TRIAGE

Preface

Skip this if you don’t read prefaces. I’ll cover three things briefly. 1. Autobiography vs fiction. 2. Setting and time. 3. Use of citations.

1. A writer I know, every time he was asked if his work was based on fact, used to say, “everything that is not made up is absolutely true.” Funny, but it actually doesn’t cover all the possibilities. Something can be neither true nor made up. This would be a misinterpretation or distortion. Something can be both true and made up. This might be the definition of great art. In *Triage*, I have used many chunks of data from my own life, and yet none of the characters is essentially strongly similar to any living person.
2. *Triage* is set in Texas in the mid 80’s, for several reasons. One of them is that this is the last time Texas was Texas, and even then it was changing rapidly. Also I wanted my characters to invent Home Depot, which they could not do if it had already been invented. I have used many real events and real people as background and setting. In particular, I really know nothing whatever about Saks Fifth Avenue, so the Saks in my text has little to do with the real corporation. I’ll leave it named Saks though for reasons you can easily gather from the text. Nothing I say about it is anything but complimentary so the issue of defamation doesn’t really come up, I don’t believe, and neither does using their trade name for monetary gain, as this text is free. Still, I may have transgressed the last taboo. You can curse, swear and blaspheme, you can describe obscenities, you can defame, lie or distort, but you still have to be careful of taking the name of a corporation in vain.
3. The style of *Triage* is late modernist in using stream of consciousness, formal experiments, and pushing the envelope of language, though I have tried to make the text more accessible than high modernism was. The salting of numerous quotations and citations is appropriate for these characters and this text. For centuries, embedded citations and quotations were thought to add depth, allusiveness and literary homage to a text, besides preserving and re using thoughts and sentences of supreme beauty. Texts still make allusions, but now mostly to recent pop culture, which may or may not be recognizable to readers as short as a decade later. But the old classics and canon, which in theory was accessible to everyone who was well read, is no longer recognizable to most readers. So there was a period of time when using allusions was a way to alienate readers, and struck them as merely pretentious. Now however I believe we have entered a new period. Anyone with a smart phone or computer can “recognize” any quotation with a tap of the finger. Hopefully, this reader will enjoy discovering the origin of quotations she likes and will skip the ones she feels like skipping.

Triage

"Why, the miserable little weasel," Rose exclaimed. In the grit on her tenement foyer's floor lay her brother's embossed business envelope; in her slender horsewoman's hand, "A pink slip, I kid you not. What a turd. Mooooom!"

Actually, Rose had rarely suffered that impulse. And lately Mom, Fiona, phoned HER, daily. The solid ring of Rose's indestructible black rotary, calling, imperious or plangent, through her loping sixth floor-through walkup, whose light, from three sides, infused her creamy skin and decor, in contrast to carved walnut moldings, a smooth tan and sungilt mahogany hair. Mom's building, antique scout/interior decorator brother Davey's finds, the patchwork tan Rose earned racing a bike.

"Oh, Mom. Lisken, afore you get started, I'm going to need a little extra this month."

"God, Davey hasn't fired you, has he? I just knew it. Something. I wondered what that lunch at Schrafft's was all about. Davey hates that place."

"Mom!"

"I knew he was upset. Otherwise he'd know I, The Plaza--Russian Tea Room, if it's not too crowded. Thinking of me as some respectable old body to be placated, I guess."

"Mom." Rose wriggled with impatience. The irony was like needing to pee. Because, though the family mythology held that Rose, dark, didn't resemble anyone, she'd been struck, watching a home movie picnic, by their identity of movement, so she could envision her mother's own parallel agitated dance before the teak phone table in her Scarsdale breakfast room, commanded by glass cabinets of Spode ware.

It'll take minutes just to get Mumsy back on track. Getting a check out of her is like winkling coins out of a storm drain.

"Both of you underestimate me, you know," her mother said. "I may not be as clever or modern--what do they call it now? evolved as my children, but you got smart, uh, genes from, um, not just your poor dad."

"Mom."

"Well what is it?"

"I'm just doing a few races on the Coast, is all."

"Rose, don't be blowing smoke and mirrors at your Mom. You've cried wolf too many times to pull the wool over my eyes now."

Rose groaned. Mumsy's twitterpated charm and mixed metaphors. Rose settled in for the duration.

Fiona laughed. "And Rose, no distracting me with... literary...either. --What am I going to do with you? Even Leo--"

"--Mom."

"What."

"I think you may've misinterpreted your main clue. I think David likes Schraffts. I heard him call them 'post retro.'"

"Post retro?"

"Mmn."

"Can that be good?"

"It's hard to figure, isn't it? As a rule of thumb, though, I think, uh, what do you call it--double meanings, puns--layering--is positive. Unless he's quoting someone."

"Or if it takes more than two words."

"Precisely."

The next day.

"Do you hear a buzzing sound?" (Fiona)

"Not really. I mean this is New York, there's always....All your phones are....Mom? What are you on, the Princess? The one with the button that starts the answering machine when it hits your chin?"

"Rose, I really, you shouldn't tease all the time. Sometimes one has to be serious. It gets annoying. No. I do hear buzzing. I'll call you back from the other, another...."

"Can you hear me?"

"Well of course I can hear you. I mean, that's like 'Are you awake?'"

"Well I can't. Now it's two people talking about software." Fiona snorted. "You know I can't bear that."

"Mom! Am I doing it? What do you take me for? a ventriloquist?"

"Rose? Can you hear me? Rose. I'm going to try another phone."

"Please." Dial tone. After all, I'm unemployed. What else do I have to do? Ride.

Crisp air, only mildly fetid, wafted in Rose's windows. Those that opened. She was still hot from riding, even after her shower.

"Rose? Rose, where is Davey?"

"I, uh, his note said Trinidad. Doing a house."

"But Miriam told me he was in Cassis, and his office says San Miguel de Allende."

"Doing what, studying watercolor? You can't even own a house in Mexico. I think we can rule that out. Red herring. He was sick as a dog last time, and you can't even ride there."

"Well, where could he be then?" Fiona bore down, taking Rose's mildness as passive resistance. If it resists me I know it's real. Shit, and I forgot the damn mulch again, too. Stupid vegetable garden.

"Rose!"

"Hmm."

"I'm worried."

"Mum, you're always worried. When you concentrate."

"Rose, damn it--

"OK. Sorry. Peace. Listen, I do know that screenwriter--what's his name? from One Fifth?--was trying to get him down to Wimberley for a river house."

"Wimberley? Where on earth is that?"

"Oh Mom, it's in the Hill Country. Near Austin." Rose stretched her bike-stiff neck irritably. Mold assailed her sinuses, a siren ascended from Carmine street. What she really wanted was the roast beef calling from her fridge. Pumpernickel. Stone ground mustard. Coke on ice. Savor her new copy of VeloNews.

"I know the old places get full or ruined or old or unchic or whatever but I still can't understand why anyone would go to Wyoming or Montana. You can't even fly there without spending hours in one of those ghastly hubs."

"Mom, really, even if you don't remember the Hill Country's in Texas you must've heard of Austin." An indescribable din suddenly filled Rose's airshaft. "Best winter riding in the US, incidentally," she added, shouting. "Direct flights from Newark: Continental. Or, if you must live in Westchester, a one stop from LAG. You can hide on the plane if Dallas pains you. Texas."

"Same thing. And stop distracting me. --What is that racket? Can't you go into Davey's office and snoop?"

"Mom the embarrassing fact is David changed the lock." Rose pulled the phone to her bedroom window for a look. Below, a bearded man was attempting to bisect a huge cast iron double washtub with a sledge hammer. El Super. "Damn! Mom you wouldn't believe-"

"Changed the lock?..."

Rose was hauling at the window, phone tucked between jaw and shoulder. One sash weight was fallen. Her struggle dislodged the handset, which clattered onto the red pine floor. Rose heaved the window straight and then brought the unwieldy mass down with a shoulder drop. The twisting and wrenching seemed to do her neck good. Pleased with her handiwork, she picked up the phone.

"Rose? Rose!"

"Yep."

"I had no idea things had come to such a pass. What happened? Give. Changed the lock!"

"I think more to hide his trail than...but still."

"Really!"

"Shall I fly down to Wimberley to look for him?"

"Sure, and pedal round those hills or whatever all day for weeks. He'll still be hiding in San Juan des Pins or Sint Maarten and I won't be able to reach either of you."

David stood before his polished granite sink and Secessionist mirror lathering sandalwood froth into his wanton cheeks with a lavish antler-handled badger brush. He was contemplating buying an inlaid straight razor (so beautiful, but there must be a reason no one uses them anymore) and firing his sister. Rehashing his decision. Could not put it down. One of those squirrel wheels. Made even his own brain ache with impatience sometimes.

It was roughly noon: one cannot pull a nickel hunter watch out of a hanging pants pocket when one's hands are soapy. He took in a deep breath of foamborn steam, unguent. Rose had been worse than an inconvenience. A pain more exquisite, finally, than another round of family discussions about what to do with her. Which he'd succeeded in avoiding--so far anyway.

David loathed discussions. Mum still had the ability to embroil him in absurdities not so much against his better judgment as by clouding it. Sometimes her proposals finally seemed reasonable only because he got too bored to think them over any longer.

He picked up a plastic Gillette with distaste. Its grip-frets vexed his fingerpads. But the gold singleblades are clumsy, obsolete; the Father's Day models effete--even garish--until debased by weeks of caked foam, when, sudstained, they decrepe grey as cats in the moldy dark.

Amber gaze fixed to unshorn jaws, David recalled excruciating discussions suffered at Mum's behest. That videotape distributor, projecting as little inclination to employ him as he....Videotape sales, forsooth! Well, Mum once suggested the ministry too:

"But, Mum, I don't even believe in God."

"Oh, none of them do anymore these days. They're well-educated, you know. I don't think the Jesuits ever did. You know, I asked--Father Paul, remember him? You know what he said? With that distant smile:

"’Hmm,’ he said, '”*God*,” yes, an interesting concept, to be sure....’"

David suspected Father Paul might've been putting Mum on, like as not. Subtle casuist. After all, who but Mum would expect a one word answer, in the vestry, from a pro?

But that videotape guy. Profiles misbegot as Cezanne's: same chalky darkhued ambergris skin tones too. He'd licked illshaven lips as he avoided David's equally shamed eye. David shuddered. Where had Fiona found him, and how had she twisted his arm?

Long ago, fortunately. Long before, that is, David had discovered, in NY, that he could resell paintings, bric-a-brac and furniture bought at estate auctions to interior designers for double what he paid. The resulting income had been decent for a single guy. Living in a Tribeca loft--once a piecework sweatshop--borrowed from Mum. Its abandoned obsolete electric loom converted to a clothes rack, the zinc worktable to dining.

And that income required but small knowledge of antiquities; required, instead, incestuous but platonic relationships with decorators of all four sexes, who demanded only responsive charm--and brunches lunches cappuccino drinks dinners parties. The fewer but more lapidary David paid for, the greater his eclat.

Other deals followed, happily necessitating a small but bright SoHo office attached to some uninsulated storage space. Manned telephonically, mornings, by his sister. BCE. No more.

His incorruptible--this was the rub--sister. Rose did not give and she did not take. A manner burnished as her skin.

David frowned thoughtfully at his Santa Claus face. The lengthening hairs on the ends of his shortening brows bristled. The frown made him look not unlike the French cycling champion Bernard Hinault, he decided. The Badger. He tried a Badger snarl but it destroyed rather than enhanced the resemblance.

David sighed. Unctuous vapor smoothed his windsprint-chafed bronchia. Well, put it behind.

David shaved down and forward from the temple to the jawbone and to the edge of an imaginary (merely soapy) Vandyke; then up from the sides of the neck over the same area. Then down from chin-line to Adam's apple, then up over the same area. Finally (trickier skin soaking longer) Moore shaved down from his nose to his chin, then up over that same area.

This invariable procedure--self invented but for advice, taken long ago from a teen pamphlet, to shave first with and then against the direction of hair growth--had evolved quickly, and hardened into a ritual. It took about ten minutes.

And rarely failed to sow some measure of calm among his anxieties, like sand on fire, or that liquid tranquillity icy bourbon or Ativan seeps into the blood. And Roman baths are guilt-free, too, comparatively. He'd suffered some bad spins with meds, though he had to admit they seemed necessary, at least some of the time. Not a pleasant admission. One likes to be normal.

But then (David's rumination flowed back) Rose was so superb a rider. He pictured her slashing calves spinning long cranks. Such fluidity forgave much. Begged--required--support.

Almond smell of her skin.

An insidious turbulence simmered from behind his stomach to his throat. It's hard enough getting along with clients when you try. When you possess some demonstrable skill at it.

Rose. A free spirit. At his expense. No problem--as long as she didn't take him down with her. Hard enough staying afloat yourself.

David considered, instead, the climbing intervals he performed that morning. Pre-nap. Considered for perhaps the hundredth time whether exhausting repeated sprints up big hills would keep him from being dropped by the break in his next race.

David sighed again. Rose climbed so well for a woman too. That sinuous dorsal rhythm, empathic to his own kindred loins. Bike racing. A dream difficult to awaken from. Real life is slow, its goals muddy. No adrenaline rush, no blood pumping, no endorphins. Instead, satisfactions so subtle as to defy definition, only palpable when absent. All right, devastating when absent.

Could he have given her a separate office? But then, rearranging his whole shop....

Oddly enough it had not been obvious that her obvious contempt for his clientele had hurt his business. Her effect had required some thought.

Everything seemed to require some thought. Even faits accomplis.

But even delicate imbalances could founder an emotive enterprise like his. And then he wouldn't've gotten anywhere. Such as it was. Interior Design. Still, if some clients had been offended, there was always turnover. Others may have been brought closer.

Uncomfortable with analysis, David preferred to feel his way. He could be accurate without knowing causes. Working and reworking data only bamboozled him. Perhaps, he had at first hoped, Rose's unfortunate (ugh, patronizing, call it austere) manner might throw his own diplomacy into relief; or reinforce his clients' image of themselves as a cut above their profession: educated, successful, Romantic failures, on the model of the witty, martini drinking Ad exec/novelist manque who 'sold out' for wealth and irony.

Ach, what a bother. David's own mercantile charm consisted largely of implying to each client that he shared her discreet irony about the business at hand. Whereas Rose had tended to make them feel they were bothering her with trivia, with pointless subtleties. The more confident found it funny, sharing her impatient sense of humor; a few hardasses took the position that for the amount they paid they could expect finely argued proofs of the existence of God, should they require them; but the middling, insecure clients were miffed, or felt hurt. Subtly, even unconsciously. And there weren't so many.

David sniffed. The pleasing scent of sandalwood effused the sybaritic moisture. Then too, his family trouble had bred empathy in some clients. The sympathy vote.

And some people liked her. David did.

He grinned into the mirror, seeing if his discoloring tooth showed. He normally took growing less attractive in stride so he must have too much time on his hands today. Keep pleasantly busy and don't think. Cultivate your garden. Though Voltaire also said, more somberly, il faut creuser sa propre fosse: you dig your own grave.

A quote with many facets, when you turn it around in your mind, especially in the French. One must dig one's own...and fosse is more like "pit." Next time he spoke to his Belgian cousins, remember to ask.

But Rose's modus operandi forced him to think, and errant thoughts would wander afield into that nasty wood mentioned by Dante. The famous entrance to hell. Discovered by the pale cast of thought.

David rinsed and shook out his shaving brush until it again resembled a thistle. His wrist flicks crisp in his elbow.

The phone rang.

"Hey," David said, pushing a button.

"David," his sister's voice said.

David made a buzzing noise like phone static.

Gotta escrape, he thought. Take that Texas job, that screenwriter…Rafe? Yes, Rafe. How bad could it be? River house. Hellhound on my trail. Mum AND sister. The Furies.

His tummy knotted with guilt. All the shaving ritual soothing evaporated like mist from the mirror. Bourbon.

Dark, with her brother David's gold coloring resurfacing only as a burnished sheen on her silk-straight hair and rider's tan, Rose was prodigiously resourceful at anything she put her mind to, so she was certain she could find David. She could scout round mongst his clientele. He was orderly, he must've left notations in his calendar or correspondence or e-mail.

The Scandinavian bimbo David now had manning the phone (Rose's replacement--the new voice on the answering machine) could be tricked into admitting her, since David probably had been too embarrassed--he was congenitally indirect, an avoider like his dad--to have specifically forbid Rose the premises. He'd probably said "anyone," leaving Rose openings to blandly assert her way in. Or, after the argument, Rose could listen on the cordless she still had from his office. David wouldn't've forgotten, but he'd hardly have advised the bim to secure the lines. Too lazy and thrifty, for two things.

Another, more interesting option was assault. Given David's taste, the bim was probably a big blonde athlete--some underfunded Olympian?--but she wouldn't expect judo from a slender demure woman in a silk dress, nor anticipate the strength and extraordinary quickness--Rose killed airborne flies and mosquitoes with her bare hands--that made Rose one of the US' top bike racers. No money in it, but Fiona had plenty for two, Rose opined. The property in Scarsdale, Saks stock from Dad's options, other investments, the Greenwich Village tenement/storefront (once Al's Haberdashery, from before Dad joined Saks) whose top floor pied a terre Rose used. And an interior decorator son who turned down more lucrative work than he took. Like fly-in jobs, normally.

Rose thumbed through her address book. Useless to call David's travel agent. Too discreet, too cunning. Hmm. Rose chugged at a liter of spring water.

It wasn't just soft city life, she considered. Human beings as a species don't expect unheralded assault. Mammals don't. Even lions or rutting deer or sociopaths are accustomed to foreplay. Pawing, stamping, roaring, stoking. So Rose's moves could be gentle, finito before indignation could bubble. The best defense, as von Clausewitz remarks....

All the same Rose was acutely aware how few situations are essentially improved by violence. That's the mistake your sociopath makes, if you consider those people volitional. But there are cases, to be sure; and threats or rage can help too, used sparingly. Still, for the most part, unfortunately, negotiation's the key to life, despite Goethe's mot about resignation.

So even Rose's closest friends didn't necessarily know her proclivity for aggression. Which did alternately worry or amuse her mother.

So possibly just a tap to the solar plexus and a quick yank, locking the glass door behind el bim prostrato. By the time police arrived (were the bim to lose her head) the thing would be done.

But Rose saw no percentage in finding David--entertaining as it might be--unless Mom made it worthwhile. Like by becoming truly, rather than conversationally, worried. And once found, then what? David ought to leave New York more often, was Rose's opinion. He was absurdly attached to The City. For business reasons, he claimed. Smelly, expensive, dangerous, ungreen, inconvenient and with only Central Park to ride. Subsidized food and housing, though.

Awaiting a client, David sat outside the Cafe Dante, feet out, sipping an espresso macchiato. Exiled from my own office, hunted like a spy or mafioso, he whined to himself. He caught his tone and turned on it, mocking. A honest businessman. Harming no one. Sniffle.

He regarded his espresso cup benevolently.

Where do they get their stoneware? Umber outside, eggshell within, solid form. I'll ask.

The bitter coffee showed his edgy stomach little mercy. I miss my office.

A futile Lexus nosed by, searching for a parking spot. Wages of sin. The Orwellian wages of Running Dogs. Capitalist crooks hoisted on their own petard. You overcrowded the city, tax-starved the public sector of affordable parking.

The trick to living in New York, for someone with a high anxiety level, is pacing yourself. Not unlike bike racing. Call it scheduling.

Unfocus all the ambient harassment. Noise. Bruit.

Bruit. Pronounced brewy by cardiologists. In French--David was nearly bilingual--the word means merely noise, but some Homeric medical poet had memorably commandeered it for the sound of a morbid heart rhythm. Like his own, which was how David came to know the term. A bad childhood medical history he was only now trying not to recollect.

Yet tense people are drawn to The City, David thought. It gives them something for their tummy's furry little weasel to bite into. Hold its attention, distract it. People like an objective correlative to blame their anxieties on. Otherwise it’s them.

Yet overscheduling leads to borderline ideation. California dreaming. Hophead ambitions. So it's better never to do two things at once. Number the schedule, one at a time. Dangle your toes in the cappuccino.

David would get bored with his analysis by the time he meandered this far over this beaten track. He sighed. Internal life isn't as volitional or improvisatory or random as it seems. It's as compulsive as herbivore rumination. Or an obsessive's.

Drat that woman. Client, my ass. Why is she never on time? Being late yourself's no use. You arrive, unconsciously guilty and upset already, don't see her, and have to worry she's already left. At least in his office....

The dazing serum of city air swam hazed shimmered the billboards’ instructions’ neon as though inwardly from faint nausea. Kaleidoscopic. A visual lusciousness. At least for illiterates. Prismatic rainforest of artifice.

The Lexus doubleparked, disgorging silk-suited men David tastily suspected of being "made." Mafiosi dropping by their neighborhood club for an espresso doppio? One can fantasize. A calico cat also strolled by, crozier-tailed, sniffing the combusted air. Predators walking their garden in the cool of the evening. The comparison amused David, making him feel better.

Still, triangulating his sister, his mother and his clientele disbursed a metallic taste: herald of those corner-of-the-eye lightningbolt migraine flickers. Even before rent, projects, billing.

“High visibility deters thieves,” Moore read on a posted flyer. High thieves deter [our] visibility too, he added. He could worry a public sign like a ragged tooth. A reflex left over from Classics translation. Like doodle/spelling with Greek letters.

Time to go. Hell, too much monkey business. Take the Texas job? Escape, or at least put off, the inevitable family conference? Another unnavigable attempt to reason with mother? to get Rose to see someone else's point of view? David's tummy sank further. As though, finding itself trapped in the dark among strange unsentient organs, it panicked, diffidently.

"Ah Miriam. Brought the swatch, great! Mmm, texture. Hemp?"

"Rose, we've honestly reached crisis proportions, I'm sorry to say. Can't you find him? I've asked round much as I dare, and all I get is his own clients don't know where he is. His clients. We're talking about his business."

"Money."

"Yes, MONEY, Rose. Food rent respect prospects opportunities. Leisure. Sports. Rose, don't be hopeless. Please. I don't want to argue."

"Mom, I really and truly surmise he's in Wimberley--don't start that again, TEXAS: haunt of writers, film notables and Dallas chic. Texas being the country's new center of gravity, if you read the papers. I know politics bore you but you have heard of James Baker and George Bush if not Jim Wright. Texas Instruments? Ross Perot? Second largest population after California?" Rose rolled her neck, squeezing the trapezia with her free hand. She looked out her window at Carmine Street, awash with tourists and street people. Need to work on climbing. Hill intervals.

"Ah yes, Wimberley. 'Finest winter riding in America.' Oh Rose, we need you this time. I know he's moping. He gets depressed after fighting with you, and won't admit it. Self-medicating, probably. When he should be taking, what is it?--Pax something, Pax Romana--Paxil again. I can't imagine what he objects to. You hardly feel it."

"Possibly he misses orgasms and being able to sprint."

"Well St John's Wort then. Much better, anyway. Organic."

"I didn't think saints had warts--OK, bad joke. --You know, Mom, eating weeds never helped any of us. It was irresponsible. You--really, Mom--"

"—All right all right, let's not get into that again. Be hidebound and stiffnecked. No, wait, listen! Stop changing the subject."

"Well, but Mom, what's the point of finding him, precisely? I mean, then what? I drop a straitjacket over his head while he isn't looking? Pop him into the trunk of my rental car?"

"Very funny. Really, Rose. So negative. Really, you need to cultivate a more positive--OK, laugh, but Dale Carnegie did a lot for your Dad's career. I mean, really, one would think you're the one who's depressed. I mean, consider the alternative. You must help. I mean, this really is your fault this time, Rose. I know it isn't always, and I really don't say it is, either, though I know you think I do, but you need to be gentler with him. You know how much he loves you."

Rose groaned.

"Rose, it must've really hurt him to think he had to fire you."

"Hurt him? I like that. Poor guy. Is my eye bothering your elbow?"

"He must've felt he had no choice, Rose. Oh, Rose, what am I going to do with you?" Fiona, wrestling with her tangling phone cord, yanked impatiently. "Rose? Are you still?..."

"Yes, Mom. Leave the damn cord alone for a minute, will you? Fix it after."

"So you will help find him?"

"OOF. I see you won't send me to Wimberley without proof. So I'll get it. Du calme, ma belle. Though your assumptions about my venality...." Rose shifted the phone to her other jaw. She dug her thumb into the sore spot in her vastus medialis, rotating. "I know perfectly well you could scout your own contacts and find him easily as I can. David must be--I assume you can't because you're too upset or too lazy, or it's too embarrassing, ask for help tracing your own kid."

"And his reputation, dear. No one gives jobs to bolters."

"Well, Rose once more unto the breech again. Foof. Black sheep have no standards to maintain. Don't talk, I'm on the case. Sit by the phone and squeeze tight to your gold card."

In David's steel and marble foyer Rose bounced and stretched. A passing brown-suited man stared at her. Rose ignored him. When she felt limber, she took a few breaths.

It would be just like David's sense of humor to hire some black belt. Rose had never bothered to take a belt in judo, and she'd passed by the karate and tae-kwon-do crazes with hardly a second thought. Pure Japanese karate was, in Rose's opinion, hardly more than a kind of harmless dance (shoeless!) and the problem with even tae-kwon-do is that a black belt, no matter how fast, can't hit you without tendering a hand or foot. Or you move into his harmless short range and grab.

His blows land only if he creates enough incidental chaos to sneak a foot or hand around or through. And Rose made a point of knowing where all five of her opponents' appendages were at all times. This was considerably easier than, say, basketball, where you need to know where nine players are. Especially since a fist can't move freely and independently over 500 square feet, like a point guard.

Rose rang the bell left of the glass door. Hell, the bim (tall blonde athletic as expected) was wearing a loose shirtdress which obscured her solar plexus. Shit.

Big. Swimmer? Doesn't have the hulky stooped back, though, and too cut. Swimmers are smooth, porpoise-shaped.

And she also wore an alert look. Might indicate she's been warned. Or the look could be the faint unease Rose was used to inspiring. Her feline walk, something in the set of her shoulders, maybe the psychic distance between her quiet eyes and mobile face.

Like that saleswoman who'd leapt clear when Rose tried to snatch back a check she felt still belonged to her. Rose later discovered--in conversation inspired by Rose's admiration for this woman's reflexes--she'd been an unwanted child. Actually suspected her own mother of almost pushing her over a cliff once. Or had that been her nightmare? Same thing. Sociopaths, borderlines, some paranoids--New York boasts many remarkably alert people, for a world which hasn't seen war in generations.

Men were often intensely attracted by this intimation of danger. The kind of men, however, in whom Rose had no interest, or no longer had any interest. There'd been the celebrity period (the only one Rose was embarrassed about), the athlete period. Many athletes are smart, even brilliant, but they tend to be ill-informed. Rose didn't care to be the intellectual superior. She felt she'd neglected her own education, and held lovers to similar standards. By hindsight she thought she wasted too many of her Ivy League days jumping hunters and playing varsity tennis and basketball. Now she was looking, if at all, for an ironic broker. Someone who fit smoothly into a Bond Street suit.

The bim reached for the door with her left. Offwhite Swatch on her right wrist. A break! A lefty! Only four per cent of the population. Rose almost gasped with relief. The bim had to pull the door to her with her strong hand and block the opening with her weak side. And Rose was of the opinion no one on earth was quicker with her off-hand than she was with her right.

"Rose, I presume," the bim said drily.

"Ah, you've been warned, I perceive," said Rose, grinning. Have we been underestimating our intellect?

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm just dropping off the phone actually. I was at the Vic." Rose bent into her bag and held out the cordless so the underestimated bim had to open the door further to take it. She did, tensing almost imperceptibly.

"Well, that's that," said Rose, hoping to get the bim to stand down. "Goodness, what interesting earrings." Change of pace. Rose extended her right vaguely toward the dangling papier mache fish suspended from the bim's lobes. The bim pulled her chin back, jarring her own focus momentarily.

Rose cut and flipped the backs of her fingertips into the bim's Adam's apple. Only a tap, the point being neither to kill the poor thing nor deprive her of air. By the time an oxygen deficit came into play, Rose intended the whole exchange be over.

The bim choked. Her eyes, Rose knew, momentarily went spotty, so Rose dove left through her blind opening and whirled, using the back of the bim's shoulder to pivot. Shoved forward, the bim pulled back, righting herself desperately, choking, disoriented, spotty.

Now behind, Rose yanked her collar, accelerating the bim's rearward stabilizing movement. Now afraid of landing on her back--and choked again--she lurched forward. And also doughtily attempted to duck and twist to her left, in order to chop. Rose moved with her neatly, sending her flying through the open door.

Rose pushed hard to right herself and back up. Simultaneously, she swiped the heel of the bim's rear foot as it lunged forward for balance. So the bim's toes caught on her forward, fixed foot.

She sprawled on the rug. Landed creditably, though, tucking and rolling.

Rose shut the door. It had one of those pneumatic devices to slow it down, otherwise she would've just shoved, not bothering to trip.

Good, the bim was bagless and her shirtdress had no pockets. No key. Bag on premises. Rose turned the lock.

The bim was already sitting comfortably, legs tripoded, punching the cordless. No swimmer ever had legs like those. Wicked in (Lucchese?) boots. A rider?

"Elegant," she croaked at Rose amiably, without looking up from the dial. "Mille compliments."

A quickthinking lady herself. Righthanded, she might've been on the good side of the door now, or winning an unseemly struggle. Rose anticipated they'd be great pals. She drew the "closed" curtain.

Meanwhile, however. The bim's quick work with the phone stymied any attempt to get the number but Rose soon had the office handset to her ear as she hunted through her brother's desk and files.

"Erika!" her brother exclaimed, telephonically. Ah! some rare Davidian erotic warmth. The woman's stature was increasing by the second.

"Yep, it's me all right." Erika had a strong foreign accent. Hoarseness already waning.

"What's up?"

"I met your sister."

"I see." Well that did it for romance. So fragile, these manly libidos. Especially David's.

"Exactly. I mean, watch your words."

"Rose?" her brother said. "Rose, are you on?" Rose decided no purpose would be served by answering. "Erika. I think I don't need the whole story right now. How about just your present location, and Rose's."

"Welp, I'm sitting on my ass on the hall carpet. I've got the phone Rose kindly returned but no key. Rose is occupying the high ground, behind your locked door. So if you left evidence of your whereabouts lying about, you're blown. I think that's the expression."

Dutch. Terrific English though. Learned somewhere in the western US. Texas?

"Mmm," said her brother. His ah-what-the-hell sound. (Boy had no grit.) Good, that means the info's to hand. Agenda? Recent letters? Ah, here we go. Tax file: faxed receipt for a bed and breakfast in Wimberley, TX. Lot of bother for nothing.

Rose hit the second line and punched in the B&B number. She kept an eye on the first line's lit button to be sure Erika didn't tap in. The cordless had a switch, no lights.

"Can I make a reservation for Kate Strong for tomorrow? Good. And would you let David Moore know I'm coming? Kate Strong. Perhaps he could pick me up at the airport? I'll fax my confirmation and the flight number. Good, but listen, I'll have to give you the card number and all in the fax. Gotta run, sorry. Thanks so much." The real Kate was a Christy auctioneer David had been trying to lunch.

Rose punched in his travel agent's number. "Hi, Joan? Rose. Could you get me on the first flight to Austin tomorrow? No, not Boston, Aus-tin. Texas. Great." Rose considered the already booted PC. Nah. It would save her time and money but David might see the sender's address. Use Joan's fax. "I'll stop by in ten minutes. Bye. Sorry, gotta run."

Erika padded in on the balls of her feet, pumpless. Girl definitely knew a fight sport. But those legs! Too big for the road. Track rider?

And she obviously already knew about the spare key at the Dante Cafe too. A fast orienter. Far better employee than Rose, clearly.

"I'll go quietly," Rose said. "I give up. I never could find anything here anyway." She sighed helplessly. "Guess that's why I got sacked, huh?" Erika didn't look taken in.

"Say, Erika [oops!], since it's almost lunch time anyway, how about it? Has David taken you to Louie's yet? Well then. Fifteen minutes? I have a small errand first." Rose strolled briskly from behind the desk toward the inner office door. Erika crouched and raised her left.

"Truce," Rose said. She slid through the doorway. "Peace, actually." She flashed the V sign and headed out. "See you at Louie's."

Rose deplaned in Austin wearing a wide-brimmed flowered hat. David's crowd-scanning eyes, looking for Kate Strong, might dismiss the hat without bothering to identify the face under it. Rose figured once David saw her he'd give in--not sneak off and ditch her--but so much the better if she saw him first.

Of course David would register her walk even in peripheral vision but all the same she didn't intend to Chaplin her way through an airport. The hat made her look enough like Minnie Pearl already. Stay behind people on the ramp, move slowly, were about the most she was prepared to do. Rely on David's affection and sense of humor for the rest.

"Howdy Rose." Rose started slightly. David had been hidden behind the ramp door. "Welcome to Texas. Shall we pick up your bike? Baggage claim is straight ahead. You'll have to ditch the sombrero, though, if you expect me to walk with you."

Rose put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Oh fine," Rose said. "Where'd you get the skateboard?" She set down her bike case and eyed the Porsche with distaste. "How did you figure on getting a bike in there?"

"Belongs to Rafe," David mumbled. "You remember, my client," he added with growing energy. "The bald long-necked dude you said looked like a penis? In his hearing? --Fine thanks for picking up an ex-employee come uninvited."

"I forgive you. I'm sure you've thought of something."

"Wimberley is about 25 miles from here as the crow flies, about 40 by really fine Hill Country roads. I thought I'd take the luggage, we'd check the case, and one of us would ride. I got a nice little map here all highlighted. Wouldn't mind getting in a few more miles myself."

They had exactly the same inseam so Rose's saddle height would need only a half inch (longer male feet). David's torso was longer but her bars wouldn't cramp him long as he sat up on the brake hoods. In fact the sibs were remarkably equal in many sports, which meant David was, for example, a strong rider (mens' division) and Rose one of the best (women's).

"I need them worse than you," she said. “Nothing but shenanigans and stewing in planes for the past 24 hours."

"Well, let's sit under those live oaks on that--uh, grassy knoll--and put it together. Bring the Ciocc?"

"Yeh. The pedal and allen wrenches are in the sidepocket of the carry-on."

They sat on the grass after David checked it for fire ants.

"Hmm,' Rose said, looking around. "This IS what they call a grassy knoll hereabouts, isn't it?"

"Didn't know you'd been to Dallas. Oh, the Fortnum house."

"I can see if everything's flat and bare it'll stand out--but still, why knoll?"

"Folk memory of the auld sod? Texas State Highway Commission Lingo? Must say I've never heard any other real estate given that name. They do go on about bluffs."

"Vowel shift?" After checking the parking lot Rose shucked her pumps, jeans, underpants and blouse in favor of cycling shoes, shorts and jersey. "I think some clumsy early report christened it forever into history. A graded highway embankment baptized "Grassy Knoll."

"Field of fire for the second shooter."

After the bike frame and wheels had been pulled out, David carried the case back inside. Rose popped the wheels on, slid the saddle post in and tightened it, the stem and tightened it, repositioned the bars and tightened them, and finally screwed on the pedals and tightened them.

David returned with a couple double cappuccinos in styrofoam. He sat on the bermuda grass.

"Ah," he said.

"Uh huh."

They sipped, enjoying the warm weather and trim unpopulous landscaping. No traffic this time of day. Oleanders, pampas grass, ocatillo, yucca. A big blue sky shone through the noble limbs of the twisting live oak.

"I don't mean to utter a discouragin word," Rose said, "since I shore am grateful to be enjoyin skies not cloudy all day, especially this late o the year, but I was thinkin, them empty roads're a mite creepy when you're on your lonesome."

Rose's mock twang--just like the last time they rode here. David didn't approve. Her drawl could be kind of funny sometimes--Rose had a marvelous ear--but it tended to piss off the natives. Who, David felt, were fine folk when treated right, but touchy.

"You could carry this," he said. He pulled a small automatic out of his so far unneeded toolbox.

"What the hell is that, David?"

"A nine millimeter Beretta. Light--practically Campagnolo--but nasty, should the occasion arise."

"Ek. Bro, you've done an gone plumb loco. Even in Texas you can't carry a concealed weapon 'thout a permit."

"Who said anything about 'concealed'? See, it fits on this fannypack. I mean, you want it visible."

"David, I'm less afraid of rednecks in pickups than of shooting off my own ass when I stand up to climb. 'Honest to Gawd, Ossifer, I din know it were loaded.'"

"That's 'depity' round chere, I think, Rose. --But, please, lay off the drawl, though, will you? Else you really are going to get your ass shot off."

Rose hugged her locked knees to stretch her hamstrings, shook her neck loose. "Think I'll pass on the firearm, all the same. Thanks for the thought. Have you found anyone to ride with?"

"The Olympic team. Winter training here again."

"Cool. Any slots left?"

"You know they might, if you could get on with Eddie B. this time around."

"I'm not super keen on coaches even from free countries. What makes Poles so right wing, anyway? Eduard Borysciwicz, prima donna."

Rose rolled in about four, famished but otherwise in high spirits. David had moved from the B&B to a condo on the Blanco. Rose sank into its springfed jacuzzi with a pint Gatorade and liter spring water. She stretched her legs, gazing out over the limestone rockwork framing a view of the cypresslined crystalgreen river working its way through a small rapid.

"Riding in the morning, tennis in the afternoon," she said. David caught the quote from Marx, about life after the revolution. “Fishing in the morning, hunting in the afternoon.” Their speech, full of allusions to common experience, could be incomprehensible to infidels.

"Working with a contractor on a riverhouse in the afternoon for me. But the divine Olympians do plan a century every morning, 7 to 11."

"Paradise. Many thanks."

David handed her a frozen Margarita. The condo had a machine. "So no hard feelings?"

"If you call Mom and get back to your clients we're straight. She wants you back on Paxil but I think a hundred miles every morning will flush out the bad blood jes fine. 'And the doctor said.' A few pork ribs and brisket, some Tex Mex, that fake French place if we get unappreciative." Rose sighed. "After all, just think what they call barbecue back in New York."

"And Mexican." David looked vaguely into the colorless sky. "The local wines are mediocre but we don't have to drink them." He was massaging Rose's quads, moving down toward the gastrocs.

"Yow! Ouch. Why not invite Erika?"

"Somebody has to hold the fort. I lost my assistant."

"No fault of mine, bubba." Rose dipped her head back into the bubbles.

"Was too," David said, waiting till her ears re-emerged.

"Was not."

"Let's not get into it. Awapuhi shampopo?"

"Please. One other thing, not in the contract."

"Mm."

Oh fuck you, David. Miss Priss. "When you talk to Mum, can you convince her Olympic road racing is gainful employment, suitable for Protestants? I promise to butter La Borysciwicz. You can be my interpersonal skills coach."

"All you need do is shut up. Nod and smile at whatever he says. Pretend you're following all his advice with gratitude. That's the easy part." David discovered himself frowning. Stop it, Pecksniff.

"Yeah. Mom is unlikely to go for the Olympics as a career choice. No future for old Rose, again, eh?" It was hard to care, massaged by calciferous bubbles, endorphins flowing.

"There's not really that much future in interior design, as far as that goes....Money....I don't know. I think the Olympics can lead to many things, actually--just not for someone with your personality. I mean, you had Johnnie Weismuller, but now you have Mark Spitz. And you make him look like Dale Carnegie...."

They lay back in the bubbles. David's face went slack again. The wind in the cypress. Vague hunger.

After a while he said, "Interior design. Not really a manly ambition hereabouts. Though Erika tells me it's different in Holland. De Stijl, Mies van der Rohe....Still, I remain unenthused. Not something you want to tell Saint Peter. Nor can Home Furnishings fill The Existential Void....You were always the one with energy and purchase, I thought."

This is not sounding good, Rose worried. "Well, funny" she said gently "that's what I felt about you. I'd be in the soup again, fucking up one way or tother, but Davey was the fairhaired boy, toeing the line, attracting no special attention from the gods, as it were." Rose tipped the dregs of the drink into her mouth, searching the squat glass's belly with a strong, cleancut, deep cadmium tongue. A cloudless sky sang through the tiny olive leaves of the live oaks.

"I was what they used to call lazy. Then 'underachiever.' Now I think it's 'low grade chronic depression,' cf Mom & Co." David hunted the nearby rockwork for the mislaid margarita pitcher. "Yas, there's your 20th century in a nutshell. From Puritan ethics to neutral behaviorism to DSMIV neurochemistry in a single generation."

"It makes me nervous when you wax philosophic. Buck up, kid. Let the endorphins roll." Rose dug her strong fingers into her trapeziae, rolled her long neck. Dinner time.

"Odd we turned out athletic given Mum's...."

"Simple. We grew up next door to a gold medaller. Pa off-stage, building a fortune in retail. Besides, Granda's our major chord. Holy, Roman and apostolic. Plus liquid assets." Rose proffered her glass to David's rediscovered pitcher. Wine of the country.

"I've never understood why Jay was so generous with his time--even after discovering you were better coordinated than his own girls. He was a nice guy, but not that nice."

"Mmm, Davey, I think maybe you don't want to hear the whole story."

"You're right." Especially given his own memories. David now realized that if he had been gay, the good man's approach might've felt not only erotic but affirming of sanity, but at the time Jay's touch imparted guilt and disorientation. Surely nothing he could tell Mum.

"Nothing much ever actually happened, I hasten to add, afore defamatory rumors start circulating mongst your many rich personalities. We'll leave it at 'generous.'"

"There are many true histories."

"Precisely."

They laughed.

David added, "Especially since in your life experience 'nothing much' could describe an incident that would cause your average cloistered Roman virgin to fall on her sword."

"Or not."

"Or not."

"Precisely. Did we say that already? Too much tequila. Tee many martoonies. From here on in no more than a glass of wine with dinner for me. Goes right in the legs next day."

"'Your legs feel dreamlike and your head seems disinclined to become involved in today.'"

"Oh Davey, you even remember my letters. No wonder I can't find anyone else." The summer she rode Europe solo he was in the bin.

"I remember all kinds of....I coulda been a schola" David said in Brando's 'On the Waterfront' voice. Two Margaritas in a jacuzzi and Rose got sappy as Mom. No head. She surely wasn't one of these athletes who like to stretch the endorphins with Schedule I, II, III and IV additives; the energetic chaos of the playing field with stimulants and psychedelics. Unlike himself.

Fiona was worried about her kids. For the most part she took a laissez faire approach. Summerhill. But...Davey was making some money, but....so far just coasting on family contacts. His father helped build Saks into a retail empire and my father bought and sold small companies and real estate. A Knight of Columbus. Who outlived his own son.

Buddenbrooks. Don't be so depressing. Sound like Davey: even Rose didn't suffer and deny untreated depressions. Though Rose might be worse. Fiona didn't know what to make of her. No one in the family had been an athlete. What kind of work is that?

Being a housewife isn't truly respectable anymore--not even master of the castle, social secretary, keeper of the keys and family strawboss the way she'd been (Fiona couldn't imagine how the busy rich ran their domestic economies anymore, those in sales their entertaining, but never mind) and anyway Rose shows no leaning or prospects in that direction. Of course wild girls often settle down just fine but Rose....

What Fiona heard and borrowed from Simon (the shrink she'd been going out with) about character disorders--it was confusing, Rose didn't seem to fit any of the criteria rubrics--but Fiona sometimes suspected Rose was capable of anything.

That bully (Quentin? Justin?) Rose shoved into the deep end of the pool. Of course he had been chasing Davey with pruning shears. Rose's blue eyes looking at you so cleanly as she apologized you knew she was unconvinced she'd done anything wrong.

"Capable of anythin'." Like that horrible man in that movie what was it Chinatown. "Goddamm cheap Florsheim shoes." Fiona smiled. Though in the movie Jack Nicholson wasn't dressed like a bounder. He had to be glamorous. Or the money decided he did. Lost the whole low-rent Chandleresque point, but who was to know? Polansky? A Pole, married to a pretty face from the Midwest. Meissen face. Horrible friends, obviously. A little boy who liked little girls.

Oh dear. So difficult to keep your mind on the problem at hand. So big and diffuse. The day's obviously insufficient to the evil thereof.

Of course you meet people with no ambition who seem happy. Not that one approves entirely, necessarily, but her kids could hardly be described as happy. Rose perhaps (Fiona suspected her of becoming a different being when out of sight) but Davey, certainly not, under the meaning of the act. Major depression.

How was she to know? They didn't even have that diagnosis then. Could it be hereditary? Have to ask Simon if Granda's manic depressive, what is it now, cyclothymic disorder? Bi-polar? And Al's horrible death. He was a good husband. No one but Simon and the cardiologist knew about the stroke before the second heart attack. That there were two MIs, consciousness between. A full day.

At least it had lasted no longer. Kids hadn't even had time to get home yet. See a deranged father. Such a gentle man to die such a vicious death. "Fuck you," his literal last words. They hadn't always gotten along, sure, but it'd never been that bad. Famous last words: another Catholic myth exploded. Fuck you. Etiology not a hellbent soul, but a cerebral venous accident. Apoplexy. (A salve of medical poetry. *The most exquisite physicians' mild and med'cinable eye*.) Transient ischemic incident. TIA.

Greek and Latin did help. Peculiar, my old classics teacher was right (imbecile sadist) at least now the pain's past. The agony of the second aorist, those endless declensions.

Perhaps I caused it. Whoever heard of a depressed kid, then? The epithet would've sounded like a punchline. Times change. As Marx said (look at his rep!). We were so busy then. Al at Saks, trips, dinners, so much expected of me, entertaining, Horace Sachs almost weekly. So many changes. Upward, but still.

Four moves. Carmine street, midtown, that first house, then the Scarsdale property, remodeling, what a barn it had been.

Have to ask Davey if you can restore crepe de chine drapes. Ask someone else, he was in such a foul, uncommunicative, besides he wouldn't bother to find out. Remembers anything he ever heard or read and that's enough. What Me Work? all through St Paul's, from some comic book. Mad magazine? That TV show, from the Bud Schulman book? with that actor, Gilligan's Island. What a load of tripe you store, raising kids, even badly.

It was nice to know their language--poor Al never had a clue--but it was strictly from hunger, when you came down to it. As they used to say about bad money, trash drives out....

Bad money. What on earth was that all about? Bad money. Throwing good after bad? Can't remember anymore. Al said I had a memory like a wood chipper.

He never planned a dinner for 40. Must say he appreciated ....So many husbands condescended then. Mean. Still do. Not he. A gentleman. Natural, a la Henry James, since he was Jewish, didn't even prep.

Davey's trip to San Miguel. Clever. Saltillo tile, gorgeous stained glass, the artisan in Mexico. Colors startling to Anglo-American eyes but certainly seem to work with the light in those photos--Davey can do anything, marvelous prints. Perhaps we've all been too stuffy, here in the sepia and pastel rain. Land of the Cimmerians, perpetual mist and shadow, speaking of Greek.

That Dutch girl, worrisome, one knew nothing about her, have to check, who do I know knows Holland? So familiar, yet remote; not France or England or even Germany, yet....seems to have a good effect on Davey all the same. Smart, energetic. Erika, with a K. David said interior design is man's work there. Putting me on? The light of Vermeer. Erika van der Meer. Good.

What had Rose said? About how Erika and David met? Quoting some Netherlandic Exchange Commission or something, on a trade mission? To Texas! In that amusing accent (Dutch officials trying to twang their English, congenially. So difficult to do right, clever Rose). "See, y'all hev a loot of mooney, but no art; vhile we hev a loot of paintings, but never enough mooney; soo..."

And they claim the Dutch are good in sales. Surely not. Too Nordic one suspects. Making fun of the client, tricky. A locker room art.

European economy troubled now. No wonder. The Dutch buying a painting from each artist every year! Guilt for Van Gogh and Rembrandt.

Still, education will tell. Here illiterate populists will wreck everything. Or not, who knows? We bumbled our way into Berlin twice this century, once more!...Practice, not theory.

On a fabulous errand for her new boss, Erika van der Meer deplaned in a Mexico gay as a Caballero ad--those endless, beautifully shot cigarette commercials shown as leaders in Dutch movie theaters. Her rusted Fairlane taxi seemed at least as romantic as their 4-by-4's phoneboothed full of fresh-tanned unshaven blond models, exuberant with faux outback camaraderie.

We're hicks. What American movie still portrays bad driving as glamorous?

The high altitude prick of Mexico's breath passed along her arms and shoulders, raising fine blond hairs. Ah, Popocatapetel. The serrate cone fresh, pale above the dry red dirt and lead emission stained grime, already gathering to itself an impressive heat. Scent of jasmine. An actual burro porting twin milk cans and a sombreroed, mustachioed, sandalled, dark-eyed....too cool!

It was no dream, flying to third world countries, New York--other Dutch design graduates had done likewise--but it was the image of success at 25. Milan. Tokyo.

Better, Mexico. The saint dangling from the cracked rear view mirror, dusty seats smelling as if the cabbie and his whole family slept there. Erika's nostrils arced wide in appreciation of the exotic, the human. Passing stucco, arranged European into squares and real streets, with precipitate sidewalks. Neighborhoods of ochre, chartreuse, canteloupe; others sober as France, but for fanciful wrought-iron and Primitivist cement decoration. Postmodern avant la lettre.

She'd learned Spanish more or less on the plane. In the tremor of the jet, vibrating as if from within her skull. Not hard after Italian, Latin and French. Enough, she hoped, to supervise the stained glass David had designed in San Miguel de Allende: a mountain resort also known in Holland. She recalled its thin sharp air, implying threats among the early shadows, incising its pave's sunnyside, rustling the hot bougainvillea. The artisan's glass-blowing atelier was in Mexico City (called merely, and exotically, Mexico--Mekhiko--by natives). David's standing river waves, bald cypress (fantastic olive fans, almost oaks! not the drear European variety, obviously), ribbed limestone, sprays of ivory yucca, even an amusing ring-tailed cat.

David’s riverhouse was tremendous. Emerald water. Amethyst water. Its perfume--literal eau de vie--enfolding you. Mastering. The power of this new land. The strength.

You could own a river! A stretch, anyway, of an 'unnavigable' one. David had explained the law.

He already knew about tubing, white water kayaking, hunting, the Texas Railroad Commission; had met elected judges and sixth generation ranchers, learned the flora and fauna. Bluebonnets, winecups, Indian blanket and paintbrush, live oaks, mesquite--and that bone limestone, so like French rockwork, lambent with the light of the Loire: Notre Dame, but also every village townhouse, farm building or potting shed in the Massif Central. Texas varieties in rose madder, several greys, some ugly oranges (always a difficult color). And the white, glazed with Texas light. Heat laying its weight on the occiput hair. The harsh glare of midday decanting.

But also the lurid viridian evenings, sub-riparian, presaging those velvet southern nights, starstrewn, drunk with moonlight you could read by, etching yaupon holly on the buffalo grass. Filling your softened sinus as with linden tea, fragrant.

David Moore. The man was what the English call a quick study. The jack-of-all-trades interior design requires. A palimpsestic art like film or medieval cathedrals. Uomo facit. Modernist collage, postmodernism's eclectic wit.

A renaissance man--even an athlete like herself--that golden skin, the amber eyes, the wellturned molding of his joints, hands and feet. The neat elegance in proportions smaller than hers--in the past she'd admired stature as much as the next Dutch girl, perforce, given her own.

Erika was as excited as a teenager. She uncrossed her legs to dry the damp. She was passing a square, then glimpses of hidden Spanish gardens imploded in bougainvillea; yellow and magenta flowering trees whose names she didn't know in any language. Hardest to translate: words learned on childhood walks. Birds. Flowers. Trees.

A smell of rot: threats of paradise: jaguar urine. Erika the White Huntress.

The tropics. Gauguin forever changed our vision of Eden from Italianische Reise to Tahiti.

But David himself had no respect for his metier. Made her anxious. Hollow under the heart. It was not, Erika surmised, any common or garden want of self-confidence. She pulled her legs under her to counterbalance her rubbernecking head, smelling low grade Mexican diesel, papaya, charred corn flour, incompletely combusted leaded gas. Equilibrium settled back into her wide hipsockets. No, David was intensely self-confident, almost delusionally. The cycling nonsense. Too old to race. Time to put aside childish things.

Assailed on all sides and from within Erika was exhilarated, sleep deprived, jetlagged. Pink dust sifted dry through the taxi's jammed window; broadcast itself democratically over every part of the road, its horse-drawn truck-wheeled carriages, women in black mantillas or Indian serapes, heads covered, men in worn straw sombreros and unbleached cotton, the occasional ribby dog with sores or tumors.

Chimes of the cathedrals and churches. Bells clashing in no particular order, tunes discordant, cheerful. Storms of color.

Erika herself had long since given up skating. The handwriting on the wall said her one Olympiad was as far as she'd get. No medal, but it was enough. Perhaps she should've stuck with karate, but the trainers rated her VO max higher than her reflexes.

Time to move on. Erika was a girl who studied the main chance. Knew her limits. Already intensely social ethnically, she learned to ask herself, what do they want from me? Getting along with people makes up for innumerable IQ points, and she had enough. Not as many as David, some of her profs.

Drivers played a hesitant, desultory form of chicken at the crossroads. The big Ford engine roaring at every stop. Idle made it stall. Blue smoke spread underneath like a skirt, like hen feathers sheltering chicks. Tendrils climbed the window. Lurch of drive. Acid blue. Peau de chagrin...chickenskin? no, goosebumps!

So skating's day had passed. The endless training, in the summer mostly on a bike, as skating is almost the same sport as the cycling events called Kermissen. Known in the US as criterions, crits, Erika knew. Both done in swift closed loops--city blocks--among a pack with legs pumping and wind resistance cut to the bone. Sweat drying from the fierceness of the dream. She was too big for road racing. No climber. Be realistic.

Unlike David. An artist in the Romantic sense, perhaps. Retro 50's. Paint lefthanded, support angst-ridden brow with right. Or raise bottle. Not that David drank.

Immense ability. Perfect recall for color, an eidetic memory for hue lacking even in hot architects at her school, in fine painters. David could match a vase to remembered drapes without a swatch.

Shape too. Buy a frame knowing it fit the painting. Measure an allen wrench socket by eye. All dismissed by him as parlor tricks, unrelated to genius, even talent.

Not uncorrelated, Erika thought. An architect must see his building in his mind; he can't impasto his way like a painter.

The cab stopped for a light, only because a stream of tourists blocked the cobbled road. Vendors of cheaply made sandals--where did they sell huaraches?--and Taxco imitations in dubious silver dangling from handcart roofs. Scents of strawberry and passionfruit flattering her eager palate. Brown dusty putti underfoot. Licorice eyes. A Dutch tourist would say, "O, wat an droppie!" at these dark eyes, lekker as gum drops or Lab pups. (Real humans being blue-eyed blond.)

Cynicism's a waste of time--'stop whining, get a life,' the Americans say--but David was no ordinary cynic. She approached his case with a circumspection beyond her usual tactful caution. The deep flaws scared her like a sense of imminent ruin. But the talent! The gifts! A man made of gold, as though touched by Midas, skin, hair, even eyes.

Leaning on the windowless door, weight of her unflexed shoulders folding like dough, Erika looked the beggars and children selling gum right in the eye. They sought more demure prey. Black roasted animal corn, sugar cane, what're those white slivers on ice? Thin--goat milky?--smell.

Still, she wished David would surrender his athletic dreams too. ("When I was a teenager I was in love with my bike. Now I see it as a job" said one of her ex’s, turned pro.) If dreams they were. Erika had to rely on his more verbal sister for much of her understanding. Rose. David talked better, but less. Too many gaps. He was over Erika's head, and she recognized it wasn't just the culture. Still, the ideal partner for a girl with an eye for the next rung up. Synergy.

She loved Rose almost equally. A necessity for an affair with him. Rose was easier to follow, which made for more affection if less of the awe that inspires love. (Anyway, a backburner emotion in the ambitious. It may flame as hot, but it can't take up as much room on the stovetop.) There's something equally dark in Rose but you can forget it much of the time. It isn't pervasive in the manner of speaking and thinking.

Rose's little judo demonstration was neither here nor there. No blood drawn, and any serious Olympian has had her ass kicked plenty. Bow, shake hands. This secular occasion was no cause for envy or admiration, obviously. No cause for a rematch--they weren't children, or even competitive athletes any more—but were there one, Rose might get a chance to see it come out quite differently. Meanwhile, her genuine, physical affection, high spirits. As comforting and relaxing as the coffeebreaks American don't take. Her twin-like paralleling of David's stream of consciousness, like railroad tracks. Rose of Castile (Cast Steel).

Texas. Sunday training ride, a full Century--100 miles in four hours. David was following his sister's wheel, watching without often seeing her throw her thighs and calves, the reactive tremors in the thin layer of fat on her buttocks as she worked her pull at the head of the pace line the Olympians formed. Behind him and to one side David felt the nervous stride of US #1, Lance Armstrong. Erika a few riders back.

Rose's ass really does have a marvelous quiver. David was tucked in tight enough to her windshadow to smell her. If only her passage through life cut as clean as her aerodynamics through this morning's coldly resistant air. If only her telephone manner had flowed smooth as her stroke. She had driven more clients away than she attracted, he concluded, once again. Why couldn't he ever let a decision go? It'd been a slow hemorrhage, perhaps, but his had been a thinblooded enterprise, then. Couldn't afford to offend people in this new service-driven world. Even now, where could she fit, post Olympics?

David increased pedal pressure. Time to play some lead. He looked smooth, his body compact, his round shaved knees unseparate from his thighs. His pedal stroke had some of the young Lemond's high stepping elegance.

The wind impeding his pull required his brain to shut down some neurons--reduce cerebration to life support only--so perforce David let the subject rest.

This is why one rides.

Travel-jangled Erika soaks in the jacuzzi with both Moores. All of them just back from the ride; Erika from a week in Mexico too. Tired and talked out, they submerge in separate ruminations, which surface desultorily in speech. The river's up, muddy from last week's Norther. Ozone. Electric air flogs the cypress boughs.

This Roman pastime still strikes Erika as weird--80 degrees already--but it is relaxing. David seems to need it as much as Rose--in training. They're massaging the lactic acid out of each others' legs.

David still mentally replaying his tactical errors. Racers ride in a pack--the peloton--so as to take turns breaking through the wind resistance up front. A rider wins either by sprinting fastest at the finish or by accelerating out of the peloton earlier: "attacking" to form a "breakaway" group of one or more riders. Counterattacking riders may bridge up, or the whole peloton may reel them in--chase them down. David went out too early. Or was just not strong enough to stay out? Dropped by the break, he rejoined the peloton, but was by then too beat to sprint.

Once warmed up, the men and women had split. Like the men, the women sprint up all hills, and for city limit signs. Honing hearts. (The only gal with a resting pulse over 40 is called Thumper.). The hill jams are engineered to drop riders (you regain the peloton's wind shelter fast or never--it's as hard to ride 100 meters behind as 100 meters in front) but the city limit signs are for the pure sprinters. And to teach non-sprinters some skills they can use to beat a small breakaway someday.

Speed power endurance: sprinting climbing time-trialing. The international language of the bike. Desperanto.

They'd rolled out at dawn, toward Fischer this time instead of the big climb to the south. Calves stiff but still fresh. Leg warmers and zip jerseys removed and tucked into rear pockets as the day warms. First 14 miles of deserted, rough, accidented road, crossing the Blanco through an avenue of cypress and sycamore, then up the dry plateau, never again under cover, alongside juniper (genever gin reek of Dutch cafes), cactus in bloom, red and gold agarita bushes, slender does still feeding, very few bucks (hunt-shy). Armadillo, coon and fox are hid for the day, but Erika sees roadrunners (beep beep!), scrub jays (which to her are sapphire magpies) and cardinals (scarlet--European birds are subdued browns, grey-blues and roses: what birders here call LBJs--little brown jobs). Amazing. The dun earth and sunbleached olive flora take some getting used to for an eye accustomed to verdure, but Erika's premium skill is adaptation.

Fischer is hardly a village. In fact, merely a general store/dance hall no rider has ever seen open. Preceded by some dogged climbing out of the Blanco, but nothing as serious as the 306 hill or the one Erika later descended to get back to town. So the riders are still fresh when they approach the sprint for the city limit sign. Fischer.

The sprint's flat too. Tailwind.

Natural terrain, that is, for the born power-sprinter, even if not in premium shape. Sprinters are born not made.

Coming off her pull Rose slides over to Erika to murmur "Take my wheel." Erika tucks in. The tempo boosts as riders up the pace to put the bikes into big sprinting gears.

Four hundred yards before the sign Rose jumps clear of the pace line, Erika glued to her wheel. The other women react, so Rose now pulls a train. Riders jockey for position, another attacks left, instantly countered by Rose and her group, grabbing the wheel of the attacker. Rose attacks again to the right and again the peloton snakes behind her. More jockeying for position, especially for Rose's wheel, since everyone figures she's spending energy this early to set up, rather than take, the sprint, but Erika fends off nudges and elbows with ease. Training, they tend to be cautious--no one wants to fall, perhaps snap a collarbone and put herself out for the season--but even in a race it ain't easy to dislodge a 175 lb Dutch sprinter from a wheel she wants.

At 200 meters Erika breaks right. Jagged, insane. You hurl everything into a sprint. Even a sober Dutchwoman. Her heavy sloping shoulders whip the bike as she flogs her biggest gear. Spinning the 53/12 at 220 RPM. 40+ mph. Eyes clenched against the wind of passage she hurtles clear of three other women straining to hold her wheel, heads bucking like thoroughbreds on the stretch. They hope to stay in her draft and come round, but Erika blows clear by a length. Hands not in the air: uncool when training.

Two nonsprinters then seize the opportunity--post sprint exhaustion--to break free, but are soon reeled in by the regrouped peloton. They aren't trying their best to stay out, given 85 miles to go. Deal out a little hurt, wear some girls down.

By Canyon City 15 miles later the other riders are alert to Erika's acceleration and top end--many had sized up her massy skater's thighs and improbably flared calves even before Fischer--but since she's been resting in the peloton, taking only sweet pulls, she still rides fresh enough to pull it off again. The two other sprinters hold her wheel this time, one even managing to pull round, but not far enough to slip her rim in front.

On the other hand, they both make it up the 306 hill in contact with other riders to help them bridge back to the climbers. Erika drops off like an overripe plum, to peddle back alone, map to hand.

The morne beauty of that deep descent into Wimberley. Beat, glad not to be climbing it. Freewheeling, washed in the view of distant olive folds, cones of limestone, ledges, bluffs. Sweat drying in a rush of sage scented air. Only 9:30, the morning still fresh, but 50 hard miles already in the legs.

These girls showed endurance, obviously some could climb--Rose--but Erika's unimpressed with their handling or sprinting. In the wind they ride loose as Frenchwomen (she remembers a Belgian sneering, ”Eux, les Francaises, elles fait le contre-le-montre comme un troupeau de vaches” [they team-time-trial like a herd of cows]). And their efforts to edge her out into the wind between sprints were amateurish. Why, she hadn't even been the best sprinter on her Dutch team--her job was to lead in--nor was she in top shape. Not that sprinters need condition as much as climbers or rollers.

Rollers. Rouleurs. The strong-men (hommes forts--femmes fortes!) whom the incomparable Eddie Merckx had shown to own the Tour's yellow jersey. And Olympic gold.

So, soaking in the hot tub, Erika takes this whole California style escapade as one of those business retreats Americans and Japanese love. She experienced more than a few when she was setting up architecture exhibitions, her first US gig. Seems a childish waste of time to her post Calvinist mind but why argue with success? Especially when it feels good. She flexes her neck against a jet and sighs. Well, Rose's turn for massage. Erika and David won't do another 100 tomorrow, unlike Rose, in Olympic training. So far so good with Coach Eddie B. Rose hasn't assaulted him yet.

Erika sighs again, pleasurably, as her practiced hands seek Rose's thighs. She works strong fingers deep into the dense musculature. Rose's quads knead loose as a goose. Sexy. Girl's sleek as an otter.

Though in David's case these rides risk aggravating a distraction he needs weaning from, somehow. But Erika senses his enthusiasm ebbing on its own, so she feels no need to risk her own coin. She hopes, though, that the etiology of his waning desire is realism, not depression.

The jacuzzi mutters to itself under the mild sky. Black espresso bites into their veins, reanimating blood already roused by hard riding. Cheer loosens their massaged tendons. Erika moves to David, floating after his work on her and Rose. His hamstring knots; careful, pull the knee straight or he'll cramp.

David's worried too, but in another way. He takes a slug of spring water, thighs loosening under the heels of Erika's hands, big as his. What Erika deduced is true, the harsh glare of migraine aura has begun to penetrate this cool nook of avoidance, cycling. His other and better world. For men's racing, David's too old, not good enough. Rose has a chance. She's younger and women's racing is less competitive. True, women can't turn pro, but sponsored amateurs can scrabble a living doing what they love.

And amateurs they are, sad to say, David thinks. The Women's Tour de France--cancelled for next year, which says it all--was won, twice, by a 40 year old ex-skier. Maria Canins. A magnificent athlete, clearly, but imagine the real Tour taken by a middle-aged crossover. Michael Jordan retires from basketball to bang in 150 runs for the Yanks.

So Rose can do it. A gold medal. Training this hard. So long as she doesn't vex Eddie B. Centuries in the morning, hill intervals and sprints in the afternoon. Gold has historically gone to a Dutchwoman, a Frenchwomen or an American, and Rose is already, before peak condition, riding on equality with the US team. She isn't winning the training races yet but neither can they drop her in the Hills.

"Great ride, Rose. Really, I envy you. I mean what's left for me? Keeping abreast of this year's color and skirt length."

Erika assesses his face, her hands requiring no supervision. She hopes to introduce him to her crowd in Amsterdam, show him buildings, musea, her school. Make him appreciate his lot. Brilliant profs, big goodlooking students with athletic and academic backgrounds. The way Rem Koolhaas says the word *building*. Deep in his throat, habitual and thrown away, yet full of meaning, history. *Gebouw*. Like Iacocco saying *car*, in that TV interview.

The Mexico trip helped. Still, she knows design remains a non art, to his mind. Teal, he groans. They don't have the wit to learn the pigments. David did (in art history) and Erika knows them (basic as sketching for a design student) but he complains he's forced to describe trim as "sort of salmon"--trying not to wave his wrists to help waft the shade into his supposedly professional clients' comprehension. Millionaire interior decorators.

Only in America. But Erika feels no chauvinism about it. She's too sanguine. Even without morning rides and hot tub massages. Glad of her education but aware things are done more informally here, with improvisational energy and long hours. "I'll scratch your back later, maybe, you suck my cock now," as another Dutch expat described US professional apprenticeships: his surgery residency. Erika smiles to herself. Bright funny guy, Tjerd, and doing well in Chicago. So Americans don't have the naturally socialist group mentality--nor succoring government--but nonetheless design, art, architecture flourish in New York. They have much to teach even her best peers. And vice versa, she hopes.

A spasm of doubt passes across her open face. Nerves. Can she be out of her depth? Even if hardy and of good cheer she's still a sojourner in a strange land. *Jacob gone to Padanaram. And this stone shall be God's house and dreadful*. As her brand new King James puts it. A Gideon Bible, begun one night on a trip. Strange customs. Still, so much more beautiful than the flat Dutch translation she suffered through every Sunday in her Calvinist village. To really learn a language, you must read the proverbial texts in the new vocabulary. Watch TV. Read comics, history.

Unfortunately, to David interior design has all the panache of “fashion.” His take could offend clients and sap his own energy, but you have to work with it, for his pained sensitivity is integral to his exquisite eye. She'll have to supply the virtu, somehow. She needs him and he needs boldness to succeed, but he seems not to know this, or to lack the will. Perhaps even to live. To him design (interior decoration) remains worthless sub specie aeternitatus.

Eternity! Who cares? Carpe diem. So religious, Americans. Still waiting by the corner, after two millennia. Salvation. Not a practical girl's idea of useful occupation. Not once past the devout horsey swooning of pubescence.

"David, you know every art changes. Not just design. Why, two centuries ago everyone admired sermons and despised fiction. Then novels became--how did Pound say?--holy writ. Modernism. But now everyone watches TV. Worships 'lesser gods,' starry eyed over emotional cripples like Liz Taylor or her clone Michael Jackson. Who really cares about novels anymore? None of it means anything, in God's eyes. Poor cold mad thing. Why take His fashion advice? That tacky neon halo."

David grunts. Point taken, and he's feeling too squishy to argue for shading. Centuries vs weeks. Arts vs crafts. Erika looks away, unsure of having gotten through. Fashion. David sees bygone clothes grow foolish or quaint. A throwaway art. Why is tootling on an ebony tube art? Hard to prove. Especially before lunch. But there's no doubt, nor that his metier isn't. No history, no critical vocabulary, and the people who run it provincial idiots.

Though in Holland they call it *binnenhuis architekture*. Inside-the-house architecture. Let Erika show off her Amsterdam and Milan. Hope. She speaks Italian. He could learn from Latin and French--and perhaps learn some Dutch too, though a taller order. Vocabulary lists are amusing enough, but declensions and conjugations, bah.

"Well, Erika," he said, skipping some steps, "OK, let's Christmas in Holland. And to think I swore off learning declensions, after flunking Greek."

"Who told you Dutch is declined?" Erika asks. "Forget it. Everyone will speak English to you. I take the car keys and go to Rafe now." In emotion she still conflates the three English present tenses. Especially when pissed. Her sole slip of temper. Rafe is their riverhouse client.

Erika picks up the jingling keyring and her smooth naked waistless body rises from the waters as she strides off longlegged, the steps jutting her cartoony calf flare farther than seems real. Foamborn Aphrodite rising from the waves, *wichtig* as the Homeric goddess who made Diomedes' chariot axle groan beneath her weight. David and Rose watch her, stalwart buttocks undulating up the limestone steps. Massaging those sloop-chined quads took ten minutes.

She laughed when she first heard the word. "Buttocks. Ouf, it's like what you call tulip *bollen*: bulbs. And Americans say Dutch is homely!"

"A magnificent animal," Rose says. "I think I'm in love. You should've seen her take the Canyon City sprint."

"You should've seen her in female superior."

"Next time."

"Mhm." Backing off.

"Mhm" Rose mocks.

"Fischer too, huh?"

"By a length."

"Fischer. One of the loneliest if homiest spots I've ever seen. You know, once when I got dropped on John Knox I was so beat by the time I got to Fischer I just sat on the stoop of that General Store. I was looking for a tap but there's nothing. Nothing. Just that tiny graveyard, and even that's round the corner, on 32. Headstones marked 1890's.

"I ate my banana, must have rested ten minutes. Not a pickup passed. Under the hanging moss on the live oaks, in the shade, looking up the valley. Some goats, a Charolais calf. Pasture, rock, juniper, cactus, hackberry. So peaceful. Moving. Green but austere, that touch of olive."

"Live oaks do look like olive trees. Or even cork. You might be in Calabria or Provence--the Massif." Rose, hulaing her back to pull her rectus loose, sends forth frothy waves.

David sits up to avert drowning. Doesn't she ever consider?...Ah well. Such purity. "Both are degraded limestone plateaux," he says. "Except the Massif is higher." He looks up into the rusting cypress.

"I'm starting to wrinkle," Rose says. "Lunchtime. Hoy, Erika! Let's do lunch. Topsy's? We're comin. Invite Rafe?"

From the balcony Erika calls "I put the goat cheese, peaches and strawberries and some things to drink in the red thing--cooler. We pick up bread and meet him at the site. Hurry up."

"Poteet strawberries, Fredericksburg peaches, Mexican cheese and German bread from New Braunfels. I'm going to offer her a partnership," David says. "She works hard, knows what she's doing, clever. If I draw the designs and massage my clients, and she does hers and keeps running those legs off, we're a team. Otherwise she'll move on when she develops a client list. But so long as I keep making rain, she'll have no reason to. Equal shares after three years, staggered."

It's one of those 80o winter Texas days, not so rare as fine. The river gleams cobalt through the cypress. They towel, pull on linen shorts and shirts, huaraches.

Among his compulsions David wrestles, lately, a shameful, embarrassing, unrequited love affair with linen. He shops for his sister too when the fit's on him.

Linen's not the best career choice in the Lone Star Republic, however ideal for the climate. And shopping mania no masculine vice. Surely, no one expects him to wear stretch Wranglers, gargantua buckle, ten gallon hat and ostrich boots, but linen....well, the best can be said, it isn't silk. Passable in Austin--maybe.

"How much bigger is she?" Rose asks.

"Ten pounds and one and half inches. Four kilos, four centimeters."

"Propose, instead."

"Mhm."

"Well educated, too."

"Pretty well. No better than OK outside art." Unseen, David briefly draws his mouth up and eyes tight, a grimace of the pain of scrupulosity, like squinting against a harsh sun. The tic looks old on him, evoking a middle aged exec negotiating a tough sale.

He's combing his hair, and then hers, with the only available instrument, a balding hog-bristled tortoise shell brush artfully draped in a limestone nook alongside a nickel cowboy shaving bowl and a dull inlaid straight razor--antiques clearly intended by the lessor as purely decorative.

"You guys have gotten thick as thieves, I must say," David says. She's even been puttin' on yore faux Texas twang. I admit it's kind of funny. Don't know whether to call her Dutch or Tex. And natives do seem to take it as a pore furriner sincerely attempting to master their tongue, rather than snotty satire. She has a knack for avoiding offense, unlike you. Something a bit coarse about her, all the same. Her sensibility, of course, but morally too."

"Morally? A tough customer, is all. Just what we need. Incarnadine our paling bloodline"

"Mmph."

"No one's perfect. You were the one quoting Emerson, scoring off--what's her face? the Christian Science excrescence? How'd it go again?"

"Margaret Fuller. And it was Carlyle's comeback, not Emerson. Fuller said "I accept the universe,' so he replied 'Gad, she'd better.' Probably apocryphal, anyway."

"Apocryphal!" Rose bronx cheers. "Same point. Whatever. Don't change the subject." Put your head down and ride, bro. Empty your so called mind. Focus on moving the bike.

"Rose, does this mean you have your eye on someone? A new strategy for success?"

"Could be." The Porsche toots. "Let's roll. The Dutch are ahorse. Alles on time. --Though I think I need a nap and then some sprints rather than a nice long chat with ol Rafe bout whether Maimana kilim or Navaho hangins go better with Saltillo tile. I'm cuttin yuh loose, podner.

"What are you kids doing down there? It's been months. Until this I never even heard of anyone going there at all before. Makes me feel old. Even Erika is being mysterious."

"No one's mysterious, Mom. Everyone's busy and tired. I'm either on a bike or eating or asleep; David and Erika are executing some kind of leveraged buyout of the entire interior design industry in the Lone Star Republic--between flying to Amsterdam for architects, Baghdad for rugs and Mexico for artifacts--plus building their dream house."

"A house? In Texas?

"On the Blanco. Small, don't worry. Two bedrooms, some patios, 25 acres with a spring and swimming hole. Outside of town."

"Twenty-five acres! What? Are they? Cows? Not--what's it called--livestock? Why didn't they ask me? For the love of...--For the depreciation? Your father got burned that way. Those yokels sold him pregnant heifers or something. Had to feed them bourbon in the middle of the night, don't ask me why, and they died anyway."

"Mom, don't....Twenty-five acres is small here. Only four thousand an acre. Two-hundred, tops, for the whole project. They've been making money hand over fist anyway. He does whole houses now."

"Since when did your brother become an architect? Why has no one told me any of this? How did he get a license?"

"You don't need a license for anything here. Republican dreamland. David even carries that stupid Beretta in his stupid truck--oops! It's unloaded, don't worry. At least I hope it is. How can you tell?"

"Uf. I'm speechless. He's never even taken an architecture course, to my knowledge. Beretta? Is that some kind of pistol? I'm thinking James Bond?"

"He did, actually. At Yale. Besides, he's not designing skyscrapers. Anyone can draw floor plans and consult a builder."

"But the permits?"

"What permits? This is Texas."

"Goodness. Well, I hope Erika can keep him sensible. He's not manic, is he? --Why am I asking you?"

"He's making a boodle. Isn't that the differential diagnosis between mania and enterprise? You're the one with your own personal leatherbound DSMIV. What is it? Diagnostic, Manual?"

"Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. Gift from Simon, you know that. Kind of a joke. It's interesting, anyway. David...--I can see I'll have to grill Erika. You know, I checked, she comes from good people. Not aristocracy, but solid...burghers. A great-uncle owns a factory, a grandfather was Postmaster of Leiden."

"How did you find that out? Old snoop."

"I have my ways. It can't be an LBO, you must have that wrong."

"I just mean lots of clients, not only film people but Dallas money. See, Texans won't leave the Republic to retire or vacation, and they hate water, so the Hill Country it is."

"I think you may not be acculturating as fast as they are. Erika says it's beautiful, and they spend their time in rivers instead of the sea. Hunting or horseback riding or something. I picture kind of Reagan California, sounds like. She says you find Texans in Colorado and Venezuela and Dhahran who've never been to the East Coast, much less Paris or Rome--in fact not in any real city, ever. I know it's hard to imagine. But Californians don't care if there's opera or theatre or musea or sidewalks or anything either. The outdoor life." Fiona sniffed. "Erika seems excited though--levelheaded girl too. Not without culture. And I see there's business in it. I have my sources too. Did you know there's a Saks in San Antonio? That your own father set up? One in San Marcos? Isn't that on the Blanco too? Rotterdam? Of course not."

"Saks Fifth Avenue? What do they call it, Off Off Fifth?"

"Rotterdam? It's called something else, there are partners, but it's Saks all right. This is getting very interesting. When will the house be done? Can I have a bedroom, or--what do they call it there? guest cottage?--too English--guesthouse? bunk-something? if I pay for it? Hmm. You need a sensible person on site, obviously. Apart from Erika. Older. Though it sounds like he's doing just fine."

"Actually I'm worried about him is why I called. I mean, it's...well, for example, he's not riding at all anymore. Hardly ever anyway. Maybe 150 miles a week. If that."

"Rose, puh-lea--I can assure you, I can set your mind at rest, that's definitely not in the, among the criteria. I don't even have to look. I mean, Rose, be sensible, think of all the people who don't sport at all. They haven't all lost their marbles. I mean, you don't think I'm--"

"I don't know, Mom. Drastically changing your activity pattern? Loss of interest in what you formerly held dear? He gets Dad's frown on his face practically all the time now. Every conversation. That squint/grimace? Even indoors, or in the shade. Showing the yellowy tooth? Lovely, graceful, self-conscious Davey?"

Silence.

"I'm on the way. Hold the bunkhouse."

So, meanwhile back at the ranch, Fiona brought with her to the new Texas enterprise staff and investors from her husband’s outfit, Saks. David set up an architecture firm, private homes mostly, called Inhouse Counsel, and then, upon Saks consult, an entirely new entity, called BinHouse, which was a kind of public warehouse chain, using new computer stocking and ordering, selling home appliances and building materials wholesale directly to consumers. Funded with Saks money.

The Wimberley house was but half finished--tile roof just up--but Erika, David and Rose moved in. They shared a king sized cypress bed, in the big room with the porch over the river, a space defended, perhaps mildly intimidated, by bare stoic limestone walls and Saltillo tile still faintly redolent of grout and sealant. Erika and David only made love on weekends now anyway. Med-breaks. They were busy or out of town and David was on medication prescribed by a local psychiatrist of good repute and sweet manner, found by Erika. A *landgenoot*, Caroline Batenberg. She rode a bit, actually.

Rose was supposed not to know but had come across a pill bottle. It gave her some peace of mind. She knew Erika must be the instigator, and therefore following up. Rose surmised this was why David wasn't riding much, which was not soothing.

He didn't look well to her. His golden complexion had lost glow--damask accents--to become nearly sallow, though a stranger unaware of his striking normal color mightn't have remarked anything amiss.

Rose herself was winding down an affair with another cyclist--Wyoming born Jim Hammond--but they had the river, its ledges and the second bedroom. More than sufficient, as Rose was unenthused and they were oft exhausted. Their entente meant Jim bruised his back on rock face oftener than she.

Unabashed Rose always needed physicality of all kinds, including sex, overflows of the voluptuous energy needed to turn cranks at her level. And Jim was a cool enough guy, soothingly reserved and dry humored. Limited, true--surely from her high, perhaps unreal (Olympian), expectations. An elegant rider, to be sure. Noble pedal stroke.

Rafe--David's original Texas client, a screenwriter--was interesting and not bad looking but besides being on the old side smoked cigars. The odor was pleasant only first hand and from a distance, the discolor and chawing not at all. He sometimes munched like an old man, one of those self-stimulating habits suffered by persons of lonely and sedentary occupation, like writers or hackers. Fun to talk to, though, evenings. If Rose didn't doze off.

Still, except for weekends, construction possessed the house more than they. The chief loci, the bed and hot tub, were both what Erika called cozy, seeming to translate from a Dutch word that meant much more. Rose in fact liked to sleep spoonback to her great breasts. So did David. They too were soothing. Bedwarmed flesh, in the words of Joyce. Comfy. David and Rose were as relaxed about nudity as the Dutch--judging from Erika, whose idea of a vacation spot was a place where, unlike in her foggy land, you don't have to dress.

"Clothes is not vacation."

Sunwarmed Republic. In fact they only dressed, *chez eux*, for the Mexican rockworkers terracing and walling their way niftily down from the back bedroom, fanning sideways to the big kitchen and sitting area with their central open fireplace, descending to the patios, rock hot tub, dock steps and weir-beavered swimming hole. They worked cheap, fast and well.

In time the house would gain comfort from tribal rugs and handmade leather and mesquite furniture--some made by David himself, some executed from his design by an imported East German cabinet maker. The spring and its tributary to the river would acquire a separate studio guesthouse with its own toilet, kitchen and bathhouse. Fiona designed it herself, with nudges from David.

He'd optioned the bluff across the river too, with its view of meadows and hills, but at present was disinclined to invest in three acres of purely vertical feet. Bluebonnet season would settle the question. See if the view's worth it.

He accepted Rafe's crew-cab F350 with double rear wheels for late additions to Rafe’s own riverhouse. The Porsche was refused. Sunstruck, Texafied, Erika had her heart set on an open four by four, a la Caballero. For the clammy crowded urban Dutch, SUV images strike the Romantic note of frontier grace and freedom, the tropics, Nature. But she recognized the truck as more practical. Seeing it as more chic, too, took a while, and even then her visceral inclinations adapted more slowly. Grasping a new culture's redefinitions takes time, even trying as hard as she did, adaptable. Pace Marx, she thought, words change meaning not only over time but place. Perhaps for a Texan--some Texans, it's another error to view a foreign culture as monolithic--an SUV is a taffeta pickup. An urban cowboy's hoss. Like Californians she'd met when she was still setting up exhibitions--she met David at one--Texans may enjoy driving anything of interest. But, she speculated, nothing with cupholders and a propensity to trip into bar ditches strikes them as utility, even in a Levis sense. Nor are rollovers Sport.

"Ma'am, would you be Fiona? Dave's Mom? I'm here to pick you up. Name's Rafe."

"Yes, I am. Sir," Fiona said, respectfully. She was taken aback by the use of her Christian name. Ma'am?

Texas.

"Well, howdy, Ma'am. Pleased to make your acquaintance. I've heard a lot about you from Dave." Rafe did not extend a hand until she did. Fiona, mollified, gathered you don't touch women unless they offer. Frontier mores. The shortage of women (highly prized and well defended)? or persistent Victorianism?

The light. Even inside the terminal it hurt your eyes.

"Well, thank you for coming to get me," she said. "Where's David?"

"It's no trouble, ma'am. Glad to be of assistance."

Fiona was amused by the Porsche. Teenage taste, in her milieu. She hadn't expected Rafe would be her contemporary. Second childhood? Probably different here. Car culture.

She squinted. No public transport, not even cabs. I guess someone has to pick you up.

She felt distracted because Rafe had avoided her question about Davey's whereabouts. He could be on a job, but why not say so? Perhaps she wasn't meant to know.

Unconsciously soothed by some aromatic scent of which she was unaware in the still, dry air, she said "You're David's client, aren't you? I've heard so much about you too. Let's see, you come from Texas but you're just moving to this area?"

"Not really, ma'am. My primary residence is in Malibu." Rafe sniffed politely.

"Ah," said Fiona, more respectfully.

"This is a vacation home, more or less, Fiona. Quiet place to work." Rafe opened the car door for her, tendered a hand for her squat, then walked round to fold his long stiff limbs in. "There's an extra pair of sunglasses in the glove compartment. Should fit OK."

Driving--faced forward without looking at each other--seemed to make him more comfortable, conversationally. The twang waned. Fiona meant to chart its tides. She'd studied to please Al's clients and intended to do the same for an unmarried son.

"Yes, you're a screen writer, aren't you? Uh, Rafe."

"Fiona, it started that way. I still work on scripts but it's a complex business nowadays. Folks talk money, phone people, commission work, take options, sell them. It's possible these days to, ah, seize your place in the sun, so to speak, yet never see your work on the screen. A blessing, in some respects. For Ah blieve none of it now bein writ's fit to wash hogs. Still, long as they ladle greenbacks like silage ain't nobody disputin their taste."

Fiona laughed, musically.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch.

Rafe had been dragooned into this mission, with good will, because Rose and Erika were on search and rescue. Limp, happy, they'd awoken to the warble of the mockingbird, the one day a week they slept late, only to find the right side of the bed unoccupied. From her central position Erika had been vaguely aware, that night, of David getting up and wandering about. Insomnia. The white night of a full moon so strong you could read Newsweek captions. Rose slept the sleep of the just cyclist on the left, uncontrolling side, bereft of all but mini-alarm. (David had known Erika slept mostly on her right. Facing him.)

The women held war council as they reconnoitered. *The twitter of the birds seemed insipid to Francoise*. The pillbox Erika uncovered showed David days behind with meds. His truck was still there but Beretta and bike were gone. Both women were breathing through their mouths, used to riding panic. A hard wind soughed in the live oaks. Northers unsettle people as much as a Mistral or Foene.

"He could be anywhere." Erika sat, a moment of despair. Her clenched calves jutted. From sleep to terror. She seemed to stare at nothing for a moment. Her mind seemed to be spinning. Deprived of focus or object, her anxiety rose into her throat. The unfelt tile floor still cool in the fresh morning.

"I have an idea," Rose said, pulling on bike shorts. "Call Dr. Batenburg and get her to meet me at Fischer--with a syringe or something. Meet me there. Or pick her up. Oh, and call Rafe at the site and ask him to pick up Fiona. Say 'emergency' or something--unspecific. At least till we find out, at least."

"You're not going to ride, are you? Take the truck. It'll save ten minutes."

"I have to use my best judgment, Erika. He hates motor vehicles. I really don't think I should roar up in that beast. Got to keep him calm till we can get something into him. This isn't my first rodeo, I have more experience than you. I may be wrong but you have to trust me. Please."

Erika was already on the phone.

Rose climbed her Ciocc up the construction-rutted caliche drive out of the riverbed fast as she dared and did the remaining eight miles in 17 minutes. She freewheeled onto the Fischer general store parking lot breathing evenly.

"Whew, Davey," she said. "What be you doin here." She stood the bike.

"This is enough of a comedy already," he said. He was sitting on the steps, back against the padlocked door. A mild breeze stirred in the pecans, hardly moving the hanging moss, but drying Rose's light if roadgrimed sweat.

She dismounted fluidly, passing her left leg over the bars rather than the higher saddle, and leaned the Ciocc against the second staircase. "Sorry, I'm out of breath. Soon as I get some air I'll talk sense."

David grunted. He was cradling the Beretta on his lap. He'd been sitting there not more than half an hour. Taking inventory, perhaps leave. It had seemed odd to him that he was still aware of the rough door scrunching his back. Too right angle to be really comfortable. No need to put up with any of that anymore. *It must be born with a man to be content with little things*.

Mesquite in bloom, its gentle caterpillar flowers scenting the mild air. The usual big sky.

"Uh," he said. "Sit on those steps, Rose. These are uncomfortable enough already."

She complied. "I was going to check the graveyard next."

"Don't be morbid."

She laughed, choking the rising note quickly. No Davey please. Take your meds, honey. Minimum half hour for Dr Batenburg. Ten minutes more at least.

It worried her David didn't respond. Get him to talk. Lighter. Voice lower. "Davey, I'm getting cramps in my feet. No warmup." She pulled off a cycling shoe, then the other. David zweigt. She massaged her foot; stood between the two stepcases in the weight of the sun to dorsoflex against the pavement.

"Close enough" David growled. He shifted to ease his back. Gazed up the valley without seeing its gyre of black vultures rising on a thermal against the bluff. His head seemed to swim with them all the same.

They heard the snarly putter of Dr Batenburg's Civic making the turn from 32 onto Fischer road. David started, turning his head toward the road. He grasped the Beretta.

Rose took a half step, planted both feet and sprang. Michael Jordan's launch, viscerally recalled from college basketball. Her right backhand forearm swipe caught the automatic in David's lifting hand. Something snapped audibly and the light gun skittered butt first along the pavement, safety fortunately still engaged. It skid to rest eyeing them sprawled on the buffalo grass.

"Shit" David said. "Geroff, would you? Ow, fuck. I think you broke my thumb." He uttered a sound between a moan and a snarl.

"You asshole," Rose sobbed, not moving. "That thing could've shot me, couldn't it?"

David said nothing.

"How would you have felt then?"

Tears running down his face, cradling his hand, "I really am sorry," he said. "Really really. I didn't want to take anyone with me. Not even part way. Especially not you."

The Civic slid to a halt in the gravel lot. Erika struggled out of its low doorway like a tripped sprinter. She scooped the firearm on the run and hurled it into the mesquite.

The risen Moores stood facing each other.

"You got yourself into the line of fire," David said. "One has a right, you know. We're not fundamentalists." His flushed face besweat.

"One has a right," Dr. Batenburg said in a light Dutch accent from the driver's side doorway, "if one's serotonin levels are normal. Otherwise the act is a symptom. We leave aside the law, which takes a less sanguine position." Her sweet face and wide blue eyes made even her dicta sound sympathetic. Tender voice. What a cream pie, Rose thought, not for the first time. She knew Caroline from Sunday rides with local groups. "My aim is to help you try to get what you really want, not stand in your way."

"’Only knowledge is power,’" David said. "’No one does evil willingly, for evil is essentially self-destructive.’ How Socratic psychiatry has become. I take a more existential line, myself." He had backed to the brushy edge of the meadow, faced now by Erika. Deepening sun baked the colors flat.

Rose was giving him his distance. His color had improved, and he was talking. Philosophy, even. The fugue had lifted. Let the adrenaline drain, disarmed.

Batenburg got out of the car. She carried a cardboard syringe box and a vial.

"Oh no you don't" David squeaked, breathy. "You can't stop someone, or force drugs on him. Hospitals." He thought, inconsequentially, that she was heavy for a rider. Lush.

"I can," Batenburg said. "In fact, it's my job. You need the thumb looked at anyway." David was still cradling it, visibly swelling. Now he looked panicky.

The eternal wind of the plains ruffling their nerves.

"Don't be childish Davey," Rose soothed. Be a good loser was on the tip of her tongue but the inevitable sports analogy was hardly the way she wanted him to see this. She restrained an impulse to move toward him.

"All the same I'm not being carried out punctured if I can do anything about it." Forced out of Mom's white and gold Lincoln to The Little Red Schoolhouse against his will, sobbing quietly, ashamed before the other toddlers and a fifth? new nanny, unconcerned. Wishing in his small heart to be left home with just Rose.

"Punctured!" Rose exclaimed. "Back any further into the mesquite in those bike shorts and your ass will make a pin cushion look--Remember how poisonous the spines are?"

"This won't knock you out or even make you drowsy," Batenburg said. "Just calmer. You're still hyperventilating."

David backed further into the mesquite. The faint green fronds blent gracefully with yellowgreen blooms to hide wicked two-inch spikes.

It was quiet, but for the mild wind. Dry.

"Come on, podner," Erika said, following him face to face. Envisioning a chapless roundup--Keystone cops scrambling among the thorn--she recalled David reading her the opening of some Texas novel: 'Lonesome Dove was founded by folks who lacked the grit to push on through another hundred miles of mesquite brush to San Antonio.' "Listen, lover, you haven't seen your options clearly yet. You take your medicine, or I fracture something else and then you take your medicine." Erika was panting--everyone but the Doc was panting--and almost crying but she felt angrier by the minute, perhaps from relief. The Dutch nurture frailty, she worried about David, but she also saw everything she'd achieved, even her shining Prince, splattering. Shooting a brain was intolerable. America.

Her wall of low profile circumspection breached further, spilling heretofore mute monologue. Rehearsed eloquence rose to the occasion. "You might wish my Olympic training was in some gentle art that harmlessly disarms your opponent, but you know perfectly well that what I learned is how to incapacitate someone by--and I quote--'gross insults to his skeletal integrity.'" Erika may have missed a medal, and switched to skating, but she'd achieved a high degree black belt all the same. Knees bent, she studied David like a predator. Her calves flared like cobra hoods.

"You didn't have much luck with Rose." Milder.

That incident had amused Erika if anything but she'd also turned it over in her mind now and again during the enforced idleness of long Texas roads when more congenial business considerations had run their course. Rose was a tremendous athlete, super quick--she'd judoed, played basketball at Yale--but seriously! who had competed in Tae Kwan Doe? Even before skating in Barcelona.

"David, I'm bigger, taller, stronger and ten belt levels higher. Both of you know face to face in the open neither of you has the chance of a doodlebug in a bat cave."

David laughed. "That must be one of Rafe's. What a student of language you are, to be sure! Eh, what the hell. Do your worst." He turned, bent over and peeled his shorts. It seemed a pleasure to accede to language like that. An appropriate tribute.

"Arm will do," Batenburg said. She'd been letting things run their course. Talk was better. Any kind of talk.

"Caroline," Rose said. "Let's take what we can get."

"Gluteus it is," the Doc replied.

"Who's going to take him to Laurel Ridge? My malpractice would throw a fit; besides, my husband has both kids at Schlitterbahn." Caroline was packing her gear, studying the family group sidelong. She hid a relieved sigh.

So Rose bike-sat while Caroline dropped David and Erika at their truck, parked on Purgatory Road. They recovered Rose riding both bikes toward them on FM 32. Still pumped, she'd gotten antsy waiting.

Erika and all the Moores in Rafe's hot tub. Swimsuited this time. The smoke of Texas barbecue and spice of homard etouffe still hanging in the mild evening air. Bourbon light filtering through the pecans. A tinkly tray of armagnac, espresso and chocolate mousse to hand.

Fiona and Rafe had begun seeing each other. He ramrodded a colony of film folk tiring of frozen Aspen or Montana, ready to build on these sunny understated hills, in their hidden canyons lush as Faberge eggs by beryl springs enfolded in elephant ear, or atop windy aeries with views of olive hills and limestone bluffs.

Besides, Fiona liked Rafe. Warm, quiet, unerring. He had season tickets to the Houston Opera. They'd driven to the Kimball in Fort Worth and were contemplating javelina season. Or flying to La Scala.

Simon and Westchester had gotten a bit tame for Fiona. Actually, to be honest, Simon hadn't worked out. All she'd needed--on top of being widowed. Simon had treated her son once, but that was no longer an issue. No, like quite a few psychoanalytically oriented shrinks, his cool imperturbable manner proved to mask inflexibility--what she concluded was a rigid defense against insecurity. Gaiety may be just what such a man finds he needs most in a mate--look at her former neighbors John and Martha Mitchell, if you want historical precedent--but--look again at that same marriage's end--sometimes the girlish pebbles thrown provocatively at the great stone face shatters the dulce et decorum.

Rafe was a big goodlooking guy, comfortable in several cultures, gentle, witty, unflinchable. And it was good to get out of Westchester for a while. NY felt dank and stuffy, sometimes, once you knew Texas' glare and space. Which, on the other hand, could also sear the windows of the soul, compared to the soothe of Westchester's hardwood canopy, lush vegetation and sepia skies.

And Fiona felt called to mold her son's milieu for a time. He hadn't taken to the new meds as well as he should've, she felt. His eyes sometimes seemed to focus in different directions, and one had to overlook an inconsequent loquacity. Alarming rather than cheering, since he'd been so laconic--dour--at least since toddler's babble. Fiona recalled laying her exhausted head on the kitchen table, after a long day organizing a dinner party for Arthur Sachs, and weeping, unable to stand another piping 'if a tiger and polar bear fought, who would win?' How the fuck would I know? Or care. David had looked stunned. Had he ever talked freely since? His enunciation had been so clear, until breaking in adolescence. A break that never truly healed. Well, so what, I have a throaty voice too. Men like it.

"Rafe, however did you get Davey to do this house? No one ever got him to do a complete interior before, much less..." David had been sitting out the conversation. The burble of the tub seemed to get tangled in your vocalization.

"Showed him the riverbed. 'Cypresslaced cathedral stained chartreuse.' Pardon the verse. Told him I loved Vermeer interiors. No other specs. We'd been talking for a while then; David had seen my Topanga place."

"The interior walls are almost folklorique." Rose shot Fiona a look. "Well, style ancien then," Fiona amended.

"The climate and landscape do resemble the south of France," Erika said, smoothing. "Besides, David claims to be allergic to sheet rock." She looked at him. His mind still seemed to be elsewhere. She slid her sleek instep over his knee. He was charmed by the unselfconscious agility as much as the touch.

"Besides," Rafe added, "like Ahab, we developed a problem with white. Pure white glares in Texas and Dave is convinced off-white--ivory, bone, mission, Dover, ecru, what have you--just means dirty. He doesn't care for paint generally, it turns out. And I'm nervous about color, myself. Dangerous as wallpaper. So we went for a natural substance. Limestone. Because wood panel does tend to make the whole place look like 'the rec room'--he was right--and cork is too dark, Prousty."

Architectin's not unlike lawsuits or psychotherapy, Rafe found. Bein the focus of a intelligent sympathetic adult is gratifying, soothing. On some level you feel you're getting what you need and deserve but somehow haven't attained since bein forced to give up your wetnurse. It's like shopping, but stronger.

Still, Rafe was careful not to speak like this before Texans or even film folk. Absorbing how other sets converse had been a hobby since he reached his majority. The proof you've mastered a tongue is being able to participate without arousing suppressed smirks.

White space is the trick--as in screenplays, or the fiction he preferred. Gaps, blanks for the unfigured fancy.

Pre-conscious imagination? Rafe liked to read several books at a time. Freud's 'The Economic Problem of Masochism,' a Peter Handke, the new Oxford Book of English Verse. Uncited, they'd bubble round his rumination like the calciferous water in his jacuzzi; produce texture in a screenplay's space, he believed. Even in Hollywood scripts; though surely in the few he 'sold' to independent producers. Which were nought he sometimes felt but a way to occupy a month or two of billable hours with vain horseplay.

Rafe poured a round of armagnac. He lay back in the churn and gyre, floating a return leg toward Fiona after accepting a proffered calf. The prevailing south wind, originate in the Sonoran desert, soughed in the cypresses enfolding the Blanco, whose cascade could be heard faintly over the tub.

*Blue, blue the smoke rising into the cypress branches. The words following like chimes.*

Rocks coated with slime, trailing weeds of hair. Skulls of drowned women. Gravid. "You know," David said, after a while, interrupting, "what I hate about this business life, in fact this whole country, or maybe it's getting middle aged, is not so much it's not as fun as riding or whatever--I mean there comes a time when riding gets too exhausting anyway--it's that every interaction and relationship becomes 'What do I get out of this?' Networking. Erika somehow doesn't mind that." He looked at her with humility. She looked worried. Each expression seemed to erase 20 IQ points. "Either the reward seems sufficient to you, honey, or you've just been 'realistic' about expectations all your life. But in my case, if I get pissed now, or someone seems insulting or I like someone, like Rafe, or some funny observation occurs to me, instead of expressing it, I say to myself, 'What's this going to get me?' If it's a potential client or source of clients, I just say 'What the hell' and let the guy be insulting or whatever. Before I make a joke I ask myself, is this going to offend him--refer to someone he knows or something he likes in a way that may jar him? I don't talk about religion or politics or cultural taste or education or anything 'important'--become unimportant under these new rules--because they offend. I just have dollar signs stuck in my epiglottis like screens. It's dehumanizing. No wonder most people don't make any real friends after their 20s. Even when I do find someone I get along with, I'm not going to hang out with her or get to know her because I don't have time unless she's working a job with me. Otherwise I lose touch. It seems we're entering the world of corporations, having left that of the church, or humanism or whatever, but I don't think they're going to do a better job for us in the long run, except economically. Maybe getting most people fed and housed and clothed is the best we can expect: the fact they have to work all the time and consume all the rest is no worse than being morally stifled and sexually amputated by the church, or owned like a slave by the lord of the manor...."

Uneasy silence. The river burbled, the cypresses whispered at each other. A keen sun over-exposed the faded grass outside their unguent cloister.

"Ain't you the cheerful son of a bitch, though," Rafe said, kindly.

"Joe Bob drive his pickup (rooster-tailin dust plume) past his neighbor' barnyard. Brakes, cause he see im holdin a shoat up to his persimmon tree.

Spits. 'John Boy,' he shout over the bar ditch, 'what in tarnation you doin?'

'Feedin this shoat, what it look like?' John Boy frees a hand to reset his greasy straw. Pig grunts.

'Ain't that right time consumin?'

'Hail, Joe Bob, you know time don't mean nothin to a pig.'"

Another lunch--not Schrafft's this time--again plotted to soften and prepare David's way, found him instead once again carefully avoiding the subject of his sister. She deserved financial support, and Mum was better positioned to provide it. David preferred to feel his way; follow his cold feet before his chronically ambivalent brain. A good negotiator, when he set his mind to it, he came with a handful of desired options--money for the guesthouse, Rose's future, even his own issues--but no rigid agenda. Listen sympathetically, but derail the other guy's train when possible; and keep your wish list firmly in mind. Never give up, and never push a technique that isn't producing.

His mother's elegantly lined face, lambent with reminiscences he'd calculatedly evoked. Ash blond: china tea *avec un nuage*. The Huisache Cafe, cunningly chosen, abetted him with plush booths and relentlessly cheerful flower prints (burgundy gold green) in unsharpening her lulled wits.

It gave him a pang. Relaxed, unsistered, he'd enjoy Fiona's grim fairy tales. Grim because Moore suspected her of child neglect. His isolated sick childhood, unsuccoured unmedicated alone alone. His escape from the family desert-—Rose either too young or, later, at school, the parents fully engaged in retail clothing—-into the parallel continent of reading. Where you met and heard many admirable people. Whom however you could not talk back to or interact with. Reading taught you many things but not social skills.

So Fiona’s busybody spasms felt so intrusive because they were an interloper's, governed not by observant nurturing but by some compensatory tide, for whose cadences he hadn't discovered causes.

The restaurant’s stuffed chair irked his back crick. Lowering his saddle a centimeter hadn't helped, apparently. David shifted. Momentary relief. David's slighted mind wandered, following the nearest hare, its wont when avoiding an issue. *The vast frozen sea within*. A farrago of quotations, intrusive as an irritating jingle.

Tiny Eumenides retook his sacrum. Unfortunately for the tone of Mum's visits, his suspicion, which he could expeditiously bury, was roused by her artless remarks. Disingenuous shocks, delivered faux naif, wide-eyed, every visit:

David recalled, for instance, the last summer day at The Point, Larchmont Beach Club. Forest green beach chairs lugged from faded jade lockers to the flatter wrinkles in the garnet encrusted sea rocks by the Sound. Gulls and kids calling. Awry seating unkiltering his moral balance. Seasalt seawrack, ammonia of split mussels.

"You know," Fiona had said, "the babysitter we used in Antibes would just ignore your crying. We'd come back and you'd be in your crib just screaming, and she'd be reading a paperback romance. Of course, we found someone else when we could. But you can have no idea how hard it is to find help there, especially in the summer. With that loping *accent du midi* always sliding away from you. Still, you both became bilingual." Not by any effort on her part. Hard work in college, recouping.

And another example, from the family home in Scarsdale, before he left NY: "Neglected children have weakened immune systems, did you know that? Mmm. Immunologic chic." Fiona leafing through her Vanity Fair, over tea--ineluctable Spode--in the bosky solarium viewing her Scarsdale creek. Stocked on all sides with interiors thirsty for David's finds--bric a brac, Milanese furn. Troubled waters, to be sure. Do not scare away the fish. Business.

Immunology. David knew that before he was 16 he'd had pneumonia twice, hepatitis, mononucleosis, a perforated appendix with peritonitis, chronic strep throats leading to rheumatic fever, with a heart murmur and arrythmias as sequelae. Plus all the childhood diseases. Not to speak of undiagnosed depressions. And an unrecognized speech impediment--even now a choked utterance whose breathiness had been however adored by some of his more fragile clients.

He couldn't remember Fiona ever checking his homework or report cards, asking about his friends, or discussing his major, or career choices, at least while she had a husband to absorb her attention. Though of course childhood memory is notoriously inaccurate. So maybe he was wrong, but what David did remember was Da's doing those things, during his flying visits--always pressed for time. Even checking on David's meds and rheumatic prophylaxis. Mum would blithely send him to the dentist, unprepped, risking endocarditis. And now, manless, she was always underfoot.

"Can you really order fish here? So far from the coasts?"

"Oh, yes. Flown in daily. 'The third coast.' Undeveloped, too."

"Well, I'll have sole then. They're Caribbean."

"I don't think so, actually. Dover? But they flash freeze them. It's good. Just do it," David said to the waitress, about to circle away. Kind, patient brown eyes, unafflicted with glamor. Indian print cotton and technical sandals.

Fiona followed her to the ladies'. David sipped his wine. An uncertain, if inevitable, Sauvignon. He caught someone's eye--a city councilwoman--and waved. Tall dark attractive but skittish widow, efficiently running her late husband's drywall company. Another sip. Fiona reseated, looking pleased. Mum isn't the kind of woman who disappears into the ladies', Karybdis.

And yet another example. Just the week before David left for Texas, in the bay window of his steel front loft. Fiona, white Chateauneuf du Pape in her amethyst ringed hand, balancing on his Thonet rocker to roll and point a gold slipper, stretch her instep.

"When we lived in the Carmine Street walk-up--it was over your father's haberdashery then, before he joined Saks--I'd have to talk you up the entire five flights, after shopping all morning. You can't imagine how exhausting it was, 'Come on, honey, please, just one more step.' You'd just sit and cry, saying your throat hurt."

Hours shopping afoot with an undiagnosed strep throat. Three years old.

David glanced across The Huisache's white table cloth, uncertainly seeking his mother's eye. She was engrosssed in boning her sole amandine, so David relaxed again, shifting down to memory. Why the fuck not do something about all those sore throats? Focus on my problem, for once, not you and Dad's. Sorry my rheumatic fever interfered with your shopping, Mum.

An old photo swam into his ken. Himself, seated at a red lacquer table scrolled with sea-green (was it dragons?), a giant panda sitting across from him. David imagined this dewy three year old climbing five flights after shopping all morning with a strep throat. Department stores still made his crotch and bowels crawl, he knew the toilets in them all, and much as he loved to cook, supermarkets still woozed him.

Fiona considered her son's vacant eye. He looked blind sometimes. Seething in distant paradises. If I liked eating alone, why have kids? What's he up to now? She softened her eye. Relax.

But David's heart skipped a beat. A premature ventricular contraction. PVC. That syncopated lurch in the 2/2 time, that hiccup that jarred him only when he was sad and at rest. His heart was an R&B drummer with a bluesy sense of mortality. *"Things ain't been the same since my mother died, yeah, little by little I'm (skip) losing my love for you."*

So if it killed him--a salvo of skips, then V-tach--it would be in his sleep. Riding whipped his heart rhythm into shape. So long as he kept pedaling, he was safe. Don't look back.

The heart murmur was something else, a prolapsed mitral valve. (Probably related to the arrythmias, though.) Eventually it might kill David--his father had his attack at only 60--but more currently it was probably why he never got up those climbs as fast as Lance. Sinuous as a dolphin, dancing his magenta Vitus uphill.

David's large pale father. Al Moore. A hardworking circumspect man who found emotion painful and pain embarrassing. Angina. Misting his livid face.

As eldest son--and family artist--David had arranged the funeral. Composed the tombstone engraving. *It Wasn't My Fault* came to mind. Even his father might've found it funny. A good, if cruel, sense of humor, when he felt relaxed. Fiona, though gay, was humorless.

But of course David settled, instead, on *Blessed are the pure in heart*. Kind and dewy, still goodhearted after three decades in retail.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*. Dad had surely been the former, in his way, not a mean bone in his body, innocent of all cynicism, and, if he hadn't seen The Latter, that could hardly be laid to his fault either, given the invisibility normally attributed His omnipresence.

Besides, who was to say Dad hadn't? Those red mists of angina may've been not unlike a burning bush. The pain. The pain. Exsanguinating his moist face. Dearly beloved. If oft unregarded for very awe.

"David, do you think you're going to want any dessert? I think I'll stick with the fish. It is good. I don't know what ‘Mississippi Mud’ is but the reverse psychology fails to tempt me."

"Yore instincts are ko-rect: ah do blieve it's a brownie smothered in goo. You can get excellent fish here, oysters, shrimp, the barbecue's the best on earth, and for my money TexMex beats all but the very best Mex, but desserts....You're always safe with ice cream, I guess, but I don't think anyone in this Republic has ever tasted a good pastry. Wouldn't know what to do with one. The arts and dessert remain Europe's forte."

David waved the waitress over for the check. "How y'all doin?" she said, but since she was wearing drawstring pants and an Indian top with mild makeup and short clear nails, Fiona began chatting with her anyway, nothing loath. David relapsed into his brown study.

Da's kindred heart. David's own litany of disease. Now, David did not like trouble. He disliked victims, victimology. Tales of abuse set his teeth on edge. But still.

Neglect. According to Roseanne Barr's trailer camp epistemology you could only know for sure you had been. The negative was unprovable. Lost in childhood amnesia and filicidal white trash lying.

Daytime TV's reverse eschatology: The Four First Things: Abuse Neglect Denial Amnesia.

Fragments of parochial schooling still floated up through David's septic psyche, long since lazied by collegiate aversion. Those fine trains of medieval logic, finally proving, according to the best minds, nothing.

Whereas stroking the cranks moves you forward, and the acquired muscles are palpable, neither metaphoric nor conjectural, like those of the intellect.

"Well, Mum, feel like hitting the mall or shall we hie on home to Wimberley?"

"Great. I could use a swim, actually."

So he'd choked on his stupid agenda, again. *Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.*

Yet again. He would need something from Fiona, or want to air a grievance; then he'd feel resentful because he anticipated objections, or because he hadn't gotten justice in the past; so he'd try to formulate the anger judiciously, mold it into presentable form, to avoid a shamefully incoherent outburst. But that meant arguing Fiona's side too. Resulting in an internal attack on his own impure motives. And he'd never be able to reach a conclusion without writing implements, so the whole mass of argument would finally founder of its own weight, dragging him with it. And he wouldn't have actually said anything at all.

Rafe was taken with Fiona. She was beautiful. Of course Rose was spectacular but Hollywood opportunities had ultimately decided Rafe in an unforced way on acting his age. It'd come to him gradually that it was possible Rembrandt, Ingres, Raphael and Leonardo had better taste than Playboy. The painters' women tended to zaftig--mature and rich in personality.

Perhaps unfair. Playboy espoused womanly figures, even on teenagers. Vogue, then. MGM.

Flesh sure felt better. No doubt about it. Luscious. Stunning young athletes are, ultimately, insubstantial. Lightframed. Rafe was a less-is-more kind of guy in scripts and architecture but not when it came to sex. That was an anchorite's road--just as a cult of youth is self destructive in anyone over 30. Perhaps for anyone at all.

Fiona had efficiently calculated exactly how Rafe played cowboy--the way her in-laws played Jew, cultured or Yiddish as met the occasion. She contemplated Texas. Retirement. The Sunbelt, with all its, if waning, cultural disadvantages. I mean, who reads in Westchester anymore, under 40? New England winters are less difficult now--with better cars, roads and houses--but still cold. Snowgear even allows some yuppie Vermonters to be outdoorsy instead of housebound. The chill, though, cramped the arthritis clawing her hands.

Similarly afflicted friends hothoused their nails scarlet. A compensatory defiance. Fiona, though--still attuned to nails as accent rather than thing-in-itself--pared hers shorter, subdued the color. Who accents deformities? Flamboyance belongs to youth. Enfants terribles invite perfectionist scrutiny.

California is full (no vacancies) and weird, climate, landscape and culture. Earthquakes, forest fires, mudslides, sociopaths. No wonder they make action movies.

Florida is muggy and mosquito infested. And, oddly for the tropics, unprepossessing. 'A river of grass' indeed. Flat as the midwest but gloppy too. Fiona had loved the beach as a child but it bored her now; and fellow Republicans had made it carcinogenic.

(So obvious: ditch the greedier corporations and fundamentalists, seize the socially liberal, fiscally conservative center: own the country.)

New Mexico/Arizona. One misses green. Shade. Rest for the weary eye. Even in Texas. And the heat. Perhaps New England in the summer and fall, Texas in winter and spring. She'd miss her Scarsdale friends. Rafe is companionable, and many film folk are transplant New Yorkers--but not of the better sort, unfortunately. Texans? No. Non. With all due respect.

Still, women Rafe's own age either obsessed about their kids or were, finally, rather strange. Products of odd pasts. Odd's OK, except it tends to be angular. And one sure advantage of older women is expertise at making life comfortable. Conversation about kids is fine too, cept they aren't yours so the topic tends, not toward what's interesting about them (gossip about mutual acquaintance) but toward what worries a parent, so the chat lacks equality of interest. Fiona, so far, recommended herself by demonstrating only a subdued, intermittent concern about her kids (and you always have to humor some special interests, within reason) yet she's no brittle spinster or manic divorcee neither. Rafe found that if you pay careful attention to people's special worries--invest some time, in the interest of nipping the bud--you're often rewarded not merely in heaven, or by gratitude, or by a gratifying rep for compassion, but with reducing rather than aggravating their idees fixes. And if that don't work, cut your losses. To be less cynical, there's something to the idea that when people mesh it's either because their obsessions match, or because these obsessions are mutually interesting, or because the people develop a mutually pleasing and soothing minuet to address them.

That seems to cover the logical options. See? Periodic sentences still have a use.

"Well, Fiona, I can see where you'd be concerned about David and drugs. Drugs can be hell sure enough." Rafe was game, if slightly uncomfortable--cautious--with her expressed anxiety. His humorously selfconscious drawl thickening under stress.

They were driving to Houston for a French dinner and Rigoletto. Perhaps a swim, maybe a sauna in a Galveston hotel before heading back. Or take another day or two--The Houston Museum of Fine Arts?

Clearing his throat. "I was more or less a drunk myself when I was a youngster. It was practically normal--binges for kids then--but I can sure enough avow I did a whole number of things under the influence that still shame me. I don't bemoan the past but it does no good to forget it nor whitewash it either; surely not for a writer, even of filmscripts.

"All the same, Fiona, I wonder if they got it right this time around, now drinking and drugs ain't considered normal nor hip anymore. I mean, if you think about it, probably 3/4 the population take drugs. Probably 90 per cent if you count aspirin and caffeine--and why shouldn't you? I can tell you from ranching and hunting that coyotes will eat fermented persimmon, stock will lap up fermented silage--beer is what it is--and coonhounds love a brewsky too.

"Now all these folks and animals may be doin themselves no good. The flesh is weak. But you do have to wonder. Not growin up as an intellectual--mongst uneducated if often smart folk--I always had a high comfort level with what you might call ambiguity. Indeterminacy. No one I hung out with as a kid ever figured any preacher or teacher, much less politician, had it all down perfect. You'd listen and nod, or not listen, but you'd go on and do what seemed best to you, or what you were told, or what you felt like doing, and the fact it wasn't always the same things, and didn't always have a set rhyme or reason to it, never bothered most of us that much. We didn't expect it.

"So maybe they're right. Swallowing, inhaling or injecting anything but what's prescribed, or maybe a glass of wine with dinner, is bad for you. You know, folks our age, it's probably close to a hundred per cent. I take something for blood pressure myself. It does affect my mood too. So does the stuff people take for their hearts or their hormones or their diabetes or whatever. Not to mention Paxil and Prozac."

Rafe popped the cooler beside him in his new Rover--he'd finally found a happy sucker for the Porsche--and pulled out another Buckler for himself. He set the nonalcoholic beer in the coozie between his knees, ignoring the vehicle's bar furn. Then he felt round for a pint of Badoit and proffered it to Fiona, laying its coolness against her upper arm to pull her gaze back from idly contemplating, as she listened, the open gently rolling landscape along 290, of brush yielding to tan pastures and then black cotton fields ("the blackest dirt and whitest folks in Texas"; Fiona snorted) with occasional streambeds cleared of thirsty mesquite for steamboat gothic houses under live oaks.

Rafe liked the SUV, so far. His practice with motor vehicles descended from Gramp's with hossflesh. Trade, sell, buy. Never new. He might take one he didn't trust but couldn't diagnose just to find what was wrong with it. One ranch hand--Jake--worked pretty much fulltime just on machinery. Rafe swallowed, clearing his throat of phlegm. Smoothing his lazy tenor drawl.

"It's funny. When I grew up the solution to unhappiness was generally considered to be prayer, insofar as there was considered to be a solution, or insofar as people thought about there bein a solution. Then when I went to college I learned unhappiness, better known as angst, figured as the existential condition of the thinking reed. It was sexy. Nowadays I understand they think it's a neuro-chemical problem. Probably genetic. Just the way some dogs are nervous and some are mopey and some are placid and cheerful, so it is with us. If you were misfortunate enough to be born a pit bull or coonhound, you had ought to take something will turn you into a golden retriever. Fine. I like golden retrievers. Got no objection, either, to hangin out with people who are easy to get along with. Don't hold with the idea, necessarily, that easygoin means less interestin or creative or whatever. All the same, I have my doubts about becomin a golden retriever myself. It don't seem reverent."

Rafe paused. Lulled Fiona said nothing, like the tar baby. One part of her mind memorialized Arthur Godfrey. Rafe was funnier. Smarter. Less soothing. This uneasy formal tone--better not bring such up again, at least not for a long time.

"Maybe I'm just too old a dog. I do preciate the book you gave me, been leafin through it, and sure enough you're right it is interestin and sure enough it could indeed help a script. DSMIV. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders. Fine title. You wonder if Bob Stone and Joan Didion know it, and there are no finer scriptwriters. I've passed along some of hers for a lot of money, not to brag.

"But it does, more than ever, make me wonder if we're not all destined to live out our future in a chemical fog. Not that that's consolin, necessarily, maybe I'm underminin my own point, such as it is, if not digressin...." Comfortable pause. Hum of the big tires.

"Seen *Blade Runner*? --Course not, I wouldn't expect. I wouldn't recommend it to you either. A sci-fi dystopia. Good of its kind though. Let me talk about it anyway, indulge me, it's been on my mind. It is apposite.

"See, I handled a piece of it, once, and nothin goes through my paws without leavin green ink. But my point is--I'm gettin to it--the script is what should make all narrative. Dialog/character/plot, cause there always plenty good actors. But there are exceptions. Natural ones like opera, and plumb unnatural ones like movies. Hollywood movies, anyway. Practically, it's a producers' medium now, and artistically, the directors'. You're stuck with a cliche script--frankly, even legitimate drama is so tightly formulaic now, it takes a special kind of genius to leave a mark--so what's left is atmosphere. Atmosphere. Set, visual effects, style. Manner.

"So *Blade Runner* takes place in a modern urban sewer system. I don't take credit for that idea, but I do for sellin it in those words, and that ain't bein modest, ma'am. A yellow fog, a drugged haze, a homeless nightmare like what you might imagine exhalin from out of one of those New York street vents. Or Dante's Inferno…."

Rafe had succeeded in becoming well travelled without becoming in the least cosmopolitan. Months of shooting in Spain or Brazil, yes, but within an enclave of film folk, without any language except American dialects, including preppy and Hollywood. Rafe did learn some Spanish, plus some clever French idioms here and there about architecture, landscapes, food (some from an ex-wife--Fiona was not his first Francophone). Yeah, for a ranch kid, *Rognons de veau au cognac* represents the same negligible challenge as a trip to Boys' Town in Laredo. Drink the mescal, eat the worm, chew the jalepenos, fuck the whores. No biggie.

So he kept that solidity of center common to enough Texans. Courtoisie. Courtliness. Courtesy. In part from genuine kindness but in greater part from seeing that unflinching consideration for his interlocutor made life easier--getting what and where he wanted quicker. A deep-rooted formal esthetic: manners are the appropriate theme music for the movie called ordinary life. Pay mind.

Perhaps a golden retriever after all (few of us can identify our own totem animal) Rafe was unbeset--either by nature or training--by that anxiety which, by throwing up a constant smokescreen of pointless speculation about the future or a constant doggy worrying of old bones, prevents some folks from attending to matters at hand. *Do no pain* was the Victorian definition of gentlemanliness, and in mores Texas was in some ways a hundred years behind the times.

Rafe did not necessarily extend the principle to nonpersons or to new definitions--he was a strict constructionist by nature--but to say he was no saint in a reformist or revolutionary sense is not to say he was not akin to the greengrocer whom Kierkegaard (an expert on saints) speculated might be the hidden Man of Faith. Rafe was born and raised to be content with small things. And ambition.

English major Fiona recognized in him once again 'the natural gentleman.' In the American, Henry James, sense. Like Al. Indeed as fourth generation ranch Rafe was in many ways the country gentry which in England itself ceased to exist generations ago.

The land. It increases in value. It sustains. It has its own clout, its own security, its ineffable beauty. You can run cattle on it, you can lease it to hunters, you can stock it with exotic game and charge admission. More tigers inhabit Texas than India. You can sell the thin-soiled hillsides to developers or lease them to dude ranchers, rent the riverbanks to outfitters (all the old spreads have good water) or run them yourself, supplying employment for retainers, factotums, entourage, and corollary (nonprimogenitive) lines.

Rafe viewed folks, like Fiona's family, who speak one or more foreign languages--he knew many such folks--with neither envy nor respect nor the amused contempt of the businessman; any more than he felt these emotions about his quarterhorse's ability to do 400 meters in 24 seconds. That is, he entertained such emotions at restful speculative times but in such mildly ruminative forms as to have less effect on his mood and ambition than a lite beer.

He saw in Fiona another culture with deeper roots. He let it come to him. If it did, he was unintimidated. If not, the point was moot. He liked New England, in the summer and fall, though his sense of home now was movement. Saddle up. A season or two suffices. In *whither thou goest* he was most touched by *goest*.

Gettin a mite tired of Dave, anyway. A nice kid, smart, able, and willing to hold down his Yankee nerves. Stoic within his means. Rafe had been pleased as always to find he could really talk to Dave--unusual with this generation--but it was something he found with a number of people.

Creepy kid. Rafe was moved, but.... One thing movies lack is intermissions--supplied by breaks not so much commercial as natural, bespoke.

Fiona had a nice place back east and he had some business with TV scripts at a NY studio. He might look like a hick to her there, but he knew when and how to tone down the accent. Owned some Savile Row suits. Knew the restaurants and galleries.

Besides, movement. Not frenetic but stately, well organized. Travel. Get her away from the kids. He sensed she'd enjoy it, especially on his responsibility. At his age he wasn't looking for a good mother for his children--never had been, which might've been a mistake--and who was to say she hadn't been? He hadn't done well in that department himself, point of fact, and this did not set him apart from Hollywood folkways. Only the insecure boonies, undeterred by evidence, believe in a uniform standard, a platonic scale of virtue applicable from situation to situation, culture to culture, person to person, movie to movie. There may be only one reality, but there are many visions. And if there be a soul, it's no essence, but as mutable as any other well written character. Give the Old Boy credit.

"Define 'Pole,'" Rose said, plopping into the hot tub, steaming.

"Aw, come one, a Polish joke? It's barely noon," David muttered.

His sister grunted. Perhaps Olympic cyclists ought to be stoic. But Eddie B *(*Borysiwicz), the Polish directeur sportif of the Olympic team, was enough to try a saint.

David wiped her splash from his eyes with his unoccupied hand, holding little Sassy above harm's way with the other. Saskia van der Meer Moore, Erika and his contribution to the bloodline. Jacuzzied babies have to be air-cooled often anyway. Up, down.

"An incompetent Nazi," Rose answered herself. "They couldn't even run their own Holocaust. The spirit was willing but the mind was weak." She worked her sacrum catlike against a jet, slopping water over the rims.

David craned behind, assessing the damage to his muddied hibiscus seedlings. He'd masoned a fountain and a multi-terraced drip-fed garden to encircle this limestone tub; bamboo, bananas and waterlilies descended to it from the new nursery, reached in turn by wrought iron circular stairs from the master bed.

Tricky for 2 AM feedings, unfortunately. Every act a compromise.

"Well, Sis, I like your distinction of spirit and mind. *Nous*? Coleridge? But otherwise not funny, even for a Polish joke. Not even Sylvia Plath could compare Shoah to her own discontents without sounding nutty with vanity." He let his arms float loosely in the subsiding waves.

The good news was Rose being gainfully employed on the Olympic team. Gotta run interference here, set a pick, buffer Rose and her coach

Rose fumed silently.

David schwiegt in turn. His rhythm still seemed to be off. He might've fumed too but Sassy's litchi flesh cradled his humor. The van of the season's first Norther, counterpointed by the fuss and plaints of a small rapid, whined among the cypress enlacing the gothic vault of the riverbed. *Back water rising, has been for nights and days.*

David reconsidered his remarks, again. He felt pompous. Sylvia Plath: The Holocaust Reconsidered isn't really the issue, is it? He persevered bravely, though his sentences seemed to fall flat. The Paxil? Mania? Truth?

An improvement, still. The other stuff had made him feel like his eyes were focussing independently: med-a-morphed into a chameleon, hooded panzer turrets rotating toward different panics. David cleared his throat, swallowing at the tongue lethargy. Try again.

"I take it we're talking about Coach Borysiwicz. World famed Eddie B, Sarmatian warrior. I hope you've come for hydro-counselling before taking arms against a sea of troubles on your lonesome. A ounce of prevention is worth a tubful of damage control, I always say."

"Aren't we pithy this afternoon. Archimedes, Sage of Bath." Rose sniffed.

Wish she wouldn't do that. One of Mum's less auspicious mannerisms. David swirled Sass through the bubble stream.

He began to massage his sister's sore quads, keeping an eye on Sass, now ensconced in her Nereid shell throne, fists directing unheard music. Of the spheres, surely. Though clearly vigorously atonal.

Rose's filet mignon loosening, flowing. Tigerish symmetry of proportion--gluteus, quads, gastrocs.

"Ow! Watch it."

"What's he done now? You know, it's not like discovering he's an asshole is news. Or unshared by multitudes. Or even the point. I hope we're thinking of Rosey cycling, not Eddie B's moral education. *Bildung*."

David tried to stifle the irritating scholarship but the baby made him manic. More manic. Labile. Sometimes it was all he could do to suppress giggles, straighten his comic face like Jonathan Winters to listen to others' troubles. As an architect must. Paterfamilias. This is not the way to true mental health, he admonished himself, risibly.

"What's so funny?" Rose snarled. "You pedal on rage, I need joy. Perhaps you could share some." She shifted, stretching her rectus and hamstrings. She felt good, actually.

"Sorry," David said. "It's Sassy, see."

Rose grunted, not unmollified. You had to overlook some "inconsequent loquacity" (Mum's phrase? Dr. B's?) in your bro, post bin. Be grateful suicidal ideation had subsided. She closed her eyes, trying to go limp. David switched to her gastrocs. Scent of juniper in the stormy air. Play of the bubbles along her ribs.

"Can you hold out a couple months?" he asked. "After the Olympics, who cares what he thinks? What does he think?"

"He think we need plenty rest. Ugh. Jim say him talk like Tonto." Master of a fluid pedal stroke--that noble stride--Jim could be pretty funny too. Vernacular wit, natural iconoclasm.

"Not really," David said, shocked.

"Well, evenings and even part of the afternoon," Rose admitted.

"So centuries in the morning..."

"Nothing but a few sprints in the afternoon, then bedrest. Some of us have been sneaking out for an extra ride, until Mr Asshole twigged."

"Our idea being, keep on piling up the miles until the last weeks, then work on speed?"

"Of course."

"So how do we do that without Eddie B finding out? I mean, talking His Holiness round is out of the question?"

"Precisely."

"A distraction."

"Like?"

"Hmm, how about Rafe interviewing him in Montana for terrific Western opportunities suitable to his venal freemarket Pole heart?" Rafe's riverhouse was done. Saltillo tile, unstained cedar, Navaho and Kilim rugs. His damn antlers gracing a toolshed.

Antlers. Marvels, to be sure. The color, the texture, the subtle shape. But there doesn't seem to be a damn thing you can do with them. Except pocket knife handles. His badger shaving brush, of course. David had seen furn, bric a brac, scrimshaw--endless Western ingenuity--and antlers still only looked good in his hands or on a live buck's head. Frustrating. Just the natural Southwestern material he was looking for, you'd think.

"Nah," Rose said, regretfully. "He'd feel it was too near the Olympics to desert us."

"Hook him up with faxes and cells. Mucho high tech. He'll be impressed."

"He's low tech when it comes to riding. Forces soggy grape sandwiches on us at feed stations. Dipped in wine."

"Dipped in wine? Grapes? Not jelly?"

"You heard me. Don't make this more difficult. It's not funny." Rose was laughing, though. Big smile from Sass, attracted. "You know he thinks riders mostly fall left because the heart's on that side?"

"Geh, I guess I must've been in the southern hemisphere or something, because I fell right. Of course, coincidentally, races are routed for right turns--with traffic--and bikes mostly slide out from under you. No rider will fly over the bars if he can lay the bike down. Why, hell, if you got launched every time, every crash could cost a collarbone. Suppose he noticed that? Being the world's foremost coach and all? What can he be thinking?"

"David, I know that, you know that," Rose said, irritable again, "but facts never discourage an asshole. And why are you explicating bike racing to me?"

"Grape sandwiches. Just thinking out loud, warm up the motor. Speech rusty from parenting, you know. Infantile aphasia. Europeans don't even make sandwiches. And no American would eat grapes on bread. What if we have good ol' Dr Batenburg chunk him in the loony bin? Spike him in the rear with mind-boogling chemicals? Cloud his mind with tricyclics? Mbwa-ha-ha-ha. The man is clearly mad. Unfit to be on the road. Even without cyclists."

"Davey, this is all very funny and enlightening and all, I'm sure it's having a fine effect on my mood and what not, and I am trying to 'control my expression of affect like a grown up,' as y'all kindly advised me, but I still need to figure out how to ride enough miles without pissin off my coach." Rose chugged the last of her quart of Gatorade and set it aside to accept a proffered flask of chilled spring water, its silverbacked cork dangling on its chain. Calcium flavored, straight out of the aquifer. Cool tickle.

"Yeh. Well, we'll get to that, believe it or not. Dialectically. Patience. Seek counsel. I do preciate yore comin to me fore losin yore temper with Eddie B and chokin our negotiatin room." David blew out his cheeks, disembarrassing himself of Rose's faux twang. He still found it kind of funny, on her at least--marvelous ear!--but besides pissing off the natives, it alarmed Dr Batenburg. "But first. Are you sure he's wrong? I mean beside his lunacy--ad hominum--are we sure you need endurance more than speed? --Slavic languages don't use articles, you know. That accounts for Tonto; we needn't impute his speech rhythm to insanity. You know, you can never explain articles to....There must be rules, else why do we all use them the same way? but no one has been able to formulate them. Far as I know."

"Oh, please. Davey, the other stuff made you incoherent. Now you babble." Rose hadn't splashed him only for fear of choking Sass too. "Get a grip, will you? Slavic languages."

"Patience. True progress is slow. Freud said. Also Marx. Also Darwin. Also Dr. B. First let's run it again for Erika. She trained with the best." David took his handset and put Erika (enCadillac to Houston) on conference. She loved her pink convertible. Her best wedding present. Rafe. To her it was retro, to her new compatriots probably at best witty. So what.

"Heighho, sweetypie," David yodelled. "Sass wants to chat but first we need advice. Probs with Eddie B. He counsels Rose tapering off, probably unwisely, but Rose--I'll let her tell it."

"OK. From the top, Erika. David insists. You know this is the toughest Women's ever. So far we've had pussy courses--women being fragile and all--but this time, well, in the first place they got tired of Dutch sprinters exploding after unphotogenic strolls. Glance down for your beer and you miss the race. The, the male course is Montjuich, so they're gonna let us try too, fewer laps, women's lib etc etc. You know all this. Point being we're unlikely to have a sprint finish. It's going to be whoever can last lap after lap of that climb."

The sibs listened awhile, nodding, floating. Then David held the phone to Saskia's mouth, fortuitously vocalizing.

Erika had gone to check inventory orders at the newest BinHouse: full service exterior/interior remodelling factory outlet franchises. Anything from an architect to design and supervise your (guest)house during flush times, to upwardly mobile clerks to explain how to install brass tub fixtures during Texas recessions. David raised funds and product, Erika was CEO and legs.

Those legs! David's mind wandered. His blood too. Took ten minutes just to massage her improbably flared calves, let alone the quads, sloop-chined from skating. He fended off Rose's shameless hand.

"Point taken," David said, over the arm tendering the phone. He flipped off the speaker. "All right. How bout this? Occam's razor. We simply say you have to come here afternoons to bond with your niece--a Dutch custom. (Poles probably still suffer extended families too.) I'll suit up. We'll do some hills. Spot me the hundred miles you'll already have in your legs, I should be able to push you some, still. Or take Sass. I'll put a kidseat on your mountain bike. Climbing a 40 pound bike up RR12 should turn your quads into steel.

"And I'll plead Eddie B myself. Invite him for dinner. Ah developed plenty expertise negotiatin with the mad by hagglin with longnailed Dallas decorators and snooty UT architects sulkin in their Sicilian tents."

Rose grinned beatifically. She sloughed back into the bubbles. David surfed Sass over the wave. Happy tub. Techno-umbilic to Moeder in pink flattop.

They soaked. Now full blown, the Norther soughed in the cypress encathedraling their limestone riverbed in chartreuse light. Sanctuary. David's mood settled. The Blanco sang.

Rose recalled Fiona's last call: "Doesn't that racket drive you bats? After weeks?"

"Eh, Mom, it's only loud when the river's high, and then only from the jacuzzi...well, bunkhouse porch, sometimes. That's why David put in the weir--one reason. Besides, I think he needs it. White noise. Just think of surf. I mean, what's the diff?"

"Well, that's exactly why I live in Scarsdale--"

"--You like planes--"

"A week of the Hamptons--what?--is all the pounding and battering I need. What did you say? Interrupt?"

"Gettin old, are we," Rose inquired solicitously, maliciously defending her brother. "Hearing loss tends to rough up ambient noise with static, I hear. Rafe says. Can see it might make surf unpleasant. To say nought of kids or Rock and Roll."

During the summer heat Rose had trained in Colorado--once and partly still a Texas province. Fiona was still in Scarsdale, raiding Saks for BinHouse staff. Theoretically she was also helping resident Rafe with a pilot for a Western TV series. After all, he did like to recite dialog. Hear it. Mostly he liked Fiona, and Scarsdale TLC. And his investment in BinHouse.

"'Sicilian tents'?" Rose sat up to drain her spring water. Long muscular throat undulating. CA++ burp. "I'm a dumb athalete, 'member? I dropped Greek. Still feel bad about it, but the second aorist was the last straw."

David licked his lips. "Sorry. Kind of an esoteric allusion. A big hop. Even for us. What I meant was, UT profs see Texas the way exiled Athenians saw Syracuse or Sicily--what did they call Sicily then? have to look it up. The dirtbags don't even bother to hide their contempt for us natives, while showing no qualms about cashing our checks or using our library. It'll be a generation afore they notice it's sunny outside and you don't have to broken-field your pricey way through crowds, as on the coasts. They're stupid, like so many intellectuals." David lay Sass back in the shallows to play. She splashed at the water onehanded, spastic little propeller, holding her head up like a seal or bike racer. Soft riverlight lambent in the wetshiny mother of pearl skin. Nibbleable hiney.

"'Brief Encounter' was amazing wasn't it? Another world." Rose was free-associating--along the Texas/Europe cultural divide--to the English movie they'd rented last night. Exhausted from training, she'd fallen asleep. David wondered how much she'd caught, but said only, "The World of Yesterday: Memories of a European."

"Drinking tea all the time is cozy and all--what's Erika's word?"

"Gezellig."

"Yeah--but you come to realize they had to ingest constant hot fluids just to unfog their tweedy be-hatted innards. What a climate. Especially before central heating and Housewrap." Rose was a student of her brother's business, with an eye to the future as well as kinship.

"A weird tragedy, to be sure. Noel Coward must've written it as farce, originally. I mean, Noel Coward. Did you notice the Royal Censor's Stamp of Approval--so named--in the titles? And how the characters were kept from consummating by one Brit obstacle after another? It wasn't morals, whatever they said."

Collecting their stuff, David searched among the rockwork for Rose's discarded Gatorade. Move camp to LR. What a production. Household gods, bag and baggage. *Pay, pack and follow*. Well, keeps me off the streets.

"Yeah, it took hours to find a private space, get the damp overcoat and rubbers off, light the chill fire and drink your hot tea, before you could even begin to english your stuffy way into bed."

"It's funny, Sis." OK, five more minutes. Then nappy-time. "I still believe in literacy, the arts and all, but it's coming to seem like an esoteric hobby. More like being handy at dodgeball in the schoolyard than like being expert at things everyone should know summat about. We still teach all this stuff in universities, even in Texas, but we know more and more people who are happy, smart, successful by any reasonable standard, but don't know squat about art or architecture, and never read a book. Including my new self, it sometimes seems. I mean here I am leading the sportif outdoor life, abaff with fambly, and the only counter example is a gaggle of pissy neurotic expat UT profs commuting from library to classroom to subdivision, primarily engaged in writing articles for obscure journals even they don't read except to swot up another article."

David sighed. Sour grapes. Pace Freud, suppressing bile is better for mental health. I'm hopelessly self-involved even during acts of supposed charity. David looked at Rose--really listening. Relaxed as a dozing cat.

"Seriously," he said. "I'm a complete amateur, but I've had more effect on the landscape, the way people live and the buildings they do it in than even fairly successful Yale Architect grads. I don't know what to make of it. Maybe Robert Burton was right. Reading dries the brain, aggravating Melancholia."

Rose had enough. An appetite for cold barbecue chicken--she could visualize its niche in David's fridge--and maybe a nap drove her onto dry land.

"Well, bro, what I do know is this," she said, drying her hair. "Besides Intellectuals, the only other Tribe governed by Ideas is Loonies. Well, Retards. Look at psychosis. Fundamentalism. Regard Eddie B." Where did he go, between sentences? Well, not as far as before. Good color.

"Still, you like to think thinking is some use." David bounced Sass--becoming cranky--in and out of the water. She burbled. He plugged her into a bottle of Mother's Special, prewarmed in the jacuzzi. "I mean, we considered your problem, maybe outsmarted Eddie B. You and me and Erika. Trained in the best schools. Weighing the differing perspectives. You and me and Erika and *Saskia In Her Bath*."

"Uh. Less we're miscountin our chickens."

THE BLACK CHAPTER; FLASHBACK

The black dog was what Winston Churchill called his depressions. *Melancholia* was then the formal term. He treated it--his Familiar--with brandy and cigars. There being then no other meds; being not the kind of man-in-his-world/time who'd ask for help. Therapists now say these treatment modalities--alcohol and tobacco--are counterproductive.

But we must say Winnie succeeded. Though to say so categorically we'd need to clone a thousand PMs and treat 500 with PaxilR.

Disthymia. Succubus. Incubus. A beast unknown. Only its servant feels how deep it sets its gentle fangs into neck and nape: philosophers say only its sufferer can testify indubitably about the nature, or even existence, of a mood [disorder].

So David's story remained unnarrated even to himself. There was for example that summer, before his second senior year at Yale. By that era, treatment modalities abounded--among a surviving sentiment for what pros dismiss as self medication--but the best succors were still obscure to laymen.

This summer forms an interlude vivid in our subject's history and consciousness, exemplary, a memento mori. We can call it The Black Chapter. It forms a shadow, *eidolon*, deep behind his eyes like a clot on an angiogram. A spider web curded with suspect grey. The darkness everyone sensed in him.

David often longed to call up this daimon, give himself to it, end the suspense, find peace. But--more usually--he tried to light lamps to keep his beast from the firelight, deep in its onyx jungle (unfortunately interior). That is, David preferred to soak in whatever hot tubs proved the most promissory of effusing salts volatile into his peccant organs. Hydrocure. Lourdes. Hence his penchant for jacuzzis amid drip fed terraced gardens. An architectural signature. The Baths. Water of life.

The summer in question, Rose had been finishing a junior year abroad. The Sorbonne. She and David meant to close with an August bike tour. But by then he was already back at Yale: in, however, its exalted Psychiatric Institute.

But at the end of May David had been at home in Scarsdale. In the bosky steamboat gothic house renovated by his mother, amid landscaping supervised by his father. Northern magnolias, a yew alley, the red beach beetling over the gazebo, a swimpond with red-eared turtles among waterlilies in its shallow end.

In theory David was packing for a gig as firewatcher in eastern Oregon, but on this particular Monday he found himself working his way steadily if desultorily through a quart of Stolichnaya. The artichoke aftertaste scoring his gullet like swallowed diamonds. Fiona was in Manhattan, scheduled to return for dinner. Al was in Dallas, La Galleria, supervising a new Saks branch.

David hadn't intended to drink. Surely not coffeebreak, lunch and tea out of a bottle while curled foetally on the Recamier couch. Or pacing room to room. From the blue velour breakfast room bay-windowed to birdfeeders among dogwood, through the ficus in the French provincial parlor to the wicker sunporch vaulted in grape arbor.

However, David had found the mescaline dropped with prep school buddy Tony--hmm, where was Tony? lost somewhere along the line--backing up on him. It seemed to italicize the voices plaguing him the past weeks. Megaphoned now by that burpy swallowed nausea; that unadvertised side effect of what is, after all, an acid.

These voices presented a subtle conundrum. One could not clearly say they were delusions. They weren't telling him to do anything. Nor did he feel they belonged to an Other.

That is, we all have an internal voice. It accompanies us from the birth of reason, past its demise, perhaps all our waking hours: rehearsing the future, correcting the past, telling us what we feel, entertaining us, boring us.

We become aware of it at our peril.

Such times may birth a need to argue, even to beg for quiet--creating a second voice. In extremis, to tell it and its new interlocutor to shut up--creating a third voice.

The French word *ennuie* applies: boredom raised to an existential statement. Call it angst; otherwise free-floating anxiety.

Mescaline can transform Vox into a hieroglyph, a thought balloon, a scrolling text. Subtitles. As it may cartoon our vision; transform the humans we see into clothed apes; further metamorphose some into their totem animals: Janey, the dyspeptic Moore housekeeper, became Miz Beaver waddling, her flat grey tail extruded from her apron.

So David needed to spend time with his soft cat. Snooker. Snuggle her. Reverse and cup her warm ears in his palms. What seemed like a lot of time. His boon companion in solitude and lonely childhood sickness, his role model failing all others, his true mentor, significant other, upon whom he'd modelled his yawns and stretches, his pacing gait; envying the grey over blue fur as opposed to mottled human skin, feline litheness as opposed to our clumsy....

Ah yes, that's what became of Tony! In the dark of night, long before the release of morning, he and Tony had been neck deep in the pond, mother of life, to escape mosquitoes. The idea of flying organisms sucking your blood is disquieting in psychedelia. In fact, to chemically amplified empathy, the Insect Weltanschauung felt even more fearful than bloodsucking. Insects seemed virally, mechanically, horribly primal, by virtue of their deactivated immobility: crouched, senses alert but inhumanly twigstill, when not 1/seeking prey 0/fleeing predation.

In the terror of imagining it they became it. Life razed of all meaning other than fear and desire. Thanatos and Eros, amputated of grace. Enough truth to that vision to fix their contextless attention. The chemical bath washed away history, nuance and multivalence, leaving fundamentalist conviction. Momentarily. Then the images passed, leaving only the fear.

Then Tony had observed what appeared to him to be bags of eyes. David was fairly sure they were bullfrogs' eggs. At least initially. He even believed he communicated this scientific conjecture to Tony. (David couldn't be sure, now, how fully Tony had shared his insights, much as he felt their communion then.) But in any case Tony had been firm about his version. Between the bags of eyes and the bloodsucking airborne binaries, Tony must've perceived an urgent necessity to escape. Too urgent for ceremony.

Or had leavetaking gone synaptically unrecorded? David wasn't sure. It was not that data slipped from his mind's grip. Quite the reverse. Mind slid from one scintillate to...born each moment to a brand new world, like the staring rabbit beginning his day.

Feeling in control of these cartoons, or not caring whether one is in control, can be amusing, and answers to early descriptions of what was once called--admittedly inadequately--Simple Schizophrenia.

Whereas feeling taken over, answers to Paranoid Schizophrenia; which still goes by that name, perhaps because it is so memorably unpleasant for all concerned.

Depressants, including alcohol, are known to take some edge off stimulants, including psychedelics. Hence the Stoli.

One soon forgets how much antidote one has ingested. TID? QID? Even which is the antidote, which the poison.

By the time the sun was over the yardarm, and pater and mater were expected for dinner (or was Da [still?] in Dallas?) David discovered himself to be in no state to receive polite company.

For some reason, it seemed like a good idea to take the train to Manhattan. Empirically, we observe Manhattan seems like a good idea to many who are incapable of evaluating ideas. If--with notable lack of historicist empathy--we project from sounder states we may find their decision surprising (Manhattan being a trial even in normal stress) but the demographics are convincing.

David had in mind walking anonymously until this pharmaceutic tide went out. Visiting some non-polite acquaintance in search of further chemical aid. He wasn't sure.

It was quite a project. Took a long time to trek to the station. Possibly several decades. There were false starts. (The lurch of awry flagstone ending the walkway deja vu. The dizzy vault of verdant hardwood turning. Don't look up.) One wasn't sure what to pack. The Stoli, obviously, but what else? Old vials of codeine left from Da's migraines? A change of clothes? Raingear? His camping equipment?

Returning for an item was fierce, since Mum might've come back. The broad world shrank at the thought. That is, either David had forgotten his watch or he was unable to read its face, owing to the scrolling, which turned at times into primitive motion pictures (black and white; sticky or jumpy projection).

Oh, sweet jesus, Dad's old steel B29 navigator's Rolex! Recouped from the attic, where David had found it in a duffle among slim highwaisted khakis and a canteen. The watch had been minimally operational till reconditioned with David's 16th birthday check. No! had he laid the beloved thing down somewhere--to get a magnifying glass? (how would that help?)--or hadn't he put it on that morning? Please.

Good. Thank God for his unconscious. The autopilot defending us from anarchy. If it goes....OCD, ADD, ADHD. Those euphemizing, antisepticizing, acronymic attempts at (too many As on the whale road. Broken record. Tasting of compulsion.) control employed by the deadly professions. Military. Psychiatric. (Did you know untreated major depression has a morbidity of 40%? Makes oncology look wussy.)

The zither behind his forehead, feathering like a moth in a stormlamp, weakened his concentration. Best not look up. Swimming head ascends the figured terraces of the plane trees, adrift among their golden shafts of light. *The Sultan's turret*.

The train itself was soothing. Tight. It might've been pleasanter with fewer or less intrusive conductors, possibly with fewer raccoons, but gazing out the window was deliquescent. By then the Stoli was doing a decent job on the voices. Still heard, but seeming not to matter. Natter. Even so, a tinge of mescaline lurked, though it should long ago have achieved half life. Was this a flashback? permanent psychotic break?

Well, who could be sure what a given tab contained? Particularly without an operating timepiece.

Timepiece was good (avuncular vests and rimless glasses). Lurk was bad (Killroy heh heh heh). Vocabulary is defining. Keep this in mind.

Impossible to keep anything in mind. Only creates a nagging sense of having forgotten something, which becomes identical to anxiety. Which conjures--oh shut up.

Back to the train window. Vacant lots. Introduced to epistemology by R Crumb. 'I'd never have seen it if I didn't believe it.' Discarded tires, scrap metal, car parts, amazing rank weeds purple and green. Amazon. Black beast in its jungle. Keep up the bulldog upper lip, Win. Bare the pre-emptive fangs. *Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for I am the meanest SOB in the joint.* How many Viet Nam grunts wore that on their helmets?

David walked till he was footsore. It was comforting, like rocking yourself in your own arms. From Grand Central's star-vaulted cocoon of *bruit* through streets equally distracting and human until deep in the magenta night he found himself exhausted. *Bruit*, yes. Leitmotif. The French word meant merely noise, but the medicalized "brewy" denoted David's murmur, an exhausted rhythm from within, dragging a foot. Slush-boomp. Slush-boomp.

His dark-blue sea-island cotton shirt hanging damp. Formication.

The trashcan firelight of a panhandlers' campsite attracted him. He turned out his pockets to their request and sank after banter ebbed into a wordless corner. Sometime during the night he curled from backrest to fetal. Cement bruising his hipbone.

Sticky dawn. Cold.

Homelessness demands more ingenuity than firewatching; camps more exposed and brutal, requiring greater resource. David was still not sure, that is, whether he was diving or falling. He never would be. The distinction was too subtle, an irrelevant artifact of an outsider's ahistoricist viewpoint. Particularly since this expedition could later only be recalled vaguely, not re-experienced (shudder), and memory of its sensation was both spotty and unwanted.

The camp he struck had its own folkways and one advantage, the exhalation of a Con Ed heating vent. Its folk were less frightening with familiarity but more dangerous. David's wallet had long since disappeared--perhaps far earlier--but this was not the evil which woke him.

Rape.

Enunciated not with screams of terror or rage but whimpers of habituate helplessness. A rabbit murdered. Poor woman, poor beast. Bootless cries forced by pathetic fear, hopeless of communion. A voice expressing pain, to no one. The poor soul's anciently tracked arms rent their rags, her gaping mouth anemoned yellow teeth. Rat Queen. A derelict, brain rotted inhuman? or, poor thing, as sentient as he? Perhaps hypersentient from inability to see beyond this moment. Poor cold mad feary thing. So appealing appalling. So loathsome. So like.

A Holocaust, intensely small. The mescaline again? Had he dropped another tab?

The men were armed, infected, mad, so David, no coward, never considered intervening, even once fully awoke from short sleep. Call a cop? He could imagine himself pleading, disheveled; returning, harshly condescending Officer in tow, to show The Man this group of invisibles again peacably drinking, panhandling, napping, the fetid woman, curled under burlap, unwilling to show her schizo face, much less file incident reports or again expose of her own free will her greenbruised clotted thighs for a sad Polaroid. (Backlit acid cyanine, the hue of her varicose....) Clearly law and custom did not apply.

Goths encamped in the eternal city, the seat of empire.

David walked back to Grand Central, stripped to the waist in the men's room and bathed. The water brooked along his pebbled back, infested his trouser seams with damp. The universal solvent marking the insoluble stranger.

The waiting room was too exposed. He struck his tents again. All the same he would days later pass one of his father's colleagues on Madison at 42nd but by then David would've become invisible too. Torn, dirty, homeless. As callous about room temperature as a bike racer. Wandering Jew.

The days passed. He developed an obsession with cleanliness, arcane knowledge of bathrooms and fountains. The obsession metamorphosed.

His topsiders would hold up well, though provide inadequate cushioning. Intended for sailing, a nongravity sport.

He shifted for himself. He studied where the rain does not fall, the sun shineth not, where wind is lost. He found a refrigerator box on the Lower East Side, pulled it into a drain gully behind a Canal Street culvert and insulated it with carpet remnants and chunks of fiberglass found in a construction dumpster. Omar Khayyam, his tent. Put up and hidden away at daybreak, repitched at nightfall. The box was safer than a Shelter or Con Ed tunnel but still too exposed to grizzlies. He'd seen their shivs. He made his own, from a putty knife and patience.

Though time was not as abundant as might seem. Sheltering, foraging, washing eat up the wilderness camper's day.

Many dull hours follow one another in a dull month, inching their slow way along, serpentine, many warm stretches, but even a miniscule break can fatally sever this linear progress. A moment's inattention to glass underfoot or the squeal of a brakeless delivery van. An hour's freeze. An untended wound.

After a run-off shower, a fresh washed shirt stroked his fine pored skin like an emperor's gesture of good will: his shown palm too holy to touch what it mimes caressing.

Early on he'd called Tony--back chez lui in Manhattan--to borrow a twenty and some blotter. The bill would be required for Thunderbird (Cheyenne god) but supermarkets discard fruit and vegetables only half-bruised; bakeries, day old bread. A balanced diet.

He needed warmer clothes. Near a Canal street emporium's streetside bins he approached a fellow shopper, a big, chinoed college student with amused eyes. "I'm cold," David said. "Could you give me 50 cents to buy a flannel shirt?" The guy gave him two quarters without haste.

Looked in his eyes. Curious with selfconfidence from a calm heart. A find. The kindness of strangers. Grace. Falling in brightness from the air. Preserving the day.

But only the used broadcloths were 50c. Flannels, 75. "Give me a break," David asked the wise eyed Spanish clerk, salsa cheeked to his stool. "I'm cold."

"OK but beat it" the boy said, uneager to take the shirt back. Dress Campbell. If the clerk’s xenophobic passions hadn't been exhausted by meringue (that is, had he been working with a good night's sleep under his faux alligator belt) he would've chased David off in the first place.

The shirt could be washed in a commercial laundry's (irony) clean runoff collected in a discarded half sink salted with detergent granules scooped from laundromat floors. Gritty to the invaded touch. David used the less sensitive sides of his hands, preserving the tips and nails.

The Third Street Mission doled corduroy coats and soup. Also theologically suspect sermons. Perilous showers. Smells. Bitter mildew, defeated by astringent chlorine bleach, discouraged the tender skin inside his nostrils. Then that swimming pool ache in his shy rejuvenated sinuses.

Panhandling seemed too nastily satiric, an aristocratic presumption, a slumming *droit du seigneur* usurping what was needed by the truly poor ye had always but in Scandinavia; but collecting aluminum cans, deposit bottles, found objects like coins or resellable discarded furniture provided enough fruit of sordid patience so street performances or tools to recondition the furn proved unnecessary, if clearly viable options.

Life was gritty. NY seems indoors but is outdoors. David was tired. He learned to nap. Newspapers and grey rags softening the pigeon beshat green bench slats. Central Park was fine at night, if you didn't move. Predators track movement. They rely on stealth and ambush, chance, more than speed or search. Even Bambi and Thumper can prosper in the bush. Anyone visibly without money is safe from all predators but the rare pure sadist or wilding gang. Lay low.

David drank Thunderbird, dropped the blotter, copped a dealer's cache of heroin by patiently and invisibly stalking the nervous little vermin over several days on Delancey. David felt no compunction about taking him out with a two by four--something about the little weasel raised weird hackles--but that proved unnecessary. The vole scored from his man in the morning, stashed, moved small amounts at corners. His drainpipe hiding place was childishly obvious, once you tracked which alley. Why he aroused such a baring of David's teeth was uncertain, inherent in the stimulus: David was more often fearful than enraged, more often remote than fearful.

But most of the time David was straight, he thought. Hard to be sure. He watched. Time slowed. His spirit moved into his eyes. Away from the voices, that was good. The movement of the streets. Wind blowing plastic bags; downcast eyes of scurrying commuters. Briefcases. Shoes. David demonstrating a nice judgment of pumps.

The panic ebbed gradually. Refocussed itself on real dangers. Selfconsciousness diverted to making himself small comforts, a reasonable place to sit, collecting MacDonald's mayonnaise packets for his raw vegetable salads, sugar for his day-old bread. Manhattan's watertowers a comfort of sentinels.

David somehow lost the ability to determine the intensity of his emotions. He was in pain and fear but could they be called despair or merely Freud's ordinary misery? The dread was more bodily now but did that mean it was stronger? He couldn't even imagine Scarsdale or Yale, so a new venue--firewatching the Eastern Cascades--seemed preposterous.

He wouldn't have been able to talk or listen, even to Mum, to anyone, because preemptive obsessions circled behind his eyes. About things left undone; embarkation on wrong tracks. Had he studied the wrong things, taken the wrong tone with old friends, mentors, lost the best of them through ignorant vanity, inability to hear above his own selfcentered noise? He'd said a bad thing about Tony's girlfriend leaving him. A cruel and shameful thing.

He improved old conversations. Experienced an urgent need to speak to his 30 year old mom about neglect. Why had her son suffered pneumonia, chronic strep throat, rheumatic fever, endocarditis, a prolapsed mitral valve, a perforated appendix, peritonitis, phimosis, hepatitis, mononucleosis, an undiagnosed and untreated speech defect, chronic depression, despair, loneliness and all the childhood diseases--before he was 14? Had she ever noticed he had no friends? Invited someone over? Offered advice, checked his homework? Shared a few reasonable words? David could recollect only Dad, itinerant Saks slave, rara avis, doing these things, but was that childhood amnesia or true? Had Mum been overworked by Saks and preschoolers? And if she was neglectful then why was she such a busybody sometimes? That summer in Bermuda. No more husband to monopolize her interest? When and why did she change?

But the only Mom available to question was 50. Unfair. Not the same. Hence the dialog with the dead. Among the dead: replay of his own piping replies.

What attitude should he have adopted, that summer in Bermuda, the year Mum and Dad needed separate vacations? The slant he had taken was clearly evil.

Did his family not care what was happening to him because he didn't care what was happening to them? The ache in his lungs, was it remorse, or an infection caught on these mean streets; or earlier, from bad drugs?

I am called Remorse. My name is Might-Have-Been.

But what absolution can there be without confession? There was too much to confess. You got lost. Shunted thither.

He had much to think about, when he could concentrate. Memories circulated in fragments. Inconceivable to actually talk. You can't go home again. Wolfe at the door.

It was as if he was seeing himself from outside, envisioning any other disoriented bum (*mon semblable mon frere*) transported to Fiona's house or the Bineke. Impossible, surely.

This was called “derealization.” “Distanciation” by Binswanger. From Heidegger. Who saw it as normal, even essential. In order to re-evaluate being thrown-in-the-world from the affectless Archimedean stance of the Absurd.

David could do without it, personally. He suspected Heidegger had perused the sensation on himself, tinnily, in a stuffed American-leather Weimar armchair, between services of dark coffee in tiny Meissen cups by his Hausfrau or Dienstmadchen. He should try it in Times Square, dosed stronger than espresso doppio.

Other times the street seemed far away, as though seen through the wrong end of a telescope. This was called micropsia.

Macropsia he had to sit out in an alley or Central Park's brushy lakeside gullies. Everything invasively close, microbial. Loathly things.

Halfbearded men with brown slugs for teeth, rotten oysters for fingernails, hospital armbands still fixed filthy to their creping wrists. Phlegm. He had sat in it, it was woven into his uncleanable twills. Slimy in the wash tub.

The streets. Hard remorseless step of the sloped concrete, rasping his skin, bruising through his thin topsiders and the slim pads of heel and ball. The solitude. Occasional wary conversations--loquacious free associations mostly--with other bums affixed like ancient mariners on the one hand to their flight of ideas, on the other to any interlocutor, hopefully real.

A few quite reasonable. Ben. A Nam vet with a sense of humor. Lost when he awoke one block from his terrain, Ben was glad for directions. Tilting his face to the mild sun. Paper coffee cup in one hand, scratching amiably in the grizzled hair under his pajama top with the other, thick, brown-nailed. He smiled benignant thanks at David, inviting a breakfast chat. Stretched his back, looked up again at the uncertain sky. David lounged against a railing, not yet ready to sit. "What do you do when it rains?" Ben smiled noncommittally. Direct questions, no.

"Getcha some coffee." Ben pointed his chin at the bodega across the street. "Need change?" David got his own Parthenon print cup. Took a pew.

Astoop, elbows aknee, not unpleasurably bemused, Ben compared the Bowery's insect parasites unfavorably to My Lai's. Mild if direct of eye, irony in his lipcurve. They spent three hours together.

And other days. Sometimes with Ben's best drinking buddy, John Coyote Ear, a fullblood Kiowa undone by firewater. Or Nam. David learned where to find Ben, how to open bottles and cans on the under edge of mailboxes; traded sources of clean water. He learned to spot Ben's friendly offcenter amble from afar. To approach loosejointed, open torsoed, smiling but not too direct of gaze. Port in brown bag. In his cups Ben told tales of LURPs, abandoned pointmen, a superior officer admired if hated.

David, not sharing the bottle, brought his own cup. He might be called Miss Priss behind his back, or have to dance the dominance ritual, but in the absence of medical care, phobia about germs was essential; any sport a mad risk. The problem was rest, not exercise.

But Ben had an edge to him. Boredom set it off. When he'd take to calling David "Loot," time to disengage. Not always easy, as among Ben's avocations was an adroit balancing of giving and taking offense. His wide grin, missing a canine, could signal real bonhomie, or invasive sadism. Skirting the edge. On the street it was called fucking with your mind. All streetfolks' psychic antennae, however damaged, were still finely attuned to it. Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for I am the meanest SOB in the joint.

David liked Battery Park. The open sight lines, the salubrious sea breezes, the plethora of benches and forage, the absence of his kind. He watched the ferry grind its heavy way to sea, unmoved by weather, gulls screaming it for garbage. The feathered frenzy of the refuse scows. The park did Batter, though, taken in large doses. A hard wind, threatening as a memory of clowns, blew in and through you, rambunctious as a too healthy playmate carelessly unconscious of your cradled broken bones.

After eight weeks--the term of firewatching Fiona believed him to be filling--David walked back to Scarsdale. Five hours. Sixteen miles from Columbus Circle as the crow flies. In more sylvan times Edgar Poe did it every weekend. To visit his fiancee. Lenore. Loopy as loons themselves, Edgar Allan twice as drunk.

Fiona checked him into the bin. Again. Wordless. Filthy. Matted. Mad.

David had lost weight but the nomad exertion kept him fit. Mental states aside--always tricky, subjective--David had to remark he succeeded. To prosper in that world took even more resource and intelligence than he'd've expected. And he had prospered, within the parameters. Under the meaning of the act.

This would forever lend him a certain security--along with an abiding fear of reverting to the streets. The bottom was not only endurable but manipulable. Down but not out. Orwell had done it (*Down and Out in Paris and London*). Though he had merely meant manual labor. Well, in London he had been a tramp. Not penniless though. And not in NY. Nor this pitiless decade.

If it was an adventure it could be called a triumph. Our word, in an age of genocide and irony, for catastrophe survived. David not only endured but prevailed: if, that is, he could ignore the utter misery of the lower depths, where he had been peripatetic in a tape hiss of obsession, sans famille, sans societe, always in savage peril.

Had the hallucinogen, this urban wilderness vision quest, this Kiowa naming rite (*hanbleceya*) graced him with a glimpse of the meaning of life? Of the Face of God? Perhaps not immediately. Generally speaking, true revelation takes time.

*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, where thou goest.*

Finds Water Fox. His Kiowa name *(hanbleceya*).

*All this I have proved by wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me.*

David retained a lasting fear of head drugs: psychedelics, cannabis; the psychiatric cornucopia. Body drugs retained an appeal. True, Batenburg cited data they did no net good. (Except endorphins, his drug of choice.) Alcohol was too wet, sloppy, acidic, hungover; opiates constipating, enervating; stimulants jangly, nervous stomached; but nothing sublunary is perfect.

At Yale he switched his major to architecture. David meant to build himself a home. And he kept on building because each attempt fell short of the hearth he imagined in his celestial city. The only true paradise is the one you still need.

BACK AT THE RANCH: THE PICNIC

The burning bush spoke to Rafe. A scrub juniper, orange with pollen, windscreening his blazing picnic. Fortunately he wasn't among the majority of Texans allergic to the mean evergreen. Sneezing and weeping their swollen way through winter. One reason he hadn't got round to cutting this brush yet. (Again. It was War.)

Among the other communicants--ranch folk and friends, her family--Fiona heard it too.

"Rafe," it cried again. Fiona tipped her Panama back, uncovering her drowsy stuffed face the better to hear. Getting to be almost swimming weather. Amethyst river. Back east, water was still frigid--and always brown. Her head was pillowed--for want of a more angular word--on the saddle of the Peruvian mare Rafe had leant her. She was no horsewomen, unlike her daughter, but the thing was gaited like an Eames chair.

"Rafe," it cried a third time. Who stood stiffly, awoke and amazed from among the ruins of potato salad, smoked brisket and borracho beans. Stood amazed in the middle of his family ranch, a good mile even as the crow flew from the nearest road or neighbor.

"Who is it?" he asked politely, rejecting *Here Am I* or *Behold Thy Servant*. He was cataloguing in his still half asleep mind who might be ahorse here. He'd heard no ATV; a pedestrian was unthinkable. Ranches do admit neighbors, granting themselves parks large as National Forests to ride, camp or picnic. Not that ranch folk don't use public land too.

"Oh come on," the voice said, now sounding irritable and thus more like Rose.

"Rose?" he hazarded. "Why don't you come out?

"I can't."

"Are you hurt?" She didn't sound hurt, and how or why would she have got herself into this formidably scratchy cedar brake if she were? If she'd been thrown, why hadn't she said anything up to now? Besides, what horse would dozer into juniper? Not even that crazy thoroughbred David gave her.

The hoss had been her birthday present. Rafe kept it at the ranch. It was cheaper than David's usual gift: a new bike (now supplied by Olympic sponsors).

"No, I'm not hurt. Just come over here a sec, would you?" Rafe's gentlemanly instincts balanced against profound experience of mountain cedar. Should've cleared this patch long ago. Thirsty stuff drank up all the water--depleting the springs--killed every other plant, and not even deer or turkey could get into it for forage. Formerly the Feds helped but of late welfare for the rich was in decline.

The point being, formerly, that debrushed land becomes pasture, suitable for stock. Plus more rain makes it to the aquifer. And ranchers need all the help they can get in their war with oligarchic meat processors: who eat at both ends of the table, consumers being no better off either, despite dropping cattle prices.

That is, Rafe reflected, ranchers have gone the way of all flesh in these United States. Artists doctors teachers farmers become servants not of those who partake of their skills or produce (who must make do with less, at greater cost) but of a vast phalanstery of obsequious eunuchs occupying the middle (high ground) who accept a bureaucratic tithe and pass the shekels up to multinational aristocracy whose tunnel vision focuses pure on the bottom line. *They do not spin, nor do they weave, yet....*

"Gee, Rose, I'd be happy to--if you can't get out yourself. What's the problem? Do I need to bring in wire cutters or a brush saw?" Rafe was delaying the moment he vividly foresaw, of pushing his way into the nasty stuff. Crisp little burrs always made it down your collar and into your boots.

By now all the picnickers, for lack of other entertainment, were attending this small mystery. The more malicious, like Gramps, rehearsed dry remarks for Rafe, once re-emerged furred in needles and arthritic twigs, tarred and feathered in tacky resin and prickles. Lookin for dessert? Dint know you et snake. Find any yaupon/agarita berries? (Yaupon and agarita being truly spiny, and the only flora besides persimmon that can coexist with juniper and thus be found within its thorny bosom.) If'n you enjoy scrub juniper, they's a fine patch of huisache yonder you might admire strollin mongst.

For huisache {despite its magnificent early spring metamorphoses into Bunyon bouquets of flame yellow) bristles genuinely luciferian; it's feared even by blase Texans inured to fire ants, scorpions, rattlesnakes, moccasins, copperheads, chiggers, coral snakes, ticks, chokachaw burrs, tarantulae and cacti. Yes, huisache--also called devil's claw or (deceptively mildly) cat's claw, or (by the numerous transplant Australians) wait-a-bit thorn--can flay alive even a longhorn bull. No one but Marsyas would dream of pushing his way into a thicket of it.

"Rafe, you really don't want me coming out there like this. Trust me."

Rafe did not. Not as far as he could throw her thoroughbred. Fiona's only drawback was her troubled kids. Long as she kept her preppy snoot down.

Rafe contemplated what in Rose's appearance or state could be worse than his own, once extracted from six yards of evil tannenbaum.

"Well, I do might want you to be comin out on your own, actually. Happy to come git you if necessary, but...." Rafe's drawl broadening with discomfort.

"Oh hell," said Rose. Thunderous crackling and whipping. She emerged. The warm air suffused the bite of gin: crushed juniper berries.

Her audience was doubly impressed.

First, and most remarkable, she had managed to stand her highblood mount still. Hadn't even nickered at theirs.

Second, she was stark naked. Not even boots. Nor saddle.

Hmm, perhaps (2) was more remarkable after all. Fine lookin woman.

"Well," said Fiona. "Lady Godiva, I presume." Her tone bit. Fully awake now, she could see why Rose had called upon Rafe rather than Mom to bring aid and raiment. Girl was truly disgraceful. These folks were Baptists. (Or seemed to be, in many respects. Confusing.) What got into her? Virtually daily. There were still crayon marks in that Aubusson.

Rafe seraped a checked picnic cloth over Rose's back. Her creamy skin and martini odor aroused nostalgic remorse in this reformed alky. He had been ungentlemanly. For, actually, this was an explanation that had entered his mind, because--

"--I suppose you require an explanation," Rose began haughtily, addressing the assembled throng from her high horse, cap-a-pie in fry chicken grease.

"A convincing apology would seem in order," her mother began.

"--Nope, actually," Rafe said, politic. "If y'all will permit me. See, fact is, I think we already know this story. For, my friends, there are but 12 plots. (I cite V.I. Propp, the folklorist.) So this'n happened afore, once upon a time, to my very own stepmom here." He nodded in the direction of Ruth, a woman barely older than Rose, whom she only vaguely recalled having met. (Rose liked strangers to swim into her orbit slowly).

Chunky, florid, Ruth mock-scowled at him. She was Gramps' third wife--married at 16 to a sexagenarian, two decades ago.

Rafe sniffed politely, ritually swiping his nose backhand. "You swam your hoss cross the Guadelupe from Bear Creek Canyon--the trail I put you on. His saddle, with all your clothes tied atop, broke free midstream."

"Forgot to re-cinch the girth strap," Rose mumbled, finally blushing.

"Yep," said Rafe. Ruth chucked a half eaten turkey leg at him.

Rose gathered that her update of this ranch folk-tale would come to pass down its corridors of tradition intermingled with Ruth's version, like the favored/disfavored sons who echo down that hall of mirrors called *Genesis*. She began to laugh. If she was going to be the butt of a fablieau, might as well enjoy it. It was pretty funny. Look at Mom's face. Found my place in history at last. Without Olympic training.

Her audience, heretofore tactfully hiding smiles, broke out hearty guffaws. Ruth took several friendly buffets on her sinewy little shoulders: leopard skinned with redhead freckles.

Ruth had been in trouble more or less most of her young bridehood. The former sheriff had actually spanked her once--it was either that or jail--at the behest and concurrence of her husband, a terror in his own right.

Gramps had found Ruth immured in actual convent walls, an orphan. There, besides leading the other kids in perilous dives through white water hydraulics and in shortcuts through moccasin entwined cypress roots, she had fished for the institution. Instead of receiving (tuition, which, in the days before Ritalin, would've been a hard press even for a stone inspired nun) Ruth had given, more blessedly: bass, catfish and crappie to her community, who allowed her the run of the river in return.

From which she was rescued by Gramps, in need of a new wife, the last having been shot out from under him. He didn't believe in doctors or hospitals, or at least hadn't till recently, when a failing kidney inspired a conversion, at least on his own behalf. (The Texas locution *ornery* may cover curmudgeons with hearts of gold--if there be such outside TV--but usually tolerates, in *formule de politesse*, true meanness. It was said that few snakes infested Gramps' spread cause they didn't care to get bit. Though everyone knew it was the quality of the land. Bottom, sculpted into KR bluestem shaded by live oaks.)

Ruth was put to work. Not that there was anything wrong with that. Everyone in the ranch world worked, Gramps hardest of all. She was hardly the kind of gal who'd've preferred lounging on the sleeping porch reading improving literature. Even at that time, before Attention Deficit Disorder had been called into being--DSMIV naming the beasts and fowls--hyperactive applied.

Besides, Ruth spent much of her waking life ahorse. Gramps in his way truly loved her, or as much and in the manner he was capable. Grant him his cultural due, it's an emotion hard for a Niedersachsen peasant to allow.

"You ain't never told me you loved me even once since fore we got married," Ruth once complained.

"I'da said if I changed my mind."

He bailed her out of the pokey and paid her weekly speeding tickets without demur--or word spoken.

The Ur-Godiva incident had occurred, for another example, when he was picnicking with neighbors, and Ruth had known where to find him because he was reclined in the locus of their own honeymoon idylls, by a sylvan rock pool under live oaks and cypress where a prayer rug of moss genuflects before the mouth of an aquamarine spring, in homage to its crystal spirit. (Y'all will excuse the purple prose--truth is, there ain't no words....)

Another day she and Gramps were prepping a field with telephone poles pulled by a tractor when they ran low on diesel. Gramps took the pickup for more. Ruth had been thrown and kicked earlier but hadn't bothered to mention it. Gramps didn't countenance plaints.

A pole stuck. Ruth, barely a hundred pounds but strong as a donkey, lifted it from its crack. But something gave inside and she began bleeding heavily. The kick had ruptured an ovary.

She limped and crawled to the barn, where she knew Gramps would return with the diesel. When he drove up--a full hour--she said "You got two options. You can take me to McKenna [hospital] or you can watch me bleed to death."

Gramps drove off.

He never talked, though Ruth was a chatterbox and raconteur. (These stories entered legend under her impetus.) Even now, in his sere but mellow leaf, in the loquacity of age, raillery was about it. They communicated well, but not with words.

Well, she thought. Guess I'm fixin to die.

But he'd gone to consult a neighbor. Soon Judge Scheel raced up, bouncing his truck on the rutted caliche. He cradled her up and drove to McKenna.

It was some time before Gramps arrived. He'd had to put up the tractor and set things to rights. (You can't just leave a ranch when you feel like it. Actual vacations are out of the question.)

He marched into her room, yanked out her IVs, and carried her to his truck. Staff could only wish they had a legal right to stop him.

At home she wasted to 65 pounds. A furious Judge Scheel told Gramps if he didn't get her back to McKenna he'd see Gramps serve a full sentence for capital murder in Huntsville.

All the same she only got four days, post op, Gramps being stingy as an HMO, similarly tough at other's expense.

Back home (Gramps somewhere up in the north pastures) Ruth took a call from the sheriff about some cattle broke loose into Bear Creek Canyon. Normally deputies would drive strays back--the old rich get good service for their small expense of ag exempt property tax--but these were longhorns. (Pets, really. Till, of course, a market grew.) The bulls have a tendency, when riled, of attacking their problem head on, even if it's a police SUV. The county had already lost several units this way and, with Ruth abed, hadn't caught enough speeders of late to contemplate buying any more just yet.

Ruth saddled up. She walked her Appaloosa up and down the arroyos--leaning back to slide the mount down their rocky embankments--to round up the herd. Her metal stitches held. The strain felt uncomfortable though.

After she drove the stock back to the ranch and fixed the bobwire, it occurred to her she hadn't enjoyed a good ride in some time, with the injury and all. She spurred her horse west.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Gramps had returned to find her and her mount gone. Thus, unbeknownst to Ruth--cantering among the turning red oaks and yellowing chinaberry, enjoying views of Saddleback from her bluff--a posse was out looking for her, including a helicopter, which couldn't spot her till she ambled the horse into the meadow fronting Hueco Springs Road. Soon she saw Sheriff Warnecke's unit approach from the field's far end. She stood the horse.

"Have you lost your mind?" he began. "Get down off that horse."

"Well, he looked mad and I want about to get spanked again fronta all them people--man, that belt hurt, and it sure was humiliatin too--so I said 'No way.'

"He folla'd me all the way back to home, where Gramps was waitin. They woulda spanked me there but Judge Scheel tole em it might loose the stitches. They didn't like to believe it, give I'd already rode all up Bear Creek, but they credit most anythin he says. The judge can talk a coon outa dewberries."

Which didn't prevent Ruth from getting pissed enough at him one day to ride her horse into town and up three flights of stairs into his court. "I don't recollect now what I was so mad about--I want but about 17 then--but the Judge was so ticked he called the sheriff, and that time he did let him spank me. None of em ever knowed what to do with me."

Listening to these tales, barefoot in work shirt and pants someone found in a saddlebag, Rose felt an affinity. Kinship. Spooning comino beans into her hatless sunburned lips, she reflected that even five hours a day abike, sore necked or spastic spined in 100 degrees or freezing rain or even hail; up mountains, against fierce winds; depleted of water, electrolytes and sometimes even courage, seemed mild compared to this adventure. Rose had got herself into some fine pickles in her time, but climbing a quarterhorse into a county courthouse was historic. A girl after her own heart. Bonking 30 miles out didn't compare.

So they took to riding together Sundays. Rose's easy day. She'd spin 25 miles in the morning and save the afternoon for shenanigans and expeditions. With a well equipped packhorse. East meets west. For, well as Rafe and Fiona came to get on, they were never this extended family's true soul mates.

"Ow. Shit," David Moore said to himself in the chartreuse light. Rising steam touched the Weimar glass, shading its top quadrant as it rose on cat feet toward the vent.

His new tortoise shell Swedish steel razor was not working out. Found in a local antique emporium, it was exquisitely inlaid, but nasty.

David laughed. 'With bitter selfmockery,' he quoted, with bitter self-mockery. The straight razor was hard to handle even if his right thumb....

PT hurt; not too badly: attractive therapist (pain is intimacy).

He laid the razor aside and stood on the toilet to rummage the back of its cabinet for a disposable--only suitable really for bike touring. Thereby wetting the stressed oak door and knocking over a brown plastic bottle of peroxide, cap unsecured by sloppy Rose. He sopped up with distant--awkward stretch--shreddy toilet paper.

Things were not working out. *Het falt niet mee*, Erika said, one of the Dutch expressions he had managed to learn. "It falls not with." Though it spills peroxide on you all the same. Stinging his urethra, a million to one shot.

The lather on his face had begun to dry but he persevered, pinky out to emphasize the absurd size of the razor. Comedian. He torqued the crick in his back, strain from a long ride, digging his good thumb into the tightness burrowed between L5/S1. A disc which had come to know him in the Biblical sense.

He didn't even ride with the male Olympians any more. Got dropped on the first or second hill like a persimmon from a possum-shook tree. Long, exhausted pedals back the empty roads, everything aching. Head, neck, back.

Riding with the women was OK, but still bothered his thumb. Rides-With-Women. Ugh. Worn, he'd been reading detectos about Lieut. Leaphorn. By Tony Hillerman. A man capable of a real novel expending his talent in a waste of shamefully silly conventions. Genre fiction.A brother, thus--except real talent. But Leaphorn got David through nights a real novel couldn't.

The Blanco muttered at him through the thick glass, fresh sage rose pungent from the roman bath, but in his present mood even this much admired room struck him as too cute. He'd built the master bath overlooking the river but felt The Bunkhouse's bath (his mother and Rose were never going to stop mocking Texas) might be cool **in** the Blanco. Aquarium glass along one wall--the tub wall--with the spring tributary flowing across. Guadelupe bass, occasionally.

If God didn't want folks depressed why is the world green, brown, blue?

Trying to calm us down.

He shaved carefully round the cut. A block of alum would be 'a nice touch.' Seaglass color. Masculine. Old Country. Very Polo. David shifted his hips foot to foot, pulling his sacrum looser. Malaise sinking his belly.

Aquariums, though...that subaqueous light. You go to see the fish, marvel, but no one'd put a cafe in one. Cafe being the ultima of comfort, congeniality. So for him a house, and bath, should be a private cafe. (An oxymoron, but call it, kindly, paradox.) Well, then, open bathrooms with naked people wandering in and out. Home.

Still have cafes in Texas. Most're called Dairy Queens, serve lousy food and fearful decor to slow hamlets. But the concept's exactly French, and good enough to mean much. Plus some are fine. No place for strangers, all the same.

*Jitters* in Wimberley isn't bad.

David rinsed the brush, the razor, then his face, blotted it with a towel, patiently incarnadined a washcloth drying out the cut, and put away the razor in the wall cabinet.

True, he'd gotten Rose out of his business, but as feared this led to endless if oft unspoke family discussion. So she wasn't in his office, and Erika was, but now Rose occupied his very bed, and Mum The Bunkhouse, not 100 feet as the crow flew. (Texas-translate to black vulture? No, they soar. Though perhaps wandering aloft is the appropriate image.)

Mum and Rafe were in Houston, so David could escape Rose and Erika by testing The Bunkhouse. But the women were still thick as thieves in his own proper house; ready to attend The Shaving like some clownish royal levee, laughing at the faces he pulled to stretch his skin. Smooth clean tight.

Chevalieres of the Garter. David smiled. He loved them. He should be amused by their gay antics, but this much family contact.... The constant intercourse whelmed him like noise the autist. Creating a need to withdraw, escape, lose his temper like returning fire.

He pulled the tub plug, then straightened to gaze out the glass: over the *Bunte Stein* surface of his tumbling limestone riverbed, across the flattening expanse of white shallows (Blanco) upstream from the swimming hole, then--as his eye sextanted his window, arcing up its skylight curve--up the verdant face of the ascending cliff bearded with honeysuckle, hackberry, willow, sycamore, ash; mustached with yellow and red rose-flowering cactus clinging to the goat-creviced rock and finally browed with the gaslight-bloom of huisache snooping over the edge of the plateau.

In axis to depression, he'd become an irritable optimist: impatiently hurrying toward a future necessarily better than the rack of the status quo. Else why go on? So when folks didn't act up to par--himself included--he was bedundered by an unconscious conviction they could be doing better. A lot better. Even Rose and Erika. Fine as they were, they lay siege. Preux chevalieres.

Two Horsemen. Almost a quorum.

When had his interior monolog--never a source of superior entertainment, unlike Rafe's--become an extended *plaidoie*? Whines-Like-Dog. Ugh.

He kept his mouth shut for the sake of his rep in stoic Texas but he was having trouble putting up with himself. Riding used to shut down that voice, or knead it, but the only present means was chemical, and less successful, not merely in side- and after-effects.

A tank top, mesh-lined shorts, huaraches. It was getting hot, even in his sylvan oasis. Rayban Wayfarers and a Panama hat as sequester from the merciless Aztec Sun. *Keen edge of the bronze*.

He lived fine with people one at a time but as soon as we became three or more he became sullen at an odd one out for the most venial transgressions--a constant peroxide drip--or convinced he was the odd one and the others pitied and contemned him, Caliban. Why? Had one parent laid plot with him against the other? Had his childhood oeconomy been so bilious?

He put his truck key and superthin wallet in his pockets. Always hated carrying things. Burdened enough. Tent and duffle, bikes and watercraft already loaded for South Padre. Even Rose was willing to ride the flats a couple days. Mountainbike the beach, stretch in the sun, sailboard the foamy waves. Steamed shrimp, eaten cold, with horseradish sauce.

Erika would already be outside, striding the ledges impatiently, those calves flaring like cobra hoods. She'd learned six didn't mean six sharp in this country but she didn't have to like it, at least when she was alone.

Well, long as he beat Rose, the superior wheedler. Relaxed as a conditioned athlete. In top form, weeks before the Olympics. While he was tired. Catch-up nap in the truck. If the girls didn't babble.

Getting in any vehicle for a trip, even brief, always sentenced him to a certain moment of panic, of sinking fear and isolation. Particularly creepy if it was not his. Had family trips been such a cage? Little Davey already *L'Etranger*, age three? A toddling Meursault. And why did small boys always touch his heart? as innocent and at risk, as earnest but doomed. He could not bear even a segment of those kiddy-torture TV movies, couldn't dismiss them as just another Minnow in the wasteland. Not even Watching While Intoxicated. WWI. (Could lose your architect licence.)

Resident Mom. Third Horseman. Himself the eschatological Fourth?

Hell.

He'd never asked these questions of Fiona directly.

Neglect remained unmentioned because: 1. The moratorium was past. The statute of limitation on these crimes if any is the victim's majority. A felon, 30, can no longer plead he's an orphan; and no right thinking guy lets childhood excuse malfeasance. Even if causative. 2. He knew his Mum. The issue once raised would never resolve, never progress. This had been true even of less sensitive contentions, and child neglect is the worst calumny in the Western female pantheon. (Sex abuse being for women a purely gratuitous insult, an absurd accusation.) Only men can admit to neglecting, and then only in past tense at AA meetings. Mum's response would be teary fearful mea culpas (planting in him an angry embarrassment he could only, barely, handle by silent rage), reasonable discussions, illogical impertinent excuses, resentful self-justifications, handsome apologies, stubborn silences, identification of his plaint with unrelated traumas inflicted on her by other relatives, true sorrow drawing the dear face; scraps and fragments of newspaper, notes, postcards, marginalia stuffing misaddressed envelopes; withholding of communication, help, money (in her family tradition, liquid assets became an erratic carrot and stick when they entered the private realm): all these would follow each other in no order, unaffected and unmoved by any reply, except to be thereby quickened--enlivened, heightened, restarted. A stream of self-indulged reactions--feeling out loud--while he'd be constrained to mill a response for weeks, until it asphyxiated. Gave his more force, in justice, but undesirable force. Limned in drear lines of sadness.

*Silence exile cunning*. He hadn't been nearly smart enough, had taken it with (what hadn't followed) and the babble was unceasing. The river's too. Queasy thoughts in a green shade.

He stood on the porch watching the deer grazing in the woods. Occasional testing triangulation--ears, nose--otherwise they paid him no mind.

A small and fragile peace descended through the morning air. Tired.

Insomnia. He'd crept out of the stifle cave formed by the sleeping women to moon by the silver-chased river; had hibernated finally exhausted in The Bunkhouse after a dose of purgative Leaphorn. (Neat's foot oil.) His sister's to his Mum's bed, their raw ochre scent the same under different perfumes. Faint damp chafe of talcum. Erika would long since have tracked him to safety and then withdrawn discreetly--if pacing impatiently.

So the business was going well. Good, you'd say. Except, before, the point had been he could work afternoons and ride the morning. Now he had a partner, a house, a best friend, a parent and a sister to support in various ways. The whole V.I. Propp cast. (Mom had decided forking out for Olympic training only encouraged Rose.)

David spotted Erika squatting lanky among the herd, feeding a fawn sections of apple cut with her Swiss Army knife. She grinned at him ecstatically, turning her long neck as gracefully as the doe, balanced on equally wicked haunches. Erika, Erika. What a vicarious solace her good cheer was. *Oh, yes, there is an infinity of hope. But not for us*.

At least Rafe took Fiona away. Not as much help as she thinks she is, was. A busybody's view of the world. Granda told me Saks was Dad's idea; Fiona thought your own shop was the road to riches. Only the custom of the times kept her stronger will from prevailing. Though Dad did negotiate his gentle way oftener than one might imagine. Fiona was always out to lunch, in part. Self indulgent, she couldn't be bothered to keep track of money. Her entertaining had been indispensable, give her credit, but entertainment has changed too. That old Reagan/Cary Grant optimism and cheerful selfconfidence are as out as haberdashery. Those wonderful soft hats, by now eccentric on anyone not searching for Solomon's Mines. And feminine ditsiness has gone the way of all flesh too, unless you're Goldie Hawn in a movie. Strange: a moral fashion preserved in amber celluloid--a supposedly swift-changing art. Things do come back, sure, recircle past Eve and Adam's, but meanwhile....

David fired up his commercial espresso machine, fine ground Kona, set out solid white cups for himself, Rose and Erika. He filled the steam pitcher with whole milk from the Bunkhouse's mini-fridge. Take a thermos, pick up croissants at HEB.

Rose and he had long recognized, for example, that anything left in Scarsdale, no matter how clearly cherished, was subject to instant theft, loss or gift. Fiona was as erratically generous from them as to them: actuated by a kind of property-is-theft persuasion that is, paradoxically, quite upper class. His three foot Steiff panda (*Knopf im Ohr*), Rose's collection of Life magazines, his big metal jetliner with detachable wings; not to speak of SLR Nikons and Campagnolo brake sets. At the same time Fiona could complain inconsolably about the sale of her own inherited Persians to finance the illfated haberdashery--though possibly her own idea, not Al’s. Best not take her too seriously, lay back in the bubbles and enjoy what you could. Not whimper about lost bears like Citizen Kane.

Her whole generation. Survived the Depression, won the Cold and World Wars, built the empire and Pax Americana--but without suffering the competition for niches his crowded, cunning, Darwinian generation came to know; and too busy to pass the flame on to their kids, raised by TV and each other.

Erika came in and rested a python arm along his working shoulders. His turning mouth received a long friendly tongue.

The true host, there is no doubt. A measure of forgiveness.

Rose was worried about David. He seemed to be leading up to another escape. Rose feared that by the Olympics David might be gone--he would hide the body--his friends and relatives coping in their own ways. Erika perhaps less well (sojourner in a strange land). Fiona was never predictable. Her astute/obtuse/ness might come as a surprise.

Insofar as Rose had focus, time or energy left over to be worried. Olympic training is tough, we all know. She slept deep. Napped. Every sport stakes its claim to be Acme, but bike racers argue for being the fittest of all athletes, by the test of VO max or resting pulse. Mountaineering is even more exposed and dangerous, sure, but consider that a race or training ride is as demanding aerobically as a marathon and as demanding anaerobically as boxing. All those sprints, all those attempts to drop rivals on climbs, taken not from between rests, but from 25 mph in a nervous peloton, after hours of hard riding. In all weathers but ice.

Still, in repose, the fear molded Rose's dreams. Racers dream races: the desultory milling before the start with its bluff jokes, the tense careful herding of the tight pack, then that wolvish tunnel vision once the course has loosened, even the savage triumph of the break, who don't so much exhaust opponents' aerobic capacity as break their spirit, condemn them to the slushy indifference of oxygen debt.

Dreams. Never, for some reason, victory. Exultant relief of throwing relaxing hands in the air.

But her dream was strangely coherent. Recurrent. The Olympics. A great lurid Rose-colored mist as of sodium arc light in a fog. The color always meant her in a dream, but it could be clean, or saccharine pink.

This one was orangey as sunset. Harvest moon? Sailor's take warning?

A dream of Olympus, from the gates of horn or ivory.

Rose takes silver. She breaks away laps before the finish with two Dutch riders and a Frenchwoman. Who becomes David. Fearing the Dutch sprinter--she seems to be Erika--Rose escapes on the hill, last lap. Flies up into the air, above the dwindling road. But the sprinter rejoins on the last descent. Alpe d'Huez. (The sensual pull/push of the leaning centrifuge and centripede, grateful to her thighs, exalting her ears.) The Dutchwoman takes the sprint by a quarter wheel. In a blur of orange sweat. Would've been more, but she's exhausted by the effort of bridging up to Rose. A dense heaviness under her breastbone. Occlusive.

Rose on the second step, medal yoking her neck. ABC's human interest story, the usual formula, up close and personal, about how Rose trained just as hard, though worried sick about her beloved brother: a fellow if failed athlete's "mental illness" and disappearance.

Disgust. Queasiness. The cables snake through and above the arc lights, Rose keeps trying to explain something important through a pastel mist of tears, but the interviewer--slick hair haloed in the lights, giving a steam of Mennon off him like a leaky tenement radiator--keeps appearing and disappearing, distracted by coiling strangles of cables, boa heads swallowing mikes.

It isn't true, Rose means to say. Just a little extra energy and I'd've taken gold, edged up that 1/4 wheel I lost by; and that extra energy went to the grave with Davey. Is she him or the sprinter or Rose? *Rose Selavy*.

It's as if the shame of it lives on after him. You can't take yourself out of the race. This is the moral, not ABC's. You can only win or lose.

Or

In a kind of replay or flashback, David reappears behind the barriers, French-waving enthusiastically on the last lap, giving Rose the energy to sprint a little harder, open a bigger gap on the hill.

Gold.

In his own dreams David struggled on. Moments of euphoria and despair. It doesn't feel as if it progresses. Sitting in a jacuzzi musing to his sister. Driving Rafe's pickup to a site with a load of PVC pipe, a marble tub or a water heater. Riding River Road. These don't bear thinking about or dwelling on for someone who finds life too exquisitely vivid compared to his safer dreams.

*In dreams begin responsibilities*....

But instead David reaches--in what we call real life, you should excuse the expression--what Aristotle calls a perepetia. A turnaround, in the words of the bluesman.

For it is a true and known fact, statistically, that a man will not commit suicide while his woman is with child.

A wedding too, natch. A legal recourse to gain permanent resident status for Erika, paternity for a child and Texas community property in the architectural firm Inhouse Counsel; to satisfy Fiona's soul and also in some secret way Erika's and even David's, which thought beforehand it could've been satisfied with less. The civil bonhomie of Dutch relatives, well-clad. Reception on the Amstel.

Cocktails in Scarsdale.

(It doesn't interest me. Two weddings is too many. Skip to the birth. Back to business.)

Postpartum, David has something to live for, an organic responsibility who cannot be set loose, much less condemned, statistically, to follow his moribund footsteps. A loved and in love creature learning in peculiar and entertaining ways to become human. Saskia requires hands-on care that might (might) come as well from an excellent nursemaid, but only, David feels, to perpetual loss. His own history repeated. God save the child. This one will not suffer neglect.

Erika is too energetic and enamored of a new world to rest in a nursery. So though Dutchwomen come to parenting not only by nature but incessant training in the world's homiest society it's David who stays home, consulting by cell phone and fax with a peripatetic Inhouse CEO on mission. Driving her wedding gift, a pink-finned Cadillac convertible. Lovingly maintained by godfather Rafe's minion.

A business expanding into franchise under Erika's Saks-abetted hand, which also finds time and energy to pursue MBA courses at UT as David forages its school of architecture.

David's scrupulosity is desirable, I find, but many will not be won. Life is tough all over; we don't want to hear about it. It's easier to admire a character cheerful in adversity than depressed in prosperity (by prosperity). Even though in the latter I recognize more intimate acquaintance. Myself.

So I like David. He's personable, careful. He wishes to be kind to his relatives, and succeeds with his sister. He tries to find comfort in return support. He's a good rider, for an intello, and knowledgeable, for a rider.

And he has a gift, even if he looks in its mouth. (*It is ill to disrespect the gifts of the gods*.) Besides, he's a guy who can make a hot tub more amusing. The golden boy when he's in good wits (do we call it hypomanic?), when he pays attention to his interlocutor.

Still, he senses he isn't likeable. Bitter rage lapses or bursts through, he gives offense; raises hackles and suspicions of effeteness too. His inwardness is seen as snooty, his high standards as judgmental, his humor as sardonic or whining. Like Nietzsche, Middle America reads only abulia in English or Jewish irony. So David feels his best strategy may be invisibility, anonymity; the next best listening. Or making himself useful to people able to respect him. He underrates his charm.

So in the photos he appears blind. Eyes uninvested with psyche. His mind inside the wide universe of his muscled imagination.

In the wedding pictures the eyes are but mucous tissue, slivers of gleam, windows to nothing. His contact lenses dry in the desert air, his blurred eyes feel like raisins, unable to recathect.

He is far from home yet.

We will carry him, you and I. And little Saskia.

Rafe was contemplating proposing. He was a traditionalist, as noted. Who figured Fiona would make an excellent fourth wife. Sequential, of course. At least legally and romantically speaking, if not in terms of support of the various kinds.

Cruising down 'the Hutch,' momentarily off the phone, Rafe was awaiting a callback from a producer whose call he'd just returned. The New England Thruway was faster and safer but this 19th century carriageway--"parkway"--tickled him, even though he observed uneasily that New Yorkers never develop that comfortable unity with their vehicles Texans manage by 18. Easterners seemed to fight their cars instead of easing them, precious.

These are the fuckin cowboys. Absentminded fuckin cowboys. Hazardous to life and limb.

Three previous marriages seemed like a lot, even to Rafe, even after living in movie circles for some time; and his first had indeed been a mistake. A youthful indiscretion. Appallingly youthful, from his present perspective--if not remarkably young in Texas.

For the other two wives he really had no excuse. He seemed to have misplaced some along the way. It surely could not be said they left in acrimony or accusations of abuse, whether legal fictions or not. He remained on good terms with all his ex's. Except the first. Deceased. By her own hand, if again, not legally. An accident while under the influence. Several influences.

Asshole. What's your turn signal for, turkey? Yo, the stick thing by your steerin wheel.

No wonder everyone's pissed by the time they get to Manhattan.

Yes, as for the other marriages, he could hardly say how they'd ended. He'd been out of town at the time. On location, for up to six months; actually up to twelve months, once eighteen months. Wives are not desired on location. Sometimes impossible. Wives have no desire, in their own right, to be on location. Especially not on some locations. Brazilian jungles, Spanish or Mexican deserts. Living in trailers packed with foolish, yet overworked, people. Then there'd been the weeks and months sequestered with coteries of other cranky writers under pressure. And the time divided between the coasts.

There HAD been those great stints in Paris. Ah, now there was a location! And he had studied French for his required language at Rice. A Humanities major. Not the first in his family to go to college, but the others had gone to A&M and majored in Ag. Gramps had bitched and pissed and moaned but he was secretly impressed. Otherwise he would’ve never forked up, even though those were the golden years for cattle raising. Congressmen and Senators and Governors went to Rice. Lawyers. Anyway, eventually everyone in the family went his own way. Spent a lot of time on the ranch all the same.

Ahh. Tulip poplars, in bloom. Marvelous! The Prince of the Forest.

It was unclear how Fiona would take all this. The course of honor was far from pellucid. Some sort of offer ought to be tendered soon, but would it be caddish, if that was the word, to offer an honorable widow a fourth if last (how could one be sure?) seat at the supper?

Man! Don't they ever fix this thing? How many brokers you think dropped a front end in there! Pothole? Kettlehole! Swallow a side o beef.

Issue was not at issue, at least. The point was, rather, it was getting difficult to take himself seriously. All very well for his own peace of mind but he couldn't offer Fiona anything but the best. If that's what she wanted.

Times had changed, to be sure. Presently he was spending a lot of it in Scarsdale. The fiction being his real NY residence was in the City, where indeed he had to stay overnight on occasion. And Westchester matron mores had changed. Some years ago it would've been improper to stay over at all. Now, long as an appropriate narrative was supplied, Fiona's circle wouldn't be concerned where his leased Jag resided nights. Interested, yes.

(The Land Rover was too big for the East Coast. Besides, he'd come to see SUVs as imitation trucks: tarted up versions of his first love.)

In fact if you wished to push it you could even co-habit, nowadays. Rafe believed Fiona wouldn't wish to push it.

"Michael! Bout time good buddy. Listen, you know I'm gone be tied up here bout a month. I mean, a weekend or two's fine but I can't go on location till the 15th, next. Will that suit? Otherwise--hate to hold you up good buddy--but my fee'd have to be biggern Moby's dick for me to just drop this here.

"Well, haggle with Bill, then. Sorry, but those're my options, bubba....Otherwise, try Jake. He might have some time. Good man. Writes a lean page."

Rafe took the NY Central RR back out so he could work on his pilot. But the script began to bore him, a sign it needed some rest. Much to be said for commutin by train, all the same. Bar car's too smelly if you aren't a drinkin man but you can read, open your laptop, take along coffee and a croissant, the New York Times....

He'd lived in New York before, been to its suburbs, coast, mountains, but still hadn't known exactly what to expect. There was the charm.

Neither Cheever nor Updike could be taken literally, he'd supposed. Extrapolating from Dallas and, more, Houston, he'd vaguely imagined lawn parties, candelabra lit suppers served by foreigners in tails.

Fiona had invited some couples; some women her age had come to lunches; they'd gone to a cocktail party and restauranted with companions, but the close-knit world of Fitzgerald and Cheever seemed to have passed, if it ever existed.

The house was much as he'd imagined, on the other hand. Not unlike some in Houston, but older and...it's hard to say. Not exactly more tasteful. More subdued, lived in; organic rather than designed.

Rafe looked out the train window at the sugar maples, locusts, white oak, pin oak in the village stations; ailanthus along the roadbed. He liked to know the names of things. But half of em he couldn't identify. Nor could Fiona nor any of her friends. Lush. More board feet per acre than rainforest, he'd heard. Or was that the Pacific Northwest?

Hardwood's wonderful in its way--unsurpassable in Fall--as were the rocky yet unjagged hills. The landscape felt soft, scented with a history of great trees informing a sheltering sky: a Jamesian annale of some kind, involved, persnickety but sensitive. Villagey, but sophisticated.

Claustrophobic and wet, all the same--or at least grey--for his taste. If [geologic] age equals wisdom then the sweep of western space equals nobility. Age=wisdom/ space=nobility. Rafe tried it out on the laptop. Kinda silly, put like that. Though it let the script rest. Call it working notes. East vs West. Say, James vs Homer. Civility of culture against the cruel holy awe inspired by a raw world. Cooked vs raw? Have to read a page or two of that Frog again. Refresh the memory. Sieve.

Clackety-clackety. Soothing.

Fuckin script is stale. Needs more than tinkering. A concept break. Another *expense of spirit in a waste of shame*.

Clickety clack clickety clack. Singing ears? engine noise? Check blood pressure, just to be safe. Been a while.

He'd expected more trips to the city too. Once a month seemed about average for Fiona's circle. True, they enjoyed theater, museums, could identify the major post-impressionists, but they didn't talk much culture, and were surely neither expert nor aficionado.

Mosey on over to the bar car. Try out the coffee. Chat up some ad exec or endocrinologist.

They knew nothing to speak of about film, besides gross narrative recollection of golden age Europeans and Hollywood classics.

They tended to be quieter but less polite and tactful than Houstonians, calmer and more grounded than Californians.

They were interested in Hollywood gossip. Who isn't, nowadays? And stories about filmmaking, yes, in fact they had a patience for words that was not found in the West, where sentences had to be shorter, except among older or rural folks; perhaps when narrating a story.

Workin your way down the car--lurch--is like raftin standing up. Little rapid every doorway. Not for oldsters or tots, the infirm or feeble. Smells of old vomit, BO, grease. Carpet unfit for a kennel.

Rafe wasn't as good at conversation as he seemed. His gifts were storytelling and listening. Repartee, give and take, apposite comment, these weren't really in his line. But others in his circles tended to be swifter, so his own lacuna went unnoticed, particularly as he was adept at steering for appealing topics.

Sway of the behemoth car, smell of grime. Clackety clack.

That Rafe understood his strengths and weaknesses, and found mere listening and storytelling not fully up to gold, implied his underlying appeal: insight and humility.

Cranky door, momentary huff of cold wet air, danger. Back in the grimy warmth. Rapid run. Guess old folks oughta stay put--break a wrist--or hip.

Fiona's circle. They liked his accent, soon as he established modest political, sartorial and intellectual credentials. Money talks everywhere, however quietly. Art too.

There are a number of Texas accents. Rafe's was neither the hard twang nor the nasal drawl but that riparian C&W baritone.

Stooping to peer out the smeared window--bad coffee cooling in plastic--he spotted Fiona's Lincoln standing in the wives' line. Absurd. Funny. Gave him a homey glow though. Don't even need that dry Gibson, Scott, John.

"Miriam, do you have any interest in The Garden of Ethan?” Fiona said on the phone. “I need some kind of mulch, for vegetables, and gloves, and a better--what do you all it? spade--trowel. We could stop by McGuire's for lunch on the way?" An interior decorator, Miriam had been Davey's first and best client. A solid waisted Jew with pouchy menschlich eyes, her raucous humor was well known and sometimes feared in the neighborhood. Her escaped Airedale Houdini was always in everyone's garbage. "Porkchops and tampons flying left and right. Had to sprint all the way across Tina's tennis court to save her narcissus. Dumb mutt. Got him for the kids; now they're gone, I'm still feeding and bathing the innocent."

"Gee, Fiona, you know I hate gardening. I'm a city Jew. Shtetl to ghetto to Delancey Street to Scarsdale. And I finally found a gardener who seems to be working out, too, though he won't last, I know from experience. The last one weeded the flower beds with a backhoe. And dug up anything he couldn't identify. And what he couldn't identify--Adam knew more before naming the birds and trees. I would like to have lunch though. Meet you there? Wait, actually I do need another pot for that stupid porch plant. Houdini knocked it off the rail, trying for a squirrel. OK, what time?"

Fiona pulled her white Lincoln up in front of Miriam's house and got out to ring the bell. The garden did look pretty good. Houdini was barking at something.

Settled back in, Fiona decided to leave the subject of Rafe for later, over lunch perhaps. She didn't feel like broaching it right away and by now Miriam was talking about her publisher husband Saul's meeting with Jacqueline Onassis. He'd said she was perfectly competent, quite involved in publishing, no figurehead at all, had even got her own son interested in the industry. John John. Saul was impressed. Jackie O. Smart, well informed woman. The breathy voice not at all conspicuous at close range. Shyness of TV cameras had probably exacerbated it.

"What was she wearing?" Fiona asked.

"Well, he didn't notice, of course."

"Hmm. Samuel Butler did say, what was it? about perfect gentlemen's dress...you could tell if...if you don't notice what a man's wearing he's perfectly dressed."

"No good for women. And it contradicts Diana's [Vreeland—ed.] idea about clothes being costumes. Besides, Samuel Butler can't have had Saul in mind. Pretty much anyone would be a perfect gentlemen if impeccableness depended on his notice."

"But Diana also said 'saffron is the navy blue of India.'"

"Everyone comes back from India with what they brought. The Beatles with a guru, Lord Acton with--though Saul is reissuing *Maneaters of Kumaon*, kind of a boys' book about hunting tigers, and its author, Jim Corbett, is a clear exception. They named a national park after him, despite his being a British Colonial Officer, not only because he really helped Indians, at terrible risk, and permanent damage to his health--did you know a maneating tiger could kill as many as a thousand people in his life career? and completely ruin the economy of an entire region, depopulated by terror? And they got so hunt-shy they were practically impossible to kill, especially with a primitive rifle in deep jungle. No, Corbett also addressed Indians--this is 1920--without any hint of condescension. Not even that fake humility, that dumbass proto New Wave shit, bending over backward about how primitive cultures are really superior. He admires them, he gets mad at them when it's called for, he understands, he knows how to elicit their help. Remarkable man. True humility. A wonderful book."

"I think David had a copy."

Miriam snorted. "I know he did. Saul and I gave it to him. Tenth birthday? A first edition. Not that they're rare. A bestseller in its time. Saul read it himself as a kid."

Miriam was always au courant with her husband's work, as Fiona herself had been--a curiosity they had in common--though Saul in his turn affected only naive generalized admiration for Miriam's esthetic choices in interior design.

Fiona gathered her gloves and tools, and finagled from a callow youth the appropriate mulch--carefully bagged, loaded into the trunk of the Lincoln--but Miriam couldn't find a pot she could stand.

"Look at this," she said, Fiona joining her before the ceramic display.

"Pretty dismal," Fiona whispered, checking to be sure no store employees could overhear.

"Dismal? The one I had was dismal. These are a disgrace to Westchester County. Think of all the Italian and Mexican potters. I'll have to stick my peonies in one of those black plastic insults until I can find something. A whole afternoon shot."

"Thanks."

"O come on Fiona stop being narcissistic. I'm the aggrieved party. Permit me to enjoy it. We could've passed an equally congenial lunch date successfully snagging one fucking pot."

Backing and turning slightly, Fiona let her expression disassociate her from Miriam's rage, though Fiona actually got a kick out of Miriam's take no prisoners approach to shopping. Miriam was, after all, a professional pot-herd, competent to evaluate Ethan's purchasing efforts.

They forewent the lobster--Maguires' specialty--for a lighter and less melodramatic fish. Blue was in season. Miriam's temper subsided as quickly as it inflamed. If Fiona meant to talk about Rafe, now was the time. But something still held her back, tender, unready. She was used to bringing up or suppressing topics or items or complaints based on her sense of the mood. Momentsgeist. A technique that functions better unanalyzed, analysis merely muddying instinct and impression. Not that she ever came to any such conscious conclusion either. Analysis is a crutch for the ungifted, who must substitute a retort for a nose.

"Mim. I don't suppose your gardener has any openings?"

"What, lose a pot and a churl on the same day? What black Wodehousian treachery are you contemplating, girl?"

"Sorry I brought it up. Never mind." Fiona laughed. She was thinking of the scene in The Garden of Ethan, particularly of Ethan's flush. Well, he should pay more attention to purchasing, and Miriam had given him a contact as well as the blister.

"No, seriously, I'll ask. Don't pay him any more than I do though."

Rafe folded his laptop. The jet hum became distracting as he tired, and besides, he'd figured his new hook for the pilot. Not that he had much confidence in it. But weak premises often fly fine. Long as the hordes feel at home in a situation, doesn't matter how you get them there.

He lay his head back on the rest and sighed, pursing his mouth to let the air build a spicy pressure inside his cheeks and gums.

Sore neck. Coming down with something?

The dialog with Dave was becoming increasingly intriguing. Rafe had flown down a few times already, once to sequester a group coaxing a deal, more than once to follow his investment in BinHouse. The local outlets were franchises, basically, and his, in Houston, was doing so well that he also invested in the holding company, InHouse Counsel, which numbered among its employees Texas' hottest new architect and among its investing trustees the same fella plus Saks crossovers. Reassuring, in a new business. Also that BinHouses catered to the low end while InHouse took the high. The Walmart and Saks of interiors--in a building boom, an expanding economy.

Rafe took a few sips of ginger ale. For some reason he never drank the stuff except on planes. Tomato juice tastes better but it's nearly solid salt. Unquenching, to say nothing about blood pressure.

‘If it ain't broke don't fix it’ sounds American but is actually pure heresy. Sure doesn't work for TV scripts.

Further, Dialectics with Dave were professionally fruitful too. Rafe was convinced film was becoming more purely visual. The art film, New American Filmmakers, the auteur theorists had been right--but not as they imagined. It wasn't that movies are now non-narrative or inventively shot. Not quite. Rather, the plots are paring, regularizing. Formulizing into virtual non-existence. These simple scripts are non-narrative in hardly having a plot--always the same ones--so focus shifts to action that neither advances nor complicates plot. To color. To dialog that surprises rather than exposits.

Cute stewardess. Round rear echoing bobbed hair.

As for characterization--what characterization? Hero, pretty girl, buddy, baddy. Sometimes evil/good mentor. So familiar they need no motive anymore, only "motivation" expressed in a bankable face.

Iago's "motiveless malignity." Projection of audience fears?

He'd been explaining it to Fiona--perhaps not cleanly enough, as she'd only mildly attended, though a good listener, when caught. A rare quality. In her too.

Told her that each center of deal power--directors sometimes, otherwise producers or increasingly actors--has thus become a nullity at the core, a corporate enterprise with nothing to distinguish it but a visual signature. Tom Cruise or Arnold Schwarzenegger are not persons--the Faces had long since been born with other names--but multinational entities with legal staffs, trainers, advisors, moneymen, allies. And this organism struggles to find or make a niche based on "feel": created by visual effects. Non-narrative.

Best shot, and most popular, are the action sequences. Special effects. Apocalyptic choreography without a word spoken. *Never more speak word*. *Shattering glass and toppling masonry*: Joyce's definition of history. The only plot question being whether our hero catches a brick in the head or not--hardly in doubt to anyone over five.

You had to count on the overseas sales, the moron sales, and they barely spoke English. No one really likes subtitles. Particularly if you can’t read. So the movie is about color and action, dress, attractive actors in easily identifiable situations.

Fiona had wandered at that point. But Dave would get it.

For it was not unlike what Dave said about stone. A cliff's infinite detail renders, finally, a monolithic essence. Mono lith. One rock. Versace interiors.

The bare West. The New World, gradually leaving the imported arts behind. Stripped of character, plot. Human trace.

Pure scene. Now. Audiences no longer understand flashbacks.

Further, Dave was the only person Rafe knew besides Joan Didion--usually too busy or weirded out to chat--interested in talking this way. Folks in the industry didn't talk about it, they did it. That is, they did talk--and think--a lot. Pitching stories, endlessly finetoothing scripts, trolling and sifting for new properties, applying management's latest esthetics, analyzing actuarial tables, contact groups, the structure of successful deals, the demographics of visual niches.

But it all came to the same thing, was Rafe's take. Different vocabulary rubrics for seeing the same scene. Just as you could put a history in Marxist or psychoanalytic terms. Still telling the same story. *The ineluctable modality of the visual*, in Dave's quote. Otherwise known as the imprinting of movies on the soul of the folk. Expressing the demographics of hope and desire in distribution gross.

Rafe shifted his long legs around irritably, trying to find some room beside his oversized carry-on. He hated waiting for baggage and didn't trust the handlers. Better to keep clothes spread around his different loci.

For example, the European novel had been about adultery. Which meant, demographically, innumerable imprisoned wives experiencing, risk free, the pleasures of promiscuous seduction. While being seen as 1. indulging in a pointless pastime (conspicuous consumption of time) or 2. improving themselves.

So the novel had to demonstrate quality to be perceived as art rather than masturbation aid. Many qualities. Chic, PC, genius. A rich tapestry forming the monolith.

Artfulness was a distractive disguise, rather like the cute sleight of hand--play on words--Freud said pushes a joke over a threshold, permitting hostility to be wit.

Rafe opened the air vent a touch. Dries out the eyes but unstuffs the head. Ahem, we were saying. Yes.

But our [movie] fantasy is also a breakout. (Though you might imagine viewers would now feel less locked down than 19th century housewives! More cocooned?) Our fantasy breakout takes arms against a sea of troubles: the insolence of offices, the lockstep of mass economy, Time's irreversible hand, even the oligarchic family. "Action" is justified schadenfreude. Bourgeois dreams of running the Apocalypse. Retribution. Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, en masse.

Pressure in the ears. Descending. The Colorado, blue in the twinkling hills. Definitely coming down with something. Land of Colds. Rafe swallowed, yawned purposively.

And of course film gives you buddies and family to hang with--replace the ones excluded from your cocoon.

"Esthetics" seems useless to most Players, but Rafe took another view. At Rice he'd given up Philosophy (the only manly humanity) as fiction. With irreducible problems relating to so called reality. Esthetics is even remoter, but more use: corrective commentary. Truth might be found Beyond--in God's View--but He ain't tellin. So 'the facts' are versions.

Besides, there's a lot of down time. Joan feels she has no time for unremunerated discourse but what about the hours spent in airplanes or motor vehicles? Time for thought, for cell phone, which shouldn't always directly concern deals. Stroking perhaps, but impressive stroking. Like the European novel.

If you penetrate to the feel of successful movies, grasp what audiences feel, you have a leg up. Besides, Rafe was as enriched by his interior monolog as a cat by its purr.

Hey! Our shootist is a woman, in disguise! Pull a Zane Grey! So old it's new. Recycle Rosamund. The good ole bard. Even Jeff Katzenbach still uses him. The Shmaltz Dismal Corporation.

Woman shootist. Hmmm. Have to check with....Contact group. Will gains in woman-share balance loss of pigs? Pork throw-weight. MCP rules the Western?

"Not hardly," Erika drawled. She was answering a Gruene furniture maker's question: “Perhaps the Houston outlet could wait a couple extra days?”

"Fraid we're gonna have to hold your feet to the fire on this. We need a partial on due date and, minimum, re-supply as she goes. Otherwise we gotta exercise the late penalty. Which I really don't think would be fair to anyone. Beautiful pieces. Worth every penny. Look, why not, I told you, I can get you a German woodcarver tomorrow. Expand!"

Erika was having a ball. Even schlepping (slepen: American Yiddishisms are nearly Dutch!) the breast pump around's no problem if you're never more than 50 feet from your car. Hoss. She used hers as overcoat, pockets, purse, closet, luggage, parlor. Your own little space bubble. Pink Caddy with fins. Like Hud. Vanilla beanbag hanging from the mirror.

Americans will never go for public transport. Not if you need to take your fridge to the beach. Cooler. Like that idiom about the kitchen sink. No wonder, the obesity. No Recreation without Consumption. What Rafe said the colonists fought the British for. Sell motorized coolers? Marry them to golf carts.

Rafe and David thought her car was funny. Not ridiculous funny. Something like witty but not quite. Hard to get it perfect if you haven't followed elections and sit coms from a tender age, gone to "High School." ("Prep" is a four letter word in Texas, only for the East Coast. And Bushes and Bakers. *We got no dog in this fight*. That’s what the Secretary of State said about why the US wasn’t going into Bosnia!)

Discovering a new culture is more than an adventure. It's a rebirth.

Erika liked being born again. She'd been a good little scholar in blond pigtails in Montessori school, then spent her teens and early 20s as an athlete, finally studied interior design, before moving to the New World. Met David at an expo she was hired to help organize in Dallas. Six months of Texan over already fluid English. At home they felt it'd been spoiled but what did they know? Brits are farther from Shakespeare, in language, than are Appalachian rednecks.

Erika's father was from a straightlaced horsey background, her mother somewhat more liberal in the Dutch manner--post Calvinist--so she'd undulated with the Oedipal tides, Montessori to preppy athletics to the arts. Industrial arts. Mild swings, along the small road of a tight society. Her Mom made speeches frequently, politics, *Tweede Kamer*, the Dutch parliament, so Erika had been taught elocution. How to speak extemporaneously: that is, from rehearsed bits saved up in RAAM like a jazz musician. She rehearsed speech in her head constantly, the way to learn idioms.

Now she looked at photos from Holland and saw overcoats and baggy sweaters, pilled and greasy from being worn all year. Zuinigheid, pride of the Dutch. Thrift. Six words for it in American--five pejorative!

Where were the people in her old albums? Hair, glasses, a few centimeters of suspiciously shiny skin. None too clean, the Dutch being impeccable housekeepers but cavalier about personal hygiene. Tiny (though powerful and high tech) washing machines, one old tub per house, snooty expensive drycleaners.

Back at the front of his shop, Erika smiled brilliantly at the furniture maker. Vietnam generation, ex-hippie, or vet. What did they say? Honey catches more flies than vinegar. "I'm serious, Kyle. I was in East Berlin just last week. Met a guy who's dying to get out. They pay him nothing. He's good. Look, I got pix in my trunk."

Kyle handed her a sulky look. Well, what the hell, Dieter can come anyway. We need this guy like a headache. Stick Dieter in The Bunkhouse or an off-season B&B, loan him the truck. Trade it to him, in kind. He can buy a couple acres and a trailer soon as he gets on his feet. Already owns his own tools. That semi-retired German cabinetmaker in town--Schlieder, Schliecher?--can show him where to buy wood.

They love Germans in New Braunfels. The old set will eat him up. (Erika loved idioms. Still memorized two a day.) They'll set him up with square dances and square babes. He loves C&W already. A perfect match. All he'll need to pursue happiness--catch it!--will be an old Harley to tinker. Get us some German production. Fab furn at cut rate, at least till he figures out where else to sell.

I wonder if you can make an international call on a cell phone?

Erika wanted to hit San Marcos on the way home, check the new BinHouse. Opinion was divided about sticking one in a mall. David felt you could put anything in a mall. The conservative take--the Saks crowd--said weekend clothes shoppers won't buy furn or drapes, much less order carpeting.

Anyway, check Polo, J Crew, Saks, maybe Brooks for business dresses, if she had time. Left the warm Dutch student stuff in Holland. Bah. Yuck, as Saskia was bound to say. Dragging your canvas tents through the rain.

You barely had to wear clothes here, as a woman. A linen shift, earrings. Let them read bare legs as a cultural difference. No one looked at them to your face, anyway. Frontier manners, cultivated to avoid offense. Looking at people was Dutch apparently. No wonder we're painters. And besides they think Swedes (!) are supposed to be sexy. Free. And good at furniture. Little Copenhagen restaurant in LA--with Alps on the walls and waitpersons in Lederhosen!

What the hell, no one in Europe knows the difference between Galveston and El Paso. Twice the population of Amsterdam.

Gruene was clogged--held her up--but it perversely charmed her. Even in Europe they make Ye Olde Villages now: that ski resort, Courchevel; rebuilding Poland like Monte Cassino, from photos and memories. Inauthentic? well, but what about neogothic and Palladian, neoclassic, even post-modern eclecticism?

What would authentic be in Texas? Teepees? Prairie style? Anything can be done well or badly. Or both, like Gruene.

Its "antiques" were shoddy modern kitsch or plain old used furniture, nothing over 50 years old, but the tinny German settlement was booming, sending tendrils of restaurants and outfitters up and down its bluffside river front, trucking in frontier Texas lathe and plaster houses, excreting suburbs--solid, even beautiful. David did a stone house in one.

Erika drove past it, though it was out of the way. Living space a central atrium you could look all the way through, above garage/storage, leaning on a short cliffside, under live oaks to prevent the glass hothousing.

The monthly fair was on. Kyle's tent. Potters. So energetic, so organic. Life. Janey's BBQ scenting the dry air. Barbe a queue: beard to tail! Goats, clearly. Smoked meat, really. "Up north they call grilled meat barbecue!" Instead of six hours in a smoker over slow burnin post oak. "Mesquite?" Gramps had replied to her question. "Mesquite smell like goat piss. Burn hot too. Yankees're welcome to all the junk wood they can cut. Never could understand what y'all see in it. Mote as well barbecue with juniper."

Both make stunning furniture, for one thing.

"Not me," she said. "You're the Yank." But he didn't get it.

Erika accelerated her Caddy up the ramp onto I-35 at FM 306. Beats peddling. Though it's good David and Rose make me climb the bike weekends. Spent too many years on these legs to let them go. No lunch till I've done the RR 12 hill.

Erika tried to pare trips to Houston and Dallas, but Austin corporate HQ was only 30 miles from her house. Which she refused to call I Takki. You have to be careful with slang, puns. Sound like a fool, easily. Tacky means sticky (*kleverig*--English often has three differently nuanced words for one Dutch equivalent) but also something like tasteless (*smaakloos*) and she thought her home was lovely and wasn't sure where Saxon irony and understatement left off and David's biting unhealthy and not to be encouraged self criticism began.

Besides, Bernard Berenson had been in disrepute by the time she studied art history, so his castello (I Tatti? Tati?) was as bad an allusion as I'm Tacky. Possibly David's portmanteau for backward art in a backward place. "The cracked lookingglass of a servant."

God, haven't had time to read a book in months!

All the same she was much less worried about him now. This new withdrawal needed watching, and there was always that layering--she'd draw him out sometimes, only to hit deeper levels, like Schliemann's Troy--but his sexual interest had returned in force--fortunately, since flitting about meeting big goodlooking businessmen was lubricious. Americans always said money was aphrodisiac.

She felt David was on--she had helped him on--a true course, finally. Of course David borrowed complex supports for his esthetic: the Spanish influence, natural local materials like limestone and mesquite, water, open baths. There is no one story, as he and Rafe liked to say. No single narrative. The whole truth and nothing but--a legal fiction. As Rafe says, the Gospel truth is known only to God, and He's the soul of discretion.

So Erika had her own Version. A lover can see the child's tale. From her perspective David's layered esthetic became a child's blocks--monolith--again. Yale architecture, sure, the references, and what was beyond words--much of which Erika grasped, much of which she didn't, some of which David could explain, most of which he couldn't or wouldn't (impatient, superstitious?). But it all came down, in Erika's fairy tale, to David's intent to build himself a home. The one he felt he'd never had. Open unsecret spaces, scaled like a child looking up.

And David kept on building because each attempt fell short of the hearth he imagined in his celestial city. "The only true paradise is the one you still need."

Water. His signature. Primeval sea? The world's blood. Amniotic fluid? The river of Jordan? Maybe. Lethe. Styx. But to Erika his aqueducts and hydraulics, roman fountains, marble tubs were bathtime for Christopher Robin and Pooh Bear. Moated sandcastles on the beach his parents rarely had time to take him to.

Well, so long as he was building for other people, not in his head--playing with blocks at home--he could be fine. At least you must hope.

*Oh, yes, there is an infinity of hope. But not for us*. Rafe and David's black humor. Well, pace Kafka and Mitteleuropa, here is grace abounding even for the chief of sinners. New Jerusalem. America.

Had our *Bijbel* been as beautiful as King James' perhaps it might've meant more to me. Rafe's baritone reading voice. Martin Luther King. Beauty is the Faith of Modernism.

She exited into the mall. Absurd elf village. Wonderful, Warholian--and conveniently empty, weekdays. Its heart a vast desert of parking; weekends a fertile sea of motor vehicles. Lake Winnebago.

Further, David could run the shop, any time he wanted. He was on the phone to her and the branches hours a day. And indispensable on site. She could sub sometimes but the sites are harder to reach than San Antonio--only an hour--and clients want David himself much of the time. Clientele dwindling--swings of fashion, we can hope--but also growing richer, more solid. And anyway David wants more time at home.

Still, Erika wished she too could spend more time with Saskia. So fun in the river, crowing with triumph, kicking, glee at the warm water cascading. Sweet little curls starting at the nape. Blonde--not to be racist.

Erika pulled in by Saks Off Fifth. Leave the top up. Thieves and vandals rare as rain, your parking space never out of sight. Hobble your hoss close. Too hot to walk. In Texas, walking is a sport, like biking. Not transport.

David had found a wonderful Montessori school nearby, on a farm, in a stunning understated log building packed with visual and tactile treasure. He was the most resourceful person she'd ever met. Drop him in the Sahara and he'd drystack sandstone for housing, organize antelope to find water, camels for transport.

Erika had been Montessori all the way to University. She understood kids hated school here (no wonder even adults' grammar is so bad even a foreigner's appalled). This might become a problem. Saskia should be Texan, but not too Texan.

Erika waved at the manager, who left her discreetly alone till, done grazing, she picked her head up to scan. The customer isn't just always right, she's Princess Diana.

Erika had worried about giving birth here too, so far from home, among, perhaps, barbarians, depending on your definition. Though hers tended to follow the spirit of post-modernist high-tech iconoclasts like her teacher Rem Koolhaas, who prefers New York and Tokyo to Amsterdam or Paris. And clever David asked Michael DeBakey himself, come to inspect his new castle on 400 acres near Kerrville, to explain how UT surpassed any birthing facility in Holland. The best cardiac surgeon in the world, people say. A Brooklyn Jew in black alligator Luccheses, working his way round the pie slices of his facility, open heart to open heart. His closers better than any doktor/professor/surgeon in Holland, she heard. An amazing country.

It had gone well, in any case. What's a little discomfort to an athlete? The luxated kneecap had been far worse. Besides, David gave her a Zen exercise. Draw a yellow circle round the pain. Taken from a book Rafe recommended, *Dog Soldiers*. And she was fit. Wide hips. Only hurt the last 20 minutes, only really hurt the last seven, when they had to give her--Pituitin? something to speed up the contractions--worried about Saskia's heart dipping. Perceived through monitors attached to the crown of her head. That had been panicky, though David said probably the pain and contractions magnified it, as he'd felt everything was under control. WNL. Within Normal Limits.

Clothes do still tend to be too short, though they keep improving. Colors no longer run, even cheap sweaters hardly pill. The homeless are better shod now than nobility a generation back. Everyone shod like kids, in bathetic sneakers.

A baby.

They'd tried birthing classes but didn't have time to start with gestation facts every teenager knows from Middlebar School in Holland, where sex education isn't blasphemy. Verbal information transfer is so slow, David had no patience at all for it, face swelling with bored rage.

Hope he isn't going to get that pickled, stuffed bratwurst look half-dead white males get in Holland. The watery eyes. Teary with supplication. Or indignation. High blood pressure: heart infuriated that nature doesn't bow to its will with society's alacrity. Poor things. Can't even find their own socks.

Not David, so far. Can even find Saskia's.

Still goodlooking even if middle aging. Thinning hair.

He's shortish of course. 183 cm. Six feet? Feet. Like hands for horses. So folklorique for a progressive folk.

Saskia smelling of lavender baby shampoo. Have to cut her nails again. David's good with her--never a worry--but the squirmy fingers still escape him.

Ah, the hell with shopping. Who has time? Home, James! David does it better anyway.

Rose and Jim spun a few miles in the morning, enjoying a rest day in prep for racing La Primavera the next day. Then, not feeling too beat for once (peak condition at hand) they decided to canoe the upper Guadelupe. The dam-tamed lower river, between Canyon Lake and New Braunfels, ran softer, with better levels and less porting, but was infested with tubers. Besides they'd done it. A 20 mile party, weekends, rowdy with felons.

Rose and Jim hoisted the canoe into the pickup. She caught his eye and smiled, remembering that morning. Both men and women teams, still together on an easy day, had stopped in Sattler for Gatoraid and bananas. At Jaks: no shirt no shoes no problem. Jim and Rose--first in, first out--were already under the awning rehydrating and discussing whether to ride River Road next.

"I don"t know," Jim said. "Saturday. And gettin late. It's probably full of drunk assholes by now, pickups loaded with loose tubes." Then they noticed the couple parked nearby, in just such a vehicle. The guy glared at Jim. Jim held his red eye, though mildly.

"Talkin bout me?" the guy said, spreading his trapezia. A tackle, from the look of him, and Jim a slender rider teetering on cleats.

But the door to Jaks opened and the teams poured out. Twenty sweat-gleaming athletes, corded legs pumped.

"Heck no," Jim said. "Hell, I didn't even know you were an asshole."

It's smarter to be sweet to motorists, Rose conceded, and the Olympic committee counsels good PR, but....

David had packed them a picnic. They drove his pickup upriver to Rafe's landing, lashed the cell phone, double baggied, to the thwarts, stowed the cooler and pack amidships and put in, paddles to hand. Erika would pick them up at the Cypress Creek bridge and drive them back to the pickup. Then they'd have to return to Cypress Creek for the chained canoe. Erika refused to admit it to her Caddy.

Jim j-stroked cleanly across the pools, backstroked incisively through the white water cuts. A stroll compared to the Snake. The appropriate river instrument is a kayak, but a clumsy old boy-scout-camp canoe actually made for better fun on an easy river. Besides, this was a date. Hangout time. He had fun with Rose. They had a similar sense of humor, surprisingly. And she was great looking. Unusual for an Easterner.

Jim had heard of Yale. To him it was like learning a rider spoke Urdu. Less impressive than immaterial. Neither his state governor nor big ranchers went East to school. Probably you had to learn Latin, or some other noxious hurdle, to get your degree over with.

Unembarrassed of preppy mystique he was clear to see Rose was nuts. Missing one or two of the screws that hold the lid on. Not unusual in athletes, though loons have to be awful good to get past the coaches. The less talented end up in jail or on drugs or something. Married and living in a trailer camp.

Jim himself focussed pure on turning cranks neater than the next guy. Seeing the good break. Lowering his resting pulse, raising his VO max.

When you did chill, time for unexamined fun. The unlived life is not worth examining. In fact, exams....They spent half his sole philo class--Colorado State--trying to prove they existed (!)

Post-Olympiad didn't exist. If it had, or some wee dormouse in his subconscious anticipated it might, then this critter entertained no vision of Rose settling down in Cheyenne, making potato salad for church barbecues, impressing bankers' wives with her organization of Garden Club fundraisers for Boys' Town. There was for example the mystery of fingernails, which Rose appeared to know even less about than he.

A world that did not yet appeal to him either, his crewcut glistening droplets onto his wetdark ponytail. He was afraid of losing, afraid of not training right, but he was not afraid of people or physical danger, and he believed such fears led to suburbia. Fearful of being trapped in a dead end job, or taken down by the wrong buddies or girl, you built a prison for yourself. He understood. It takes a lot of energy, power and confidence to break away. And even more to stay out. Because they chase.

Eventually Something catches you, or you die, but meanwhile you're the one flying the wind, the cannibal. Hennie Kuiper said the secret to bike racing is, suck down the other guy's soup first.

Not that Jim wasted time pondering it.

They paddled lazily, porting or wading down the trickiest of the limestone terraced rapids wending through cypress and rock pools. Crystal green water, cool in the afternoon heat. The team was heading for Colorado after tomorrow's race (La Primavera) to top off their already high octane blood with some high altitude red corpuscles just before the nearing Olympics.

Threading the canoe through rose madder, buttermilk and burnt orange limestone formations and umber knotted cypress knees, alongside willow, under tall cottonwoods drifting bloom from shimmering leaves. The air sparkled.

The smell of the river. Showering afterward would be like shampooing your bar of Ivory.

An hour or two floated by. "Let's eat here," Rose said. "It's gorgeous and I'm hungry." They'd just paddled through a viridian tunnel of cypress, round a water-moccasined must-scented island and were approaching a rapid, cut into a towering bluff. Goats and Barbary sheep on its ledges, amid the cadmium light red and yellow oxide roses of cactus flower and scarlet hanging snake apples. Fire engine red. Rose couldn't name the pigment, even after leafing through David's recent Strand acquisition.

They unpacked the smoked chicken, rye, cuke salad, Fredericksburg peaches, Texas Ruby Reds. A split of Dom Perignon among the juices! David! Feet dangling, they ate on a ledge overlooking the rapid. Fired up a reefer. Had to be the last before the Olympic blood tests.

The rapid's largest fall ended in a natural jacuzzi. They soaked, post prandium, massaging each others' legs, floating through the bubbliest hole. The sun shone mildly from a dizzying sky. Black vultures soared the cliff updraft.

They'd seen a red tail earlier, screaming. Turkey, deer, turtles, bass. And cattle, of course. No humans.

Rose slid a hand in Jim's suit and pulled out his dick. He kissed her, pulling her wet top clear.

"Mmm," she said, feeling him stiffen. "Sit up here."

"Whoa, you don't still have that same IUD, do you?" Its plastic dangle had gored him good just the week before. Drawn blood. "Man, you would have a spear in your pussy."

Rose laughed. Just as well, this time, he wasn't learned enough to cite vagina dentatus. She didn't need Freudian mockery about maneaters--as if she'd chosen the brand on purpose! Sigmund Fraud.

"Nah, I'm back on the pill. Erika said Americans are silly to be scared of it. She's right, all the other methods were invented by, uh, Puritans." Rose had considered anhedonists, but swerved, fearing having to define hedonism. Lectures on the pre-Socratics would do neither the affair nor her mood any good. Puritan might be better anyway. Perhaps European sophistication was needless complexity. Sure didn't turn pedals. "Lie up here, come on."

Rose kicked up beside him, wheeled over, 69. She sucked with relish the outer organs of beasts and fowls, finally swallowing Jim's dick whole. She lay loose, regarding his gleaming legs, running her fingertips in the shaven stria. Surely his thighs were as beautiful as the light in this tumbling water.

Marvelous rider. Such grace astride. Fluid, noble spin. What Davey had always wanted.

Just goes to show riding isn't everything.

Not a good pre-Olympic thought.

Rose wheeled back around to mount. (Stretch more. Stiff.) Jim had excellent endurance. Besides, the guys diverted so much blood to their sore quads there was little left for rapid response. Some nights they'd be too beat to get a hard-on. The women proposed to petition the Olympic committee.

"Uhn....Hey, you don't think..."

"Relax, there's probably no one for miles." Rose concentrated on shifting and pumping--pressing her clit right. Mm.

Actually she liked imagining some ranch kid spying through the willows, though folks generally made so much noise approaching, in ATVs rather than horses nowadays, you could hear them even over rapids. Guess you can always hope for a lonesome rider. Horseman, pass not by. Mmmmm*. Ils ne passeront pas.*

Top woman riders seem to come in three shapes.

There's the lean, sometimes haggard look, as modeled by Maria Canins, triple Tour de France winner. This can be quite attractive--to be sexist. Kind of leggy and Nordic, coltish. Add boobs and you have Anita Ekberg. Greta Garbo. Though, actually, riders can have boobs already. Erika. Why not? Whatever their psychic heft, breasts are never formidable enough to create air drag or climbing weight.

Then there are the filet mignons like Canins' eternal rival, Jeannie Longo. *Fille mignon*. She seemed to have no fat at all, massy with muscle, skin cut to the veins. A lovely, intelligent, doe eyed French face, nice waist, meaty but compact upper body: and hips legs and thighs like a telescoped quarter horse. You'd suspect steroids if Tour testing was less rigorous.

Rose was glad she'd metamorphosed into the third type. Her narrow stomach washboarded only when she flexed, otherwise still looked and felt soft, though she'd lost the outcurve. Her thighs were full, beautifully shaped, soft and white in repose, as were her deep dimpled tush and willowy shoulders. Back lean but rounded as an accidented limestone fall. Breasts grown a bit solider. Her calves flared nicely--nothing melodramatic. She was no sprinter, after all. At 5'9" almost a model. Bit too fleshy. Maybe.

White as clotted cream from her neck and shoulders almost to her knees (her glove- and shoe-protected hands and feet too) but face and arms and legs brown as a cinnamon bear.

La Primavera. Texas' top ranked race. Even a Dutch team this year, on tour. At 7 AM in a park on the Colorado--warming up--riders saw armadillo and yellow eared turtles strolling across the course.

By now any race with serious climbing was Rose's. It got so top riders wouldn't show if they knew Rose was entered, if the locus was hard to reach. Races with moderate vertical feet were still in contention, though Rose's strength had improved till she was winning even solo time trials, even when they were too flat.

Primavera was a lightly rolling ten mile loop. The women would do it five times. Rose's strategy was therefore dismayingly obvious. She had to go out early--almost immediately--alone or with a break, and leave her team's sprinter in the peloton (main pack), in case it recaptured her. The Olympians had been persuaded to break down into their original teams--only fair, and besides, the sponsors' logoed jerseys....--so there'd be rival sprinters to worry about. To say nothing of the Dutch.

The start was an all-out jam. Before the race settled down some women decided to shake things up. Otherwise the course would be too easy. A walk for the sprinters. The air still crisp; steam huffed from the gasping riders' mouths.

Rose hung back about fourth till a big break formed.

Too big, and containing sprinters. So Rose attacked, soon as the break settled into a pace line. She hoped to catch many of the others--recovering from the hectic start--too oxygen depleted to counter.

But no one went*. Le peloton ne reponds pas*. She was a known threat, but this was only the first lap. Let her cook, solo, was the peloton's consensus. (If--disoriented, at cross purposes--it had formed one yet.) Reel her in later, once a jammin paceline got rollin on this gentle course*, La Muette* decided.

La Muette. The Mute. The Peloton. The main pack at the heart of the race. The silent juggernaut an escapee feels breathing down her neck, ready to reabsorb her, amoeba-like. Though a patron[nne] (superstar in the American) can teach it breathless humility.

Rose thought about drifting back into the break. But she was training, for the Olympics; and had even less chance in a break with two sprinters than solo. The Dutch sprinter even had a teammate along to lead her in.

So, a forty mile solo time trial. After sprinting her ass off to get clear. David cheered her on, letting her know how big her gap was each lap. Gettin respectable. She'd like five or even ten minutes.

Out of shape, David wasn't riding the Cat. 1,2, coming up. Erika was in the break, not fit enough to ace the opening shenanigans, but always strong enough for a women's pack.

Hot pavement. Sun, a crisping south wind. Rose tucked deep into herself, rocking a heavy spin calibrated to even breathing. Her blank eyes gazed inward, focussed automaton on balancing her pain on the aerobic\anaerobic cusp.

Tiring badly the last laps, Rose heard from David the Dutch had broke clear, picked up their sprinter, and were closing. Erika was on board, blocking best she could, but too beat to help much. Besides, *Kwallen* (their sponsor was Kwantum Hallen--a grocery chain--but the team name was usually contracted to the Dutch word for jellyfish) were far too hard and experienced to let Erika interfere substantively, much as she might try to dog her rotation or let gaps open. So she just hung on to a big sprinter's wheel. Kwantum were rolling. Not averse to bumping a blocker into the bush. Pumped, on the assault. Flinging sprays of sweat onto their wheels with every flog of the pedals, probably at nearly double Rose's speed, twisting solo in the wind.

Hold out. Try not to let the Dutch coach see her with her eyes closed.

Last lap. Approaching the line. The Dutch already in sprint formation. Wolf pack. Erika struggling near its back.

Rose accelerated with what she had left. She might have to tangle herself in their endgame, praying for strength. Their sprinter, also tired from riding a break instead of the aircooled peloton, came round right, having seen Rose ready to shut the gate to her left. The scrambling opportunistic chaos of the sprint.

Rose felt a tug on her jersey. She struck sideways, close-fisted. The Dutchwoman scampered right, throwing her bike neat over the line. Held her arms aloft. And spat out a tooth.

Which entrained serious inquiry, protests on both sides. A matter, not merely for race disqualification, but USCF suspension.

Thus no reciprocal FICP membership. No Olympics.

Brouhaha. The motel lobby thronged, its mustard appointments exacerbating the ambient irritation. Debate called to order by the head official. Who let David roll his tape. In slow motion it showed the Dutchwoman's deltoid stretching to extend an unseen left arm for Rose's jersey; even showed the jar in Rose's momentum at the tug. David paused on Ans' deltoid, crawled the tape over the jar, FFed Rose's sidearm. (I mean, no one denies it.)

It's illegal to "impede the forward motion" of a rival--automatic DSQ in a sprint--but also no big deal. Sprinters grab with some frequency, if they feel they can get away with it. Since Ans had done a good job--sprinters even steady each other in the fray sometimes--Rose had never been endangered. Whipping her bars in a calculated maelstrom.

A karate chop in the teeth is a more serious matter. All the same, Rose had provocation. And she apologized. Tearfully. Big blue eyes astream. It'd been but a moment's impulse, unpremeditated in the heat of adrenal battle.

Had Rose merely thrown up that hand in protest--vengeance is mine, sayeth the USCF--the Dutchwoman would've been put last, Rose given *le palmaire*. In these circumstances, a double DSQ seemed fair. Plus an official USCF warning, signed in Washington. Probation.

Not even the Dutch wanted her disqualified for the Olympics. Sprinting is dangerous. Yank the gal's jersey, you expect blood. Better call it even, with no hard feelings to screw up the next meet. Negotiate, compromise, set up to deal again. Hanseatic detente intact. FICP memberships untouched.

Quite the purple lecture from Davey and Erika, though. Torrid enough to torch lacrima culpa. As if it were my fault, Rose pouted. So pointless: the dumb athalete had me beat irregardless.

The winner of record? Ms Third Place, on the road. An experienced opportunist who'd been resting in the break, legitimately refusing pulls (her own teammate, Rose, was ahead, off the front) and who had thereby had preserved enough breath to unleash the spectacular turn of speed her legs could always conjure if not exhausted.

Erika van der Meer/Moore. No virgin to flat sprints.

This lost race and near catastrophe gave Rose confidence. She (in fact the bike world) had grown accustomed to writing climbing courses on her name. And she had even won some individual time trails on "flat" courses (few bike races cover truly flat roads: only the odd male Tour stage meandering 300 miles, perhaps a course where a promoter can't find any hills). But nearly winning Primavera--a flat race--meant that if she could escape the peloton (wind resistance bunches up racers) she could probably exhaust and outsprint anyone capable of following her.

She'd known she could always get away on a hill, but now she felt she could stay away, even despite a well organized chase. And in the Olympics all the other Americans would be working for her. Disrupting chases, blocking.

So the only race she still couldn't win was a flat course where a strong team--like the Dutch--could work at the front of the pack to hold it together for a final sprint, when they could lead out their specialist sprinter. Never Rose's forte.

And not at all like the designated Olympic course.

Encouraging.

"I wish he'd stop calling it I Takki. My home. I mean, it worries me," Erika said, apologetically.

"Why?" Rose said coolly. They were in Erika's caddy, with Rose's de-wheeled bike tucked into the trunk. It fit neatly enough but the finicky process of loading it--into sheets of tarp--had annoyed Rose. She didn't like folks to be persnickety about possessions, except tools. And to her unTexas (UnAmerican?) mind the Cadillac did not qualify. Unlike a bike.

So Rose begrudged, in better moods indulged, the legitimacy of Erika's TLC for her new toy, but also thought an SUV or truck would've been more to the point. Besides, snapping a crank arm 20 miles from nowhere, having to hike to and then call from a pay phone for help had soured her mood; it pissed her further to have to ask for help from family rather than Olympic staff--kept in the dark about her clandestine, incognito-jerseyed afternoon rides in defiance of Eddie B's training schedule. She'd ruined a pair of kangaroo Italian bike shoes and, worse, a whole day of training.

Still, Rose could be annoyed with Erika without changing her basic feeling, benign untrammeled love. Olympian, Rose was developing equanimity or even indifference for the cars of this world. Even gratitude for being picked up. Lucky Erika was home. All, except Enlightenment, is a pale veil of Maya; nothing really matters but a meditative focus, making a bike move faster, more efficiently and with greater cunning.

"Well, tacky or I Tatti--I mean I'm not a native speaker, but--"

"Nah, Erika that's not the first reference. It's Rikki Tikki Tavi."

Silence.

"I guess they don't have that book in Holland. Kipling. See, RTT is a mongoose. He fights cobras."

"--A what?"

"Mongoose? Uh...little weasel. Type thing. Indian. --You know I heard they tried one on a rattlesnake, and it got bit. The coiling instead of rearing bamboozled it, or something. Don't know I believe it though. Texas chauvinism, provincial legends. On *Nature* they looked awfully fast. Mongeese. Mongooses."

"Rose!"

"Yeah.--But anyway Rikki Tikki Tavi saves his family--human family--a baby, little boy, I think--from this evil Queen snake. Cobra."

Thoughtful, they watched the sun and wind chase each other among the amber waves of native grasses along 2325, a well paved and nigh deserted road running from Blanco--pop 573--back to Wimberley.

Saves his family. Evil queen snake. "I see....I guess the neglect...." Erika hadn't discussed this issue with Rose. Tricky, talking about a mother's neglect with her daughter, before you know her position. You could discuss anything with Rose--her angers passed like clouds in Texas sky--but it's still difficult, in another language, among other mores. You can't pick carefully through differently nuanced phrases for the least likely to offend.

"Yeah he does."

"It weighs on him." Erika sorted her thoughts. "It's not good--souring--to ask him about these layers."

"Yeah. He can make you feel stupid if you don't get it without explanation. Especially if he has to repeat--and he does, because his voice drops when he feels redundant. You know, the speech therapist Dad finally brought him to--he was in college by then--said David doesn't hear his own voice level correctly."

"But an American kids' book! I mean--"

"No, it's not that. See, he feels all this naming and wordplay is sickly, or at least stupid. If someone gets it and is warmed by the pun--that's how he feels, it's like exorcism, ritual--if someone gets it, fine, but explaining it, I mean, it's like..."

"Superstitious? Ruins it?"

"Well, yeah, maybe, but more....also....I mean he doesn't feel he's James Joyce or T.S. Eliot or something, expounding recondite profundities. It's like having to explain a joke, except stupider. A bad joke. One you come to regret."

"I can feel it's an effort for him to talk."

"The speech impediment...I mean, it's not for nothing he's an architect instead of an actor or something. Most people just babble--they need to talk--but he thinks he has to have something to say. Worthwhile. Or shut up....Dumb cowboy logic. Laconic John Wayne. No wonder he feels comfortable in Texas."

"I see. Terrible...defensiveness. Is that the right word? I don't mean it as an insult. Self-accusing. Kafka. Rose, this is kind of important but I don't want to say the wrong thing. The neglect, the illnesses, almost flunking out of Yale, really, he feels unwhole, I think. It must've been pretty bad."

"Yes and no, Erika. It's a bad history, medically, we know Fiona was busy, but...well of course we have no witnesses. I mean I was there, but a five year old's testimony is inadmissible for good reason. David doesn't remember much and I was even younger.

"Still, there's another side." Rose pulled her mouth to the side, considering. Stared through the window. Now on higher ground, up on the rolling plateau, the dun brush fought spare cactus; glimpses of Saddleback between spires of oak and juniper rising out of bare caliche--cadmium orange here, farther from the river. Rabbitweed in yellow oxide flower. Ubiquitous vultures, teetering on unstable wings, fleabit lords of all they survey. Their fathom of wingspread as long as eagles', if frailer. The other fauna waiting out the daylight. Well, longhorns.

Alerted, Rose made an effort to stay calm and loose. She'd lost a whole day, OK, but she couldn't get it back. Focus on the family, however little that did for your conditioning. Nothing else to do during the drive anyway. Butter her bread. *Love loves to love love*.

But the damn open car was a pain in the ass. Yelling. Rose hated convertibles. Erika liked to free her sunny locks to flow in the wind, and Rose supposed they looked glamorous, a blonde and a brunette in a pink convertible, but she had no interest in impressing the passing eyes of ranch kids.

Of course it was just as likely, on this back road to Wimberley, that a passerby in a pickup was a writer with a multiple book contract at Scribners or a screenwriter on option with Ovitz, but that still wasn't Rose's feel for the Hill Country.

All the Caddy meant to her was an unpleasant battering in too much sun (as much time as she spent abike in Texas light she avoided all the UV she could, dismounted). She anticipated combing gnats and hoppers out of her tangled hair afterwards.

Still, it depended on your mood. She'd driven this same road with Erika singing along to "Why must I be teenager in love," relishing a 50's adolescence she'd never had and wouldn't've enjoyed. Nostalgia beats reality hands down, to quote Proust. Come on, concentrate, Rose:

"Consider, first: his dad was in retail, his mom primarily interested in interior decoration, at least hobbywise, so he becomes a retailer of interior decoration. I mean, that indicates some kind of bonding, normal imprinting.

"Then, you know, with all the respect in the world for your work and genius--really, I mean it--yours and his--all the energy you put into this corporation, still, think about it, neither of you had any experience in retail. What I'm saying is the unsung hero--I don't mean you and David aren't the story's heroes, I mean there can be more than one in a project this size--but the *unsung* one is--well let me put it another way.

"Uhhh. See, in the thirties forties fifties sixties there were many successful department stores. Macy's was the biggest. Saks had a smaller, upscale market. Sears, Gimbel's, even May's posted higher profits. And now there's Neiman Marcus. Doing better than Saks, right now. But the stayer is Saks. Saks Fifth Avenue. This argues a high level of competence. Retail is cutthroat, always has been. Pleasing a million assholes who think they know what they want. Meretricious ads or sales by competitors. Dishonest, feckless suppliers, hiding in Malaysia. A perfect headache, start to finish. Dad...but anyway (it killed him!) but anyway your unsung hero is Leo Schwarz. I mean maybe I'm being tactless--thorny Rose again--but the point--"

"--No not at all, I grant that. Leo has helped at every turn. And been amply rewarded too. Stock options--"

"--Well, but what I'm saying is, who got Leo interested? It doesn't take any credit away from you to say that without Saks money and expertise your project--at the least--couldn't have taken off fast as it did. And the woman behind the scenes is Mumsy. She's been working the Saks angle. It's never just one meeting or one deal, you know that. They don't call it business--busyness--for nothing. *Delenda est Carthago*. How many times did--whoever it was--have to repeat that before the Roman Senate acted? A life's work in a phrase. So once again, yes, David has some bad history back there, but look at all the positive--what would the opposite of neglect be, concern, help?"

"I see." Erika could listen so intently that her immediate soul registered full agreement--even additional arguments--for what she heard; but she could revert, on maturer consideration, to a previous color as easily as a flounder. So she didn't feel Rose had settled the problem, though what Rose said was good. Enlightening. Not that Erika hadn't considered her points before. People got over worse childhoods, didn't even think about them.

And Leo was indispensable (no one person ever developed an empire, even in retail) and Fiona had got him involved. But he stayed involved because he and Horace Sachs saw a golden goose--not to speak of Leo's vice presidency, board membership--and not because Fiona....

Still, Rose was indispensable too. She was a loose cannon but in war, even in detente, you need cannon. They're dangerous for good reason. Formidable. "So, Rose, you see the neglect issue as...how can I put this...overreaction or defensive, obsessive..."

"It is that for sure, under the meaning of the act, I mean Caroline Batenburg--I mean put it another way, you don't get anywhere pedalling backward, is my redneck Amurcan view--but no, I don't want to say that at all, entirely. I think it was pretty bad. He suffered. I don't remember much but I do remember coming home from school--which I kind of liked or shrugged off, and Davey hated--and he'd be in bed, pale, veins showing in his slender hands, with another strep throat, yellow with jaundice, something, all by himself with a huge chawed loaf of pumpernickel Mom had left for him. Stroking the cat--he used to turn its ears back and lay eyelids on the warm insides. A pile of books by his bed. He read three a day sometimes. They were his friends. Not only does he remember every phrase, but he sees where it was on the page. You have a kind of phonetic genius but he has a true eidetic memory. But well, books talk to you but they don’t listen. One way mirror.

“I remember her coming in the door late and I'd run to her to be picked up--dressed like Barbie! junior league bullshit--but David would hang back with that uncertain mysterious smile on his face. People think he's smirking sometimes, but I still don't know what it means, what he's feeling. Not smirking. Wants to please but unsure? Then maybe he'd get a pat on the head. Or nothing."

Rose had scooted over right next to Erika on the bench seat so she could talk right into her ear without shouting over the wind of passage. Erika concentrated on the road, listening intently, feeling Rose's breath. Sweet as an athlete's sweat. Rose slung her arm around Erika's deep shoulders--give the pickups a thrill--and continued.

"You know, his voice was clear as a bell until, oh, 12. I'm afraid it...it lasted a long time. Or before. He stopped talking early. Fiona said once, at Carmine Street, she laid her head on the kitchen table (that 50's stainless steel and formica one I still used) and just cried, because she couldn't stand his babble anymore. Why is the sky blue? asked four times, you know two year olds. David looked shocked. And shut up. Maybe for good. The speech therapist said his voice never made it over the adolescent break. He gave up.

"Still, any mother will get exasperated sometimes. How patient was she, comparatively? *What is truth*? We don't want to go back to making 'Mom' responsible for every mental problem.

"I truly don't believe Fiona was cruel. Sometimes unwittingly. Giving away favorite toys to some birthday boy Fiona had been too busy or distracted to get a present for--but not usually. I mean, it wasn't entirely her fault she didn't know which he liked best. He was secretive, well, uncommunicative. --Though I did. All you had to do was be there and look. But usually she meant well, I think.

"I imagine he got enough to eat. Though he sure looks thin in that album Mom brought last time. But oh Erika I don't know. I just want to forget about it and ride. I sure hope sure hope David survives, prevails, and now he's found you and architecture I hope he will. The wind behind him at last."

After Erika dropped Rose and her bike she set off for Austin. She turned the problem over, postponing BinHouse's computer billing glitches.

First, she wasn't keen on this indeterminacy approach--"there are many true stories." She liked to get things straight, at least in her own mind. Sure, she knew from sophomoric philosophy discussions that you can't prove anything; she was aware, as Rafe put it, that the difference between a God who's unknowable and one who doesn't exist is nil--at least from a human perspective, and what else have we? She realized that if a fact can't be established--a common occurrence--you must act as if it's indeterminate.

Still, facts are facts. She suspected seeing all four sides to everything was Rose and David's way of softening the truth for themselves, or partially denying what they did, or should, know about their childhood.

So here is what Erika knew or found out, concerning, for example, Leo Schwarz.

1. Erika knew Leo well in some ways. Many board meetings in New York, daily phone calls at some stages. Leo was acting executive VP of her corporation before he transferred Bernie in.

2. Leo was slender, small, frail looking but limber and healthy for his age--a yoga buff. A gentle, kind and softspoken man with an old world manner, who, however, discovered a sly sense of humor once you knew him better. Coarser wit than you might've anticipated. He was Horace Sachs' nephew, and had begun as a concert violinist. *Der Bonze* (the Boss) loved classical music. When Leo was 20 and saw the extent of his talent--a seat in an orchestra but no solo career--he elected to make some money in retail instead.

3. His sister was Al's mother, so when the haberdashery failed, Al was taken into the fold too.

4. So Al was Jewish by rabbinical law: his mother was Jewish. Moreskewicz? Erika had to smile, comparing the Torah to European primogeniture: well, you know who the mother is! Leo wasn't orthodox or even conservative--a gymnasium educated German Jew--but the tradition still held meaning for him, surely when translated into family loyalty.

5. Al's kids, of course, were not. Or Al might have risen even higher. (Not sure about that.) Especially as Fiona was a mix of Mayflower (mother) and Catholic Belgian (first generation father). Neither persuasion is dear to the Jewish heart. Worse, the Belgian grandpa left Brussels right after WWII. Now, people emigrated then for all kinds of reasons, but Erika happened to know of Belgians who may've been evading denazification inquiries. The Dutch and French harbor that oldworld crankiness about their neighbors anyway, suspecting Belgians of stupidity and avarice. Granda surely had the drive and ruthlessness, by all accounts. He ran his family, ensured the grandkids' confirmation, built a small fortune buying and selling small companies, financing and refinancing. A Knight of Columbus.

6. Before InHouse Counsel was incorporated, before the first BinHouse, David consulted Leo.

7. Leo had promised Al he'd look out for his kids and wife, after his death. Al had a just idea of his prognosis, the state of his coronary arteries.

8. Fiona's estate was largely in trust. She had the disposition--to do with as she wished--of the property in Scarsdale, half the income from the income bearing instruments, and of modest inheritances she'd accrued in her own right, which, untapped and well managed by Al, had grown respectable. But the bulk of Al's estate was governed by trustees, who included Leo, Horace and an attorney who specialized in estates.

9. None of her estate was invested in Inhouse. The attorney saw it as a conflict of interest. None of Fiona's money either, though she had free disposition of it. She'd even welched on the Bunkhouse. Not that it mattered anymore, though at the time it had been awkward.

10. In fact, when it came down to it, David and Erika didn't own a controlling interest in their own corporation. Not surprising, considering the capital investment came from Saks and other sources (David had done his best to round up balancing assets elsewhere, including Rafe). This was nothing to be concerned about; few corporations are privately owned anymore, and she and David did have a solid percentage of voting stock plus CEO and board memberships--as much as most entrepreneurs retain of a successful venture.

11. Saks style, Leo had considered David's project fulltime for some weeks, talking to Horace. Contact groups, demographics, direct mail surveys, they both ended up enjoying the idea. And some fine dinners at Fiona's. Which surely provided congenial occasions for dealing. But Erika, knowing Leo pretty well, doubted the shrewd businessman, moderate in all things, could be bribed with food or muddled with Burgundy. Fiona had little interest in the details. Let the men talk. Change the subject if she got too bored.

12. Fiona did have very good taste. An eye. It was possible Rose's kiddy clothing could be described as junior league by Rose's more bohemian standards--Fiona was conservative--but Barbie would have been as repugnant to Mom as her.

Erika learned these things by witnessing them, by talking to David--times when tension relaxed and they enjoyed occasion and mood--and by chatting with Leo. She'd been taking Leo to lunch after board meetings. Not much over five feet, the sight of himself in a good restaurant's fine mirrors with a 6 foot plus *shiksa* tickled his fancy. 6'3" in Lucchese ostrich. (The American upper classes say you can't be too rich or too thin; well, a Hollander can't be too tall. Dante's infernal giant was "tall as two Frisians.") Still, Leo made a point of introducing her as Dutch, not German, and as niece-in-law. Yeah, Erika got on well with Leo.

And finally, Leo, with a more relaxed work schedule in his golden corporate years, liked to arrive at board meetings early; sit over a cup of French roast to chat with younger Bernie and Howard Abrams, his contemporary from Saks, who was also on the board. After she discovered this, Erika began to come early too, and sit discreetly, ostensibly checking through sales charts, but occasionally asked to smile at or respond to remarks addressed her way.

The chat was fairly purposive, actually. Bonding, but more. Synchronizing their wavelengths, getting history straight. It concerned early days at Saks sometimes, problems already solved with BinHouse rehashed in jokes, which nevertheless churned the mill finer. Business gossip. Which Leo and his gang had a habit of salting with Yiddish, as Erika affected to be engrossed in printouts.

She was engrossed. For some reason--perhaps the big dumb blonde myth--it didn't occur to them that a woman who spoke Dutch and German could also catch Yiddish, particularly spoken with Leo's mellifluous clarity. Perhaps they didn't care, perhaps they were even cleverer than she knew. She missed important words but could store them as easily as the American idioms she collected. A trip to the Strand produced, not only art and architecture books for David's new library at I Takki, but a Yiddish dictionary.

So, 13. Once the conversation turned to Fiona. They liked her. Lovely woman. Such charm! Grace! But the throwaway was Howard's sotto voce "*Doch mehr Witz im Tukhis als Kopf*" and Leo's reply "*Nu, was? tupischer Shiksa, nischt*?" Erika still wasn't sure of the spelling, nor if she'd mentally re-translated back to German somehow--she hadn't got to her dictionary till the end of a busy day--but the sense was dead clear. "All the same, more wit in her booty than her head." "Aw, what do you expect? typical Gentile chick, no?"

So Fiona helped, for sure, but the help was introductions and contacts. Not to be sneezed at, but also not what she and Rose signified.

Extrapolating back, Erika could assume similar etiology for Al's success at Saks. Also not to be sneezed at, also....

That left the neglect question. There was just too much evidence. The medical history, David's specific memories, and most tellingly Fiona's present way of being. She was once again totally engrossed in a mate. To this day she didn't even recognize that David had a speech impediment. The emotional problems skimmed right over her head. They were up to Erika. Her grandchild interested her but rarely.

It's difficult for a mother--particularly a young mother--to respect a mom like that, but Erika was not so much tolerant as dismissive of the past. She had the practical new world approach; the Moores were the ones engrossed in the world of yesterday. In this sense, she realized that motherhood's a tough job, so tough that no parents do it perfectly, even working together. An Olympic weightlifter she consulted about squats and thrusts--form, technique--once said, 'No two guys lift the same': like marriages, childrearing's hard to judge from outside. Americans, some explicitly believing in absolute morality, and all under that influence, naturally tend to judge everyone by one standard. But people have facets. Some good mothers are perfectly intolerable human beings, while some fine people just don't have a parenting instinct, never develop sympathy for children. They discipline well and encourage badly, or vice versa.

Erika was satisfied with this amount of progress. Forward looking, she had no driven need to delve farther into this past, but getting some background established about her husband’s history was important. What she worked out was subject to revision, not set in stone, but the outlines were pretty determinate compared to her in laws’ uncertain, fearful and waffling vision. Erika kept her own counsel.

A Free Press is the Bastion of Democracy

(Though Maybe Not The Sports & Entertainment Section)

Even people who should know better--David and Erika--subscribe to strange myths about athletes, Rose thought. Funny this issue should come up again now, just when she was submitting to an interview by "June Bug"--June Keierstein--for *Winning*. Rose enjoyed talking about bike racing, her feelings about it, but David had, finally, beaten into her a truism everyone else seemed to grasp instinctively, intuitively, a priori: interviews present magnificent opportunities to put your foot in your mouth. All the way down to your asshole. To piss off Eddie B, her teammates, the entire Olympic Committee and all its sponsors. Journalists sell controversy. If they can't find it--and they can--they make it. Coach David elucidated modest video after dull video of dim wholesome athletes, great guys all; counseled Rose to emulate Jim, who possessed an impeccable ability to parrot sports cliches and homilies. "You strive to do your personal best, to forget your ego and work for the good of the team, for the Olympic ideal." Right. On some level Jim even seemed to believe this tripe, though it clearly had little purchase on the sophisticated, vicious and nuanced dedication that drove his training and racing. But Rose's problem was she tended to tell sympathetic souls the truth as she saw it. Not good.

'A person with the determination to win a gold medal can do anything.' Well. some can't hold down a job. For others athletic supremacy is less something to strive for than something they're driven to. Less of a goal than a gaol. Less a focus than an escape. They could all grin nobly for a sweatsoaked photo op, but not necessarily raise a child or balance a checkbook, nor keep their foot off a competitor's neck or their knees out of his groin.

Cute bobbed hair, attractively scruffy with bleach, bright funny eyes, listening adoration, June Bug was easy to unburden yourself too. Bubbly and agreeable--with a memory like a beartrap. David, digging around, found her to be the source of sprinter Keona's faux pas about the Olympic Committee. "Mt Olympus had women on it." Quoted in SI. Keona was coaching track at Howard now.

A good journalist, June Bug. A great listener, nonjudgemental, understanding--with fewer scruples than a hooker on crack. She understood her moral duty to be to elicit and betray confidences, her fiduciary responsibility to melodramatize in the interest of readers.

A perfect compartmentalizer, who genuinely admired Rose, really thought of herself as a supporter of athletes and a true friend--at least over lunch. Though Rose extorted an expensive dinner, instead. Prima donna.

David's advice was 'no Rose interviews' period. To Eddie B, Olympic Committeepersons, anyone who would listen. But the Olympic Committee does not hearken to athletes, much less to their relatives, and does contract athletes to promotional work, including interviews. You can't raise money for invisible heroes. So the fallback position was, learn to talk without saying anything.

Rose meant to get a fine dinner out of it. That was her agenda. She lived well at the training camp, and there was I Takki, but every now and then she missed preppy dates or NY freebies, the Scarsdale crowd's functions: French cuisine in the fullest sense of the phrase.

And Austin ain't Podunk no more. Take L'Aubade, for example. Low Bad, in the local idiom. Austin was always sociable, attractive, a fine place to go out, chocked with live music, but now its restaurants were developing a remarkable sophistication, and range. Yes, Austin was leaving Sante Fe in the dust. It was a real city, for one thing. And now its limestone bluffs, riverfront and springfed pools were infested with tech-yuppies, writers and academics from all over the world. NYers who might've gone to California a generation before, Californians who might've gone to NY.

L'Aubade. Rose and June Bug were sitting in leather Mexican chairs in the garden of a converted mission style mansion, next to a fountain descending through bamboo to a creek. Could almost be David's work. Maybe it was. Crisp linen and chilled silver made Rose's mouth water.

The worship of sports is strange. Perhaps Rose had become too close to see sport as glorious anymore. “I used to be in love with my bike. Now I see it as a job.” What she did know intimately was the profound selfishness, the ineluctable narcissism, required to focus your entire being on becoming a bike motor. You had to be ready, willing and able to neglect everything else, your family, your friendships, your marriage and career, whatever. And in some cases it wasn't a conscious decision but more like a personality disorder.

Rose was going for the gold. Do whatever it takes. Risk her life on icy descents, manipulate or desert anyone on or off the course, take illegal drugs if necessary and if she could hide from the blood screens. And that was only the beginning, the minimum they all did--washouts too. Yet she was far more normal than many of the Olympians she knew, far less ruthless by nature. Olympians are exceptional, obviously.

She didn't so much admire them as wish to surpass them.

And yet of course they must be admirable. Not only because most people thought so but why else would she want to become one? Sport is finally as much of a mystery as art, as unexplainable as life. If you wanted to know more about it, she was the wrong person to ask. She was a bug, not an entomologist.

A thoughtful bug, though, stunned by the enigma of her own propulsions.

"I know how tough it is," June Bug said. Never still, she rewound a curl behind her ear. Thick curvy hands, each nail a different length. "I ride a little myself, with a club. Not that I dream of riding at your level, but I've been cold and exhausted miles from home too. The worst is, I know Eddie B isn't really into the girls' team. I mean, you need all the support you can get, and he..."

Rose smiled. Mmmm, turtle soup. *Schildkrotensuppe*. A single brilliant of green fat floating in *wichtig* broth. Serious stock.

"Is it true the guys get so beat they can't get it up anymore?"

"Gee, I never heard that. If you say so, it wouldn't surprise--sorry." Rose scowled at her recorder, lying neatly next to June Bug's. "Gotta change the tape, I think. This thing is a pain--but the Olympic Committee makes you take one to interviews. I guess they've been misquoted."

June Bug scowled too. She didn't believe that was Olympic policy, and now there was no use pretending this was just dinner, given her own recorder--which she wouldn't have used, if Rose's hadn't been on the table first.

June's face had cleared nicely by the time Rose raised her head from her audiovisual work. Ah, peppery Gulf tiger shrimp, mesquite-barbecued with cloves of garlic, a dip of lemon Bearnaise on the side.

"Those guys do work incredibly hard. I've seen Jim unable to hang up his bike when he finally dismounts."

"How long have you been going out?"

"We're just good friends, really."

Actually, Rose would've been lost--how could she make her way through a champagne cocktail and a glass of Pinot Noir, plus venison in truffles and shallots, snow peas, chocolate mousse, turtle soup and shrimp without losing it? Bike racer's portions, too.

And everyone needs someone to confide in. Most of us are unquietly desperate for it. But the people you know well have heard it all. And, while old friends you haven't seen for a while serve nicely, you haven't seen them for a while.

Confidences used to be the great charm of love affairs, Rose remembered. She had no time or energy now, and had had enough, but she recalled the kick, nostalgically. The precipitous eyes mirroring your blinding attraction, the heady anticipation, the sexual excitement, the Biblical knowing of another body--but the true rush was emotional disclosure, sharing histories.

So what saved Rose from June Bug was the girl's bubbliness. Rose appreciated bubbly, but didn't truly go for it. Too close to ditsy. Rose had seen Fiona working it. Not quite real on a girl this smart. *Nicht echt*. Perhaps that was why June Bug worked for *Winning* instead of *Sports Illustrated*.

"Still, it must be super tough to train that hard and feel you're not getting the same 100% from your coach that you're giving."

Rose looked thoughtful. Her lithe tongue captured an escaping drop of bourbon and shallot sauce. Served over medaillons of tender rare venison, with marble sized fried potatoes to soak up the excess. Crunchy snow peas stirfried with red and yellow sweet pepper slices in fresh rosemary and garlic.

"June, the challenge is potentially overwhelming however you cut it. Intimidating. Uh, I just hope to strive to try to be the best I can be. There are a million things--emotional, physical, social--that can mess you up. You try to stay focused, to remember that if you can tough it out it's worth it. I mean, even if you fail, um, accepting a challenge makes you feel better about yourself. That is, I sure hope I don't let down my sponsors, my family, the Olympic Committee, Eddie B and his great coaching staff. I'm so grateful for their support." Blanking her eyes dumb, trying not to grin cynically at June Bug's disappointed skepticism.

June was barely able to hide her rage behind an equally girlish pretense of naivete. She was furious Rose hadn't met her minimum obligation, to provide good copy by destroying herself. Yes, June waxed as indignant as Gloria Steinem, who once snarled that she had felt betrayed by Pat Nixon's declining to share her marital problems--even after Gloria confided to Pat that they shared similar straightened small town Midwestern backgrounds: a remarkable affinity which should've engendered many trusting confessions. Indeed, such secretiveness certainly reflected badly on Pat Nixon--and probably Dick too. Even worse than a public liberal like Gloria might've prejudged. A decade later she still hadn't completely recovered her temper. Why, she had held out her hand in friendship, across politics! Which should certainly have garnered some good copy, when she still needed it badly.

Hell. And Rose was reputed to be tactless--insulting--supposed to be forthcoming about love affairs, her secret rides, disagreements with tyrannical Eddie B. Material like that June could sell to *Time* or *The Post*, if Rose won. She had to get some good scoops somewhere, or moulder in the minors forever.

For the mariner a shipwreck is a catastrophe, though for the archeologist it may become a godsend, but only the journalist enjoys fresh blood--even rocking the boat herself.

The mousse was a marvel. Desserts always seemed to be a problem in Texas, but this, under a leafy roof of frozen mint, was creamy and frothy as cappuccino foam, though dark as a Nazi's heart.

Still, Rose didn't feel good about passing by June's nets, though she had done her duty by David. Made herself into a public idiot.

"Ah, I see they have really good cognac. Marvelous. I'll take one after my espresso, please." The willowy sleek haired waitress smiled admiration for Rose's sommelier taste. Working girls aren't usually the best of tippers, but no harm trying.

"Junie, I've really enjoyed this. Thanks a bunch. It was a great meal and you're great fun. Good listener. And I gotta hand it to you. I know how tough freelancing is."

June sulked. "Well, you could've been a lot more forthcoming."

"Sorry."

"Like that pays my bills."

"Honey, I've been handed a whole lot more expensive evenings than this without putting out for them."

"I bet you have. And I bet your Mom fed you truffles for breakfast every morning. I never even laid eyes on one before today. Some people have to earn their living, you know. They don't live in their brother's mansion and play sports all day."

"I can see your point, but it's not a perspective I expect from a sportswriter. Listen, a month from now you'll still have a career. Not me. Age 30. Even if I don't crash. Some call it sacrifice."

"You don't need to get all preppy and snooty with me either. It's bad enough you rip me off for a dinner that costs more than I make in a week. Without throwing me the tiniest bone, metaphorically speaking. You might've warned me."

The waitress came with the brandy and the bill. June turned to hand her a credit card. Rose coughed and nudged both pause buttons.

"You know," Rose said, sipping, "off the record, I got to know a lot of journalists in NY. If they were honestly predatory it'd be one thing, but they all seemed to feel that if they extended their hand in a warm NY minute of friendship, their victims were duty bound to let them feed on their livers, and with gratitude too. You see Diane Sawyer--I knew her when she worked in NY, you know, interviewing Ed Koch and such--and now you see her smiling, head tipped sweetly at some tragically newsworthy poor white trash (you can sense Diane doesn't think much of her career profile) and ol Diane asks her, in that syrupy voice she learned from her acting coach (I sure didn't hear it from the tough six foot ambitious babe I knew) to spill her guts in return for two minutes of Diane's charming modest sympathy. "How did it feel to see your two year old daughter butchered before your eyes?" And you know that, one minute from now, that poor weeping bitch won't get be able to get Diane to return a 20 second phone call if her life depends on it.

"I suffer five hours a day on a hard saddle, rain or blistering shine--man, hail!--sweating out two liters of blood, while laying in enough lactic acid to reduce a beef carcass to fertilizer. I take descents at 60 mph, knowing a crash could end my career, if not my life. My legs look like Watusi cheeks. Now, for some reason my country feels that since I port a red, white and blue jersey while I risk life and limb I'm doing it for their glory, so to them I'm an inspiration and role model, but you I don't owe shit."

June Bug's face lit up with joy. She looked like Connie Chung, when Marlon Brando said "Now you're making me really mad," as she was grilling him about his son's murder trial.

Rose snatched both recorders, one with each hand, and tucked them in her lap.

June started, and leaned forward. Rose's steak knife--blade up, pecan handle butted into her palm pit, but out of sight of other diners--was no more sharply pointed at June's throat than Rose's blue eyes at June's, which, stunned, considered them mad. June paled and drew back. Rose put the knife down. June took a breath. Rose popped both tapes, slipped them down the front of her linen dress and put the recorders back on the table.

"Aw, Rose, you may as well give mine back now. I got all the cards, and nothing to lose. Imagine we knock the table over struggling. "Olympic Hopeful Assaults Journalist/Restaurant Damaged." Hell, I could get on AP with that."

"The only thing that's going to get damaged is you, sweetheart. And you got plenty to lose. Your pearly teeth and perky nose, for starters. You have no respect at all for me, do you? Not even physical respect. I mean go ahead, assault me. 'Insane Fan Attacks Olympic Star.' Munich. Monica Sellars. I'm just sittin here. You can report your side from Hell, after I send you there."

June attempted to look crestfallen, but couldn't master her expression of relieved, triumphant vindication.

"Junie, I'm not as dumb as you think. I know the tape isn't essential to you, but it is to me, Junie, because, Junie, this is what's going to happen. You get a certified transcript day after tomorrow, FedEx--minus my last tomfool peroration. If you print anything that's not on that transcript, my brother's corporation lawyers will ensure you spend the rest of your productive life in a courtroom, and that no commercial periodical will ever again touch your words with a Pole."

Actually, that wasn't enough. David also had to trade June in-depth material about Rose's troubled family background. Wagering that his architectural rep had reached a point where psych smudges only added panache. He didn't like that bet, actually, but at least his carrot and stick did beat out Rose's brushfire. Her red, white and blue sentence never saw print.

June also demanded an apology, but merely as a throwaway negotiating item. She didn't really give a fuck.

She liked David. Why not? "Would she really have stuck that steak knife into me?"

"I don't know," David said soberly. He felt conspiratorially drawn to take June's part--the wisest strategy. Leaving a physical threat hanging seemed not a bad idea either, nor would it do to belittle June's trauma, nor to seem to defend Rose.

"That is, June, for the record, whut knahfe? I wouldn't insure you even now."

Actually, though, David didn't think Rose would've. Whether she was mad enough was beside the point. Rose was cool under fire, and had confidence in her bare hands. She'd've felt June couldn't take the tapes from her even unarmed. The knife was just to make a point. Calm June down.

June Bug smiled at him. Cute guy.

High five. Who else could boast of beating Rose Moore in a course on line? Four courses.

"Rose, really beyond the pale. I mean, your other raids had heroic elements; this was sordid." They were munching David's plantains in the hot tub. Deep fried in olive oil, dried, sea-salted. With beer, poured into two thirds OJ.

Rose was nearly in tears though so David experienced a change of heart. He put an arm around her. So emotional. "Well, you're exhausted. Stressed out. Two weeks to go. It's heavy pressure. We should've gotten you out of that interview. I didn't research June Bug adequately." He kissed her on the cheek. Calciferous from the aquifer, salty with sweat and maybe tears. That almond smell.

Rose slumped, face in her hands. "I should've just let her buy me a cheap lunch, if I wasn't going to say anything. You can't cheat an honest man. I knew she'd be pissed, but I also could've predicted I might lose my temper. Three drinks!" Rose had been riding a hundred miles every morning with the team over the hilliest terrain they could find, sprinting every hill and city limit sign. After lunch and a nap she'd do sprints for another hour. David had found a quarter mile of road with exactly the incline of the Olympic course finish, plus a steeper section for strength, and a flatter one for speed. She'd alternate, and climb the mile long Wimberley hill four or five times too. Sundays two hundred, Wednesdays 150.

But, starting this week, R&R in Colorado. A couple weeks to get the red corpuscle count up without EPO. She'd ride an exhilarating short fast training race mornings, some flat loose chatty miles afternoons. Then, the weekend before, a short Olympic replica--dress rehearsal--and another one three days before.

"Aw, Rose, that's June Bug's technique. If a sympathetic ear doesn't work, she gets you to lose your temper. Besides, you get few enough perks. You should see how we wine and dine BinHouse's suppliers and investors. In fact, maybe some would appreciate dinner with a beautiful Olympic athlete, if we can fit it into your schedule."

"Well, thanks, maybe."

"No, many of them are interesting. Really. I mean, promotion--"

"--Well, even without that, I'm grateful. I mean, I really do regret this one. Don't think I don't appreciate your...."

"Well, you kind of saved my life too, actually. I mean, you did. Many times, really. Plus, you know, it's funny. I'm a grownup, I know the Olympic Committee solicits bribes, they and the coaches abuse their power. I know they're hypocrites. And the athletes, they're not distant stars to me. I know how many of them are fucked up.

"Given that one guy gets a gold medal and the other thousands get to teach high school gym--if they suck up to the principal--it's always going to be, medal winners are largely people who'll do anything to win. Take drugs if they can get away with it, whatever. But the blood tests are serious, and--what I'm saying, backwards--is I still believe in the Olympic Ideal. The athletes' performance really is magnificent, over and above what the venal networks make of it.

"Eh, the networks. I mean, 'up close and personal' impiously reducing every holy individual to that same banal story, ad nauseam. How Xladibouk, despite having a ridiculous name and coming from an unchic country, suffered and slaved, how his whole family sacrificed, so he could, in the brief course of idly entertaining a nation of couch potatoes, greatly enrich some multinationals. Advertisers and networks. Commercials, TV Personalities, human interest, and, finally, last, sports footage. Which leaves the interchangeable TV Personality at a total loss, if not for words.

"Still, you know, when you see the competition, the men and women really are the best in the world, in a fairly pure sense. Demi-gods, like the Greek winners. As for the committee, they're not the Olympics. Imperfect custodians of the numinous.

"You know, what you can say for a hypocrite, at least, is he shows the way he thinks things ought to be. He advertises Virtue. So what's disgusting about them, besides corrupt power, is not so much what they fail to be, but how mean their acted image of virtue usually is. The sadness of inauthentic people--con artists, liars, hypocrites--*O ye whited supulchres*!--is that, melodramatizing their ideals, they only show tacky underwear. They--"

"--Davey, you babble worse than the tub. Jacuzzi Motor Mouth. You should've been the journalist. Brook Moore."

"God forbid. Even lawyers smell sweet by comparison. June Bug isn't a bad person; Connie Chung probably isn't either; Diane Sawyer is really nice when talking about her husband (she not only tolerates his grumbling, she calls it "his royal cuteness") and Gloria Steinem's a political heroine. But when your job is getting strangers to publish private emotional information....Not that a lot of victims don't seem to be willing to do anything for their own fifteen minutes of fame. Or 20 second sound bite."

David was climbing the staircases and terraces ascending his new-bought bluff. He'd exercised the option some months before. Westernized, he'd come to feel tender about anyone overlooking his property; InHouse Counsel was lifting on the Sunbelt's economic tide, and the bluebonnets had been spectacular. Flocked carpet of cunning weave, in the furze of distance a cobalt glaze on the shimmer of western heat. Erika said nearly as stunning as tulip fields.

He'd been masoning and carpentering cement, limestone, cedar, using whatever crew was free and the workshop he built just above the floodplain on the new side. The Left Bank. Working during Saskia's naps, baby beeper and cell phone hanging from his toolbelt. He took her along if she was awake, suspending her swing from a post or hackberry. With play breaks. Wafts of babypoop flagging the gin bite of juniper, the magisterial odor of the river. The clean sweat of virtue flushing his pores.

Eventually he'd hang an architecture studio or guesthouse, something for Rose--he wasn't sure yet--under the lip of the cliff. It faced south, protection from Northers. A west curve of rock and live oak would screen out afternoon heat; a shallow porch admit winter sun but deny summer. Garage on the bluff itself.

Every morning he crossed his footpath suspension bridge--cypress to cypress along The Narrows--to climb the hundred feet with Saskia, the weight of her paraphernalia (amazing the baggage these creatures require) working his underexercised--by bikie standards--quads. On the way down he'd pause, sipping stashed coffee. Long for a croissant.

He was often alone at I Takki now. (Everything in this Anonymous West requires a name, usually Comic, as befits a New World. To nail things in place, like the shivering anomic poplar Kafka baptized Noah-in-his-Cups: for only the old things and the old words are real. Naming ensouls the beasts and fowls.) David had cut back on servicing clients; jobs requiring residence in the camper. Erika stayed home much as she could, but as CEO of a growing....

Landscape. Landescape. People are too intense, invasive. Especially their eyes. David had to be careful to meet eyes, not only for their owners' sake--and his commerce--but for his own, as eyes avoided only fester blacker magic. Even with Saskia, he suffered a temptation to focus, not only on landscape rather than humans, but on physical rather than human process. He could build and draw, bird dogging at perfection, but forget to attend the client. Her legitimate fears about money, safety, utility, her legitimate desire to swing in the loop of her own project. And, similarly, David could rise to the challenge of Saskia's feeding, clothing, bedding, safety, health, cleanliness, but forget to look into her eyes. Play.

He mounted the first platform above the massy live oak set back from the riverbed. Here David gazed through the tall cypress in stillness. An unspeakable beauty rent him. *The earth abideth forever*. Mute. Uncaring presage to fey inexistence, but also a sanctuary he could regain.

A great sadness descended upon him. Unspeakable. He could not move. His face was merely watching. Saskia could inherit this sorrow like an earlobe, a cut of lips. *Peau de Chagrin*. He worried about her. Wanting her to be happy. It seemed impossible, judging from his experience. But it was important not to console himself with her. To hold her only when she wanted or needed to be hugged, not....

He again felt that impulse to cast himself from the heights. Even the vivid recurrent fantasy of throwing Saskia into the deepest pool and then jumping in to rescue her. But, beyond patrimony, suicide had come to seem painfully unnecessary. It would all end anyway.

Further, if the murder/rescue scene gained traction, he'd commit himself, which no longer held the same terror. The meds had become milder, your fellow inmates less monstrous.

But he felt less pressure. Saskia was safe. Such foul imaginings came instead to seem like the impulse every commuter entertains to throw himself under his oncoming train: perhaps an aversive exercise like rehearsing calamity and response? or--who knows?--a governable intimation from Thanatic depths. Every parent suffers borrowed terror. Children are *hostages to fortune*.

To be profoundly honest (David thought) such fears entomb a certain deeply hid pleasure. As with any imagined death. A disaster enjoyed vicariously conveys much of its energy, little of its agony: a pump of blood and hormones, without tiring any muscles or grey matter. Let it rest. A mystery. Aristotle said a painting of dogshit is enjoyable, if like. St Augustine compared plays to masturbation. You enjoy feeling pity without actually feeling a need to perform any charity.

By now he was at the terrace--about two thirds up--which best overlooked his gardens. Descending from nursery to hot tub. His solace. Conversation pit. Negotiating room.

"The Hanging Gardens of Babble On." Unfair, since Rose was as talky as any other member of his circle/family. Her bite had softened, anyway. She seemed finally to be developing that corollary habit of considering how a particular listener may feel about what your autonomous speech process generates.

David sat Saskia on the rail--within both arms' grip--to show her the new vegetation across the river. "Someday all this will be yours my child. The pridelands extend far as the eye can see." David tried out a fatuous James Earl Jones roar. He coughed. Unsuited to his uncertain tenor. "I have to cut, that is, more of this damn juniper swatting us in the puss."

He twisted at his lower back. Better since he'd cut back riding. But the sinking in the belly....

*Mal etre*. Body disthymia.

For the most part he'd managed to keep his mouth shut even during his mother's extended visit. Fine of Rafe to get her back to Westchester. His movie pilot had crashed but Rafe, as usual, had walked away from the wreck like Chuck Yeager. Carrying rep and moneybag. The one because of the other. Rafe still flew in to proof Fiona's reading group's sitcom script. Not a bad concept, he allowed.

There'd been that moment though when a change in meds had unmanned David, and one of his mother's grim fairy tales had aroused an unwitted response. "Fancy becoming an architect! You always did love blocks. You were always so good at playing by yourself. Your grandmother bought you those adorable Swiss ones for your birthday--in primary colors? Whatever happened to it?" David realized she'd given them away. The word neglect may even have crossed the barrier of his teeth. David's memory for that period was spotty. Med-eaten.

In response, his mother had indicated, ultimately, she didn't have time to discuss it. Neglect, that is.

Quod erat demonstrandum. QED. The doubt laid to rest, it remained only to sort the pieces, put them in some order and put them away. His therapy sessions--short, infrequent and result oriented--convinced him that intense bursts beat those earlier ruminations, which had tiptoed, whistling, round such topics. No doubt in any case the thrust of Batenburg's successful intervention was chemical.

So. There was Rose's sidelong insight they'd been raised by neighbors. Erika's about the labor-intensive energy-inefficiency of his mother's undoubted role in Dad's mercantile rise. A ditsy propulsion exhausting even to contemplate, for a boy made efficient by coping with peak demand on low--diverted--energy. Dizzy from PVCs thrown by his prolapsed mitral valve.

And her intrusions in his own career felt invasive because they were so random, coming out of the blue smoke of depression into a lurid shadowless light cast by no continuity, no background spadework. Ride of the Valkyrie, untombed.

Laid to rest, now she had a new man. No more time for distractions like raising kids.

David reached the top of his present construction. He surveyed upward, drawing angles. The view would be marvelous. Already was from here. He turned to look, shifting Sass to his shoulder for burping. Often as not he came down coated in drying milk. Erika's smell.

The Hill Country. Spread beneath his unworthy feet. Olive turrets blued by distance; gnarled live oaks' stoic probity grasping the hard soil; grasslands undulant as the sea. No hint of the hand of man.

The Western idea--that manmade is per se ugly, nature sublime (*God is in his heaven and only man is vile*)--consoled his bruised heart in passing. Passerine on his crow's nest, in the plainswind.

Wafts of sage spicing the dry air. Caressing and softly rousing the gold fur along his legs. Milk drying. Faint tickle. Better.

Batenburg had told him, also, about new research on siblings. Sociologists had long known this relationship to be the strongest (non-video) in modern America. (Spouses divorce; parents die, retire, inhabit their own ghetto; offices change; neighbors--what neighbors?) But what the sociologists' cunning studies--of identical twins raised apart vs adoptees together--had missed, formerly, was that sibs are never raised in the same household. One lives in the world of the younger, the other in the world of the older. Niches as different as wolves' and raccoons'.

David smiled. That busted his old Yale Soc prof's brilliant career. Never count a man happy till he is dead.

Yep, Prof. Coates' statistical answer to nature/nurture. The 50s question.

A subtly misstated antimony, anyway, David mused. Ethologists and existentialists say imprinting is inextricably endo- and exogamous, even in geese. *The Clay and the Potter*.

The potter was thumping his wet clay

And with its all obliterated tongue

It murmur'd, Gently, Brother. Gently, pray.)

Sass *boert*. The earthy Dutch word, so much more onomatopoeic than burp. David wiped her lipcorners with the remains of his T shirt, clotting.

OK. Next.

Babybreath. Small fragrant arm around his sticky neck.

Newt Descending a Staircase. With baggage.

So--that is--there had come a time once upon a time when younger Rose came to engage Fiona's interest, but that time had not come for him. She'd never checked his homework, inquired about his teachers, noted his friendlessness or disease processes. Perhaps Fiona preferred girls; perhaps boys threatened her. (Such speculations are productive at this point only for some psychoanalytic historian--an obsolescing dubious profession, which all the same might cast light on the darker side of his parents' late marriage.) But in any case Mum's interest in small children was light. They bored her. Saskia, dandled and returned to Nurse David. Until kids could chat, their nurture must've seemed like plants' or pets'--which never appealed to Fiona either.

Nor had washing his little prick properly. David suddenly recalled his phimosis. She'd never bothered to get the adhesion fixed either. Dad brought him to a surgeon to circumcise the constricted foreskin. Al had imagined it would make intercourse painful or impossible, which apparently never crossed Fiona's mind.

In the surgery, David had sublimated his fear into scientific curiosity, an inherited dodge: fascinated, he'd contaminated the awaiting instruments with his small investigative hands. Not impatiently scolded, this time, by his dismayed father, but warmed, so warmed, so tenderly warmed, by his father's gentle attention. Allowed to buy two books afterwards. Collected Sherlock Holmes and Maneaters of Kumaon. Dad attending his selection patiently, if with waning interest. Big dry warm hand.

Well, perhaps this explains why I can't remember any nursery rhymes or songs to sing Sassy. Probably never heard any. Surely never felt comfortable singing.

Pushing his voice through his choky impediment always felt laborious: its ineloquent fruit not worth the effort, certainly not twice. Further explanation ranked even lower.

Uneven tread. A warped 2 by 12. Even though Wolmanized. Womanized, they say here. *Frauenzimmer*: Freud's old pun about buildings (houses) being feminine. *The love that dare not speak its name*: of Art.

Remember to saw another tread, bring it along tomorrow. And crowbar. And hammer. And nails.

More exercise. And yet more to remember. Mind teetering under the stacked clutter.

The morning river mist came up to meet him.

In fact, come to think of it, David also recalled Fiona saying that when Al had been hospitalized with pneumonia, his internist had sent her home. Because she'd left David at the Carmine street walkup alone. Age three, that would be.

Ah well, nothing to be done about it now. Sometimes Batenburg implied it was all genes anyway. Biochemistry.

Water over the weir. After all, when he suggested Mum might write her response down later--when she did have time--Fiona said 'I'm no writer.'

They both knew, of course, that Writers as a class--oft solitary creatures--aren't particularly skilled at parsing family problems. What's required instead is a mensch, to use his grandmother's word. But since Fiona derailed discussion of neglect with time problems, of their solution with impertinence (writers!), David foresaw no progress when that was corrected either. You could put Fiona on track, by nudges, persuasion or force majeur, but you couldn't keep her on it. Not one she didn't wish to pursue.

And if you did catch her attention, her misinterpretations and counterattacks could never be derailed or refuted. Decades later they would rear the same heads, unscathed.

David collected Saskia and her goods and chattels from the rock terrace. Damp with mist. He humped the gear down another level. Rested there again. Besides enjoying the views, he found descending stairs disagreed with his knees. Leg presses had always felt beneficial, lunges precarious. So he went up fast, came down slow. Well, bath time. Tub would be hot now.

These familial discoveries reinforced David's desire to raise Saskia himself. He was convinced, observing her Dutch extended family, that manners, what we call socialization, character insofar as it's nurturable, are inculcated by constant interaction. Doesn't matter what strategy, what school attracts intellectual allegiance. Long daily contact entrains as a matter of course understanding and patience.

Discipline is egregious, he concluded. Corporal punishment and sequestration, even yelling and temper can ideally (ideally) be replaced: by parents always showing, pointing; encouraging what pleases and burgeons while gently snubbing peccant irruptions. In Holland this seemed to grow happy confident kids. Some claustrophobia, perhaps. Always a downside trade-off.

So, cappuccino consumed, bolts ratcheted tight, David threaded his way down the last level. Head turned toward the shade, scanning the rock planes for fossils, since the sun had lit upon the face of the water, piercing at his bare eyes. He was in the market for chic sunglasses, the local equivalent of a European trenchcoat or waterproof boots, fur for an Inuit. Light ones that gripped face and headtop firmly. Optically correct. With polarization, glare screen. Shading sore pupils from the remorseless Eye of God, and also the casual misprision of one's fellows. Poor me, poor Saskia. Let her suffer less. Strange to say: for a person who rarely missed a meal or night's sleep I had no easy life. *By bread alone*.

David re-threaded the footbridge over The Narrows. Made Erika nervous, with Sass, but physical dangers are the easy ones. David had more confidence in his reflexes than his temper. His coordination than his equability. HIs thighs than his personality.

Pushing his tiring knees against the uneven mounting shale of cascaded rock ascending the normal floodplain.

Then mitred stone stairs. Civilization.

David put the gear down to check a railing bolt. He propped Sass' bottle--full of expressed mother's milk--in her mouth, using a sling rigged from the carrier handle. Used sparingly. Hand fed cub.

David took a last look up the rock. His inclination was to bolt the new construction (one or two rooms) into the cliff face--once certified by a UT geologist as fixed--and sculpt the limestone into a rear wall.

Also to market Erika's bounteous mammary overflow to the less fortunate but well heeled. Bimbo Architectonics. BimTonics. A scheme which earned its inventor and proposed major stockholder only an amused swat on the head.

David eased himself and Saskia into the hot tub for their morning bathe among the banana and bamboo. Pine tar soap. Sandalwood. Hibiscus and yellow roses.

The water cure almost as soothing as reading. But excessive reading dries the brain, leading to Melancholia, Robert Burton said 400 years ago. Misbegotten childhood doing what all the other overactive kids couldn’t be got to do by well meaning parents.

He could handle things fine if he didn't have to hurry. If he could take a breath during his improvisation--among the ineluctable imbroglia of business, childrearing. Schedule crises one at a time, with space for contemplation.

It required remorseless efficiency. Calm. Planning. Patience. Erika.

Who required neither regular meals nor sleep, surely not her own space. Only children, upward mobility and *gezelschap*. Good fellowship. God rest ye merry gentleman. A wellrun nursery.

Childrearing, his new study. Books and hearsay. Anecdotal evidence.

"They have to learn they can't always get their own way." The motto, not merely of a hypocrite dictator, but an idiot. Who in hell had ever been dumb enough to imagine she'd always get her own way? Despair about ever getting her due, or any sympathy for her needs, ignorance of what made her happy--these later led to manipulative cunning, desperate assaults. In time the neglecteds' perception of share shades to existential doubt.

"They have to learn who's boss." As if tyrants ever go unrecognized.

7:30. Soon the fool phone would be ringing its fool head off. The crew at the Fredericksburg site now called every time their noses needed wiping: revenge for his reading them the riot act over their attempt to work round a discovered seep on their own hook. Coverup. Shameful compared to his own terse solution: pull the seep up into a well: interior fountains, putto to putto descending the stairs.

His best crew, too.

Enterprise, great. Problem solving, excellent. Re-drawing his blueprints in the field, no. Nyet.

The waters churned and gyred at David's floated legs and arms, his unclenched sacrum, pushing, infusing and pressing warmth into his worked thighs, his relaxing belly and loosening bowels. Saskia chirped, a curvey smile spreading over her toothless gums. The fresh sage in the tub rose pungent, mingling with his and Sass' soap and shampoo. *S'Morgens fruh ist die Welt noch in Ordnung.*

So--he concluded--the conundrum of childhood is helplessness. Innocence. The child has an indecent lack of autonomy. It cannot choose its playmates, school, furniture; where to live, when to go to bed, what to eat. Few prisoners suborn such dismal fates.

But there's no help for it. Kids can't make those decisions. So the tyrant strives to be benign, to recognize and acknowledge his mistakes, admit when he's doing something for his own sake. To grant, at least, cognitive autonomy. As much autonomy as possible, within the corruption of absolute power. Still the inevitable tyranny calls forth ineluctable, necessary, declarations of independence.

Oversight by family and neighbors, perhaps.

Not to be crass, Saskia needed her grandmother, BinHouse its Sakson alliance. Besides, was he born a prince that he should have a perfect mother? As her kids gathered momentum Fiona's purchase had improved.

David had no true bill of complaint about the present, only residual irritation, the chemical wash leached from old bottles by new wine. Let the dead bury the dead. Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof. Sylvan Sayings of the Sage of Bath. Surveying the bullfrogs from a bucolic Shakespearean balcony.

A new chapter had been struck. Called Saskia. Set in Texas. Light. Optimism. Simplicity. Decor by InHouse Counsel Inc.

David rose from his waters. Left his river. Last look.

"Hey, see that, Sass? Huge catfish. Monolithic as great grampaw's dick."

Fiona had enjoyed being married. It gave one something to do. Besides, it was Hobbity in a houseproud English way she liked. Opening and closing the drapes, the service of tea. Marital love's ritual offices among the congenial household gods.

Beyond that she had begun by being in love with Al and had continued to feel, approvingly, attached to him; Romance being, she decided, essentially adolescent. Nothing wrong with that but it was just a fact of life people are not heroes to their valets--or spouses.

But Al had been gone two years; the house steadily drained comfort. "Home furnishings, no matter what texture and pattern, only go so far," she complained, cautiously, to Miriam, still married.

Miriam and Saul mixed well with Rafe. Saul was still in publishing--not so different a profession from Rafe's Hollywood nowadays, as transpired in their cocktail conversation.

"It appears we work for the same multi-national," Saul informed Fiona, coming into the kitchen to pour himself a fresh Martini. He seemed not altogether pleased. Munching the colossal olive, he pronged cocktail onions, instead, for his next.

"If you can call it work," Rafe said, towering behind.

"Oh Rafe, stop playing the lazy Southerner," Fiona said. "I've never seen anyone our age work as intensely as he does." She looked up from her edible artwork at Miriam. "Not even Al in the old days." Miriam raised an uncommitted brow. The anchovies look better beside the pimentos, Fiona decided.

"I was referrin more to the dignity implied by the term than the labor," Rafe drawled.

Saul laughed ruefully, partly mollified. Fiona patted him consolingly. Declining light filtered through the western blinds, diffusing a mild glare. Mild irritation.

Fiona handed Miriam the antipasto for seasoning: collaged on a Zimbabwan platter Miriam brought when she did Fiona's house. The friendship had recovered, though it had required half a decade of hibernation. Too many chefs.

Fiona had handled her loss with as much healthy denial as she could muster. Al had often been gone on business--sometimes they'd hardly spoken for days at a time. So this was just an unusually long trip. Surveying the cloud demographics for another Saks, hiring angels. He reappeared almost nightly anyway, intimating his death had been a misunderstanding.

This tactic didn't work for Fiona all the time but keeping busy helped. Sort of. Stupid vegetable garden. Stupid Republican canvassing.

Rafe helped. They had comfortable habits already, like snuggling in front of old movies. Usually classic Hollywood, but Rafe had other consoling sources. Prague Spring ("Intimate Lighting"), homey BBC product. No contemporary Hollywood. Apocalypse shrivels the balls; broad caricature is somehow unsettling. Vaguely sardonic.

Fiona liked "Fawlty Towers," "The Chef." Sometimes she encouraged Rafe to pause, show her camera angles or cuts, though too much of this seemed excessively energetic for the mood. Static Euro-camera movement was just right.

Pictorial. A new world, thus vocabulary. Clever. She'd liked art history at Bryn Mawr. Young knees beneath civil tartan under the great trees. Aiming to be prettiest girl on campus.

Rafe stood on the back porch with a fresh bourbon in hand. Rafe mostly held drinks these days. He'd pitched the last one, already watery from the hot kitchen, into the azaleas. His ostensible goal out here was dill, but he was taking his time. Taking a break from the claustrophobic martini and white wine crowd--all three of them--in the sunroom. Enjoying a respite from being on his best behavior, from dusting off and displaying the company Southern manners. Besides, a Texan has to be outside, at least some of the day. That faux pas about multinationals had required an adroit stutter step to get back into the minuet without bruising any more feet. Touchy SOB.

The main problem though was irony. To Westerners, it reads 'slouchy puling.' When it's acknowledged or recognized at all. So Rafe was never completely at home with it. He was a writer, of sorts, and adaptable, but still the fine tuning for another culture is always tricky. Freud's right about humor being hostility. You gotta get the disguise just right. "Threshold."

And irony seems to be going the way of all flesh, anyway. A taste whose time has gone. The Age of Irony passing, at last. Un-American. Texans do recognize, and dislike, sarcasm; they see the sardonic as merely wizened; but otherwise they take statements at face value, or as honest badinage. Whereas these proto-English New Englanders have to be witty all the time, and assume you're trying too, where a Texan'll assume you're at least trying to be friendly, unless you actually throw a punch, at least metaphorically speaking.

Of course Rafe had figured Fiona'd continue to prefer EC taste in movies even after learning to see it as unkinesthetic. New England's nostalgia for Europe has by far the deepest American roots, he opined. The Southern "traditions" he grew up amongst seem like mere orneriness in comparison. Mostly lore and prejudices, really. *Methinks they do protest too much*.

Rafe peered at the sunset hidden amongst the trees. Hardwood forest. It's like a weight, like walls. The sunsets thicker, somehow; malty, if still beautiful. Diffused.

Wet and claustrophobic, all the same, or at least grey, for his taste.

Behind him he heard tinkling glasses, murmurs, a Brandenburg concerto on low.

Rafe was a travelin man at heart. Years on location had rubbed off, if few words of anything but Spanish, then at least a yen for the exotic; and to a Texan (even one comfortable in LA) the East coast is something like time travel. The deep softness of the hardwood canopy an unfamiliar comfort, Fiona a Monacan princess. The profundity of the soil, cultural and ecologic, provided soft footfall for wandering feet, bound to come to rest eventually.

Rafe took a sip. His own George Dickel. He surveyed the suburban lawns. Lord, ain't it green. He rolled his neck preparatory to re-entering the fray, not unenjoyable. Travel means rebirth from the broken shell of habit, sure, but being born again can seem childish eventually. Even once. There's that proverb about the rabbit, after all. Born again each morning to a brand new world. Experience rolling off his downy back like water....

Fiona found herself in equal solitude on this congenial occasion, namely in a working kitchen. An experienced hostess and cook, she liked to enjoy her own parties, so she cooked meals that, while they might require advance preparation, did not consume all the hors d'oeuvre time. Still, minutes or quarter hours working the stove are always necessary, and she liked to concentrate uninterrupted, except maybe for some back-burner musing before the cutting board. Cooking together can be fun, but it's another art. The dinner party function of the helpmeet is, rather, to ride herd on the guests. Drinks. Rafe was doing well, especially for an outsider.

They'd been cautious about sex. Besides the age of AIDs there was the age of age, when one becomes chary of mouths. Your own too. Still the old progression.... Straightening his tie, laying a hand on the luncheon-served shoulder. Women have to touch first, especially Texans. Hugs at appropriate occasions.

The first sleep-over date resulted quite simply from Rafe's dozing off on the couch in the TV room. Poor man had a hard day at the studio. A dismaying day, assessing the handwriting on the wall. *Mene, mene, tekhel upharsin*. So rude, businessmen. Quite the OT prophets. The Free Market is a jealous God.

Though Rafe seemed to have a way with it. Blessed, he demonstrated a gift for walking away from even disasters--the cataclysmic Hollywood management style--like Chuck Yeager from a fiery wreck: rep intact, saddle and moneybags (up front) slung over his high shoulders, canting his lightly bowed legs.

Deja vu. Had Rose been quoting Davey to that effect?

Not really a comfortable couch, and hence--after a breakfast of lox, bagels and capers--Rafe's gift of a flat widescreen TV with neat corners. It had to go in the master bedroom, the TV room already occupied by the mahogany model Fiona had come to understand as equivalent to a Victrola in his eyes. Not that he ever said anything but she could read between lines.

Its cabinet heavy with charm, it was furniture rather than a tool. The point was vision, Fiona granted. Always fun to learn from someone, adapt to his ways, if they were reasonable, especially if they were clever.

Few men own this female readiness to learn--except business or sports--but Rafe did. Before dinner, she taught him to cut tomatoes across the grain. They look nicer and hold together better, release more flavor too. He'd been grumpy about that lesson at first, finding cooking together to be going at least half way already. Do as the Romans do, sure, but when Romans wanna teach grampaw how to suck eggs....

"Hey, does it matter? I never realized there was a right way and a wrong way to cut tomatoes. Anyway, I thought the salad was my job, boss."

Fiona laughed musically.

"I think you're tellin me I been doin this wrong all my life, Fiona."

"Rafe, I admire how you bow to experience. One of your charms. Strategies. I mean, it may soothe you to know no one has ever liked being told how to cut tomatoes. Rose threw a tantrum. What a temper! But all of you come to see the light."

"Well I do admit they're prettier," Rafe allowed. "Don't know about holding together better, though." He held up a slice, dripping.

Converted. Point taken. She was tickled by the way he kept using her name. She liked his too.

She was always in a good mood cruising her big light filled kitchen--converted from the original dining room, a porch having been closed in for dining. (Old houses have bad--servants'--kitchens and baths.) Cooking was the one housework she'd never minded, especially done in tandem, and therefore the only housework she still did herself, unless you count shopping--not for staples.

"Rafe, can you reach the chutney? Top of the cabinet over the microwave, little green bottle?--Wait, wipe the bear paws." Fiona scrubbed his hands with a Royal tea towel.

"Delighted, modom." And he was. Tea towels. Chutney. The Concentus Musicus Wien CD of "The Four Seasons." He'd asked, its woody springbok rushes being vaguely reminiscent of a Greatest Hit version that incessantly annoyed the inner man during power lunches at Malibu's *Four Seasons*. Where there was only one.

"So nice to have a tall man around the house. There's never enough room to store everything in a handy place, no matter how big and modern the kitchen."

"It's a Murphy's Law, I think. 'Objects propagate to fill available space.' After 'Nothing is foolproof; fools are too ingenious.'"

"Rafe, do you want coconut in your curry? I have a fresh one." The man was getting positively giddy. Old chestnuts. Couldn't be said things weren't going swimmingly.

Hmmm. Made her nervous? Back off a little? A person could get hurt. Women have a responsibility for safe driving.

But once the bed had been occupied with TV watchers it was a simple step to get into it. At first in silk PJs, and only for its avowed purpose. And more snuggling of course. A brass king size experimental model Al had brought from Saks, decked with a log cabin quilt and percale. Flocked wallpaper, marbled by its reflection in the gilt Louis Seize mirror.

Fiona had never been shy about her body so soon as she found Rafe liked fleshiness and didn't mind its creping at the edges--found her luscious, in his own words--she wasn't shy now.

She considered re-doing the master bath, perhaps expanding into the closet: one of those jacuzzis so beloved of new home builders in Texas. So different, to design and build your house from scratch instead of remodelling, or looking for the right one. Ask Davey, when he visits.

She'd gotten too fat, she still thought, but otherwise still had a good figure; and retained the creamy complexion she passed on to both kids. Rafe took evident pleasure in her skin, burrowing, absorbing morning heat from squished against bedwarmed breasts and buttocks. Like a ol horny toad on a sunwarm rock, as he described his insalubrious basking on underlit Southampton Beach. Texan was infectious. Rose, Erika, now even her.

It took him a while to get going, a plus. She didn't like to open her thighs to his face at first--though Al had enjoyed that too--since she found her own smell rather too musky, almost skunky, but Rafe's appreciative breaths and kitten-lapping tongue, well, in the throes he even liked to wipe her own juice on her face, getting her "deliciously cunty" all over. Always takes some getting used to, of course, but... "nnn," he'd groan, so, flattered, wet, she'd tickle his neck with her tongue and snake a long white arm to caress his balls.

She came only after or more usually during licking; and discouraged acrobatics. A big woman, she liked to lie on her back. To receive, passively fruitful as far as movement went. She was quiet too. "Un, fuck me" in the clench, when she could feel his prick getting really hard. Too much groaning and moaning distracted her, ruined her absorption by seeming theatrical or silly, so she was glad Rafe's species-song was but light--actually erotic--low pitched sighs.

All was not peaches and cream, but is it ever? Fiona was disinclined to move to California. She could conceive becoming a winter Texan--snowbird, natives called them--especially now her kids and grandchild lived there but she could abide neither the summer nor the culture. She understood Davey and Rafe's take--these folks are unassuming, honorable, tactful--but it wasn't enough to make up for their utter lack of interest in anything but sports and business. Not even meals.

She'd never once been invited to a bona fide dinner party in Texas. Except Rafe's, which hardly counted. "He sure likes food," a woman said--of Rafe, surely no gourmet! Nor fat, especially by Texas standards. I mean, really! who doesn't like food? You'd think no human culture...not that there aren't good indigenous dishes, smoked meat, TexMex.

True, you have the occasional hobbyist--dog fancier or gentleman rancher or reader of Southern civil war books--but none of these interested her. In fact animals and sports seemed base. And that "Christian" moral superiority--in folks who should be as ashamed as South Africans or Germans!--disgusted even as hardened a Republican fundraiser as she. If this was another cultural definition of morality they could keep it. Their Heritage! What were they, Greek, Romanoff? Really.

Fortunately the spread belonged to Rafe's older brother--primogeniture, could you believe it?--so while there was always a place for him Rafe was no rancher, nor even someone who enjoyed living on one fulltime.

Pleasantly alone in her kitchen now--guests retired to the sun room--Fiona peeked in the oven door at the salmon, prying some flakes apart with a long fork. Still slightly glassy. Dill browning nicely. The oven's hot breath fogged her reading glasses.

She took a breath and a sip of white wine before returning to the sunroom, where an orderly succession of tenor, baritone and alto voices had told her things were going well. Best to let people find their own way. Your intermediation can actually stifle acquaintance. She remembered getting to know Rafe. In motor vehicles, Texas style.

She cast her mind back. The trip to Houston, the opera. Rafe focussing out his windshield, rare glances at her. Relaxed when driving, the most confidential. But Rafe's meant-to-be-consoling discourse about Davey and drugs, though funny and clever, had merely implied to her he took them. But he didn't seem to any more--at least not in front of her--so she could deploy the Darwinian skill most women her age acquire: ignoring, avoiding or denying the violence their men do to order.

"Well," Miriam said, "if she is a bitch, that's all the recommendation I need. Of course, it may be just another of those cynical campaign promises, just another cunt tease." She was referring to the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate, Geraldine Ferraro, whom Barbara Bush had delicately described that week as "It rhymes with rich." "Anyway, I thought for a Republican anything associated with rich is good. I mean if greed is--wasn't that a deadly sin once? You're Catholic."

Fiona sighed--inaudibly. Religion and politics make bad aperitifs. The problem isn't that no one mind is ever changed--who cares?--but they trigger lost tempers, hurt feelings, grudges. Or truly stupifying lectures. If not all of the above. She awaited an opportunity to change the subject. Difficult, as she wasn't an assertive conversationalist.

Rafe perked up, after first stiffening. In Texas a remark like Miriam's is grounds for a diagnosis of personality disorder, and is met with stony silence. You talk politics only with people you know for sure agree with you. Eastern chat is more assertive and farflung, but still.... He looked at Saul and Fiona to see if they found the remark a provocation or normative. Hmm, Fiona looked distressed. Though not appalled. But Miriam's her best buddy. Tough call. More data.

"Aw, Mim, don't yank Fiona's chain," Saul said. "How's the campaign going, anyway, Fiona?"

"OK, though we'd do better here if George talked like he was from Connecticut--which he is--and lost that "Dallas" TV accent. Rafe says it doesn't ring true to him either."

"He ain't no native speaker to my ear. Nor of English, point of fact. Course prep school will ruin anyone's American, we allow him that."

"He's a perfectly good candidate, but not much of a speaker," Fiona apologized.

"Mark my words," Miriam said, "he's got that patrician take on work. Work is for the hired help and junior partners. Call him at the golf course if there's a problem, though it won't get you a promotion. Unless it's a hobbyhorse that intrigues him. I think Republicans don't believe in government because they're too lazy to run one. Let the folk mess up on its own. Dwight Eisenhower enjoying a well deserved retirement in the White House, Reagan taking naps during NSC meetings. His hobby being Iran-Contra."

"What do you think, Fiona, is Bush lazy?" Saul asked. Rafe was studying his face, blandly, trying to figure if Saul was being helpful--cutting Miriam off at the pass--or camouflaging a trot line. Maybe both.

Fiona sighed, audibly this time. "Mmm" she said noncommittally. "Well, anyway, you're right, too much energy does seem...risky."

"Ill bred," Miriam shoved in.

"All the same," Fiona said diplomatically, "What I really miss is the old Rockefeller wing. Jake Javits was the person who got us involved. Al's family loved him." She glanced at Rafe. Mention of AL had never bothered him, but she liked to check.

"A Landsmann," Saul said. "Liberal Republicanism and Yiddish, dead languages."

"Well," Rafe said. "Richard Nixon was accused of a lot of things, but never sloth. Seems to've kept himself busy. Photos of him walking the beach in his suit--probably didn't even own shorts. Or an informal side. Twin beds, I hazard."

"QED," Miriam said. "This exception really does prove the rule. If anyone was ever odd man out, junior partner from the poor side of the family, it was the Dick."

"Funny," Rafe said. "Y'all booted him--not without cause--and got yourself Reagan. If you look over Nixon's record, foreign and domestic, why, he was, de facto, practically the answer to liberal prayers."

Miriam sniffed but didn't say anything. Rafe was warming to Saul. If he ever needed someone to handle a book contract--not unlikely--Saul appeared quite the negotiator. Still, the soother in one pairing may be the abrader in the next. Folks who deploy a "nice judgment" with difficult people may be difficult with nice people. (The nice Johnsonian usage—“nice” as in thinsliced--popped into Rafe's mind, from the Sidney Greenstreet character in "The Maltese Falcon"--watched last night with Fiona. The usage seemed appropriately Anglophile for this crowd.) Reviewing his own marital history--Rafe was feeling old and nostalgic--he felt a kinship, watching Saul handle Miriam. Yep, I may've been guilty in the past of the former nice virtue myself--attracted to women who require soothing. Bless you, Fiona.

A transition had been reached somehow so Rafe set off for the john, more for his restless legs than bladder. When he returned Saul was describing Jackie Collins' lawsuit against her publisher, so Fiona, her subject-changing question rewarded--mission accomplished--trickled off to the kitchen. Remorseful, Rafe glanced at her, promising a more active role in conversational navigation. He'd been seduced, speaking of sins of omission, by the slothful comfort of passive watching. Life ain't TV. You can't watch it come to you like a 3D trainwreck.

Miriam's such a paradigmatic Democrat, Fiona thought. Fiona never bothered to argue with her. In fact, she learned at mother's knee that argument is not only unseemly but counterproductive. Stiffens positions. Let Miriam provoke; we lobby. Why, if Miriam got her way our government'd be--even more than it already is--a knotted-together twig raft of exceptions, special privileges, tax complications and abatements, protections, piecemeal programs and overlapping rights. Only the very rich used to be able to afford their own lawyers on permanent retainer, now every felon can--at our expense--and if we enact Miriam's energetic hodgepodge, everyone will also require his own permanent accountant. A personal bureaucrat for every person--as a right. Look at Holland. Erika was saying there are three homeless people in Amsterdam (refusing public housing for some crazy reason) and they have their own personal social worker!

Well, that's what makes Miriam such a good interior decorator. An obsession for detail so strong it can't see the forest. Takes all kinds, I guess.

Love her African print shift. Goes well with black hair. It would overpower my coloring. Fiona would've gone on to entertain doubts about the pearl cashmere caftan she'd elected to wear--hot, for one (lesser) thing--but she needed to concentrate on dinner so dismissed the fret from her mind. A skill which comes with age, and not to all.

Fiona moved the pinkly orange fish from the grill with a special tool and decanted it on a fish shaped Davenport platter. She edged it with fresh dill fronds, lime slices and baked new potatoes. After briefly surveying the effect she ported it easily into the dining room. The rice curry was already on the table. Rafe could bring his salad from the fridge.

"*Diner est servi*, or Come 'n get it, as the case may be," she called. Laughter and shuffling furniture. Well, they're in good mood. Wasn't that funny. Good.

She watched them file in, noting with affection Rafe cramped in at the back, like a good host. Cattle dog. Well, it's always difficult, especially with someone from another background. Nothing's perfect, though. She and Al had been a different faith--when that mattered.

Yup, pre-cafeteria-style Catholicism--surely a big pill for him to swallow. Holy, Roman and apostolic, then. Perhaps still holy (whatever that meant now), but no longer Roman, and apostolic only in the sense that it seems ready to put up with anything. Whatever. Fiona recalled the discussion in David's hot tub about his housekeeper's marital problems. (Whatever does he see in being ever abath? Marat. You can't get in a decent talk with him without getting all wrinkled.)

Or had Rose talked to her on the phone about the housekeeper's interview with her priest? What had he said? "If you don't believe in your heart you're truly married," it's grounds for annulment, now. Whatever. And you needn't deduce your kids are bastards because--poof!--the word has been disappeared. Like “logic.” That fabled Thomist logic she'd been at such pains to memorize, dutiful communion girl.

Still, *whither thou goest*....The drift did seem to flow that way--a second marriage for her, Rafe's fourth, a bit alarming, though he started awfully young, and wild--and if no good and sufficient reason is discovered to abandon ship, it probably means it's a good tide. Embark the sere harbor.

One misses one's youthful enthusiasms sometimes but on the whole satisfaction is better. Age is underrated. Rafe's a good guy, and he passed all the tests, though she'd been prepared to discount them as stupid. "If you just look for your old husband back," Miriam warned, an old hand at re-marriage herself, "he'll be pretty moldy by the time you dig him up." Nor can you be matching material to some mental ideal, like a naive teenager. You'd miss the new and changing reality. Another soul. Marriage. "Two solitudes touching at one point." Rilke, in *Letters to a Young Poet*. Funny she remembered that, from college. Though, come to think of it, he foxed his own marriage but good. *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

Still musing to herself, Fiona let the men talk over her Wiener Werkstatte table. Davey's find. After breaking the ice and cooking the dinner (even for an experienced hostess timing's always tricky) she felt a need for a few minutes' brown study. 'Spacing out.'

And some undistracted fresh salmon in dill sauce! Slightly too salty, but OK. Even by her standards.

Intimate disarray of sated china, the dishes foraged, the men leaning back in the Umbrian chairs. Fiona pronged another drippy tomato slice thoughtfully. She caught Rafe's eye, tipped her head and smiled.

Miriam stopped listening to her husband to evaluate Fiona's expression. Winning. Fiona, she reflected, is still of that male-adapted generation who moved from her father's house to her husband's. Never borne her own name. But never underestimate the purchase of cunning.

Saul was saying he found *Less Than Zero* unique in being both silly and revolting, while Rafe maintained it was merely a film property. A novelization before the fact. "It's true I've never seen a trade publication as badly edited," Saul admitted. "The last 50 pages--missed verb agreements, pronoun references--just early draft word processor."

"Risky title too. Just askin for reviewers to romp over it."

"Aw, he's critic proof. The more they sniff and tut, the better he sells. Well connected little pup too."

"Joan Didion drops his name, if you can believe it. With respect. For the sales?"

"No literary--no any kind of novel makes money nowadays. Even someone like Phillip Roth sells maybe 12 or 15 thousand, nets maybe a few bucks a copy, and can "produce" no more than one every couple years. So you're right. No Hollywood tie in, and you're writing for love. If you're not Jackie Susann, Stephen King, Turow, John Grisham, one or two others. You can count 'em on the fingers of one hand. No room in the tiny global village for tyros or minor poets. The Minors are a memory. Huge gender gap, too, speaking of elections. Not that trade publishing as a whole isn't doing rather well--no worries, mate--it's not my wallet whining, just my pride. But not much fiction. Airplane reading. You wonder what'll happen once they make palmtop TVs with cable access."

"Strange, init?" Rafe said. "In movies, no market whatsoever for nonfiction--documentaries; while on TV it's gotten to half and half; but in publishing, well, what's between the covers of 90% of books sold can be described as fiction only pejoratively."

If Fiona were younger, Miriam thought, I'd say it might not last. But though we seem to get more rigid and predictable as we age we also become, oddly, more adaptable too. Practical. Realistic. What did Fiona say? 'Age is underrated.' Take these vine-ripened tomatoes, the cask-aged olive oil. This Rhone wine.

"Fiona," she murmured. "Where did you guys get these wonderful tomatoes? And I've never even seen a white Chateauneuf before. Marvelous."

David slid his hoss-traded pickup down his Blue Norther-eroded caliche drive, glad to be home. He missed Saskia and Erika. She'd held the fort while he strode his site this week in new wide heavy linen pants tucked into Lucchese elephant boots (certified cull by Jomo Kenyatta National Park) traded for a Davenport service. The outfit, now dubiously Australian, was grudged Suitable for Artists by his client, himself a widebrimmed wildcatter--of Texas Instruments. And he’d been referred to David by a Brooklyn Jewish cardiac surgeon shod in yellow full quill ostrich ropers.

Linen. Its loose princely drape untouched by iron or drycleaner fluid. Unbleached, tint of limestone. Soft light of dawn, that rim of fetal white that invades your bleared morning eye. *Lineaments of satisfied desire*.

Linen. David needed its virginal, waxy, honing-oil feel; the way it seemed to exhale the sulfuric vapors that other fabrics--even cotton--allowed to collect on his mephitic skin. A delusion, perhaps--in the clinical sense, perhaps--but his itchy hide still felt poisoned inwards, like an inside-out Amazon frog. Mental illness as auto-immune disorder. Lupus. The wolf who ate Flannery O'Connor.

Jess Schumann, a strong mother and fine needle, had swapped Bunkhouse lodging for babysitting. Her stringy colorless hair, bony Appalachian shoulders and raw hands were redeemed for David by her tenderness with children--proof of empathic intelligence. Not that Southern gush, but the way, asquat, she looked at them, entering their world.

Jess was hiding out from a gyre of marital violence on Rafe's ranch. Labile in their cups, the spouses provoked and ultimately battered. The ranch hand was stronger than the seamstress; but this gave the woman moral edge. (The antagonist who loses his temper loses.) Her community aborted ER escalation--distaff screams never go unanswered on a hill country ranch--but the mouth on the woman was as destabilizing as his ungentlemanly knuckles. Or hers. Separated, they were softspoken, homespun.

"Let this be a lesson to you, Sass, humans need community." David laughed. "Yas, zu sprach Sage of Bath, anchorite of I Takki. I know as much about villages as priests about contraception."

His extended fambly had already taken one hot-tub discussion on solutions to Jess' marriage choices. She was Catholic--but her priest informed her that if she felt in her heart her marriage was no true marriage an annulment might be no sweat. Quoting the Baltimore Catechism, supposedly, but his theology remained opaque to the bathing Moores. So were her kids now bastards? Redefined as figments of the divine imagination? God impossibled souls.

So, besides childcare, David invented other projects for Jess, involving cloth. Those red, capable hands. Freckles flushed by work.

Still, you prefer one or both parents home. Preferably David, since somehow the mental evolution of his Pieta anxiety and its seeming or at least surface or at least practical resolution aggravated--he thought it an improvement, he was happier--his turning away from people. Not toward bitterness or emptiness (perhaps monastic space, yes) but toward a love of the earth.

Of limestone. Its unclassifiable colors, unEuclidian forms.

Wood. Its texture, the recorded history of the greatest of living things; its scrolled planks, pages from the book of Being. Perhaps, David mused, we deduce God is great because he made this oak. (Then the artist--and no other human--is made in his image.) A circular argument, and disrespectful of the oak.

Leather. Skin of Esau.

Cloth. Wool, cotton. Products of Scot sheep, or Texas black earth and sun, formed by Jess's hands.

Linen.

David had come finally to see what he did as intimate architecture. A Chamber Music. Not symphonic--skyscrapers or grand public buildings--yet no one argues the Brandenburg Concerti are minor nobility in the realm of sound.

His impulse leaned toward spareness, but it didn't matter if a client owned many things or loved chinoiserie or Victorian bric a brac or even wallpaper. Enough accumulated detail and the whole became monolith again. A cliff face, read as innumerable cracks and splits, flora, irregular forms so various as to be without recountable pattern, finally beetles massive, simple. One Rock. Mono lithos, he elucidated the Greek for Rafe. Earthly forms are rarely smooth or regular yet few fuss. Fussing is repeating. Repetitive patterns.

Besides, his was an art of accommodation, empathy. Mothering. Home-making. Somewhere in the client's unformed imagination, in her vague eidetic space, lives that vision of beauty shared by all men, that image of the sublime loved by all women. Yet each revelation is original as hands or breasts.

For him to draw out. Then to encompass in the waves of his own context: not a reinterpretation, but an unknowable, if warmly felt, whelming of the originator's detail within the tide of his own passion for "the ineluctable modality of the visual."

Mother.

It was cowardice, his unwillingness to pursue this line. But so what? Pusillanimia numbers not among the deadly sins. Perhaps it's a Virtue, pace Hemingway. (David had been reading, re-reading, Westerners.) A social knit, O Ernest cimarron. Why else did you love sentences, that other cement, the thread of nature?

Mum. Or perhaps it was laziness, his unwillingness to pursue this line. Acedia.

The topic had been churned into anonymous paste. Finally become a boredom, ennuie. So he turned aside--from what came to feel smallminded, petty irritation--toward calm. A contemplation whose goal was to remake the river.

Remake the river.

Mimesis. Remaking.

Remake, that is, not the Guadalupe's "spirit" but its body. Render its habitat into habitation. Architecture. An art that has no spirit--neither sound nor ideas nor story--but exists. Like rock.

Or the river. Which does not change, essentially. Its waters flow, rise and sink with the seasons' rains, but its standing waves, beds, bluffs, just are. Too magisterial to compromise. Ocean waves move, tidal, but a river's standing wave freezes Heraclitean flux. Restless molecules rush to create stained glass.

Of course the river changes--*tout casse tout passe*--but the alteration is visually meaningless. That a rapid has been different before and will change later has no significance to the eye. Its flow has an organic life, but David saw it as it is, there. No mere step in a progression.

Suspense, anticipation, memory, all the petty discomforts of a restless mammal, they all vitiate the aboutness of now, the thing in itself: that only painting, sculpture, architecture can remake in parallel human Mimesis.

Sure, memory adds context, dimension, flavor, but even the inward eye does not see these. Vision looks out. Away from the self. At things. Bodies. What is not there can only be implied, is mere background.

In fact, esthetics began to bore David. He liked to look at things, put them together. Build.

Take infant clothes. Why run snaps all down a leg, only to end in a cuff you still have to snake the little rigid or squirmy foot through?

Why snaps at all?

David was working on garments--he called them Mummys provisionally but that mightn't do when it came time to market them to Saks--that did not require manipulating baby appendages through holes; nor finding and popping snaps in technical displays of patience and fine-motor dexterity just when screaming and five other things to do make such exercises most tedious.

You place baby on garment. Fold it over her like a burrito. (Burri-tots? Right, bury tots, mummies. Free association still morbid. Good thing Batenburg doesn't use it.) Then attach soft velcro tabs to wrap her within. Simple. Swirly and colorful. Lends itself to long riparian designs. Snakes, giraffes, weasels. Who says Saskia likes round smiley faces? Why assume Jeffrey Katzenbach knows her better than her dad?

Well, put Smiley on the end of a long neck then.

Erika's gift for management, the staff acquired from Saks--solid and talented, innovative but sound--meant David had more excuse to stay home, design. A playroom now hung beside his suspended studio. (Keeping her out of the water was going to be a problem later. Hire beavers? Teach her to swim before she could crawl?)

He came to prefer the clifftop to the riverhouse. True, even sheltered under foliage, the light in the canyon is penetrating, and its trees are simpler, of fewer varieties, smaller than the East Coast's rich canopy, but the true West lay spread out before his bluff eyrie. Two, even three different squalls in his survey. The expanse, the air, the sensation of living in the sky, of the earth's surface as thin--too young to have laid down the dense vegetal poundage and mass and variety of History. *That nightmare from which we are trying to escape.*

The practical, ahistorical, unironic West. How much better it has done than the history-obsessed old world. Say, now, fella, who's doomed to repeat whut?

David looked out over the empty plains, the turreted castles of thunderheads, the distant folds of olive and gold hills, and saw the earth curve, open to a stoic heaven.

The Olympic road race would be nice for our climax. Though maybe you've had enough bike races.

But my coverage is really "up close and personal." I mean, those swimsuits are deliciously snug, but divers don't actually flash their boobs, do they? They even tuck in their modest fannies before leaving the water.

To say nothing of baring their inmost soul in stream of consciousness.

And it'd be a new story for once. Not the one TV shows every time. How Dwazigbhzst (a surprisingly normal, even nice, looking fellow despite his--well, shall we say quaint?--land of origin) suffered and worked and slaved and sacrificed, along with all his family--and not a one of them with any thought of remuneration or recompense other than (heh heh) Olympic glory--in order to provide us, comfy in our beery recliners, with the delightful spectacle of a Major Network, and its Corporate Sponsors, making a pile. Undistracted by too much sport--I mean, a highly staged (though unexplained) minute or two per half hour more than suffices.

I'd walk you through it, no commercial interruptions, start to finish, intelligent explication and commentary as well as up close and personal, but it was a walk.

Horace Sachs, lunching a clubby Olympic sponsor or two, suggested everyone might be happier if the Women's Olympic Cycling course demanded as much as top amateur races. Like most lobbying, his was easier than might seem. Adroit noodging uses prevailing tides. Women racers already demanded tougher courses, and the Olympic committee does, latterly, fear PC. So they added laps to an already rugged course. Montjuich.

The Olympic race is not point to point, much less a stage race like The Tour (de France), with its multiple events demanding different skills and multidiurnal endurance, demanding heroes and heroines*. Vedettes*.

No, The Olympics is a one day circuit race. Often as much a crap shoot as any single stage of the Tour may be. Anything can happen. A crash, a flat, two strong riders eyeing each other, unwilling to work together to chase down a weak break.

A circuit race is either a piece of cake--a flashy criterion, zip zip round & round the block, which pros use just to show off, for money--or, if it contains a true climb, brutal. Straight up and down. The heavy muscled sprinter need not apply, but the pure climber can anticipate less romping than she might expect. It's those descents, those short flat sections to maintain at speed, the exhausting re-gearing for the incline, every lap.

The terrain requires a roller who can climb, or a climber who can also roll.

Only a handful of riders of that description exist in any epoch. Powerful, rolling time-trialers who can climb alongside the slender goats; or true climbers who can time-trial within the parameters of the muscled specialist. If they are men, they wear yellow--the victor's jersey in the world's biggest and most watched annual sporting event, the Tour de France. (Only the Olympics--not a single sport--and the Soccer World Cup draw more viewers and more amateur participants. And both take place only every four years.)

But women's bike racing is less competitive, unlike say women's tennis.

Still, Rose had so many miles in her svelte legs now that her enhanced natural climbing ability was hampered neither by the course's ascent, nor length, nor its accidented recuperative flat.

She drove the pace early. As she hoped, her rep meant every rider able to tag along made sure to. No one was going to let her go on a hilly course, since the hill would break the momentum of a pack trying to reel her in, even if she did tire. So the only--if unlikely--worry (that a big wind driven pack would somehow juggernaut itself up and down the climb) was history by lap five, as the race broke into small groups strung out by the increasingly brutal climb. Each lap reduced rather than augmented the threat of chasers, who were by then spreadeagled all over the course, rather than swooping up and down the hill in a dense aerodynamic peloton. Too steep a climb for that, even for powers who decided not to meet Rose's challenge early. Five miles of 10 to 13% grade each 14 mile lap.

Rose. Focussing acutely on that smear of salmon sand on the inner side of the hairpin, another part of her mind tracking by breath the rider drafting her. The knee straining jumps of the climbing pedal strokes, out of the saddle, rocking the bike. *En dansant* (dancing). Assessing her quads: to figure, uncertainly, the depth of response left: how many more parabolae over her anaerobic threshold would they tolerate before going flat on her?

The sweat trickling along her shades into the sides of her eyes, unnoticed till it stung. On a descent, sit up, remove shades, wipe lids with the back of the gloves. Take a peep behind to see where everyone is. Italian gone.

That hot exhale of the prevailing wind each time she turned into the 7K marker. Spray from bottles, the slide and click of their removal faintly audible over the chain whir. The creak of the Scots girl's right pedal as she climbed. A bumped shoulder.

!Crunch-can-on-asphalt-scrape! the sound of a pedal going into spokes; the clatter and thuds, cursing, of a crash--fortunately behind her. Not daring to peek even under her arm: with everyone nervy at the noise, the slightest veer can cause a panic. A domino collapse like a pack of cards, a human and bicycle surf.

Racing machines, which support 180 lb riders at 40 mph over cobbles, crumple like tin when torqued.

Leaning deep into the hairpin, the bike's little hop as she put a pedal into the asphalt--for a surprise acceleration, just to discountenance her drafters, relaxing into the turn. I work, you work. If Momma aint happy, nobody aint happy. The heat and grit coming up off the road. The easy undulation she felt ascending her loins.

A good day. The tightness of last month's slump gayly abandoned.

Each time Rose could, she again upped the tempo. And each time riders dropped off the back of her break--a declining coterie. A pair of the strongest, left with small tactical offensive resource, attempted attacks: not so much in hope of escape, as of taming Rose. Getting her to ease up. If she could be bluffed into believing them capable of hanging to her every uphill acceleration--and then even challenging her--she might also, intimidated, imagine them conserving enough breath, by drafting her, to slaughter her in the sprint--her known weakness.

But Rose rated their panting, the heaviness of stroke on their accelerations; and not only rolled easily back to every breakaway but calmly continued to drive the pace on every climb. One suffering attacker was dropped by her own unwise gamble of energy expenditure, another, rejoined, hung on in a misery of oxygen debt, vowing to hang in Rose's slipstream evermore.

Or at least one more lap. Trying to keep the pain vivid, from fading to that half blind numbness that cares no more about bike races.

But each lap Rose's windshadow seemed to grow smaller, her uphill pace more vicious. The chasers' sear and clench, their lungs' exquisite depth, finally anesthetize prey gone slack and dumb in a lion's choking jaw. Rose the Lionhearted, the Pitiless. *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

An exhibition not of speed or acceleration or tactical acumen nor yet of adroit team work but of pure strength. The ability of a champion 'to just ride away' not by attacking, or finessing tricky curves, or by team blocking, but by simply putting a little more pressure on every stroke. For four hours. Taking in a little more oxygen each breath. Flushing a little more lactic acid out of her thighs during each resting quadrant of spin.

The ability to suffer, other riders call it, but winners suffer less. Sadistic schadenfreude accompanies an inhuman VO max: the capacity of her lungs to extract the gas of life from our indifferent air. A mad exultant Nietzschean triumph over this Mount of Calvary, Montjuich.

The hard dust of the road, the shimmer of its heat, mouthfuls of tepid water from the plastic bidon, the shrill cries of roadside supporters and the crowd's roar equally distanced by the uneasy movement of alloy steel in the scheming peloton.

The fear: bonebreaking cement road held at bay only by a fine balance of slender tubing and the social ethics of other riders.

Thirst exhaustion anxiety.

And growing exaltation.

*Centaur, her neck clothed with thunder, the glory of her nostrils terrible, she mocketh and is not affrighted; swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage, and saith among the trumpets, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting, Ha ha! From thence she seeketh prey her eyes behold afar; and where the slain are, there is she*.

By the three quarter mark, riders were strung out all over hell and back, in support groups no bigger than four, and Rose was off the front alone. Her gap grew with the race.

She could stop pedaling well before the line, over which she freewheeled with her fine hands in the victorious air, showing a cruelly brilliant smile and her sponsor's logo for an endless photo op. USA. Spanish light indifferently caught in the nubby silk of dried sweat and road dust.

She'd had time and wit to blow her nose.

Quite a boring race to watch, unless you're an aficionado or one of the characters in this book. All at least a little in love.

Since there was no parent left alive to give his mother away, and Fiona showed a reluctance to pay for and organize, if not enjoy, a wedding the size Rafe had the most use for, David decided to throw the party. He had some under the table help--Rafe saw it as only fair.

InHouse Counsel was growing but profits went into R&D; the board planned to go public when it outran private funds but for now modest liquid profit. Horace Sachs' holding company, once interested by Fiona, had invested incisively, even releasing management. The BinHouses looked good, a neat complement to Saks. (Retail being a business Saks affects to understand.)

He did require division of inventory to avert competition. BinHouses wouldn't sell clothing, Saks hardware or furniture.

Home furnishings were an overlap. The decision was BinHouses would sell drapes and some bedding but in a different style. Saks went for haut bourgeois with some modern; Binhouse with rustic or high tech. If the market proved too tight for both, the least successful might phase out.

David himself elected not to be a member of the wedding. He put it to Fiona he had an offer he couldn't refuse. A Chilean ex-rancher, given post-Pinochet opportunity to rebuild, proposed to use the equity he'd accumulated in Texas (where the Peruvian walking horse is much admired--the Tennessee variety seen as veritable dog in comparison) to construct a palacio on his recouped ranchero. He offered David a medium fortune to that end.

Money which would never see the US, nor be seen by IRS. The project would take six months, even a year. Afterward, even if all else failed, David would still be middling rich in Switzerland. A dull but safe place to raise and school Saskia. Near her maternal homeland.

It made sense to Fiona, and transpired too late to postpone the wedding, which until then David had to all intents been planning to attend, in fact planning.

Rafe wanted the wedding in Scarsdale, receptions in Malibu and on the ranch. Fiona felt big weddings were dubious--too junior league even the first time; she certainly wasn't going to wear white--but if that's what he wanted. Granted, its use for Hollywood. Which, ahead of the times, had long lost any shame about serial polygamy.

The Referenced Commandment

So long as you fuck one person at a time--of whatever sex--and the turnover isn't too rapid you are moral. All other systems--true monogamy, singles playing the field, celibacy, polygamy, you name it--are either foreign, old fashioned, immoral or weird, which come to the same thing: irrelevant, aggravating to contemplate. Change the channel.

Besides, a big wedding could be fun. If fully catered. So nice of Davey--though Fiona suspected Rafe of laundering part of the wherewithal. Let that hound sleep.

Family excused in service of upward mobility made historical sense to her. Al's trips. Once she spent a year in Chicago, when he was establishing the first Saks out of New York.

Fiona hated Chicago. Since the kids found the new school environment so intimidating, Al saw her move back, booting her Scarsdale renters. Al stayed another eleven months, not counting a week in June.

Not that David felt he'd have to stand and object during that part of the ceremony. He wished Rafe all the best with Mum. It was instead (one hates to admit this: one likes to resolve the protagonist's major conflict by the denouement) a recrudescence of bitter neglect. Reflux of bile. *Breath of wetted ashes. Agenbite of inwit*. Manageable but not yet comfortable.

He couldn't imagine failing to bring Saskia to the doctor for a strep throat, leavng her home sick with high fever; nor, once she got rheumatic heart damage, taking her to the dentist without penicillin prophylaxis. Anytime David had wanted to stay home from school and read--felt he needed less hard time in stir and more education--he'd said his throat felt sore. (Or vice versa?) Mum'd leave, return after lunch with books he ordered from the library (*Freddy the Pig*) and a crispy but soft loaf of rye from the bakery. Mum being thoughtful, but not focussed.

"I just don't have time to discuss it now." "I'm no writer." Mum pleaded nolo contendere to the charge. If not actual contempt of court. But human moral judgment is always in session. Its opinions cannot be evaded, its sentences though ambiguous are inexorable, and appeal if always possible is never complete. Kafka was a stone realist.

David's goal was balance. Reduce meds while keeping the *moody brooding* in check. More meds and the megrims faded--which seemed to Batenburg a better solution. But then she was med'cinable by profession. After all, meds were now effective, milder, with "trivial" side effects. Longitudinal studies showed few hazards.

So far. But it was David's conviction that when you fuck with mother nature she shows a habit, historically, of calling on considerable patience and cunning to fuck you back. Besides, he'd rather with Erika. Oftener. "Trivial" as impotence might seem. Quadrivial.

He recalled Freud's cocaine, Leary's LSD, the 50's Miltown. Discredited wonder drugs of yesteryear.

Besides, David had never got round to narrating the black chapter. Post-psychoanalytic, Batenburg didn't delve the past. He wasn't sure she'd consider the episode a psychotic break but was sure he feared anti-psychotics. Even the sanguine don't view tardive dyskinesia as trivial. The most exquisite physicians can't steer this course small enough, David opined.

("Steer small, damn your eyes," his sardonic sailing master used to bellow, winking through his grizzly ironic beard. A med student. Amusing himself quoting C. S. Forester, David later realized. Bored with teaching kids.

Oft, pedaling his prairie skiff across the plains, later, David thought 'pedal tight steer small,' tucking in his knees and elbows, turning with hip shifts alone. Damn your eyes.)

David didn't believe he could architect while munching and drooling, pill rolling, stiff gaited. He labored under no illusion his marriage was eternal in that sense either. Erika was an ambitious girl. The last thing he wanted was to disappoint her. She loved him, trusted him and was trustworthy--she'd stick tighter than most Americans, he felt--but even The Church had acceded to historical imperatives: the cafeteria style religion discussed abaff with Mum: agreeing to annul marriages whose spouses "did not believe in their hearts were true marriages."

(What can the children believe? David asked himself, spinning one of his mental squirrelwheels. And suppose the spouses no longer believe, but the doubt is not located in their hearts? Schoolmen could've happily debated such questions for centuries; now metaphors are abandoned on challenge. But who can say Metaphor is less godly than Truth? Flux more pernicious than Adamant?)

David's reserve with Erika signaled incomplete trust. Complete as far as it went but aware, in his old day, of limits, not unbounded romance.

As perhaps her restlessness also demonstrated, granted. Erika could look into his eyes for minutes, but never hours--distracted by an itch to sort Saskia's clothes or check Dallas sales figures.

The jilted no more pine away (Get a life!) nor do unsclerotic hearts still break.

Eternal love has come to seem a distemper, David thought, on the order of stalking. Prodromal to suicidal ideation.

Endless love: an invidious barbarism like suttee; the inhuman perfection for which all humans have an inhuman desire; the peace which surpasseth understanding; thanatos, the inorganic solace of immutable stone. A monolith he could safely court only under the stepmothering aegis of art.

An unromantic view perhaps but it's a tough rhetorician who can refute reality forever. What charitable soul advocates unswerving vows to the comatose? Erika was good for better or worse but worse is worse, and there is a hell beyond worse where a kind spouse can but find the appropriate institution once hope is abandoned. If true love can now find alteration where it alteration finds--in economics, child rearing and compatibility--where do we list madness?

Saskia, little Saskia. Never ever abandon her. Half orphan. Of a single [over]working parent. To part time orphanages. Daycare. Loveless care. Queuing in orderly elvish rows, her wide blue eyes fixed on a stranger's unreturning gaze. Obedient trusting uncomprehending. Saskia. No orphan so long as Daddy can hold his footing on the beam. Little little Saskia.

Rose surveys the wedding feast. How green and soft the lawn to the Texas eye. The smooth grey bole of the pin oak looks noncommittal, though its canopy is responsible for this light. In the sunroom, a wedding guest leafing through a displayed family album has stopped, for no known reason, at a snapshot of her young father. The pin oak and her mouth are represented but otherwise the serrate edges and black corners are a window perhaps only to her. Giddy with blanc de blanc and the flow of victory's endorphins. The lambent room ebbs and flows with folks moved to argument, laughter, anxiety by the occasion. Many had known her father but few might recognize, in the curly-haired straight-set tennis player, proffering a greeting racket, that pale bald and solid businessman they had sat dour beside at dinners or consulted about weedkiller. His own swath green as good jade. The emerald in Mum's filigreed Edwardian necklace. Inviting you to sit without risk other than grass stains. No fire ants, no chokachaw burrs.

Rose was having a blast. Crossing the finish line she crossed the bar. She no longer gave a fuck what anyone thought. It ameliorated her behavior. A Southerly moved mild among the maples. Threat of chill in her pollinated nostrils. The florid azaleas softening a last piercing forsythia.

The red will blow

open the door of perception

but the yellow

can pierce your heart.

"Tulpen":"Tulip Fields"

From the original Dutch, grace Erika. The Blake probably via Jim Morrison.

Rose picks her out, amast above the ethnic East Coast crowd, and bushier than the few Mayflower pines encopsed amid this madding mostly Mediterranean throng. Erika is pregnant, yet hunkers easily to guide Sass's toddle. She can still squat 300 pounds. And take the Olympic champ in a flat sprint.

Rose surveys the crowd again. Weddings are notorious for being filthy with potential mates. Many of the preppies athletic, the Jews witty. All the same, Rose decides, the one she wants is Erika. It seems she shares her brother's taste. They're mirror images, isomers? twinned. Not-so-secret sharers.

She remembers the heavy buttocks ("buhlbs") warm against her upper thighs as Erika's nightie rode up in the morning light, her straw sheaf peeping out a crack lux with musky bush. Erika showers only mornings, no matter how much she hustles during the day. Unlike an American. Also apres sport, of course. But still she smells earthy, fertile, almost river, by nightfall. Radiant with gentle heat.

If Rose had chosen tennis, or were a man, she'd now be at the foot of a lucrative career, riding the Tours or playing the circuit for millions. But the bike chose her. What the hell, I can retire, rest on my laurels. The world is full of projects.

Meanwhile she can milk mother--unlike David she fears no one, without underestimating Fiona--and David will always feel what she has done is better.

At least partly. He's complex. That layering. Everything signifying three things. It'd worry at you, were he not so fine now.

David wasn't in love with his solution. Felt many ways, often contradictory. ('I may contradict myself,' Montaigne said, 'but never the truth.') Still, parties had always made David queasy. Christmas, especially his own birthday, were *Unbehagen*. The gifts or festivities seemed meant for someone else, designed for another person's happiness, for whom he had to stand in, awkwardly, a rictus of affected smile burdening sore cheeks. Specter at the feast. As unwelcome in his own heart as Jeremiah among the Cities of the Plain.

He didn't want to be a spoilsport. Pouting narcissist. True, his feelings might stem from his childhood romance--if not some genetic ancestor--but many put worse behind. Childhood is no sinecure. Tough, bein a institutionalize iggorant retarded celibate dwarf.

If you've rarely missed a meal or a night's sleep, been clothed like Solomon's lilies, enjoyed an athlete's glowing health, many--some residing within--will wonder what you have to complain of. Folks who suffered abuse, trauma or disease own a more objective correlative to hang their anxiety upon.

Disease, yes. All right, he fully recovered from most of them. (Except his heart, tolling arhythmically.) But still, his medical history's nothing a soft-hearted woman would wish upon a child. Perhaps nothing a hard-hearted man would wish upon a felon. And Batenburg said research shows neglect to be the most virulent if least glaring of the traumas. *The subtlest beast of the field*.

David could make himself feel even worse with recriminations about the faults in his emotions, but he could help what he felt only by burying it. Which he was no longer inclined or in state to do. He was middle aged and rich. He felt rather--or at the same time--inclined to indulge his peculiarities: no weirder than those suffered by many acquaintances who were successful in more than yearbook senses.

So David would no longer be found at parties much or long and he wouldn't be a member of the wedding. People could make of it what they would.

They would make less because he'd hide the point his feelings were enjoining him to make behind screens of *politesse*. Few guests have quiet enough hearts, amid festivities and their own upwellings, to observe the signs of what transpired in his.

Neglect and alienation enjoin privacy--to nurse the wounds in a corner, out of fangs' reach of the misunderstanding and misunderstood--but ultimately neglect and alienation come to enjoy privacy. David became much addicted to his own company.

The bonsai achieves its own beauty and may enjoy it in health, such is the wonder of organic growth. We are told the largest living creature in the world, a California redwood, misses its entire original crown.

But such is the wonder too that deformities may never be fully understood or compensated. One possible symptom of atypical arrhythmia is sudden death.

Erika too surveys the wedding feast. She's paying David no never mind. Otherwise she'd have to disapprove of this boycott. Scarsdale is just a party, rampant with floating pastels under a mild sun--and who really talks anyway? Hints of expensive perfume waft among the leaf molds. She feels a light prickle spread up from her wrists, erecting the fine hairs atop her forearms.

You go to weddings. Besides, nothing much wrong here, so why not? Mild, as Family Leave goes. Even the unguent magnolia performs ablution. That pink and white odor of the shy Northern variety. So take your place.

Still, the net of rules Erika learned in congenial Holland features numberless escape hatches, all as hinged to their own cliches as more moral actions are to their proverbs. Everyone lives in the same two warm rooms all winter--but then it's perfectly OK to say you've had it and close yourself up in a frozen bedroom. One doesn't drink except socially or on special occasions: or *an het neut*: a bender right in your own living room. If it happens often it'll occasion talk but there's always talk anyway.

The governing concept for David's behavior--which he or another self-defining identity-searching American might have difficulty formulating--is *ruzie*. Family quarrel? Fight? Making a scene? None translates the word, yet it came as *naturally* to a Dutch mouth as panting after a sprint. Hollanders seem almost to enjoy *ruzie*--the nether axis of this most social of folk. *Ruzie*. They get into it. Though not, true, with the relish of the French.

Ruzie. David was on the outs with Mom. Family problems.

Keep it quiet, keep everyone calm, chop fire breaks, ride it out. They'll get bored and reconcile.

Or not. *Ruzie* can last 40 years, to enter legend. Remember when Oom Piet returned Opa's bike with a flat tire? What a brouhaha! Refused to speak for 35 years. Not till they happened to run into each other on the Oude Schans--was it '63? the winter the canals froze hard enough for the seven village race?--did they finally agree to a drink in 't Wippertje. Their former hangout.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, David had found the best hiding place yet. He had indeed received an offer from his Chilean--the best lies are closest the truth--but rejected it out of hand. He or Erika would have to be separated from Saskia for up to nine months.

He figured the separation would seem plausible to his mother--hire a ni¤era or take Jess along with the crew--but it did not seem plausible to him. Or Erika.

It wasn't as if they expected InHouse Counsel to fail--quite the reverse--nor as if they had no other resource: more local if less remunerative.

Heretofore, if David needed to flee (“all is discovered!”) escape was complicated by his dislike of travel. Custom and habit--how he shaved or made coffee--became expeditionary. Normal ablutions are soothing, calming. He seemed to need them, in order to reduce the workaday sensory input. And he already suffered Depression: a definition of life as an endless round of boring errands and mean tasks, never completed, a Sisyphean banality. No doubt in his mind, evil is banal.

Beyond that, travel meant moral isolation. When his attempts to keep peace among his relations shorted, he could harrow himself out from among them, but this solution was at best radical surgery. A surgeon removes not the problem but the whole shebang. Ass and teacups. Liver and lights. Flight excises the peccant relations rather than improving them.

Then (isn't that enough?) Abroad discovered either solitude--in a way better, though it entailed moody brooding--or a new set to negotiate. Often quite literally foreign to him. He had, for example, spent Christmas at Erika's homestead in The Hague. Her parents were thoughtful and tactful--in fact intimidating--but he constantly had to imagine whether it's OK to be the first to pick up his coffee. (Quite excellent, served in small cups alongside almond paste cookies or whipcream kiwi pastry.) Is it expected of the guest, or ought he wait? That kind of thing. Unnerving.

There were ways to handle the anxiety. Defensive aggression, and spoken or withheld preemptive criticism, these lay closest to hand, but remained the most catastrophic. In civil society, offense is not the best defense. It's not even good offense.

Other methods--reverting to adolescent selfdoubt, pimples and stooped posture (nasty, brutish and tall)--were no finer.

In The Hague he took walks. The joint-cramping spaces the folk inhabited--frozen frontiered--meant a Texan had to get out. Shear the jetlag wool with sharp air. They also took walks, sometimes, and sometimes alone, but still he worried he was taking too many.

Then, once, after household lockup, he found the back door key laid ready for him by the coat rack. Now was this an example of intense consideration, a subtle unspoken OK, or was it extended-family tolerance for a peccadillo, like keeping the household drunk in clean glassware and warm socks?

For many, including his wife, such acculturation was exactly the pleasure of travel. Such social doubts tendered thrills of danger akin to the luxurious hair raised by an Alpine descent.

Aristotle and Plato said learning is the chief human joy, so there you go. Travel: a Puzzler with real time uses.

Erika loved escaping habit. For David too travel could've been electroshock, hosing out the old and ringing in a fresh mind.

He had so used it. But like electroshock it was drastic, to his mind. And did nothing for anxiety. In bitterness of soul, excluded by his own ineluctable hand.

So escaping to his own home was a dream. No family but Erika knew he was there. No boggling phone from Fiona. No visitations. No devilment from nitroglyceRose. Hardly a way to find trouble at all. And yet clients and employees to hand--no disruptions--and his shaving brush by his shaving soap. Nukeler fambly inna bubble baff.

When his folks found him--sure to tree him sooner or later--he'd've savored his respite. (Screen his calls? Salt his propitty wif Rottweilers and Smith & Wesson jokes? --Rose would return fire.) He could say the crew was doin fine on their own in Chili. Walkin they hosses on down the line.

Erika again surveys the crowd, during a moment Sass accounts for her own self by clinging to Mom's skirt. Grass as chromium as Holland, trees even bigger. Different colored trunks, too, not all mossgreen. Pthalocyanine. Rafe and Fiona lost in the throng, behind the gazebo or porch perhaps. Rose in the offing. Something on her mind.

"Yo, Erika, who's the big dude with the Jack Nicholson brow? Brioni suit?"

"Where?"" Erika enjoys a politician--or CEO--'s memory for names and faces. (Poopy invading the smell of mown grass?)

"Over by the rhododendron folly. Emergent from the north, or creek, end. Come on, Erika, how could you miss him?"

"Unfurnished with the eye of love....He's a broker...uh...--Hoy, Saskia! *Kom terug*! --A Yalie, too, I seem to remember. Did David? No. Rupert! Rupe something. Dutch! Ah, yes, I know him, from the Olympics. He's a fellow medaller, Rose. Go introduce yourself. Still rows, I think. I'd do it, but Saskia...Sassy! You can tell him I want to ask him something or something."

Rose was off. View halloo.

"Rose!" Out of earshot already. "Not in rowing, dear. JUDO."

Oh well, not karate at least.

Rose's propensity to assault prospective beloveds has not been lost on Erika. A family of loons. Could never say that to an American. So Either/Or. David can be--what's the expression?--a fruitcake and still be responsible, hardworking, brilliant. Missing a few cards for a full deck. Such a witty tongue. Every phrase a figure of speech. Just the opposite of Greek--literal. ('Give me a hand': Greek looks at his hand.) Besides, so many families are*...folie a famille*. The Moore charm.

Where did I drop the changing bag?

What a party, Fiona thinks, taking breath in the downstairs vanity. Better than my first. Marvelous not to put it on myself this time. Retired!

Pity about David but even Rose having a good time. Not sulking in the creekbed as at Al's big feast. Accession to the Board. Of course she was only 16. Not that she's matured. Miss Gold Medal. Who could have imagined?

Rafe schmoozing the flown-in Hollywooders, mingling them with her people. Social skills outlast looks--even wealth. Something to be said about the South, one must admit. Though David has them too. Except with me of course.

Fiona snorts. All that nasty bushwah about neglect and then he goes off to Peru himself for a year.

Hmmm, or does he?

Bah.

It's never enough with that kid. Help make him rich, give him everything a kid could want, and his face still clouds with dull spots of humor. Imprinted those early years. Fiona sighs. They'd worked so hard then. Neglecting the first born's present for the sake of his future. Businessmen still realize how social business is--networking, bonding--but not how greatly the social mores have changed. Those Friday cocktail parties, that long-term delicately-handled flirtation with Arthur Sachs. *Der Bonze*, a subtly and honorably married man himself.

She feels guilty; she felt guilty. But everything you did for Davey brought further problems. A gift meant a heartbroken face. He hopes happiness is in the parcel, but it contains only a Steiff tiger. Doubly confusing, since it does wear *the lineaments of satisfied desire*. A model plane meant hours of frustration rounded by indifference. He wouldn't eat foods he himself requested and used to adore. Even when you found his shoes they would be the wrong ones or not fit any more or then the socks wouldn't be right. First call him six times, then get him to sit still at the table, then get him to address his food instead of Rose, then clean up the glass he gestured over, and only then would his Major Conflict (Rafe's phrase) transpire. But not the one you had with him.

Rose was so much easier--though sneaky. Because sneaky.

Erika, drifting toward the rhododendrons in Saskia's train, notes violent agitation in the shrubbery; hears a muffled cry. She scoops Sass and breaks through the allee.

Rose lies supine--white--Rupe genuflecting over her.

"I'm terribly sorry. It was a reflex. I'm out of training, you know. Lie still. Your breath will return. Don't worry, you're fine. I'll get you some water in a minute. What possessed you to try to flip me anyway, Rose? Warn me next time, will you please?"

"Are you all right, Rose?" Erika calls.

Rose, unable to speak yet, gives her a thumbs up and waves her away.

Erika withdraws discreetly though the dark leafage, shielding Sass's face against her chest. Fore-arming her dirty diaper clear.

Ah youth, she thinks. The course of true love....