

A CHILD ACROSS THE SKY

by Jonathan Carroll

flyleaf:

Across America, readers are delighting in what their European counterparts have long recognized: Jonathan Carroll is a novelist of rare and terrifying power. Pat Conroy first recognized Carroll's magic, calling him a "cult waiting to be born." Now, spanning the literary spectrum from Stephen King to Ruth Rendell, *Booklist* to the *Berkeley Beat*, the growing and diverse ranks of believers testify to the fact that Carroll is the first original movement in contemporary American literature.

A Child Across the Sky is a modern *Faust*, a seductive psychological descent into evil set in the chic world of film. An intellectual, Oscar-winning filmmaker, Weber Greston is horrified to learn that his best friend Philip Strayhorn has committed suicide. Strayhorn, the creator and antihero of the cult series of "Midnight" films, leaves behind only a disturbing videotape as explanation. The tape forces Weber to confront the twisted significance of Phil's movies. In the process, he learns not only how little he knew about his best friend, but also just how far he's willing to go in the name of Art.

Carroll's fifth novel and his richest offering, *A Child Across the Sky* shimmers with invention and feeling. It is both a stunning addition to his work and, for those who have yet to experience Carroll, a dazzling entree to his world.

JONATHAN CARROLL is the author of *The Land of Laughs*, *Voice of Our Shadow*, *Bones of the Moon*, and *Sleeping in Flame*. He lives in Vienna.

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FIRST EDITION

For Beverly -- My life across the sky

"They are coming to teach us good manners. . . . But they won't succeed because we are gods."

Giuseppe Lampedusa,

The Leopard

one

The people

one loves

should take all

their things

with them when they die.

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

Love in the Time of Cholera

An hour before he shot himself, my best friend Philip Strayhorn called to talk about thumbs.

"Ever noticed when you wash your hands how you don't really do your thumbs?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's your most important finger, but because it sticks out, away from the rest, you don't really wash it. A little dip and rub, maybe, but not nearly enough attention for all the work it does. It's probably the finger that gets dirtiest, too."

"That's what you called to tell me, Phil?"

"It's very symbolic. Think about it. . . . What are you reading these days?"

"Plays. I'm still trying to find the right ones."

"I have to tell you I bumped into Lee Onax the other day. Said he'll still give you half a million if you direct for him."

"I don't want to direct films anymore, Phil. You know how I feel."

"Sure, but five hundred thousand dollars would help your theater a lot."

"_Five_ dollars would help a lot. But if I went back and did a film now, it'd be fun and seductive and I'd probably want to direct movies again."

"Remember in the *Aeneid* the hundred and forty thousand different kinds of pain? I wonder what number yours would be? 'I don't want to be a famous Hollywood director anymore because it'd make me confused.' Pain number 1387."

"Where are you calling from, Phil?"

"LA. We're still cutting the film."

"What's the title?"

"_Midnight Kills_."

I grinned. "Terrific. What's the most horrible thing you do in it?"

The telephone line hissed over the three thousand miles.

"Are you still there, Phil?"

"Yeah. The most horrible thing is what I *didn't* do."

"You were making a movie, man. Bad things happen sometimes."

"Uh-huh. How are *you* doing, Weber?"

"Good. One of my main actors is really sick, but you've got to expect that when you're working here." I looked at the small Xeroxed poster tacked to the board above my desk. THE NEW YORK CANCER PLAYERS PRESENT FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT'S "THE VISIT." "Our Opening night is in a month. We're all getting nervous."

"Theater's so different, isn't it? With movies, opening night means everything is finished: nothing you can do but sit back and watch. In the theater, though, it's all beginning. I remember that."

There was a worn-out echo in his voice that I took for exhaustion. I was wrong.

Sasha Makrianes called to tell me he was dead. She'd gone over to cook lunch and found him sitting on the patio in his favorite high-backed armchair. From behind, it looked like he'd fallen asleep while reading. A copy of Rilke's poetry was on the ground next to him, as well as an unopened can of Dr. Pepper. She called his name, then saw the book was covered with blood. Going over, she saw him slumped forward, what was left of his head spewed in a wide splintered arc over everything.

Running into the house to telephone the police, she found the body of Flea, his Shar-Pei dog, in the big brown wicker basket Phil brought from Yugoslavia.

Hearing he'd killed the dog too was almost as shocking as the news of Phil's death. Sasha often joked through gritted teeth that he loved Flea as much as her.

The first thing that came to my mind was our thumb discussion. Was he thinking about that an hour later as he loaded the gun and put it in his mouth? Why had he chosen *that* as the topic of our last conversation?

A few years before, we'd been through an earthquake together. As the ground rumbled, Phil kept saying over and over, "This isn't a movie! This is *not* a movie!"

We'd been creating or adapting scripts so long that all part of me could think of was setting and the last words this character, Philip Strayhorn, would

have chosen. I was ashamed my mind worked like that, but if Phil had known I would have laughed. In the process of spending almost twenty years trying to get our names onto the silver screen, we'd lost parts of our objectivity toward life. When someone you love dies, you should weep -- not think of camera angles or last lines.

After the phone call, I went out for a walk. There was a travel agent down the street; I'd book a flight to California the next day. But a few steps out the door, I realized what I really wanted to do was visit Cullen James.

Cullen and her husband, Danny, lived up on Riverside Drive, a good hour's walk from my apartment. Pulling up my collar, I started out with the hope exercise and the tiredness it'd bring would take some of the e.g. off the news of Philip Strayhorn's death.

In the last few years, Cullen had become famous in a peculiar sort of way. When we first met, she was going through what could best be described as an "otherworldly experience." Every night for a number of months she dreamt of a land called Rondua where she traveled on a bizarre quest after something called the "bones of the moon." I fell in love with her then, which was very bad because she was happily married to a nice man and nursing their first child. I am not a wife stealer, but Cullen James made me crazy and I went after her as if she were the gold ring on my personal carousel. If I'd been a sailor, I'd have had her name tattooed on my arm.

In the end I didn't win her, but during that confused and passionate time I began dreaming of Rondua too. Those dreams changed my life. Those dreams and the earthquake.

When I got to the Jameses' building I was cold inside and out. The death of a loved one robs you of some kind of vital inner heat. Or perhaps it blows out the pilot light that keeps your burners lit. Whatever, it took an hour of hard walking in the blue lead cold of a New York December for me to really hold in the palm of my mind the fact my best and oldest friend was dead. He had almost no cruelty in him. After twenty years I knew Philip Strayhorn was even better than I'd ever thought. He once said there are thirty-one million seconds in a year. So few of them are worth remembering. Those that are, thrill and hurt us without end.

"Hello?"

"Cullen? It's Weber. I'm downstairs. Do you mind a visitor?"

"Oh, Christ, Weber, we just heard about Phil. Of course, come up."

There was a giant holiday wreath on their door. The Jameses loved Christmas. For them, it started in November and went on well into January. They used their daughter, Mae, as an excuse for the festivity, but it was clear they liked it more than the kid. There were always oranges stuck with cinnamon cloves in every corner of every room, Christmas cards on the windowsills, a tree out of a 1940s movie like *The Bishop's Wife* or *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was a good place. Slippers belonged there, and a friendly dog that followed you from room to room.

Cullen opened the door and smiled. There are perfect faces. I've known and slept with some, but they were meant to remain placid and untouched, not shaken or distorted by the push and pull of great emotion or a long and full night in bed. They're tuxedos -- you wear them only on special occasions and then hang them up carefully in the closet afterward; a stain or wrinkle on them ruins everything. Cullen's is not a perfect face. She smiles too much, and many times it's obviously false: her safe and easy defense against a curious and persistent world. But she is beautiful and . . . whole. When I first met her she was full of love and confusion. Even then I wanted it all but knew I'd never have any. Without trying, she handcuffed herself to my heart.

When she opened the door that sad day, instead of offering a hug, Cullen took off the silver bracelet she was wearing and handed it to me. When I was trying to woo her, I'd once asked her to do that. It was the only real physical intimacy we would ever share: her warmth, my only moments of owning it. Although she'd blushed when I first told her that, since then it had become her way of saying, I'm here, friend. I'll do what I can.

"How're you doing, Weber?"

"Not so good. Where's Mae?"

"Inside with Danny. We haven't told her yet. You know how much she loved Phil."

"Such a nice man." I started to cry. "You want to know something strange as hell? The last time Phil stayed with me here, on his way back from Yugoslavia? He slept on the couch and wore my pajamas. When he left the next morning, for some strange reason I took the pajamas and put them up to my face so I could smell them. Smell *him*. I don't know why I did that, Cullen. He was there. He's gone. He was everywhere."

She put her arm around my shoulder and pulled me gently into the apartment. Almost as soon as the door closed behind us, a little black Cairn terrier that looked exactly like the dog in *The Wizard of Oz* came trotting importantly from another room. Her muzzle was completely, comically white. She'd obviously just been rooting around in something thick and foamy.

"Mama! Negnug ate all the whipped cream!" Mae James, age five, came running in, arms windmilling, tongue stuck out, big eyes delighted. "Weber!" She leapt up on me and wrapped her legs around mine.

"Hiya, Mae! I came over to say hello."

"Weber, you cannot imagine what just happened! Negnug ate all the whipped cream Mama made for the cake."

Danny walked in with his great warm smile on, something I always liked to see. He stuck out his hand and we shook hard. After a moment, he put his other hand over mine. "I'm glad you came, Weber. We were worried about you. Let's have a drink."

"But, Pop, what about the whipped cream? Aren't you going to spank Negnug? If I did that, you'd spank *me*! Now she's probably going to throw up all over the rug, like she did last time."

A small fire burned in the grate in the living room. The dog was plopped down on its side nearby. It looked pleased and exhausted. Mae walked over and, hands on hips, shook her head disgustedly at the furry traitor.

"Now our cake won't be half as good because of *you*, stinkpot."

Cullen and I sat on the couch, Danny in a paisley-covered armchair nearby.

"Mae, honey, would you do me a favor and go see if the tea is ready yet? Just tell me if the water's boiling, but don't touch anything, okay?"

"Okay, Mom."

When the child had left the room, Cullen spoke quickly. "Fool around with her a little, Weber, okay? Then she and Danny are going to the movies. You and I have to talk."

"About Phil?"

They looked at each other. Danny spoke. "About a couple of things." He reached down and pulled a box from beneath his chair. "We got a package from Phil in the mail a couple of days ago. We thought it was Christmas presents for Mae. But when we opened it, this box was inside along with two others. It's got your name on it."

I sat forward. "It's from *Phil*?"

Danny shrugged. "We didn't understand it either, except he knows we all spend Christmas together. Cullen thought maybe he wanted us to open our presents from him together."

"The water's just beginning to boil, Mama," Mae called from the kitchen. "But I didn't touch anything. Not even the potholder."

Cullen started to get up. "He was a sad man, Weber. Had absolutely *no* patience with the slowness of the world. You know that better than anyone. He did *everything* quickly and well, but that's always big trouble. Because then you're always disappointed no one else can follow suit. I loved Phil, but what happened doesn't surprise me."

"That's a pretty hard-ass thing to say, Cullen."

She was walking toward the kitchen but stopped next to me. "There are two things that don't leave you alone, Weber -- love and disappointment. You can't turn either of them off like a fan or twist the direction of their *flow* a little to one side.

"I'll tell you something. Once when he was in his cups, Phil called, said one sentence, then hung up: 'Life is comprised of fuck-ups and fuck-you's.'"

"Sure, but at the same time I've never known anyone as full of life as he was. He was curious about everything."

"True, but that doesn't keep your heart full."

"What about Sasha?"

"Mom, come on. It's boiling!"

"They weren't living together anymore. Wait a minute. Let me get the tea and I'll be back." She touched my shoulder and moved on.

"Do you want to look at the package?" Danny held it out to me.

"What do you think, Dan?"

"I saw Phil last week."

"What? He was in town?"

He nodded. "Asked me to come and meet him at the Pierre but didn't want you or Cullen to know."

"Why not? Christ, what'd he say?"

"Okay, everybody! Teatime!" Cullen walked in carrying a big tray full of tea and cakes. I looked fast, then at Danny again. He shook his head, said only, "Look in the package."

"That one? The one from him?"

"Yes. We'll talk about it after you see."

"See what?"

"The videos. You want some help with that, Cul?"

There was a new log of applewood on the fire. The room had been silent for some time while Cullen and I looked into the flames. I shook my head. "He wanted to be liked and admired. He wanted to be left alone."

"Who doesn't? You know what fame is, Weber. When it comes, it's like a crazy fan who won't leave you alone. And who can be damned scary! It gets obsessed with you in all the wrong ways. You know that old line about how the woman catches her man? 'He ran after me till I caught him?' Well, that's the same thing with fame. You want it, but once you've caught it, you realize it's been waiting for you all along . . . like some kind of monster from one of Phil's films. Like Bloodstone! Philip Strayhorn wanted to be a very famous man but stay private, live his own life. Good luck with *that*, as we all know.

"Look, you guys got exactly what you wanted, what you dreamed about when you were at Harvard. Or so you've told me. But what did you two do with this fame you wanted so badly? *You* threw it over to direct dying people in obscure plays. And Phil? He shot himself. They're not new stories, Mr. Gregston."

"You're really showing your teeth today, huh?"

She sighed. "No, it's just coming up through my brain like a slow fog that sweet Phil Strayhorn is really dead. That makes two of my friends who've died violently. I hate it. Neither of them deserved that."

"Phil killed himself."

She rubbed her mouth. "Do you believe that, Weber?"

"Yes. He talked a lot about suicide."

"Shit. I believe it too. I wish I didn't. You know what I can't stop thinking about? The lovely, exact way he peeled an orange."

I opened my package from Phil before the elevator had reached the ground floor of the Jameses building. As Danny mentioned, three videotapes were inside but nothing else. I wanted a note or some kind of explanation, but there were only the three tapes, each 240 minutes long, labeled FIRST, SECOND, THIRD.

In the taxi home I continued to stare at them. What was there? I remembered telling Cullen how I'd smelled his pajamas after he visited the last time. I felt for a moment like smelling the tapes too, each one of them, in case there were some kind of trace of him there. But that was silly and strange, unnecessary: I had 720 minutes of something Phil thought important enough to show me shortly before he died. It would have to do. The answers would have to be there.

The view from one of my windows is directly into the apartment of a pretty woman who likes to walk around naked. I am convinced she drops her clothes as soon as she gets home, the way some people drop their umbrella in a stand by the door. She must have a high heating bill because summer and winter her pink skin and small pointy breasts dart and bounce through her rooms at all hours of the day. She always seems to be in a hurry. Running here and there, objects in her hands, pacing the floor while she talks on the telephone. Always busy and always bare-assed.

I have often watched her, although neither she nor her nakedness excite me. What I love is being able to live in her everyday privacy. Not as the proverbial fly on the wall, because that image evokes seeing something forbidden. No, sometimes I feel like her husband or roommate: intimate as well as comfortable enough to watch her walk into the kitchen nude, enjoying her familiar sights without having to have them.

Getting out of the taxi I looked up and saw her standing there, waiting four feet away. I had so much on my mind and was so surprised to see her close up that the first thing I said was, "Did you want this breast?"

"Excuse me?"

"Uh, this *cab*. Do you want the cab?"

"Yes, please." Her look said she thought I had a few screws loose. I got out fast and held the door for her. She had on a nice woody-smelling perfume. I almost asked her name but held back. Did I really want to know who she was? Then she would only be a Leslie or a Jill. A name, a zip code number, a Diner's Club member. Slamming the door behind her, I smiled and was happy for the first time that day. I don't know why. It made going back into my empty apartment that much easier.

After Phil saw my New York place for the first time, he laughed and said, "'A Room in Brooklyn,' huh?" Later that day he went out and bought me a copy of *The Notebooks of Louise Bogan*. In it, he'd marked this passage:

Edward Hopper's 'A Room in Brooklyn.' A room my heart yearns to: uncurtained, hardly furnished, with a view over roofs. A clean bed, a bookcase, a kitchen, a calm mind, one or two half-empty rooms. All my life wants to achieve, and I have not yet achieved it. I have tried too hard for the wrong things. If I would concentrate on getting the spare room, I could have it almost at once. . . . I must have it.

There are two pairs of pants in my closet, only five books allowed in the apartment at the same time. It sounds pretentious and pseudo-Zen, but living like this has been both painful and instructive for me. In my heart I am the perfect Yuppie because I like things. At one time I was a walking UN of prestigious labels and loved it. Italian leather jackets, English suits, cashmere sweaters from Hilditch and Key in Paris. Give me quality things and lots of them. If they have initials on them that's okay too -- I don't mind being a walking advertisement. One of the delights of being a movie director was you were expected to wear those things because of your position as a young creative lion out there. The spoils of the battle of Hollywood: Once you'd made a film that went into the black, they encouraged you to put on your first Patek Philippe wristwatch. You took your wallet out of a Miyake pocket, and the light you turned out at night was designed either by Richard Sapper or Harry Radcliffe. Long live excess!

But after I moved to New York, I got rid of everything on purpose. Maybe because I liked it all so much, maybe because it was just simpler living in a room that was furnished only with air and white walls.

I'd come back from a year in Europe where I'd lived in the kind of pensions where you peed in the toilet down the hall and if you wanted a shower you paid extra for it. At the beginning of the trip I carried a five-hundred-dollar knapsack from Hunting World. It was promptly stolen in the Cracow train station. The rest of my year abroad was done via a Cracow fiberboard suitcase, Polish suit and shoes, and a loden coat I bought at the Vienna flea market for four dollars.

I'd read Thoreau's "Economy" and the Lives of some saints, but until the earthquake and the Europe trip, I didn't agree that life was better with less. Or that less was more. The lesson I did learn after Cracow was all those lovely expensive things in my missing bag were not indispensable and could be replaced. Too easily. How could they be so special if you could go right out and buy another, or ten, if you wanted?

So when I got back to "Morka" (as Phil called it) I got rid of a lot. Moved into a New York life with my Polish suitcase, a copy of Cullen's just-published *Bones of the Moon*, and a real desire to see if there were any other windows to look out besides the ones I'd known for the last couple of years.

But I kept two wonderful things from my "old days." I had to; it was hard to erase the movie director from inside me. Besides, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

kept a small video camera and the television video system I'd bought with residuals from my film *Sorrow and Son*.

Without taking off my coat, I turned on the TV and video machine and plugged in the first tape. Squatting in front of the set like a catcher waiting for the first pitch of the game, I rubbed my cold hands together.

The electric gray buzz and hiss cleared. Phil's face appeared. He was sitting on the couch in his living room petting Flea. The dog was lying half on him, attentively gazing into the camera. With all those impossible, hilarious wrinkles it looked like an alive hot fudge sundae.

"Hello, my man. I'm sorry about what happened. You know I love you and will miss you most of all. You were the only brother I ever had. I love you more for that than anything else. You-you-you: I'm saying that too many times.

"Danny and I met a few days ago. He'll be able to answer most questions you have. But please don't ask him anything until you've done two things: watched the rest of this tape all the way through and then called Sasha. Another thing -- don't be shocked by what you see. You have some very hard stuff to do in the next few months. I hope some of what you see here will help you get through it.

"How do I know? I just do, Weber. That's part of the reason why I'm dead when you see this. Can't handle it. But I think you can. There are others who do too.

"One last thing: You won't be able to watch the second or third tapes until you've been out to California. You'll see what I mean."

The dog saw something in the camera's direction. Looking straight at me, it started to bark. Phil smiled and petted the dog back into silence. It looked at him and licked his hand.

"I love you, Weber. Don't ever forget that, no matter what."

He put up a hand and waved slowly: goodbye. The picture dimmed. A moment later everything began.

My mother died in an airplane crash when I was nine. She flew off to visit her family in Hartford, Connecticut, but never returned. The airplane ran into a flock of starlings on takeoff and, like some silly cartoon, sucked the birds into the engines. Then it stalled. Then it crashed. Seventy-seven people died. They found Mama's handbag completely untouched (there were still traces of perfume on her handkerchief) but could only identify her caramelized body via dental charts.

When they told me the news, the only thing I could think of was whether or not she had died quickly. In those days I was completely intrigued by airplane crashes, intrigued the way any preadolescent loves the macabre and dangerous from a distance. So long as it didn't bite or want to come into my living room, I would press my nose as close as I could up against its glass. But suddenly my wonderful mother was gone. The thing was loose in my life.

Unfortunately I learned enough from reading articles and gaping at pictures of catastrophes to know it could have been any of a thousand possible hideous falls to death in those last few minutes, or seconds, of life. Had her end come fast? Slow? Painfully?

They were questions that haunted me thirty years. Whenever I flew, I looked around the cabin at curtains that could burn, seats that might snap in half or send their jagged pieces through a body like medieval weapons. . . . Her body had burned and that was bad enough, but was the burning "all"? Was there more -- worse -- I didn't know? Why did I *want* to know?

I cannot say, but Phil's video answered my questions.

The first thing I heard was a muffled, phony voice speaking.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This is your captain, Mike Maloy. Welcome aboard flight 651 to Washington. Our flying time will be approximately one hour and fifteen minutes."

It took a moment to register that I was inside an airplane cabin, seeing it all through someone's eyes. A tracking shot. Several women wore pastel-colored Jackie Kennedy pillbox hats; men had short hair and read the *Hartford Courant* dated March 1960. "I" looked down at my lap and finally knew in a furious flash of recognition who I was -- my mother. There was her red leather purse, the gray dress she wore only on special occasions. I'd sat on their bed the day she left and watched her carefully fold the dress in half and place it in her suitcase.

"When'll you be back, Ma?"

"Tuesday, dear. I'll be back before you're home from school."

The pilot went on speaking. My eyes, Mama's eyes, looked out the oval window at the runway and the little yellow trucks scuttling back and forth on the ground below. The plane revved up and began to move backward.

I saw through her eyes but had my own thoughts. Terrified and captivated, I knew exactly what was about to happen. Was this the way God saw things? Did he kick back in his leather Barcalounger upstairs and flick on the tube to someone's life in peril? The same way we sort of watch and get interested in the fate of soap opera characters?

What should I have done, stopped the film? All my life I'd wanted to know what these last minutes had been like for her. The questions around her death had been the basis of much of my young confusion, not to mention the inspiration for my first film, *The Night Is Blond*.

The man next to Mama offered her a copy of *Time* magazine. Fidel Castro was on the cover. She thanked him but said reading on a plane made her ill. He tried to make conversation, but she only smiled and busied herself with the seat belt. I remembered how nervous she became when strange men spoke to her. She was good-looking but shy; my father had won her through gentle persistence. She said she'd first fallen in love with his patience.

Her slim hands were so familiar. The gold engagement and wedding rings that slipped on and off her finger so easily whenever she washed her

hands. The shiny scar above her thumb where she'd cut it deeply one day while making lunch.

The plane turned hard left, then began to taxi. A stewardess came by offering a bowl of hard candy, Mama's favorite. We often joked that she had a mouth full of sweet tooth. This last time she took two -- an orange and a green. She looked out the window again at the nice weather. Some purple-gray clouds far off in the southern sky. In an hour and a half the plane was due to land in Washington. In an hour and a half firemen would still be trying to control the flames that licked up at the clear Hartford sky. She put a piece of candy in her mouth. The plane began to pick up speed. A blond stewardess hurried down the aisle toward the back of the plane, a nervous smile on her face.

The plane goes faster and faster, the view out the window begins to blur. Then that fast, stomach-lurching lift off the earth and the hard pull *up*.

A few seconds going up, up. . . .

A loud fast *thunk-thunk-thunk*. *Thunkity-thunkity*. Everything stops. Just stops. The whole plane feels . . . it's falling backward, crazy angle up and all. Someone screams. More screams. Explosions. I choke. The candy's gone down my throat the wrong way. I can't breathe! Choking, trying to get it out. Explosion. Dead.

The screen went dark, then lit again on Philip Strayhorn's face. "She was dead in half a second, Weber. One big blow she didn't even feel. I promise you that. I know it for sure.

"There's more on this tape you must see, but not now. You can watch your mother's part again if you want, but there's nothing new to be learned. That's how it happened.

"Call Sasha, okay?"

The tape went black again, then turned into the electronic fuzz that's so annoying at the end of any video film. I reached over and fast-forwarded it a count of one hundred, then pressed PLAY again: fuzz. Rewound it to the beginning, replayed a little of what I'd already seen: Phil in his living room with the dog. FAST FORWARD: Mama being offered candy again. More FAST FORWARD: fuzz.

I reached down for the other tapes (SECOND and THIRD) and tried them both: fuzz all the way. For no reason at all, I put the first one in again and ran it up to the end. "Call Sasha, okay?"

But this time there was more.

A little fuzz, then his face again. I jerked back like I'd been slapped.

"This tape goes on and gives you more and more, Weber, as you can see. You've obviously tried the other two now and seen they don't work. But they *will*, later, when you're ready. Like this one. The more you discover, the more the tapes will tell you. Sort of like deciphering the hieroglyphics." He smiled. "The ride starts here, Scruno. I wish I could have gone on it with you, but I tried and it ate me.

"Don't let that worry you, though. I'll still be around in here, in these tapes. I'll be able to help you in some ways. Remember Kenneth Patchen's line? 'It may be a long time till morning, but there is no law against talking in the dark.' Call Sasha, huh?"

Sasha Makrianes's mother was Russian and her father a Greek, one of those lucky people who invent something ridiculous like the disposable lighter and become instantly rich. Alexandra inherited not only a ton of money but the deep-set brown eyes and high cheekbones that make an attractive Russian or Greek woman intriguing, but also dark and a little scary. The words "gypsy" or "revolutionary" are in there somewhere.

Sasha and I were introduced in Vienna by friends. Although her arm was in a sling, my first impression was I couldn't imagine her ever losing, or being used. Her life must be an obedient and loving pet she led around on a silver leash without much thought. She looked spoiled but also strong and decisive. It struck me if she'd been poor she'd probably have had the same aura.

How wrong I was! A week before we met, she'd broken up with her boyfriend of two years. Her arm was in the sling because on leaving the restaurant where they'd had it out, she had stepped into the street, blind and finished, and been hit by a taxi.

"Our relationship was always thin as a spiderweb anyway: delicate and lovely, but the slightest breeze broke right through it. It got so he was like a ventriloquist with his hand up my back, moving my lips -- I was so afraid of saying the wrong thing.

"Love is a bully, you know? It can't be avoided and it can't be held off at arm's length. It arrives or reappears or descends or whatever, and we might as well throw up our hands and just hope for the best, right?"

"My analyst told me I ran away from my boyfriend the way a child runs when being chased by a parent -- you know, laughing and yelling and looking over her shoulder the whole time, dying to be caught?"

She didn't stop talking, although after the initial boyfriend flood, most of what she said was interesting. But there is a certain pathos and desperation in the person who never lets anyone else speak.

That first evening was nearly asleep by the time we left my friends' apartment together and walked down Bennogasse to her car.

"Whenever I go to the Easterlings' house for dinner, I feel like an ugly frog swimming through an aquarium full of colorful, gorgeous fish. You know what I mean?"

I stopped walking and took her hand. "You're so *tight*. What's the matter?"

"You're Weber Gregston! You made the greatest film I ever saw: You made *Wonderful*. You think I'm an asshole, don't you?" Undoing her hand from mine, she stepped back. "I was so excited to meet you. I didn't want you to see this stupid arm and I didn't want to say the wrong things . . . I wanted to hear *you* talk. . . . Now I fucked up again --" She tried to say more but tears stopped her.

A beautiful woman with her arm in a sling standing on a street corner in Vienna in the middle of the night, crying, is a good picture for a movie, but not real life.

I asked her for coffee, and we went across the street to a big shabby café that was all yellow light and old cigarette smoke. I even remember the name: Café Hummel. No one hummed in the Café Hummel.

Her father was just diagnosed as having pancreatic cancer. Her boyfriend left because she bored him. She wanted to do something else with her life. We talked in the café until three, then went back to her apartment and mistakenly made love. It wasn't very good.

But something more important happened in that charged night and during our next few days together. A friendship began that immediately did us both good. Soon we liked each other so much we knew we'd found something vital and necessary.

On impulse, we dropped everything and went to Zermatt together for a long weekend because it was snowing all over Europe that winter.

There are places in the world with which one falls in love with the passion and vitality we usually save for a great love affair. We see it and know from the first this will be right and long. If we're very lucky, our being here now will add dimension and knowledge to our lives later.

When we made love there, it was without the held-breath passion of the beginning of an affair. It was gentle, unhurried and long: two great friends on a walk together through a wonderful, familiar city.

The day we left, we sat out on the balcony of our hotel room and held hands, looking up at the Matterhorn. We were tired and fulfilled, in love with a moment in our lives when we'd made the right decision and it had led us to a treasure of high *i.e.* silence, and *Schlagobers* in our coffee.

"Escape can be expensive, but sometimes it's more necessary than breath, huh?"

"What do you mean?" The late-afternoon light had grown tired and tan.

"This whole trip has been . . . before we got on the train in Vienna, I turned around and looked at the world there. In one part of me I knew that after this trip, no matter what happened between us, things would never be the same again. Something was coming to an end for me. So . . . so I looked at Vienna as if it were somehow the last time.

"I don't do things like this, Weber. I don't go off for weekends with people unless I'm in love. We both know we're not in love. But this time has lifted me off that 'old me' earth back there. It showed me how things look from a good distance.

"It's showed me it's time I went home to America. Knowing that my friend but *not* my love, Weber Gregston, will be there soon makes it better. Thank you."

She went back a week later to be with her father while he died. We wrote often while I roamed around Europe, and she flew to California when I returned. The sexual part of our new history was over, but we were still so glad to see each other again.

I introduced her to Phil Strayhorn. At first, they scared each other.

She knew him more as a writer: had read every one of his "Midnight in Hollywood" columns in *Esquire* and loved them. When she heard he was my best friend and that I wanted her to meet him, she rented the first Midnight film. And turned it off, shouting "Enough!" after ten minutes.

"What does he look like?"

"You mean does he look like Bloodstone? No, he's sort of middle size and balding."

"But it's so violent, Weber! I've seen horror films before, but that was the worst. How about that part where the dogs eat the child?"

"That's from Hieronymus Bosch, 'The Garden of Earthly Delights.' Most of his worst scenes come from famous paintings or books he reads. Did I tell you Phil graduated summa with a double major in Physics and Art History? For years the only thing he wanted to do was restore paintings."

"How did he end up in horror films?"

"A month before we graduated he decided he wanted to make movies."

He thought she was too good to be true.

"Phil, please go out there and talk to her!"

"I'm making the salad." He wouldn't look at me.

"You're not making salad, you're hiding. Don't forget I was your roommate for four years."

"That's true, Weber, she's pretty, she's rich, *and* kind? Bullshit."

"She *is*. Word of honor."

"She knows I make the Midnight films? That I play Bloodstone? You told her?"

"I told her everything. You write 'em, direct 'em, act in 'em. . . . Now give me the fucking salad and go talk to her!"

They fell in love over the dog, I think. A black Chinese Shar-Pei named Flea. Phil called them "sharpies."

On their first formal date, he took Sasha to Beverly Center to see the new film by the Taviani brothers. While they were riding the escalator up to that monstrous beehive of a mall, a bunch of teenage girls recognized "Bloodstone" and mobbed him for autographs. He was always nice about that, but they got pushy and demanding. It reached the point where, grabbing Sasha's hand, he just ran. The kids followed until Phil pulled a few quick moves and ducked them into a pet shop.

I know the store because a hamster there costs about as much as dinner at Spago. But one of them (they later disagreed over who) saw the little black pile of wrinkles in a corner cage.

One of the oldest homilies I know is don't buy a dog from a pet store because they're inevitably sick. But Phil said he'd never seen anything like that and wasn't it great? Sasha said it looked like a piece of dehydrated fruit: drop water on it and it'd blow up to full size. Phil didn't laugh. It was the most peculiar animal he'd ever seen. He paid with a credit card and picked the creature up after the film.

It sat on the back seat of the car as regal and still as a Bugatti hood ornament -- until it threw up on Sasha's suede purse. When they got back to Phil's, the puppy continued vomiting -- for hours. They took it to an all-night veterinarian who said it was only nerves: getting used to a new life.

Home again, they ended up singing quietly any song they thought might calm it. Sasha said in the middle of "Yesterday" Phil came up with the name Flea.

When do people cross the line to love? Wake one morning not only with the full taste of it on the tongue, but the sureness the flavor will stay as long as we work to keep and appreciate it?

Phil said it differently. To him, you opened your mouth one astounding moment and, with the first unexpected word, realized you were suddenly able to speak and understand an entirely new language, one you'd had no previous knowledge of.

"You know when you travel in another country how you pick up some words or phrases to get by? 'Donnez-moi le pain,' things like that. This language doesn't work that way. You either know it completely in an instant or you never know it at all. There aren't any Berlitz phrase books, and you can't pick it up on the streets. There *are* no streets where these words are used.

"But even if you know the language well, that doesn't mean you can write poems in it."

"What do you mean?"

"When I realized Sasha and I were in love, that we both spoke and understood this new language, I got excited as hell. It was our language and we could do anything we wanted with it. Pass your A. P. exam in Italian and you think you're pretty hot stuff, right? But then read Dante or Pavese and you realize you understand Italian, which *is* great, but you can't sing to the gods with those same words the way they did."

"You mean your love wasn't enough?"

"You know me, Weber, I always want more. As soon as I knew about this new language, I wanted us to move up to the next level and communicate *without* words. ESP or something. Maybe life is only greed."

The dog puked for three days. Sasha came home once to change her clothes and give me a full report. When we talked again it was over the phone, when she called to say the dog was still sick and she was going to sleep on Phil's couch.

She did. From our time together in Vienna I knew she was willing to go to bed fast, but her relationship with Phil went differently. For a long time he didn't make any gestures in that direction and neither did she. He slept in his bedroom and she slept on the couch. They spent four straight days together talking and nursing Flea back to health. He cooked for them and never stopped asking questions about her life. Sometimes she told him the truth, sometimes she lied.

"That's when I knew I was coming close to loving him: When I started telling so many lies. I was afraid he wouldn't like me. I wanted to say all the right things."

"Did you lie to me when we met?"

"No, because I think I knew right away you and I weren't meant to love each other that way, Weber. Partly because you pitied me in the beginning. Pity is bad stuff to build your foundation with.

"Phil listened so carefully to me. I found myself talking less and less because I sensed he was really thinking about whatever I said.

"In Vienna, in that café? Your face had so much concern on it that I felt demented or handicapped. Grateful you were listening but convinced you did it because you're a nice guy, not 'cause I was an interesting person.

"Phil was intrigued."

She watched the first two Midnight films in silence, holding his hand the whole time. She made him turn off the set when he got up to go to the toilet.

She gave him a back massage. He made her Yugoslavian *cevapcici*. Flea felt good enough to go out on the patio and sniff around. The dog had to whine to come back in because they were kissing for the first time.

The man she'd lived with in Vienna was a rock musician who used her and her money unthinkingly but felt no compunction about treating her badly.

Phil was gallant and shy. He wasn't a good-looking man and wasn't sure his talent or intelligence was enough to hold her. He'd spent so much of his young life alone, or worrying about how to impress *any* girl, that even in his successful thirties when he was a movie star and a wealthy man, he wanted to be loved for what he was, not what he'd become. But Hollywood is not a good town to find that kind of understanding person. The actor Stephen Abbey was purported to have said, "You come to Hollywood to get famous, not laid. The greatest fuck in the world is seeing your name first on the screen. Period."

Their love grew tentatively and genuinely. They both wanted to believe, but were both smart and hurt enough to be careful of false love's Northern Lights.

One morning she called from a phone booth and said he'd asked her to move in: What should she do? That afternoon, Phil called from another phone booth and announced he'd asked her to move in. Did I think that was a good idea?

They took a trip together to Japan. When they returned they spoke with the exaggeration and intimacy of excited newlyweds. I was sure they'd get married, but they continued to live together and seemed pleased enough with that.

Sasha became involved in Phil's production company, Fast Forward, and showed herself to be a shrewd and sometimes innovative businesswoman who was largely responsible for the company's involvement in a couple of successful projects outside the Midnight series. She told me Phil had so much confidence in both her and their relationship that it naturally spilled over into other things. I told her she'd just never found the right spot to land before, but that didn't mean she wasn't capable.

She shook her head. "I know I'm capable, Weber, I've never had any reason to apply it to anything. Using your analogy, it was always easier flying around from place to place. Landing takes effort: constantly checking your dials and taking the plane off automatic pilot."

I moved to New York at the height of their happiness. My last picture of them was standing together in the driveway of Phil's house in Laurel Canyon, Flea investigating the rosebushes nearby. They had their hands behind their backs. As I was driving away, they turned around and quickly back again, both wearing those gruesome Bloodstone masks that were in the novelty stores then. They waved. Flea looked up from the bushes, saw two monsters where his friends had just been, and barked.

Later they came to New York for a visit. Over dinner, Phil sheepishly admitted they were thinking about either getting married or having a child.

"Can't you do both?"

Sasha said, "One thing at a time."

Whenever they called from California, things sounded better than ever.

Until three weeks before he killed himself, when I got this letter from Sasha.

Weber.

Phil and I aren't living together anymore. The whole thing is still tentative and not worked out, so neither of us wants to talk about it yet. You'll be the first to know when we make whatever decisions. Please tell Cullen and Danny. We'll be in touch. We promise.

I called many times to hear what was going on, but the only thing that said hello was Bloodstone's voice on their answering machine. I told it I was around if they wanted to talk or visit or whatever might help. I heard nothing more until Sasha called to tell me he was dead.

"Sasha?"

"Weber? Hi. I was expecting your call." She sounded so old and dry.

"I -- uh -- I had to call again, Sasha."

"I know. You got Phil's tapes?"

"You know?"

"Yes. I got one too in the mail right after we talked this morning."

"Can you tell me what was on it?"

"It was a video of Phil. Phil and Flea sitting on the couch. It's hard to . . . I --" Silence.

"Sasha?"

A long intake of breath, then: "He said he was going to show me my future.

"The next shot is of me in a hospital bed. Weber, I'm very pregnant. I thought I was there to have a child, but it's not that; I'm in the hospital because I have cancer and they're going to try and cut it out of me."

"_Are_ you pregnant?"

"I can't be. Phil and I hadn't slept together in months. I just had my period, too.

"Weber, Phil came on after it was over and said everything depends on you. What was he talking about?" She began crying. "What's going on, Weber? Damn it! Where is he? My God. My God, where *is* he?"

"Wait. Sasha, sh-h-h. Wait a minute, honey. Was there anything else on the tape?"

"No. Just the tape and a Xerox copy of 'Mr. Fiddlehead.'"

"What's that?"

"A short story. It was going to be his next project."

"All right. Do me a favor: Hang up and go plug the tape back in. See if there's anything else on it."

"Okay." She didn't ask even why -- hung up and called back a few minutes later. "There's nothing else. Just me pregnant in a hospital with cancer. Are you coming out?"

"Yes. I'll be there sometime tomorrow."

"I called his parents. You know what his father said? 'All right. When is the funeral?'" Only that, completely calm. "When is the funeral?"

"Did you call his sister, Jackie?"

"The father said she can't be reached. Off studying bugs in Nigeria or something. They'll send her a telegram. I can't get over that. 'All right. When is the funeral?' That's it. Only that. 'Hey, mister, your son's dead!' 'All right. When is the funeral?'"

An hour later I'd packed a bag and was sitting by the window thinking about everything that had happened.

When Sasha asked what was on the tapes Phil had sent me, I said only a short goodbye from him and some goof-around silliness we'd filmed with a video camera when I was last there.

After getting off the phone I put the first cassette in the machine again, but there was nothing new to see. Nothing on the other two either.

I'd turned off the lights in the room because I wanted to think in the dark. After a while I realized I'd been looking across at the naked woman's unlit place without being aware of it. When both my eyes and mind came back into focus, I realized someone was sitting near the window of her dark apartment too. Was she looking over without being aware of me? I smiled. That would have made a nice scene in a movie.

The phone rang. I picked it up but kept looking at my dark neighbor.

"Weber? It's Cullen."

"Hi."

"That's all you have to say? 'Hi'? What was on the *tapes*?"

After I explained it to her in a very quiet voice, almost a whisper, there was a long silence. Then she said, "You poor man. Home movies of the apocalypse, huh? I can't imagine what it would be like to watch that. But you know something? It reminds me of what Phil said once when I asked him about a new Midnight film that was about to come out. I wanted to know if it was as gross as the others. Know what he said? 'I behaved very well in it. You'll be utterly ashamed of me.'"

The next morning the doorbell rang at seven: a postman with an express letter from California, mailed the day before. Signing for it, I looked at the red, white, and blue envelope addressed to me in Strayhorn's handwriting.

Inside was the short story Sasha had mentioned earlier, "Mr. Fiddlehead." Neatly typed. Nothing else -- no note from Phil or notations on the story itself. There was no author's name anywhere, so I assumed it had been written by Phil.

MR. FIDDLEHEAD

On my fortieth birthday Lenna Rhodes invited me over for lunch. That's the tradition -- when one of us has a birthday there's lunch, a nice present, and a good laughing afternoon to cover the fact we've moved one more step down the staircase.

We met years ago when we happened to marry into the same family. Six months after I said yes to Eric Rhodes, she said it to his brother Michael.

Lenna got the better end of *that* wishbone: She and Michael are still delighted with each other, while Eric and I fought about everything and nothing and then got divorced.

But to my surprise and relief, they were a great help to me during the divorce, even though there were obvious difficulties climbing over some of the thornbushes of family and blood allegiance.

They live in a big apartment up on 100th Street with long halls and not much light. But the gloom of the place is offset by their kids' toys everywhere, colorful jackets stacked on top of one another, coffee cups with WORLD'S GREATEST MOM and DARTMOUTH written on the side. Theirs is a home full of love and hurry, children's drawings on the fridge alongside reminders to buy *La Stampa*. Michael owns an elegant vintage fountain pen store, while Lenna freelances for *Newsweek*. Their apartment is like their life: high-ceilinged, thought-out, overflowing with interesting combinations and possibilities. It's always nice to go there and share it awhile.

I felt pretty good about forty years old. Finally there was some money in the bank and someone I liked talking about a trip together to Egypt in the spring. Forty was a milestone, but one that didn't mean much at the moment. I already thought of myself as being slightly middle-aged anyway, but I was healthy and had good prospects, so -- So what! to the beginning of my fifth decade.

"You cut your hair!"

"Do you like it?"

"You look very French."

"Yes, but do you *like* it?"

"I think so. I have to get used to it. Come on in."

We sat in the living room and ate. Elbow, their bull terrier, rested his head on my knee and never took his eye off the table. After the meal was over, we cleared the plates and then she handed me a small red box.

"I hope you like it. I made them myself."

Inside the box were a pair of the most beautiful gold earrings I have ever seen.

"My God, Lenna, they're *exquisite*! You *made* these? I didn't know you made jewelry."

She looked happily embarrassed. "You like them? They're real gold, believe it or not."

"I believe it. They're art! You *made* them, Lenna? I can't get over it. They're really works of art: They look like something by Klimt." I took them carefully out of the box and put them on.

She clapped her hands like a girl. "Oh, Juliet, they really do look good!"

Our friendship *is* important and goes back a long way, but this was a lifetime present -- one you gave a spouse or someone who saved your life.

Before I could say that (or anything else), the lights went out. Her two young sons brought in the birthday cake, forty candles strong.

A few days later I was walking down Madison Avenue, proudly wearing my new present, when, caught by something there, looked in a jewelry store window. There they were -- my birthday earrings. The exact ones. Looking closer, open-mouthed, I saw the price tag: five thousand dollars! I stood and gaped for what must have been minutes. Either way, it was shocking. Had she lied about making them? Spent five thousand dollars for my birthday present? Lenna wasn't a liar and she wasn't rich. All right, so had she copied them in brass or something and just *said* they were gold to make me feel good? That wasn't her way either. What the hell was going on?

The confusion emboldened me to walk right into the store. Or rather, walk right up and press the buzzer. After a short wait, someone rang me in. The saleswoman who appeared from behind a curtain looked like a Radcliffe graduate with a degree in bluestocking. Maybe you had to work in this place.

"May I help you?"

"Yes. I'd like to see the pair of these earrings you have in the window."

She looked at my ears as I touched them, and it was as if a curtain rose from in front of her regard. When I first entered I was only another nobody in a plaid skirt asking for a moment's sniff of their palace air. But realizing I had a familiar five grand hanging on my lobes changed everything: She would be my slave -- or friend -- for life, I only had to say which.

"Of course, the Dixies."

"The what?"

She smiled, as if to say I was being very funny. It quickly dawned on me that she must have thought I knew very well what "Dixies" were since I was wearing some.

She took them out of the window and put them carefully down in front of me on a black velvet card. They were beautiful; admiring them, I entirely forgot I was wearing some.

"I'm so surprised you have a pair. They only came into the store a week ago."

Thinking fast, I said, "My husband bought them for me. I like them so much I'm thinking of getting a pair for my sister. Tell me about the designer. What's his name? Dixie?"

"I don't know much, madam. Only the owner knows who Dixie is and where they come from. But whoever it is is a real genius. Apparently both Bulgari and people from the Memphis group have been in already, asking who he is and how they can get in touch with him."

"How do you know it's a man?" I put the earrings down and looked directly at her.

"Oh, I don't. It's just that the work is so masculine I assumed it. Maybe you're right; maybe it *is* a woman." She picked one up and held it to the light. "Did you notice how they don't really reflect light so much as enhance it? Golden light. You can own it any time you want. I've never seen that. I envy you."

They were real. I went to a jeweler on 47th Street to have them appraised, then to the only two other stores in the city that sold "Dixies." No one knew anything about the creator, or weren't talking if they did. Both dealers were very respectful and pleasant, but mum was the word when I asked about the jewelry's origin.

"The gentleman asked us not to give out information, madam. We must respect his wishes."

"But it *is* a man?"

A professional smile. "Yes."

"Could I contact him through you?"

"Yes, I'm sure that would be possible. May I help with anything else, madam?"

"What other pieces has he designed?"

"As far as I know, only the earrings, the fountain pen, and this key ring." He'd shown me the pen, which was nothing special. Now he brought out a small golden key ring shaped in a woman's profile: Lenna Rhodes's profile.

The doorbell tinkled when I walked into the store. Michael was with a customer and, smiling hello, gave me the sign he'd be over as soon as he was finished. He had started INK almost as soon as he got out of college, and from the beginning it was a success. Fountain pens are cranky, unforgiving things that demand full attention and patience. But they are also a handful of flash and Old World elegance: gratifying slowness that offers no reward other than the sight of shiny ink flowing wetly across a dry page. INK's customers were both rich and not so, but all of them had the same collector's fiery glint in the eye and the addict's desire for more. A couple of times a month I'd work there when Michael needed an extra hand. It taught me to be cheered by old pieces of Bakelite and gold plate, as well as another kind of passion.

"Juliet, hi! Roger Peyton was in this morning and bought that yellow Parker Duofold. The one he's been looking at for months."

"Finally. Did he pay full price?"

Michael grinned and looked away. "Rog can never afford full price. I let him do it in installments. What's up with you?"

"Did you ever hear of a Dixie pen? Looks a little like the Cartier Santos?"

"Dixie? No. It looks like the Santos?" The expression on his face said he was telling the truth.

I brought out the brochure from the jewelry store and, opening it to the pen photograph, handed it to him. His reaction was immediate.

"Why, that bastard! How much do I have to put up with this man?"

"You know him?"

Michael looked up from the photo, anger and confusion competing for first place on his face. "Do I know him? Sure, I know him. He lives in my goddamned *house*, I know him so well! Dixie, huh? Cute name. Cute man.

"Wait. I'll show you something, Juliet. Just stay there. Don't move. That shit!"

There's a mirror behind the front counter at INK. When Michael motored off to the back of the store, I looked at my reflection and said, "_Now_ you did it."

He was back in no time. "Look at this. You want to see something beautiful? Look at this." He handed me something in a blue velvet case. I opened it and saw . . . the Dixie fountain pen.

"But you said you'd never heard of them."

His voice was hurt and loud. "_This_ is not a Dixie fountain pen. It's a Sinbad. An original, solid-gold Sinbad made at the Benjamin Swire Fountain Pen Works in Konstanz, Germany, around 1915. There's a rumor the Italian Futurist Antonio Sant' Elia did the design, but that's never been proven. Nice, isn't it?"

It was nice, but he was so angry I wouldn't have dared say it wasn't. I nodded eagerly.

He took it back. "I've been selling pens twenty years, but I've only seen two of these in all that time. One was owned by Walt Disney, and I have the other. Collector's value? About seven thousand dollars. But as I said, you just don't find them."

"Won't the Dixie people get in trouble for copying it?"

"No, because I'm sure there are small differences between the original and this new one. Let me see that brochure again."

"But you have an original, Michael. It still holds its value."

"That's not the point. It's not the value that matters. I'd never sell this.

"You know the classic 'bathtub' Porsche? One of the strangest, greatest-looking cars of our time. Some smart, cynical person realized that and is now making fiberglass copies of the thing. They're very well done and full of all the latest features.

"But it's a lie car, Juliet. Sniff it and it smells only of today -- little plastic things and cleverly cut corners you can't see. Not important to the car, but essential to the real object. The wonder of the thing was Porsche designed it so well and thoughtfully so long ago. That's art. But the art is in its original everything, not just the look or the convincing copy. I can guarantee you your Dixie pen has too much plastic inside where you can't see, and a gold point that probably has about a third as much gold on it as the original. Looks good, but they always miss the whole point with their cut corners.

"Look, you're going to find out sooner or later, so I think you'd better know now."

"What are you talking about?"

He brought a telephone up from beneath the counter and gestured for me to wait. He called Lenna and in a few words told her about the Dixies and my discovery of them.

He was looking at me when he asked, "Did he tell you he was doing that, Lenna?"

Whatever her long answer was, it left his expression deadpan. "Well, I'm going to bring Juliet home. I want her to meet him. . . . What? Because we've got to do something about it, Lenna! Maybe she'll have an *i.e.* of what to do. Do you think this is normal? . . . Oh, you do? That's interesting. Do you think it's normal for *me*?" A dab of saliva popped off his lip and flew across the store.

When Michael opened the door, Lenna stood right on the other side, arms crossed tight over her chest. Her soft face was squinched into a tight challenge.

"Whatever he told you probably isn't true, Juliet."

I put up both hands in surrender. "He didn't tell me anything, Lenna. I don't even want to *be* here. I just showed him a picture of a pen."

Which wasn't strictly true. I showed him a picture of a pen because I wanted to know more about Dixie and my five-thousand-dollar earrings. Yes, sometimes I am nosy. My ex-husband used to tell me I was.

Both Rhodeses were calm and sound people. I don't think I'd ever seen them really disagree on anything important or raise their voices at each other.

"Where is he?" Michael growled. "Eating again?"

"Maybe. So what? You don't like what he eats anyway."

He turned to me. "Our guest is a vegetarian. His favorite food is plum pits."

"Oh, that's *mean*, Michael. That's really mean." She turned and left the room.

"So he's in the kitchen? Good. Come on, Juliet." He took me behind on his stalk of their visitor.

Before we got to him I heard music. Ragtime piano. Scott Joplin?

A man sat at the table with his back to us. He had long red hair down over the collar of his sport jacket. One freckled hand was fiddling with the dial on a radio nearby.

"Mr. Fiddlehead? I'd like you to meet Lenna's best friend, Juliet Skotchdopole."

He turned, but even before he was all the way around I knew I was sunk. What a face! Ethereally thin, with high cheekbones and deep-set green eyes that were both merry and profound. Those storybook eyes, the carrotty hair, and freckles everywhere. How could freckles suddenly be so damned sexy? They were for children and cute advertisements. I wanted to touch every one of them.

"Hello, Juliet! Skotchdopole, is it? That's a good name. I wouldn't mind havin' it myself. It's a lot better than Fiddlehead, you know." His deep voice lay in the hammock of a very strong Irish accent.

I put out a hand and we shook. Looking down, I ran my thumb once, quickly, softly, across the top of his hand. I felt hot and dizzy, as if someone I wanted had put his hand gently between my legs for the first time.

He smiled. Maybe he sensed it. There was a yellow plate of something on the table next to the radio. To stop staring so embarrassingly at him, I focused on it and realized the plate was full of plum pits.

"Do you like them? They're delicious." He picked one off the shiny orange-brown pile and, slipping the stony thing in his mouth, bit down. Something cracked loudly, like breaking a tooth, but he kept his angel's smile as he crunched away.

I looked at Michael, who only shook his head. Lenna came into the kitchen and gave Mr. Fiddlehead a big hug and kiss. He only smiled and went on eating . . . pits.

"Juliet, the first thing you have to know is I lied about your birthday present. I didn't make those earrings, Mr. Fiddlehead did. But since he's me, I wasn't *really* lying." She smiled as if she was sure I understood what she was talking about. I looked at Michael for help, but he was poking around in the refrigerator. Beautiful Mr. Fiddlehead was still eating.

"What do you mean, Lenna, he's you?"

Michael took out a carton of milk and, at the same time, a plum, which he exaggeratedly offered his wife. She made a face at him and snatched it out of his hand.

Biting it, she said, "Remember I told you I was an only child? Like a lot of lonely kids, I solved my problem the best way I could -- by making up an imaginary friend."

My eyes widened. I looked at the red-headed man. He winked at me.

Lenna went on. "I made up Mr. Fiddlehead. I read and dreamed so much that one day I put it all together into my *i.e.* of the perfect friend. First, his name would be Mr. Fiddlehead because I thought that was the funniest name in the world, a name that would always make me laugh when I was sad. Then he had to come from Ireland, because that was the home of all leprechauns and fairies. In fact, I wanted a kind of life-sized human leprechaun. He'd have red hair and green eyes and, whenever I wanted, the magical ability to make gold bracelets and jewelry for me out of thin air."

"Which explains the Dixie jewelry in the stores?"

Michael nodded. "He said he got bored just hanging around, so I suggested he do something useful! Everything was fine so long as it was just the earrings and key chain." He slammed the glass down on the counter. "I didn't know about the fountain pen until today. What's with *that*, Fiddlehead?"

"Because I wanted to try me hand at it. I loved the one you showed me, so I thought I'd use that as my model. Why not? You can't improve on perfection. The only thing I did was put some more gold in it here and there."

I put my hand up like a student with a question. "But who's Dixie?"

Lenna smiled and said, "I am. That was the secret name I made up for myself when I was little. The only other person who knew it was my secret friend." She stuck her thumb in the other's direction.

"Wonderful! So now Dixie fountain pens, which are lousy ripoffs of Sinbads, will be bought by every asshole in New York who can afford to buy a Piaget watch or Hermes briefcase. It makes me sick." Michael glared at the other man and waited belligerently for a reply.

Mr. Fiddlehead's reply was to laugh like Woody Woodpecker.

Which cracked Lenna and me up.

Which sent her husband storming out of the kitchen.

"Is it true?"

They both nodded.

"I had an imaginary friend too when I was little! The Bimbergooner. But I never saw him for real."

"Maybe you didn't make him real enough. Maybe you just cooked him up when you were sad or needed someone to talk to. In Lenna's case, the more she needed me, the more real I became. She needed me a lot. One day I was just there for good."

I looked at my friend. "You mean he's been around since you were little? Living with you?"

She laughed. "No. As I grew up I needed him less. I was happier and had more friends. My life got fuller. So he was around less." She reached over and touched his shoulder.

He smiled but it was a sad one, full of memories. "I can give her huge pots of gold and do great tricks. I've even been practicing ventriloquism and can throw my voice a little. But you'd be surprised how few women love ventriloquists.

"If you two'll excuse me, I think I'll go in the other room and watch TV with the boys. It's about time for the Three Stooges. Remember how much we loved that show, Lenna? I think we saw one episode ten times. The one where they open up the hairdressing salon in Mexico."

"I remember. You loved Moe and I loved Curly."

They beamed at each other through the shared memory.

"But wait, if he's . . . what you say, how come he came back now?"

"You didn't know it, but Michael and I went through a *very* bad period a little while ago. He even moved out for two weeks and we both thought that was it: no more marriage. One night I got into bed crying like a fool and wishing to hell Mr. Fiddlehead was around again to help me. And then suddenly there he was, standing in the bathroom door smiling at me." She squeezed his shoulder again. He covered her hand with his own.

"God, Lenna, what did you do?"

"Screamed! I didn't recognize him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he grew up! The Mr. Fiddlehead I imagined when I was a child was exactly my age. I guess as I got older so did he. It makes sense."

"I'm going to sit down now. I have to sit down because this has been the strangest afternoon of my life."

Fiddlehead jumped up and gave me his seat. I took it. He left the room for television with the boys. I watched him go. Without thinking, I picked up Michael's half-empty glass of milk and finished it.

"Everything you told me is true?"

She put up her right hand. "I swear on our friendship."

"That beautiful man out there is an old dream of yours?"

Her head recoiled. "Ooh, do you think he's beautiful? Really? I think he's kind of funny-looking, to tell the truth. I love him as a friend, but" -- she looked guiltily at the door -- "I'd never want to go *out* with him or anything."

But I did, so we did. After the first few dates I would have hunted rats with him in the South Bronx if that's what he liked. I was, as expected, completely gone on him. The line of a man's neck can change your life. The way he digs in his pockets for change can make the heart squawk and hands grow cold. How he touches your elbow or the button that is not closed on the cuff of his shirt are demons he's loosed without ever knowing it. They own us immediately. He was a thoroughly compelling man. I wanted to rise to the occasion of his presence in my life and become something more than I'd previously thought myself capable of.

I think he began to love me too, but he didn't say things like that. Only that he was happy, or that he wanted to share things he'd held in reserve all his life.

Because he knew sooner or later he'd have to go away (where he never said, and I stopped asking), he seemed to have thrown all caution to the wind. But before meeting him, I'd never thrown anything away, caution included. I'd been a careful reader of timetables, made the bed tight and straight first thing every morning, and hated dishes in the sink. My life at forty was comfortably narrow and ordered. Going haywire and off the deep end wasn't in my repertoire, and normally people who did made me squint.

I realized I was in love *and* haywire the day I taught him to play racquetball. After we'd batted around an hour, we were sitting in the gallery drinking Coke. He flicked sweat from his forehead with two fingers. A hot, intimate drop fell on my wrist. I put my hand over it quickly and rubbed it into my skin. He didn't see. I knew then I'd have to learn to put whatever expectations I had aside and just live purely in his jet stream, no matter where it took me. That day I realized I'd sacrifice anything for him, and for a few hours I went around feeling like some kind of holy person, a zealot, love made flesh.

"Why does Michael let you stay there?"

He took a cigarette from my pack. He'd begun smoking a week before and loved it. Almost as much as he liked to drink, he said. The perfect Irishman. "Don't forget he was the one who left Lenna, not vice versa. When he came back he was pretty much on his knees to her. He had to be. There wasn't a lot he could say about me being there. Especially after he found out who I was and why I'd come. Do you have any plum pits around?"

"Question two: Why in God's name do you eat those things?"

"That's easy: because plums are Lenna's favorite fruit. When she was a little girl, she'd have tea parties for just us two: Scott Joplin music, imaginary tea, and real plums. She'd eat the fruit, then put the pit on my plate to eat. Makes perfect sense."

I ran my hand through his red hair, loving the way my fingers got caught in all the thick curls. "That's disgusting. It's like slavery! Why am I getting to the point where I don't like my best friend so much anymore?"

"If you like me, you should like her, Juliet. She made me."

I took his hand. "That part I like. Would you ever consider moving in with me?"

He kissed my fingers. "I would love to consider that, but I have to tell you I don't think I'll be around very much longer. But if you'd like, I'll stay with you until I -- uh -- have to go."

"What are you talking about?" I sat up.

He put his hand close to my face. "Look hard and you'll see."

It took a moment, but then I gasped: From certain angles I could see right through the hand. It had become vaguely transparent.

"Lenna's happy again. It's the old story. When she's down, she needs me and calls." He shrugged. "When she's happy again, I'm not needed, so she sends me away. Not consciously, but -- look, we all know I'm her little Frankenstein monster. She can do what she *wants* with me. Even dream up that I like to eat fucking plum pits."

"It's so wrong!"

Sighing, he sat up and started pulling on his shirt. "It's wrong but it's life, sweet girl. Not much we can do about it, you know."

"Yes, we can. We can do something."

His back was to me. remembered the first time I'd ever seen him. His back was to me then too, the long red hair falling over his collar.

When I didn't say anything more, he turned and looked at me over his shoulder, smiling.

"We can do something? What can we do?"

His eyes were gentle and loving, eyes I wanted to see for the rest of my life.

"We can make her sad. We can make her need you."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, Fiddy. When she's sad she needs you. We have to decide what would make her sad a long time. Maybe something to do with Michael. Or the children."

His fingers stopped moving over the buttons. Thin, artistic fingers. Freckles.

Finky Linky drove me to the airport, which was nervous-making because there was always a good possibility he might drop dead at any moment.

Finky Linky, alias Wyatt Leonard, one-time star of the funniest and most innovative children's show on television.

"First there was Pinky,
then there was Winky.
Don't forget Pee Wee —
But the king of them all is
Finkyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

Remember that? Remember Finky-Pinky-Rings? Or the Finky Linky Stinky Magic Carpet that no one on the show ever wanted to ride, despite its magic, because it smelled too much?

Wyatt made it big so fast because he was smart and crazy and willing to do anything to make kids laugh. I have never known anyone who loved children as much as Wyatt Leonard.

I met him a few years before he joined our Cancer Theater Group. A friend-of-a-friend of Cullen James, he was at the peak of his success when it was discovered he had leukemia. He accepted his fate so calmly. Perhaps because he never really believed it would get him or else, as he said, a million children's love buoyed him over death's fearsome sea.

Six months after I began working with the group in New York, he showed up and asked if he could watch. It would be another year before we actually tried to put something on stage, because those early days were more group therapy sessions than anything else. A bitter young woman, bald from radiation treatments, pointed to her head and asked if he had a part for her on his show. He did. Remember Wig Woman with the pink dress and all those different hairdos? The first star that ever emerged from the New York Cancer Players. People associated with the show thought she was only a nut with a shaved head. Neither Wyatt nor she ever told them the truth until she died and Finky Linky did the show about death that won him an Emmy.

When the constant medical treatment and hospitalization ate into his energy and resistance, he gave up the television show and became the hardest working member of our group.

Phil was a great fan of the show and thrilled to hear I knew Wyatt, so I introduced them. A month later, Fast Forward Productions flew Finky Linky out to LA to do that bizarre bit in *Midnight Too* that had everyone laughing . . . and retching.

After I read "Mr. Fiddlehead" that morning, I called Wyatt and asked him to take over rehearsals for our play. When he found out why I was leaving town, he told me to get someone else because he was going with me.

"How come?"

"I'll tell you on the plane. What time does it go? I'll drive us out."

I've traveled with famous people before, and it's always interesting to watch how the man in the street reacts. With movie stars, you see the expected admiration and desire, but also many darker things -- envy and hunger, real anger.

With Wyatt it was entirely different. When he parked his car in the long-term lot at Kennedy Airport, the attendant not only had him autograph his baseball cap but ran next door to the hot dog stand to tell the gang there. A stampede followed, all saying "Finky!" The show had been off the air for over a year, but he was still their funny hero and friend. First he had to give five people the secret handshake -- touch the heart, touch the nose, blow a kiss, shake. Then autographs. One bedraggled man asked for a personal souvenir. Wyatt gave him the paperback book he had in his pocket, and the man asked him to sign it.

"But I didn't write it!"

"Yeah, but you *owned* it!"

The same thing happened in the terminal building and right onto the plane: greetings, handshakes, pure love for an old and missed pal.

After we took off, a stewardess came up and said she'd once won a wet T-shirt contest wearing a Finky Linky shirt. Wyatt looked long at her chest, smiled, and said in his Finky voice, "_That_ was a lucky shirt!"

She went away smiling. I asked him why he'd come. The plane was still climbing, and before he answered we broke through the clouds into the pure blue of thousands of feet high.

"We were lovers once."

"You and *Phil*?"

He looked at me and touched my hand a moment. "He wasn't gay, Weber. Only wanted to know what it was like. Remember when I went out there to do *Midnight Too* with him? We were together a couple of days. Nothing special, just warm for me and new for him. He didn't like it very much, but I wasn't surprised."

Although I knew he was gay because we'd discussed it, Wyatt appeared straight. There'd been a bad scene in our group once when a woman fell in love with him and he didn't reciprocate. He told me sickness had replaced gender anyway in his life, that when you get cancer and they're sticking things in you or cutting them out, it's hard feeling sexy.

"Are you shocked, Weber?"

"Sure. It's interesting, too. You think you know your friends but you don't."

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you, especially now."

"No, I'm glad you did, Wyatt. One of the reasons I'm going to California is to find out why Phil shot himself. Until yesterday, I didn't think that was him either. Would you mind telling me about what happened between you two?"

"He thought I was funny, and I thought he was a genius. A mutual admiration society. We talked on the set; then we went out for something to eat after. You know the end. The strange thing was, I didn't come on to him at all. I told him I was gay and no big deal. He kept asking questions about it, so I answered them. I don't believe that deep in his heart, every hetero man is secretly gay and only waiting for the right moment to jump out and admit it to the world. Some are and some aren't. Phil wasn't gay, only curious. Curious about everything. That's why he was such an interesting man."

"If he wasn't gay, why were you together two days? Wouldn't one night have been enough?"

"Not for Phil. He wanted to know as much as he could."

To be as successful with children as Wyatt had been, you had to have the wonder and openness of a child. When I told him the story of the day before, including the experience with the magical videotapes that played back my history and fast-forwarded to Sasha's future, he only shook his head and grunted. He asked if Phil had sent anything else. I took "Mr. Fiddlehead" out of my bag and handed it to him.

"What's this?"

"A short story. Sasha said it was going to be his next project."

"I can read it?"

"Are there more things you're not telling me?"

He looked at the story in his hand. "Let me read this first." He took the famous Finky glasses out of his pocket and put them on. The tough-looking pig on the motorcycle with the wheels holding the glass? Those.

While he read, I looked out the window and thought about Phil, then about my mother. Wyatt chuckled a couple of times. Once he looked up and said, "Phil must have written this. I can hear him telling it. You're obviously Mr. Fiddlehead."

"Why? My red hair and green eyes?"

"Partly. Let me finish."

Phil dead. Phil sleeping with Wyatt. Phil writing "Mr. Fiddlehead." The plane bumped up and down and the FASTEN SEAT BELTS light came on.

"I don't understand the end."

"What's not to understand?"

"What does it mean?" He started reading from the manuscript. "'Thin artistic fingers. Freckles. Fiddy and I were in a dazzle and knew it. He turned out the light again. Blood was rushing into my head, and I hoped I wasn't glowing in the dark. I started to hate him. I felt like blaming him for something that hadn't happened yet.'"

I took that manuscript from Wyatt and looked at it. The new sentences he'd read *were* on the page: words that hadn't been there when I'd originally read the story a few hours before.

"The story I read ended with the word 'freckles.' These last lines are new since then."

"Did Phil ever tell you about Pinsleepe?"

"Wyatt, did you hear what I said? This story's *grown* since this morning!"

"I heard. *Do* you know about Pinsleepe?"

I shook my head. The world was too much with me, and how.

A week before he died, Phil came to New York. Usually when he came it was an Indianapolis 500 of speeding around to all his favorite places and people. He didn't like the city but he loved what was in it, so his trips were manic, albeit infrequent. He liked his friends to get together: to have big rowdy dinners in restaurants where sensational or peculiar people told long stories that held the table in thrall.

The last time was different. He contacted only two people, Danny James and Wyatt Leonard. The rest of his friends and fans -- the rare book dealers, a dinosaur specialist at Columbia, the vegetable chef at Benihana, *me* -- knew nothing of this visit.

From what Wyatt and Danny pieced together, he stayed at the Pierre Hotel and spent most of his time traveling in and out of town, destination unknown. Both were surprised when he called and said he was there, shocked when they saw him. Danny thought he looked very ill, Wyatt that he was deranged.