part of my job. Put me on a computer and I can get anything." Mark was smug.

"That's good for us. Very good. Keep it up."

"That's not why I'm in it. You want to know more? He's from Connecticut. Father a Wall Street guy recently canned after a big merger. Made a mint. Here are several articles." He produced copies. "Mother's been in and out of dry-out places. She's a drunk."

"Good, good. So if I work it in right, the sympathy of the jury won't be too stretched by a poor little rich kid who doesn't know how to ride a bicycle. What about the witness?"

"Nothing. Vanished. No credit cards, no magazine forwardings. Looks like she wanted to."

"So tell me. Are you sleeping with the other side?" He stared into Mark's eyes.

"Yeah, well. That's personal." Mark felt Herald's gaze penetrate his thoughts.

"Okay. I am. Satisfied?" Mark became emotional. "Listen. I don't like doing this to him. I got what you wanted. Don't think I'll give you more. That's it. The rest is my private life and you can stay out." Mark shifted; the chair tottered. He threw his arms out to catch his balance.

"Nervous?" Herald asked in a mocking tone. "Look, Mark. You'll give me more when the time comes. I'll make you." Herald flashed a cold smile.

"You think you can control me like that? Make me spy on someone I care about?" Mark was defiant, angry. "Who do you think you are?"

Herald jotted a note. "We're finished for the day. You may go now," he said imperiously.

Shaken and dismissed, Mark left the room without a word. Herald did not look up.

Long and early shadows traced charcoals on Soho sidewalks. Blinds blinked open in high arched windows. Shop gratings rose, grumbling. In coffee shops the waking stared numbly out and sipped. Dogs dragged owners along for walks. White limousines deposited people in evening clothes at their doors. A yellow cab stopped on gray cobblestones. Philip folded his newspaper, paid the driver and got out at Broome and Greene Streets.

Scaffolding lined the corner, concealing the converted warehouse where he worked. Utility lamps hung from old boards. Maroon plywood covered the first floor. 'New shop going in,' he thought. During the years Philip had been in the office the corner storefront

had held in turn a card shop, a Cajun restaurant and a label clothing outlet. Rainwater from the night before dripped through the awning here and there. It dribbled rusty splotches on his tan jacket. Philip reached the entrance of the building. He stopped. The painted plywood ran the length of the building without a break. He crossed the curb and stepped out into the street. He stared up, his jaw open. The building was missing.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and started, dropping his cane. His boss, Shirley bent to recover it. "Thought I'd wait for you to get here. You're ten minutes late, by the way. You had a week off. The least you could do is show up on time."

"What happened?" Philip asked.

"Structurally unsound. Middle of it collapsed over the weekend. Sides started leaning against the other buildings. They couldn't bear the weight."

"Must have been one too many of your memos," Philip said. She punched him in the shoulder. "You know how vicious you are, Shirley?"

"Yes," she answered. "Anyway, big machines came. Leveled the place. Happened yesterday. I found out this morning. Got a call from our owner, the illustrious Tim." Tim Nemo was a comic book artist who had started the graphics business Philip handled accounts for.

"That means?" he asked.

"We're all out of work. No office, no job. Simple as that. The rest of our group's up the street having breakfast. It's a bitter celebration. Care to join?"

"Sure." Philip staggered along with her.

"Pretty cane. You look like hell. All banged up." Shirley inspected his form.

"How's the body?"

"Damaged. They'll probably have to tear me down too."

"That's all right. You can lean against me. I won't fall." He put his arm around her shoulder. "What do we do now? Are they gonna start the office again?"

"I don't know. There are insurance companies and that sort of thing. It might take a while, and Jim might just take the loss at this point. You should have seen him. He was in shock. He's gone home. Didn't want anyone to see him in that state."

"Can't blame him."

At breakfast he said goodbye to everyone. Marie, Al, Matthew, Eleanor and Shirley surrounded him at the table. They worried over him, propping him up on pillows, making sure he had what he wanted.

"Glad no one was hurt," Philip offered.

Shirley cleared her throat. "Uh. Not quite... The weekend security guard kind of got crushed by a beam and died."

"Wow," he said. "Can't think of a worse way to die."

Responses arose from around the table. "What about the guy who got decapitated by the stuck elevator in the Bronx?" Marie sliced the end from a sausage.

"Or the woman who got eaten by an escalator coming up from the subway in Brooklyn?" Al bit into an English muffin. Butter ran down his chin.

"What about the woman who fell through the broken sidewalk grating?" Eleanor poured syrup over waffles.

"How about the guy who cut up his girlfriend and cooked her in a stew?" Shirley added.

"And then there was the executive the kidnappers put in a box. He suffocated because they didn't give him enough air holes," Matthew offered.

"Or the wretch in Connecticut who chopped up his wife with a wood chipper?" Al offered. "He would have gotten away with it, too, if they hadn't found that piece of a finger."

"And what about the people blown up in the World Trade Center? I'm amazed this big blue boulder keeps rolling." Shirley sipped her bloody Mary.

"Hey. I got one," Al said. "What did Sheik Abdul Omar Rahman say when they asked him if he bombed the World Trade Center?"

"Okay, what?" Marie pursed her lips.

"What World Trade Center?" Hands slapped Al's face. "You see, the man's blind, and—." More hands slapped his face.

Philip got up. "I've got to make a call." A cellular phone fell into his lap. He dialed.

"Mark?" he asked.

"Philip?" Mark's voice returned.

"They tore down the building I work in."

"Oh." Mark paused. "You want to have lunch, then? You know where my office is?"

"I'm just having breakfast with everyone from work."

"Oh. Come anyway. We can sit and talk."

"Sure. Sitting's about my speed right now. I'll talk while you have lunch."

Philip looked around Mark's office. Between the windows hung portraits of smiling infants. "Lovely children," Philip said.

"Thank you," Mark beamed.

"Who are they? What are their names?" Philip asked.

"I forget," Mark said. "People send me pictures of their demon spawnlings. I put them in cheap frames."

"Oh." Philip cocked his head. "You do have a family?"

"Prove it." Mark leafed through a file.

"You were born."

"I was not." Mark drew breath. "You see, my family's all in prison. I had to do something."

"If I tell you about mine, will you tell me about yours?"

"No. Let me guess about you." He paced, circling Philip. "You're from Connecticut. Father an exec, mother very involved with local functions. You were miserable in the suburbs and never had much of a life there. Who could? You have one

brother and one sister. You had most of everything you wanted except something dangerous like a motorcycle, hence your rebellious nature. You don't like authority and it doesn't like you. You speak before you think. You came here to explore and adventure. You've worked a dull but okay paying job and you were out on the town the night I slammed into you. How did I do?"

"Very well. Then you *are* psychic."

"No, just right all the time."

"I'll smack you." Philip reached back.

"Not and live to tell about it." Mark held his arm back.

"What is it that you do here?"

"Paperwork, phone calls, memos, reports — the usual."

"The name of the company doesn't give it away."

"I'm with the CIA. Is that what you want to hear?" Mark closed a file.

"Anything but that."

"It's all about serving information clients with various market studies and so on."

"Market research?"

"No. Not quite that simple. We employ people to read every kind of study that our clients might find useful. We summarize, report and present. Does that make sense?"

"No."

"I'm afraid I can't do any better. You want lunch?"

"To tell the truth, I'm a bit beat from walking here."

"We'll order in then." Mark produced a binder marked 'menus.' "May I kiss you now?"

7 Aunt Lucille

In darkness Valerie crept down the stairs. The boards felt worn, cold under her bare feet. They creaked here and there as she descended. She held the banister. The pale porch light revealed the outlines of larger, brighter objects in the kitchen. She walked to the wall phone, knocking into a vacuum cleaner. She looked back toward Selene's room, next to the stairs. She imagined the door opening, and conjured excuses for her being in the kitchen: a thirst for tomato juice, a nightmare. Valerie needed to let the one person she loved know she was alive. If the women of the house overheard, they might start asking questions, find out about her physical maleness. She was sure they would throw her out if they knew. How could she expect them to understand that her biology was not her destiny, that her mind, her heart and soul were those of a woman? Given time could they accept her as she was? Valerie doubted it, could not chance anything, not yet. They had to be as limited as people in the world she came from. People were people after all. This warm house was no protection. To her no place was safe, no face that of a friend.

She picked up the receiver and pressed illuminated buttons with a long red press-on nail. She let it ring on the other end ten times. She heard a click, the feeble, elderly voice. "Who the hell is this? You know it's three in the morning? If this is a prank I'm gonna report you to the phone company and call the cops right now."

"I know it's late, Aunt Lucille, and I'm sorry." Valerie dropped her voice a note or two.

"Val? Is this Val?" Valerie heard a clunk as Aunt Lucille dropped the phone.

"Aunt Lucille? Aunt Lucille?"

"I'm sorry. I fainted for a second there. Heart stopped cold. Val. I thought you was dead. I thought that rotten no good son of a bitch must have killed you, tied a rock to your body and sunk you somewhere in Jamaica Bay."

"Aunt Lucille. It's me, Valerie and I'm not dead."

"Valerie? Oh!" Valerie heard her pause for breath. "All right, okay, uh, Valerie. You know it doesn't matter. I love you, whoever you are, however you want to be."

"Lucille, I'm in hiding. I wanted to tell you I was okay and not to worry." She heard something large hit the window and jumped. She turned and saw nothing. 'Tree branch or something,' she told herself.

"So, Val. Where the hell are you? Where are you calling from? You know you got me so worried about you." Lucille's voice sounded shaky, joyous.

"I can't tell you where I am, just that I'm safe." Valerie twisted the phone cord with her left hand.

"Could you maybe give me a hint. Alaska? Spain? Albania? You know I'm supposed to look after you with your parents gone, but I don't know. You run away. Not even a goodbye. I call over there and I get Joey and he's furious. Asking me where you are, like I know anything. And he makes me afraid for you. What happened between you two? Are you coming back? You know you can tell me everything. I want to know."

Lucille had a mild coughing spell.

"I'm talking to you now Aunt 'Cille. I had to go away. I had a problem with Joey."

She wound the phone cord around her hand.

"That animal. What did he do to you? I'll kill him myself, with my own two hands. Snap his neck like a twig. Don't think I wouldn't do it. I don't know how you stood it so long. I told you to get away from him years ago. You could have moved back with me."

"Now I think if he finds me he's gonna kill me, so it's better you don't know where I am or anything about what happened."

Valerie heard Aunt Lucille light a cigarette. "I guess it's good then. Val, honey, you know you can't run away forever. Sooner or later he's going to find you."

Valerie shivered from fear, not cold. "I know, Aunt Lucille. Anyway I can't talk, so I'm saying goodbye now."

"Okay. Good to hear you're all right. You take care of yourself." Lucille hung up the phone.

Valerie placed the receiver on the hook, turned. Selene stood, framed in the soft peach glow of her room.

"I want to speak with you," she said.

"Sit down, Valerie." Selene gestured toward an old chair that looked more comfortable than it was. The room was furnished with semi-antiques, repainted beat-up furniture. Its shapes and patterns seemed strange to her. Draperies and weavings, masks and paintings, hung crowded on the walls in a mixture of world cultures. An African mask,

a Javanese batik of a female dancer, a black and white photo of driftwood by a lake, all seemed a jumble to Valerie.

"All of it done by women, you see," Selene offered, sensing the question unspoken in her eyes.

"Women are so, um, so powerful," Valerie returned.

Valerie fidgeted in the chair's cushions, sinking backward. She decided to sit upright, summoning the poise she could. "I'll pay for the phone call."

Selene waved the point aside. "I'm not interested in that. Valerie. You can't call anyone you know. If you want to send a postcard, you may. You give it to me, I send it across the country in an envelope, and it's mailed from there. Nothing must compromise us and our location. Do you understand?"

"I do." Valerie bowed her head.

"Valerie. Look at me." Valerie complied. Selene was stern, speaking deliberately.

"I don't know what you think, but you don't fool me for a minute."

"I —. What?" Valerie quickly crossed her legs, crushing her testicles.

"You're not the woman you seem. You're not a woman at all." Selene paused.

Valerie uncrossed her legs, blinking away a tear. "Oh, you put on a good front: the makeup, the clothes, the attitude; but you're not at all what you seem."

"You're right. I'm not." Valerie prepared to confess.

"Exactly. You're a scared, pitiful creature. You're demoralized, barely human.

You've made over that bruise around your eye. A good job, if one is not looking for it."

Valerie reached up and touched the injury. A vein throbbed at her temple.

"Look at you. You're weak. You can barely hold yourself up. You're far too thin, incredibly so. Likely an eating disorder or an addiction. I'd bet you've stopped menstruating long ago. Am I correct?"

"Uh-huh," Valerie managed to grunt.

"And why? To look good for some truly horrible man? Oh, you've been taking this kind of abuse for a long time. I think I see a scar under your left ear. The upper lip's wrong too, probably fattened from any number of punches, then sunken."

"I was thinking of getting an injection for that."

"You'll need an injection for your mind as well, then, for that is the most damaged part of you. The only question I have is, what made you run? What did he do that finally crossed the line, made you realize that your life was in danger? Did he threaten to kill you? Did he rape you? Don't answer now. I'm not trying to pry details from you. I want you to come to trust me first. Valerie, hold my hand." Valerie reached across, placed her hand in the upturned palm, felt the clasp of warm fingers. "We're going to try to help you, Valerie. I don't know how long you'll be here, but I want you to feel welcome. You've come to a refuge. This is day one of your existence on earth. Recovery is what you've come for. We can't do it for you, but we'll provide a safe space for it to happen."

"You don't talk like anyone I ever met before." Valerie looked around, avoiding Selene's penetrating stare as tears blurred her vision.

"I used to think that too," Selene said. "Used to think we could recreate the world. I still think that to some extent, but I feel we've lost our way with compromises."

"Is that why you live here, with only other women? You're like, like those old feminists they used to have, right?"

"I guess I am." Selene blinked, startled. "I know what you're about to ask and no, we're not separatists."

"Not who?"

"Lesbian separatists."

"They got guns?" Valerie jerked her head around and looked out a of window. The crescent moon hung like a foam chest pad on the line in her bathroom.

"Only a few. You see," Selene continued. "That ideology seems to us a dead end. I'm referring here to struggles waged within the women's community here long ago. Several of us once belonged to a lesbian separatist settlement about five miles away, but we broke off to build this glorious place, Womonwood Farm. That other group, Splitsville, still exists. Sadly, its members no longer speak to us. We are woman-centric, not separatist. While women need a protected space to develop on their own, we can never be free of our social development. If men are, so to speak, screwed up, so women must also be because of the cues we're given from infancy on how to act, what to want. Together women can heal the damage done, the obvious and hidden. So can men, if they stop the harm they do to women. Men don't question what gives them privilege, and most women compromise to make men happy. Merely being a lesbian doesn't erase social conditioning."

"So, you only like girls, right?" Valerie asked, and Selene did not hear.

"Separating from men may be a useful strategy, but it can't be an end in itself. Were we feeling superior by virtue of looking at men as some alien species? Was negation of a negative a positive thing? We lost our faith in that." Selene bowed her head, reflecting.

"I'm sorry," Valerie supplied.

Selene looked at her quizzically. "I'm afraid progress is more glacial than I'd hoped. Women must help other women and educate men."

"If you say so, then I'm for that." Valerie nodded vigorously.

"You see, we allow straight women in as refugees, even if they have not renounced involvement with men. It's almost our mission and commitment at this place. Other groups around here do not."

"Is there a map or something? I wouldn't want to wander into the wrong place, meet up with some crazed dyke with a shotgun."

Selene went ahead. "Of course, men rarely visit here, and not unless invited by consensus of the group. We don't allow them to stay overnight. In time, if you should wish to conduct a romance, you'll get no lectures. We'll only ask you to ask yourself if you are getting the sort of respect you deserve. I've yet to see a man give that to any woman, but I'll believe it if I see it."

"I don't think I want a man around again yet," Valerie said.

"We deal as much as possible with woman-owned businesses. While you are here we expect you to do the same. We here have created a place apart, but someone strings the

telephone wires, comes to read the meter. We have no control over who shows up there.

We are connected to the world at large. We must influence it, change it. We lose some battles, win others. There's so much you've probably never been exposed to. I tell you, Valerie, we're going to make you into a whole woman again."

"Again? Oh. Yeah." Valerie said. "You know, I'm a kept woman from Brooklyn. I never lived any other way."

"Then hold on, because you're about to start. Look at it as an adventure."

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"I can't find the electrical outlet in my room. I have to charge my Lady Electric shaver. Gotta stay beautiful if I'm going on an adventure."

Selene put her hand to her chin. "You might try moving the dresser."

"And you think I could to into town and do some shopping? I'm almost out of nail polish."

Lucille yanked the folded Post through the mail slot and set it on the kitchen table.

The evening breeze blew the lace curtains on her window. In the next house she heard her neighbor sneeze.

"God bless you, Mrs. Carmine," she said.

"Thank you, Lucille," Mrs. Carmine returned.

"Don't mention it." Lucille walked to the counter, picked up the yellow tea pot and started to pour. She heard a banging on her bungalow door. She put down the tea pot and walked back to the entryway. The banging grew louder. "Whoever it is, stop the banging!" she yelled. "This is a quiet neighborhood."

"Lucille, it's Joey. Open the door. I want to come in."

She drew the small curtain on the front door to the side. "You can't come in."

"Lucille, I'm gonna stand here hollering until you let me in this door. Then I'm breaking it down."

"All right. All right." She took opened the door. Joey pushed it open the rest of the way.

"Come in and sit in the kitchen. Want some tea? A pastry?"

He sat on a vinyl-covered aluminum chair. "Nothing for me, Aunt Lucille, thank you."

Lucille moved to the window and slammed it shut. "Don't you ever, ever call me Aunt Lucille. I wouldn't call you mine if you were my own kid. Joey," she said, sitting, "you're a rotten, no good, crumb of a human being. May your wife divorce you and take you for everything your worth. I can give her one or two good reasons she don't know about. What is it you want before you get lost and I never have to look at you again?"

"Val's missing and I need your help to find him."

"Missing, is he? Since when?"

"A few days now. We had a fight." Joey folded and unfolded his hands.

"You're sure he isn't just with friends or something?" Lucille sipped her tea.

"I tried everyone. I thought you might know where he went to."

"I don't know where he is. He didn't come here. I'm sure if there was anything wrong, he would have called me." She bit her lip, stood up, flustered and got milk out of the refrigerator. "I forgot that I like milk in my tea," she said and poured some into the delicate cup.

"Did Val call over here?" Joey tapped his feet on the floor.

"Joey, you're so wound up today. Why don't you relax a little? Have a little tea anyway, why don't you." She took a cup out of the cabinet.

"Sit down, Lucille." Joey's voice was low, commanding. She complied. "Now tell me. Where is Val?"

"Val don't want to see you no more." Lucille stuttered slightly. "She, she's somewhere you can't find her, a long way from here. She wouldn't say where, but she's away from you and that's all I care about."

"Is that all you know? It better be. If I find out different, I'll come back here."

"And what, beat up a defenseless old lady? Yeah, that's your style, Joey, a bully from the day you was born. I'm not scared of you. You kill me and I swear I'll come back and haunt you to the day you die and go straight to hell where you belong. I don't know how my sweet little Val ever stood for it all these years. And me the only one who knows the whole story. What do you think would happen if they found out in the neighborhood? Poor Elaine doesn't know what kind of monster she's married to, or it would break the poor

dear's heart. I know. I've known her all her life too. She's a good girl — conceited, but a good girl. How a group of kids could grow up with all these secrets, this crazy stuff between them, that I'll never understand until the day I die. You go back to your wife and live a good life, and let my Valerio start over his without you. I don't care who he is, what he does, who he's around as long as they're good people and he's happy. I just want him to find some love out there in the world. You want to own him and you want to have Elaine too. It isn't fair to either of them and you know it. Don't stop him, Joey. Forget Val. Forget the whole thing."

"You don't understand, Lucille. I love Val. Val is mine and no one else's, not even his own."

The teacup rattled as she set it down. "What about Elaine and the kids?" She shook her head slowly.

"I love the kids. Elaine, I guess I love her enough. I have no complaints. I've got to be married to someone and it might as well be her. Spends money, though, unbelievable. But it's Val I've always loved, you know, deep in my heart."

"You treat him awful. You beat him up that time he came here. God knows what else."

"If I could get him back, ask him to forgive me... If I could work things out with him. All I know is I want things to go back to the way they've always been. Help me Lucille."

"Joey. I wouldn't throw you a life preserver if you was drowning in the ocean. You're no good for Val, no good for anyone. God help Elaine and the kids. The sooner you see how rotten you are, the sooner you might change, if it ain't too late. Until then, I'm going to have to ask you to leave my house and don't ever come back." She crossed her arms for emphasis.

Joey got up abruptly. The chair screeched on the linoleum. "Fine. Be that way. Only, when I get done with Val, no way he's ever going to think about leaving again."

"That's right, sweetheart, turn on the goddam charm." She followed him to the door, opened it. As he walked out, she planted a heel in his butt, her knee bent. She gave him a strong push. He fell face first onto the walk, skinning his wrist as he broke his fall. Cackling, Aunt Lucille slammed the door. She bent down, opened her mail slot and yelled through it. "And another thing. I never thought you was even the slightest bit good looking." Lucille got up and went back to her tea. She opened the Post, frowned as she compared her lotto ticket to the printed numbers. She tore the ticket in half, turned pages to the comics.

8 The Lawyer and the Criminal

"Cow," Joey muttered as he climbed into his black sportscar. He picked up his cellphone and dialed.

"Joey here. Listen. I talked to that old witch Lucille, Val's aunt. Val called her all right. Didn't say where she was at, but Lucille thinks its somewhere out of the city."

"Good. I can get someone inside the phone company to trace it." Pinely answered.

"Give me her name and address."

Joey gave him the information. "You do have your ways, Mr. Pinely, Esquire," Joey chuckled.

"Yes I do." Pinely put his feet up on his desk and lost balance for a moment as his desk chair adjusted to the position.

"Mr. Pinely. We have to meet when you get that information."

"I said no on that one."

"I mean it. There are a few business arrangements I'd like to float past you."

Pinely squinted as the sun broke through the clouds. He sighed. "All right. Where do you want to meet?" He made a note and hung up the phone.

"Alex?" he called. Alex put down his book and entered Pinely's office. "Any calls?"

"Nothing. Totally dead. Look around. The secretaries are all reading magazines."

"Not good, for me or for you, Alex, old pal. Come in and close the door."

Alex sat across the desk. "What am I supposed to do? Go out and work the streets?"

"It may come to that yet."

"I hear they just fired a slew of associates down at Mattherby and Wells."

"Yes. I heard about it. Read it in the Law Journal. Even got a call from one of them. Told him nothing's up here and I'm worried myself. The corporations are all doing things in house more and more. They've got legal staff, accountants. What do they need us for? Things have to be pretty booming for them to justify outside counsel at these rates. What do we do? Rely on the old clients? They're all old and comfortable, not doing much moving of property and capital. Not a good situation. Must look at other options, if you know what I mean. If I were you, I'd do the same thing. Just a word there. Go back to your book."

"Thanks, Jim."

"Oh you're welcome, Alex. You're quite welcome. I might even take you with me if I go."

"That would work for me."

"And get me my old pal Mr. Jameson at the regional phone company. He's on your database, I believe."

"Right away, Jim." Alex left, closing the door without a sound.

Pinely read his watch. "You're late."

Joey sat down. "Hard time finding this place again. Even with the number, I still can't find the street. They twist all around in Chinatown." He cast a glance over each shoulder, then peered through the large aquarium in the front window. Indigo fish bobbed lazily in liquid sunlight. A treasure chest opened, disgorged bubbles and closed.

"If you're going to do that the whole meal we're going somewhere else."

"Hey. I've got to look around. I don't know who's here."

"I don't know them either, but they don't look like threats to public safety. Wish I could say the same about you."

"Thanks for the compliment." Joey picked up a large red laminated menu.

"Don't mention it."

"At least the food's good here." He perused the menu, poured tea from the metal ewer into the small cup.

"They haven't wasted any money on the decor." Pinely scanned the dull interior — brown tiled floors, drop ceilings yellowed and browned with stains, wood paneling bleached by time. The tiny shrine up the wall in one corner, a placard of gold ideograms above an orange electric lantern, gave the old place its only touch of color. He thought it strange how some Chinese restaurants could wrap you in delicate, warming hues, some could startle you with electric color contrasts, and some could be like this one, washed out, devoid of tint.

The waiter descended on them. "You give me your orders now," he commanded.

"Vegetable lo mein," Pinely said.

"Vegetable lo mein. That's it? No more?" he said. "You don't want something to drink? Coke? Sprite?"

"I'll drink the tea." The man humphed and wrote down characters. He glowered down at Joey.

"Duck. This one." Joey pointed. "The lunch special, wonton, egg roll. Number —."

"No numbers. I see which one you want." The man was irritated.

"And I'll have a coke."

"Coke, yeah. Okay." He smiled falsely. "Big order. Thank you." He snatched up their large menus and stalked off behind a wooden screen. They heard him shouting in the kitchen.

"If they don't want you to order the lunch special, they shouldn't put it on the menu. Maybe close the door until four when it's over."

"Why am I here? What am I doing in the same room with you?" Pinely crossed his arms.

"Work for me."

"Me? You?" Pinely laughed out loud.

"If you keep laughing this goes no further. If you stop you get an incredibly lucrative client. Okay, I'm small time but I'm mostly independent now. I want to expand my growing business. I'm a distributor and I need a man like you to handle finances, move money around, as safely as possible. I know you do that now. You can do it for me, start

your own practice if things go well for you. Listen. I can't exactly walk into your firm and say I want you for my lawyer."

"Call me again when you find your boyfriend."

"Don't talk that way to me." His voice was ice, low and clear. He growled. "This is a serious offer. You ought to investigate it."

"And lose my job?"

"Your firm's not doing that good I hear. Talk of cutting back. My cousin has a friend who's a secretary there. Which one I won't say."

"You mean the one who has big hair, chews gum and reads catalogues all day? That's half of them." Pinely sneered.

"You know, Mr. Pinely. You haven't got what I would call a pleasing personality."

"I guess I don't turn on the charm unless I'm charmed first."

"Fair enough."

"I guess this blows our first date. Let's not have another one."

"By the way," he slid folded piece of note paper across to Joey. "These are the addresses and the names on the accounts of the out of town calls placed to Val's Aunt Lucille."

Joey opened the paper. "Damn! You have crummy handwriting." He ran down the list. "Let's see. Long Island, New Jersey, Florida. No, no, no. Hmm... Massachusetts. Selene Mercator. A definite maybe there. The rest of these people I think are relations and

old friends. You can tell from where they live. Even the ones I don't know, I know someone three blocks over."

"That's your part of the job. I could get an investigator, but he'll just say yes or no. I think you can be a bit more convincing."

Joey smirked, leaning forward in his chair. "That I can be."

"Then get to it."

"Will do. And you keep my offer in mind."

Through his trousers, Pinely felt something hit his penis. "What the hell are you doing?" He looked down. An envelope rested on his lap. He took it up, opened the flap. He let his thumb flip the thick parcel of crisp hundreds. He closed the flap.

"And that's just the tip of the ice cube. There's only one thing, here. You never meet the real guys. And take that envelope as a possible retainer. You'll return it if you decide the wrong way."

Pinely forced the packet into his inside jacket pocket. "I'll think it over, Joey."

"Do that. By the way, what time is it?"

Pinely consulted his crystal. "3:30 in the p.m."

"I gotta hurry up. I have a speech class at 4:15 uptown. The guy hates it when I'm late."

"A speech class?"

"Yeah. I'm trying to improve myself. The guy's great. Trains all these actors and stuff. I've almost completely stopped saying yuz now. This week we work on getting the

ar off the end of Florider and putting it back on computuh, if you catch my drift. What is that, anyway? What am I drifting there and how can you catch a drift? I tell you, this guy's really got me thinking about stuff I never even thought about before.

"Anyway, it's all because of Elaine, my wife. She says I don't talk so good. She wants to be able to hang out with the, what d'you call 'em, glitterazzos, since now she thinks we have more money. Wants to move to Connecticut or some goddam place in the sticks. Personally I have no use at all for birds and trees, but she thinks it'd be better for the kids."

"Best of luck." Pinley's WASP soul cringed.

Two plates hit the table. Joey trapped his fork as it slid across the veneer. Jarred, Pinely noticed the waiter standing over them.

"One lunch special duck and one lo mein." He set down serving dishes. "Rice!" he shouted, placing the bowl between them. "One coke." A straw protruded from the can, covered by a tiny paper condom. He glared at Pinely. "You want more tea?" he asked angrily.

"No. Everything is just fine." Pinely patted his chest. He served himself noodles. His worn plate showed a stately old building marked INDUSTRIAL VISTA HOTEL, CLEVELAND.

Smirking, Alex pressed three buttons on his phone. "The man never learned these phones properly," Alex thought. 'Especially that privacy feature.'

He heard Pinely's voice. "Loved last night, Peter."

"Same here," the other man said.

"Called to say I got something of a job offer. I mean, it's kind of striking out on my own, really. This place is totally dead. Heard the bad word, the D word."

"Downsizing?"

"Yup, and I'm getting out before it all comes down. They'll drop kick my secretary soon as I go. Told him I might take him with me if, but that's so he won't leave before I do." Pinely chuckled to himself. Alex bit his lower lip. "Hell. They might even split up the partnership. Everybody takes their marbles and goes home."

"What about our meetings?"

"That case will be absorbed back into the firm."

"So. Is this goodbye?" the man asked poutily.

"Hey, baby. Just because we aren't getting paid for it, doesn't mean we still can't do it together. I'll call you after I get home." Alex pressed the star button, cradled the receiver.

Seconds later Pinely emerged with something in his hand. "Alex. I just bought this video camera and it broke," he whined. "Could you take it to the shop I got it from during your lunch hour?" He put the videocorder down on Alex's desk, along with the store receipt.

"Sure." Alex touched the machine. Sweat stood out on Pinely's upper lip. Alex squinted. He glimpsed a few white grains. "Bend forward," Alex commanded. Pinely leaned toward him. Alex pulled a tissue from the box and wiped his nose.

"Oops," Pinely said. "Not showing again, am I?"

"I warned you about that, Jim." Alex tossed the tissue.

"Thanks, Alex," he said, cowed. "How else am I going to keep my thin and girlish physique?"

"How, indeed?" Alex came back. Pinely skulked into his office, quietly shutting the door.

Alex turned the small camera over, flipped it open. A tape appeared. He closed the camera quickly.

At Lens Land Alex deposited the recorder for service. "By the way. I believe you have a tape duplicating service."

Returning Alex walked in on Pinely. "Jim? You know you had a tape in that machine." He held the cassette aloft.

"Oh no." Jim cringed. He held out his hand. Alex placed the tape in it. "Oh no. I didn't realize. Thanks, Alex. What would I ever do without you?"

9 Derek Conquers the World

Mist beaded on Derek's mud-green raincoat as he strode Second Avenue. All the world was damp. The avenue was a slick black mirror reflecting cars and shadowy pedestrians. Women pushed small children in plastic-wrapped strollers. 'Fresh toddlers,' he thought. 'Packaged at the factory.' Night was sweeping in with a cold front foretold by fat, jolly TV weathermen. Derek passed St. Mark's Church in The Bowery, which, he noted, was neither on Bowery nor St. Mark's Place. Derek collected places named for New York districts in which they were not: Soho Billiards in Noho, the Chelsea Cafe in the East Village, and, oddest of all, Marble Hill, Manhattan, which was somehow in the Bronx.

He stared through the wrought iron fence on his right. It enclosed cobblestoned barrow graves around the stately house of worship. The church front held forth large yellow, red and blue banners advertising its usual arts programs. "God's dancers, profane poets, mesmeric theater. I shall not bow down to the idols of experimentalism. Nothing new, nothing even slightly new." He hunched over and looked straight ahead. The raincoat's synthetic material chilled his skin, made him shiver and speed up. He approached a nun with an umbrella. He peered at her within the habit, seeing the face of a dragon, her nostrils smoking, fogging up her glasses. She smiled, showing fangs painted pink with blood. The nun drew a puff from a large cigar. Derek snapped his head to get a closer look. Her umbrella hit his head, pulled the hood of his raincoat back. Drips from trees hit his forehead as he readjusted himself.

away to hide amidst the other refuse. Fluid oozed out, trickling down the sidewalk toward the curb. Derek frowned at the brown puddle.

He crossed Second Avenue at St. Mark's, noticed a table of books. It rested beneath the orange awning of a closed shop. Incense smoke wound from a conical burner on the folding metal table. Derek coughed. Below the mist religious books stretched out. Buddhist, Hindu, Christian Gnostic and New Age texts overlapped. Carl Jung crowded Black Elk. Krishna and Vivekananda sandwiched the Dali Lama. One weathered blue cover drew his attention.

"Hah," Derek exclaimed. "The ultimate truth! How long I have searched for you. Waited these endless dusty days in the sultry Sahara of my soul." He picked up a copy with the title "Blues Lyrics." He opened to a dog-eared page and read aloud:

'Since the day you left me, I've been cryin' all the time.

Since the day you left me, I've been cryin' all the time.

I'm going down to the station, baby. The way you hurt me, it's a crime.'

"If you're looking for the ultimate truth, my card's inside the book." Derek saw a scruffily bearded man step out of a dark doorway, his long gray hair tied up with a strand of colored beads. He flipped the pages until he hit the card:

The Rev. John Starmountain, Temporal Patriarch

The Church of Solar Enlightenment

Don't let the world end without you!

Weddings · Funerals · Past Life Analysis · VCR Repair

"What we fear is who we are."

From Ch. 2, Par. 5 of Last Call for Souls Departing Planet Earth

By the Late Rev. Dr. Charlie Mars

Meetings Saturdays: Cor. 4th St. & Ave. B, N.Y.C.

the card read, and gave a phone number. A graphic showed a smiling sun beaming down on the outline of a man reaching for it. Derek placed the card back in the book, handed the man the price penciled inside and strolled. "Prayers, a book of prayers," he muttered, thumbing through pages as he walked. "You hear that, Ruler of the Universe? You hear me?" he sobbed tearlessly and read another verse in reverent cadence:

'You cheated on me baby. You ran around the town.

Drank liquor from the morning 'til the sun went down

You're a no good mean old lover with a heart made out of lead.

You're a no good mean old lover with a heart made out of lead.

The only place I ever find you is in another man's bed.'

He tucked the book in a large pocket, looked up at the steaming brown skies. The dripping clouds broke in downpour. Sheets of rain bent the branches of stubby trees. A flash of lightning hit a few blocks down toward Tompkins Square Park, then the crack

reached his ears. "At least He is listening for once. What a magic book of incantations. What a find at such a price. I better get my ass in somewhere out of this divine liquid wrath." He looked down the avenue, and remembered a small cafe near the Indian restaurants.

Mark was there, reading a book amidst the splendor of elephant tapestries, brass lamps, and padded chairs. He looked up. "Derek. Good to see you. You're early."

"Were we supposed to meet? Here?" Derek took off his raincoat, hung it on a hook and sat in the chair opposite Mark.

"Not for half an hour." Mark looked sideways at the man.

"God again has guided my steps to you through fear. I would have forgotten why I came. We are but worms on the pavement, awaiting His gracious foot, peas on a park bench waiting to be squashed by His giant butt. Oh to anoint the holy foot, oh to kiss the holy backside."

"Derek. Derek? Calm down. You're a nuclear physicist and a lifelong atheist, have you forgotten?"

"That was before I saw the fire-breathing dragon nun today or found this book of prayers." He reached around, got the book and showed it to Mark.

"Book of prayers? Dragon nun?"

"Yes. The dragon nun to whom I must offer sacrifice. And how would you like your virgin — medium, rare?" Derek giggled wildly.

"Would you like something, Derek? Chamomile tea and a cinnamon raisin scone? I know you like those. I'll get them." Mark stood, shaken, and placed the order at the counter. He turned to see Derek nodding over his book. Derek chanted, his voice ascending:

'You stole all of my money and you took my dog away.

You stole all of my money and you took my old dog away.

You left me with an empty house and all of your bills left to pay.'

The other drowsy readers at the cafe looked up from their books. "Derek. I've got your tea and cinnamon raisin scone."

"Scone?" Derek bellowed. "I ordered a virgin."

Mark returned and watched Derek sip the tea he hoped would calm him.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Derek challenged.

"You're an intelligent man."

"Don't humor me. I know I'm losing my mind. Precious mind, slipping away like a cat in the dark. I'm a theoretical physicist. If that's not crazy, I don't know what is. Strings strung through seventeen dimensions, quanta popping in and out of sight like ghosts, a universe like a bubbled pancake on an iron griddle. The millions and millions they pay us for poor imagistic poetry. Yes, I'm a madman and I've got the equations to prove it." He sank into the floral print cushions. Mark examined him. He was pale and thin, haggard like an old man, his cheeks sagging and mottled. His hand shook as he put his cup to his lip. "I may be crazy, but this is different. I don't know this. I can't control it. The mind I

harnessed like a horse to the chariot of science now sees parking meters wink slyly, solid buildings bend and sway with the breeze. I don't know what to do."

"What do the doctors say?" Mark asked.

"What do they say? Try these antipsychotics once a day, those antidepressants three times, two sleeping pills at night, three stimulants in the morning. And what's more, I'm taking them. In addition to the chemical soup my body has become, now my brain is its own little laboratory. I'm a miracle of medical experimentation. Stick me in a supercollider, smash up my molecules and see what comes out the other end. Boil my bones and shoot them into the sun. Suck my soul up with a vacuum cleaner and weigh it on a scale."

"You're not crazy."

"The truth, I said, and nothing but. You know and I know that I've started the endless spiral downward."

"Wait. People are living longer now. You've got the new treatments."

"All too late to stop the slide. Don't deny me my one moment of clarity in this day of hallucinatory splendor. That's why I called you here. I need to talk about it, truly, honestly. Mark. I'm not getting better."

"I can't let you go, Derek. Think of the years we've spent, looting and pillaging the city like the barbarians we are. Friends like you don't fall off trucks. Remember your last birthday? Sheryl dancing on the bar?"

"How could I forget? I may be losing my mind, but I remember everything. It's my peculiar curse."

"I'll make the next one better."

"No you won't. I forbid it. You know what it is that I want."

"I know and I can't."

"You will or you won't."

"Okay. I'll call him. I promise. But if he says no, I don't know." Mark glanced at Derek's half-eaten scone. "Can I walk you home?"

10 Family Secrets

Mark drove through the dense suburban landscape. He turned left a mile past the Woolly Mammoth Mall. Water towers hovered over houses on their quarter-acres. Double-windowed garages stared out blankly. He pulled up into his family's steep driveway. The garage opened to swallow the car. He locked up and saw the side door open. His father was there, framed in the yellow glow of the kitchen. He wore jeans and a flannel shirt, looked thinner than he had the last time Mark visited. "Hello Mark. You hungry?" he said.

Mark sat at the table as his father produced a plate of packaged cold cuts and a box of crackers shaped like manhole covers. Outside he heard the roar of a neighbor's riding mower. 'Vibrators for men,' he thought and ate while his father read the local newspaper. After a time the man spoke.

"You want to watch television?" Victor Milano asked, and flipped a football game, using the remote for the kitchen television.

"You know that's not what I came for. How's the work going?" Mark sipped black cherry soda from a plastic tumbler, crunched an ice cube in his mouth.

"Almost there. Plenty of time for that. How are you doing?"

"My best friend's dying. Then I hit a guy with my car. Now he's suing me," he said.

"That you know. We're dating. That you don't know."

Mark's father shifted uncomfortably in his padded chair. Cheers rose from the television speakers. "Wait a minute. Let me catch the replay on that one." He absorbed himself in a moment of bone-crunching action, slowed down. The play replayed on the screen from an overhead angle. Markers drew lines of motion for ball and key players. "Wow, beautiful," his father said. Mark stared dumbly at the screen. As many times as people had explained it to him, he simply failed to get football. The athletes hid in suits of armor. Mark was not a fan of any sport, but would idly watch male bodies. His father noticed Mark not noticing the game.

"You're staying over?" he asked.

"Yeah. I need to know if we can take care of business first, though. Then I'll relax in the humongous fake leather couch." He looked toward living room. His favorite couch, all pillows and afghans, sank into the shag carpet before the television. Nothing changes in the suburbs. Mark found it comforting and scary.

"Come on to the basement and I'll show you." his father stood rigid, resigned to what he was about to do. "You coming or not?" he asked.

Mark followed him to the basement door. They descended to the tiled floor, minding the cut of the drop ceiling. Mark ignored the dark laundry alcove to the left, turned and followed his father down an old wood paneled corridor to a door with a safety glass window. He unlocked it, motioned Mark in and switched on a light. Mark found himself before an object, a large gadget on a work table. It was rectangular, made of hard white plastic, rounded at the corners. It had a small screen, several switches. Wires and

clear tubing sprouted from the top. "Turn it on," Mark said. His father pressed a button. It came to life in a series of pops and beeps. The LED display showed solid vertical black bars that traced oscillating sine waves, until they fell flat.

"It's working. At least that," his father said.

Mark walked toward it. "You'll show me what I do."

"Of course. God! What am I doing? Yes. I'll show you. It doesn't have a manual, so follow what I do." The man bent over the machine and began to explain it to Mark.

Mark and his father enjoyed a dinner of food boiled in plastic bags. There was a goopy chicken cutlet entrée, servings of peas with pearl onions, a kind of sliced potato in a sticky ochre sauce. "I try to eat like the astronauts," Mr. Milano said. "Very patriotic. Never could cook and don't want to start now. Have another glass of wine. Dissolves cholesterol like that. Studies prove it. It's very important to drink lots of red wine."

"You told me not to believe every study you hear about. No. I've got to drive back tonight. Stuff to do in the morning. Look, I'll spend a weekend coming up. Too much on my mind to relax. I only wish you could come in sometime and see a show or something."

Mark grabbed his bag and the large metal case by the door.

"Maybe in a few years. We'll have to see what happens. I'll get that." Mr. Milano offered.

"No. Hold the door if you can."

"I'll walk you out. Gotta take out the garbage anyway." Mr. Milano stepped on a metal trash can pedal. The lid opened. He grabbed plastic strips hanging from the bag and tied them together.

Mark loaded the car and backed down the drive. He rolled open the window. His father opened the green garbage can lid and put the white plastic bag inside. He returned to his son and smiled weakly. "This is as far as I go." Victor Milano leaned against the car to kiss Mark goodbye.

"No," Mark said as his foot slipped from the brake. The car lurched backward. The motion caught Mr. Milano off-balance. He hopped on one foot, then fell. Mark watched him bounce a few feet down the drive and spill out on the front sidewalk. Mark locked the emergency brake and jumped out. He ran toward his father. The man was gathering himself up stiffly on the walk. On the side of his belt a beeper box was flashing red and trilling an alarm. His father looked up sheepishly. Mark extended a hand. "You okay?" he asked. "I'm a menace on wheels lately."

"I'll be fine. You go now. My alarm went off. I've got to run in the house and phone in, or else." Victor Milano froze as flashing streaks of blue approached.

"Everything okay, Mr. Milano?" the metallic voice boomed from the cruiser.

"Fine. Just fine," he called. "I had a little accident, a little spill. I fell and rolled down the driveway. I'm afraid I crossed the perimeter there."

"Okay, Mr. Milano." The car rolled off slowly.

He hit a button on the beeper and it stopped. "That button only works when I'm back inside."

"Still need to phone?" Mark asked.

"Better if I do. Crazy world." He gave an open-handed shrug.

"Sorry I made that happen." Mark hugged his father and climbed back into the car.

"The neighbors are used to it by now, like a car alarm that goes off in a thunderstorm. At least the cops didn't search the car. It could have been probable cause."

"Yeah, we squeezed past that." Mark waved as he backed into the street and drove off. Victor Milano waved back, and started back toward the garage. His shoulders fell. Mark noticed a slight stagger from the fall.

Philip's car service driver pulled up at the familiar iron gate. The security guard in the booth scowled at the driver. The guard's black uniform and cap accented the severe face behind bullet-proof glass. The driver rolled the window. Philip did the same. The guard spoke. "You can't drive in," his words hissed, popped, and boomed through the speaker.

"I have a passenger here for 37 Heliocanthus Lane," the driver said.

"I've got my ID," Philip added, holding his open wallet up to the guard's window.

"Doesn't matter," came back. "He can go in, but he's got to get out and walk. New rules. No cars inside unless we get a twenty four hour notice of who it is."

Philip paid the driver and got out of the car. He struggled to maneuver his bag over his shoulder. He leaned on his cane to balance the weight. He watched the car pull away. He showed his ID again. The man fiddled with a control. The gate swung open. "Have a good evening, sir." Philip shook his head and hobbled up the lane. "Five blocks of staggering home," he spat. "Some security."

Philip mounted the slate steps to the door of the family home. The house, recently built, held enough New England character, unornamented and imposing, to blend in with the stern historic homes around it. He opened the red door with his key, heard the deafening roar of the evening news as he walked down the corridor. He saw his mother, back to him, chopping vegetables on the kitchen's center island.

"Hi Mom," Philip said

"Philip!" She turned and walked toward him. She seemed to him a little wobbly. She pecked him on the cheek. He hugged her gingerly. "Watch my hands," she said. "They're covered in beet juice." She held them out, away from his clothing. "How are you healing?"

"I'm getting there. Trying to avoid addiction to painkillers, so it hurts when I do things like carry a bag to the train." Philip threw his ruddy brown leather satchel down. He leaned his cane in an empty corner, limped in and opened the breadstick canister. "I suppose one won't hurt before dinner," his mother said. Philip cracked the fridge and popped a can of cola. He leaned against the back a tall chair, munching.

"You're father's so happy you're staying tonight."

"That's a laugh."

"Now, Philip," she said while rinsing her hands and drying them on the dish towel.

"Don't start with him. He's a little edgy lately."

"How can you tell? Are the veins on his forehead sticking out more than usual?"

"Philip. Stop that. He needs all the patience and love we can give him right now."

"Why? Because he lost his job?"

"Now be fair. They didn't renew his employment contract. They merged his division with one from the company they acquired. I'm afraid there were some back room deals, and your father got caught out. Think of how he must feel. The years of dedication he put in. Twenty years up, at the top for five, then this."

"You know, for years I figured he was a vampire, since I only saw him at night."

"What a thing to say!"

"No, really. I watched enough monster movies as a kid that I started checking the hall mirror every time he walked in."

His mother shook her head. "I'll never know what to do with you. At least things couldn't be better financially for us. We have nothing to worry about there, but it's like he's lost his reason for getting up in the morning. So let's just surround him with love and try not to get him upset over anything."

"Sure, Mom. I guess it's the opposite of Japanese Businessman's Syndrome. Some higher management guys there wake up one day and can't get out of bed, like shell-shock victims in a war. What are we having for dinner?"

"Roast beast. I know how you like that."

"Tell the truth, I haven't been eating much red meat lately."

"Well, you're home now, and I won't tell if you do. Here, come over to the counter top." Philip followed her. A line of appliances buzzed, beeped, whirred and gurgled at their tasks. "Here's the programmable bread maker. It's done, but I have it on 'warm' so it will be hot and fresh for dinner. In the food processor we have a dressing I made for the salad. Coffee's ready now if you want some. Inside this," she lifted the cover of a silver sphere, "we're making grilled vegetables, right inside. The roast is in the oven. The readout has an O and a K, so I guess it's okay," she giggled. "And I just got this one." She pointed at a brown vat with a round opening at the top, where curved peeling knives waited. "It peels the potatoes, drops them in the tub, cooks them, smashes them up and voilà, you've got your mashed potatoes. I don't know how they figured that one out, but it's wonderful."

She turned and smiled. "And for desert, the ice cream maker's churning away in the freezer. Everything's going to be so perfect. All spin-off technology from the defense industry. Now, go out and say hello to your father. He's waiting to get a look at you. Oh, and take your father his drink, will you hon'?" She placed a glass of amber liquor and in his hand.

"Okay. Where might he be?"

"He's out on the patio."

"Which one?" Philip asked candidly.

"The west side, for the sunset, of course. Never misses it on a warm day since that Feeding Your Inner Infant seminar last April. We both went and I think it changed our lives. We even had the finger paintings framed."

Philip pushed through the French doors and crept out onto the graceful terra cotta veranda. Fake Greek statues lingered by bulbous planters that spilled forth English Ivy and purple geraniums. Exotic species were unseen on the Hayes grounds. George Strathworth Hayes, IV sat on a lounge chair. An electric motor screamed softly in the distance. Philip scanned for the source but failed to find it.

"Ah, Philip. I see you brought my drink. Put it here by me." Philip set it on the white, wrought-iron table. "That's a good boy. Excuse me a minute." He stood up. "Gerardo!" he yelled to a hedge. "Don't trim those bushes back too far. I said six inches and I meant six inches." Philip watched a yellow cotton hat, then a man's face appear from behind a tall hedge. The man nodded. "And leave some of that new growth. We need it to fill in the dead spots. Let it grow and fill out and next time come back and trim that." The face disappeared again. Mr. Hayes sat down with a grunt, sipped his drink and slammed it down. "Less lemon would be nice."

"Sit down, sit down. Notice you're still limping. That's too bad. So, mother says you're visiting. Haven't seen you in a while, three or four months I think it is. I wonder when the last time was you stayed the night. I think it's been more than two years, now. Am I right?"

"About that," Philip responded. The sun oozed orange over the stark white columns that surrounded them.

"Always back on the train directly after dinner. You tell us you have plans. Plans! Excuses, they sound like to me. The only time we get to talk is on the phone. You just don't want to be here, do you? You don't have to answer that. You don't have to tell me. I know. You dislike us so much you don't even show up for holidays. Rather spend them with your friends. Your charming, wonderful, *different* friends. I won't even ask you about Thanksgiving, which is coming up. All we do for you and this is how you act. By the way, how are things in the city? How's that madman you're living with? What's his name?" Philip had forgotten how much his father's voice irritated him. The man's dry rasp had the power to split bone.

"Trevor's okay, and he's not a madman."

"Not a madman. No. Of course not. Been in the loony bin, hasn't he?" He offered a thin, wicked smile.

"He went to a place once for a month. Wish I'd never told you about it."

"Why? Keeping secrets from the old man? Think I wouldn't figure out the man is nuts? I would have regardless. One meeting is all it takes. He told me he was possessed by the spirits of dead stars from old movies. Hah! I told him to get a priest in for an exorcism. Dead movie stars indeed." Hayes smirked and sipped his drink again, set it down and scowled at it.

Philip shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Dad. That's his performance method. He didn't mean it literally."

"No business of mine if you want to live with a crazy man. I tell you though, that one's just waiting for the day when he takes pills and lies down on a bed covered with roses. Hah!" His father's sandpaper chuckle unnerved Philip. Philip had trouble being on the same planet with the man. "Guess you're doing him a world of good. I'd just rather you went out and volunteered, rather than keeping the needy so close to your door."

"It *is* Trevor's apartment. He offered to share it and I needed a place. We get along."

"Oh, then, let's drop the matter. Let's not you and I argue over a nut case you happen to live with. Someday you'll see reason or I'll have to invest in an apartment and have you stay in it for me."

Philip cringed. "Dad, I want to live on my own. It's important. Remember what the family therapist said?"

"You say that now, but I don't see you sending any of my checks back. Any word on when dinner will be ready?"

"Mom didn't say exactly."

"Well then, if you didn't bother to ask her for me, we'll just find out right now." He took the phone out of his shirt pocket, flipped it open and pressed a button. "Well, Myrna? Half an hour? Fine! And less lemon in the drink. Oh, it was yours? Yes, I know you like it that way, but I hate it when you mix them up. Is there something we could do about this

situation here, maybe put a blue swizzle stick in mine and a red one in yours? Oh, we don't.

Then put them on Marta's shopping list and by Wednesday we shouldn't have this problem any more. Right? And make me a new one if you have a moment. Okay, bye."

Philip cast an evasive glance around. Dark flat clouds tinged red were closing in from the west. He felt a drop hit his nose.

"Rain. Damn!" Mr. Hayes erupted. "Can't the weather just do one thing for an hour or two while I'm trying to sit here and enjoy the sunset?" He got up, stalked toward the house, opened the doors. "Are you coming inside with me or not?"

"In a minute. It hasn't started yet."

Philip saw him frown and enter. "I don't know what to do with him, Myrna," he heard his father grumble. "Not even enough sense to come in out of the rain."

Wind stirred the stately garden, turned over leaves of well-pruned trees. The sky opened up and poured. Large drops hit the abandoned drink. It spilled over the lip of the glass, down the sides, through the interstices of the table's ironwork. Philip stood up, stretched out his arms and legs. He let himself feel the frigid rain.

"Philip! You're soaked." His mother shook her head and pointed. "Take your bag upstairs to your room, dry off and change this minute. I hope you remember where your room is."

"We've kept it just as you left it. I made sure of that," his father added as he inspected the dinner for doneness. "By the way," he added. "I've invited Renee over to join us tonight."

"What? My crazy sister has to show up tonight? Is she bringing the evil Adam?"

Philip picked up his bag.

"Now watch that! She's your sister and she's coming to see you. Adam's staying home and babysitting."

"Babysitting. Not letting the nephews see their uncle?" He turned away. George Hayes humphed and broke a block of frozen peas into a pan of boiling water.

Philip trod the plush, pale blue carpet of the stairs and hallway to his room. He turned the knob. The door whined open. He dropped his bag, switched on the light. "Ugh!" he said, suddenly afraid. Magazines littered the unmade bed. Petrified underwear hung stiff from the backs of chairs. Dead mold covered the bottom of a glass on his dusty desk. He opened the closet. Cobwebs covered shirts he no longer wore. "Just as I left it. He wasn't kidding," he muttered and entered his bathroom to find a towel.

Food jammed the table in yellow ceramic bowls set on green cloth. Philip looked up at his father at the head of the table, glowering at him through the flowers. His sister Renee sat next to his father, across from his mother. Philip sat a setting away from the two, opposite his father. Renee wore a proper red blouse and simple tan trousers. She unfolded her napkin and bowed her head. "Oh Lord," she said. "We thank you for the abundance of the land that we are about to share and hope that all of us may come to You at last, however far away we stray, whatever errant, sinful and evil path we may follow until we see Your radiant Presence."

Mom and Dad gave the traditional assent. Philip rolled his eyes. "I can't help think that was directed at me," he said quietly.

His sister looked at him, examining him carefully, then said, "Philip, will you pass the bread, please?" He did so. Silently they passed dishes around and served themselves. Philip looked at his plate, covered with food. Gravy dribbled down mashed potatoes, touched peas. The hunk of rare roast beef pushed against the pretty grilled carrot strips.

"How've you been, Renee? How are the kids? Adam?" Philip tried to cool.

Renee's shoulders, set stiffly, barely moved as she sawed the meat before her. "Fine. All fine. Thanks for asking. Adam's become a Vice President of his company, and the twins are growing fast, shooting up like corn stalks. They're quite a handful, but I love the home life. You never know what matters in life until you start a family."

"Are you raising them as born-again, rabid right-wing fundamentalist Christian children?" Philip lifted a forkful of peas.

"Philip, dear," his mother cautioned.

"Philip. For one thing, the children are far too young to be born again. For another, I don't think we should get on the subject of raising children or practicing religion, considering the fact that you seem to want to do neither. I'll have you know that I do not hate you. I can hate the sin and love the sinner. I love you, Philip. You're my brother and I pray for you nightly."

"Thank you, holier than thou sister of mine. We were raised in a mainstream Protestant denomination, remember?" Philip goaded.

"And you can't even stay with that, can you?"

"I've got my own view of things."

"Look, Philip. You are my brother. I want you to come back to some sort of morality."

"No chance. I'm out mugging grandmothers in the streets nightly. That's how I get my heroin."

"Stop kidding around. You are kidding around?" She turned to confront him. "I want to tell you so much that I love you, even though I don't love everything you do. I just don't understand why you want to live life without having a family."

"Yeah. I guess I'm sitting at a table with total strangers who just happen to have the same DNA. Oh, I'm sorry. Genetics must be a figment of scientists' imaginations, else we start down the road to admitting that evolution exists. In that case, stop eating. The cow in front of you is a domesticated perversion of its ancestors. It can't even survive in the wild. By the way, how do you explain the fossil record?"

She sighed. "That question again! Our Church believes that the Lord placed false clues at the creation of the earth to test our faith. Only the wicked or misguided would believe the evidence of their senses over the holy word of scripture. Philip. I've found the Lord and I believe every word in the Bible as it's written."

"After your extensive studies of Hebrew, Greek and Latin? After you're lengthy comparison of the translations with the original texts? Let's not forget the Dead Sea

Scrolls, early Coptic versions and so on. Renee. People spend their lives studying these things."

"Our Church has its translation and that's the one we believe in. Satisfied?"

"Good someone's done all the thinking for you. That must simplify life and atrophy the brain beautifully."

"I know enough of the Bible to know that you shouldn't sleep with a man."

"I always wonder why conservatives say they're for the freedom of the individual, then you turn around and they're in everyone's business. 'No gay sex. No abortion. No having any fun. Forget freedom of religion. You practice ours or else. We're right and you're wrong.' Then you find out this one's gay, that one dumped his wife when she was at death's door. Another one's so family-oriented he never speaks to his adopted son. It's all 'Do as we say, not as we do.' Follow the most Neanderthal congressmen around day and night and I'm sure you'd find facts that don't fit public statements. You're right sister. I'm deeply flawed, but no more than you are." His sister grimaced and put down her fork.

His father turned to his mother. "Why do you let these children argue, Myrna?" he asked.

His mother spoke up. "Now, no more of this stimulating discussion at the dinner table. We have a difference of opinion here, and cases of indigestion are not going to settle it."

"But Mom, Renee's so completely bigoted. If I told you half the things she did in High School." Philip sipped spring water.

"At least she's polite," she returned.

"That's right. Enjoy the meal, kids." Mr. Hayes poured himself a glass of white wine.

"Anyway Philip, you're just going to have to respect my choices here." Renee punctured peas with her fork.

"I will. As long as you do mine. By the way," he said, drawing himself up, "I met a great new guy. We've started going out. I think it's getting serious."

"That's nice, dear," his mother said. "Renee? Would you pass the mashed potatoes and the butter. I really shouldn't, but they're so smooth and creamy."

"That's right," his father agreed. "The machine's are better than yours ever were." He gave a wink.

She punched him weakly on the shoulder.

"Sorry, mom," Renee said, "but I have to say I don't miss all the lumps."

"Young lady, that's the last time we ask you to dinner," her mother said. Next time I get to come to your house and criticize your cooking." She laughed and the other two joined her. Their hysterics built. Philip watched Renee's cheeks streak with tears. When they subsided, gasping for breath, he pouted a moment.

"Isn't anyone going to ask me what my boyfriend's name is?" His father filled his mouth with a forkful of food. His mother fidgeted. Renee had clutched her hands in prayer below the table.

"I'm thinking of running for the town council," his father said, swallowing. "Get my feet in the political water, so to speak."

"Oh daddy. What a great idea!" Renee gushed.

"Then, after a couple of years, maybe mayor or county chairman, something like that. I have a lot of experience running things and I think the public sector can always use some shaking up."

"Only if you don't spend all our money, dear." His mother tapped him on the forehead.

"Now, risking ones own money on politics. I wouldn't vote for the fool who did that! I have some powerful corporate friends. Hell, throw a stone down our street and you'd hit two. Hah! If I get something local maybe they'll back me for the next step. Won't risk your security, dear. What about moving back for a year, Philip, just so I can get your vote? I mean, you wouldn't have to actually live here, just on paper."

"You're serious, Dad? George Strathworth Hayes, IV, Mayor of Historic Farthingdale, Connecticut?" Philip stopped, truly frightened by the thought.

"Damn straight I am," his father's eyes glinted with the warmth of the wine. "You know, they say George Washington had a conjugal visit with Martha when he camped right down there by the river!"

"Farthingdale needs a man like you, I'm sure, Dad, but I'm registered in New York, and as a Democrat."

Mr. Hayes dropped his fork on his plate. "Don't joke with me, son."

"I'm not joking."

"Dear," his mother said to his father, then "Dear," in his direction. "Let's not have another political argument at the dinner table."

"Yeah, Dad. I'll move up and campaign for you. Vote for George Hayes. I'm his fag son and I'm here to get out the homo vote: all one of me."

His father gulped. "You'd do that? You'd undermine me? You'd do that to your own father?" All eyes fixed on Philip in horror.

"No, Dad. Bad joke there. I'll stay back home and tape up my mouth. You don't have to worry. I won't haul my boyfriend home. None of the neighbors ever have to know you're son's as queer as a snowball in August."

"Philip," his mother says slowly. "I have to ask you to mind your manners. I know you've had an accident. Perhaps you hit your head too hard. I read that that can happen. We're trying to be understanding, but these outbursts! You act as if you think we're ashamed of you. It's not that. It's just that people aren't so understanding in our neck of the woods."

Philip charged ahead. "Right. Not as understanding as my sister, when she keeps her kids away from me, so I won't influence them? Not as understanding as my father, when he wants me to climb into the biggest closet I can find and stay there? Not as understanding as you, Mom, when you change the subject as soon as I bring up someone important in my life? No. I can't imagine the neighbors could possibly be as understanding as all that! Now, if you'll all excuse me, I've got a book to read." He got up and slipped

away, leaving the three sitting upright, stunned. As he climbed the stairs he heard their low, inquisitive voices trail him.