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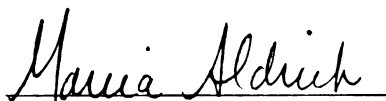
PRELUDE AND FUGUE

presented by

Terry Pow

has been accepted towards fulfillment  
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Prelude and Fugue

By

Terry Pow

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ABSTRACT

PRELUDE AND FUGUE

By

Terry Pow

*Prelude and Fugue* is a seriocomic novella that deploys a flashback narrative structure of questionable stability to investigate linkages between virtuosity, insanity and suicide.

"Discord is harmony in a remoter key."

— Arnold Schoenberg

"What it all adds up to is not the issue; it's what it all subtracts to that counts."

— Roy Prewt

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## PRELUDE



Nathan Dupre peered through the backstage peephole to assess the evening's turnout. A square-shouldered man with a large shapely head topped off with a vibrant mane of dark curly hair (strategically tinted to keep him on the youthful side of 40, though he was, in truth, nudging 50), Nathan struggled to suppress the nervous wallowing sensation in his stomach that always afflicted him just before a performance.

Behind him a dapper little man with small quick hands fussed with the tails of Nathan's jacket.

"Try to keep your hands off my ass, Hendershot, there's a good fellow," Nathan muttered as he pressed his right eye close to the peephole and scanned the rows of seats. The auditorium was already half filled.

"Can't have you walking onto the Wigmore Hall stage looking like a dog's dinner, now can we sir?" said Hendershot.

He grasped both sides of the jacket and gave them a sharp tug. The gap between the tails closed momentarily then sprang apart again.

"If you don't mind my saying, sir, you've expanded a bit since you were last in London," said Hendershot. He gave up fighting the tails and began flicking dandruff flecks from the jacket's collar.

"Are you suggesting I'm fat?" said Nathan, controlling with an act of pure will the gorge of pungent gases bubbling up from his gut.

"Portly is the term I'd use, sir. Quite an attractive shape, for some tastes."

Nathan had stopped listening. His attention was caught by a young woman third row back. Her hair was piled in a Gaudi tower of golden ringlets, and the *décolletage* of her blue satin gown left precious little to the imagination. Nathan sighed. At one time such a sight would have required a mental note not to glance in her direction for fear of forgetting whether he was meant to be playing Beethoven or Stockhausen. Somewhere in the passage of years between New York and London (and Paris and Rome and Berlin and Rio and Budapest and Tokyo and Des Moines and Ljubljana – name a city with a piano in it) the eager arpeggio in his loins had diminished to an almost imperceptible pianissimo. Only the dry lust of looking remained. This troubled Nathan. With most male virtuosi of his age the notion of performance carried a lusty double meaning. Both on stage and in the bedroom they displayed prodigious appetites. They never seemed to get enough. Indeed, one octogenarian pianist Nathan knew well, a household name, had to be defibrillated on top of his

Steinway, where he'd passed out while servicing a young French horn player. Musicians still joked about it on the circuit. Which reminded Nathan that years ago he had once enjoyed a French horn player.

"My lord, but did she give amazing head."

"What's that you said, sir?" asked Hendershot, as he buffed Nathan's wingtips.

"Nothing, just musing to myself," replied Nathan, his eye glued to the peephole.

Must be something to do with the embouchure French horn players develop to control their refractory instrument, Nathan pondered. What was the girl's name? No good. Gone. Sucked into the great waste-compactor of the past with so many other happy memories. Speaking of happiness, the blonde with the plunging neckline had leaned forward to adjust the strap on her shoe. Paradise cracked open its doors to Nathan's straining eyeball. Two of the most beautiful breasts he had ever seen listed to the brink of freedom from their slender harness. Nathan tried to suck the entirety of the image through his eye and pump it down to his crotch, but somewhere around his belly button it faded. The usual problem. And no chance to try again. The woman had finished with her shoe and was now talking to her companion, cozying up to him and resting her hand on

his thigh. Quite high up his thigh. Nathan took an instant dislike to the man. Too young, too handsome and, worst of all, too slim. Most likely an arbitrageur with a Jag and a penthouse at Canary Wharf. Punk. Nathan became aware that Hendershot was trying to ask him something.

"I was wondering what the house looks like," Hendershot repeated.

Nathan sighed: back to dull reality. He tore his gaze from the blonde and swept his eyeball across the hall.

"Not bad. About five hundred punters. Oh, shit!"

Hendershot paused in his ministrations.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That little turd Briskit from the *Herald-Tribune* just walked in."

"I think the name is Brasket," said Hendershot.

"Briskit, Brasket, whatever the fuck!" snapped Nathan.

"Who the hell invited him is what I want to know?"

"He's meant to be one of the more perceptive daily critics," said Hendershot.

Nathan tore his eye from the peephole and turned around, his face flushed with irritation and repressed stomach acids.

"Perceptive my dick!" he exploded. "He covered the *Well-Tempered Clavier* recital I gave at Avery Fisher last

season and spent half the review yammering on about my 'excessive rubato'. The idiot doesn't know rubato from rhubarb. He has some burr up his butt about 'period authenticity', as if Bach wanted a bunch of half-witted robots playing his music. He tried to paint me as an old fart from the Pleistocene era totally out of touch with modern musicology. That kind of party-line hogwash gets right on my tits."

A sudden flare-up of heartburn silenced Nathan. He closed his eyes and took a long deep breath.

"How much time?" he asked.

Hendershot glanced at his watch.

"Less than a minute. Let's do the list, shall we.

Boogers?

Nathan sniffed.

"Clear."

"Hanky?"

Nathan slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and felt the cool Irish linen of his handkerchief.

"Present."

"Fly?"

Nathan ran his hand down the front of his pants.

"Zipped."

Hendershot smoothed Nathan's lapels then looked him in

the eye.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"I want to puke and poop my pants at the same time. Other than that I feel wonderful," Nathan replied.

"Go break a leg," said Hendershot with a wink.

"Fuck you too," Nathan responded, and stepped into a void of bright light and thunderous applause.

The piano, a massive Bosendorfer, awaited him like an ocean liner ready to cast off. Its matt black exterior housed nine thousand moving parts – three times the number of bones in the body of the poor soul whose job it was to wrestle sublimity from it. It seemed such an uneven contest. Like a gladiator facing a famished lion armed with a net and a toothpick. Nathan turned to the auditorium, rested his left hand on the side of the keyboard and bowed. Hendershot was right about the dress pants; they needed letting out at least an inch in the ass.

Nathan sat down. He adjusted the height of the piano stool, not because it needed adjusting but because the activity of fiddling with the knobs felt somehow calming. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed Hendershot standing in the wings. The little man gave Nathan a dainty wave. My life could be worse, Nathan thought; I could be Hendershot, being buggered by a different sailor every

Saturday night. But maybe that's not so bad. At least it's contact of a sort. Who do I have to snuggle up with on a Saturday night? Any night come to that?

In the auditorium the final murmurs, rustlings, snorts and coughs diminished into a pool of silence pregnant with expectancy. This is the awful moment of commitment every musician dreads. Beyond this point there's no stepping back until the last sixteenth note has been slain, the final chord laid to rest. Nathan swung his hands to his sides to loosen his shoulders, tested the pedal with his right foot, raised his hands and poised them above the keyboard ready to execute the B flat major chord that launches Beethoven's "Hammerclavier" sonata on its rendezvous with destiny. It was at this moment he heard the voice.

*Nathan Dupre, how did you get so old?*

It was a young woman's voice. Nathan lowered his hands to his sides and glanced at the audience. The surprise of hearing the voice, any voice, at that moment overwhelmed his comprehension of what exactly the voice had said. He expected to see turned heads in the audience, maybe some "shushings" to silence the miscreant who had violated recital etiquette. But all the heads faced forward, oblivious of anything untoward. Puzzled, Nathan

turned back to the keyboard and positioned his hands once again to begin.

*And so fat. Nathan, how on earth did you grow so pudgy?*

Nathan swung around. This time he heard both the sense and the sound. And there was something in the timbre of the voice, a sparkling, audacious merriment that struck a remote chord buried in his memory. But he quickly dismissed the idea as absurd. Nathan noticed several members of the audience turn to each other with shrugs and puzzled expressions. It was clear they were wondering why he had twice aborted his performance. By now Nathan's surprise had transmuted into annoyance. Why would someone attempt to disrupt his recital in such a juvenile fashion? He decided to say something. Without rising from the stool he turned and addressed the auditorium:

"Ladies and gentlemen, with all due respect I must request you keep any comments until after the performance. This is a difficult and demanding work. It requires of the interpreter every last ounce of concentration. Thank you for your understanding."

For some audience members this little speech only increased their bewilderment. Others, who perhaps had even less of an idea of what was going on, settled for the



notion that it was a permissible display of artistic temperament and rewarded it with a ripple of applause. Nathan acknowledged the applause with a patrician nod and turned back to the keyboard once again. He closed his eyes and raised his hands above the keys.

*You look sad. Are you so terribly lonely, Nathan?*

"Cassie?"

The question burst from Nathan's lips before he could stop it. He sprang to his feet, knocking over the piano stool, and staggered to the edge of the stage. Using his hand as a shield against the lights, his eyes raked the auditorium for the source of the voice. By now the audience's mood had transformed from puzzlement to consternation. One dowager in the second row began swatting her neighbors with her program in her panic to squeeze by and escape the madman on stage.

Nathan paid her no attention. Standing at the edge of the stage, he scanned the rows of seats back and forth, searching. Until at last he found her. Third row back. The golden hair, the merciless blue eyes, the wide full mouth and almost perfect teeth, and most of all the head rolled back and laughing, laughing, an inexhaustible torrent of laughter.

"Cassie!" Nathan repeated, louder this time. ("Who's

Cassie?" someone asked in the audience.) Nathan rubbed his eyes – and she was gone. In her place sat the blonde in the blue satin dress, cringing in her companion's protective arms. Nathan felt his blood go cold and his knees buckle.

"Don't do this to me again!" were the last words he uttered as he stepped off the edge of the stage and pitched head first into the lap of the critic from the *New York Herald-Tribune*.

#

## FUGUE

The donkey stood in the middle of a wide expanse of lawn that fronted a large, rambling Victorian house. The building exuded an air of crumbling neglect. Stout oak buttresses supported a tumoral bulge in the west wall, numerous roof tiles lay cracked, missing or skewed at eccentric angles, and rampant ivy smothered the entire front of the building, including several upstairs windows, in an impenetrable mass of dark green leaves.

Nathan put down his suitcase. In the distance he could hear the grinding gears of the taxicab that had delivered him from the airfield at Barnstaple. The cab was an ancient Morris Minor, minus suspension, driven by a old man with beer-bottle glasses and an luminous wen on the side of his nose. Had Nathan not been so weary from travel, he might have been more alarmed at the manner in which the driver hurled his vehicle down the narrow Devon lanes, where two emaciated cows could not comfortably squeeze by each other. Since the lanes were lined on either side with thick high hedges, every bend represented the likelihood of hideous collision. In the whole trip the only words the driver uttered, in his clotted West Country accent, were: "You be a Yank, then, young'n?"

Nathan took a deep breath. The fresh early-morning air tasted good. And there was something new carried on

the breeze that he hadn't experienced before: the salty tang of the ocean. The house and its fifty or so acres of grounds, a mixture of copse and pasture, stood on a high bluff. In the distance beyond the northernmost hedge Nathan could make out a long promenade and beyond that, flecked with sparkling white caps, the rolling green blue of the Atlantic Ocean. This vast continuity of water linked the New World with which Nathan had been familiar since birth to an Old World that promised him only strangeness.

A desperate he hawing cut short Nathan's reflections. The donkey seemed to be in distress. Nathan regarded the animal for a moment then looked around. Since arriving he had not seen a single human soul. It was early but surely somebody must be up and about. Nathan picked up his suitcase and made his way toward the front entrance. A second strangled he-haw stopped Nathan in his tracks. What on earth was wrong with the beast? Nathan put down his suitcase and crossed the lawn to get a closer look.

As he neared the donkey he noticed something dangling from its mouth. It took him a moment before he recognized it was the strap and lace-trimmed cup of a white brassiere. The rest of the garment was apparently lodged somewhere in the animal's gullet. As Nathan drew closer, the animal

backed away. It gave Nathan a dark look and wagged its head, which made the bra strap jiggle in a ludicrous fashion. Nathan took another slow step forward and reached out for the strap.

"Get yerself back, young'n!"

The shout came from a middle-aged man in field clothes who emerged from around the side of the house. He hastened across the lawn in a bandy-legged stride.

"Get yer back!" he repeated.

A bramble of carrot-colored hair topped the man's round red face. He led Nathan by the arm to the edge of the lawn, turned and approached the donkey. As he drew close, he began talking to the creature.

"What yer been up too now, Ernest?" he began, then recognized what the donkey had in its mouth. "Oh my gawd, she'll be right bolloxed about this, old lad!"

The man took a series of baby steps toward the donkey, then lunged forward, grabbed the end of the bra strap and yanked as hard as he could. The donkey reared back with an anguished he-haw, dragging the man off his feet and halfway across the lawn before it occurred to him to let go of the strap. He lay on his face moaning.

Another person appeared on the scene: a large roly-poly woman in a cook's apron. She waddled up to the man

and stood over him with her arms akimbo, shaking her head.

"Dudley Figgis, you daft bugger," she said, reaching down a fat hand and yanking the man to his feet. "You've skinned yer nose, that's all. Get into the kitchen with yer."

Holding his nose, the man limped back to the house. The woman turned toward the donkey, which stood facing her twenty paces away, pawing the ground with its front hooves. It was not a picture of contentment. Nathan noticed that the other cup had now disappeared, leaving just a few inches of drool-flecked strap dangling from the side of the creature's mouth.

The woman approached the donkey, making a soft clucking sound. When she reached it she laid her hand on its back and began stroking. The woman paid no attention to the bra strap, but edged her way toward the animal's rear end, never letting her hand leave its back. Once level with the donkey's haunches she paused. She took a deep breath, slipped her hand between the donkey's back legs, squeezed its testicles, and then jumped to one side with surprising agility.

The donkey levitated from the ground. With an anguished he-haw it ejected the brassiere twenty feet across the lawn, where it landed in a damp ball. The woman

walked over, picked up the brassiere, gave it a vigorous shake, and headed back to the house with it.

A moment later another figure appeared at the front entrance. Nathan recognized the face from his mother's photo album.

"Nathan? Is that you?"

The tremulous voice belonged to a tall thin middle-aged woman wearing a silk dressing gown decorated with astrological signs. A turban of the same material covered her head. She approached Nathan with an angular gait as if the bones in her slender frame had worn loose in their sockets and threatened to dislocate at any moment.

"My dear child, how long have you been standing out here in the chill air? I expressly told that idiot of a taxi driver to honk his hooter when he dropped you off. We would have fetched you from the airport ourselves except that Henry's eyes aren't reliable any more and as for me, well I never learned the art of driving. I do most of my voyaging on the astral plane. Ha, ha. Well, more of that later. Come, let me look at you."

She gripped Nathan's shoulders with her bony hands and leaned down to study him. It was a long face, with high cheekbones and blue watery eyes outlined with a thick application of black mascara and eyeliner, giving the



overall effect of a mask. But it was not an unfriendly face, even though the fluttering eyes lent it an air of perpetual distractedness.

"Welcome to Hawksmoor," she went on. "As you've no doubt surmised, I am your Aunt Iphegenia. But do call me Aunt Iffy – everyone does."

A cloud from nowhere darkened Aunt Iffy's face and a large solitary tear rolled down her bony cheek.

"Forgive a foolish woman, Nathan. But Cassandra wrote so much about you, your musical gifts, your beautiful nature – and now to meet you for the first time in such tragic circumstances."

Nathan was too travel-weary to feel tragic at this moment, but he made an effort to appear sad.

Aunt Iffy dabbed away the tear with an astrological handkerchief and managed a wobbly smile.

"But we must be brave! What's predestined in the stars, right Nathan? Chin up and all that."

She took his hand and led him toward the front entrance. "We've just started breakfast. I'll introduce you to your new family."

#

For some reason the curtains were still drawn in the breakfast room, which was illuminated by two oil lamps, one

situated on a sideboard and the other in the center of a large oak table. At one end of the table sat a large man with straggly gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. He had a professorial air about him. Aunt Iffy introduced him as Nathan's Uncle Henry. He glanced up from his bacon and eggs, muttered something that sounded vaguely like a welcome, shoved a wedge of fried bread into his mouth and returned his attention to his breakfast plate. Next to him sat a skinny man with bulging cadaverous eyes and a mottled bald head. He half-rose from his chair and nodded curtly at Nathan. His name was Franz, but Nathan didn't quite catch on to his connection with the family from Aunt Iffy's vague description. Before he could enquire, the big round woman who wrestled the brassiere from the donkey entered and placed before Nathan a large plate stacked with fried bread, six rashers of crispy bacon and two fried eggs.

"I hear Ernest has been eating underwear again," muttered Uncle Henry without looking up from his plate.

Aunt Iffy sighed.

"What was it this time?" she asked.

"From what I'm told," continued Uncle Henry in a slow pedantic tone, "it was a lady's brassiere. A double 'D' cup, from what I hear."

The big round woman flashed Uncle Henry a baleful look.

"We have Cook to thank," Uncle Henry went on, "for extracting the item of lingerie from Ernest's gullet."

Aunt Iffy beamed at Cook.

"Oh well done!" she said. "However did you manage it?"

"Yer don't want to know, Ma'am," replied Cook, thumping the teapot down on the table.

A pained expression clouded Aunt Iffy's face.

"Henry, I get so worried about Ernest," she said. "He's such a sensitive soul. In those sad eyes one can plummet the depths of the world's pain."

"If yer don't mind my mentioning it, Ma'am," Cook cut in, "that beast needs tethering."

Aunt Iffy's eyes almost fell out of her head.

"Tether Ernest?" she exclaimed.

"Jest a suggestion, Ma'am."

"But he's a free spirit. Like the wind, he comes and he goes."

"That's as maybe, Ma'am," persisted Cook. "But he also 'comes' to my clothes line and 'goes' with my undies."

Aunt Iffy considered the thought, then shook her head vigorously.

"No, the idea is unthinkable. To tether Ernest would be like putting a ball and chain on the vital force of nature itself. It's quite unthinkable."

"Whatever you say, Ma'am," said Cook, exiting the dining room with a tray piled high with dishes.

As Nathan tucked into his bacon and eggs he heard bangs and crashes interlaced with muffled Devonian oaths from the direction of the kitchen.

"Imagine tethering Ernest," Aunt Iffy went on, still distraught at the notion. "Henry, did you hear what Cook just said?"

"Yes, my dear," responded her husband, without looking up.

Further conversation about the callous impropriety of Cook's suggestion was interrupted by the arrival of a girl of fifteen or sixteen. It was clear she had just climbed out of bed. A riot of uncombed blonde curls tumbled about her head. She wore a faded blue blouse torn at the elbows and pair of baggy corduroy trousers that had seen many better days.

Aunt Iffy's face lit up.

"Cassie, my sweet. Let me introduce you to Nathan Dupre, your cousin, all the way from Chicago, Illinois."

Cassie turned to Nathan, and he received the first

indelible effect of those piercing blue eyes. Set wide in a high broad forehead, their gaze fixed him like a specimen on a pin until she released him by turning away, offering only the briefest smile by way of greeting. Cook entered and placed a plate of buttered toast before her. She ruffled the girl's tangled hair with her hand, smiled to herself, and then left the room. Cassie nibbled a slice of toast, then turned to the head of the table.

"Is it true, Uncle Henry," she asked, "that farting in church is a sin?"

"It's a little early for theology, don't you think my dear?" muttered Uncle Henry, sponging the last residues of egg yolk from his plate with a piece of fried bed.

"Rory Dimcock's dad is a deacon at St. Anselm's and he says a fart in church is an affront to the Holy Ghost."

"My dear," broke in Aunt Iffy in an attempt to divert the conversation, "perhaps you could walk Nathan down to Westward Ho! this afternoon, after he's had chance to rest up."

Cassie took another nibble at her toast.

"It is an issue, though," she persisted, "for people who believe in the bodily resurrection. It means there's going to be an awful lot of farting in paradise."

"Well, I'm sure the people in paradise will be very

discreet about it, my dear," said Aunt Iffy.

Cassie turned the full beam of her wide blue eyes on Aunt Iffy.

"But think about it," she insisted. "All the dead people from Adam and Eve until yesterday. That's an awful lot of people to cram into one place. The smell has got to be pretty bad."

Aunt Iffy wilted under the child's intense gaze. She turned to her husband.

"Help me, Henry," she said.

Uncle Henry crammed the last piece of fried bread into his mouth and flushed it down with a swig of hot tea. He looked down at his empty plate for a moment as if in deep thought.

"The flaw in your argument, Cassie my dear," he finally pronounced, "is that one needs to subtract the multitudes of people who, for one reason or another, won't make it into paradise. That should ameliorate to a considerable extent the smell."

Cassie considered this point, then looked up with a beaming smile.

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed, "I forgot all about the damned."

#

Nathan rolled over in bed and felt a current of hot, musty air brush his face. Feeling too exhausted to wake up he turned away his head. Something cool and moist nudged his cheek. Nathan turned and found himself looking up into a pair of large doleful eyes.

"Ernest? What are you doing here?"

The donkey seemed well recovered from his morning adventure with Cook's brassiere. He wore a large silver pentagram between his ears, which lent him a magus-like appearance. Nathan didn't notice the animal's lips move, but he heard him say: "Hop on my back."

"What was that?" Nathan asked.

"Hop on my back," the animal repeated.

Nathan closed his eyes and scrunched his head deep into the pillow.

"Ernest, I'm far too tired. Come back after my nap."

Again, Nathan felt the donkey's cold wet nose pressed against his cheek and the voice was more insistent this time.

"I've something to show you."

Realizing further rest was out of the question, Nathan pulled on his jeans and a sweater and, using a chair, climbed onto the donkey's back. They slipped silently from the house.

It became clear that Nathan had slept longer than he intended because it was already dark outside. But there was a full moon, which bathed the house and surroundings in milky light. Not that Ernest needed much light. He was a surefooted animal and negotiated with ease any obstacles in his path. Soon they passed the property's northern boundary and entered a neighbor's cornfield. The tall stalks, drooping under the weight of ears the size of grape bunches, brushed against Nathan's legs as they traveled through. Twenty paces into the field, Ernest veered a little to the left. Looking down, Nathan glimpsed what the donkey had sought to avoid. Two bodies, their flesh pale and snakelike in the moonlight, lay coiled together so tightly it was difficult to tell where the man began and the woman ended. The woman's dark hair lay splayed among the cornstalks in tendril-like waves. Her lips parted in a silent sigh as the man moved within her. As the donkey passed by, the woman's eyes flicked open and she smiled at Nathan. The donkey proceeded a few more steps into the corn then veered to the right. Another couple came into view. This time the woman straddled the man, her breasts pendant as the ripened corn. The donkey's progress through the field became an intricate zigzag as the animal picked it's way between couples. On either side Nathan witnessed



every imaginable configuration of intercourse, and some that even his virginal imagination could never have conceived. Bodies of all ages, sizes, shapes and sexual proclivity copulated in the corn. Nathan looked on this carnal diorama in wonderment as Ernest slipped through a gap in the hedgerow and they emerged into a sheep pasture.

This narrow strip of land terminated at the precipitous edge of a cliff. Beyond its ragged margin stretched an endless expanse of ocean. Moonlight flowed on its undulating surface like molten lead. A well-worn sheep path followed the cliff's contour at a safe distance from the edge but close enough for Nathan to hear the ponderous rhythm of waves breaking among rocks a hundred feet below. Ernest picked his way along this track toward a narrow spit of land that jutted some distance into the ocean. The sheep track, Nathan felt relieved to see, gave this vertiginous promontory a wide berth. But his relief turned to terror when, instead of following the track, Ernest turned onto the promontory. Nathan shouted at the donkey. He pulled his mane, even tugged his ears, but to no avail. Ernest continued his measured, surefooted pace down the spit, which narrowed to the point where two people walking along it (should they be suicidal enough to try) would have found it treacherous to pass. Nathan forgot the first rule

of acrophobia and glanced down. The dizzying emptiness rushed up at him and almost knocked him from the donkey's back. He clutched at the animal's mane as it continued forward. At the sharp end of the promontory the donkey stopped, and for the first time on their journey Ernest spoke.

"Watch."

Nathan had no intention of watching anything. He kept his eyes tight shut. Beneath him he could hear the sea's predatory roar and that was bad enough. But a sudden jerk of the donkey's body caused Nathan's eyes to snap open — and then widen at what they beheld. The sliver of ground beneath the donkey had begun to crumble. It started with a small patch beneath Ernest's right foreleg, which broke free and sent a rain of rock fragments skittering over the edge into the abyss. Ernest adjusted his footing. But now a large chunk broke loose beneath his right hind hoof. The donkey lurched backward, its hoof stabbing at the exposed cliff face in desperate search of purchase. It was a brave but hopeless effort for now the entire section beneath them subsided several feet, remained stable for a cruel moment, then broke free of the cliff face with a sharp crack. The donkey disappeared beneath him and Nathan tumbled into a roaring void that sucked the breath from his body.

Nathan lurched upright in the bed, every pulse point in his body pounding. He opened his eyes. The room was darkened but needles of daylight pierced the moth holes in the red velvet curtains. Nathan wiped away the sweat that beaded his face and ran his hands through his hair. He took a deep breath and shook his head.

"That must have been some dream, Chicago boy."

Nathan swung around. Sitting on a stool by the door he recognized the curly-headed profile of Cassie. At her feet he also recognized his suitcase. It lay open with his belongings scattered on the carpet. For a moment Nathan didn't know what to say, then he blurted out the obvious question?

"What are you doing in here?"

"Going through your things, of course," she replied. Cassie picked up a framed photograph from the suitcase and turned it toward Nathan.

"Is this your famous dead mother?"

#

Cassie walked several paces ahead of Nathan down the narrow lane that led, with many sharp twists and turns, down to the seaside village of Westward Ho! She clutched a brown paper bag filled with cheese and pickle sandwiches that Cook had packed for their lunch. Aunt Iffy, after

much probing of her purse, had handed Nathan a sixpenny piece with which to buy ice creams, uttering the tremulous hope as she parted with the small silver coin that he might bring her back the change.

Nathan and Cassie hadn't spoken a word to each other since he asked her to leave his belongings alone and clear out of his room. This she had done with magnificent indifference to both possessions and possessor. Indeed, it is unlikely they would setting out on this little excursion together had not Aunt Iffy insisted, with particular emphasis toward Cassie, that the fresh air would do them both a world of good, and wouldn't it be a nice opportunity to get to know each.

Nathan couldn't help but notice that his cousin, for all her *outré* behavior, cut a pretty shape as she strode down the lane, her head tilted back slightly with the sunshine dancing in and out of her curls. There was something about her walk that was different from that of any American girls Nathan had known. Not that he had known any in a sense remotely intimate. Perhaps it was in the free and easy movement of her limbs; something flowing and unrehearsed, a kind of liquefaction within the loose-fitting blue frock. Nathan also found himself fascinated by the way her hand, when it swung back, appeared like a

little bird about to take flight.

Cassie turned around in the center of the lane to face Nathan. She spread her legs apart as if ready to do battle. Nathan stopped, wondering what he was in for now. From the strained expression on her face it seemed as if she were coming to some momentous decision.

"All right," she said. "I was wrong to go through your suitcase. Not that you've got much that's interesting in there. But that's not the point. It's just that I've never met an American before, and..."

"You thought I might have a six-gun in there, and maybe some spurs or maybe the shrunken head of Al Capone," Nathan broke in.

"Oh go on, pee all over my apology. I'm trying to be nice. It's not easy."

"I guess not," said Nathan. He wasn't sure where this line of conversation was heading and wasn't in the mood for a major confrontation. In a less abrasive tone, he asked: "So what were you looking for in my case?"

Cassie stared at the ground for a moment, then glanced up at Nathan. Again he felt the almost physical effect of those piercing blue eyes. Her expression was serious.

"Actually," she said, "I was looking to see if you had packed any johnnies."

"Packed what?" Nathan asked.

"Johnnies," Cassie repeated. "Those rubber things men slip over their willies to prevent girls from getting banged up."

Cassie rolled an imaginary johnnie down her raised index finger to demonstrate what she meant.

Nathan stared at her.

"Were you raised by wolves?" he asked.

"I take it you didn't pack any johnnies, then," continued Cassie. "Pity. They come in jolly useful at the right moment."

Nathan's could think of nothing to say. He could only continue to stare.

Cassie maintained her intense expression for a moment longer then dropped the bag of cheese and pickle sandwiches and covered her face with both hands. It looked as if she was struggling for breath. Nathan stepped forward, worried she might be having some kind of seizure. He touched her shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

Cassie dropped her hands. Tears streamed down her reddened cheeks.

"You silly bugger," she gasped, and reared back her head and let go with a peal of laughter that startled into

flight a large bird resting in the hedgerow. The laughter rolled on and on, each wave cresting the next until, doubled up at the waist, she managed to regain control of herself.

"My god, I thought I was going to die laughing," she said, catching her breath.

Cassie straightened herself, brushed the hair from her eyes and faced Nathan with a broad smile salted with irony.

"I think we should be friends," she said.

"Well, okay," replied Nathan, still wary.

They stood facing each other in silence for an awkward moment.

"Well?" Cassie asked.

"Well, what?" Nathan responded.

Cassie cocked her head and pursed her lips.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Kiss?" Nathan felt his knees liquefy.

"We're cousins, silly. It doesn't mean anything."

"It's not that, it's just ..."

"Oh come on, don't be so wet!"

Nathan stepped forward, held this feral, unpredictable creature lightly by the shoulders and kissed her cheek. He stepped back.

Cassie gave him an appraising look.

"I though you yanks spent all your time watching movies," she said.

"As it happens, I haven't seen many movies," Nathan replied, relieved to be talking rather than kissing. "If I wasn't traveling with my mother on her concert tours then I'd be at home in the charge of a tutor, and none of them seemed to have a thing for movies. On top of that I practice the piano three to four hours a day. So you've probably seen more movies than I have."

Cassie reached forward and pulled Nathan's head to her. Her lips met his with a soft, moist intensity. Nathan found this experience new and overwhelming all by itself, but when her tongue slipped between his teeth and began exploring the inside of his mouth and throat he became aroused.

Sensing this, Cassie ran her free hand down the front of his trousers and rubbed her palm up and down his fly. Her eyes gleamed into his.

"So you are a boy, after all," she said.

She turned away, picked up the brown paper bag and carried on down the lane, whistling.

For a moment Nathan couldn't move, as his brain struggled to process the clamor of messages from his senses. Then he caught up with Cassie and walked beside



her in silence.

"I was wondering," he finally said.

She turned and looked at him, her eyebrows raised.

"I was wondering," he repeated, "if you greet all of your male cousins in this fashion."

Cassie smiled.

"You're the only cousin I have. So I don't get much chance to practice."

Nathan nodded.

"I'd say that's probably just as well," he said.

As they passed a wooden gate to a cornfield Cassie stopped walking.

"Wait here a moment," she said, and climbed over the gate.

"What are you doing?" Nathan asked.

"Back in a jiffy," she said, and disappeared behind a thick hedgerow. A minute later she reappeared.

"What was that all about," asked Nathan, as they continued down the lane.

Cassie ran her hands through her hair and shook her head.

"I took my knickers off."

"What?"

"Are all yanks deaf or something? I said I took my

knickers off."

"Whatever for?" insisted Nathan.

"If you really must know, I wet them laughing at you."

They walked on in silence.

"But what did you do with them?" Nathan found himself asking against his better judgment.

Cassie turned to him.

"I threw them as far as I could into the cornfield."

She chuckled to herself.

"I'd love to see the farmer's face when he comes across them"

#

A salt breeze snicked along the promenade. It felt like fine sandpaper against his skin as Nathan leaned over the stone parapet. Before him lay the Bay of Bideford, a large cup-like indent in the north Devon coastline, framed by the sandbars of Ilfracombe to the northeast and the craggy cliffs of Hartland Point to the southwest. The tide had retreated, exposing a wide strip of bronze sand punctuated by outcrops of barnacle-crusting rocks slick with seaweed. Children clambered over a nearby rock pool seeking hermit crabs and other stranded sea creatures. A little farther out, a man and woman walked their dog, their shadows elongated across the smooth sand. Straining his

eyes, Nathan could just make out the hazy outline of a sliver of land slouched against the horizon. "Lundy Island's the last bit of land between here and America," Cassie had informed him, before borrowing the sixpence and disappearing to fetch ice creams.

The thought of America slipped like a cold stone into Nathan's pleasant mood. Since his mother's funeral earlier in the summer he had built a wall around his feelings. The formalities of the funeral had helped, followed by the successive condolences of family acquaintances and those of his mother's musician friends who stopped by their North Shore apartment to talk with him in the days following the service. It later struck him as odd how people had talked to him without quite talking about the exact circumstances of her death. Although he hadn't been able to put a name to it until several weeks later, his predominant feeling during the whole sad affair was one of irritation. Simply stated, his mother's sudden death had put a major crimp in his plans. He had loved her, but she could have chosen a more considerate time to depart the planet. First there was the issue of where he was to live. He liked Chicago, but as an orphaned sixteen-year-old (his father had abandoned them when he was a baby) he could not seriously expect to live in the apartment by himself. For one thing

there was no way he could afford to. His late mother's estate was comfortable not spectacular; her international celebrity had only just begun to pick up when the 747 she was traveling in tumbled out of the sky over the Sea of Japan. Or was it the Indian Ocean? How odd that he could no longer quite remember.

A trust fund secured his future education. The plan was for Nathan to attend Julliard, his mother's alma mater. Arrangements had been made for him to fly to New York City in the fall to audition for a place the following spring. For the first few days after the funeral, Nathan clung to this idea as the one rock of certainty in the suddenly fluid foundations of his life. He would get into Julliard and move on with his life. However, a request to revisit his mother's attorney two weeks after the funeral stood this certainty on its head. The attorney had discovered a sealed envelope overlooked among his mother's papers. It contained a letter from Nathan's mother assigning guardianship of him to her sister in England in the event of her death. It took Nathan a while to comprehend the implication of this information. He had a vague awareness of having an aunt somewhere in England. He even recalled some joking at the dinner table when he was younger about "batty Aunt Iffy." Apparently she was a good ten years

older than his mother. The sisters were never particularly close and hardly ever kept in touch over the years. Nathan could never have imagined a circumstance in which he might end up living with Aunt Iphigenia. Not even remotely.

A scream wrenched Nathan from his thoughts. Below, a boy with a lobster-red face chased a girl across the sand waving a string of seaweed above his head. In desperation, the girl abandoned the sand and began scrambling up a steep ridge of large gray pebbles stacked against the sea wall ten feet beneath where Nathan stood. The boy whooped and hurled the seaweed. The gelatinous string lassoed through the air but missed the girl by a yard. Nathan smiled, then realized it had been a while since Cassie had disappeared with the sixpence. He looked down the long promenade. In the distance, beside a bowling green, he could see the yellow-and-blue ice cream stand. A handful of people stood in line, but Cassie was not among them. Neither could he spot her swaying walk among the staggered clusters of holidaymakers passing along the promenade.

Nathan sighed. Maybe she'd got stuck in one of the little gift shops around the corner from where he stood. Quite likely his ice cream cone was already history. Bored with waiting, Nathan decided to investigate. Surely it would be almost impossible to lose someone in such a tiny

village, whose commercial enterprises amounted to a couple of pubs, a fish and chip shop, a general store where you could buy anything from bacon to socks, and a string of marginal businesses focused on relieving bored tourists of their small change. These latter businesses had a sad and hopeless air to them. The heyday of Westward Ho! as a tourist attraction, inspired in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century by the popularity of the Charles Kingsley novel of the same name, had long passed. These days most holidaymakers heading west drove on by. Westward Ho! lacked both the commercial allure of Weston-Super-Mare, with its restaurants and theatres, and the quintessential charm of Clovelly, a tiny fishing village twenty miles up the coast. Nestled in a small bay at the base of a high cliff, Clovelly's steep streets were impassible to most motor vehicles. Other than walking, all transportation was handled by donkey. Several dozen of them passed their whole lives in the village.

Cassie was in none of gift shops. Nathan began to feel irritated. He stepped back into the narrow road and looked up and down. It was then he noticed that a building he had taken to be private home appeared to be a bookstore. A sun-bleached sign above the entrance read: "Orient Books" and beneath it in smaller type, "World's Largest Secondhand Bookstore." It seemed an unlikely claim to Nathan, but he

stepped inside anyway. If Cassie wasn't in here, at least it would kill some time.

A musty fusion of old books, damp and cat pee hit Nathan's nostrils. Nathan squeezed through a narrow hallway lined with tumbling stacks of ancient encyclopedias, magazines, and yellowed newspapers crumbling at the edges. At the end of the hallway he turned into a small room. Book-crammed shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling and spilled into precarious stacks on the threadbare carpet. On the windowsill sprawled an enormous ginger cat. It regarded Nathan with large liquid eyes, blinked, and returned to its nap.

"Can I help you, young man?"

Nathan turned. A squat woman who appeared to have no neck had entered behind him, supporting herself on a hickory cane. Lank gray hair straggled halfway down her back. Her eyes glinted with a sharp intelligence and her voice revealed no trace of Devonian burr.

"I'm just browsing," Nathan replied.

"Ah, an American," she said, swiveling her neck-less body to get a better look at Nathan. "Then you must be Iphigenia's new charge."

It took Nathan a moment to realize she was talking about Aunt Iffy.

"So sad about your poor mother," she continued. "I have no appreciation for music myself, classical or otherwise. Tone deaf. But I've heard Iphigenia talk about her sister, Cassandra, and she showed me a press clipping once from one of her concerts. Having you here will be so nice for Cassie, the poor little waif."

Poor little waif was not the description that leapt to Nathan's mind in thinking of his cousin. The woman eased herself into an armchair. The instant she was settled, the ginger cat jumped from the windowsill and climbed onto her lap.

"Mr. Thackery and I have some cataloguing to do, so browse away young man," she said. "This floor is novels, romances, children's books and West Country history. Second floor is poetry, philosophy, religion and biography. Third floor you'll find esoterica and archeology. In the basement there's quite a decent collection of erotica, but you'll have to ask me nicely for the key to get into there."

"That's okay, I'd better be going," said Nathan.

The woman said nothing. Mr. Thackery gave Nathan a disdainful glance, yawned, stretched, and settled himself into a large ginger ball on the woman's lap.

At the door, Nathan discovered that a summer storm had



sprung up from nowhere. Rain pelted down and a miniature flood raced down the glistening street. He pulled back into the bookstore and decided he might as well look around until the rain left off. The first floor didn't hold much interest so Nathan decided to investigate the upper stories. Piles of books and fusty periodicals constricted the stairway's already narrow wooden steps. Halfway up, the stairs turned at a blind angle. Nathan didn't notice the man coming down until they collided. A large heavy book slipped from the man's hands and tumbled down the stairs. Several pages tore loose from the tattered binding before the tome landed with a thump at the bottom. The man pushed by Nathan and loped down the stairs to retrieve the book. He sat on the bottom step muttering to himself as he reinserted the pages. Nathan recognized the mottled bald head as belonging to the skeletal foreign-looking man who sat next to Uncle Henry at breakfast. Franz (Nathan recalled the name) finished fiddling with the book and headed toward the little room, presumably to pay for it. It didn't occur to him to glance back to see if Nathan was all right.

Nathan was about to continue up the stairs when he noticed one of the book's pages wedged between two stacks of magazines. He picked it up. It was an illustrative

plate depicting, according to the caption, "The 'Grubmannspiel', based on the microtonal concepts of Juan Carillo's 'Metamorphosen Piano'." The picture showed a grand piano to which had been added four additional keyboards terraced one above another. Sixteen pedals were connected to a complex system of blocks and pulleys, and beneath the piano hung what looked like a steam boiler. Nathan folded the page and slipped it into his pocket. He would give it to Franz at supper. Maybe it would coax a Teutonic "thank you" from those cadaverous lips.

At the top of the stairs a small dormer window filtered a few fugitive rays of daylight through its grimy pane. Nathan peeked out. The window overlooked an alleyway that ran behind the bookstore. The rain had eased up. Nathan was about to turn away when he noticed two figures at the far end of the alleyway locked in a tight embrace. One was a youth of about eighteen years, a beefy lad with close-cropped hair; the other was Cassie.

Nathan recoiled from the window. He felt his stomach twist and knot. And the next moment he felt foolish for reacting this way. Why should it surprise him that Cassie had a local boyfriend? He peered through the window again feeling a little like a Peeping Tom. Cassie and the boy had gone.

Nathan made his way out of the bookstore. As he passed the little room he glimpsed the neck-less lady and the ginger cat asleep together in the armchair.

Dodging puddles, Nathan walked back to the promenade wall, where he found Cassie waiting. As he drew near, she turned and smiled.

"Jesus, Nathan, I thought I'd lost you. Where have you been?"

Nathan tried to conceal his irritation. He reminded her about the ice cream. She stared blankly at him for a moment then covered her mouth with her hand.

"Oh my god!" she screamed. She rummaged in the pocket of her frock and pulled out the sixpence. She offered it to him. Nathan pushed her hand away.

"Keep it," he said.

Cassie shrugged and pocketed the coin.

"We'd best get back," she said. "Aunt Iffy is holding a séance tonight, which means supper is a little early."

They walked along in silence for a while, until Nathan asked a question that had been puzzling him.

"Why do you call your parents 'Aunt' and 'Uncle'? I noticed it at breakfast this morning when you were talking with your father."

Cassie thrust her hands into her pockets as she strode

along.

"They're not my real mum and dad," she said.

"They took me in when I was a toddler. They seemed so much older than other kids' parents that I began calling them Aunt Iffy and Uncle Henry. They don't mind."

Nathan felt curious about the fate of her real parents, but since she didn't volunteer further information he decided not to appear nosey by inquiring further. But he did have another question.

"That bald, skeleton-like guy at breakfast..."

Cassie turned to Nathan with a broad grin.

"You mean Franz?"

Nathan nodded.

"Who is he? What's his connection with the family."

Cassie chuckled.

"What made you suddenly think of Franz?" she asked.

"He almost knocked me down the stairs in the bookstore a little while ago."

Cassie laughed.

"And I bet he didn't apologize, right?"

Nathan nodded.

"That's because he's locked in a world of his own," said Cassie.

"But who is he?" Nathan persisted.

Cassie took Nathan's arm and pointed to a large, ugly Victorian building set back from the promenade on higher ground about a half-mile ahead of them.

"That's the Lido Hotel," she said. "During the war it was turned into a prison for captured German officers. Uncle Henry was sent down from London to interrogate them. That's how he met Aunt Iffy, by the way. She was a nurse at the prison and quite a looker back then although it's hard to believe now. Anyway, Uncle Henry took a shine to Franz. It turned out they shared a passion of some weird kind. Don't ask me to explain it. All I know is it's some crazy idea to do with musical sounds. Uncle Henry began spending more and more time off-duty with Franz in his room discussing theories, poring over books, making weird drawings and such. I'm sure the War Office would have shit themselves had they known about this. But Westward Ho! is such a long way from London, so who really cared."

"But how did Franz end up living with you?"

"The war ended and Franz discovered he had nothing to return to. His family was wiped out in the Dresden bombing. Poor sod. So Uncle Henry and Aunt Iffy took him in. He and Uncle Henry spend their time pottering around in the barn working on their 'project'."

They turned from the promenade and began climbing the

steep, twisting lane that led back to Hawksmoor. A mile up the lane they paused to catch their breath. Behind them an engorged crimson sun sank into the ocean as the Lundy Island ferry steamed its lonely way back to Bideford. Nathan noticed the tide had turned. The sea had repossessed the rock pool where the children played earlier.

"You like to look, don't you cousin Nathan."

"What do you mean?"

Cassie squinted at him. Nathan noticed she had a small gap in her otherwise perfect front teeth.

"I noticed it when I saw you from my bedroom window this morning."

"I didn't know I was being watched," Nathan responded.

Cassie persisted with her train of thought.

"You have a way of not quite participating in life," she said.

"As opposed to kissing anything with pants on and a pulse?"

Nathan regretted the words the moment they were out of his mouth. Cassie frowned and looked at him closely. He felt the intense blue eyes slip beneath his skin, exposing the tight little protective knots with which he kept the world at bay. Again, he felt like a specimen on a pin under

her gaze. Cassie smiled, but it was a smile laced with challenge.

"How would you like an adventure, Nathan Dupre?"

Now it was Nathan's turn to smile.

"Every moment with you is an adventure."

Cassie acknowledged this compliment with a nod.

"I mean a real adventure," she went on. "Life or death. I wonder if you're up to it."

#

Nathan had just slipped into a sweet dreamless sleep when he sensed a sudden sexual arousal. His eyes flitted open to discover Cassie with her hand down the front of his pajama bottoms. He tumbled out of bed.

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed from a tangled heap of sheets and blankets. "Is this what you mean by an adventure?"

Cassie stood up. She wore a pair of corduroy pants and a light sweater over a blouse.

"I was trying to wake you up in a nice way," she said. "Hurry and get dressed, we haven't much time."

Nathan glanced at the clock on his bedside table.

"It's gone midnight," he complained.

"I know, and if you don't get your pimply arse into some trousers right now we're going to miss it."

Nathan disentangled himself from the bedclothes.

"'It'? What 'it'?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I'll wait outside the door since you're such a shy boy."

Nathan pulled on his clothes and joined Cassie on the landing. She put her finger to her mouth and led the way down the stairs, every other one of which creaked as if in pain. The passage to the back door took them past a room that had been closed earlier in the day. Now it was ajar, spilling a pool of light into the hallway. Cassie stopped by the door. She motioned to Nathan, who put his eye to the gap and peered into the room. Five people sat in a tight group around a small shiny table. Nathan recognized four of them: Aunt Iffy and Uncle Henry, Franz, and the neck-less woman from the bookstore. The fifth he hadn't seen before: an imposing older woman in her sixties with a broad Slavic-looking face and tight curly gray hair half-concealed by a black shawl. The group sat in silence with eyes closed and hands linked on the table. Aunt Iffy's head suddenly slumped to her chest and a long tremulous sigh raked her frail body. Nathan heard something heavy move directly behind the door, followed by a snort and a he-haw. Cassie's hand clamped across Nathan's mouth as she pulled him down the hallway and out of the back door. Once



outside, Nathan turned to her.

"Was that what it sounded like?"

"Not so loud," whispered Cassie, leading him by the hand around the side of the house toward a small wooden shed.

"Ernest is Aunt Iffy's spirit medium. She uses him to channel Harun bin al Shadad."

Nathan stumbled into a vegetable frame and scraped his shin.

"Shit! Harun bin al who?"

"He's one of the Guardians to the Other Side. Now shut up a minute while I find the key."

Cassie felt along the top of the shed's door frame.

"Bless you Dudley Figgis for being such a creature of habit."

She held up the key, unlocked the padlock, and swung open the door.

"Hold this a moment."

She handed Nathan a candle stub. She pulled a box of matches from her pocket, struck one and lit the candle. It sputtered into life. Cassie took it from Nathan and stepped inside the shed. Holding high the candle, she scanned the contents. The usual things: spade, fork a rusted-out wheelbarrow, flowerpots, big bags of potting

soil, and cobwebbed shelves filled with bottles containing mysterious fluids and cans of pruning sealant, rooting powder and rat poison.

"Ah, there it is," exclaimed Cassie.

She pointed to the back of the shed. Nathan strained his eyes to see. Leaning against the wall, covered in bird netting, stood an ancient tandem bicycle.

"Quickly, let's get it out," said Cassie.

They had to remove half the contents of the shed before they could extract the machine.

"I hate to tell you this, but both tires are flat," said Nathan.

He was right. It looked as if the tandem hadn't been used in years.

"Shit!" said Cassie. She grabbed the candle and disappeared back into the shed. Nathan heard objects being thrown about before she emerged with a big smile and a bicycle pump.

The initial sensation as Nathan peered over Cassie's shoulder was one of delight as the tandem rolled down the sloping lane and the summer night air brushed his face.

"Why didn't we take this thing this afternoon?" he asked, as the vehicle picked up pace.

"Aunt Iffy wouldn't approve," responded Cassie over

her shoulder.

"Why not?" Nathan asked.

"She says I have no sense of danger."

The tandem sped down the slope. Cassie's hair streamed into Nathan's face and obscured his vision of the road ahead.

"Can't you slow this thing down a bit?" Nathan yelled in her ear.

"I wish I could."

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't have brakes."

"What?" Nathan screamed, almost tumbling from the saddle.

"Don't jiggle!" Cassie yelled back.

The lane's gentle slope steepened into a serious hill, which, as Nathan recalled from their afternoon's walk, warped into sharp twists and turns before it leveled out at the promenade several miles distant.

Hedgerows blurred by on either side. Nathan closed his eyes and gripped the handle bars.

"We'll be fine," Cassie shouted, "if we both lean into the bends at the same time."

#

A full moon hung over the ocean as the tandem creaked along the promenade. Pedaling became more difficult until Nathan, still shaking from their lunatic plunge down the winding hill, noticed the rear tire was riding on its rim. The tandem rolled to a stop.

Cassie inspected the tire.

"Never mind," she said. "I'll sweet-talk Figgis into picking it up in the morning. Come on, let's run."

"Run?" said Nathan. "Run where?"

Cassie pointed along the promenade. About a mile away, he could make out a dozen or so people standing by the sea wall where he'd waited for Cassie in the afternoon. On a sudden impulse they scattered away from the wall.

"It's a full moon, which means a spring tide," Cassie said. "If we don't run we'll miss the peak."

As they drew nearer, Nathan saw what made the people scatter. A tower of water rose high in the air from behind the sea wall and lashed down on them with a drenching spray. Nathan heard screams and laughter as people ran in all directions to escape the salt rain. Then, like the children's game of "What's the time, Mr. Wolf?", they tiptoed back toward the sea wall. In this game most of the players were not children but sturdy youths. At a dry distance from the spray, a gaggle of girls in tight

revealing blouses and heavy make-up cheered on their heroes and challenged in graphic terms the masculinity of those who ran too soon. Behind them, its doors open well beyond legal closing time, the Dog & Whistle pub offered a cozy vantage for viewing and refreshment.

"The trick is to count the waves breaking against the wall," said Cassie, pulling Nathan through the crowd of onlookers.

"Why's that?" Nathan asked.

"Because every seventh wave is a big one," said Cassie, who appeared to be searching for someone in the crowd. "It's not guaranteed, but..."

Screams and yells cut her short as a massive column of water leapt up with a whoosh from behind the wall, hung in the air for a moment, then lashed down.

Nathan scrambled backwards, tripped and sprawled on his backside. He shielded his face with his arms as the cold salt water drenched him from head to toe.

Cassie, who'd been niftier on her feet, peered down at him.

"Are you okay?"

Nathan nodded and stood up. He would have been more embarrassed had he not seen that a number of others had also been caught by the wave.

"I want you to meet someone," said Cassie, leading Nathan by the hand to a group of leather-clad youths standing by their motorcycles. As he drew nearer, Nathan recognized the close-cropped hair of the boy he'd seen with Cassie from the bookstore.

"Findlay," said Cassie, "I want you to meet Nathan Dupre, my cousin from Chicago, Illinois."

The youth sized up Nathan, decided he was no threat, and gave him a nod by way of welcome.

"Aren't you going to get us some scrumpy?" Cassie asked him with a sweet smile.

"Git it yerself," Findlay responded.

"Come on, Fin, you know we're under aged," Cassie wheedled.

Findlay shook his head, smiled and took a step toward the pub door.

"Ye've got money then, I take it?" he asked, turning back to Cassie.

"Oh, give me a break," Cassie pleaded. Then her eyes lit up. She rummaged in her trouser pocket and pulled out the sixpence. She pressed the coin into Findlay's large, farm-reared hand. He looked at it in mock disgust.

"Jeezus frigging Christ, it's going ter take more than a bleeding sixpence fer two pints of scrumpy."

"Well, add this to it, then," said Cassie, flinging her arms around his broad shoulders and fastening her lips to his. Nathan turned his attention to the sea wall.

Another wave reared its head above the wall and pelted down upon the scattering spectators. But there was something different about this wave's effect on the spectators. Instead of yelling, the crowd went quiet. A bandy-legged youth with a cigarette dangling from his mouth ran toward the wall and, straining with the effort, lifted an object from the ground and hoisted it above his head. From what Nathan could tell, it looked like one of the large smooth pebbles he had noticed beneath the sea wall when he watched the children play in the afternoon. The youth turned and hurled the pebble back over the wall. A roar of cheers and motorcycle horns greeted the ceremony.

"It's begun," said Cassie, back at Nathan's side, her face flushed with excitement.

"What's begun?" Nathan asked.

"The potwalloping," Cassie replied. "See, there's another one!" She pointed to a pebble, larger even than the last, glistening beside the wall. A different youth ran across, picked it up and tossed it over the side.

"This is really great," Cassie went on, her eyes wild and shining in the moonlight. "A spring tide like this

only happens once, maybe twice, a year."

Findlay appeared at their side holding two pint glasses of what Nathan imagined was beer. Cassie grabbed one of the glasses, threw back her head and gulped down half its contents. She wiped her lips with the back of her arm. Findlay seemed impressed.

"Christ, gal, have you got an elephant's bladder?"

Cassie took another draught and drained the glass. She turned to Nathan, her face flushed.

"Drink up or the tide will be over."

Nathan took a sip and screwed up his face. It wasn't any kind of beer he recognized.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Scrumpy," said Cassie. "Like cider but without the bubbles."

"And a mule's kick," broke in Findlay.

Nathan took a swig. Cassie snatched the glass from him and handed it to Findlay.

"Hold onto this for him," she said, dragging Nathan away, "we're going potwalloping."

A couple of dozen people, men and women, hunkered down behind the sea wall.

Another big wave hit and two huge pebbles slammed onto the ground behind them. The women screamed and two men ran



from the wall, hoisted the pebbles back into the sea and crouched down again.

"Do you mean to tell me the sea is hurling those huge stones over a ten-foot wall?" Nathan said.

Cassie smiled. She was looking for some spaces along the wall.

"This is nothing," she said. "One year the sea pitched a pebble through the roof of the Dog & Whistle. Come on, we can squeeze in over there."

She dragged Nathan to a spot along the wall. They crouched down just as another big wave hit. He could feel the wall shudder as the waves slammed into it on the other side. With the next big wave, a large pebble hit the ground five feet behind them. Cassie sprang forward to get to it first. She managed to lift it a few inches from the ground then dropped it.

"Leave it!" Nathan yelled. "Get back here."

Cassie stared at him as if he were insane.

"I can't leave it after I've touched it. That's seven years bad luck." She tried to lift it again and moved it a few more inches.

Nathan could sense the monster beyond the wall preparing for another stone-hurling assault.

"Shit!" he muttered. He left the safety of the wall,

ran across to Cassie and pushed her aside. "Get back to the wall," he told her.

He slid his hands beneath the stone's slick surface and lifted. He managed to get it to knee height and staggered with baby steps about ten paces before dropping it. He heard Cassie's voice shrieking from the wall: "Hurry up, Nathan!" He tried again and this time managed to hoist it to the top of the wall. As he pushed it over, a wave roared up the seaward side of the wall, sending Nathan flying. Sprawled on his back, Nathan looked up into a towering column of water. At its liquid heart he saw a blackness that grew larger and larger. At the last moment, Nathan rolled aside and a massive black pebble crunched into the ground inches from his head. People were now fleeing the wall for the safety and comfort of the Dog & Whistle. Nathan felt someone grab his arm.

"Come on," said Cassie. "The fun's over."

Fun? The notion seemed to Nathan hysterically funny. He began to laugh. Cassie looked at him and smiled.

"You almost had your head bashed in, and you're laughing about it?" she said, laughing herself. "Maybe there's hope for you yet, Nathan Dupre."

#

Nathan awoke late next morning. As he lay in bed, he sensed a tension in the house. He heard Cook's heavy footstep on the landing and whispered voices. Nathan could not make out what they were saying, though he could hear Aunt Iffy giving instructions of some kind to Cook and Cook responding, "Yes, ma'am". A minute or so later Nathan heard a vehicle scrunching on the gravel outside. He climbed out of bed and peered through the tiny dormer window. He was just in time to see a white ambulance disappear through the gate. For a while its light was visible above the hedgerow as it made its way down the lane.

Nathan pulled on his clothes and hurried downstairs. The door of the breakfast room stood open. The room was empty, although half-eaten eggs and bacon congealed on plates suggested breakfast had been suddenly abandoned. Cook entered with an empty tray. From her puffy eyes it was clear she had been crying.

"Where is everybody?" Nathan asked.

Cook stacked the dishes on the tray. She seemed to be debating within herself whether she should be talking about matters that, strictly speaking, were none of her business. The debate didn't last long. She put down the tray and eased her large frame into one of the chairs.

"The poor little wretch," she said.

Nathan knew at once that whatever had happened that morning involved Cassie.

"Where's Cassie?" he demanded. The bluntness of the question shook Cook from her lachrymose state. She looked in mild surprise at the young lad who before yesterday had been a total stranger to the family.

"The poor smidgeon had another one of her episodes," said Cook, accenting the word "episodes" to suggest a process both mysterious and maleficent. "She's had 'em before, poor little waif, but this'n were bad. Right before breakfast. Mistress called the ambulance. They've gone with her to the big hospital in Bideford."

"What happens with these episodes," Nathan asked.

Cook ignored the question. Her mind was traveling down a different path.

"I dunnat understand why it's the innocent little chicks of this world that suffers so," she said, talking to herself more than to Nathan. "I know she can be a right hellion," she went on, a smile flitting across her face as if hellions met with her approval, "but no child has a sweeter nature."

Cook turned to Nathan, her face breaking into a wider smile.

"Why, even that damned donkey, which plays havoc with my clothes line, owes its life to her."

"Ernest?" said Nathan, surprised.

"Beast near died in front of her," Cook went on, warming up to a story. "'Appened in Clovelly, three summers ago. Collapsed from a weak heart, they said. Most like the strain of carrying heavy loads up them steep cobbled streets all those years. It got its wind back, but they was ready to take it to the knacker's yard. Cassie, bless her heart, wouldn't let 'em. Stood her ground and defied them. Never seen nothing like it. She had Figgis fetch it home next day. If I'd had my druthers, the knacker would have gotten the beast, and good riddance. Anyhow, there's precious little chance of getting rid of the animal now that Missus has decided it is a spirit messenger for Harun al Whatisface. A donkey, I ask yer! Figgis has more sense than that, and he's as daft as three short planks."

Cook pulled herself from the chair and resumed stacking the breakfast dishes on the tray.

"Sitting here talking all morning won't butter my parsnips," she said, hoisting the tray and heading toward the door. "That cousin of yours will be all right, young'n. You'll see."

With nothing better to do, Nathan decided to take a stroll outside. Puffball clouds scudded across a blue sky. Nathan could hear the bleating of sheep from a pasture behind a ramshackle pole barn that stood near a small copse a hundred yards from the house. He decided to walk in that direction. Having been brought up in a city apartment, the ways of country life were quite alien to him. Maybe the fresh air and the sounds and smells of nature would help sort out the tangle of impressions and feelings churning around inside him. As Nathan neared the barn, the door slid open and Franz stepped out.

For an awkward moment they stared at each other without speaking. Then Nathan remembered something. He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out the illustrative plate. He handed it Franz.

"I think this belongs to you," said Nathan.

Frank took the page and goggled at it, trying to sort out in his head a connection between it and Nathan.

"It fell out of the book on the stairs," said Nathan, adding, "In the bookstore."

The penny dropped. Franz turned his bulbous eyes on Nathan and something that may have been a smile twitched in his face.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, yes! Much thanks! This is

most important. Most important indeed."

He continued to stare at Nathan, which made for an awkward moment.

"Well, I was just out for a walk," Nathan said, and began moving away.

After a half-dozen paces Franz called his name. Nathan turned around.

"You play the piano, yes."

Nathan nodded.

"Of course you do. You are your mother's son. Cassandra Ostrey. I heard her in Berlin before the war. Wonderful musician. Tragic affair, her death. But I'm sorry to remind you of sad things. There's too much sadness everywhere. Come with me. I'll show you something. It may interest you."

Franz indicated that Nathan follow him into the barn. Nathan hesitated. He did not want to appear rude, but he really wanted to be outside at this moment. The house had seemed closed-in to him, and the barn's gloomy interior looked even more so. He wanted to stay in the daylight for a bit. Though none of this was spoken, Franz seemed to intuit the boy's feelings. He looked up at the sky.

"It's a beautiful day," he said, and another smile struggled to establish itself on Franz's abject face.

"Henry and Iphigenia have gone with the girl to the hospital. You know this?"

Nathan nodded.

"Which means my day is free until they return. Would you like to see an old lighthouse? Good, it's settled."

#

The lighthouse perched on a small headland three miles up the coast from Westward Ho! Though it hadn't been used in more than sixty years, the solid stone walls still gave an impression of permanence and security on a stretch of coastline notorious for shipwrecks. In his excellent English, Franz explained that before the Customs and Excise built the lighthouse in the 1800's, the locals set false signal fires to lure ships onto the rocks so they could plunder the cargo.

"This light changed everything," he said. "It could be seen miles out to sea."

He stretched his arm toward the middle distance where the Atlantic swell glistened in the sunlight.

"In 1943 I saw the light myself. From the periscope of German U-boat."

Nathan looked up at Franz, who responded with a crooked smile.

"We were reconnoitering this coastline for a possible



invasion route. With British defenses concentrated along the English Channel, we thought perhaps we would come in the back door. Catch the British with their pants down. Pretty damn smart, heh?"

Franz shielded his eyes as if searching for the precise spot where the U-boat had waited beneath the ocean's surface on a summer night sixty years ago.

"I told my first officer, 'I see the light'. I gave him the coordinates, and told the crew to prepare to dive. We had other beacons to confirm along the coast before daylight. But my first officer remains hunched over charts. He's scratching his head. He looks up at me. 'Something is not right,' he says. 'According to our charts the lighthouse is eighteen points north-west of the coordinates you just gave me'. So I raise the periscope again. Check coordinates. Same coordinates. 'Wolfgang," I tell him, 'maybe our charts are a little bit off.' He gets red in the face. 'The Fuhrer's charts are never little bit off," he says. He is a loyal party member. No question in his mind the charts are accurate. 'Then Wolfgang, how do you explain the discrepancy?' He thinks for a moment. Then he announces in a matter-of-fact voice: 'The lighthouse has moved.' One of the deck officers laughs aloud. I shut him up. I'm beginning to lost patience. I

remind my first officer of certain facts we know about the Widdicombe Lighthouse. It was built in 1823 from one hundred and sixty tons of solid Devonian rock. It does not get up in middle of night and tiptoe two miles up the coast. My first officer is a stubborn man. He urges that we surface and make confirmation with binoculars. It is a full moon, he says. Visibility will be good. I remind him that visibility will be also good for any destroyer cruising the coast looking for German submarines. But I decide to err on the side of caution. We surface. I check the lighthouse with my binoculars, then hand them to my first officer. He spends a long while studying the lighthouse - its shape, its height, even the peculiar wobble in the light as it turns past the twenty-five degree mark. It is every solid inch the Widdicombe Lighthouse. My first officer lowers the binoculars. He looks at me and nods. I give the order to dive. We submerge to ten fathoms. Fifteen minutes later we run aground on those rocks over there. Do you see the tops of the tallest ones sticking out of the sea like teeth?"

Nathan could just make them out in the swirling surf.

"By our charts and visual confirmation of the lighthouse we should have missed that headland by one hundred meters at least. At least! Fifteen crew members

drowned in the wreck, including my first officer. Two years later, long after Henry had finished interrogating me and the war was almost over, he explained to me what had happened. British intelligence had learned of the alternate invasion plan. They even knew of our U-boat's mission. So a company of the Royal Corps of Engineers was ordered to demolish the Widdicome Lighthouse, transport it two miles west along the coast to a treacherous headland, and to rebuild it there. Stone by stone. And they did this in one day. One hundred and sixty tons of stone in one day. But do you know what amazes me most?"

Nathan shook his head.

"When they reinstalled the light mechanism they found it no longer wobbled when it turned past the twenty-five degree mark. In moving and rebuilding the lighthouse the wobble had somehow been corrected. It took ten electrical engineers working into the night to put the wobble back in the light. They had it fixed just one half-hour before I raised the periscope."

Franz thought for a moment, then turned to Nathan.

"Can you imagine anyone going to that much trouble in order to deceive? That is precision, Nathan. That is virtuosity of a high order."

#

Aunt Iffy and Uncle Henry returned to Hawksmoor by taxi late in the afternoon. Cassie was not with them. Uncle Henry headed straight for the barn without saying a word to anyone. After some brief words with Cook, Aunt Iffy put a stick-like arm around Nathan's shoulder and led him to the back room where he had witnessed the séance the night before. Aunt Iffy's face looked even more tragic than usual. She settled into a chair at the small polished table, closed her eyes and put her hand to her forehead. Nathan wondered if she were about to slip into a trance. After a moment she opened her eyes and rested them, moistly, on Nathan.

"My dear sweet child," she began. "your cousin will be staying at the hospital for a little while."

"How long?" Nathan demanded. "What's wrong with her?"

The force of the boy's questions startled Aunt Iffy. Whatever soothing words she had prepared in her mind became jumbled into confusion. Her long bony fingers fluttered on the table-top as if grasping for her derailed train of thought.

"What's wrong with her?" Nathan insisted.

Aunt Iffy sighed and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Well, you see, she has a condition," she began.

"She's had it since early childhood. It's partly physical

and it's partly, well..." Aunt Iffy put her hand to the side of her head to complete the sentence.

"Will she be okay?" Nathan asked.

"There are treatments," Aunt Iffy continued, her voice slipping into a tremolo over which she had no control, "that seem to help but they are rather taxing." Aunt Iffy forced a smile, "But there's every likelihood she'll be back with us in a few weeks."

"Weeks?" Nathan shouted the word across the table, making Aunt Iffy jump. He had not intention of upsetting his aunt, but the mention of weeks seemed an unconscionable amount of time. He softened his voice for his next question.

"When can I visit her?"

Aunt Iffy wilted as if she were about to slip beneath the table.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. Not for any of us. The doctors are quite insistent. For the treatments to be effective, Cassie needs total peace and quiet. Nothing to excite her poor, precious little head."

Large tears began rolling down Aunt Iffy's cheeks, carrying a slick of black mascara with them. Nathan felt bad that he'd been so concerned for his own feelings that he hadn't thought to consider his aunt's emotional turmoil.

He reached across the table and laid his hand on her arm.

"Bless you, sweet child," she said, dabbing away the tears with a handkerchief covered in kabalistic signs. She made an effort to pull herself together and placed her hand on Nathan's.

"Since we're having this little chat, now might be a good moment for me to make an announcement. It's something of a surprise. I've found a piano teacher for you."

This statement was indeed a surprise. In fact, it was such an unexpected segue from the matter in hand that Nathan pushed back his chair in astonishment.

"Piano lessons?"

"Yes, my dear," Aunt Iffy pressed on, trying to build up a head of steam that would discourage interruptions.

"Madame Soler. Quite an extraordinary woman, although her personal habits may seem a little strange at first. But impeccable credentials. She was once a pupil of Nadia Boulanger in Paris. She now lives in Croyd, quite alone, and she is accepting pupils. In fact, I rather think you may be her only pupil. She's rather fastidious – I mean picky, Nathan dear – about whom she teaches. But when I told her of your background, your provenance, so to speak, she immediately became interested. I've arranged with the taxi company to pick you up at 3 p.m. on Wednesdays,

beginning tomorrow afternoon. There's a rather decent spinet in the basement. Hasn't been used in years, but a thorough tuning should cure that. I'll ask Figgis and Franz to haul it up into the front room so you'll have something to practice on. So you see it's all quite settled."

Aunt Iffy affixed an expression of resolution to her constitutionally irresolute face, hoping against hope it would hold in place at least for the next few minutes.

"But Aunt Iffy, I don't want to play the piano anymore," Nathan responded.

"My dear, you mustn't say such a silly thing. After all those years of study. Such a talent cannot be allowed to blush unseen. It belongs to the world."

"Well, the world can screw itself," said Nathan, with more asperity than he'd intended. "I'm done with the piano."

Aunt Iffy gathered her scattered wits for one final assault.

"Nathan, you don't quite know what you're saying. You're upset. The unfortunate circumstances of your mother's bereavement are still fresh in your mind. And now this business with Cassie. It's all very understandable."

"I'm done with the piano."

"But when you've had a moment to think things over..."

"I've thought things over."

"It seems such a terrible waste."

"I'm sorry."

"But it's what your mother wants!"

Nathan stared at his aunt. Her face registered the final exhaustion of dissembling twitches and tics. She lived now from the raw nerve of truth. Nathan asked in a quiet voice: "How do you know what my mother wants?"

"I spoke with her," responded Aunt Iffy.

"When?"

"Last night at the séance. Harun put her through."

Nathan closed his eyes. Aunt Iffy grasped this as a sign of encouragement.

"It's just like Harun to do that. I had no thought of trying to contact Cassandra. In fact, we were trying to channel that musician-inventor fellow who's been helping Franz and Henry with their project in the barn. What's his name? Something Carillo. A sweet little man who comes through clear as a bell. He's so excited that Franz and Henry are completing the project he had to leave unfinished. But where was I? Ah, yes, last night we could tell Ernest was restless. I'm sorry, I should explain. Ernest is our spirit link to Harun, who's one of



the three hundred and thirty three Threshold Guardians to the Other Side. It's a little like a relay race. We contact Ernest, who contacts Harun, who 'calls the name' of the deceased we seek to contact. Usually it goes like clockwork. But last night Harun reported a 'disturbance' at the portal. Someone *un-called* was seeking contact. Strictly speaking, Harun should have observed our wishes and put Mr. Carillo through. But he's such an impulsive Guardian that he switched Cassandra through instead. You can imagine our surprise. Particularly mine. I hadn't spoken with my sister in years, alive or dead. Because of our age difference we were never close as children. And when she moved to America, our only contact was an occasional letter. Of course, I was always delighted to hear from her. And particularly of my talented nephew. Anyway, after we'd recovered from our shock around the table, Cassandra implored me to find a good teacher so you could continue your musical studies. It was desperately important to her. She made me promise, Nathan, and I did. She also asked me to tell you that she's keeping busy, and not to worry about her."

#

Nathan resisted the idea of piano lessons for a week. But Aunt Iffy's reproachful look at the breakfast table day

after day wore him down. Also the continued absence of Cassie, with no indication of when she might return from the hospital, left him at a loose end. If nothing else, the taxi ride to Croyd, a village on the other side of the River Tor, would make for a change of scenery.

Madame Soler's home turned out to be a small cottage set some distance back from a narrow lane. It was a quintessentially Devonian cottage, floating in a riot of English country blooms. Beaming sunflowers contended with ambitious hollyhocks to see who could climb highest up the front wall. Musk roses gilded the lower windowsills and on either side of the narrow stone path that led to the front door foxgloves, daisies, lupins and forget-me-nots rubbed shoulders in promiscuous profusion. The whole effect indicated the careless artistry of a green thumb.

Nathan knocked at the front door. No answer. He tried again, louder this time. Still no response. Nathan walked around to the back of the cottage. He paused to look down the long narrow garden, framed on either side by an herbaceous border. Farther down, a trellis covered in sweet peas half hid a small herb garden and a vegetable patch in which carrots, beetroots and leeks stood smartly to attention in regimented rows.

The back door stood open. Nathan knocked and waited.

Something smelled good.

"I expect you could use a slice of gooseberry pie."

Nathan jumped. Behind him stood the Slavic-looking woman with the tight curly-gray hair he had spotted at Aunt Iffy's séance. She carried a pair of pruning shears and a half-dozen yellow roses. The petals glowed as if the sun was folded into them. The old woman took Nathan's arm and led him into a small kitchen, where the source of the enticing aroma sat waiting on a counter.

"Sit, sit," she said, as she cut a large wedge from the pie, slipped it on an old cracked plate and handed it to Nathan along with a fork. He broke off a piece of pie with the fork and was raising it to his mouth, when the old woman cried out: "Wait! First we do introductions and toasts."

Her joints creaked as she stooped to retrieve a bottle and two small glasses from a cupboard beneath the sink. She set the glasses on the table and removed the bottle cork with her teeth. Nathan watched with alarm as she filled the tiny glasses to the brim with a clear fluid. The old woman smiled and turned the bottle label toward Nathan. It depicted a hermit standing beside a clear blue lake. The lettering beneath the picture was in an alphabet Nathan didn't recognize.

"Red pepper vodka from Lake Baykal," she said, flinging back her glass and draining it with one gulp. "Very difficult to obtain," she continued, and pointed to Nathan's glass. "Drink up!"

Nathan raised the little glass to his lips and took a sip. The fiery fluid slipped between his lips and set the inside of his mouth aflame. The old woman waited for Nathan to finish choking, then topped up both glasses.

"Now watch me," she said. "Like this!"

She knocked back the drink, snapped her empty glass down on the table-top, sighed and turned her dark eyes on Nathan.

"No, really, I can't drink it," he said, pushing aside his glass.

"Sure you can," she said, refilling her glass. "Watch one more time. Pay careful attention to my hand."

She flicked her wrist as if throwing the vodka to the back of her throat. This time a tiny shiver of pleasure accompanied her sigh. She pointed to Nathan's glass.

He picked it up, closed his eyes, and threw the contents as far to the back of his mouth as he could. He had prepared himself to choke, perhaps die, but the effect was quite different. The liquid rippled through his body with a warmth that unlocked tensions he didn't realize he

had. Even his thoughts became lighter.

The old woman watched him closely.

"Excellent!" she said. "Now we can make formal introductions. Nathan Dupre, it is my intense pleasure to introduce myself, Madame Soler."

She paused until Nathan realized it was his turn.

"Madame Soler," he began, noticing that he didn't have quite the accustomed control over his speech, "it is also my intense pleasure to introduce myself, Nathan Dupre."

Madame Soler slapped the table with her hand.

"Bravo! Now we can begin."

Nathan picked up his fork and aimed it toward the gooseberry pie on his plate.

"No, no, no!" Madame Soler exclaimed, catching hold of Nathan's hand. "First we toast the Greats."

Nathan dropped the fork.

"The Greats?" he asked.

Madame Soler nodded vigorously.

"The great composers," she said. "Today we shall skip the Romantics because they are so many. We will instead toast the great forebears of the Western classical tradition."

Madame Soler topped up the glasses and held hers in front of her.

"To Johann Sebastian Bach," she proclaimed and downed the vodka.

She gave Nathan an encouraging nod.

He picked up the small glass.

"To Johann Sebastian Bach," he yelled, knocking back the vodka. As he slapped down the empty glass on the table he wondered who else Madame Soler might have in mind as "great forebears of the Western classical tradition". Bach had nine children, four of them also composers. Was it possible they were going to toast each one of them? It was with no small relief that he heard Madame Soler skip the younger Bachs and go straight to Franz Joseph Haydn. By the time they reached Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the third and last toast to the "greats", Nathan's muscles, bones and sinews had liquefied into a body of light. He had never felt more lucid.

As Nathan forked ambrosial chunks of gooseberry pie into his mouth, Madame Soler leaned across the table and fixed him with her large black eyes.

"Now about this piano problem Iphigenia tells me about," she said, tapping Nathan gently on the arm. "I know you're mother died and this is a big sadness. And this sadness is all around you like a fog. Where does the fog come from, Nathan?"

Nathan put down his fork. For the first time he became aware of the ticking of a large ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. Madame Soler repeated the question.

Nathan looked up at her.

"From the piano," he murmured.

"From inside the piano?"

"Yes."

Madame Soler lowered her eyes as if she were thinking over his response. After a moment, she looked up again and slapped the table with her hand, making the tiny vodka glasses jiggle.

"No problem!" she declared. "We forget about the piano. Screw the piano! Screw all the pianos! The big ones, the little ones, the in-between ones – screw them all twice over! But, Nathan, every Wednesday I bake a pie and you come here for your lesson."

#

For the next six weeks, Nathan turned up at the cottage for a piano lesson during which he never once touched or even caught sight of a piano. He began to wonder if Madame Soler had a piano in the house.

Each lesson began with the smell of fresh-baked pie as Nathan walked up the narrow stone path through the lupins and forget-me-nots. Each pie seemed more delicious than

the last. Madame Soler's back garden offered not only a profusion of gooseberries, but also strawberries, raspberries, quinces, damsons, loganberries and exquisite sloes which, sweetened with honey, deliquesced upon the tongue with a pinprick of tartness.

The toasts multiplied as they worked their way through the Romantics, from Schubert to Berlioz. By the third week, Madame Soler had to creak her way down to the cellar to retrieve a fresh bottle of vodka. Once done with the Romantics, Nathan imagined the toasts might ease up a bit. But he hadn't reckoned with The Russians. In addition to the well-known figures – Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Borodin, Smetana, Rimsky-Korsakov, Shostakovich, Mussorgksy, Scriabin and Stravinsky – Madame Soler also dredged up Dargomyzhsky, Gniesin, Ippolito-Ivanov, Scherbatchov, Viyelgorsky, Dunaevsky, Slonimoky, Miaskovsky, Vasilenko, Taneyev and Kalinnikov. Nathan had his suspicions about their qualifications for "greatness", but they toasted them anyway.

After the toasts, they moved to a small sitting room and collapsed into armchairs. A large stone fireplace dominated the room. Above it hung a forested landscape by Levitan, which looked as if it might be an original. At this point in the lesson, Madame Soler usually launched



into a story. The stories took different forms. Some were rambling, sentimental accounts of her childhood in Moscow. Others were pointed and often hilarious satires of musicians and their peculiar habits and obsessions. But on the fifth visit, Madame Soler, more expansive even than usual, began a story to which she took the unusual step of appending a title:

### ***Godolfini's Violin***

*I don't expect you to have heard of Tomasio Godolfini. Few nowadays remember his name. The encyclopedias grant him only a passing mention, listing a half-dozen etudes and a caprice, and dismissing Godolfini as but one of a legion of virtuosi who trod the trail blazed by the peerless Nicolo Paganini. In one sense, the neglect is justified. The etudes are derivative and the caprice is laughably unplayable – you would need three hands to make it work! But with others' music, Tomasio could conjure his instrument to sing like an angel. As with the Genoese master, who'd died just a few years earlier, women flocked to Tomasio's recitals. They threw themselves at him, body and soul. More body than soul, perhaps. It makes one wonder: What is this connection between virtuosity and the female libido?*

*Where did this young man, so handsome, so charming, so*

talented — where did he spring from? Therein lies a puzzle. Nothing is known about his background before he arrived in Genoa, almost a year to the day after Paganini's death. Not a thing. Not a scrap of a record. Not a mention in a diary or register or court document or lover's letter or tailor's bill. Nothing. Godolfini himself brushed aside all such inquiries. "I am here," he would respond with rakish disdain, "isn't that enough for you?"

Of course, the inevitable happened. People began to whisper that Paganini had returned in the body of this elegant young man. His playing certainly approached the bravura of a Paganini. He was adept at all the tricks: the left-hand pizzicato, double-stop harmonics, ricochet bowings. He had the virtuoso technique under his finger tips. The same finger tips that teased the secret parts of women into a frenzy of passion.

["Nathan, I trust to your maturity that I can talk frankly about such things."]

One evening, after a concert in which Godolfini dazzled and seduced the audience into demanding fifteen encores, an old man approached the maestro in his dressing room as he was packing away his instrument. Godolfini looked up, surprised to find the old man there. He was also a little irritated since he was anticipating at any

moment the arrival of a young woman who's abundant cleavage, so entrancingly visible from the stage, had tormented Godolfini almost beyond endurance. During the intermission he sent a note to her. When he returned to the stage, the sight of those trembling hemispheres as she leaned forward in her seat, and the bold, unambiguous smile when their eyes met, were all the assurance he sought for an evening of delight to follow. But now he had to deal with this ancient intruder. Something about him appeared just a little familiar to Godolfini. That shock of white hair and emaciated, almost spectral, face: hadn't Godolfini glimpsed him staring down from the nosebleed seats at Mainz? And, before that, in Scharhausen? Now that this connection had been made, it suddenly seemed to Godolfini that this melancholy face had been a background fixture at all of his concerts and recitals.

"Pray, what can I do for you?" Godolfini asked, struggling to keep a tang of irritation out of his voice, while yet remaining brisk and businesslike. Godolfini had the showman's sense of noblesse oblige. A crumb of attention must be paid to one's idolaters.

The man stared hard at Godolfini.

"Burn it," he said, in a cracked whisper.

It was Godolfini's turn to stare hard at the stranger.

"I'm not sure I quite caught what you said," he responded.

"Burn it," the man repeated, louder and quite distinctly this time.

Godolfini glanced toward the door and was relieved to see it standing ajar. Should this strange fellow turn out to be an escapee from a local lunatic asylum, inspired by some deranged hatred of music, rescue could be quickly summoned. Yet he was so pathetically thin. A feather would knock him down. Godolfini took comfort from this observation and decided, at least for the moment, to humor his uninvited guest.

"What is the 'it', my dear sir, that I should burn with such urgency."

The man pointed to the violin Godolfini was about to place in its silk-lined case.

"That thing!" he said, injecting the word "thing" with a disgust that sent a tremor through his frail body.

Startled, Godolfini looked down at the instrument, then up at the man. He began to snicker and soon was laughing aloud.

"This is no laughing matter," the man snapped.

Godolfini pulled himself together.

"Indeed it is not," he replied, no longer striving to

keep the tartness from his voice. This bizarre interview had gone on long enough, he thought. Time to cut it short.

"I'm rather fatigued, as you might imagine, and I am expecting company at any moment. Now, if you don't mind..."

Godolfini stood and extended the violin bow toward the door.

"Sit down!" barked the man.

Without knowing quite why, Godolfini sat. The old man took a small step toward him.

"You'll have plenty of opportunity to diddle that young woman with the big titties sitting in the third row of the orchestra who seemed to inspire your performance this evening. That is of no consequence. What I have to say to you, however, is of the utmost consequence. It concerns, sir, your immortal soul."

In other circumstances, Godolfini would have brushed aside such sententious nonsense. But he felt no such inclination at this moment. It took Godolfini a moment to arrange his thoughts.

"Sir, I hold in my hands an artifact from the workshop of Antonio della Sigure, master instrument maker of Cremona, mentor to Stradivari and Guaneri and spiritual heir to the divine Amati. I would rather burn in hell than consign such craftsmanship to the flames."

"So you very may well," responded the old man in a quiet voice.

Godolfini's patience snapped. He set the violin in its case, strode across the room and flung wide the door.

"I didn't invite you into my room. Now I am ordering you out of it."

The old man ignored the demand and settled himself, with an arthritic sigh, into a well-upholstered chaise lounge, a piece of furniture for which Godolfini had quite other plans for the evening.

"This is really too much!" Godolfini exclaimed. He was about to add a good deal more when, to his horror, the old man reached forward and lifted the violin from its case. Godolfini darted across the room to interpose himself between the old man and the hearth where a fire crackled briskly.

The old fellow looked up, and his face broke into a smile, or something close.

"I have no power to destroy this. Only you can do that."

"But why on earth would I want to?" demanded Godolfini. His composure had begun to fray around the edges. "I make my living from that instrument."

The old man held the violin at arm's length, as if it

were infected with plague.

"No, this devil's handiwork makes its living from you," he said. "Come closer and I will show you what I mean."

Godolfini edged forward – then lunged and grabbed the violin from the old man's hands. He clasped it to his bosom like a mother reunited with her abducted child.

"Have you ever listened to it," the old man asked.

"Are you mad? I listen to it whenever I play, as do thousands of others," Godolfini replied.

The old man pulled himself to his feet and approached Godolfini, who clasped the violin even tighter.

"Listen to it now," said the old man.

Godolfini looked perplexed. "But I'm not playing it now."

"Precisely," said the old man. "Now is the time to hear what you have failed to hear all these years. Humor an old man. Put the sound board to your ear and tell me what you hear."

Godolfini sighed. "If it will finally get rid of you," he said, and put the violin's sound board to his ear. He held it there for a moment, then lowered it with a shrug.

"Nothing," he said. "Now if you would be so kind as ..."

*"Listen again!" interjected the old man. He added a soft "please" which so caught Godolfini by surprise that he raised the violin again to his ear. For a few seconds his face retained its disdainful expression. But then, by degrees, it began to change. A flicker of sadness crossed his face. This deepened into a profound sorrow. Godolfini began to weep. He lowered the violin and sank down onto the chaise lounge, his head hanging on his chest. He sobbed like a baby.*

*The old man regarded him for a moment with compassion, then left the room.*

*[Madame Soler took a sip of tea. Nathan leaned forward in his armchair. She smiled at the boy. "What did Godolfini hear from inside the violin, and did he actually throw the instrument in the fire? I can see from your eyes, these are burning questions. I will address the second one first."]*

*Yes, Godolfini did thrust his beloved Sigure into the flames. But straightaway he pulled it out again. Apart from some minor singeing of the scrollwork, it was undamaged.*

*For a year, Godolfini did not play the violin. He departed for Italy and closeted himself in his summer villa in the Val d'Orcia. The "official" explanation was that he*



was exhausted from years of recitaling and needed to rest. Of course, gossip elaborated this into a nervous breakdown, and even that the ineffable purity of his high E had, from repeated performance, perforated Godolfini's eardrums and rendered him deaf and unable to play any more. In other words, the expected tittle-tattle. Darker rumors also emerged. Two servants, man and wife, who claimed to have fled Godolfini's villa in fear of their lives, spoke of screams in the night and strange comings and goings at all hours. These disturbing stories began to gather circulation, until Godolfini revealed in a note to the local magistrate that the servants had been dismissed for stealing silverware. The servants were drummed out of the town and after that people left him in peace and the name of Godolfini dropped off the edge of the world.

Or seemed to. Months later a poster appeared in a railway station in Krakow: "Maestro Godolfini - The Second Paganini - Will Perform a Selection of His Compositions Including a New Work Entitled, 'Lucifer's Caprice.'"

You could count on your thumbs the number of people who turned up for the recital, held in an obscure hall smelling of rotting fish in a remote suburb of the city. Most were local drunks and derelicts seeking a warm refuge for a winter's evening. But the audience did contain one

distinguished guest. Returning by train from a visit to Moscow, the Viennese music critic Oscar Stein found himself stranded in Krakow due to heavy snow in the Tatry Mountains. He noticed the recital poster. It piqued his interest. Rather than spend a bleak night in a railway station, he hired a horse-drawn cab to seek out the performance hall. A few years later he included a brief account of that evening in his memoir, "Musical Nights." He described a gaunt, almost cadaverous Godolfini, who sneered down at the sparse audience before launching into the first etude. Stein noted that the playing was virtuosity of the highest order, but that it had – how did he put it? – something of a fraught quality, as if the performer were being pursued by demons in velvet slippers. But this was nothing to compare with the urbane critic's astonishment when Godolfini stepped forward to perform the final work of the evening, the "Lucifer's Caprice." I believe I can recall Herr Stein's exact words: "This walking skeleton twisted and cavorted about the stage, his eyes blazing as if he were in secret communion with Beelzebub, while his instrument screeched like a tortured cat."

In another recital shortly after, Godolfini exhibited himself to the audience. Three ladies fainted. The

*authorities were called. Godolfini was committed to a local asylum, where on a cold moonless night he hung himself with the strings from his violin.*

Madame Soler stopped talking. She stared at the floor for a long while. Nathan leaned forward and tapped her on the knee.

"What happened to the violin," he asked.

Her face lit up.

"Of course, of course," she exclaimed.

She pulled herself from the armchair and crossed to a large teak armoire. She groped around on the top shelf and returned to the armchair carrying a battered black violin case. She handed the case to Nathan.

"Open it," she said.

Nathan flicked open the rusted latches. Inside rested a violin, a venerable instrument whose varnish had darkened to a rich sepia. It had no strings, and a portion of the scrollwork showed evidence of fire damage.

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to tell you how I came by this instrument," Madame Soler said. "All I know is I've been waiting a long time for the right person to show it to."

Nathan stared at the instrument.

"Take it out and hold it," said Madame Soler.

Nathan hesitated.

"Go ahead," she urged. "It won't bite."

Nathan lifted the instrument from its case. He was surprised by how light it felt.

"Hold the soundboard to your ear."

Again, Nathan hesitated. Madame Soler smiled and rolled her eyes. Feeling a little foolish, Nathan raised the soundboard to his ear. At first he noticed nothing, except the musty smell of old wood kept too long in the dark. Then he heard it: a faint sob, from inside the violin. A child's sob. Nathan held the instrument closer to his ear. The sobbing intensified. It seemed to come from every part of the violin, swelling and filling the soundboard, a lonely, helpless sound. Tears welled up in Nathan's eyes. He wanted to tear the violin from his ear, but he couldn't. Amid the tumult of sobbing he now heard, faintly at first then louder, another sound: his name. "Nathan..." the voice sounded. "Nathan..." – so much like his mother. The voice uncoiled from the instrument and slipped into Nathan's ear, snaking its way deep inside him. Nathan glimpsed Madame Soler's face. She sat upright in her armchair, her eyes closed tight.

#

At the next lesson there was no pie and no toasts. Instead Madame Soler led Nathan to a room he had not seen before. A vintage Bechstein, battered and scuffed with the passage of years but still a magnificent instrument, dominated the small room. Madame Soler pulled a sheet of music from a shelf crammed with scores and set it on the music stand. She tapped the piano stool with her hand, inviting Nathan to sit. Nathan hesitated. Madame Soler fixed him with her large dark eyes.

"It is time," she said.

Nathan sat and glanced at the music. It was a Chopin etude, a piece booby-trapped with whiplash dynamics and a seductive melody that slipped from hand to hand like a woman of loose virtue. He began to play, hesitantly at first then with growing confidence. It felt strange to once more be in control of a machine that had been a part of his life since he could remember. He also recognized a familiar comfort that harkened back to childhood. If he stayed close to the notes he would be safe. The lines of the musical staff were like railroad tracks. Beyond them, on either side, lay chaos — a land of torture and pain and inexplicable cruelties where creatures with heads growing out of their backs ran wild. But if he stayed on track, no matter how difficult things became, the music would bring

him home unscathed.

Halfway through the piece, Madame Soler stopped him.

"Yes, it's good," she said. "Technically, I would say it is even exceptional. I can tell this. But there is also something lacking. Something your mother had. You know what I mean?"

Nathan shook his head.

"Danger is lacking," said Madame Soler.

"What do you mean?" Nathan protested. "I played the notes, I observed the dynamics."

Madame Soler thought for a moment.

"It's not about the notes and the dynamics. They are essential, of course. But Chopin invites you to something else – to risk, to unpredictability, to discovery. This invitation he offers only to the truly accomplished, not the hacks and tinkle-plonkers who fill the concert halls today. You hear Chopin's invitation, but you hold back. The question is why."

Madame Soler leaned forward and flipped the pages of music. She pointed to a passage.

"Play from here."

Nathan began the section and after a half-dozen bars Madame Soler clapped her hands. Nathan stopped playing.

"Read to me what it says three bars back from where

you stopped," she said.

Nathan squinted at the score.

"'Tempo rubato'" he said.

"You know what rubato means?"

"Of course," Nathan replied. "To vary the time for greater expression."

Madame Soler shook her head. As she spoke, her words burrowed deeper and deeper into Nathan.

"You must *steal* time, Nathan," she said with great emphasis. "Rubato comes from the Italian. It means 'robbed'. You rob from the tempo – you rob from time. You don't shoplift a little bit here, a little bit there. You must be an audacious thief! Steal the whole caboodle from right under Chopin's nose! That's what a virtuoso does. Are you such a man, Nathan? The voice is inside you, but are you reckless enough to follow wherever it leads, even to insanity? Will you sinter and burn for your art, Nathan, or will you grow old and fat and comfortable? Are you truly your mother's son, or are you merely talented?"

#

At his next visit to Madame Soler a bottle of red pepper vodka and two small glasses had returned to the table. As Madame Soler filled the glasses, she announced:

"This is the last time we shall meet." The news hit Nathan with a dull thud in the stomach.

"Why?"

It seemed such a puny word for all he was feeling.

Madame Soler slugged back the vodka. She pointed to Nathan's glass, but he shoved it aside. It fell from the table and splintered on the stone floor.

"No, I need to know why," he said, with a violence that took him by surprise. "You can't just abandon me like this. I'm tired of people doing that."

Madame Soler looked at him, and for the first time Nathan saw how old she was. She had always been fastidious in her make-up. Today she wore none. While her eyes remained bright, her cheeks were sunken and the skin bagging in her jowls. It seemed to Nathan a wretched container for such a fierce spirit. Yet at the same time there was a beautiful heroism in the way she allowed herself to be seen unpainted.

Nathan felt a confusion of emotions sluice through him.

"I'm sorry about the glass," was all he could think of saying.

"Forget about the glass," replied Madame Soler.

She picked up her glass and hurled it against the wall



where it shattered with a pop, skittering bright shards across the countertop and floor. Madame Soler's eyes did not move from Nathan.

"Where are you, Nathan?" The voice sounded as if it was coming from some resonant space inside Nathan.

"What do you mean?," he replied.

Madame Soler paused as if she was organizing in her mind something elusive that needed to be expressed.

"I mean your absence, Nathan. Your absence from your own life. When did you leave and where have you been? Your mother's suicide..."

"My mother died in a plane crash," Nathan broke in, feeling Madame Soler's words lance through him like burning iron. "My mother ..." he repeated, then faltered.

"Cassandra Ostrey died as she lived, Nathan – wild and entirely selfish," said Madame Soler. She continued as if talking to herself: "She was brilliant, talented, a musical prodigy, the kind of "little virtuoso" newspapers love to write nonsense about. From the age of four she was on display, a tiny thing seated before a big black box full of levers, pedals and wires. She discovered she could control this beast. She could make it dance and sing. It was at Julliard that she received her first warning. Her professor's students were gathered for a studio recital.

Cassandra was the star of the studio and she knew it. She raised her hands to play – and froze. She could not move. All she had to do was let her hands sink down into the keys: gravity would do the rest. But her hands refused. They hovered immobile above the keys, defying gravity. No effort of will would unlock them. Her body began to tremble. The professor asked her what was wrong. She turned toward him, her face pale and terrified, and then she collapsed. Later, she said all she could remember was feeling the way she had once felt as a child when she became separated from her mother in a large department store. She had been admiring a pretty doll. When she turned around her mother was gone. She was alone in a world of strangers. Cassandra experienced two more such episodes after graduating from Julliard and beginning her concert career. One happened in Paris, and was passed off as an "indisposition". The second occurred at the Wigmore Hall in London. She froze at the opening of Beethoven's "Hammerclavier" sonata. Two days later she flung herself into the River Thames."

Madame Soler paused. Tears streamed down Nathan's cheeks. Madame Soler reached across the table and took his hand in hers.

"Nathan, it is time to step into your own story," she

continued. "You are not your mother. For one thing, you are not as gifted. But count that as a blessing. You will make a name, you will be applauded, and you will slip into a comfortable, forgetful and impotent middle age."

Madame Soler eased herself to her feet. She retrieved two new glasses from the cupboard beneath the sink, filled them with vodka and offered one of them to Nathan.

"We will make one last toast together and then we will part."

Madame Soler raised the glass. "Tempo rubato!" she cried and downed the vodka with a single defiant gulp.

#

As the taxi returned him to Hawksmoor after the final lesson with Madame Soler another cab approached them down the narrow lane leading from the house. Nathan's driver had to pull into the hedgerow so the other cab could squeeze by. This cab was empty, which for Nathan could mean only one thing. It had just dropped off a fare at Hawksmoor. As his cab pulled into the driveway, Nathan leapt from it before it stopped. Cook stood by the front entrance. She smiled at Nathan and pointed to the back of the house.

Nathan ran around the side of the building.

She was standing at the bottom of the garden by a gate, staring across the cornfields and pasture toward the distant ocean.

"Cassie!"

She turned at Nathan's call, appeared for a moment to be searching for a name to fit a face, then smiled and waved back. Nathan ran up to her. After a moment's hesitation he flung his arms around her. She began to laugh, but when he tried to kiss her she pushed him away.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

Nathan was taken aback by the force of this repulsion, but kept in mind where she had been and what she had likely gone through during the past couple of months.

"I'm sorry," he said, blushing. "My impetuosity got the better of me."

"I should say so," she responded, but in her next statement a glint of the Cassie he remembered broke through this frosty exterior. "Anyway, when did you become infected with impetuosity, Nathan Dupre?"

Nathan smiled.

"It's great to have you back," he said.

Cassie looked at him, and it was as if her gaze flowed around him and rested on some distant object visible only to her.

"They had no choice," she said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Cassie narrowed her gaze on Nathan.

She looked older though still pretty, with her cascade of blonde curls and the little gap in her otherwise perfect front teeth that he found so charming. Yet in a few weeks she had grown into a dimension where he couldn't quite see all of her.

"I told them to bring me back to Hawksmoor or I'd kill myself," she said, her voice level and matter-of-fact.

All Nathan could do was stare. Cassie smiled.

"That knocked the wind out of you, didn't it," she said.

"I can't believe you just said what you did," he replied.

Cassie pulled back the sleeves on her pullover to reveal bandages on both her wrists.

"I think I made my point to them," she said. She winked at Nathan. "You can kiss me now, if you like."

Cook's voice calling them to supper rescued Nathan from the immediate demand of trying to make emotional sense of what he'd heard.

He turned and hurried toward the house.

Cassie watched him for a moment.

"Oh, well," she said to herself, following Nathan.  
"Maybe later."

When Nathan and Cassie arrived at the supper table, Uncle Henry and Franz were locked in a discussion about their project. The name "Julian Carillo" came up repeatedly and quite a heated dispute developed as to the number of times one could "split the tone". Uncle Henry, wielding a chunk of beef sausage on the end of his fork, maintained there was no limit. He waved the sausage around the table in search of validation. Aunt Iffy averted her eyes and Nathan and Cassie presented him with expressions of such cosmic vacuity that he gave up and turned back to Franz.

"Microtonal division," he said, punctuating his point with the impaled sausage, "is held back only by the limitations of the present technology."

"Theoretically, yes," replied Franz, stretching his head like a snapping turtle toward Uncle Henry. "But in the land of living things, these limitations are insurmountable. Consider the technology of the human ear. Sensory data passes through a *mechanical* interface – the bones and drum of the ear – before it reaches the electrical circuits of the brain. It is mediated, Henry, by *mechanical* processes. We are *mechanisms*. Everything

beyond the mechanistic domain – art, philosophy, music, literature – is a card trick. We permit ourselves to be deceived in the name of a fiction called culture. It is tragic that we are so willing to sacrifice the purity of the machine to such a gaudy harlot.”

“But Carillo in *The Thirteenth Sound*,” responded Uncle Henry, his face reddening, “makes it transparently clear that ...”

Franz interrupted: “Whatever theoretical position he takes, Carillo was constrained to recognize the mechanical limitations of tone division with his *Metamorphosen* Piano. He reached sixteen divisions of the tone perceptible to the human ear. Maybe we will achieve thirty-two divisions with our *Metamorphosen* II. Beyond that, I fear, lies an irreversible glissade into madness.”

“Poppycock,” responded Uncle Henry, wrenching the piece of sausage from the end of the fork with his teeth. “I thought all you Germans were idealists.”

“I had a bellyful of idealism in the last war, thank you very much,” said Franz.

An uneasy silence hovered over the table. Aunt Iffy, in a dither, summoned Cook to bring more toast and a fresh pot of tea.

Cassie turned to her uncle.

"Uncle Henry," she said, "Nathan here is a pianist. I'm sure he'd be fascinated to see a demonstration of your project."

Uncle Henry chewed over this suggestion along with his sausage. He swigged down the remains of his tea.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, my sweet," he responded, pushing a frizzled fragment of bacon rind around on his plate. "Unfortunately, the project is not quite ready for public demonstration."

Cassie broke into a peal of laughter. Unnerved by the sudden noise, Aunt Iffy poured hot tea into her lap instead of her cup.

"But Uncle Henry," Cassie continued, ignoring Aunt Iffy's moans as Cook helped her into the kitchen, "you and Franz have been working on this thing for fifteen years. It's almost as old as I am. If not now, when will it be ready to show to the world?"

"She has a point, Henry," said Franz. "Sooner or later we have to let go."

Uncle Henry fixed Franz with a look of alarm tinged with a faint gleam of interest.

"But what about the temperament calibration?" he asked.

"It's close enough," said Franz.



"And the arpeggination modulator you were working on?"

"Fixed it yesterday," responded Franz, grinning like a gargoyle.

Uncle Henry nibbled a corner of toast and ran his hand through his thin gray hair as he thought this over. A twitch began at the corners of his mouth and almost developed into a smile when he shook his head vigorously and slapped the table with his hand.

"It's no good, I'm afraid," he said. "You're forgetting about the leak in the boiler."

Franz took a moment to think this over.

"That's true," Franz muttered, half to himself. "But it's only a tiny leak. A small weld should patch it. And if we watch the pressure regulator carefully, we should be able to keep the Metamorphosen running for at least five minutes without fear of explosion."

Uncle Henry raked out his ear with his pinkie, tasted its contents with the tip of his tongue – and pushed back his chair.

"Against my better judgment," he announced, and turning to Nathan, added: "Come on, my boy."

#

The Metamorphosen II resembled the illustration of the Grubmannspiel that Nathan discovered in the bookstore at

Westward Ho! The basis of the device was a Steinway concert grand piano. This had been augmented by the addition of an elaborate system of pedals – thirty-two compared with the Grubmannspiel's sixteen – connected to the piano's innards by a ganglia of wires running through an array of blocks and pulleys. The most striking innovation with the Metamorphosen II, however, was the presence of eight full-sized keyboards, double the Grubmannspiel's complement, arranged in a double-tiered circle around a small round stool where the player presumably sat.

Uncle Henry extricated himself from beneath the machine, his face shielded by a welder's visor. He turned off the welding torch, and gave the large cylindrical boiler slung beneath the Steinway a sharp rap with his knuckles. It responded with a dull metallic ring.

"I think that should hold nicely," he announced. Turning to Franz, he added: "Be sure to keep a close eye on the pressure regulator."

Franz nodded and stooped to adjust a thermocouple.

Uncle Henry turned to Nathan.

"Are you quite sure you're ready?"

Nathan nodded.

"Very well then," said Uncle Henry. "You'll need to

crawl underneath to reach the stool."

Nathan glanced at Cassie, who gave him a smile and a thumbs up as he scrambled beneath the circle of keyboards.

He discovered that the stool swiveled three hundred and sixty degrees enabling him to reach any of the keyboards with ease.

Uncle Henry pulled a lever and a valve on the side of the piano opened with a sharp hiss.

"It'll take a few moments to get a full head of steam," he said. "Give me a middle C. Any keyboard will do."

Nathan pressed middle C, but he couldn't hear the note due to the whirring of wires and pulleys beneath the piano that steadily intensified in volume.

Uncle Henry stood back from the machine.

"All set!" he yelled.

"What do you want me to play?" Nathan shouted back.

Uncle Henry cupped his hand to his ear.

"What's that?"

Nathan repeated the question at the top of his voice. The heat and steam from the boiler had begun to make him sweat.

Uncle Henry appeared surprised by the question. He turned to Franz, who shrugged.

"You don't play a Metamorphosen, dear boy," Uncle Henry bellowed at Nathan. "It plays you!"

The monstrous device began to revolve, slowly at first and then with gathering speed. At the same time, Nathan's stool began to turn in the opposite direction. As he reached out to steady himself his right hand accidentally stuck a chord on one of the revolving keyboards. This threw him off balance in the opposite direction. He flung out his left hand and struck the dominant of the same chord on a different keyboard. Again, to retrieve balance he struck a chord with his right hand. Then his left. Then his right. His left. His right. Left. Right. Leftright. The counter-revolutions of machine and stool steadily accelerated. Sweat rolled down Nathan's face and trickled from his armpits. His hands moved in a blur from keyboard to keyboard as he maintained precarious balance by the fleeting touch of fingers on keys. Inside him a voice insisted: "This is crazy. You can't keep this up!" He soon realized the voice was the problem. He could not listen to it and keep his balance. He clung to the voice for as long as he could and then let it go. It disappeared with a shriek into the vortex. And a strange thing happened. Without the voice he discovered he could play all eight keyboards in turn as they whirled by him. It felt

as if he were performing the whole of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, all of the stately preludes and sinuous fugues, from minute fractions of each tone orchestrated into a single moment of time.

#

Cassie came to Nathan in the middle of the night.

He felt her body slip into bed beside him. He felt her breath on his neck. He felt her voice in his ear. He felt her mouth all over him.

#

A noise awoke Nathan just before dawn. Sensing the empty space beside him, he got up and went to the window. A light fog lounged above the dewy grass. Nathan went back to bed. When the noise awoke him a second time he knew what it was. He leapt from bed without dressing, hurled himself down the stairs and ran outside. The wet grass chilled his feet. He ran around to the rear of the house. Nathan glimpsed a movement near the cornfield. He cried out but the fog, much thicker on this side of the house, swallowed his voice.

Nathan ran toward the cornfield. He found the gate open and a narrow passage trampled through the corn. Nathan stepped into the corn, crying out as broken stems cut into his bare feet. Again he saw movement ahead, and

this time he recognized what it was. Almost to the other side of the cornfield trotted Ernest. On his back, naked, sat Cassie. Nathan called out her name. She half-turned, revealing a silver pentagram woven into her golden hair. She faced forward again and Ernest trotted faster. They left the cornfield and entered the sheep pasture that bordered the cliff top.

Ignoring the trampled corn that cut like razor blades into his feet, Nathan ran across the field and emerged, breathless, into the pasture. He was in time to see Ernest and Cassie moving along a sliver of cliff that jutted perilously into the ocean. By the time Nathan reached the entrance to this narrow promontory, Cassie and the donkey had arrived at its vertiginous tip. The Atlantic breeze lifted her golden hair like a prayer as the animal stepped into nothingness and rider and donkey disappeared from view.

#

CADENZA

Glock, Hinters & Connolly  
Attorneys-at-Law  
Michigan Plaza  
Chicago, Illinois

Nathan Dupre  
c/o Sutton Manor Recuperative Lodge  
Hampstead, London

Dear Mr. Dupre:

Please permit me to extend my very best wishes for your continued recovery from your unfortunate fall in the Wigmore Hall six weeks ago. The effects of prolonged concussion can be severe and unpredictable. I would like to reassure you that at all times your affairs have been protected by the full legal resources of Glock, Hinters & Connolly.

As to the information you requested in your recent correspondence, I am now in a position to report back to you the findings. As you know, we secured for this research the services of Orghast and Withers, a reputable firm of private investigators in the West Country area of England. We will be sending you their full report under separate cover. What follows is a summary, which I've taken the liberty of itemizing under the following headings, without presuming any order of priority:

LIDO HOTEL, WESTWARD HO!

Indeed, this establishment was sequestered as a prisoner of war facility in 1940. Its primary function was as an interrogation center for captured German officers. Since you were unable to provide a last name, I am afraid it is not possible to determine if the "Franz" you mention was one of the 15 German officers who bore that name at the facility during the years it operated as a prison.

U-BOAT

A record does exist of a German U-boat running aground, but 30 miles to the north of Westward Ho! No survivors were reported.

WIDDICOMBE LIGHTHOUSE

No record exists of a lighthouse of this name, or, indeed, of any such navigational warning device having been erected in this area.



#### HAWKSMOOR

This house does still exist. It was built in the early 1800s by the owner of a number of tin mines in the locality. It has changed ownership several times over the years. As a musician, you might be interested to learn that the house was occupied for a short period in the late 1800s by a violinist named Godolfini, an eccentric fellow by all accounts. Today, Hawksmoor is owned by the boroughs of Northam and Appledore and used as a retirement home for the elderly.

#### ORIENT BOOKSTORE

No record exists of a bookstore of this name in the area.

#### POTWALLOPING

This is indeed a local custom stretching back at least 200 years. However, it is carried out slightly differently from the way you describe it. The strong Atlantic tides have a propensity to push back the barrier of pebbles that runs from Wesward Ho! to Seaton. Every summer, the locals pick an evening to move the pebble ridge back to its proper position. (I understand from Mr. Orghast that this colorful tradition is accompanied by heavy consumption of the local brew!)

#### AUNT IFFY, CASSIE, UNCLE HENRY, MADAME SOLER, ET AL

No verifiable traces can be found for these people – with the exception, perhaps, of Madame Soler. Mr. Orghast happens to be a theatrical history buff and the name "Soler" pricked his memory. In searching through his collection of documents he came across a poster for the Prince William Music Hall in Exeter, dated 1923. Listed near the bottom of the billing is the following: "Madam Soler & Her Amazing Talking Violin". Apparently this person (real name Hetty Baxter from Liverpool) used her ventriloquism skills to throw her voice into various musical instruments.

I hope you find this information helpful. Once you have read Orghast & Withers' full report, please do not hesitate to contact us again should you require our further assistance in this or any other matter.

Again, let me wish you a full recovery and a speedy return to the concert platform.

Sincerely,

Norman Glock

Senior Partner

P.S. I believe that Mr. Hinters, my fellow partner, previously informed you that Mr. Brasket of the "New York Herald-Tribune" has agreed to settle out of court for the minor injuries he sustained as a result of your fall.