

This is to certify that the

dissertation entitled

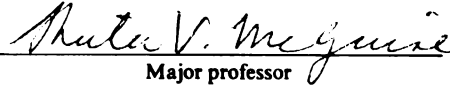
AFTERNOONS OF ALLIGATORS

presented by

Diane Moody

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in English


Major professor

Date July 28, 1986



RETURNING MATERIALS:
Place in book drop to
remove this checkout from
your record. FINES will
be charged if book is
returned after the date
stamped below.

--	--	--

AFTERNOONS OF ALLIGATORS

By

Diane Moody

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1986

412 5-12-72

ABSTRACT

AFTERNOONS OF ALLIGATORS

By

Diane Moody

Afternoons of Alligators is a collection of serio-comic short fiction in the classical sense—the hero succeeds, but just barely. Adventure, its challenge and risks (hence, the alligators), is the theme uniting these pieces. Reilly is the archetypal hero of adventure fiction; he is introduced in the opening biographical sketch; "Reilly and the Garden of Kathar," and "Saint's Rest, The End of Reilly," complete his adventures; "Purple Lace" addresses the agony of the author in writing literate prose; "Modern Love" investigates the wait for love and the weight of love; the title story explores the challenge of change and the will to risk in love and the work place, and what happens the following day is the topic of "Jewel's Afternoon."

In Memory of
RUTH EVELYN HIGDON MOODY
1927-1984

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank and acknowledge the assistance of:

Sheila McGuire, for her gentle courtesy both in and out of the classroom, for her unflappable and unfailing kindness toward fledgling creative writers, and for her "peregrine eye" in matters aesthetic and editorial;

JoAnne Isbey and Sr. Christian, two finer Professors of English it would be difficult to find. I am fortunate indeed to have them as my personal friends as well.

John Smolens, to whom I dedicate "Jewel's Afternoon"; without introducing me to Andre Dubus I would not have been able to write it;

Mary Pierce, a former student from whom I learned the benefits of brainstorming, especially in application to "Saint's Rest, The End of Reilly"—

- illegitimate child (seer? someone else?)
- identical twin sister?
- a return of favors?
- write the ending first

Joan, my friendly proofreader and proved friend through thick and thin (ha ha);

R.L.M.K., for the encouragement he gave, most especially when I was in darkness and doubt. I can always use a good cheerleader . . .

my father and stepmother, for their love, support, nagging, and rare common sense. I have been twice-blessed in matters of mothers;

and last, to my mother, who did not live to see this work. I thank her now for her belief in me.

D.R.M.

PREFACE

Sidney Reilly was real. He was born near Odessa in 1874. His death is recorded by the Russian Government in 1925, yet reports and sightings in the West of the Master Spy surfaced in 1927, 1931, 1935, and 1945. In 1956 the British Intelligence community applied to Khrushchev for information about Reilly. They received no reply. In 1966, Robin Bruce Lockhart, whose father worked with Reilly on spy missions in Russia, authored the book, Reilly: Ace of Spies, which stirred the Soviets to circulate two million copies of a book claiming to present a true account of the capture, interrogation, and execution of Bolshevism's number one enemy.

The Reilly biography I present is based on facts gathered by Lockhart. "Reilly and the Garden of Kathar" is my own invention, while "Saint's Rest, The End of Reilly," presents an imaginary solution to the ultimate mystery of his disappearance. I have distorted dates and manipulated characterization at will (there really was a Pepita—she was Reilly's third wife). I must confess the peculiar hold over my imagination that this man's story has had since the 1983 PBS Mystery! dramatization when I sat glued to the TV week after week. In no way can I hope to capture his sinister charm or wicked style, nor his keen intelligence, zest for danger, and sexual magnetism. He was rumored to have had "eleven passports and a woman to go with each." He was also a bigamist. Private life aside, he contributed much to what our modern notion of espionage is; he has been called the first spy of the twentieth century. He was also a bitter foe of Communism, expending his private wealth in fomenting anti-Bolshevik activities with the aim of over-throwing Lenin's regime. He very nearly pulled off Lenin's assassination in 1918, and, if accounts are to be believed, it was Reilly who authored the infamous Zinoviev Letter which toppled Ramsay MacDonald's pro-Socialist Labour cabinet in 1924. It was on a trip to Russia in 1925 that Reilly disappeared.

The title story, "Afternoons of Alligators," also contains reference to a real life situation which I first came across in the February 1970 issue of American Heritage Magazine, the article, "'Never Leave Me, Never Leave Me,'" by New York lawyer Louis Auchincloss. It was the fascinating treatment of an uncommon love affair between Henry Adams, historian and descendant of two American presidents, seventy-five years old and a widower, and of Miss Aileen Tone, the beautiful and gracious thirty-four year old woman who shared the final five years of his life as secretary/companion. I follow the "tone" of their relationship closely.

I recommend both Lockhart's book and the Auchincloss article to those who may care to look further into the lives of these remarkable people. It is my hope I have done them no disservice in helping their memories to live again.

D.R.M.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Reilly: The Hero's Beginning	page	1
Reilly and the Garden of Kathar	page	8
Saint's Rest, The End of Reilly	page	39
Purple Lace	page	79
Modern Love	page	88
Afternoons of Alligators	page	118
Jewel's Afternoon	page	130

Reilly: The Hero's Beginning

Sidney Reilly, né Sigmund Sergei Aleksandr Pinsky, was born in Odessa in 1904. Since there was nothing remarkable about either the place or the year of his birth, that left only the man himself, or rather, the man he would become. Of what he would and did become, let this history be the humble record.

Sigmund made his appearance into a comfortably middle-class Russian family who lived in a comfortable house in one of the more comfortable districts of a city devoted to maintaining its comfort. As Sigmund thrived and grew, which is to say as his critical awareness expanded, as he was a boy of both brains and imagination, he rapidly realized that all this comfort was leading him to an acute case of discomfort. Granted, his Mama and older sister Odile fairly doted upon him; nothing was too fine for their "dear boy." And that was as it should be. Was not Sigmund the center of their tiny universe? Was he not their "perfect darling"? (indeed he was not, but that is fodder for other biographers)

While sweetness and light circumscribed his boyhood world, what saved Sigmund from a situation which threatened treacle and sunstroke was his Papa. Papa politely tolerated his only son. While this fact of life was puzzling to the little boy, it at least broke the monotony of his at times too-comfortable existence. Sigmund's approach was to live with this fact by working around it. His talent for

accommodation would later reveal itself in his work as well as in his private life.

Sigmund—"Siggy"—to his Mama and Odile, was therefore loved and knew love in that largely feminine household (Papa never really counted since he came home from the bank at mealtimes). Some biographers contend that it is here, in these tender beginnings, that the groundwork was later laid (no pun intended) for Sigmund's notorious womanizing. Other biographers hold a Freudian view, that Sigmund harbored definite Oedipus tendencies, tendencies which his environment encouraged and which he never outgrew, though this biographer will not repeat the scurrilous lie that no woman between the ages of sixteen and sixty was safe from his attentions, nor will we delve into the prurient details involving the Dowager Countess Dragomiloff and her scintillating young niece Marvillia Savinkoff at the 1935 Venice Film Festival where Sigmund commandeered a private box in which to view the screening of that year's winner, Anna Karenina, a sentimental favorite among the Russian émigrés present, not excluding the Dowager Countess and her niece, who shared the private box with Sigmund—that scandal would profane the lips and sully the pen of any conscientious biographer, but it should be noted for the sake of journalistic integrity and biographical completeness that Marvillia was delivered of her child a full nine months and two weeks after the said screening, that she was contracted in marriage to a member of the lesser exiled Russian nobility prior to the blessed event, and that the Dowager Countess never failed to speak of Sigmund after that night in any but the most

rosate terms, especially of his ability to

But that is fodder for other biographers.

Let it stand that Sigmund was a man of great charm and many talents.

To return to our account, Sigmund therefore loved and knew love. His Papa obtruded his presence at best and worst but thrice daily. Life therefore was quite simple for the young Sigmund until one day his world collapsed, comfort vanished, and his life truly began . . .

Prefatory to the above comment, it is the duty of the biographer to briefly inform the reading public of the rigors and personal hazards attendant upon the task at hand, especially when said figure proves as elusive to methodical research as this man. If one but knew the sources and circumstances under which the biographer exposes himself (no pun intended!) in order to obtain information of the highest order and most irrefutable caliber. But let us recommence our history, for all good biography is at least three-fourths tale and one-fourth truth.

His Mama had never been robust, though she did have a rather nice one which she kept freckle-free through nightly applications of Monsieur Olivier's Crème du Buste. Her delicate constitution, therefore, required the continual diligence and bedside attendance of Odessa's finest physician—who happened to be Jewish, but although it was the Pinsky practice not to over-trust Jewish scrupulosity, Jews at least made, to Mr. Pinsky's way of thinking, trustworthy physicians—and so, following the birth of her son and for years afterward, Sigmund's Mama received once and often twice-weekly visits by the good doctor. These visits established themselves into a fixed pattern of comfortable

(that word again) and convenient regularity at the Pinsky household for as long as Sigmund could remember.

Then one day, shortly before Sigmund's thirteenth birthday, the good doctor's visit was neither good nor comfortable nor even convenient, for Sigmund's Papa, arriving home unexpectedly between mealtimes discovered his frail wife in bed with her Jewish physician. From that day forth the doctor never again set foot (nor any other bodily part) inside the Pinsky door. Sigmund's Mama thereafter became a tense woman, tight-lipped and withdrawn. She took to dabbing at the corner of her eyes with a white lace handkerchief. Only Odile remained to coddle him as before, but even that relationship received a different coloring, for Sigmund learned, on that fateful day, that he was not, and indeed had never been, his father's son at all.

The profound shock of this news, that this doctor, this very doctor, who had attended his precious Mama all these years and who had also presided at his birth, had, unaccountably, inexplicably, and outrageously presided also at his conception, would have undermined a lesser personality, but the revelation, so long in coming, so dark in its myriad implications, instead produced an immediate, liberating, effect.

Sigmund, half-Jewish bastard though he was, was NOT the scion of a self-contained bank clerk of impeccably dull (and comfortable) middle-class origins. He was now, to his agile young mind, a figure of Byronic romance, the illicit issue of star-crossed lovers, the palpable evidence of a secret liaison, the love-child of a hopeless

love. He saw himself as a hero without a name—or rather, a hero with a new one—Rosenblum. But Sigmund dared to dream even further; he would make his own name. Trembling on the brink of young manhood, Sigmund had behind him the lie of years' making. Before him lay an uncharted terrain open to possibility.

In short, the world lay before him and the prospect was sweet.

Life at home became untenable. His ersatz Papa's half-concealed resentment and icy reserve, the products of years' worth of accumulated suspicions and dark wonderings, gave way at last in face of the truth. Cuckold is neither a pretty nor pleasing title to any man, but it is excruciatingly uncomfortable to an anxiously conservative bank clerk. The boy's daily presence was but salt in the wound. Sensing this, young Sigmund knew it was time to cut the cord to hearth and home. He vacated his comfortable nest in a most singular manner.

As some biographers would have it, he died.

Shortly after the revelatory accident which marked Sigmund's first escape from mundane morality, a second followed. To date this event with greater precision (the most worthy and time-consuming of biographical pursuits), it was upon the exact occasion of Sigmund's thirteenth birthday, as he was trying out one of his presents, a gift of ice skates from his putative Papa, when, suddenly, as with all unexpected things, he fell through the ice to the freezing river waters below.

The current was strong, and though Sigmund was a practised swimmer, having lived near the water all his young life, he could not break its icy grip. Bobbing beneath the ice for the last time, he

was soon carried out of reach of his screaming companions on shore.

His body was pushed and scraped downstream under an implacable canopy of ice. Burning to breathe, aching to breathe, but daring not, our young hero (dare we evince such biographical bias? A resounding yes!) clung to life. Seconds seemed like minutes, minutes stretched to eternity. Muscles screaming for oxygen began to prickle then tingle then throb. He thought his brain would burst with the effort to hold his breath. And then the cold claimed him, numbed him, froze his heart. He gave up the unequal struggle and slept in the bosom of the river. The sluggish fish ignored him. The weeds waved along the bottom as before. Quiet and unpretesting, his body continued its course downstream.

As the waters neared the mouth of the Black Sea, the ice gradually thinned and began to recede. Passerby noticed a dark blotch traveling beneath the ice. Suicides and corpses were common enough freight for the river in any season. No one attempted to fish it from the water as it bobbed limply upward through a break in the icy crust.

Washed to the edge of the bank, his cheek resting on a pillow of frozen mud, Sigmund could not know that he had indeed died and been reborn, that news of his death would reach but not solace his grieving mother and sister, that he would travel the world and render service to a foreign power, or that he would, many years hence, lie stretched face down in the snow, a vision of terror to haunt the dreams of a psychic émigrée . . . all these wonders lay closed to him behind the door of the future as he lay cheek down in the mud—but that is fodder for other

biographers.

Sigmund Rosenblum reborn Sidney Reilly began to breathe.

Reilly and the Garden of Kathar

Another sultry afternoon in the seamy bazaar quarter of Morocco's market district found Reilly at his usual post, the Cafe D'Or, drinking his first scotch and water of the day. The hot white light of the blistering North African sun rarely found its way past the cheap pink plaster facade of the Cafe D'Or; in fact, the only thing golden about it was the front tooth of its beaming proprietor, an Egyptian by the name of Faisal-el-Harid.

Reilly had patronized the Cafe now for two weeks. He stood at the bar, glass in one hand, the other resting on his jodhpur-breeched thigh. With a quick flick of the wrist he drained his glass in one swallow. He was plenty sick of the place, the climate (beastly), and the people. Damn! If only Kennedy'd show up. It was days like these . . .

Among the clientele of the Cafe sat the Fat Man. His red felt fez was perfectly centered on his thinning, sweat-soaked hair. He periodically dabbed at his glistening brow and flushed cheeks with a sodden white silk handkerchief. The Fat Man's once spotless Tropical whites were no more. His Bond Street tailor would have shrieked. The Fat Man too hated the place, the climate (beastly), and the barbarous lack of decent togs, but nothing, unless it were an intact fifteenth century incunabulum, would persuade him to abandon his post.

Reilly sighed and shifted his weight to the other hip, resting his booted foot against the low brass bar rail. He peered at his

smoky surroundings as if willing Kennedy's face to appear. A good trick if he could pull it off. Unfortunately, he couldn't. His keen slate eyes, pale against sun-bronzed skin, squinted. His aquiline nose (would the Screen Writer's Guild have it any other way?) wrinkled distastefully at the heavy clove-scented smoke. He knew if he waited much longer he would be reduced to the same stupor enveloping the Arab crowd.

He also knew it would take every trick in the book to get the Fat Man off his back, for get him off he must, but now all he could do was wait for Kennedy, and he was already overdue. Reilly's one hope was that the Germans had not gotten to him first.

His reverie came to an abrupt halt when the beaded entrance, de rigueur to all Mediterranean-facing North African cafes in the '40s, parted. Reilly was ready to give thanks to Allah the Merciful for the sight that met his eyes. No, it was not Kennedy. The brilliant afternoon sunlight etched her silhouette against the parted strands. She hesitated, balancing on ridiculously slim high heels. From there, Reilly's gaze moved upward, from her shapely calves and long legs to her narrow waist and sleek shoulder length hair curled down in a page boy.

Her momentary indecision at an end, she stepped down, and looking neither right nor left she glided through the curling smoke and press of unwashed bodies at crowded tables, unconcernedly crunching pistachio shells underfoot, heading unswervingly toward Reilly as if in answer to his unspoken prayer. This is too good to be true, he

thought. Something's up. The Fat Man too watched her entrance with avid and oily interest, apparently the only kind bad guys know. A hush fell over the Arab crowd. Silence reigned.

For some, the vision was too much. It always is in the movies. Greedy brown hands reached out to stroke the ivory-skinned beauty but it was the swarthy arm of Asad-ben-Achmed which snaked out to snag the prize about her waist. Caught off balance, she toppled against his burnoosed chest. The crowd crowed with joy.

She struggled, small white fists beating a tattoo against his desert-toughened skin. Asad chortled and shifted her weight to his plank-hard lap. The heroine did the only thing left her to do. She slapped the blackguard. Hard.

Asad stopped chortling. White women did not slap Arab men and get away with it. The saucy minx needed lessoning. He lifted one great teak-stained gold-ringed fist to strike her down when a movement from the bar caught his equally keen but sable eye. Reilly was poised to throw a knife. The whole bar held its collective breath; the air noticeably sweetened. This was better than last week's sock fight.

Asad paused.

"Let the lady go," Reilly commanded in a deceptively dulcet tone. "Let the lady go now."

The woman froze. The Arab debated. For two weeks the Anglo had come to the Cafe and had said nothing and done nothing to warrant Asad's attention; therefore, the Anglo was obviously bluffing. He accordingly

ignored Reilly's quiet command. A silver flash cut the air. Asad screamed. Blood dripped. His. The woman was dumped to the pistachio shell-littered floor.

"Merde! Shit! Shaitan!" The hairy teak-stained hard-muscled hawk-nosed villain swore, in the only three languages at his command. He really did have a filthy mouth.

"Well old chap," Reilly drawled, as leading men must, "that was my woman you were pawing." A man's woman is sacrosanct in Islamic law. In the eyes of the Arabs Reilly had correctly behaved in defending his property. What they didn't need to know was that he had never set eyes on the woman before.

"And if you don't mind," he added nonchalantly, "I'll take this back as well." He stooped to retrieve his blooded knife still embedded in the Arab's dripping hand. "That looks nasty, old boy," he intoned in his best Cary Grant accent, "I'd have that seen to if I were you." Solitude always goes down better with a British accent.

Retrieving his pearl-handled knife and wiping the blade clean of cloying blood, Reilly once again concealed it behind the clever crease in his jodhpur breeches put there by his London tailor, and extended his hand to the shellshocked female on the floor. "Really m'dear," he crooned in henied platitude, "we have to stop meeting like this." Her chatoyant eyes beamed back. "All the excitement in this heat is bad for one's nerves." His lips twisted in a mocking smile and his slate eyes struck sparks the way an arsonist torches tenements.

Thus far the beleaguered lady had not spoken. She glared up at him from her position among the shells. Her green eyes snapped,

her perfect cheeks flamed in an otherwise ashen face, her rosebud lips snarled. She grabbed the proffered hand and prepared to lambaste him with the other but Reilly saw it coming.

"If you insist, m'dear." He hoisted her to her high-heeled feet and enfolded her in a liquid embrace.

His kiss drained her. She'd been on a damn cargo transport for ten hours just to get to Morocco. Ten hot stuffy cramped hours with lousy service to boot. Then three hours from the landing strip (she wouldn't dignify it with the word "airport") to this crummy Cafe D'Or—where house, more likely, she reflected—because the French-speaking Arab taxi driver couldn't follow her perfectly good instructions in English. And now Reilly's knife-throwing act—yes, she knew his name though he hadn't caught hers yet—followed by these cheap theatrics. It was days like these she regretted joining the Service, but what the heck, her country needed her, and so thinking, she did what any heroine would do badly in need of a change in toilette. She fainted.

As if waiting for his cue, Faisal, the grinning gold-toothed proprietor, went into action. Stepping from behind the bar he quickly motioned two of his prime bouncers to escort the still-bleeding and still-scurly Asad outside. Next, Faisal indicated the narrow twisting staircase to the rear of the Cafe to Reilly. The rickety stairs led to the second floor guest rooms which, in quieter days, had been known to receive the stray tourist. Whoever said war was good for business was a liar, Faisal thought.

Grateful for Faisal's innkeeperly tact, which he put down to a keen nose for cash, Reilly shifted his load and trod the squeaky boards

upward. The Fat Man watched the entire performance from his dark corner. He was certain this woman was Reilly's long-awaited contact. That stupid Asad had had to go and put his hands on her, he thought. He would ensure that Asad never again did anything so foolish. It was days like these . . .

* * * * *

Reilly turned left at the top of the stairs and down a dimly lit corridor to the end of the shabby hallway. The Cairo Hilton had nothing to fear. Room Four housed the best bed in the house; a double bed, in fact. Was it only three nights ago that he'd taken that drunk little French cabaret dancer upstairs? My, how time jitters. He shook his black brilliantined hair as if to clear his memory. Feeling his burden begin to stir in his arms, he kicked open the door in best Mills & Boon fashion and strode over to the commodious bed, dumping her onto the cream chenille coverlet.

Sprawled thus, her pencil-slim skirt biked above dimpled knees, her long pale legs skewed, her arms splayed, one across her decorously buttoned bosom, the other curled across tumbled auburn locks, she looked like a disjointed and rumpled porcelain doll. Slowly she opened her eyes into Reilly's keen slate stare.

"Have a nice nap?" he queried.

She was attracted to Reilly. Most women were. However, she had one bad marriage behind her already. She knew from experience it wouldn't do to look interested right away. Let'm dangle. So she opted to fight. "I could've handled that Arab octopus without

attracting," she paused significantly, "the attention of the whole bar," she announced in a husky American accent.

"Your make-up's a mess," he non-sequiturred, allowing him to segue into, "and your stocking has developed a run."

She looked down at her leg. Touché. And damn those slate eyes that made mashed potatoes of her knee joints.

"Besides which," he shot his parting salvo, "you have a message to deliver, I believe."

So much for her strategy.

"Okay," she agreed in a throaty purr calculated to melt his impudence, "I surrender." Reilly sat back on the bed and narrowed his eyes at her. This one was hot.

"Kennedy was spotted by the Gestapo after his plane touched down in Algiers." She paused for dramatic effect. "It isn't pretty what they do to suspected spies—even from neutral nations. North Africa isn't the tourist spot it used to be—"

She really knew how to steam him. What she didn't know was that Kennedy was a good friend, an old friend, and apparently now a dead friend. "Why are you here?" he probed.

"They needed a replacement, and with so many agents in the field, well, you can appreciate the total chaos this war has thrown everyone into," she faltered. Things weren't quite going as she planned.

"Your message?"

"Mother told me never to trust—"

"Cut it, m'dear. The message."

"Mother says it's time to come out and play in the garden. There. That's it. Happy?"

Reilly abruptly stood up from the bed. He moved over toward the window and looked out. She couldn't see the light of joy in his face. "Fix yourself up. We're going to take a little trip."

"Look Mr. Spy, or whoever-you-think-you-are, you can take a flying leap out that window." Actually, that was the last thing she wanted him to do for her, but it sounded appropriately tough and self-reliant. "I'm only a courier. I just deliver messages, I don't act on them—whatever the hell they mean. I'm catching the first transport out of this Moroccan pesthole—"

Reilly swung from the window and faced her. "You're coming with me and that's final. I'll be back with a boy to fetch your bag—I presume you brought one?—and don't lock the door. I don't fancy locked doors." He turned and left the room.

Well kiss me stupid too, she thought. Then she counted to ten and got off the bed.

From the second story window of the shop across the alley the Fat Man's agent had witnessed the entire scene through binoculars. He was also a licensed lip-reader. His master would be pleased . . .

3

Her name was Constance Ford and she ran messages for the Americans. Reilly found that much out and more after he'd left the room. A quick call on the crank box, as Reilly called the portable transmitter/receiver, to Q at the Foreign Office had told him she was

trustworthy and resourceful but without formal espionage experience. She could jeopardize the success of Reilly's mission and change the course of the war, but that was a calculated risk Reilly would have to run. After all, he really didn't have much of a choice anyway. Too much time had passed. It was days like these . . .

When he pressed Q for more personal details on Constance, Lieutenant Commander Mark Wing-Davies, HRM Navy, Retired, balked. "What the devil else d'you want," Q sputtered into the handset, "her stocking size!" Q went on to explain how totally unsuitable Constance was for the mission, that she was a last-minute loan from the Yanks after the unpleasantness about Kennedy—his condolences—and that Tompkins, though a bit dull at times, was a steady, reliable chap who could be sent out in three days.

Sometimes one had to put up with Q's tiresomeness. And then sometimes one did not. Reilly decided he did not.

"I'm keeping her with me on this assignment. I can't wait for Tompkins—besides which Constance has much nicer legs and Tompkins's a silly ass."

"Really Reilly! You don't bloody well give White Hall orders, you know!"

A slight pause.

"Mark, old boy, you do recall that little favor I did you back in '40 that so pleased Winnie? I really pulled your bacon out of the fire on that one."

"You promised me you wouldn't hold that over my head!" Q's voice sounded worried. The old boy was slipping. He wouldn't have

cracked so easily in the old days. Reilly mercifully decided on only one more turn of the screw.

"And you do recall the time I got rid of the charming Dowager Dragomiloff before your wife—" Reilly never got to finish his reminiscence. Lieutenant Commander Mark Wing-Davies, HRM Navy, Retired, capitulated.

Q recited Constance's vital statistics from her service file on his desk.

"That's fine. You can stop there," Reilly instructed Q. Interesting. Constance was divorced with one child, a girl, Maria. "What about after her divorce? Any jealous lovers hanging about? Bill collectors? Stray relatives? Parakeets?"

"You take the biscuit!" Q roared into the handset. "I realize our line of work plays havoc with a home life (only too well, thought Reilly, recalling the charming countess), but it's none of your bloody business if she does—Reilly? I say, Reilly? Bloody cheek! The bastard hung up on me!" The Commander replaced the handset, wishing he'd never retired from the Navy. It was days like these . . .

Approximately ten minutes later, when Reilly returned to the room, Constance was at the wash basin repairing the damage done to her Max Factor in the fly-specked oval glass that hung over the washstand. She turned to face Reilly, mascara wand in hand, as the promised mulatto boy followed at his heels lugging a travel-stained brown leather suitcase. Reilly motioned the boy to leave it on the bed. He tossed him a silver coin which the boy expertly caught, salaming as he scampered out the door.

Reilly appraised Constance's freshly powdered face. Corn Silk #6, Factor's finest. He made a mental note to buy her the economy one-pound size. She deserved it. After all, weren't women always running out of face powder anyway? And besides, she was a smasher, all spunk and fire. He wanted her. Trouble was, they didn't have the time to go into it just now.

He walked over to the suitcase on the bed and opened it for her. "I trust you brought some boots? Well, never mind. I'll get you a pair." He looked up.

"We're going to drink tea in the Sahara at a very special garden party."

Constance dropped her wand.

4

Precisely three days later a weary travel-stained sweat-soaked couple could be seen topping the crest of a sand dune at the border where Morocco merges into the arid and vast Sahara Desert. Reilly's timetable had miraculously suffered no setbacks. Their journey, first by jeep, then camel, then Arab guide, beset by scorching heat, blowing sand, and the torturous black flies for which the Sahara is justly infamous, was now behind them, and much to Reilly's satisfaction all argument from Constance had been quashed by the application of a single simple lie: "You've been ordered by Q to accompany me." With each step and every mile Reilly could only rejoice they were that much closer to his goal, a goal Constance, perforce, had come to share.

* * * * *

Riding the crest of a wave of battle victories, Germany seemed invincible that summer of 1941. It remained only for the Axis Power to launch a massive propaganda campaign to prevent the neutrals—especially the United States with its large German-American population—from entering the war on the side of Great Britain. Germany wished to seal its destiny as ruler of the world, but propaganda campaigns cost money, money which Herr Hitler had rather were spent on armament factories, airplanes, and shipyards. One solution to the fiscal problem which would not siphon existing funds presented itself one day to the Fuhrer at his mountain retreat of Berchtesgaden, a solution so congenial to the aims and purposes of the German nation that Herr Goebbels's face was wreathed in a smile—and it took a great deal to make Herr Hitler's Minister of Propaganda smile.

Thus early that summer of '41 a German archaeological expedition was mounted in North Africa in search of the legendary Garden of Kathar. Only recently had the German team come upon the foundation stones of a garden complex said to rival the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. With pickaxe and camel hair brush the crack archaeological team, under the direction of Herr Kubbeiderf, curator of the prestigious Staatliche Museum, Berlin, and the watchful eyes of his Stormtrooper escort guard, had labored under the blazing Saharan sun to uncover the lost garden.

Concealed beneath the elaborate stone flag pathways and mosaic tiled fountains, however, lay the real reason for the Nazi

expedition: the treasure hoard of Kathar, pre-Christian Prince of North Africa, rival to Pharaoh in earthly majesty and military might, a fitting symbol for the fast-rising German military state. Kathar's tribute would raise millions of Deutsche marks for the Nazi propaganda machine to wage its paper war, but the most priceless object of all, and the one most eagerly awaited, was the legendary statuette of the African goddess Archite, carved from a single emerald stone totaling over eighty carats—easily a fortune to fit a man's hand. Reilly's mission was explicit: prevent Kathar's treasure hoard from falling under Nazi control and retrieve the Archite for England.

Competition for the statuette, however, was fierce; the question was, into whose palm would she fit? Not only did Reilly have the German High Command to contend with, but he also had the Fat Man, avid art connoisseur and collector of antiquities with a passion for the rare, the exotic, and the unattainable. Not one to be denied, the Fat Man was an opponent of equal caliber to the Nazis.

Reilly and Constance certainly had their work cut out for them. It was days like these . . .

* * * * *

Constance flicked a straying strand of auburn hair from her nose. Mother never told her she'd have days like these, especially the last three days. Whoever said the desert was romantic was a liar, and as far as sheikhs went, they smelled as bad as their camels. "Well, we certainly have our work cut out for us," she nagged as she tipped her Sahara sneaker upside down, spilling its burden of yellow sand to the

desert floor. Reilly hadn't been able to locate a pair of boots, given such short notice, and Constance wore a size 10, which didn't help either. Well, there goes my 'Most Chic Spy' nomination, she thought. But at least my Italian heels had style . . .

Reilly's sun-bronzed face was starkly outlined in the glow from their tiny campfire. He lit a Players from the slim gold lighter—a present from a lady—he kept in hip pocket. He pulled a deep drag into his lungs. Leaning back on his haunches he closed his eyes and slowly exhaled a white cloud of smoke into the starry Saharan night. God, that felt good. Reluctantly he opened his tired slate eyes and looked about, focussing on nothing in particular, allowing the cooling night air to run teasing fingers through the sweat-matted hair at the nape of his neck. He wished it were Constance instead. Another chilly night—in more ways than one—and she wanted to talk business. Maybe this was where her first marriage had gone wrong. He wondered what her little girl looked like.

Reilly sighed and stretched his six foot two inch frame upright. He flicked his barely smoked Players into the dark. "I've outlined the plan. Just do your bit and they'll never know what hit them." Weariness filled his voice, weariness of the war, of the whole cloak-and-dagger business which was the spy game, and weariness of Constance's controlled aloofness. It's those bloody sneakers, he thought; I should have tried harder to get the boots . . .

"You make it sound all too easy," she began yet again. Nag nag nag. "Just what makes you think those Germans are going to fall for my

story? They weren't born yesterday, you know." Nag nag nag.

Reilly restrained himself. Sometimes one had to put up with this foolishness and sometimes one did not. Sure she was tired and cranky, but did he deserve this? He decided he did not. "They'll believe anything if you show enough leg," he commented innocently.

Oh sure, Constance thought, too angry to reply. They'll really go for these sneakers . . .

But as weary as Reilly was, he was nothing if not optimistic, especially when they were this close to the green goddess. Their camp was perched just beyond the stormtroopers' patrol perimeter. Tomorrow morning, bright and early, Constance would wander down to the Nazi dig and play the stranded tourist who had become separated from her caravan. While she provided the diversion Reilly would prime the camp with explosives; what the hell if untold millions in pound sterling of treasure were buried under rock and rubble for another eternity? At least he'd get the statuette (providing he located it first) and the Nazis nothing. He'd dreamed of the Archite for six months now, and he'd be damned if Kennedy's death, a pouty Yank, and a stormtrooper patrol would get in his way. Get the emerald, blast the camp, and hie-tail it back to England—with Constance in tow, though she didn't know that yet—, and wave the bloody green bitch goddess under Q's nose as if to say: Look, I've done it again for King and Country, and now you can bloody well stow it.

His pleasing reverie was cut short by the feel of cold steel against his spine. Constance's warning scream was cut short by a muffling

hand from behind. Her chatoyant eyes, bright in the flickering firelight, widened when she beheld a ghostly figure emerge from the shadows, the figure of a tall burnoosed one-handed Arab.

Reilly had forgotten to count the Fat Man.

5

The Fat Man had had an exceedingly pleasing week thus far, and it was less than half over. As soon as Reilly and the woman had left the Cafe D'Or he'd had them tailed by his agents, Asad and Abdul. Then the Fat Man had checked out of the execrable dump where he'd been staying and into his comfortably-appointed desert retreat, there to await further developments while he burned his perspiration-soaked Tropical whites and donned his preferred loose-fitting Turkish silk robes. My, what a refreshing difference a decent change of clothes made!

It was a pity about Asad's hand, though. It had not had sufficient time to heal, but given a few weeks, the bandages would come off and he would be almost as good as new. Now however the Fat Man had better things of which to think. He sat back in his gilded Directoire-style chair and absently fingered the solid jade temple lion, an ornament from a Thai palace he'd picked up in '33, which reposed on top of his Louis Quinze bombe chest. It always amused him to juxtapose the Bourbon with the Napoleonic, with just a touch of the East for that certain piquancy. The play of his thick sausage fingers over the jade surface paused; he could almost feel the sensuous weight of the goddess pressing herself into his moist palm. His wounded stomach shivered in delight. She was

almost his . . .

* * * * *

Herr Kubbeldorf carefully swathed the shapely green figure in the cleanest lint-free cloth the camp could offer. They had just unearthed her yesterday and he had personally photographed, numbered, and catalogued the green beauty for the sake of science. How proud he would be to escort her to her new home, to his beloved Staatliche. The good curator had no idea the carefully logged and crated artifacts would never see the museum, that instead, their sale would fuel the Nazi propaganda machine on the antiquities black market, a market the Germans had controlled ever since they'd overrun the treasure houses of Europe like a horde of twentieth-century Visigoths.

He lovingly gave one last pat to the cold green statuette and placed her in a separate box apart from the other numbered boxes in his tent. Goodness! He'd barely left an aisle from his cot to the tent flap should he need to use the latrine in the night. He'd have to order those clumsy oafs who paraded in black shirts . . . what were they calling themselves these days? . . . oh yes; stormtroopers, that was it. The good curator tried (and succeeded) in maintaining the proper scientific aloofness toward current events, an aloofness which required little studied effort since he neither read the papers nor considered the present century proper focus for an antiquities professor whose provenance was pre-Christian art.

Now, where was he? His mind longed for the quiet order of his museum . . . aha! that was it! He'd order some of those guards to clear

the crated items into one of the trucks waiting to make the run to Algiers. The Archite he would regretfully send in the morning; regretfully, for he both wanted her to stay a little longer, and yet he knew she would be safer the sooner she left camp for the security of the Staatliche. Women!—they're all alike, he mused to himself as he closed the tent flap for the night—they all need protection . . .

* * * * *

What I could use right now is some protection, Constance thought, as she surveyed herself in the pier glass in her apartment at the sumptuous desert retreat of the Fat Man. This silk peignoir leaves nothing to the imagination and the Mechlin lace negligee is just that—negligible. At first Constance had feared the worst when Asad's men had closed in on them, but his orders had been to take them alive. Reilly had been bound and Constance trussed in a sack for their trip to the desert hideaway. Geezus, Constance thought; it's not like I'm a virgin waiting to be deflowered in one of those romances, but just the same, I wish it were Reilly and not the Fat Man . . .

Reilly struggled against his bonds. His dark cell gave him little clue to his whereabouts. He wondered how Constance fared. If sweaty obese Maltese put his pudgy paws on her he'd kill him, but first he'd have to get free of his bindings, then find Constance, then get the hell out of God alone knew where they'd been taken.

* * * * *

The next morning, bright and early, Herr Kubbeldorf breakfasted sparingly so not to upset his delicate stomach on the long and jolting journey by truck to the Algerian airport. He had personally supervised the loading of crates onto the waiting truck.

He had decided to leave camp to personally escort the green goddess to her destination, such was her hold over his imagination. I'm her slave already but I really don't care, mused the bemused curator. Thus Herr Kubbeldorf rode up front with the driver, a particularly boorish recruit raw from the provinces, eager to prove himself and disdainful of chauffeuring "a lot of old rubbish about," on his virgin mission. As they prepared to leave camp that morning Herr Kubbeldorf balanced the boxed Archite on his lap, her cold curves nestled within protective layers of the purest gauze. He wanted to keep her safe and snug until such time as she would take up new residence in the antiquities collection of his Staatliche . . .

* * * * *

The next morning, bright and early, Constance awoke refreshed between champagne satin sheets in a Campaign-style double bed—alone. She stretched and yawned. One spaghetti strap of her lace negligee had fallen from her creamy shoulder. She pushed it up as she reflected on last night's activity. Somehow she felt vaguely disappointed; the only moves she'd had to fend off were those made on a twelfth century ivory chessboard from Norman England. Apparently the Fat Man was as avid a chessplayer as he was a collector of international antiques and antiquities . . .

The next morning, bright and early, Reilly was rudely shoved awake in his dim cell with a poke to the ribs. Asad's sable eyes glittered with the promise of a score to settle. "Get up, Anglo!" he spat. "My master awaits." He brandished his rifle (cocked; Reilly had checked to be certain) threateningly with his one good hand while his bandaged stump balanced the butt.

"Stupid Anglo," Asad spat again, for emphasis.

It was not the best of mornings for Reilly. He retaliated. He should not have. Asad wordlessly responded by knocking him to the ground. He motioned two guards to carry the limp body up to the Fat Man's private quarters.

Somewhat later that morning, not so bright and early, but at a more civilized hour approaching noon, the Fat Man entered his drawingroom tastefully attired in a subdued Turkish robe the color of pale green grapes. Seated before him was a freshly bathed and breakfasted Constance dressed in a smartly tailored Coco Chanel peach linen walking suit with kick pleat. Beside her sprawled Reilly, newly revived, unshaven and rumple-haired, still clad in his sweat-stained jodhpurs which now smelled, unfortunately, like rancid watermelon rind. He also had the beginning of a very nasty headache.

"Friends," boomed the Fat Man in a fulsomely mellow basso profundo reminiscent of Orson Welles at his oiliest, "I wish to announce that the long wait is almost over for us all. I expect a very important guest to be arriving at almost any moment. I'm sure she'll leave you all speechless with amazement"

* * * * *

As Herr Kubbeldorf and his green goddess jolted over the rough desert track he thought his kidneys would turn to mush. "Can't you miss some of the potholes?" wailed the carsick curator above the rear of the engine. He was convinced the young SS driver was determined to turn his first assignment into a Wagnerian epic, even if it meant hitting every crater in the roadbed at top speed. Or especially if it meant hitting every crater in the roadbed at top speed. "Achtung!" screamed the new-seated professor. "Stop this truck! Schnell!"

The careening vehicle lurched to a halt as Herr Kubbeldorf over-balanced, barely missing hitting his balding head against the dashboard, still tightly clutching the goddess to his groin. "I'm getting out to inspect the crates," he prevaricated. "Stay in the cab and for God's sake, stop revving the engine!"

The good curator couldn't decide which needed relieving the most: his bladder or his stomach. Stepping down from the running board, he automatically headed for the back of the truck, thinking fresh air and solid ground under his feet just might quell his queasies. His bladder could wait another minute. Besides, he told himself, still clutching the boxed goddess to him, it wouldn't hurt to check for possible damage to the crates caused by his idiotic driver. "That young barbarian has no idea of the value of what he's tossing around, much less of you, mein lieblich," he cooed to the box in his arms.

Satisfied none of the crates had broken loose from their moorings, Herr Kubbeldorf looked for a place to drop his pants. It was the last

thing he clearly remembered. A moment later he was knocked unconscious, his driver bound and gagged, and the cargo-laden truck commandeered by Arab agents of the Fat Man . . .

* * * * *

Reilly turned his aching head ever so slightly to the left to get a better view of Constance sitting beside him on the brocaded Victorian loveseat. She looks a stunner in that peach walking suit, he thought. And a traitor. She's gone over to the Fat Man for a bar of soap and a soft bed.

Constance felt Reilly's cold slate eyes boring into her. She stiffened her spine, feigning indifference. I'm not going to grovel for forgiveness simply because I'm clean and unmolested, she thought. What gives him the right to judge me? Just because he couldn't play Sir Galahad he thinks I'm a slut and a turncoat. He's as bad as my first husband . . . and then she wondered what Marisa was eating for dinner.

As the hands of the ornolu-ornamented camelback horloge atop the travertine marble mantelpiece approached the luncheon hour (such was the perfection of the Fat Man's timing, to say nothing of his decor), an apprehensive Herr Kubbeldorf, a failed would-be Siegfried, and the green goddess—gift-boxed, no less—entered the elegant drawingroom of the Fat Man's desert retreat. His fantasy was now complete, his dream both fact and flesh, for he now held them all and he held the Archite.

"Friends," he addressed Constance and Reilly, "I do believe she's arrived."

Gott in Himmel, thought Herr Kubbeldorf. That grotesque swine in the green bathrobe means to take her from me! Constance looked directly at Reilly; the disgraced SS driver looked at the box clutched to the curator's skinny chest; Asad and Abdul looked to their master. Herr Kubbeldorf did the only thing left him to do, given the circumstances. He charged the Fat Man like an enraged bull—head down, shoulders squared, heels flying. All ninety-five pounds of him. The impact, nonetheless, was terrific.

Reilly propelled himself from the loveseat and grabbed the Fat Man around the throat from behind, pressing his thumbs against the stunned collector's windpipe. "Make a move and your master dies," he snarled to the Arabs. Herr Kubbeldorf, crumpled at the Fat Man's feet and equally stunned to have found a protector, mutely communicated his thanks by pounding his fists on the Fat Man's insteps. The silk-gowned collector of antiquities howled. Asad, who held the young SS driver, inwardly writhed. He wanted Reilly himself, and now he was once again at the Anglo's mercy. Seeing a chance to recoup lost glory, the SS driver brightened. Perhaps all was not yet lost. Constance stood up from the loveseat, uncertain what to do.

"Give me the Archite," Reilly commanded the Curator, still on the floor.

"Nein."

"Give the Archite to the pretty lady then."

"Nein."

Reilly tensed his thumb pressure a fraction.

"Don't be an imbecile," bumbled the purple-faced Fat Man. "Give him the goddess."

"Nein."

Constance walked over to the adamant little curator and hunkered down on her new pair of Italian leather dress pumps. She was eye-level with him now. "Please, you don't understand, Herr Professor Doktor Kubbeldorf." She deliberately used his full academic title. God, how these Germans doted on rank. Maybe if I show him some respect he'll listen to me, she hoped. Please God, you little shit.

She continued.

"You want to save the green lady, yes?"

"Ja."

"Then you must give her up—to us—to Herr Reilly and me."

"Nein."

"But you must. You must know Herr Hitler's destined her for the black market—don't you?"

"Gott in Himmel!" shrieked the distraught curator. Therein followed a string of oaths in German. Herr Kubbeldorf had never felt so betrayed by his country, so confused, or quite so alone before.

Constance continued to work on him. "You must see that if the Fat Man gets her no one will ever see her beauty but him. No one. Ever. He'll lock her away and take her out for private showings," or should I say 'gloatings,' Constance thought as she nervously surveyed an anxious Reilly, an empurpled Fat Man, the bored SS driver, and the two restless Arabs. "You'll lose, the world will lose, everybody but the Fat man will

lose," she breathed into his ear.

Still no response.

Then Constance played her trump card.

"Science will lose."

That was the last straw. Herr Professor Doktor Kubbeldorf wimpered, kissed the box, and tenderly handed it to Constance; then he stopped.

"What will become of her?" he whispered.

Constance thought fast. What the hell would become of the Archite? She was a national treasure of the African people. She thought of the Nazi plan to coldly rifle and sell another nation's heritage. She thought of Lord Elgin, the Parthenon frieze, and the British Museum . . . then again, if Keats hadn't seen the Marbles, where would "Ode to a Grecian Urn" be? She was losing track of her thoughts. And how about America? She thought of her own country's duplicity in assisting Britain when America was still technically neutral. What could she tell Herr Kubbeldorf with his puppy-dog eyes?

"Please, Herr Professor Doktor Kubbeldorf, I don't know. All I do know is that if you allow her to continue her journey to Algiers, she'll be sold. I also know that if you let the Fat Man have his way the world will be the poorer for having lost her a second time. I can only hope that after the war she'll be restored to her people." I also hope, Constance added under her breath, that you make up your mind pretty damn quick, you little shit. Those Arabs are getting antsy and I don't know how much longer Reilly's thumbs can hold out.

After a brief but bitter struggle the plucky curator who, in essence, held the war in his hands, blinked away a tear, rose to his knees, and like some courtier of old presented the battered box to his lady fair. It was a touching moment.

Reilly relaxed. The Fat Man groaned. The Arabs stiffened. The young SS driver despaired. He would never get a medal at this rate. Now what am I supposed to do, thought Constance. I've got the hot potato. It was days like these . . .

Asad thought for her. Enraged that his master had been gotten the better of, Asad went into action. He hurled his scimitar through the air, aiming for Reilly's dark head. Reilly ducked, the Fat Man bolted, forgetting the curator at his feet, Constance shrieked, and the SS driver brightened. Maybe he still had a chance for a medal after all.

The Fat Man fell over Herr Kubbeldorf, effectively immobilizing both. Abdul, who still guarded the SS youth, swiftly left his post and grabbed Constance with the box. Reilly, weaponless, glared at Asad from behind a Louis Quinze double bench in burlled beechwood. He despised his defenseless state, especially behind that silly piece of furniture. The scimitar had landed beyond his reach. What an ignoble end to Reilly, ace of spies, he thought. Serves you right, you silly bastard, for staying in the spy game.

Asad advanced on Reilly with a drawn pistol. His Arab compatriot Abdul maintained a firm grip on Constance and the disputed box. Though one-handed, Asad was still capable of inflicting a lethal wound. Reilly remained absolutely still. As Asad continued to advance, he momentarily

paused to offer his bandaged stump to assist the Fat Man to rise. Herr Kubbelddorf was in no position to get up, having had the wind knocked out of him by the Fat Man's fall.

"That's enough, Asad," the Fat Man coughed, massaging his bruised windpipe as he rose. "Take them all down to the dungeon."

Reilly, Constance, Herr Kubbelddorf, and the young SS driver (who had yet to prove himself in action), were led down to the interrogation room. The SS youth promised himself that if he ever got out of this alive he would retire to his Uncle Otto's goat farm in Schleswig-Holstein. To hell with heroes, soldiering, and Siegfrieding about the globe in the thankless service of the Fatherland. It was days like these . . .

The Fat Man followed the dejected quartet, bringing up the rear behind the herding Abdul and Asad. He motioned the Arabs to handcuff the prisoners to the wall. Abdul began to heat the charcoal brazier. Asad prepared a branding iron, watching the dull black tip glow orange, then a searing white. He judged it ready.

"Strip his shirt," The Fat Man pointed to Reilly, directing Abdul. It was done.

"Now, Constance my dear," beamed the Fat Man, "how badly do you want him to live? Choose! I'll dress you in silks and furs, designer originals, diamonds! You'll never know the meaning of rationing, standing in line at the check-out, or those awful synthetic nylons coming out on the market! You'll travel the world first class, you'll want for nothing! Choose!

Reilly looked sideways at Constance, who was chained next to him on the wall. She had more than proven her worth back at the drawingroom. Resourceful in the field? Hell yes! He'd have to tell Q how wrong he'd been again. His eyes, however, registered disbelief at the Fat Man's proposal; was he dreaming, or had he lost his mind? This was the twentieth century, wasn't it? He certainly hoped she didn't hold those bloody little sneakers against him.

Constance quickly assessed the situation; choose the Fat Man and she would be the most pampered, indulged showpiece this side of Marie Antoinette—and no guillotine either . . . just the guillotine of the conscience. But on the other hand, Reilly had deliberately waved those ugly khaki sneakers under her nose back in Morocco, knowing how she loathed the second-rate and the prosaic in fashion; and the Fat Man had so much to offer: the villa on Malta, the house at Majorca, the casino at Monte Carlo, the Paris apartment, the London townhouse, the cottage on Cape Cod, the hotel in Rio, the palace in Hong Kong, the chalet in Gstaad, almost limitless wealth, no worry about back child support from Mungo, Swiss finishing school for Marisa, real silk stockings . . . and Reilly's life.

There really was no choice after all.

She assented. "But first, you release Reilly and set him free. No strings. After all, you have the green goddess and now you have me. So you've won. Hooray for you."

Reilly thought he'd throw up. So she was sacrificing herself for him? Bloody hell she was! Didn't she know the Fat Man would never let him go, much less forgo his torture? Now who was born yesterday?

The Fat Man smiled. Beatifically. He motioned Abdul to release Reilly. Constance sagged against the wall in relief. The Fat Man was no barbarian after all; he merely wanted his way, and maybe, she thought, he just wants a decent chess partner.

But Reilly wasn't through yet. Released from his manacles, he dived for Abdul; the two men wrestled each other. Constance was speechless with shock, the Fat Man speechless with anger, and Asad speechless with delight. He waited his turn to jab Reilly with the white-hot iron. The two men rolled to the ground, kicking and punching, each trying to gain the ascendancy. In the course of their struggle they knocked over a low table in their path, a table next to the brazier, a table holding the momentarily forgotten boxed emerald goddess Archite, chief prize of Kather's treasure house, chief object of despair and desire, then as now. The goddess had never been one to inspire quiet worship. In short, the box, with the goddess, went into the fire.

All gasped.

They watched her burn. First, the box. Then the goddess. The flames licked her stony curves and coldly serene face almost like a lover delivering a caress. Then the flames grew hotter and the ravished goddess so long to deny her favors to a suitor, melted at her lover's touch, melted, into a pool of worthless green slag.

The goddess for whom Kennedy had died and countless schemed, was a fake.

The curator, still chained to the wall, fainted. The young SS driver shrugged, turned stoical from so many defeats and the comforting

thought of his Uncle Otto's goat farm. Reilly and Abdul stopped fighting. Asad lowered his poker. The Fat Man screamed one long painful drawn-out wail of rage, despair, and frustration and then fell to the floor . . .

* * * * *

By December America entered the war on the side of Great Britain, largely due to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor for which Churchill thanked his Imperial Highness for getting America off its arse and into the fray officially at last. Axis Germany now realized its dream of a blitzkrieg was forever shattered. They would be in it for the long count. The propaganda campaign was scrapped.

The crated treasure hoard of Kathar was found to be largely worthless trinkets. Apparently Kathar's neighbors to the south had fobbed off shoddy tribute on the desert prince. The site was quietly abandoned to scorpions and the stray lizard, to be re-opened after the war as Kathar's Garden Cafe, a fashionable watering-hole for jaded oil shiekhs and their bored mistresses.

The Fat Man lived in semi-retirement after suffering a massive stroke. Asad remained with his master, faithful as only one of his race can be. One pleasure remained, however. The Fat Man could still enjoy a game of chess, even though his collecting days were over.

After the Kathar Affair, as the Foreign Office came to call it, Reilly retired from active service to a small estate outside London, there to raise and breed thoroughbreds and to live the life of a modest country squire. It also made excellent cover for free lance jobs. He took Constance with him. One weekend each year they relive the occasion

of their first meeting by re-visiting the Cafe D'Or and Faisal, its grinning gold-toothed proprietor.

In addition to their annual pilgrimage, Constance performs one small, unvarying ritual: Reilly drives her to a secluded desert retreat, there to play chess with a paralyzed stroke victim while his one-handed aid pours tea.

Saint's Rest
The End of Reilly

Prologue

Out of deference to other aspiring or would-be authors elsewhere, this history bows to those who have trod the slippery path of biography before; no apology will be made for a certain amount of incompleteness to Sidney Reilly's story, for his life was full of the peculiar passion for secrets and of the passion to keep those peculiar secrets secret.

Nonetheless, the jigsaw that Reilly was would make a book in itself, and though this biographer has had to contend with a certain amount of nastiness from the recordkeepers down at the S.I.S. and with their zeal regarding the Official Secrets Act, the portrait which emerges of the man is, on the main, whole and true, despite certain gaps, holes, chronological discrepancies, and a measure of wishful thinking.

Or in the happy words of George MacDonald Fraser, history is very much what you want it to be. Likewise, both Mark Twain and Winston Churchill came to a somewhat similar conclusion about the idiosyncrasies of history-writing: it's not so much whether it did happen or didn't happen as whether it could happen or should have happened.

And if it didn't, change it.

"The End of Reilly" presents a tale of how it might have happened in the best and worst of all possible worlds.

Biographical tyros, take note.

Let the idyll begin . . .

* * * * *

October, 1954 and Constance was dead.

The fifty-year old Reilly, Ace of Spies, late of Saint's Rest, his estate outside London for the breeding and sale of thoroughbreds, discovered the partially unclothed body at 3:37 pm in the upstairs master bedroom sprawled across the partially made bed in the partially darkened room since the blinds had been partially drawn against the partially slanted rays of the westerling autumn sun.

Reilly noted the partiality of everything, except for the wholly dead condition of his beloved consort.

They had had thirteen mostly tranquil but sometimes tempestuous years together as man and wife. Upon marrying, Reilly retired from active service with the Secret Intelligence Service, but free-lanced for M.I.5 in the capacity of spy-catcher. The work was generally less hazardous, which Constance liked.

His S.I.S. days behind him, he devoted himself to another of his consuming passions (other than Constance), that of horseflesh. Because of his uncanny business acumen, his innate ability to read human nature and human greed, he succeeded in turning an increasingly tidy profit throughout the years of his stable's operation.

Now he would put that money to good use. Now he would track down his wife's killer. And there would be nothing partial about it.

Constance's life had been ended by a bullet to the back of her skull. She had been dressing for an appointment in town when the killer fired. She had said she would be gone only an hour or so. Now she would never return. It had been a professional job. Execution style. The question was, who had been the perpetrator and why? Reilly'd handled many cases over the years for M.I.5. So many suspects, so many reasons to hate him. He couldn't think.

The white-breasted moon coyly slipped behind a wispy veil of cloud as Reilly sat on the edge of the double bed they had shared together, the bed where he had found her three days ago, the bed he could no longer sleep in. It was past midnight. The venetian blinds allowed one last peek before the Cynthia of the Skies chastely retired to the ministrations of her sister stars. Reilly was oblivious to the nocturnal strip show. His wife had been foully murdered in her own bedroom. How dare Nature show herself as if nothing onward had happened?

He slumped, facing the slatted moonlight. Tomorrow he would begin his search. Tomorrow he would rejoin the ranks of active agents. Tomorrow he would resume the title Ace of Spies.

He half-stumbled downstairs to the couch.

Now he could sleep.

In the interest of biographical accuracy, authenticity, and honesty, let the narrative confess that things at this point looked rather dim. The trail of Constance Reilly's killer was already three days cold.

The Master Spy was fifty and out of training. He also carried at least ten pounds of excess weight. Frankly, he didn't have a clue.

So bright but not early the next morning, it being eleven of the clock (since our hero had to catch up on the previous two night's missed sleep; heroes are only, in the last analysis, human and subject to the wear and tear of Time) Reilly yawned, stretched, sat up on the couch, scratched under his right armpit, and swung his cramped legs onto the seventeenth century oak parqueted foyer, it being a genuinely old estate outside London to which Reilly and Constance had retired after the Kathar Affair.

He determined to visit the Fat Man at his secluded desert retreat. That would be the first stop on his quest for justice. Or vengeance. He couldn't be bothered with niceties just now.

By 1954 the Fat Man was a seventy-six year old paralyzed stroke victim with a faithful one-handed Arab retainer by the name of Asad-ben-Achmed, as those readers of "Reilly and the Garden of Kathar" will doubtless recall. Also, in the ensuing years since his fateful stroke, the Fat Man could no longer be said to resemble his moniker. He had dwindled down to a svelte one hundred and forty pounds, which is just about right for a five foot one inch man of medium build, according to the Metropolitan Life Insurance actuarial tables for the height and weight of men aged twenty-five (of course, the Fat Man wasn't twenty-five, but the folks down at Metropolitan made allowance for that too).

Within the week Reilly was knocking at the Fat Man's door. If nothing else, he would tell him that Constance would no longer be able to come and play chess at their annual get-together. Abdul answered the knock

and ushered him in immediately. Although it was not time for the Reillys' annual chess visit, Abdul sensed a certain purpose behind this call. Then he noticed Reilly was alone.

The Fat Man, for he refused to relinquish that last tie to his past, no matter how loosely the name sat on him these days, sat propped upright in his antique Bentham cane-backed wheelchair ca. 1860, made more comfortable by the addition of Chinese silk throw pillows embroidered with erotic scenes from the sixteenth-century Ming dynasty novel The Golden Lotus.

Reilly still possessed keen slate gray eyes.

Time, age, and physical infirmity had mellowed the connoisseur of the rare, the unobtainable, and the exotic. Chess and the easing of physical discomfort, however, remained his twin passions; Constance had at one time been a strong contender for the above two, but now untimely Death had eased her out of the running. Reilly's news was an additional paroxysm to his already impaired cranial synapses. In less grandiose terms, he genuinely grieved.

It was these marks of true shock, the silent slipping of twin tears down the Fat Man's thin cheeks, which tipped Reilly off that he knew nothing of the plot against Constance's life. The formerly Fat Man was clean. While this piece of news eliminated one suspect, it opened the field to a nameless and faceless host of maleficent and significant others. Where to start?

Asad stood behind his master, slowly waving a palmetto fan bound to his stump back and forth, back and forth in hypnotic rhythm through the still, desert-heated air. He listened to Reilly's grief and determination.

At one time Asad had dearly wanted to kill the upstart Anglo for spoiling his fun with the deliciously writhing Constance on his ample lap. Now she had returned to the dust from whence she came. Life was funny that way.

Asad momentarily broke the monotonous rhythm of his palmetto-waving long enough to reach out his remaining hand to crush a pesky black blowfly between dusky fingers. The Fat Man certainly didn't stint on quality help. Then Asad spoke.

"Anglo," for such he still addressed and thought of the Russian-born albeit Hibernian-named Master Spy, "Allah the Merciful looks down upon your suffering. Allah knows all. The miscreants will be found, for surely not one but many were involved in the foul murder of the Lady Reilly."

It was the longest speech Reilly ever remembered the laconic Arab deliver. He was touched.

"Anglo," Asad continued, apparently on a roll, "my master and I know of someone who may help you in your quest. Do not refuse her assistance. She is a pearl beyond price. My master trusts fully in her powers. She will help you in your search. Do not shun this offer. Seek her out."

The Fat Man, silent throughout Asad's mystifying advice, cloaked as it was in the miasma of the occult, nodded. These days Asad did his talking for him. Everything seemed to tire him now.

Asad slipped Reilly a card with the seer's name and address handwritten on the back in a flowing script. Her name was Karyll Auschlander, her address the Albany, in London's posh West End.

He stayed the rest of that day and night at the Fat Man's desert retreat. He would take the morning plane from Algiers to London, with a stopover in Berlin to visit Herr Kubbeldorf and break the news of Constance's death. In the interim he supped at table with the Fat Man and Asad, swapped stories, shared reminiscences, and burped at the banquet provided.

2

The next morning he took a window seat near the wing in a converted German bomber that passed for one of the three craft in the hastily organized Algerian Airlines which made daily hops to Kathar's Garden Cafe as well as points North. Strange how thirteen years ago Kathar's was just a German dig in the desert from which Hitler hoped to win a paper war subsidized by a green lady. But that is another story and a lifetime ago, he thought, looking out at the blurring runway as the belly-heavy bomber took off in flight like a pregnant hippo with wings. First stop, the Staatliche, to confer with the good curator.

* * * * *

A gray drizzly day awaited Reilly as he stepped down from the plane onto German soil for the first time in more years than he cared to remember. He hailed a cab in flawless German (after all, he spoke seven languages) and was whisked to the museum. Post-war Berlin wasn't a pretty sight, but then, the Germans had lost the war. A gray day for a gray city. He paid the cabbie, who had the face of a sugar-cured ham, and got out of the cab.

Herr Kubbeldorf was fussily arranging the window dressing on the Egyptian display case when Reilly stopped by. Mummies do tend to become unraveled. So did Herr Kubbeldorf. After all, it had been thirteen long years since he had last seen Reilly and what Reilly told the curator unraveled him further. He recalled the fair Constance with warmth and feeling; after all, it was to her that he entrusted the Archite on banded knee all those long and faded years ago; it was to her that he had entrusted his dream for Science.

Well, they both knew how that had turned out.

And now she was stone dead. He almost fainted at the thought of her inexplicable ending, all ninety-five pounds of him. He sighed. No, he did not know of anyone who would profit from such a senseless killing, such a brutal wasting of precious life. No, he did not know why someone would want Constance dead, and no, he did not subscribe to terrorist acts for political ends. He barely read the paper as it was. Besides, what political connections could Mrs. Reilly have had, seeing that she had retired from the Service upon her wedding to Mr. Reilly? Was it not so that Constance had become the perfect hausfrau in all their years of wedded bliss (indeed she had not, but Reilly had never held that peccancy against her; she excelled in other areas)? So who would want her dead?

Indeed?

Who?

Reilly shrugged all six feet one inch of himself (so he shrank an inch; he's fifty) and thanked the teary-eyed little curator, not that he'd been of any real help. Another lead down the proverbial drain. Time

to check into an hotel for the night and catch the connection to London in the morning. He turned and left, his leather soles ringing down the marble hall. Herr Kubbeldorf returned to pinning a scarab beetle of inferior Middle Kingdom dynasty workmanship on the mummy of the wife of an assistant temple architect. A woman returned to her notebook, jotted something down, pushed the bridge of her glasses back up on her nose, pulled her wool skirt back down (it had the habit of twisting itself up as she walked), pocketed her notebook, and followed Reilly at a discrete distance. Most mysterious.

* * * * *

Pepita "Pumpkin Seed" Bombadilla adjusted her skirt and twitched her supple hips one last time in the mirror before deciding on a hot bath that evening in her room at the Hotel Excelsior. Her frizzed bleached hair was swept up by a tortoise shell comb she'd cadged from a customer the night before last when that hotel management kicked her out on her proverbial can—and boy, could she can-can.

He was a traveling tortoise shell comb salesman trying to make a deutschmark and trying to get a good time out of the hot blonde number he'd picked up before she rolled him for all he was worth, which wasn't much, seeing as how sales had been consistently down that fiscal quarter and Berlin was a depressed market for pretty much anything you'd care to name, but especially tortoise shell combs. He thought he'd try Chicago.

Pepita was a nineteen year old struggling Cockney actress from Argentina trying to hit the big time in Germany. Her real name was Maisie Micklewhite and she'd been raised in London's East End district, but

Argentina always sounded better on a résumé. The name helped too. Unfortunately, it didn't help enough. She wasn't having much success as an Argentinian actress in Berlin, so Pepita knocked on stage doors and agents' doors, and finally on strange men's doors to make a living. Her looks got her by and she usually split her takings with the management where she plied her trade, only she'd been kicked out the night before last for rolling the comb salesman and somehow she'd ended up here at the Excelsior. What was truly awkward was that this wasn't even her room. The towel boy had got her in.

And so the failed Cockney actress from Argentina slithered out of her knee-length red-spangled skin-tight evening dress, dropped it to the carpeted floor where it lay in a crushed pile at her tawny ankles like a circle of spilled Dutch Boy's best vermillion indoor latex, stepped out onto the white hexagonal-tiled floor of the bath in nothing but her three-inch red-sequined stiletto-heeled evening pumps, and turned on the hot water.

3

Reilly stepped into the second-best room of the Excelsior since their first-best was the Bridal Suite. Everything had changed with the death of Constance. He had grown older, the world had grown older. He had no leads other than the Fat Man's belief in the occult. Herr Kubbel-dorf had been his usual myopic scientific self, though sympathetic. What Reilly needed right now was some sympathy too. He began to dial room service for a bottle when he noticed a red splotch on the carpet reminiscent

of spilled paint. On closer inspection, it was a woman's dress.

Pepita was lathering up nicely when the door opened and a tired-looking middle-aged man stepped through holding a gun, but she'd seen a lot of weird things in her line of work, so she just relaxed and smiled because her mother told her to always wear a smile and in this case it was all she was wearing anyway. And the tired-looking businessman (another traveling salesman?) slowly relaxed and smiled and Pepita slowly raised one long and shapely leg and coyly asked in her Cockney-accented broken German for the scrub brush on the wall and Reilly smiled a little wider because her accent was so terrible and thought, I'm getting too old for these bathroom scenes; she's young enough to be my daughter, but he still kept his gun trained on her.

Shrugging her tortoise shell-manacled frizz, Pepita lowered her long and shapely leg, turned her shoulders toward Reilly, and slowly (ostensibly to keep her purchase in the slippery tub; 75% of all household accidents occur in the bathroom) stood up to grasp the desired brush. Iridescent soap bubbles clung and slithered down her glistening lavender-scented cleavage to the dark V of her crotch like cascading ropes of jealous sea pearls or glowing, moonstruck opals. Aha, thought Reilly, she uses peroxide.

The goddess of the bath spoke again, this time in her native tongue.

"Care for some comp'ny, luv?" Venus slowly descended back into the foam, brush in hand.

Reilly brightened. "I certainly would." He lay his revolver (and other considerations) down on the bath chair and stripped, much to the surprise of Pepita. He had looked so tired a minute ago. He slid into the warm frothy tub and presented his back to her.

"Now you can use it."

Nonplussed, she went to work.

* * * * *

Later, after they had toweled off and made their way to the bed, Pepita eased Reilly further with a slow back rub, a special which she often had neither the time nor the inclination to perform for her other customers. He fell asleep under her supple fingers, totally relaxed and at peace.

Pepita smiled, then reached for the bedside phone. She dialed a number.

"The fish is in the net."

She replaced the receiver then lay down and drew the sheet over them both for a well-deserved rest.

* * * * *

Reilly awoke the next morning curiously happy. His tension and self-pity were gone. He looked at the sleeping figure beside him. She had been an unexpected pleasure. Constance was gone. She wouldn't blame him now.

Constance. As delicious as last night had been, he had to make his London connection this morning. There would be another time for this, another hotel, another girl. But Pepita had been pleasant. He pulled a bill from his wallet on the nightstand, then decided on two, and tucked them

under her pillow.

Pepita lay sprawled on her stomach. Actually, she'd been awake the last half-hour. She was just too lazy to leave a warm bed. And she needed to move very cautiously with this one. He hadn't been so bad last night. Grunty pigs, most of 'em; real rutters, it you took her meaning. No finesses. Sex and pleasure—that was for the customer. For her it was business—that's where her acting came in. 'Cept 'e hadn't been clumsy or too quick. 'E worked it proper. And 'cor! him jumpin' in the tub last night! 'Nuff to give a workin' gal a right fright, it was, what with the gun an' all. 'Cept, it wasn't as nice as the one 'e kept between his legs. She thought: Why not send 'im off nice-like?

She looked up at him and smiled.

He saw the invitation in her eyes.

4

Karyll Auschlander was a buxom dame d'une certain âge as the French would say, or as the English would say, fifty-three. The number corresponded to both her age and hip measurement. In 1940 she had been a thirty-nine year old resident of the Byelorussian capitol of Minsk, which was shelled by the Germans on their advance into Russia. In the panic and destruction which usually accompanies military conquest, rapine, and civilian bombardment by mortar shells, a house beam fell on her head, causing her to black out. When she woke, she had lost her name, her memory, and her eyesight, none of which would return to her. The advancing Germans herded civilian survivors of the attack into work camps throughout Eastern

Europe. Into one of these she was placed.

As with the other prisoners, she too was assigned a number, which, considering what had happened, was just as well. Henceforth, for the duration of the war she was known as #0924144. Despite the terrible blows Life had dealt #0924144, the falling house beam had bestowed more than just lasting amnesia and permanent blindness; what it had taken from her it had conferred in "second sight."

She put her one gift to use, looking into the future since she could see nothing of her past. She began by predicting camp work assignments, especially the coveted kitchen positions. News of her amazing predictions soon reached the ears of the camp Commandant, who pulled her from the kitchen (where she peeled more skin than potatoes with her sightless fingers) to install her as his private Muse. After a few years, when the tide of war began to turn in favor of the Allies, #0924144 began to fear she would see her own number come up on the death squad quota; she recalled the old saw about ~~what-happened-to-messengers-who-brought-bad-news~~. Luckily, her camp was liberated before the Commandant decided to terminate her prophetic services.

Desiring a fresh start in life, #0924144 traveled to London, where she found a talent agent who knew a good thing when he saw one. Said agent, one Marvin Auschlander, asked her her name, got a number, and decided to christen her himself. From Marvin she acquired both "Karyll" (because it sounded ordinary but was spelled most artistically—Marvin couldn't spell worth beans) and "Auschlander," since he had no intention of letting this prize pigeon fly the coop. He quit his agency, married Karyll, and

happily took more than his rightful percentage from her readings for the rich and titled.

She practiced her trade on Harley Street and kept a consulting room across from an ear, nose, and throat specialist. She read fortunes, predicted winners at the track, fast-rising stocks, future husbands, future divorces, future deaths, and logically, conducted séances with the dearly departed. Police occasionally called upon her services (her record was two out of three). She was respected in her field. She acquired wealth and standing in society. As the years passed, she grew plump and tinted her brown hair red (weren't most seers redheads?). In 1950 Mr. Auschlander died. Now Karyll no longer parted with an agent's commission. She did quite nicely on her own through word of mouth, and she had built up a rich and influential circle of clients, among whom was numbered the Fat Man.

This night the buxom fifty-three year old widow was cautiously pacing her newly-decorated mauve apartment (she had been told by her interior decorator that mauve was a mysterious color) in a bathrobe under which she wore a flimsy pink chiffon nightgown trimmed in pink marabou with matching marabou-accented mules of modest two-inch height. She paced cautiously because she frequently bumped into the furniture. It was her lot to see ahead, but never what was close at hand. Her decorator had suggested padded furniture to reduce mishaps. As Karyll conceded, it didn't inspire confidence in the paying customers to consult a seer with bruised shins.

She continued her sedate pace though her heart beat like a voodoo tom-tom in four/four time. Her pre-war memory had never returned, though she often had flashes of what seemed to be scenes from her past life. Trouble was, these flashes romped promiscuously with her genuine visions. It was difficult to tell them apart. Tonight's vision, however, had been disturbing vivid. She clutched her chiffon gown closer to her football-sized breasts. She felt around for her upholstered armchair. She plumped down, squeezing her melon-round thighs together. Her heart rate slowed. She breathed deeply, forcing herself to count between breaths. She fingered her tinted curls. She concentrated. A man face-down in the snow. Aching cold. Death by violence. Someone she had known or would know.

She pulled her bathrobe closer to her shivering body.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, back in Berlin the very next morning, the mysterious ~~woman-with-the-twisting-wool-skirt-and-eye-glasses-that-slipped-down-her-nose~~ repeatedly tried to lurk inconspicuously in the shadow of a building across the street from the Hotel Excelsior. She still had her notebook with her. It had been a tedious morning. In fact, the morning was almost used up, and he still hadn't emerged. What was keeping him?

Importuning German business-types had accosted her several times already. What was it with them? Her slouchy raincoat couldn't even keep them away. She knew herself not to be pretty in the classical sense, or even in the conventional sense, but Freddy liked her. Well, more than liked her, probably; but she had no intention of giving up her career. Her

mother's blood ran too strongly in her veins for that . . . except Mother had done so for one man.

She continued to wait, automatically frowning when any adult German male looked her way.

With more difficulty than Reilly had anticipated, or perhaps because he had been so long out of practice, he managed to at last extricate himself from Pepita's embraces long enough to dress and call a taxi to take him to the airport. She, however, extricated a promise from him in the hotel lobby: he must see her upon the completion of his London business. It was an easy enough promise to make, knowing in the back of his mind that such promises were easily broken.

After he had left, Pepita went back up to the room and dialed a number.

"The fish has slipped the net."

She replaced the receiver. She was vaguely uneasy. It didn't do to let these chaps down. No telling what they might do.

The noon sunshine greeted Reilly's eyes when he stepped down from the Hotel Excelsior and walked the few paces to the cab stand where his taxi would pick him up. The air had freshened, probably from yesterday's drizzle. Berlin was still a gray place, but now at least it looked cleansed and not quite so shabby. It was a bright October day. It took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the outside light. Then he spotted a rumpled female shape that gave his heart a start. Constance! Was it Constance back from the dead? . . . Constance in the shadows scrunching her head down, yet peering up at him through horn-rimmed glasses? . . . Constance

in a rumpled raincoat? And no lipstick?

It was Marisa, his stepdaughter.

Reilly relaxed. His heart slowed to normal. At twenty-five, Marisa was the pudgy, eye-glassed replica of her mother as she had been thirteen years ago. Except Constance had never been pudgy. And didn't wear eye glasses. And certainly wore lipstick. And had better taste in clothes. Actually, Marisa was more like her mother in spirit than in flesh. Marisa didn't wear high heels either. She preferred the safety of flats and ballerina slip-ons. She had trouble negotiating heels, what with her glasses falling down and her skirt riding up. But Marisa had been devoted to her mother. And, if truth be told, Marisa had had a school girl crush on her stepfather at the time of the marriage.

Marisa had been a sixth grader in Baltimore at the time of the Kathar Affair. After Constance's marriage, she sent her daughter to Europe to be educated in Swiss finishing schools, which nearly finished her off, but somehow never made a dent in her stubborn desire for comfort and practicality over fashion. Marisa would've preferred the Sahara sneaker to desert boots, had positions been reversed, but that would have made a different story entirely.

The Swiss schools, however, placed Marisa in the rarefied company of ambassadors' and movie stars' daughters and the special world of media coverage in which they lived. It intrigued the plain girl. She decided to become an investigative journalist. After the finishing schools, she consequently studied political history, photography, and journalism at University College of London, coming down to visit at Saint's Rest

between terms. It had been a comfortable pattern for Maria, one which had instilled a touch of stability in her otherwise peripatetic existence. She only guessed at the drama of Reilly's life. Now she determined to help him.

The plain, pudgy girl in tweed and wools who wore horn-rims, however, had a protector who watched over her by the name of Freddy MacCorker, son of Elias P. MacCorker, M. P. House of Commons, nouveau-riche heir to the MacCorker Colliery Works in the Midlands (nouveau-riche in English terms is anyone who has acquired his wealth within the last one hundred and fifty years, and certainly anyone who has acquired it manually rather than through the accepted channel of inheritance). Freddy met Maria at a party in Cambridge. He attended the London School of Economics. He was enchanted with the plain girl with career plans. He followed her around a lot. He planned to marry her one day, whether she knew it or not.

Reilly hailed Maria from the cab stand and she blushed, pushing up her glasses. At this rate she was a washout at sleuthing. They went to London to see Madame Karyll together.

As the night had been unkind to her, Karyll applied two cucumber slices to what she was certain were puffy eyes that morning. Her red hair had been dressed, but she wasn't. She called her lady's maid to choose something suitable for an afternoon consultation. "But Madame," Lucy said, "you don't have an afternoon consultation on your agenda." Madame Karyll pulled herself stiffly erect in her vanity chair. "That is what you think," she answered in a superior tone.

Her lady's maid was used to such I-have-spoken pronouncements from her employer. What did one expect, working for a seer? She picked out the eggplant wool suit with matching peplum jacket and lavender ascot blouse. A redhead in purple should look mysterious enough, Lucy reasoned, for whoever was coming. Madame often resorted to a little stage-dressing for heightened effect. Just look at this god-awful mauve apartment, she philosophized.

* * * * *

Reilly pushed the buzzer to Madame Karyll's apartment at the Albany just before tea time. Marisa was by his side, pushing her glasses up, pulling her skirt down, and adjusting her wrinkled raincoat. Burton, Karyll's butler, ushered them in when he saw the Fat Man's card with Asad's flowing script on the back. He told them to wait in the salon.

Reilly was impeccably dressed in a flawlessly-tailored suit from Savile Row. He was freshly shaved and had had his hair trimmed at the barber's before coming here. He wasn't sure why he had gone to all the extra trouble for a blind woman, but he had. Marisa had combed her hair. Madame Karyll made her entrance on the arm of Lucy, since she detested walking canes. She felt they added years to one's appearance and she was old enough, thank you. Her bruised shins revealed her vanity, however.

She was seated and then Reilly sat in a chair facing her. He extended his hand to her outstretched one and gave his name at her inquiry, surely a formality for one so gifted as she. An indescribable shock ran through Karyll's system at the touch of this man. Her medium's sense told her this was he whom she had seen in last night's vision. This was the man

who would die. A tremor seized her body. She forced herself to attend to his speech, though it wasn't necessary. Her "psychic window" was crystal clear on this one. Windex couldn't make it brighter. She would do all she could, gladly. She liked the sound of his voice. Something in it drew her. That of his stepdaughter's sounded plain.

Reilly found himself inexplicably drawn to this plumpish, overdressed woman in tinted curls and rouged cheeks who offered tea and lemon cakes and seemed to vibrate when he touched her. Her voice calmed him and put him in mind of his home. She wasn't that much older than he. It would be soothing to bed such a pillowy woman, he thought.

Marisa was frankly bored. Both Reilly and Madame seemed to share an instant rapport and the lemon cakes were dry. She looked at her watch and tried again, this time successfully, to pull her creeping skirt down. Freddy was in town this weekend. Nothing much was happening here. She looked up and begged to be excused. Reilly and Madame nodded. She could be reached at Freddy's parents' townhouse, since Parliament was in session. They had an awfully nice typewriter and she would just type up her notes and if her stepfather could be so kind as to call her in the morning from his hotel they would meet for breakfast to plan what next to do? Yes yes yes he had said, continuing to gaze into Madame's sightless eyes and hold Madame's hand. Marisa shrugged. Lucy showed her the way out.

Children could be so tiresome at times.

* * * * *

Karyll awoke once in the night with another vision, but this time she simply turned on her side to the man and shifted her leg over his hip

and thigh, pressing her voluptuous breasts and opulent belly against his back and sliding her arm under his and against his chest. He stirred, clasped her hand in his, and sank deeper into his dreams. She was infinitely softer than Pepita.

As Reilly prepared to leave that morning to collect Marisa Karyll talked to him from the vanity table. She was seated, combing out her tinted curls. Last night had surprised them both, none more than Reilly. She was giving him advice, the gist of which pertained to his staying out of the snow. When he mentioned his Russian winters in Odessa as a boy, she was the one who froze. "No no no, you must not go back to Russia," she had said. She told him of her premonitory vision. He shrugged. It merely gave him a clue where next to go. He had to find his wife's killer. She stilled her hand, hair brush aloft; a flash went through her system once more, then she recovered. Reilly asked her what it was. Nothing; an impression of red, that's all, she had said, resuming her combing; of what use could that be?

Reilly adjusted his tie, stepped behind Karyll, and encircled her with his arms, giving her a brief kiss and a quick squeeze. He silently thanked the Fat Man.

Now he suspected a connection between Pepita and Karyll's snow vision. The flash of red. A woman's dress, certainly; there could be no mistake. He would go back to Berlin, alone. He would keep that promise to Pepita. He mumbled something about catching a plane to Karyll as he went out the door. She didn't even have time to share last night's dream with him over croissants and tea, a dream of ice skates and drowning; did

he think there was a connection between the two visions? Now she would not know.

That was the trouble; how could she know that it was not her psychic window which had been open last night, but memories of her old life? That Reilly's voice and touch had rocketed her fog-bound brain back to memories of her Odessa girlhood, that she was, indeed, not only #0924144, but Odile Sofia Pinnesky-Kutyapoff, half-sister to Sigmund "Siggy" Rosenblum, aka Sidney Reilly, married at age seventeen to the owner of Minsk's largest shoe store, or that Sam Kutyapoff, her husband, still grieved his wife's loss?

5

It hadn't been easy prying the information out of Madame Karyll, but enough coconut bon-bons and the promise of a date with Rosano Brazzi (Marisa's Swiss finishing school connections had paid off at last) did the trick after waiting fruitlessly at Freddy's parents' townhouse for the expected phone call. She berated herself on the way over to Madame Karyll's in the taxi. She should have known better than to trust that he'd call her. What did she think she was on—a picnic? Something was up and she had to find out what it was. The seer's confused mumblings about ice skates and snow and red only confirmed Marisa's fears that Reilly was headed back into danger, and most likely, back into the arms of that frizzed blonde at the Excelsior. Well, Mother was dead now, and she had outgrown her school girl crush, but couldn't men be a little more

discriminating than that?

But, like mother, like daughter; Marisa determined to follow Reilly into danger. She bought herself a ticket for the boat-train and prepared to depart for Calais that afternoon. No telling what she'd find in Berlin when she got there. Marisa chalked it up to training for her career in investigative journalism, and it would probably also look good on a résumé. Freddy, however, had other plans. Looking deeply into his beloved's horn-rimmed eyes, he saw sheer idiocy. He determined to follow her.

* * * * *

Pepita had difficulty masking her shock when Reilly strode into the Excelsior bar. He'd only been gone two days. She was meeting with two KGB agents to discuss ways and means of luring Reilly back to Berlin and covering her butt in the event it took longer than her superior anticipated. Now things had miraculously uncomplicated themselves—or was it too miraculous? Best to hook this fish and forget sweetening the bait.

She left the two men and ran over to Reilly, throwing her slender arms excitedly around his neck and asking for a kiss first, then a drink. He accommodated her with both. The agents watched discretely. It wasn't too difficult or too imaginative what Pepita did next, but she didn't have the time to be fancy. Reaching into her clutch, she felt for and pulled out a slim gelatin capsule which she maneuvered into Reilly's scotch and water. It dissolved on contact. Within seconds of finishing his drink his speech slurred, his coordination slackened, and he blacked out. Upon his collapse and Pepita's cries for help, two men emerged from

the shadows offering the lady assistance to get him into a cab. It was that easy.

They switched transportation at the Wall and rode through the check-points to East Berlin with a minimum of fuss or questions. The border officials fell over themselves to cooperate with KGB. From East Berlin Reilly was continuously kept under the influence of Pentathal, administered intravenously every six hours on the 900-mile long train ride to Moscow. The trip took seven days.

By the end of that week, upon arrival at Moscow's fortress-like Loubianska Square, the Inner Prison, Reilly was allowed to gradually regain consciousness. The Soviets found Pentathal a useful drug for transporting valuable prisoners great distances with little expenditure of manpower. Reilly, however, felt as if he'd been hit over the head with a hammer. Repeatedly.

* * * * *

Marisa was frustrated and frightened. Her great adventure was not going well. Why couldn't she get it right? Mother surely never had days like these. She and Freddy debarked from Calais after a calm Channel crossing and took the train for West Germany. She cursed the time they lost crossing each international border; she'd forgotten there were so many—France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and finally, Germany. Why hadn't she simply flown, she asked herself. She could see it now: writing children's books for a living, instead of leading the life of an international investigative journalist, wiring fast-breaking stories to fist-pounding, cigar-smoking editors of the world's most prestigious newspapers—her beat:

the globe. All bunkum. She couldn't even get her transportation right.

And she was also frightened. Asking for information at the bar (the only logical place she could think to ask), witnesses from two days past recalled a drunk answering Reilly's build and description being escorted from the hotel in the company of two men and a beautiful blonde. Where did they go, she asked; did anyone hear where they told the cab to take him? No one could remember. It didn't seem important. Drunks were always being escorted from bars, but usually not in such lovely company.

Two days, two whole days, her mind screamed. She thought back to what Madame Karyll had said. The vision. Snow. Red. Death. And he had spoken of his boyhood in Odessa. That was all. So little to go on. Where could he be now? Where, dammit?

Freddy was all for packing it up as a poor job. Her stepfather had nine lives; he'd been in worse scrapes before this—remember the Kathar Affair? He'd get out of whatever or wherever he was, just you wait and see. Marisa didn't see. Reilly was fifty years old this time. And he didn't have Constance with him. He didn't have anyone with him, and as far as she knew, no one knew where he was at precisely this moment, and certainly not the British Government. He was utterly alone. And then her racing mind took a quantum leap. She made an announcement to Freddy.

"Russia. It must be Russia. Don't you see, Freddy?"

Freddy didn't see. She really did say the most hare-brained things at times. She needed someone to follow her around, she did. Marisa explained in a calmer voice that Madame Karyll's vision was of a cold place, and what, her flawless logic argued, could be colder than Russia? Plus

Reilly had done counter-intelligence work over the years for M.I.5. He'd caught countless KGB spies in the West and knew the placements of others. Perhaps an enemy had gotten to him this time, tripped him up, kidnapped him, and taken the Master Spy back to Mother Russia? It could be true, she reasoned.

Freddy listened. She made a little more sense this time. Then she suggested following after him. Wrong again! They were private citizens. It would take months to get the paperwork through merely requesting permission to cross the Soviet frontier. The formalities would be too time consuming, he argued.

And Freddy was right. There was no time.

6

Pepita made the journey with Reilly for the express purpose of meeting the supreme head of KGB activity in the West, her superior's superior, Felix Derjinsky. Reilly's capture had been a goal of Derjinsky's for over a decade, ever since Reilly had begun free-lancing for M.I.5. Many ploys and stratagems had been devised, but always with the same lack of results. Finally a plan had been executed which promised to remove Bolshevism's prime hindrance in the West. And it had all begun with Constance's murder.

Derjinsky used a woman in the plot, rehearsed her in her role, sent her to England. This woman claimed to have information for Constance's husband, a list of double-agents in M.I.5, a list of traitors vital to the security of the West; she herself was a simple secretary in the Service;

now she feared for her life; would Constance see her, take the list from her? she couldn't be seen in public talking to Reilly; she feared for her life, but she loved her country; would Constance come and not tell her husband? Constance had agreed to a meeting place over the phone. She was dressing for the afternoon appointment when Pepita walked into the master bedroom and fired.

* * * * *

When Reilly regained consciousness he found himself wearing only a strait-jacket and strapped down to an iron bed frame. His tiny cell was cold and damp. He judged it underground. His clothing and shoes had been taken from him, as had his mattress and blanket. One naked light bulb dangled from the cracked ceiling. No window alleviated the grayness or told him day from night.

This was not his first time awake. He dimly recalled the hotel bar in Berlin, meeting Pepita, then a gap of meaningless nights which would have been days, a gray non-time. Then a hazy swimming-up to consciousness, as of the time he nearly drowned in the icy, swift-flowing Dneiper. But now there were endless rounds of repetitive questions in a room containing one long wooden table, a scribe to take down his confessions, and another man to apply the pain of a rubber hose in vicious licks across his body for each question left unanswered; always the same questions, always the same pain, followed by eventual loss of consciousness.

Coiled springs cut into the back of his head and the backs of his legs. He looked down at his exposed thighs and calves. They were purple with bruises, as, he guessed, were his face, chest, and arms.

His testicles ached. He needed to use the lavatory, but there was only a drain in the center of the tiny cell and he was strapped down. His throat cried for water. He couldn't remember being fed or given anything to drink. He shivered, unable to move.

The naked bulb continued to glare from the cracked ceiling.

* * * * *

Pepita was arguing with Derjinsky. Theirs had been a relationship of whispered phone calls and meetings through intermediaries. Now they were face-to-face, and the dislike was mutual.

Like Lenin before him, Derjinsky had been a school teacher before joining the Party. He was a thin, dry, ascetic man with the high, proud cheekbones of the Slav and tiny wire-rim glasses through which his cold blue eyes looked on a world of pain. There was nothing coarse about him; his body was small and compact, his thinning fair hair neatly trimmed, his slim fingers long and tapering on soft hands with the power to sign life or death on the endless forms that crossed his desk each day.

Across from him, disturbing the quiet efficiency of his office, sat Pepita, the insolent slut one of his agents had plucked from the gutters of London's East End six years ago. Her coarseness offended him; everything about her offended him. But she was useful. The KGB had given her a home, friends, training, money; had watched over her welfare as her alcoholic father lay dying in a charity ward and her mother had left to take up with another man. The KGB, as she had come to know them, cared for her; in turn, she showed first her appreciation, then her loyalty. They had asked little things at first, and she'd done them. What they

had asked was not extraordinary for a girl who had done many things just to stay alive. And then they asked larger things, and she consented, priding herself on her discipline and ability to survive. That's what life had taught her: one must survive at all costs.

The unexpected combination of her fresh young beauty, amenability to training, and absolute ruthlessness had made her an ideal assassin. This unlikely combination had made her more successful and more dangerous than her older male counterparts. It had also made her arrogant.

Restless and uneasy with her stay in Moscow, she demanded a fresh assignment with the delivery of Reilly completed. Derjinsky wanted her to stay a while longer. She bickered. He listened in stony silence. In some respects Pepita was childlike. It has been observed that children often make the best killers because they have not yet developed sophisticated emotions such as remorse, nor have they the power of self-analysis; witness the children of Northern Ireland, the children of Palestine, Beirut, Lebanon. Tell them they are ridding the earth of evil and they will believe you. Derjinsky decided to tell Pepita some home truths. Its ultimate effect, he calculated, would be to bind her more closely to them.

She fell silent, her tirade at an end. Derjinsky opened her dossier before him and began to read aloud, began to read facts about her life, parentage, origin that she had never expected, facts which she listened to but did not begin to comprehend in their entirety until much later, facts tirelessly gathered, culled, assembled, arranged from the investigative work of years, facts which named her runaway mother and alcoholic father not her parents, facts which told her of the ancient tie of

blood between her and this land, the call of Russian soil to her blood and bones, the tie of heritage and race, of a seduction in Venice, a marriage arranged, a Russian mother, Mother Russia, loyalty, loyalty, "father unknown" read the certificate, but they knew, bond of blood, family, family, father unknown father unknown father . . . Sidney Reilly.

He did not stop there but continued on and on, voice droning, boring, pounding into her skull: father father father where can you go? where can you belong? who would take you in who who who would take in someone as vicious as you corrupt as you low as you? you a murderer of the lowest kind you do it for money you do it you did it with your father father it rang in her ears kill kill whom do you kill? you kill your father's wife you did it with your father didn't you didn't you rotten vicious corrupt you did it and then you betray you betrayed him to us to us where can you go? to whom belong? no home no home unfit to live vicious wretched low creature you belong to us family family you are one of us. You are.

* * * * *

They were still sitting in the Hotel Excelsior bar. Marisa was sobbing into Freddy's wet tweed shoulder. He determined to help her in any way possible. He couldn't stand to see her this broken up over the business. And he must disabuse her of this foolish cloak-and-dagger notion. He must save her. From herself, if necessary.

"I'll talk to father about this," he soothed, stroking her stretched-out cashmere sweater on her heaving back. She really did need a decent wardrobe. "Father's an M.P. He'll know what to do, pull a few

strings, collect a few favors. Don't cry so, pet. Don't cry. It'll be all right, I promise you. Here," he said, taking her glasses off her nose and wiping them, "now then, Father will talk to the Foreign Office. I'm sure it'll be all right. An official inquiry, a protest, something, maybe pressure for a release, if that's where you think he is," he added hopefully. He righted her dried glasses on her nose.

She raised her head. Her eyes were rimmed with ugly red circles and the skin had puffed around them, giving her the look of a dyspeptic owl with conjunctivitis. Tears, those which had missed Freddy's tweed shoulder, had dripped a wet trail down the front of her baggy sweater. She ceased her sobs and looked deep into his eyes. He saw tear-washed irises like panels of radiant stained glass.

She looked beautiful.

Pepita wore a gray jersey dress and low black heels. Her bleached blonde frizz was pulled back severely from her face in a tight chignon at the nape of her neck. Her roots were growing out. Her face was scrubbed and pale without her customary rouge and eyeliner. She looked like a penitent nun, and as she descended to the lower level of the Inner Prison she realized she blended in with the walls. Her escort guards halted before a door. She asked for five minutes alone. She had it with her. There was something she could do for him now.

* * * * *

Reilly had been incarcerated six weeks when the Foreign Office inquired after the status of one of their British subjects. Six weeks into a Russian winter. Between beatings and questioning sessions he was locked in solitary confinement. It was a crude but effective routine: questions followed by beatings followed by solitary confinement followed by more questions. He was bony now and he ached all the time. His skin was broken and refused to heal properly. His eyes watered from the incessant glare of the naked bulb in his cell. He suffered from the intense cold and damp. The short, monotonous rations of salted herring made his lips crack. He begged for additional water. Help had to come soon or it would be too late. He would use it on himself.

* * * * *

The communiqué from the British F.O. which had come to Derjinsky's hand courteously requested information on the status of one Sidney Reilly. Should said British subject be unlawfully sequestered or maintained against his will the British Government objected most strenuously and would take the strongest possible action according to established guidelines sanctioned by international protocol.

It met with the same silence which greeted other such diplomatic inquiries. Nonetheless, the subject would be moved. He was too valuable to kill just yet. He hadn't given them the names of all the agents operating in the West. And Derjinsky derived enormous satisfaction from his coup.

* * * * *

Two months had passed since Reilly's disappearance. Marisa was reading The London Times in the townhouse of Freddy's parents, who had put her up during the ordeal. She had become officially engaged. Her eye scanned a small press release on the inside of the front page. The body of a British subject had been found at the Russo-Finlandia border in a routine patrol by soldiers . . .

Marisa fainted.

Reilly was dead.

Epilogue

August, 1955. Marisa wed Freddy in a small private ceremony at his parents' London townhouse. No members of the bride's family were present. The bride was quoted in the papers as "wishing her dear stepfather could have been present for the happy occasion." They honeymooned in Scotland, in time for the grouse season, of which Freddy was fond. Upon their return, additional wedding presents had accumulated at the townhouse address for the happy couple, but none were more mysterious or quite so large as that sent by the Fat Man.

Prying open the shipping crate with a crowbar, Freddy and Marisa found a rare and unusual example of the cocoon-style Louis Quinze hooded chair in black leather and hand-carved solid walnut frame. It stood close to six feet tall. It was a horribly lavish and dear gesture to make to a woman he had never seen, but old associations, a soft heart, and pressing necessity had compelled the Fat Man to use the wedding gift as a device to conceal a private missive as unexpected and precious as the heirloom in

which it reposed, in a slit in the lining underneath the bottom of the chair seat. But more of that later.

Upon their return from Scotland and the grouse season, the happy young couple also discovered that the MacCorkers' wedding present to them was the deed to the London townhouse. Freddy took up the administrative and managerial reins of the MacCorker Colliery Works to great effect, since he had taken a First at the London School of Economics. In later years he cast his eye on his father's seat in the House of Commons and maintained that family tradition with equal distinction.

After the disappearance of Reilly, the flat reception which had met the official inquiry, and the death notice in the paper, Marisa thoughtfully reviewed her career goals and performance in the Reilly Affair. She found herself not to have the stuff of her mother in her. In subsequent years, she took up the writing of children's books and received no little success upon their publication, being much in demand by the public and read with equal relish by her own two children, Freddy Jr. and Sydney Constance. She had indeed come to terms at last with her own spirit of adventure.

Though the coming years brought many changes, as Time invariably can and will, let the biographer confess that some things did not change: Marisa's glasses continued to slide down her nose in direct proportion to her wool skirt riding up and Freddy continued to love her.

The Fat Man, reclusive collector of the rare, the unobtainable, and the exotic, one-time nemesis of Reilly, chess maven and grand soul, died quietly at his secluded desert retreat within weeks of sending the

wedding gift to Marisa and Freddy. He died surrounded by the objects he had loved, in his sleep, which, let it be noted, was in a nineteenth-century Victorian mahogany sleigh bed with hand-carved corner posts, side rails, headboard and footboard embellished with solid brass bosses. Had he lived longer he might have died otherwise and in other fashion, since he had been on the verge of ordering the new Swedish modular furniture units which were hitting the market just then. It would have added depth to an already considerably broad collection. As it was, he died with the catalogue in his hands, peacefully, Asad by his side.

He left his considerable collection of art and furniture to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; to Asad, the desert retreat, tax-free, with a lifetime annuity. In a mysterious codicil he willed to Reilly his extensive collection of Napoleonic memorabilia, worth a veritable fortune, and in the event of his death, in trust to Marisa Ford Reilly MacCorker, and no, most assuredly, the Fat Man's collection of memorabilia did not extend to the grossly vulgar, low, and ribald acquisition of prime Napoleons despicably put up for auction at Sotheby's; that of the shrivelled, dessicated, and finger-length member of the Grand Emperor said to have been excised upon death by an unspeakably mercenary fortunehunter of even baser scruples . . . well, you know.

Though Herr Kubbeldorf was never again sent on field expeditions for the Staatliche after the singularly embarrassing outcome of the Kathar Affair, the museum, as has already been seen, did allow the good curator to stay on and oversee the maintenance of new acquisitions. His retirement party was planned in 1960, but the good curator so abhorred the

thought of separation from the things which had meant so much to him—he was quite similar in this regard to the Fat Man—that he barricaded himself in the Pre-Christian Art Wing of the Staatliche behind rows of piled mummy cases for two whole days until the Board of Trustees voted him an honorary lifetime position. Happy in service to science, the curator died five years later, after conducting a tour of visiting Girl Scouts from America through the Early Art of Man exhibit. The Staatliche erected a memorial cenotaph to him in the southwest corner of the museum grounds which stands to this day for all who care to see it.

Valentina Maria Eleni Savinkoff-Potiphar, aka Maisie Mickelwhite, aka Pepita Bombadilla, disappeared from the list of active KGB agents shortly after the Reilly Affair. Various reports place her as the wife of a South American coffee plantation owner; a burlesque dancer in Cleveland, OH; in England as the genuine manifestation of Rula Lenska, formerly thought to be a publicity-generated non-entity; the mother of Madonna in Royal Oak, MI; and a Bhuddist nun in Tibet.

Madame Karyll, aka #0924144, aka Odile Sofia Pinnsky Kutyapoff Auschlander, continued to live in mysterious style at her rooms in the Albany. Her predictions continued to garner her success, wealth, and popular acclaim as she continued to confuse flashes of her past life with those of her genuine visions, though she managed to maintain her two-out-of-three record. Approximately ten years after the Reilly Affair she experienced a momentary flash of an old man with white hair and rheumatic joints conversing on a mountain top with a comely middle-aged novice on the merits of Oriental mysticism, but dismissed it as indigestion from

too many cream buns from that afternoon's high tea. Harder to dismiss was one Sam Kutypoff, who, on reading of the celebrated Madame Karyll and of her phenomenal success in contacting the spirits of the dead, applied for and obtained a travel visa to make the long trek from Minsk to London to consult the famed seer. The element of French bedroom farce was further increased since Madame Karyll, the lonely widow of Marvin, had married her butler, Burton. The ensuing brangle is fodder for other biographers.

Postscript

As readers of "Saint's Rest, The End of Reilly" will have followed the twisting plot line this far, they will have doubtless also noted that nothing since has been said of the mysterious missive containing a private message to Marisa secreted in the bowels (if indeed chairs may be said to have such) of the chair which had been sent as a wedding gift from the Fat Man.

Let the letter speak for itself, since it traveled a journey arduous by human standards—llama-carrier, airplane, train, tramp steamer, fishing boat, oil tanker, desert camel, Willis Jeep—then hence by insured freight across the Channel and into Marisa's trembling hands when she dislodged it with the dustmop one dismal foggy London afternoon in the spring of 1957 (she would have found it sooner had she been a more meticulous housekeeper, but such is the vicissitude of Fortune).

It was somewhat the worse for wear and handling. Its substance is faithfully reproduced in the Appendix. The original now resides in the biographer's private collection.

Here then, is the letter.

Appendix

January, 1955
Moscow
The Inner Prison

My Dear Marisa,

Should this letter reach you know that I am well and in a place removed from harm. Do not worry for me. I am not alone.

Know also that I am no traitor to the West, that aid was given me by one whom I had no reason to trust, and that en route in my transfer I slipped free of my guards with the aid of my friend and made my way South to the lamasery of the Bhuddist adept Lao-Tzu. Know also that should my escape succeed, it will have been with the help of one with whom I have made my peace, one whom shall go by the name Valentine.

If you should ask and wonder in the years to come why I do not make my way back to you, know these two reasons. First, they will never stop searching for me. I have seen and know too much; and second, for my sins, m'dear, for my sins.



Purple Lace

"Quick, Peacock!" Sir Baldwin Thornedyke Bushcock IV, also known as 'Baldy Bushcock' to members of the Club, gabbled to his man, faithful manservant, personal valet, and family retainer to the Bushcocks for sixty-six of his seventy-eight arthritic (well, truth to say, at least fifteen of the last sixty-six years were truly arthritic in the medical sense) years, peering through the invitingly open yet not obviously ajar (since they were French) doors overlooking the splendid sunken garden, "Bring me the spyglass!" as it appeared the randy young Lord Harry Mungetud was about to compromise Lord Bushcock's nubile young niece the Honorable Lady Maude Lucilla Touchnot by the trel-
lie of trailing tuberose which exuded an indefinable yet in no way unidentifiable fragrance of musky sensuousity over not just the invitingly nice sunken garden but also over the entire Bushcock family estate in delightful Devon on a dappled day in about the middle of the month of a splendid spell of deliciously dry (but not too dry for the tuberose) weather one balmy June in the Year of Our Lord 1789-

Oh . . . shit.

I get an idea for a colorful commercial historical romance with stock characters, a popular century, the scenic English countryside, an impending sex scene with definite voyeur (too racy for Harlequin? too "peried" for Come?) overtones, but it's, well it just isn't . . . art. You know.

Hey, it's not like I don't know good writing. I'm an English major. I've read Shakespeare. But the public reads pulp and the publishers want "formula" and I just want to get rich so if I give the people what they

went then I can laugh all the way to the bank and then when I'm rich and famous I'll give the people GREAT LITERATURE 'cause I'm an English major and I've read Shakespeare but I'm damned if I'll be poor in the process of becoming one of the most significant writers of the late twentieth century.

Except I'm not really sure I can pull it off, so Lady Maude will have to do for now. And Reilly. And Darish.

I mean, look at Erica Jong. She's written her sex novels and books of poetry and she teaches English somewhere—I think Australia. Or is that Germaine Greer? Well, what I mean is, she's an academic, gets rave notices, teaches, and laughs all the way to the bank. I mean, she's got some credibility. Unlike Jackie Collins who just has gobs of money and books on the Best Sellers' List but no accreditation by academe. Jackie gets read now and has her sister Joan appear in mini-series of her works but who will know who she is fifty years from now other than players of the twenty-first century edition of Trivial Pursuit, right?

When I'm in class the plot lines, characters, and scenarios run through my mind with the ecstatic abandon of Dionysian maenads.

I mean, I am HOT.

Inspired.

Imbued with direction.

Then the blank page in the typewriter confronts me and the spark simpers and farts out Lady Maude, Reilly, etc.

For two hours each week I sit in class and I listen to trash and I listen to treasure (but mostly trash) and I wonder how Sheila does it

for a living. I mean, Reilly is okay writing but it's not GREAT WRITING. She's published. She does it. Even though most of our stuff is good, some of it is just plain awful (well, it is our juvenalia) and how does she manage to sit still term after term and smile sweetly and offer positive comments without screaming in frustration year after year after year after year?

Those eager and innocent faces: tell me it's good, Sheila; tell me I'm a writer, Sheila; tell me I should think about getting an agent, Sheila.

John is reading his stuff now. I look forward to class when he's there, especially when he reads something of his. Trouble is, some writers can't read their stuff aloud worth shit and John is one of them. He spits his stories out in a stiff machine gun staccato punctuated by a racking cough. His stuff is good—it mostly seems that way—but it sure is hard to follow, especially with his bronchial accompaniment. (There I go again, getting artsy & dithyrambic)

Now John is dark and curly-haired, with just a slight scraggle of nape hair nuzzling his Oxford collar. Patched sweaters, tight, faded jeans. He talks like a New Yorker. He can also talk about a piece of writing—what it means, where it's going, what's dishonest about it, using his hands and voice and eyes.

He's spell-binding. A word wizard wonderman.

I mean, I know I've got Kent and he's sweet but dumpy and lumpy and a lousy dresser and . . . he's just not exciting. John is exciting. John is a writer.

John exudes the musk of the writing animal. John vibrates with the raw power of untamable words. He has this habit of standing close to you and cocking his head just slightly, so as to hear you better, and then he angles his face just a little bit downward and skewers you with his dark eyes as he listens to you speak. He'd be great at book-signing appearances. The ladies would be lined up for blocks.

I do get inspired when I listen to him read (between coughs), listen to the dense rococo richness of his prose as his words fill my mind the way his cock fills . . . well, you know; like a writer.

And then I shake it off, because, after all, I do have Kent. But I can dream.

And boy, can John write.

Can I write?

I grunt and out comes Lady Maude.

I get these great ideas inside my head but I can't get them out.

Sheila says Read other writers to get past a block, but I've done that and all I get is depressed because my ideas aren't there and my words aren't there and my meaning isn't there. But theirs certainly are.

But more important: I saw this class as a Test. If I could do well in it that would mean that I was a writer and that I might make my living at it. I'd like an unpretentious estate in Ireland. They give writers tax breaks.

Except I'm blowing my plan.

Does that mean I'm not really a writer?

Have I been fooling myself all along?

Did this happen to Hemingway?

But I'm an English major.

I've read Shakespeare.

(Those who can do; those who can't)

Shit.

Then my self-confidence gets blown out of the water further by our class's forty-five year old overweight insecure housewife with three kids who comes trotting in clutching the latest installment to her god-damned fucking wonderful novel-in-progress which she thinks maybe she'll feed to the incinerator. Jayzus H. Kee-rist. She'll beat me to the Best Seller List yet.

"Those who can"

Shut-up.

So yeah, there's real honest-to-earth talent in this class which makes my effort suck Grade AA turkey eggs.

And Roger. Dear Roger. Who likes to draw pages of screaming heads with piano keyboards-horns and crescent jack o'lantern eyes with his blue Bic pen. He's talented.

Kent says he's twisted.

Instead of taking notes during class Roger just bends his pale pudgy acne-riddled pudding face closer to his notebook, scrunches his spatulate fingers tighter to his Bic, and re-draws these screaming faces over and over and over.

Endlessly.

Sometimes with commentary.

He's well-read, too.

I feel sorry for him. Hell, I sit right next to the guy. I can see those faces. Sometimes I wonder how his sex life is. If he's getting any. Would it help? Why do women usually see sex as the answer to male pain?

Roger is like his prose: tough, uncompromising, tortured, gritty.

It's sad, you know. So much talent locked up inside him and he puts himself down, his writing down, life down.

But by God he can WRITE.

And then there's Phyllis.

Phyllis is gray, a fading, flesh-toned fig-lined face; Phyllis is rabbitty-nervous bug-bulgy eyes and protuberant front teeth; Phyllis is heavy dangly earrings that swing and sweat against powder hair.

Boy, she can write too.

Maybe she's a writing teacher.

Her stuff is clever, sweet, mystical, nostalgic, detailed, and keyed-in to the senses; sensate. Phrases like: "peregrine eye" of her mother; "skin like the petals of roses," or, one of my favorites, the "uncomplicated neutrality of the door," just blow me away.

And her themes—rich with LIFE. That one about the jasmine-scented Chinese lady wedged popover-fashion in the bathtub with pearl-escant skin and porpoise-wet feet—what a marvelous image, as richly detailed as a jeweled bracelet, as hypnotic as a Byzantine icon.

Oh sure, there were clinkers. But for the most part, even they were figuratively appealing. Phrases like "as constant as plaque on teeth" tend to stick. Even schlock is memorable.

For instance, there was the sex fantasy about the bored postman on Route #609 who gets a blowjob from a beautiful blonde housewife and a Mickey Finn from her husband who then ships him via air mail to Rio where two garbage dumpster-sized hoods escort him to their boss who demands to know the whereabouts of some microchips of which the dazed postman knows nothing because he's been mistaken for the courier at the airport where the two garbage dumpster-sized hoods . . . well, you get the drift. A popcorn romp through the American psyche.

Huh? Me, you ask?

Uh, well, ah . . . I did have this classical idea in mind. The Parthenon by dusk, stuff like that. A re-telling of the Persephone myth. But it didn't work out. I did my research—even went to the library and xeroxed pages out of the Oxford Classical Dictionary and Bulfinch's Mythology, both of which I highlighted with fluorescent felt tip markers. I even scribbled marginalia in the white space.

But it didn't work.

I get thoughts like

The little mermaid dives descends delves down
 wet regions unknown, twists kicks spirals ever
 deeper headlong down rapt in her desperate goal
 past coral-spined cliffs she cleaves a path,
 past rotting wrecks raft from the Ocean's be-
 som there to rest upon her mother's sandy cheek
 past sea-fed ghosts, eyeless sailors' implor-
 ing glares, past alabaster howls polished sleek/
 as a bowl of new seal's milk ever downward she

glides banks curves debouches where at last
upon an open plain in that wet region unused
to sun she finds her fate

but I can't write like that.

It just stays locked up inside my head. Instead, out comes—

"Oh la, sir!" the ravishing Regency minx More
Prevel, second cousin once-removed from Lady Maude,
her blue-veined ivory bosom jiggling like two bowls
of suet in a high wind, tittered to the dashing
rakish Captain Axel Wixley of the Light Horse Guards,
5th Platoon, Lincolnshire, where we lay our scene,
"you do quite take my breath away, you naughty
thing!" as she removed his questing hand from her
heaving bodice (he was searching for his Officer's
commission, having misplaced in a fit of rapture at
the mere sight of Lady Maude's second cousin once-
removed) bedecked with purple lace and rows of sil-
ver faggotting—her second-best riding outfit.

See what I mean?

I want prose with the gymnastic wonder of a supple-hosed Errol
Flynn. I want rippling, wind-furled words with the vigor of Indiana Jones.
Instead, I get paragraphs with the agility of a Lippanzaner with a limp,
the poetic punch of a package of Farmer Pete's sausage (thawed), and the
shimmering subtlety of Hollywood Squares.

I'm not a writer.

George Orwell said that Good prose is like a window pane.

If that's the case, my efforts are scratched plexiglas.

Why can't I write good?

Not well; I mean really good words. Real words. Honest words.

It's not that writing's hard.

(It's hell.)

It can be fun.

(Like hell.)

I want it to be really SOMETHING.

But the work is sheer drudge. Step. Drag. Step. Step. Step.

Drag.

Is this agony part of the Growth and Development of the Writer?

Is this the Exploring and Discovering Stage? Did Hemingway put up with this? Did Shakespeare wade through this shit?

I'd give a hundred bucks for a flashlight.

Six days off the Cuban coast the privateer frigate Golden Cod captained by the snidely rapacious yet darkly handsome and somewhat knavish cad known otherwise as "Dick the Dirk," known fondly as "Dagger," by his bloodthirsty crew of rum-drunk Limeys, and known chiefly by the fair captive Euphemia Blankinsop, half-sister to the Lady Maude, bound and gagged below decks in the disheveled ruin of her peach velvet dancing frock accented with scallops of écreu Belgian lace, her perfect pear-shaped breasts peeping above daring décolleté, lying on the invitingly capacious and silk-canopied bed, as "Dag the Stag," shuddered, convulsed, and gave up its gold-glutted hold to the creamy turquoise sea as . . .

Enough.

Modern Love

Imagine if you will a corn-fed heiress from Kansas—but No.

This story will confine itself to the truth insofar as the facts are known and the dialogue surmisable.

Imagine then, if you will, that somewhat more than thirty years ago there was born unto the owner of the largest independently owned and operated department store in Taunton Town, Iowa and to his wife, a girl-child. Imagine also, in your mind's eye, the growth and maturation of this girlchild surrounded by all the accoutrements of comfortable living known to the mind of Midwest America: dolls that wet and cried when tilted backward and rolled their cloudless China blue eyes open and shut; a rocking horse on steel springs, engineered for a superbly smooth ride; mechanical whuzzits that squeaked as they walked; a Blue Delft tea set complete with four place settings, plus sugar and creamer; and, as she grew older, her first Barbie doll and accessory travel kit, complete with Barbie's onerous wardrobe changes necessitated by Barbie's exhaustive social schedule.

You will have imagined, then, if you have followed the girlchild's progress with the least bit of attention, that she grew up in a pampered environment showered with the material blessings which that child of affluent America was heir to before the advent of computerized games and He-Man and the Masters of the Universe.

This Pre-Computer Age child rollicked and rambled amid vast expanses of watered green lawns set on the family estate outside of Taunton

Town. She was free to frisk her chubby legs and to stretch her agile mind on problems no more puzzling than the location of her missing purple heels-keop. Her father, for all that she was to be his only child, adored her profoundly; stealing time away from such administrative and managerial duties as the owner of Taunton Town's single largest independently owned and operated merchantile establishment was heir to, he delighted in his darling baby daughter, holding her, talking to her, listening to her childish dreams and crankish complaints, brushing away her baby tears and cooing reassuring remonstrances into her perfect pink ears.

People of Taunton Town whispered the father was more a mother to the little girl than he ought to be, or had a right to be; it was not decent for a man to care so plainly for his little girl in public; it looked downright suspect, if one knew what one meant . . . but let us forgive these whispering voices, for this was before the advent of Feminism and the Mouse Husband.

It is to be imagined, then, that the girlchild's mother played a lesser role in her baby daughter's existence, and this is correct, for while Mr. Dove was cooing and coddling and cuddling and coaxing his infant daughter's first steps, and later answering her first questions why grass is green and the sky blue, Mrs. Dove was elsewhere. It is not to be surmised with any great narrative accuracy what the good woman was up to in the time that lay heavy upon her soft white hands; indeed, if we are able to guess at all, it is to infer that Mrs. Dove simply spent as much time away from her baby daughter as could decently be arranged. Of Dariah (rhymes with "Delilah," if pronounced with a Japanese lisp; Mr.

Dove loved the mysterious and the exotic. The name simply irked Mrs. Dove) and her mother, let it be said that after an unnervingly long confinement of thirteen months she was more than eager to set her burden down.

Fearing a repeat performance, Mrs. Dove never let Mr. Dove within reach again.

Thus the unhappy circumstances attendant upon Dariah's delayed arrival into the world hardened her mother's heart against her own offspring while simultaneously insuring there would be no little brothers or sisters for her to play with in future. Lest a harsher than necessary judgment fall upon the head of Dariah's mother, it should be noted that in every other respect Mrs. Dove was a model wife and mother, kept a spotless house with the help of a competent staff, fixed her husband's meals on Cook's night off, chaired endless social teas, campaigned for safer streets, more beautiful gardens, and better birth control.

Thus Dariah's toddler days melted into school days and her school days into junior high and hence from junior high to high school and on to college. Mrs. Dove missed them all, missed the long slow lazy burgeoning of her daughter's youth, missed her daughter's smiling achievements and aching defeats, but one thing which Mrs. Dove did not miss was Dariah's first date, for Mrs. Dove could not miss what Dariah had never had.

* * * * *

To put a thing plainly—not unkindly, but plainly—Dariah was fat. Dariah had not stayed little for long. Her chubby toddler legs grew to stumps, her pleasingly plump arms to lumps of tallow-soft skin that folded at the elbow. Her body itself had no discernible waist, but then

few toddlers do; however, when one reaches junior high, high school, and college, one is expected to have one.

Dariah didn't.

Dariah didn't have much of anything except sheer bulk. Her pretty face was semi-hidden under a pair of semi-chins. Her cheeks looked perpetually stuffed, as one will have noticed in wild creatures of the nut-gathering variety, squirrels, for instance; or in the domesticated variety of rodent, the school-kept gerbil. Her eyes and hair were her best features, they being respectively blue and chestnut. Her skin, lovely to a fault, if levelness be blameworthy in one so needy of self-esteem, was her finest asset, it being a glowing peachy-pink of the kind rumored to have been possessed by "TM," aka Marilyn Monroe. The old saying, "such a pretty face if not for the weight," plagued Dariah all her growing days, so it was not unreasonable that she kept growing after those days had clearly come to an end.

Dariah was not of the circus grotesque variety and Dariah did not have glandular trouble, as one might shrewdly suspect in a child who had taken thirteen months to be born. That left Dariah with the startlingly obvious fact that she and only she was accountable for her condition. The difficulty with that revelation, however, was this: she knew she overate, but not how to stop the business. After many years of trying to stop the business, she went out of the business of trying to stop and resigned herself to her condition. Thus in kindergarten Dariah weighed ninety pounds; by third grade, one-hundred and thirty-five; graduation from high school, one-hundred and seventy-six; graduation from college, two-hundred and

twenty-two; and by the time of this narrative, which is to say fourteen years later, or "the present," Dariah topped the scales at two-hundred and eighty pounds.

It has been said that Dariah had no dates in high school, and one would correctly attribute this lack to her physical condition; at one-hundred and seventy-six pounds the only boys who out-weighed Dariah were on the football team, and they preferred the slender cheerleaders and Prom Queen-types.

Except that one boy did love Dariah.

One Ramsay Hinton.

Of the upwardly mobile and socially prominent Chicago Hintons, these Hintons being known amongst connoisseurs of the potted meat variety who especially praised the Hintons' innovative foray into the Vienna sausage market with the introduction of their Hickory Smoked and equally tasty Barbecue Flavored Vienna Sausages.

Indeed, as these Hinton Brand Hickory Smoked and Barbecue Flavored tinned Vienna sausages had made their flavorsome way to Taunton Town shelves, Dariah had acquainted herself with their meaty appeal and had pronounced her approval to Cook, who forthwith included said sausages in her charge's school lunch box on a weekly basis.

Might we, then, as careful readers see in Dariah's predilection for these Hinton potted sausages a covert sign of her regard for the cousin of the famed Chicago-based Hintons, as evidenced by her lunch box contents, especially since this same Ramsay Hinton attended the very same set of schools which Dariah did, and, in nowise a coincidence, lived at the

very estate adjacent to Dariah's very own parents'?

No.

For it may be said that young Dariah Dove was quite eclectic in her tastes comestible and aesthetic and never once did it enter her head that Ramsay, by seating himself next to her as her lunchtime tablemate might suspect that she returned a measure of his regard through the, to him, unfailingly regular appearance of Hinton potted meat products.

Alas—!

Such is modern love. The self-absorbed Dariah may as well have been munching on Ramsay's potted heart for all that she noticed the young meat heir's sighs.

And so Dariah's school years passed and time itself passed, as it has the unshakable habit of doing, and Ramsay waited. It may be wondered at by the reader why and how Ramsay, promising heir to the Chicago-based Hinton Meat Packing fortune, should have come to love Dariah. In addition to her lovely hair and eyes and skin (though there was altogether too much of it), Ramsay loved her because he loved her and because he loved her. Such is modern love.

Ramsay therefore was Dariah's one true suitor, though having received no actual sign from Dariah herself, he had never openly stepped forth to proclaim himself as such.

And while Time was passing for Ramsay, it inevitably passed as well for Dariah. After her graduation from Taunton Town College, Dariah spent the next fourteen years at home. Reading. And eating. And sleeping. Quite soundly.

As Dariah had not been trained to do anything out of the ordinary (here was an English degree) and as she had come into her Trust Fund at the age of majority, she enjoyed a measure of economic freedom denied most other girls. She had considered teaching, since that was the most obvious employment of her learning, but that took too much time away from her own studies.

Her speciality was pirate novels.

Dariah had read everything pertaining to pirates. She'd read R. L. Stevenson's Treasure Island in grade school. And then all the Sabatini swashbucklers. Arthur Conan Doyle's Pirates and Blue Water. And Defoe's King of the Pyrates. She'd seen Captain Blood and The Sea Hawk with Errol Flynn, The Black Swan with Tyrone Power and The Pirates of Penzance with Kevin Kline, and certainly Robert Newton's unforgettable Long John Silver by the Disney studios. She took her studies very seriously. It was her dream to pen pirate novels of her own; to become, as it were, the reigning queen of the pirate genre in late twentieth century literature.

This then, was her goal. Her father was lovingly supportive, especially since he saw how it helped occupy Dariah's plentiful time. Such is modern love.

And it seemed to keep her happy, as happiness goes. Admittedly, it was a safe environment for a more than somewhat reclusive girl who one day looked into her mirror and saw staring back a thirty-six year old two-hundred and eighty pound virgin.

Ramsay had waited in true princely fashion until one day Sally Sue Becker wiggled her considerably less than two-hundred and eighty pound posterior at Ramsay. Not that Ramsay was fickle. It was just that after grade school and junior high and high school and college, having waited for a sign of interest from Dariah, Ramsay, in a moment of weakness or despair, forgot the dream. So he married Sally Sue Becker. And they settled down in Taunton Town until such time as Ramsay would rightfully come into the Hinton Meat Packing fortune and they would move to Chicago. Such is modern love.

And so, Ramsay had been wed to Sally Sue approximately fourteen years and had produced two children, both boys, when Mrs. Dove made her somewhat shadowy presence felt, whether from frustration at her daughter's complacent self-imposed exile from Life, or from embarrassment at having the town's "character" under her roof, or, from the uneasy adumbration of Dariah's distressingly long gestation, it is not the place of this narrative to speculate. Nevertheless, Mrs. Dove decided to take the scissors into her own slim hands and to cut the umbilical cord this time herself.

It was Mrs. Dove who put the idea into Mr. Dove's head that Dariah should study abroad. In France. Especially since Dariah's abiding interest was the seventeenth century French corsairs. Otherwise Dariah would never truly accomplish her life's goal. Taunton Town's library was only just so big. Mr. Dove agreed. After all, his precious daughter was not getting any younger. Or lighter. And Mrs. Dove perceptively pointed out that Dariah was also certainly not getting a husband in Taunton Town. So Dariah's Fate was sealed from that day forth,

because Mr. Dove would not let the idea which Mrs. Dove had planted rest until Dariah agreed to go.

And being a sensible daughter, Dariah did see the wisdom of conducting her studies abroad, first hand, as it were; that would definitely add flavor and realism to her projected novel. And she would take a place for, six months or so, however long it took to complete her research, maybe take a class, and then return to Taunton Town with her opus complete.

And after all, if nothing else, at the very least, France was the home of the most exquisite food. There would be compensations. And after all, a few more pounds wouldn't show and would make negligible difference to her already shapeless bulk. So she smiled.

But Dariah had forgotten to take one other thing into account. If France was renowned for its exquisite cuisine, it was also the Land of Love.

* * * * *

So the thirty-six year old two-hundred and eighty pound virgin plus her allotted forty-four pounds of luggage arrived in Paris in the spring of the year, for what better time is there to see the glories of Gaul?

Unseen by Dariah, Ramsay had waved farewell from the Taunton Town airport.

As it was spring in Paris, a most gloriously moisty-damp and invigoratingly romantic season, Dariah immediately felt for herself the literary effect of the environment upon her aesthetic sensibilities; snatches of poetry from her copious reading days at home came unbidden to

her mind—

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough

and this she took as a most propitious omen for her pirate research. If standing in line for the subway at the Paris Metro could do this, then what further serendipities awaited her during her academic sojourn abroad?

Indeed.

She took a place on the Rue de Babillotte, not far from the University of Paris, where she did enroll in a course on Pirate Literature. Her tiny apartment was also not far from, it being directly over, a most wonderful pastry shop which Dariah had occasion to visit with far greater regularity than her three-day a week university course, which is to say she patronized the shop approximately three times daily.

The little shop was chiefly patronized by university students and accordingly did a brisk business in brioches and banquettes of fresh bread, hot croissants dripping with creamery butter, as well as the standard delights of powdered madeleines, cream puffs, cream eclairs, and cream-filled Napoleons. Dariah was more than a regular customer of the shop, and that is how the peach-faced and peach-shaped American heiress met Julien.

Julien was the dark younger son of the proprietor of the pastry shop. Julien also attended university. He was also interested in Dariah, and last but not least, he was also considerably younger than she.

Julien made, unlike Ramsay, his attraction felt in numerous small ways: he always waited on Dariah himself; he always gave her the freshest

and creamiest cakes and buns; he always smiled politely at her; and, most disconcerting, he always looked Dariah in the eye, a practice which she put down to Gallic impertinence. And one last thing Julien did: he enrolled in Dariah's Pirate course and sat next to her in class three days a week. The only thing he did not do, Dariah reflected, was bring potted Vienna sausages to lunch.

All Julien's attentions Dariah found puzzling in the extreme. She had, indeed, walked through Life largely invisible, despite her ungainly bulk. She looked at the pavement when she walked. She looked at the shelves when she shopped. She looked at the register when she checked out. She did not look at people. Dariah's theory held that, if she did not see them, they did not see her. This gave her a measure, if somewhat spurious, of comfort. But Julien looked at her. Directly. Deliberately. Disturbingly.

It was most distressing.

Dariah found him dogging her heels. Wherever she turned, Julien was there. He offered to help with her daily shopping at the open-air markets. He offered to translate in her commerce with shopkeepers. He offered to show her the Left Bank and the Louvre. And most alarmingly, he offered to show her Paris by night.

His offers of assistance became a steady drip drip drip on Dariah's nerves. She almost considered patronizing a different pastry shop but she changed her mind since these days she was getting short of breath on walks of any great duration.

This she put down to advancing middle age.

Still, Dariah was greatly disturbed by the boy; he could not be above the age of twenty-two. She was not in the least attractive (aside from her blue eyes and chestnut hair and glowing peachy-pink skin) or physically appealing (unless one went in for marshmallow Venuses). She did not advertise the fact of her relative wealth. She knew she was upwards of one-hundred and fifty pounds overweight. She had known this fact a long time, and had deliberately thought, with no small relish, that her exceptional size had blessed her with the armor to withstand Life's blows.

This had made her feel smug.

Still, Julien, persistent French flea that he was, clung; until one day Dariah did require his services.

One day, while on her way back from class to her Rue de Babillotte apartment, on the sidewalk, waiting to cross the busy intersection, Dariah fainted.

Just like that.

In broad daylight.

With no provocation.

Poof!

Julien saw her collapse in one sinuous folding motion, fluid, actually, and he knew something was wrong. Alarmed, he ran the few paces which separated them and, squatting down on the pavement, cradled Dariah's limp head in his lap. A chattering knot of Parisians gathered around her inert body. A gendarme was called. Traffic slowed on the street, curious at the clot of people on the sidewalk.

Dariah blinked and opened her China blue eyes into Julien's worried brown gaze.

She was mortified.

Him again.

She knew she had made a spectacle of herself and that somehow, he was involved. Where was her invisibility when she most needed it? The gendarme alerted the hospital; an ambulance was on its way. When Dariah tried to protest, Julien explained to the gendarme that mademoiselle was Américaine and, consequently, did not know what was best for her.

The gendarme agreed. He cleared the bystanders.

Julien rode in the ambulance with her. He urged the driver to use all possible speed, but since the driver was French, this was not necessary.

After a prolonged wait in Emergency, Dariah was seen by a doctor. He examined her and took her pulse (which was fast) and her blood pressure (which was high) and pronounced the same verdict which she had heard throughout her entire life: lose weight.

His verdict, redoundingly obvious, irked Dariah. Any fool could have told her that for free. But the doctor added that unless Dariah applied herself to a slimming régime, her fainting spells would persist; that unless Dariah stripped her frame of the unhealthy avoirdupois, she would be bedridden by the time she was forty, if she lived that long.

This, needless to say, did worry Dariah. So much so that she felt an eating attack come on. Time was running out. She could no longer afford to complacently sit and watch Life pass her by. She had to complete

her research on her pirate manuscript. She had to finish her sea-going epic before the blue waters closed over her own head.

And, most depressingly, she had to diet.

Julien rode home with her in the cab. He had talked to the doctor about Dariah's condition. He too knew the obvious. It was too embarrassing. Embarking from the cab, Dariah stepped onto the curbing in front of the pastry shop and resolutely walked through its welcoming door. She resolutely picked out their largest strawberry and cream cheese-filled croissant and walked out the door. Julien met her at the curb and resolutely threw her purchase into the gutter.

"Shit!" raged an incensed Dariah.

"Etes-vous folle? Qu'est-ce que vous avez? Je t'aime!"

The outraged Dariah loosely translated the above as a demonstration of his concern. She stumped up the outside staircase to her tiny overhead apartment. Julien followed.

"I didn't invite you in," she growled, between puffing.

"I invite myself in."

It had not been the best of days.

Dariah wanted to be left alone, as was her custom. She remembered the delights in her ice box, especially the almond cheese cake. Then there were the day-old doughnuts in the bread box. Glazed. They at least promised peace.

"Get out. Leave me alone," and, because he was familiar enough to use the familiar voice with, "va-t-en!"

"You are always a-lone."

She was running out of her limited French vocabulary. How did one say "Scram!" à la française? She held the kitchen door open. They were standing near the landing. Maybe he'd get the hint.

"I care for you," he muttered softly in his accented English.

Darish snorted in disgust and impatience. The cheese cake was drying out.

Julien, Frenchman that he was, took up her feminine challenge. Stepping up to her, he wrapped his wiry brown arms around her peachy softness, squeezed, and clamped his mobile moist mouth over her protests.

It constituted her first kiss.

After what seemed an unnecessarily long pause he stepped back onto the landing, saluted her with gallant flourish, and promised to escort her to class the day after tomorrow.

Then he was gone.

Darish snorted again, touched her lips wonderingly, then headed for the ice box.

* * * * *

Thus began Darish's curious courtship.

The semester by now was half over. Her manuscript had grown by slim bounds. Her lack of progress she blamed on Julien's disturbing presence. He gave her no peace. So much for the inspiration of Paris. She determined to leave at semester's end.

Julien had other plans.

He offered to go to the library with her to help translate a court document relating to a trial of one of the French co-sairs, the

notorious Happy Dan Paw (see George MacDonald Fraser's The Pyrates).

Dariah decided to take him up on his offer; she had not forgot the curb-stone croissant incident; she was damned careful eating in his presence, but he did speak the language as she did not.

They went to the document stacks first. From there they were directed to the archive section, due to the age of the manuscript. Without Julien she was sure she would never have been able to understand the rapid French, so she smile her thanks to him.

The archives were housed in the basement of the library. As with all such basements, French or domestic, it smelt of musty paper, greenish mold, and Time itself. Dariah wanted permission to xerox the court transcript. She could then, she reasoned, work out the translation herself with a good dictionary sans Julien. The archivist had pulled the transcript in question, the trial of Happy Dan Paw, and was checking with his superior about the possibility of xeroxing the fragile document.

While they were waiting, Julien made his move.

Standing behind her as she faced the counter, Julien whispered into her perfect pink ear whether she would prefer the privacy of her place in which to conduct a thorough translation.

That made sense. She nodded.

Instead, with the appalling ability of the French to translate innuendo into action, a gift peculiar to that nation, he began to nuzzle her neck and to squeeze her, pressing himself against her body as a puppy nuzzles for its mother's teat.

The archivist stepped back to the counter. He politely coughed.

Dariah shook Julien off as a dog shakes water off its back. Her peach skin blushed to the roots of her chestnut hair. Furiously, Julien smiled. Contentedly.

The supervisor would permit xeroxing of the court transcript providing he himself did it. Would mademoiselle kindly wait? Or, if mademoiselle were in a hurry, as all Americains seemed to be, she could collect the xeroxed copy the following day and pay the small charge then.

Mademoiselle would not wait, s'il vous plait. Mademoiselle would most certainly collect the xeroxed copy the following day, merci.

Dariah trundled out of the library basement as majestically as possible, Julien hungrily nipping at her heels. He followed her all the way to her apartment. She turned to firmly dismiss him from duty when he reached out and pushed her back through her kitchen and into her study-bedroom where he grappled her to her bed, there to lie upon her heaving, and indignant, bosom.

His whispered endearments, all in French, came thick and fast upon Dariah's incredulous perfect pink ears. He groped. And slithered. All over her peach-mounded perfection. He kissed. And licked. And teased. And tasted. And fondled and tickled and blew and caressed every voluptuous centimeter of her.

Naturally, this took some time.

Dariah was alternately stunned, shocked, revolted, embarrassed, uneasy, curious, questioning, open, responsive, enthusiastic, and at the last, excited.

Let him see, she thought triumphantly, let him see.

Let him see me au naturel.

Then he'd leave me alone, she thought.

Unless he had a fetish about fat women. Perhaps he wasn't normal. Perhaps that was why he had dogged her steps from the beginning: was she just another swollen crumpet ripe for conquest? Or was he making a fool of her? Using her? Would he laugh at her?

Then he proposed. Of course, in the heat of the moment, it was in rapid French, which is, after all, according to the poets, the language of Love. Except he had to repeat himself several times in English when Dariah kept saying, "What? What?"

He said he loved her because he loved her and because he loved her. Would she be his? Forever and ever? His prospects were excellent. He had come from a long line of French pastry chefs. They would not starve. And he would see to it that she stuck to her diet. They would be so happy. Would she say yes? Would she say yes now and put him out of his agony? He so loved his chère coeur.

It should be recalled by the reader of this narrative that this constituted Dariah's first time with a man. In bed. A rather unclothed man, by this time. Actually, in the interest of narrative accuracy, they were both rather unclothed by this time. And out of breath. And Dariah was rather more than startled. He had not only seen her in the all-together, but he still wanted her.

Amazing.

Impossible.

Unbelievable.

Outrageous.

Outrageous what he was doing with his big toe.

Unbelievable what he was doing with his tongue.

Impossible what he was doing with his elbow.

Amazing what he was doing with his . . . but let us draw the curtain of privacy over the scene. Some details are too graphic for a charming, if absurd, story of modern love.

And so, Miss Darish Dove, two-hundred and eighty pound virgin spinster from Taunton Town, Iowa was proposed to in bed by a naked Frenchman fourteen years her junior for the first time in the history of the planet. And it was good.

And it felt good.

But Darish couldn't say Yes immediately. She still had her reservations. And her pirate novel to finish. And, perhaps, a plane to catch at the end of the semester, now only two weeks away.

Really, this was all . . . rather . . . abrupt. To think about. To seriously think about. It didn't bear close thinking about.

It was wonderful but terrible.

Glorious but stupid.

Ecstatic but embarrassing.

Rapturous but wretched.

Blissful but—

Darish was running out of descriptors. And time. Those two remaining weeks, as the proverbial expression goes, flew, as Time will. Julien gave every indication that his only thoughts were of her. Their

course at the university ended and the marking period came to a close. Now it was Dariah's turn to give Julien his marks.

She decided, and this twist of plot was wholly ontoward in a sedate child of the Post-War Years raised by right-thinking, Republican-voting, and God-fearing Episcopalians, that she would live with Julien without benefit of clergy. Such is modern love.

She wrote home to tell her parents this.

Mr. Dove was stunned.

Mrs. Dove was pleased. She had, with the passage of years and the onset of menopause, moved back into the master bedroom.

And so, according to all surmisable dialogue and twists of plot, Dariah lived with Julien above his parents' pastry shop on the Rue de Babillotte for the first year. They were quite happy, as happiness goes.

Dariah, with the aid of the xeroxed court transcript, ably translated by her lover, for such Julien truly was, was able to supply her pirate narrative with the right amount of historical realism, legal procedure, suspense, and intrigue consonant to the period. She at last put the finishing touches to her first novel, which she proudly entitled, Blood and Swash.

It was an instant success in France.

It went through five printings in America.

Hollywood negotiated for the movie rights. They wanted Richard Gere to play Happy Dan Paw.

Ramsay kept a hardcover copy by his bedside.

As to Dariah's health, that too had taken an unexpected and

unlooked for, but certainly not unwelcome, turn. She still would, and always would, love sweets and pastries. And Snickers bars. And peanut butter ice cream. And cheese cake. And hot crusty croissants, butter-rich. And raspberry streudel. And really decent double-cheese pizza with all the toppings, including hot peppers and anchovies. And chewy, raisin-studded oatmeal cookies the size of small moons. And—

But Dariah's list could go on and on, for she had had a lifetime in which to compile and taste test, and seemingly, a lifetime in which to eat.

But now she had a new Life.

And a certain measure, modest, of Fame. Respect and recognition also.

And a lover who came home to her every night.

And peace reigned in the Pirate Queen's kingdom.

She ensured that peace the first year by joining the fellowship of the French arm of Overeaters Anonymous. Now she was ready to listen to them. She lost ninety-one pounds.

In the vernacular of the Optimist, things were, indeed, looking up for Dariah. But she still hadn't made up her mind to marry Julien.

And so, Year Two commenced and Dariah wrote a second letter home.

Mr. Dove was not as stunned as before, since Mrs. Dove had moved back into the master bedroom the previous year.

Mrs. Dove was doing an awful lot of smiling, even for a right-minded Episcopalian.

With Year Two Dariah wrote her sequel to Blood and Swash

Blood and Sweat II: The Untold Story.

It was an instant success in France.

It went through five printings in America.

Hollywood negotiated for the movie rights. They wanted Emilio Estevez to play Richard Gere's son.

Ramsay kept a hardcover copy by his bedside.

Sally Sue Becker Hinton filed for divorce.

Dariah lost an additional sixty pounds.

Julien proposed again.

Dariah wanted an additional year in which to think. With two best-selling pirate novels on the market, one Hollywood movie and another in the works, healthy percentage checks from her publisher and movie agent, plus her Trust Fund checks, Dariah was, indeed, sitting pretty.

She was also, much to her middle-aged surprise, looking pretty. Granted, in the course of all surmisable twists of plot and dialogue, Dariah would not be mistaken for, say, the still-glowing and poutingly sensual Julie Christie, she of the tawny-skinned and honeyed-limb school of acting, but Dariah did turn heads now. And for an entirely different reason. With her weight loss, which had to her acquired the semblance of permanent recovery so long as she desired to remain abstinent, she had begun attending exercise class. Regularly.

Consequently, she did not become short of breath on walks of any great duration. Her peachy skin did not sag. Her peachiness now consisted of the glowing quality of tree-ripened fruit, rather than the shape of such fruit.

And so Year Three opened and Dariah wrote a third letter home.

Mr. Dove had stopped being stunned by his daughter, but not by his wife.

Dariah wrote a prequel to Blood and Swash; Blood and Swash III: The Early Years.

It was an instant success in France.

It went through five printings in America.

Hollywood negotiated for the movie rights. They wanted Robert Redford to play Richard Gere's father.

Ramsay kept a hardcover copy by his bedside.

Sally Sue Becker Hinton married Almanzo Duvett, of the socially prominent Long Island Duvette of golf ball manufacturing fame. She'd had it with Vienna sausages.

Julien proposed for the third time.

Dariah was now thirty-nine years old and weighed one-hundred and twenty-nine pounds of bone and muscle.

She accepted.

She wrote a fourth letter home to tell her parents the wedding date, and a separate letter to Hollywood specifying the percentage she wanted of the video sales when Disaster Struck.

Two days before the wedding Julien was hit and killed by a speeding ambulance.

Peace did not reign in the Pirate Queen's kingdom that day.

Dariah quietly said her good-byes to Julien's parents and packed her bags the day after the funeral. She would never return to France. It

must be said, to Dariah's lasting credit, that she did not turn to food as an easy solace during this difficult time. It seemed she had learned that lesson quite well. Now she would have to learn to live without Julien.

Dariah returned to Taunton Town full of Fame but heavy of heart. She moved back into her old room. It was as she had left it three years ago. She, however, could never be that same girl again. Yes; that is what Dariah had been at the age of thirty-six. A girl.

But now she was a Woman. A successful woman. A modestly famous woman. And a woman alone. Life had touched Dariah Dove.

But something, or rather someone, wanted to touch her too.

One Ramsay Hinton.

Ramsay had, indeed, taken over the Chicago-based Hinton Meat Packing fortune some years ago. He had moved with Sally Sue and their two boys to the Windy City to establish a base and to learn the operation, first hand, as it were. All this time he had never forgotten Dariah, nor his thwarted love for her. Now he was divorced and alone. Now she was back and alone. Now was his Time.

Casting aside all thoughts of the past, and of how meaningless and somehow empty Life had been, even with the Chicago-based Hinton Meat Packing fortune and Sally Sue and the two boys, Ramsay decided to fly to Taunton Town and, as the Old Soldier is fond of saying, "Do or die!" Such is modern love.

While Ramsay was winging his way toward Dariah, she was in the back yard exercising to a Jane Fonda tape. Appropriately, her leotard was

black, as, unfortunately, was her mood. "Life just isn't worth living without Julien," Dariah muttered between leg lifts. "He alone was responsible for my rebirth, which took somewhat longer than the original thirteen months, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty, switch, legs, but he alone made me feel like a woman," she panted.

As the Post is fond of saying, "the world lay before her, various and new," but all Dariah could see were ashes and broken dreams. Her financial success meant nothing to her now. The projected advertising blitz for a new line of pirate romances, complete with movie and video rights, toy sales, tee-shirts, a Saturday morning cartoon show, and a weekly series on TV, lay untouched on her desk upstairs. Life, indeed, had become a burden and black to Dariah. She had everything and she had nothing without the love of a good man.

"So much for Modern Love," Dariah intoned through her nose, following the suggested breathing exercises. Dark indeed were her thoughts that day and inconsolable her grief at the happiness which had been plucked from her bleeding heart-strings.

Indeed, her heart felt as if it had been wrenched from her body and in its place a battery-powered pacemaker inserted to smoothly pump her life's blood in syncopated rhythm to the suck-and-swallow suck-and-swallow whoosh whoosh of the four-chambered valves of the artificial plastic model which would be subject to neither dietary excesses of red meat, eggs, and dairy products, nor to the excruciating loss of a loved one.

It was upon these very thoughts that Mrs. Dove stuck her head from the upstairs master bedroom to announce to her daughter below that

she heard someone ringing the front door bell.

Dariah switched Jane off and, grabbing her exercise towel, also appropriately black, entered the house through the rear sliding door wall to see who was there.

Mopping her sweat-glistening peach brow with a corner of her black exercise towel, Dariah pulled open the door to see a middle-aged businessman in a dove gray three-piece pin-striped suit holding a be-ribboned wicker basket containing an assortment of Hinton Brand potted meat products, including their new line of Cape Cod Style Oyster-flavored Vienna Sausages and New Orleans Style Creole-flavored Vienna Sausages.

"I gave up red meat," she said automatically as she prepared to shut the door on the face of what she took to be a traveling Vienna sausage salesman in her exercised, grief-stricken state.

"Dariah! I've come to offer my condolences!" Ramsay expostulated.

"Oh."

She let him in. She vaguely recalled his face. How could she have known it was he who had waved to her from the airport observation deck three—was it only three—years ago before her departure to France? It must be remembered by the reader that that was back in Dariah's invisible days. Grief made neighbors of many strangers and mere acquaintances, she reflected.

"Dariah! Don't you remember me! Hinton! Ramsay Hinton! Your former next door neighbor and old school fellow!"

"Oh."

To be sure, once Ramsay had adjusted his eyes to the inside light,

he was quite taken aback by her appearance after so these many years. He reflected on the winsomely chubby kindergartener; on the coyly trundling third grader; on the time he had defended her against the opprobrious slur of "spotted hog" in fifth grade; and on all the dances he'd never danced with her in junior high and high school.

The Woman, for such was she who stood before him now, was almost a stranger. He offered her the basket but then thought better of it in light of her previous comment and instead placed it on the foyer table. He nervously flexed and unflexed his hands, uncertain what to do or say next.

"I say, Dariah, you are looking well these days, even in black."

"Oh."

Recalling the Famous Old Navy saying, Ramsay cast all caution to the wind—"Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" as it were. He launched his hurt and his longing for her on a protracted torrent of tortured prose which, to the ear of the untrained, sounded rather like some very bad dubbing in a foreign movie, or, failing that, as if Dariah were watching an American movie counterfeiting Swedish dialogue by running the actors' English backwards.

"Would you please speak a l-i-t-t-l-e m-o-r-e s-l-o-w-l-y."

"Dammit dearest, I've loved you for thirty-three years! Couldn't you guess!"

Dariah felt as if her artificial heart were beating more slowly, that her hearing had somehow gone wrong, that the words Ramsay was uttering sounded somehow very queer without a French accent.

"Oh."

Moved to truly desperate action for the first time, Ramsay forcibly tore the black exercise towel from Dariah's grasp—no mean feat at that, since she had developed an impressive hand grip through the exercise of her fine motor muscles—he tore said towel from Dariah's firm grasp and threw it to the marble floor as he wrestled—with somewhat more success, since his attack was wholly spontaneous, even though Dariah had the advantage of rippling, fondleized muscle—as he wrestled and threw her to the floor, himself atop (lest the reader be anxious for Dariah's bodily comfort during the exercise of Ramsay's fear-inspired maneuver let it be said that even at the peak of his manly fit he had so engineered the exercise that Dariah fell atop the Aubusson rug atop the cold marble floor before he fell atop her).

"Oh!"

"Dariah, my dearest, Dearest, DEAREST Dariah! I love you! I need you! I've always loved you! I've come for you! Say you'll be mine! Say it! Say it, dearest! I can't live another empty day without you! It's just no good! I can't pretend anymore! It's always been you, You, YOU!"

"Oh!"

Dariah was quite taken aback. It was as if her artificial plastic heart had now acquired a peculiar arrhythmia, as if her battery-fed pacemaker needed to be sent back to the manufacturer, as if, as if . . . indeed—! As if Dariah heard, for the second time in her life, Love's faint call from a great distance, as if, as if . . . but No! Julien was

barely dead and buried! . . . but still; was this, then, was this Modern Love, that intensely, profoundly, indelicately relentless yearning for fulfillment and, her ripe peach cheeks blushed to the roots of her chestnut hair, twentieth-century Woman that she was, was Modern Love the biologically based refutation of Kierkegaardian Existentialism as interpreted by Sartre?

"But I don't eat red meat anymore."

"I can fix that! I'll give up the business! I've more than enough money for the two of us!"

"But it's too soon to think of such things."

"I can fix that! I'll wait!"

"Butt, butt," Dariah gasped between torrents of kisses that Ramsay rained down upon the Pirate Queen's upturned face.

"I can fix that too if you'll just tell me what you mean!" he pleaded.

"My butt is sore!" Dariah wailed between clenched teeth. All her exercising and careful dietary monitoring had, without doubt, built up her muscle at the expense of her twin peach-halved posterior. Aubusson rugs are only so soft atop cold marble floors.

"Forgive me my precious!" panted Ramsay, as he adroitly heaved his dove gray pin-stripe suited frame from the object of his despair and desire.

"Ramsay, you've given me new hope for Life," Dariah began cautiously, rubbing her bruised peach posterior. "I can't say what your proposal means to me. I thought Life was over when Julien died. Give

me time to think about you and me together. Perhaps . . . we can live together. And Ramsay, one last thing."

"Yes, dearest?" he said, love radiating from his green eyes like a warming stream of split pea soup with bacon (or tiny, sliced Vienna sausages) when poured from a thermos flask on a cold January afternoon.

"Promise me you'll stay out of ambulance zones."

Such is modern love.

"To be is to do."
—Socrates

"To do is to be."
—Sartre

"Doo-be doo-be do."
—Sinatra

Afternoons of Alligators

It was like this in sleep, even from the distance of more than half a century, the lace curtains fluttering discreetly in the wisping dawn breeze, the violet rays pulsing across the half-drawn shutters of her sleeping mind. Oh, I must get up, I must get up she thought, the drowsing curtains fluttered, the half-light nodded and winked, the dreaming lace streamers caressed the silent sanded floorboards, Uncle John's coachman will be waiting, he is there, and I must get up but oh! the river, I hate the river, it is a misery to me the curtains wailed, the floorboards sighed, the damp the damp those drives are hateful, hateful but I must get up he is waiting, the pulsing dawn agreed, the curtains shook themselves then settled, the floorboards relapsed into silence as slowly, strangely, sadly the old woman pushed open the waiting shutters on the dawn of a world that Uncle John had not lived to see and Sabina herself near death—

No, I don't like that last line. Needs revising. Has to be a smoother, more poetic nuance to it. That's it. Put a little poetry in it. "Just a minute, Mike, I'm coming."

The woman reluctantly filed her story under "possibilities" and grabbed her battered portfolio in time to catch up with Mike. In time for yet another dreary fifty-minute session in the process (as in processed cheese spread, she wondered?) and craft (as in cheese?) of writing. Shit,

she thought; the older I get the more convinced I become writing should not be taught for the simple reason it cannot be learned.

She moved her dissatisfied legs in rhythm to Mike's brisk stride. They taught in the same building, their classrooms at opposite ends of the same hallway, she to English and he to first-year Spanish. Mike held the door open for her, as always, and she entered, as always. My dreams are slipping away, she thought, that's it, and all the green of spring can't make them come back. More and more her life of late felt like a small stuffy room. Where's the exit sign, she wondered. But even if I knew

"Hey Jewel, have a good one."

"Thanks Mike. You too."

She curved her lips into a smile, swung left down the hall, walked into her classroom, and looked out upon the familiar half-filled tables and desks ranged against the walls. The start of yet another session. A scattering of jean-clad bodies moved across her line of sight as she began the hour by handing back last week's graded themes. A few groans erupted. Earth tremors signalling a quake. She felt the air stiffen with static. No doubt her office hours would be filled with students this afternoon. She decided to ignore their hostility in favor of a pop quiz. That would focus their energy elsewhere.

A few protests. Shuffling of papers. Book bags dropped to the floor. She assigned an essay question from a short story considered a classic and mercilessly anthologized. Her students had found it boring and inscrutable in class. As always, it seemed.

Malcolm of the blond-and-black dyed Mohawk shot her a look from the back wall. Her class punker, but one of her brighter students. She smiled back sweetly, gritting her teeth.

"You have the full period to draft your answer. No books and no talking. Any questions?"

Malcolm's hand shot up. "I suppose notes are out."

It was a statement, not a question. His naturally red hair was starting to come back where it had been shaved down either side of his head. He wore his ankh earring today.

"That's right. Any more questions? Fine. Begin."

Sabina had learned the libretti to the popular Gilbert & Sullivan operettas which she performed and sang at small private gatherings, musical evenings, in Baltimore and Washington. It was at one such evening that she met the man to whom she would become a "niece in wish," a bullish widower, stout and dapper, supremely confident, bossy and self-assured, a caretaker of civilized customs and manners, the man she would come to know as Uncle John.

He was seventy-five and in precarious health; she was thirty-four and unmarried. In the crucible of human companionship neither expected a friendship as refined and durable as steel or as pure, nor an intimacy closer than that of couples long wedded.

She moved into his Washington townhouse as paid companion, secretary, and hostess to his dinner parties. She had her own room. She attended to his correspondence and hosted his formal dinner parties for the important young men of the town. Her days assumed the regularity of clockwork: mornings she rose at seven to ride with Uncle John to the river, a damp misery to her but a source of contemplation for him; a 'gathering of one's reserves,' as he put it; then back to the townhouse to dress for breakfast and attack his mail; luncheon at twelve; he napped from one to three; and then the consult for the evening's entertainment, but

always the companionship of his keen mind, restless and probing, active, lively, demanding—and jealous of Sabina's time and physical presence. On that point he was adamant. Yet, for all his tyranny, his mental power resided in a crumbling shell of which they were both all too aware. Sabina did not begrudge him her time, for he fascinated her; she did not begrudge him her youth, though he often reminded her of the eventual price she would one day pay—

"Miss Tone, Miss Tone, here's my answer," Helene Rodriguez said as she thrust her scrawled essay forward while digging thick black bangs out of her coffee-dark eyes. Daydreaming again. She took the paper from her and looked at her watch. The period was over. Could she recall what she had just thought in the time it would take to maneuver out from her students' clutches, lunch with Mike, and hold office hours from two to four? She thought not. Just as well. She wasn't sure she liked it well enough yet.

After Helene, the deluge began. More hastily contrived circumlocutions fluttered to her desk as students exited for the relative freedom of a Friday afternoon. The pile thickened and grew, then settled. Malcolm, in an exaggerated show of being last, stood before her.

"Here goes, Ms. Tone." He deliberated over her title, the sibilance resonant of controlled hissing. She wondered if Malcolm actively disliked her.

"A masterpiece of Marxist thought, I'm sure." This term Malcolm was studying economic theory.

"See ya tonight." He slouched off. He had the disturbing habit of frequenting the same movies as she.

Jewel looked down at the depressingly full pile of papers before her. It had grown like a yeast colony. She clipped the pile together, stuffed it into her portfolio, and headed for Mike's classroom.

They ate at a small lunch counter at what had become their Friday spot. Mike's dark fingers gripped his seeded bun as he sank his strong white teeth into his burger. It had taken her some time to ac-custom herself to what she felt were stares and half-shy glances when they went out together. Mike was black.

Today for dessert she ordered a crumb-topped cake doughnut. She'd start her diet Monday. The doughnut tasted of memories; store-bought crullers her mother had bought over twenty years ago; breakfast at home; childhood; safety. Strange how food triggers memories. I haven't thought of home in years. Mom's dead. The house is sold. Dad remarried. My life is slipping away. She pushed the crumb-littered plate aside and sipped her diet cola.

Mike looked at her. "What up, Jewel home girl?"

She smiled. He had written that to her in a letter once. Just friendly illiterate greetings from Detroit, he'd said. They could joke together.

"I can't make the Metheny concert next Sunday."

"No sweat. I meant the other question."

"Oh. Still thinking. Look, I've got office hours. We're still on for tonight though, right?"

He nodded. They had been sleeping together off and on. Mike smelled of clean coal. At night she imagined his arms around her were

those of Night itself; living night, breathing night. Enveloped by night, swallowed into unconsciousness she lost herself in the jungle of him. He became human mahogany, hard and muscled, polished to a gleaming perfection, the perfection of night, of secrets whispered in the dark, promises made safe because there was no light. He loved her.

"Bye."

"Bye."

She walked across the busy street to her office. A few students were lined up outside her door. Dear God, here we go again.

Her last complaint came from Justine, the university's track hopeful. Justine was a sleek black girl who did not carry the music of English in her ears. She substituted a high-fidelity Walkman. Her head was filled with the latest in running shoe technology. Her papers always circled back to her athletic career. Justine came to class regularly and occasionally asked questions. Perhaps it was enough, Jewel thought.

"And you see, don't you, that you have to go back and sharpen your conclusion by emphasizing your three main points from the body, okay?" Let her see it, she prayed, though Jewel was not given to prayer as a rule.

Justine saw. Or pretended to see. She had a meet to run in half an hour.

"Okay Miz Tone. Bye. See you in class next week. Have a nice weekend."

She smiled at the girl's platitudes. How easily the young mouthed them.

She turned back to the typewritten page of the morning. Her novel. What would she be and do, her relatives had asked when she was young. Be a writer and make a million bucks, she'd proudly answered. They had looked at her parents as if they had raised a half-wit. Maybe they had. They were all working on novels or short story collections in the department. A bunch of frustrated Hemingways on academic pay. Teaching writing was what they did to make a living, but writing was what they did to live.

And what of her? Where had her time gone? What had happened to those long lazy afternoons and quiet evenings spent hunched over a typewriter, ideas flowing and pages writing themselves in the white heat of creation? She had discovered that pages didn't write themselves, that her manuscript lived a life of its own in her head, free of the fixity of the typed page, free also of definable progress. Her story grew, breathed, and outran her wildest hopes on Monday, but by Friday, the weekend approaching, her child faded, gasped, and stumbled into the darkness of her mind. Her best ideas lived inside. Weekends she graded papers.

Jewel looked around the deserted office. Outside the dress of winter was wearing away into the sludge of spring. Tiny green buds pockmarked the forsythia. The campus dogwood had bravely bloomed last week. A groundskeeper trudged across the sodden yellow lawn spearing litter. The sun-starved trees shook bony knuckles at the bleak April sky. I know how you feel, she addressed them; we are sisters under the skin, you and I . . .

"Hi."

Malcolm, her punk Marxist. Slim legs sheathed in printed black denim. The snake in her Garden of indecision. The afternoon's trials were not yet over.

"Look, I was just getting ready to leave, but if you need help—"

"No. I won't hold you up."

Somehow his words made her think of a stick-up. Self-indulgent foolishness, she thought. There is nothing here to fear. I need this weekend more than I know.

"See ya at the movies." He turned on black heels and walked away. His leather boots rang down the hall, each step striking with confident precision. My snake, she thought; my lovely, lovely snake. Well why not. She turned back toward the trees. We are sisters under the skin.

Jewel arrived early to buy her ticket and slink in unnoticed. No ank-h-earringed apparition pursued her. It must have been a joke to worry her. What a great joke it had been. What students wouldn't do these days. But no joke would keep her from enjoying her evenings. They belonged to her as her days did not.

She slouched down in her seat. A black family of four blocked her exit to the aisle. Two rows ahead of her sat a young mixed couple holding hands. Further off she spotted a second couple, the girl a pale ginger in white shorts and pink tee with her arm around the waist of her white boyfriend. They looked self-absorbed and happy. She thought of Mike and marriage and facing car dealers, shoe salesmen, and bank loan officers with a black husband and black children. She imagined the eyes

of the businessmen; would they be indifferent, or otherwise? Would they sneer or pretend out of politeness. Would they care?

She turned the picture over in her mind, handled it as she would a framed picture, then set it back on the top shelf, out of sight to gather dust. She felt a surge of anger, as if a conspiracy existed against her feelings, a collusion which made her look unreasonable or a coward. Times have changed, Society said; but I know differently, she answered.

Jewel looked at her watch. She overheard a girl behind her talk of how she would structure her review of the movie for her professor. The film department had assigned it as a technical exercise. Jewel repressed her slight disgust. Why must they pick the bones of beauty? She was here to lose herself.

The lights dimmed. The blank screen trembled and swelled, burst into Technicolor with accompaniment by Korngold. The Adventures of Robin Hood. Errol Flynn, the god in green tights who swung onto a tree limb to welcome Olivia DeHavilland to Sherwood Forest. Bring on the alligators, Jewel thought; Errol's here and all's right with the world. Korngold's swashbuckling score opened possibilities of action, avenues of escape. Anything was possible, anything. Her spirit took flight.

Someone was stumbling across the knees of the black family, groping his way toward her. It was Malcolm. Her heart sank. What outrage would he commit? Basil Rathbone's face filled the screen. A close-up. He sneered beautifully. Just like Malcolm, Jewel thought.

While the rest of the audience booed and hissed or clapped and whistled, something had gone out of the evening for her. She shrank inside, waiting. When Mutch the Miller's son prepared to shoot the King's deer Jewel cringed inside, waiting for Malcolm to loose no less sinister bolt of his own. She hadn't long to wait.

At last the lights went up as Errol exited with Olivia through the castle portal and out into the waiting world. Jewel stood up to leave. Malcolm did not.

She tensed, waiting.

Malcolm snorted. "Let's go somewhere."

She thought of excuses. I'm busy, I've got another date, I have papers to grade, my head is splitting. What did he want? Had he pulled this on his other teachers? What hadn't they told her?

"All right."

* * * * *

They went across the street to the same diner where she and Mike had eaten at earlier that day. She ordered a diet Pepsi and feigned a "this happens to me everyday and I really don't care look" when the waitress stared at Malcolm. He just ordered a cup of hot water.

They talked, she nervously of writing, its craft, the demand of it, its fascination, its difficulty, of her love for it—

He cut her off. You're a fraud, he said. A fraud. He whisked an herbal tea bag from the inner pocket of his jacket and dunked it in his cup of hot water. Jewel caught an aromatic whiff of chamomile as the water darkened to amber. He stirred his tea with a spoon, looking at her

sphinx-like, dark and exotic, unquestionably male and challenging.

"You're a fraud," he repeated. "Words, just words. You blow words out of your mouth you don't mean. You're a fraud." He looked at her polite shock. "Do you only live in your head? Do you only live up on the screen," he sneered.

What can I say to this boy whose freedom appalls me, she thought. What right has he to judge, what divine gift? What if her life consisted of the chambers of her mind? What is it to him if I teach formulas useless to help me? What does he know? Who are you, she thought. Who are you?

"I'm sorry Malcolm, but I really have to be going." She stood up. She owed him nothing, really. My lovely snake, she thought. I won't take your bait, I won't. You can't tempt me.

He brushed the palm of his pale hand against the variegated tuft of his Mohawk. It reminded her of the bristle from a Hoplite helmet. His eyes challenged her to speak. She did not.

"Your name. Jewel Tone. I like it. It could almost be true."
Don't push me, Malcolm, she raged. Jewel walked out the door.

* * * * *

That night as she lay in Mike's arms she thought of the answer she would give him. She decided to tell him in the morning. Sleep was overtaking her now, but she thought of her story. If she could just hold onto the idea until morning. Sabine would take a weekend trip to the country with friends. It would be spring and she would be tired and run-down from the winter's nursing of Uncle John. She would need to get away but at the same time she would deeply worry about his health; she would

call his townhouse repeatedly for updates but the housekeeper would reassure her that nothing, nothing was wrong, but Sabina would become so agitated that she would cut short her visit to rush back, rush back to the old man the dear tiger who would be sitting upstairs in a low chair by the fire having a book read aloud to him and Sabina would kneel, would kneel and put her arms around his body and his whole being would tremble Never leave me, Never leave me and two mornings later she would walk into his room and find him dead except the next morning when Jewel awoke and Mike was in the shower she had somehow tangled her story up, for she had the distinct impression that somehow it had been Sabina who had died.

Outside the feeble spring sunshine beckoned to the waiting trees.

Jewel's Afternoon

Betty is a large motherly woman with rounded edges blurred from living. She sits beside me on the stiff bench in the hall because I don't want to disturb my office partner who is conferencing a student of his own. Also, I want privacy from male ears. So we sit out in the hall. Most conferences last fifteen to thirty minutes. Mine lasts three hours.

Betty comes to my morning class faithfully week after week, though she is not always on time. Her oldest daughter, the one who will be marrying this June, works the morning shift at McDonald's and there is only one car so Betty must drop her daughter off then drive to my class. She is apologetic when she is late. She wants to be there and regrets the time lost almost as much as the eighty pounds she cannot lose.

Betty is my student. She makes up for the Malcolms. We exhaust her paper revision as topic of conversation. We are two women drawn together by a community of kind, a community of need not easily available but always indispensable. Betty talks.

She grew up in a small Catholic factory town one of six children to a father who worked as a machinist and taught her carpentry and a mother who cooked and sewed and cleaned for seven people because she didn't have the time to make messes of her own. Betty speaks of her girlhood as a time of waiting; waiting for the bathroom, waiting for her mother's attention, waiting for her carpentry lessons when father came home. I see no real change in that pattern even though Betty is forty-two.

She is still waiting for deliverance.

She married at twenty-one, the same age at which her daughter will wed. Looking back from the perspective of years, she sees that Tom was a poor marriage risk and I silently ask why is it women gauge the success of their lives by the men they marry? Tom was an adventurer, an outdoorsman. In ten years of marriage he was seldom home, though Betty conceived two daughters by him. When he came home he drank and carried a gun and took to threatening her and the children. Is that what happens when dreams die, I ask. No, Betty answers; that is what happens when the man doesn't die before the dream.

Tom became abusive and drunk when he was home so Betty filed for divorce even though she saw it as a kind of sin. Tom didn't want the divorce but he didn't want to be married either. Then he threatened her and left the state. It took three years to finalize it because Tom was still on the move and hard for the court to serve papers on. Four years later he shot and killed a man in a bar with one of his guns. Even after almost ten years of marriage to her second husband, the FBI calls Betty twice a year to see if she has heard from Tom or knows where he is. She saw him around campus two weeks ago. They are on amicable terms now.

Her second husband would be a family man, a nurturer, Betty swore. No more rolling stones. Roy is fifteen years older than Betty. He had never been married and was a prosperous farmer who lived in a small town on his parents' land and cared for his elderly mother. He owned the strip of land Betty leased from him and on which she built the house where they now live. Roy esteems family values. He is a nurturer. Betty

married him.

Three years ago Roy was officially diagnosed as a manic-depressive. He undergoes regular and predictable mood swings, like a male menstrual cycle. He withdraws from the farm, from Betty, from the girls, from their own daughter, born seven years ago. He retreats to his demons.

Betty did some checking and found that it goes back four generations in Roy's family. His mother was kept in a sanitarium and given shock treatments in the '30s. Perhaps he is haunted by that memory as a nine year old. This winter Betty told Roy to go to the barn, so Roy has been living in the barn since January. During the winter he let his hair and beard grow long and become dirty and matted. He let his fingers become frost-bitten. He let the food grow moldy that Betty brought out to the barn for him to eat. He hid his money by burying it. Betty manages the farm and the girls and life without Roy, but it is hard.

Roy longs for death when the demons have him, but he is too afraid for the openness of the rope, the knife. He dies inside by inches measured in fingertips. He waits for spring to return, waits for the chemical winter to lift as lift it must and one day will until the cycle's upbeat by its own momentum pivots and points downward once again gravity-bound. Even though they have pills now, Roy prefers not to take them. The pills make him slobber and drool, but that is not why he avoids them. Roy prefers the blackness of his pit, the rhythm of its opening and closing. He knows its depth and circumference. There is no guesswork, only the known and predictable quantity. The pills make life real. It is life he cannot handle.

Betty longs for a weekend lover, especially since Roy has been in the barn all winter and it is almost spring. Betty is a physical woman. She built her own house on the land she rented from Roy, but that was when she was younger, lighter, when her body did not show that it had borne two daughters or that she would bear yet another. She is proud of her carpentry skills, proud of her ability with raw wood, hammer and nails. She bartered her skill for medical care for herself, Roy, and the girls and that is how she met Phil, the man she would like to be her lover. Phil is quiet and kind and listens to Betty with his eyes when she talks. Phil is a good doctor and understands Betty's life and what coping with Roy must be like. Betty and Phil like to fish together. Phil's wife is thin, sharp; a business-suited Amazon with long red nails. Betty wonders if Phil is happily married since she and Phil are so much alike and his wife is nothing like him.

Betty thinks about divorcing Roy, especially if anything happened to her and Roy were guardian of the two girls left at home. She would not like them raised in a barn, like animals. Her littlest is only seven. But it would be her second divorce and once in a lifetime is bad enough but twice is failure and she is Catholic and Michigan is a hard state to prove mental incompetency in so she dreams of losing eighty pounds and sleeping with Phil on weekends while Roy is in the barn.

Still, Betty is philosophical about her life. She waits for her eldest's wedding to pass; one less victim. Then she will file for divorce. Her priest told her it was no real marriage. If Roy will not care for himself, then she must care for herself and the girls. She

cannot fix him. She knows this now.

Betty is a mountain of a woman and she limps. Betty limps because she injured her ankle years ago in a fall that brought her to Phil, a fall from the house she was building on a strip of Roy's land and now she has developed arthritis from the crushing weight which bears down on those nine inches of ankle like a one-ton block. She wants to lose weight to ease the constant pain for which Phil writes prescriptions and she wants to grow more attractive by becoming less of herself so Phil will want to make love to her. Betty must somehow lose the weight to find love because no man willingly makes love to a fat woman. So she eats bowls of carrot sticks and celery stalks and unbuttered popcorn to fill the emptiness inside she wants a man to fill. Betty is still young, still on the edge of it, but losing eighty pounds takes such a long time that she consoles herself with extra food and there are times when she is not sure she will reach either goal, but while she is waiting to grow slender and waiting for Phil to make love to her and waiting for Roy to come out of the barn she is still waiting for deliverance.

I look down at my watch and realize it is two o'clock. It's Saturday and Betty must return home to the farm, the girls, Roy. She extends an invitation to visit her at the farm. We embrace, I nod, and Betty limps away.

I go back to my office. My partner is gone, the office empty. I sit at my desk and stare out the window on a wet spring. I am still inside, quiet where it counts. Where would you go / That is not the

same / Blank field? No, there is / Nothing left for you / But to stand here / Full of your own silence / Which is itself a whiteness / And all the light you need. The poetry leaves me, contracts, breaks off. It is something I have read not long ago. Betty's story has settled inside of me like a stone that cannot be dislodged. Where would you go that is not the same the same the same? Betty thought she was escaping a bad marriage for a better one. She thought she was escaping to safety. The same blank field. Nothing left nothing left nothing left but to stand. Stand where? Where? I don't like where I'm standing. I'm afraid. Nothing left for you nothing left for you but to stand full of your silence silence silence echoes in my head. I cannot hear my own silence. What is my silence? Listen listen listen it whispers.

Betty's story. Betty groping her way toward happiness. Betty the carpenter making a house she can live in, a house to stand for life. I do not like the house of my life. I do not like my students, except for Betty. I'm not sure I like Mike. I know I do not like Malcolm. Roy is not so distorted that I cannot recognize myself in him. Letting the disease choose. Roy lets the disease choose. A cynic once said Life is the incurable disease. I am not sick like Roy but I know about pain and despair. I know it is when they become a way of life that life becomes a way of dying, like Roy.

The office phone jangles. I walk over and pick it up. It is Mike, wanting to make plans for Sunday.

I say yes.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES



3 1293 03196 2289