

THE BUILDING

A Novel by

VLADIMIR GRJONKO¹

English Translation by

VLADA CHERNOMORDIK²

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And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

Genesis 3:4-5

CHAPTER ONE

The bitumen roof is hot as a frying pan, and I'm the only egg on it. What the hell am I doing up here, you ask? That's easy. If you're tired of the fuss that reigns in the streets, the roof is the way to go. The higher, the better. I'm not a fussy man. I guess I see the vanity of it. From the point of view of sensible middlebrow folk, the sort I call "respectable burghers," my attitude will be my downfall because it spells laziness. Have it your way; I don't like arguing either. For all I know, I am lazy. I might just end up singing praises to that unpopular human quality.

It's the end of July. Summer sears its catch. I'm walking down the street, trying to stay in the shade. Breathing is next to impossible, but I avoid the air-conditioned stores. Too much fuss. (I have to stop using that word; it's getting to me more than the fuss itself.) So here I am crawling along through the flabby air and the crowds. Nothing to do. This makes the heat seem even more oppressive. My only salvation is visualizing winter. The equally depressing, raw and windy winter, when you'd rather die than go outside. Winter in general. But what comes to mind is a little more specific.

...It was early morning. I was schlepping to my current indenture. Life sucked, and it was written all over my face. A ten-block hike from the subway! All the world was coldness

and grogginess; the city around me yawned and shivered. Running would have helped, but thanks to my stupid punctuality I was half an hour early already. Mustn't spoil the boss with early arrivals. Freezing and cursing the day I was born, I left the stream of grey walking bundles and turned onto a languid side street. Why not take a scenic detour? A little exercise won't hurt. Just ignore the sub-zero temperatures. Through the first tokens of dawn, I padded through one of the wealthiest parts of town. I bet no one here has to haul ass to work. In these buildings any given loft takes up a whole floor, sometimes two. Snuggled up in their warm beds were the most respectable burghers of the city and all five boroughs. I passed by marble lobbies where doormen were just beginning to cultivate servility on their half-awake faces. I didn't judge them: it's what they get paid for. I'd once seen a burgher toss a few coins to a cabbie and then hand a five-dollar bill to the doorman who'd run up to help him out of the cab.

The hell with social equality. I'm all for social inequality. I've seen the end result of forced equalization and hatred for those more fortunate. God spare us...

Staring blankly into space as I philosophized, I passed too close to a doorway. The door opened right in front of my nose. Not to mince words, it hit me in the head. Small wonder: the doorman was watching the tenant walking out, not the stranger walking by. Out came a lady. Not a young lady, alas, but not an old hag either. She was slim and well-groomed, and, of course, staring at me: my collision with the thick pane of glass produced a pop that shook the sidewalk. I wasn't in pain, though, just in shock. Have you ever noticed that the louder the boom, the lesser the pain? I think the noise milks the strength from the blow. The lady appeared to think otherwise, because she looked anxious and asked if I was all right. I was fine, but the lady... In a matter of seconds, the neutral sympathy in her eyes turned into... Can't even explain it. No, not lust—I wish!—but a sort of intimacy. As if years ago we'd been very

close, then lost touch, and now she'd recognized me and memories came flooding back. Total nonsense: we'd never laid eyes on each other. But she could have fooled me. I have no illusions about my looks: women usually love me with their ears. Well, perhaps I overstate, but never in my life—

This was a new experience. All my hangups rushed to the fore and I got instantly self-conscious about my bad haircut, my dirty workclothes, and my scrawny neck that's too long for a guy's. Given the choice, I'd rather be obese. Fat people carry more weight in the world. Because I'm a lightweight, the winds of life tend to blow me towards the back door and out the emergency exit. Wherein ensues the litany of "shoulda, coulda, woulda." That's the way it's always been, and I have no reason to expect things to change. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I was thrown by the situation and my inane musings that maybe the two of us really had had a thing going at some point... The look in her eyes was explicit, direct and a little perplexed: what's your problem?, it asked. If she had mistaken me for a friend, she would have called me by some name. Certainly this went way beyond simple human concern for a stranger, especially one standing upright and not bleeding on the sidewalk. What was the deal here?

– You're all right, then, – she repeated, more as an assertion than a question.

I exaggerated a shrug like a goddamn street mime and mumbled something unintelligible, while my internal monologue went something like this:

– Smile and be charming, you moron. You've done this before. Pull yourself together.

It's rude to keep a lady waiting...

All was futile. My mouth stayed shut and the pause dragged on. Female burghers were a tricky breed. Wouldn't be surprised if she'd had a fight with her husband and was looking for a dupe to get back at him with. Did I need trouble in my life? Shit, I was just fishing for

excuses. I'd had a chance to examine her: she was a babe, and younger than I'd thought. But what really grabbed me were her eyes. They were gentle and kind, and harbored no foul play. I was sure of it. And, being a confirmed romantic and adventurer, hell yes, I needed trouble in my life! I had a flash of her and me— Yup, I positively liked her. A lot. Well then, it was my move. How much longer would she stand there in the cold?

And then the lady surprised me again. She stepped up, reached out and touched my cheek with her palm, fingertips softly grazing my ear. Then she ran her fingers along the back of my ear, lightly squeezed the lobe, and took her hand away. A caress like that from a total stranger! My mouth opened at last, but she smiled once more and was already gone, headed for a parked car I hadn't noticed before. A huge limousine with tinted windows. That wasn't the end to her surprises either: the woman walked around the limo, opened the door and got into the driver's seat. This was even more stupendous than her cheek-stroking stunt. I'd lived in the City for many years and seen many things, but a fine lady driving her own limo... It was unheard of! These people *ride* in limos and *drive* a Mercedes or a BMW. My word... But she didn't look insane. In fact, she took off with confidence, made a clean turn, stepped on the gas and vanished from my sight.

I turned around. To look at the doorman, nothing unusual had taken place. The man knew his job. Speaking of which, I had to get to mine. I was suddenly aware that I had frozen solid. Spurred on by the late hour and a sneaking suspicion that the doorman was only pretending not to look, I hurried on.

In and of itself, this episode was hardly a big deal. Just a curious encounter; perhaps a chance for an adventure with open-ended possibilities, wasted because I'd been slow on the

uptake. It gave me food for all sorts of fantasies—whole movie plots with palm trees and sailboats. They helped brighten up the dull commute to work.

Later on in that interminable workday, I tried to gain some perspective on the incident. It had a touch of mystery to it, and I hoped to find some leads. I spun it in my head on a few different axes, but no answers came. Of course, I could have gone back there some other morning and given it another shot. Maybe in Take Two the moron would have loosened up and let me talk to the woman. After all, I'm not a teenager. As it worked out, however—be it because of the doorman, who I was sure had remembered me, or because of some instinctive inclination to keep clear of potential hassles—I never allowed myself to walk past her building again.

Once in a while I thought about her. I tried to relive that strange caress of hers, the way her hand had smelled, the whole of what I'd felt minus the stupor part. It gave me a thrill, as do all things that were at some point possible but never happened. I remember how once, as a kid, I was running down a hill overgrown with young firs, flying so fast I couldn't see what was up ahead. The slope ended abruptly and I ran out to the very edge of a cliff. Something still drove me forward, I knew I could leap right over to the other side, no sweat. At the last moment I came to my senses and stopped. It didn't matter then; I just turned around and went back up the hill. But afterwards I lay awake night after night, picturing myself with my neck broken. Unrealized delights arouse me just as much. Call it psychobabble, but I honestly think that if my fantasy came true, the memory of it would be less delicious. It just wouldn't have that special kick.

A lot has happened since. I don't feel like going into it: it reads like the standard list of failures and misfortunes that befall a little man in the Big City. Lady Luck, if she exists, hasn't

smiled on me too often. Especially lately, I can't shake the feeling that life is out to get me. It seems determined to drive me to the brink of despair and steal from me another lady friend, who's not much of a lady—a foolish, fickle slut called hope. I know all her tricks and have no expectations, but the little bitch is irresistible. When she's with me, life is worth living.

But when she's gone... watch out. Don't bank on my distaste for futile fuss. Some savage legacy of prehistoric ancestors awakens in me, and I switch to survival mode. That's probably why I hate cops. They make me nervous. I'm a law-abiding citizen, or just about, so what's up with that? Evidently, the potential evil I'm capable of comes alive at the sight of badges and holsters, and steers me away from trouble. Or do we all resent a force that's stronger by default and always in the right?

Well, never mind the cops; so far I've managed to avoid them. The matter at hand is this sickening July heat through which I drift without aim or purpose.

Back in the early spring I'd lost my job. To tell the truth, I was glad of it. It was hard and tedious work which barely paid the rent. Each morning that I sat down at my workbench, I commenced the funeral of yet another day. So when my boss, his well-fed face constrained to show regret and his eyes avoiding mine, declared that he had no more work for me, I felt a whole cocktail of emotions stir up inside. Right away I relegated the daily-bread issue to the backburner. Plenty of time for that. Everything else struck me as amusing. For years I'd taken orders from this man, deferred to his bullshit and pretended to like it. For forty hours a week, he owned my life. And every Friday, with reluctance, my efforts were rewarded by a check. A check that wasn't worth the paper it was printed on... An exuberant lightness, freed from some place within, was going to my head. Small currents of joy danced under my tongue. My benefactor was still standing there clutching my last check, looking past me and

sympathizing. I gave him a big toothy grin. He looked puzzled: did I misunderstand him? But my smile was completely heartfelt.

– I’m really very sorry, – he mumbled and shoved the check at me.

– Of course you are, – said I, – and so am I. I’m so terribly, terribly sorry! But you shouldn’t feel bad about it. It’s going to work out just fine.

With that, I patted my boss on the shoulder, and then with more zest on the cheek. What a clean shave! What pristine cluelessness. What a pity this hadn’t happened sooner...

– I’m sure you’ll manage without me. Let me hug you goodbye. – Squishing the check that was aimed at my chest, I opened my arms and puckered up for a big wet smooch.

The check was still falling, and the man was gone.

– *Oora-a-ah!* – I cried in that most expressive of tongues—my own—and was about to break into a jig. But I could not permit myself such excess. And not because I didn’t want to; on the contrary, that was exactly what my soul craved. But my soul must not be indulged. And don’t ask me why. It mustn’t, and that’s all there is to it.

As I bent to pick up the check, I even believed for a moment that my boss was genuinely sorry to see me go, though I knew it was a crock of shit. I felt slightly embarrassed, both for him and for myself. And sorry, also for both. Though Mr. Rosen, the proud owner of a jewelry business that employed six—five—was the last man on earth who needed my pity. All his needs were pretty much taken care of. A tubby gray-haired Jew who spoke English with a funny accent, he hailed from South Africa, where, I believe, he co-owned a diamond mine. Every so often he seemed to forget that he wasn’t dealing with oppressed South Africans but with new arrivals to the Land of the Free.

In my last few weeks there, I'd get the shudders at the sound of his voice, booming and unbearably fake. It was like he only pretended to be angry, or busy, or concerned. I was getting the impression that he was in business not to make money but to play boss. And that his real, full and interesting life was elsewhere and had nothing to do with jewelry. Who's to say I was wrong?

But what might have been a game for him was hard-core reality for me. On one occasion, shortly after I'd gone to work for Rosen and still liked him reasonably well, I'd had a fit of frankness and started telling him stories of life in the old country. He ooh'd and aah'd and gasped with horror, but after awhile I realized that to him it was like watching a scary movie: you're scared all right, but all along you know it's just a movie. He's quite a character, this Mr. Rosen. Had I been a little more fond of my job, I might have enjoyed observing a solipsist businessman. Well, he can play business without me. Me, I've got my own games. And what sad games they are.

And so I walk under the scorching sun, thinking about this and that, trying to forget that I'm a destitute loser with a shitload of problems. At some point, the melting street gets to be too much for me. There's got to be someplace I could go... The memory of lady in limo crops up again. Why the hell not? Seems like the perfect occasion and the right frame of mind.

I took my bearings and headed in the direction of her building. It turned out to be a short walk. The quiet street was deserted, and there was no one under the awning by the entrance. What now? Stand there and wait for her to show? What if she's out of town? As well she should be, in this heat. I put my nose to the glass and peered inside. The spacious marble lobby was empty. I went in.

Intentions unclear, I slowly crossed the lobby, stopped at the elevator and instantly realized where I wanted to go. The top. Inside, I pressed the last button and went up. The elevator let me out at floor sixteen, where I discovered a stairwell that led still higher. No objections. I climbed it, pushed the squeaky door, and found myself on the roof.

The sun was past its peak, and there was shade by the little booth I came out of. It was much cooler there and the bitumen didn't sink beneath my feet, so I chanced sitting down. Well, actually... I don't know what had come over me—maybe I had sunstroke—but I didn't just sit: I lay. Just stretched myself right out on the roof.

Mind you, if there'd have been people around, I wouldn't have. Moreover, I wouldn't have if I'd been alone but in a different mood. I am a city creature. In the street and in public places, I don't sit down before feeling the spot with my hand and scanning the scene to make sure all is calm. *Lying* down I wouldn't risk even in Central Park. What am I afraid of—stinging vermin, shitting canines, or just being at a disadvantage in case I have to defend myself? Beats me.

But there on the roof there were no dogs or insects, just me and some junk—bits of paper and used coffee cups. The bleak city sky arched above me as I lazed in the shade. A drowsy street trickled far below; drowsy thoughts simmered in my head. I should get up. It's crazy to be lying on a strange roof for no good reason... I did too have a reason, I'd come there to rediscover my winter adventure.

All at once, ever the masochist, I started feeling sorry for myself. And what a sweet humiliation it was to be lying on a dirty roof wallowing in self-pity! There's something kinky in admitting to your frailties and secret desires. Isn't there a porn show on cable called *True Confessions*? I think confession by design is more sin than sin itself, but in my case it's

completely benign. Self-pity only weakens me to the point where I develop a detached philosophical attitude towards people. If any are in evidence. Now there was no sign of human presence save the smog and the odd wail of a siren that reached me from the street below.

None of it disturbed my reverie. Self-pity flowed unchecked. Troika bells jingled in my ears and brought a vision of a magic power, soft and supple as a cat's paw, that lifted me and swept me off the roof, and carried me—no, not into the street whence I'd escaped, but that way, further to the East, and further yet... All the way back home, to my lumpy couch of old... But there was no such power in nature, no power in me to fight off a thick, marshy sleepiness. My bitumen bed smelled of oil, home and childhood...

My slumber was quiet and joyous. Shrinks have a term for it: regression to the womb. When the world is too much to bear, you want to crawl away, curl up into a ball and sleep, like you did in your mother's womb. They're right on target there. I slept like a baby, maybe for the first time in a week of anxiety over what to do with my life.

As a rule, when I open my eyes I remember where I was when I closed them. This was the exception. I woke up, listened to myself and heard nothing of value. I made to raise my head and found it held in a tight grip. I tried to move and, with growing terror, discovered that I couldn't.

The sky above was black and nearly starless. Judging from the low level of noise below, it was late evening. The obvious conclusion was that while I'd slept, the sun had invaded my shelter, softened the bitumen, and fused me head to toe into the goo. With the sun gone, the mold had hardened into a perfect replica of me. I was stuck. I broke out in hysterical giggles. What a perfect metaphor for my life!

All at once I was aware that I couldn't feel my limbs. Panic bubbled and popped. I started to writhe. Efforts to free bare forearms from bitumen proved painful and fruitless. My legs hardly stirred inside the jeans, and the T-shirt had gotten so soaked that the bitumen had bonded with my skin. I felt a scream building up in my lungs. I clenched my teeth and jerked harder.

A few more minutes of this, and I would have cracked up or blacked out. Maybe both. But the squirming frenzy did me in pretty quickly. I let go and began to calm down.

Pardon me, sir, I said to myself, but aren't you the famous antifussist? 'Cause it sure looks like you're fussing now. Could it be that your contempt of fuss is a big load of crap? Well, you talked the talk; time to walk the walk. Let's see you get out of this with no fuss and a little dignity. Anyway, what's the big deal? So you're stuck; so it's a stupid place to be. And I suppose your life till now was full of wisdom and not comical? What horrible irreparable tragedy has befallen you now?

I am the master of self-persuasion. All my life I've been afraid of pain, so whenever it threatened I'd keep telling myself that pain was nothing but a sense impression, a bunch of neural impulses the brain interprets in a certain way. It helped, and it was helping now. Ain't no big thing, being stuck. Don't dwell on your alternatives—shed the threads or yelp for help... I said, don't dwell! This is your chance to get some R&R. The roof is a most romantic place to dream and meditate, so get the most out of it. And I got down to getting.

It was rightdown poetic: a roof, black sky, and stuck am I... Suddenly I no longer felt lonely. How many roofs were there in the City? From my vantage point, there was no end to them. So the odds were that somewhere out there on another roof, there was at least one other moron foreigner, stuck just like me. Maybe more than one. There we were, lying motionless,

gazing at the occasional star. And we loved it. Because it was fucking wonderful to have no choice but to lie around! By gluing us to the roof, Chance took all responsibility upon its elaborate shoulders. I wasn't really trapped; I was floating, I was free and serene, goddamn it. Let Chance wiggle out of this as it chose. I was content to be a curious spectator.

Chance, however, wasn't in a hurry. I spent another minute in contemplation, trying to ignore my numb limbs. OK, I said to myself, it's time to do something. Like, yell. It was critical not to think how demeaning the whole thing was. This wasn't happening to me. I was watching a sitcom on TV. Otherwise the morning sun would have thawed out a raving lunatic.

I weighed my options. The yelling would have to be loud and sustained, until the tenants on the upper floor awakened. Then the burghers would deliberate whether they'd really heard something, and if they had, should they call the police or mind their own business. Well, no: when the sleep of a marble-lobbied building's resident was disturbed, he complained at once. So then, the police. No thanks. Proving to the cops that I wasn't a burglar or a schizoid jumper would have bordered black comedy. I didn't want to spend the night in jail.

Then again, I could try to liberate myself. From the pants. If not the whole caboodle. And where would I go stark-naked? The police... Was that what Chance had in mind for me? I knew that one fine day I would be laughing when I told this tale, even embroidering it for entertainment value. But how was I to survive the chasm between "me right now" and "me back then"? I took a deep breath, then another. There was no choice.

See if I could crawl out of the clothes, retrieve a scrap of fabric from the bitumen, wrap it around myself and—hello, Officer. Like the doorman would let me sneak by. You know what? Fuck it. Absurdity follows its own logic. No use trying to second-guess it. My job is to untruss myself. What a foolish thing life is! The key to self-confidence is a few yards of fabric.

And it's not just a question of shame or being arrested for indecent exposure. Inner vulnerability, that's the rub. Ever try arguing while naked in a sauna? Or demanding something, especially from a clothed person? Adam, covered with a fig leaf, wordlessly obeyed God's will, whereas the fully-clothed postmodern man... Even aggression wanes when you're naked. Take the sauna again, or a locker room, anyplace where people remove their clothes: nary a brawl ever breaks out there. What a bunch of crap. Let me out of here!

Luckily I'd lost a few pounds just before, and my jeans were loose in the waist. I thrust up my hips as high as they would go, and concluded that the jeans would let me out. If I could free my arms and back, that was. Arms in particular. I tried to bend one at the elbow. No go. Fucking lightweight... Gotta yank them out. Ouch! Easier said than done. And what about the head? I wear a crewcut, but pulling hair out of bitumen, short or no, would be no picnic. All right, an idea. Keep moving as much as my position allows, but slowly, very slowly. Melt the bitumen with body heat and friction. Just enough not to get skinned alive. Dare I hope to salvage some clothes? I'd settle for the jeans.

I began to wriggle, as if I were in bed scratching my back against the sheet. But there, in bed, this sort of thing is fun, and here I was out of breath in no time. The smell of bitumen, so poignant in the afternoon, now drove me nuts and clogged my nostrils. Can't stop, or this foul muck will harden up again... No, goddamn it, I can't! I fell back with a groan. Pain!!! Sweat, and possibly tears, were stinging my eyes. Sitcom, my ass! This was now, and it was real! There was no "me back then," there was just me and this fucking bitumen! That's all she wrote! And yet, piped up the voice of reason, everything comes to an end. Yeah, like being reasonable! By now I was ripe for that scream, but I had no strength left. My mind was groping for something to ward off all-out dementia—

And then my heart jumped: I heard the creak of an opening door. Somebody was on the roof! I was lying by the back wall, they wouldn't have noticed me in the dark. Well, holler! I had a mortifying flash of my retrieval from the claws of the savage bitumen as performed by police and emergency medics, probably some firefighters thrown in for good measure. And swallowed my tongue.

A flashlight's beam bounced off the wall. Whoever had come up to the roof at this hour seemed to be searching for something. Before long, I glimpsed the outlines of a human figure walking along the parapet, the flashlight held low and directed at his feet. If he walked the perimeter and left, I'd be stuck there forever. But what if he stumbled upon me by Chance? That would have been the best-case scenario.

Que sera, sera, I resolved. The outcome was a moot point whether I was found or not. Ditto for how to act in case I were. In the dark, he might have taken me for a stiff, but was a talking stiff any better? For all I knew, it was some feeble-minded old fart who could have dropped dead of a heart attack, and I'd have wound up with a real stiff for a neighbor. Sweet!

I didn't finish evaluating this prospect, because the man completed the round and headed for the door. I heard it creak. He's leaving, I thought. That's it; I'm doomed. But the door banged shut and the beam was still there. In fact, it turned the corner and was approaching me.

All-righty, I was going to be found, but was that good? A chill ran through me. What should I do when the light reaches me? Stare stoically into the sky? Greet the man with a smile? Cry "help"?

The beam hit me and blinded me, and I knew there was no need to think further. Here it was. Like the rollercoaster—what we used to call "American Hills" back home. The car crawls up higher and higher. You never thought the thing was so high looking up at it from the

ground. And now you don't want it that high. But the car keeps climbing implacably, and there you are at the top, and for a moment you contemplate the plunge—the first pull of a fearsome avalanche. The car brakes for a split second... come on... And you're off! Now it's up to the elements, now it can't be stopped! The blast-off, the onset of change is what's terrifying in life. After that, you just go with the flow. But the leap... It's the instant of birth and the instant of death. The instant is everything. And now it was done. I'd been born.

– Hello, – she said. – I thought I'd find you here.

CHAPTER TWO

I just wanted it all to be over. Dazed, I quit trying to understand and refused to be surprised. Freed from the deadly grip of the bitumen, wearing a loincloth improvised from my T-shirt, I plodded along and didn't wonder where to. My brain got a jump-start on the sixteenth floor, where to my chagrin we ran into two men waiting for the elevator. One of them, short and pudgy, ran a curious eye over me; the other wasn't looking.

We didn't take the elevator. That was a relief. I would have crumbled under the long stares guaranteed under the circumstances. I put a workaday expression on my face and paraded down the stairs after my rescuer. By instant contrast, the woman leading me astray became a kindred soul: we were in this together. This feeling was probably my body's natural reaction to the slow current of absurdities that carried me along despite my listless protests. For a second it seemed that we'd been walking down these stairs forever, and a thousand stories later, for the thousandth time, she smiled her warm familiar smile and made that soft gesture with her hand, as if to reach me—or to lure me on... but one floor down she stopped and pushed a heavy oak door. The door opened ("disengaged" would be a better word for the dignified unhurried way it did so) and the current carried me inside. All right, I'm lying: I'd almost recovered by then, and the foretaste of adventure played sweet music in my heart. But I preferred to still think of myself as overwhelmed and yielding to the tide. Anyway, I was in.

I didn't look around, but the room with high ceilings felt huge. The only light source was a floor lamp in a distant corner by the window. I took a couple of steps and stopped. I didn't have a clue what to do next. My helpmate had shut the door and walked away. Was it the same woman? I was sure I recognized her. Not because I remembered her face, but from the little things that had stuck with me since our winter meeting—things you can't really define,

but they give you that tingly feeling. It was the sensation of flipping a coin and knowing it would come up tails, yet not believing it. And when it did come up tails, you didn't believe you'd known it to begin with. You wanted to believe it was coincidence. All these beliefs and coincidences suddenly made me shiver. Unless it was the cranked-up air conditioner.

I kept standing and she kept hiding. Well, screw it. I couldn't have looked more ridiculous no matter what I did; might as well do something. I spotted an armchair and made a move for it, but midway there it dawned on me I'd make a mess of anything I sat on. (The truth comes out: not KO'd after all.) I felt a yen for a good shot of vodka. No luck: the bar was hiding too. I deposited myself right on the cool hardwood floor, legs crossed, facing the door. Didn't want her to sneak up behind me. The pose was right for the beach and matched my outfit, but the breeze was all wrong: it had an indoor scent—cigars and human comfort. Just an observation.

My back was just beginning to ache when something in the room changed. I turned my head and saw her. She had on shorts and a cropped top, and she was barefoot. It had definitely been rash of me to call her past her prime. Even in the semidarkness I could see that her legs were slim and smooth, her small feet pampered and exquisitely shaped. Yes, indeedy... I realized that I'd been ogling her legs somewhat longer than I'd meant to. The positioning was certainly favorable, but staring up at bare legs that approach till they're flush with your nose is kind of brazen. I shifted my eyes to her face. She was no longer smiling but studying me in the same quizzical way she had that time in the winter.

What did all this mean? I waited. The pause was getting pregnant. At least this time she couldn't pull that turn-tail-and-drive-off number on me. "Take a seat," I suggested brilliantly. Shell-shocked, I overplayed the nonchalance like a hick in a five-star restaurant.

She sat down next to me without a word. I mean, right next to me—not at a cautious distance people keep from filthy strangers—yet not so close that her silky legs were sure to brush against my grimy nakedness. This must be how wives sit down beside their husbands of many years, when a stray touch no longer kindles passion but merely stirs the embers of possessiveness. She kept silent. Well, I may be able to cogitate and vegetate when stuck to the roof, but ignoring the questioning eyes of a beautiful woman while sitting in her living room posing for the cover shot of *National Geographic*... Friends, I too have my limits.

– Well!, – I chirped, beaming with a cocktail-party smile. – It's a lovely place you've got here. And that delightful smell could only be cigars!

Take it down a notch, I ordered myself, and continued more casually:

– I appreciate a good cigar.

As if she'd been standing by for my signal, my hostess got up on her hands and knees and crawled to a big boxy dresser at the far wall. She opened it and rummaged inside, affording me a strategic view of a great ass and two baby-pink heels. Oh, boy... The lady sure did take care of herself. But graceful she was not. That trot on all fours had not been poetry in motion.

A massive ashtray rushed at me across the polished floor, chased by a sizeable cigar in a shiny wrapper. I'm not a big expert, but this one looked expensive. For me..? I picked it up, peeled and sniffed. M-mm... nice! Makes you wonder: what if I'd said I appreciated good scotch? Followed by good sex? Get real! So far you haven't worked up the nerve to say you appreciated a good piss and a good bath after a day of bonding with the roof. What did nerve have to do with it? I just hadn't had a chance to ask where the bathroom was. It didn't seem like the best opening line, OK?

Meanwhile, she rejoined me and took the cigar out of my gummy hands with a soft but firm determination. She held it vertically, brought it up to her face, smelled the tip and ran her fingers up and down, up and down, staring at me over it. The oversized thing looked completely obscene in her hands. My eyes must have spoken volumes, because she grinned slyly, bit at the cigar and held it out to me; the tip she spit out on the floor with studied indifference. Freudian symbolism all over the place! But of little interest to a man in pressing need of a bathroom. Nonetheless I shoved the cigar in my mouth and reached for matches where my pocket should have been, meeting with sticky nothingness.

– Look, – I braved at last. – If I... If you don't mind, I could use a bath...room. I'm a little... – And I vaguely waved the cigar about, smiling bashfully.

A grimace of something like disappointment darted across her face. There, in the corner of her mouth. What, did I say something wrong? Was I being inappropriate? But I thought we sort of knew each other forever! Wait, maybe this wasn't the woman who'd hit me with the door last winter? In any case, what could possibly be disappointing about a dirty naked guy wanting to use the bathroom? Yet she got up off the floor and motioned me to follow with a good deal of disdain. My intimate of a moment ago now showed me her back with the stiff civility of a ValueJet stewardess.

It was amazing how quick I was to accept the conditions imposed on me. There I was taking this chick for a bosom buddy and lamenting my faux pa with the bathroom, instead of viewing the situation realistically. A well-meaning stranger had uncoupled me from the roof and kindly brought me to her apartment. She was acting a tad peculiar, but that was her problem. These were the facts. Yet just like that, as an aside, she'd managed to embroil my unsuspecting self in some intricate game of hers. What the hell did I care about her

disapproval? What was I going to do, mess up her bathtub? What other heinous crime was I liable to perpetrate? But I was demoralized. I didn't know the rules of her game, my first move had been a mistake, and now I groped my way down a hallway that had surfaced beyond the dresser... and through a situation in which I was beginning to feel trapped.

The tub was luxuriously sunk into the floor. A shower gleamed behind a glass door in the corner. I examined myself in the mirror and determined that the shower wouldn't do. I wished I could ask for some gasoline to rub the gunk off, but the way things were going, I feared that mentioning *gas* would be my final blunder. My best bet was the tub and the hoard of cleansers that stood on its wide edge. Whatever was in store for me, I could use a serious soaking: the basin was the basis of true grit. Plus the patches of bitumen on my skin were starting to burn, and picking at myself would have rated right up there with gas, I imagined. I turned on the tap, picked out a bath gel and let it froth under the running water. The bathtub, full of iridescent blue foam, looked yummy, almost gourmet. My misplaced sense of responsibility for the immediate past slowly dissolved in the hot water. The susurrous bubbles at my cheek sounded like faraway voices. In a word, it was relaxing. I didn't even feel like scrubbing. That's all well and good, I mused, but then what? Get out of the tub, find a towel, ask for some pants and... go? Or stay, and put my head in the jaws of adventure? From the outside looking in, there would seem to be no two ways about it: stay and explore this enigmatic, glamorous affair. But here on the inside, before it unfolded, I felt the growing urge to break out and lose myself in a very dark alley. Alluring as she was, my mystery friend could kiss my ass. I wanted to go home.

I started to get up in the tub when two things happened at once: the lights went off and the door swung open. The hallway was dark too, except for a ghost of the living-room light at

the far end. Buried in a landslide of darkness, I soon made out a silhouette framed in the doorway. A glowing red dot marked the head. After a brief jolt I realized it was her with a lit cigar in her mouth. The smell was strong and good. She started to advance slowly, and I heard her giggle. I was on my knees, holding onto the tub's edge. The hot soak and the objectivity it bestowed led me to conclude she'd come to surrender with creativity—by the beacon of a burning cigar in wet darkness. Then she uttered her first words since we entered the apartment:

– Here's your cigar.

Well, this was familiar grounds, and I stood up. It was my turn to be a little disappointed: the coming attractions were pretty predictable. But I was mistaken. Apparently her eyes had not adjusted to the gloom, because as she tried to pass the cigar—with the burning end forward, for some reason—she misjudged the distance. The red-hot tip missed my shoulder by a breath. I jerked instinctively in the slippery tub, but, to my credit, didn't fall. Startled, she dropped the cigar in the water.

– Gee, thanks! – I spit out, with some honest feeling for a change. So call me a freak: I don't like being burned with cigars.

– You're sweet, – she replied. – But... we should go.

If she had simply said "we should go," I would have taken it as a confirmed invitation. The "but" put me on guard.

– Come out, if you're done bathing.

– Sounds great, and what shall I put on?

– Wrap yourself in a towel if you like. There isn't time. You're expected.

She turned and scurried out like a mouse, shutting the door behind her. Suddenly there was urgent and jarring music in my ears, obbligato to a dull throbbing in the pit of my stomach.

I'm not the world's biggest coward, but I never put in for the Red Badge of Courage. That wasn't even the point. Something in her voice, a shadow of surprise, another slur from the resentful stewardess... In short, I forgive myself for the glorious display of cowardice. Bad dreams never come true literally, but here I was stark naked in a strange apartment, and somewhere out there somebody was expecting me... Going after the absurd had had its moments, but now the absurd was coming after me—and what a difference! But I couldn't take up residence in the bathtub. The lights were still out, and I was too rattled to look for the switch. I knew there were bound to be towels hanging around, so I reached out and found something better—a nice terry bathrobe. Except in the dark I couldn't figure out its gender. Well, who gave a damn! My stewardess, who I discovered waiting at the door, gave me an encouraging smile. I set out for the living room, but she caught my sleeve and nodded in the opposite direction. Her silence no longer fascinated, and it occurred to me that with a bathrobe on and a fragile woman for a vis-à-vis, I could leave instead of meekly following. But though I'm no greenhorn and have had my share of hard knocks, I still grasp at the straws of innocence and curiosity, and never get tired of turning the other cheek. A regular overgrown Jesus. Missed my own crucifixion, or rather slacked off and let it miss me, and a fat lot it now matters which cheek I turn...

So I taunted myself as I squired my lady. The layout of her place would have made an impression were I not so distracted. We walked a dozen paces down the hallway, turned left, went down some steps, turned again and continued straight. The hallway, with doors on both sides, now felt more like corporate offices than private quarters. I thought I might have seen a nameplate on one of the doors. I didn't get the name: we kept a brisk pace, and the light was too dim and diffused. On we walked, and my anxiety began to melt away. After a while I got

intrigued again. What if she brought me into some ballroom full of dressed-up people—just as I was, wearing what I strongly suspected to be a woman’s bathrobe? Unlikely. The lady was still barefoot and in shorts. And why would she want to show me up for a fool? But maybe I was a hostage to a bunch of maniacs... And I still hadn’t asked her a single question—not if she remembered meeting me last winter, not even how she’d found me on the roof. Was it the shock? A reluctance to spoil the game with trivialities? I had no answers, and I had no questions. I simply followed, and as we approached the fateful door at the end of the official-looking hallway, I could tell from her back that she was slowly reconnecting with me. That feeling of age-old intimacy somehow made me her willing slave, and I was eager to do what was expected of me to prolong the wicked sense of being an impostor. I enjoyed staring at her legs again.

We stopped before the door. The woman turned to face me and quickly stroked my cheek and ear, just like before. The way she smiled up at me, I knew we felt the same. She reached for the doorknob and bumped the door open with her sexy butt.

The image of a ballroom was firmly entrenched in my mind; alternatively, I would have expected a fancy office. Well, at least a well-illuminated room, or the reverse—a boudoir with candlelight and a heart-shaped bed. The room we entered would be more aptly described as drab and ordinary, which was very strange in itself. Actually, it wasn’t even a room, more like a utility space squeezed under a stairwell: it had a low slanted ceiling and no windows, only a second door. It was furnished with two old leather armchairs and a festive lampshade hung low over a shabby coffee table. To my taste, the room would have had coziness potential if it weren’t for the skewed ceiling and the stains on the walls.

– Why don't you sit, – said my lady. Soft fingers pushed me towards the chairs. I took the one on the right and wrapped the robe around me as tight as I could. My bare legs with fond tokens of bitumen were a pathetic sight. Her bare legs were as swell as ever. Such is my way. Sometimes I'm short, dull and nondescript; other times tall, debonair and charming. It all depends. She must have sensed my dire shortness, because she leaned over me and asked:

– Can I fix you a drink?

Hell, yes! Though if she worked her liquor like cigars... She disappeared before I had a chance to answer. Left alone, I lifted my feet off the floor and sat on them: the air conditioner was on full-blast here too. Suddenly there were noises behind the second door. I distinctly heard the toilet being flushed, then the sound of running tap water. A moment later the door opened and a guy walked out into the room. Fuckin' A. I bid an instant farewell to a certain great ass and well-exposed legs as they galloped away from my reach.

The guy was tall without being gangly, close to forty but youthful and well-groomed. Coincidentally, he too had on a robe. But what a robe! This stunning dressing gown of damask silk, with sash and tassels, didn't suffer from gender confusion. The legs that showed from under it were wearing trousers; the turned-up sleeves exposed a crisp white shirt. It was his face, though, that dealt the final blow. In our time, the line between assurance and cocksureness has worn as thin as an old welcome mat, but a jealous eye will always see the difference. I had in front of me a clear-cut case of self-assurance, genuine and deep. Male models need not apply: here was a real man. I bristled. But the guy showed no sign of alpha behavior. He stopped in the center of the room looking surprised, even startled.

– Yes..? – he offered uncertainly.

It was obvious he hadn't expected to find me there. Oh, great! The man was waiting for an explanation. Let's see now, where should I start? How I got stuck to the roof? How I got hit with the door? But he was quicker than me.

– That's right, Julia's brought you. Sorry, I blanked out for a moment. And you are..?

The tilt of his chin was compelling: it would behoove me to introduce myself. In that respect I had nothing to hide. I rose up in my chair—not an inch higher than politeness demanded—and held out my hand.

– I'm Alex.

He didn't take the hand. I should have known better: bitumen. He settled in the other armchair, flinging the robe open with pizzazz, and leaned towards me across the table:

– I'm Harry.

And ceased, contemplating the wall. A minute passed. Two. Five. We looked damn stupid sitting there like the last two patients in a busy doctor's office. I guess I wasn't a very patient patient, because five minutes was all I could take. It wasn't so much curiosity as a wave of acidic irritation that rolled up from my stomach:

– Look, Harry, I'd really like to know what's going on here, and—

He turned his head and mimicked my tone with thinly veiled dislike:

– Look, Alex, after all that's happened, you either leave or contain yourself. Julia will be back soon, and to start the conversation without her would be rude, if that means anything to you.

His initial suggestion that I depart from this abode of delirium drowned in the ghastly prospect of showing bad manners. I doubt he considered for one second that I might actually get up and leave. Well, I reasoned, if I was being offered an opportunity to go, I could take a

raincheck and do it when I was good and ready. He was a big guy, but about as far from a thug as they came, so he wouldn't make offers I couldn't refuse. The antacid worked, and I was well on the way to containing myself when the door opened and Julia came in. I didn't see a drink in her hand, but I did get an eyeful of a very low-cut evening gown she'd put on instead of the shorts. Now I had a chance to appraise her breasts. Alas, her legs were much better. She stopped in front of me and smiled in that cozy trusting way of hers.

– We can go ahead now, – she said like she knew we'd been waiting, swung around and sat at my feet.

– Now, Alex. – She spoke in a confidential tone that pressured and soothed all at once, like a nurse to a difficult patient. I should have been, but wasn't, surprised she knew my name.

– Let's do this: you will listen very carefully to what Harry has to tell you. All right? And then you and I... (here the shameless hussy held a provocative pause) ...you and I will have a chance to talk.

Predictably, I nodded. Julia propped herself up on her arms and pulled up her knees. I shifted my eyes to Harry. The lady's arrival had had no effect on his reverie. She was watching him expectantly. They didn't look like allies. Up to that moment, the situation amused and annoyed me in turn, but either way I felt I was playacting. It was all up to me: to put an end to this nonsense and leave, or stick around and romp a while longer. But as soon as Mr. Man turned to me, I knew at once that something had changed. As if a choker snapped around my neck and the leash tightened. It wasn't hypnosis or anything mystical. It had the total reality of a nightmare. Meanwhile, nothing had happened yet. Harry just faced me and started talking.

– In my personal opinion, it would have been best to give you no explanations. But as I’ve observed, you are impatient and temperamental, although the fact that you’re still here indicates that, if nothing else, you’re inquisitive. And that will be your downfall. – He smiled to indicate he was joking. – The simplest things, you see, are the most difficult to explain. And the most tedious. Besides, if I start from the beginning, we’ll be here all night. Which is why I believe it makes sense to tell you only what we’re looking for. The rest you’ll figure out along the way. Is that all right with you? So, then. We’d like you to stay in this building for a period of time—say, two weeks. Not alone, of course: Julia will be with you most of the time. There will be very few things you’ll be required to do, except perhaps satisfy a few requests that Julia may have. All your needs will be taken care of, plus, if we find ourselves in disagreement by the end of your term, you will be paid severance in an amount that would make it worth your while. Let’s put it this way: we are offering you two weeks’ employment in a nice cushy job. It couldn’t be simpler: you stay here, socialize with Julia, look around, get an idea of how this place works. In a few days we’ll meet again and discuss things in more detail. And I don’t mean to be mysterious. Trust me, doing it this way is more natural and easier for all involved. Most of your questions will prove irrelevant, others you’ll find your own answers to, and the rest I will try to address as openly as possible. Hold on a moment. – He held up a hand as I tried to open my mouth. – You still have questions that won’t brook delay: why you, how did we find you, what exactly is going on here. Right? But if you think about it, each of these questions is a bottomless pit.

He smiled indulgently, glanced at Julia, and moved on to unqualified rot. In this humdrum rinky-dink world, said he, where routine was the common lot and wonders only happened on TV, I’d lucked out and won myself a free trip to an exotic spot. And in all

sincerity, his only wish was to see me have a great time. How fun would it be if an illusionist revealed the secrets of his art to the audience? What was the difference between a good magician and a bad one? The good one believed in his magic. To cut to the chase, I was being offered a part in an experiment. The part of the guinea pig, the rabbit that popped out of a hat without the slightest clue how it was done. Why yes, he did find the comparison appropriate. Because, you see, what happened was that in the collective psyche of the rabbit and the audience, the magic trick closed the aperture on reality. Put another way, it brought them a step closer to a certain conditional reality... That was when I stopped listening. Julia's cleavage was much more interesting.

When the torrent of bullshit abated and Harry threw an emphatic glance at Julia, I wiped the drool off my chin and turned back to him. Don't know if there was any truth to it, but at that moment the man seemed less the top dog than a peon, and his gobbledygook a speech he'd learned by rote. He gave the impression of having shrunk somehow, as if with every word he spoke, some of his confidence was let out of him. In his eyes I read anxiety bordering on terror—what if I refused??—like he was going to get whipped for botching the job.

I didn't know what answer to give him. It must have been getting late, because I had trouble keeping my eyes open. I didn't feel like talking; I was so-o-o comfy in my chair... Funny, but I pitied the guy. All right, all right, I'd stay, just as long as he cheered up! More to the point, I was too lazy to move. Harry got up, checked his watch and looked at Julia; I gathered the audience was over. Then Julia rose.

– Our guest is exhausted, – she said, massaging her leg. – It's a lot to take in all at once. But I do want to show you what we mean by "realities." Watch.

She slowly sashayed past me, like a model on the catwalk. In that evening gown, she was flawless—slim, sweet, and suddenly stern, as a model should be. And honestly, that cleavage wasn't half bad.

– This, – she said, – is one reality. And here's another.

She stepped away from me and abruptly hiked the dress up to her waist. She had nothing on under it. Maintaining the austere expression, she turned her back to me and bent over. I was struck by a bolt of lightning. With an elusive but incredibly erotic movement, she ran her fingers between her legs, either fondling or offering herself. It lasted a few seconds. Then she pulled down the skirt and became the forbidding model again. Harry kept a stone face. You'd think that Julia had simply added a couple of words to his monologue. He smiled at me and said:

– Well, I think that about does it for now. I'll see you later. Oh, and if you don't mind, you'll be spending the night here. – He held the door open for Julia and stepped out after her.

– Sweet dreams, – she breathed, and flitted away.

– Wait! – I shook off my trance. – What happens in the morning?

– In the morning?... I guess we'll know in the morning.

And the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

The diagonal rays hit him right in the eye. Had he arrived a half an hour earlier, at his customary time... Now the sun had moved out from behind the high-rise on the left and made it impossible to look at his window. This meaningless trifle—a grain of sand in the clockwork of a steady life—conclusively ruined Sam's day.

It was evening, summer, and Friday. Unlike most people, Sam hated Fridays. Every Friday, as his tedious workday crawled to an end, Sam found himself believing that tonight something was bound to happen. He didn't try to imagine what. Just some lovely unexpected adventure. For Friday evenings breathed with the anticipation of something out of the ordinary, and one seemed to catch the scent of joyous preparations like those that filled a happy home before the holidays. It was a Friday feeling. Saturdays had a different smell, a fading fragrance of ongoing celebration all too quickly winding down, whereas Sundays were laced with the rancid glumness of Monday to come.

And every Friday on the way home from work Sam would realize that it was merely the end of a workweek, and that all his readiness for pleasant surprises would go unclaimed. The crowd passed him by, cheerful and oblivious. Something was certainly going on somewhere, and all these people were in a rush to get there... Sam slowly walked to the subway. It took him more than an hour to get home. He might have stayed in town and wandered round in search of his adventure, but common sense crept in and gently reasoned that a fat and balding office clerk with no rich uncles...

As he neared home, Sam would look up at his window from across the street, sigh, and chug his way up to the third floor—his building had no elevator. Sure it was silly to peep in one's own window when one knew perfectly well one lived alone. Yet he looked every time,

every day, with nothing so ridiculous as hope, but playing a game of “what if?”: what if the lights were on and shadows moved behind the glass? He frequently saw such things in his neighbors’ windows. This meant that under the ugly husk of grey brick, another kind of life went on—a life different from that of the streets, a quiet intimacy. Sam was lonely. But he was used to it: the monotony of his dreary existence had made him comfortably numb.

As he left the office that day, Sam decided that he wouldn’t even try to smell the coming weekend. He would go home and spend his usual evening on the couch in front of the TV, except without the tinge of disappointment—the Friday disappointment that was as much a part of life as the uncomfortable shoes Sam wore to work every day. Goodness me, he *was* lonely.

He managed to grab a seat on the subway and congratulated himself: for once he wouldn’t have to hang on for dear life nearly all the way home. He wriggled to make more space for himself and looked around. To his left sat an unkempt old lady, who completely ignored Sam’s arrival. She held a bag of peanuts in front of her and pensively dug in it with a dirty finger, fishing out one peanut at a time, examining it and popping it in. One could see her roll the nut around in her mouth, trying to find the most agreeable spot for it in her dentures.

Sam started to turn his head to the right, but his eyes bounced back to the old lady like a tennis ball that hit the wall. An attractive woman was sitting next to him. She was sitting very close, her hip touching Sam’s. She was looking at him. And not in the blank way people glanced at one another when jammed together by the rush hour. Sam knew the difference in an instant. Her eyes were alive, free from the scales of anonymity. She was staring straight at him! Meanwhile, the crone turned her rapt attention to plowing the depths of her oral cavity: apparently the last bite had misfired. Sam risked another peek to the right and met the stare again. He fixed his eyes straight ahead and kept track of the woman with his peripheral vision.

She seemed to have stopped looking; Sam's heart rate stabilized. And then he felt the stirring of her hip. It was moving away from him. Sam threw a sidelong glance at the hip and saw a hand. Her graceful, dynamic, sensitive hand with long fingers, veins faintly showing through the suntanned skin. One could have thought the hand was just resting there on the hip, but there was something absolutely mesmerizing about it.

Sam sensed more than he saw the hand lightly stroking the firm sultry hip, kind of massaging it through the thin fabric with fluttering fingers. Somehow this perfectly innocuous business was profoundly sensual... *wanton*. It was an awfully daring hand. A thousand sinful thoughts crowded Sam's head. What the hand was doing to the hip was savage and intimate, and innocent at the same time. Sam could not bear it. He was burning up. He wanted to look away and couldn't. Distant bells were chiming in his ears. If she'd been stroking his hip instead of her own, he couldn't have been more perturbed. After a while he mustered up the courage to snatch a glimpse at her face. Like him, she stared straight ahead, but it was clear he was being observed. Sam glued his eyes to the metal pole and resolved not to let them wander. He told himself it was all in his mind. But he couldn't escape what no one else could see—the torment of those quiet caresses.

The fingers began to make tiny slow circles; the manicured nails trembled. This was a private performance for Sam's benefit, candid and shameless. Sam imagined that the woman beside him was barely suppressing ragged gasps; uncontrollably, he too began to pant, and felt himself get hard. The chiming bells ganged up on him and joined in a resounding steady toll. The train had meanwhile left the underground and sped along the elevated track. Their car, flooded by the evening sun, grew emptier with every stop. With failing strength Sam struggled

against the bedevilment that had him in its grip, willing himself to focus on the urban landscape in the window.

All at once her elbow was pressing hard against him, and he felt a slight movement: her body arched as she pushed her hips back. Over the thundering bells Sam heard what might have been a cough or a moan. That did it! The tolling in his head broke off. In deafening silence Sam jumped to his feet, hitting the old crone's arm and sending her peanuts flying, and made a headlong dash for the exit. The train, which had been stopped at a station, was just beginning to close its doors. Sam almost made it out, but something pulled him back: his jacket was trapped. Bewildered, he turned to see what was holding him. As he did, the doors reopened their jaws, and Sam's gaze met with a pair of mocking eyes. So it wasn't his imagination! The woman leered at him with vengeful triumph. Then the doors closed for good, cutting him off from that black-hearted stare. The train left him behind.

Sam stood for a time on the empty platform before he realized his station was still a few stops away. He couldn't imagine taking the train again, so he left the subway and walked home. Hopelessly late, distraught and upset, he stopped across the street to look up at his window. He felt sorry for himself. That beautiful woman must have recognized him for what he was—a musty bachelor deprived of feminine attention—and had played a cruel joke on him. What strange malice had motivated her? Had she been hurt, and taken it out on Sam? Didn't she have anything better to do? He reproached himself for being unable to laugh in her face, for letting a stupid joke so easily puncture his armor—the armor which, despite it all, he'd considered pretty strong. He knew he would torture himself with the memory for some time to come. The incident annoyed and bothered him like a fresh stain on a new pair of pants... something he'd come very close to getting.

Sam uttered a mild curse, crossed the street and stopped at the entrance, rummaging for his keys. He found them in the pocket of his jacket, breathed a sigh of relief and unlocked the front door. He assumed that closing it behind him would divorce him from everything that had taken place, and his sidetracked Friday would get back on its beaten path. But it was not to be. Sam stepped into the lobby and held onto the door to keep it from slamming. In that instant, the grain of sand that had slipped into the well-tuned clockwork of his Friday finally reached the fine lacework of gearwheels, wrecked one, then another, and suddenly they were all out of joint, spinning every which way with a speed irresponsible and frightening.

Sam heard loud stomping behind him. The door he was still holding was pushed from the other side. It hit Sam in the back—so unexpectedly that he performed a pirouette worthy of the Bolshoi, twisted round and came face-to-face with a man who was running straight at him. Tall and burly, the man crashed into Sam, and as they both fell, Sam heard a loud bang, shortly followed by another. Amplified by the lobby's acoustics, the bangs sounded like gunshots. And as he lay on his back, flattened by the stranger's bulk, Sam realized that was exactly what they'd been. He'd never heard gunshots before, except in the movies. Maybe for that reason, and also because in his heart of hearts he didn't believe people really got shot at, Sam felt that it was all happening to someone else. A milky firewall of illusion came up to protect him but was quickly gone, and Sam understood that it was real indeed. He was having difficulty breathing. Air lazily oozed down his throat but did not reach the lungs, smearing all over the windpipe. The man on top of Sam stirred and turned his head in the direction of the shots. Sam smelled a potent mixture of good cologne and sweat. The man raised himself up on his arms, grunted and got up. Sam's breathing eased, but he lay still. The man looked down at him. Sam didn't like

the look. Something hung in the air between them, and though Sam couldn't pin it down, he knew for certain that the incident had not ended with the gunfire: it was only beginning.

The man who stood over Sam was wearing a black suit and something black under it. He thought for a second, then collared Sam with gruff determination and started jerking him up to his feet. Sam was about to get up anyway; the man's hand was more hindrance than help. Standing next to the stranger, Sam discovered that they were almost the same height, but the man had more muscle and no trace of a belly. He kept staring at Sam and not saying a word. Sam was new to this game: he felt like he'd broken some basic rule and the stranger was waiting for his next dumb move. Sam wanted out of the game, out of the lobby, out into the street and the comfort of other people. It didn't even enter his mind—till much later—that the shooter could still have been waiting outside. Thoughtlessly, he started for the door.

– Yo! – The stranger grabbed Sam's arm. – Get your ass home!

There was no mistaking the threat in his words and actions. Sam took a bit of offense. Trying to keep his dignity, he moved towards the stairs, thinking that the man simply wanted to be left alone, and got a swift push in the back.

– Step on it! I wanna see where you live.

“Some Friday adventure!” – thought Sam as they entered his apartment. His new acquaintance shoved past him, barged into the living room and went straight to the window. He stuck his head out cautiously, then turned to Sam.

– So, you live alone?

– Yes.

– Good. You can call me Joe. And who are you?

Minding his manners, Sam introduced himself and was about to ask his guest to sit down, but reflected that the word “guest” didn’t seem to fit this hooligan. The way he sauntered about the room, he looked like he owned the place. Joe stopped in front of the TV, drew something on the dusty screen, turned around and spoke in a rapid patter:

– You wasn’t thinking of calling the cops, right? Good man. Here’s the deal. I gotta stay here for a while, maybe half an hour, and then— Well, we’ll see what happens. You watch movies, right? So you know not to ask stupid questions.

He wearily collapsed into Sam’s one and only armchair.

– I see you got no bitch. That’s good, that’s good. No squawking. Bitches, they’re...

He interrupted himself and leaned forward. His eyes, cold and ruthless up to that point, took on a new expression that Sam couldn’t have defined.

– So tell me about your life.

Such an invitation from a hoodlum (this person could not have been taken for anything else) distressed Sam. How was he to respond? Was it a good idea to tell a hoodlum his whole life story? A clear and present danger filled his tiny apartment. Sam was afraid to anger Joe, but he didn’t know how to avoid it. He wanted the thug to leave, or at least to let Sam go, but he didn’t know how to negotiate it. It was a nightmare version of the subway incident. Sam suppressed a bitter chuckle.

– You got nothing to tell me, is that it? All these years on God’s green earth and nothing to say for yourself.

Joe said it in the tone of a schoolteacher scolding a trouble student. For a second Sam almost believed that if he were to promise to mend his ways and become the man this hoodlum wanted him to be, he would be forgiven and dismissed.

Sam was trying not to look directly into that terrible face, but some disturbing signals—the cords that stood out on the thug's neck when he talked, the tension in his legs, the fist that clenched and unclenched itself, some other intangible things—told him that Joe was purposely working himself up against him. Working up a sense of entitlement so as to... A dreadful word—inevitability—was whirling in Sam's head. It cannot happen, but it will. It can't, but it will! Sam felt weak in the knees and sat down on the couch. If only there'd been no scene in the subway, he'd have been home an hour ago. If only he'd been a little quicker opening the front door. If only...

– Hey, I bet you don't even play the lottery. I bet you wouldn't know what to do with the dough. How come it's maggots like you always hit the jackpot? Sorryass suckers with no dreams... Do you even know what you want out of life?

Actually, Sam could tell him about the shadows in other people's windows, but he realized the inanity of it. Joe wasn't looking for an answer anyway. He kept on talking, and Sam sensed something change. The pressure in his head lifted, though sour needles were still prickling his tongue. Joe no longer wanted to kill him. The thug got distracted, describing what he would do with fifty million dollars. He relaxed in the armchair and asked Sam with a grin:

– So, you ever get lucky? Cards, broads, anything? You a gambling man?

Sam smiled, feeling foolish. He'd been to a casino exactly once, about ten years before. As soon as he'd entered the vast hall filled with row after row of slot machines, he'd been appalled by the haze of insanity that hovered over the players. The faces of these people, lost to the world, eyes riveted on one-armed bandits whose mechanical will was stronger than their own, had looked completely mad in the flashes of colored light. The prospect of rubbing

shoulders with that madness, the sheer unsightliness of it, had driven Sam right out of the casino into the balmy breeze of the embankment. He'd never gone back.

The hoodlum laughed. Suddenly his laughter exploded into a scream:

– You're a fag! You hear me? A fucking fag!

He lunged forward, bringing his flushed face within an inch of Sam's. What happened? Why was this man cursing at him? Something feral was bursting from the thug's gaping mouth. Sam was completely aghast. He'd heard worse language in his life, but no one had ever yelled at him so loudly. A roaring mouth had never been so close to his face... There was something both hideous and spellbinding about it. Then the mouth snapped shut, and Joe fell back in the chair. Sam dared to look up. The hoodlum was lighting up, sucking the life out of a cigarette. Their eyes met.

– Well? – Joe demanded... and with no warning flung the lighter at Sam.

Sam flinched and instinctively held up a hand—the lighter was bound for his forehead. Pure coincidence, but a smooth move: a lightning pitch and a lightning catch. The thug was visibly surprised at Sam's precision; so was Sam, and he got busy inspecting the lighter to cover it up. It was a round heavy piece, gold with black enamel, embossed with a lewd but striking design—a naked woman in the claws of a dragon. The woman's body was carved with exquisite realism, whereas the dragon seemed an ephemeral sexual fantasy. What an unusual object...

– Like it? – Joe asked. – It's an antique. Used to be a handle from one of them swords back in the olden days. Then they cut off the sides and made it into a lighter. Or so they tell me. I got it from this crazy lady in Palm Beach. Sixty years old and rolling in dough. I met her on the beach one night. Don't know what got into me. Never did stupid shit like that before or

since. I was young, out for some kicks, you know? It was dark, there was no one around, so I dragged her to the edge of the water. You lie low down there, they can't see you from the boardwalk. The bitch was fighting so hard her dentures fell out. I thought my dick was gonna burst. I pinned her down and rammed her from behind. She's twisting and turning, howling like a wildcat, and I'm thinking, is she hating it or loving it? So I let her go after I'm done. She gets up and looks at me. I go, "You better be clean, bitch, 'cause if my dick starts dripping I'm gonna hunt you down and kill you." She gives me this smirk, and it was fucking freaky: her teeth were gone, her mouth fell in... fucking witch. She don't say nothing and walks off. Left her jaws and her purse behind. I got real pissed, 'cause she didn't even say goodbye, you know? So I chased her down and gave her a good foot up the ass. She starts running and then just drops. So I split. Better safe than sorry. The purse was the best part, though. Stupid old cunt had a shitload of cash on her, plus some plastic. And there was this lighter. So it's, like, a memento.

The felon paused to flick the ashes into the palm of his hand. On the heels of his horror story, this prim-and-proper gesture—God forbid one sullies the rug!—piqued Sam. It set him thinking that Joe might have made up the story just to frighten him. All of a sudden Sam calmed down and even had a frisky notion of playing it up to Joe and throwing the lighter back at him. He was saved from any rashness by the bell: Joe's pants started ringing. The thug narrowed his eyes against the smoke and pulled out a cell phone. The conversation was short.

– Yeah?.. Yeah, I got you. What now?.. Will do.

He put the phone away, got up and crossed to the window, cigarette ashes still in his hand. The sun had set, and one couldn't possibly see very much. Sam watched him from the

couch. Joe was radiating danger again. He threw the butt out the window, rubbed the ashes between his palms and said:

– OK, that’s it. Let’s roll.

According to Joe’s plan, Sam was to leave the building first, walk to the 7-Eleven on the corner, go in and keep an eye on the street until a red Toyota appeared. As soon as it did, he was to run as fast as he could in the same direction, away from his building. Sam was clearly being cast as a decoy, and he recognized that it might cost him his life. But this contemptible, cold-blooded, forceful baddie had managed to enchant him. Sam felt like a boy accepted by the older kids. No more the timid Pillsbury Doughboy abashable by an immodest woman on the subway. So what if he was risking his life for a criminal? What difference did it make what Joe was? It might have seemed like Sam had no choice, but there was more to it than that. He wanted in, wanted at last to be a part of something different, something dangerous. Joe became his chance, and Sam was not about to miss it. He might have been a stooge, but he was not a victim.

He put on his only black jacket, and the two of them stood before the mirror.

– It’ll do, – said Joe. – It’s dark out anyway.

Sam was proud that he could be mistaken for Joe in the darkness. A turn to play at being someone so unlike himself, however brief, sent shivers of excitement down his spine. That’s right, he had the shakes, but it was only stage fright. And he knew that Joe knew it, too.

Downstairs—standing in the wings—Joe patted him on the shoulder.

– It’s gonna be all right, you’ll see. Life’s worth risking when it’s worth the risk. And take my advice, try the scratch tickets. Your kind always gets lucky. OK, go!

A few steps out into the street, the thrill of the game abruptly left Sam. He lost his nerve. The block was deserted. It was the usual twilight pause: everyone was home from work and had not yet come out for the evening. Joe's nonsense sentiment, "Life's worth risking when it's worth the risk," kept flashing in Sam's mind. The more he repeated it, the more frightened he got. The only reason he didn't run was that he felt he was walking on glass and any sudden movement could send him crashing through it. With every step he waited for a snap, a blast, a shot... nothing would have surprised him. When he reached the 7-Eleven and the neon light fell on him, he could no longer control himself and turned around. He was being followed.

The dim streetlights wouldn't let him get a good look at the tail. He was paralyzed. In all the stupid action movies he'd ever seen, the prey made a point of avoiding crowded places. It lured the predator into abandoned basements, lofts and construction sites, as though intent on being killed without a fuss, impediments or witnesses. Sam understood that he was best off seeking shelter at the 7-Eleven: there would be people inside, which might discourage gunfire. But he couldn't bring himself to turn his back on the man. Sam started backing up. He was at the entrance when he realized that his pursuer was Joe. Something had gone wrong. Joe wasn't supposed to follow him: that wasn't the plan. But Joe kept coming, and he made a sign which Sam took to be an order to get inside the store. Sam darted in and jumped right out again, unsure that he'd read Joe correctly. They collided in the doorway. Something was definitely wrong. Joe quickly cased the joint and winked at a stymied Sam.

– Everything's cool, kiddo. A little change of plans. Don't freak out on me. It's almost over. You'll be home before you know it.

Joe pushed Sam towards the counter but remained in the doorway, as if deliberately displaying himself to the street. He seemed convinced that the danger had passed. Sam's

nervous shudders began to subside, and he looked around. There were no customers in the little store, where he'd been buying his sundries and his morning coffee for more years than he cared to count. This was odd: in the evening you could usually find a small crowd of old geezers that gathered around Ali, the owner and the only vendor. They drank a lot of coffee and argued about nothing. Club Lonelyhearts... But tonight no one sat at the counter. Moreover, instead of Ali, there was a strange man at the cash register. This man, short and lean, paid no attention to the staring Sam. His unblinking eyes devoured Joe, who was standing with his back to him. Sam didn't make any conclusions, he simply got a bad feeling. He wanted to signal Joe, he wanted to cry out and warn him about the strange vendor... But a mist of unreality enveloped him again, and he could only observe what unfolded, powerless to stop it.

By now he knew what was going to happen. Still, when Joe started to turn around and the little man sprung over the counter, the horror and inescapability of what he was seeing bore down on Sam like lead—the lead that was about to be fired... Slowly, Sam began to sink to his knees.

His downward motion may have saved his life. The vendor shot at Joe twice, bolted to the exit, whirled around in the doorway and fired at Sam. But Sam's head was on the way down, and the bullet went too high. The vendor disappeared.

Sam did not see Joe fall. When he looked, Joe was lying on the dirty floor in a very casual pose. If it weren't for the blood, brown on the black of Joe's jacket, Sam could have easily believed that Joe had had the peculiar notion of taking a nap in the middle of a 7-Eleven.

Joe stirred, rousing Sam from his stupor. Banging his knees on the cold hard floor, Sam crawled to him on all fours. Joe raised his head a little, glanced at the door, and then grinned or grimaced in a scary way with his mouth wide open. Like he had when screaming at Sam.

– I guess that’s it, huh? Or maybe not. What the fuck you looking at? Stop staring and get the fuck out!

– But you... You need help!

– Yeah, well, I don’t need yours. I said fuck off, you dumb shit!

Once again submitting to Joe’s orders, Sam started getting up. Joe’s head thudded back to the floor. He lay squinting into the hushed neon glow. Sam was scared: he’d never seen anyone die before. But Joe didn’t die. He shifted awkwardly, reached into his pocket and stretched his hand out to Sam.

– Something to remember me by.

Sam was holding the gold lighter and a scrap of paper—a blue square with yellow marks. That gaping grin was on Joe’s face again.

– I sure did a job on the old cunt back then. Still feels good after all these years... That there’s a lottery ticket. You hold on to it for me, OK? Maybe you’ll get lucky. Only kind of luck you losers get. You check it out, you hear? The jackpot’s fifty million. All right, get lost now. Scram!

Moving like a robot, Sam took his presents and walked out into the night. The street was very still and the windows glowed with their peaceable light, as if nothing was wrong with the world.

Afterwards, Sam could barely remember what followed. There were sirens... police, who got ahold of him at his door... the detective’s office. It was morning before he was released from the station after signing something or other. Sam forgot to ask the cops if Joe had survived, and he never followed up on it. The Friday-night adventure he’d so long hoped for turned out to be more than he could handle.

And it didn't end there. A few days later, when he finally recovered and even felt a degree of pride for being such a desperado, Sam found the lighter and the lottery ticket in his pocket. Since he didn't smoke, he left the lighter where it was and stashed the jacket away in a far corner of his closet. He didn't need it for the summer anyway. He looked at the ticket for a long time, musing, and decided he had an obligation to the perished hoodlum to check if it had won. Which he scrupulously did the very same day. From that point on, life galloped forward at breakneck speed, sweeping Sam off his feet and bouncing him around like a kite. The crumpled bit of paper he'd so strangely inherited won him fifty million dollars.

CHAPTER FOUR

I seemed to have fallen asleep. My leg certainly had, which meant I'd been out for at least three hours. I was slumped in the armchair with my leg folded under, and the leg disowned me, mad at my neglect. I got up with difficulty and dragged my leg to the bathroom. No toothbrush, no towel... Some respectable burgher! The mechanical nature of this morning routine triggered the next logical step, and I felt hungry. I returned to the room.

If memory served, they'd locked the door behind them. More bullshit to deal with. They'd better come get me soon. And if they didn't? Break down the door? Fuck you, people, I'm famished! I was about to start yelling and pounding on the door when I realized I couldn't remember the name of the woman who'd brought me in. There'd been plenty of distractions last night. Guess my attention had been elsewhere when he— Uh-oh, his name had escaped me as well. Had I been hypnotized? *Puh*-lease. Names just weren't that important for what I'd had in mind. Should I try to meditate on it? With a concentrated effort, I can often recover a forgotten phone number. Let's see if it worked on a name. I focused on visualizing the lady. My mind obediently showed me... what she'd done just before her departure. Damn! Instead of the desired result, my personal alarm clock stirred and buzzed, confirming that morning had come. Its throbbing made my stomach cramp. Food! Drink! And I didn't mean chair upholstery and water from the toilet. I scanned the room and started for the door in resignation. Suddenly a name popped up—Julia... Could it be Julia? Oh, what a swell sight to see from the hallway—a door charged from within by a freedom-bound amnesiac shouting out random names. This so-called adventure was out to polish off the crumbs of my self-confidence and fill the void with gutless speculation. Screw that! I would not be starved! I'd been promised sustenance, goddamn it! I took a resolute hold of the doorknob and yanked it back and forth.

Luckily, my survival instinct proved less sluggish than the massive door: as the latter was pushed open from the outside, I had time to pull back my foot and my nose. There stood my Maybe Julia, maybe smiling. I didn't dwell on the subtleties: the power of my righteous hunger, unclaimed by the door, threw me right in her face.

– Good morning! – I barked. – Can a man get some breakfast around here?

– Good evening! – Her reply was no less curt, and it took me a moment to pick up on the discrepancy.

– Are you trying to tell me I slept through the day?

I didn't seem to be able to put the brakes on the gruffness, and it agreed with me.

Apparently, she didn't mind it either.

– No, you've slept for about three hours.

– Look, I don't have my watch, but it feels like—

It felt like my alarm clock was buzzing again. I struggled to keep a straight face. With silent empathy, she took the watch I'd left in the bathroom off her wrist and handed it to me. Undamaged by the bitumen, the dial showed seven past one. I looked her over. She still wore the evening gown, except now a sassy white bra was peeking out on top. So? The watch could have been reset. Hadn't it been spelled out for me that I was the designated rabbit? I guess the time had come to be pulled out of the hat to the utter delight of the audience. She must have caught my train of thought, because she smiled and flipped her hair:

– All right, let's go get some supper.

As I followed her down the familiar hallway, I started to get a kick out of my costume's bold clash with the scenery. My nifty robe, how I've misjudged you! A silly mood caught up with me and frolicked in my chest, which I proudly stuck out Superman-style. If we'd walked

into a room full of people right then, I would have had a ball. Up and down we went, and just as I decided we were on the way back to the room that had smelled of cigars, we took a different turn and padded past the office doors again.

We entered a space that was empty and long, like a hangar without a plane. At the far end I made out a deli-style self-service counter with a row of covered pans. Next to it was a shiny tank with a black plastic tap—presumably coffee. Feeding time! Drooling, I picked up my pace. But the call of nature was nipped in the bud. The rabbit lost sight of the carrot, and the magician's comely assistant was not to blame. The crux was the window which I spied on my left. The heavy dark drapes were drawn almost shut. Almost. But not quite. Seeping through a crack between the panels was bright light. The light of day. Oh, you vile deceivers! I sharply changed direction, marched up to the window and pulled the drapes apart. Sunlight hit me in the face, bouncing off the adjacent building. It was hard to tell the exact hour, but from the light's intensity I judged it to be noonish. The window offered a peaceful view of the balcony across the way. An ordinary balcony with flowers in a plastic planter. Well, well, well. Caught red-handed in a cheesy bluff. A "good evening" sliding smoothly into a good afternoon. No need to reset the watch, no excuse for forgetting the windows.

The magical melody of the whole cockeyed mystery was cut off in midnote by this small oversight. The woman standing behind me suddenly seemed outguessed and deflated. Relief and disappointment brought me back to earth and down under: I remembered I didn't have enough change for the subway in the pocket of my forsaken jeans. Yup... The rabbit looks back at the astral vortex whence he came and sees... a hat. What now? Now, my half-baked Copperfields, I will eat and go home. I turned a sarcastic eye to my lady. She was still smiling stupidly. Her Catholic-schoolgirl white bra had crawled halfway out of her dress.

– Is there anything you want to tell me? – I challenged.

– Oh yes, I’m sorry... There’s coffee and stuff over there. I’ll join you.

She sighed, glanced at the window and headed for the counter. Guess the show was over. Too bad. It had had a certain *je n’est sais quoi*. Their very first stunt was a bomb, and the poor girl had tried so hard! Didn’t study, flunked the test... Viewed in the midnight sun, the woman and her pal in the snazzy dressing gown struck me as two characters from some dated *New Yorker* cartoon. Shallow parvenus at play. I felt cheated. Conned in the stupidest way. Sorry, ladies and gents, but this rabbit refuses to take part in tricks he doesn’t find clever or interesting. That’s all, folks!

At that point I reached the smorgasbord. Something was steaming in the pans, but I’d lost my appetite. The very smell of food made me nauseous. I’d think I was knocked up, except I’m a male rabbit. I got myself a cup of coffee and looked around for a table. There wasn’t one. My companion helped herself to some salad, put the paper plate down on the floor, pulled up her dress without a moment’s thought and sat down to her meal in a graceful lotus position. The daring swing of the skirt had been meant for me: there was nothing under it still. I wasn’t quick enough to get a good look, but by then I’d learned to read her body language. Another wrong move. Higher, the dress should have gone higher! Last night, now that was on the level. But I refrained from commentary and sat down facing her in a similar pose. I was briefly tempted to open up my bathrobe by way of repartee—there was nothing under that, either—but I’d fallen out of love with the game. Broad daylight, white bra... yawn.

To my surprise, the coffee was thick and tasty. Well, that’s nice. I took another sip and reposed on my side, propping my head with an arm. A morning pose. A scene titled “Lion preparing to pounce on prey with questions.” But I didn’t rush things, content to study her with

clemency. For her part, the lady appeared entirely nonplused by her blunder. That's all right: I have a big heart. Especially once I've had my java. The silence lingered, but it didn't bother me. I felt like a loving father, occupied with the morning paper, whose youngster, eyes ablaze, is trying to engage him in a game. The tyke, convinced that their ship is caught in a storm, dashes about the kitchen bringing down what he reckons to be lugsails and jibs, while Dad, from behind his paper, throws in what he reckons to be relevant comments. But the game is over, and not because the ship sinks but because Daddy blows it by shouting "Land! Land!" completely out of sync... Well, I wasn't going to steer the course of this voyage. It wouldn't be over till the fat lady sang. The lady, meanwhile, pushed aside her plate and lazily changed positions, her very slender left leg now stretched out, bare foot almost touching me. She was not planning to sing. I couldn't hold back any longer.

– Well, thanks for the delicious *morning* coffee.

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise.

– Are you upset with me?

– Not at all, why should I be?

– I don't know... You sound like you're about to get up and leave. You can if you like, of course, but I thought you and Harry agreed. And where would you go in the middle of the night? Bee-sides..., – she crooned, and mischief flashed across her face as she demurely dropped her eyes, – If you're feeling well-rested, I could offer you a taste of something better than coffee.

Now, by the light of day, responding to her charms would have been work. Their flub with the window diminished the value of everything else. But I didn't want to be rude.

– It’s just that you caught me off guard, – I began, addressing a spot slightly above her head. – It’s natural to look for explanations, and... I really don’t know what to say.

I knew all right, but I didn’t have the balls to say it: you’re full of shit!

– You can’t blame me for wondering what’s going on. You finding me on the roof...

And that time last winter...

– I must have really hit you hard with that door. You’re still not well.

A wave of that complex winter sensation rolled over me again. I actually felt the comical whack resonate in my head. All right, forget the window, but everything else... This woman... Yes, now I remembered—she was definitely Julia. I also realized that once I had wised up to the deceit, I’d tried to downplay the whole experience, reduce it to the mundane level of a sloppy stunt.

– You shouldn’t be embarrassed about it. – Julia rose, fixed her dress and became unapproachably formal. – As for the roof, I couldn’t help finding you. How? I can’t explain it.

– Well, that makes two of us, – I snapped suddenly. Whoa! The oscillations of my response to the lady and her mysteries were fit to be measured in kilohertz.

– Look at it this way, – she continued, ignoring my remark. – Millions of people watch TV and only a few of them know how it works. But who thinks about it? Who even cares? Some Curious George might stick his nose inside and see a few dusty wires. So what? It’s not like it makes *Seinfeld* funnier.

She giggled. Snickered, like a Catholic schoolgirl who said a dirty word.

– Almost forgot. – Like a good magician’s assistant, she produced a pack of cigarettes from behind her back. – You probably want to smoke.

Ever been on a non-smoking crossatlantic flight? Then you'd appreciate the frenzy with which I ripped off the wrapper.

– Would it be all right if I left you alone for a while?

There she went with the intimate stare again. I shrugged. She came up against me and stroked my ankle with her foot. That got a rise out of me, but I was unprepared. My hands were busy with the goddamn cigarettes... Julia took off before I could react. Two seconds later I heard the door click shut. I guess there's a dirty-minded child inside every male of the species: soon as she touched me, I found myself willing to play their games for a while longer. My tinny inner voice, with its pretensions to objectivity, picked up its hopeless monologue, but what did I care if it was day or night outside? Whatshisname—Harry, was it?—Harry never claimed to be a prophet. So I'd been told it was nighttime. So I'd accidentally— Wait a minute. What if it wasn't an oversight? Julia hadn't even blinked when I'd opened the drapes. Why would they want me to see through their hoax?

I pulled a cigarette out of the pack. No matches! Before I could howl with frustration, I discovered a lighter lying by the coffee dispenser. It was funky-looking, and as I took a drag I examined it curiously. It appeared to be made of real gold, with black enamel in the grooves. The raised part depicted a naked maiden in an unnaturally erotic pose, caressing a handsome scaly dragon. The dragon's claws held her loins in a flaccid embrace. Whether by intent or bad craftsmanship, this popular theme had a twist to it: it was the woman that seemed to be raping the dragon, while the poor beast tamely accepted his fate. I thought it unwise to leave the lighter on the counter and put it in my pocket, meaning to give it to Julia when she returned. Well and good. The first cigarette of the day gave me a pleasant head rush. I got up to get more coffee and felt sweat tickling the backs of my knees. The place didn't have air conditioning,

and as soon as I realized this I noticed how stuffy it was. Weird... Stiffness is an attribute of small cluttered spaces. This room was spacious and empty, except for the counter, but there you had it. No, the walls weren't closing in on me, I wasn't suffocating, and yet... A quick glance confirmed that the whole long room only had the one window. All at once a breath of fresh air seemed absolutely imperative.

I was sure I'd left the drapes open, but Julia must have drawn them on her way out. Just before I parted them again, I had an instant of certainty that I'd find the depths of night outside. Now, that would have been some serious magic! But no. Fortunately, the sun was still reflecting off the building across. Why fortunately? Oh, never mind. Just undo the latch and push the window up. Even before I completed the task, I got that breath of air, which was neither fresh nor summery. My nose picked up the scent that an outlaw backstage draft sometimes smuggles into the audience—a playhouse blend of electricity, machinery and dust. An obnoxious electric sun was spilling light from a high angle on a fairly artful flat of a brick wall with a fake balcony. Well-chosen proportions and perspectives created the illusion of depth, when in actuality I could have leaned over and reached the wall with my hand. A few feet down from the balcony, the stage set abruptly ended in a floor covered with black cloth.

And a very good morning to you too! Ignoring the butt that was burning my fingers, I stood there and gaped, unsure of what to feel. Suddenly I decided it was a neat trick. Nothing fancy, but nicely executed.

So the coy lady chose to disregard the sunlight and gave me a chance to enjoy the full effect. What for? In the name of absurdity? For all its simplicity, the ruse must have cost a pretty penny. Was I meant to discover the forgery? What reaction were they aiming for? I leaned on the mock windowsill and smoked the butt down to the filter, blowing smoke out into

the pavilion that was posing as the great outdoors. The deeper I delved into the potential intricacies of the plot, the less I trusted myself. Common sense—not my strongest suit—advised that a stupid game was all it was, and there was no need to make too much of the bogus morning. Though it was possible I'd been fed a half-truth and it was actually morning now. Though it was equally possible it was night. Meanwhile, with the nagging persistence of a sewing machine, my ingrained habit of expecting the worst ran long stitches of paranoia through my efforts at rational thought. They want to mess up my sense of time. They want to make me mistrust my own eyes: day turns out to be night, a woman may be a man, the floor is in fact the ceiling. The plan is to drive me insane. And the point would be...? Human experiments? That's a stretch. Then again, wasn't I hired to play the guinea pig? But my participation was voluntary, and it was politely suggested that I abstain from asking questions and enjoy a little mystery in my life. Well, if I'm the lab rat, this must be the maze, and somebody must be observing my actions. It stands to reason that there would be cameras all over the place: Julia's timing has been too perfect. All-righty then: low-budget thrillers aside, the rat accepts the rules of the game. And tackles the maze as it chooses.

I stubbed the butt out and got ready to light another. Damn, but the set was convincing! Down to the imitation breeze that carried the smoke up and sideways. Where was it coming from? I leaned halfway out the window to examine the ceiling. I couldn't see shit because the spotlight nearly blinded me, and as I shimmied my way back in, I dropped the lighter. The chunky disk fell softly on the black cloth outside, spun in place and whooshed across a perfectly level floor with the ease of a downhill skier. It came to a halt under the balcony. I smiled sardonically. Were these special effects also part of the plan? An invitation to enter a stage set and wind up in perpetual morning, in Twilight Zone, in some La-La Land of their devising?

Somehow I was reluctant. No chilling premonitions—I just felt that the audience should not be allowed backstage. The backstage is for actors.

But the lighter had to be retrieved. Tacky as it was, the gadget was plainly expensive, and the owner would want it back. Stay tuned for the amazing adventures of Alex in Windowland... One leg over the ledge, I was visited by the disturbing thought that the black floor was not a floor at all, it was another flat, and that if I jumped down I'd go right through it. Who the hell knew what they could have dreamed up? Sitting astride the sill all hunched over to fit inside the bottom window frame, one foot barely touching the floor and the other dangling in the air, was not, however, very comfortable. So I took a deep breath and jumped. Nothing terrible happened. My bare feet met the pleasant fuzziness of velvet or plush. There was indeed a slight slant to the floor between the window and the ersatz wall. Well, there you are. The way to overcome nightmares is to confront them, not run away from them. But my smugness was premature. I took three cautious steps and realized I had been fooled again.

The space between the window I came out of and the phony balcony was just about what you'd expect for a distance between two buildings. So it wasn't forced perspective after all. Close up, the set looked even more believable. Chintzy drapes were showing through the glass balcony door. I bent down to get the lighter from beneath the long rectangular planter. Quite unexpectedly, the flowers in it proved to be real and the soil moist—I touched it with my finger—as if the flowers had been watered recently. Very thorough of them. Everything authentic save the time of day. And the wall, presumably. I couldn't see them putting up an actual brick wall here. To take the guesswork out of it, I lightly punched the wall. Good thing I did it lightly. It stood firm and felt real. I forgot my worries about the floor and headed for the wall's outer edge, where the spotlight didn't reach and darkness began. I was curious to see

the other side, to check out what held the flat up. Where I expected to find the end of the flat and an entrance to the wings, I found nothing. The wall did not end. A few yards off to the side of the balcony, it was masked with the same black fabric I was standing on. Bemused, I hooked the edge with my finger. The fabric gave pretty easily. There was brick under it. I took another step into the murk and tapped on the fabric. Higher, lower, the brick was everywhere. In other words, they took a real brick wall and glued black fabric over it, leaving exposed a small square with the balcony. Apparently I was not in a big room with scenery but in a corridor between two walls. And the slight draft would seem to indicate there was an exit somewhere. Should I investigate? Well, Julia could be back any minute... Excuse me, but let's be consistent: if I'm a lab rat in a maze, then I have the freedom to choose my own paths. What kind of a rat travels with a chaperone? If they want control, they'll have to pull me out by the tail.

I went left, towards the draft, holding onto the wall like a blind man. Didn't get far: a dozen paces, and I bumped into a door. A locked one, need I add. I could hear a low hum behind it, as if further down the corridor there was machinery at work or a full auditorium. So much for that. Might as well turn back. My initiative did not extend beyond a closed door. The door-breaking spirit had left me. I returned and checked the mess hall to see if Julia had shown up. She hadn't. It didn't make much sense to walk in the other direction—I was willing to bet it was another dead end. Wonder what the lady would say if she found me sitting on the balcony? Or had they allowed for that option as well? Come to think of it, I felt much more comfortable in her absence. I was suddenly conscious how oppressed and inhibited I'd been by her untouchable sexuality. Those mixed signals turned me into a zombie. I had allowed her to lead, not so much because the situation was bizarre as because she confused the hell out of me. And because I couldn't resist her calm confidence. Oh, how it helps to lean on someone who's

calm and confident! And oh, how it sucks— All right, enough. Deep down in my heart I knew that after my late-night chat with Mr. Man I'd just been too damn lazy to get inside my filthy rags and drag my ass back home. Hurray for laziness! Didn't I say I'd be cheering it yet?

I waited at the window for a few more minutes. Just like a woman to be late for a date! Have it your way. Careful not to crush the flowers, I climbed over the balcony railing. The room I'd left was well within my view, so Julia would be able to find me. I'd like to see what she'd do if she couldn't, though. What if I turned the tables on them and became the spectator? The notion of eluding their watch and observing the reaction felt like a delightfully illicit diversion, sort of like making faces behind the anchorman's back during a live broadcast. Before the next thought could sober me up, I confronted the door and twisted the handle. The door let me in. Madly curious—don't we all want to know what's behind Curtain Number One?—I moved one drape aside. All I had intended was to hide behind it, hoping to find a nook between the drapes and the wall. Nothing else. Making a getaway via the balcony had never entered my head.

But I found myself looking at a room. Crammed full of furniture, it seemed small by contrast with the ones I'd left behind. The presence of an immense bed, tall in an old-fashioned way, broadly hinted that I was in a bedroom. I didn't know what to think. Though, to continue my multi-level projections, it could be proposed that the stage set had been extended as a play on my predictable nosiness. I took stock of the room. Without a doubt, somebody lived there. The slightly messed-up bedspread; the array of medicine boxes on the antique dresser, some left open with packets of pills sticking out; the neat little pile of what appeared to be bills... Either the designer was a genius, or— Impossible. You could recreate the décor, give it a lived-in feel, but the quality of air... Now I knew why I was so sure people lived there. Old people, to

be exact. The room smelled of old age, though the smell was diluted with perfume. In fact, to judge from the dressing gown which I'd only just noticed hanging on the headboard, this was the bedroom of an elderly woman. But how could it be?! This was a frigging stage set! The sun outside was a prop, not the real thing! Asserting that the place was populated with actors hired specifically to drive me insane would prove that their mission had succeeded!!! There was only one way to stop the insanity: walk through the apartment and find the exit. Or the fucking stage door, goddamn it! Even presuming that the entire building belonged to a Howard Hughes type, I refused to believe that any billionaire could afford to turn a public road into a movie lot. There was an image right out of a nightmare: whole city blocks of virtual buildings where truth and artifice brewed in one pot, where night became day and winter turned summer at the invisible master's whim, inhabited from the ground up by actors scrupulously faking real life. With frightful clarity I pictured them—some in shorts, some in fur coats—meeting in the greenroom after the show, drinking coffee and rehashing the day's performance. But this wasn't Hollywood; such a thing could not be. Consequently, all I had to do was pull myself together and find the front door. Or at least a window. A genuine window that opened on an actual street. The bedroom I'd just broken into had no windows. To my left, however, there was a double door with large frosted-glass insets. As a last resort, I could break the glass. But a dull indecisiveness had me rooted to the spot. I was trespassing. Like a burglar, I'd climbed in through the balcony. Yeah, yeah, I know, it wasn't a real balcony, the street was just a corridor with a spotlight and a backstage smell, but still... With no perceptible connection, I remembered that all I had on was a retarded bathrobe. Back there, with Julia, it had been more or less appropriate, but here, in some old lady's bedroom...

This gave me a new idea: I could always go back to Julia. I turned around. What I beheld completely did me in: the window I'd come out of was tightly shut and the curtains drawn. This last fact somehow convinced me not to bother trying: it would be locked. They'd left me no choice. I didn't care to ponder why Julia wouldn't let me back in after suggesting that our evening wasn't over. It was a fact, and it had to be reckoned with. So let us sum up. If all of this, including the bedroom, was their idea of an evening's diversion, then I was in. But if the escapade had ended in the room across the way... Old Granny would call the cops on me. What fucking cops? I was inside a set! Absurdity threatened again. Enough of this shit! Once more I just wanted it over and done with. If I could just get to the front door and open it and run like hell down the stairs, sooner or later I would find the street... patrolled by police, most likely, but screw it, it beat staying there! All right then, let's go. I finally regained mobility and got as far as the glass doors when I heard someone approaching from the other side. More than one person, from the sound of it. Willing as I'd been to throw myself at an old lady's mercy or even turn myself in to the cops, I wasn't prepared to be caught at the scene. I was supposed to be a surprise to the tenants, not the other way around! So call me a coward, if that's the term you prefer. At any rate, I ducked behind the drapes and held my breath, like the lover in a bad French farce. I heard the door opening and heavy footsteps moving in my direction. Trapped! All at once a low and scratchy woman's voice spoke up right next to me:

– Frankly, I was expecting Bob. It's OK, though. Come on in.

CHAPTER FIVE

Found again... I reached for the curtain, ready to come out, when a second voice—a young male one—spoke up inside the room.

– Bob’s out sick or something, – it reported casually. – So they sent me. You can call the office if you want.

– No, you’ll do, – said the old woman’s voice. – It doesn’t make any difference.

Silence fell. Relieved, I slumped against the glass. Inanities crawled in my head again. Was I an accidental witness... or had I been expected? I even felt myself starting to preen: if they’d gone to all this trouble just to impress—nay, to derange—yours truly... They really shouldn’t have! They hadn’t, of course. All of it was just a chain of coincidences interlinked with my eager initiative. I must have invaded somebody’s private theater.

The silence was broken by the creaking of the bed. A very telling creaking that left no room for doubt, accompanied by the rhythmic banging of the headboard against the wall. This was at striking variance with my notion of old ladies. Was I hearing things? I sidled over to the gap between the drapes and slipped a finger in. What I saw made me flinch and nearly keel over. Aesthetically, the tableau was strangely reminiscent of a slaughterhouse. Maybe the common thread was the relentless cynical bluntness that typifies bloodshed. A shapeless mound of naked old flesh stood on all fours facing the balcony and shook under the impact of the body behind it—a young black guy with his head tilted back, staring at the ceiling with slightly bulging eyes. He appeared to be smiling. To my mind, the scene was not even suitable for the notoriously filthy German porn: no eroticism, however depraved, was to be found in this business transaction between butcher and pig. Easy enough to be blasé about it now, though; at the time I was dizzy with a mix of excitement and disgust, as if I’d had a close look at a victim

of drowning. I retreated behind my drape. All I could do was wait. Whatever had taken place in that other apartment, so near and yet so far, seemed like something I'd read in a book. I could never, ever go back there again... I thought of Julia and her different realities. It didn't get much more different than this!

All at once something changed. It took me a second to catch on: the spotlight sun had gone out behind my back. The darkness was almost complete. The Looney Tune I'd been mentally whistling—the perfect soundtrack to my nutty adventure—was rudely interrupted. I got the creeps. Somebody out there was watching me, and they'd turned off the lights. Why? Was it Julia's retort to my vanishing act? Up till then I'd been feeling like a man who falls into a puddle and tries to save face by playing it for laughs. The gawkers are meant to see that the clown appreciates the humor—there he is splashing in the water (couldn't get any wetter anyway). The fool acknowledges his pratfall as goofy, but trivial and not without appeal: the idea is to make the crowd laugh with him, not at him. But now I was freaked out for real. The puddle proved to be much deeper than anticipated. More like a quagmire with will-o'-the-wisps. Even the scene of action was transformed. In the gloom, the light that fell between the drapes took on a strobelight quality; sounds and movements became sinister, haunted, and the participants themselves evoked the demigods of ancient Greek myth. The ominous blackness swelled behind me like some primeval slime. I wished for a stronger support than the brittle and revealing glass, but I didn't dare stir: the noises heralded that the bacchanalia had reached its denouement and Hercules was zipping up his fly. Nor could I stay put: my overtaxed brain had me convinced that the darkness at my back was thickening into some monstrous and lethal Unknown. Worst of all, I couldn't look the danger in the eye: if I'd turned, I'd have disturbed the drapes and given myself away.

As Sophocles retreated, Aristophanes took center stage. Like a man with hayfever who's reluctant to sneeze in a library, I held out for as long as I could, struggling to keep my mind off the dreadfulness lurking behind. But at some point I pressed too hard against the door, and it opened. I could almost sense the Unknown's feelers, talons, chokers closing around my throat. Ker-CHOO!!! My head pulled in, my mind a blank, I lunged forward.

A distance of five steps separated the bed from the balcony. I covered it in one. A naked, disheveled old hag with a bad dye job in her wispy hair was sitting on the edge of the bed facing me. I stumbled, skidded, and landed smack between her spread knees, face buried in her timeworn fat breasts. The serviceman, who'd been on his way out, collapsed in shock and covered his head with his arms as per emergency instructions. The old woman's sweat stung my nostrils. She automatically stroked my hair before pushing me away. I sat down—sank down—on the floor.

None of us, it appeared, knew what to do. I cowered on the floor in my sillyass bathrobe; the blubbery folds of naked old bag towered over me on the bed; a decidedly pale-looking black guy labored to collect his wits in the doorway. The woman was the first to recover. Darling granny, she wasn't a bit perturbed by her deshabelle or my stunned expression.

– You can leave now, – she dismissed the stud, who still wavered to the tune of “Should I stay or should I go?” – Don't worry, it's not the police. Just my crazy neighbors. Go on home. I'll call the office later.

She had a grating voice, as if something was stuck in her throat and she wouldn't clear it. Showing a lot of agility for her oozy bulk, she got up, took time to check if her dressing gown was turned the right side out before putting it on, smoothed down what was left of her hair... and became a normal senior citizen. If I met her on the street I'd have sworn her

interests no longer reached beyond trips to the supermarket, the daily soaps and Wednesday-night bingo. Appearances sure could be deceiving; reality, even more so. What slaughterhouse, what ancient passions? A retired schoolteacher's afternoon nap disturbed. Strangely enough, her metamorphosis was reassuring. It was like nothing had ever happened. No trace remained of the lustful harridan, no trace of her discombobulated lover—the guy had gone out without coming to. The schoolmarm closed the door behind him, crossed over to the balcony, looked out into the murk and turned to me.

– Come along, young man. I'll show you out.

She sounded understandably hostile, but not too much so. It seemed she found the situation amusing. Then it sunk in: I'd gotten my way, I was going to be released! Granny walked back to the door at her own relaxed pace and left it open as she waddled into the next room. I scrambled to get up off the floor, stepped on the hem of my robe, almost fell again, but finally managed to rise and follow. The next room was a disproportionately large but otherwise standard living room with matching sofa and armchairs and a stodgy coffee table. If anything went against expectations for a goldenager's habitat, it would have had to be the absence of a TV set and the presence of two life-size color posters of brutish young chaps exhibiting large muscles and small briefs. Be it my penchant for contemplation or simple curiosity, but the posters caught my eye. I detected yet another anomaly there, but didn't have time to analyze it: Grandma's expressive stare from the other end of the room, where, I presumed, the hallway began, invited me to make use of the front door and never be seen again. I complied. When the door loomed ahead and the semirespectable face of the burgess was inches away, I was struck by a practical thought. A bathrobe worn over nothing was an awful thing. The night's episode of "Scaerie Tale Theater" was finished, but one of the players had to leave the lot in costume.

And all the Julias of the world with their multiple realities wouldn't help me get home like this. Not with real reality waiting outside. However, if the old woman was part of that reality and not a cast member, that would mean... That would mean that I should forget my foolish pride and ask her for some clothes. With a pair of pants on, I'd be a different man. But I didn't know how to ask for such a thing from a siren on Social Security. Asking has never been my forte. I always come off sounding either too flip or too humble.

The old woman watched me with cold expectation, but her vaguely ironic air betrayed that she wasn't all that mad or surprised, seeing as she knew a thing or two about her crazy neighbors. And that she was kicking me out mostly for propriety's sake, for such was the logical order of things. Besides, calling her neighbors crazy implied that there was no love lost between them, and an unfortunate victim of their craziness could maybe count on her compassion and a little information. This thought gave me strength.

– I feel terrible asking this, ma'am, – I began in my most genteel tone, – and I really hate to impose, but could I... would you...

Here, out of the sheer awkwardness of my predicament—the horror of asking a stranger for pants—I made a helpless gesture with my hands inside the bathrobe pockets. Predictably, the robe fell open. The old gal seemed to get a real kick out of that. I quickly restored myself to decency, but my power of speech had left me.

– Pants, – I croaked. – I need... pants.

The old woman smirked, and for an instant I glimpsed the wanton maenad again. But she held up a hand prudishly, which I construed as a request that I wait in the living room while she brought me some clothing. Whew! I happily took a seat by the fireplace. My savior disappeared into the bedroom. Whenever I was in a stupid mess, there always seemed to be a

woman around to fix it. Or to cause it? Be that as it may, I'd soon be in pants and out of there. Though I really should try to get Grandma talking and see if she'd give me the scoop on the neighbors. Would be a shame to leave without ever finding out where I'd been.

I glanced up at the theroid muscleboys and suddenly realized what had been bugging me: the posters hung right where you'd expect to see the windows. I appealed to my spatial thinking. OK, the bedroom balcony was part of the scenery, but here in the living room there had to be windows. At least one. At least a phony one! Ah, but I was no longer in the same building. Or was I? My throat went dry. There was no escaping the weirdness of it all. Nobody was chasing me, nobody forced me to do anything, the adventure was not without its charm, and yet... And yet, like a party balloon—a Halloween party balloon—hovering ever so softly and patiently over my head was a nightmare. I felt an urgent need for a sensible explanation to everything. Don' be afraid, chile. Ain't no big ole crocodile hidin' in the dark. Ain't nothin' but the couch. Mammy turn on the light and you see for youself... There's an upside to the fact that magic isn't real: black magic isn't real either. It's not, right? I mean, I just don't get what all those teenagers in the slasher flicks are afraid of. If you're being pursued by the living dead, shouldn't that give you a clue? Never mind the chainsaws in their rotting hands: you've got nothing to fear because—*duh!*—there's no death! Or at least there's life after it, which is even better. Even if you end up in hell. Definitely nothing to fear in hell—everything's already happened. Except none of it's real. There's no magic, there's no zombies. It would be just too good to be true. Too interesting. In the realm of the average consumer, the only truths are the IRS, the cops, and a cemetery plot secured in advance. Nothing to fear but fear itself... So our whimsical Grandma likes to camouflage her windows with studly boys.

How scary is that? In a moment I'll have the pants, get outside and find out the time. And sanity will restore itself.

As if to dispel any leftover willies, here came Grandma, pants thrown over her shoulder. Peculiar pants though they were, made of dull yellow silk with wide black stripes. The kind they used to call "pajama pants" in the old country, circa 1950.

– This is all I could find, sonnyboy, – she said as she took a seat across from me. For some strange reason the pants remained draped over her shoulder. – You should count yourself lucky to have these: my husband's been gone for ten years. But they're still lovely.

She tenderly pulled the pants down into her lap and stroked the fabric. With her middle finger, right along the seam of the crotch. All in all, rather touching. Made you feel guilty taking such historic pants. She fondled them awhile longer and finally handed them over. I brightened up, clasped the pants to my breast, and decided I'd better put them on out on the stairway. God forbid they should bring out a strong resemblance to hubby in his heyday. And I really did feel kind of bad for the old girl. I got up and remembered that I'd meant to ask her about the neighbors. But how should I broach the subject? I stood with the cherished prize in my hands, the old woman, misty-eyed, seemed to have forgotten I was there, and the pause stretched like chewing gum. Unexpectedly, it was she that began to talk. Now and then, as much as her rasp allowed, she spoke in singsong, the way people do when recalling happy times; then she'd lapse into short broken sentences, as if chatting with an old friend who knew her well and had heard the story many times.

– My husband was always a little odd. We were both middle-aged when we met, and his quirks really jumped out at me. But there was something about him... Let's just say he was a very rich man, and you know what they say—the rich are different from you and me. As for

me... well, I've never been what you'd call pretty. He asked me to marry him. Of course I said "yes". It was an awful strange wedding. Rich as he was, he had trouble finding witnesses. There were no relatives, no friends. Just me, him and two strangers. He made reservations at a fancy restaurant and blushed when he talked to the waiters. You'd never guess he was rich from the look of him... I never knew where his money came from. Still don't, to this day. Somebody probably left it to him. I didn't care. There sure was a lot of it, only he didn't seem to know what to do with it. Right after the wedding, he ups and buys this building. From then on, things just got stranger. He turned the whole place over to some people. They changed it all inside to their own crazy taste, but he didn't mind... Even the way he died was strange. We'd only been married a year and a half. His lawyer came to see me and said that my husband died in the office and left instructions to be buried without a ceremony. I don't even know where his grave is... He left me all his money, but with one condition. I had to leave this place just as it was and let his crazies stay. Well, I hardly touched a thing. And the crazies—

She shifted in her chair, and suddenly there was that suggestive smirk again:

– Well, you're one of them, right? No need to tell you.

I shook my head vigorously and started to object, but quickly wilted under her knowing smile. Try proving you're not a "crazy" when you've catapulted into an old lady's bedroom at the most indelicate moment wearing precious little but your birthday suit.

– Don't you take it to heart, sweetie. It's just a nickname I have for them—"crazies".

I don't really know what to make of them. I paid a visit once. I won't say they weren't hospitable—showed me right into their function room. My stars! There was a boxing ring and a fight going on, and little tables all around like in a restaurant, and lots of people, lots of smoke and cheering, and everyone was dressed like it's the Roaring Twenties. And I noticed they were

drinking whiskey. Out of coffee cups. What was I supposed to think? Crazies! But I don't mind, they don't get in my way. Well, maybe once in a while...

She smirked again. I hastily looked away and concentrated on the posters. She followed my gaze.

– Those are my boys. Bill and Jimmy, I call them. Bill's on the left, Jimmy's on the right. Nice, huh?

I bobbed my head with enthusiasm—oh yeah, very nice. Though if she'd named them after Wonderland's frog and lizard, I failed to see the similarity. If we were talking reptiles, the massive torsos and eye-catching intellect suggested dinosaurs. But the old gal could care less what I thought. She laughed, and again I itched to clear my throat on her behalf.

– It was one of my husband's quirks, boarding up all the windows. He had some modern paintings hanging over those. When he died, I was going to uncover them, but then I remembered the will. So I took down that garbage and put up my boys. Who's going to know?

I opened my mouth and closed it again. What was happening to me? I, who possessed the gift of gab in excess, had not said a dozen words all day. I should have inquired, insisted, demanded—down here, back there, all over the place! Oh, get off my case. On the other side of the balcony, the way my foxy friend had toyed with me, I'd been afraid to speak and scare her off. And pressing the old lady was pointless—I could see she'd told me everything she knew. I guess sometimes she needed to talk, and her midnight cowboys were no more skilled at conversation than Bill and Jimmy. Then again, a few things had come to light. The merry bunch next door was playing with the money of a dead millionaire, who hadn't been playing with a full deck himself. What were they all playing, was the only question. Then I recalled the

feeling I'd had while hiding behind the drapes. A curious feeling. A stupid feeling. A bad feeling.

Here the old woman rose from her chair, and again I was struck by how nimble she was. Like a young girl.

– You can get dressed right here. I won't peek. It's not exactly a tuxedo, but you don't have that far to go. – She tittered and repaired to the bedroom.

What did she mean, not far to go? Did she think I was going to go back to *them*? Oh, who cared what she thought! Why the fuck was I acting like Mary's little lamb, hemming and hawing as I was herded along? Was that my true identity? I took a quick look inside myself and tried to awaken the manliness and self-reliance that, I assumed, lay dormant in my blood. Oh, well. Maybe if I got dressed first. Another challenge... The legendary husband had been a short fat fellow. Well, it would have to do. I stuffed the bathrobe inside the pants. It got all balled up but filled the vacancy. The elastic waistband expanded and the pants stayed up, in a manner of speaking. Good thing there wasn't a mirror nearby. The sight would have turned me to stone, and then I'd never get back to Kansas. All right, ready to go. But not without saying goodbye... I looked in the direction of the bedroom. Granny kept her word: she wasn't peeking. Should I call her? Oh goddamn it, not again! I didn't know her name. Fuck her name! I coughed to invite attention and called out:

– Uh, excuse me! I'm all set here!

The bedroom was quiet. Had she died in there or something? I waited: nothing. What, just turn around and leave? A slave to good manners, I hesitated. What would be ruder—to slip out on the sly or to stop by the bedroom? Well, as I saw it, I'd stopped by there before, and

would be hard put to catch her at a less strategic moment. And I did need to know if she wanted the pants back. The bedroom it was.

The old woman was not in the room. Theoretically, she could have crawled under the bed, of course, but I didn't think her dimensions allowed. Though frisky as she was... Had there even been an old woman? And had she really been old? Could you disguise a young woman so well that— Again I was aware of being drawn into the tangled web of speculation. Were they trying to keep me here? Or was I trying to stay? Sure, when I was scared I wanted to go home, but what about right now? I made my way back to my point of entry and looked outside. No change. Still the same darkness. That show was over, but was a new one starting? I imagined the old woman in her dressing room backstage, sans the fat suit and wig, puffing on a cigarette and chuckling as she checked out her unrecognizable self in the mirror. I hated to be tricked. Maybe the real reason I was yearning to go home was that those mean kids kept playing tricks on me? Maybe what scared me most of all was looking ridiculous? It was like the old wallet-on-a-string gag. You see a wallet on the ground, you bend to pick it up and it jumps away—somebody pulls the string. So what do you do? Grab it, break the string, knock the jokester's teeth in? Or shrug and walk away? I'm too smart for this: I'll walk.

I pulled up my sagging pants and strolled out of the bedroom. It was a leisurely stroll—I still hoped to be intercepted. Nothing new in the living room either. It seemed I was free to go. Obligated to go, in fact: remaining alone in a strange apartment would have been indiscreet in every sense. I struck out for the hallway, sorry to be leaving and sorry that no one was stopping me. Not because the mystery would remain unsolved... just sorry, that's all. There it was: the door. How do we recognize the front door, children? Very simply: by the outer appearance and the number of locks. The door to the left was most likely the bathroom, so this

had to be the exit. At last I would find out the time of day! Why knowing the time was such a priority defied explanation. There was nobody waiting for me and no occasion to be late for. Yet from the moment I'd exposed the bogus sun, the need to establish whether it was day or night was giving me ants where my pants should have been. I fiddled with the locks impatiently: click this one that way... that one this way... done! The door swung open. Surprise! I was looking at your basic storage closet. Junk on the shelves, buckets of dry paint on the floor, old shoes... full stop. What the hell..? Was I being shut in or confusing the doors? I bolted to the door on the left. Nope, I'd been right: a designer toilet plus a bright shower curtain equaled a bathroom. There were no other doors in the hallway. Had I just been sulking at having been so callously dismissed? They weren't done fucking with me yet! I rushed back to the living room: empty except for Bill and Jimmy, who flexed their muscles with utter lack of sympathy. OK. The old woman had left; at one point she'd come in; her gigolo had come and gone... There had to be an exit. The balcony? I couldn't see Julia as Rapunzel, sitting by the window waiting for me. And I wasn't too sure I wanted to hang with that crowd again. Grandma might have called them crazy as a joke, but then she thought a man who'd sealed up all the windows in his house was just a harmless crank... I noticed that my thoughts were moving in a strange spiral: one moment I suspected my girlish old lady of being one of them (how many of them were there, by the way?), the next I believed in a demented husband and his hangers-on that spent their time playing Prohibition games and hunting for idiots stuck to the roof. The absence of windows, my gay apparel, the very atmosphere of this outwardly ordinary but very dicey apartment—the details came together and coiled into a fist that started gently tapping on my forehead. I wouldn't go as far as to say I was losing my mind, but there was no denying I'd been successfully disoriented and was beginning to get a trifle confused. All in all,

it was time to find that exit. And the sooner, the better, before they put me in the ring or made bootleg whiskey out of me, ha-ha.

I stood in the middle of the living room trying to use my brain. It resented being used and kept wandering off to things irrelevant, like studying Bill and Jimmy. Huge motherfuckers... Wait! An idea! She'd said there were windows behind them. Real windows, I bet—no reason to cover up fake ones. Therefore? Therefore I had a chance to make contact with the outside. And? And nothing—this had to be the fifteenth floor at least. But I was so desperate to see the normal world and find out once and for all what time of day it was that I went straight for the gorgeous Jimmy. First I lightly ran my hands over the paper. I knew it! The edges were glued to the wall, but in the middle the paper was hollow. Now what? Do I rip the poster? Granny's favorite? Shit, I can't! I picked at a corner, but Jimmy was stuck as firmly as I had been a while back. I put a cautious ear to the paper: silence. Sure. Respectable burghers had their air conditioners on in this heat, and what could you hear through a closed fifteenth-story window? How about just a tiny little sound? Careful not to damage the paper, I gave it another go. We must have made a lovely couple, old Jimmy and I, my cheek pressed against the bulge of his shimmery G-string.

– Hey, what do you think you're doing?

Even my hostess was thrown off balance. As for my own precarious balance, I lost it and fell through the poster. My head ended up on the other side. What I espied while trying to reclaim it looked less like a window than a folding door. Of course: first the shutters, then the pretty pictures. Sealed meant sealed.

I turned to see the old woman frozen in the doorway with a tray in her hands. On it were two steaming cups and possibly a sugar bowl. I shot a hangdog glance back at the poster and

felt, I swear, worse than I had when I'd flown into her arms in the bedroom. Back then she'd been caught off guard, whereas I'd had a pretty good idea of the mess I was getting myself into; and now it was she that had caught me... doing God knows what. And doing it in secret. And I'd ruined her favorite poster. Horribly awkward. There was only one thing to do. Stand stock-still like an idiot with my hands behind my back.

Once again Grandma composed herself quickly, not one to be outclassed by deviant behavior.

– I didn't think you were... hmm.

She cocked a bawdy eye at the poster.

– Poor Jimmy. He's no good anymore. Oh well, there's more where he came from.

Take a seat, sweetie. I made us some coffee.

All hands and flushed face, I sat on the edge of the armchair. There you have it. The old lady returns to discover me appraising Jimmy's jewels; I mutilate Jimmy; the old lady smiles and offers me coffee. Nice lady. Ten minutes ago, when the time had been ripe to ask questions, establish my whereabouts, make a half-hearted effort to pass for a homo sapiens, I couldn't be bothered to get with the program and had let things slide. Now, under her probing stare, suspected of being a different sort of homo and maybe something worse, I felt I couldn't leave without explaining myself. Go figure: suddenly it seemed critical to convey to my gracious hostess that I had nothing to do with the gang of lunatics her late husband had taken under his wing, and that this proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that I hadn't been fondling Jimmy when she'd entered the room. My need to communicate this to a stranger I wasn't likely to ever see again was beyond reason: something inside compelled me to tell her everything before I went. Maybe my instincts told me that the only way to freeze the action that was

sweeping me along was to step out of my role, where every move was being dictated by an anonymous prompter, and start improvising—using my own words and speaking my own mind.

But before I embarked on any explanations, I surprised myself by asking:

– Do you happen to know what time it is?

An obvious question, you say, but I hadn't thought of asking it till then.

The old woman picked up her cup without haste and regarded me. The look in her eyes didn't square with my innocent query. You'd think I'd asked her what year it was.

– You see, my dear, – she began in a hushed tone, and my throat started itching immediately, – That was another one of my husband's oddities. He hated clocks. Clocks and watches. He didn't want to know the time.

– You're kidding, right? It's impossible to live without a watch. You have to have some idea—

– That's what I used to think. But little by little it grew on me. My Sam used to say: "One should eat, sleep and work whenever one feels like it, not when convention prescribes." I told him that he of all people could afford to do what he wanted when he wanted anyway, but he said it didn't work that way. He said we all had a lifelong habit of building our schedules around the sun, and it fences you in. So like it or not, you follow the routine. That's why he didn't care to know the time of day, or even the season. He had his office in this building too, on some other floor. From the time we bought this house, we never left it. There's an indoor park one floor down. It's got grass and real trees, and fresh air gets pumped in. I take my walks there. It's really pretty. The time, though... I couldn't tell you. Sorry, sweetie.

I let myself go and had a good cough. Some story: a willing prisoner of her husband's money slowly going insane. My sympathies. There was something that hit closer to home,

though: the idea that she might have planned for me to share her confinement. That would have certainly explained why I hadn't been able to find the exit. All my conjectures lined up in a single hypothesis that glared at me like a deadly blade. Julia and her sidekick have tracked down and bagged a qualified candidate—an unattached foreigner whom nobody would miss, but not a drugged-out bum: minimal intellect was ascertained through a series of conversations—and put him at the old bat's disposal. She may have shown me the door, but she'd never intended to let me use it. Oh sure, all of it had been my idea: going up to the roof, climbing over the balcony. Much as a fly might take all the credit for getting caught in a spider's web. I was never getting out of there! But was such a thing possible in this day and age, in this city? Alas, in this city and in this day and age, anything was possible. I guess my thoughts were written all over my face, because the old woman leaned forward with the look of someone who'd posed a riddle and wanted an answer. My answer was to get up and start talking my way out of a complete nervous breakdown.

– I demand to be let out of here, – I said, and heard myself imitating her screech. – I want to go outside. Right now. Where the hell is the exit? – And added unexpectedly, – Please?

The old woman raised her penciled eyebrows and shot back with hurt in her voice:

– Nobody's keeping you, dear. There's the door.

– I've tried the door. It's not an exit, it's a storage closet! Show me the way out.

She sneered, rose and walked to the closet door with such confidence that I briefly believed in a miracle: the door would open onto an accommodating stairway. But miracles don't happen. At least not the way you expect. The door opened on the storage closet, the woman entered it, and I realized I'd made an ass of myself: at the far end there was another

door, which I hadn't noticed the first time. My hostess turned the lock, set the door ajar and looked at me. I felt better at once. The deadly blade of my hypothesis had proven but a prop. The way was clear—metaphorically speaking, because the old girl's bulk was blocking most of it. I charged. Pushing my body past hers and feeling all of its fat lumps and bulges, I managed to squeeze out a "thank you". She gave me a candid smile and, slightly tilting her pelvis, pinned me to the wall.

– Come by anytime, sweetie. Don't let the folks next door frighten you. They mean no harm. If they start any trouble, you just tell them you're here to see me. Well, I'll see you later. Have to go replace poor Jimmy with some other boy. I'm sure he'll be to your liking.

She let me go, went back inside and closed the door behind her, but not all the way: I didn't hear a click. It didn't matter: the only door I cared about now was in front of me. The door to freedom. But as I took hold of the doorknob, tremulous thoughts took hold of me. Another door... just unlocked, yet to be opened... who knew what lay beyond it? A familiar sense of unreality crept over me, my nerves gave out, and I ripped the frigging door open. Bleak overhead lights were reflecting soberly in the elevator's plastic sheen. To the right I saw a flight of stairs. I could almost taste freedom. Down, down, out into the street where day and night are real, away from horny old she-goats and the reek of phony-baloney...

CHAPTER SIX

I paused. The stairway's uneventful airs seemed to suggest all wonderments were done with and normal life awaited me downstairs. Great. Moderation in all things, wonderments especially. I pulled up my restless pants and took a step toward the elevator. That very instant, the shaft started humming: somebody had pushed the button. Well, I certainly wasn't about to share the ride. Not in the lovely ensemble I was wearing. It would be one thing to take a brisk walk down the street displaying a devil-may-care attitude and quite another to be stuck in close quarters with a tenant of this funhouse, a crazy though he might be. Where would I hide my eyes on the long trip to floor one? No thanks, I'd walk; luckily, I was downward bound. Though walking didn't prove easy thanks to the goddamn pants, which started squirming as soon as I picked up my stride and proceeded to slither in the general direction of my knees. I had to reduce speed and hold the slipsiding item by the waistband as I continued down.

There were none of the usual floor markings on the walls that I could see. How many down and how many to go was anyone's guess. Was I to take it that the dearly departed had not only shunned the times of day but snubbed the floor-numbering system? But the further down, the further away my thoughts traveled from the loony microcosm I was leaving. I had to get home, and my immediate concern was how to do so with no money, no proper clothes and no shoes.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of floor nine, I tripped over a step and had to let go of the pants to grab onto the banister. I didn't fall, but a heavy object in my pocket banged against my hip. Shit, how could I forget—the lighter! I'd left with it. Now what? The thing was too expensive, I couldn't just take it with me.

I sat down on the steps, fished out the crumpled pack of cigarettes and lit up. I didn't know how to find Julia again, nor, frankly, was I sure I wanted to see her. Having racked my brains a while, I came up with what had to be the dumbest and most juvenile way ever to return somebody's property: leave it at the door, ring the bell and run. That was the best I could do at the moment. An all-but-sleepless night and a small cup of coffee over God knows how many hours in never-never land were kicking back with a headache and the butt's nasty aftertaste. All I wanted was some sleep. It was a long-term plan, but if I was going to sit on my ass all night... I tiptoed to the nearest door and stooped to put the lighter on the welcome mat. But I never reached it.

The door burst open, and I was jerked into total darkness. By then I was used to all sorts of surprises, but thus far it hadn't come to violence. Now, however, I found myself restrained by a pair of strong hands that were brazenly grasping my collar. The door slammed shut behind me.

– Sh-sh-sh, don't be scared, – said the invisible man. – I'll get the light.

He let me go, fussed around in the dark, struck a match and came into view with a lit candle in his hand. Yes sirree, this Halloween outfit topped everything I'd seen till then. The man had a long shaggy beard and a big black hat on his head. He brought the candle closer and peered into my face. Behind the twisted eyeglasses with thick lenses, his eyes looked like two voracious mouths that he rapidly opened and shut. Despite the freaky getup, though, he failed to frighten or amaze me. Perhaps by that point I'd forgotten how to get frightened or amazed.

– Give me your watch! You got a watch? Let me have it!

I gave a feeble shrug, pointing to my own attire. Mugging me just then was a pretty senseless enterprise. Even my watch got left behind in the mess hall.

– I see those gangsters have stripped you already. You should be happy you got off so easy! Terrible things are happening here. We must get the police. I couldn't find a phone, and with my luck, they've got no clocks here either! And I absolutely have to know the time!

The man swung his arms, nearly setting his beard on fire, and abruptly brought the candle down. I saw a stained white shirt and a long black coat dusted with dandruff. This was no Halloween costume, and the man was not a deranged criminal. I was looking at the traditional garb of a Hasidic Jew. This was starting to be fun. It seemed I wasn't the only one who'd been waylaid. I breathed out in relief and smiled at him.

– Take it easy, sir. It wasn't gangsters. Nobody stripped me. It... just worked out that way. We can leave here together, if you like.

– Leave here? I've tried to leave! I need to get home. See, I have to be home before Sabbath begins, but I'm stuck here, and I'm lighting the candles, and for all I know Sabbath's come and gone! Leave here, he says! If I could leave here, the police would have been here yesterday! And it isn't funny, young man!

– But look at me: I'm on my way out and nobody's trying to stop me. Somebody even gave me these clothes. Anyway, I just happened to come in. It was my own idea.

– Me too. I see this building, it's a big building, it's a rich building, I figure there must be Jews here who'd be willing to make a small donation to our synagogue. So I thought I'd go door-to-door, talk to people. And now it's been two days—I think it's been two days—that I'm trying to get out of here... All I can do now is look through the peephole. I've been looking through the peephole for a very long time, and I haven't seen a soul. Nobody! In all these hours! Then finally I see you, and I knew I had to warn you. May the Lord keep you from taking the stairs again!

I was much amused, but felt sorry for him too. Nobody takes the stairs, ergo, the stairs are dangerous? Where was the logic in that? Then again, after my short acquaintance with the building, I could well imagine how it might terrify a humble seeker of donations. And boy, was he terrified. No room for logic there. His comical twitching, which threatened to set his beard ablaze, made me chuckle against my will, which did nothing to put the man at ease. What was I to do? Leave the wacky rabbi to be eaten alive by his fears? I felt an obligation to get him out of the building. But how, when he wouldn't budge?

Clearing my face of any hint of merriment, I touched the rabbi's arm, trying to still his turmoil.

– I'll go first if you want. I walked all the way down here just now, and I didn't see anyone either. How about this: you follow me. If somebody stops me downstairs, you'll have plenty of time to hide.

Something was tugging at me to call him "Holy Father". I bit my tongue and cracked up anyway.

– Look at him having a good time. "I go first, you hide..." Have you any idea what this place is? You don't, do you. Well, take a look!

He held his candle up, and I realized we were standing in a tiny cubbyhole with bare concrete walls, the same kind of entryway or antechamber the old woman upstairs was using as a closet. Except this one had just one door, the one I entered through. So? What do you mean, "so"?! The rabbi looked at me with renewed suspicion. If I don't see anything, don't I least smell that? I did. It was a strange smell—a mixture of rust, leather, and burnt something or other. That smell, and especially the giant eye-mouths that were spelling out the answer for me, burst my bubble. Some foulness was afoot again.

– They torture people here, farshtaist? I saw it with my own eyes! Leave, he says!

He turned away from me and mumbled under his breath. Praying, I guess. I didn't believe him, couldn't believe him, but what he said sent a chill running prickly fingers down my spine. To snap out of it, I asked just to hear my own voice:

– Where do they torture them? Right here in the building?

– That's what I'm telling you! Down in the dungeon, as is their way. I saw it plain as day! Then I lucked out and found this place to hide, and I've been sitting here not knowing what to think. I'm scared to try the stairs, but I can't leave the way I came. Here, come look at this, but be quiet.

He thrust his chin at the far corner and stepped aside, exposing a rectangular hatchway faintly glowing in the murk. It wasn't covered, and a ladder ran down into the darkness below.

– There. That's the dungeon. It's empty now, the sadists went away, but there's no telling when they might be back.

He cackled wildly. The man seemed to enjoy feeding his terror, intent on proving there was no way out. I stood over the hatchway thinking that either this rabbi was yet another of Julia's hoaxes or I really had gotten off easy. For the moment. Who was to say that the former owner of my pants hadn't been some kind of devil worshipper, conducting clandestine and dreadful Black Masses, or a gamester who played Inquisition when he got tired of playing Speakeasy? Granted I had been let go, but then I hadn't made it to floor one yet. The rabbi stood beside me, and I could see his beard trembling. Before long we'd both be bawling, huddled up in the corner like kids. I had to get hold of myself. Why hadn't I just kept the damn lighter! Would have been all the way down and out the door by now. At least there'd be a chance. Now that way out didn't seem any surer to me than to the rabbi.

– How did you get away? They didn't see you?

– That's the thing! I knocked and knocked, and nothing. The door wasn't locked, may it rot in hell, so I went in and called from the hallway. I yelled that I'm so-and-so looking for such-and-such, and a woman yelled back for me to come in. So I did. And inside—

Suddenly the lights came on in the room below. The rabbi dropped the candle and threw himself at me. Tickling me with his beard, he pressed me into the nearest wall as if to shield me from the light that had flooded our shelter. He was panting and casting mute bug-eyed glances at the hatchway.

Downstairs there were footsteps and then a man's voice, prosaically explaining to someone that the water needed to be changed at least once a day and that in general it was advisable to pay closer attention to detail, otherwise the whole thing was pointless. After a short pause the same voice swore vaguely, and I heard metallic clanking and a kind of low hum—noises that a closing iron door would make. Then everything was still.

– Nu? Now you understand? – breathed the rabbi right into my ear.

I winced. He was still leaning on me, and I could smell his stale odor.

– No, I don't, – I said, turning away.

– There's a cage down there where they keep people! The ones they capture. I saw it for myself, and I heard a man screaming. Oh God, such horrible screaming! We've got to get out of here!

I felt sick to my stomach. This weirdo pressing against me, the gruesome scenes he was describing, that metallic smell that was stronger now... all of it grossed me out. I didn't want to play these games. I didn't want to play, period. They could have had me in that cage ten times

over by now if they'd wanted to. There had to be some logic to all this. For all I knew, the rabbi was one of them. And even if he wasn't—fuck him.

I shoved the snorting hairball out of the way and made for the door. It was time I got down to floor one. Damned if I wouldn't try, anyway. The rabbi recoiled but promptly clutched my sleeve, waving his free arm and hissing; he didn't dare speak up. I had the doorknob in my hand when he easily pulled me back in. Fuck, the man had brawn! As I reached for the knob again, I heard his frantic whisper:

– Quiet, quiet!.. Spare me, if you won't spare yourself! – He pushed my hand away and threw the door open. – OK, go!

With that he slammed the door, if the maneuver behind my back that was quick as lightning but completely noiseless may be termed “slamming.” I was in the light again and took a moment to get used to it. It was all nonsense. Julia's pranks, or whatshisname's. Obviously they just wanted to keep me there. First they tried to intrigue me, now to scare me, and I almost fell for a pretty dumb trick. Wonder if the rabbi gets paid by the hour or COD, per sucker delivered? What a ham, though. I started on down.

One flight below, a guy stood leaning against the wall by the elevator and smoking. After all the characters I'd met, here at last was someone who could pass for sane. Jeans and a T-shirt, young and rugged, an earring in his ear, the guy had the look of an electrician or some other handyman: witness the red plastic handles of a pair of pliers sticking out of his pocket. I scrutinized him, envying the poise of a properly dressed human being.

The guy raised his eyes at me and grinned. Well, who could blame him? I tried to sneak by as quickly as possible. His grin grew wider, and he spoke:

– So you met the head case, huh?

I froze with my back to him.

– Which head case?

– The one who came in asking for money. You know, the Jewish guy. The moron's been hiding up there for two hours, and he won't come out. He thinks I don't know where he is. I know where he is, I just don't know how to get him out. What am I gonna do, fight with him? I heard him grab you. I was hoping you'd talk some sense into him. Well, screw him, he can just stay there. Not my problem. What am I, his daddy?

His tone was a bit sarcastic, but otherwise he addressed me like an ally—a co-worker, perhaps. I wavered. Clearly the kid was with the building's maintenance. Since he took me for a local, should I maybe pump him for some information?

I turned around and leaned against the railing with all the sang-froid I could muster.

– You scared the shit out of him. What was the point?

– Nobody meant to scare him. He walked into Mark's place. Saw the cage, went apeshit and started climbing. Now he's just sittin' there. I mean, we can't just leave him, you know? Fuck, he could starve to death or something...

I was baffled. Surely it wasn't a *birdcage* that had the rabbi shitting bricks, yet this kid referred to it as some standard household item. Of course, this being the house... But hell, all those medieval tortures couldn't be real! Plus the casual tone of the guy, probably a janitor, for whom these wonders were all in a day's work, who went home every night and turned his Friday paychecks over to the little lady... I just couldn't be that far off base.

The kid gave me a look that was almost pleading.

– Look, dude, help me out, will you? Explain to him that it's cool. Oh fuck, he's not gonna let you back in... Tell you what: let's go inside, and you can talk to him through the hatchway. Man, nobody's holding him hostage...

He put out his cigarette and opened one of the doors. Beyond it, I spied a short narrow hallway and a portion of a brightly lit room. I thought I saw an armchair in the corner. In a word, nothing morbid. Of course, the rabbi did predict that I wasn't going to make it downstairs, and this invitation smacked of another trap. Why resort to such ploys, though? A little physical force, and they'd have me right where they wanted me. I supposed it was possible they just liked screwing with me, and this was yet another ruse. But as ruses went it was pretty lame, and they couldn't be seriously counting on me to fall for it. Besides, the eyes of this kid were so sincere and his appearance so normal that I just knew: were I to balk at going in, he'd feel the same good-humored pity for me that he extended to that sad sack of a rabbi. And I'd walk on, followed by that cynical but understanding gaze. I don't think so!

In the meantime the kid had gone in, disappeared for a minute and came out again.

– All right, come on in. He's still up there, I checked.

I crossed the threshold and was composing my appeal to reason when, instead of leading the way, the kid reversed direction. He squeezed past me and gave me a bad look. It took me a moment to realize what was bad about it. Not until the kid was out of the apartment and the door locked with a snap did it hit me what I'd seen in his eyes. Sympathy. But a harsh kind of sympathy.

So his heart bled for me as he followed his orders... Dimwit. I would just go back up to the rabbi, take the stairs again and— Provided, that was, I could access the cubbyhole from there. Well, we'd find that out soon enough. I hitched up my pants with bravado and marched

inside. It's not a good idea to push me against the wall. Really it isn't. If I should revolt right now and make a stand, there'll be hell to pay. For everyone. Me first and foremost, probably. But by then it would be too late. Don't corner me, fellas!

The room was modest in size and looked innocent enough: a dinky potted plant by the wall, a low sofa, the armchair. Tall cases of books. Except that disquieting smell was stronger here. Suddenly it came to me that it wasn't leather or rust but hot steel. Uh-huh! If this place smelled like the rabbi's cubicle, they were definitely connected. But I didn't see a hatchway anywhere. I looked more carefully. Next to the bookcases there was another door. Presumably the hatchway was behind it. Great. I kicked the door open. Somehow this act strengthened my courage, not quite heartfelt but sufficient to keep up my fighting spirit and loose pants.

This room was smaller than the first but also completely ordinary. All the more unexpected and frightening was the enormous cage in the corner. It took up nearly a third of the space, wall-to-wall, and propped up the ceiling. There was something medieval, if not downright barbaric, about its thick bars, the heavy hinges of the undersized door. Even the color itself—the natural shade of wrought iron, plain and crude—insinuated that torture was not, perhaps, a mere figment of the rabbi's imagination.

Most horrible of all, lying inside the gloomy structure was a human being. He lay right on the bare floor, dressed, I shuddered to see, in a bathrobe all too similar to the one tucked into my pants. For a second I even thought I was looking at myself—or a doppelganger—and my knees buckled.

The man lay with his back to me, using his arm for a pillow, bare legs pulled up to his chest. The shock of that figure, that cage, that stench pierced my heart with fear and pity—a sharp spasm of pity for the wretched prisoner.

I ran to the cage. The bolt that held the door in place was pushed through two loops and loosely held with a nut. Undoing it, even from the inside, had to be a cinch. What stopped him from trying—depleted strength or a broken spirit? Whichever! I went to work on the nut. The captive, myself, and the rabbi upstairs... that made three, and the rabbi was a powerful guy. I had a sudden ill-timed vision of our lucky escape, all our troubles safely behind us. Cops hovering over us, swaddling us in blankets, being atypically kind and caring. Me supporting the feeble prisoner, the goofy rabbi shuffling to and fro asking everyone what time it is...

Just give me a minute here... My hands were sweaty, and the damn nut kept slipping through my fingers. Never fear, I'm up to the task. What's the use of mouthing off about valor when the time for action is now! And I will take action. I've already started. I might cry uncle when evil takes me by surprise, but this time, you bastards, I've had time to prepare! The nut came off at last, and I flung the door open. The hinges screamed. Prisoner, you're free!

The man rolled over languidly and squinted at me through sticky eyes. He struggled to open them all the way, yawned and sat up with ease, crossing his legs.

– Yes? – he said in a voice bank tellers use to address small-time clients—civil but condescending. – May I help you with something?

I'd been fooling myself that I was used to their surprises. I wasn't used to shit. As an action hero, I sucked. Long on visions, short on hunches.

Sitting before me was the slick character that had lectured me on the different realities—Harry, that was his name. He was looking somewhat worse for wear, but still a far cry from a martyr. Just sleepy and not very fresh.

Hysterical laughter bubbled inside me. I kept it at bay by focusing on the heroic rescue. So let it be Harry leaning on my shoulder—what difference did it make? It was he, after all,

who'd been kept in a cage and probably tortured, and it was his debilitated heavy frame that the cops were now taking over from me...

Harry refused to jibe with my scenario. Evidently he thought I was the one that needed help, because he admonished in the same tone:

– My good man, are you aware that Julia's been looking for you for hours? And here you are touring the stairway, sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. You woke me up, you know.

Despite his tarnished lustre, Mr. Man's attitude hadn't changed. Visions of torture chambers and rescue missions faded. Rescue *him*? Yeah, right. There he is under lock and key, in a cage, for fuck's sake, and yet...

Faithful to my pattern, I was thrown by the turn of events—confused as a result—pissed off in reaction, and bitched:

– I'm here to talk down the rabbi, whom *you* scared half to death. He needs to get home. Which is just where I'd be going if your so-called janitor didn't ask me to help.

And added vengefully:

– And the rabbi's not nice like me. He won't rest till this place is crawling with cops and news crews. You can tell them all about the multiple realities when they put you in that other cage. The one they got down at the precinct.

With intentional slowness, Harry changed his position. He stretched out one leg, bent the other and hung an arm off the bent knee.

– Did you really believe in the rabbi? What a decent human being you are. Quite trusting, though, aren't you? I told Julia you wouldn't work out, but I see the issue has resolved itself. You were running away, you said?

– So the rabbi's not real? Is he another one of your employees?

– As a matter of fact, the rabbi is quite real. We're letting him conduct a few experiments. He calls it "talking with a normal person in abnormal circumstances." He buttonholes a man, tells him some horror stories—you may have noticed how difficult it is not to believe him—and observes the reaction. He says he's studying God in man. He's been doubting that God created us in His image, or some such. Hence the experiments. So there'll be no police.

He briefly fell silent and then added, abandoning all courtesy:

– Can I go back to sleep now?

I kept forgetting that this building's populace was off its collective rocker. So the WASP sleeps in a cage. With bright lights on to boot. So he likes it that way! A prime example of narrow-minded thinking: a man in a cage means he's locked up, therefore a prisoner. The janitor casually mentions the cage and sends me in to flush out the rabbi. Probably on the rabbi's own request. And what do I do? Buy into the rabbi's tall tale, jump to a banal conclusion, and hie to free a wretch from torment. An inane display of initiative that makes my ego smart.

Just then, as luck would have it, a portable welding machine caught my eye. The electrode was burned down halfway. Here was the explanation for the weird smell: somebody had done some welding here recently. Fixing the cage, no doubt.

After Harry's rebuff, I had nothing to say to him. I turned around and headed for the door, forgetting that the janitor had locked it. Behind my back, the cage door clanged shut. If my first conversation with Harry was to be taken as a job offer, the exchange we'd just had amounted to my being canned. No problem. I was inured to such developments.

As I was passing the ladder that still descended from the hatchway, I glanced up at the hideout of the experimenting freak. Right where the end of the ladder faded into the murk, I saw his glasses twinkle. Apparently not satisfied with the first round of tests, the rabbi, visible in the chandelier's gleam, was making signs at me.

He was pointing to his wrist, and at first I thought he was still trying to find out the time. But no, it was something else. I moved closer: no point in playing hide-and-seek when Harry knows he's up there. The rabbi shrank back but did not stop gesturing. He kept pointing to his wrist, thrust his fingers at his eyes, bared his teeth and shook his hands together, as if begging me to understand.

And after a minute I thought I got what he was driving at. I did an about-face and walked back to the cage, feeling a little awkward, like a man who's had his wallet lifted in a crowded store and must now point out the thief amongst some very respectable burghers.

Harry was back in his original position, showing me his ass. Something had to be done, but I was fresh out of ideas. What the hell, no reason to be sneaky. He hadn't tightened the nut, so I just opened the door and walked in. It was a noisy entrance.

I hadn't anticipated the reaction. Harry sprung to his feet, as if he'd known I'd be back and was lying in wait. Forsaking his suave persona, he grabbed my collar with violent fury.

– Get the fuck out of here! You fucking hear me?

Stunned and half-choked, I looked down at his hands. I'd been right about the rabbi's purport. Ringing red around each straining wrist was a grisly fresh scar. This affair was getting creepier and sicker by the minute. I wanted to go home, and screw my wounded pride. But how could I go home when he was strangling me? I was putty in his hands: as I said, I can't think on my feet. What the hell had made the man go nuts?

Harry was avoiding my eyes, though maybe it was just a coincidence. Suddenly—and that much more effectively—he shoved me away. I flew out of the cage and smashed my foot on the doorstep before collapsing on the floor.

I'd never blacked out before. Perhaps because I'd never fallen on my head before. Or else my nerves had snapped, worn thin by the unmitigated idiocy of my plight.

I found myself drifting in a reddish haze, the kind you see when you look up at the sun with your eyes closed. The rabbi popped up, hat pushed back on his head, brim glowing like a black halo. He spoke, not through his mouth but with his eyes, magnified by the lenses. His eyelids were moist, and they twisted like lips as they formed the words.

– Don't be a schmuck. Stay. They know what to do with your kind. Wouldn't you rather see a good show than just the filthy insides of the set? Sure, the show can get scary sometimes. But a good show has got to convince you. And what could be more convincing than fear? Think about it.

A woman peeked out from behind the halo. It was Julia, just as I saw her that first time on the sidewalk except totally naked. She burst out laughing behind the rabbi's back and made obscure signs at me, and somehow I understood her. She was asking me not to believe the rabbi, not to believe anything at all, just to be happy we met. Once more I could feel our breathtaking intimacy. Julia looked the way a woman can only look in a dream. But the rabbi, if it was still him, had guessed who stood behind him, and he narrowed his two mouths with scorn.

– She's only a woman. And haven't you noticed she's almost deaf? She's been taught how to speak, but she's better at gestures. Remember how she caressed your cheek? There,

you see, her secrets aren't even a secret. Believe me, when you get to know her, she loses all her appeal.

Julia shook her head, dropped her eyes in dejection and covered her stomach and breasts. I didn't know what to say to the rabbi, but my heart went out to Julia, and she drew closer, displacing him, until she was right next to me...

Right at my eye level I saw a bare foot, the top of it trimmed with denim. I fought to lift up my head, ungluing a cheek from the floor. Julia, in a man's red shirt over jeans, was standing at my side.

– You keep hurting yourself, – she said with a smile. The smile I'd just seen in my delirium. – Forgive me. What happened was all my fault. I should have come right back, I should have never left you with Bertha. But now we'll go straight to the Center, I promise. And all will be well.

I got to my feet with the sense that everything was whirling backwards to the starting point: just the two of us, I her obedient slave. I trusted her. And I had to know how the story ended. Even if it ended with nothing but the morning-after blues.

Harry was gone. The haze of impurity, the aura of dangerous madness had melted away with the welding smell. I followed Julia. She turned her face to me and I faltered, spotting a tiny flesh-colored device in her ear. A thing deaf people wear. And I would have been very surprised indeed if just at that moment I wasn't distracted by a hand in a greasy white shirtcuff that hung down from the hatchway. The rabbi's hand. For a second I was sure it was the hand of a dead man.

CHAPTER SEVEN

This had to be it for surprises. The turn his life had taken was already too fantastic. Sam woke up with a feeling... Well, as far as feelings and desires, they'd begun to pile up as soon as he realized he was now a rich man. The day when, out of the blue and with no rhyme or reason, a simple string of matching numbers had yanked him out of the rut. The process of collecting his winnings, with its neverending red tape, had seemed to Sam a bewitching prelude to all that was to come. All at once he'd understood that concealed under the thin unsightly layer of his former existence as a humble clerk lived his real self, who craved... everything. Craved the joy of being that appears before a man's inner eye at the sound of the words "fifty million."

And now, a month after the most extraordinary Friday of his life, Sam woke up with a feeling that things weren't going at all the way he had imagined. He was still living in his tiny apartment, and although the money was already in his account, all he'd done so far was call his office and tell them he quit. The apartment, the 7-Eleven on the corner, the street itself—everything was an unwelcome reminder of the vanished Joe. One would think Sam now had the means to take off, move on, start a completely new life. With all that cash..!

But Sam procrastinated. Things just didn't feel right. Now, had he bought that ticket himself... Then he could see his way clearly. But money all but handed over by a dying mobster just didn't seem to Sam to be entirely his. In truth, he was plain scared to spend it. Joe could show up at any moment and demand his loot back. Sam beat himself up for never finding out if Joe was still alive. And now it was too late. Of course, with all that money, nothing could be simpler than to dissolve in the colossal city or just go someplace where nobody would

think to look for him. But... The self that craved things—his real self—stalled... and kept stalling.

Today Sam decided to go uptown and walk around. He needed to relax. Lately he'd hardly left the house. It wasn't likely, he told himself, that anybody was going to come and take away the money, and it was time he started to get a taste for his new situation. Look for a nice rich neighborhood to live in. Visit a few stores he could never afford before. Try his new life on for size. Enough shilly-shallying! Millions awaited him. Millions of opportunities.

It was that brief stretch of summer morning when the sun, though high up in the sky, was not yet scorching. Even in the heart of town, on the affluent quiet streets, one could breathe easy. Sam walked without a care, taking his time. Not just the day but the whole future was at his disposal. One thing for sure—never again would he have to look up like a fool at his own empty window. He pictured a beautiful blonde... or brunette. Either one: he was flexible. Sam was compelled to start spending his out-of-the-blue riches right away. Get into the habit. Shortly, he came upon an ATM and stopped to take out money. A lot of money. More money than he'd ever held in his hands before. Sam was amazed at the sense of self-assurance inspired in him by the thick wad, which he could feel in his back pocket every time he took a step. Now he needed to figure out how to spend it.

He stopped at the entrance to a small but unmistakably high-priced café. Through its floor-to-ceiling windows, he could see that it was empty this early in the day, except for a couple in bright summer T-shirts who were having coffee. Leaning back aloofly in her chair and listening to her escort—a balding, paunchy gentleman in shorts—was a young suntanned woman, also wearing shorts. Wow, thought Sam, I could have a date that looked like that. He compared himself to the gentleman and found he was quite up to par, if one discounted the stiff

dark-blue jeans and the out-of-style shirt he had on. The heck with it, said Sam to himself. I'll go in and order coffee, see if I don't! Who said one has to wait till Friday to catch the scent of adventure? On this sunny quiet street, the memory of Joe felt like a hazy half-forgotten nightmare.

He took a firm step to the door, gave it a resolute push, and was already hearing the muffled tinkling of the welcome bell. Nothing to it. Here he came to spend his money. Shell it out this very minute. Extravagantly. Out of the corner of his eye, one foot already inside the café, he suddenly saw a dark-suited figure behind him that was headed straight for him. Sam twitched. The half-forgotten dream mushroomed into reality. It was him—Joe. The thick wad of cash was obscenely bulging out of Sam's jeans like a piece of telltale evidence. He really should have it out with Joe, explain that the ticket simply happened to be lucky, but, naturally, if Joe thinks... A force unknown to Sam spun him around and hurled him away from the impending figure. How long he might have kept running on legs that had turned to lead is hard to say, but his flight proved brief. The feeling that he was about to be overtaken made Sam look back, and he realized that the black-clad shape was not Joe. It was, in fact, not a man but a woman. Nor was she wearing black as he'd thought, but a moss-green dress. The nightmare receded, leaving him feeling faint and disoriented. The woman caught up with him. Sam sighed with relief and, fighting the residue of fear, forced a smile. He could see she was past her prime from the blatantly wrinkled flesh of the neck and breasts that her low-cut dress exposed, but her face, round and good-natured, was still smooth. She was overweight and far from pretty, but not ugly either. An ordinary woman. Just a woman.

The ordinary woman smiled back at Sam. She seemed to sense something, or maybe he was just pale and panting and she was the compassionate sort.

– Are you all right? Do you need assistance?

Sam thought that her voice sounded unnatural, too low and too hoarse. It was the voice of a man imitating a woman. He stole another glance at the curves barely contained by the tight dress. Definitely a woman.

– No. No, thanks. I'm fine now. I really am. Don't trouble yourself.

Then it occurred to Sam that it wasn't very polite to brush people off. Especially a woman who generously offered her help.

– It's just that I... Never mind. I feel much better now. I just need to rest for a few minutes, and I'll be perfectly fine. No cause for alarm, really.

The woman started to respond, and Sam quickly realized that getting rid of this bleeding heart wouldn't be easy. In the course of a minute he learned that she was in the medical profession (probably a nurse, because doctors say they're doctors); that she was from a small town and here on vacation, "to get lost in the big-city crowds"; that she was single. At this Sam looked at her with interest. But no. Certainly not. Young beautiful women beckoned from his imminent future. Nonetheless he surprised himself by asking her to join him for coffee. Of course, she'd love to. Unlike Sam, the woman seemed to anticipate a most pleasant sequel to their budding friendship.

The bright couple was still in the café. Sam and his babbling companion took a table away from the window: he'd had enough fright for one day. It was time to move into his cool and laid-back new character, or rather vacate the old one. Except he was failing miserably. The man in shorts paid the waitress, casually embraced his date's alluring waist and took her outside. Oh me oh my, where does one find fresh and supple female bodies like that? Sam tried walking in the man's shorts and put a mental hand around the waist of an imaginary

knockout at his side. It wasn't working. One couldn't very well dash after a number like that and start carrying on about one's millions! It reeked of a business transaction. And that was not at all, not at all what he had in mind!

It was just horrible how Sam's face was an open book in which anyone could read his thoughts. The woman in green halted her screeching soliloquy and looked into his eyes. Sam had a momentary feeling that her chatter was merely a diversion technique, and that the real concerns of the woman now keenly studying him lay very far from the state of his health. Still staring, she covered his hand with a velvety palm and said:

– My name's Bertha.

She caressed his hand, and Sam remembered another hand—that of the woman shamelessly fondling herself on the train. He shivered.

There was nothing that could justify Sam in his own eyes. His new life just wasn't working out the way he had planned. Later he would make up neat explanations for himself about how he'd realized that it was impossible to become a different person overnight, and that no amount of money in the world could ever put him at ease in the company of a sexy and beautiful woman. But in reality and against all common sense, his initial scare of mistaking Bertha for Joe, as much as her unwomanly voice, served to suppress Sam's own willpower. Something malicious and mocking murmured to him, *entre nous*, that next to this woman he was safe. Middle-aged and unlovely, in some unfathomable way she managed to take the place of the dreaded Joe in his mind, and at her side he suddenly felt entitled to spend his millions. Things happened the way they happened. And they could never have been otherwise.

They spent the day strolling around the city. Sam was long used to her artificial-sounding voice, and when, every once in a while, softly and with promise, she squeezed his

hand, he was stirred and felt that it was a good thing. Indeed, had such an adventure happened to him before he'd won the lottery, he would have been happy beyond all measure. And now he was studiously avoiding the thought— Any thoughts. Then, too, Bertha was handling him so confidently and yet so femininely that he had little doubt as to where and how their evening would end. This sent a delicious little chill running through him. He was tired of life's unpredictability and wanted at long last to know what would happen next. And now, it seemed, he did.

As expected, they ended up in her hotel room. He was surprised by the smooth white firmness of her flesh when, naked, she casually came out of the shower and drew him into her arms. Just the way he wanted her to! Right away she was close and available, not to just anybody but to Sam alone; the candor of that availability filled Sam with marvel. In bed, Bertha's face looked defenseless, young and sweet, the way it hadn't when she was standing up. Whether it was the light or some mask of hers that she now made a point of throwing off didn't matter to Sam. He pressed her to his chest, taking in her warmth and her unknown but knowable scent, and thoughts of a new life gone wrong scattered. Right or wrong, the new life had begun.

Bertha was incredible. Once Sam got completely comfortable with her voice, face and body, he could not imagine how at first he could have found her so unattractive. She was just incredible! As soon as she moved in, his little place was infused with the ambiance he so long dreamed of. Not that anyone would describe Bertha as compulsively clean or a great housekeeper. That was not the point. Her almost maternal tenderness, combined with a deep and powerful sensuality, transported Sam far away from reality. It was a good thing.

There was only one bad thing. Whenever they left the house—Bertha liked dining out—Sam would be smitten with a strange sort of embarrassment. He would take a third-person view of himself and, worse yet, of Bertha, and plainly see that she was not young, not good-looking, and not very intelligent at that. She called him pet names in a loud voice, tugged and pulled on him and, Sam felt, attracted public attention to herself. Sam preferred to stay home.

Naturally, he told Bertha that he was rich, and liked the fact that she didn't ask how rich or how he'd come by his money. She simply made a mental note that he did not have to work for a living.

When, a week and a half later, her vacation came to an end, they were married. To be exact, they signed a piece of paper and in return were issued a certificate granting them legal permission to enjoy each other's company. Which, for a while, they did. In another month, they had their first fight. It was a trivial spat, which made it all the more hurtful. Sam got emotional, grabbed a jacket—it was drizzling outside—and stormed out. Outside he cooled off and decided to take a walk, suddenly conscious of how long it had been since he'd been alone. A round-the-clock face-to-face marathon, even with a woman that made him feel good, was certainly no easy task. In a way, he was actually glad of their fight and the chance to enjoy some solitude.

Gradually getting wet, he walked down the street at a leisurely pace. It was funny how, although his life had changed greatly when Bertha entered it, he couldn't avoid admitting that in every other way it had pretty much stayed the same. Maybe if Bertha were to give him a little push... But she was completely indifferent to the possibilities open to two people who possessed such a great deal of money, and Sam himself was quite content with what he had. His alter ego that hungered for the good things in life had not been heard from since Bertha

appeared, and given his new status, Sam reasoned, it would be stupid to make himself do things he wouldn't enjoy. Then again, he thought, a little trip to some exotic island—a romantic getaway, as it were—would do nicely to help shake things up and save the two of them from drowning in petty squabbles. Gee, what a great idea! He would come home and invite Bertha to go on a cruise. Right away. Why not? All they'd have to do is make reservations. Money was no object. Just take the next plane out and— In his excitement Sam had forgotten how it pained him to be seen in public with Bertha. Well, he could always choose an unpopular island. He pictured the bustle of the airport, the polite flight attendants, the tropical beauty of an undiscovered isle... and hurried home. Bertha was sure to love the idea. He raised his eyes to his window. The glow of the lamp looked all the more friendly against the dank gloom outside. Sam smiled. His heart grew tranquil. Leading Bertha to him was another inestimable service the phantom of Joe had performed for Sam.

As Sam reached for the keys, his fingers closed on a round object. He pulled out the chunky thing—a lighter. The one from back then, with the dragon on it. He'd forgotten all about it. Well, he wasn't going to let it spoil his mood. Though, to be sure, the story associated with it was a nasty one... He'd have to put the thing away someplace. Wouldn't want to have to explain to Bertha why a nonsmoking man carried a lighter, especially one that looked like that. He could have just as easily thrown it away, but it was a remembrance, albeit not a very pleasant one.

Sam decided to ring the bell. Bertha would open the door and he'd tell her about the trip right there and then. It would be more momentous that way. Fingering the lighter inside his pocket, he waited for Bertha. Soon enough Bertha did open up, her smile a little disconcerted.

She wasn't wearing the housecoat she had on when Sam left but a pair of too-tight slacks and a silly T-shirt. Sam hated that outfit.

– We have guests, – she said. – Unexpected ones, too. I can't imagine how he found me. But you don't mind, do you, sweetie? It's about time you met my family. It would have been nice if he let us know in advance, but...

Sam was confused. What family? He couldn't remember Bertha ever mentioning any family. Sam himself had had no family since his parents died, and its unexpected presence in Bertha's life somehow put him on guard. And who exactly was this "he"?

– Oh come on, you remember! I told you about him a hundred times.

They went inside. A man sat sprawling in the armchair. Bertha glanced at him in a timid sort of way and nudged Sam forward.

– Here he is, sweetie. Meet my baby brother Billy. And this is Sam, my husband. Why don't you two get to know each other while I make us some coffee.

And Bertha darted into the kitchen. Sam took a step forward, and his high spirits were smashed to smithereens. He had known, he'd had the feeling that one day this would happen! Sitting in his armchair was Joe. Not a nightmare, not somebody who looked like Joe, but Joe himself. Sam would have recognized him anywhere.

His hands immobile on the armrests, Joe deadpanned him silently. Coincidences like this just didn't happen. It couldn't be Joe. Bertha'd never had any family. This was a disaster. All of a sudden Sam did the most preposterous thing: he swung his arm and pitched the heavy lighter at the sitting man. It was funny how the situation almost mirrored itself, except this time it was Joe who deftly caught the lighter bound for his forehead. He weighed it in his hand and threw it on the couch. Despite the simple jeans and leather jacket he was wearing today, Joe

still exuded his eerie and slightly cinematic sense of power. Sam just stood there. He knew that his hysterical stunt had given him away, had exposed his fear, but he had no idea what to do next.

Joe stirred in the armchair and let out a sudden yell that made Sam jump:

– Hey Sis, you gonna be long? I want that coffee! Sit down. What are you, nervous? Think I'm gonna give you hell over old Sis there? Nah, I wouldn't do that. You married her, didn't you? This place is a dump, but that's her own damn fault. Dumbass should of got herself a rich guy. Right? Right, my ass. What's a rich guy gonna want with Miss Teenage Bride there? She's lucky to get your sorry ass!

He guffawed—not very convincingly, Sam thought as he slowly lowered himself on the couch, the way he had once before. Except back then this had been a bachelor's couch, where he tossed and turned in his bad dreams. And now every night, or just about every night, it was where he and Bertha... And here was Joe back again.

There were many things Sam found hard to believe: that Joe hadn't recognized him, that Bertha hadn't mentioned the money... that Joe was Bertha's brother at all! Of course, if this really was her brother and not Joe, that meant he— No, it couldn't be. People just didn't look that much alike. Which meant it was him, and he'd recovered from his wounds, and by sheer coincidence Bertha turned out to his sister. And while Joe would surely not have forgotten Sam, the lottery ticket could have easily slipped his mind or been dismissed as unimportant: another ticket, a scrap of paper. What a lucky thing it was that Sam had hardly touched the money!

Bertha, smiling obsequiously, came scuttling out of the kitchen. And scuttling was the word for it. Sam had never seen her like this. Her face was flushed; the tray was jumping in

her hands. For all its swiftness, her gait was shaky. Plus, Sam noticed, in her great big hurry to paint her face, she must have slathered too much eyeshadow under her left eye, which made it pop out and look as if it sat lower than the right one. She set her tray down on the coffee table, sat next to Sam and took his hand. The hands that Sam had always found so sweet and tender were just unbearable to him now. He was ashamed of Bertha. A ridiculous, insensitive... dumbass.

– Oh Billy, you scared me so much! You have no idea! Here I was thinking it was you coming back, – she snuggled more tightly against Sam, – and surprise!—it was Billy. He was the last person I expected to see. I didn't even recognize him at first. But then of course I did, and off I went to change—

Here we go, thought Sam. There'll be no stopping her now. Before he could finish the thought, he heard Joe laughing. He guffawed loudly, with his mouth agape, just like back then. Bertha ceased in midsentence.

– That's my Bertha! The whole clan loved to shoot the shit, but this one... – He interrupted himself. – All right, let's get down to business. We got a little business to take care of, don't we?

Sam thought he saw sympathy in Joe's eyes. Here it came: he was going to ask for the money. The stupid fool told him! The fifty million, the islands, the freedom were going up in smoke, leaving only the leaden gaze of the hoodlum across from him and a sweltering, sweaty woman pressing into his side. Sam realized she was even more frightened of her baby brother than he was, and her fear terrified and revolted Sam. He couldn't believe that just a minute ago he was thinking of their nights together with nostalgia. But he was paralyzed and could not move away.

– You can stop shaking now, – said Joe with a smirk. – We’ll figure things out. I’ll be right back.

He got up and left the room. They heard the bathroom door close.

Bertha jerked and brought her face up close, and Sam even felt sorry for her. Mouth askew, one eye bulging absurdly, she looked just dreadful.

– He’s not my brother, you hear me? He just showed up and told me to... and threatened me... He’s really scary. Please do what he says. I don’t know who he is, I swear! But he made me say I’m his sister, I don’t know why, but just do what he says, OK?

Bertha was quaking. Sam looked at her quivering breasts and saw the nipples harden. Was she actually aroused by all this? What on earth was he thinking about at such a moment! Still, Sam felt himself getting aroused, too. Unexpectedly, this awakened the man in him. Could Bertha be in league with Joe? Could all of this be a well-acted charade? Was Joe now waiting for her to work him over? What did Sam know about this woman? Next to nothing. Only what she’d told him. Could Joe have prearranged Sam’s whole meeting with Bertha? It was possible. But how had he known about the winning ticket?

Strangely, the money was the last thing that concerned Sam just then. All he felt was fear and disgust. That imbecile Joe didn’t give a hoot about his own life or anybody else’s. Sam remembered him standing in the doorway of the 7-Eleven, in plain sight, just asking to be shot. What was Sam to him? He wanted to get up, but the woman had pasted herself all over him. She wouldn’t let go of his hands and kept whispering, frantically swallowing words. Could she be telling the truth? Would it be best to do as Joe said, and then things would be as before? And his couch would be safe again? But the mask on her face—and those phony eyes... Was this the woman he slept with? Sam couldn’t shake her. He tried to break loose

once more, but she held him tight, and he realized he wasn't going anywhere. Ever. He was mired in this swamp of a woman.

Sam groped behind him for an armrest to help him move away, but his fingers found the lighter instead. A crazy idea flashed in his mind. Barely conscious of what he was doing, he seized the lighter, brought it to the nipple that protruded through the fabric, and spun the wheel. Sparks flew. Bertha let out a wild yelp, writhed, and fell on the floor. That screwed-up eye, that gaping mouth... It suddenly dawned on Sam that she really did look like Joe when he was laughing. No doubts remained. He jumped up and ran for the door. All he could do now was get out of there. If he was lucky.

All at once Joe was blocking his way. Sam had time to notice that he looked surprised—frightened, in fact. That was reassuring. Sam threw his arm forward and struck the lighter's flint again—a naïve and futile move. But instead of bloodless sparks, the lighter fired a long and narrow tongue of flame right into the hoodlum's face. Sam heard something sizzle. It may have been the flame or the eyebrows on that face. It vanished from sight. As he ran down the hallway to the door, Sam heard himself bellow. But it was a cry of victory, beastlike and visceral.

He ran through the streets for a long time, the lighter that had saved his life squeezed tight in his hand. He would have matched it against any gun now. And at last he knew it was true: he had won fifty million dollars.

He was standing in a back alley under the soft glow of a streetlight, recovering his strength. A subtle change had taken place in Sam. Once, goaded by Joe, he'd gone out to meet danger head-on—and come back with a ticket that won him a veritable fortune. Now he'd gone up against Joe himself—and won his life. And here he was, alive and with money to boot. Not

bad at all. The only problem was that the hoodlum and the rest of his gang could still track him down. And suddenly he felt that it no longer fazed him. Goddamn it, he had a shitload of money! He wasn't the helpless underdog he used to be. No need to run, no need to hide. There was another way. What way it would be Sam didn't yet know, but he felt a gambler's rush rise up in him, and he liked the feeling. He looked down at the lighter in his hand, made out the embracing woman and dragon, and laughed out loud, recalling the duo he'd left far behind in what used to be his apartment. We'll just see which one of us is the dragon. Officially, of course, the fake Bertha was still his wife, but he had trouble imagining those two running headlong to court to sue him for his millions. Too many holes in their story. Had Joe been planning to do that, he wouldn't have rushed things. He could have waited a year. No, Sam was on the right track.

He spent the remnant of the night wandering through the city, and by morning he knew what to do. Luckily he had all the proper papers on him, and at ten a.m., when the offices opened, he headed downtown. Sam was after the most impressive-looking real-estate firm he could find.

The rest was quick and easy, as things always are when big money and top-notch professionals are involved. In two weeks, which Sam spent in a small motel outside the city, he became the owner of a recently erected sixteen-story apartment building. In the course of the same two weeks, he acquired a financial advisor and trustee, who goggled in astonishment when Sam announced that none of the apartments in the building would be rented out. Moreover, the interior of the building was to be completely remodeled, so he was going to be needing a good architect and a construction crew. In the meantime Sam himself would occupy the sixteenth floor and oversee the works. Further instructions would be issued in due time. Oh yes, one

more thing. Somebody would have to get in touch with theatrical agencies to let them know that a new repertory theater was assembling a permanent company and announcing a casting call for male and female actors. In particular, they would be looking for a middle-aged overweight actress with a raspy low voice. That was all.

Sam felt great in his new role. It was seldom that he'd be up in the middle of the night in his modest and quiet motel room, awakened by the dream of a foolish, two-faced, but affectionate woman lying at his side. In those moments he felt frightened and lonely again.

First thing upon assuming ownership, he started selecting the right people. The actress he chose to play Bertha didn't look much like her physically. But as soon as they met, she touched his hand and gazed into his eyes with tender devotion. Here it is, Sam thought. Only this one will play my games, by my rules.

The dignified big-name architect they'd found for him was instantly dismissed. Sam needed someone with an open mind and no annoying hangups. The young fellow he hired openly smoked marijuana, but he knew right away what Sam wanted and even came up with some good suggestions of his own. Busy with realizing his plans, Sam caught himself losing sight of the danger that had inspired the idea of buying the building in the first place. The further the renovation work progressed, the more carried away he got by the project itself. And one day he understood that this was the true beginning of his new and completely unexpected life. A fancy born in Sam's mind that night, magnificent and clever in a childlike way, was becoming reality, hard as the trustee, serious businessman that he was, may have waved his hands at him, arguing that it was sheer madness to squander most of the money—an entire fortune!—on whimsy that was beyond his comprehension.

What did money matter! All the money, and all the mobsters, and all of Sam's life up to that point had been merely the prerequisite backdrop, a dressing room where the finishing touches of makeup were applied, the darkness of the wings, from which, at a key and all-decisive moment, under the heady glare of the footlights, ready to give his intriguing and largely ad-libbed performance, emerged a bald pudgy man in a black jacket, holding tight in his hand a gold lighter on which a lascivious dragon was drawing beneath him a yielding female body.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The so-called code of honor of medieval chivalry, sprouting customs and conventions as it evolved, basically came down to worshipping the dame. As the Knights of Table Round, hacking armor with sword, walloped each other and their neighbors, they imagined in their blessed innocence that whatever the outcome of the joust, they were guaranteed heaven—or heaven on earth. I venture to guess that their preference was heaven in the arms of ladies that swooned at their derring-do. Still, the iron breastplates of these desperados, though bursting with courage and lice, left room for the unshakable conviction that if the hand should falter and the horse should fall, the Kingdom of Heaven, albeit bland by comparison, was a done deal. Those guys had it easy.

And my point was..? Right—chivalry. Chivalry was how I justified my sudden change of heart and plans for the immediate future. Lack of willpower just wasn't an acceptable explanation for why I didn't want to go home anymore. I couldn't believe how close I'd come to leaving!..

I was treading on Julia's heels again, and the glacial numbness that had spread through my brain from the rabbi's dead hand suddenly took on the ringing tones of a sword clashing against steel armor. Any chivalrous inclination, however self-serving in character, was no fake where metal, chance and danger were met. As the man had said, the show had to scare you to keep your interest. The scene of the rabbi's demise had been just stagey enough to let me wear the knight's scabbard at my side in spite of the fool's knickers on my ass, and I'd stashed away my fear in that he-man accessory. Sure enough, a couple of simple tricks was all it had taken to give my reality a split personality. To keep my cool, I just told myself the rabbi was alive and nobody had tortured Harry; to keep the game intense, I had only to doubt it was a game.

We got out of the apartment with no further incident, and Julia pushed the elevator button. With her for company, I was not at all afraid of being stuck in a confined space. *Au contraire*. She was smiling at me, which meant that everything was peachy and my escape attempt was not considered grounds for dismissal. I still wasn't sure if it had been a hearing device that I'd seen in her ear, but now I imagined that her short sentences and my own silence had been dictated by her deafness all along. And somehow that was a nice thought. A deaf Julia... It took nothing away from her—in fact, it added. For my money, it was the sexiest and most attractive handicap I'd ever seen.

I was pleasantly dizzy, whether from the spill I took or from the sun bouncing off my armor. I must have been smiling. Julia mirrored the smile and asked confidently:

– Would you like me to take you outside?

I shook my head. I had a feeling that if I left, I'd never be able to get back in. No!— I swung my head once more for emphasis, automatically glancing at her ear. She looked at me quizzically, touched the device and laughed. I couldn't tell what this signified. Maybe the thing wasn't a hearing device but a receiver, or whatever you call it, that she got her instructions through? I couldn't bring myself to ask.

The elevator came, and we found a huge fat hulk of a man in a uniform cap and jacket awaiting us inside. Julia smiled and addressed him like a cab driver:

– The Center, please.

The hulk huffed, puffed, fiddled with the buttons and sent us down. Then he took off his cap and leaned against the control panel with grace unexpected in such a behemoth. Neither his pose nor his face expressed the least sign of respect. It looked like the elevator attendant was as

fake as everything else in the place. I felt myself get tense: this lardass fairly dripped with attitude, if not downright aggression.

– Why not the basement? You haven’t come round awhile. Whaddaya say we take a ride right now? Bring your friend along, too. He outta like it down there. Trickster’s been looking for some fresh blood.

Unlike me, Julia was very friendly to the lardass. In response to his cheek, she asked him to give Trickster her apologies and promised to stop by soon, perhaps even later today. As for her friend, the two of them were on their way to make some introductions, so she couldn’t spare him. Deaf or no, she didn’t seem to catch the fat fuck’s overtones. Or was she sucking up, afraid he might take us straight to the basement? I for one had no desire to meet this Trickster character.

The elevator slowed, but the doors didn’t open. The hulk pushed some other buttons. There was a click overhead. The car rocked and, picking up tempo, started moving sideways. I wasn’t a bit surprised. The lardass, though, was staring, expecting a reaction. He was getting on my last nerve. Not a moment too soon the car stopped, Julia took my hand and we got off.

I was expecting to see things that I associated with the word “Center”—i.e., lots of busy people moving to a high-powered business rhythm. Instead, we found ourselves in a vast winter garden without a soul in sight. Starting at the elevator and spreading in all directions were the walls of a living fence—neatly trimmed bushes that stood taller than human height. It looked like a man-made maze. The elevator had opened on a stepped platform whose cold marble floor nipped at my bare feet. An early-evening dusk and stillness reigned. The air was moist and light, not stale like it gets in a hothouse, and, to my surprise, with a hint of cigar smoke mixing in.

– At first, – said Julia, carefully negotiating the steps, – we thought you’d find it more interesting if we didn’t explain anything. But it seems some explanation is necessary.

She turned around and waved me over. I came down the steps. Instead of marble, there was now Astroturf under my feet. Not a very nice sensation: it was rough and made me leery of stepping on something nasty. Julia didn’t look too happy either. She shifted uneasily.

– What I mean to say is, it’s really important to us that you find things interesting. That’s the whole point.

She smiled with her usual charm and promise, entered the maze and was instantly gone. Took a sharp turn, I figured, stumbling after. The maze had been constructed by experts: when I looked to the left, expecting to see Julia, all I saw was two diverging dead-end alleys. Before I could assess this development, I heard her voice, coming from my right.

– I’m still here. I haven’t gone anywhere. But don’t follow me, OK? Nobody’s trying to make fun of you, please don’t think that. It’s just that this garden was meant to be walked alone. If you walk together, it’s... it just feels wrong. You go on ahead, OK?

She fell silent but added after a moment’s thought:

– You can’t get lost here. The design makes it impossible. If all else fails and you can’t follow the paths, just go through the bushes. They’re not as thick as they look.

Her voice made it plain I’d be losing the last of her respect if I were to act on that suggestion. Very well, I’d walk the straight and narrow. Wherever to and for whatever purpose. Then again, if this was the promised Center, it stood to reason I was being given some kind of test, and everything would be explained upon completion.

With a hunch that I was being watched, I stepped lively and took the right alley. As I’d suspected, the dead end was an illusion: deceptive shadows confused the eye. Cool. I took

another right. The sense of time that had jilted me back on the roof reappeared right around the fifth turn. I wasn't scared or anything, just miffed that I couldn't outguess a stupid maze. It just wouldn't end. And the goddamn Astroturf was seriously hurting my feet. I looked up. The ceiling offered no point of reference: instead of rows, the distant lights formed a perfect circle. Wait a minute; maybe the idea was to go ripping through the bushes? That would be suitably symbolic. Granted, Julia had mentioned that approach as a worst-case scenario, but who knew... If she was deaf, her delivery was questionable. And honestly, I saw no other way.

If I was right about being watched, I could now be observed stealthily glancing about before sticking my hand in the bushes. The arm went in all the way to the shoulder, but in the dense electric gloam I couldn't tell what was on the other side of the green wall. The sleeve of my bathrobe crawled up, the branches were groovin' on my bare arm, and I could just imagine the shape I'd be in at the end of the test if I'd have to plow through a couple of such walls. Didn't think I'd be in the mood for love for a week or two, till my boo-boos healed.

I took my arm back and crept along the living fence with drastically diminished enthusiasm. Oh sure, this wasn't really a jousting match and nobody had knocked me off my horse, but still... Julia, with her cages and hags and basements and roofs! It wasn't the maze that had led me astray, and it wasn't just my one-track mind that had lured me in here. Something kept preventing me from leaving this building. Though nobody was stopping me—not physically, at least. I could have gone home right from the roof; I could have refused to reason with the rabbi... But what about Julia's legs? And the frightfully good show?

I felt tired again. I could explain anything to myself except for how to get out of there. I sat down on the disgusting grass right in the middle of an alley. What if I were to just lie down there—pull the roof stunt all over again? Let her look for me for a change.

I leaned back and felt something alter. Imperceptibly, like a statue stirring. I sat bolt upright. No; nothing. I lay down again—and understood. The slight vibration of the floor under the Astroturf gave it away. They were moving the walls around. Some smug snickering motherfucker hiding in the dark was jerking me around this maze by pulling the walls apart and closing them up again. Wouldn't be that hard to set up, I guess, if somebody wanted to. What the fuck for, though? The roof stunt, it seemed, had been pulled on me: once more I was trapped, with no chance of freeing myself. What made the predicament particularly vile was that this time I felt no fear, so thrashing around with the frenzy of the doomed would have been stupid. All I was doomed to was Julia's ridicule.

What did a Knight of the Realm do in a no-win situation? With a battle cry and a Latin catchphrase, he charged. I jumped to my feet with a fierce determination to break through, and scratches be damned. But the scene changed before my eyes. The wise-guy operator shifted the left wall, creating an aperture through which I glimpsed not another interminable alley but a small quadrangle with a pit in the middle. I couldn't see the pit from where I was standing but guessed it was there from the glow it radiated, as if a nightlight was on inside. All right, I'll bite. I advanced. There it was, a large round hollow in the quad's center, lined with marble like the stairs outside. On the bottom I saw two armchairs and a desk with a lamp. One of the chairs, pulled over to the desk, was occupied by a portly man with a bald spot, deeply absorbed in reading.

I quickly conjectured that, given the presence of the operator, this meeting was no accident. The results of the bullshit test were about to be announced. I moved up to the edge of the pit. A narrow steel ladder, similar to a fire escape, led down to the bottom.

The seated man raised his head and gave me a welcoming smile. I was supposed to come down. As I approached the desk, I realized there was nothing on it. Did I catch the man intently studying his empty desk? To my observation, preoccupied people had a different way of staring into space. Even so, this chap, sit though he might in a weird little pit buried within a preposterous maze, had such a normal, homey look about him that I instantly warmed up to him.

– Tell me, do you find it interesting here? – he asked, leaning back in the chair to keep the light out of his eyes. I shrugged. Where was “here”? The maze, the building, the planet Earth?

– One more question. Do you use drugs?

To that I gave the standard response that I’d experimented in college, but then who hadn’t.

– You know, like the President.

– Beg pardon?

– Well, like, what every new President says when the reporters ask about the drugs.

I looked at him with inquiry: now what? If I’d been expected, these questions were just a lead-in. Something was about to be revealed, explained, proposed. Otherwise, why would Julia have brought me there?

The man in the chair raised his eyebrows apologetically.

– Oh my. You must have been told you were being taken to the Center and then left in the maze. So you’re assuming that this is the Center and I’m the man in charge. Unfortunately, that’s not quite the case. I stopped by here today completely by accident. It’s quiet here and conducive to thinking. Also, the strangest and most wonderful odors drift down to this pit.

There are the light, higher odors and then there are the heavy, lower ones. It's a rare man that can pick up a lower odor. If one wants to do that, one needs to lie down with one's nose to the ground, and even then one would smell mostly earth and dust. But here one can enjoy heavy odors in comfort.

Me, I wasn't picking up any unusual odors at all. Instead, I got a whiff of what I thought was the winsome chap's deteriorating mental health. Then again, it could have been my nerves, because when I ran my eyes along the outer edges of the pit, I had the palpable sense of something thick and sticky spilling over them and slowly oozing down to us. People often attribute their neurotic sensitivities to the delusions of others. What the hell did I know about odors, anyway?

– So my point was, if you're thinking I'm in charge here, I hate to disappoint you... I don't know who's in charge. I'm not sure that anybody is. And the only reason we call this place the Center is because it is, in fact, the geometrical—or, if you will, geographical—center of the Building. Julia brought you here, didn't she? As it happens, the Center is the most convenient point from which to begin one's acquaintance with all this. You see, the floors above and below us are occupied by a great variety of people and... how should I put it... realities. And the further up or down from this, the central floor, the more different they are from one another. The reason I asked you about the drugs is because a user would have an easier time orienting himself in our Building's realities.

I followed his finger with my eyes—up and down—and reflected that, now that I'd climbed the local stairway to heaven, his description made me loath to visit the underworld.

– No, no, please don't think in terms of analogies. Believe me, there are no angels upstairs and no Satanists in the basement. Nothing like that. That's not at all the issue here.

It would be all too easy if good and evil were on separate floors. No... It all happened by chance.

He stopped, took a deep breath and shook his head. I took advantage of the pause and asked (for the first time since I'd entered the place!): just what exactly was going on here? It appeared that here at last was someone who could answer that question.

The man regarded me with puzzlement and mistrust. Only now did he take a good look at me. His gaze lingered on my pants, and he burst out laughing.

– That's right! You came in on the spur of the moment. Somebody mentioned that. By the look of your clothes, you even got to meet Bertha. Actually, you've traveled almost the exact route that was originally intended for uninvited guests. But don't take it the wrong way: these days we're glad of any visitors, even accidental. Though you're the first stranger ever to be brought to the Center for introductions. That says a lot. Julia knows what she's doing. She's a good judge of character.

He caught me squirming impatiently, nodded with understanding, rose and began to pace, ambling along the curving wall like a circus horse around the ring.

– There's a reason I asked if you found it interesting here. If you don't, you won't care to understand. Imagine, if you will, a psychiatric hospital. What is it? Well, to the doctors it's a medical establishment, their place of work. To sane people it's lunatic asylum, a house of sorrow. And to the patients?—Anything and everything. Every patient is in a world of his own, each has his own concept of what surrounds him. Agreed? So then, picture three people—a doctor, a patient and a visitor—standing side by side having a conversation. Now ask them: what do they see when they look around? Who, in fact, is mentally ill, who is well, whose reality is more objective? I don't believe anyone really knows.

He continued to circle, emerging into the light, fading into the shadows, dropping out of sight behind me and popping up again. I was beginning to regret having asked the question—there went another one talking about realities, with no explanations forthcoming—but the man seemed to read my mind.

– Please understand that it isn't my intention to confuse you. It's just that—how can I explain it... Have you ever wondered why the Bible was written as a series of elaborate, conflicting stories that lend themselves to an endless number of interpretations? One would think it was easy enough to give mankind clear and precise instructions, the way it was done with the Commandments, for instance.

I was in no mood for a theological debate: keeping up with his laps was getting to be a literal pain in the neck. So I replied, rather curtly, that the Bible contained such complex information that no human tongue was equal to presenting it in instruction form, and that I failed to see the connection between the Bible and the things that went on in this building.

– You're absolutely right. I can't help but note, however, that the way the Bible was written was very possibly meant to invite contradictory readings. And there is room for discussion as to why this should be so, and perhaps you and I will have that discussion one day. But now, I see, you're eager to get a straight answer to your question. So here goes: I have no idea what's going on in this Building. I mean, I used to in the beginning, ten years or so ago. Back then I had the notion of building a great big trap, was all. Somebody was after me. Well, that's a long story, and it doesn't matter anymore. But almost right away, the Building became more than just a labyrinth. To my surprise, the actors I'd hired stopped acting and made the Building their home without coming out of their characters. From there, things just took their own course. People came to stay here the way one comes to join a monastery. They left the big

world for one that was small but fashioned after their personal preferences, strange as those preferences sometimes seemed to me. And so it went. The instructions I gave in the beginning—no windows, no indication of time, no visitor must ever leave the confines of the Building—they were all related to the specific goal which had prompted me to undertake this project. And then I found out that some of these instructions became law, even though the need for them was long gone. Though I guess I can understand it: once one leaves here, one loses everything one has gained while in the Building, and re-entering a reality is very difficult. In a nutshell, then, this Building is occupied by people that have the means, financially speaking, to create for themselves any kind of world they want—what we here call a personal reality—and live in it. They say there's a child inside every adult, but unlike children, we know that a game is only a game, and that whatever we pretend to be, the real world awaits us once the game is over. But what if the game never ended? What if one had the ability to go on playing forever? Here, we have that ability. And so—we play... Of course, this is a very simplified sketch of what goes on in the Building. Indeed, sometimes there are cases that are quite beyond... beyond my understanding of how things can or should be.

He halted in a patch of light, gave me a slightly disconcerted look, and dived into the greyness again. His words intrigued me, and if that really was the way of this particular world, then... It was high time Julia returned. Had she perchance betaken herself to the basement after ditching me in the maze? Though if she didn't want my company, she needn't have retrieved me from Harry's place. The thought of Harry made me wince. So Mr. Man had lined up a cozy little S&M reality for himself... things were starting to connect... and the rabbi had taken it for the genuine article, and had been murdered for it! What the fuck was I talking about??? Must have been the odor buff's orbital velocity that was making me dizzy and

confused in their frigging realities. Or were the actual heavy odors doing a job on me? I looked up. The murky opaqueness swelled at the pit's periphery and, I could swear, was slowly rotating. Though damned if I could tell in which direction. Just like a young 'un who'd had a spin too many on the merry-go-round.

As I brought my head back down, I realized the pause was getting too long. I looked around. The dizzying dude was gone. I was pretty sure he hadn't gone "poof" or climbed up the fire escape: I would have noticed. Evidently, the pit had another exit. Yup, there it was. Naturally, nothing so cheesy as hidden panels and secret passages. Just a little side door. Well, since Julia still hadn't seen fit to show, there was no need to go chasing wayward walls again. It made sense to use the door—and quickly, before the carousel whisked away all my sense-making faculties.

The door wasn't locked, and behind it I found a corridor that curved along the pit's circumference. The ceiling—a jumble of insulated pipes, valves and cables—and the concrete walls suggested that it led to the maintenance facilities. By the dim glow of sparse overhead lights, I thought for a spell before taking a right, and walked along the corridor, which straightened out after circling the pit, till I reached two steel doors to either side of me. I could have gone on, but the increasing noise and vibration called up visions of a ship's engine room—seething, steaming, stinking of oil and gyrating with gadgetry that set my subliminal teeth on edge. The only thing less tempting was backing up and exploring the other end of the catacomb.

I pushed the right door; it was locked. The left yielded. After the gloom of the corridor, I had trouble taking in the brightly lit room. When I did, a shudder ran through me. On a sloping dais, in the center of a space almost large enough to be called a hall, stood an open

casket. The grey face of the body inside could have been a hole in the white satin lining.

Otherwise, the room was empty. I was frightened, disgusted and embarrassed all at the same time. Dead bodies were fine as part of a distant well-attended ritual, preferably one that had nothing to do with you. But crashing a funeral from the back door, like I just had, was, in my opinion, a profanation. A rude intrusion upon the intimate practices of strangers living and dead.

In sum, I hastily snatched at the handle to pull the door closed when a sudden idea made me hang onto it and take a long look at the dead man's face. No, he didn't look like anyone I'd met. And it certainly wasn't the rabbi. Where did a thirty-year-old specimen of rational manhood get off being scared to enter a room with a coffin? Especially since both the box and its contents were probably fake? Chickenshit! Even supposing that somebody had really died, how likely was it that the final farewells would be taking place here? You could play games with your life, but death was the ultimate checkmate. A real corpse would have been long since dispatched to a funeral home and handed over to the experts, the paramount reason being that an actual death would have shattered all their realities like an old-fashioned flatiron dropped on a glass thermometer. Playing dead, on the other hand, was a different matter, and very much their style.

Diffidently—couldn't help that part—I approached the dais. The coffin rested at a slight angle, right about even with my chest. Well now, what have we here? I held onto the side of the box and leaned in. No question about it: this was not a real human being. A dummy, quite obviously. A doll made to order for somebody's perverted reality. That was why the room was empty: the prop was waiting for its hour onstage.

The doll was wrapped in white satin up to its chin. I scrutinized the face: shrunken, it appeared to be touched with powder, eyelids and lips tightly shut. The Latin expression *facis Hippocraticus* floated into my head: the face of Hippocrates, a death mask. Mask? No shit. Probably a latex one.

Your pits may give me vertigo and your rabbis may make me see double, but this feeble attempt to simulate death had just missed the mark. Come on, people! If you want me to play along, at least take the trouble to make the game convincing. And just when I was starting to feel like Sir Lancelot, hero of a real-life adventure! It well and truly pissed me off.

Irritated, I pushed away from the bogus box. Suddenly there was a screeching noise, something under the casket snapped, and before I knew it—slowly at first, then hustling along—the box was sliding off the dais, feet first. There was no excuse for chewing the scenery; instinctively, I sprung to intercept it. It was more than halfway down when I got there—too late to catch it. The heavy box hit me square in the chest and thundered to the floor, landing on its end. I still held out my arms, but only in self-defense: the doll, thrown loose by the blow, was falling on me.

I wasn't sure how it happened, but we collapsed together, doll on top. And as we made contact, unspeakable horror took place. The jaw of the thing that had covered me dropped, and I heard a deep sigh. A smell hit me in the face. A smell unmistakable, instantly recognized, not by me but by something within me: the smell of the morgue. Lying on top of me was a real cadaver.

I howled, flailed, rolled out from under it and dashed blindly away, away, not caring where. No time to analyze. There went the pants again, shooting down to my knees, but in my frenzy I was helpless to fix them. Subconsciously, I was searching for the door I had entered

through; the only thought that reached me over my electric terror was the equally terrible awareness of the sacrilege I'd committed—the body and the funeral were real!.. But Jesus, to turn back and set things right again... The idea sent me hobbling in double time, tripping on the pants.

I never found the door I wanted, nor was I in any state to look. All claims to nonfussiness renounced, I skipped along the room's perimeter, desperate for an exit, any exit. The fear must have affected my vision: despite the glare, I could see no further than a flashlight's range. At last something like a doorknob entered that ludicrous range. I grabbed, pulled, leaped, slammed: that was the way it had registered. Only after I'd slammed did I realize it wasn't an exit. Or at least not a way out of the room.

I found myself in total darkness. In a different state of mind, I would hardly have dared to explore it for fear of breaking my neck. As it was, arms stretched out, I staggered forward, presently to discover that I was shut inside an empty enclosed space not much bigger than an elevator. There was nowhere to go from there, unless it was back for another round of Spoon with the Stiff.

All-righty, said I to myself. If there was no way out, I'd have to invent one. Gots to prove myself a worthy member of this secret society. Was it Reality A, B, or C that was going to get me out of there? None of the above? No hysterics, now! Where oh where was my Julia, my armor, my sword? Gone to hell in a handbasket, sticking me with blackness, four walls, and a footloose corpse bringing up the rear. How's that for a doze of reality?

Before I had time to panic properly, lights flashed on. My cubicle bounced and began to crawl downward. It *was* the elevator! Where it was headed was beside the point. Here was a machine that traveled between floors; it was just a matter of pushing the right button. I looked

around: no buttons. In fact, no door. Through the open frame, I could see the shaft's dusty wall slowly rolling up. Evidently this was a freight elevator, controlled from the outside.

Well, what the hell. It was bound to stop somewhere... I was distracted from the thought that I'd soon be facing whoever had called the elevator by numbers blinking in descending order on a display panel overhead. Mesmerized, I watched with obscure but growing alarm as the leisurely twinkle edged further and further to the left.

Floor three... floor two... I stiffened, expecting the jolt of arrival. For a second the fickle flicker seemed to find peace at the number "one." But no... the wall kept creeping up... At last the car screeched to a halt. And—as if I ever had any doubts—there I was in the basement. Was it the dungeon of the rabbi's fears, or just an alternate reality as preached by the tubby pitmaster? And once I found out, would I live to tell the tale?

The elevator's outer doors opened, but I saw nothing: my eyes were assaulted by a wide beam of harsh white light. A familiar raspy voice that made me want to clear my throat said with an ineffable expression:

– Oh, sweetie. It was an awful bad idea for you to come down here.

CHAPTER NINE

The blinding light went off, and in the yellowish darkness that followed I made out the familiar shape of the Building's proprietrix. Her appearance called for a double take. It was hard to recognize the sexy beast of a schoolmarm I'd left upstairs. All dolled up in a red clown wig and an impossible purple robe that concealed her convexities, the old gal would have looked ridiculous if it weren't for her odd expression. Her eyes were like two saucers and her eyebrows arched out of control, but it wasn't surprise I was seeing. It was a mask of fright that seemed permanently stuck to her face.

The chill that still lingered after my date with the dead made another sprint down my spine. Little had I thought, when busting out to freedom from the lady's claustrophobic pad, that just a few hours later, still wearing my unbeatable robe-and-pajama-pants combo, I'd be running into her strangely transformed self in the basement I'd heard too much about...

– You really shouldn't be here, – she repeated, approaching. – And I don't know how to send you back up. This elevator—

She was close now, and I could smell—almost taste—the queer, tart chemical odor that was coming from her. The smell of spilled ink from my childhood. She was going to say something else, but a voice spoke behind her back, and the old woman hastily cleared the way without changing her expression.

– Welcome, welcome, come on in. – The owner of the singsong voice materialized in the passageway.

This was a tall, lanky man with long black hair and sparse growth on his pointy chin. The tip of his prominent nose was crowned with narrow, snaky-looking glasses. The fixed stare aimed at me, though friendly, was so intense that I felt my chill sprout goosebumps. Perhaps

my vivid imagination made too much of what took place in the basement, but the man before me evoked a strange brew of responses. I felt drawn to him and repulsed at the same time.

– Come, let's sit and chat and have a drop of tea, – he continued in his lilting tones, and led us down the passageway. It turned out to be a short walk, but granny had time to hiss into my ear with a mixture of pride and fear:

– That's my son. They call him Trickster. Do as he says, dear, don't argue. See, he likes—

I never found out what she thought he liked. We'd arrived at a doorway curtained off with a piece of heavy fabric, which Trickster flung aside with a welcoming flair.

We entered a smallish room dominated by a round table squatting under a low-hanging orange lampshade with fringe. Shadows of massive dark armoires lurked in the corners. Trickster installed me in an armchair at the table, waved the old woman in, and slipped back out through the curtain. My eye was caught by his terrible posture: the right shoulder was noticeably higher than the left, plus, like many gangly people, he slouched. A chair squeaked as granny sat down next to me, promptly leaned over and resumed:

– Do you even know where you are? Oh, I'll explain later. But you sure picked a bad time to come. All hell's breaking loose here today...

She rubbed her palms on the edge of the table, sighed and scratched her head under the wig. I could see she was bursting to tell me something, and I brought my head closer so that we could whisper. Instead, she jumped up so abruptly it sent the lampshade swinging, and headed for the exit. They must have collided in the doorway: I heard a cry, a quick hushed exchange, and right after that Trickster's face appeared, twisted with malice. On second glance, however, I figured he was graciously smiling at me as he came in with kettle and mugs. So he'd meant it

about having tea. The orange circle of light swayed over Trickster's feet. He was wearing enormous suede sneakers, the color of ripe raspberry. What was I supposed to make of that? Well, whatever. The room's reality was tranquil, even homey in its own quirky way. It pacified me, and the hot kettle, set right on the table's bare surface, promised an entertaining conversation with my intriguing host.

He took a seat across the table and put before me a deformed ceramic mug, obviously hand-made and decorated with the craftsman's fingerprints. Dark glaze spilled over the rim in sloppy dribblets.

– Do you like my mugs? I made them myself. Go on, pick it up. Can you feel it? The hand has to be sensitive, it's very important. Everything's important... but the tea.

He laughed, and I couldn't help looking at his own hand, which held the monster-mug in a tight grip. Long-fingered, expressive and strong, the hand seemed foreign to its spindly owner. But then he looked different now, sitting at the table: all there was to him was the hand and the stare. His pale skin wrinkled under the beard. It was another of his friendly smiles, but somehow, almost as a by-play, I felt uneasiness building up inside me. Not so bad that I'd get up and leave, but pronounced enough to promise more surprises.

A high-pitched moan, almost a howl, rent the air behind me. I spun around. No one was there. Trickster watched me with interest, his eyes so invasive I felt like our noses were touching despite the table between us. Then he receded to proper distance and deigned to explain:

– My kitty-cats. Meow!

He scratched on the chair, and I saw a white bolt shoot up from the floor. A cat was standing on his shoulders, tail up, legs apart. Trickster reclined in the chair, using the motionless cat as a headrest. Their rapport was complete.

– So, what shall we talk about? I know: women! No, wait, you must be dying to find out what's going on in this bizarre Building of ours. Hey, I heard tell that you and Julia are an item. Is it true? So, how is she? A good lay? Just curious, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. She doesn't spoil us with her company too often. Doesn't like it here. I wonder why. Has she mentioned me at all?

He chattered nonstop and gave me no chance to reply. The man clearly preferred talking to listening, but still aspired to play the gracious host. The contrast of his black hair against the cat's white fur was disturbing to the eye. Trickster seemed to be aware of the effect and enjoying it. His head rubbed against the purring beast with something approaching lust.

I sipped from my mug and immediately wished I hadn't. The tea tasted funny. I didn't relish the idea of succumbing to some crap it was laced with, less still to the man who'd laced it with the crap. That must be why I took another sip.

– Such strange goings-on, – Trickster murmured. – I hardly ever go upstairs, but they tell me astonishing things are afoot. And rumor has it...

The cat jumped down into his lap and was instantly caught under the master's hand. Trickster's touch was almost predatory: instead of petting the feline, his groping fingers squeezed it, crushing the fur. The cat skewed at him and meowed reproachfully, but he ignored it, taken with an image in his head.

– My overall feeling is that Sam has gone too far with his gimmicks and mysteries. He's got his hands full and no idea what to do with it all. But if the Building exists and all these

people live here, there must be a need for it. Did you know that the original tenants were actors? They're still here, too, except they've stopped acting. Or vice versa—maybe they've finally found the roles of a lifetime. Ah yes, we're all playing here. Human beings always play, of course, but ours games are more interesting. Infinitely more interesting than real life. Wanna see for yourself?

He sprung to his feet, grabbed my wrist and yanked me up from the table. My sympathies to the cat: his hand was like a goddamn vise. If it weren't for that jack-o'-lantern smile, and perhaps the impolitic tea, I'd have thought I was being assaulted.

He dragged me over to an armoire, opened the door, and we dived into darkness. The armoire turned out to be a vestibule of sorts. When I looked down, I recoiled and clung to the wall. We were standing on a narrow ledge without any safeguards. Far below us was an immense round room, empty except for a circle in the center of the floor—a big white disk that appeared to be made of some strange bubbly fabric. Trickster let go of my hand and took a step forward. The toes of his ludicrous raspberry sneakers hung in the air.

– This is where Ritual lives. All the paths lead here, – he declaimed, flailing his arms for dramatic effect... or to keep his balance.

I couldn't take my eyes off his sneakers. The man was teetering two or three stories up in the air! I would have fused with the wall if I could: I pictured my wrist in his relentless grip again, both of us plummeting to the marble floor beneath.

– What happens here is stuff that dreams are made of. Or nightmares. For no one can predict what's going to happen next, or when, or how. I'm considered something of a psychic around here, yet even I...

He leaned forward, raised his arms and glanced at me with a crow's wily eye. The world stood still. The ledge seemed to slip out from under my feet.

– Now. – He lingered a moment and stepped into the void.

My heart missed a beat. But nothing happened. He hovered a foot away from the ledge, his probing eyes too close for comfort again.

I have no idea what I would have done next if Trickster didn't suddenly burst out laughing, slap his skinny thighs and sit down right in thin air. As he leaned back on his arms, it dawned on me that he was sitting on a sheet of clear glass that extended outward from the ledge.

– Damn! I just can't keep a straight face when I'm workin' that magic. Woolf's coming over, he'll do the shaman bit for us. Me, I should give it up. I always crack up and break the momentum. Let's go in and talk instead.

We returned to the parlor and he refreshed our tea, not the least bit embarrassed. So the trick laid an egg, big deal. It seemed that nothing could faze this man. When I mentioned the odd taste of his tea, which got more distinct as the tea cooled off, he shrugged his discrepant shoulders.

– I didn't drug your tea, if that's what you're implying. Never fear, I don't serve drugs to my guests—it's way too expensive. But there is a little something in there, you're right. Just wait, you'll thank me for it later. Julia is an attractive woman, no question, but... She happens to be the only one in touch with the outside world, which makes her... shall we say, not the most intriguing focal point. The women you're going to see have been playing for years, and believe me, that's a whole different ballgame. Hey, I'm not advertising anything, but Woolf's going to be here any second to do his, uh, incantations. That's what we call it these days... That should be him now.

The curtain in the doorway flew aside, and the mountainous elevator attendant of my acquaintance squeezed his way in. He spilled into a chair, panting. I had the slightly paranoid notion that he was avoiding my eyes on purpose. Trying to hide his bad intentions.

– Hey, Trickster. We’re ready down here, but upstairs...

He trailed off and made a big show of reluctance to speak in front of a stranger, turning and glaring at me with portentous gravity. A lifer looking at a new cellmate. I knew I had good reason not to like the fat fuck!

– Yeah, yeah, I know all about it, – Trickster dismissed him, smiling at the cat that had reclaimed his shoulder.

– You think you know everything. Well, know-it-all, things are royally fucked. Basically, the funeral bit the big one. And I know you know what that means.

My breath got caught in my throat. I was about to be revealed as the perpetrator of the desecrated coffin... The upshot of this was moot: the hulk’s tone of voice and Trickster’s reaction made it equally possible that my feat would be punished or rewarded.

– Uh-huh! This I didn’t know, but I could have surmised it. Well, that changes things. Here’s what we do: we have to intercept Woolf. He’s en route somewhere; well, you know where to find him. Let him know that our plans for today require adjustment. Hop to it.

The hulk puffed his way out, and the eyes behind the snaky glasses resumed their perusal of me. I’d been frantically looking for a way to explain my intervention in the funeral, and had resolved to take the easy way out and tell the truth. But Trickster’s gaze wandered away from me. He attended to the cat on his shoulder, and was, I do believe, kissing it on the nose.

– A little change in plans, – he said without turning. – But that’s a good thing. It’s chaos up there. How many times have I told Sam that this endeavor of his... Well, I won’t bore you with details, but all the pieces are falling into place. And we’re winning. Come on, I want to show you something special. Really special.

He got up, and I saw the cat’s claws dig into his shoulder as it tried to hold on, but Trickster was oblivious. He opened the door that led out to the ledge.

– By the bye, I keep meaning to ask you—to what do I owe the pleasure? Crazy Bertha brought down the elevator and you popped out. Care to explain?

OK, let’s see if we can weasel out of this one. I bleated that I’d been taken to the Center by Julia, had a conversation there with somebody or other, gotten lost on my way out, stumbled on the dead body, and, well... I was careful not to specify in what sense I used the word “stumble”. Let him take it as he would. If push came to shove, nobody could prove I was the one who’d knocked over the coffin.

But the local psychic didn’t want the specifics. He eyed me seriously, without his usual smirk, and led the way. We were back on the ledge, and now there was more light in the room below.

I never found out what Trickster had put in my tea, but when, cat still perched on his shoulder, he left the ledge behind, walking on glass like Jesus on water, I followed without batting an eye. This was no ordinary glass. It didn’t sag, even when we crossed the room halfway, though there were no supports that I could see. Then again, I tried not to look down: for all my pot-valor, the trepidity of walking on thin ice—multiplied tenfold—was breathing down my neck.

We were directly above the white circle when Trickster turned to me with the same solemn face and trumpeted:

– Now we shall fly for real.

Sound behaved strangely in this interspace between the glass and the ceiling. It roared back, and I felt a vibration under my feet. Trickster took down the cat, cradled it in his arms and, without changing his pose or expression, began falling backwards. I braced for the inevitable, sure that the impact would shatter the glass and we'd go crashing down in a shower of slivers. But I was in for a surprise: there was no glass over the white circle. Black hair flew up, madness blazed in the cat's eye, and the long narrow body was airborne.

Why did he do it? A second later, I knew, I'd hear a thud, the crunch of breaking bones, a scream... But there was nothing. Nothing at all. Below me was the same empty room with a placid white disk in the middle.

It's very unpleasant—witnessing a stunt where someone takes a dive from a great height and disappears, leaving you stranded at the aforesaid height on a plate of glass. It's considerably more unpleasant than ousting a stiff from a casket.

Inchmeal, I got down on my knees, then slowly lay face down and spread my arms. The vibration of the glass was strong and constant. I didn't know what had happened to that maniac, but whatever fate had befallen him seemed preferable to the thought of walking back to the ledge. I began worming my way to the spot where Trickster had stood last. It must have looked uncanny from below—a spread-eagle man coasting through the air.

I reached the circular opening and almost fainted: the glass was marginally thicker than windowpane. One wrong move, and the whole plate could go. Yes, ladies and gents, I was stuck again.

I heard footsteps beneath. Two stark-naked women entered the room and came to the edge of the white circle. They were talking, but the weird acoustics made their words indiscernible. The women were young, unless the bad lighting deceived me. No, they had to be: as one followed the other in a slow stroll along the circumference, I could see their nipples bouncing in a firm, youthful way. They acted naturally, as if fully clothed, but there was something about their gait, the way they held their heads... Anticipation. An anxious flutter and the bated breath of expectation floated up to me on a wave of warm air.

Something—my guess was, the tea—rushed to my head, and my fear mingled with curiosity. And excitement. Trickster's fate no longer seemed to matter.

The vocal volume increased, and a third woman joined the others. Taller and bigger, her body was white—painfully, morbidly white—in the lateral light. It would have looked right on a redhead, but this one had long raven hair. With clothes on, her old-fashioned full hips might have looked too heavy, but in their naked reality they stirred me with their primeval call. I wished I could see her face.

More women came. They filed along the circle's edge, and my sense that they were setting the stage for some esoteric ritual grew stronger. Though if you overlooked the nudity, what went on down there was fairly ordinary. Would somebody explain why I keep pushing against the tide here? A set with a balcony compels me to run, a moving maze puts me out, a fake corpse that proves to be real scares me silly. And now I dismiss Trickster's vanishing as a vicious practical joke. Am I too straight for this far-out world?

While I'd been crawling, my long-suffering pants had slipped down to my knees, the robe had fallen open, and my bare flesh pressed against cold glass, which was not cooling me

off but intensifying my novel sensations. Anyone looking up would take me for a bedlamite, but the thought made me hug my fragile bed all the harder.

Suddenly, nothing stirred beneath, and the women were all ears, waiting for the command. Any moment now... The galvanized suspense of female nakedness below infected me, and I clutched the edge of the glass. If it took much longer, I'd break the damn thing myself!

A woman stepped forward, held out her arms, and jumped into the circle head first. I gasped. The white fabric rippled and surged into waves when she touched it. But it wasn't water. Millions of tiny rubber balls that filled the circle closed over the diver's head. For a second, something like a vortex appeared in the center but instantly smoothed itself out, and the pool looked like groundcloth again.

A few seconds passed, and another nude body slipped into the circle. Then another, and another. The room was emptying out, but the tension wouldn't release me. I was grafted to the glass. A ritual this was, and it was far from over. I had a feeling it was just beginning.

At last there was only one woman left at the edge—the wide-hipped one that had captivated me. She seemed to hesitate. I kept waiting for her to follow the others into the white caviar of the pool, eager for a glimpse of slightly parted thighs as her body sunk into the quicksand.

But she was in no hurry. She turned her back to the circle and sat down on the edge. The tilt of her head made me think she was listening to something I couldn't hear. I pulled myself forward and hung my head down through the hole. The room was silent. She was sitting right under me, hugging her knees. All I could see of her was the alabaster back, half hidden by the straight black hair. Now. Now it would come.

An inkblot was suddenly there on her back, and after a pause trailed down in a jagged streak. The woman trembled and her body arched, as if responding to an unseen hand. Another, bigger dot appeared, spread out of shape and rolled down to her buttocks. Things unholy, depraved, and wildly arousing fermented in my brain.

I let my head drop lower and felt a warm stickiness under my chest. I flinched, looked down... and it all made sense. I'd sliced my palms on the glass I was clenching and never even felt it. It was blood—my blood—that trickled down that receptive pale back, creating patterns that looked like cracks.

Was it the blood I'd spilled, the barbaric symbols emerging on ghostly skin, the whole spellbinding sorcery of the scene? My head was spinning in a wide circle, I wanted the blood to flow on, and the distance between us diminished, my fingers could almost reach her and follow the blood patterns down... down... There was nothing I feared, I was part of this world, open and hungry for all of it as much as the luminous body beneath.

Then the ambiance changed, shifted without breaking my ravishment. The woman uncurled herself and leaned back slowly, until, her head down on a pillow of white balls, she was facing me.

I knew she could see me; she might have seen me all along. Was she beautiful? I couldn't say. I saw her in flashes: serene lips, breasts slightly splayed, long shapely legs. I moved my hand; a few more blood drops fell. One of them glazed the wide pink circle of her nipple. I writhed and leaned over the edge. The leap seemed inevitable.

Far back behind me there was a creak, a bang, and the inimitable scratchy voice enounced:

– Oh, sweetie. I'm so sorry. Didn't I tell you it was a bad time? Well, nothing to be done now... Come on back here. Come on, come on, I'm scared to walk out there.

The confounded old hag in her cockamamie outfit was standing on the ledge, the homey orange lampshade glowing behind her. The contrast of sensations was profound: I would have preferred a cold shower. An image of her—naked, obese and revolting, her ass bucking in the grip of black hands—rose before my eyes and turned me into a small dirty boy.

I wiped my palms on the robe without success, got up and wobbled back to the ledge. The old woman buzzed about the room, found some gauze and bandaged my hands. In a fit of mothering, she even pulled the pants up from my knees. As she fussed over me, she jabbered away, mentioning names I didn't know and some events that were going on or in the making. It all went over my head. But when I heard Julia's name, I pricked up my ears. Julia, it seemed, had been waiting and waiting, and was worried, and was ready to come down and get me, even though... Julia. I'd forgotten all about her, the upper-floor tenant I'd once found so alluring.

With no clear sense of purpose, I left the old babbler to talk to my back and drifted towards the dark gap of the elevator. Did I want to find the woman tattooed with my blood? I didn't think about it. The emotional storm of the previous scene had left me dazed and drained.

I got into the elevator and sat down on the floor, waiting impassively. Sooner or later somebody would push a button and I'd be on my way. Where? To join Julia, perhaps, or somewhere else. Up. Down. Sideways. Who cares.

Sure enough, soon the light went on, the car twitched and started moving down. I realized I'd been vaguely hoping for that—the room I wanted was down there... But my wishes were irrelevant. It wasn't me that moved between the Building's realities; it was the

Building bouncing me around, like a kid teasing a fly trapped in a matchbox. Easy enough to say I'd lost touch with reality. The question was, which reality.

The elevator stopped on the next floor. A strange sight opened up before me: in total darkness, far away, a fire was burning. There was no ceiling, no walls, just a fire and a sharp primal smell of roasting meat. I got up and walked towards the fire, feeling the moisture of real earth under my feet.

Trickster was there, watching the fire, turning large chunks of meat on a grill. A stomach cramp reminded me how long I hadn't eaten. But the hunger was suppressed and existed in some other reality, outside of me.

Trickster silently invited me to sit. He was sad and quiet now, this chatterbox in raspberry sneakers, staring pensively into the fire. I, in turn, stared at the luscious meat, contemplating how to go about getting myself a piece.

– Them's the breaks, – Trickster uttered finally. – The funeral flopped. The Building falters and the game stands still... The pagan priests of the last Roman temples must have felt like this.

He followed my gaze and grinned.

– Help yourself. I can't promise you'll like human flesh, though. I'm kidding, I'm kidding! It's pure mutton. Just one of my jokes. Like the jump into nothingness. Had you going for awhile with that one, didn't I? Though I'll tell you, when you fall backwards from that high up, you want to be dead sure somebody's there to catch you.

I was stuffing my face with undercooked meat and wondering why he'd said the Building faltered and the game stood still. I'd just come to appreciate the rush of that game, and

would have hated to lose it. But I also hated to ask stupid questions. What reasonable explanations could I hope to get here, by this fire, in this basement or wherever the fuck?

– Ideas are like women, my friend. Attractive while they're fresh. Once they age and lose their bounce, nobody's keen on them. It seems that our idea has fed too many babies, and its breasts have shriveled and sagged. Alas, as we all know, nothing escapes punishment.

He sounded melodramatic again, but sincere. Then he shook his head, snatched a rib from the grill and greedily wolfed it down. And I instantly doubted his melancholy. Only a bon vivant could eat like that.

Trickster sucked the bone clean and wiped his hands on his grungy pants.

– So! – He sounded like himself again. – Did you like the babes? Why didn't you join them? I was betting you'd at least have the cojones to hit the pool. A pool full of cheesecake! When I didn't find you downstairs, I assumed Julia stole you away, though I would have thought they've got bigger fish to fry right now. And Woolf was asking about you... Oh well, I guess it's a matter of preference. There are times when I, too, enjoy a good sit by the fire over a chop of fresh-killed game. There's something... ferocious about it, *n'est pas*? By the way, an old friend of mine's going to be joining us. He's a big fan of fire and game... and he doesn't mind a good chat either. I'll introduce you.

If the old friend likes to hear himself talk half as much as this one, I mused, how good can their chats be?

Something stirred and rustled in the dark nearby. We both sat up in alarm. Actually, it was Trickster's alarm that alarmed me: for all I knew, things were supposed to rustle here. But the resident psychic seemed surprised and a little frightened. It must be his cats, he offered

uncertainly, because he wasn't aware of any rats around these parts. He threw a scrap of meat into the gloom.

– Though to tell you the truth, – he added after a pause, – I have no idea what lives around these parts. Nobody knows for sure. I wouldn't put it past them to have let something loose...

He didn't elaborate, and I didn't ask. Instinctively, I stuck my bandaged hands under my arms. The smell of fresh blood on top of fresh meat, I thought in passing, could attract whatever they've let loose.

Trickster got up so abruptly that I jumped. He pulled a charred log out of the fire and swung it around like a torch. I realized he wasn't scared at all, just excited and curious.

– We could walk straight ahead till we ran into a wall, go around, find the switch, and the next thing you know it would be light as day. Then again, we could sit here and wait. Let things run their course and see what develops.

His lack of concern calmed me down. After all, it's not like they'd turn loose a tiger or a crocodile! Trickster sat back down, threw the log in the fire and relaxed.

The next noise made us both jump. A man came out into the light. His head was crowned with a headdress of feathers. His powerful bare chest was heaving. The bow and arrow in his steely arms were pointed in our direction. It would have been kind of cool if this was an actual Indian in full regalia, out on a break from some local reality. But the man's arms and torso were awful hairy for an Indian, and he had a bushy black beard. He turned his head, and my heart sank: I recognized the bulging eyes behind thick lenses. The rabbi... Insanity was the only explanation.

– All right, you two, – said he. – Turn your backs to each other.

CHAPTER TEN

We sat back to back, bound together with a nylon cord that cut into the flesh. Trickster seemed delighted with the situation. I didn't buck either, but only because this reality was not sinking in.

The rabbi stood next to us, scanning the scene with an eagle eye, keeping vigil over the darkness. The crazy plumage swayed in his hair. He kept grim silence. My arms, squeezed against my ribs, were slowly growing numb. Finally even Trickster was fed up.

– Look here, Rebbe. – His tone managed to combine venom with bored indifference. – Nobody's forking over the ransom, and if we lallygag here for much longer, we'll miss the incantations at Woolf's. And I daresay that's a little more interesting than your live reenactment of scenes from Native American folklore.

The rabbi rolled his head, righted the glasses, and uttered in the voice of a warrior:

– It will not avail you to insult Big Buffalo, for he is as deaf to insult as he is to prayer.

– Is that your new handle? Big Buffalo?

The rabbi grew thoughtful, feathers flapping in the air. Then he lowered the bow, leaned into Trickster's face and spoke in a normal voice, which was completely at odds with his makeover:

– You think I'm crazy, don't you? Not anymore. I was crazy before, like the rest of you. Am I Big Buffalo? Of course not. Though to a degree... When an infant of eight days bleeds as he is circumcised—that is of Big Buffalo, see? Everything else is dreck. All the books were written by mortals. All the commandments! Believe in them or not, your choice. So where do you turn? Why is the God I believe in the correct one and yours is incorrect? How can you have faith incorrectly? And who knows the correct way? So all you have left is Big

Buffalo, and for you information, he's got no commandments. You can touch him with your hand, he gives nothing and asks for nothing back, see?

I strained my neck to look at Trickster, who was itching for a pause in the rabbi's cryptic babbling to interject. But he didn't get the chance. An explosive noise came from a distance and roared its way towards us. It took me a moment to realize it was the sound of a car engine at full throttle. In a space this vast and walled in, the sound unrolled like a giant steel sphere. The cord bit into me with new strength: Trickster was fidgeting. If all that had transpired thus far somehow squared with his convoluted realities, this new sound, I gathered, just didn't compute. The rabbi, too, was surprised, but not for long. He straightened, forcefully drew his bow and turned to face the noise. In the flitting reflections of the dying fire he stood tall, face inscrutable, lips moving. If not for the beard and the glasses, he would have looked damn convincing. The headgear and the bow—props of a gullible mind on the fritz—were in perfect harmony with the impending formidable sound, the flames and the smell of burned meat.

A second later, headlights blazed on. A car was charging straight at us. The rabbi moved not a muscle: I believe he was taking aim. Trickster, though, was seriously rattled. He bumped against me and pulled, trying to get up. A sharp pain sliced through my arms, like a knife on raw flesh. We lurched and fell away from the fire. Before we did, I caught a peripheral glimpse of the low dark hood and glowing dragon eyes of the car, which materialized inches away from the rabbi. Brakes screeching... a dull bang... and, inexplicably, shattering glass. Ignoring the pain, I writhed spasmodically. Something was happening to which I wanted to be neither witness nor participant.

– Idiot! – shrieked Trickster. I wondered if he meant me or whoever was there, by the fire. – You miserable idiot!

We managed to sit up again, and I saw that the fire was gone. In its place—the coals still smoldered under the tires—was a small sports convertible. Sprawled lifelessly in the driver's seat was a suited figure. From our angle, only the coat lapels and elegantly drooping tie were visible. Trickster made a herculean effort and nearly succeeded in getting us to our feet.

– Move it, – he snarled at me. – The shit's hit the fan, if you haven't noticed.

Our clumsy attempt to turn around was interrupted by more noise: the rabbi, bow and feathers forsaken, leaped out of the darkness and landed on the hood. The impact sprayed shards of windshield all over the driver, and still he didn't stir. The rabbi squinted at the man, and his face fell. He pushed forward for a closer look. When he turned around, it was the old rabbi again—an unnerved, undressed Hasidic Jew. He jumped down gracelessly and sputtered:

– Listen, I didn't even hit him... I don't think. So how..?

As if he'd only just noticed that we were tied up, the rabbi pulled out a pocket knife and tried to open it. But his hands were shaking, so he mumbled something and went at it with his teeth. Blade released, he slashed at the cord so savagely that I arched with pain and Trickster snarled again.

Cut loose, Trickster went straight to the car and bent over it. The rabbi fussed nearby, looking over his shoulder. I was content to stay where I was. The meat I had eaten traveled back up and hovered in my throat. I stared at the wide oval blur on a faraway wall—the high beams were still on and seemed to have suffered no damage—musing that if I were to make it to that wall, I could just follow it until I found the door... Figuring out what had just happened was something my brain flatly refused to do. I'd had it with analysis and self-analysis. The fucking realities had faked me out again. Thanks to them, I feared I was now a witness, if not a party, to a bona fide murder.

– Happy now, Rebbe? Had enough of playing Geronimo? – Trickster leaned back against the car in a dramatic pose, arms folded. Only his voice, strained to the breaking point, betrayed his unhealthy agitation. – I don't seem to be seeing Big Buffalo. Isn't he coming?

– I'm telling you, I didn't hit him. The windshield I broke, but where is the arrow?
I don't get it! I don't get it at all!

The rabbi was fit to be tied, whereas Trickster was calming down and appeared to be relishing the rabbi's angst.

– I don't know what to tell you, – he drawled in the tones of a cop on the take. – It's not a good situation, Rebbe. In fact, it stinks. Well, what have you got to say for yourself? Because of you they'll turn the Building on its ear. And that's the least of it. Use your head, Rebbe: a man is dead. And what a man... It's Mark Mazel in there, Rebbe. *The* Mark Mazel. Boy, I'd hate to be in your shoes right now.

I didn't quite see what Trickster hoped to gain by psyching out the rabbi, who was scared stiff as it was. It smacked of blackmail, but what was there to be had from a frantic half-naked man?

Muttering under his breath, the rabbi sidled over to the car and made a cautious circle around it, blocking my view of the lifesaving wall as he passed in front of the headlights. Then he rejoined Trickster.

– There's only one way out of this for you, Rebbe. What am I saying!—one way out for *us*. We bury him and hide the car where the sun don't shine. I know just the spot around here, I'll show you. We'll be at Woolf's before anyone misses him. End of story.

The rabbi observed him keenly and shook his head in an ambiguous way that could as easily have been a nod. Abruptly, he swept—nearly flung—Trickster aside, opened the car

door and stooped over the body. The underweight Trickster crashed into me, gripped my shoulder with an icy hand, and made an expressive sound that I took to be an invitation to join in the fun. The world was swimming before my eyes, the yellow spotlight on the wall my only beacon in a raging sea of realities.

Meanwhile the rabbi had turned to us, and now the expression on his face was even stranger than at his grand entrance from the gloom with bow in hand. Trickster's claws dug into my shoulder.

– It's the same old story: a stupid detail, a piece of nothing can put the kibosh on a glorious enterprise. Farshtaist? – The rabbi propped himself up against the car in imitation of Trickster's pose a minute before.

– This is about Big Buffalo, not your two-bit reality games. This loony bin you call your Building is enough to drive anyone crazy, but... I came here by accident, but now I'm glad I came. See, if God created man in His image, doesn't it figure that the best way to know God is to study man? One day it came to me. So you spend your life with your nose in old books, so you find out in the end their truth is only true if you believe it. But truth can't be believed or not believed, see what I'm saying? Big Buffalo doesn't ask for faith. There is an arrow; the arrow is shot. When it hits the mark, that is Big Buffalo. But when it misses, that, too, is Big Buffalo. You might say Big Buffalo is at the tip of the arrow. What, you don't believe it? Stab yourself with an arrow and you'll see. Idol worshippers, the yellow-bellied putzes, prayed to him. What does Big Buffalo want with their prayers? What possible use could he have for prayer? I've observed men, I've picked their brains, and I've come to a conclusion: human beings are descended from apes, Big Buffalo had nothing to do with it!

The man was in a bad way. I felt genuine pity for him. Not so Trickster, who let go of my shoulder and took a gingerly step towards the rabbi, as if afraid to scare him off.

– You need to stop it now, Rebbe. There's too much going on upstairs for them to worry about Mark right now, but it won't last. Leave the speeches to your defense attorney, OK? Quick, let's get him out of the car.

The rabbi was oblivious. He calmly removed his glasses, looked around in vain for something to clean them with, turned back to the car and started wiping them on the dead man's coat. Trickster and I exchanged glances. In my opinion, it was time we were out of there and on our way to see Woolf, Julia or Big Buffalo himself. The insensitive Trickster, though, had no intention of leaving the poor nutcase alone. He jabbed an elbow into my ribs:

– Hey, Mr. Accessary, looks like you'll have to help out. The rabbi's pretty useless.

No way! Sorry as I was for the rabbi with his Indian fixation, I didn't want to get in any deeper than I already had. I couldn't and I wouldn't! I'd seen enough dead bodies. I backed away from the car. The crushing smothering weakness I'd felt on the roof overwhelmed me again. An insane rabbi, the shifty and probably evil Trickster, and a corpse... it wasn't company I wanted to keep.

In another second I'd have run away screaming, but something I'd been unconsciously expecting all along—and had all but given up on—finally happened. I saw the rabbi rebound from the car when a hand holding a broken arrow grew out of the driver's seat and pointed in his direction. The rabbi dived head-first into the murk. Trickster, who stood with his back to the rabbi, shook his dirty tresses in farewell and bared his teeth in a chilling smile, but didn't bother to turn.

The driver mundanely stepped out of the car, carefully pressed the door closed, and joined us. He was small in stature and looked pretty comical next to the gangly, lopsided Trickster.

– Is this the way you welcome friends, old chap? A fire, quoth he, fresh lamb, good conversation... Instead, you send mad Indians to shoot me. If I hadn't ducked, Big Chief would have ruined the game. As it is, he's only ruined the leather. Still, most impressive for a rabbi.

The casual aplomb with which he spoke reminded me of the hapless Harry. Same high-hat mannerisms. Except Harry was a yodeling hillbilly next to this acid little man.

– Next time you're invited to a barbecue, why don't you just fly over in your jet, huh, Mark?

Trickster was trying to keep up the light tone set by his resurrected pal, but it wasn't working. He was plainly reaching, he lacked confidence, he even exhibited cold glimmers of fear. Strange...

The man named Mark stepped up to Trickster and put a hand on his misaligned shoulder. Trickster jerked, and I wasn't sure whether his impulse was to shake off the hand or make obeisance.

– I bet you thought the funeral was botched, didn't you? Well, for the record, it was a great success. Worked out better than we'd planned, actually. And to top it off, that brilliant lunatic of yours... What was it that he said?—Big Buffalo at the arrowhead? By George, there's something to that. Well now, since my burial seems indefinitely postponed, get in. I'll give you a ride.

He steered Trickster towards the car, from which the latter recoiled like it was a burning oven. Realizing he'd lost the round by showing fear, Trickster tried to cover up by turning to me, as if to indicate he was with someone. The man turned around too, and I found myself constrained to play up to his silken but malignant urbanity: I fixed the twisted collar of my robe and hitched up the pants with my best shot at panache.

– Dr. Mazel, this is... – Trickster stumbled on my name, which he'd clearly forgotten, blushed and was about to cut the ceremony short, but recovered: – This is a referral from your camp. Julia brought him. I'm sure you've heard.

– By all means, let's take him along. He may come in handy. Never too many where we're going, right?

His eyes barely skimmed me as he got in the car; he didn't condescend to take a proper look. I didn't want to go anywhere with this creepy dude, but Trickster, dispensing with his airs of nonchalance, clamped onto me again and dragged me to the passenger door. From the outside it might have looked like he had a friendly arm around me, but I knew better than to struggle: I was no rabbi, and brushing off his bony hook was not an option.

Three people, even three skinny people, jamming into a trim two-seater is sorry business. Or so it was for me: I was wedged between the seats, squeezed in by the expensively perfumed Mazel on one side, sweat-reeking Trickster on the other, hand brake puncturing my tailbone from below. Mazel tilted forward to give us the eye, which glowed with the promise of nasty surprises, and swung the car around. The little auto with a herd's worth of horsepower shot into the darkness. I couldn't imagine how Mazel was able to judge distance: the walls were phantoms swaying in the holes that the high beams were punching in the gloom. At this speed, the joyride could have ended in a head-on collision. I shrank away from Mazel and

pressed into Trickster's craggy side. Trickster squirmed testily, but let it go. He sat with his head thrown back and eyes closed. I closed mine too, but it only made me more scared and nauseous. Just then the dragster bounced as we entered a wide corridor that dipped sharply. The car cleared it in two seconds and came to a stop in a garage—standard issue, complete with a fork lift and tool drawers, smelling of oil and gas. On the heels of that kaleidoscope of realities, the setting was so down-home ordinary that I half-expected Mazel to get out of the car, lift the hood and ask us to help check the battery.

We mounted the lift, and Mazel did get out of the car, but he crossed to a little side door without saying a word. Relieved that we'd made it in one piece, I stepped out after him and felt Trickster glaring at my back. He was trying to communicate something—for a moment I thought his eyes would pop—but his meaning eluded me completely.

Mazel opened the door, nodded to us, and went up a steep metal staircase. Trickster leaped out of the car, prodded me towards the door, stole aside, opened a drawer, and pocketed a small but hefty-looking monkey wrench that gleamed like a surgical tool. The footfalls on the stairs broke off, and Mazel's voice, urbane as ever, commented:

– Don't be a fool, Trickster. You're making me doubt your abilities. One Indian chief is plenty, don't you think?

Mazel backtracked a few steps and crouched down. His smiling Ivy League face appeared in the doorway. He couldn't see Trickster—the open door was in the way—but he still disregarded me and spoke into thin air:

– I did mention, did I not, that the funeral was a success? Are you sure you want to play Big Buffalo?

Trickster edged over to me, met with Mazel's eyes, smiled sourly and threw the wrench on the ground.

– Come on, Mark. Your imagination's running away with you. I told you before, I'm just a big old magpie. Love'em purdy shiny things!

He was still trying to keep on a par with Mazel, and still failing. That sour expression wouldn't leave his face, and when Mazel started up the stairs again, Trickster snatched a furtive glimpse at the wrench. I wasn't sure how to act around those two, who were more enemies than friends: one looked right through me, and the other, secret signals notwithstanding, would have stopped me if I'd tried to leave. My impression was that, for whatever reason, Trickster didn't dare disobey Mazel and was keeping me around to avoid being alone with him.

The staircase turned out to be a long one, and I was getting wheezy. And when it brought us to the very room where I'd knocked over the corpse, I forgot to breathe entirely. Thankfully, the dais and the coffin were gone, replaced by a circle of a dozen armchairs that accommodated a motley crew of characters. One glance at them was enough to make me very uneasy. First, I couldn't help but make a direct connection between this crowd and the body I'd disturbed. Second, and most distressing, draped over an armchair right across from me was a swankily tuxedoed Harry. The memory of our last meeting flogged the sense of self-respect that had lapsed in the heady succession of realities, and I forced myself to give him a look of cold defiance. The effort went unnoticed by the grinning Harry, busy leafing through a notepad in his lap.

Mazel had made himself scarce, whereas Trickster, evidently knowing what was expected of him, made himself conspicuous by slinking between the chairs and plopping down in the middle of the circle. He sat there like a pitiful clown, large palms splattered on the floor,

legs splayed out, toes wiggling inside raspberry sneakers. A whisper ran through the audience. I noticed that all of them—men in black tie, women in generous evening décolletage—held notepads like Harry's in their laps. I was being completely ignored. The whole thing reminded me of a dog show, with Trickster as pup before the panel of judges. He was fooling around, rolling his head side to side, but when our eyes met I realized the dog he really brought to mind was a mutt surrounded by a pack of wolves. I felt the dull tug of despair, a strange reaction to the outwardly peaceful sight of people with notepads quietly gathered around a nervous Trickster.

I jumped and whirled around when somebody tapped me on the shoulder. Julia, wearing her low-cut evening gown, stood behind me. She touched a finger to her lips. Seeing her smile was like coming home. All I wanted to do was throw myself at her and bury my face in her cleavage, and there, in that warm fragrant darkness, to lose sight of the whole sick affair. As usual, she sensed something and stepped back with the same smile. Confusion was brewing again: Julia and Mazel... If she was here, that meant... And the enigmatic basement guru submissively sitting before them...

Mazel reappeared and started making rounds. He lingered at every chair, leaning over, listening, nodding. Sometimes a panel member would shrug, and Mazel's eyebrows would rise in disappointment. I could see Trickster straining to hear those quiet exchanges, but he wouldn't turn to look. At last Mazel completed the circle. He paused to think for a second, smiled, and signaled to Julia. She answered with a nod and was instantly at my side, holding my arm. For some reason I broke out in goosebumps. Julia was betraying me... Out of the corner of my eye I saw Trickster get up, wipe his palms on his thighs, sneer at the crowd and leave the circle. I turned to him with hope, but he walked away like I didn't exist. He didn't

look back till he was almost at the door, and tossed a glance of blank indifference at me over his snaky glasses.

Julia was hugging my arm and I could feel her breasts against my elbow, but now it was a turnoff. The whole crowd was staring in our direction, and I knew it was my turn to get into the circle. The thought of it churned my stomach, and I had to fight the urge to shake Julia off like some slimy slug that fell on my shoulder. But the judges watched me so dispassionately, and yet with such bureaucratic conviction that everything would go on as scheduled, that I understood: running was absurd, struggling useless.

– Don't be afraid. It's just a little procedure. It's not very pleasant, but it will be over quickly, – murmured Julia. Her warm breath was moist and sour. I shied away and glanced at her. No device in her ear; did that mean talking was pointless? Her eyes were glazed over; her tongue was licking her dry lips... Just like that, an intensely graphic scene flashed before my eyes in living color. Me and her. Those lips and eyes looking up at me. It was the damnedest thing: I was feeling actual revulsion for this woman now, and that very revulsion prodded me to savor the details of the picture in my head. She whispered something else, but I didn't hear and didn't really listen. She gently propelled me towards the audience.

In a daze, I entered the circle and sat down, Trickster-fashion, with legs stretched out in front. Of all the stares that shoved at me like billiard cues, what I remember are the eyes of Harry, full of mockery, and another pair—large, dark and compassionate. A woman's eyes.

Mazel was there again, circulating. I couldn't hear what they were telling him but sensed that this ordeal, meaningful in a way that was hidden from me, was nearly over, and that my judges were about to announce their final verdict. The grave efficiency with which they marked their notepads was preparing me for something I was desperate to avoid. If this had

been some pompous barbaric ritual, I would have felt better. Rituals carried an element of play, a stamp of the chimeric realities that inhabited the Building. Masked faces, droning music, mysterious preparations would have revived my sense of the theatrical, the way it had happened before. But this didn't feel like a game. Reserved well-dressed people matter-of-factly penciled me in and crossed me out.

At last everyone stirred, rose and spoke at normal volume. Julia squeezed through the crowd and sat down beside me.

– So? – I asked resignedly, meaning “so what happens now?” But she ignored the question and breathed into my ear in a feverish whisper that now that it was all over, now that I'd been chosen, and she'd never had a doubt, oh, the moment we'd met on the street she knew... Well, now I was a very, very important and indispensable man, and Harry, who'd been against it, could go to hell, and best of all, she'd never leave me alone again, couldn't if she wanted to, but she didn't want to...

I was trying to glean what the hell had just taken place and what the consequences would be, while Julia whispered and whispered. Before I knew it, the strain of the preceding scene had quietly passed into a kind of lighthearted silvery contentment. I no longer thought of the procedure as offensive and baffling, and was even proud to have been chosen... though it would have been nice to know what I'd been chosen for. The realities were reined in again. The Building was only a building.

Julia and I took the elevator once more, this time without the aid of the attendant, then walked down a hallway, and I was not surprised to find myself back in the room with the fake sun in the window. Except now it all seemed to have happened centuries ago, and I felt different—felt a sense of belonging, I guess, which was probably why the mess hall now struck

me as pleasant. When, with a domestic hand, I drew open the curtains, I took it as a matter of course that it was now fake night outside: even the poor lech Bertha had to sleep some time.

Once again we sat on the floor in front of the nickel-plated coffee tank, and as before I wasn't hungry, but some java would have hit the spot. Julia was near, but all traces of my recent experience, including our vivid mental duet, were washed away by a deeply satisfying sense of having accomplished something difficult and important that had earned me the right to enjoy some peace, quiet, and a good cup of coffee.

The repose and the coffee called for a cigarette. Amazingly, the pack that Julia had conjured up for me all those centuries ago was still in my pocket. I drew one out lazily and offered the pack to Julia. She shook her head and continued to gaze at me with a loving smile, for all the world like a wife feeding her husband dinner after a hard, productive day at work.

Pack in one hand, I reached for the lighter with the other, and realized I'd never given it back to Julia like I was going to. Certainly my newfound feeling of togetherness with all that went on in the Building erased that minor social blunder. Still, for a second there my hands trembled and ruined the moment: the lighter flashed as it twisted out of my fingers and fell into Julia's lap. It was heavy, but not so heavy as to cause her pain, and I didn't think there was much surprise involved. But Julia flinched. She gave me a strange look, then looked back at the lighter—and leaped to her feet. Used as I was to her mercurial mood changes, this was an order of magnitude different from anything I'd seen.

– Where did you get it?! – It was a hideous distorted squeal, the shriek of a hysteric who'd seen a mouse. – How come you have it? You.. You... This is *his* lighter! Where is he? You know where he is, don't you! Do you have any idea what will happen if they find this on you? Do you have any idea of *anything*?!

She shuffled in place, knees jerking forward convulsively, and I realized she was having an out-and-out fit. You'd think the dragon on that lighter was real: she dropped it like a hot potato and furiously kicked it at me. Stunned, I started to get up, the unlit cigarette dangling from my lip. Julia jumped away from me.

– Don't you come near me! Stay away! Everything's different now! But you're going to talk. You're going to tell the whole story...

She cut her words—her screams—short with a bitter grimace, waved me off and bolted to the door. I shambled after her, trying to explain, but the door slammed in my face and I heard the key turn in the lock.

It was getting ridiculous, the way things kept repeating themselves. For a change, though, I seemed to have a real reason to run, because if someone like Mazel were to react to the gadget half as violently as Julia... My thoughts galloped backwards, and I shuddered. What a fucking idiot I'd been to relax! The place was a minefield—one false step and you were screwed! What the hell was the deal with this lighter? I'd stepped in it again, hadn't I. And this time I didn't care what "it" was. They were coming after me, and when they came... Well, there was at least one way out the hysterical bitch had forgotten about.

I dashed to the window behind which Bertha was dreaming the phony night away. If she hadn't locked up, I'd zip clear through her sex nook and she'd never know it. Then what? Never mind that now—the window was latched, and the latch kept slipping through my fingers. There! I pushed up the glass—and heard a distinctive authoritative voice, ringing with the thrill of the hunt.

– Stop right there! I said, don't move! – barked Harry.

I froze: the tone suggested that the weapon aimed at me was nothing short of an MA16. My back had never felt so broad before. I suppose I was eager to narrow the open target it had become, and that was why I started turning sideways. Before I could complete the turn, I heard a woman's scream—Julia's, I surmised; then another, and just as I faced the door, it shut with a bang. And not a moment too soon: a split-second later, there was a predatory buzz as a familiar-looking fledged arrow struck the door on what would have been Harry's chest level.

I was still trying to take it all in when a huge hand sprung up behind me, caught hold of my robe and pulled me out the window. I proved too heavy even for the rabbi, and we went tumbling down. The rabbi grunted—I'd poked him with my elbow—easily shifted me over and got to his feet, panting. The light from the window was sufficient to see that, even without the headdress, he was still channeling Geronimo.

– How, offspring of ape. Didn't you hear me tell you this was no place for a Sunday walk? Lucky for you, Big Buffalo has more than one arrow. I might have missed the last time, but Big Buffalo never misses, see? All right, let's get out of here. Big Buffalo is on everybody's side, because he's on nobody's side. And his quiver is always full.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sam had the oddest feeling. His Building, the fantastic little universe he'd dreamed up and created, had taken on a life of its own. It was exactly what he'd hoped for, but... Submerged in his miniworld like all its denizens, Sam was sometimes forced to come up in the big world and reckon with its one and only reality. The contrast was a torment on the mind. Worse yet, the real world presented problems with which Sam had no strength or desire to contend.

But somehow things always worked out. Every once in a while his legal advisor paid a visit, wearing the sour face of a grownup obliged to put up with the whims of a sick child. Sam was inattentive to his trustee's explanations, understood nothing of the paperwork he signed, and nodded a passive "yes" to all suggestions. He couldn't get his brain around the financial side of the enterprise. The money he'd won was just a Lot of Money, and its infinite quantity seemed in no way related to invoices, interest rates and market fluctuations.

And so the day the attorney showed up in Sam's small attic office in the company of a Dr. Mazel, Sam had to painfully concentrate in order to grasp why that frail diminutive stranger was there.

This time the trustee spoke at length, scowling but keeping his voice neutral. As Sam understood it, he was facing disaster. It seemed Sam had been repeatedly warned that his irresponsible handling of funds, his short-term low-return investments, as well as the unfavorable tax policies presently in effect, would one day result in his being unable to meet his financial obligations. That day had now come: he was virtually penniless. The ramifications were as bleak as they were clear: foreclosure, liquidation of assets—specifically, the Building—bankruptcy and belated regrets.

A little shiver ran through Sam. He no longer thought of the Building as his property—in fact, it was kind of the other way around. And now it turned out that his universe was at the mercy of decisions he made, the volatile outside world and the countless confusing events that went on out there.

Fortunately, emphasized the attorney, there was a way to forestall financial ruin. That was the reason he'd taken the liberty of bringing along Dr. Mazel. One could tell the trustee took great pride in the solution he'd found, and viewed himself as the benefactor of both parties. Much depended on Sam himself, of course (at this, the petite doctor nodded earnestly), as well as whether the arrangements would be acceptable to the organization which this gentleman represented.

When Sam asked what that organization was, Dr. Mazel flicked a sidelong glance at the trustee as though they were fellow conspirators. His evasive reply was that first he would like to take a tour of the building and verify that it suited his organization's purposes. If he liked it, he hastened to add, Sam could rest assured they would assume all financial responsibility, the building would remain unchanged, and Sam would keep his present position. What position that might have been Sam didn't know, but he didn't argue. Instead, he repeated the question.

With a hint of irritation, the attorney remarked that his reputation would never permit him to involve a client in any shady dealings, and that if Sam had seen fit to trust him with managing his millions—scattered to the winds as they, alas, had been, in spite of the trustee's best efforts to prevent it—then Sam should hardly hesitate to put faith in his recommendations. Sam had no choice but to shrug in assent.

Sam took Mazel to the Center; the attorney refused to accompany them. The doctor perked up and was asking lots of questions on the way down. Sam sensed that he was prepared

for what he was about to see. That was peculiar: the trustee could never be persuaded to take a walk through the Building, not even out of simple curiosity. Sam voiced his puzzlement.

– Well, – grinned Mazel, – We have our sources. And I hope you don't think we're taking advantage of your situation. I've been wanting to have a chat for quite some time, but you're not an easy man to reach. Things being as they are, however, when I shared my ideas with your attorney, he was happy to help me out.

Mazel was wearing a flawless suit that bespoke a successful businessman, he smiled a lot and radiated casual confidence, but somehow Sam felt sorry for this man. Sam's years in the Building had impaired his judgment of things practical and rational but deepened his intuition, the way one's hearing sharpened when one went blind; and what he sensed in Mazel was distress, uncertainty and fear. Something wasn't right there. Then again, thought Sam, what does "right" mean? None of us are quite what we wish to seem...

He showed Mazel "The Snail" and "The Steamboat", led him to "The Throne Room" by way of "The Roving Maze", and even offered to take him to the basement to see "The White Circle", but Mazel shook his head. Enough, enough, the basement would be too much bother, nor was it necessary. He'd seen all he needed to see, and, in his opinion, it would do very nicely. They could now proceed with the closing, sign the papers and—

– Wait a minute!.. Surely some explanations are in order? I'd like to know what your plans are for the Building and the people that live here. Not that I seem to have a choice, but still...

– No choice indeed. But didn't I already say we plan on leaving everything as is? It's simply a matter of a few new people moving in, on the same terms as the others. By the way, how many residents are there?

He was not surprised to hear that Sam couldn't say with certainty.

– Not to worry. There would be no more than ten new tenants, fifteen at most. Room enough for everyone, I'm sure. We've hardly seen a soul in all this time, so I don't imagine you're squeezed for space.

Mazel waited for Sam to nod reluctantly and asked with a smile that betrayed underlying anxiety:

– So is there a process of initiation into this... community of yours? Some dark and secret rite of passage, as it were?

He looked disappointed when Sam explained that there were no rituals involved and no mystery to speak of. A person was simply let inside the Building and left alone to decide where and how he wanted to live. Except no clocks, calendars or telephones were allowed.

– Well, that's going to have to change... – drawled Mazel and waved his hands when Sam tried to object. – Look, Sam—I may call you Sam, may I not? The alterations we make will in no way interfere with your Building, I promise you. In fact, things will get considerably more interesting. You can't haunt the same maze forever. You need new blood; you need new realities. If I understand your concept correctly, I guarantee you as a licensed psychiatrist that in six months you would have arrived at precisely the solution I am offering you today. Of course, in six months you would not have this Building.

Well, Sam had nothing against it... the Building lived by its own rules anyway, but... but he felt it was important for him to know what exactly Dr. Mazel meant by "alterations."

Mazel pondered the question with a furrowed brow. Then, avoiding Sam's eyes, he imparted with some embarrassment that the first thing they'd be looking into was constructing a funeral parlor.

Sam sighed with relief. He'd been afraid there'd be talk of converting apartments, installing windows, and similar things that would have cracked the fragile shell of the Building. It would have pained him to see his "Maze" become a winter garden for bored philistines and his "Circle" filled with actual water.

Certainly he had no problem with the kind of additions Dr. Mazel was proposing, and new people would be welcome as well—he couldn't see any reason why not. If the essence of the Building would be left intact, the details really weren't all that important. "The Funeral Parlor"...

– It's settled, then. – Mazel rubbed his hands together, also relieved. – And Sam, I'd like you to know that you're doing a good deed; I'd even go as far as to say—a great deed. I didn't want to bog you down with details at the outset, but there's nothing dark and secret about our organization either. Just the opposite, unfortunately. It hardly warrants the name "organization", really—it's more of a private club. And I am one of its founders. You may believe me when I tell you that all of our members are, as they say, the cream of the crop. The annual membership fee is five million dollars.

He waited for a reaction, but Sam only nodded absent-mindedly. With growing enthusiasm, Dr. Mazel went on to explain that money was just one of several parameters that qualified one for membership. But the facts and figures were of secondary import. The fifteen members of his club had long been looking for something unique, having tired of the hobbies and pastimes they'd enjoyed in the past. And being intelligent adults, the members could fully appreciate the difference between a sideshow attraction, however clever, and the opportunity to live in an alternate reality that this Building offered. This was why, when the pertinent information had been presented, everyone had thrilled at the idea and instructed him, Dr. Mazel,

to pursue negotiations and make the necessary arrangements for the club's relocation to the Building. Obviously, the place could have been had for peanuts if they'd waited for Sam to go bankrupt, but... It had been him, Mazel, that had insisted that naught and none in the Building be touched, because if Sam and the others were to leave, they would have taken with them... well, the very thing that made this Building so valuable to the club. As concerned the finances, Sam could put his mind at ease: the funds they planned to invest in the project would ensure that he'd never have to worry again. Never again. Wonderful, wasn't it?

By then Sam was not really listening to the good doctor. Everything was turning out OK after all, except that Sam had the distinct impression he was being bought part and parcel of his Building. Mazel revealed no further details about his mystery club, but what Sam had heard was enough to set him thinking about the great many people that could potentially find his Building irresistible. But were these the kind of people that would be good for the Building? He'd hand-picked the original residents, who were a special lot—actors, accustomed to multiple realities—and who'd soon felt at home there. Of those who had wandered in by accident, only the ones who couldn't do without the Building—and whom the Building had accepted—had stayed on. For them, it was something like a monastery... a very unorthodox monastery, to be sure. And now, jaded millionaires... Well, he'd have to wait and see.

A few days later Sam was signing the papers. The ownership of the Building was being transferred to the club, whose name Sam didn't see in any of the documents—not that he looked. He signed whatever he was given without reading it. He did notice that the club's letterhead featured an unusual symbol: something that appeared to be a spider split in two. Sam put the pen aside and took a closer look; Mazel and the trustee exchanged glances. The spider turned out to be a crab. A ribbon inscribed in Latin ran diagonally across its severed

halves. Oh well, what difference did it make? Sam signed it all. In conclusion, Dr. Mazel solemnly shook Sam's hand and asked that he call him Mark.

As promised, the new tenants brought no changes to the Building. Well, almost none. Dr. Mazel gathered everybody for formal introductions, but Sam promptly forgot all the names. All that registered is that there were four women amongst the club members: three unattractive ones, chatty in a nervous kind of way and trying to look younger than their age, and one truly young, very pale and sad-looking, with hair so long and black it seemed unreal. That one kept to herself.

The men varied in age and appearance, but something in their bearing grouped them together like a uniform. Perhaps it was wealth, Sam reflected. But they didn't act snobbish at all. On the contrary, as they crowded into his cramped office and stood holding their fancy travel bags, they looked more like supplicants than owners. It made Sam uncomfortable: he rushed through the formalities, welcomed all, and ran away to his private quarters.

Some time later, perhaps a month or two—who kept time?—Sam thought he'd go for one of his usual walks through the Building and see if he could get a feel for any subtle changes. There didn't seem to be any. What do they want with a funeral parlor?, Sam suddenly asked himself. Death, or at least the rituals surrounding it, were somewhat out of keeping with the Building's realities. Then again, everyone had a right to one's own brand of reality. After all, immortality was man's eternal dream, and that was why death was so often accompanied by symbolic rites—our pitiful attempt to convince ourselves that we were part of the phenomenon and therefore to some degree able to control it.

Lost in thought, Sam walked on, and was surprised to find himself in the part of the Building he'd taken pains to avoid before. It housed what, to Sam, were the darkest and most

arcane realities. Its medieval mystic gloom, the aggressive way it greeted visitors, really disturbed him. Once before, when he'd been walking down one of these vaulted passageways, a strapping cross-eyed fellow in leather trousers had risen out of the murk and blocked Sam's path...

His forearms were encased in leather cuffs. Sweat glistened on his bare torso; the bloated pectorals were smeared with soot. The giant gripped Sam's shoulder, lugged him to a nearby alcove, and shoved him into a damp narrow cell. With an evil grin that warped his bristly face, he grunted, "Bail yourself out, motherfucker!", and slammed the iron door.

Sam was no stranger to the Building, so he didn't get scared. In complete darkness, he lay down on the cold stone floor, put his hand on the gnarly wall, and set about adjusting to a new reality. He lay there for quite a long time before he heard loud voices, clangor, and what he thought were the sounds of a struggle.

The door opened, and Sam was pulled outside without much ceremony. By the unsteady light of torches he saw Trickster, slumped lazily against the wall. The smile on Trickster's face was one of utter serenity, but his foot in a singular-looking slipper with a turned-up toe was resting on the throat of the felled cross-eyed giant. The latter was fighting for breath but made no attempt to get free, and averted his eyes from Trickster like a man who would see no evil. Two other fellows in leather vests who stood by holding torches were also careful not to look at the asymmetrical figure leaning against the wall. Sam marveled at Trickster's inexplicable authority: Trickster wasn't running things here—his realm was the basement. But Sam didn't ask; he just said "thank you" and left. Before rounding the corner, he turned to see Trickster still standing there with his foot on his prostrate foe's throat.

Sam hadn't set foot in that part of the Building since. Nor had he seen Trickster. Sam felt sure that if he came upon the basement-meister, there would be inevitable discussion of Sam's rescue which would somehow reveal what went on in the Building, and Sam really didn't want to know. It had occurred to him that just as he'd once retreated into the Building, unwittingly bringing the realities to life, so was he now retreating from these realities and the forces that drove them which he could not control.

...Now Sam felt ashamed of being such a coward and continued down the gloomy passageway, sheepishly expecting trouble at every turn. His apprehension made him pick up the pace, but the hallway remained empty.

The first thing he saw when he took the next turn was a bright strip of light that fell on the cobbled floor from the arch of a doorway. As momentum carried him past it, he caught sight of a strange human shape illuminated by a narrow beam from above. Sam slowed, believing he'd recognized the person, and took a step back.

He'd been right: it was she, the young woman from the millionaires' club whose detached beauty had stuck in Sam's memory. Wearing a shapeless grey robe, she stood frozen in the dense shaft, right arm raised and pressed tightly against her head. As if reaching for the light source high above, the muscles of her bare arm strained, the fingers trembled. Her face alone defied the urgent pose: it was the brooding face of a weary, wretched human being. That disparity, that smock, the silver light on ebony hair, the dismal darkness beyond... it held Sam spellbound. Solitary and motionless, with eyes that lived and suffered and stared straight at him, she elicited strange pity and a stranger fear—a fear of ruining something before one could understand it, the fear of touching someone who balanced on tiptoe on the edge of a roof.

Nonetheless Sam was compelled to take a timid step forward, not knowing why and sensing that it would have been much better if he'd kept on walking. The woman's eyes widened and her lips twitched. Was she forbidding him to approach, or calling him with no hope he would come?

Sam took one more faltering step—all at once he was dizzy—and picked up a bitter medicinal smell mixed with the delicate scent of female sweat. The eyes still devoured him; the outstretched fingers shook harder. But as soon as Sam advanced again, the woman sharply exhaled, dropped her arm, and sprung away into the darkness. Sam entered the empty spotlight, regretting that he'd gone off course and disturbed her fragile solitude. Ordinarily, the Building's realities had no trouble intermingling: when necessary, they simply overlayed one another, forming intricate new patterns. But now Sam felt like an outsider, and suddenly he was sure that the ritual he'd interrupted would have painful repercussions on the way of life in the Building.

He stood for a while reassuring himself, and resolved to speak with Dr. Mazel to see how the new tenants were doing and if this floor was the home base they'd chosen for their realities. On the whole, thought, it seemed the time had come to give up this aimless gadding about the Building. His brainchild had become too complex and unpredictable.

Sam turned and went out into the hallway, which now seemed even murkier. Nothing stirred behind him: the woman appeared to be gone for good, or at least till he'd removed himself. All right, he could take a hint.

He could still see her face, and it brought understanding of how these people might have changed the balance of realities. He sensed a nameless Presence that had come in with them. There'd been room for fear in the Building before, even for gothic horror, but such things never

existed autonomously: they were part of the scenery, a decorative detail, a condiment, one might say. But that face in the glare, the absurd stretching arm... He'd had good reason to be wary when Mazel had mentioned a funeral parlor.

These thoughts so took possession of Sam that he forgot to be cautious as he followed the curves of the passageway. Startled out of his reverie by a burst of laughter, he rounded the next bend and came face-to-face with the same coriaceous crew once humbled by Trickster. This time Sam got a friendly reception. At the sight of him, the cross-eyed thumper rubbed his neck and guffawed.

– Wanna hear something funny? The crapper gave out the other day, so we sent word through the Elevator Man, the usual shit, right? OK, so the plumber shows up, and he looks around and he goes, “Did somebody forget to pay their electric bill?” We’re, like, all right, smartass. So he dicks around for half an hour, and when he’s all done, he just has to ask. He goes, “What is this place, a nuthouse or something?” So Frank gives him the spiel about realities. You should have seen the guy’s face! He’s, like, “Oh shit, I knew this was a bunch of psychos, I gotta get the fuck out of here before they get violent...” But check out the balls on this dude: he packs up his tools and goes, “How about a tip, you guys? I’ve earned it.” Can you believe that shit? Asking *us* for a tip? So we showed him “The Black Hole.” Would have dropped him in, too, if Frank wasn’t such a sap. You can bet your ass he won’t be back for seconds, though.

He cackled again, but cut himself short and fell silent, staring at Sam. After a moment, he pulled a wry face and finished:

– Other than that, things kind of suck.

Sam didn't know how to react to that announcement. He wasn't sure what "The Black Hole" was, and had his doubts if this fellow was on the level. Sam remembered their last meeting all too well, and was getting more than a little nervous. But they were waiting for a response, so he asked in what he hoped was the same conversational tone:

– Hey, have you guys seen any strangers around, besides the plumber? Like, the new folks?

– That's what he's talking about, – the man named Frank stepped forward. He looked to have a little less brawn and a little more brain than the others. – There's been shit going on. I don't know about your side of town, but we're pretty spooked down here.

– Well, what is it?

– These newcomers are really bad news. I'm dead serious. I went down to see Trickster, but he just laughed it off. So I go back a second time, and I'm trying to get through to him, and then I look at his feet and he's still got the boots on. You know, the ones with the spurs on them. What's the use of talking to the guy!

They weren't kidding, Sam was sure of it now. But they didn't seem scared—more like concerned. Concerned enough to make repeated attempts to alert Trickster: that did sound pretty serious. But now they were treading water and wouldn't get to the point. Very strange.

The cross-eyed giant must have realized Frank couldn't spit it out. He moved him aside with a huge dirty paw and said flatly, with a smirk designed to dispel any notions that he might be uneasy:

– Some of our people have gone missing. And it doesn't smell right.

In these Dark Ages they've got themselves here, thought Sam, missing people are a must. But up to now nothing like that had happened. True, their reality was barbaric and their

games severe, but— He didn't finish the thought. Frank and the third man, who was holding a torch, broke away from each other, and their ringleader's smirk dropped clear off his face.

Advancing upon them from the depths of the passageway was Dr. Mazel.

– Sam, I'm so glad I've run into you. I was planning to hunt you down.

Mazel was looking the same, his immaculate suit a quaint sight in the firelight. No, he hadn't changed, except the hard glint in his eye no longer gave the slightest cause for pity.

A petite, poised, mild-mannered Dr. Mazel. Only why were the leather-clad ruffians so pale and still? Even Trickster, with his unaccountable power over this bunch, had been forced to use his fists. And look at them now...

– Let's go to my place, Sam, if you don't mind. I'm just around the corner.

Mazel took Sam's arm and drew him back up the passageway without so much as a nod to the other men. They retraced the turns Sam had taken, but hard as Sam tried he couldn't figure out where he'd seen the woman.

Mazel pushed open one of the doors—a crude chunk of wood braced in iron—and let Sam through to a comfortable living room with a blazing fireplace and two oversized leather armchairs. He offered Sam a chair (which was hard and cold despite the hearth's proximity) and proceeded to make small talk.

Sam declined the cognac and cigar. He could see that Mazel was striving for the effect of a casual tête-à-tête, but his affable tone was at odds with the terrified threesome back in the hallway and Mazel's personal aura. By obscure analogy Sam recalled the long-lost Joe, and mused that the charming and cultured Dr. Mazel could prove to be more daunting than that hardened criminal.

Sam felt in his pocket for the lighter—still the same one. He didn't believe in good-luck charms, but always had it with him anyway. Not that Mazel aroused anxiety: the doctor did not emanate danger the way Joe had. No, something else was at work here, but Sam couldn't put his finger on it.

Mazel settled in the other armchair and crossed his legs. He carefully selected a cigar from the humidor on the coffee table, sniffed at it and bit off the end. Sam surprised himself by lunging forward with the lighter and striking the flint. Dr. Mazel inclined his head with gratitude and lit up.

– That's an interesting piece. May I?

He toyed with the lighter, clicked his tongue, and put it down next to the humidor with no apparent intention of returning it. To get up and reclaim the lighter struck Sam as impolite.

– To the point, then. There are some things that bear clarification, and I promise not to take up too much of your time. A few small misunderstandings occurred shortly after our arrival. Naturally, a wrinkle or two are always to be expected at first. They've all been ironed out now, I believe. Certainly our female members report a high degree of satisfaction. All three have taken lodgings with— uh, on Trickster's turf. I'd gone down for a look: it's really rather engaging.

– I'm sorry, – Sam interrupted, – but there were four women, not three, and I've just—

He didn't finish the sentence, having suddenly decided that what he'd seen was none of Mazel's business.

– Four to begin with, yes, but... different arrangements have been made. You shouldn't trouble yourself with the private affairs of the club. But we digress. No doubt you realize that our members are unconventional people, otherwise they would have chosen another place to

live. In view of which, I wondered if you'd mind explaining to your folks that certain adjustments and modifications—pick whatever term you like—that have accompanied our arrival, are simply another reality. That is the word you use, am I correct? It's perfectly possible that we may cramp somebody's style. I for one could do without this homage to the Spanish Inquisition, but I tolerate it... for reasons of my own. By the same token, we expect that our practices be accepted by the locals. Instead, I hear absurd rumors circulating around the Building. What was that out there just now, if not a bitch session?

Sam was getting tired of that cajoling voice, and he honestly didn't see what he could do to help. He barely knew half of the Building's residents and had no authority over them, and none of this was news to Mazel. So he dispensed with diplomacy and asked straight out:

– People gone missing, is that your idea of adjustments and modifications?

Dr. Mazel fell back in his chair with a surprised smile. A little too surprised, perhaps. Straining to feign ignorance, was how it looked to Sam.

– People missing? I'm sorry, I'm confused. Do you mean to tell me no one's ever left the Building before?

– A few people have left over the years, sure. But I've never heard the word "missing."

Mazel chased the look of surprise off his face. Signs of hurt, bewilderment and profound disappointment began to show through his civil veneer.

– You speak of disappearances as abnormal phenomena here, in this Building? My dear Sam, in all seriousness... Very well, since you're concerned, I'm going to demonstrate a few of our realities. Perhaps you'll understand how these rumors originate. Come.

He straightened, threw the cigar in the fireplace and marched to the door without a backward glance, a man determined to prove his point at once. No sooner were they out in the

dim passageway that Mazel, whose movements had gone from silk-stockings smooth to abrupt, ducked into a pitch-black nook at full speed. Sam hesitated: Mazel's harsh tones and gestures put him on the alert.

– Come in here and help me!

That triggered an instinctive response: Sam went, and was immediately grabbed by a hot hand that pulled him forward and downward. Sam lost traction, fell on top of Mazel, and the two went swooshing down a slick, steep incline.

– Sh-shit, – hissed Mazel when they hit bottom. – That's not the kind of help I had in mind! All right, forget it. Stay here, I'll be right back.

He retreated into the murk. Sam heard a soft smack: Mazel must have walked into something. And a second later, the darkness was punctured by two intense parallel beams. Sam was sitting well out of their way and could see the outline of Dr. Mazel standing next to a low open sports car with the headlights turned on.

– Hop in. – Mazel vaulted over the side and held open the passenger door. – We're going for a ride.

Sam nestled in the luxurious sunken seat. Mazel's hands trembled on the steering wheel; he was smiling a tight-lipped smile. The mighty Porsche Boxter took off like greased lightning. The floor they were on had been remodeled several times, but bearing in mind the Building's overall layout, Sam knew that at this speed they were seconds away from crashing into a wall. A kind of fog or nebulous dust enveloped the car; a glowing haze danced in the knot of lights and flew apart in sparkling smithereens. It occurred to Sam, an old hand at the Building's gimcrackery, that the car may have been standing still while the illusion of movement was being created by a special device. He stuck a hand out the window. A strong

air current pushed back against his palm. Strictly speaking, this too could be simulated... Mazel slammed on the brakes, and Sam's doubts dissipated: the Boxter rocked and started skidding. Mazel twisted the steering wheel, switched off the ignition and relaxed his grip.

– We're here. Now let's see where we are. Get out, but be careful. Watch where you step.

Not heeding his own advice, Mazel sprung out of the car, strode up to the front bumper and sat down on his haunches. As Sam followed, he understood what Mazel was warning him about. The Porsche's front wheels stood on a crumbling ridge of concrete, beyond which there was only darkness. The dust they had raised still reeled in the headlights, turning the gulf into a yawning abyss.

– Not much of a trick to it, – murmured Mazel, lifting his chin and staring out into the void. – Floor the pedal, count to ten, brake. But each time the car stops closer to the edge. Why? Search me.

Careless of soiling his suit, he suddenly lay down flat, head and arms dangling over the precipice. Sam's heart stopped.

– Gone missing, you say? Perhaps... Maybe they end up here. I don't know. Probably.

The next minute Mazel was in the car and backing up without waiting for Sam. Sam had a momentary notion that he was about to hurl the Boxter off the cliff. But Mazel only swung the car around, turning on a dime. Sam stood in a cloud of dust.

– By the way, I know I've been a little bashful, dodging your questions about the nature of our club. Well, my friend, it's really very simple. When you're practically made of money, it is particularly galling when life stabs you in the back—always in the back!—and your body is

invaded by disease. Incurable disease. All the members of our club, including me, have terminal cancer. And a thing like that... need I say more? We play different games. In short, don't be too surprised at disappearances. Okey-doke?

With that, Dr. Mazel threw the vrooming Porsche forward and left Sam alone in the dark on the edge of a precipice.

The Presence that had entered the Building with the intruders was as grave as their illness, and Sam could feel his Building writhe as it took that Presence in. Things would never be the same again. Doom was a great force and a reality all unto itself. Sam was frightened.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It's times like these that set me thinking there's something to the notion of Big Buffalo. What's in a name? Does it make any difference what we call the flux of life that spins and twists us all, starting with that sophomoric excuse for a sinner, Adam: a higher power, a string of coincidences, the law of cause and effect? As I see it, Big Buffalo is all these things. Besides, all the supposedly immutable truths which we dub "laws of existence" are essentially nothing but conclusions drawn from our meager experience. This experience, in turn, is based on the notion of the absolute reality of everything that happens... when, for all we know, what goes up has a good chance of switching realities at some high altitude and need never, in fact, come down. Oddly enough, the rabbi holds that this turn of events would have nothing to do with Big Buffalo. Only Here and Now, he asserts, are we dealing with the Buffalo's manifestation. From there on he gets carried away and, flailing his arms and blinking those oversized eyes of his behind crooked frames, talks drivel that wouldn't be taken seriously even by the Building's denizens. He contends that God shouldn't have banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. That's like putting a troubled teen in a jail cell with hard-core felons: by the time he comes out, you'll have yourself a fully-formed criminal. So OK, Adam did it with Eve! Sure it was disobedient, but what's their sin next to those of our coevals? Child's play! Yet the Omniscient One had to know what He was doing. Did He intentionally set His own creatures on a downward path? No: that's where Big Buffalo enters the picture.

We were in a tiny walkthrough room with a vibrating metal floor. The rabbi had hauled me there in the dark, past Bertha's balcony, through nameless doors and passageways. I had a funny feeling that all the different realities of the Building had formed a ring around me and that I was running in circles like a lunged horse. Nor did I have any new insights into what the hell

was going on, inside me or around me. Now the rabbi was hypothesizing how we could escape from the Building guided by Big Buffalo and the rabbi's knowledge of some passages and stairways. Which made me wonder: if we ever did escape, was he going to walk out half-naked with archery under his arm? And was there even anything out there, beyond the walls of the Building?

The floor of our cubbyhole was vibrating because the Building's utility system seemed to be right below us: the powerful transformers gave off the scent of ozone and something else unmistakably electrical. A ladder led down that way. Evidently, Big Buffalo had in mind for us to go down and try to shut off all the electricity in the Building. The rabbi assumed that the main switchboard was down there. He thought our chances of getting out were better in the dark.

But I wanted explanations. Dammit, I was ripe for explanations! And I had severe doubts that in the dark we'd be able to find our way around this labyrinth. I didn't quite trust the rabbi still. What had he rescued me from? First I had been chosen... for fuck knows what and why. Then the scene with lighter... So Harry had come in wanting an explanation of where I got the thing. *And...?* The rabbi butting in with his Buffalo had made it look like we were in cahoots, and there I'd gone skipping out on Julia again. True, they wouldn't let me leave the last time. But they'd been nice about it: Julia beckoned and I was back in the game. Now the rabbi had snatched me out of that particular ring. By the way, how had he known where to find me? If, as he claimed, he was not much more than a prisoner himself, how come he knew all the ins and outs? The man stepped out of walls like a specter and stepped back in when he was done. Would the Big Buffalo he served so loyally also be known as Mazel, by any chance?

The rabbi patted me on the shoulder, got up and started down the ladder.

– The most important thing is to figure out which switch we want. But you know what? I'll tell you what. We'll switch off all of them. – He giggled and paused halfway down, where I could only see his head. I thought of the lifeless hand hanging down from the hatchway in Harry's room. It didn't add up. The rabbi says he can't get out of the mousetrap, but out he gets and, instead of going home like he was dying to, marches off to play Cowboys and Indians. So he and Harry must have had a deal going. But I'd distinctly seen the rabbi shoot an arrow at that selfsame Harry, missing him by a hair...

– Eureka! Come here, I found it! – the rabbi called from below. I climbed down with the air of a man who knows full well he's about to do something stupid. Why, may one ask, did he need me if he'd found the switchboard? What, he couldn't throw a switch by himself?

The rabbi was indeed standing in front of a wide panel lined with rows of hefty switch grips. A weak lightbulb flickered above it. I squeezed through the narrow gap between the demurely growling transformer boxes.

– Here we go. – The rabbi turned to me. – This is it. I've got a candle, so it won't be too bad. See that red grip with the seal? Go ahead, pull it! Big Buffalo has drawn his bow again. Can you just imagine what's going to happen?

Maybe my senses had been sharpened by the whirlwind of realities, or maybe the rabbi was just overworking the Buffalo bit. I didn't so much as flinch when, reaching for the main switch, I heard the voice of Mazel. I guess I did have an idea what was going to happen. It wasn't that hard to track us down, and the rabbinical moron had to pick that moment to hold forth on Big Buffalo.

– I wouldn't touch that thing if I were you. It's for your own good. It's a dummy trap.

The switch is not insulated.

Mazel was standing behind me, and he sounded just as snotty as he had back in the basement, when he'd scared the bejeesus out of the rabbi and, if truth be told, myself. I looked at the rabbi. He'd fallen into a stupor and stood gaping, huge presbyopic eyes popping out. But it wasn't fear: I would say, astonishment. Something akin to rapture was darting across his face, as though he really was in the presence of Big Buffalo himself.

If Mazel had meant to frighten me with his talk of traps, he'd failed. I just wasn't buying his uninsulated switch. Then, for the first time since we met, he looked me in the eye and smiled. It was the weirdest thing—under that stare I felt like a lawbreaking klutz, caught at the scene with an idiot rabbi for a partner.

– Our games are not your cup of tea, I gather, – Mazel said, still smiling. – And if it weren't a matter of unfortunate necessity brought about by a whole range of factors, you wouldn't be here. We needed to make an immediate choice, and we couldn't very well have voted for that dunce Trickster. So we chose you. As for the details... It's all just our local bickering and scheming. Believe me, you wouldn't be interested. Let us agree: you will do what we ask of you, and afterwards you'll be free to do as you please.

He was deaf and blind to the rabbi, who was gazing at him with devotion. Considering (or wishing) the matter closed, Mazel turned around and started weaving his way between the transformers, but stopped to add:

– Oh, one more thing. Why don't you give me that lighter? You have it with you, do you not? Or perhaps you'd lost it?

Why would he offer me a chance to make an excuse and keep the lighter? It hadn't been all that long before that I wished to be rid of the thing and on my merry way. But now I didn't feel like handing it over. I wasn't sure why. Was I maybe thinking to give it back to Julia? She'd thrown a fit when she'd seen me with it, which meant it was a big deal. And I was far from convinced that Mazel was the person whose hands the lighter was meant to end up in. I had no inkling how things stood between him, Harry and Julia. In short, I shook my head and mumbled something contrary. At that point, the rabbi came out of his trance, jumped at me and pulled the lighter out of my pocket with the sleight of a monkey. Fawning, he pressed it into Mazel's hands, smiled at both of us, and ran away with amazing speed. Mazel and I lifted our eyes to the thundering metal overhead. Three leaps, three thumps—the rabbi was gone. Where would Big Buffalo steer him this time?

I thought I'd lost all capacity for blushing, my circumstances being what they were. But no: being shown up for a small-time liar stung. Mazel did not seem shocked or wag a finger at me, nor was he all that concerned with the lighter: he just glanced at it briefly before pocketing it. He even shrugged to show that he paid no mind to such trifles and had an altogether different purpose for coming there.

– Shall we go, then? – We made our way to the ladder and went up. When we found ourselves in a wide hallway with doors on both sides, very similar to the one through which I'd followed Julia, Mazel took my arm, which wasn't something I expected from him. I actually felt flattered.

– Perhaps you'd care to tell me when and where you came across that trinket. You know, the lighter.

I felt I owed something to this unpleasant but impeccably polite man. And I really could see no further point in keeping a tight lip, things having worked out as they had. So I gave a thorough account of how I had coffee with Julia, how she'd handed me a pack of cigarettes and left, how I'd found the lighter next to the coffee tank and how later on, after I'd come out on the stairs through Bertha's apartment, I'd tried to leave it on somebody's doorstep so that it wouldn't look like I'd stolen it, except the rabbi—

– Pay no attention to the rabbi. And try not to fall for his tricks. He's a special case. Perhaps later, when we have more time... But for now I'd like to concentrate on what you will be called upon to do in the near future. And I hope we'll find no more overturned coffins on your conscience.

I lost my step. Eat that! And there I'd been hoping that little escapade had passed unnoticed. True to form, Mazel mentioned it without indicating any feelings on the subject, but he did mention it. I gave him a reserved nod, falling in step again, but I felt like an adulterer caught with his pants down. The annoying sense of being at Mazel's mercy intensified, while my ego, perching in the vicinity of my ear, whispered that I was just goofing around and wasn't at anyone's mercy, or rather that I was getting a momentary kick out of thinking that I was and so humored myself, but if I should get sick of it, you'd best believe...

I was expecting us to walk into yet another function room, and was more or less ready to follow obscure orders and do things that made no sense to me but were evidently important to these people. And off I'd go on another round of traipsing through the Building and its assorted realities... Instead, Mazel and I entered a small office that was for some reason perfectly round and had a round table in the middle. Mazel sat down and folded his hands together neatly.

Something long-forgotten stirred in me, the way a fish left for dead suddenly stirs on the kitchen table. Sitting before me was the Chief. The Boss. The Master. What the hell..?, thought I. He wasn't paying my salary, nor, last I checked, had I been sold into slavery, so screw that! I took a chair, leaned back, and put one leg on top of the other.

– First of all, Alex, I give you my word that whatever goes on in the Building never goes beyond it. Absurd as the idea may seem, you will have to put on a mask before you leave this office. In other words, your mission here—let us call it that—will be strictly confidential. Only the members of the Council have been informed of your role in... in what lies ahead. Keep in mind that while several people know that you're in the Building, nobody—not even Julia—knows what happened to you after the rabbi had pulled you away. So the outlook is favorable. Now, about the vote and the reasons for it. It's a fairly delicate matter. Some time ago, a sort of committee or council for the Building was set up. Whenever an important decision needs to be made, the responsibility is divided amongst its members. We have given you an opportunity to walk around and get acquainted with the Building, so I presume you have some understanding of the sort of place this is. Many years ago, in the very beginning, a certain Sam, the man who created the Building, had failed to... In a word, he lacked the imagination and the funds to develop and maintain his concept. For a number of reasons, it is vitally important to us... well, in this case, to me, that the Building continue to be. You not being an expert in psychology, it would be difficult to explain certain nuances, but the gist of the matter is that all our realities can have a three-dimensional existence only if they're built upon a solid foundation. It isn't enough, you see, to find yourself in a cave before a fire to feel like you're living in prehistoric times. Reality is as reality does. What you need is wild animals roaring in the night outside your cave, and the knowledge that the sound is not coming from a

loudspeaker. Once that is in place, it doesn't matter if you feed on canned tuna while you're there. But there has to be at least one point where everything is authentic and genuine. Otherwise, put up all the buildings you want and make believe all you may, the game is only skin-deep. Though to give Sam his due, shutting himself off from the outside world like that was an intriguing idea in and of itself. But as I say, without a firm foundation, you can at best drive somebody crazy, intentionally or not—just look at the rabbi—but never anything more. This is why Sam had run into a dead end. Fortunately, we came in to rescue the Building.

I was looking at Mazel, thinking there was a point to all this. Dr. Shrink was obviously leading up to something. I noted that he referred to Sam in the past tense. That was curious. Trickster, if memory served, had used the present tense when speaking of the same man. Well, I didn't much care one way or the other. So Mazel had succeeded Sam; no skin off my back. I supposed it may have made a difference to the residents, but I myself had only noticed the discrepancy because Mazel spoke of Sam with an underlying meaning, a certain emphasis. It was as though he suspected I knew Sam and might even repeat our conversation to him, whereas Mazel really didn't want bad blood between Sam and himself. That was what I was getting out of it.

– Any questions? – Mazel smiled, making it clear he was asking mostly for the sake of politeness. I was starting to see why I'd felt I should watch out for him when we first met at Trickster's. The man was cordial—rightdown congenial—as long as things were going his way, but whenever this wasn't the case, a steel carcass would instantly start to show through his plushy civility. And it would be immediately obvious that he wasn't just acting tough, that he wasn't a tough guy at all; he was something far worse—a Power that Be. Then again, why shouldn't I make use of his good graces?

– Well, – I began, and felt my double-crossing voice go flat on me, – would you mind telling me why all the fuss about the lighter? Julia nearly hit the roof when I took it out.

I uttered Julia's name and instantly regretted it. It felt like a small betrayal. Mazel shook his head with weariness and vexation. He didn't want to go off on a tangent, but in brief, this lighter... (– A vulgar piece, isn't it? – He slid it to me across the table. – Hold on to it if you like.) So, to go on, for some reason Sam, the man he'd mentioned before, refused to part with it, and then... And then Sam had disappeared. Most probably, he'd simply left the Building. That was his, Mazel's, personal opinion. Others, however, who saw Sam as the soul of the Building, assumed... In a word, they'd started searching for him, but given the kind of people that lived there, getting factual information was a well-nigh impossible task. And naturally, when the lighter was seen in my hands, it was felt that I had something to do with Sam's vanishing.

Wasn't it an interesting coincidence that I was the one who'd found the lighter (and Mazel himself was convinced that Sam had simply left it behind, he used to love such theatrics), and now I was also the one who'd be doing the Building a great service at a difficult moment? In a way, I'd be stepping into Sam's shoes. Which, considering the gravity of the matter, did not rule out financial compensation if I felt it was called for.

He tapped his fingers on the table and held a calculated pause, giving me a chance to accept or reject such a mercenary offer. I said nothing. So this committee of theirs had elected me to be Sam's proxy. But why me? I was just about to ask Mazel that, but the pause came to an end and the time allotted for questions ran out.

– Let us move on to the most crucial issue. The issue of what you will have to do.

It might seem like I was calmly taking in what Mazel was saying. In actuality, however suave and beguiling his manner, I felt a new reality, hard and distasteful as a Monday morning, creeping up on me. The fact that he went into a lengthy roundabout discussion of things obvious and not very relevant was a dead giveaway. On and on about the Building, the trouble the basement dwellers were giving him, Trickster first among them... This after stating the intention to get down to the nitty-gritty. I was starting to think that Mazel didn't have the heart to give it to me straight. Was what he had in mind so awful? But then I caught him watching me and realized he was playing with me on purpose—trying to get me to mentally go through every imaginable horror, so that I'd be relieved when he finally told me what the fuck he wanted from me. I was losing my patience and starting to fume. I hate being taken for a fool.

– ...So there's that. And the rabbi is a mere coincidence, I assure you. He's been loitering about for quite a while, and I was ready to show him the door, but then I decided that he does add his own unique touch to the Building. Especially now, with the bow and the arrows, not to mention Big Buffalo... There's a reason that I bring him up. You may recall that he was quite in earnest when he shot at me that time in the basement. And you saw that he could have easily hit Harry as well. But this is precisely the sort of thing that serves to add another stone to the foundation of our realities. It would be easy enough to get crocodiles or panthers... In fact, some steps in that direction have been taken. Oh, but you needn't shudder: I'd quickly realized that, given our lack of experience, the animals would have simply devoured us. Either that, or we'd have had to shoot them. Therefore, the two panthers, the crocodile and the pair of pythons we've acquired are kept in the menagerie. For the time being. And I cherish hopes that letting them loose in the Building will not prove necessary. Thanks, in part, to your assistance.

He halted to scrutinize me, concluded I was ripe for a full frontal attack, and gave me a clear and simple explanation of what was required of me. There was no chance of me having misheard or misconstrued him. It was proposed that I become an executioner. A real one. In the most literal sense of the word. The problem was that the Building's brittle realities had been slipping away and breaking apart of late, and all that remained was meaningless games for the local lunatics and tasteless sexual diversions of the sort Trickster enjoyed. That was the most likely reason that Sam had left us. For his part, Mazel could not, and would not, see this remarkable Building go to ruin. And so the council, or whatever they called themselves, had come to a resolution. They would hold a public execution. Well, actually, first they'd had a funeral, and the idea had worked beautifully: the corpse dumped out of the casket had only enhanced the desired effect, thank you. But... Funeral rites for someone who dies a natural death evoke the wrong type of sensations and emotional responses. *En masse*, the bereft are just happy they're still alive. There is no sense of danger, no exertion of willpower, nothing more than a titillating *mise en scène*. An execution, now that was a different matter. That was Live Death. Oh, one could go on at great length about it!

Mazel's eyes turned inward and he took his hands off the table. I could feel his excitement, though he tried not to show it. But it was not the sick arousal of a sadist. Rather, it seemed to me that he was picturing himself in place of the condemned, and that there was a meaning behind it all that was never to be learned by me, the uninitiated.

Of course, Mazel went on, they could have named one of their own for the role, but... There was a great deal of nuance to take into account. Firstly, the executioner could have never remained anonymous: everybody in the Building knew each other one way or another. Then,

too, an executioner is a mystical figure, so a stranger would fit the bill perfectly. Members of the Council were unanimous on this.

I was dumbfounded. Observing my condition, Mazel finally lost his cool: he jumped up and started pacing.

– I'm sure there are several issues that concern you. The first, of course, is whether this is to be a real execution. I regret that I cannot answer that question. The executioner's behavior during the proceedings, his... emotional state—you wouldn't be able to fake it, nobody could. But if it would be easier for you to think the beheading was merely a staged scene, like so many in the Building, feel free to do so. You will agree I could have simply told you the execution would be a sham, and you would have played it for a lark. But I don't want the game to be fixed. After all, you thought the funeral, too, was... Well, the point is, you can see I'm being as frank as I can with you. And another thing that you may find helpful: the man whose... in short, the condemned—consider this!—has volunteered for the part. All on his own. And trust me, he has his reasons.

– And if I refuse?

That was not an easy thing to verbalize: I was scared as a kid of this man, who, it appeared, could not even conceive that his will might be opposed. He stopped pacing, turned to me and suddenly burst out laughing. That was even scarier.

– Your nymphomaniac friend Julia did say that, judging by the way you've gone about trying to leave the Building and by your general reaction, you are that common personality type—the coward-adventurer. The body is willing but the spirit is weak, as it were. You didn't mean it just now about refusing. Admit it, you want to be a part of this. Don't try to convince me you do not. Think of it: you have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to find out what it feels like

to kill a man. And get away with it. I guarantee that nobody outside the Council is ever going to know it was you. Unless, of course, you should see fit to reveal yourself. Which, too, could happen. And most importantly, you are absolved of moral responsibility. Of any kind whatever. Believe me, you don't have a choice.

That last piece of advice was redundant: I believed him all right. I didn't know if his intent had been to frighten me, but what I felt was unexpected relief. Nasty but thrilling anticipation pushed the rest of my floundering feelings aside. I realized that Mazel was right: the best adventure, the most unreal reality was just beginning. At the same time, I knew in the back of my mind that I'd been had, manipulated, that Mazel had known which buttons to push. But there was vile comfort in it.

Mazel sensed my state at once: he threw up a hand to indicate that words were unnecessary, that I should sit quietly. What am I, a zombie? – I thought detachedly. – Could be... Maybe this was exactly how it happened to zombies: first they resisted the alien will, then there was a breaking point... and then surrender, fulfilling in a way that was almost sensual.

I wasn't aware if Mazel had gone out. I sensed a presence behind my back, but before I could turn around, something was thrown over my head. A tight belt bit into the nape of my neck. The mask had a long nose and what felt like a smile. The slits for the eyes were small, and I could only see straight ahead. I was expecting Mazel to come out from behind. But, whether because he was afraid to ruin what he'd achieved or precisely because his mission was accomplished, Mazel had vanished. I turned my head, trying to accustom my eyes to moving in a new way, and discovered a woman standing behind me. For a second I thought it was Julia. No: tall and pale, she looked nothing like Julia. Long black hair, enormous black eyes...

I shivered. Down in the basement as I clung to the glass... Only now she was wearing a loose robe. Still, the memory of the blood on her body... And that face! Julia couldn't hold a candle to her.

She seemed to feel that I had recognized her. Her tragic lips twitched. She approached and slipped my bathrobe off. The pants that held on by a prayer went with it. Consciousness lagged behind, and before I could catch up, something white appeared in her hands and was deftly pulled over my head. My listless arms went into the sleeves, and I understood it was a robe like the one she was wearing. I had a moment to reflect that if it got caught on the mask, there would be clumsy attempts to straighten things out which would shatter the psychedelic trip I was on. Luckily, nothing like that happened, or else I didn't notice. I stepped over the pile of clothing and followed the woman.

I was back in the hallway with the office doors and nameplates, but it no longer daunted me. Just the opposite: the mask and the robe against the stiffly formal background—as always in dreams, mutable but convincing—created the aura of ritual, a presentiment, a tantalizing nightmare.

At last the woman stopped to slowly push open a double door. She looked at me expectantly. Something else, too, was in her eyes. A warning? A plea? But my heart was kicking up too high, the mask pressed too hard on my face. And the eagerness... Oh, I am such an asshole!

I went in first, and heard her enter and close the door. Why was I distracted by that soft clicking sound? Out of fear, or to prolong the sweet anticipation before looking ahead?

Right at the door, a long and narrow platform began—the sort of ramp where models strut their stuff at fashion shows. Not now, though. Now, aware of many eyes fixed upon him

in the sheltering darkness, walking slowly up the scaffold was a monster. Was the Executioner. Was... me? I wasn't sure. What was before me was all that mattered.

At the far end of the scaffold, flooded in projected light, was a structure... I cannot describe it. All I could see was the bloodthirsty blade hoisted high in the air, painted darkly, its honed edge a gleaming menace. A figure in white entered from the side. It's *him*, – thought I... thought the Executioner. Treacherous qualms pulled at my gut. But it was not the condemned man. As I came closer, I saw that all the gruesome humiliating preparations were complete. Kneeling directly underneath the guillotine's suspended blade, head in wooden stocks that exposed a narrow strip of neck, was a man draped in black.

The upright figure, which wore a mask and a white robe like mine, approached and pointed to the lever that brought the blade to life. I took another step and physically sensed the silent tension in the room. It was so easy—just pull the lever and... I heard a whisper behind me:

– As soon as the lights go out. Not before.

I felt a flash of disappointment. The most unspeakable, most alluring act was to take place in the dark. Why? Was the beheading a sham after all? Strictly speaking, Mazel had not denied that possibility. At that moment, the black-clad dead man stirred. So he was real... All at once I had the urge to look into his face. What for? Perhaps the Executioner wanted to revel in the sight of the other party... his party in crime. Or maybe it was me wanting to read the answer in his eyes: were the two of us really going to... Or were we playing a game—with the audience, with each other, with ourselves?

I walked around the structure and bent over the kneeling man. On this side, the mammoth wooden beams of the guillotine's base had been prudently encased in metal. Of

course—the blood... The Executioner stiffened over his victim, while my inner self flailed in horror of all the fine detail. A few more seconds and, I knew, it would separate itself from the Executioner, but I feared that the monster would sense it and pull the hellish lever before.

I heard a muffled moan. The doomed creature had seen me and was trying to communicate. My mask would not permit me to make out his face, so I leaned closer. Neck twisted, eyes straining, looking up at me was Harry.

I saw the rest of what went on in washed-out freeze frames. I straightened up. A hand reached for the lever. Whose hand? Probably mine. Then a woman's scream, more bloodcurdling than all that came before it. The mask squeezed tighter and tighter, choking me.

And then the lights went out. At long last, out. And I knew I could not do what I had been brought there to do, and was thrilled to realize I was not going to do it. And would shudder for years to come, remembering how close I'd been... Or perhaps regret that I had failed, had not been able to rise above myself. What an evil trap had been laid for me! How heavy and stifling the heinous mask was! Out there, it seemed, the woman had stopped screaming, and silence fell deep, and the crowd was an invisible ball of nerves...

I started to collapse, and it felt like I was doing it in stages. My arms, obeying the same rhythm, flashed white now in front of me, now at my sides. And then—I heard it clearly!—the lever screeched under somebody's hand. The massive blade hissed as it tore its way down and, with a wet thud, fell between the stocks.

When did the lights come on—right away or much later? I didn't know. I was standing on all fours with my back to the guillotine. I rose on faltering legs, and felt the crowd recoil. Did that mean that the ghastliest part of the spectacle was me? Fine! This craven human mass, as odious as I, feared me. Well, here goes, maggots!

With both hands I tore off the mask that was suffocating me. Look! That's right, it's me! Want to remember my face? Go ahead! But it wasn't enough. An alien voice, reeling, whorling into a spiral, pounded in my head. Only by debasing myself, it affirmed, could I debase those whose eyes were devouring me in the darkness. But what could I do? Of course! I seized the robe's collar and yanked. The delicate fabric came apart in my hands. Done! I stood stark naked on the scaffold, projectors throwing light at me like mud. Here I am, you scum! Arms and legs jerking, I was performing a convulsive dance—a dance of degradation, revulsion and sorrow. But it was also a dance of liberation and euphoria, of breaking through to an absolutely inconceivable reality, where all that's left for you to do is throw back your head, see the moon, and amaze yourself by agreeing that it's black... Except turning around and facing the guillotine was something I could not do. And, picturing it, I knew I could no longer do anything at all.

Oblivious to my nakedness, I sprinted down the scaffold to the all-too-distant door. There it was, finally! One more thrust to get out into the hallway... And there I was face to mournful face with Mazel. Behind him, inevitable as the day of reckoning, stood two cops.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

No thoughts were there. For a moment it seemed I myself wasn't there. The senses were the first to return... I was back on the roof, stuck, choking on terror and the urge to scream the turbid nightmare away. Then, a foul sense of fear; foul, because what put the fear in me was not what had happened—had it happened?—but the cops showing up. Were they real or just a couple of Mazel's costumed extras? I didn't know. But I fled, and felt that the faster I ran, the more surely I shed the unthinkable bloody reality that clung to me like bitumen.

By some fluke I ended up in the room where my trek through the Building had begun. Nothing had changed here. The same floor lamp in the corner, the same stale smell of smoke. Funny, but I knew I wasn't losing my mind. On the contrary, I thought it was just coming back to me. What the fuck had possessed me to get butt-naked on the scaffold?! Well done! My bare-assed vulnerability concerned me most at the moment. Where the hell was I supposed to go looking like that? Oh yeah, that bathroom was somewhere around. My dirty clothes might still be there. Dirty would do it; I was past caring. And then what? I had no clue. Leave the Building? How? It stood to reason there'd be an ambush for me at the front door. Good thing the Building had no dearth of hiding places. Somehow I was sure it was best to find my way down to the basement and seek refuge with Trickster. He didn't strike me as a rat. But first things first: clothes. Even if Julia had junked my old stuff, there had to be some bathrobes or towels around.

The bathroom was dark, and I couldn't find the light switch. There was only one towel hanging on the door. I took it off the hook. It turned out to be a whole fuzzy sheet. I pictured myself sneaking down to the basement wearing a terrycloth toga. Ridiculous. Gotta keep looking. Maybe my jeans were still there on the floor. I felt my way around the cubicle and

stumbled on the bathtub. My groping hand got wet: the tub was full of water, nice and warm. As naturally as if that was the reason I'd come in, I got into that water and stretched out in the tub. There were no bubbles this time, but it still felt like Julia was about to walk in with a cigar, and... what? We'd start at square one? Whether it was the water or the darkness or the silence, but the sense of time winding backwards was amazingly palpable. I had no trouble believing that before long I'd be meeting Harry again. Except this time around... But then, what could I do differently? Not climb over Bertha's balcony? Not join Trickster by the fire?

Wonderfully soothing, this water... In a moment I'd get going, quietly, without a fuss... soon as Julia came in with my cigar... In a moment...

I didn't even stir when, through half-closed eyelids, I perceived a woman's silhouette. It arose in the doorway and slowly approached. Close... but no cigar. Well, that's all right. Can't expect instant replay. Time warps have their own rules... Julia, it seemed, could see better in the dark than me. She bent over the tub. If I recalled, now I was supposed to stand up. Except the darn water had me so sluggish I really didn't feel like moving...

Then I thought that Julia hadn't seen me after all and must have assumed the tub was empty. Because after a brief pause she got in. Time zoomed forward, and I could already hear her scream her lungs out in fright. But Julia didn't scream. The tub gave her plenty of room to stand without stepping on me, feet planted on either side of my hips. She was silent in the dark. Her ankles were pinching me so hard it was getting to be a little weird. Suddenly wide-awake, I knew as surely as if I could see that she had no clothes on. My only reaction, though, was to turn stiff as a board, and not in the sexual sense. A steel grip and dead silence just weren't Julia's style. That was when I stopped feeling like I'd traveled back in time. Because it wasn't Julia.

The woman leaned closer. My eyes were used to the murk by then, and I glimpsed dark straight hair spilling over white shoulders. I feared I knew who it was. When she squatted over me, I had no doubts left. Her hand reached out, and I felt acutely embarrassed: my manhood wasn't much to brag about just then. The next second I was clawing at her wrist: she was causing me pain. If not for the warmth of her flesh, I'd have sworn it was a statue come to life. The hand was so strong I couldn't peel it off me. Stone fingers clenched tighter and tighter. The tub may have been wide but not wide enough: I couldn't dodge that hand no matter how I squirmed. Cracking through my pain was merriment at the absurdity of my fix. There I was in the bathtub with a gorgeous naked woman who was about to unman me, and damned if I could do a thing about it... But the pain was getting worse. I jerked, got a mouthful of water and had a coughing fit. The stupidest thing was, I had no clue what the crazy bitch wanted. To tear off my dick?! Was this how sadists got their rocks off? Whatever it was, the pain was becoming unbearable, and it was a matter of seconds before I'd be squealing like a pig.

Then the woman relaxed her grasp, and a sense of ethereal freedom descended on me. My thighs and stomach relaxed, and my lower body felt like it was floating high above my head. The cold cruel hand became warm, almost caressing. With horror, astonishment and a great deal of pride, I felt myself— But again she squeezed me hard, too hard, hard almost beyond endurance. I was going to die! The water turned to ice and my legs were convulsed. I was going to die.

All at once the lights came on. The fury that had her claws in me shuddered, covered her face like the light was burning her, and scrambled out of the tub. In her panic, she got her foot caught on the edge, fell on the tile floor, landed awkwardly on her side, slid, thrashed, sprung to her feet and flew out the door.

When a man's face loomed over me, I was lying without a thought, watching the swishing water settle. I recognized the man. It was the little pudgy guy who'd been telling me about the lower odors in that pit in the middle of the maze. Beyond him, I could see the concerned face of Harry. And other faces. The bathroom was jam-packed with people. A familiar bearded mug in twisted glasses materialized at the edge of the tub. The rabbi shook his head, fixed an abashed stare at the wall above me and said:

– I told you it was going to get scary, didn't I? I told you not to schmooze with a deaf woman, didn't I? Well, there you are. No more realities for you. It's a good thing Sam got here in time.

He looked up at the pudgy guy, pointed to something with his walleyes, and turned back to me.

– All right, home you go. No reason for you to stick around.

The lights went out. It was really cold. I started to get up in the bathtub, not caring that the water was splashing on the floor. I must have dozed off, the water had cooled, and that was why I'd had a scary vision. My body, frozen numb, had suggested to my brain a waking nightmare with eerily vivid sensations. As a matter of fact, I was still in pain. I put a foot up on the edge of the tub and was struck by how slippery it was. There were bubbles in the water after all. There's a neat little factoid for you... I just hadn't realized it in my naked turmoil. If you left bubbles in the water long enough, they just dissolved. I thought I was getting the idea... The only thing left to figure out was at which point I'd fallen asleep. It would, of course, be wishful thinking to suppose it had happened right after I'd come down from the roof. Dreams were never that long and detailed. Or were they? If so, then Julia was about to walk in with the cigar, and I'd be putting on a robe, and...

A woman appeared in the doorway. She leaned against the doorjamb and I saw that it was Julia, wearing shorts and a T just like... like back then on the roof. Smoke crawled up my nostrils. Julia raised her hand, and there was the fat red dot of the glowing cigar. But I didn't dwell on how things had worked out the last time. I simply stepped out of the tub.

– Let's go. We're expected. – I thought she sounded tired and disillusioned. – But put some clothes on, please. Your stuff's right here.

She kicked over a small pile of clothing which I'd missed before. Not very polite, that. As I moved toward her, Julia backed out into the hall. Didn't want to see me naked? That wasn't it: she didn't look away. In her eyes I saw the same weariness that was in her voice.

I picked up a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. It wasn't easy to pull them onto my dripping-wet body, but I relished the experience. I zipped myself up and felt a burst of confidence. The bad dream was ending, and the battle was far from over. The phrase "dress for success" took on a whole new meaning.

Julia watched me get dressed, then chomped down on her cigar and motioned me to follow. The sense of déjà vu returned. Once more I was ready to tag after her, no questions asked. Dared I hope that the adventure had rewound itself completely, and Julia was taking me to meet Harry? Because that would mean that nothing ever happened. And Mazel and his brainstormers would be left out of this story. Along with everything else. When a living and breathing Harry asked me to stay, I would respectfully decline. I now had an edge. I had seen the future. Read: here was a second chance not to end up howling at a monstrous black moon.

The topography of this Building never ceased to baffle me. A few turns down the same old hallway, Julia pushed open a door and absently let me through. I was standing on the stairwell next to the elevator. What was this? Were they letting me go? But Julia gave me a

lips-only smile and started up the stairs. I didn't get it. This was not the route we had taken the last time. We weren't going up to the roof, were we? I imagined being carefully placed back in the melting bitumen. Not a pleasant sensation. But what if it was a necessary evil, a payoff, a boundary between me and all that had taken place?

Julia halted at the next landing and turned to me. I was still standing half a flight below. She smiled with more heart, becoming the Julia I knew, and beckoned me again.

– Come on, come on. There's hardly any point now... I told you, you're expected. Don't be afraid.

– Who's afraid?

In response to my mature comeback, she shook her head and pointed to her ear. I came up to the landing and saw that she was wearing no device. Could she really be deaf?

And there I was walking behind her again, clueless to where and wherefore. Suddenly, the whole Building seemed like one endless amusement-park ride that spun me relentlessly round and round, as if the off-switch had gone haywire. And the succession of predictable surprises was beginning to make me queasy. What in the goddamn hell did they want from me? And what did I want?

We reached the next floor. Julia threw the cigar down on the tiles, took out a set of keys and opened the door to one of the apartments. The coat rack in the cramped hallway was overloaded with winter coats and jackets. Julia led me into a charming little bedroom with a low narrow bed and a bunch of artificial plants hanging from the ceiling. Nobody was there. Julia crossed over to the bed, halted and looked back at me. My mind took a short trip to the gutter. Nope. Not a chance. Julia paused, then pounded on the carpet with her bare heel. She waited, shrugged and pounded again.

I flinched when a hand and then a head popped out from under the bed, but I quickly recognized their owner. It was the fan of lower odors whom I'd just seen in my dream. He turned his head from side to side, smiled at Julia and made an inviting gesture.

– Get down here, both of you. And hurry up, please. Feet first.

The head went away. I was a trifle taken aback. What were the three of us going to do under the bed? Were we even going to fit? Julia threw an impatient glance at the door and pulled my sleeve. I got down on the floor and wedged halfway into the narrow gap before discovering that the bed stood over a hatchway. I promptly lost ground and fell through that hatchway, catching myself a good one on the chin. Before I knew what was happening, I felt Julia dropping on my head. As we tumbled down and landed, looking like two spectacular fools, I recognized the room. We were in the old woman's bedroom, where I'd wound up after vaulting over the fake balcony. The hatchway was right over her king-size bed, which was where Julia and I touched down.

– I guess I never had a chance to introduce myself, – said the odor junkie, watching us flail about. – I'm Sam. Before we go any further, please accept my apologies for my assistant's behavior. When Julia saw the lighter in your hand, she thought you were somehow connected with my vanishing. In other words, she got the idea you were Dr. Mazel's stoolie.

I sat up and looked at Julia, who was now standing a step behind Sam. So she was his assistant. And he'd never disappeared. He was hiding from Mazel right in the Building. Well, what did it all have to do with me? Sam shifted from foot to foot and suggested we move to the parlor. There, Sam and I settled in the familiar armchairs, while Julia made herself comfortable on the floor. Bill and Jimmy were present as well: Bertha had never replaced the poster I'd damaged. Granny herself, though, was nowhere to be seen. I wondered if she was another one

of Sam's assistants. I remembered what she'd told me about him. Among other things, she'd mentioned he'd been dead these ten years. Sam eyed me anxiously, sensing the nature of my puzzlement.

– Poor Bertha. Years ago I hired her to play my wife. That's right, she's an actress, or used to be one: she's getting on in years. Life in the Building had driven her mad after a while. But she's a sweet, sweet lady. She was acting the part of a millionaire's widow and behaved accordingly. It's not her fault she fell into the hands of Mazel and company. You've heard about the funeral, haven't you? Bertha was supposed to play the deceased... But then Mazel got himself a real corpse. And still it all fell through at the last moment. As did the execution, actually.

– Are you saying Harry is alive? And nothing happened? No... beheading?

Sam dropped his eyes, then turned to Julia and tipped his head. She got up gracefully and went back to the bedroom.

– That's where the problems start, Alex. We don't really know what happened to Harry. I don't think even Mazel was quite sure if the beheading was going to be real. Or maybe it was the other way around: he knew, but he tried to persuade everybody it was only a game. But the reason their plan fell through wasn't because you... well, it's not that you didn't do a proper job. It's just that no one anticipated the effect.

He didn't finish, because Julia emerged from the bedroom with a briefcase. Behind her walked the rabbi, dressed appropriately for a change. He held a cup of coffee in his hand, and I had a pretty good idea where that coffee had come from. Sam got up, as though to greet the rabbi, but instead of sitting back down he remained standing next to Bill and Jimmy. The rabbi

nonchalantly took the available seat, gave me a sidelong glance and blithely attended to his coffee.

– You two know each other, I believe, – said Sam, and the rabbi nodded without taking his mouth off the cup. – Well, my friends, the story is near the end. Everything is proceeding as it should, if not quite the way I had expected.

He paced along the wall in agitation, throwing glances at the three of us and the two beefcakes in turn. The rabbi finished his coffee and shook the remnants into his mouth, dribbling on the beard. Then he crumbled up the paper cup and, failing to find a place for it, put it in his lap.

– You, Sam, – he began, cranking his neck awkwardly, – will soon be left alone in this madhouse. I don't know about Mazel's flock, but Trickster's ladies have all vamoosed, he tells me. If that's what you've been trying to achieve, mazl tov. But mind you, it won't be long till this place is teeming with undesirables—the police, reporters and whatnot. I ask you, do you need the headache? And don't count on me to stay. Trickster's basement has outlets into the sewer system.

Sam was looking at the rabbi in a peculiar way, as though busy with his own thoughts and not listening. Or maybe he didn't trust the rabbi's stability. Though he seemed perfectly sane to me, especially now that he was back to his old self and not rambling about Big Buffalo. A peppermint chill spread through my bowels. To hear the rabbi tell it, all the realities, along with their masters, would soon scatter like fog in a gust of wind, leaving nothing but the rusty shell of a building where a murder had quite possibly been committed. And the buck, alas, would stop with me. And my demented black moon would shrink down to the size of a badge on the chest of a hard-nosed cop.

Julia pushed the briefcase closer to Sam as a tactful reminder. He took it, snapped the locks, peeked inside and grinned.

– Stop scaring the young man, Rebbe. Nothing terrible is going to happen, I promise you.

– How can you promise me anything, Sam? What, should I believe you over my own eyes? Even Big Buffalo doesn't propose to be taken on faith. The police will be here in an hour, soon as people come around and realize what happened.

The rabbi sneered and took off his glasses to rub them on his grimy coat. My eyes were riveted on Sam. Say it ain't so! Convince me it's a bunch of crap, the Building's staying where it is, the rabbi's an old crackpot! But Sam only smiled pensively, cradling the case in his arms. Julia, for her part, seemed dead to the world.

– It's very simple, – Sam finally uttered. – Alex is afraid he'll be framed for Harry's murder; you, Rebbe, are afraid you'll be committed; even Julia... What's going to become of her if there's no Building? We have to hand it to Mazel: despite it all, he's achieved the effect he was after. Everyone's frightened, including himself. And fear... Tell us, Rebbe, what does Big Buffalo have to say about fear?

– The arrow has no fear. The bow has no fear. The hand has no fear. The eye has no fear. Look for the fear, and if you find it, kill it. – The rabbi listened to himself and nodded complacently.

– Well put, Rebbe. So here is my point. I know where to look for the fear, and, most importantly, I know how to kill it. To put it plainly, as soon as there's nobody left in the Building, the Building will cease to be. Literally. I mean, on the outside it'll still be the same high-rise, but on the inside... It's nothing complex. This case contains an ordinary remote-

control device. You push a button, and kaboom!—all of the Building’s internal partitions, including floors and ceilings, are lying topsy-turvy in the basement. That’s all there is to it. But... There is one big “but.” It so happens that the device will only work if the person who’s pushing the buttons is inside the Building. That’s why the entire Building has been divided into three sections: the first seven floors, the middle six and the upper three. You push the buttons, and the Building’s insides fold in on themselves in that order. Like a house of cards. That’s all our Building really is, anyway—a house of cards... Well, be that as it may. We’re on the fifteenth floor, so... You understand. Theoretically speaking, it may be worth trying to get to the roof, but I can offer no assurance that the roof would hold out. The whole system was designed to make sure nobody’s tempted to blow up the Building out of vengeance or plain stupidity. But you can see how things have turned out...

I stole a glance at Julia. She was sitting on the floor with the same vacuous expression. Couldn’t hear a goddamn thing. The rabbi was playing with his paper cup, but he didn’t look nervous. Just abstracted. Must have been conversing with Big Buffalo.

This whole adventure, from the prologue to the final act... Conclusions—simple and obvious, like the answer to any riddle—were adamantly knocking on my insensate brow. And still... Oh, what frigging difference did it make what went on in this Building and why! I had three people in front of me, and each one was crazier than the next. For all I knew, the whole place was peopled with sickoes. Hadn’t Sam said as much back in the maze? Or had that been Mazel? Here was a sweet and harmless lunatic explaining that somebody had to play kamikaze and bring down the Building because... because this escapade had gone too far. And who was I to issue diagnoses? By now I was part of the Building, and what with my cavorting under the black moon...

– Well, I don't buy it. – The rabbi put aside the ball of paper and looked at me. His magnified eyes were slowly rolling inside their black brackets. – Even if Sam is telling the truth, who's to say the explosives are real? They've got everything ass-backwards here... Any way you slice it, I say it's still baloney. He thinks I'm scared of the nuthouse. Want to see me push the button? I'll do it right now! Nothing's going to happen. Enough with the hocus-pocus! It's time to make tracks before Mazel gets here. That one's the biggest meshuganeh of all. I tried shooting him. Nothing doing.

Sam gazed at the rabbi sadly. Then, alert as a cat that senses a mouse, he turned his head to the door. I listened too. Despite the length of hallway that separated us from the entrance, I distinctly heard voices. And noises. It sounded like the door was being rammed. With a vengeance. The rabbi heard it too, and held up a triumphant finger. Sam bolted from the room, but turned back halfway and grabbed my hand.

– Come with me. Julia! Hurry!

He all but dragged me to the bedroom, Julia in tow. She pulled back the covers on the old woman's bed. In one sweep, she flung off the T-shirt, under which she wore nothing; then she paused for half a beat and dropped the shorts. The rabbi was huffing behind us. Before I knew what hit me, Julia was undoing my fly. There was something neurotic, but nothing erotic about her businesslike efficiency. Indeed, this was hardly the time for eros. After a minute I deduced that we were about to hit the sack as a way to distract Mazel. Sam helped me get out of my T-shirt. Julia flopped down on the bed, covered up, and lifted the blanket for me.

– All right now, don't let me down. – Sam drew the rabbi towards the balcony, and they were gone. The front door had not yet succumbed, but was well on the way. Between the

blows, Julia turned to me. There was a strange glimmer in her eyes. She stared at me without blinking. Her smile was directed inwards, and she whispered, but I couldn't hear.

As the door yielded and footsteps approached, Julia pounced and pushed me down. She straddled me and undulated to a frenzied tempo. Her body rubbed against me like she meant it, but there was nothing I could do for her. Julia, the woman I'd followed without murmur for so long, was finally mine, and the glimmer in her eyes was a bonfire now, and her hot flesh was seeking out mine... And I couldn't even pretend. I lay still and waited.

Three of them burst in—Mazel and two characters I didn't know. Burst in and froze. One of them dropped his jaw. Mazel observed us with a sinister smile.

– Come on, will you! – Julia hissed at me. And things just took on a life of their own. Damned if I knew why, but there was no need to pretend anymore. I was aware of Mazel giving orders to his men, and my brain was aghast: here, now, in front of them... But... The bed throbbed under me and the ceiling careened above me. One more thrust and—

Mazel's goons grabbed Julia's shoulders and yanked her off me. The bed creaked and swayed once more in farewell. Julia shrieked and then growled like a tiger.

– Easy there, cunt. We gonna fix you up good...

I started to sit up, anticipating a punch. When the explosion rocked the room from below, the goon that was holding Julia lost his grip on her and reeled to the wall. The other one, who was taking aim at me, was thrown Mazel's way, and the puny Mazel, grimacing, clutched onto him to keep his balance.

The Building shook with a second explosion, and ominous-looking dust rained from the ceiling. Mazel broke away from his sidekick and cleared the distance to the glass door in one bound. He must have known about the Building's mines. Every vertebra of my back felt how

unstable the bed had become. Now the third wave would hit, and... Julia crawled up like a dog and lay on top of me. Terror racked her quivering body. I had to restrain myself from kicking her off: she was crushing me like the ceiling would when it finally collapsed.

But instead of the expected jolt that would have surely sent us to the basement, the rabbi appeared. He looked horrible. Blood was streaming down his beard, congealing in clots; the glasses were dusty and hung off the tip of his nose; his hands were shaking. He opened his busted mouth trying to speak, but could only wheeze and cough. Forsaking his flight to safety, Mazel darted to him.

– Is it Sam?!

The rabbi nodded, spit blood on the floor, held up three fingers, momentarily crossed his arms in front of his chest and let them drop at his sides. The message was clear. The third explosion would knock down the remaining supports; there was nothing below us already. I kept trying to shift Julia, who stuck to me like wallpaper. She wouldn't let me move. She wouldn't let me breathe.

Shouting something incoherent, Mazel made for the exit. His henchmen dashed out after him. Julia cleaved to me still; the rabbi hovered at the foot of the bed, wiping his mouth with a filthy sleeve. And me—I relaxed. If Sam had blown up the other floors, I couldn't imagine him sparing us. There was no two ways about it: in a moment the floor would cave in, there would be an instant of weightlessness, and then the ceiling would catch up and make all further thought unnecessary.

But nothing was happening. Julia raised her head, looked around and burst out laughing. The rabbi came over, clapped me on the shoulder and chuckled too. There was no blood on him.

– Time waits for no man! You two planning to spend the night? Or maybe you want to wait and see if Sam really blows up the place? Well, don't hold your breath. I told you it was a trick. It shakes, it quakes, but it doesn't fall down. Special effects! Let's get out of here. Mazel's not a schmuck, he'll put two and two together.

The fog was lifting. Julia and I threw our things on frantically, jamming sweaty bodies into cotton and denim. There would be no third explosion. There hadn't been a second or a first one. This was serious shit they had going on. I felt a sudden twinge of regret that Mazel had barged in too early. Julia pulled on her T-shirt. There went that. The spring that was coiled inside me slowly released itself, I could breathe free and easy again, but it hurt to look at Julia. I felt like I'd betrayed her at a crucial moment, like I couldn't hack it, like I'd let everyone down... Though, it appeared, the only one feeling let down was me. But how could I have known? Sam and his stupid jokes...

We climbed out through the balcony, ran in the dark along the brick wall, and, one by one, wriggled through a door that was stuck ajar. The rabbi explained that the door had been wrenched out of shape by the blasts, big old whoppers that they'd been. Yeah, yeah, we know, everything has to feel authentic...

– OK, – said Sam, who was sitting on a stool with a flashlight in his hand. – We've got twenty minutes, thirty at most. Strictly speaking, I'm the only one Mazel is after, but obviously, I can't leave the three of you behind. So here is the plan: we make our way up to the sixteenth floor, and from there to the roof. That's the last place they'll look for us. Mazel will think we took the elevator down to Trickster's. He knows about the sewers too, or has suspicions. Which means the roof will be the last thing on his mind.

– Excuse me, but why is Mazel so determined to get you? – I perceived an annoying disparity of cause and effect in his reasoning, a split through which logic leaked out.

– Didn't he tell you? Mazel and his cohorts are what you might call a suicide club. All of them are incurably ill and incredibly rich. They hated the thought of dying in their mahogany beds and leaving their money to good-for-nothing heirs. They found out about the Building by accident and decided they couldn't wish for a better place. And they were right. When one's life is almost over, one doesn't attach too great a value to it. One isn't afraid to take risks. And the payoff was the opportunity to live out their days in a dreamworld. The only thing was, they needed real blood to feed their realities.

– That's right, – piped in the rabbi. – Big Buffalo's lips should be smeared with blood. And sperm!

Sam did not show due respect to Big Buffalo. The rest, he continued, was simple enough. Sam's reality, pure and beautiful, was being slowly polluted by the morbid realities of the dying millionaires. He had no choice but to embark on guerrilla warfare. And that was that. Sam was aided by all of the original tenants that remained in the Building. Mazel couldn't afford to kick them out: on their own, the incurables would not have been able to maintain the right atmosphere. In retaliation, Mazel had taken drastic measures. It wasn't very clear what purpose the funeral had served; the beheading, on the other hand...

It was time to go. Though I still didn't see how fake demolition could slow Mazel down for long. Or why he wouldn't think to look for us on the roof. Sam was holding something back.

We followed him out to the stairway. The Building's bowels were dark and resonant, filled with strange thick air that hurt the lungs. The thin beam of the flashlight, our only light

source, flitted from wall to wall and over our feet. We started up the stairs, rounding the wired cage of the elevator. It was slow going. Sam painstakingly illuminated each step, as if he weren't sure the stairs were intact. Intact... I hooked onto the cage and pressed my face against it. The smell that wafted up the shaft made me choke and gag.

– Sam! – I shouted loudly—too loudly for the gloom and emptiness. Startled, Sam swung around. The spotlight fell on the shaft, and my legs went limp. Instead of elevator cables, pitiful ragged shreds were swaying on my eye level.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sam's face was serene, benign and dreamy. He looked like a man lost in music. Julia was panting and struggled to smile, but looked scared anyway. Her eyes were a void of confusion. The crazy rabbi seemed the happiest. When the beam hit him, he grinned and gamely shook his bristling beard. I could tell his only regret was not wearing his sachem feathers. Big Buffalo knew what he was doing. The fact that the buttons had proven to be real behooved the pulverized realities. Can't fake folks out forever, got to do some serious damage some time!

Myself I couldn't see, but the thought that buried under us were not only deflated realities but, very possibly, human beings—Trickster, Bertha, others who couldn't or wouldn't leave—produced nothing but lukewarm concern about the unavoidable cops and the annoying obligation to explain. The truth was that, despite the irrefutable dust, I wanted to believe that all of it was yet another gimmick. First a rigged beheading, now a rigged explosion. In a moment, the lights would come up on Mazel, Trickster and Harry, and inexplicable things would once more commence with all the solemnity of utter nonsense.

– You all must think me a terrible person, – Sam sighed. – I stole the briefcase from Mazel and succeeded in pushing the buttons. Succeeded, in spite of it all. I, who'd been forced to hide from my own wife... I feel awful. But I was almost certain nothing would come of it! Or so I wanted to believe. At one point in my life I had to elude some criminals, but back then I was driven by fear. And today, I needed to test... myself, Mazel, the briefcase, the Building itself.

– Do you believe in God, Alex? – he asked me unexpectedly.

Irrelevant. Even Big Buffalo was a silly fable in this cocoon of gloom and dust.

Everything was real now. Didn't he get it?

– I imagine that once upon a time God, too, had pushed a button, and there was light.

Then He pushed another, then another... And things took their own course, and He kept trying to intervene, to mitigate, to help. But... Yes, He stopped Abraham from killing his son, but people wanted cruelty all the same. Jesus had to suffer on the cross, or else he couldn't be Jesus. Escape is impossible. Mazel's right: it all must have been necessary. That's why I... Mazel did say the blasting caps were real, but... Or maybe he arranged it all so that I'd...

He stood on the landing of the last, sixteenth floor, the flashlight pointed upwards. Layers of dust swirled in the beam, the diffused light obscured the walls, and Sam, briefcase in hand, seemed to hang in thin air like a self-styled God in homespun clouds. A spiky sense of déjà vu grazed me. Dust in a beam of light... I'd seen it somewhere before.

Suddenly the rabbi came alive and threw himself at Sam. With the left hand he grabbed Sam by the throat; with the right, he tried to wrest out the case. Sam lodged the flashlight against his furry jaw. Lit from the bottom, the rabbi's face looked terrifying. Julia sunk to the steps next to me. The rabbi chugged through his nose, Sam struggled in silence, and I didn't know which of the two I was supposed to help. Maybe neither. What if Sam wanted to get to the roof just to blow up the rest of the Building? And I wouldn't have put it past the Buffaloed rabbi to push the last button either.

The decision made itself. I lunged forward, and not a moment too soon: Sam was starting to buckle under, and the rabbi's hairy paw was closing around the handle. The beam darted sideways and down as Sam let go of the flashlight and reached for the case with the free hand. The flashlight fell but didn't break, exposing a breathless Julia. I yanked the spooky

briefcase out of the mishmash of hands... and realized I had no clue what my next move should be. Two pairs of dazed eyes goggled at me, wondering what I meant to do.

And then... Ah, what a lovely word is “then”! It implies a bygone time that may be recounted, a distance between story and storyteller. ‘Tis passing strange and wonderful at times how easily things far-out and mind-boggling fit into the simple logic of an oft-repeated “then”... And then there was nothing. I was frozen at the landing’s edge, clasping the dusty case to my chest. Julia quivered a step below. Sam and the rabbi, still locked in a bear hug, glowered at me from above.

– A ton of plaster, or three or five or ten, makes for a lot of dust, I daresay, – remarked a voice one landing under. – Specially if you throw ‘em bags down the elevator shaft from the sixteenth floor. Phew!—even the basement’s dusty.

Glasses flashed and bespeckled black hair swayed in the beam. Trickster put a hand in front of his face, shielding his eyes from the light. I saw blood on his palm. He was a bit wobbly and sounded totally wasted.

– But lo, amidst the dusty silence I behold friendly faces. Just don’t try to tell me Alex pushed the button. I’m not—whoops!—falling for it. Rebbe, did Big Buffalo tell you to do it, or did Sam actually get up the nerve to see if it worked? As if it matters anymore...

Clutching onto the railing, he climbed up to my landing, mugged, and took the case from me. He dangled it under Sam’s nose, as if inviting him to witness that no mistake had been made, that this was indeed Trickster and indeed the briefcase, then turned and leisurely started back down.

OK! Another gag. Even Sam was taken in. The Building had not collapsed. Somebody drops a load of plaster from high up. It produces a sizeable bang. The bags burst

and release a cloud of dust. And the man who pushed the button feels like a failed suicide—very demoralizing. Or else he's sitting on the roof convinced that it's all over, that under him there's a void sixteen stories deep and that he's a murderer responsible for the loss of a dozen lives. Nice.

Muttering under his nose, Trickster dissolved in the murk en route to the basement. He was only a flight below us when Julia jumped up and wordlessly followed. I turned to look at Sam. He picked up the flashlight, for some reason aimed it at the ceiling, and moved the beam back and forth. Then he shrugged phlegmatically, pushed open the nearest door and vanished in the darkness inside.

The rabbi checked out the ceiling too, then approached the elevator shaft, flattened his face against the grid and squinted into the gloom. What the hell was there to see?

– Didn't I tell you we should have cut out? What do we want these problems for? – He pounded on the grid. Dust flew, but the heedless rabbi clung to the cage and yelled down the shaft. – What for?!

Meanwhile, it dawned on me that Sam had taken the flashlight yet I could still see the rabbi. The overhead lights had gone on, if only half-strength. Well, that's that, I thought with relief. Show's over, and it's time to go. Before somebody else decides to push a button. Before Mazel recovers from the blast. Before I fall asleep in yet another bathtub. I'd done my valiant best walking on the brink of this delirium, I'd played my part in their crazy shenanigans, I'd even gotten my hands on Julia for, alas, too brief a moment. Coated with dust and ignoring the rabbi, who sputtered at my back, I began a slow descend.

The next floor down was still submerged in darkness, as were the ones below it. So what? Sixteen stories wasn't much, especially if you were headed down and there was such a

thing as a handrail—a thoughtful handrail of polished metal, sloping and sliding comfortably under your hand. What happened was what happened, no more and no less. Even if the Building wasn't wiped out for real, could I blame myself for my childish impulse to take part in a beheading? Why, at this point I wasn't even sure if Julia was real. She could have been a bang-up inflatable doll made to wriggle about by a clever internal mechanism. And what about me—the silent, submissive type led around on a leash? What was I made of? The same thing, perhaps: a bunch of metal gadgets that allowed me to move, walk and breathe. Anything else in there? A timid soul... Oh, fuck it all! Downward, on the double! Once upon a time, inconceivably long ago, I'd come out of a sultry afternoon into a respectable building...

Darkness is conducive to soul-searching. I was so deep in thought, running my hand along the rail and putting one foot in front of the other, that I didn't sense trouble until almost too late. For some reason, instead of sliding down, my hand swerved to the side and upwards. That unexpected curve made me lose my rhythm, and I prudently halted.

I hugged the mangled handrail and tried to feel the next step with my foot. No next step. Emptiness. I did not break out in goosebumps, nor was I drenched in cold sweat. Quite casually, I backtracked and sat down on the steps that remained. Only my hand clenched spasmodically around a warped iron rod.

If this was the lay of the land, where had the unsinkable Trickster come from? And where had he gone to, together with Julia? What bags of plaster was he talking about when here I was hanging over a precipice thirteen... yes, thirteen stories deep? In a blackness as deep as a lair, a nasty suspicion stirred. Could it be that the whole show, too scary and way too realistic, was being put on for the benefit of just one viewer—me? But it was unthinkable—blowing up a whole Building to impress an accidental tourist! The alternative was that I'd lucked out and

gotten here just in time to... Fuck the alternatives. I thought I'd long given up all attempts to understand things. To get that notion through my head, I repeated out loud:

– I've given up trying to understand things.

– Good for you.

And again I didn't react. Somebody cautiously touched me in the dark and, judging from the soft rustling, settled one step above. I couldn't say how I'd recognized him. It was not just the voice, but the heightened sensitivity of my skin: certain spots and patches of it seemed to pick up the faintest currents in the gloom. It was this new sense that told me that the original game was over, the rules had changed and another was starting, and that in this new game it was OK to lounge serenely over the ruins of the erstwhile Building.

– The little people are dangerous for their unpredictability, – said Mazel, and I wondered whom he was referring to. – Not even that, but the apparent artlessness of their responses. They up and push the button. You'd think they'd know better. Even if there's a chance it wouldn't go boom. It is you, Alex? You were headed down, weren't you? Heigh-ho... So, the Building's gone.

He fell silent, and suddenly I forgave him everything. The cruel joke of an execution, the pursuit that followed... It was only in that other game that he'd been a scornful and ferocious deity. Now sitting next to me was a frail, worn-out and shaken human being. At least that was how I envisioned him—a wrinkled dirty suit and a hung head.

– What was it all for? – I asked, clumsily showing compassion. – The case, the buttons, the mines under the Building?

– What did God show Adam the forbidden tree for? What was it doing in the Garden of Eden to start with? Don't you find it odd? We tend to forgive irrational behavior in God and in

ourselves, but not in other people. Take you, for example. You've milled about the Building, you spied some things here and there, you overheard a few more... Admit it, the unconditional lack of any logic whatever really got on your nerves at times. Everybody's lying, talking rot with an air of great significance, doing things that are silly and strange... And nobody can provide any sensible explanations. True? Well, let me tell you the biggest secret of all: nobody knows a thing. Hence the solemn airs. So why not dig in and unearth the answers? Well... So you eviscerate the teddy bear and confirm with triumph that there's sawdust inside. Bully for you! And then what? No more teddy bear. And darn, you can't snuggle up with a rag and a pile of sawdust. Better not fuck with it in the first place. And so the Building stood...

He grew quiet again, and just then it hit me that the ongoing silence and darkness were kind of out of sync with what had taken place. Wasn't something else supposed to follow explosions, toppling floors, disfigured handrails? All those jolts, the noise, the debris... Where were the sirens? Why weren't police cars, fire trucks and ambulances rushing to the scene? Why hasn't anybody raised a fuss? Was I confused about how much time had passed? Still, any second now we would have searchlights, orders barked through loudspeakers, a mob of gawkers and the antheads of firefighters.

Mazel sat in silence. Again there was the prickling of nameless signals, enhanced by the blackness, and I knew that Mazel was not at all disturbed by what had happened. Far from being crushed, he was pleased as Punch: something along these lines must have been mapped out in his scenario. Unless it was the cold comfort of having his worst fears confirmed.

– Well, – I said, warily lifting my ass off the marble. – The cavalry must be on its way. Do you think we ought to look stunned and gush about the funny smell of gas?

Before I'd finished the sentence, I knew I shouldn't have taken that tone. Not with Mazel, visible or otherwise. I heard him hem ironically and get to his feet.

– Why do you suppose the rescue team is so late? Not that they're ever on time, but this is ridiculous. By the way, do you have the lighter with you? You don't? Wonderful. So there you were in utter darkness, and you came upon a broken handrail and a chasm where a landing belonged, and you surmised the Building was no more. The evidence is highly circumstantial. Of course, the things I said... But surely you've learned by now to trust no one. And now there seems to be some evidence that it was all just another contrivance, seeing how the outside world does not react to the explosion...

He trailed off, inviting me to listen. The Building, demolished or not, was still. Something stirred below us. One floor up, a door slammed furiously.

– And there's the quandary, – Mazel declared with theatrical resonance, and I realized he'd gone up half a flight to where the apartments were. – Can one ever truly know what one has done? Even when the one in question is myself, whose brainchild it was? The briefcase, I mean. No: a gamble is a gamble. A chocolate is filled with poison and then is shuffled with the others in the box. Half the chocolates is thrown out. The rest is offered to the players.

– It's the Russian roulette, – I said into the darkness.

– Not really. None of the participants knows for sure whether the poisoned chocolate is in the box. It's a subtle nuance, true, but nuance is everything.

– Thus the ruckus when Sam absconded with the box.

The voice spoke right over my ear, though it could have been the acoustics. Acoustics could do nothing to change Trickster's caustic tones, though. The comment was closely followed by a second emphatic slamming of the door. I could tell from the long pause that

Mazel hadn't expected to hear from Trickster. The speech addressed to me had been merely a scenic device. Mazel was really declaiming to the Gloom and the Building. Thought Trickster was buried in the basement, had he? The pause dragged on and on, and I was starting to think Mazel had gone off as suddenly as he'd shown up. But then he cleared his throat nearby, and this time when he spoke he addressed me alone:

– The ruckus over Sam and the case arose because I thought he'd left the Building for good. Imagine being deprived of such a lovely toy... He must be holed up in his haunt up on Sixteen even as we speak. And though you may be sure he'll never press the last button, he's indulging in the delusion that it's all in his hands.

Mazel was just the man whose misconceptions were a joy to shatter. But I waited till I could clearly picture his face, smug as ever, before innocently noting that, oh no no no, Sam didn't have the case, Trickster did. I expected surprise, possibly alarm, indignation. But after a brief silence, Mazel wearily observed that that sybarite of all people would never do the deed, and that it was downright disappointing how easy everything was turning out to be.

– Poor Sam, – he added, – now he'll be tormenting himself for having all but leveled the Building, but for the life of him he won't come down to see if he had. How well I understand him. Well now, I'm a little tired, so I'm going to bed. If you're planning to stay with us a while, Alex, why don't you drop by some time? I'm on the fifth floor. I've a curio or two that you're sure to find intriguing. You'll be pleased to know you've made a profound impression on—well, the name wouldn't mean anything to you. She tells me the two of you first met in the basement. Oh, and another thing: Phase III melanoma is a hideously painful affair. Harry was happy to be rid of it. Though the way it all happened was rather sad. Who'd have thought that everyone would panic? Sad indeed. Well, good day.

Till now, Mazel was just yapping. It was my choice whether to believe his words.

I could sense him smiling sagely in the dark, making smooth gestures, coming down a few steps and going up again. Just a minute before, he'd passed right by and brushed me with his jacket. But now he was walking down! The stairs! Even if there'd been no explosion, I'd checked: beyond the flight with the twisted handrail, there was *nada*! What the hell was he doing?!

I made to stop him but knew it was too late, I'd missed my chance, and if I moved I could... I was nailed to the spot, and the familiar gummy impotence expertly swaddled my brain. I was waiting for the distant crash to echo in the silence. No sound came. All right, thought I, be that way! I'd follow suit, and give Mazel my mental apologies for not *dropping by* as I went past floor five. Some other time, perhaps. Let's hear the old refrain: I was stuck again...

Mazel had to have fallen. How would I know what sound a falling body made? And it was so far down... Yet he'd insisted on bamboozling me right up until the end. Very well then, I'd be right behind him. And let the blame for a kamikaze's joke, the sick joke of a man who felt entitled to dispose of my life as freely as his own, fall on... On who? Whoever! Who was there to judge us? God, downsized to a pile of Buffaloshit? What's a man to do in a mess like this? What does his disintegrating common sense suggest? None of our answers match the questions. Like a master politician, God speaks obliquely and never addresses the issue. Just watch me forge ahead and take a plunge from the umpteenth floor! Mazel said people are annoyed by what they can't understand. Crap! Can I understand why I've started down the invisible stairs again? Yet here I go. I have good reason to suspect that, like as not, my leap into the void would be a washout, and that instead of the abyss I'd meet with yet another landing. Now, *that* would be easy to understand, but fuck, would it be annoying! If I had that

last button handy, I'd gladly push it right about now. And if no explosion followed, a dreadful Minotaur—Big Buffalo personified—would sweep upon the Building and drown it in blood. Blood and sperm—was that what the rabbi had said? I would enjoy that. But alas, I have no button, and all I can do is walk on in the gloom.

Can't say I'm making much headway, though. A drop of liquid running down my cheek gives me pause. What's this? Am I crying? Another drop, this one bigger, hits me on the head. I look up just as a narrow beam of light bores into me. It burns my eyes. Will there ever be a motherfucking end to these pointless Russian-doll adventures?

– Come upstairs, – said the rabbi, speaking in the cadences of sanity for the first time since we met. – You shouldn't be alone here in the dark. It's going to be OK, you hear?

Limply, very limply, I turned around and trudged up the stairs. The rabbi lowered the flashlight, and I saw water glissading off the steps in broken rivulets. I reached up to the rabbi and asked for his light. He shuffled in the puddle and handed me a hefty black club—the kind of flashlight carried by cops, whose failure to come rescue us was still a mystery.

If what I saw was a stage set, I'd never encountered such superb craftsmanship. Not even in the Building. Wisps of unsettled dust whirling in the beam did not obscure my view of gutted walls and twisted girder segments that stuck out like tree roots far below. I might have glimpsed a dark human figure, unnaturally small against the rearing, roaring concrete. The rabbi leaned over the surviving banister, staring down with me.

– Mazel's down there, – I said, pointing with the flashlight. My voice sounded ordinary. The rabbi nodded. He didn't look like himself. I wasn't even certain he was still a rabbi. He tugged on his beard, as if to make sure the makeup hadn't come loose, fixed his glasses, and heaved a deep sigh.

We stood and looked awhile, then the rabbi took the light from me and we went up. More and more water rushed toward us; probably a pipe had burst somewhere. The rabbi took me to the sixteenth floor, where, instead of climbing the stairway to the roof, he propelled me through a wide-open doorway. The room inside was lit at weird angles by two cockeyed wall lamps that faced in different directions. On the floor, barely skimmed by the circle of light, sat the she-statue that had tormented me in my dream. The same pallid face, eyes so black they seemed to go clear through her head. The white robe she still wore instantly took me back to my jig on the scaffold. That and the dream, which still made my nether regions ache. In her lap, clinging fast, as if listening for something, was Trickster's head. His long body, legs crossed, faded into the darkness. On his chest stood the open briefcase, his long stained fingers fastened on its sides. The head turned. Trickster squinted at us.

Something hovered in the air. Something visceral, menacing and repellent, permeated the idyllic scene. It was in the inscrutable message in Trickster's eyes, in the head which rubbed incessantly against the female knee like I recalled it rubbing against a feline headrest, the way the chin that flickered in the beard's thin shadow was drawing miniature circles in the air. The rabbi seemed surprised to find the lovebirds there. He faltered, his arms and shoulders jerking strangely. After a pause, he fingered his glasses and said to no one in particular:

– Things have pretty much collapsed down there. And there's water on the stairs. We should go.

Not stirring, Trickster twisted his eyes at the rabbi, then rolled them up at the silent woman. The whites, huge and glaring, and the zigzags of the eyebrows over them gave his face a look of anguish and bewilderment. He intoned in a hoarse high voice that didn't sound like his but reminded me of the perished Bertha:

– Has Big Buffalo ever told you, Rebbe, that the world is a lot like an egg? And that good and evil are like the white and the yolk? While the shell is intact, there is reason and order. But drop the egg... So let me answer the age-old question: first came the shell. Except why do you suppose Big Buffalo didn't think to make it nice and thick, like the dinosaur's armor? Then again, maybe that's why they died out. Too thick-skinned. Such invincible machines, absolutely fit for survival, must have bored Big Buffalo's titties off...

At that he smirked, but it came out pathetic. Something prevented him from smiling wryly as usual. He eyed the woman again, but she paid no attention to him or to us. If not for her pupils, which every so often darted to and fro in short quick stabs, I'd have thought she was strung out on drugs. And then I knew what it was that bothered me about those two, what had assaulted my eyes and my nerves right off the bat. The affectedly loose poses and the suggestive slither of black hair on white robe could not disguise the odd rigidity of their bodies. The woman's hands were buried in Trickster's mane, and her arms seemed to be locked in a spasm. His stiff fingers were digging into the case like he was waiting for a gun to go off. It was as if a photographer had asked them to hold the awkward pose until the flash came on, and then just left them hanging.

– Think about it: what could ever happen with the biggest and nastiest dinosaur? He ate his peers, he reproduced—and that's about it. Bor-ring... No, Big Buffalo wanted to break some eggs! Right, Rebbe?

Trickster pushed forward to address the rabbi and was instantly gagging and coughing. When he recovered, he complained to the woman:

– I really gotta pee.

Her shoulders shifted, and Trickster had another coughing fit. The rabbi, who got the picture before I did, began a soft advance, steering left of the woman. Once the lantern on the wall was behind him, he crouched down as if to whisper in her ear, but stopped short and froze with one hand touching the floor.

– We have ourselves a goodly standoff here. Two dinosaurs of comparable caliber. She’s got the cord, I’ve got the case. She can’t decide if she should strangle me, and I don’t know if I should push the button. So here we lie. What gets my goat is, I don’t have the first idea what she wants. That, and the fact that I’m about to piss myself. What are the Buffalo’s thoughts on the subject? Eh, Rebbe?

The rabbi plunked his heavy backside down and rubbed his knee. His conspirational glance was egging me on. I hadn’t yet grasped what he was trying to do, but all the same I crossed over and sat down facing the woman, whose eyes were now fixed in front of her. As I did, I caught myself thinking that if Trickster couldn’t hold it in, I’d be wet in short order.

– Your friend Mark is lying dead down there, – the rabbi reported, leaning closer to the woman. – The police are on their way. They’ll be up in a trice, and things will get ugly.

Her arms twitched, the cord tightened, but Trickster didn’t sound worried:

– Screw Mazel. And the cops aren’t coming. Don’t be a chump. As soon as Sam made off with the case, they put up a fence around the Building and hauled in an excavator or some such ugly. The Building is under renovation. And construction sites are noisy, as you may have observed. So no one will be dropping by to save us. Not for a while, anyway. Wonder if Sam knows it, though?

He wanted to go on, but the woman’s shoulders stiffened. She bit her lip. Cords stood out on her neck. Trickster flailed his arms and scratched at his throat. The briefcase tumbled

off his chest and stood on its end like a half-opened book. I was just getting up when the rabbi, arms spread, swooped down on the woman. Just before contact, he stopped and backed up. Trickster gasped for air. The rabbi took a short swing and socked the woman in the face. She tipped over like a doll and banged her head on the floor. The rabbi looked at me and made a face. It was apologetic, but not very sincere. I leaped to my feet. Trickster got the next hard punch.

I didn't have time to bandy words with the rabbi. I snatched up the briefcase and was off like a shot. The stairway was dark and flooded. Water flew in all directions as I bolted upstream. It was simple: I had to get to the roof, dump the briefcase and... and then I didn't know. But at least the real world was up there. As were Sam and Julia, most likely. The way this cookie crumbled, I could have wound up in worst company.

The rabbi was hollering after me, but I ignored him. I was stirring my stumps like mad. Another flight, another, one more... How many could there be? At some point, the flow began to taper off. Soon I could feel dry marble under my bare feet. I kept running up. And up. And up.

Out of breath, blind as a bat, on the lam from the unhinged rabbi, I still retained some of my mental faculties. All that remained from the Building was three floors; that's two flights each plus landings in between. Not much. I thought I'd started on the sixteenth floor, with only a short stairway to the roof. Maybe not, but I'd been running and running, and the ridges of the stairs had been alternating with the smoothness of the landings. Just how long was it going to take me to get to the roof? What was the deal with all these stairs and landings? I was bound for the unreachable roof, huffing along with case in hand like a passenger late for a train. The train takes off, it's gaining speed, and I know I'm not going to make it, but some force drives

me on and on, past the end of the platform and onto the tracks... Maybe there is no roof? But there had been a roof before, and not so long ago, or very long ago, I'd been stuck to it. So where is it?

I'm galloping on, and it isn't delirium brought on by the rabbi's huge fist. No, this is real as real gets. Because I can't find my breath, because the case weighs heavy in my hand and bangs against the banister, and the rumble of the rabbi's exhortations below shows no sign of fading. This miserable Building has it all—gimmicks, gadgets, structures and contraptions that defy belief, but not goddamn *spatial distortion*! Yet this interminable upward race... It's im-fucking-possible! I have a choice: go on as long as legs will carry, or sit and wait for the rabbi to get me. And there's something else I have. The briefcase. I could open it and grope for the last button. It would be worth it just to see what happens. The thing is, if three floors were left standing and I'd just scaled a minimum of ten... What's going to blow?

I opt to drop down on the cold marble steps. I'm spent; that's it for me. Would somebody mind telling me where I am? Maybe the rabbi, who's almost upon me, judging by the puffing and the sputtering?

And then—there's that word again!—the rabbi appears. I can't see him, naturally—the stairway is pitch-black—but I hear him quite clearly.

– What's wrong with you? – he asks when his wheezing subsides. – Why are you running? What, did I scare you? Well, what was I supposed to do? She almost strangled the guy! And he could get the damfool notion to push something. Well, he could! I know you took the case away, but still...

He carries on, but I'm not listening. I'm trying to figure out how he homed in on me in the dark. He doesn't have his flashlight, but he's standing right in front of me and talking.

Don't ask me to believe he's got night-vision goggles. Where would a rabbi get night-vision goggles?

– Where is the roof, Rebbe? – I interrupt, because a queer suspicion creeps in. – Where the hell is the roof?!

The rabbi falters and falls silent. I can tell he's thinking hard. But he says nothing. I guess there's nothing to say. Anyway, who is this rabbi character? Why does he always pop up out of nowhere wherever the action is? Now he's a frightened Orthodox Jew who's come to ask for donations, now he's a half-assed Indian, now a plain old fruitcake. Why the fuck is he here? What does he want from me? The briefcase? Well, here it comes!

– Hey, hey, what are you doing that for? – the rabbi pipes up from the murk when he hears me snap the locks. – Don't do anything stupid, you hear? Wait, let's talk about this, there's a lot you don't know! Gloib mir, you don't know anything!

No, I don't. And I don't care. Not even why three floors have stretched out to eternity. And now I'll never know. Because I have my hand on that beautiful button. No room for error here: two are pushed in and only one remains. A slick little protuberance, so pleasing to the touch... I'll use my thumb just to be on the safe side: might have to push hard. All set. The rabbi managed to stop me once, when I was headed for the precipice, but it's not going to work this time. I'm just mad because the stairwell won't end. And that's enough. Everything has to end. No exceptions. And since it won't end of its own volition, there's an excellent remedy. Guaranteed to work. Besides, I'm curious what's going to go boom. Anything's possible in our Building!

The rabbi, cooing, starts closing in on me, and I know he'll be at me in no time. I haven't forgotten how strong his hands are. The tension sweeps me up to my feet. Thumb on

the bulge that sizzles under it, I clench my teeth and, almost lustfully, press down. The rabbi makes a sound that may be a sob or a cough. Something vrooms beneath us, and I know we're about to blow sky-high along with all the stairs and landings. Instead, bright lights go on. Normal stairway lights. They reveal the rabbi hunched over, arms out, reaching for me.

– Nu? – he demands. – Didn't I tell you it wasn't a good idea?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I'm a liar. I try not to think about it. And it's not because lying is wrong. Who am I to moralize? It's just that I'm disheartened, not to say disgusted, by the essential nature of the soap bubble that the lie amounts to. The knowledge that all my fellow men, rounding their eyes and sticking out their chins for authenticity, habitually lie to each other and themselves, is small consolation. The beef I have is not so much with lying per se as with the aftermath. It's a vicious circle that puts dishonesty on par with substance abuse. We blow a bubble large enough to fit us whole. We blissfully inhabit it for a period of time. And after a term it bursts, as bubbles are wont to do, making an ugly sound and spraying its precious yield in all directions. Ain't that a shame! Quick, let's blow another, before the hangover sets in. The trouble is, the suds—the stuff that lies are made of—are running low...

In short, much of what purportedly happened to me in the Building either didn't happen at all or has been godlessly distorted. To wit: I never got it on with Julia. What an idiotic notion—to halt Mazel's pursuit of Sam with a scene from an amateur skin flick! I just felt like having Julia jump into bed with me on the fly, with no long overtures. And the foolishness with my dancing naked on the scaffold? Never happened. Likewise, I invented the sillyass rabbi with his campy Big Buffalo. There was no rabbi. Would a rabbi ever romp around in feathers? Nonsense. What on earth for? In fact, "what for" is a question that could be asked of me many times over. And the answer is—how the hell do I know? How could I know... The rabbi thing, that's easy. I really didn't want to leave the Building, and the rabbi... he kept preventing me. And then he kicked over the traces and started doing things that I myself might have done if... His existence justified my petty sins and foibles. This, of course, begets the strong temptation to propose that there was no beheading and no Mazel either, but... then we're

talking a whole new bubble, when I'd be happy just to lose the soap scum and the bitumen the last one left behind.

I take an impish peek around and ask myself: what else have I invented to facilitate a smoothly-running tale? To provide a plausible explanation for my blundering through the Building's realities, trying them on for size with guilty curiosity like a stranger's underwear... And what do I see? I'm standing on a landing between floors in a resonant stairwell shaft. The lighting—and everything else—is thoroughly ordinary. The rabbi never caught up, melted like the Wicked Witch by the power of my coming clean. I am, however, holding a small flat case in my hands.

With all my might, I bring my right foot down on my left foot. No, I'm not trying to wake up. There, I say to myself, somebody just squashed your foot. Feel that? Yup, I can feel the foot that hurts. I can also feel the one that did the hurting. I seem to be able to fool my head, but not my feet. From which we may infer that of the two, the feet are the less biased, hence the superior, mechanism. Where was I? Oh, yeah. I was running up the stairs forever, trying to get to the roof. I was gasping for breath, my legs were giving way, and the darkness wasn't helping either. I unlocked the case, got the lights working and surveyed the scene. The make-believe rabbi was gone, and so was the flesh-and-blood Sam. Along with Julia, whom in my head I... But mind the feet! you can't fool the feet! They really were killing me, what with all the running. Whereas—and I was firm on this—only three floors were left standing. Unless I'd made up the explosion and Mazel's suicide... No, I couldn't have. I'd seen the ruins and the body in the beam of the flashlight. The flashlight that I'd gotten from an imaginary rabbi. Uh-huh. Well, I must have picked it up from Trickster along with the briefcase.

So there I stood, grinding into my own foot, which was starting to atrophy, trying to get a fix on why I'd been hell-bent on reaching the roof. And why it was taking so long. I didn't invent that, Scout's honor! Too bad. It would have been a cool story. I'm running for hours, and there's no roof in sight, and three floors balloon into thirty—no, make that three hundred. And still there's no roof, and there won't be a roof, because I made the roof up along with everything else. Mmm... Better not go there.

I dawdled a while longer, massaged my poor foot, and slowly started up again. It would have made more sense to go down a flight or two, see if the cotton-pickin' floors had really blown. But I wasn't up for it somehow. What if there'd been no explosion? I'd have to face the fact that everything I'd been through was a hoax and that I'd felt the things I'd felt in vain. Besides, investigating where the roof had gone to was no less interesting. It occurred to me that now, after the endless aimless race, it made little difference whether I headed up or down. Either I was trapped in an out-and-out nightmare of neverending stairs, in which case the direction I took hardly mattered; or I'd just recovered from a fit of temporary insanity, and it wouldn't be long till I found Sam and Julia. This reasoning struck me as fairly sound. The Building was no more, and the only person who wouldn't be indifferent to the fate of the briefcase was Sam. My guess was that Sam and Julia were the last of the residents. The last in the Building, I hoped, not the last surviving...

I seemed to be discounting Trickster and the woman. You know, the *woman*. With all due respect, though, my bathtub vision and the scene of our last meeting left me with no desire to seek out either one. If I had my druthers, Trickster, too, would have been my invention. If not the man himself, then everything that had happened after I stumbled on him by the fire.

Be that as it may, I took the stairs up and got to the next floor, where, scattering my speculations, the elevator's sleek doors stared me in the face. The elevator! I couldn't believe it had slipped my mind. What if... Before I finished the thought, I was pressing the button. Yes, indeed: the rule-abiding doors drew apart. Before getting in, I paused. True enough, the tired throbbing in my legs was proof positive that I'd been running, which in turn evidenced a seemingly impossible fact: whether or not the Building was still in one piece, the material nature of things had mutated, and space itself, unrelated to local realities, had expanded... A stage set, obliged to have a disappointing flip side, was proving not to be a set at all. Could it be that Sam's guileless wonders had taken on a life of their own at the very moment the Building was all but abandoned?

And another reason I was stalling for time was that in this frame of mind, I had to contend with the possibility that I'd made up the elevator too. Why not? The preposterous illusory rabbi had been meddling in my affairs all along. I would have been home now if he hadn't collared me in Chapter Six or tied me up with Trickster in Nine. That really set me thinking. Absurd as the idea may sound, I could have stepped into a nonexistent elevator. Time and time through history, fictional characters and events have changed the course of human lives. Mankind has always insisted on inventing social conventions, mediums of exchange, religions. Real or not, its gods brought misery and happiness to millions. To this day, holy wars are the most senseless and brutal invention of all. But that's the world we live in.

On the other hand, if the Building had acquired an independent existence, if every incredible detail was becoming bona fide reality, what was to stop a pretend elevator from taking me where I wanted to go?

Just in case, I shook my head to clear it. The elevator stuck to its guns. All right, I said to myself walking in, on to empirical studies. The doors closed. The control panel gleamed equanimously. The elevator awaited instructions. My behavior was far from logical. Five minutes before, I'd been hightailing it to the roof, supposedly to find Sam and dump the case but probably just running scared. Now, staring at the solid row of numbers—every floor accounted for!—I felt an overwhelming desire to test the elevator's mettle, to see how far its existence extended. I challenge you to take me to the lobby!

The car jerked and started dropping slowly. That was that. No surprises. Soon enough it would stop at floor one, and then... Strange, but I didn't even want to know. As I neared my destination, sober disillusionment took hold. There was nothing imaginary about this elevator, and it inevitably followed that there'd been no explosions, no executions, no suicides. Nothing but a thick smothering dream, a Fata Morgana that lurked on the upper floors. And it didn't matter if I'd made it all up. I was coming down to be confronted with the real world and the glaring sun, which so cruelly exposes the frailty of contrived realities.

But I must have been more confused than I'd thought. Having lost all reference points, I caught myself seriously questioning if the bustling city streets and the deep blue sky above didn't have a backing of canvas and rough-hewn supports. The elevator stopped, the sliding doors parted as prescribed, but now I balked at getting out. It wasn't too late to push the top button and shoot back up to Sam, Julia and the statue-woman... Astonished at myself and knowing I was doing something irredeemably stupid, I put the useless briefcase down between the doors and ventured out.

Yes, this was the lobby, and damned if it had changed one bit since I'd left it to go up to the roof: empty and cool, sunshine pouring in through the panels of glass that revealed the quiet

street outside. So what did it all signify? Only the fact that, for a day or two, a lonely soul named Alex had been lost at sea—a concrete main full of exotic creatures whose motives were unknowable and actions unaccountable. And now he was about to be washed up on a tropical shore...

I heard resounding footsteps and instinctively cringed: when the doorman reared his head, I'd be in for a prim talking-to and a courteous kick out the door. But the hand that tapped me on the shoulder was dainty and not at all doormanlike. I turned around. Julia, my Julia, was smiling up at me. Without a word, she reached for my hand and flipped it over. Solemnly and a little sadly, she placed a heavy round object in my palm. The lighter.

The last thing I'd expected was to see Julia. If she was here, with me, then perhaps the story continued and the Building was not a mirage. The lighter, too—a key detail of the terminated dream—conveyed a sense of substance to my palm and offered a ray of hope. Julia stood smiling for a second, then turned on her heels. Before it was humanly possible, she was at the doors, pushed one of them—the same one she'd hit me with light-years before—and dissolved in the light of day. Was I to take it I was free to go? Like somebody was stopping me before! It was me all along, playing the victim of circumstance and horning in on the action. So what have you learned from the experience?, I asked of myself. Oh, was I supposed to learn something? Was I expected, like the forenamed Curious George, to go twisting Sam's arm for the dope on the Building? To cross all the t's, to dot all the i's, and to sigh at the end with smug disappointment—oh, is *that* all... Was that the idea? Julia was right. It's a dumb couch potato indeed that would take the TV set apart in an effort to make *Seinfeld* funnier.

Forget it. I wasn't going to pry. What was the problem, anyway? I'd just felt a little under the weather up there and needed a breath of fresh air. The elevator had presented itself,

and I'd taken a ride. The lighter was a gift. The Building was fine. And Julia had simply ran out on an errand for Sam. Everything was under control. I could do whatever I pleased, and nothing was preventing me from staying in the Building. If I were to leave now, I'd never forgive myself for not sticking around. Not to ask silly questions, but to know that I still had that option.

Something had short-circuited in me. Beguiled by the airy tranquility of the lobby, I seemed to have split in two. I saw myself walking away from the Building down the hot sunny street, telling myself that enough was enough, the fun was over, the lighter had been a going-away present. I was pulling myself away from the Building by the ear, like a spoiled brat from the merry-go-round, having discerned, as grown-ups do, the exact moment when the ride was about to go from giddy to queasy. While at the same time, that spoiled brat—myself—had taken root three feet away from the elevator and obstinately wanted to go back. I recognized the familiar signs of a stupid mistake about to be made against my own better judgment, almost against my will.

– I ought to get going, – I said out loud. It wasn't very loud. Or very convincing.

I faced the sliding doors. The briefcase was standing where I'd left it. With no further thought, I got in, lingered over the buttons and pushed the top one, number sixteen. The dutiful elevator took me up. OK, so I'd get there, and then what? What was I after, anyway?

The car crawled up leisurely, flashing at me with ascending digits. Wonder what would happen if I were to get off on a different floor? Just to check things out. Not that it was necessary: I'd been down to the lobby and it was in one piece, so obviously the blast had been a hoax.

Just then the elevator stopped. Here you are, sir! I was about to disembark when I realized I was on the wrong floor. There was no trace of a stairwell. The doors must have opened inside an apartment, because I was looking at a snug little hallway—mirror on the wall, coat rack, et cetera. Of course: the display panel showed a red “six.” Somebody on this floor must have wanted the elevator. But the hallway was empty. Well then, I’d be on my way up. In that instant, the hulking shape of the elevator attendant loomed at the far end of the hall. When he spied me, he grunted with joyous malice and made for the elevator. He was rushing at me with bared teeth and appeared to have every intention of leaping at me or at least leveling me with a punch. With barely a chance to regret my return, I backed into a corner. No place to hide... But when he reached the doors, which somehow stayed open, the hulk braked and stopped dead in his tracks. It was like an invisible barrier stood in his way. He had a weird expression on his face: part fury, part thrill, plus something like pity. And fear.

– Well, now, – he said in an chilling undertone that was almost tender. With caution, as if afraid to cut himself, he held out his hand. – Let’s have the case. I’ve been looking all over for you, bitch. I’m chasing her up and down the stairs, and she comes riding straight into my arms. That’s more like it. Now give me the case, nice and easy.

What was he, a total moron? Afraid of the case? Even if the buttons had been real, they’d all been pushed! Actually, he may not have known about the third one. But if the first two hadn’t worked... A wicked but delightful sense of power over this clown with a ferocious mug tickled my nerves. This must be how you feel when, trapped by a mob of assholes high on booze and their own invincibility, you find the grip of a machine gun in your hand. You arm the chamber with deliberation to make the knob snap in the sudden silence, and your drained

finger caresses the trigger, and the barrel, sight set high, glides softly left to right: you feelin' lucky today, punks?

Fully aware that it was sheer silliness and immaturity, I snatched up the briefcase, popped the locks, and put my hand inside. It lacked the panache of the machine-gun scenario, but still. A bitch, am I? Let's see you eat dust! But the lardass was in no rush to drop.

– I said, give me the case! Don't go playing with it now! Have you lost your frigging mind?

– I don't think you want to threaten me. I might get nervous. My hands might start shaking. And I've got my finger on the button. You get my drift? – I replied, trying to keep pace with the dialogue. The lardass eyed the car's ceiling suspiciously, took a step back, and laughed. Something in that laughter instantly transformed my mighty machine gun into a dime-store toy.

– Why don't you push all three just in case, you freak! Come on, hand it over. Well, hurry the fuck up..!

Clinging to the vestiges of my false courage, I put the briefcase down behind me and gave him an enchanting smile. It was clear the numskull was afraid of *something*.

– Get it yourself, why don't you? I don't get paid to be your luggage handler.

The lardass chuckled suggestively again, and I smelled a trap.

– I'll make you a deal. You give me the case, and I'll explain everything. Honest I will.

Well, balls! I had another trick up my sleeve. I pushed sixteen again, expecting the elevator to whisk me away from the hulk. Let him run up a flight or two, he could lose a few pounds. But the elevator didn't stir. It refused to go any higher. And the doors wouldn't close.

So there I stood like a fool in the middle of a posh elevator carpeted in grey wool, subdued light streaming down from the ceiling. The attendant's mugshot countenance fumed an arm's length away. I wasn't planning to come out or give up the briefcase. It was basic self-preservation. At last the hulk lost all patience with me.

– Look, little freak, – he said almost affectionately. – You don't need that briefcase for shit. Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you. Just give it a little push so's I can reach it. Otherwise there's just no way I can get at it, see?

He waited, face expressing hope for my good sense and shrewdness. I still had no clue what he was driving at, and maybe I didn't want to.

– I'm pretty heavy, see? No? The elevator's hanging by a thread. It's lucky I noticed. If I get in there, we're both fucked. Can you get that through your thick head?

Well, that was simple enough. And he wasn't bluffing. He could have kicked me out and just taken the case. My inner eye shot right through the car's ceiling and saw that straining thread. With buckling knees, trying to tread on air, I moved forward.

– Not without the case you don't!

– What?!

– Get the case, or you're staying right there. Hurry up, dickhead! You can do it, you don't weigh much.

I wasn't going back—no way! My legs weighed a ton, and now it was my own exposed nerve that the elevator was hanging by. That murdering bastard wasn't going to let me off the hook. For some insane reason, he wanted the briefcase. But oh, that one step back... Slowly and steadily, as if swimming in syrup, I twisted my torso around. Like, a hundred and eighty degrees. The feline flexibility of fear... Somehow I managed to reach the case. I got a crack in

my spine, a stitch in my side, but—the handle in my hand. Now in reverse, slowly and steadily... God, don't let me fall. I started to lose balance, but the lardass swung into action and deftly pulled me out of the car. I stiffened and shuddered belatedly, but by then I was standing next to him, that fiend, that sadist, that really cool guy with a negligible penchant for stupid jokes. And—wonder of wonders!—the elevator was still there.

The attendant usurped the briefcase and pointed a beefy finger at something above the elevator. Through the cage of the shaft, painted grey to match the walls, I saw a high-voltage light bulb, attached for some reason to the bearing cable. And the cable itself... A fluffy cluster of busted steel ligaments sat on the elevator's roof like a dandelion atop a fat stem. A second dandelion hung upside down a little ways above. Connecting the garland was a slender—breathlessly slender—strand of two remaining twisted wires, stretched to the max between the two blooms.

Didn't I tell you, you brat? Didn't I say to go while the going was good? Didn't I know it was madness to return? Should have cleared out in the brief hiatus when it all seemed like a senseless game played by a bunch of flakes. Sure I would have felt stupid for taking it so close to heart. Especially after the soap bubbles I'd blown to justify my participation. Still, having sworn off looking for explanations, I should have walked. I would have thanked myself later. How affecting and thought-provoking could a Spooky World haunted house be? Whereas the way things stacked up now... They just didn't stack up at all.

Transfixed by the sight of the mangled cable, I finally realized how exhausted I was. My head was pounding and my stomach turned. The biggest bummer was the fact that this floor had no stairwell. If I wanted to get downstairs, I'd either have to risk the elevator or seek some less hairy way out.

I snapped out of my trance and looked around. The hulk was gone. The only thing less appealing than going after him was getting trapped in the elevator. Not much of a choice.

Candles were burning some distance away. Two of them, standing on a dark flat surface that might have been a table. The pounding in my head was not subsiding, so the candlelight was an easy option. It was the only guide in the darkness that enveloped me as soon as I set foot out the door. Now and then I walked on pebbles, and thought of the sea. The moist air smelled of the sewers. The hush was deep yet strangely resonant—the echoing silence of a vast enclosed space that could have been an aircraft hangar. Something crackled faintly, like a cooling motor engine or a branch under a prowler's foot.

Sure enough, the candles were standing on a table. Sitting around it were Sam, Trickster and the elevator attendant, the latter puffing over the briefcase open in his lap. Trickster paid no attention to me. He was huddled up in his chair; the scraggy beard all but lay on the table. I remembered him—eons ago—falling backwards into the bizarre swimming pool, and felt bitterly sorry for not having followed. Now I'd never know what it had all been about, what marvels had awaited me at the hands of the naked witches. Sam raised his eyes and gave me a shy smile.

– Well, Julia's gone. For good, I believe. We're just sitting here thinking things over. This is everybody that's left.

He glanced at Trickster, as if expecting him to argue. But Trickster watched the melting candles and was mum. Not so the hulk, who looked up from the case and said to Sam with satisfaction:

– Done. There were two wires loose, but I tightened the terminal. Should work fine now.

Sam nodded and turned to me again. I had the impression he was ill-at-ease in this gathering: he was terribly happy to see me. Like a man with a toothache, he seemed grateful for any distraction. I was a little apprehensive myself. The peculiar silence of the gabby Trickster, the lardass messing with the briefcase... Methinks this wasn't the best time to come. I'd have taken my exit if I knew where it was.

– You're too late, Alex. You've come to the Building too late, I mean. What a shame you didn't turn up sooner! You and I would have gotten on famously. I knew it the moment I met you. Julia, too, commended you highly from the start. The deaf are very perceptive, you know. She said you had some kind of special ear... Funny, isn't it? When you went up to the roof and never came down, she happily ran to your rescue. She felt that getting stuck to the roof automatically qualified one to be well-received in the Building. Though anyone who wished to stay was welcome here. Even Bertha. Oh yes, the beginning was glorious... And it certainly wasn't your fault that everything just— Anyway, what does it matter now whose fault it was? No use crying over spilled milk. It just seems strange how you always ended up right in the maelstrom. Again, nobody's blaming you, but... If only you'd taken the briefcase out of the Building! You must have had a reason to snatch it from me. So why not go ahead and leave with it? Instead, you bring it back. And now we have to make a decision. Once again, through no fault of yours...

He mentioned my inculpability so many times it was obvious he blamed me for everything that had happened. Would be nice to know what had happened!

– The whole briefcase business was a goof-up. I was hoping you'd figure it out. It was you that pushed the third button, right? And the lights went on. Trickster here is convinced it's all Mazel's antics. Could very well be. Mazel was after verisimilitude, not verity, even if at

times his similitude was a little too credible. I took the elevator down, too. And didn't I hear you running up the stairs shouting something about—a rabbi, was it? Well, I came down and found Trickster sitting here with the candles. So now we're trying to decide if we should push the buttons again.

– Oh, that's not the point, – Trickster interjected suddenly. – This reality is no worse than the old ones. See, Mazel maintained that pushing the buttons twice would switch on the emergency lights all over the Building. And if we try it, we'll know for sure if Mazel himself was—or should I say, is?—very credible. And if all of this...

He cut himself off and stared into the flames again. Sam observed him anxiously, shook his head, and spoke to me in an apologetic tone:

– Imagine a man whose leg was amputated. He wakes up after the surgery and doesn't know how much was cut off: just the foot, from the knee down, or the whole leg. Of course, he could look. But it's scary. It's stupid, the thing is done, but it's still scary.

Trickster was making wry faces as Sam talked. Now he reached across the table and plucked the briefcase out of the attendant's lap. Sam perceived his intentions and nodded agreeably, as if his whole speech has been meant to provoke Trickster. Something wasn't kosher with that briefcase, I felt it in my bones, but the escalating headache wouldn't let me concentrate.

Everything happened with the speed of light, which flooded the place: powerful illuminants went on high up somewhere. I couldn't exactly say where, because once my eyes got used to the sudden glare, looking up was the last thing on my mind. I also avoided looking down. What I beheld was a macabre, inhuman sight that was unreal, that could not be. Yet I was standing in the center of it.

We were suspended over an abyss on a narrow concrete splinter, the whole of it permeated by cracks. That's when I knew what was responsible for the sense of vastness and the crunching noises. To all sides of us, and up, and down, swelled nothingness. I glanced over my shoulder. The elevator shaft, miraculously intact, snatches of walls and ceilings stuck to it, looked tenuous and flimsy. How this snakelike fragment had managed to hang in there was a mystery, but it was plain that any second now it could come tumbling down, way down into the powdered concrete rubble of the Building's innards. Down to where Mazel presumably was buried. And as for me... How easy had it been not to head straight for the candlelight but to get sidetracked in the dark instead?

Neither Sam nor Trickster had so much as stirred. They stayed in their seats with unnatural calmness. Trickster merely gave the scene a once-over and cocked an eyebrow at Sam, as if to inquire how they should proceed. The lardass looked as stunned as I felt, but he sat stock-still. He must have feared his slightest move would cause an avalanche. Stealthily, weightlessly, suppressing the urge to run, I began to back out towards the elevator.

– *Voilà!* – said Trickster. – Weren't you the one, Sam, who used to make fun of my fondness for the gloomy basement? Well, here's a little light for you. What now? Shall we go on with the experiment? Or shall we leave things as they are?

Sam smiled at him, waved to me for no apparent reason, and soothingly stroked the sleeve of the attendant, whose eyes were popping out of his head.

– I have a hunch, my dear Trickster, that Mazel had foreseen this course of events. Frankly, I'm beginning to think he was right when he said the Building didn't have a future without him. I used to believe the Building was my creation. But it turned out Mazel began his contest with reality long before me, when he started his club for the incurables. Was any of

them even ill, except Mazel himself? He found a pretty clever answer to a hackneyed question—“to be or not to be?”: straddle the fence between the two states. But maintaining that equilibrium required potent measures. Very potent indeed. And, as you so eloquently put it—*voilà!*.. No, say what you will, I’m pleased with all that’s happened.

– Blah, blah, blah, – Trickster raised his voice, and the report rocked our brittle foundation. – Enough with the theories. What now, I ask you? As you know, the buttons may be pushed in different combinations.

I’d reached the door that I’d come out of and felt behind me for the doorknob. The echo of my booming heart zoomed like a crazed jellyfish all through my body. The last thing I saw before turning away were Sam and Trickster bent over the briefcase and the blank stare of the hulk.

I carefully closed the door, eager to shut myself off from the insanity I’d left behind. The elevator stood by. After what I’d just seen, after waiting for the bottom to fall out, a car that dangled on a hair seemed like a bastion of stability. But the elevator was on the blink. I tried all the buttons and got no response: it was stuck. A thought grazed the edge of my mind. All I had to do was sit tight till that tottering slab of concrete went, and then... But that was more than I could bear. As an added incentive, there was a more audible crunch, and the car wobbled. Oh, fuck it all! Maybe it had brakes that would slow up the fall. If I could get the cable to break... What the hell, it was only five floors.

My mind made up, I jumped into the air and came crashing down full-force on my ass. The steel thread overhead snapped with a sonorous pop. The car lurched and slipped out from under me. I closed my eyes. A moment later I was pressed into the floor. The elevator was

braking. It moved in jerks and starts, now halting, now slipping again. I sat on the floor in mindless terror, eyes shut.

It seemed to go on forever, but at some point the elevator came to a rest. I didn't open my eyes for a while; then I resolutely got up and walked out into the lobby. The setting sun was pummeling the building across the way, but otherwise the lobby looked the same. I took a deep breath. It was impossible! First the unaccountable stairway marathon, then the savage destruction, now this blithe immaculate lobby... Should I shrug it off, bite the bullet and go back up? Hell, no! Even so, I raised my head—and got my answer. The ceiling was beset with monstrous ruptures and sagged in the middle. A warm breeze tickled my ear. I turned in that direction and saw what used to be the glass wall lying scattered in a thousand pieces. That did it.

I shot over the slivers, feeling no pain in my bare feet, and burst outside. Clearing the sleepy street in a flash, I rounded the corner of the busy avenue and stopped. People walked by, throwing cursory glances at my twisted face. The air was thick as molasses, the way it gets in the summer. And suddenly I had a revelation. The little side street and the avenue buzzing with city life were nothing more than an extended stage set. Not Sam's, eccentric but harmless, but a different one, more cruel than Mazel's. Because cruelty binds the world like the steel hoop that girds a barrel, and keeps it from falling apart. We need it more than the Building's residents. They were tenants-at-will, and here in the streets we're all prisoners of a reality without end. And if we wish to escape, the only alternative to death is a piece of real estate with a strategic location: in limbo. The Building...

I looked behind me, slumped against the wall and started sliding down. I couldn't help it. The ground slipped out from under me, like the elevator's floor had before. Then it

shuddered and rumbled. The Building I'd just left began to founder by degrees, weirdly folding in on itself. For an improbable second I imagined that if I could just stay on my feet, the Building, too, would halt its huge grim collapse. But some heedless irrational force pulled me down to the heat of the pavement. I fought it with failing strength. The Building seemed to slow its progress, then succumbed to the inevitable and sank to its dusty grave. A cloud of smoke billowed up and outward and, just as I hit the sidewalk, shrouded the final devastation in a whirl of tiny tornadoes. The dust blocked the sun, and I was almost sure somebody simply dimmed it as per stage directions. There was screaming and aimless commotion. And in the midst of it all it came to me why Sam and Trickster had played it so cool at curtain time. The Building stayed true to itself. This was only a change of scenery. I wonder what's coming next?

THE END

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