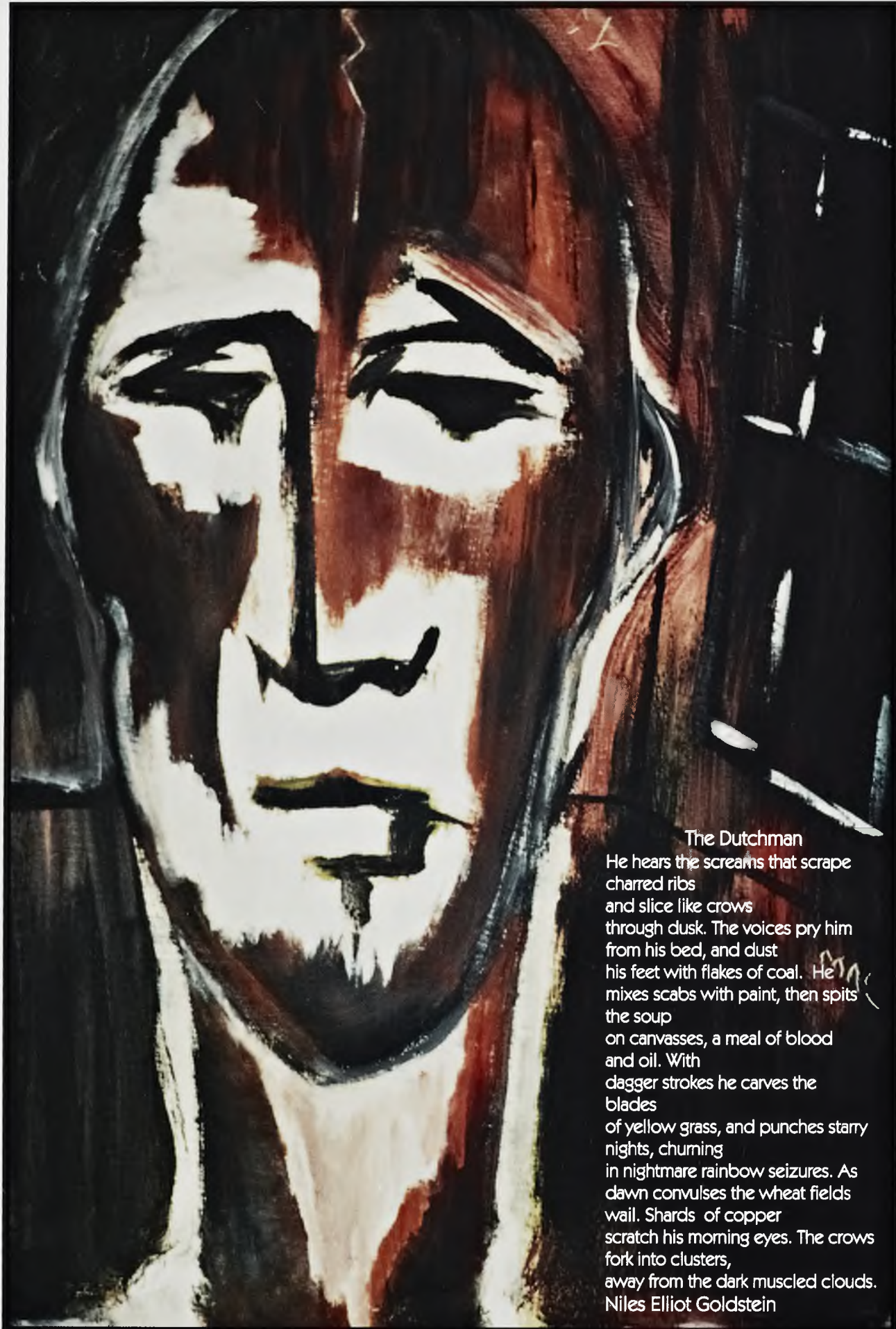


ICTUS REVIEW

W I N T E R
V O L U M E I I I
I S S U E I I





The Dutchman

He hears the screams that scrape
charred ribs
and slice like crows
through dusk. The voices pry him
from his bed, and dust
his feet with flakes of coal. He
mixes scabs with paint, then spits
the soup
on canvasses, a meal of blood
and oil. With
dagger strokes he carves the
blades
of yellow grass, and punches starry
nights, churning
in nightmare rainbow seizures. As
dawn convulses the wheat fields
wail. Shards of copper
scratch his morning eyes. The crows
fork into clusters,
away from the dark muscled clouds.
Niles Elliot Goldstein

ICTUS REVIEW

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Mary Antonia Lombardi

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New Members of The Ictus Staff



Born to Thea Jon and Frank Curry, **Aaron Jon Curry**. Thea was an Editor of *The Ictus Review* for a year and a half.



Born to Thomas and Danielle Good, **Nathaniel "Gnat" Good**. Tom is the only writer to have been featured in every issue of *The Ictus Review*.



HENRY LEWIS



EUGENE GRUBBS

BAD IN CRAZINESS MEMPHIS



NANCY RICHARDS

SEARCHING FOR THE ALTAR OF AMERICAN KITSCH

MICHELLE KEERY

When we first made reservations at Graceland, the woman warned us not to come. “It’s a bad weekend,” she said. “We have two conventions in town. One is for Twins who: Love Elvis and the other is the Amway convention. They’re taking over all of Memphis, it’ll be a mad-house.” That sewed it up for us. If Graceland wasn’t cheesy enough on its own, a group of midwestern pig farmers in polyester vying for space in the Jungle Room with hordes of anxious Amway sales zombies would push it beyond the Velveeta threshold. We had to leave for Tennessee immediately.

Reservation lady was right, though—the twins and Amway took up all the hotel space. We ended up staying in a youth hostel full of dissatisfied, rich European students making their way across America in ratty clothes in an attempt to be bohemian before they headed back to their free universities and lived off their parents for another ten years. They were visiting America but hated Americans. We were the only two Americans in the whole hostel, and were treated with such venom that we forgot the original name of the place and began calling it the Hostile Youth Hostel. We even told a cabbie to take us to the Hostile Hotel one night, and without thinking, he drove straight there.

We hated them too. They carried all their belongings in small, ripped backpacks with special side pockets to hold their parents' credit cards in case of an emergency, and none would deign to visit Graceland.

"What do you mean, you won't go to Graceland? Why the hell are you in Memphis?" Nancy asked one Belgian girl as we sat in B.B. King's on Beale Street.

"For the music. The blues," the girl airily answered, indicating the cover band in front of us that was performing as part of a week-long Blues and beer festival sponsored by a major record label and two different beer companies.

"What about Elvis? He loved the blues!" I countered.

"Elvis is tacky. Graceland is so...so touristy," the girl sniffed.

"Touristy? Well, what are you? A native? I've got news for you, America is tacky and cheesy, and Elvis is the essence of that tackiness and cheesiness. We're here to make a pilgrimage to honest tacky and cheesy things before heading out to Las Vegas to see an impersonator do it," Nancy said, just getting wound up enough before we left the bar to go sit in W.C. Handy park with the locals and groove to the free band playing there. She had to drink three beers before her anger at the Belgian girl from the Hostile Youth Hostile wore off.

We dropped two tabs of acid apiece before we went to Graceland. The idea was to soak up the essence of Elvis through hallucinogens, and I think it worked. We spared no expense at Graceland. We splurged for the entire package tour, the car museum and Lisa Marie plane included. Once we had boarded a bus that drove us through the iron gates and to his house, we relaxed. There wasn't a rich European student with a backpack for miles. It was all middle-aged people, some who shared the same genes, others who sold overpriced carpet shampoos in an attempt to reach the American dream that a poor boy from Mississippi had managed to capture before keeling over while taking a shit on the john. Many of our fellow passengers might not ever share much in common with that poor Mississippi boy beyond their love for fattening foods, tacky furniture with plastic slipcovers and their ability to have a massive heart attack while squeezing out a corn log, but damn it, they could dream.

The drug kicked in somewhere around the pool room, then became especially intense in the handball house Elvis had built after he bought Graceland. Nancy settled in at the bar and stared in wonder at the leatherette decor in the handball house. Crowds of people shuffled

through, listened to the tour director and shuffled out, slightly bored and wondering when lunch was. After about 40 minutes of answering our questions, the tour guide—she seemed to be the only stationery one, an expert in the handball house no doubt culled from thousands of employees who just operated as Graceland drones, hoping to one day reach her level of Elvis knowledge—began looking slightly uncomfortable. We continued asking. Her grasp of all things Elvis was stupendous, yet she maintained a bit of PR sheen on her tidbits. For instance, she wouldn't say directly whether he had died in the bathroom, and was vague about his use of drugs. I don't know whether it was the sight of two drug-addled women sitting on Elvis' leatherette bar stools, apparently bent on staying there, or the fact that our questions were becoming more obscure, but she began muttering in her Graceland patrol radio that she needed relief for her lunch break.

"Do you know if Elvis was circumcised?" Nancy wanted to know.

"I'm sorry, I have to leave for lunch," she answered, obviously stumped. She remained silent for the next ten minutes as she waited for her second in command to take over and we gawked some more at the furniture.

"You know, he made a lot of money, but he never acquired any taste no matter how much he raked in," I said, nodding at one particularly gruesome chair.

"Yeah, isn't it great?" Nancy whispered reverently.

Near the memorial garden, we met a set of twins who claimed they kissed Elvis. The twins entered into a hot debate with us over which version of the Elvis stamp should have won. They were 50 and had souvenir bandannas around their necks from his last concert in Vegas, and they thought the stamp with young Elvis on it was a more suitable memorial. Nancy and I disagreed. The older, fatter Elvis strung out on pills was what the majority of Americans immediately brought to mind when they woke up in their trailer park homes and began playing "Suspicious Minds" to start their days off right. Sure, the younger portrait was sexier, it showed Elvis as a hot rising star. But wasn't it a testament to his strength as an icon that people loved him just the same even when he had made a string of bad movies and worse management decisions, and lost his outward good looks? We thought the fact that America gave Elvis unconditional love was what should be driven home every time someone bought a stamp with his sweating, neon-streaked fat face on it. They were puzzled by our explanation, and the one named Sally finally told me:

"I think you're thinking too much about this, honey. I just love Elvis."

Her straightforward passion for the man sobered us up. Maybe we were thinking about it too much, and in the process, had lost our passion for the simple things in Elvis: his generosity to the people he loved and his fans, his down-to-earth tastes, and most importantly, his music. When we went back to the Hostile Hotel that night, we stayed up late singing to a tape of his early recordings. We annoyed the Belgian girl so much she went to sleep in the living room.

The Gloaming at the



JANET WENGER

The night sky chases the sun from above, leaving a full moon in twilight, with Venus brazenly blazing in the west. The gulls pay no mind to the purple and orange reflected on the Kill from clouds cast in the last moments of the dying day. Here, where Victory Boulevard can reach no further, where the Richmond Turnpike spills onto Long Neck, the wild beauty of Nature has again endured, reclaiming from Man what He once took for his own.

Out beyond Con Edison's Travis facility, less than a mile from Staten Island's busiest movie theater, I sit quietly for hours, listening. The varied trills of the Seaside Sparrow carries across the salt water marsh. Tribes of House Sparrows, unconcerned with my quiet presence, dine on the many seeds and insects afforded by the grasses and catkins. And if my patience holds strong, and my gaze be quick and focused, I may even see Henslow's Friend skip among the stalks and stems, like a worried field mouse escaping a Screecher at night. Then, fluttering about from a stand of paper birch to quaking aspens which have not yet found gold dressing for their autumnal leaves, American Robins sing their songs of cheer. As happy as well met neighbors a great distance from home, they are all too content greeting each other's commonalities.

With my lips pursed in an attempt to sing out salutations I hear only crickets chirp, for neither robin or sparrow return my call. Soon, as quiet time passes, birds return. Pheobe and warblers find perch on the marsh. Myrtle's yellow-rumped warbler, sitting cheeky atop the birch, looks dark brown and gray in the twilight. Among sweet Myrtle's chirping and buzzy warbles I hear a fierce clicking afoot. A brief investigation brings me below the reeds, down to the rich, tidal flats which house the many mudholes dug by immature blue crabs. The clicking is armed combat, claw against claw, as the crabs hone skills necessary to survive the Kills.

End of the World

CLIFF HAGEN

Earlier in the day a boy crept up from the shore of Arthur Kill through the catkins. The young, luckless fisherman spun for me yarns of stripped bass in days gone by. And since he had not yet grown as tall as his tales I decide to help flame his imagination.

I relate to the boy recent rumors of white-tail deer living on Staten Island. A number of doe and a buck have been spotted traipsing up and down the west shore, and if he were silent as he made his way to the Kills then he too might catch a glance of the herd. The boy's face was stricken by fantasy. His eyes sparkle with wonder and his smile stretches wide as he walks away up the Boulevard.

My young, imaginative companion is no doubt a Travis resident. His small, west shore town was once Linoleumville, for it was a town constructed around a 19th century linoleum factory. Travis seems to be modeled on rural America, incorporating small stores and homes with churches and a fire house. Independence Day celebrations in Travis are incomparable.

One hundred yards beyond the splayed asphalt of Victory Blvd., just beyond the streets of Travis, Nature continues her enduring assault on rubble once known as The New Blazing Star Ferry. In 1816, then-Governor, Daniel D. Tompkins made possible the construction of the Richmond Turnpike (Victory Blvd.), connecting his own Tompkinsville with Elizabethtown, New Jersey, by way of the New Blazing Star.

As important to east coast commerce and travel as the Verrazano Bridge is today, the 19th century New Blazing Star Ferry is now strewn across a considerable length of shoreline. Pounding ceaselessly, wave after wave, tide after tide, the waters of Arthur



EUGENE GRUBBS

Kill have made a beach of The New Blazing Star's remains. Snails, fleas and midges have settled among the seagrass and algae which grow on the bricks, while herring and black-ringed gulls come to feed.

At New Blazing Star it is evident that nature is in control. Her Queen Anne's Lace splits through weakened defenses at the outer edges of Victory Blvd., to open doilies of white. She does not care for names, dates or money; does not know of courts or commerce, but heedlessly continues her assault on the makings of Man. The Morning Glories, which wind their way like slow moving snakes through the brush toward the sun, engulf the rusted latticework of chain-linked fences. Double-breasted cormorants make perches of automobiles and other man-made designs cast aside.

As the moon creeps up slow over my shoulder, bold-faced and bright, I am absorbed by the Spirit of Nature. It is Her indescribable creations—of semblance and sound—which absorbs the true admirer, and I now know myself to be true. I also wonder, with pity, whether environmentalists, with all their samplings and surveys, can truly enjoy Her peaceful fury, or if in their circles She is known only as Ecology, a science like any to be poked, prodded and tested. They feel that Nature requires their alliance, that She needs be defended. Lost in the moment, they fear for Her future.

I am assured of Her strength and longevity. I watch the European-bred Butter and Eggs open its stand of fragrance in yellow, orange and white bloom, attracting an assortment of pollinators to market for trade. Parties of bees dance in celebration as a colorful parade of moths, with a fanfare more diverse than the most tendered flower beds, help Nature to disperse her riches and fame. The stately Goldenrod, regal and proud, harkens forth royalty. And from above, swooping softer than the breeze upon the golden path laid by the wildflower, a Monarch butterfly takes position to inspect the marsh.

Tonight, while the Monarch sleeps in his chambers, his nocturnal domain is still awake for the full moon's high tides that swallow the beach and flood the many tunnels dug by muskrats in the marsh. The tides also push me further inland, so I am unable to see the muskrat's glossy, brown coats sparkle by the water, but I can hear them squeal as they jostle each other for a scrap of dead crab or fish brought ashore by the tide. Instead, I content myself with spying on Norway's brazen exports making sloppy meals of refuse. Amazed by the Norwegian brown rat's propensity to survive, I always find time to gaze at the remarkable mammal. Found in every neighborhood of Staten Island, Norwegian browns show an incomparable fearlessness and adaptability which demands our respect.

And though our contagion bedfellows show little fear of Man, they bolt at the briefest appearance of *Feline Domesticus*. The night-time salt water marsh hosts at least two dozen stray cats. Once domestic, never tamed, these house cats explode from the catkins stalking crickets and unwittingly interrupt the race's meals. Only darkness when confronted by light can make a quicker exit. Drawn by the play of cats on the western end of Victory Blvd. I walk from the marsh hoping that the players might find time for me. My need for companionship after so many quiet hours goes unfulfilled because the cats want nothing to do with *Humanus Domesticus*. Tired and lonely I drive home.



KIM BROWN



BOB KODADEK

in a symbolic way

In a very symbolic way I'll say that my feet smell. That they ache. That the nerve in my stomach, the nerve in my forehead, the nerve in my wrist is pounding. That my blood's running the wrong way, in crazy directions, and that it's hardly the color of real blood. That my limbs fold bow bend and burp in astonishing discord. That the alcohol on my breath stems from a hole in the gut. That the shit falls in indiscernible patterns. That the skin is murky and hard to see through. That the fog is a result of untrained eyes. And that these eyes have turned back in the head. Seeing only the interior functions of the master. And none of the wonderful landscape that must be just at his fingertips...

Su Byron

MORNING COMMUTE

CHRIS PABST

The news came on at seven, as usual.

"...and police are now said to be in control of the disturbance, which, according to eyewitnesses, has raged unchecked for over an hour. An unconfirmed source has stated that the riot began shortly after Controllers announced a second half hour delay on the southbound IRT line. Presently unsubstantiated, witnesses also claim that cell members belonging to the terrorist group, People's Express, sparked the orgy of violence; leading frenzied, hypercaffienated commuters in several extended clashes with the Transit Police.

"People's Express, an anarchist organization sworn to fight substandard public service and perceived corruption, had been involved in two lesser outbreaks earlier this year, but this morning's disturbance has already surpassed that combined death toll. A number of arrests are said to have been made, but according to Mamoudu Chin, our On-The-Spot reporter, the only people to have been removed so far have gone out in body bags. For PATH commuters, expect delays of..."

I shut off the radio. After last night's debauchery, the drone of the daily traffic report was background babble I could do without. Beside me, Amy was still asleep, her drunken, guttural snores only partially muffled by the three pillows I had successively piled upon her head. The excuse for last night's festivities had been her birthday, an anachronistic reason if there ever was one for a drunk. Just another annum older and several million more neurons temporarily taken out of the loop, not to mention the small fortune credited to our bar bill at the Powderhound.

It wasn't until I attempted to shift from Homo Supine to Homo Erectus that I belatedly remembered my own excesses had closely paralleled the ball and chain's. Stumbling over to the window, I cracked one of the shutters and squinted out. Hoping to see a city obscured by clouds or failing that, an acid rain shower with a very low ceiling; I was met instead with unfiltered, visible radiation. Sunlight. Awful stuff. Raising my hand to ward off the unaccustomed light, I...

Involuntarily jerked my head back as the sharp pitter-patter of metallic hail resounded just centimeters from my pressure-sensitive headache. As my face pulled away from the window, I caught a glimpse of my towheaded little bastard of a newsboy ducking down on the roof opposite. Resealing the shutters, I pondered the dangers of falling into debt. Just one week behind and already Paper Boy was directing steel jacketed delinquent notices at my bedroom window. MBA material, I thought approvingly, my bladder directing me to the throne room.

Later, as I used up my (and most of Amy's) allotment of bath water, leaving her just enough moisture to wet a washcloth and scrub her unmentionables, I pondered my place in the over-all scheme of things. I often waxed philosophic with other people's bath water. Making for the kitchen au natural, I took a seat as the remainder of last night's distilled urine and dishwater dripped into the percolator, filtered through the ersatz java and exited as a brownish liquid, pooling heavily in the bottom of my cup.

'Wasn't science wonderful?' I thought, cutting my coffee with something that claimed to be "Better Than Milk!". A necessary marketing ploy, since they'd never be able to unload a product sporting the more realistic logo, "Much Worse Than Milk" or "Not Even Close To Cow Sweat!" Not that anyone had the slightest idea what real milk tasted like: although somewhere, somebody probably had a herd or two stashed away, each animal chomping away enough grain to sustain nine or ten citizens. As for the term "milk", that was just a generic misnomer for

the host of soy products which had long ago replaced cow juice in the cereal bowls and coffee cups of man.

Pouring myself a glass of something, "Better Than Orange Juice Ever Was!", I carefully added several drops of LiveLong. Besides displacing the tumors and neoplasms struggling daily to gain a foothold in my body, fetal juice also had the beneficial side effect of regenerating tissue and prolonging human life centuries beyond our original warranties. It was like cheating the hand of God, this daily refusal to grow old and die. In a world of poisoned air, rationed water and Musak, humanity still refused to go down for the count, clinging stubbornly to any hope, even if born out of its future generations.

The juice went down, bitterly; so I chased it with a sugar roll, saccharine really. "You getting out of bed?" I called out to the bedroom.

"I'm calling in sick," came the carefully rehearsed response, a cross between a croak and a last gasp: "Throat cancer."

"Great. Then who am I going into work with? Hubbard! With all the sick time you've been taking, I'm surprised I'm not dead yet."

"I talked to Mary while you were in the shower using

I assumed to be Mary, a short, fashionably anemic brunette. She was adjusting her filter; Bloomingdale's. Buying a Bloomie's filter was like breathing through your fingers during a mustard gas attack. If you wore a filter that didn't do didly, then you were either crazy or you had wads of credit and drank fetal juice out of evening slippers.

It made sense then that she was anemic. Only the rich could afford to diet. Everybody else scooped up every calorie they could get their lips on.

"Yes?" said Bill, breaking my internal fixation.

"My wife is sick and I was wondering if I might go in with you and Mary?" I hated to ask for favors and this reeked of one.

"She isn't catching, is she?" asked Bill, obviously not a Ms. Sidney Biddle Barrows graduate.

"Mental Health Day, honey," said Mary in the background.

"Where do you work?" asked Bill.

"Mid-town," I told him, "the Trump Concourse."

"Oh yeah," said Bill, "I work in the Trump TVC. Mary works downtown in the Trump Towers. Any problem swinging that way before we head uptown?"

"No problem," I assured him. It wasn't.



P. C. GUAGENTI

up all my water," said Amy, "and she said you can go in with her and Bill. Just give them a call."

"And who are Mary and Bill?" I asked, searching the hamper for the least-encrusted pair of underwear and socks.

"They moved into the Freeman's apartment last week. You remember the Freeman's. They were that nice couple whose guns were always jamming. Remember what you told them?"

I remembered. "If you two assholes don't get your acts together, someone's going to have a new lease soon." Well, somebody had a new lease.

Picking up the phone, I punched the numbers as Amy recited. Two rings later it was answered, but there was no picture. "Who is it?" asked a muffled voice.

"Mike Diaz, apartment 32B," said I.

There was a pause, then more muffled speech. The screen cleared and I could see Bill's face. He tossed a sheet behind him.

"Never know who's on the other end," he explained while buttoning up his vest. To the right I could see what

"All right," said Bill. There was a pause. I knew something was coming. I was right. "Er...by the way, what do you carry?" queried Bill, looking at something off screen.

So that was it. "Nothing fancy," I told him, modesty not one of my strong points. "A Browning short-barrel with autoloader and infrared, armor-piercing shells and combat clips."

"Not bad," conceded Bill, holding up his Sony Killman and checking the chambers. "Back-up?"

"A Colt .44, shrapnel heads: tear gas canisters and some smoke grenades."

"Sounds good," said he, really looking at me for the first time in the conversation, "Where do we meet?"

"The lobby in fifteen?"

"Make it ten." The screen went dead.

Switching on my hallway monitor, I did a VIH (visible light, infrared, heat sensitive scan). Nada. Opening up the blast shield outer door, I waited for the inner, inch-thick home-security entrance to recede into its holding slot. Cradling the Browning at the ready, I stepped out. All clear. Tossing the hermetically sealed paper back into the

apartment, I counted to five and on the last number, heard both doors come slamming shut behind me, locking into place. I was outside and alone.

Glancing at my watch, UV/radiation/microwave sensor, television, calculator, video game, radio, telephone..., I realized I'd have to hurry if I wanted to catch the 8:05. Up ahead, the elevator door seemed to be stuck on something. Normally silent, I could hear its closing mechanism grinding. Flush against the wall, I moved forward, three of the four pounds of pressure I needed for the trigger already applied.

The riddle was soon solved. Clad in his robe and still clutching his overloaded bag of garbage, Mr. Carrol had stopped a bullet with his temporal lobe. Too bad. I'd miss his sacks of reeking trash left to rot and attract roaches on the incinerator room floor. I looked around for his shotgun but I didn't see it. I guessed that whoever had retired him had relieved him of the weapon. Hope they'd clean it.

I was just about to shove his body aside and take the elevator when I noticed something flat and shiny beneath his pelvis. A pressure mine. Move the corpse and it would spring up into the air, four to six feet high, releasing five hundred steel flechettes in a fifteen foot circle of death. Very clever. Kill one or two more citizens without even having to pull a trigger. Nice guys. Abandoning the elevator, I took the stairs.

Pushing the stairwell door with the barrel of my Browning, I waited a moment, then darted across the opening, firing a high burst; more to let anyone know I was coming than with any thought of actually shooting them. Silence...except for the reverberating echoes traveling up and down the thirty flights. Satisfied it was clear, I began the descent: half a floor at a time, pausing a few seconds on each landing before continuing on to the next.

I had almost reached the fourth level when the door burst open and a pair of grenades came bouncing out. Grabbing the guardrail with my free left hand, I jerked myself up and back to the mid-floor platform, adding a healthy kick to speed my ascent. Hitting the floor back first, there followed a tremendously painful blast and the wall immediately above my head was peppered with bits of flying

metal. I blinked as dust floated down into my eyes.

A chorus of youthful voices filled the air with screeching curses as a pack of grade schoolers came running out, firing up and down the stairwell as they uniformly descended, maintaining an order which would have reduced a drill instructor to a weeping idiot. After a moment of silence, I painfully got up and brushed the dirt off of my suit.

Moments later, I was in the lobby alcove of the staircase. There was a movement behind the sofa on the other side the foyer and I was tempted to fire a burst into it, but remembered Bill and Mary.

"Mike, that you?" called a voice from somewhere to the right of me. It was Bill.

"Yeah, it's me," I said, relieved, and stepped out into the open. What followed felt like several simultaneous blows on the chest from a baseball bat. I went flying back into the alcove. A cacophonous eruption of automatic weapons fire erupted, filtering through to my dazed senses as some distant, dreamy thunderstorm. Meanwhile, my right hand groped senselessly for my pistol holster. Looking up, I heard a shrill scream and caught a glimpse of Mary as she charged across the lobby, firing an M-34 from the hip. From the sofa, a stream of tracers flew to her right.

In the following seconds of silence, broken by someone moaning piteously about his intestines, I brought up my hand and removed two bullets from my vest. 'It pays to buy the best,' I thought.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, I found my pistol and drew it level. It was Bill. "All clear," he said, giving me a hand up.

"What happened?" I asked, then saw one lifeless and three mostly lifeless bodies strewn between the sofa and potted palms.

"Free agents," said Bill, meaning the homeless. In a society where housing was such a premium, the only way to get an apartment was to kill those with leases. This accelerated the otherwise tedious attrition process. "They must have broken the code again. I told that jerk Harriman the next time this happened I was going to blow his balls off. If we weren't late, I'd do it right now."

"It's not his fault," said Mary sooth-

ingly. "He does his job and changes the codes everyday. I already told you, we have to sue management for a new security AI. We have to get rid of this old computer system. It's been here since the late nineties. Turning to me, she said, "His niece, Terry, broke into the system two weeks ago."

"How old is she?" I asked, glancing at my watch and still searching for holes oozing blood.

"Eight," replied Mary.

"Can we go now?" asked Bill, holding up his wristwatch.

"How do we work this?" I asked. The three of us were standing inside the bulletproof vestibule, staring out upon the meticulously groomed, pockmarked grounds. On the far side of the lawn, I could make out the subway entrance. A police tank was parked across the street in front of a Mr. Donut shop.

"I'll go out and you cover me," volunteered Mary impatiently. "When I'm at the tree," and she pointed out a gnarled, blasted, leafless trunk more than halfway to the station, "then you follow me while I cover. S'alright?"

"S'alright," replied Bill and she sprinted out the door and alongside the building. I watched her calves pump up and down, her body suit accentuating the tightness of her thighs and buttocks. Her breasts were already heaving as she rounded the corner, now fully exposed out in the open lawn. Bill lay down a suppressing fire while I held myself in reserve. A patch of grass rose up slowly as Mary passed and without thinking I unloaded an entire magazine into it. The patch flopped back down and Mary dropped beside the tree, unscathed.

"You're next," said Bill and I reloaded as I jogged in her footsteps, saving myself for the dash from the building's corner to the tree. Out from the shadow I darted, head down, staring at Mary as she fired at something above us both. I dropped beside her and was shocked to see that she was using Harriman's body for cover. The superintendent had caught a line of bullets in the back, probably from the sniper in the grass dugout. We both opened up as Bill retraced our path and ran past, continuing to the street. He crouched beside the police tank and waved us on.

"Let's go," said Mary, "I have to make a presentation." A smattering of

rounds dug into the grass as we ran.

"Snipers!" I yelled unnecessarily. It was like yelling, "Raindrops!" during a sun shower. Feeling naked in the open, we both dove the last few feet, rolling out beside the tank, safe in the shadow of its armor.

"What took you so long?" demanded Bill. He jumped up and fired off several rounds at the top of a neighboring building. As he knelt back down, I heard a far off scream of pain. Across the street, two middle-aged women were hunched over, walking carefully behind a line of trash bins. The lead woman carried a pistol and the second clutched her purse and a sawed-off shotgun.

"I can't stand seeing that," whispered Mary, pointing to the pair as they kept a few inches ahead of a lead shower. A bullet caught the second woman's purse, blowing most of its contents all over the sidewalk.

"It's the old who can never afford to rearm properly," she said, touching up her face and rearranging a misplaced strand of hair. "When do you think was the last time she saw the inside of a gunsmith's, I wonder?" Meanwhile, the pair crouched together behind an abandoned car while a machine-gun tore the wreck to pieces above their heads.

"They seem to be doing all right," commented Bill, watching the one in the green leisure suit crawl through the gutter on her elbows, "though I doubt they're going to make the 8:05." He stuck his head up for a moment, bringing it down just in time to miss a bullet.

"While the ladies are occupied, maybe we can catch our train," he suggested, pointing the Killman towards the subway entrance. "Mike, the fire seems to be coming from the 100 building. Just fire a few bursts and we'll dash across. I'll cover you from the stairs."

"Right," said I, holding the Brown- ing at face level and popping up like

some deadly jack-in-the-box, laying down a suppressing fire along the roof line. I watched clouds of mortar kick up as the bullets pelted the aged concrete.

"We're clear," I heard Bill yell out, "move it!"

I hunched over again and ran, scuttling across the thirty yards as fast as my heart could pump. I saw the relief on the faces of the two middle-aged women as I drew their fire. I wondered at their age. Would I be unable to afford my fetal juice one day? These were the thoughts running through the synapses when the hail-storm descended to my left. I dove to



the right, rolled out and kept on running. I could see Bill just in front of me, half out of the subway entrance and firing furiously on full auto. He dropped back as I reached the lip of the stairs and that's when I caught it. Several were hammer blows to the

back and shoulder. The vest took those. But I could feel two in the thigh that were like hot, sharp stabs from dull needles and I grunted as the right leg buckled. My momentum carried me down the staircase and out of the kill zone. I put out my arms as I tumbled, missing Mary's hand and crashing down instead on the metal-sheathed edges of the stone steps. The pain dulled my memory of the event.

I woke up in the ambulance. The medics were lifting my stretcher into the bus while the cops, roused from their coffee and donuts, provided cover with their scoped laser rifles. The

medics worked fast and furious, as if we were in some hot LZ.

One stayed with me while the other waddled through the cramped interior to the driver's seat.

Holding a scanner to my neck implant, the female drew out my medical record.

"This one has coverage," she stated and only then did the bus start moving, the driver waving 'all clear' to the police.

"What happens if I didn't have coverage?" I asked, my voice cracking. I was freezing, the result, I would later learn, of my femoral artery pumping out a quarter of my blood supply into the air.

"It is alive," said the male in the driver's seat, hitting a bump. "Picking your ass up is putting me

over my sixteen hours. I have a life outside of this steel box, you know."

"Oh can it, Bob," said the female, whose badge read: Gerwick, Madeline A., Advanced Paramedic. She wiped my forearm with an alcohol swab, then inserted a needle. "No coverage?" she said to me, taping the site. She shook her head and answered, "Then we'd give you as much neoglobin as your credit

would allow, plasma if you had none, bandage you up and place you back on the ground where we found you. For a small charge, we'd call your next of kin and let them know where you were."

"You're regular angels of mercy," I croaked out, watching as she adjusted the IV, running the clear liquid into my arm from the swinging plastic bag.

"The only ones stupid enough to haul your fat ass up a flight of stairs, pal," rebutted Bob. "The moment we showed up, your friends were running for their train." I closed my eyes and pictured Mary and Bill running hand in hand down the long corridor to the subterranean cars, with my bleeding body lying on the floor in a growing puddle of blood. I could hear her clear laughter as she and Bill disappeared, her muscled back exposed to the waist by the v-backed body suit.

I woke up to the sound of the siren echoing in the loading bay. "We're here," said Madeline, popping open the back doors and jumping out. I found myself looking out into the harsh white of a hospital loading dock, beyond which lay a series of automated doors which swung back and forth in a steady pattern, swallowing and disgorging a stream of people. Bob came around and helped pull out my stretcher. As I lay on the loading dock, I could see, between the ambulance and the building, the driveway from which we had come.

Gerwick distracted me by dropping my chart on my chest and then stamping the half dozen forms with his operating number. "No stampee, no money," he told me, emphasizing the point with one last hard thump on my sternum. "Next time," he told me, picking up the chart and leaving a single copy taped to my side, "keep your butt down and maybe I won't be going into triple time hauling your carcass in here."

"Lay off Jackson," snapped Madeline, slamming shut the ambulance doors. "With your alimony payments, you could use all the triple time you can get." Drowning out their chatter was a pitiful background

wailing of screeching voices, individually disharmonious, but in chorus making up a frightful theme. Turning my head, I saw some fifty yards away, at the bottom of the driveway, a spiked, barbed-wire wrapped, wrought iron fence. Beyond it lay a thick mass of the wretched refuse, as if the fence were some shoreline upon which they had just washed up. The crowd was some six or seven deep and most of them were beseeching the paramedics and others on the loading dock for assistance. There were crying mothers holding aloft limp babies, husbands propping up wives, children carrying parents and some, alone, just wordlessly clung to the fence, staring in mute agony.

"Get a job!" shouted Jackson at the dirty faces pressed in desperate hope, flipping the bird at one distraught man, who, tired of pleading for human mercy, resorted to righteous anger and pulling a pistol, vented his rage by firing several shots at the loading bay; only to have the bullets deflected by the transparent plasteel shielded further up on the lawn.

"Security," said Jackson, thumbing his radio's transmit button, "we have hostile fire coming into E-1 from the perimeter. Do you copy, over?"

"We copy, over," came the crisp drawl of the Security AI. Simultaneously, a fine shower descended upon the crowd, an artificial drizzle from buried heads near the fence. A score of people reacted violently by desperately pushing their way back through the mass of bodies. Their alarm fell like pebbles on a still pond and produced isolated pockets of panic. On the periphery of the pockets, others, ignorant and thirsty, rushed forward to fill the spaces on the exposed fence. For many, it was their first drink all day.

"No," whispered Madeline, who stopped pulling my stretcher, leaving me half within the first set of double doors. She fumbled for her radio, but it was too late. Even as she struggled to release it

from her belt, a dazzling aura of flickering white threads, hundreds of them, issued out from the spiked tops of the fence posts. They played upon the crowd like sinuous tentacles, indiscriminate, and as each one alighted upon a body it drew out a cry of anguish terrible to hear. A crowd control device typical of most municipal hospitals, the electric current used was judged humane: not strong enough to cause severe injury, but enough to induce a blind panic in any ungrounded, undisciplined mob; such as this one.

I watched in silent, dry-mouthed horror as men and women bolted from the wrought iron; mothers dropping babies, husbands abandoning wives and children deserting parents. "Stop it!" yelled Madeline into her radio, over and over, ineffectively, until finally the AI, judging that enough energy had been expended and the disruptive biomass sufficiently reduced in density, cut the power and the dancing branches of waving voltage faded, then died. As I was wheeled into the ER by Jackson, his face triumphant over the forces of the disenfranchised, a class which he himself was but by an economic hair barely separated; I could hear, even after the doors closed behind me, the thin cries of forsaken infants and toddlers as they lay, like broken toys, squirming on the wet cement.

"Are you in pain, Mr. Diaz?"

"What!?" I said, startled out of my depression.

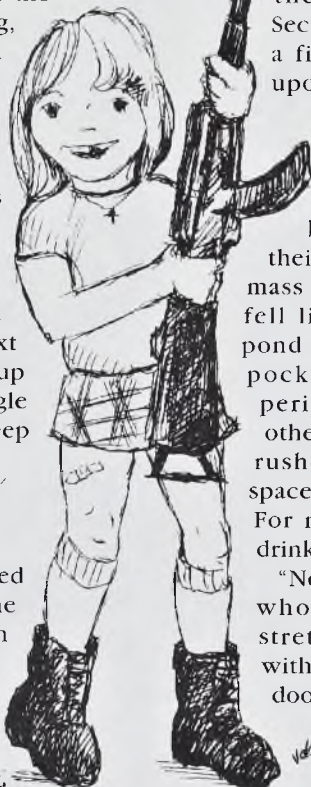
"I said, 'Are you in Pain?' You're crying." It was a female voice, softer than Madeline's.

"No, I'm all right," I lied, dragging a hand over my face to remove the evidence.

"According to your chart," continued the clerk, "you've received field treatment for a partially severed right femoral artery, as well as three units of neoglobin. Subtracting the time spent in the ambulance and in field surgery, you're still entitled to 7.2 hours of primary hospital care. Do you wish to exercise that right?"

"I guess so."

"Will you want to remain on your stretcher here in the ER, in a special holding suite or out in the observation hall? We also have beds available in wards, multiple room, triple occupancy, semi-private and private suite accommodations. Your insurance however, does not cover beds or ER



holding. Would you authorize a credit advance for a bed? We have sliding scale and low interest rates for extended payments." She paused.

"I can't afford a bed," I admitted.

"Too bad," commented the clerk and in her eyes I saw her demotion of me. She checked off a series of boxes with the mouse. "Your insurance covers recycled bandages and syringes and generic medications. Do you wish to upgrade?" She didn't sound as if she was too hopeful on that account.

I didn't want to disappoint her. "No, I'll just take what my insurance pays for. When am I going to see a doctor?" I asked.

Despite her training in neutral affect, I saw her eyebrows ascend and the sides of her lips curl up in a faint hint of a laugh struggling to break free and rage uncontrollably in my startled face. "There'll be one to see you shortly," she finally managed, closing her window and turning away. A half minute after she left her seat, I could hear her animated voice announce, "And then he said, 'When am I going to see a doctor?'" In response there was a roomful of laughter. A man in white scrubs came to me a few minutes later.

"Are you the doctor?" I asked.

"I'm the transport tech," he replied, unlocking my brakes. "I'm here to push you to your holding area."

"When am I going to see a doctor?" I asked him.

He put two fingers to his forehead and closed his eyes for a second. Then he looked at me and shrugged, "What am I, a psychic or something? Just lie there and enjoy the ride."

The holding area was an auditorium-sized room packed with stretchers, over a hundred. The stench was palatable. The transport tech wheeled me between two of them, locked my wheels and left without a word.

"What are ye here for?" asked a gray-haired man in a stained light blue gown on my left.

"Gunshot," I replied. "And you?"

"Liver transplant. Can't afford to take my juice every day and the booze just rotted her out. Cirrhosis or something, they said. Don't know what it is." He gave a cough and brought up some phlegm, leaning over to spit it onto the floor. There was a puddle of it.

"Some kid had his head blowed off last night—free agent—so they gave me his liver. I'm a vet," he said proud-

ly. "Good thing too. They take good care of vets."

Seeing the yellow stain around his groin, the encrusted food below his chin and the empty plastic bag flapping above his arm, I shuddered to see what bad care consisted of. Another man in green scrubs came up to my stretcher and unlocked the wheels. "Time for surgery," he said cheerily.

"Gee, that was fast," said the vet, impressed.

"You important or something?"

"Surgery? Surgery for what?" I demanded, the stretcher already in motion.

"Why cosmetic brain surgery, as if you didn't already know," responded the tech, guiding me to the door.

"I was shot in the ass, not in the head," I protested.

"If you say so," agreed the tech, moving faster once he was in the hallway. We had to pause as somebody crawled back to his stretcher from a water fountain. I could feel the technician's fingers drumming on the metal near my head.

"I don't want brain surgery," I insisted.

"Can't say as I blame you," agreed the tech, not really listening.

"I'm not scheduled for brain

surgery," I insisted. "I can't pay for it."

"I won't tell accounting if you don't," whispered the tech, pushing the stretcher forward to circle around the crawling body. We ran over his trailing IV line.

"I refuse to have surgery!" I half-shouted, my energy expended.

"Come on," said the tech, finally stopping and visibly annoyed. "I've heard of reluctant brides but you take the cake. If you didn't want a piece of your frontal lobe cut out and a few games put in there, then why did you come here in the first place?"

"I told you, I was shot. My name is Diaz, Michael."

"You're not Newman, Anthony?" asked the tech, alarmed now.

"Diaz," I insisted.

"Christ!" he swore. "Now I have to go back in there. I hate being around sick people." He turned the stretcher on its axis and ran back over the IV line.

When I reentered the room, Amy arrived, dressed in sweats and a baseball cap. We waited for the doctor together while the vet tried to bum cigarettes from every passing person, ignoring the oxygen tank by his side. I told her about the cosmetic brain surgery episode.

"Oh yeah," she asked, "what

games?"

"How do I know...?"

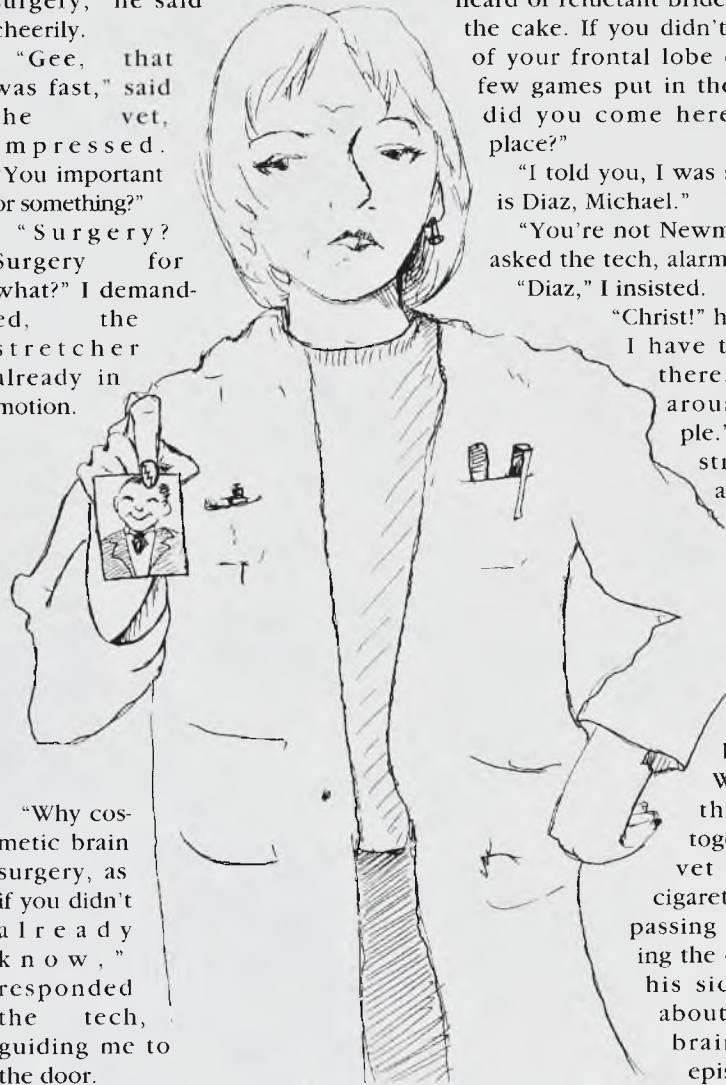
"Mr. Diaz?" A woman in a white lab coat stood at the foot of my stretcher.

"I'm Diaz, Doc. Listen, you..."

I'm not a physician, Mr. Diaz. I'm a quality review nurse from discharge planning. I'm here to complete your paperwork and release you from the hospital."

"I didn't see a doctor. How can you discharge me?"

"Here," she said, searching her pock-



ILLUSTRATIONS BY VINCENT VOK



BARBARA BEYAR

ets, finally pulling out a small photo. "This is a doctor. Are you happy?"

"It isn't funny," I told her.

"Depends on your sense of humor. Anyway, that's Dr. Choung. He reviewed your case and will be your billing physician. If you have any questions, call his service."

"He didn't see me. How can he bill me?"

"He saw your chart. That's as good as seeing you. He reviewed your case and signed you out." Taking back the photo, she said, "I need your signature here," she flipped a page, "here," and flipping another page, "here and here again."

"You can't be serious," I protested.

"As death and taxes. Please sign the chart so that I can go to lunch." She placed the pen in my hand.

But..." I began.

"Sign it," said the nurse.

"Sign it," said Amy.

"Go on, sign it," said the vet, then he asked the nurse for a cigarette.

I signed it. Taking back the pen and her smile, she left.

"She's one of the nicest people here," said the vet, smiling his death's head grin. Turning to Amy, he asked again, "you sure you don't have a smoke?"

Within five minutes, two techs had lifted me off of the stretcher and into the waiting cab. Amy tipped them heavily: union rules didn't allow for out-of-hospital direct care.

"Going back to the same address?" asked the cabbie, his voice tinny over the cheap intercom. The steel plate separating us was dented and scratched with graffiti.

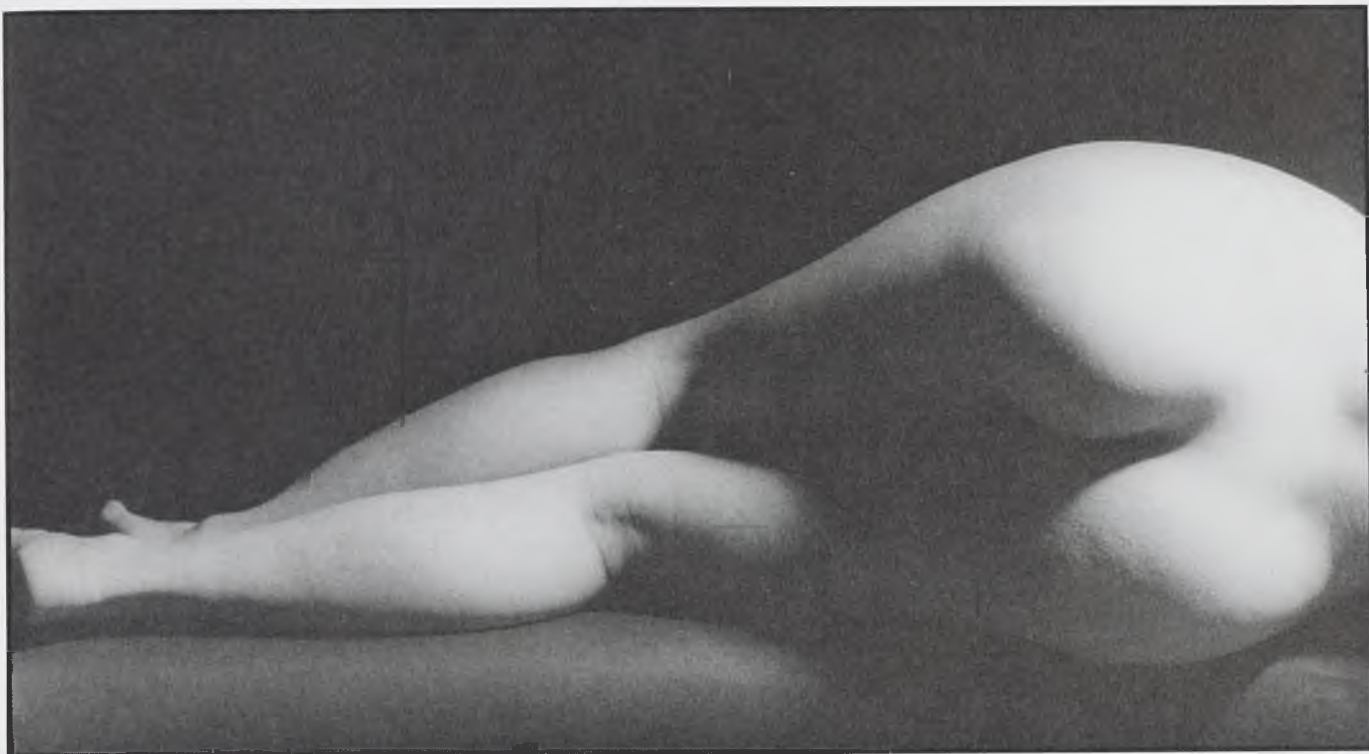
"Yes," said Amy, "same address."

"Mind if I listen to the radio?" he asked, not waiting for an answer as he turned it on and flipped through the stations. He stopped at one and turned it up.

Like his voice, it blared harshly over the rusted speakers.

"...police have finally restored order on the downtown IRT line after a delay which set back scheduled service for most of the morning. Also restored was service to the BMT station in the Trump Towers, the scene of an earlier terrorist bomb which killed several dozen commuters as their train entered the station. Greenpeace has claimed responsibility for that attack, citing the razing of the last tree in the Staten Island Greenbelt by developers. Police were

forced to fatally wound six looters found scavenging the bodies, but otherwise, major delays were avoided this morning as trains were rerouted. In a further update on yesterday's ferry tragedy..."



BOB KODADEK

Voyeur of Conception

walking upon a street,
I saw
figures
shadows
faces
shapes
moving behind the flow
of open drapes
mingling gracefully,
like the other fabric
of life,
being,
made inside.

Steven R. Schwartz

RING OF FIRE

THOMAS GOOD

A searing heat careened across a blasted courtyard. Oversize billboards sported portraits of a large, heavyset Black man in a general's uniform. The General smiled reassuringly, flanked by slogans scripted in French. All around him stood windowless buildings, blackened from soot. An acrid smog hung over the city. Outside the gutted hotel that sheltered Staff Sergeant Cash an American built tank burned furiously. It was the last remnant of Cash's unit, his platoon having withdrawn when their position was overrun. The enemy had missed Cash when they did their building to building foraging.

He had been unconscious at the time.

The Guerrillas had not missed the secret police captain who lay in the street, charred beyond recognition. The tire around his neck still smoldered, his mirrored sun-glasses, their frames melted to his hairless and blackened skull, reflected the carnage around them. Necklacing, the G's called it. A cruel death reserved for the Ton Ton Macoute. Provincial payback for those secret police/death squad members that had terrorized the Haitian mindscape for decades.

In a way, Cash mused, the Captain was lucky. He had died relatively quickly.

Gone up in a ring of fire. Cash, having taken an AK round in his belly and shrapnel frags in his shoulder and thigh, figured that he would die very slowly. Piece by piece, bit by bit, over the next day or so. He hoped he might bleed to death, thus hastening the process.

All right Jack, stay focused, he told himself as he struggled to maintain consciousness. Help will find me, he lied, as the pain worked toward a distant crescendo. Cash blinked. Dust danced in the light that insisted its way through the slats in the twisted Bahama louvers that dangled from the shattered window frame.

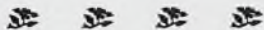
"Goddamn, I despise this place...goddamn heat..." he mumbled.

Sweat poured down from beneath Cash's synthetic helmet. Absently, he reached up to undo the strap. A stabbing pain in his shoulder leapt from his windpipe with a sharp gasp. Cash clutched his throbbing shoulder with his good hand. Why, he sighed, did it have to be his left side that got all shot up? Cash fingered the embroidered patch on his wounded shoulder, a little above the bloody tear in his uniform. He cursed his luck, being a southpaw, as he rubbed the familiar black stripe and horse's head, resting on a field of yellow—the badge of the cavalryman. Growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, he had first worn this patch as a ten year old when his brother came home on leave from the War.

The famous First Cavalry Division. Cash had always wanted to be a soldier, especially after his brother had fallen in battle. And eventually John R. Cash found himself in the same uniform his brother had worn ten years earlier. Following an uneventful first tour Cash made buck sergeant. He commanded his lieutenant's confidence and a squad of very tough cavalry scouts. Two years into his second tour, the First Air Cav was deployed to the Caribbean where counterinsurgency training had failed to enable the Haitian military to halt a guerrilla war in its fifth year of struggle. Several U.S. advisors had been neck-laced by the Marxist insurgents, for their role in reviving the dreaded Ton Ton Macoute—the death squad unit the Marines had "eradicated" in 1996. With things heating up and an election year looming, The U.S. administration reluctantly and quietly sent in some two Marine divisions. When the U.S.M.C. bogged down and the C.I.A. got panicky over the thought of a Marxist victory, the Administration called in the Cavalry to save a military dictatorship that, publicly at least, no one wanted. With the Media doing only sporadic coverage, due mainly to the Administration's news blackout, Cash gloomily concluded that his final hours, his final sacrifice, would go unnoticed. With his good hand, he clumsily undid his helmet strap. It tumbled to the floor. The unrelenting throbbing in

his gut drew Cash's attention to his web belt, which he undid to alleviate some of the pressure. He ripped open the velcro catch on his sidearm holster and removed the semiautomatic. Cash set the gun down momentarily as he fumbled his blouse pocket, wincing when he strained his shoulder. Extracting his lighter, Cash smiled. The stain-less steel Zippo had been a gift from his wife when he graduated from "A" school. The daughter of a soldier, she understood what it meant to be in an elite unit. To be a cavalryman. The lighter was engraved with the image of an eighteen sixty-one era Federal cavalry trooper. On the reverse the inscription read: "I am with you, however far you are." Cash read the familiar inscription and slowly put the lighter back in his pocket. He had no cigarettes left. He picked up the nine millimeter and, with some effort, succeeded in chambering a round. Cash grinned at the weapon in his bloody hand.

He put the barrel in his mouth. As the echo of a tear formed in his peripheral vision Cash began to squeeze the trigger with increasing force. "Adios asshole," he mumbled. Passing out from the pain before he could apply sufficient pressure to sound the last charge, Cash slumped over. The pistol clattered across the dusty stone floor.

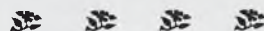


Lance Corporal Ira Hayes, a member of Second Platoon, B Company, First Marine Division, had been sent out to find any survivors of the last Guerrilla attack. "Oh man," he muttered, "this place is worse than Texas. It's like Florida or something. Fuck this heat. Fuck the goddamn Marine-mind-fucking-Corps. I don't need this..."

"Hayes? Get your ass over to the other side of that courtyard. Check out the buildings behind that tank. And don't take all day," the squad leader bellowed.

"Yeah, yeah." Hayes swung left, eyes wide. Yuma and Reno went the other direction, hugging the cover on the opposite side of the courtyard. "Great fucking place to get shot by a sniper," Hayes muttered, "goddamn G's."

"What the fuck is this!!?" Hayes exclaimed, looking down at the smoldering remains of the secret police officer. "Ton Ton Macoute or some shit...nice shades, dickhead..." Hayes jumped, hearing a metallic sound nearby. He crouched, clicking the safety on his weapon into the off position. "Man, I always get the shit details," he mumbled, as he advanced toward the old hotel with the flaming tank parked outside.



Cash tossed and turned fitfully as his nightmare rambled on. Beneath a demon sun he was lashed to a striped pole as

dancers with faraway eyes twisted and turned around him. A bare breasted woman held a writhing snake to his cheek. Cash flinched as the woman laughed ecstatically. He was surrounded by an immense ring of fire which the dancers leapt through effortlessly. A distant figure banged a wooden cooking utensil into the side of a battered iron cook pot, a rusted cauldron. Cash drifted in and out of the rhythm of the man's blows. Cash found himself chanting with the dancers.

"Ouvrie barie, Legba... ouvrie barie, pour moi pase, pour moi pase, Papa. Oye Legba, Atibon Legba..."

New dancers entered the fray as some of the women dancers retired to the periphery of the circle. An old man contorted himself into various poses, waving



a cane. Around him younger men drew diagrams into the sandy soil. Circles with cross hairs dividing them into quadrants appeared. The old man began running around the circle, as if he were being ridden by some great host, some invisible rider.

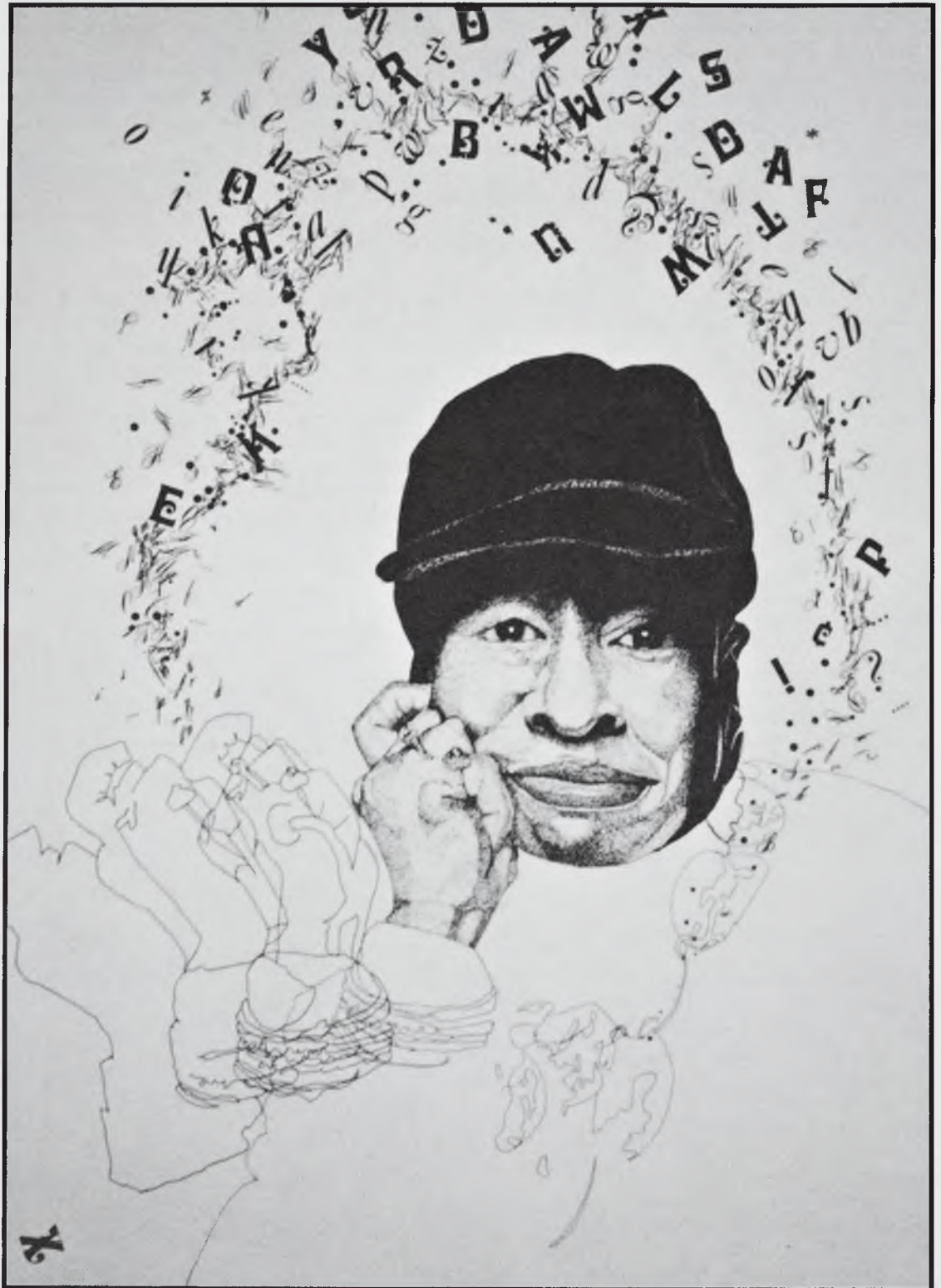
"They comin', man...the Horsemen are comin' now," one of the younger men screamed, pointing at the old man.

The chant of Legba continued as the drumming intensified. Many of the dancers joined the old man in his contortions. Just outside the ring of fire the bare breasted woman writhed in ecstasy, rubbing her body with a white hen. The chicken squawked furiously, its feet running in place, as the woman pressed it to her quivering form.

"Erzulie!" a watcher shouted. The crowd murmured in agreement.

Cash coughed as the smoke burned in his throat and blurred his vision. He blinked several times as the young woman slit the chicken's throat, rubbing its lifeblood onto her arms and breasts. In the crowd Cash noticed a thickening throng of native warriors, some holding automatic rifles, some antique pistols and some spears. A few old men held flintlock rifles, ancient muskets of a French design. The drumbeat changed slightly as it quickened. The crowd began to chant in unison: "Oye Ogoun, Ogu Ferraile..."

One of the old men waved his flintlock at Cash, scream-



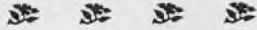
KIM BROWN

ing: "We beat the great Bonaparte...now we come for you, Yankee soldier man, the Loa come for you..."

Cash winced as a spear tip pierced his bicep. The throng of warriors drifted through the ring of fire, closing on Cash. Suddenly the wave parted in the center as a large, muscular man wearing a Yoruba chief's headdress made his way to the centerpole.

The crowd gasped in astonishment. Muffled cries of 'Ogoun!' wafted through the thick air. The great chief cut Cash's bonds as the crowd shouted, "The Loa have come for you, soldier man..." Cash looked up as the great warrior unleashed a fearsome grin. Two of the younger men lowered a tire onto Cash's shoulders. Cash coughed as the chief poured gasoline onto the tire.

No!" Cash screamed as he was shoved into the burning ring. The tire went up with a whoosh as Cash jerked himself to his feet. He shrieked in pain as everything faded to an all enveloping blackness.



Cash awoke with a start, finding himself in the grip of a tall, lanky Black man clad in the uniform of a U.S. Marine. The man grinned down at Cash, loosing his grip. "Hey Sarge, it's all right," he said, "the cavalry's here."

"You're uh, uh...Marine?" Cash blinked.

"Goddamn Marine-mind-fucking-Corps, at your service my grunt brother."

Hayes laughed waving a cigarette before the stunned Cash, "Got a light there, trooper?"

Cash stared at the intruder with a mixture of joy and disbelief.

Hayes knelt down. "Listen, brother man, we gotta go," he said, "HQ's gonna pull out of this sector. The G's got some plans for a big show up north. They'll be comin' right through here."

"Your unit nearby?" Cash asked.

"What's left of it, Sarge? Hayes examined Cash's injuries. He unwound a length of gauze, offering it to Cash. "Stuff this in your gut, brother." Hayes glanced at the ruins.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so...maybe if I had a rifle, a crutch of some sort," Cash replied.

"Shit, you're all tore up," Hayes said. "Here, man, take this bad boy," Hayes said, handing Cash his rifle. Hayes picked up the discarded nine millimeter as Cash steadied himself. Hayes examined the handgun briefly. He clicked on the safety, surmising that Cash had left a round in the chamber. "What's your name, Sarge?" he asked.

"Cash...John...First Cavalry Division," Cash croaked.

"Mine's Hayes. Listen Sarge, we gotta go. You ready?"

Cash nodded.

Hayes helped Cash stagger to his feet. The wounded man gripped the rifle barrel firmly, planting the stock on the floor. He lurched forward, screamed once and collapsed in a heap.

"Oh man...all right Sarge, stay cool." Hayes crouched down, propping Cash up against the wall. Cash coughed and spat out a mouthful of blood.

"O.K. Jack Cash, listen up man. We just gonna sit here for a minute. My squad'll be back soon. Don't worry, Troop, you just hang in there and we'll get you out of here."

Cash shook his head vigorously in the negative. "Negatory. You hear me now, Private. You get the fuck out of here, a-sap. The G's are comin' and they're comin' in a goddamned hurry. I saw them. So skip the John Wayne horseshit and get the hell out of here."

"You what? You saw them? How the hell did you see them?"

"In a, in a, in my goddamned dream...I know how it sounds, but it's true. You see that poor slob outside, the fool with the Goodyear around his neck?"

Hayes nodded.

"That's what's waiting for us, Private Hayes. And no Marine Corps, no Cavalry is going to save our miserable asses. So you just saddle up and get on out of here, while you can. That is a directive, Private."

Hayes wiggled his cigarette between his teeth as he surveyed the dying Cash. With an air of resignation he sat down next to Cash. Then he smiled.

"Listen, Sarge, some may say you is crazy, what with that dream shit, but I'm half Cherokee and half Louisiana bayou bred Black man. And what that means is that I believe, if you saw it, you saw it. Look around us, Sarge. Where I'm gonna run? If the G's are comin', they're comin'. 'Course I'm hopin' my squad's comin' first. Meanwhile, it seems to me that the least you can do, with me being the hero and all, is give this poor Marine a light for his cigarette. Fact is, I might even share it with you."

Cash shrugged, tapping his blouse pocket. "Here," he said.

Hayes found the lighter and wiped it on his sleeve. Cash pulled on the cigarette

Hayes held to his lips.

"What's this writing here, Jack? What it says? 'I am with you, however far you are.'"

Cash nodded, "My wife...reads poetry...she had it engraved for me...after A school."

Cash coughed, spat blood on the floor. He stared blankly at the stain.

"That's real nice, Jack. 'I am with you, however far you are.' Hmm. Yeah man, that's nice. You hang in there, brother. You a horse soldier, me, I'm a buffalo soldier. We gonna ride out of here, Troop."

Cash's stare went glassy as Hayes admired the image of the Cavalry trooper engraved on the lighter. He looked up as Cash went limp, falling over onto the dusty floor.

Hayes stood slowly.

"Shit, Jack. I'm sorry man but I got to go. The G's is comin'." Hayes looked at the lighter in his hand. He slipped it into his pocket. "I'll write your wife, my brother."

Hayes stuffed the pistol in his waistband and grabbed his rifle. At the doorway he turned and gave a small soldier's salute to the remains of Staff Sergeant John Cash.

Stepping into the sun he never saw the Guerrilla rifle team scouting the town's defenses.

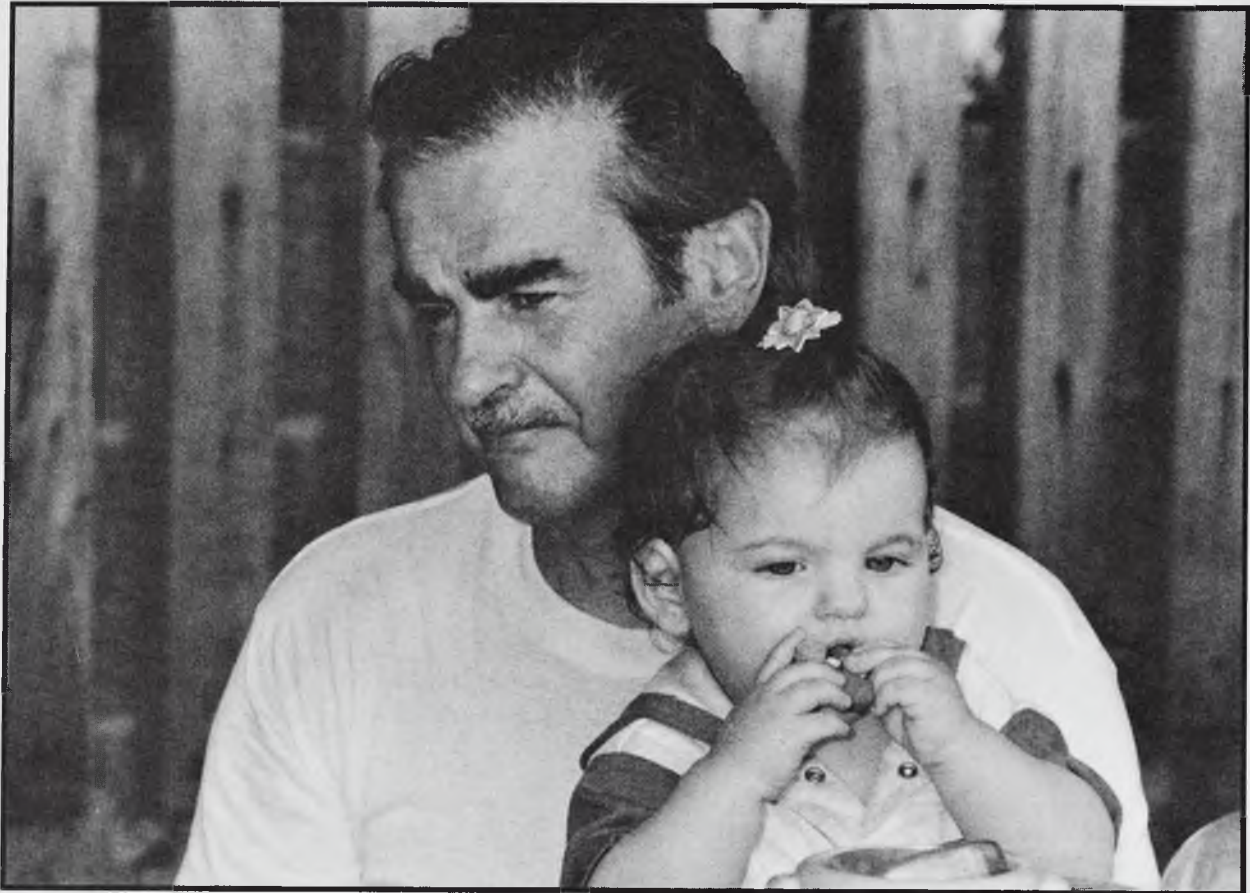
The G's point man fired his rifle twice with good effect. Hayes stumbled backwards.

He went down on both knees, holding a hand to his shattered chest. He stared in disbelief at the bloody hand he pulled from his body armor. A large shadow darkened the doorway as Hayes looked up at a man clad in plain fatigues, holding an assault rifle. Hayes offered the scout a small smile.

"Goddamn Marine-mind-fucking-Corps," Hayes muttered as he toppled over.

The G stepped over Hayes, scanning the room. He raised a tentative rifle at Cash, then crouched down next to Hayes's remains. Among the Marine's personal effects the G found the lighter. He rubbed the image of the cavalry trooper with his thumb, then pocketed the keepsake. In the distance ancient drumbeats summoned the Loa, the divine horsemen, the cavalry of a nation ever at war, a nation torn asunder.

(for Dawn F)

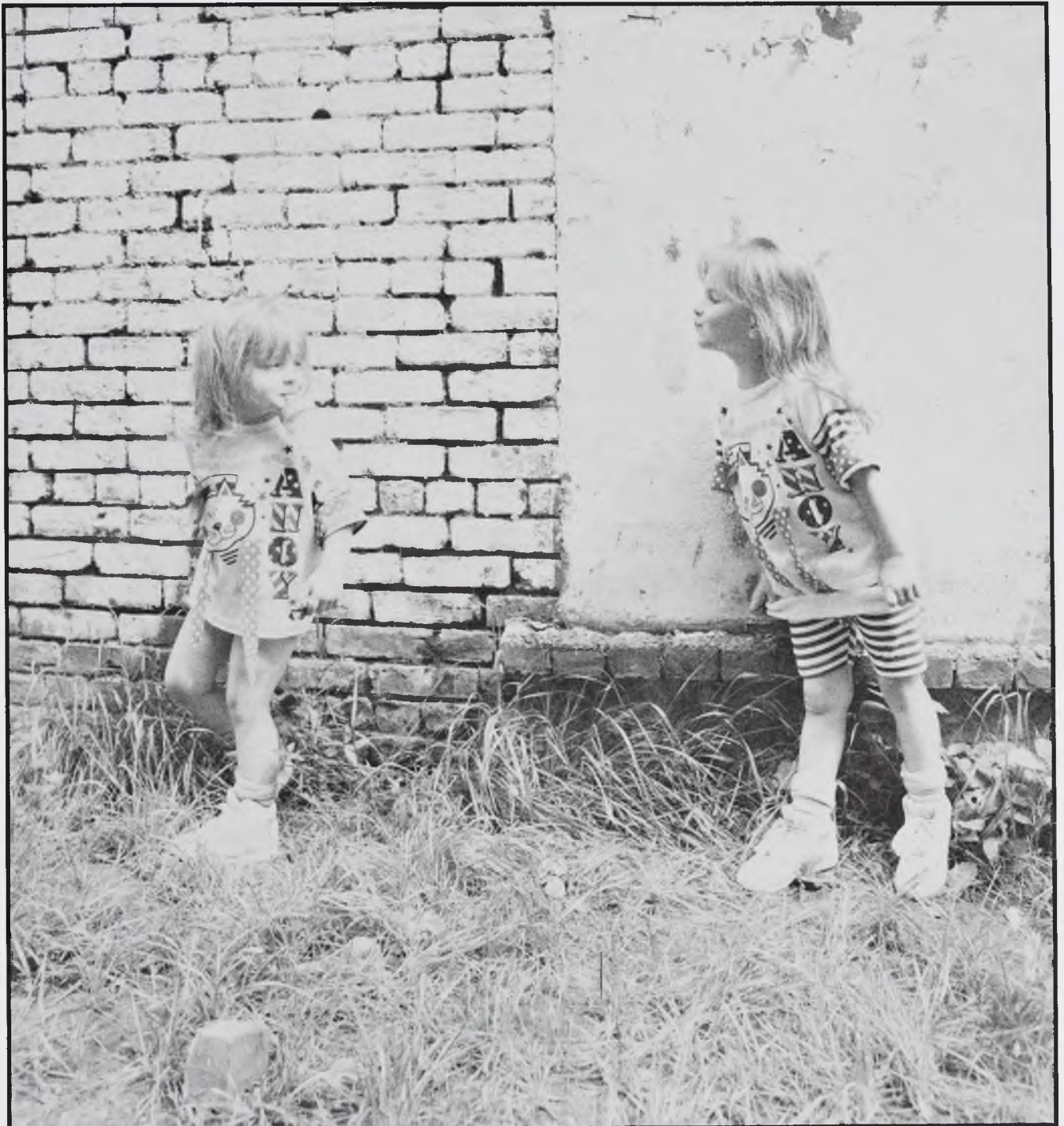


LOOKING BACK/LOOKING AHEAD

P. C.
GUAGENTI



AMANDA IS TIRED



AMANDA WANTS A KISS

P. C. GUAGENTI

TC LYNCH ANGELS

RAIN

STORIES ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE SAY YOU MEET FAMILY AND FRIENDS GONE BEFORE YOU.

Jumping off a bridge usually leaves you dead and wet. The two fellows before him were complete strangers, and Marc wasn't even damp.

He thought they resembled Laurel and Hardy, but this Ollie had gone heavily into steroid futures.

"Where am I?" Marc whispered.

Stan told Marc where he was.

"Heaven?"

Two heads nodded in unison. Two bald, slightly elongated heads, propped above silver-clad bodies.

"Angels. You guys are angels, right?"

"That's us," said Ollie.

"What's the matter? Peter and Gabriel busy?"

"They don't do interviews." A grin playing along Ollie's thin, colorless lips as he tossed a wink in Marc's direction.

"Interviews?"

"Yep."

"What happened to Purgatory?"

Stan was balefully staring at Marc. Ollie glanced up at the ceiling; a circular white object resembling a speaker grille was the only contrast to the deep blue of the room. Marc could not tell where the soft, yellowish glow that was everywhere and nowhere in particular was coming from. After a few seconds Ollie brought his eyes back down, rubbed a hammy hand across his too perfect face and came to some sort of decision. A bay window full of teeth opened. Enameled sunlight brightened the room's ambiance.

"You earned an interview for that stunt on the bridge, chief. You're some piece of work."

"That is not the proper tone," said Stan, "for interacting with one of the—" A look from Ollie caught Stan up short. Marc decided he didn't like Stan, then wondered whether it was smart to dislike an angel in Heaven.

"I was fed up. I wanted to check out," Marc said.

Ollie's smile was back in place. "You'll get your chance."

"No you will not!" Stan said. He offered a smile to Marc, not nearly as convincing—or blinding—as his partner's. "You will fulfill your new destiny. It is a holy mission you are about undertake."

"He always talk like that?" Marc asked Ollie.

"Yeah," said Ollie. "He's an insufferable bastard. Drives me nutty sometimes."

"You," said Stan, turning on his heel and striding toward the wall. "You can continue this interview alone. You know my position on this entire affair." While Marc expected Stan to dissolve through the wall, or something comparably angelic, a portal irised open and Stan stepped through. Beyond the opening Marc could make out what looked like ventilation ducts lining the upper portion of the outer area. As the portal smoothly retracted Marc stepped forward, suddenly unsure of himself and his location. Heaven should not need central air.

"Did some EMS cop fish me out of the water and pack me off to rubber room land?" He was toe to toe with Ollie, holding a good three inches on the angel.

"You never hit the water," Ollie said, walking off to the left, where a pair of tony gray recliners now faced each other. This was more heaven-like: spectral furniture. A guy could deal with that. Ollie laid back in the left chair, folding his pumped-up arms behind his head. His eyes seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely. Marc sat down and looked at his host, unsure of what the rules were.

"I didn't hit the water?"

"Nope. Snatched you just before impact."

"Snatched me?"

"Yep."

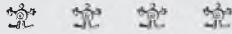
"I'm not dead?"

Ollie shook his head and rubbed a hand across his stomach. Damn good abs, helluva bunch of sit-ups in that gut.

"Care to tell me why?" Marc said.

"I got a job for you."

Marc leaned back against the couch he'd been laying on and cocked his head sideways. "Should have called me a month ago, Ollie. Would have been a fuck lot easier then."



"Wanna bet he pulls it off?" Ollie said.

"This is against all protocols."

"I'll go a second Mohammed."

"You're on."

Ollie chuckled and began to snooze in his chair. Stan sat under the white fixture, bathed in a shower of neon light radiating down from the disk. He turned to look at his associate.

"You really think he is going to succeed?"

"Sure do."

"Why?"

"That man," said Ollie, "is motivated." He slid down in the recliner, stretching his frame luxuriantly, body lengthening as arms and chest lost some of their bulk; transfiguring.

"How so?" said Stan, already finished shedding the form used so natives wouldn't go totally hoopy when they encountered God's minions in all their glory. His gray and fawn coloring pulsed with the flow of energy coming from the fixture above. Gossamer fine cilia began to sprout from his skull. His frame was it's normal three meter length. "He was suicidal just an hour ago."

"I told him the truth, and I just made him damn near indestructible." Stan's coloring flushed orange.

"You placed him in here?" he said, glancing upwards.

"Yep," said Ollie.

"Consider yourself on report."



Fed up with the mindlessness of the world around him; disgusted with the way people treated each other, hating what he was watching happen to the world (and deeply in debt), Marc Calley decided he could not deal with living in a world full of such shitty bastards and chose to kill himself by leaping from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. He had estimated that if the fall itself didn't kill him, the impact on the surface of the water would. If that somehow did not do the trick, the water guaranteed to kill him instantly. Nothing worthwhile lives in the waters of New York Harbor.

When he raised his arms skyward and cursed God, demanded that Divine Existence become manifest in a way to prove that he wasn't just another crackpot, then took the big step, ignoring the pleas of the Emergency Services officers vainly trying to talk him out of it, he never expected an answer. He certainly hadn't expected to become a walking bundle of Divine Retribution.

Marc had become an Angel. Well, a Crooked Angel. Ollie said full status would take time.

After the neon shower, Ollie told Marc that he was no longer totally human, but a symbiosis of Human and Angel. "You don't get your wings until you earn 'em," was

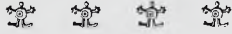


Ollie's explanation. He looked mostly the same; had lost some weight he always wanted to shed, and his face was slightly longer in the jaw. His hair had fallen out, but Marc always liked to wear it closely cropped anyway. Ollie told him why Heaven had prevented Marc from ending his life, and what he was expected to do.

"Really?" said Marc.

"Yep," Ollie replied.

"Well then, I'm your boy!"

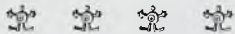


Ollie dropped him off at South Ferry, the southern tip of Manhattan. As he walked up Broadway towards his first objective, Marc wondered whether he should give some sort of speech before revealing himself. By the time he reached the World Trade Center, he decided that a bitching PR stunt would be enough. The elevator opened on the observation level, and Marc ran his hand along each set of elevator doors, disabling them. He walked up the sloping wheelchair ramp to the roof, high enough above the filthy city that the air didn't smell. He strolled over to the first security guard he spotted. He would need a witness.

"Hey buddy," Marc said, tapping the man on the shoulder. The guard, a retired transit cop named Duffy, glanced sideways at Marc, trying to keep an eye on a fresh faced young woman in a short, loose fitting aqua dress. It was very windy on the observation platform that day.

"Whaddya want?" said Duffy. Marc placed a hand on Duffy's shoulder and pointed in the direction of New Jersey. An airbus was rising from the Newark runway and beginning to turn towards the ocean.

"Watch this." While the slackjawed guard watched the sky turn neon green, a bolt of shimmering red energy hurtled down from the sky and enveloped the airplane, and Marc jumped from a ridiculously high structure for the second time in less than a day.



"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

The three of them were back in the blue room. Stan had Marc trapped against one wall, his long, thin arms preventing any lateral movement. Marc stared happily into Stan's angry eyes.

"What I thought would make the biggest impact."

"So you destroyed all the aircraft in the skies! Wiped out thousands of people in one pointless gesture! Innocent men and women!" Marc looked under a restraining arm and caught Ollie's laughing eyes.

"I didn't get all of them...Just the metro area. Anyway, what about that flood of your's, huh Noah? Or Passover? How about the Crusades? The Spanish Inquisition? I know those were all your doing. Ollie told me how you've been calling the shots up to now. All those millions of people killed, most of them weren't innocent?"



MARY-ANTONIA LOMBARDI

"What I did was socio-engineering," said Stan, not convincingly. "I had to establish a system of faith. Those events helped humanity progress."

"Into semi-hysterical idiots!"

"You are forgetting your place!"

"Ollie, talk to your partner."

"You have to tell him," said Ollie. "He won't believe it from me."

"Tell me what?" Stan stepped back, allowing Marc to walk to the light shower. It began streaming down. Mark tilted his head back, enjoying the shower of energy that invigorated his soul; strengthened his resolve. Angel's Rain.

"God is the last thing those people down there need showing up on their doorstep right now. There's too many guys been running around claiming to have the Old Man's ear. It was a stupid idea to begin with."

"Watch your tongue, you little—"

“Go fuck yourself, Stan. Invoking God’s name and promising woe and all that shit isn’t something that scares folks anymore. It just makes them start killing each other over whose version of God is correct. All that crap you blathered on about before I left; about me being ‘The Chosen One’; you can sweep all that shit under the rug. Catholic, Hindu, whatever. It’s just bells and whistles.”

“Bells and whistles?”

“You know, theatrics...melodrama.”

“But when we used Moses...”

“Yea, Moses,” said Marc, anger welling up in his voice. “The Commandments were a good idea, but where the hell were your brains when you sent those poor slobs off with the notion that they were God’s Chosen People?”

“I warned him,” said Ollie.

“Well, I, er...”

“And you got the nerve to question what I did? You probably screwed the human race up more than we did ourselves! You are the cause of more hatred among people than any circumstance of birth. At one time or another, everybody on the planet has gone after the Jews.”

“Never mind that,” said Stan, uncomfortably aware that the questioning had gone wrong. “If theatrics does not describe what you did, what do you call it?”

“Opening gambit.”

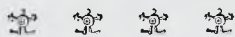
“What’s your next move?” asked Ollie.

“Media blitz. I need you to send a message for me.” He explained to Ollie what he wanted transmitted.

“Sounds juicy.”

“I hope you two,” muttered Stan, “know what you are doing.”

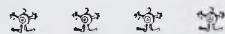
“I do,” said Marc, grinning. “Believe you me, I know exactly what I’m doing.”



Marc’s message, a very special press release, went to the major news services in every industrialized country, crashing the A.P. and U.P.I. computers in the process. It was brief: “There will be an announcement concerning the airborne catastrophes. Watch your televisions.”

Then he took control of all the communications satellites orbiting Earth. His timing coincided with the beginning of the American network news broadcasts. Before disrupting the signal, viewers across the country were treated to the sight of Ted Koppel, Tom Brokaw, Bernie Shaw and Dan Rather bathed in a neon green light that left them bald as cueballs. The picture shimmered for a second, then resolved into a head shot of a grinning, bald, obviously pleased Marc Calley.

“Hello,” Marc said. “My name is Zaphod. And this...is a warning. Take a look at the Moon tonight.” As the broadcast ended, the American airborne defense command platform, Looking Glass, was scrambled. By Marc.



Ollie and Stan, (Stan did not like having Marc refer to him so. His name was Marsuic and he was descended from a noble family), were in God’s employ. He didn’t

call himself God, their employer. He saved that honor for the One that preceded his own race, the Creator; the One who had struck the match and ignited the Big Bang. The being Stan had dubbed God, (among other names), had no name. He began the cycle of life on Earth, as he had on hundreds other planets that showed potential to bring forth intelligence.

God created life; nothing more, nothing less. But there were ground rules for intelligence. That’s where Angels came in.

The highest form of intelligence on a young planet must show the ability to become a member of the interstellar family within a decent interval, or stewardship of that planet would be turned over to another of the older, established civilizations. When that happened, the planet most times would be sterilized of higher life forms, allowing the new warden to start fresh. Good planets were difficult to find, and had to be used effectively.

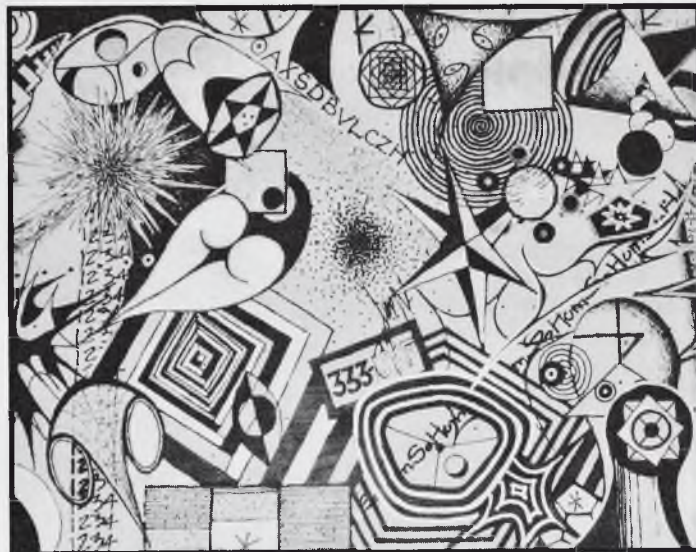
Marsuic and Gearsalo (Ollie), had been chosen by God from among their race to keep an eye on Earth’s development. Not personally chosen, for they did not directly speak to God. Ollie did not really believe He even existed. They were seventh generation Angels, the equivalent of priests on their home planet, forty-five light years from Earth. They were entrusted with the task of helping the species that showed the most likelihood of success. How they went about it was their prerogative.

The Book Of Capella, which Stan had plagiarized when creating the Bible and Koran, pretty much set the ground rules. Ollie thought the Book was too vague to be legitimate, and interested himself in getting the inhabitants of Sol 3 off the planet’s surface by any means necessary.

Theology didn’t matter much. Ollie was looking to get the galactic party hopping, and humans looked like something that would liven the universe up.

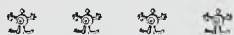
The last time they made a progress check on Earth, Marsuic and Gearsalo had prodded a few minds, producing the impetus that allowed mankind to eventually discover the secrets of the atom. According to Ollie’s projections, Earth should have been well established as residents of the Solar System by the end of the year 2010, give or take a decade. When they reached such a level, the caretakers would return to offer some more silent assistance with the final hurdle: interstellar engineering.

When their current inspection on Earth’s progress revealed the highest level of space technology were a few rudimentary reconnaissance probes and a patchwork



DEAN CAPRIARIO

space-based telescope, Stan, the project coordinator, was stunned. Against his better judgment, he allowed Ollie to try what the younger Angel called "shock therapy." Stan did not feel comfortable with Ollie's decision to directly involve a human. He especially didn't like what the human said about mankind needing a good kick in the ass.



As Marc walked into the blue room his smile outshone Gearsalo's.

"Well?"

Ollie was in his recliner, watching a wall that showed the television feeds being broadcast on Earth. Pictures of Heaven, motionless in front of the full Moon, dominated the reports. Heaven turned out to be one mother of macro-engineering, occluding a good two-thirds of Earth's satellite. Myriad scientists and government officials were attempting to explain it to puzzled and frightened viewers. Bernie Shaw was under his desk, whimpering like a whipped dog, as Peter Arnette kicked him silly while swigging from a bottle of Wild Turkey and demanding access to a space shuttle.

"I think," said Ollie, damping the sound, "that it may just work." Marc was sitting in the light shower, accelerating his body's changes.

"Marc, who's Zaphod?"

"A cool frood."

"A what?"

"Never mind, it's just a name. An inside joke."

"So what's next?"

"Well," Marc said, "I'd say they got the message. How about we go on a little trip somewhere?"

"You want to leave? After doing all this?"

"Yea, gotta give it time to sink in."

"Sounds good. We'll head off to Jupiter, scoop some fuel, and plot a trajectory that will bring us on a tour of, I don't know, Orion's Belt maybe. It will be a nice, leisurely jaunt." Marc rose from the floor, stepping from the shower and sliding into a recliner next to his new found friend.

"How does that work?" Marc said, pointing toward the magical fixture on the ceiling.

"You wouldn't understand it, but basically it tuned your body to a frequency that allowed me to channel energy through it."

"That's how I was able to do the hocus pocus?"

"Yep. Don't get used to being omnipotent; it was all done through the ship's circuitry. Capella, the star our planet circles, has a very strong interest in Earth. Your species is the closest, physically, to our own. We had a vested interest in getting you people into the fold. Unfortunately, the group that Stan's family represented had more sway than my own when the decisions on how we would implement your species' progress were made. They wanted to have your people beholden to them; wanted Humans to be in awe of them."

"Why?"

"Why does anyone want things like that? They're control freaks."

"Where is Stan?" Marc said. Ollie chuckled softly, pointing over his shoulder in no particular direction.

"He's in his cubicle, sulking. He can't stand the idea that you allowed Earth to see the ship." Ollie sat up and leaned towards Marc.

"How did you know I would bring the ship into view? You

didn't run that past me beforehand, like the airplane stunt."

"You went along with everything else."

"What if I didn't?"

"Who knows? Maybe I would have blown something else up. One way or other, Earth had to find out they were not alone."

"Why?"

"See, as long as they thought they were the only game in town, mankind would just go through the motions, accept that they were the only intelligence in the universe. Now, they know they are not. But they don't know who, or what, just scared Hell out of them. And if there is one thing I know about people, it's that they get real smart real fast when someone threatens them. Every major technological advance has come out of a war, hot or cold." Marc slid into a recliner and grabbed the channel changer from the arm of Ollie's chair.

"And I just put the whole damn planet on a war economy."

"What do you expect to find when we come back?" Ollie asked.

"I expect them to blow us out of the sky. Anything less would be a terrible letdown."

"And then?"

"Ollie," Marc said, "you never told me why you chose me to be your boy. Why pick some bozo about to kill himself? Why not some egghead?" Ollie pressed a contact on the arm of his chair. The screens all changed to MTV. Ollie coughed up a chuckle.

"Stan did that kind of work," he said. "Picked people by the results of aptitude testing. I'm more of a blue collar boy. Scientists want explanations for everything. You wouldn't believe the problems we had with Einstein. Refused to accept faster than light engines were a reality. Had to practically force feed him the Relativity theorem. I decided I would just grab the first coherent person I could find who would be inclined to go along with my idea, and lay the cards on the table; tell him what was going on, see how he responded."

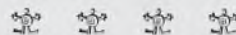
"Why me?"

"Well, if you did not go along, we could have always used you for something. We could not, however, allow you to return to Earth after being in contact with us, and since you wanted out anyway, it was a nice set-up. But really, it was plain old dumb luck."

"Well, lets hope this stunt works," said Marc, sliding a hand along his downy belly. "When we come back, I'm really going to drive them nuts."

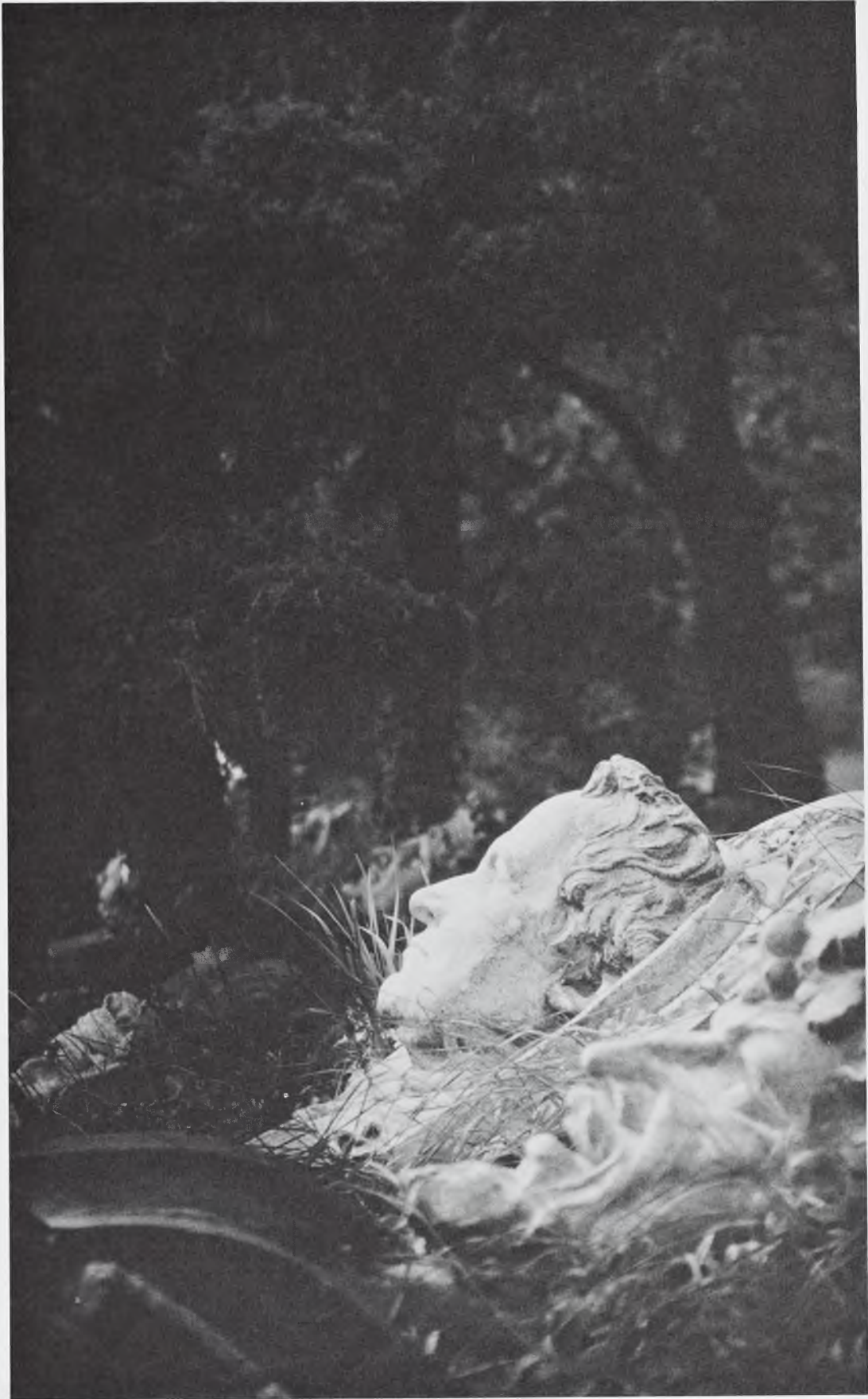
"How?"

"Dunno yet. I gotta figure that out. Let's go get that gas."



On Earth, nearly two billion people watched the incredible spectacle of mankind's first confirmed contact with extraterrestrial intelligence silently head off into the blackness. Astronomers across the globe watched the dazzling display as Heaven dipped into Jupiter's atmosphere, then accelerated until it was a mere green splash on their retinas, fading ever dimmer, ignoring everything theorized about orbital mechanics.

Carl Sagan threw the world's greatest victory party, finally able to sneer "Told you!" at the people who thought the Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence was a waste of time. The fact that SETI hadn't warned Earth of Heaven's approach didn't spoil his celebration one whit.



E
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JANET WENGER

Winter

So this is how
peace must feel.
A cloak,
abundant, vast stretch
of white, white
cotton sheets.
Crunching.
Sinking,
slowly in the silence
of celestial confetti.
Sprinkling,
salt shaker.
Snug against the
skin;
a mitten.
Dulled remembrance.
Warmth.
Hot chocolate and
cinnamon sticks.
My cup runneth
over the rim
and memory
drowns amidst
winter's dust.

Victoria Seretis

The Bridal Dress

I am empty.
Like a new page.
Naked. It is nothing, it
is bland, it is
pure
ly
nothing. Opaque.
It filters the flesh.
It filters the mind.
A tradition long kept,
Like I.

Victoria Seretis



BONNIE BARTKOW

FLOATING FLOATING

BY: M

FROM WARDS ISLAND TO JONES BEACH AND BEYOND

We are standing on Jones Beach, in a circle beneath a blazing sun that does not stop. (An excerpt from a work in progress)
None of us has ever been here before. Isa finds a place to put the blanket down. She waves it toward the stifling sky. It blows down riding soft curves, like the waves a feather takes falling to the earth. There is a field of wild grass not far behind my shoulder. The ocean is up ahead. The smell is intoxicating, inviting. Everything is a fluid haze.

It is a rare day for everyone, possibly the most memorable day of all, because we are all together for the first time: Pop, Mom, Isa, Enzo, Carlito, Alessandra, Maria, Anna, Nicole. It is strange and silent among us. We have just picked up Mom after not seeing her for a time that feels like forever. A year? Months? Where has she been? I have tried to ask and I have been silenced. No questions allowed. No explanations offered.

While we waited in the car for Pop to collect her, I perused the words outside the building, Jones Beach Mental Institution. To my own amazement, I read. I go over the words again and again, as the blanket rides down safely to the white sand.

Big bodies of beautiful women and kids making noise and having fun line the shore. Mom looks real tired. She looks at no one, but I know she is smiling on the inside. She must be happy. I am so happy to see her I could piss in this green woolen bathing suit Isa bought; one for Anna and one for me, both identical. The ugliness of the suit is only exceeded by its extreme itchiness and when it's wet, it only grows more itchy. It is a unique torture both Anna and I share in suppressed misery. We don't dare tell anyone it hurts to have fun in these green monsters. We know better. The last time someone complained, it was Alessandra about black laced shoes Pop bought for all of us.

She cried, "These are boy's shoes!" and kept crying until Pop took out an immense meat cleaver, put the brand new shoes on the kitchen floor and sliced their soles off. It wasn't so bad what he did (even though I did need shoes). It was how he did it. I never knew if he would slice right through the floor and right through Alessandra and all of us.

Isa sounds bubbly as she takes off her shoes and shorts. She is quite developed and her long hair is braided in one thick braid down her back. She sits with her chest facing the sun, arms straight, palms propped down on the blanket, with an air of confidence. It is as though she knows she looks good. She knows she is smart. She knows none of us would be here without her endless struggle.

Ma lies on the blanket in a new house dress and covers her face with her arm. Her elbow points at the sky. I wonder where she got that dress from. I look over at the tall seats and the guys in orange suits filling them. It must be fun to climb into those long white chairs.

Pop's bitching and moaning. If he could, he would send everyone on the beach home and we would find a dark spot to go clamming. Isa's making him some wine with peaches, but he says, "Never mind the peaches." He grabs the wine and drinks it down.

Eventually everyone gets to swim. My mother remains on the blanket with her elbow pointed at the sky. Isa swims like a champion, her head moving from left to right, her arms bent precisely at the right angle, cupping water, moving, faster, faster. Nicole grabs Carlito by his suit in order to keep up. He knocks her down and screams never to touch his shorts. Nicole wonders what he's hiding. Enzo lets us climb onto his shoulders, one at a time and dive into the water.

After, he dives under and dashes off in his own direction. My father lies flat on his back, his toes sticking above the water. The wine floating in his blood, him floating on the vast ocean. He gets up and hollers for us to lie down on the water. "Make sure you can see your toes!" he screams walking back toward the blanket.

As soon as he disappears into white sand and sun, Anna, Nicole, Alessandra and I start hopping in the high tumultuous sea. "Hoppitty Hoover! Hoppitty Hoover!" We scream and sing our way out farther into the waves. We are laughing hard, our mouths full of salt and foam.

"It's up to my neck! Look how far I can go!" Anna shouts.

Laughing hysterically, I hop over to her. I see Enzo and he looks like he's laughing too and that makes me laugh even harder. My knees feel weak and my

foot cramps; my toes curl into the heel. I sink like a pebble that doesn't bother to ripple the water. Enzo swims over as fast as he can. He drags me out with his arm around the back of my neck, so my face is held tightly beneath the water. The only reason I don't die is the look on my brother's face. God knows I don't want to piss him off any more than my sinking already had.

Mother never moves. We eat chicken and leftover sliced roast beef, celery, arugola, fruit, dried seasoned chick peas and lupini beans out of a jar. She lies still. She never looks at any of us. Was she there on the beach at all, or was she someplace else, flying with the birds over her brother's grave? Was it my father that made her long to be invisible? Mom kisses no one goodbye or hello.

She stayed in that hospital a few months, until the money ran out. It was an expensive place, established to steal the money from hard working desperate suckers like my father. After Pop spent all he had (money earned working seven days and nights per week, along with his two sons—children—they were sheetrockers, paid one dollar per board; it took at least two guys to make forty dollars in a day; a private hospital cost as much as twenty-seven thousand dollars per month) Mom went to Wards Island, a State-operated facility, for the second time. She stayed there until the spring of the following year. We rented our house and moved into a smaller place, part of a new complex my father was building. It had a swamp at the bottom of the street that soon provided enough interest for me, turning thirteen.

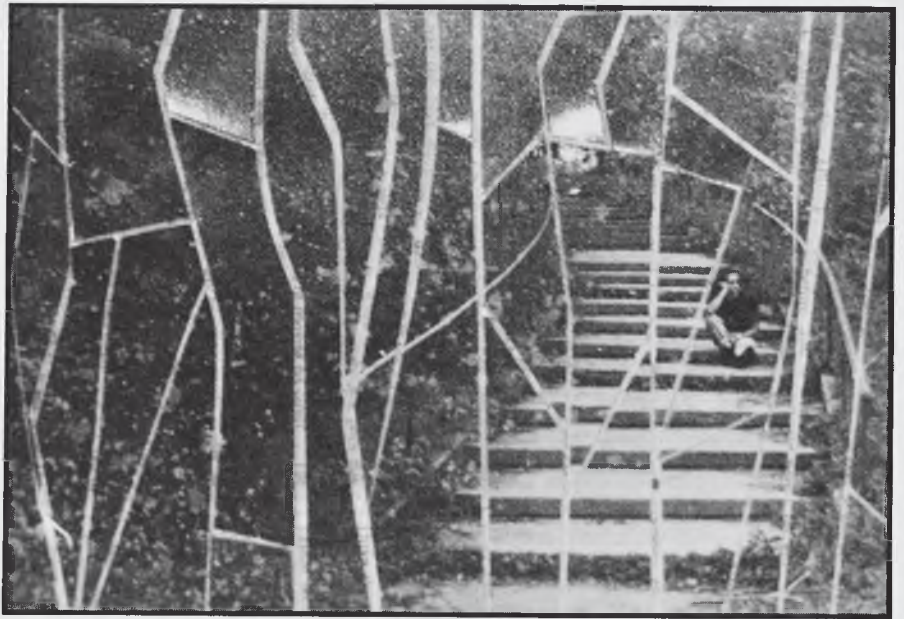
What the institutions did for my mother, religion does for my sister Alessandra and booze does for the rest of humanity. They loaded her up with enough thorazine to put a horse to sleep, applied shock treatments and scheduled a lobotomy that was never executed. She was labeled a schizophrenic (with varying degrees of severity) after the first time she was in Wards Island, in 1953. I was three when she was discharged in 1955. What remains with me the second time she was incarcerated is the day at Jones Beach (the only day we spent with my mother from all the times she was hospitalized), and the fact that Anna and I were still wearing those green monster bathing suits. My God, we must have grown up in them, literally, at least a foot.

Those years were chanted out with the Latin incantations of the rosary beads—Mother leading the force—in total submission to her suffering. Those holy beads were the beginning and the end of all conversations with Mom (and God, for most of us). The rest of it went by like a flash flood of blood and lightning.

Before Wards Island, Mom went to Bellevue. Patients like Mom, started out on Ward 9, with the walls and floors padded, and worked her way down to Ward 8, then Ward 7, until finally she reached a floor where she could have visitors. She kept her fears (men hiding in the toilets, waiting to grab her) with her from the time of her arrival to the time of her release when she was so loaded up with thorazine she didn't let out a whisper. That lasted maybe two weeks. Then her reality came back into focus—the men in the toilets, the spirits in the house. Once, when the four of us younger ones were in grammar school, we came home to find every electrical socket in our three-story house stuffed with toothpaste, to keep the spirits out of the house. Everyone that was older, was pretty angry; disheartened, to put it lightly. Hell broke loose.



Mom is walking around with her head down, her dress constantly being smoothed down by her hands, before her. Her eyes are not focused on anything or anyone. Her mouth continues the Parkinsonian constant quiver of the bottom lip with the upper lip—a feature that will grow on her in time and will remain with her forever. Only death will calm that twitching tongue and lip. It is a side effect of the drugs they load her up with, now until the end of time. My mother will never be cured of this illness, either because some things never change or because she never accepted the fact that she was not well, she worked against the doctors. Who could blame her? She was completely at their mercy. Every doctor



MARY-ANTONIA LOMBARDI

was a foreigner without the ability to communicate in English or Italian. She fought reality tooth and nail and lost the fight. (Unless of course, disconnection from the present was all she ever wanted.)

In the beginning, Mom had no options. Being married to my father, a man who believed in professional people and institutions as surely as a child believes in Santa Claus, Mom was subjected to almost every treatment available—everything that is, except human compassion and communication. It was never offered. I do not blame my father. He loved his wife. He did what was necessary; he followed the doctors orders.

Mom arrived in this country depressed. She had buried her murdered sixteen year old brother during her honeymoon. She had buried her three year old daughter. She struggled, feebly, when her husband left her with three small children and went off to another continent to make a living. Eventually, she joined him, children in tow. Depression blossomed into full-blown madness, in tow. There were two more births. Together they all traveled to yet another continent and settled in New York City. Another two were born.

I remember the years of her being treated as an outpatient as well as an inpatient. Her husband would make one of the older children accompany him to the doctor, and my father would pay incredible fees he could barely afford for experimental treatments, then return home. During some visits, she would be strapped to a table, and wedges were attached with jelly to her head and torso to use as sockets for the oncoming blast of electricity. The first time, my father tried to stay in the room with his wife. He couldn't do it, so Isa stayed. Mom would grab her daughter's hand, screaming, If I have to feel this, so will you! She wouldn't let go. It would take more than one nurse to pry her loose. Isa watched. Listened. Later, Mom would return to her bed at home, my father returning to work, with four younger children running around oblivious to what was going on. No explanation offered to the children. No comfort offered to Isa. Just the screaming silence of a home shrouded in illness.

If not Isa, Enzo would stay during the treatments. What happens to the witnessing hearts watching mother's treatments? Is life really inherited from the mother? Sickness is a unique abandonment. It grants eternal amnesty to the ever-present abandoner.

Secretly, I used to think about the time I was five years old and I sat up on a table, near my father who was busy doing some electrical work. A live empty socket stayed between us on the work table. He looked me square in the eyes and said, "Don't touch this!" pointing to the empty socket. "If you do, it will cook your brain and I'll break your head." With his last command he turned around for a moment.

I stared at the empty socket, looked at his back and quickly stuck my finger in it to learn what the big deal was. Instantly, my body surged with electricity. Waves of power flooded my insides through my finger stuck in the socket. I couldn't move until my father turned around and knocked me clear off the table. The tremors remained with me for a long while. Who could imagine being subjected to bolts of electricity? Or being jolted at various spots around the head and body? My God, just a finger was enough to paralyze me. The sensation has burned itself a place in my memory as deep as gravity. I cannot imagine being plugged into such a treatment all in

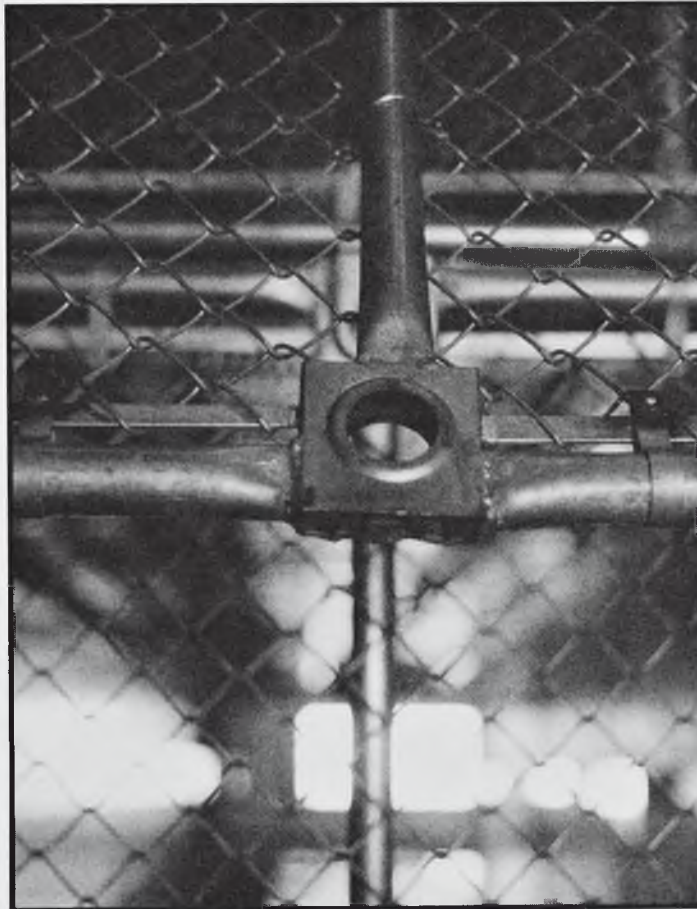
the name of reason, with the expectation of functioning on any level afterward, never mind having a big family to care for.

There were so many private as well as public doctors. Once at seventeen, when I first had a driver's license, I drove my mother to her weekly appointment with a Doctor Richard. His office was up around the expensive part of Manhattan, near Central Park. I drove through a tunnel in the park to get to his office. We parked at a meter (a great miracle when parking in Manhattan) and my mother and I entered the building to his office. We took the elevator up. Everything in the building, including the doorman, in his smart red jacket, appeared luxurious.

Once we were buzzed into his office, I was stricken with it's gloom. I looked around in the tight darkness, thinking this is the place where misery and woe grows, like a fungus

in some abandoned spot. In the tiny waiting room were two maroon chairs of old leather with large silver buttons. The chairs looked so uncomfortable and dirty, I didn't sit. There were no magazines in the small waiting room and no tables, just the big ugly maroon chairs and one standing lamp blasting small shadows on to the cracked ceiling. No one else was in the waiting room.

Dr. Richard opened a squeaky door and we walked inside a small completely tiled room. The room had a



JANICE KODADEK

medical cot on one wall and some dirty aluminum shelves with medical paraphernalia on another wall. The walls and floor were black and white four-by-four old ceramic tiles. It looked like a small, dirty renovated bathroom.

Dr. Richard looked like his office: He was very old and decrepit. He did not look either one of us in the eye. My mother sat on the cot, following his hand instruction. He prepared four large glass syringes on the top aluminum shelf. Three had some potions in them, one was empty. He instructed Mom to lie on her stomach on the cot and lift her dress. Her large panties reached her belly. Dr. Richard lowered them with one hand and punctured her skin with the first needle. I watched the fluid disappear into her buttocks. The sight made me wish I could sit down. I felt the blood rushing out of my head. I turned my gaze to Mother's face. She didn't flinch. She didn't show any sign of objection or affirmation of the solution filling her. Nothing.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Chlorpromazine hydrochloride," the doctor answered, looking away.

"Tell me that in English. Is it a sedative, a vitamin? What is it? Tell me in words I can understand."

"Thorazine. Your mother will feel tired now. It's good for her," he added.

"Why didn't you say that in the first place? She looks pretty tired already. What's in the other syringes?"

"Cyanocobalamin and pyridoxine." His shaky hands placed the empty syringes on the shelf, one by one.

Once again, I asked, "What is that in English?" He wouldn't answer me. He treated me like fly caught in the space between him and my mother in the tiny tiled room. He told my mother to sit up. I helped support her shoulders.

Mom sat on the cot and pushed her cotton house dress down over her knees. Dr. Richard rolled up her sleeve, and punctured the soft skin on the inside of her elbow. This time I watched my mother's blood fill the large needle. I wanted to cry. Again, she had no reaction. He pulled the needle out and, beginning to turn around to his shelves, he dropped it onto the tiles. The syringe shattered, splashing my mother's blood on all three of us as well as the floor and walls. My heart sank. My mouth dropped open.

"Never mind. I didn't need that anyway," he offered.

"What! You didn't need it? Then why such a large syringe? Why did you do it in the first place?" I yelled.

My mother looked at me, the eyes of someone falling out fast from the waking world.

My eyes followed the doctor. "You're horrible. You know it? You don't make a drop of sense." He kept turning around, looking around his office.

"That will be \$750.00." He put his hand out.

I wrote out my father's check. "Here Dr. Dick, buy some chairs for this place. Brush up on your bedside manner. Plug yourself with one of those syringes." I paid him. We left.

On the way home, my car ran out of gas in the tunnel that goes through the park. I had to leave her unconscious in the car and walk to a station, buy gas, and return. It was a long time before we made it back to Staten Island. She was unconscious the entire time.

I didn't stop arguing with my father until Mom didn't have to go back to Dr. Richard again. (But it was the

finances that ended those visits.) It was a time when the older sisters had their own personal lives, their own personal tragedies keeping them busy elsewhere. One pregnant, with a husband who broke his back, another, on the verge of marrying the ridiculous sailor she did eventually marry. My brothers had a life, too. I was sixteen going on seventeen. I remember those years. That was the first year I played Santa Claus in my parent's home. Oh, the merriment. The joy of giving. The total bewilderment of everyday, including holidays.



Years later, my mother, Anna (the one sister remaining in New York), and I now regulate Mom's doctor visits. It's hard because neither my mother nor I have much faith in doctors. However, we realize that without her medicine, she falls into an abyss where no one can reach her. Her skin literally turns blue from lack of circulation. Sometimes she has been funny before the final breakdown. It's a short-lived time of euphoria, both physical and verbal, like the time she climbed a blossomed cherry tree in Silver Lake Park (following my youngest daughter) and chased a jogger around the lake. I couldn't catch her. She was in her seventies.

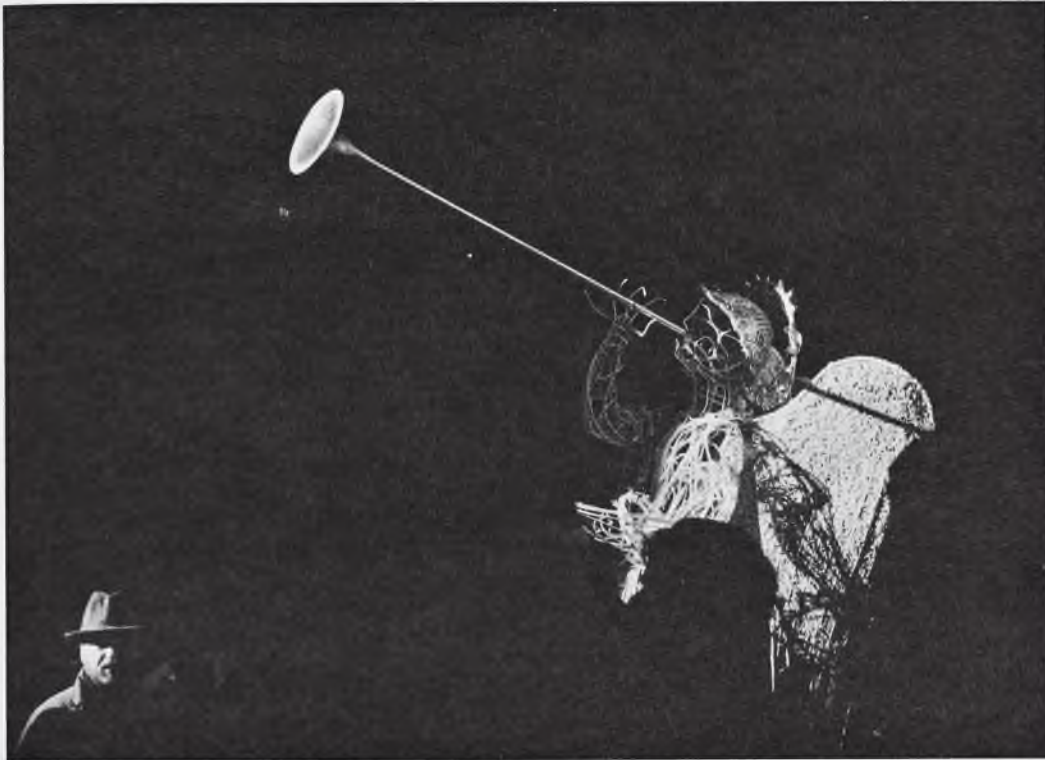
For the first and only time, my mother has a doctor who speaks Italian. Dr. George Coppe. We have come, Anna and I to get her stabilized. She is glowing, eyes open wide, seemingly in command of her surroundings, standing tall. She is out of her mind and slipping faster than one can blink an eye. We sit, at his request in his paper-cluttered office. Anna and Mom sit in the two available chairs. I stand. Dr. Coppe sits nearby the paper mountain on his desk. He is handsome. He's young. He left his wife and their daughters and moved to this country. It's the same old story—man splits, will send for woman and the kiddies, woman refuses, man desperate for raw sex, good cooking and a secretary. His desk looks like my desk. One could not find a paper clip or a document if life itself depended on it. I want to laugh out loud just to look at the shared disorganization of the universe right there on his desk, but I try to stifle it. We don't know each other. He wouldn't understand. It is the laugh of familiarity. A laugh from my heart.

Anna speaks. "Maybe you can see for yourself, Doctor, she refuses to take the prolixin. Maybe you can give it to her another way—she dumps the pills."

"Bene, Signora," he says, in flawless, formal Italian, "Come si sente? Perche le sue figlie l'manno portato qui?" ("Well tell me, Signora, how are you feeling? Why do your daughters bring you here?")

Somewhere on his desk sits a file as fat as Niagara Falls. Her life—those pages.

My mother responds in Italian, pointing at Anna. "Do you know what kind of woman this is? This is the kind of woman who cannot sleep with one man at a time in her life. Her appetite is too great. She needs many men to satisfy a hunger that will not go away. She is never satisfied. Before she came here today she left her poor husband. She had another one before she made it down the sidewalk. A big man. A Jew. Can you believe it? A Jew. She has no preference; she will be with a Black man, a Jew, a Spaniard, a Chinese, anyone; it depends how hard he works to satisfy her carnal needs, how big his equipment



EUGENE GRUBBS

can't move off the chair. His body is out of control. Out of nowhere, I ask him, "Do you have any children?"

He takes out his wallet and shows my mother a picture of his youngest daughter. She's back in Italy, with her mother. "I'm divorced," he announces.

My mother takes the photograph in her hand and studies it. She hands it back to the doctor with two words: "Bellezza sublime." (Sublime Beauty) She announces the two words perfectly. I want to fall off my chair. Before now, Mother never spoke English or any language with doctors. Her usual silence is now broken.

The doctor replies, "Thank you. Thank you." He is genuinely pleased with the compliment and nods in agreement.

I listen in awe. Who could behold their impeccable Italian communication. . . verbal intercourse at it's best. He has entered her realm of consciousness and it excites him.

"Can I start you on the medication today?" He asks my mother like the gentleman he obviously is.

"Not today," Mother answers.

"Why not?" Dr. Coppe inquires.

"I don't feel like lifting my dress today." Mother smooths down her dress one more unending time.

"That's O.K. I'll tell Erin, your nurse, you'll meet her in a minute, to give you the injection in your arm."

Mother nods in acceptance.

Anna and I look at each other, both secretly dying to burst out laughing. We work hard to keep a grip on the seriousness of the situation. But it's one of those moments in life, when the unreal reality is too much, when only laughter can bring relief. But if laughter escapes me, my mother will leap off her chair, pick it up and smash down on to my head. She hates my laughter, always did and always will. Something about laughing is unholy to both my parents. I still don't get the connection. I sit with my lips tightly pressed together.

Dr. Coppe begins to speak. He can put her back on the prolixin injection, get her started today and prescribe some cogentin to take the edge off—the tremors in her face, her tongue, her hands. Everywhere. His eyes keep drifting over to Anna, to her legs, down to her feet. Anna has these long legs that go on forever. It's all too perfect for me. Sublime beauty...Mother's vocabulary blows me away. Articulate beyond education. She is a character, my mother. A rare and special lunatic. I'm honored (in a strange way) to be there with her and listen and watch her smooth down her dress again and again.

Silence falls on everyone in the office. Everyone is a little embarrassed. Everyone but mother. She is proud. She knows who the crazy ones really are.

Erin knocks, enters. Dr. Coppe smiles at her and begins his introductions. We get up to leave, and he adds as Erin leads my mother to a private room for her injection, "By the way, make sure Mrs. Mondo gets her injection in the arm. She doesn't feel like lifting her dress today."

There is no explaining the things she said to the doctor. Partially, everything was true. True about most people. Anna, though, it's funny she said anything at all about her, because Anna is a loyal woman. She is notoriously loyal to the one she loves.

Dr. Coppe stayed in that hospital for the remainder of the month and then moved to another place. Mom's doing O.K. Almost.

is. Men like you, innocents, you don't know about what some women need. Her husband doesn't. Does she care? No. As long as she stays good and wet."

After going on like this, she sits back in her chair and smooths her dress down again and again with the palms of her hands. She looks up at Anna, the eyes of mother. Contented and satisfied eyes that laugh and shout, There. . . I've said it all!

I am kind of proud of her at this point. The twist in her presentation is impeccable. In her madness she has reached a peak of erotic brilliance. Her articulation leaves my mouth agape.

We look at the doctor. He has a hard-on from here to tomorrow. He



BONNIE BARTKOW

The Last of Alexander Montgomery Rites

BRIAN DEPRADO

For the better part of the day Richard had contemplated. Just how would he go about doing this? It was not going to be easy. He would have to do it fast. Using just the right words. Making the right moves.

Convincing Alex, that would be the hardest part. Not that he expected Alex to actually believe him. Not right away anyway. Richard knew him better than anyone else could. Or so he thought.

I tightened my sweaty fist, and timidly wrapped on the brown door marked 225C. My heart was racing, sending blood throbbing through my temples. It wasn't too late to back out, but I had decided that this was it. He wasn't going to control my life anymore. Oh no, Mr. Alexander Montgomery, your last sentence is about to be written!

The door opened a crack, held there by a gold security chain. Part of Alex's face appeared on the other side of the door. The deepness of his blue eyes were just as Richard had imagined they would be? The graying at the temples was amazingly accurate. His presence was completely astounding. Alex was all that Richard had imagined he would be.

"Yes?" Alex asked, peering at him.

"Alex Montgomery?"

"Yes?"

"I need to have a word with you. It's quite urgent." Richard said with a blank expression blanketed over his face.

"What does this pertain to?" Alex asked cautiously.

"It's very important that I come in."

"Not without an explanation."

Alex warned.

Richard knew that a conflict of this manner would interfere with his mission. But none the less, he had wanted this to go smoothly. Painlessly.

He had never had to deal with Alex face to face

before. Only through the eyes of other characters had he confronted him. But he had forgotten how stubborn he had made Alex. And how cautious. Almost as if he had given him a mind of his own. But it was foolish to believe that something you created could think for itself. With the exception of children, of course. Alex was nothing more than black on white, a plethora of words on a computer screen or on the pages of a book.

Reaching into the pocket of his winter coat, he produced a pen and a stenographer's pad that he usually used to take notes. Taking the pen to the green paper he wrote one simple sentence.

Alex released the chain, and allowed me to enter his apartment.

Alex had indeed let him in. And within seconds, Richard stood in the middle of the living room. It was furnished exactly as he had specified, right down to the mahogany bookcases that were lined with every literary great known to modern humanity.

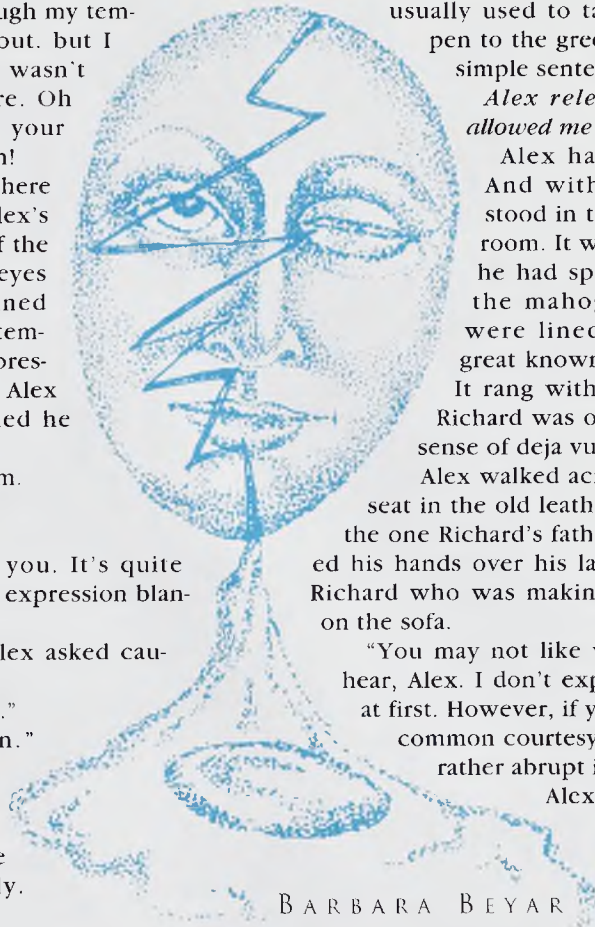
It rang with such familiarity, that Richard was overcome with an eerie sense of *deja vu*.

Alex walked across the room, taking a seat in the old leather arm chair, similar to the one Richard's father had owned. He folded his hands over his lap, and looked over to Richard who was making himself comfortable on the sofa.

"You may not like what you are going to hear, Alex. I don't expect you to understand at first. However, if you would allow me the common courtesy, I'd like to explain my rather abrupt intrusion."

Alex nodded in agreement.

Richard pondered a moment, staring blankly at the wall above Alex's head. Just the right words,



BARBARA BEYAR

he thought. It's too late to back down. You've come this far. Just the right words.

And before he knew it a senseless potpourri of "umms" and "ahhs" slid off of his tongue. Alex just stared at him, confused, looking as if he were witnessing a man falling into a state of meditation or speaking in tongues.

Richard cleared his throat, gave him a shy smile, and tried to continue. "Did you ever think that your life maybe nothing more than a vast illusion? Or possibly the product of someone else's imagination? If this were true, Alex, what kind of effect would this have on you?"

Alex rose from his chair. "What are you talking about? And who the hell are you?"

The pen hit the pad once again.

Alex walked back to his seat, and sat down. It was like he had completely forgotten what he was asking, the questions were no longer hovering in the air, which was convenient for myself. I didn't approve of his line of questioning. I, after all, should be the only one asking the questions.

"You do not have control over yourself, Alex. I know what this must sound like to you. Telling a grown man that he can't control himself. It's actually rather ludicrous, don't you think? But it's true. I created you, Alex. I control you." Control. That very word brought a smile to Richard's face.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave," Alex said calmly.

"Oh no," Richard said quickly. "I don't think I can leave until we finish this conversation."

Richard refused to go, only shaking his head. "What is he going to do to me that I couldn't do to him first" he thought.

"Well then, I'm calling the police," Alex announced as his hand reached for the phone next to chair.

Yes, Alex. Go ahead, try and call the police, Richard thought to himself.

The phone was disconnected. Alex didn't want to believe it. He hung up, and tried it again.

And again.

And again

Nothing.

I laugh as he slams the receiver down on the cradle. Oh, you'll never know how good it feels to finally let Alex have his.

"Damn it all!" Alex yelled.

"Do you believe me now, Alex?" Richard asked calmly.

"Believe what?" he asked back.

Richard crossed his legs and scratched the fine whiskers that the late afternoon had brought to his face. "That I have absolute power over you. I have the ability to alter any aspect of your life, any situation that you are in. I disconnected that phone without leaving this chair. Talent? Not really. Intelligence? I'll let you be the judge." He laughed to himself. Even if he didn't have the guts to physically murder Alex, he could drive him out of his imaginary mind.

With that, Alex grew red in the face, clenching his fists.

Alex drives his fist into the wall in sheer frustration.

He howls in pain as he removes his shattered hand from the wall of blood dripping onto the wood floors. Maybe I am being a little harsh.

"Don't you think you would be better off if you would just sit down and listen to what I have to say?" Richard asked.

"But my hand." Alex winced in pain, wrapping his bloody hand in the tails of his shirt.

"I can fix that if you would just sit down and shut the hell up!" Richard said, raising his voice.

Alex agreed, and took a seat in the leather chair. He looked pathetically at Richard who was doing something with his pad. The pad. Like a gunslinger in the old west, he kept it at his side, ready to use it at the appropriate moment. It was the healer and the avenger. It was his weapon in this bitter battle.

Richard took the pen and crossed out his previous sentences. "There, that's it. Now everything is fine."

Alex looked down to his hand in astonishment. It, just minutes ago covered in blood, was now perfectly fine. No blood. No broken bones.

"Now answer my question, Alex. How would you react?" Richard said, raising his voice.

"You mean about my life being an illusion?" he asked, still examining his hand.

"Yes," Richard answered, calmly.

Alex took a seat in his leather chair again. Looking down at his feet, anger began to swell in his eyes. He didn't say a word. His nostrils began to flare as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"You see, Alex, I'm sick of you. I'm sick to death of what you've become. Everyone wants Alexander Montgomery. Alex this, Alex that. What about me, damn it? No one gives a damn about Richard

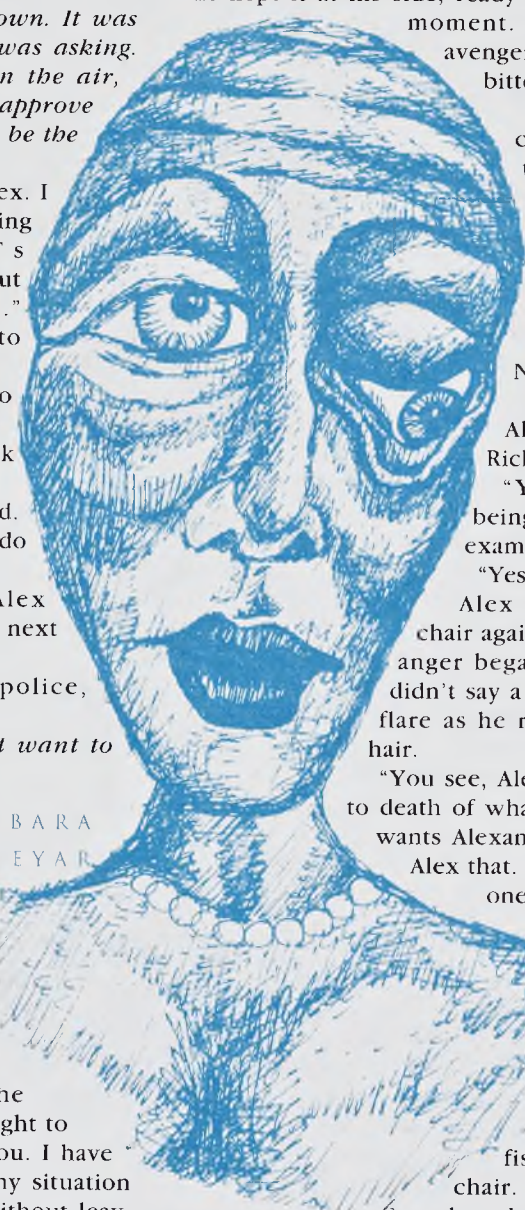
Stills. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't be here, Alex.

No one would give a damn as to who you were."

Richard slammed his fist down on the arm of the chair. All the work he had done.

Countless, lonely hours of writing with no credit to his name. "Alex, answer me!" he exploded.

"What do you want me to say?" Alex yelled, getting out of his chair. "That you're right? Do you want me to agree that some lunatic has come to my apartment to tell me that I don't exist? Here I am? Flesh and blood? He walked toward Richard, grinding his teeth. "Do I look fake to you?" He took Richard's hand and put it to his chest.



BARBARA
BEYAR

"This is Real!"

No, Richard thought, this can't be happening. "Then how do you explain what happened to your hand? And why you were so quick to let me in?"

"I don't know. What are you some kind of hypnotist?"

Richard picked up his pen.

It was a rather unfortunate situation. Resorting to extremes was really not my style. My plan was slowly diminishing because Alex was more persistent than I thought. Imagine that. I had greatly underestimated my own creation. Perhaps the fame had gone to his head. This was still my game, damn it! But Alex didn't want to play by my rules.

"Hey, what's with the pad? What are you doing with that thing?" he scorned.

At last, Richard realized it was over as Alex tore the pad from his hand. It was a good thing that Richard had brought the gun. It was as if in some corner of his subconscious he knew that the pad might not be enough.

Again, Alex pleaded Richard to leave. This time he actually made his way to the door. He clutched the doorknob, and turned his head to face Richard.

Richard pulled the gun from his jacket. "Get away from the door, Alex. I'm not leaving yet."

"Killing me would be killing yourself. Think about it. You'd be nothing without me." Alex's words came quick, and were plagued by fear.

"That's what you think?" Think? God, how could he think? Thoughts sprung into Alex's mind as a reaction to the written word. Now that the pad and pen were on the floor, Richard was losing control. Do it now, Richard. Strive on your anger. "Your problem is that you are ignorant and arrogant. Don't you understand, Alex, I'd be free without you."

"Arrogant? Ignorant? Think of what you're saying. You say you created me. Maybe I'm nothing more than you. To kill me would be to kill yourself. Look in the mirror. And don't be surprised if you see me staring back at you!" He drew closer to Richard. "I'll be around a lot longer than you. After you're gone, people will still be sitting back, lost in my world. Reading the adventures of Alexander Montgomery!"

Richard gripped the gun firmly in his hand, and pounced on Alex, forcing him into the leather chair. Alex didn't resist.

"The human imagination knows no limits, Richard," he said calmly.

Richard wrapped his arm around Alex's neck, securing his hand behind the back of the chair. He put the revolver to Alex's head. Richard could feel him gnashing his teeth together. But still, he didn't resist. He knew that if he didn't do it now, Alex might explode again. Squeezing the hammer back with his thumb, Richard whispered one last thing: "This is for my own good, Alexander Montgomery."



There hadn't been an answer for days. With the way Richard had been acting lately, Paul wasn't surprised. Usually, during times of stress or writer's block, Richard would take off to the Caymans for a week with his wife. But when someone finally answered the phone, he jumped.

"Barbara, how are you? Paul Raleigh calling. Yes, may I speak with Richard?" he said, stumbling for his words. "Yes, we had a meeting scheduled this afternoon, I wanted to make sure that his final draft would be ready. Oh, Lord."

Ben watched Paul's eyes grow twice their size. His stubby hands cupped his mouth.

"Oh, I see oh I understand oh yes oh I'm so sorry to hear that. Yes, my condolences to you and the family. And keep me updated, all right? Good-bye." He hung up the phone slowly, looking around the office as if he were thinking.

"What was that all about?" Ben asked, taking a sip of coffee with both hands.

"That was Richard's wife." He was still looking around the room in a dazed fashion.

"Yeah, I figured that much out." Ben said, not looking at Paul, but at the coffee he had dribbled onto his shirt. "Ah, damn. Wouldn't you know it? I just bought this goddamn shirt."

"Richard is dead."

"What?" Ben let out a nervous laugh, that rapidly became a whooping cough.

"Found him in an abandon apartment in the Back Bay. Bullet wound to the head. The bastard blew his brains out." Paul broke from his daze and looked to Ben for the first time.

"Suicide?"

Paul nodded. "We knew this was bound to happen. Alex had been getting the better of him for years. I mean, lets face it. Do you blame him? I don't think I could handle being the voice of someone as eminent as Alex. Look at this, Ben." Paul picked up a pile of letters from the corner of his desk. "All these letters, not a single one addressed to Richard Stills. Every one of them to Alex. Are people so wrapped up in Alex that they can't distinguish fiction from real life? Richard's protagonist simply became more popular than himself."

"Enough so that he would actually kill himself?"

"Apparently."

"I can't believe it. This is tragic. I mean, this is just plain awful. You know what this means don't you?"

Paul nodded again. "This was bad timing, Ben, bad timing"

"So what now?"

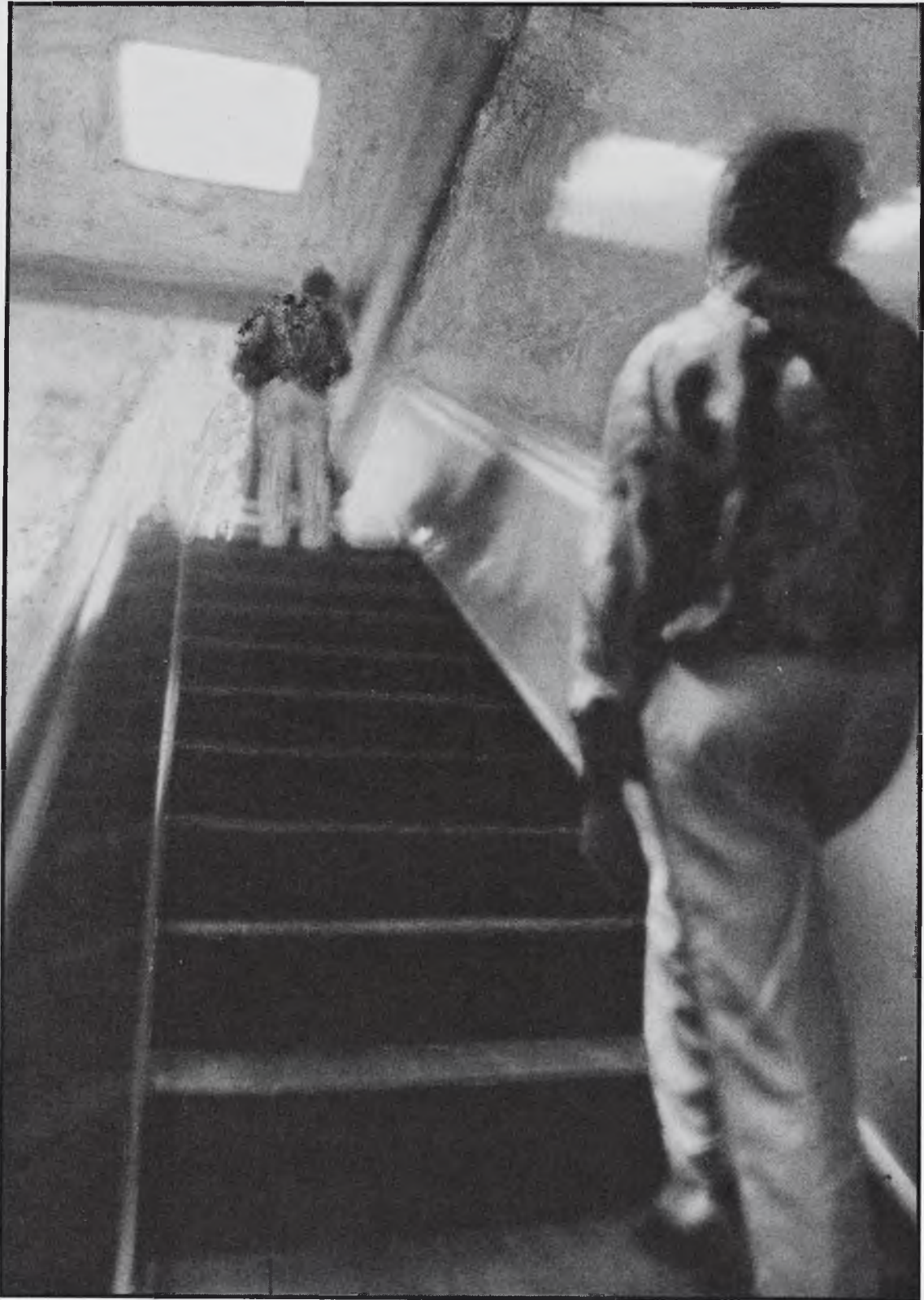
"We need to get that final draft from his wife."

"Then what?"

"Let me think, damn it? Just give me a minute." Paul threw his head into his hands, only to jump up a fraction of a second later, snapping his fingers. "I got it! Do you remember that kid we met at the conference? The one with the cleft chin?"

Ben shook his head. "Yeah?" he answered nervously.

"I want you to give him a call. Tell him we want to talk to him about taking over the Alexander Montgomery series."



BOB KODADEK

An Istrian Childhood

(An excerpt from a work in progress)

NERINA MARTIRE

Loren Eiseley in *All the Strange Hours* says that the fragments of our memories over time are like splintered glass from a shattered mirror. I am not sure whether my remembrances of the war years are fragments that have broken off from the main body of my memory or whether they were always only splinters, considering how young I was when those events unfolded. I do know, however, that these splinters are as sharp as shards of glass.

I remember a cold Sunday in January 1942, when I was not quite six. That morning our village priest was taken from inside his church, still in his ceremonial vestments, made to sit on a low wall in the piazza, and forced to drink nearly half a liter of castor oil. He died three weeks later. He was sixty-two. According to his accusers, his crime had been inciting “seditious activities” against the regime. The punishers were *squadristi*, members of elite fascist squads who were the Italian equivalent of the Nazi SS. I didn’t see Father Vaselli being made to drink the vile liquid. And I didn’t learn all the details till years later. What I remember vividly though, is a great crowd, and a muffled voice saying the same unintelligible words over and over again, ever more weakly. But most of all I remember the boots. What seemed to me a great number of men were milling about and among the villagers who, the mass having ended, were still exiting the church whose door gave onto the piazza. I don’t recall these men’s faces; I was fascinated by their boots. They were black and shiny and reached to their knees. There was a thin layer of snow on the ground. I can still hear the crunching sound of those boots on the snow.

I was shivering uncontrollably, from the cold and from fear; a malevolent spirit seemed loose in the piazza. The crowd was suddenly very quiet, the air still. Beside the sound of the boots, there was only that broken, intermittent voice, strange yet familiar, coming from behind the wall of people. I had heard that voice countless times, in prayer and in song. Lately it had begun instructing me in the catechism—I was soon to make my first communion. What was it saying now? Who was it calling? I wanted to run but I couldn’t extricate myself from the maze of black legs. Yet I knew the piazza like the inside of my own home. Perhaps it was only a few minutes before my sister Marisa found me and lead me home, on the opposite side of the piazza. I remember nothing of the rest of that day. But of all the terrors I would be prey to in the following years, none would be so utter or survive so hauntingly intact in my memory as the one that possessed me that Sunday in the piazza.

Two years older and several inches taller than I—as she would always be—Marisa had been looking for me. She and I had gone to church with Nonna, our grandmother, as we did most Sundays, though usually earlier in the day, since Nonna preferred low mass. My parents never attended Sunday services. They went to church only on special occasions—a wedding or christening, Christmas and Easter. My mother had lost her faith; perhaps it had been my father’s influence. Many years later, when she was in the United States and an old woman, she resumed attending Sunday services regularly, as though hers had been a temporary interruption, not an absence of forty years. By then it was I who had long stopped going.

As for my father, he thought religion a sophisticated form of superstition. But he liked our humble priest; he felt contempt only for the high prelates. And he never interfered with our attending church with Nonna or our receiving the sacraments. My father believed in Man, in the perfectibility of humankind, and his song, which in my early childhood he sang often while he worked in his carpentry shop, in a dark tenor voice. In a way, he never lost his belief. But more and more with the passing of the years there was in my father an unwillingness to commit himself to any ideal, to any political party, even to any friendship. Most of all, he shrank from confrontations of any kind; he called himself “neutral.” When I was growing up I was proud that my father always spoke softly, that he never pounded his fist on the table of the cafe or wine shop, like other men while expounding the merits of this or that theory, cause, country or political figure. But years

later I came to see my father like one of Dante's neutrals, those whom the poet condemns in anti-Hell for having lived "senza infamia e senza lodo," without disgrace and without praise (Inf.III,36). Toward the end of my father's life—he lived his last seven years with my husband and me, my mother having died—my growing awareness of this old man's consciousness of his own shortcomings softened once again my feelings toward him. "I was always too timid, too afraid. I should have been like your mother," he would say. "I should have been more of a man. Now, Don Vaselli, he was a man."

Forcing a person to drink a quarter of a liter or more of castor oil was a well known fascist tactic employed to silence vocal dissenters and to intimidate and terrorize the rest of the population. Or, as they put it, it was designed to teach the person "a lesson he will not soon forget," and to have him serve as "an example of improper behavior for an Italian." This was why it was often carried out in a public place with a maximum number of people present.

Starting some months before this incident, the squadristi, and members of the fascist militia in general, would come tearing into town every Sunday morning, in several motorcycles with side-cars. They would make the round of the piazza two or three times, still at full speed, the side-cars lurching wildly, the roar of the exhaust pipes rending the Sunday morning silence, or smothering the summons of the church bells, disrupting the mass in progress behind the ancient doors. As much as the distant rumble of American planes later, the sound of the approaching motorcycles made me tremble and run desperately for cover. Usually I hid under my bed, pulling even the blanket down on top of my head. There Nonna would find me. She would pull me out by my braids, make the sign of the cross on my forehead and on her own, and silently lead me with her to the kitchen. If I was at mass when they came, I trembled no less and immediately sat on the kneeler to make myself very small. My grandmother, who was very strict in such matters, somehow tolerated my impious behavior. Marisa, unperturbed, would continue to follow the service closely. That Sunday, having become somehow separated from Nonna and Marisa at the exit, I must have lingered among the crowd outside the church only because by then the motorcycles were silent.

I don't know what the squadristi did all the other Sundays in the piazza. If I were not at high mass, I would be cowering in some corner of the house. Yet I know exactly what their stance would have been upon dismounting from their motorcycles: booted legs wide apart, arms akimbo or close to the hips, around which hung black holsters—these were attached to a black leather belt which in turn attached to a wider leather strap diagonally crossing their chests—chests thrust impossibly forward, chins high. They would have looked like archvillains or corrupt sheriffs lording it over a Western town at high noon. And like those sheriffs, they were "the law."

So it was the likes of these who had seized our mild-mannered priest at the end of mass. Years later some villagers said that Father Vaselli had indeed dis-

tributed anti-fascist literature in our and a neighboring town, under the pretext of visiting the sick. Others maintained that he had merely protested the fascists' obscene arrival into town every Sunday morning. As for what he was saying, or trying to say, while they were manhandling him, I never found out for sure. My father, who was not present but knew someone who claimed to have been, said the priest's words were "non e vero, non e vero," it's not true, it's not true.

Ironically, after the war, when the communists came, Tito's forces, they accused the young priest who had replaced Don Vaselli of misdeeds identical to the older man's: "seditious activities" against their regime. He served six months in prison and upon his release (in March 1946) fled town, never to return. It was probably what they had wanted in the first place. Six years would pass before our church would again have a priest celebrating mass, but by then I and my family and most of our fellow Istrians had been scattered to the far corners of the world.

Fascists, communists, they are all the same. When I think of Bosnia and Rwanda today—or Haiti—and of the resurgence of neofascism both in Germany and in Italy, I



MARY-ANTONIA LOMBARDI

must conclude that Eiseley's fellow-hobo was right when he said "men beat men, that's all...that's all there is". But, God, is it possible that "that's all there is"?

The most searing memories of my childhood are all connected with the war and its aftermath. Unlike Southern Italy, for us in the North, the war, and the German occupation, lasted until May 1945. After 1943, Mussolini having abdicated, his regime in total collapse, the Italian fascists ceased to be a factor for us. Those that still remained in town were now commanded by the Germans; soon they disappeared altogether. It was no longer the squadristi whom we feared, but the SS, a great number of whom had unaccountably descended on my hometown.

My hometown, Salvore, is nestled close to the northernmost corner of the Adriatic Sea, on the rugged coast of the little peninsula of Istria. In "normal times"—something I would experience there neither during nor after the war—it had been a sleepy fishing village and summer resort for those who liked quiet and rustic accommodations. The town had no amenities, not even a cinema. Sometimes, on rare occasions, a film was shown in the church rectory. When that was the case, it was usually for children. Whether for children or adults, however, we never got to see the ending of a film because the projector invariably broke down. What the village had in abundance was choice wines, both whites and reds, and the tastiest fish and shell fish to be found in any of the seven seas. Here is the home of genuine scampi (with an affinity to prawns)—scampi!—not cardboard shrimps which pass for scampi, much less the redundant "shrimp scampi"—and magnificent beaches. Not beaches covered by sand, which muddles the water and prevents one from seeing the enchanted world beneath. But pebbly beaches, their small round stones smooth and shiny from having been rolled by the tides and tossed by the waves for millennia. Separating the small, secluded beaches from one another were towering rocks, mostly dazzlingly white, but sometimes gray or light pink, and one or two black. Some of these were pointy, most rounded or flat at the top, perfect for sun bathing, if one took the precaution of wetting them first with the cool sea water. But if one preferred the shade, as I did for reading or daydreaming, there was always a smaller boulder in the shade of a bigger one. Shade was conveniently provided also by the huge pines which in many places grew to the very edge of the rocks and the sea, and over whose cones we fought as children, for they yielded prized pignoli (pine nuts). It was said that these pines' constant exposure to the salt of the sea imparted a greater zest to their fruit. Even more attractive for us children, I suspect, was the greater difficulty entailed in picking these than those that grew on inland trees.

Le Grotte, the rocks, as we called them, were also our favorite playing sites. Of course, to negotiate all those peaks and valleys it was essential to be barefooted, which we all were anyway, shoes being a luxury during this period and in post-war years. Le Grotte offered perfect hiding places for children, lovers, and the pirates of our imaginations. Later they would provide dens for black-market smugglers. And later still, they became bloody graves for at least two fishermen, one of them my best friend Alma's brother, Beppo, aged seventeen. For the Germans, before retreating, along with the harbor mined

our beloved grotte. Of all the wounds inflicted on my little godforsaken town, and they were many, none caused more sorrow and outrage than the mining of its harbor and the dynamiting of its piers by the Nazis. This not only deprived the town of its livelihood, but also of its identity. The harbor, le grotte and cliffs, and the granite piers, gleaming white, disproportionate in size and grandeur to the smallness of the town, were what defined it. We were a village of fishermen and sea-faring people since before the Republic of Venice, of which we were once part. Many a sailing expeditions left from our harbor through the centuries, including one by Frederick I (Barbarossa) in 1165, bent God knows on what raid. An engraved stone, in Latin, on the side of the church commemorates the event.

But it was not the glory, or lack of it, of emperors that was on the mind of the villagers during the war years and immediately after, but how to live one more day after being invaded from the mountains and the sky, scrounging for food, submitting to the dictates of various types of bullies yet still trying to feel part of the human race. But all that was to come later; I am still trying to depict "normal times," when our grotte had yet to be stained by anything but the salty spray of the sea.

In summer we dived from the highest of the rocks into the transparently blue depth of the Adriatic Sea. And deep it is here, immediately off shore. Because of it, children learn how to swim very early; I was three. After we learned how to swim, it never occurred to our overworked mothers to supervise us in and around the water. The bigger children looked after the smaller ones; Marisa after me, as later together we supervised our brother Giorgio. Summer visitors never ceased to marvel at our freedom, as well as prowess, in the water. They affectionately called us "little savages." I'm sure they thought less kindly of our mothers. In truth, all my own mother, or more likely Nonna, had to do to get a glimpse of us—if we were not hiding among the rocks—was to look out the back windows of our house, for our domain, the sea, lapped its very foundations, as well as the edge of the piazza.

The depth of our sea allowed many large vessels, even ocean liners, to enter our port and dock alongside its piers. In winter the piers lay mostly empty, except for fishermen repairing their nets on mild and windless days, and the daily steamer which carried the mail and a few solitary travelers along the whole coast, from Trieste to Pola (James Joyce followed this route on his way to and from these two cities at the beginning of the century, when Istria was still under Austrian domination). But in summer, all manner of craft, some from faraway ports, docked here. When there were no ships tied at their outermost ends, we would dive from the piers. Unlike from the grotte, we could run along half the pier's length to gain momentum before plunging with hardly a splash into that incomparably clear water. There are moments in life when we are happy, but, alas, we don't know them till long after they have passed.

A visitor arriving in my town by ship—before 1944—after disembarking and walking the length of the main pier, would immediately find himself in the town's "center," the piazza—its living room! In front of him in the middle of the piazza he would see a beautiful fountain issuing clean, good, ice-cold water. The water originates

high up in the mountains, a great distance from town. It arrives all the way here by means of an impressive aqueduct built in the early thirties—a “gift” from Mussolini to the children of this and other near and distant towns; il Duce loved all little girls and boys, we were to understand. Facing the fountain, to his immediate right the visitor would see a pale yellow stucco house, the post office. At the left of this are two two-story houses. In the one with green shutters lives my friend Alma, with her mother, father, and four older brothers, later only three. Alma’s brothers are much older than she, the oldest, Ugo, nearly twenty years her senior. She envies my having little Giorgio to mother and to pet, for he is Marisa’s and my charge and our delight. Giorgio is very blond and very cuddly. His little belly is firm and gently curved, not yet swollen from malnutrition. More often than not, we share him with Alma.

Alma’s age is exactly in between Marisa’s and mine. She is a friend to both of us but she is my best friend. The three of us leave the piazza together in the morning for the long walk to school. Alma is as tall as Marisa; they both tower over me. I walk in the middle, each of my hands clasped in one of theirs. When we climb uphill and the bora is blowing it’s hard going, but they pull me along so hard, at times lifting me off the ground, that I feel I’m flying with the wind. A year or two later, at the sound of the air raid siren, we three will throw ourselves into the ditch at the edge of the road, face down, our rapid breathing intermingling. At the all clear signal Marisa will be the first to get up. To chase away my tears she will flail her arms toward the sky and say “See, there’s nobody up there.” Alma will brush the dust off my clothes.

After Alma’s house and two others, nondescript ones, a white low structure with a yellow and green tiled roof—rather than the usual orange—houses a small dry goods/grocery store, my mother’s. After that stands the tallest private house in the piazza, four-stories high. It belongs to my aunt Dora, my mother’s widowed oldest sister. She rents the ground floor to my family. This comprises a large kitchen, two bedrooms, and one of the few bathrooms in town, though not with running water. We fetch sea water by the pailful to flush the toilet. Nonna would consider it extravagantly wasteful—a sin, in fact—to use drinking water for such function, since “God placed the sea at our doorstep.” As it is, she thinks we “squander” too much of the fountain’s precious water; we are spoiled, she says; we don’t know what it was like before the aqueduct. It won’t be too long before we’ll find out.

My mother and father have lived in my aunt’s house since their marriage. My grandmother joined her youngest child’s household a few years after that, when Marisa was born. All the rooms on the upper floors Aunt Dora rents to summer visitors. In late 1943 the house is requisitioned by the Germans who will allow us to continue living at the bottom until two months before war’s end. They, too, are fond of all little boys and girls. My aunt also owns the smaller house attached to the left of this one. It’s the newest house in town, about eighty years old. It has running cold water both in the bathroom and in the kitchen, and in the back a beautiful rose garden which overlooks the harbor. In summer the garden is

full of tables and chairs and gay people speaking in several tongues. For the ground floor is a cafe, which Aunt Dora runs with her two sons and a daughter-in-law; they all live on the upper floor. The cafe is aptly called Miramare (look to or at the sea), a name given to it long ago by my aunt’s in-laws from whom she and her sons inherited the house and this establishment. After Aunt Dora’s cafe, straight ahead of him, the visitor would see a narrow road which climbs gently upward and out of the piazza—to smaller houses and to several elegant villas scattered on the surrounding hills, to our school, and to il Castello (the castle).

But we are still in the piazza. To the left of this road is the parish house, a small two-story pink stucco building. Usually, a priest with an elderly mother or spinster sister lives here. To the left of the parish house, at the top of a flight of stairs is the church, white, spare, neo-classical in design. It is less than two hundred years old. Like the piers, it seems too big for this town, though Salvore is sprawled out over many kilometers (away from the piazza, considerable distances separate two or three houses from two or three others; the spaces in between are filled mostly by vineyards and fields of wheat). On solemn holidays, but only then, the church is filled. The exterior of the church does not belie its interior. It, too, is stark and severe, the expressions of its saints distancing and forbidding. The organ, though perhaps too shiny and too new, provides the only warm and intimate touch (to Nonna, frivolous), even when silent. The year before my birth the aristocratic family of il Castello donated the organ to the church, and one of its members, old Don Bernardo, became the organist. His gnarled fingers are magical. The day I will make my first communion I will feel estranged and miserable—until he will play Panis Angelicus, bread of angels. Then, I will weep, strangely, uncomprehendingly, released, feeling at one with the music and my fellow communicants, though not with Him of whose body and blood I will be partaking.

On the clearing in front of the church stand two old, large almond trees. Almond trees begin to bloom in late February. Some years we wake up to find the white delicate blossoms interspersed with snow flakes and we cannot tell which is which. Though ancient, the trees are prodigiously prolific, year after year—until late December 1944, when the Germans cut them down for firewood. A very tall, pointed steeple flanks the church and houses one melodious, resonant bell, and a tinny one, which, except in an emergency, is commanded to be silent. To the left of the steeple are three more houses, the poorest of which belongs to the shoemaker. Old Signor Giovanni always sits at his doorstep, even in winter. He was badly injured in World War I and claims he is unable to work. Even if he could, though, leather is already scarce; soon it will disappear. After Signor Giovanni’s house—the visitor has made almost a complete visual circle of the piazza—the terrain rises sharply. A long and steep flight of stairs leads up a hill upon whose summit the visitor would glimpse a mass of cypresses which guard and enclose the cemetery.

In the early forties, this tiny, seemingly strategically insignificant town, a mere dot jutting out into the Adriatic, became a German stronghold. Perhaps this was due to its piers, or its proximity to Trieste, with its ship-

yard and oil refinery. Or because on Salvo's highest hill, about two kilometers inland from the harbor and piazza, stood a massive ancient castle, il Castello, with a very tall tower. The Germans expropriated the castle and made it their headquarters, the tower becoming their lookout. On top of the tower they installed a very sophisticated revolving searchlight, which for the last two years of the war, except during bombing raids, scanned the sky and the sea every night, the whole night through. Its beams were so powerful that they penetrated every crack and fissure of the closed wood shutters of our windows, casting an eerie, other-worldly light on all the faces and objects within the house. The first night the searchlight went into operation, my grandmother made the sign of the cross every time its intermittent rays came sweeping into every corner of our kitchen where we sat around the table, stunned, immobile, waiting for we knew not what. I remember that night as in a dream. Only in dreams are there nightmares.

After a time my father went out into the piazza to investigate. We had not known, of course, that such an instrument was being installed, nor that it would start operating this night. And the piazza was where one went to give and receive all news. It had always been the place where villagers gathered, day or evening, from the "center" of town and from its outlying hamlets, during festivities or in time of sorrows, in an emergency or in the sweet fleeting hours of repose after a hard day's work. Tonight would be different. A German sentry, of whom there were several now in the piazza—they lived in our very house!—commanded my father to reenter at once. From this night on no one would be allowed out after sunset except during air raids. In the last two years of the war there would be only one exception. On the night of the day my Nonna took very ill with asthma, Aunt Dora, who spoke German fluently, received permission to visit her mother next door.

My father was full of impotent rage the night he was

sent back; he instantly developed one of his blinding migraines. He, too, spoke German, but, typically, he had remained silent and had done as he was told. Not that it would have done any good to protest, or been prudent to refuse to obey. Within days there would be four huge anti-aircraft cannons in our piazza. I believe my father minded more the usurpation of the piazza than even the ever-probing diabolical searchlight.

I never became accustomed to it. Yet during curfew, which now was every night, all of us—even I, so long as I was not alone—would wait for the slow-revolving beams to reach us in order to perform small chores. These might be setting the clock, warming some milk (when there was any) on the wood-burning stove for Giorgio, who was a toddler, or my mother inspecting my and Marisa's ears. We might have missed them while washing together, hurriedly, in the chiaroscuro of our kitchen in winter. At other times of the year we washed in our bedroom. For some reason I could not understand,



JANET WENGER

Miss Emilia too, our teacher, when inspecting our persons and our clothes—once a week during first and second grade—reserved the closest scrutiny for our ears. We prepared at night because our day started very early, before six o'clock; we had to walk three kilometers to school and Mamma wanted us ready upon arising. (Until January of 1945 we continued going to school more or less regularly, though spending more and more school hours in the bomb shelter).

Nothing and no one could hide from the Germans' searchlight. Indeed, it has been said, but it must be an exaggeration, that it enabled the Germans to see from the bottom of the Julian Alps to the coast of Albania, and that nothing that floated on or swam in the Adriatic Sea in between could escape detection by those beams.

From ages seven to nine I always went to sleep with the searchlight in my eyes, though every night I determined to fall asleep during the fleeting intervals of darkness. I felt overrun by that all-revealing light. And no matter how tightly I kept my eyes shut, it always found me. Like tentacles its rays would sweep over my rolled-up body and dwell insistently on my face. Shivering, I would extend one leg and with my foot reach for the warmth of my usually already-asleep sister's leg. Marisa and I shared the same twin bed. She, being the oldest, at the head of the bed, I at the foot. On the opposite wall, on an equally narrow bed separated from ours by a window and metal washstand, slept Nonna.

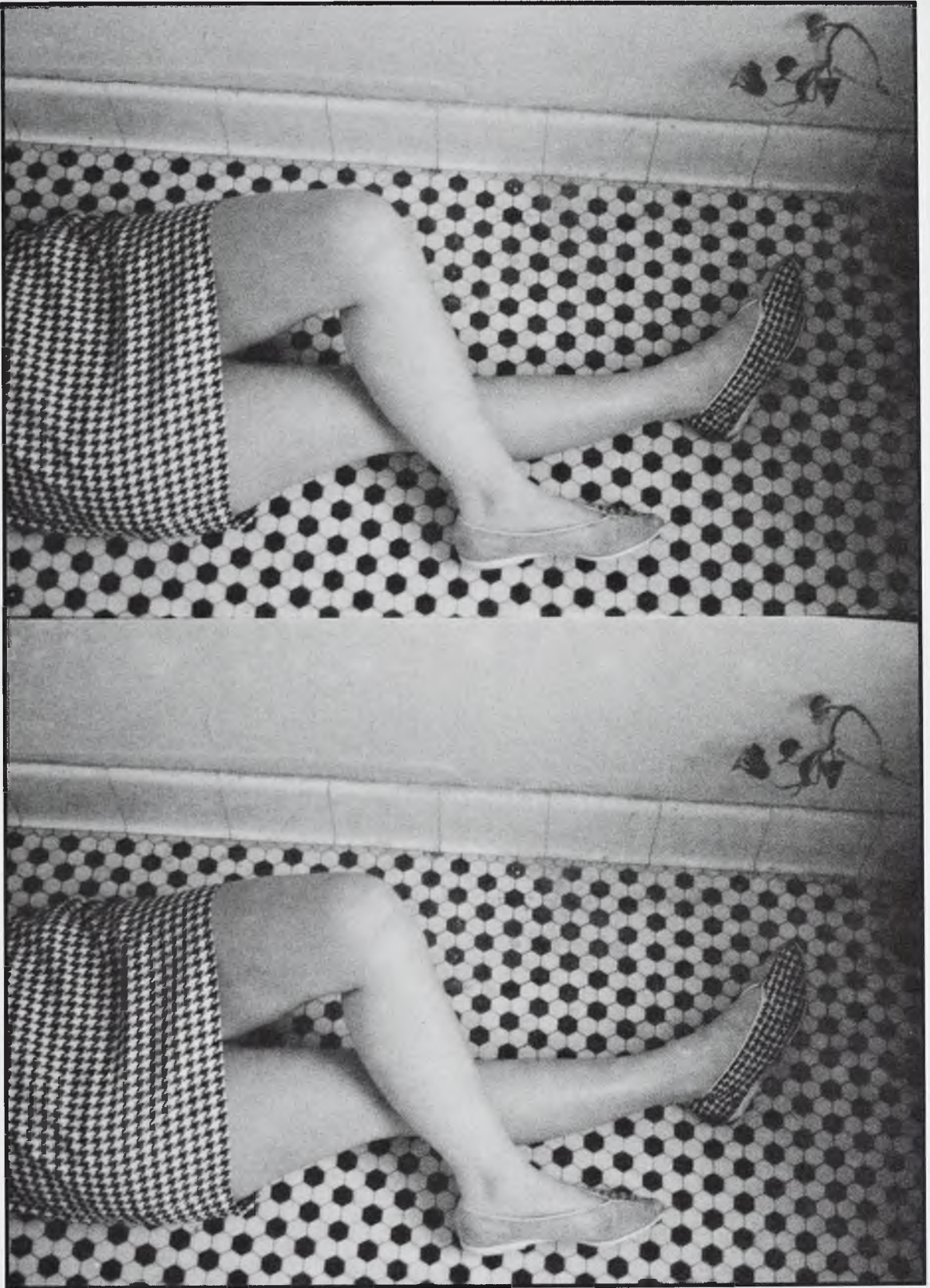
The only place the searchlight could not penetrate was the bomb shelter. This had been dug deep into a granite hillside, diagonally opposite the one on which stood the tower and castle—about a kilometer and a half inland from the piazza. When the sirens screamed and the low rumble of the yet unseen planes filled the sky, our whole village and the people from most of the surrounding hamlets took refuge here. The last winter of the war, when I became nine, we spent many nights in the shelter, for most of the bombings now took place at night. On such nights, at the sound of the first siren, when the villagers were already scurrying to the underground from every direction, the light from the tower would be suddenly extinguished. Yet often, almost simultaneously, our path to the sheltering hill would be instantly, luridly illuminated from another source. Myriad garishly red lights would fill the sky. They were the flares tossed by American planes to pinpoint their targets.

Once inside the shelter, Marisa and I sat at either side of our father, our faces buried deep against him. My mother with Baby Giorgio, Nonna and Aunt Dora usually sat across from us so that we would see one another at all times. And nearly always to the left of them, as though they had permanent reservations next to my family, would sit our teacher, Signorina Emilia, with her elderly mother and elderly uncle, Don Federico Rossi, the only doctor for many kilometers. Signorina Emilia is very kind; she adjusts her mother's shawl and she smiles at me. I love her. She allowed me to start school at five. When Marisa entered first grade, I gave Nonna and my mother a hard time. When Alma's turn came the following year, I was inconsolable; I wanted to go to school too; I was beginning to read already. My mother spoke to Signorina Emilia who consented to my starting ahead of schedule, as a trial. If I behaved I would be permitted to stay. I behaved.

Besides all the people who filled the shelter, there were always many wicker baskets with wooden lids, if one looked closely. Nearly every basket had a child sitting on top of it—Marisa always sat on ours. This both conserved space and kept the occupants of the basket warm. For each contained a brooding hen. Every household in town had at least one of these. They were an extremely valuable commodity. It was imperative to carry them into the shelter because even if a bomb fell at a distance the concussion alone would burst the eggs before they had had time to hatch. Marisa was the one in charge of our basket. She always carried out this mission with aplomb, expertly balancing it on her head while running to and from the shelter. After the war, our prized aqueduct having been bombed to smithereens, she would carry on her head with equal poise and balance pail upon pail of water from a distant well—while riding on a bicycle.

One night in the middle of February 1945, the bombing became both more protracted and more intense than usual. Our sanctuary in the bowels of the earth shook intermittently, interrupting momentarily the wailing of a baby, at times my own brother's, causing the feeble light of the carbide lantern to sway ominously and to cast grotesque dancing shadows on the walls of the cavern. When we came out at dawn the nascent sun and the sky were hidden from our view. Everywhere we looked there was blackness. We couldn't even see the outlines of the houses around the piazza until, led by my father, we reached our doors. The quality of darkness was like the one that precedes a severe summer rainstorm. Except that this cloud was still lowering and thickening, enveloping us even as we looked. There was no thunder or lightning, no faint scent of damp vegetation and earth, only eerie silence and a pungent and acrid odor, unknown, nauseating. That night the bombs had struck the oil refinery on the outskirts of Trieste, thirty kilometers away, and sunk, besides, a tanker loading oil at that port. Fourteen people were killed. Two were Germans.

For three days and nights the oil burned. For three days we didn't see the sky. No one left his house. No fisherman went fishing surreptitiously—they were now forbidden to ply these waters—though this is the month when squid is most abundant, and, God knows, we needed food. Even the planes stayed away. Only the searchlight resumed its obsessive and futile search. Nonna never stopped fingering her rosary beads. She thought the end of the world had come. In a way, it had. This was the beginning of the end of the world as we knew it. These months would see our electric power plant utterly destroyed; the very boulders of our piers torn from their granite foundations and cast, like mere pebbles, to the deepest sea, never to be reassembled, nor new piers rebuilt. The ships and we would forever lose our moorings. And the other jewel of our town and of our piazza, the fountain, would run dry.



JANET WENGER

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