

# Magnum Opus

A Novel by Nicholas Gordon

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## CHAPTER 1

### In Which Warren Hill Describes the Sun-Sculpture

For those of my readers who have not yet seen it, I will begin with a description of the sun-sculpture itself.

It sits in the center of an enormous sunken plaza on the campus of Haifa University. The plaza predates the sculpture; I remember it well from the days before the sculpture miraculously appeared, and a more brutal piece of architecture never existed. It resembled a concrete football field, or perhaps more the deck of an aircraft carrier laid meaninglessly across the top of a lovely wooded ridge--an unadorned, flat, ugly white slab of concrete.

Rising above this monstrosity was a high-rise building of glass and steel, a skyscraper that must have felt too assimilated in midtown New York and made *aliyah* to Israel, perching itself incongruously atop Mt. Carmel like a huge erection against the deep blue Mediterranean sky. Why anyone would want to put a single skyscraper atop the highest mountain in sight boggles my imagination; I cannot think of anything more obscene.

And as if to compound the obstinacy, the rest of the campus was contained in more brutal, plain white buildings adjacent to or just below the high-rise and the plaza, as if the hillside were subjected to continuous shelling and everything beneath the high rise needed to be sheltered in concrete bunkers. Perhaps there was an intentional symbolism there; I don't know.

But the sun-sculpture invited the campus of Haifa University to come out into the light and warmth of the sun, which it since has done, spreading out over the hillside in lovely white houses with red tile roofs, surrounded by gardens, blending harmoniously with the setting and the architecture of the city below.

The view from the plaza, when not obscured by smog, is one of the most beautiful on earth. To the east is the valley of Jezreel and the mountains of Galilee. To the south and west is the Mediterranean coastline, and far out the deep, deep blue of the sea blending with the sky. To the north, the city of Haifa, and the long, graceful arc of coast out to Acre, with its ancient fortress squatting grimly by the sea.

All this on a stupendously sparkling blue Mediterranean day is reason enough to justify the long drive up the mountain. Indeed, it is difficult to tear one's eyes from it to make the slow, spiraling climb down to the center of the plaza, where the sun-sculpture sits. But eventually one does dutifully make the climb down to see this curiosity, and then one understands perfectly why the sculpture was placed where it was.

It appeared one morning on the old, flat plaza without announcement or warning. The sun rose and it was there. A security guard was the first to see it. He was dozing in the lobby of the high-rise, opened his eyes, and saw it burning in the light of the rising sun. Immediately it struck him as it strikes everyone: here was the burning bush that spoke to Moses on the top of Sinai.

He assumed he was dreaming and went back to sleep. In his sleep, however, he realized that he had not been sleeping when he saw the burning bush. He was sleeping now, then he had been awake. The horror of this thought struck him forcibly, and in a chilly sweat he once again opened his eyes.

The bush was still there.

Oh, my God, my God, my God! he kept repeating to himself. Awestruck, he exited the lobby through the revolving doors and approached the sculpture as if it were a sacred object, which is generally the attitude of the millions who have seen it since. He was afraid to touch it since it looked incandescent, full of the fury of the furnace, yet it seemed to give off no heat.

He stared at it, he says, for over an hour, though one can hardly believe that he was in undisturbed possession of the sculpture for all that time. Eventually, other people awoke on that fateful morning, drove sleepily to classrooms or offices on the campus, parked their cars in the parking lot below the plaza, and climbed the short hill to behold for the first time the most beautiful thing they would ever see.

How to describe the sculpture? I have been putting it off, hesitating to touch it with common words. It is about four feet high and three feet wide. It consists of a network of gold branches which contain hidden prisms and mirrors to break up and refocus the light of the sun. The effect of these prisms and mirrors is to create a ball of light that virtually engulfs the branches, making it appear as though they were burning--a ball that flares like a living flame yet gives off little heat and consumes no fuel.

What makes the sculpture so remarkable is the color of this ball of light. Literally, the sculptor has sculpted the rays of the sun, using as raw material the colors of the spectrum in their purest form. Imagine what it was like to see your first rainbow. Or, better, imagine that you had been born blind, and that on the evening of the day you had been given sight, you turned towards the west and saw the violent glow of your first sunset.

It is that intensity of pure color, more that of a natural phenomenon than of a work of art, that the sun-sculpture has achieved. Only perhaps more intense, more mesmerizing, because it is compressed into a tiny, incandescent ball.

One of the things that makes the ball so mesmerizing is that its color changes constantly with the angle of the sun, the position of clouds, even the air pressure and humidity. So responsive is it to light and air that scientists can read the weather and even, so they say, detect minor flareups on the sun's surface through slight variations in its expected colors.

When the guard first saw it, he says, it was blood red with angry flashes of blue; then suddenly it turned warm green, if such can be imagined. Yet I have seen it, too--a warm green, so deep and pure that I felt unaccountably like weeping for all in life I would never touch with my awareness.

That is the strange effect of gazing at the colors of the ball: it plays on one's emotions so that inside one there is also an incandescent ball of feeling, burning, flaring up, changing breathtaking color in response to each tiny shift in the wind.

There is no way to convey that uncanny experience except to say that one comes away with an immensely enriched sense of the beauty of life, of the power and variety of one's emotions, and of the subtle and universal connection between what one senses and what one feels--of being the harp upon which God plays, to use an old image. And so truly, it seems, God speaks to us in the form of a burning bush.

On the morning the sculpture was first discovered, after a crowd had gathered around it, had stared at it, and had begun to discuss it in awestruck whispers, someone--I believe it was the manager of the bookstore--noticed that a note was tucked under one of the inch-high struts that served as legs.

Once the note had been discovered, it was up to the security guard to retrieve it, so the crowd insisted, which he did very gingerly, shielding his eyes and holding back his body as if trying to snatch a sizzling steak from a real fire. He grabbed the note and ran back to the

protection of the crowd, wondering who in the world to give it to. Everyone wanted to know what it said, but no one assumed authority to open the sealed envelope in which it came.

Finally, the president of the university arrived, was given the note, and rather foolishly and hastily opened it in the presence of the assembled crowd. He could scarcely believe what he saw. For in the note were plans for the complete reconstruction of his university to accommodate the sculpture that had, unrequested, had been deposited at his front door.

First, the skyscraper was to be torn down. Second, the underground classrooms and offices were to be demolished, and the center of the plaza was to sink in slow spirals to the level of the concourse below.

The sun-sculpture was to be placed in the center of this sunken plaza, invisible from the raised rim yet completely open to the sun in every direction. Thus one would come upon it suddenly, turning from the brilliance and beauty of the magnificent view to the intensity of the ball of fire, in which the color one had just seen at its most lovely in the everyday would be transformed into a purer level of existence.

Third, the classrooms and offices were to be scattered down the hillside in such a way as to obstruct neither the sun nor the view. There were to be gardens and trees, but all below the level of the plaza, and the nearest road was to be over a quarter of a mile away.

All this entailed, as one can see, the complete demolition and reconstruction of the university. I don't believe that even the sun-sculpture would have inspired such expense had there not been pretty general agreement that the campus was an eyesore anyway, and that the demands of the note were a good excuse to repair an earlier mistake.

Once the sculpture had been seen by thousands, and then hundreds of thousands of people, money poured in from all over the world, and the sculpture received precisely the setting its creator had demanded.

But what of the creator? A genius, surely, with all the audacity that true genius implies. But for all the world knew of her, it might as well have been God that planted the burning bush atop Mt. Carmel. The only clue to her identity was the inscription that the note instructed be carved into the marble entranceway to the plaza:

*This sculpture is the work of Ania Marmosa, survivor of the Holocaust, and is given to humankind in trust of the people of Israel as a monument to the beauty of Creation, which cannot be extinguished even by such monsters as are spawned by hatred and despair.*

## CHAPTER 2

## In Which Warren Hill Discovers Much That He Did Not Know

"Dr. Hill, you're well known as an authority on great artists. You've written biographies of Blake, Thoreau, and Goya, as well as your latest on Rodin. I wonder if you could give us your thoughts on Ania Marmosa, the mysterious artist who two days ago placed her sun-sculpture on the campus of Haifa University. What kind of person is she, what is she like?"

What I should have said was I'm sorry, I don't know anything more about Ania Marmosa than about your nephew's pet poodle. But there I was some three decades ago on the talk show circuit pushing my book on Rodin, and I wanted to sound interesting and intelligent and, well, worth reading. So I didn't say what I should have said. Instead, I said:

"There is no Ania Marmosa."

"No Ania Marmosa." I saw the smile of delight on my host's face. He sensed a scoop, controversy, perhaps even a bit of publicity in the next day's newspapers.

"Ania Marmosa is a pseudonym for some famous sculptor who doesn't want his or her identity known."

"You sound pretty positive about it," my host said, slipping into his accustomed role of pin to prick the ballooning reputation he has just inflated. "What brings you to that conclusion?"

"Three things," I said, turning towards the camera, putting on my most authoritative-expert expression. "First, the materials used in the sculpture are worth over \$100,000. There's some brass, of course, to strengthen the structure, but it's mostly 18-karat gold, platinum, and very finely cut glass. I just don't think a fledgling artist would have the self-confidence to work with such materials.

"Second, there's the note. Its audacity, requiring the reconstruction of an entire university, points to a rather large ego, swelled even further by the habitual acceptance of adulation. Of course any artist capable of creating such a sculpture would have a large ego, with good reason. But it seems to me that the genius we're dealing with here is one whose arrogance has been refined over years of success into the serene self-confidence of a master."

"You get all this from the note?"

"From the tone of the note. The note isn't arrogant in tone, only in content. For me, that relation points to an artist who no longer needs even to think about the importance of his or her work."

"Very interesting, Dr. Hill. I admire your ability to get so much out of so little. And the third thing?"

"The lack of fingerprints. Whoever delivered the sculpture (it might or might not have been the artist) took care not to leave fingerprints. Now granted, the artist doesn't want anything known about him or her. But why keep Ania Marmosa's fingerprints off Ania Marmosa's sculpture?"

"Maybe she has a criminal record under another name."

"Maybe."

"Or doesn't want anyone to know that she was once a taxi driver in New York."

"Look, I'm not saying that any one point is determinative. But you take them all together and it looks to me like some well-known artist is trying to hide his or her identity."

"So what you're saying is that this mysterious unknown artist who has captured the imagination of the world doesn't exist."

"Not as Ania Marmosa."

"As who then? Who is she? Or he?"

"I don't know," I finally admitted, saying what I should have said at the outset. "I have no idea."

There was, of course, nothing illogical or unintelligent in what I had said on the talk show. The problem was that it was abysmally uninformed.

The morning after my appearance, I found a note slipped under my apartment door from someone named Roger Gompsa containing a Xeroxed copy of a two-inch filler that had appeared about two years earlier in *The Villager*. It was a notice of the disappearance of a beautiful recluse named Ania Marmosa.

She had apparently lived in almost total seclusion in a loft on N. Moore Street in Tribeca. One morning when she did not appear at the usual time for her twice-weekly pilgrimage to the grocery store, her absence was noticed. The next morning, for the first time in two years, her landlord missed her monthly rent, always slipped in cash under his door in the middle of the night. An alarm was raised and her apartment broken into.

It had been stripped bare, immaculate. Empty floors gleamed, blank white walls were freshly painted, fixtures sparkled in the abundant sunlight that poured through skylights in the roof. There was not a trace of the person who had once lived there.

How strange! I thought. And how like the mysterious appearance of the sun-sculpture. Imagine polishing the floors and whitewashing the walls before moving out! I was positive that if the room had been searched for fingerprints, none would have been found.

Of course it was possible that someone chose Ania Marmosa as a pseudonym after reading this same article, and had appropriated her name. But the details rang true. This sounded like the kind of person who would leave her *magnum opus* on top of a mountain and then vanish, effacing herself completely. Well, almost completely. I was hooked.

The phone call I received later that afternoon was not required to quicken my interest. It was from her former landlord. My rather stupid remarks on the talk show had stimulated him to call. Yes, there was an Ania Marmosa. Would I like to find out more about her?

Yes, I would.

The next morning found me on N. Moore Street, in Tribeca, gazing up at a five-story former factory building, the top floor of which had been Ania Marmosa's apartment. At that time the entire neighborhood was being renovated into condominiums, as could be seen from the freshly dark green painted brick, the bright white sashes of thermal windows, and the brand-new entranceway with lighted bell buttons and an abbreviated marquee.

Inside, the lobby had been stripped to bare brick, and a shiny new elevator stood in place of the old, ponderous freight elevator, probably the type whose door had still rolled open and slammed shut horizontally, at eye level, snapping like an enormous mouth at the yank of a thick leather strap.

Two years earlier, when Ania had disappeared, the neighborhood had not yet become chic. It had still been an outpost of pioneer artists, musicians, and writers who had moved from the too-civilized precincts of Soho, daring and imaginative souls sprinkled sparsely among the steel-tusked forklifts and lumbering semi-trailers that gathered weekday mornings near the mouth of the Holland Tunnel.

These original settlers are long gone now; like Ania they have vanished, into Brooklyn or Hoboken or Jersey City, and then on and on again, like the pioneers of two centuries past, fleeing as their neighborhoods became the haunts of more commercialized people of means.

Ania's landlord was no longer the landlord, having sold off the apartments at, he had bragged to me unsolicited over the phone, an enormous profit. He had retained the ground floor, however, as a combination apartment/gymnasium labeled "Peter Sommers: Human Reconstruction Services."

On the phone he sounded like a young man into heavy leather. In the overwhelming flesh, that's precisely what he was. He came to the door bare to the waist, except for two black leather wristlets studded with evil-looking metal points. He wore black leather pants and black leather boots. A black leather vest awaited his pleasure on the inner knob of the apartment door.

His apartment was littered with exercise equipment, at which a few well-muscled clients were rhythmically straining. By the door were a rowing machine and a leather bench backed up against a rack of dumbbells. Further down were mats of various shapes and sizes, a number of exercycles, a doctor's scale, a running machine, a treadmill tilted upwards to simulate a 15% grade, a heavy leather punching bag suspended from the ceiling by a thick iron chain.

Far, far away, on the apartment's distant shore, a Nautilus weight-stack machine spread its tubular branches.

The young man's physique seemed to have benefited from every one of these devices: there was not a muscle that was not hideously swollen. His chest and shoulders looked as though football equipment had been stuffed underneath the skin. Below his wasp waist and tiny buttocks his thigh muscles bulged like a second set of biceps.

Above a thick, muscular neck the head looked strangely small, the only visible organ not suffering from elephantiasis. It was, however, a handsome head, capped by luxuriant brown hair and sporting a lovely beard clipped to a point about an inch below the chin. A Jesus face.

We sat down on a black leather couch opposite the Nautilus, on two sides of which clients were pumping at pulleys. Disco music blared from loudspeakers mounted at all four corners of the elongated room.

"She answered an ad I put in *The Villager*," Sommers said in answer to my question. "She called late--I think after 11:00. I described the place over the phone and she went ape for it. She wanted to know if she could have it right then. That night. A half hour later she was at the door with two suitcases.

"I met her in the hallway and it was, like wow! She was a beautiful woman, the kind you're afraid to look at for fear of staring. Even more beautiful wet from the rain. Fresh and moist. Her dark coat smelled damp.

"She wore a triangular scarf over long, thick black hair, like an old-fashioned European woman. Her hair was down to her ass, man, I mean it was beautiful. Her face was so fine it seemed almost carved. Deep-set, scared dark eyes. A wide forehead, prominent cheekbones, really fine-looking nose and chin, delicate, just right. Very full, sharply defined lips. A long, graceful neck.

"But as we rapped about business--the rent, the security, the keys, shit like that--I began to see that she was totally screwed up inside. She had plenty of money, paid me two month's rent in cash plus two month's security--only a little piece of the bread she had stuffed in a bulging envelope, was nicely dressed, had two expensive leather suitcases.

"But there was something lost about her, like she was some stray cat with no place to lie down, you know? That little quiver that tells the whole story, that hopeless little quiver of an abused animal, not knowing where the next blow is coming from. Like she was always bunched up, ready to leap out of someone's way. It was pitiful to see such a gorgeous woman reduced to that inside.

"She wouldn't come into my apartment--we did our little business in the hall--and when I helped her up the elevator with her suitcases, she wouldn't let me step off the elevator into her apartment. She refused my offer of a bed or mat to sleep on. She must have spent the night on the floor.

"For the next two years I hardly saw her. Each month she slipped the rent in cash under my door. She never complained about anything or asked to have anything done to her apartment. She went shopping and did her other business on Mondays and Thursdays. Otherwise, she went out only late, late on weekday nights when there were likely to be very few people around.

"I'm a night bird, too, and often at two or three on a weekday morning I would hear the old freight elevator bang to a stop and the door rumble open. It was the resident ghost, coming down from the attic for her nightly rounds. I look out my peephole and there she stands, tall and sad and slender, pausing at the threshold like a ghoul or werewolf in a moment of remorse before the savage descent to the dark streets.

"One night I couldn't stand it. I followed her just to see if she'd bite some poor bastard in the neck, drink his blood, and roll him off a pier into the Hudson. She didn't, of course. As far as I could see, she was just getting fresh air and exercise while no one was around.

"It was a hot summer night, maybe in the mid-70's even at three in the morning. She was wearing jeans and a polo shirt and leather sandals. I swear without trying she looked like an ad for Ralph Lauren. Not the smiling model, the one with the haunted look.

"Her clothes were all designer logo. Everything about her was slim and graceful--her wrists and ankles, her neck, her subtle curves. Her long, thick black hair fell behind her like a slow motion shot in a shampoo commercial. She was all class, this woman, but all tight-assed and suffering.

"What the hell was her problem? She was gorgeous and rich, what else did she want? Maybe her parents beat her. Maybe her uncle raped her or she caught her mother in bed with the plumber. Something screwed her up, that's for sure.

"She walked like she was hooked to a Walkman that was playing some private tune in her head. She kept changing pace, like the disco kept changing, and sometimes she would break out into a run. Or she would murmur to herself and laugh out loud, the way people do when they're hooked to a Walkman, not realizing that the people around them are not tuned in to what's happening in their head.

"Except that this lady wasn't wearing no Walkman. Her Walkman was wired in permanent. There was no unhooking it or changing the station. The little sucker had taken over.

"She walked up West Street all the way to Christopher, where the gays hang out by the water, then turned around and went back to Desboses. She crossed over to the river and sat down on a wood beam at the edge of the water, letting her legs dangle over the side.

"What a pity! I thought as I watched her stare at the black water. What a freaking pity! I watched her for about five minutes, then decided to go over. As I came close, she turned, frightened, and gave a little shiver.

"Don't get scared,' I said. 'It's just me. Peter Sommers. I saw you sitting here and thought I'd say hi.'

"She shivered again and stared wildly, like she was thinking about how to get away. Then she shook her head violently twice and stammered, 'Please . . . I'd . . . I'd rather be alone.'

"I don't bite,' I told her. 'Only in bed.'



"She said nothing to this, staring down at the splintered wood of the beam. I didn't know how she reacted to my pass. Sometimes a woman wants it and doesn't know what to say. She's embarrassed by that little glow of desire down in between her legs.

"Don't you go for guys?' I said. 'What's with you? You're a gorgeous woman, how come you're always alone?'

"I don't want to be with people just now,' she murmured to the splintered beam. 'Please.'

"Listen, I'd like to make you an offer.' I sat down on the beam next to her, dangling my legs over the side. She didn't turn away or get up or do anything. Just kept staring down, tense all over. 'My business is human reconstruction. I take people who are unhealthy and unhappy and rebuild them into beautiful happy people. I'm an engineer of the body and soul.'

"I let that float in the air for a while.

"I can help you, I really can. I'm going to give you a free membership in my gym. One month free. How does that sound?'

"She gave her head a little shake, not to say no, just to say she didn't want to take this any further.

"I took her skinny little arm between my thumb and index finger. She pulled it away. That was natural. But she didn't get up and walk away.

"The mind and body are one organism,' I went on, 'two sides of the same thing. You make the body healthy, the mind becomes healthy, too. So I build up the body slowly, make it strong, give you full control over it, stretch it, limber it up, until you feel terrific just breathing and feeling the blood run through you.

"When you have a healthy, strong and beautiful body it feels beautiful just to be alive. And when you feel that way the shit in your head just vanishes, it doesn't mean anything anymore. I mean like your momma played games with your head or some shitassed bastard tried to rape you when you were thirteen. All that goes away. You feel strong and powerful, fresh and reborn, all that past crap out of you, ready to live in the moment, completely new and now, and to love every second.'

"She started to shudder, looking very agitated. 'No, no, please, Mr. Sommers, I don't--'

"I'll give you two months,' I offered. 'Since you're a tenant.'

"She laughed. It surprised me--a healthy, normal laugh. Almost a girlish giggle. 'I don't want a membership,' she said, still laughing. 'God! I don't want that! Reconstruction! What a horrible word to apply to people!'

"I can make you into a happy person.'

"Happy? What does that have to do with anything?' Suddenly she lost the healthy look, slipping back into agitation, all trembling. 'I was what you might call happy, that's why I left where I was and came here.

"Anyway, you don't become happy by forgetting. What you forget remains in nightmares to haunt you. It whispers to you in dead leaves, it murmurs on winter afternoons. You think you can get rid of it by exercises? How little you know about the heart!

"You cannot abandon suffering, you must embrace it, do you understand? Hold it dear, never, never throw it away. Better commit suicide, better die completely, than be an empty shell haunted by ghosts. And you shouldn't try to avoid pain, it lies directly on the path to beauty. Don't you know that?'

"Everybody wants to be happy,' I countered, annoyed myself now. 'Even you. What's more important than being happy?'

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"Being alive!" she almost screamed at me. And all shivery and shaky she jumped up and ran towards the house."

## CHAPTER 3

## In Which Warren Hill Meets Ania's Neighbors and Reads a Poem She Left Behind

"You know, you're the second person who's hearing this story."

"Yes?" I said. "Who else have you told it to?"

"Some guy named Sampson," Peter Sommers said. "George Sampson. He came around about a week after Ania disappeared. Said he was a relative."

"What kind of relative?"

Sommers shrugged. "He talked with everybody. The neighbors, the store owners, people who saw her out walking. He stayed up in her apartment for a couple of hours. I don't know what he was doing. Then he came down and said thank you and left."

"Did he leave an address or phone number? Some place you could get in touch with him or forward her mail?"

"Nothing. He said he had known her only as a child. He saw the article in the paper and came over to check it out."

"Where as a child?"

"He didn't say. He didn't do much talking. Maybe he said something to Patty and Stan, I don't know. He talked to them longer than to me."

"Patty and Stan?"

"Those are the Levkins, the people on the fourth floor. They knew her better than anyone else. At least Patty did. You should talk to them."

"I will."

"I'll let them know you're coming. And then come on up to the fifth floor. You can see her place. I'll be up there giving a private session."

"Who lives there now?"

"Lorelei Chapman. Another classy broad, an artist. Thrilled to pieces that Ania Marmosa once had her apartment. Ever hear of her?"

I shook my head no.

"She's been written up a couple of times. She had a bright idea to work with interior decorators. They show her their concepts and she does sketches for them. Sometimes they change their decoration to fit her paintings, sometimes it goes the other way. It's like an interaction between painting and furniture. She calls it ecological decoration. Minting money, let me tell you."

"It sounds lucrative."

"It's a freaking gold mine. She's probably worth over half a million, and she's only been at it three or four years. If she wanted to work harder she could be rich, but she's not interested in money."

"No?"

"Uh-uh. Like me. You know how much I'm worth?"

"I have no idea."

"Over a million. I'm only twenty-nine and already I'm worth over a million. Without even trying. That's freaking amazing, isn't it?"

He put a powerful hand on my knee and squeezed, smiling broadly with astonished enthusiasm. At what? At life? At himself? At the ease with which good things came?

"And you know what the secret is?" he went on.

"No," I said.

"The secret is not to give a shit. The secret is just to do your thing. All your trying is like a wall between you and life. You know--work hard, pay your dues, take your medicine, all that shit. Every time you force yourself to do something, that's another brick between you and life. The wall comes down when you stop trying and start living. Things start flowing your way."

"It sounds easy."

"It is easy. I'm telling you it works. Like getting muscles. You don't have to do a freaking thing that isn't fun, that isn't pleasure. People think you have to work hard at it. That's bullshit. If you're not enjoying it, you're doing it wrong. You got to get into the rhythm of it. It feels good. The muscles come along as a bonus."

I waited for him to offer me a free month, but he wasn't selling memberships to his gym.

"Like my private sessions. They're mostly with women. I get two hundred bucks for forty-five minutes. And you know what I do? The good-looking ones I screw. Can you imagine? I get paid for screwing good-looking women. And if I don't feel like it I leave them swimming in their own cream. Then they schedule even more private sessions, they want me even more. It's a real groove." He laughed. "You want to screw a lot of women, Warren?"

"I wouldn't dream of competing with you on that," I assured him.

"Why not? I know a lot of cute chicks that go for older men."

"Well, I'm not partial to cute chicks."

"Bullshit! You're a freaking liar! You got a woman, Warren?"

"I've got another interview," I said, getting up from the black leather couch. "It's been very informative, Mr. Sommers. I guess I'll see you again upstairs--"

"What's the most important thing in life?" Sommers demanded, still sitting on the couch, ignoring my outstretched hand.

"Love, compassion, understanding."

Sommers shook his head vehemently. "That's all bullshit!" he said. "It's all an excuse for not getting what you want. I'm telling you the truth, though most people don't have the guts to say it. What do you fantasize, Warren?"

"What I fantasize is not necessarily what I want."

"Well, I don't fantasize anymore. I used to, but I don't anymore. I have everything I want."

"Then you are what people call happy," I congratulated him. And I went out to the lobby and over to the elevator.

I pressed 4, which had "Levkin" scribbled next to it on a piece of masking tape. Just above, next to 5, "Lorelei Chapman" was punched out neatly on a plastic strip. One apartment to a floor. On the upper floors, the elevator opened directly into the apartment.

The Levkin's apartment looked like a ransacked Salvation Army store. It was an enormous space, once an entire factory, with a high ceiling supported by numerous pillars that sprouted like a forest from the splintered, gouged-out floor.

Nevertheless, the Levkins had managed to overfill it with multiple couches and chairs, coffee tables, dining tables, folding tables, books, papers, empty cartons, easels, paints, old store manikins, an enormous spool for copper cable, an antique Franklin stove, three double beds (one made), four dressers, two sinks, three refrigerators, a top-load freezer, a dishwasher, a washing machine and dryer, and, not surprisingly, considering the battered condition of most of these appliances, a series of clotheslines hung to capacity with shriveled, bone-dry clothes.

"Come in, come in," Stanley Levkin said cheerfully as I came off the elevator. "Peter just called. You can talk to Patty about her favorite topic."

"What's that?" I asked, a little bewildered by the junkyard atmosphere. The sun barely reached the center of the apartment, dimmed considerably by the deep brown grime on the windows.

"Our famous ex-neighbor. The sun sculptress. Patty says this proves she was right all along."

"Right about what?"

"That she was a genius. Patty always said she was a genius. Here. Patty?"

He handed me a glass half full of ginger ale. I couldn't tell whether he had poured it for me in anticipation of my coming or had given me his own half-consumed drink, so I just held it while he wandered off into the gloom of the forest looking for his wife.

He was the type whose fat all went into his belly, with thin buttocks and narrow shoulders but a huge, overhanging paunch. He walked with a waddle, like a pregnant woman leaning back to support the weight out front. His face was covered with a black beard and thick, black-rimmed glasses. He had large blue eyes, much magnified by the glasses, and a massive nose. He was wearing a grey polo shirt, one shoulder of which was separated from the chest, and a pair of paint-spattered khaki shorts.

"Patty? Dr. Hill is here!" I heard him call out as I surveyed the apartment. There were little cubicles at the far-left end, undoubtedly offices in the old manufacturing days. I couldn't see into them, but I guessed they served as the attic of the attic, so to speak, the repository of junk too grubby even for the Levkins.

Patty emerged from near one of the cubicles, an almost square woman who gave the impression of having been washed and rewashed until all the color had gone out of her. Her hair was neither blonde nor grey--somewhere in between, as were her eyes. Her lips and skin were nearly the same color, and she had on a shapeless muumuu whose pastel rainbow had been almost obliterated by years of wear. She wore rimless glasses and a perpetual smile that revealed rather large yellow teeth. Stan guided her towards me with his arm around her shoulder.

"This is the man who said there was no Ania Marmosa," he said by way of introduction. "A penetrating intellect, positively penetrating." He turned to me. "I knew the woman for two years and I couldn't agree with you more."

"How do you do, Dr. Hill," Patty said pleasantly. "Please sit down. And please ignore my husband when he gets like this. I generally do."

"Which is why I often get like this," Stan put in.

Since he had never reclaimed his ginger ale, I assumed it was mine and sipped at it as we sat down somewhere in the jumble of the room. My seat was an old park bench that rocked slightly on the uneven floor.

"I first met Ania in the elevator," Patty began. "This was Monday morning--I believe she had moved in the night before. She was going shopping. I gave her a run-down of the neighborhood stores. There wasn't much here then, not like now. Very few people lived here, it was all factories."

"And your impression?"

"First impression?"

"Yes."

"That she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Strikingly, unforgettably beautiful. I'm not talking about Barbie beautiful. Hauntingly beautiful--the deep brown eyes, the

hollow cheeks, the sensuous, knowledgeable mouth. Her hair was positively alive, all on its own. She had an inner grace, she was the most serene person I've ever seen. She moved beautifully, her voice was beautiful."

"She was looney," Stan whispered to me, hand over mouth. "Looney. As in looney bin."

"Some people were jealous of her," Patty went on, with barely a glance at her spouse.

"But she wasn't crazy. She was the most sane person I ever knew. She was obsessed, but that's different. To accomplish anything extraordinary, you have to be obsessed."

"What was she obsessed with? Could you tell what she was doing?"

"No, she hid it absolutely."

"She was doing mental art," Stan said.

"Mental art."

Stan jabbed his forefinger at his balding skull. "All in her head. Her apartment was empty."

"You don't know that!" Patty insisted.

"You saw it! Empty! Not a stick of anything! The woman slept on blankets on the floor."

"That was only a few months after she moved in. She might have--"

"Six months," Stan said. "A half a year. Mental art. She probably had mental paintings on the walls, mental sculpture scattered at odd angles across the room, a mental cat to piss on her mental couch . . ."

"She might," Patty continued slowly, "have moved in stuff later. I saw her apartment only once, about six months after she moved in. And it's true, at that point it was still empty. But Stan and I both work all day, we're teachers, and any time during the day she could have had all kinds of things delivered--"

"Oh, yes, mental paints and easels, mental marble, mental clay for a mental kiln--all delivered by mental moving men in mental moving vans. Each morning she folded up her blanket and put it in the closet so that there would be nothing at all, nothing real in her apartment to get in the way of all those mental things. Unless you count her. But I wouldn't count her."

"He never saw the apartment," Patty said to me.

"How did you get to see it?"

"By accident. She never invited me up. The elevator opens right into each apartment, as you can see, so that anyone in the elevator when you get in gets a view of your whole apartment. But Ania lived on the top floor, so that if she got into the elevator only when it came straight up from the ground floor, without stopping, she could be pretty sure it would be empty. Except that one day I got into the elevator and forgot to press 4, and when it started up I just assumed I had pressed the button and let myself be taken to 5. Normally the elevator door to each floor is locked, but Ania must have unlocked hers in anticipation of the elevator coming. I yanked the strap to see if Stan had unlocked ours for me and the door opened right into Ania's apartment.

"I was shocked, expecting to see my apartment with all these pillars and full of, well, junk. Instead I walked into a paradise of sunlight and open space. Everything sparkled, and light danced through the enormous skylights and all over the gleaming floor. Ania herself seemed like a figure in a dream. She was dressed in a long white dress that blended with the paleness of her skin. She had her back to me, and, well, if I have to say it, she looked like she was worshipping the sunlight. She had her arms up and her head flung back, her long black hair swaying down around her calves. Her body seemed supple as green wood. Everything was almost blindingly bright except for the darkness of her hair which flowed like a dark river towards the floor. Then she spun around, and breathing heavily stared at me.

"Forgive me,' I stammered, jolted by what I took to be fierceness in her eyes. But it wasn't fierceness, it was fright. Or maybe it had turned to fright, I'm not sure. 'I thought I pressed 4, I thought . . .'

"I was just getting ready to go out,' she said. She seemed nervous, as if making up excuses. 'Would you like to come in for a minute? If you don't mind sitting with me on the floor.'

"I came into the gleaming room and sat down on the floor in a shaft of brilliant sunlight. The floor was blonde wood, scraped and polished and waxed like the floor of a stage. She sat down cross-legged, yoga style, with what looked like practiced ease.

"It seems almost a pity that these places are filled with things,' she said. 'It's so beautiful this way. I love sunlight on empty space.'

"What kind of furniture are you getting?'

"I . . . I don't know. As little as possible. Maybe nothing. Do you see what I sleep on?'

"She went over to a closet and pulled out a thick, fleece-lined crazy quilt.

"It's very comfortable,' she said. 'I love to put it on the bare floor, just under that skylight, and stare up at the darkness.'

"Aren't you lonely here?'

"Of course. I'm very lonely. But I need the empty space. Don't you sometimes?'

"Often, yes. Sometimes I dream about it. But I'm afraid of it. I could never, well, go out and get it.'

"I was afraid, too. I gave up a good deal for it. Everything. But I had to have it. It was the only way I could remember. I was all crowded in, and now in the morning I wake up and the air dances with light.'

"She seemed suddenly depressed, her eyes sad and longing. She was like that, her mood shifted rapidly to extremes, like a steel ball rolling from one end of a tilted cylinder to the other.

"What's the matter?' I asked.

"When you clear out your life . . .'

"Yes?'

"She shrugged. 'You're free,' she said. 'Things begin to happen.'

"What kinds of things? Please, I'm not just curious. For a long time I've been thinking I need more space for myself . . .'

"You become all smashed up, the pieces laugh and cry by themselves. You become empty, you begin to spread out into space. I can't describe it, sometimes you don't believe you can stand another minute, other times there's a splendid peace, and you know that you will never, never give it up. Once you let it happen to you, you become a different person. You can never go back.'

"That's what I'm afraid of. I don't want to cut myself off completely from what I am now.'

"There's no other way. It's so sad. But you need space for joy. There's no joy without knowing death.'

"Is that what it's like? Death?'

"No, it really isn't. And yet it is. I told you, I can't describe it. You must go through the anguish of total loneliness first, strip yourself of everything but intensity, then even of intensity, without hope, so that you can become a bare canvas upon which you can paint your dreams.'

"She spoke rapidly, like a translator at the U.N., as if her words could barely keep up with her knowledge. I was in awe, it was a report from a place I had often dreamed of going. It seemed like everything I had always hoped it would be, transforming, exalted, beyond the

human, but tinged, almost dirtied, by a layer of sadness that seemed to come from beyond the grave."

"I have a theory," Stan said.

"We heard your theory already, this is serious."

"It's a new theory. I just thought of it."

Patty sighed.

"You know those voodoo dolls that people stick pins in to make other people scream two thousand miles away?"

"Yes," I said. Patty was not responding.

"I think she was an old voodoo doll that some witch doctor brought to life instead of throwing away."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"That's what we all are," Stan continued, suddenly excited, his insight opening out.

"We're all voodoo dolls that people stick pins in, hoping to hurt other people long dead and far away. What a life! And then this one voodoo doll breaks away from it all and goes up into a garret or whatever and escapes from all the pins and calls it space. Only she can't stand it up there, it's death without the pins, you know. That's the definition of death: people stop sticking pins in you."

"So why does she stay there?" Patty asked sarcastically, clearly annoyed with herself for rising to Stan's bait.

"She's after a more intense experience."

"What more intense experience?"

"Art. Which is the process of turning one's longing for pins into beauty."

"Are you finished?" Patty asked. "You've gotten everyone's attention now, are you finished?"

Stan gave a mock bow, seated on a folding chair, his paunch slopping against his thighs.

"Did she say anything more about being a bare canvas?" I asked. "What kinds of dreams was she painting? Did she say?"

"No," Patty said. "She went on about emptiness. But she never said anything specific about her past, about what kind of life she left behind."

"What else did she say about the emptiness?"

"She said it wasn't for me. Not unless I was driven to it. It's not something you choose, she said. It's something you find yourself compelled to do. We talked for about twenty minutes, I think, and then she got up and said she had to go out. She was going shopping. I walked her to the store, then we parted and never talked intimately again. It's a pity, she was very wise and had seen things few people see."

"Did you try to see her again?"

"No. I never asked her questions or tried to impose myself on her. I respected her quest for emptiness, I didn't want to fill even a tiny corner of it with myself. I do have one other communication from her, though."

"Yes?"

"A poem she wrote. There was a man here, a relative of hers, who came asking about her a few days after she disappeared."

"George Sampson?"

"Yes! How--? Peter told you about him?"

I nodded.



"He found it in her apartment. I don't know how. It had seemed absolutely bare. But--let me get it."

She got up and disappeared into the forest. Stan smiled at me, perhaps thinking thoughts he did not want to say.

"So you're a teacher?" I asked.

"We're both teachers. At Washington Irving High School. I teach social studies and Patty teaches art. We met in the principal's office. I groveled in unusually obsequious fashion and she fell in love with me."

"Can you tell me anything about this George Sampson?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything you can tell me."

"He was short. A full head of dark hair. Looked to be about fifty. A muscular, well-built person, though nothing like superman downstairs."

"Did he say how he was related?"

"An uncle? Cousin? I don't know. He said he hadn't seen her since childhood. He saw her name in the paper, had no idea she was living in New York until she disappeared."

"Did he mention the Holocaust?"

"No," Patty said, returning with a small piece of paper ripped along the top, as if from a pocket, spiral-bound memo pad.

"Did he speak with an accent?"

"I'd call it an accent," Stan said. "He sounded affected, like an announcer for a classical radio station."

"But he sounded native."

"He sounded created, is what he sounded," Stan said.

Patty handed me the poem. "I copied it from her original," she said.

"Sampson kept the original?"

She nodded. "It was scribbled on an envelope. I didn't understand what it meant until I read her inscription for the sun-sculpture in the newspaper. I had no idea she was a survivor of the Holocaust. Now a lot about her makes more sense. Not just the poem."

The poem read as follows:

*Bones and fire,  
Fire and bones.  
We cannot look!  
It will sear our eyes!  
Even here is beauty,  
The ashes of love.  
To see you truly  
I would have to die.*

## CHAPTER 4

### In Which There Is Much Speculation About Ania Marmosa

All three of us went up to Ania Marmosa's apartment. Stan said I would love Lorelei's latest decorations, which he described as pink thunderclouds about to pour pastel rain. And so they were.

We stepped off the elevator into clouds, as though we were a squadron of 747's headed off into the sunset. Or perhaps a small party of lambs newly risen to the celestial pasture. Three huge canvases spread out directly in front of the elevator, a triptych of puffy pink clouds pitched cleverly so as to seem below us, even though the tops towered above our heads.

The floor was covered with a thick white shag rug, vast as a snow field, and the walls were hung with more massive canvases of clouds. Scattered about this awesome emptiness, like the equipment of a mountaineering expedition on the surface of a glacier, lay various collections of modernistic steel-and-glass furniture, all transparent or black and white: two sofas and an armchair set around a glass coffee-table; an empress-sized waterbed, covered with black quilt and sheets, hedged in by a white dresser and dressing table; a black-and-white dinette set by a kitchenette in gleaming white; a set of aluminum and black exercise equipment, including Nautilus and exercycle.

The far side of the apartment was roped off like the forbidden section of a movie theater, with brass stanchions and thick red velvet rope. This was the studio, covered with a hard white surface that looked like Formica, at the center of which stood an easel on which sat a canvas--you guessed it--of puffy pink clouds.

The studio lay directly beneath the last of the three large skylights that marched majestically across the ceiling. The center one was largest, but all three towered above the roof, little houses in their own right, so placed that the sunlight from each overlapped that from the others, so that there was no place in the room that was not flooded with light, as if the roof itself did not exist.

One could see easily, even surrounded by the clutter of Lorelei's clouds, how in this place Ania might have conceived of the sun-sculpture, so completely did the sun possess the room and fill its space with light.

"Ah! Beautiful!" I exclaimed as I stepped from the elevator. "Extraordinary!"

"You like my decorations?" Lorelei asked, coming over with Peter Sommers to greet us. She was a tall, slender woman with long, silky white hair and a wrinkled face, dressed in a pink leotard unzipped down the front to reveal her cleavage and a generous portion of breast. The athletic body of a thirty-year-old beneath the face of a woman of sixty.

"It's my biggest commission so far," she went on, mercifully not waiting for my answer. "The whole 70th floor. They want it to look like heaven, like they're not attached to the world at all. They think it will improve productivity."

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said as I stepped uncomfortably onto the snowy white carpet, wondering how she kept it clean.

"Everything will be done in white," she told me. "So I copy it here."

"You mean you redo--"

"Not all the time. Only for the really lucrative ones. I need to be surrounded by stimuli. As you see, I'm committed to my work. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks. I had--"

"He finished my ginger ale downstairs," Stan said, solving a mystery I had long put out of my mind. "This is what you do: Instead of asking him if he wants a drink, you give him yours to hold and he finishes it for you."

Lorelei laughed. "Don't mind Stan," she said. "He's always like this. Unpresentable. What drink should I pour myself to give you?"

"Scotch-and-soda," Stan answered for me.

"OK," I agreed. "I'll pass it on to Stan halfway through."

Lorelei went over to the kitchenette counter and poured two scotch-and-sodas, a screwdriver for Patty, and a glass of orange juice for Peter. I wandered over to the studio to stare at the model for the painting on the easel--a video terminal with a pink cloud on the screen.

"You see how I paint them," Lorelei said, coming up behind me with my drink. "Clouds are a perfect example of the operation of chaos in the universe. There are equations that describe them. I just plug in the same equations again and again, while the computer randomly selects variables. It's very similar to what happens in the sky."

"Ingenious," I said.

"The next step is having the computer do the painting. Look at the screen."

I looked at the screen.

"That's very high resolution. Do you see wisps in front of the main mass? It's like a real cloud, it dissolves as you approach. Uncanny, yes? I try to get that on canvas. You see?"

She pointed to a corner of the canvas, which I stepped towards to examine more closely. Indeed, she had captured the wispy, three-dimensional effect of clouds seen up close, beautifully, with tiny expert strokes.

"Excellent work," I said.

"Thank you. But nothing like the computer. Look again."

I looked again at the computer. This was even more exact. It looked as though the screen itself would dissolve as I approached it.

"The problem is that there's no way to print that screen out with the necessary precision. And if you try to blow it up on a larger screen, you lose resolution. We tried it up here, turned the whole wall into a monitor. The resolution was awful."

"I'm sure they'll come up with something--"

"Yes, we'll have beauty directly. That's the next step, isn't it? We'll get rid of the media of art altogether. That's Ania's message, what I read in it, anyway. The future is in sculpting with lasers and beams of light. Clay, canvas, stone, metal--these will be obsolete."

"Perhaps. But even Ania--"

"I'm a futurist. What I look for in the present are gleams of the future. Isn't that what really excites us in a work of art?"

"Then why do you paint?"

"To make money. I'm also practical. I'm getting over a quarter of a million dollars to make the 70th floor of an office building look like heaven. That's also a bit of the future, the point where interior decoration and set design meet."

"A quarter of a million dollar toast!" Stan shouted, coming over from the bar, glass held high. "May the office wolves turn into lambs and the secretaries . . . Well, let the secretaries turn into lapdogs. Listen. Has your client handed out the contract for sound effects yet? For a modest fifty thou I can supply harp music and a few unobtrusive tweet tweets. Sure to cut sick days by twenty percent. Reduce turnover. Halve dental bills. What do you say? Have they forgotten about sound? Or do the plebeians intend to make do with Muzak?"

"Muzak, I think," Lorelei said.

"No futurists there! Don't the idiots know that the ordinary media of music are obsolete? That the moog synthesizers and laser discs and other outmoded instruments of punk are cavorting with dinosaurs in the La Brea tar pits? Gone is all this clumsy paraphernalia that used to stand between us and sound! We produce the pure article. We oscillate the air with feathers directly into the ear. Think of it! Only the latest in computer-controlled feathers! It replaces air conditioning. A total environment of sound and gentle breezes wafting through the corridors of heaven! The little lambs and lapdogs won't know what hit 'em!"

"That's not a bad idea," Lorelei mused. "Selling them sound. Part of a total package. Creating environments. I didn't think of that."

"Twenty percent," Stan demanded, holding out his palm.

Lorelei took my arm and led me away from the studio, pushing the side of her breast confidentially against my elbow. "It's a real thrill to live in Ania's apartment. I can't tell you. I think of it as hers. Not mine anymore. It's like living in a castle where famous things happened long ago. I did that in Europe once. But this is even more exciting. I feel . . . inspired. What she's done will change the history of art. Tell me what you know of her. We must talk more, at length, alone. What do you know?"

"Almost nothing. The other people here know much more than I do."

"I heard you said she didn't exist. That's fascinating, absolutely fascinating. I think she didn't, really. I mean she was a person who lived here, but not the person who created the sun-sculpture."

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly interested.

"I mean there was a genius there who needed only to leave the world in order to see it more clearly. That's why she was a recluse, that's why she had nothing in this room. Because she could no longer be her anymore, she could no longer be anybody. A person could never have created what she did, which is so purely, magnificently impersonal. More like something created by God. Isn't that wonderful? That it was thought of here, created here?"

She squeezed my arm enthusiastically. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Peter coming over.

"What are you two talking about so confidentially?" he demanded. No subtlety there. He sounded like a three-year-old whose mother had been taken away.

"Peter, sweetheart, Warren here has this incredible theory about Ania Marmosa, that she wasn't a real person at all, that she gave up personality as we know it in order to achieve her magnificent triumph. It's like a religion, isn't it? You didn't say that, Warren, but that's what I think now. A total emptying of the self. Minimalism in the life as well as in the art. Living without a past or future, no furniture of any kind, so to speak, as transparent to sunlight as a pane of glass."

"She was crazy," Peter said to me, responding to Lorelei with a grimace.

"Then how do you explain the sun-sculpture?" Lorelei asked.

"I don't have to explain the sun-sculpture. Who needs a sun-sculpture? What's wrong with sunlight? A minimalist in life doesn't need art. Minimalism in art is a contradiction in terms. Art is by definition extra. A true minimalist makes himself a work of art."

"Or makes the work of art her self," Lorelei countered. "That's why you thought she was crazy. Because she tried to become no one. That's the other side of the minimalist see-saw. You extinguish life."

"Which is crazy."

"No, it's heroic," Patty called over, trudging across the barren waste of Lorelei's carpet in pursuit of the conversation. "Think what effort it takes to see sunlight freshly, a different sunlight, and to give the gift of that vision to the world. There's no way but to get rid of the old self that saw ordinary sunlight and to see anew, with the eye of God."

"My wife," Stan explained, coming up behind her, "has always wanted to be God. She contends that it's mainly our marriage that has perverted her."

"You mean prevented her," I suggested.

"I know what I mean," Stan insisted.

"Please!" Patty scolded. "I'm trying to make a point!"

Stan made a deep bow and stepped back two paces.

"He makes a joke of everything," she complained.

"With God's eyes," Stan mumbled in the background.

"I agree with Patty," Lorelei said. "The flamboyant artists, people like Gregor Sampo or Salvador Dali, create new combinations of old things, but nothing really new. It's like Coleridge's distinction between the fancy and the imagination. They can think of an ass with a crocodile's head, but a totally new animal is beyond them.

"Why? Because to create such a thing is to be like God, to create something from nothing, which requires nothing to start with, total emptiness, total submission. I can't approach that, I know it, I can be clever, creative in the sense of the fancy, but I can't see anew. There's a concentration there, a sacrifice which makes me shudder."

"Coleridge . . ." I started to explain. But I dropped it. This was no place for a lecture on Romantic aesthetics.

"Like I said," Peter repeated. "Artists are crazy. You don't have to create anything to see anew. All you have to do is see anew."

"You're angry at Ania because she wouldn't screw you," Lorelei said bluntly. "That's what put the bug up your ass."

"I don't screw loonies."

"You screw anything that crawls."

Since Lorelei was still crushing her left breast against my elbow, I felt distinctly uncomfortable with this exchange. I tried to pull away, but she gripped me tighter, and for a second I had the nightmarish vision of having to fight her to get my arm back.

"Dear, dear people," Stan said, coming to our rescue. "Who is this Ania Marmosa? I'll tell you. Those of us who aren't satisfied with who we are, and in that category I would include the entire human race, tend either to denigrate or elevate her, depending on the whether. That's w-h-e-t-h-e-r.

"Some of us can't stand the competition, so we make her into a looney. As we watch her disappear into the stratosphere we say, who wants to fly into the stratosphere? You've got to be crazy to fly into the stratosphere! Secretly, we hope she'll plunge to earth like a stone. That will vindicate our own cowardice. I'll call these the spitefuls, in which I include Peter and myself. We trample on everything in a vain attempt to make it even lower than we are.

"Then there are the breast beaters. They watch the little looneybird disappear into the stratosphere and say ooh! aah! What a genius! Superhuman! I could never do that! They trample on themselves so that they, too, can feel more comfortable with their cowardice.

"Now the truth is that the little bird up in the stratosphere is just like you and me, but that thought is too threatening. It means maybe we made the wrong choices. So we create a myth, the

myth of the lunatic or genius, or maybe of the looney genius, to make us feel better about having given up too early.

"So then we come to little Warren here. Little Warren with his elbow buried in Lorelei's tit. Warren is God's eyes. He's looking for the plain little person behind the myth. As she really is. The only problem is that she really isn't. She flew up into the stratosphere and disappeared. No trace. All that's left is the myth."

"Not quite all," Lorelei said. She had detached herself abruptly from my arm.

"What else is there?" Stan asked, surprised.

"A letter. Would you believe it? I got a letter addressed to her last week."

## CHAPTER 5

## In Which Warren Looks for Gen Sum and Finds Ania Marmosa's Memoirs

The letter was from someone named Gen Sum. It was on hotel stationery: the King Alfred Hotel, 7 East 30th Street. The postmark was exactly one week old.

"What were you planning to do with the letter?" I asked Lorelei, who was pressing against my arm as if for a closer view. She seemed delighted with her surprise.

She shrugged. "I suppose I should have written "Return to sender" on it and stuck it in a mailbox. But then the sun-sculpture appeared on top of Mt. Carmel, and I thought maybe someone would find the mystery woman and I would have an opportunity to deliver it to her in person. In the meantime, I'm glad it's you who's trying to find her. I don't want to call in the media. I don't think she would want that. Promise me you'll keep this quiet, at least for now."

"Mind letting me take the letter back to the King Alfred Hotel?"

"Not at all. Just bring it back to me if this Gen Sum turns out not to be there."

"Why?"

"Because it's mine."

I didn't argue with that. It certainly wasn't mine, which was good enough for me. In a way, I was relieved that the temptation to open it had been removed. I was beginning to wonder whether I should be pursuing Ania Marmosa at all. If she preferred to remain a ghost, why hunt her with a spotlight? But these scruples were like a castle in the sand compared to the wave of my curiosity. I took the letter and grabbed a cab up to the King Alfred Hotel.

The hotel was in the heart of the red light district, surrounded by welfare hotels and prostitutes. It itself, however, was clean and reasonably pleasant. The clerk behind the desk was a stock character out of film noir, with long straight black hair, a lightweight boxer's build, an emaciated face with deep, soulful dark eyes. The left ear was decorated with a thin gold ring.

"Yeah, he's checked in," he said. "But he's not here."

"Did he say when--"

"He hasn't been here since he checked in. He just checked in, paid for two weeks, and left."

"When?"

"Let's see . . . a week ago. Eight days."

"How do you know he hasn't been back?"

The clerk shrugged, grinned, looked down at the register.

"I said--"

"Look, mister. Are you a cop?"

I got the message, took out a ten, wished I had a five, and handed it over.

"The keys," the clerk said. He reached behind to a board studded with hooks. "See?" He took two keys off a hook. "He turned in his key at the desk and never picked it up again."

"What did he look like?"

"I don't remember."

I dug for my wallet, but, surprisingly, the clerk shook his head with a smile.

"I'm not milking you, buddy," he said. "The guy checked in eight days ago. A lot of people check in here. He was short, slight, I remember that, and he didn't look Chinese. Dark hair, I believe. Beyond that, I'd be making it up."

"Can I see his signature?"

"Sure."

He paged back in a thick file of pink forms and then spun the stack over to me. Printed with almost calligraphic grace was the name, Gen Sum. His address was simply Paris, France. No street or number.

OK, a dead end, I said to myself. I'll leave the letter here for him with a request that he get in touch with me. He had to come back for his things. That is, if he left anything in his room.

Well, I could find out easily enough. It seemed insane to go so far, but the clerk seemed pliable. Even so, I was crossing a line that for me was distasteful to cross. I had crossed it before, but that had been long ago, and I had been obsessively in love.

"How much to take a look at his room?" I asked, surprised to hear myself say the words.

"Twenty," the clerk mumbled, studying the register. He obviously had been waiting for my offer.

I nodded. He got up from his stool, took one of the keys, and came around the barrier. We took the tiny elevator up to the third floor. The corridor was more gloomy than the brightly lit lobby had advertised and spoke of grime and dust too deep for the cynical exhaustion of the staff. But the room itself, packed with a 3/4 size bed, an armchair, and a dresser, seemed clean and untouched.

The clerk held out his hand as soon as we entered the room. I gave him his twenty, which loosened his tongue.

"The maids don't even bother coming in anymore. They just ask if the guy's been back. I mean, what's the point? Everyone thinks he was knocked off the first night, now he's in the freezer waiting for someone to I.D. him. Maybe he came here to off somebody and they got him first. No rod in here, though."

"You've gone through his things?"

The clerk grinned. "Not me. Well . . . let's just say the place was tidied up. His stuff's all here."

He pulled open a sliding door. A large tan suitcase and a leather carry-on bag were on the floor. A raincoat hung alone just to the left. On the shelf was a battered manila envelope thick with pages one could see through rips in the side. Instinctively, I reached up.

"What's your game?" the clerk asked.

My arm froze halfway up to the shelf, at which I became aware of precisely what I was doing.

"I'm looking for a friend," I said.

"You think it's this guy?"

"No. My friend got a letter from him. The stationery was from here."

"What kind of friend?"

"A friend."

The clerk nodded and strolled back to the corridor. I decided that he was leaving me to myself. He wasn't interested in seeing what I did in here.

I reached up and took the envelope off the shelf. It wasn't sealed. The metal tabs that were to keep the flap closed had broken off. I half pulled the pages out. They were typed and unnumbered. I started reading the first page, standing facing the open closet, slowly pulling the entire manuscript out as I read down to the bottom. It was the memoirs of Ania Marmosa.

I read the manuscript transfixed for ten or fifteen minutes, standing facing the open closet, the single raincoat and stacked tan luggage staring at me, until the clerk came in to tell me that he had to get back to the desk. I looked up annoyed. I had forgotten all about him, forgotten



where I was, forgotten that I was invading another person's privacy, forgotten that what I was reading wasn't mine. Lord knows whose it was, actually, since I had no idea whether Gen Sum had gotten hold of it with Ania's consent. But it certainly had not been intended for my eyes.

I put the pages back into the envelope, then, as the clerk watched, put the entire wad into my leather portfolio.

"There's a risk there," the clerk commented flatly. "What if he comes back?"

"How much?" I asked.

The clerk shrugged. "Another twenty."

I handed it over.

"The poor sonofabitch isn't coming back anyway," the clerk said. "He's dead."

Or in the hospital, I thought. Or ill at the home of friends on Long Island. It was madness to take the manuscript. By the time I thought of Xeroxing it and replacing the original, I was already out of the hotel and waving down a cab on Madison Avenue. Why hadn't I thought of it right away? I wondered. It was such an obvious alternative to outright theft. Why didn't I turn around right then and get it Xeroxed and return it to the room?

I got into the cab, knowing my behavior was criminal and, even worse, shameful. I wanted Ania Marmosa all to myself. In a way, I had appropriated her along with her manuscript. A piece of her was mine now, a piece which for the moment I wanted to share with no one else.

Since I'm normally a rational, law-and-etiquette abiding person, some explanation is in order. Yet I have none. It was an impulse, born of the excitement of holding the woman, so to speak, in my hands. A Xerox would have been like a plaster Venus de Milo, a postcard Mona Lisa. I wanted to get to the privacy of my room and be alone with the real article. I fled with it, fled as if pursued, did not look back. I ran up to my apartment, locked the three locks behind me, sat down in the leather chair before my oak desk, and reverentially removed the manuscript from its tattered garment.

Then I read it through.

## CHAPTER 6

### In Which a Little Girl Wakes Up in a Forest and Has a Vision

My earliest memory. I am in a forest. I am in tremendous pain. The pain is far below me. It is as if I am in a balloon looking down at it, blood red among trees.

It is misty. Sunlight pours through the mist. The trees are white birch and pine. The birch have no leaves. It is windless and cold.

Around me lie bodies. I do not know whose. There are eight, perhaps ten. Some lie piled on others.

One lies next to me. It is a young woman. Not my mother. I do not remember my mother. This young woman is very thin and has light brown hair braided in one braid down her back. One naked arm is flung across my chest. Her other hand cradles the back of my neck. She has stiffened, and I am imprisoned in her embrace. The bottom halves of both our bodies lie in thick frozen blood.

Perhaps I am crying. Perhaps I watch myself cry. The sun pours more brightly through the mist. As it approaches it becomes a beautiful woman. The woman leans over me. I have never seen anything more beautiful.

Her colors are those of a rainbow, flashing from her lips, her eyes, her hair. The colors keep changing. I cannot keep up with them. Her face, too, changes shape as she hovers over me stretching out her arms.

I want desperately for her to hold me. I want her to take me with her. The pain is far, far away. I never want to go back to it.

In this moment of yearning she smiles at me. It is a warm smile of love and affectionate understanding. Yes, she loves me, but she cannot take me with her. She must leave me in this forest, among these dead people, in this pain. I must suffer, and there is nothing anyone can do for me but love me.

This is what her smile says: I will watch you and suffer with you. I will not be able to feel the pain as you do, but I will feel the pain of not being able to bear it for you. When you have suffered all you must I will come for you, and then I will hold you and you will be safe.

I return her smile. And this is what my smile says: I will wait for you. I will not forget you. I am willing to suffer now and wait bravely till you come.

She nods, understanding perfectly. I can barely look at her, she is so beautiful. She flashes green and red and blue and orange from her eyes and lips and hair. Color so intense that it hurts my eyes and I must look away.

In seconds she has faded and is gone.

A tall man is looking down at me. He has long hair and a large black beard and small eyes.

I scream. The pain is swarming all over me and I cannot stand one more second of it. All my bravery and willingness to suffer is gone, as if it had never been. My screams do nothing to lessen the pain. It goes on and on like a screw burrowing relentlessly into wood. I struggle desperately to get away from it, but it goes deeper and deeper into me, and each moment I cannot stand any more it becomes more and again I cannot stand it.

The tall man leans down to me to take me in his arms. I scream at him, I scream at the forest and at the dead bodies around me, I scream at the pain, yet at every moment I understand that not a single sound comes from my lips.

My next memory is of the kibbutz. In between I remember nothing. Strange how completely so much has been lost. In the kibbutz I must have been six or seven years old.

I share a room with Dalit. She is a young woman. I do not know why I am sharing a room with a young woman not related to me. My name at this time is Hatikvah, which in Hebrew means hope.

From our window is a view of the fields of the kibbutz, all crowded onto a little knob that sticks up from the plain, then the wide golden valley leading to brown mountains humped along the horizon. Straight ahead, on the brow of a foothill on the other side of the valley, is a monastery surrounded by olive trees and vines.

It is a beautiful view, changing constantly with the clouds and the angle of light, and I spend much of my time watching it.

I remember little about the kibbutz except this view and this room and Dalit. I take my meals by the window. Dalit serves me. We sometimes have "conversations" with our eyes. I remember now. Dalit does all the "talking." She looks at the food and then at me. With a big smile on her face she rolls her eyes so that her eyeballs push hard against the extreme right edges of her whites. "Come on, eat!" her eyes say as she tosses her head. She has large brown eyes and long, thick, slightly reddish brown hair. She is very vivacious.

I watch her in the same way that I watch the mountains.

Later we sleep together. Dalit holds me against her chest. It is warm there but at times I cannot breathe and pull away. She kisses me on the cheek and holds my hand. Yes, I remember this now. Yet at the time it is as if she is doing this to someone else.

The pain is still there, far below me. I am afraid it will be there for me should I descend. There is much else below me that frightens me. I do not want to see what it is. I want the beautiful woman of the sunbeams to come for me.

Sometimes I dream of her. When I do, I whimper and cry out in my sleep. I know this because I wake Dalit, who asks me what is wrong. But I cannot tell her because in order to do so I must come down.

I remember one dream, not of the woman of the sunbeams. I am in a forest. It is dark and we are asleep. It is wet and cold. Someone holds me.

I am crying. I do not know why. In my dream the person who holds me slowly begins to turn to gold. She becomes hard and cold and brilliant. Her eyes become glass. Her hair becomes ridges and grooves. Her stiff arms imprison me. I scream but no one hears me. I scream and scream. Around us lie other people, all gold. They are naked, gleaming gold on the forest floor. An incalculable treasure. I am the only one still flesh and blood. They lie in all kinds of attitudes and positions, in twos and threes, adults and children.

Suddenly a spear of starlight penetrates to my heart. I begin also to turn to gold. My body stiffens, my eyes become hard in their sockets. I scream uncontrollably, screaming and screaming, making no sound. It is as if the volume has been turned down on my voice. No matter how hard I scream, no sound issues. I am helpless. In moments I will be pure gold like the rest.

Dalit awakens me. "Hatikvah, dearest," she says. "You're having a bad dream, aren't you."

It is a moment before I realize that the dream is over and I am safe. In that moment Dalit is in my dream. She is . . . but in my dream I refuse to see her. In my dream she is Dalit and yet she is not Dalit at all. She is someone horrible whom I don't remember. I turn my face from her. I await the pain. The pain is about to strike me and I cower on the ground, waiting helplessly. It

will enter my body and stay for hours, days, and there will be nothing I will be able to do to reduce it or make it go away. I will scream and scream and it will do no good at all.

Then I realize that I am awake and the Dalit who is holding me is not the Dalit in the dream who is not Dalit. I am crying, I don't know why, I don't remember starting to cry. I am sobbing, I hold Dalit close and make her all wet. Dalit kisses my cheeks, first one, then the other, and drinks my tears.

I also remember walking with Dalit in the country. I do not remember whether we did this regularly or this is the only time. We walk on a rough road through fields of green vegetables. People work in the fields, bending over.

We hold hands. The sun is hot and delicious in the cool morning air. I think: I am happy. It is the first time I remember thinking that. It feels strange. I am not frightened of the pain. My eyes are not averted from something I do not want to see. I am solid on the road in the sunshine, walking with Dalit, holding her hand. I am not watching myself do this, I am doing it.

We walk along the edge of the knob that sticks up from the plain. On our left the ground slopes fifty feet down. Far ahead of us, across the valley, is my monastery, with its olive trees and vines. It is, I am sure, a place where I could always be happy, just as I am now.

Dalit squeezes my hand and points to a car making its way on a dirt road across the plain. It creates a dust cloud that rises slowly behind it, ballooning as it rises. The sky is brilliant hard blue. The green of the field shines.

One morning I am watching the mountains. The clouds have speckled them with shadows that hang unmoving. The air is so clear that here and there I can see white houses on the brown hillside and the zigzag of roads. I watch and watch. Dalit comes with food. I eat and watch. I am not aware that I am eating.

When Dalit asks me if I want more I think yes, I do. Then I look at Dalit and she is crying. Her eyes fill with tears and she takes me in her arms. "Oh, Hatikvah, Hatikvah!" she says. "My God, Hatikvah!" She squeezes me hard and rocks me, then holds me a little away from her to look at my face. Her eyes are pure gold in the gleaming sun. She tries to speak but cannot. I realize that I have said yes out loud.

That is all I remember of the kibbutz and of Dalit. I do not remember leaving. In my next memory I am in my room at home on Central Park West. My name is Rachael Miller.

## CHAPTER 7

In Which Rachael Miller Learns to Forget What  
She Both Fears and Longs to Remember

I remember a dream. I may have dreamed it many times. In my dream it is just before daybreak. As terrified as I am of darkness, I am even more terrified of light. I do not want the sun to rise.

As the sky turns grey I begin to scream. "No! No!" I scream. "Please, God, don't make it light!" But the light is coming and there is nothing I can do to stop it. "Stay down!" I beg the sun. "Please stay down! Don't come up, don't! I beg you--"

But the light comes. The sky turns blood red and my screams become uncontrollable. I scream and scream and in my dream I am aware that I am screaming out loud. I scream until my screams awaken me and I do not have to see what the light will show.

My mother tells me that the reason I scream is that I want her attention. It is an accusation, and although I know it is true I deny it. We are at one of our sessions. Every Tuesday and Friday from 3:15 to 4:05. Each session is tape recorded and then transcribed. My mother is a famous child psychologist. Her name is Dr. Dora Miller. She says I must call her Dora, as her other clients do.

My mother is fifty-seven years old when I first remember her. She is a short, plump woman with grey hair done up in a bun and large grey eyes. She wears blue jeans and sneakers, always, and speaks as though she knows precisely what she is talking about.

At the session she tells me I am angry at her for not coming into my room, which is perfectly understandable, she says. "But you can't expect me to come into your room at 5:00 o'clock every morning, can you?"

No, I obviously cannot expect that. It is unreasonable.

"Would you come into my room at 5:00 every morning if I screamed?"

"Yes," I say.

"Every morning?"

I nod.

"OK. Let's try it. You set your alarm and come into my room every morning at 5:00."

"Will you scream?"

She laughs. "No. But look. If you want attention, why don't you take responsibility for getting it? I'm willing to take you into bed with me if you're willing to set your alarm for 5:00 and get up out of bed and come into my room. Isn't that fair?"

It seems absolutely fair. At the same time, it is clear to me that I will not do it. It is very hard, and besides, I have no desire to do it. Which means that I must not scream at 5:00 anymore. I have lost the right. Which means that I must make sure I no longer dream that dream.

The dreams go away. The screaming stops.

My father is a friendly man with a greying beard and twinkling eyes. His hair is a slender grey semi-circle around a shining bald head. He is older than my mother and, although he is muscular, he has a chronically bad back. He smiles much more often than he is happy. There are times when he smiles at the end of each sentence, and then I know he is unsure of being correctly understood. He is a therapist, like my mother, but unlike my mother he is not famous and his clients are all adults. I am not his client. That is clear. My mother has charge of my case.

One afternoon--I don't remember when--I am being tutored by my father in his study. I gaze out the window as he speaks. It is late afternoon, in winter, I believe, and the sun has turned the windows across the park to blazing fire. I stare at the windows. Below them the forests and meadows of Central Park have become gold, eaten into by the shadows of the buildings near me.

I stare at the burning windows. On the other side of them there is something of unimaginable beauty that I do not want to see. I watch myself longing to see it with a longing that is both consuming and bitter, but I do not want to see it at all. I want to see only the curtain of fire.

What is behind there that should move me so? I wonder. Why am I whimpering and sniffing like a lost kitten? Yet I know precisely what it is, which is why I am terrified of knowing what it is. Let it remain behind the burning windows. I will watch them burn and not burn.

My father is asking me questions which I ignore. There is an urgency in his voice that seems far away. Later, I feel my mother shaking me. We go into her office. She is upset. I know that I have done something wrong.

"When people speak to you, you must answer," my mother says sternly. "Not to answer is impolite."

"I'm sorry," I say. Then I realize that I haven't said it and I say it again.

"That's better," my mother says. "You do these things to get attention. You know that."

Yes, I know that. It is very bad to try to get attention. My mother keeps insisting that it is perfectly natural, but her voice tells me it is bad.

"The next time you find yourself not answering someone, you must remind yourself how impolite it is. You wouldn't want someone not to answer you, would you?"

"No."

"Then why don't you answer other people?"

"I don't know. Maybe I don't hear them."

"You heard Hal."

Yes. I heard my father. I couldn't deny that.

"Why didn't you answer Hal?"

"I don't know."

"You can do better than that."

"I was watching the windows across the park."

"Is that a reason not to answer someone?"

"No."

"Then why didn't you answer?"

"I wanted attention," I finally say. I can think of nothing else.

"Is that a nice way to get attention?"

"No."

"Will you do it again?"

I shake my head no.

"Promise?"

I shake my head yes.

My mother kisses me on the cheek. It is a rare kiss, and it takes me by surprise. I cannot say how I feel about it. It is a long time before I stop trembling inside.

It is very strange. At this time I remember nothing of the kibbutz nor of the forest nor of the woman of the sunbeams. I have no memory whatever of Dalit. I believe I was born Rachael

Levy in Israel and that my parents were killed in an automobile accident when I was four, after which I went to an orphanage in Tel Aviv. I believe this absolutely even though I have no memory of the orphanage or of my parents who were supposedly killed. I am shown no photographs of them. I do not ask for details. I accept this past without question.

I do not remember any moment when I am told the story of my life. I simply know it in the way that I know my name. At the sessions my mother and I say nothing about what happened to me before I came to her and my father. It is a subject that is not so much avoided as ignored. People come to the sessions and marvel at how normal I appear to be. I hear them complimenting my mother as she walks them to the door.

I do not remember learning English. It seems to me that I have always known it. I remember nothing of Hebrew, nor of whatever language I may have spoken before that. My past has been erased totally--from my thoughts, from my memories, even from my dreams.

I am slim and very beautiful. I have long black hair and large eyes and people tell my parents that I must be trained as an actress or a dancer. My mother smiles politely but impatiently, a smile she uses at the sessions to mean that she has heard you and knows better. I have no lessons.

I remember at first staying mostly in my room. I am tutored by my father. He is "catching me up." I want to go to school like other children, but first I must catch up.

My room was once the maid's room, when people who lived on Central Park West had live-in maids. It is off a long hallway which joins the living room, dining room, and cavernous kitchen to the bedrooms in the back. The living room and dining room are now my parents' offices, respectively. Two of the bedrooms are my parents' studies. The waiting room is a large foyer.

My room is claustrophobically small, crammed with my bed, desk, and dresser. It has a small window which looks out on an airshaft and a blank wall. Its one advantage is that it has its own tiny closet of a bathroom. Thus I can stay in my room most of the time without having to venture out.

I spend much of my time reading the same books over and over. My parents' studies are full of books, floor-to-ceiling, but I am not allowed to choose. My mother chooses. Winnie-the-Pooh, Milne's poetry, Stevenson's poetry, a few carefully selected Anderson fairy tales. No Grimm. No Mother Goose. No stories of Oz. No Alice-in-Wonderland. Later, I am allowed Mary Poppins.

Nor am I allowed to watch television. My parents have a television which they use mainly for opera and ballet on public television and for news. I am never allowed to watch the news. The television is in their bedroom, and whenever they watch it the door is shut. My door is always shut. I am in a coffin, with only the few books that my mother chooses for company. I spend much of my time lying in my coffin staring at the blank wall across from my window.

I stare at the blank wall and try not to dream. If I dream, I may have a bad dream, and then I will scream and disturb my mother. I do not want to be accused again of trying to get attention. I fear that I will not be able to control myself. It is like the fear of urinating in one's sleep. Whenever I begin to imagine something, I shut it off immediately.

I have no memory whatever of the woman of the sunbeams. I am aware that there is much I do not remember. I want to remember and I do not want to remember. I feel both longing and intense, overpowering fear, and between the two I am frozen.

I do not remember how long it takes me to catch up. I am not sure how old I am when I first attend school. This is incredible to me, but it is true. For many years my sense of time is

distorted, not at all, of course, by accident. When I go to school I am the same age as my classmates. Am I seven? Eight? I do not remember.

I go to the Boston Preparatory School, which is not in Boston and has no relation to Boston that I can discern. It is on 94th Street and Central Park West. The classes are very small, eight or ten to a class, mixed sexes. There are two teachers and an aide in each class.

The teachers remind me of my mother. They are very definite and very clear. Everything they say is undeniable. Of my own free will I decide--always--to do what they want me to do. They leave everything to me and to the other children. There is nothing for which I am able to resent them.

The aide is an old woman. I like her very much. It is through her that I become acquainted with Cinderella, Snow White, and the Sleeping Beauty. I read Rapunzel with her arm around me. Whenever I enter the room I go to her immediately. Her name is Sarah. We call the teachers Miss Harlow and Mrs. White. We call the aide Sarah.

One day I am sitting in the hollow of Sarah's arm reading a book of Anderson's fairy tales. Sarah is plump and warm. As she holds me with one arm she plays checkers with Jody with the other. Jody is black.

I begin reading a tale called "The Little Match Girl." In the story a poor little girl is freezing on the wintry streets of a city. To earn money she sells matches to passersby. She is cold and unhappy. She strikes matches so that for the moment in which the match flares, she can be warm.

With each new flame she has a more beautiful vision. First she sees a New Year's Eve dinner, with a plump roast goose. Then a magnificent Christmas tree, blazing with candles. Finally, she sees her dead grandmother, clear and shining, the only person who had ever loved her.

As the match goes out she becomes desperate to sustain that vision, and she hurriedly strikes a whole bunch of matches, whereupon she sees her grandmother coming down for her in a blaze of light, coming to take her in her arms and bring her to God, where she will always be happy. The next morning people see her frozen little corpse and pity her, unaware of the joy she had felt and the glory she had seen the night before.

Long before I finish the story I am crying uncontrollably. Sarah stops playing checkers and strokes my head. She tries to take the book away, but I hold onto it for dear life. I am crying so hard that I cannot see the words, but I want more than anything to finish the story.

"Stop crying then," Sarah whispers to me, and I make a valiant effort. I want desperately to cry--it feels indescribably luxurious, abandoned, utterly lovely--yet just as desperately I want to finish the story. I keep running the back of my hand over my eyes. I can make out one sentence at a time, my chest heaving with stifled sobs, and then I must again clear my eyes.

The last vision of the little match girl, that of her grandmother coming down in a blazing light to take her to God, is so beautiful that I can no longer stand it. The cries spill over my constricted throat and I begin to cry bitterly, loudly, totally out of control. Both Miss Harlow and Mrs. White rush over to me, extremely agitated.

"Rachael, my dear! What's the matter? What are you reading? Sarah, why didn't you call us over? You know--"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. White," Sarah lies, also agitated. "I was playing checkers with Jody and didn't notice--"

I cannot help myself. I know I am getting Sarah into trouble and I do not want to, but I cannot help myself. I am sobbing now in Mrs. White's arms. I do not even like Mrs. White, but I



cannot help it. She holds me stiffly, like a paramedic staunching a wound, waiting impatiently for the blood to stop flowing.

I cannot remember what happens after this. I cry for a long time. I believe I cry until my mother comes for me and takes me home. Naturally, we have a session on this incident. But not immediately. We wait for our regular time. My mother is not angry. Sarah is not punished. Everything goes on as before, except that I can no longer read what I like in school.

At the session my mother asks me how I felt when I cried.

"It was beautiful," I tell her.

"What was beautiful? The story?"

"Yes. What the match girl saw."

"But what did you feel, Rachael? Happy? Sad? What?"

"I felt very sad."

"Is it beautiful to feel sad?"

"Yes."

"Do you like feeling sad?"

That brings me up abruptly. No, of course I don't. Who does?

"Wouldn't you rather feel happy?"

"Yes," I admit.

"Then why do you want to feel sad?"

I think about this for a moment. I cannot say that I want to feel sad.

"Is anyone's death beautiful?" my mother goes on.

I shake my head no.

"It's horrible, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't understand. The little match girl died and you felt sad. Why do you find that beautiful?"

"It wasn't her death that was beautiful, Dora. It was what she saw. That was beautiful."

"Yes, it was. But what made you cry was that even while she imagined these beautiful things, she was freezing to death. That was sad, very sad, and it made you cry. Isn't that right?"

Yes. It is. The match girl's death wasn't beautiful at all. I was crying because her death was ugly and sad. That is very clear. Once again my mother is indisputably right.

"Why do you want to be sad, Rachael?" my mother asks. "Does it feel good to be sad?"

I shake my head no.

"Don't you want to be happy?"

"Yes."

"Everyone wants to be happy. No one wants to be sad. Sometimes, when we are happy, we can feel some sad feelings and be safe. We can cry for other people because we have no fear of crying for ourselves. It sometimes feels good to cry out of pity for others. Do you understand that, Rachael?"

"Yes." Suddenly I am hopeful. My mother admits it feels good to cry. Now perhaps—

"But not you, Rachael," my mother says slowly and with emphasis.

I look up, surprised. Why not me?

"We don't often speak of this, but every once in a while we must. You know you haven't had an ordinary childhood. You're more sensitive to sadness than most people. Do you remember how long you cried that day in school?"

I nod.

"Have you ever seen any other child cry that hard and that long over a story?"

No. I haven't. It is a humbling revelation.

"That's why I make sure you read only the right things. You must be careful, Rachael. You're a little different from most people. You must never allow yourself to be too sad. A little sad, sometimes, of course. But not very sad. It isn't good for you. Do you understand that now?"

"Yes."

"It might have felt good to cry like that for a little while, but it isn't good for you. You must try to avoid it. Yes? Rachael, tell me you'll try."

I cannot say it. It is a terrible loss, but it is clear I must give this up, too. The thought is almost unbearable. Whatever my mother says, the sadness I felt for the little match girl is the most exquisite thing I can remember. I cannot give it up! I cannot! I want more than anything to read that story a hundred times. I don't care if I cry forever. I cannot promise my mother I won't cry because I know I will, helplessly, and it is precisely that uncontrollable sobbing that I crave.

"It's for your own good," my mother says. "You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," I agree bitterly. "I understand."

## CHAPTER 8

## In Which Gregor Sampo Is Assaulted by Memories and Dreams

*April 19*--Didn't show for the unveiling of my "Nude Suspended from a Balloon." Instead wasted the whole day not being there. What a head! Can you imagine? I might as well have gone and gotten the freaking thing over with. But then I think about my sick smile when I'm trying to be polite and shit! I'd rather be holed up in my head dodging my own bullets than smiling like a putrid orchid while they hammer the nails in.

*May 23*--Should have known better than to go to Litely's, even though I was horny as a Kansas toad. Took home a gorgeous black model, then she had to start talking. A sculptress, too, no less. Jealous as a snake. She said the reason everyone thought I was a genius was that everyone thought I was a genius. Pointed to Doris Lessing, who wrote two novels under a pseudonym just to prove what's in a name. Her publisher turned them down, and after she finally got them published no one wanted to read them. So I doodle on a napkin and suddenly it's worth \$250,000. I blow my nose, my snot alone's worth fifty grand. And on and on and on and on. All that pain flowing from her open mouth. She needed a freaking tourniquet.

I told her she was absolutely right. Unknown artists don't get a fair shake. People look at the signature to tell them how to look at the junk. And etc. It didn't do any good. She was too worked up to screw. Said I was a good PR man, that's all. That I substituted outrageousness for inspiration. Out for my balls. I finally had to kick her out.

*June 2*--I came across a novel in Dalton's. *Summer Sands*, by Elizabeth Sanders. I froze as if seeing a ghost. Holy shit, I thought, it's Liz! Of course it wasn't Liz, it was a woman born in 1960, much too young.

All of a sudden everything started to vibrate again, as if I were a bell struck by a heavy hammer. I began thinking about Liz, what happened to her, did she hate me for disappearing, was she a battered wife living with an alcoholic husband on top of a bakery in Bayonne. Did she have a son who screamed so loud and long in pain that he had to run away to no longer hear the screaming, and so he ran away and heard the screaming no more, but somewhere in the place he left behind it went on and on and on without him, somewhere it still went on, and now that he was no longer there to stop it, it would go on forever. And for the rest of his life, wherever he was, his main occupation would be not hearing it.

*June 10*--I went back to Dalton's to buy *Summer Sands* for old times. It wasn't very good. It was about a woman in her forties who goes back to the island in Maine where she had her first affair over twenty years before. It was a Romeo and Juliet kind of thing. He was the son of a local lobsterman, she was a summer person. The two worlds never mixed. There were clandestine meetings, a good deal of screwing in woods and on boats, a tearful goodbye. Now she's divorced, and she goes back to find that he's divorced, too.

But it's no good. The pundits had been right all along. He was a lobsterman and she was, of all things, a Ph.D. in theater. The two young rebels had aged into their assigned roles. She realizes that her sentimental memories of this romance helped ruin her marriage. She goes home a sadder and wiser spirit.

After she leaves, the lobsterman is caught in a storm. A fog descends. His boat smashes against rocks. For just a moment, as he hangs above the icy water, he has a vision of paradise. It is a warm pine wood. He and his lover are making it on a blanket spread over the soft forest floor. They are drowning in bittersweet pleasure and anything is possible. I love you, my darling, I love you so much, he whispers. I don't care what they say, I won't give you up ever. You're mine, you're mine. I love you, too, she answers. Please, my darling, make love to me. I want your child, your baby. Please.

In his mind he enters her warm body just as in reality he enters the icy waters of the Gulf of Maine. His body becomes his erection, his breath the sperm that gives life to . . . what? A ghost that drifts off in icy crystals, the Spirit of Passion Past (my name for it), drifting off in a brilliant rainbow as the sun bursts through the fog. My, my! What are these visions? Icons to which people pray for deliverance from boredom.

*June 11*--A dream. I woke up twitching like a butchered pig. I still feel the terror. My mother was drowning. I was on a boat nearby. I wanted to save her, but I couldn't because I was talking to a woman from Czechoslovakia. There she was, flailing in the water, screaming for help, and I couldn't drag myself away from the conversation. The woman wouldn't let me. She spoke critically yet respectfully of my work. While my mother went under once again and I prayed it wasn't for the last time, the damned woman moved on to another phase of my career, another period, to make a contrast, to round out a point. I was a giant in a rabbit hutch, I couldn't move. Come up, come up again, I prayed. I never let myself believe it was too late.

Then a wave lifted up the boat and slanted it so that my mother was directly beneath me. She looked up at me in horror. The wave moved on, the boat bore down on her. She disappeared beneath it. I heard the thud of it smashing into her. The woman kept talking, learnedly, interestingly. She was a middle-aged but alluring blonde with dark eyes, slim, dressed in a grey wool suit. I began to cry but she didn't notice. She's dead, I thought, she's really dead. I wept and sobbed, it was too terrifying to believe. I woke up still crying, my whole body shaking beyond my control. I kept on crying long after it was clear to me that the whole thing was a dream, which seemed to make no difference at all.

*June 17*--Still can't shake the dream. I'm sure my mother is dying, is dead, cried out to me at the moment she died. Why else would I dream of her? It's been twenty-five years since I saw her, more. I became someone else, not her son. I murdered George Sanders. I've been Gregor Sampo almost twice as long as I was George Sanders. Doesn't that make me Gregor Sampo? But Gregor Sampo would never dream of George Sanders' mother. The woman from Czechoslovakia, she's Gregor Sampo. I was torn between the two, trapped by the Czech while I desperately wanted my mother.

The message there is ridiculously obvious, I don't want to look at it. And then, if Sampo is one woman and Sanders is the other, then Sanders died, Sanders is dead, while Sampo talks and talks and talks. And even more horrifying: who is the trapped one, the powerless one, the one who weeps?

*June 19*--Why is the woman from Czechoslovakia? Sampo is a Romanian gypsy. Why from Czechoslovakia and not Romania? Marlene Dietrich comes to mind. Czech seems more romantic, more suave, a touch more Middle European. I'm not sure I like what that says about

Gregor Sampo. Screw it! Why am I worked up like this? Because I'm scared shit the dream is real. And I'm much too terrified to do what is necessary to find out.

*July 7*--Chris Wallingford interviewed me for Art World. The aftershocks of "Nude Suspended." Everybody's in a lather because it's a male nude with a member as big as an elephant's trunk. Whispers of homosexuality. I called it a celebration of life just to shut the bastard up. He asked me if I still believed that art was the objectification of the ideal. I told him I never believed that. He quoted me to that effect. I said I never said that, Gregor Sampo did. What does that mean? he said. You'll have to figure it out, I said. Of course he will. The question is will I.

*July 27*--A month and a half since the dream. I always do this to myself. I spend six weeks not finding out whether my mother is alive or dead. That's all I've done. Day after day, hour after hour, I've been not finding out. I really know how to make something an obsession.

Last night I went to Sean's opening at the Prince Street Gallery and wound up in bed with Hila for the first time in years. I forgot what a lousy screw she is. So I passed the time wondering what I was doing with my life. Can you imagine? Nothing brings on midlife crisis more unmercifully than screwing a frigid woman in the summer sweat of a sweltering two a.m.

So I had this urge to come clean, to tell Hila what was bothering me and see what she would advise. Nice girl, Hila. But of course, once I told her I wasn't Gregor Sampo, that would be the end of Gregor Sampo. I'd be George Sanders again, after twenty-five years. And whatever I am, I'm definitely not George Sanders. Not any more, not after all these years. But that's who I'd be stuck with. George Sanders from Bayonne, N.J. Who all his life pretended to be someone else. Who left his grieving, battered mother and grieving, battering father at age sixteen and never looked back, not once, not even secretly, to steal a surreptitious look. Who left a helpless ten-year-old sister in that madhouse and never looked back, not to give a penny's shit, not to satisfy a nickel of curiosity.

*August 23*--Did an oil for Sally's birthday. Brought it in a taxi all the way uptown. Lloyd-o opened the door, saw the oil, and started crying. I couldn't believe it. What a wonderful gift, he kept saying, and we'll treasure it forever. Shit like that. I think Sally was embarrassed.

But when I stood it up against the stereo everyone gasped. It was a large eye, and its iris was the sun. The light shaded from nearly white around the glowing center to nearly black at the edges. It was as near God's eye as I could imagine.

Swimming in the blue-white was a myriad of objects--planets, stars in various phases of obliteration, people, animals, plants, machines, an assortment of miniscule junk like motes in the eye. With a magnifying glass one could see them perfectly, each one distinct and fully realized, while in the painting they looked like scattered pieces of dust. It was immediately pronounced a masterpiece. I thought of the black sculptress I took home a few months ago. If I wasn't Gregor Sampo, wouldn't it be seen as a tired piece of warmed-over surrealism? I mean, come off it! An eye?

*Sept. 3*--I spent the day in memories. Things I have deliberately not thought of for years. I've spent so much time not thinking of them that now they are as fresh and powerful as though they happened yesterday. I sat on the promenade in Brooklyn Heights and stared across the bay and remembered. It was excruciating. I spent most of the time in tears. How did I survive? Why aren't I crazier than I am?

I remembered hours of my father beating my mother. The scene was always the same. She was on her knees on the rug in the middle of the living room trying to hold his legs to prevent him from kicking her. Please, Henry, please, you know you love me, you know what you'll feel later. I love you, Henry, believe me I love you, don't do this again, don't do this. Not a protest, not even an objection. A lament, sung without conviction.

She was a slightly dowdy, plump woman in dungarees and a plaid man's shirt not tucked in. He wore his railroad coveralls, though he hadn't worked on the railroad since the night a certain freight train had slid slowly into the Hackensack River. He was a good deal older than she was, with a bald head and a pot belly. Legs like stumps. He kicked hard. Each kick was punctuated with a snarl. You freaking whore! You bitch! Bitch! Bitch! Get out of my life! Get out! Get your freaking ass out!

On and on with his steel-toed shoes. Once he got down to kicking, she just collapsed like a sack. Three times he broke ribs. Once my mother told me I would have had an older brother. Then they made up. In the hospital, or by the bed, after he had been gone for two days, five days, a week. He came back with apologies and flowers. They kissed, held hands, nuzzled each other in public. The honeymoon would last six months, eight months. Then you could feel the violence building up again.

But the worst wasn't him. The worst was me. I remember standing by the door of my and Liz's room watching the whole thing with a smirk on my face. I was laughing! Why was I laughing? I don't remember. It was weird, I was worried about it even then. At age eleven, twelve, thirteen. The urge to laugh would come, and I was helpless. I hid my face and laughed while my father pulverized my mother's ribs on the living room floor. I smirked, smiled, giggled, struggling to keep the thing down. Liz lay in bed with her face to the wall, stone cold dead. Neither of us cried.

*Sept. 3, later--*One day in particular. I was fifteen. Liz must have been nine. We sat in our room facing a back alley over the bakery on Broadway in Bayonne. The sounds were rising, the prelude to the usual carnage of a Sunday afternoon. It was that time in the cycle. I started to giggle. Liz, dark, lithe, like a sunburned elf, stared at me. Ten minutes, I said. I figure ten minutes. It's not funny, she said. I never said it was. Then why do you always laugh? You always look like you're watching a show. I can't help it, I said. I don't want to. And she got off her bed and kissed me on the cheek. I shrank away from her, putting my arm up, but she got around the arm, planted her kiss, and stepped away. And suddenly I felt a cold terror for her, I knew she was doomed.

*Sept. 15--*Another dream, but this time I don't remember it. What I remember is that again I woke up sobbing. It was maybe three or four in the morning. The scene brought back memories to me. What I remember was that when I was a child it was not unusual for me to wake up crying in the night, and my mother would come into the room and hold me until I fell back to sleep. Strange that I haven't thought of it all these years. I think she must have encouraged me to have bad dreams, because right now my best memories of my childhood, in fact the only good ones, are of her holding me in the darkness. And I had this hunger for her, a hunger for her to hold me. Why is this all coming back now? It's as if I had opened a forbidden door.

*Sept. 16--*Another day in tears. I guess I could use a shrink. Except I'm not sure what a shrink could add to all this. I'm not anxious or nervous, I don't feel sick. I'm just sad, very sad.

I'm sure I'm not remembering everything, there are things I've lost. Probably the most important things. Like why I don't see my father anywhere but in the middle of the living room in his coveralls kicking my mother. Or at the hospital with flowers. That always made my flesh crawl. I think it was worse seeing them make up than watching him tear into her. Idiots, I must have said to myself.

But it wasn't like that. It was sexual. My disgust was like nausea. It was like watching them screw. I knew that within a year he'd be kicking her again, why didn't she? I was furious with her for taking him back. OK, I was jealous of him. That's why I smirked, giggled, laughed each time he abused her. It was my triumph. Maybe this time she would kick the bastard out. I hated him passionately. I wanted to kill him.

It's all too simple. There must be more. He must have beaten me, but I don't remember. Why didn't I stand up for my mother? He must have beaten me bloody one day and scared the shit out of me for good. It must have happened that way but I don't remember.

*Nov. 7--*Another dream. I was lost in some woods. It was cold, there was light snow on the ground, grey and windy, more snow to come. I was terribly hungry and cold, tired, sleepless. I began to panic, I would die here and never find my way out. Then I saw a cabin and went towards it. I peered through the window, my father was inside. He sat by a roaring fire. He was old, very old, dressed in a flannel shirt with large suspenders and brown corduroy pants. I don't remember ever seeing him like that. I came into the cabin crying for him and he took me in his arms. We both wept together for a long time. Then I asked for my mother. He motioned sadly towards the fire. There she was, burning like a marshmallow, twisting, blackening, popping, oozing. I screamed, screamed, woke up screaming cold and wet.

*Nov. 7, later--*I can't shake the dream, I've been crying and shivering all day. I need a shrink. I'm cracking up. My mother's dead, her ghost is coming for me. I can't shake the look of my father. I never saw him dressed like that. What does it mean? I can't put down the notion that one day he beat me so hard that I've obliterated the memory, and that when he did it he was dressed like that. I guess I'd like to think that, though God knows I have enough reason to hate him. I'm afraid to go to sleep now, I don't want to dream again.

*Nov. 8--*Again. I was with Liz in a park, a playground. I was watching her. It was like the park near our apartment in Bayonne, but not that park. I was afraid Liz would hurt herself, so I hovered over her. She was a beautiful child, like a gypsy, with dark hair and eyes, dark skin. She was also agile, and I began to see that she didn't need me so close. So I sat down on a bench and watched her from a distance. But still a little frightened. Somehow, for a second, I took my eyes off her, and when I turned back she was being mauled by a lion. Oh, no! I screamed. Holy shit, no! I ran towards her, but it was too late. The lion had her head in its mouth. It ripped at her body with its claws. The head came off. I woke up screaming again. I can't stand it anymore. I don't know what I'll do, but I can't stand it.

## CHAPTER 9

### In Which Gregor Spies on a Woman Much like Liz

*Dec. 24--*Actually, the 25th. The night before Christmas, four a.m. I remember as a kid being up at this hour. As soon as it got light Liz and I would come out to look for our presents under the tree. One time the drunk sonofabitch had opened them and smashed the face of Liz's doll with a hammer. It was one of those big fancy rubber dolls with the eyes that open and close, and it hadn't broken easily. He had smashed it and gouged it with both sides of the hammer, and now it was hideous.

Liz picked it up and cradled it, crying. She held it in her arms all day like a sick child, then in the evening she wrapped it carefully in newspaper and put it in the garbage. It was as if it had finally died of its wounds. My father, of course, was gone. My mother was calm, almost oblivious. She didn't want to see. Liz never said anything about it. We all pretended it never happened.

*Jan. 25--*I showed Nymbus to Frank. He said it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. But who knows? When I show anything now, it's a freaking event. People think there's something wrong with them if it isn't breathtaking. I need someone honest enough to tell me my stuff is shit.

*Feb. 7--*Had a little party to show Nymbus off a few weeks before the opening at Prince Street. Lloyd and Sally came, Hila, Jack, Chita, Vivian. Warren Hill came with Artie, haven't seen him in about two years. Super polite sonofabitch, but he tells the truth. Old Yankee stock, silver haired, little glinty pale blue eyes, gentlemanly wrinkles.

So I put a second martini into his hands, backed him up against the folding table, and asked him point blank what he thought of Nymbus. He turned white. You don't like it, I said. It's not that, he said. I'm just surprised you asked me. You were never interested in the opinions of people like me.

I want it straight, I said. No bullshit. It's beautiful, he said. I mean really, I'm not flattering you. Just as a physical object, it's extraordinary. You've never worked in wood before, have you? I don't know how you do it, it glows like a black moon. It's as abstract and menacing as the horns of a gazelle, and yet it's a fleeing girl, doomed and twisted. The perfect grace of the shape keeps it from being sentimental. Still, it's the most emotional thing you've ever done. Is my praise turning you off?

No, I said. I want to hear what you think. There's more, isn't there?

Yes, of course, he said. In this piece and in the painting you did for Sally, for the first time you don't seem to be avoiding influences. Up to now originality was the main thing with you. Not that your work wasn't expressive, but what drew one to it was the fact that each piece was totally different from anything ever done before. Not just by you, but anyone.

But Sally's painting was obviously a reworking of a surrealist cliché. And the face here is pure Picasso. Do you know what I mean? I'm not criticizing you now, just noticing the obvious. Earlier you would have been sure to obliterate all traces of influence. Now it seems you're driven more strongly. It's exciting, your work is changing. There's something haunting you, you've got to get it out. The result is a more profound wedding of emotion and form than I've . . .



As he went on, I was reminded of the conversation with the Czech woman in my dream. I thought for a second I had started giggling in his face but I hadn't, it was all inside. I was giggling, smiling, smirking, and desperately trying to hold it down, as I had as a child, when disaster struck and I could do nothing but watch my life go under.

*March 3--*Nymbus and I made the cover of *Time* this week. Why? The Pingado Corp. bought Nymbus for over two million. So there I am. Famous. No longer just a well-known artist. I join Picasso and Chagall as a Household Word.

The thing is, will my mother or Liz see it? If they're still alive. If they read *Time*. And if they see it, will they recognize me. And if they do, will they get in touch with me. That was my first thought--is this the end of twenty-five years of exile from myself?

I was sorry to see Nymbus go to Pingado. The rules are they have to put it in a public place with adequate security, but they'll probably put it in the executive washroom on the 17th floor. Bastards. They only bought it for publicity. The cover story in *Time* is worth more than two million in advertising easy.

And the other spinoffs. Already. Saturday afternoon I have an interview with this hot freelancer from *The New York Times Magazine*. Probably hopes to screw her way into some kind of scoop.

Maybe I'll oblige her. Tell her I'm not Gregor Sampo, that I've been lying all my life. I'm George Sanders from Bayonne. And Mom and Sis? If you're watching out there in ordinary personland? I'm real sorry I never gave a shit about you all these years. You want a little guilty conscience money? I'm rolling in it. So come and get it, Mom and Sis! A thousand bucks apiece if you crawl all the way here from Bayonne. Just right on across the catwalk of the Holland Tunnel. On your hands and knees. Just like that freelancer's going to crawl up to open my pants.

*March 5--*I'm going to have to change my style of work. Klaus tells me it doesn't make sense to show at the gallery anymore. Nobody's going to look at your work, he said. They're just going to buy it. For the name. Like designer jeans. Then I might as well die, I said. What's the point of going on? I'm not in this business to mint rare coins.

He tells me I should do commissions. Create something for a specific setting or occasion. Hawking finished pieces is beneath me now. I told him I can't do commissions, not even when they specify nothing, not even when they don't give me a date. I'm not a short order cook, I can't work with some idiot looking over my shoulder. Then what are you going to do? he said. I'll change my name, I said. I almost said again.

*March 10--*I'm at Vivian and Arnie's house on the Cape, hiding out till this thing blows over. In a couple of weeks everyone will have forgotten me, I'll be able to walk the streets unrecognized.

For now I walk along the beach, deserted except for one woman who lives four houses down. She is tall and slim with long black hair. She wears jeans rolled halfway up her calves and flannel shirts and comes out onto the beach barefoot even though it's cold. She looks a young thirty-five. I can't get out of my mind that she's Liz. Somehow I'm looking to recognize her, just as she might recognize me on the cover of *Time*. The same olive skin, rich dark eyes, impish smile.

Now I'm imagining, I've never seen her smile. I see her always from a distance, careful not to get too close. I don't want to know definitely she's not Liz. I don't want to discover, perhaps, that she doesn't have an impish smile. I want to be free to make what I want of her. I

don't want to be hemmed in by observation. And yet I enjoy looking at her, watching her walk barefoot along the wash of the waves, hands in pockets, staring thoughtfully at the sand, then stop and look up, absorbed in the horizon. She is a page on which I write.

*March 12*--I couldn't stand it. I had to see her up close. As she walked down the beach I followed, knowing she would turn around and then we would pass each other.

I followed at a great distance. She was less than an inch high, hardly distinguishable, I couldn't tell when she turned, except that slowly she began to grow. I became panicky, my head filled with blood. It was a ghost coming towards me, and all I had buried stood suddenly on end with fright. I felt my brain thud clumsily with each beat of my heart.

As she drew closer and closer I could see she was smiling warmly, she was looking at me, although I was merely throwing quick glances at her. She was not wearing a wedding ring. She was a trifle hippy. Her long black hair had a few streaks of grey. Yes, the dimples were still there, they hadn't changed. Tiny parentheses setting off her lips. Her eyes were dark dancing. Then it was Liz! It was! But maybe not. Was the face too full? The eyes too spread?

I nodded numbly as she passed. Had she recognized me? Had she seen me shudder? Oh, Liz! Could it be Liz?

*March 13*--I just came by Liz's house. The lights were on in the kitchen and I went behind the house to look in. She was sitting at the table cradling a mug of something hot in her hands. Then, as if aware that something awaited her in the darkness, she came to the window, leaned her forehead against it, and stared wistfully out.

I watched her from shadows. She was lovely, old suddenly, tired, her face lined. What was she looking for? What remembering? I watched her full of longing. No work of art more beautiful. I realized that I didn't want to meet her. She has nothing to do with me, I've been Gregor Sampo for over twenty-five years. I just want to watch her, maybe even watch over her. As though the window were a movie screen upon which I could view her life.

To find out whether she was Liz would be simple. Just, Hi! We're the only two people living on this beach, why don't we introduce ourselves? And then I'd know. But what would I do with her if she wasn't Liz? Or worse, if she was?

*March 14*--Liz has a visitor. She drove up in an old black Mustang at around two. A young woman, eighteen, no more than twenty. Maybe a daughter, although there's no resemblance between the two. This one has short blonde hair, large pale blue eyes, is well-built in the sort of chubby, asexual, Middle American way. Sturdy.

They walk together on the beach arm in arm, then huddle in a single blanket and talk. The young one does most of the talking. Liz listens and stares at the sea.

There's a certain pensiveness in those who have suffered acute pain, who have longed to dissolve into the horizon. We see beauty and death in everything, we live on a bare stage and dance to silence. The chatter of the blonde is, I'm sure, an obbligate over a profound stillness. No matter that we have cluttered up our lives. Somewhere we still huddle in a bare cellar, naked, shivering, waiting for the final blow. None of us need worry about significance. For us it is significant enough to have survived. And so, I imagine, my Liz listens to the young one's plaint, and remembers, and stares at the sea.

*March 15*--The two of them went into town, perhaps to dinner and a movie. It's been raining all day. I wonder who the little cornhusker is, how she has become involved in my Liz's life. Not a daughter. Maybe the daughter of a former husband? Of a friend?

The name on the house is Jessup. My Liz doesn't look like a Jessup. Maybe she's using the house and the cornhusker is a Jessup. The cornhusker looks like a Jessup.

I'm tempted to break in and find out. They won't be home for hours. It's possible they've left the door unlocked. People do that here. This obsession has got hold of me and won't let go. Maybe if I find out she's not Liz I can be free of her. Or go for a screw. It's time the bitch stopped scribbling on my mind. But of course I'll do nothing, frozen here between the urge and the scruple until they return.

*March 16*--Today the sun's out and the two of them are back on the beach. The blonde is still talking. I have the impression she's been chattering for two straight days. Liz will probably be glad to be rid of her.

When is she leaving? For that matter, when is Liz leaving? When she vanishes, I lose her forever. I don't want that. But then, should I speak to her? What would I say? Are you Elizabeth? Yes, you must be George. Haven't seen you for a while, how've you been? Just fine. And you? OK. Did you see me last week on the cover of *Time*? No, I don't read *Time*. Oh. And how's Mom? Mom is dead, George. I'm sorry. She drowned last June.

*March 18*--The cornhusker finally left. She drove off a little after eleven. My Liz is now on the beach in the drizzle, wearing a bright yellow rain jacket with a hood. As a concession to the rain she's wearing hiking boots and walking on the soft sand just above the seawash. She seems preoccupied, she stares down at the sand. Probably panting with relief, settling back into privacy as a cat turns round and round on a soft blanket.

Certainly I won't disturb her. All I want to do is watch. We shared our lives only ten years, that's less than a quarter of my life. But is it true that if she's my flesh and blood time doesn't matter? The ten years I lived with her are like a hundred years in effect, the twenty-five years of Gregor Sampo are like so many days. And Liz? How is it with you? Do you remember me? Do you dream of me at night?

*March 19*--My last day here. Tomorrow morning Vivian and Arnie are picking me up and taking me to Providence, where I will catch a train to New York. I'm tempted to speak to her, but what could I say? Liz, it's George. Yes, George. I had this dream about Mom, and ever since I've been haunted by thoughts of the two of you.

Can you forgive me, Liz? Can you forgive me for leaving and never once looking back? I'll tell you why I never looked you up, Liz. Because I was afraid. You see, Liz, I don't really want to know you. I don't want to be close to anyone. I don't know what I would do to someone I couldn't just drop. I'm afraid I might not be able to take it. You know what I mean, Liz? I mean I'm afraid that one fine morning I might just pick up a hammer and smash your face.

*March 20*--Back home. Now I can't stop crying. What if it was Liz? It couldn't have been, but what if it was? Won't I ever be able to be with her, or with anyone I love? Will I be afraid all my life? And what about Liz? Is she as twisted, as fearful as I am?

All the healing that Nymbus accomplished seems unraveled, I'm back where I was. I see her face against the window, staring wistfully into shadows, and I refuse to step forth. I will

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never step forth, I know that now. George Sanders is dead and buried, no dreams will resurrect him. Nor does Gregor Sampo exist. And Liz? Who was this Liz? She was, after all, my own creation. I sculpted her out of the body of some other woman, some stranger who lived four doors down. Into strange flesh I poured the soul of my Liz, I gave my ghost a living habitation. A new art form. Life-sculpture.

## CHAPTER 10

## In Which Rachael Forgives Her Parents and Lets Them Go

I first learned that I would never bear children when I was fourteen. I had not yet gotten my period, and my mother took me to a gynecologist for an examination. Before the exam began, the doctor and my mother engaged in whispered conversation at the threshold of the examining room, while I lay on my back, my legs spread wide, my feet in stirrups, bright light focused on my privates. My mother did most of the talking, rapidly, the doctor nodding comprehension.

Before the doctor entered me, I was given a general anesthesia, which is unheard of for an exam such as this one. When I woke up a short time later, I was told that I had a damaged vagina and womb. Damaged ovaries. That was all they would tell me. Damaged. The doctor gave my mother a letter stating to any future husband that the damage to my reproductive system was "not the result of any promiscuous sexual activity on the part of Miss Miller." This was, after all, 1956.

At twelve I had begun to get fat, and this tendency accelerated through my teen years. My mother seemed to lose interest in me. The sessions stopped. Although I had always dreaded them, I found myself missing them. I believed my mother was disappointed in me. I thought of myself as ugly and boring. I stayed in my room as much as I could. When I needed a signature for a report card or a note for school, I went to my father.

When I was finished with the Boston Preparatory School I went to the Bronx High School of Science. It seemed to be a stamp of my normality that I was able to attend a public school. I had friends (all female) and went to movies and parties. I became quite a chatterer whenever anyone was interested enough, or kind enough, to open the gates.

I became interested in physics. I did a project on selective recombination of the colors of the spectrum that won honorable mention at the New York Science Fair. I was a Merit Scholarship finalist and runner-up for the physics prize. I graduated seventh in my class.

My mother didn't come to the graduation. She said she had a client. After the graduation my father took me to Jahn's, an ice cream parlor off Fordham Road where many of my friends and their parents were going. We sat silently in the babble of my classmates, sound bouncing off the red plastic couches and black Formica tabletops. The place was large and crowded, and it took a while to get served. I could tell my father was being polite. This was a duty for him, not a joy. He smiled very pleasantly and kept glancing at his watch. I began to wish he hadn't come either.

I thought: He's very old. He looked more like my grandfather than my father. His neatly trimmed beard was now pure white, as was the thin semi-circle of hair. His small, elfish eyes were embedded in wrinkles, accentuated by his nervous, semi-permanent smile. But more than old, he seemed vulnerable, despite his still wide shoulders and powerful arms. Some insinuation of darkness had entered him, and he seemed afraid.

Most of my friends and their parents had left, and still we sat silently together amid the enormous glass bowls that had recently overflowed with such concoctions as The Fat Man's Paradise and The Kitchen Sink. When we were alone at the table he said:

"Where are you thinking of living when you go to NYU?"

"At home. It's not far."

"I think you should have your own apartment. Near Washington Square. Don't you?"

He smiled brightly, as if in anticipation of conflict.

"I . . . won't it be very expensive?"

"We'll pay for everything, of course."

"But I'm only eighteen."

"Rachael, you're grown up now. Whatever . . . problems you had as a child are over, thanks to Dora. Most college students live away from home."

"Not by themselves. If I could have gotten into a dorm . . ."

"But you couldn't, you live too near. So this is the next best thing. If you want a roommate . . ."

I didn't understand. Was I being kicked out?

"We're not getting rid of you," my father insisted, smiling broadly at the ridiculousness of the idea. "We'll be right nearby, we want you to come to dinner often and see us and talk to us. But a girl your age should have her own place."

I felt myself getting upset. But why? I was living alone now in my tiny, blank-walled room. I rarely saw my parents, even more rarely said anything significant to them. The only change would be that I would have a pleasant apartment.

"What do you think, Rachael?" My father smiled. "Don't you think it would be good for you to be on your own?"

I didn't say anything. What could I say? It was clear they didn't want me. I wondered if my mother had insisted that this little scene take place. Probably that was why she wasn't here.

"We can start looking right away. We have the whole summer. If you want to stay, of course you're welcome to stay. But this is better for you, don't you think? It's time for you to let go. It's hard, but it's time. You're old enough, strong enough. I'm sure you can do it. I have confidence in you."

Something else was vibrating inside of me. I began to quiver. I had no idea what it was. I didn't want to know. I began to move away from it, fearfully, knowing there would be no escape. I knew I should answer my father, but I also knew that I wouldn't. It was impossible. In moments I would be much too far away.

"Rachael, answer me," my father demanded. "Come on, don't go back to this. I'm talking to you. Answer."

I couldn't answer him. I watched him getting annoyed, but it wasn't at me. It was at the heavy-set girl who was sitting opposite him in the booth at Jahn's. Why was he so annoyed at her? She seemed as placid as a cow.

"Come on, Rachael. Answer."

He sounded like an animal trainer coaxing a tiger that had just turned slightly vicious.

"You know this is totally unfair of you. You've played on this for years, this is the way you've always manipulated us, and you've agreed it's unfair. Rachael! Come on back now! Talk to me!"

I had no intention of being unfair to anyone. If he wanted me to leave the apartment, of course I would leave. But I couldn't say anything to him. He was much too far away. I could barely see or hear him. He was talking to a heavy-set girl in a booth at Jahn's. Both were very far away. Even if I screamed they wouldn't hear me.

"Rachael, don't do this! We're not abandoning you, believe me. We're going to keep on supporting you. You know that when Dora dies most of what she has is yours. What do you want from us? Dora took you in, she made you better, we gave you a place to live. What more do you want from us, Rachael? Why do you punish us like this?"

I would have loved to touch him, to stroke his bald head, to make him feel better. I wanted to tell him that I had no intention of hurting him. Really, I believed he was right. I should move out if they didn't want me. But I couldn't reach him. My voice couldn't reach him.

"Stop it, Rachael! Just stop it! You have no right!" There were no smiles now. The tense mask was off. "She was so good to you, but no matter how much she gave you, you wanted more. No amount of attention was enough. You ate both of us alive. We wanted to give you a home, but you devoured it and us, too. And now we need just a little peace at the end. A restoration of what our lives were before you came and destroyed us with your silence! Just a little peace in a house where we can feel at home. You're old enough now--don't pull this bullshit on me! Not now! Have some pity, Rachael! Please! Speak to me!"

He buried his head in his hands. There was nothing I could do for him. I watched him sorrowfully, wishing I could reach him in some way. But there was no way I could come down. Not now. Not for a while.

When my mother was hospitalized for the last time I learned she had cancer. She had had cancer for four years, had been fighting it, and I never knew. For her earlier hospitalizations they had made excuses, idiotic excuses that I had never questioned. I moved into my new apartment in July, she was hospitalized in November. She remained alive until the following April.

For over four months I went to see her every day. I'm not sure why. Often, she seemed not particularly pleased to see me, especially when she had other visitors, most of whom had seen or heard about me. I received many compliments, some directly, some whispered in hurried goodbyes to my mother. Such a devoted girl. Comes every day. Seems remarkably normal. Your masterpiece, Dora. Things like that.

But my mother was ashamed of me. Ashamed of my fat, of my smell, of my clothes, of the immaturity of my conversation. In the myth that all her visitors believed, I was a challenging case miraculously cured by the wizard of child psychology; in my mother's mind I was a daughter who was only marginally presentable. A bitter disappointment.

So why did I go every day? I was driven. The few times I tried to resist going I was so miserable that I had to leave wherever I was and take a taxi to the hospital. She didn't want me there and I didn't want to be there, but I couldn't be anywhere else. She was, after all, my mother. And she was dying.

My father wasn't nearly as regular as I was. He would come two or three days a week. After visiting hours we would go to dinner. I would come in the late afternoon, he in the evening. At eight we would kiss my mother goodnight and go down to the Village to one of three or four restaurants we frequented. He would then walk me home to my apartment. I invited him up the first few times. He declined. Only once, in early March, did he come up, at his suggestion.

He seemed pleased by the neatness of the place. It seemed almost untouched. I was there only to sleep. Every day from early morning I was either in school or at the library. By late afternoon I was visiting my mother at the hospital, and in the evening I was either with my father or back at the library until eleven.

"Very nice," he said, nodding, smiling his strenuous smile. He held a little plaid fedora with a tiny blue feather on one side. As the apartment was a single room, there was no need to invite him on a tour. He stood with his overcoat on, fiddling nervously with his hat, slightly stooped. I took his hat and coat and invited him to sit down on the fold-out couch. He was my first guest and I felt self-conscious. My mother had never come.

"Would you like some tea?" I asked, sounding ridiculously grown up.

"No," my father said, sitting down on the couch. "I actually came up to say something to you."

"Oh?" My heart paused. What could he not have been able to say at the restaurant?

"I want to apologize for what I said last June. Do you remember? At Jahn's."

I nodded. Of course I remembered. In a way, I was grateful to him for having said it. I had been a child, with no inkling of what my presence might have meant to him or my mother. I had always seen my strangeness as my own affliction, not realizing that of course it had been theirs as well. It was something I had needed to know.

"There's nothing to apologize for," I said, sitting down next to him. "I'm glad you said what you said."

"I was upset about Dora. She went for tests at the hospital on the day of your graduation. But that wasn't your problem. I should have . . . done it better. I should have realized how much the idea of moving would upset you. But it turned out for the best, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"You're not just saying that."

"No. This is a very nice apartment. I'm right near school. I'm managing very well."

"That's good. It shouldn't cause you any emotional problems. It's good for you at your age to be alone. You know how to handle it, don't you? I'm sure you do. You're a very mature girl."

He smiled his support-through-confidence smile.

"I can handle it."

"That's good. You know that Dora is leaving you a good deal of money, don't you?"

"I'd rather not talk about that now."

"It's not good to deny things, Rachael. It's important to confront them. Letting go is a process that begins . . . well, earlier than death. This obsession you have with being there every day, of course you know it's neurotic, don't you? You're aware that Dora would rather you not come that often."

Smile, insisting on agreement.

"Yes."

"It sounds cruel, perhaps, but for your own good you need to start the process of letting go. To look ahead, so that when the end comes you're not at the edge of an emotional cliff, so to speak. You must have a place to go."

"I don't plan to go anywhere."

"Emotionally, I mean. You'll have plenty of money, Rachael, and this apartment. You have your studies. I'm very glad you have a serious interest."

"Yes."

"I'm sure you'll do all right, Rachael. Dora did absolute wonders with you. You're finished, so to speak. What do you think? You can live on your own now, can't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm very proud of you. That's something else I wanted to say. Now tell me you'll be all right here by yourself. Don't just say yes to me. You'll be all right, won't you? You're all grown up now and can live on your own. What do you think, really?"

"I can live on my own."

"You're sure."

"Yes."

"Because if you can't . . . well, I could make arrangements for you . . ."

"I don't need any arrangements."



"I don't think you do. You'll have lots of money, as I said, and you're very mature. I'm glad, very glad for you. How do you feel about it?"

"I can handle it."

"Yes, I'm sure you can. Just as long as you're sure, too."

"I'm sure."

Later that night, after he left, I lay in bed crying softly. He had been like someone who had come to pick up a package. If it hadn't been there he would have manufactured it. There was no way he was going to leave without it.

Why couldn't he have waited until my mother died? What was the rush? Where was he going? We had plenty of time to have this talk. What was going on with him that he needed my assurance now, tonight?

He was a strange man. I felt sorry for him, for my mother, for my past self. But I not only felt sorry for my parents, I loved them. My father had come looking for my forgiveness, and he had left with only a tiny piece of the whole. The rest remained with me in the darkness. It was very beautiful. Perhaps later I would be able to give it to him, perhaps not. But now I was able to savor it with my tears. I cried and cried and felt as though I lay on a rock of truth that would never move. I believed I understood precisely who my parents were and what they had done to me, and I forgave them completely, and I loved them.

## CHAPTER 11

### In Which Rachael Falls in Love and Discovers that She Does Not Exist

The next morning, for the first and only time, I fell in love.

It was unusually warm for early March, with a wan sun and mild humid air that turned Washington Square pastel. After my 11:00 o'clock class, like many others I took a walk in the park. Crowds of students stood among guitarists in the large concrete plaza that looked like a drained wading pool. Under the triumphal arch, a slim boy with long dark hair and a hawk-like face drew charcoal portraits for a dollar apiece. A crowd gathered as he worked rapidly in the soft light.

Seated on a folding stool in front of him was a blue-eyed blonde with the perfect features of a model for a margarine commercial. I pushed up as close as I could to the easel. The artist was working on oaktag.

The likeness was very close to perfection, yet somehow he had caught the suggestion of insipidness that lay just beneath the face. It was not a malicious satire, not even satire at all, just a statement of fact: trapped inside this extraordinarily harmonious and finely drawn body was a very ordinary person, the kind that thought almost exclusively in clichés.

Nearly everything this fact would mean in her life was captured in the rapidly sketched, charcoal-on-oaktag portrait, even a hint of darkness, of patiently waiting age, at the corners of the eyes and mouth. It was a work of genius, tossed off and practically given away, and I stood in awe, watching the quick movements of the master, who looked not a day over fifteen.

In just a few moments I was in love with him. Strange as it may seem, till then I had never felt passion, but suddenly I was weak with the desire to touch him. His body was thin and looked hard, his hawkish face exuded disdain. He seemed at once a child and a man, and I wanted to hold him for both reasons. I knew what was happening to me and was glad, even though I also knew there was no chance of his ever loving me. All I wanted was to love him, that seemed joy enough.

When he finished the portrait, the girl got up and walked around to the other side of the easel, pressing her breasts against his back as she peered unnecessarily over his shoulder. Another student, in my physics class, with long thick black hair and a body poured into tight jeans, pressed her pelvis against his hip. I could see that he was not above enjoying these attentions, not at all, though I gave myself the pleasure of imagining that he held the women in contempt.

He handed the portrait to the blonde, all business, collecting her dollar, then motioned for the next subject to sit on the stool. Off he went, rapidly creating the face, the neck, crude, yet even in rough outline clearly appropriate to the elderly male seated in front of him, catching perfectly the long, downward chin that made the face as delicate as a goblet.

He did portraits from 12 to 2 as I watched, nine in all, then folded his easel, folded the stool, shoved the pieces of oaktag and box of charcoal under his arm, and started towards Sixth Avenue. Three women walked alongside, talking to him about something, anything, as he struggled with the easel under one arm and the oaktag and charcoal pressed against his body with the arm that held the stool. I was amazed that none of them offered to help him, even though it was clear that he was not having an easy time.

I walked rapidly after him, pushing by the women. "Let me carry this for you," I begged, reaching for the easel.

He stopped, turned slowly, and stared at me. Everyone seemed to step back one step, though I'm sure no one moved. He looked at me intently, concentrating on me, as if I were quite worthy of his attention. I noticed that his long black hair was cut ragged, as though he had done it himself with ordinary scissors, and in my mind I seized upon another favor I might offer, if only he would allow me to do this one.

"Thank you," he said finally, handing me the easel. I took it under my arm, then was surprised to see him handing me the stool, which I took in the other hand. He held out the oaktag and charcoal, motioning me to lift my arm, then jammed them both under my armpit, his fingers brushing my breast. I just allowed it to happen, dumbfounded, and in moments we were walking side by side down Waverly towards Sixth, I staggering under the weight of all his things, Sancho Panza to his empty-handed Quixote.

When we reached Sixth Avenue I could no longer manage and had to lean the stool against my leg as I readjusted the oaktag and charcoal.

"Could you take these over to 141 Waverly and wait for me there?" he asked. "I have some shopping to do."

"Sure," I said. "My name is--"

"Later," he said. "Right now I don't give a shit."

And off he went north on Sixth.

I waited twenty minutes in front of 141 Waverly before I began to get genuinely worried. Perhaps I had the address wrong. Maybe he'd been hit by a car or mugged by someone who had seen him collect nine dollars in the park. Or he could be a Transylvanian count (he certainly looked like one) for whom the episode in the park had been just an afternoon's diversion, and he was leaving the refuse with me.

I was beginning to get restive since the time was approaching for me to leave for the hospital when he appeared with some additional oaktag and a new set of charcoal.

"Come on up," he said as he passed me. He opened the outer and inner doors with separate keys and up we went, four flights of narrow, creaking stairs, with him carrying just the new oaktag and charcoal and me carrying the rest. He's a genius, I told myself. He knows it and acts it. It was a serious defect in his character, of course, but forgivable in someone who had such prodigious talent. And if he was willing to allow me into his life, even as a slave, I was ready to accept his terms.

He kept on going when I had stopped after three flights to readjust my load, and entered his apartment as I floundered up the last few steps, the oaktag pinned to my hip. I caught the door with my shoulder and pushed into a bare room, totally bare except for some object in the center covered over with a grey sheet. The windows, nearly floor-to-ceiling, were also bare, and the late afternoon sun submerged the room in liquid gold. Breathing heavily, glowing with sweat, I had to shade my eyes.

"Thank you for your help," he said politely. "I'm Gregor. Gregor Sampo."

"Rachael Miller," I said.

We shook hands.

"Thank you," he said again. "And now I must get back to work. Maybe I'll see you in the park. You can help me carry my stuff again if you like."

"Yes, I would," I answered eagerly. "You're a wonderful artist. Really wonderful. I admire your work so much."

"I have to get back to work," he repeated. "Goodbye."

He opened the door for me.

"Just one thing," I said as I stood in the doorway.

"Yes?"

"I'd like so much for you to do my portrait. I want to see how you see me. I'll pay you, I don't mean as a favor. Maybe next time . . ."

He shook his head emphatically no.

"Oh, my God! Why not?"

"I can't draw you," he told me. "There's nothing to draw."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't exist," he said, closing the door in my face.

I arrived at the hospital still spinning. He was right, there was a blankness in me like a stone, assuring that my spirit would remain submerged. It was that blankness that he couldn't draw, occupying space where in someone else he would find character. Even the insipidness of the blue-eyed blonde was definite. In me the only thing definite was evasion.

Look at how I persisted in calling Dora and Hal my mother and father, even though from the farthest back I could remember they had steadfastly, even brutally refused the position. Look at how I never had a single thought about my real mother and father, nor my childhood, nor anything in my past earlier than my arrival in Hal and Dora's home. Look at how I refused even to dream for fear that I would see something--one thing--true about myself, and would not be able to stand it.

For the first time I felt frustrated by my inability to remember. I tried, tried hard, but there was nothing but blankness. Earlier than my memories of lying in that cramped, blank-walled room on Central Park West there was nothing, nothing. And I had been at least six years old! What had happened to all those years? What had happened to me? Who was I really? Why couldn't I remember?

I arrived at the hospital an hour later than usual. My mother was alone, propped up in bed, reading the *New Yorker*. She was alarmingly thin, a pipe-stem person wrapped in tissue paper, except for her grey eyes, which sat like huge marbles in her shrunken, skull-like face. Her white hair was stringy and dull, so thin that it hung like the few remaining wisps of nylon embedded in the scalp of a discarded doll.

"Hello, Rachael," she said wearily, not looking up from her magazine, not inquiring how I was or why I was late, and for the first time I felt the full idiocy of my obsession with being there every moment the hospital allowed.

"Hello, Dora. How are you feeling?"

"No different."

She continued to read. I sat in the armchair at the foot of the bed and took out my rhetoric text. In the silence between us I read nothing. I could barely think. There were so many things I wanted to say to her that I didn't know what to say.

"Excuse me, Dora, could we talk a little?" I finally managed to come out with. I didn't want to sound upset, but I knew I did. I couldn't keep myself from shaking.

My mother put the magazine down politely, still holding her forefinger in her place, and turned her attention on me. When she was attentive, as I well knew, she missed nothing, and once again I had the familiar certainty that she could see right through my forehead.

"Why didn't you tell me you were sick?" I began. There were many places I could have begun, and this seemed as good as any.

"There was no need for you to know."

"It would have helped me understand--"

"What?" she broke in.

"Your neglect of me."

"I never neglected you, Rachael. You were always ravenous for attention, and I gave you as much as I thought you needed. You and I both know that no amount would have been enough."

"Our sessions stopped."

"Because you no longer needed them."

She was her usual, carefully collected self. She spoke softly and reasonably, with the unhurried clarity of someone who was certain that every word was true.

"Still, if we were mother and daughter, shouldn't I have known?"

"We were never mother and daughter. I made that clear from the beginning. I was honest with you, Rachael. I let you know the limitations of our relationship. You never accepted them."

"Whatever we were! We lived together, didn't we?"

She nodded.

"Didn't I have a right to know what you were going through?"

"Rachael." My mother sighed, finally taking her finger out of the magazine and laying it beside her. "I didn't tell you I was ill because it would not have been good for you to know. That was my professional judgment. Everything I've done to you or for you has been for the same reason. You were very, very ill when you first started coming to me, and I cured you. You're nearly normal now, though of course later in life you'll have to see someone again."

I would have found the conversation unbearably frustrating except for the fact that she was ghastly, a marble-eyed skeleton, with mouth and cheeks shrunken into the underlying pits of her skull. Angry as I was, it seemed inappropriate to be angry. Whatever she was like, she was my mother, and she would soon be gone. There were other things I needed to say to her.

"What I really want to talk about," I said, "is me. Who I am. We've never talked about my real parents."

"Yes?"

"What kind of people were they?"

"I have no idea who they were."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know who your real parents were."

I was stunned. How couldn't she know? Where had my knowledge come from?

"I was never able to find out," she said. She picked up her magazine, as if retreating behind a picket fence.

"The Levys? The auto accident? Was it a lie?"

She looked puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"My parents. Aren't I really Rachael Levy?"

"I have no idea who you really are, other than Rachael Miller. Where did you get the idea you were Rachael Levy?"

I blushed, completely confused. "I . . . don't know," I stammered. "I . . . well, I thought . . . you told me."

"I never spoke to you at all about your past. I didn't think it would be good for you."

"But I don't understand. All my life--"

I couldn't grasp what had happened to me. Where had this story that I had believed all my life come from? Had my father told me? Had I made it up? What?

"Can't you talk to me about it now?"

"I'm very sorry, Rachael. I don't know anything more than you do."

She reopened her magazine, searching for her place.

"Where did you get me?" I said sharply, trying not to cry.

"From Israel," my mother answered, finding her place and again folding the magazine around her forefinger.

"From who in Israel?"

"An orphanage. You were very ill, Rachael. There was no one in Israel who could even begin to handle your case. I worked at the orphanage for a time, and when I returned to New York I took you with me."

"What orphanage?"

My mother shook her head slowly, smiling. "You mustn't go backwards, Rachael. Only forwards. That's your only hope. Do you understand that?"

"No, I don't! I'm nobody this way, Dora! I don't even exist! Please don't--"

"Rachael, trust me. I can't tell you how sick you were or could become again. There's nothing to know anyway, no one at the orphanage knew anything about you either. You couldn't or wouldn't speak a word to anyone until after you got here. Forget your past, Rachael, it's gone. You're Rachael Miller. That's all."

I began to cry, softly, reaching into my pocketbook for tissues. My mother watched me for a while, then resumed her reading. When I stopped, I looked at my mother and said:

"Then I have no mother but you."

She lowered her magazine. "I've never lived my life according to other people's expectations. Not yours, not Hal's, not anyone's. There is a reason why I never had children. I never wanted any."

"Then why did you take me?" I didn't mean to start crying again, but now it was coming hard and I couldn't stop.

"I thought I could cure you. I had a theory about your case, and I was right. I did cure you, Rachael. To be fair to me, you should understand that."

"I don't know, I don't know!" I moaned. I was in such pain I hardly knew which way I was turned. Her calm, quiet words were like hot wires twisted around my body and pulled tight.

"What am I to you?" I finally asked. "How do you feel about me?"

My mother sat expressionless, considering her answer.

"You're a disappointment," she finally said. "You want me to be honest with you, don't you? I would never say this to you otherwise. You were an extraordinarily beautiful child, and very bright, but very, very demanding. Hal and I found your demands . . . overwhelming, I guess. You were ravenous for attention. It got worse and worse. You ate up our lives. And then, for some reason, when you reached puberty you became fat and very dull. I began to find you distasteful--"

She stopped, watching me. I felt the urge to float far away, to become so distant that her voice would become like the buzzing of a wasp against a screen. My eyes began to cloud over, and I started to leave the pudgy victim in the armchair being tortured by the skeleton propped up facing her on the bed.

But there was one more thing I wanted to say to her, and I fought my way back to say it. What effect it would have on her I had no idea, nor did it matter, since I intended to say it regardless. I would lay it in front of her for whatever she wanted to do with it.

"I love you, Dora," I said. It sounded forced, unnatural, however much I meant it. I tried to say it quietly, but it rang in the silent room.

She said nothing, groping for her magazine.

"I love you," I repeated.

She looked up at me with her marble eyes. She was grotesque. I saw dislike, I saw hatred in her eyes. I couldn't stand it. I began to shiver. My teeth began to chatter.

"Don't make a claim on me!" she hissed. "You've been doing it all your life! You can't make me what you want me to be, Rachael! I'm me! I'm not your mother! Do you understand? Do you understand?"

She continued to stare at me, shaking. At last I had drawn an emotion from her, and it was fierce, angry hatred. This was what she would leave me with.

I was sobbing, my face all twisted. I should have run out of the room, but I didn't. I just sat there and cried. When I was able to calm down enough to wipe my eyes clear, to stop shaking enough to cast a glance towards my mother, she was reading her magazine, apparently absorbed in the words. With an effort, I picked up my rhetoric, opening it blindly, not intending to break in on her again.

## CHAPTER 12

### In Which Rachael Awakens from a Long Sleep

I am in a bus speeding east from Tel Aviv. My name is Rachael Hudson. Beside me sits my husband Paul. We are holding hands, as we often do.

The land is hot and flat, with low hills in the distance behind haze. By the roadside the orange groves are a green-and-orange blur. The bus sways on the two-lane road. I am afraid, terribly afraid, that I will see something I remember.

Why have I come? I am what most people would call happy. I have an inconceivably considerate husband. I am wealthy. There is nothing I want that I don't have, except children. I have not had an episode in over twenty years, not since before my mother died, and my mental state is perfectly normal. I do not dream.

It is true that Paul begged me and that I did not want to disappoint him. He is as happy as a child here. Nearly everything we see brings tears to his eyes. He believes that for the first time in his life he is home.

For me, however, this is home in a much more immediate way. Paul understands what terrors this place holds for me. Had I objected, we would not have come.

"Are you OK?" he asks for the eighth or ninth time this morning.

I nod, my forehead pressed against the window.

He pats my hand.

I contain a spasm of revulsion.

We should not have come here. Clearly, for the sake of our marriage, we should not have come. Home in Paris our intermittent moments of contact are worn smooth by routine. Here our constant togetherness begins to rub excruciatingly against my nerves.

We have made two stops this morning, and at both I have refused to get off the bus. For three days we have been trooped on and off the bus to stand in front of some building or monument or pile of rubble and be lectured to in three languages. A slide show would be just as revealing. I do not have the energy to go through this anymore.

I feel as though I am speeding towards death, which will finally awaken me with a powerful snap of its jaws. The pain will overwhelm me, I will scream and scream but it will not stop, it will go on and on, forever, it will become me. I am braced for it continuously, until my muscles shiver with the fatigue of being clenched.

"Are you sure?"

I nod again. What he wants to ask is, will you come with the rest of us at the next stop, but he is too polite, too considerate, to say it outright. Instead, typically, he masks his own desire as concern for me.

"What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"Does it seem at all familiar?"

"No."

I say this to shut him up, but in fact the scene does look a tiny bit familiar. The haze has lifted slightly and the hills have begun to recede, to unfold themselves in sensual brown undulations, and it is this that has begun to quicken my heart.

The bus swirls tightly around one loop of a cloverleaf and merges onto a four-lane highway. We have already seen the site of an early settlement and a horticultural institute. Next,



the tour guide reminds us, we will be stopping at the old British fortress of Latrun, the scene of a number of battles during the War of Independence. The name, too, sounds familiar, but not familiar enough to be recognized as memory.

"It sounds interesting, doesn't it?"

I nod against the window.

"Think of it! It commands the road to Jerusalem! I wonder what it looks like."

I do not think of it. I do not think of anything at all. If I think I will become angry at Paul, and I am being difficult enough. He is a dear person. I do not love him, have never loved him, but until now I have liked him very much. From the beginning I found him physically repulsive, just a little, and I thought I wanted to love him enough to wear that inconvenience away. Instead it has grown with the years. We rarely make love. Paul does not complain. I wonder what he thinks, what he feels.

Nor do I believe Paul loves me. He loves my presence, which is something different. He is terrified of losing me, of being alone. We are two very frightened people, lying side by side in silence. For many years this was precisely what I wanted, but now I do not think I can stand it anymore.

Paul is a rotund little man with thick spectacles and a rapidly thinning crescent of brown hair. He has large, soft brown eyes, a large fleshy nose, large lips, a double chin. There is a mismatch in size between his head and his dapper little body.

He is a nervous person, his right foot tapping, his hand patting mine, twisting and fidgeting in his seat. Very bright, brilliant in his field, which is tax law. A generous person, anxious to please, terrified of giving offense. Scrupulously honest with everyone but himself.

Of course, I am no beauty either. Like Paul I am submerged in fat. It is the blanket beneath which we sleep. My wide-set eyes are lost in a swollen face. I am slow and dreamy, and most of the time I am exhausted. I prefer to do nothing, to lie in bed holding the door shut against dreams, but out of inertia I lead a life. I let a maid in and out of the apartment. I meet Paul at restaurants for meals. I spend money on clothes, furniture, jewelry, paintings. I do not like my own taste, but others do, or pretend to, and I spend some time decorating the offices and apartments of my husband's clients and colleagues.

We are the kind of couple one would say fits perfectly together because neither would be able to find anyone else. For us it is a choice between each other and utter loneliness. Besides, who but Paul would put up with my perpetual fear?

"You're OK," he asks again, stroking the back of my hand.

I nod again.

"Do you feel up to coming along with us this time?"

I shrug my shoulders. We are out of orange groves now and into vegetables, low green rows in black soil. Water cascades in the circular patterns of whirring pumps. There are low hills in the distance nearly hidden in haze.

"This is one you might enjoy."

He is not good at silence. Like a puppy, he finds it difficult to leave people alone.

"Are you trying to recognize things or trying not to recognize them?"

"I'm not trying to do anything."

"You can't just be looking out there and doing nothing."

"I'm looking. That's all."

"And you're afraid, yes?" He strokes the back of my hand sympathetically.

"Yes, I'm afraid."

"Then why look?"

I shrug, still staring out the window. The conversation is an annoying buzz.

"You must want to see something."

I do not answer.

"You must want to know your past."

"My mother believed it would drive me insane."

"You don't agree."

I shrug. How can I know when I have no idea what it is?

"It has to be better to know than not to know."

"Knowing is one thing. Remembering is another."

"You know I don't want you to be hurt in any way." He continues to stroke my hand.

"Yes. I know."

"But I want you to be happy."

"I am happy."

"I want you to be as happy as you can be."

I do not know what to say to that. Actually, being happy has never been of much importance to me. To me it has been much more important to be free of pain.

"I want you to be the happiest person in the world. I want to take away every obstacle to your being happy. You know that, don't you?"

I nod.

"Rachael, look at me."

I turn away from the window.

"I'm sorry I brought you here. I really am."

"Don't be. You wanted to come."

"I can't stand to see you like this."

"Like what?"

"Like someone on an airplane that's about to crash."

"I'm trying, Paul."

"I know. I appreciate it."

That is not, of course, what he wants to hear. He wriggles in his seat, intensely unhappy. It is a burden to have someone's happiness depend so entirely on yours, a burden I am both used to and weary of.

"If you want to stay on the bus this time, I'll stay with you."

I sigh. We have discussed this twice already.

"You're not making things easier for me, Paul. Please."

"I can't stand to go off and have a good time and leave you behind. That's not the way I'm made."

"I know."

"I'd really much rather be with you."

"And I'd much rather you see the things you came here to see."

He shrugs unhappily, still patting my hand. I turn back to the window.

"Were there mountains? Do you remember mountains like these?"

"I don't remember anything."

The bus has crossed a low range of hills and entered a valley, mostly golden, with light brown mountains on the other side. It is a wide valley and the mountains are high and far away, and for a moment my heart leaps with recognition yet I remember nothing.

"Yes, Rachael? What is it?"

"Nothing. The mountains."

"What mountains are those?" Paul calls out to the guide, who is standing facing us at the front of the bus.

"Those are the Judean hills," the guide answers. "Yerushalayim is high up on that ridge." He points but I cannot tell which ridge he is speaking of.

"We'll be at Latrun in a few minutes. From Latrun the road winds into the hills."

"It's very exciting," Paul says.

The guide smiles politely. He is an elderly man, extremely well-built, who seems more self-assured and at ease than any Jew I have ever met. I cannot imagine anyone intimidating him. During the Holocaust he fought as a partisan in the swamps of Byelorussia, then came to Israel to fight in three more wars. Although he must have suffered a good deal in his life he has never for one moment been anyone's victim.

"Is your wife feeling better?" Madame Reshe asks in French from the seat behind. Paul's question to the guide has revived the atmosphere for conversation.

"Yes," Paul answers.

"Perhaps she will feel well enough to join us this time?"

"Perhaps."

"I hope so. It's such a pity to become ill on a trip like this. One plans for years, and then . . ."

"But this was a trip we took on the spur of the moment," Paul says. "Two weeks ago we hadn't the slightest idea we would be here."

"Yes?"

"We don't live that way, it's very uncharacteristic. We don't do impulsive things. But suddenly I had a yearning to come to Israel. It was almost like an inner command to come home. It was as if a timer had been planted in the genes of some ancestor two thousand years ago, and it had been passed on from generation to generation for centuries until finally, two weeks ago, it went off. I can't describe the feeling to you. It was as if someone had laid a hand on my shoulder and said, 'It's time.' That night I asked Rachael if we could go. I knew-- well, there are reasons, and I said that if she didn't want to go, I would give this up, but thankfully--"

He reddens and stops abruptly, realizing how far out he has blundered. It is not his fault, he talks from a terror of silence and cannot stop, not with friends nor with strangers nor even with me.

"So will you make *aliyah*?" Mr. Goldfarb asks in English. He understands French but does not speak it well, and the conversation shifts politely over to his language.

"How can I tell? I've only been here three days. But I'm not thinking about that right now. I only know that I'm here and it's wonderful."

"If I were younger I would do it. A young man like you. I'm an old man, I've got nothing to contribute but money, and I can do that from New York. But if I were younger I'd come and make sure there's a place for Jews in this world."

"Where no one can harm us because we have our own army," Mrs. Weintraub joins in. "Think if we had an army during Hitler, they never would have done what they did to us."

"Never!" Paul agrees.

"Then why don't you make *aliyah*?"

"I'm thinking of it. I'm thinking of it seriously. What do you think, Rachael? Do you think someday you'd like to live here?"

I shrug, still facing the window. I do not want to be drawn into this conversation. Too much is going on inside of me. I know this place! I know it! The wide valley, golden, with the brown mountains humped along the horizon! I cannot yet remember anything, but this place is familiar to me. The shadows of clouds speckling the distant hillsides. The flashes of sunlight on the windows in little villages on the slopes. My God! Where was I, who was I, when I watched this scene?

The bus is speeding along the western side of the valley towards a knob that rises like an island in a golden sea. I know the knob! It is where . . . Still, there is no memory. My heart is pounding now, I feel I am about to scream.

The conversation continues behind me. I hear none of it. Like a diver poised on a cliff I ready myself to plunge into awareness. I know the pain will come, I almost hunger for it, I strain to remember . . .

The bus swings east, away from the knob, and straight ahead, across the valley, there is a monastery surrounded by olive trees and vineyards, intensely cultivated, a bit of serene order seated on the wild slope. In that second I remember everything in a rush, and I scream and scream again. "My God! Stop the bus! You must! Stop now, please! Stop!"

Paul is gripping my arm but I do not feel his fingers. Instead I feel the most unearthly pain. It is in my womb, radiating out like fire, it is a hot poker glowing with heat that has been shoved deep into my vagina and twisted, searing my insides, brutally twisting and turning, searching for my center, in and in and in and in, there is no way to stop it, I cannot stand it and yet it goes on getting worse and worse.

I am screaming, Paul is trying to calm me, his hands are on my face but I cannot feel them. I no longer know what I am screaming, I no longer hear myself. This is what my mother feared for me, this is why she turned my head towards the future and erased my past. I see now, I see, but it is too late. The pain is with me, it will always be with me, it will never go away. "Please, please, please, please stop!" I scream, "Stop! Stop!" but I no longer know whether I'm referring to the bus or to the pain.

And then I feel someone holding me. I am embraced so totally that every fiery inch of me is covered. It is Dalit but I cannot see her, my eyes are covered, my hair is covered, my nose and mouth are covered, I breathe her rather than air. The pain goes on and on, intense, it does not lessen, it grows, and I am held, and Dalit's lovely mouth kisses my cheeks and drinks my tears.

"Oh, my darling, my darling Hatikvah," she sings, "Hatikvah, darling," and I cannot see her. I am in a dense wet forest at dawn, high above my pain. I see it winding like a narrow strand of bloody hair among trees. We are all within Dalit--the forest, the pain, and I floating high above the trees. We are all enveloped by Dalit, even the pain, we are all held within the warmth of her breasts.

"Ah! Dalit!" I cry with happiness. "Dalit! How could I have forgotten you? I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Forgive me, my darling, please! It's so wonderful to be back with you once again!"

No sound comes from my lips. There is a circle of stillness that my voice does not break. The pain rages on and I am screaming for it to stop, for the bus to stop, yet here within this dark inner sky I am loved, and the rapture of this wonder is more exquisite than the pain that tears viciously into my body below.

## CHAPTER 13

## In Which Warren Hill Remembers Meeting Rachael Hudson

As I read Ania's memoirs, all sorts of memories darted away from me like rabbits from under the boots of a wanderer. Ania had lived under many names, one of which, Rachael Hudson, I remembered as belonging to someone I had met years ago in Paris. It seemed inconceivable to me that she was Ania Marmosa. Yet many things which before had seemed totally separate suddenly seemed to fit, as if life itself were a novel written by an expert hand.

I had heard of Rachael Hudson before I met her. She was a plump, wealthy matron who wore tasteful dresses and expensive furs and jewels. She collected the safest, least distinguished decorative art, as if determined to surround herself with the barely audible hum of accomplished mediocrity. She was not stupid: the things she bought were well-crafted and worth the prices she paid. But they were insipid. She bought not only for her own collection but for those of various corporations with which her husband, a tax attorney, was involved. Just the type of woman real artists despise.

I met her at a party at the home of a friend of a friend, the sort of thing I attempt, often without success, to avoid. It was in the same luxury building she lived in, and she came down on special request to round out what was a rather dreary group. My friend quickly got involved with her friend, and off they went into a corner to chatter. I sat down on the sofa next to Rachael Hudson, and she began the conversation.

"I read your book on Thoreau," she told me. "I enjoyed it immensely."

"Thank you."

She sat at the edge of the sofa rather primly, clasping her hands on her lap, half turned towards me, her feet flat on the floor. Her beauty was hidden beneath layers of extra flesh. She wore quiet but heavy makeup, a nicely tailored grey woolen suit, a studiously blank expression. That the universal opinion of this woman would be that she was beautiful would have seemed ludicrous then. And yet as I look back, I see that her beauty had somehow been buried alive and was within her all along, waiting patiently to be disinterred.

"I was touched most by what you said about the sleepers."

"Yes?" I had said many things about that image and was not sure what she was referring to, though of course I was delighted to find someone who had read my book with attention.

"You said that being a sleeper was for some not a choice but a circumstance. And that Thoreau was critical of social circumstances that made it difficult for a sleeper to awaken to the metaphors of truth that abide in every moment of life.

"And you were touched by that."

"Yes."

"Why was that so important to you? I'm not trying to pry, I'm just curious."

"Because for some reason I have become one of Thoreau's sleepers."

"You've become a sleeper? How? In what way?"

"I'm not sure . . ."

Her voice was so abstracted, so quietly smooth, that despite her words it was difficult to tell whether this conversation had any meaning for her. Her face was blank, as though her eyes were staring at something she refused to see.

"Most people who are sleepers have never had the time or energy to awaken," I said.

"Thoreau was using the word sleeper both in the specialized sense of wooden railroad ties, the

planks of wood that lie under the tracks, and in the usual sense of lack of consciousness. Many human sleepers are victims of social injustice, the laborers who built the railroads and industries that continue to run mercilessly over them. But surely that wouldn't describe you. You've had the opportunity to experience the goodness and beauty of life, haven't you?"

"No. I'm afraid I haven't."

"Perhaps you've never fully awakened to it," I suggested.

"I have," she said very definitely. "But I don't want to remember."

"Why not? What happened?"

"I have no idea. But I suspect that the truth of it was neither good nor beautiful."

All this with a kind of surreal quietness. She smiled politely, as if remembering that I could not possibly know what she was talking about.

"I don't understand," I said.

"What I'm saying," she explained, "is that I was very glad to know that Thoreau would have attributed my unfortunate condition to circumstances beyond my control. Before I read your book, I had misread his. I had thought he looked down on people like me. You opened my eyes to a different side of Thoreau, and I thank you for that."

Though I was glad Rachael Hudson had gleaned from my book that Thoreau was not looking down on her, I was definitely not implying that he attributed philistine behavior to circumstances beyond people's control. At the moment, however, I was not interested in setting the record straight. What bothered me was the woman's inaccessibility, as though she had retreated into a cave and rolled a heavy stone across the entrance. I didn't dispute her right to deprive herself of joy; on the other hand, I would have liked very much to be able to say the words that would free her.

She reminded me strikingly of a little girl I had met years earlier in Ulm, soon after the war ended. I have written an extended description of the girl in an essay on post-Holocaust art, and so I won't repeat the whole thing here. But the similarity was so strong that I almost asked Rachael Hudson whether she had been that little girl.

In 1945 I was a lieutenant attached to the Office of the Judge Advocate, War Crimes Division. I was an investigator for war crimes trials in the American zone, the most famous of which was the trial of various officials at Dachau, and in that capacity I traveled to Ulm, where there was an orphanage that sheltered some children who had survived the camp.

The child I am speaking of, however, was not one of those who had been at Dachau. I met her hanging on the banister of the main staircase, about three steps from the bottom. She was an extraordinarily beautiful child, with long dark hair and large brown eyes and the kind of body that precociously suggests grace to come. She couldn't have been more than four. Her face, however, was a total blank, as though, just like Rachael, she was continually staring at something she refused to see. At first I thought she was temporarily bemused, or perhaps in a sulk, but even an offer of candy failed to produce a reaction.

"Don't waste your time," one of the teachers said to me. She was a young German woman who spoke excellent English and, like most Germans at the time, gave me the creeps. "She's mute. She hasn't said a word since she came here three months ago."

"Does she always stare like that?"

"Yes. Unless she's asleep."

I crouched down and looked at her. She avoided my eyes, staring over my shoulder. She was wearing a shapeless brown dress, some castoff uniform, and it was as though her body had also been donated to her soul, and all the things that were hers lay elsewhere.

"Some Russians found her in woods near Lublin," the teacher continued. "Buried in corpses. She hasn't said a word or looked at anyone since she came."

"What language does she speak?"

The teacher shrugged.

"What have you seen?" I murmured to her as she stared past me. "What horrible thing have you seen that has made you determined never to enter the world?"

Of course there was no answer. The girl remained glued to the stairs as I went up and down gathering from older children the horror stories I had come for. Yet more horrible than all those stories was this muteness, the horror that had sealed a soul, perhaps forever, in its own universe, determined never again to emerge into such a world as this.

Perhaps the little girl was Rachael Hudson, perhaps not. But the blankness was the same, the refusal to encounter life.

I don't remember how my conversation with Rachael Hudson ended; I believe some people came over and our words dissolved into pleasantries. When I said goodbye to her at the end of the evening, I pressed her hand warmly and tried to convey to her my--what? Understanding? Sympathy? Pity? I don't know what reached her; she merely smiled her bland, quiet smile. And, along with the little girl, I filed her away in my memory as an image of a soul in permanent hibernation, one who had fled into her cave in the midst of a savage winter storm and now could not believe that the seasons had turned and it was spring outside.

## CHAPTER 14

### In Which Warren Hill Falls in Love: Part 1

One more memory darted from beneath my wanderer's boots as I made my way through Ania's memoirs. The story begins in Ancona, on Italy's Adriatic coast. I had gone there to meet an old man named Shimshon, a former inmate at Dachau. Shimshon claimed that he knew the whereabouts of someone he said was the mistress of Dr. Heinrich Rosen, whom we were prosecuting for performing medical "experiments" on humans.

We sat indoors in a café on the waterfront. The café was dimly lit, empty save for the waiter and ourselves. It was a dank night with heavy sea fog lapping at the shore. We spoke in German, an unpleasant necessity.

"I worked in Rosen's house," he said. "A steward--waiter, actually. Everyone in the house knew about her."

"No one else has said anything. Didn't anyone outside the house know?"

"How could they? He never showed her any affection."

"How did you know?"

"They slept in the same room. What else is there to know? Lots went on in that room, believe me. He liked to watch other men sleep with her. Even better, he liked to watch her frustrate other men. You know what kind of animal he was. Why should it have been different with his sex life?"

"And did she do this willingly?"

Shimshon shrugged, smiled. He had large, uneven yellow teeth that showed unpleasantly between his grizzled chin and white moustache. "I gave you a price for this information."

"First I have to see what it's worth."

"So I give it to you free and then you pay me? What good is that?"

"That's the deal."

He shrugged again. "What can I do? There's not exactly a market."

"Did she do it willingly?"

"What is willingly? She's Jewish. I should have said that. He picked her from the line at Birkenau and brought her with him when he went to Dachau. Very beautiful, you'll see. By the time I came to Rosen's house she was broken. That's what it was. She did whatever he said."

"That included frustrating other men?"

"Yes. These were 'experiments.' Rosen wanted to see how much pain and privation a man could suffer and still be aroused. So she--well, who knows what kinds of things she did. People were killed in that room."

"Killed? How?"

"I don't know. Rosen wanted to see the conditions under which men could still get erections. I don't know the details. I wasn't allowed near the room. I heard about castrations. At least one man was strangled with piano wire. I don't know."

"Who else knows about this?"

"Not many people. Johanna Muller, his housekeeper. Otto Dorf, his bodyguard. Some other trustees."

"Who?"

"Dov Berkowitz. Rina Kaplinsky. I don't remember everyone. They--those two--I remember because they told me other things."



"What other things?"

Shimshon shifted uneasily in his chair. "You don't think of prosecuting her."

"That depends on what she did."

"She only fulfilled requests. That's all I know."

"What requests? What are you talking about?"

"She ended some of Rosen's experiments prematurely."

"You mean she killed people."

"Yes."

"She worked in the lab, then. Who was she?"

"I'll tell you that at the end."

"OK. So who did she kill?"

"I know only two, from the other trustees. She killed Dov Berkowitz's wife. He asked her to. She drew too much blood. It was a 'mistake.' She left scissors next to Rina Kaplinsky's son. Maybe she stabbed him herself, I'm not sure."

"You know that Berkowitz and Kaplinsky are dead, don't you?"

"No, I--when--?"

"As are Muller and Dorf. Now, did you actually see any of these things yourself? Or is this all second hand?"

Shimshon stared at the floor. I felt a little sorry for him, but also angry at the wasted time. He had probably made all this up, hoping to get some little something for it, maybe enough to live on for a couple of more days. Well, he had gotten a free meal out of his lies. He would have to be satisfied with that.

"It's no good, Shimshon. I'm sorry." I got up to go. "Everyone is dead, except you, Rosen, and the mistress, whoever she is."

"You don't even want her name?"

"What good is it? You're the only one who says he had a mistress."

"She's a witness."

"Listen, I don't have to tell you this, but I will. We don't need your information. We have enough to nail the sonofabitch a dozen times. We have people who will testify not only with words but with their twisted bodies. We have written records of his experiments, none of which had anything to do with sex, by the way. We have his own photographs. The only reason I came down here is for the record. We want to know as much as we can know. But for the court we have more than we need."

"I'll give you her name and tell you where she is. Talk to her. For the record. Please, you don't have to give me anything. I want you to know I'm telling the truth."

For nothing, of course, I wanted her name. Having already made the trip down to Ancona, I had nothing to lose but another hour or so. Besides, I wanted to call Shimshon's bluff. So I said: "OK. What's her name?"

"Sylvana. Sylvana Sofit."

"Sylvana Sofit." She had been a lab assistant. So at least he wasn't making up the name.

"And where can I find her?"

"Please." He looked like he was about to cry. "At least enough for another meal."

I put five dollars on the table. He gave a sigh of pleasure.

"You leave the café," he said. "You turn right. Two blocks on the other side of the street is a warehouse. Behind the warehouse is a flight of wooden steps going up to a small apartment on the roof, like a watchman's shed."

"How long ago--"

"Don't worry. Believe me, she's there."

In the fog-shrouded blackness outside the café I could see nothing. I cursed myself for not having brought a flashlight. I groped my way up the two blocks, then crossed the street to the warehouse. Around the back of it I banged into the bottom of the wooden staircase, which took me up to the even greater obscurity of the roof. Wandering around on the roof was a good way to get killed. I flailed the air a few feet in from the staircase, then stopped. I didn't want to lose the staircase. I wasn't interested in spending the rest of the night on the roof.

I turned to leave and somehow banged into the shed. "Aaah!!!" I had skinned my knuckles. The door opened. For a second the roof was flooded with light, then I was pulled in hard and the door closed behind me. Blinking in the light I turned to see a small woman on her knees in front of the door, stuffing a towel into the crack along the floor. She had a massive bun of black hair piled high over her head.

When she finished she stood up and turned towards me. She was a young girl, skinny, wiry, with a fragile face that was mostly dark brown eyes.

"Is Sylvana Sofit here?" I asked in German.

"Ja, ja," she answered in German.

"Can I see her?"

"I'm Sylvana Sofit."

She seemed almost a child, with a child's body and a face I could almost see myself cupping in my hands. An adorable face with deep, curling dimples on either side of the mouth, gracefully swelling cheeks, deep dark liquid shining eyes.

"My name is Warren Hill. I'm from the United States."

"Yes, I know. Please sit down," she said. She led me to a splintered wood table that stood by a gas stove. Down a narrow hallway was an open door, through which I could see a bunk bed with two children asleep on the bottom bunk and an adult on top. A sheet of plywood covered the window.

"You'll have some tea," she said, putting a saucepan of water on the stove.

"Thank you."

"Could we speak some other language? Do you know French?"

I shook my head no.

"Spanish? Greek?" She laughed. "Italian? Hebrew?"

"I'm sorry. I know it must be difficult, but German is the only language we have in common."

"I hope it's not all we have in common." She shrugged her shoulders, an amused smile on her face. "You'll teach me English, though, won't you? I couldn't stand speaking to you in German all the time. I'd come to hate you quickly. I'm very good at languages. Before you know it I'll be saying all sorts of delicious things."

I didn't know how to take her. She was unnerving. Obviously she had expected me. I was suspicious, of course, but also powerfully aroused. The notion that this beautiful child was out to seduce me excited as well as frightened me. To get involved with her was dangerous; to take advantage of her, immoral. And yet I played with the temptation, with ice at my heart.

She sat down opposite me, running her fingers through the massive bun of her hair.

"Where did you learn so many languages?"

She shrugged. "It was no problem. I grew up speaking four. We spoke Ladino at home--that's like medieval Spanish. Then in the street I spoke Greek."

"You come from Greece?"

"Yes. Salonika. I lived there until the Nazis took us away."

"You went to Auschwitz."

"Yes. But I haven't told you about the other two languages."

"OK. Tell me about the other two languages."

"I spoke Hebrew in the synagogue. I was very religious. I read much more than a girl is supposed to. And then French I learned in school."

"And Italian?"

"I learned here. And German . . . you know. So now you'll teach me English. Promise!"

"When you got to Auschwitz--"

"Promise! Please."

"I promise."

She stared at me, smiling, and for a moment she seemed so open, so available, that I found myself shivering. Could it be? Would I make love to her? But I remained frozen, and the moment hung in the ineffectual heat of her smile.

"Wait a minute, will you?" she finally said, just as the tense silence was becoming unbearable. She went into the other room and closed the door. To change? To shower? To tell the others not to come out?

For a long time I sat alone at the heavy wood table, the water steaming from the little saucepan she had put over the flame. A boy of about seven stumbled from the room rubbing his eyes and went down the stairs. There was the sound of shifting furniture. Eventually Sylvana reappeared.

"Ah, the tea!" she exclaimed. "Are you helpless? Why didn't you turn it off? Now get the door, please. The door!"

She pointed to the towel, which had been displaced from the crack underneath the door. I got up and stuffed it in while she refilled the saucepan and put it on the flame. By the time I got to the table she had disappeared again into the back room.

Again the water boiled. This time, afraid of another scolding, I turned it off.

She came out with a middle-aged woman and a young girl, both blinking in the light.

"You'll forgive me, Warren, won't you?" she begged as if we were old friends. "We'll come back later for the tea. Now could we take my friends to the port? They have luggage, and well . . ." She shrugged her helplessness.

I went into the back room and tried to lift the heavy trunk that lay by the bed. I just about got one end off the floor. It felt like it was full of bowling balls. I dragged it into the other room. Sylvana turned out the light.

"Just a second," I said. "I'll never get this downstairs. Let me take some stuff out of it--"

"No, no," Sylvana insisted. "You mustn't open it. We'll all help you, yes? We'll all get it down together."

The four of us grappled with it. We got it somehow through the door. Sylvana was in front and even in the darkness seemed to know the way. Down the stairs she seemed to hold the weight as well as I did. At the bottom was a flatbed truck. The young boy was in the cab with another woman. An old man was at the wheel.

"Put it in the back," he said. "Hurry."

We stood it on end and tried to lift it straight up so that the top could rest on the flat bed. The old man and the boy came to help. We got a corner to touch, then lifted the bottom and slid

the trunk on. I helped Sylvana and the woman and her daughter onto the back. We were all panting.

"You're coming with us, Warren," Sylvana informed me. She patted the spot next to her. "Here. You sit next to me."

"Where are we going?"

"To the port, darling. I told you. We can't possibly get the trunk off without you. Come. Next to me."

I got on next to her and we were off down narrow streets, her body swaying against mine as we jolted on the cobblestones.

"Now you must tell me about yourself," she murmured. "Everything. You aren't married, are you? You're too young. Do you have a sweetheart?"

"No."

"Marvelous! You're shy, yes? Is that why?"

I shrugged.

"Well, darling, now you have me. Isn't it wonderful? Now we can be sweethearts. Do you have twenty dollars? American money?"

This jolted me. I suspected she was selling herself, but not for cold cash.

She giggled. "Not for me, darling. You're so sweet. It's for my friends. I just need to borrow it, I'll give it back in a while. Is it OK?"

"Of course," I said gallantly.

"Good. In a minute we'll stop. You'll get out and give the guards at the gate twenty dollars. Don't worry, there's no danger. It's all arranged."

"But I can't do that! I'm in uniform--"

"Your uniform is perfect, my darling. It's wonderful of you to do this, you know that. Here, we're stopping. Now please, get down and give them the money. I'll pay you back later."

"I can't bribe them like that!" I begged as the truck lurched to a stop. "I don't even know what this is all about. What if--"

"Believe me, honey, there's no danger. It's arranged all the way to the top. The fact that you're an American soldier makes it even better. Please, it's not criminal, believe me."

Desperation came into her voice. "They're waiting, it's no good this way. They'll get scared, they'll do something silly. Then we're all in trouble. You, too, Warren, you're with us. How can you explain that? Just do as I say, sweetheart, and everything will be fine. Please, Warren, it won't work if you keep them waiting much longer!"

Feeling trapped, I got off the truck and walked over to the two Italian guards at the gate to the port. They saw my uniform and saluted with a smile.

"A bad night, yes, lieutenant?" one of them said in English. "Can't see anything."

"Very little," I said. I took out twenty dollars and gave the money to him.

"Your papers?" he asked with a malicious smile.

"I trust they're satisfactory."

"All in order."

He lifted the gate. The truck drove through, then waited for me as I climbed onto the back. Off we went, headlights out, speeding along the piers. The old man knew his way; this was clearly not their first trip.

The truck stopped somewhere in fog. We got out. A huge crate lay on its side.

"Here, darling," Sylvana whispered. "Can you take the cover off?"

The old man produced a crowbar. I started to pry off the cover, then noticed that the crate had passed through customs and was sealed.

"This is crazy!" I whispered. "I can't replace that seal. Tomorrow morning--"

"Sweetheart, tomorrow morning it will be gone. Don't worry."

"But when it's loaded--"

"It won't be loaded. It will be stolen. So you see--"

"Stolen?"

"Yes, Warren, you see it's all arranged. There's no reason to worry, people very high up know all about this. So please, just take off the top."

I pried off the cover, breaking the seal. Inside were cartons of wine.

"On the truck," Sylvana said.

All of us--Sylvana, the old man, the two women and children, and I--began ferrying the wine to the truck. I could just imagine getting caught. What would I say? That I was stealing wine? I had no idea what I was doing or why I was doing it. If someone came by and asked me I would have to say I didn't know. And what court-martial would believe that?

When the crate was empty we all carefully tipped the trunk full of bowling balls off the back of the truck and lugged it into the crate. Then the women and children stepped in.

"Hurry, please!" Sylvana whispered. "The cover!"

"You want me to nail them in?"

"Quickly, please."

The old man produced a hammer. I lined the cover up with the edges of the crate, eased the nails back into their holes, then tapped down the corners.

"A little better, please."

"But I don't want--"

"The cover mustn't come off when the crate is loaded onto the ship."

"I thought the crate is going to be stolen."

"It is, by boat. Don't worry, darling, please. These details shouldn't concern you, it's all been arranged. But you must hurry. The guards at the gate change in ten minutes."

I took off my jacket and hammered through the fabric to deaden the sound. Then the three of us--the old man, Sylvana, and I--got into the cab of the truck and drove out the gate. The guards saluted as we passed.

Sylvana rested her head on my shoulder as we turned up the narrow street to the warehouse. "You were wonderful, darling," she said. She took my hand and squeezed it. Then she cradled it in both her hands and laid it on her waist. I opened my hand and moved it experimentally across her belly.

"Warren?" she said sleepily. "You must teach me English. I can't stand speaking to you in German."

"I'll teach you English."

"It won't take me long to learn. I learn languages quickly."

"You seem to."

She laughed. "And you will be an excellent teacher. You're very intelligent, I can tell. And educated. You've been to university?"

"Yes."

"You see? Now please, darling," she said, kissing me on the cheek as we pulled up to the warehouse. "You'll help Yosef with the wine, won't you? He's an old man, he can't do it by himself."

I turned to Yosef. The grizzled old man gave me a toothless smile.

"I'm very tired, Warren, or I'd help, too. Please forgive me, I must go to sleep. You'll come by tomorrow morning, yes? Around eleven. I owe you twenty dollars and a cup of tea. Now help Yosef and he'll drop you off wherever you like. And I'll see you tomorrow, my love, and then we can spend the whole day together. Now goodnight, sweetheart, and dream of me."

She kissed me on the lips, letting her lips rest there sweetly, moving her head slowly side to side. Then she was gone.

The next morning, of course, there was no Sylvana. The watchman's shed was empty. The bunk beds were stripped, the plywood over the window was gone. Sylvana had disappeared.

## CHAPTER 15

## In Which Warren Hill Falls in Love: Part 2

Three weeks later, my investigations in Italy over, I returned to Frankfurt by train. I was in a hurry to file a report and took a taxi from the station. I got into the back seat and was about to tell the driver where to go when I saw Sylvana sitting next to me.

"Ah, Warren, my darling!" she breathed, kissing me on the lips, a long, passionate kiss with a quick darting tongue. I tried to push her off, but she was unbelievably strong.

"I told the driver you'd be pleased," she whispered vehemently. "Act pleased!"

Well, it wasn't hard for me to act pleased. I kissed her back, enfolding her, moving my hands along her sides, making suggestive moves around her tiny breasts, trading tongues. The taxi moved off, where to I didn't give a damn. If I was going to be used, at least let me get my reward. Sylvana was dangerous; I knew that. But I wanted her more than anything I had ever wanted in my life. Anyway, I was sympathetic to Zionism. I was not against doing a little here or there to help the Jews.

"Warren, darling, I missed you!" she whispered as I slid both hands over her breasts. She wore no bra. "You're such a man, you make me crazy!"

Her hand squeezed my leg at the knee, then traveled up the inside of my thigh. I kissed her eyes, her cheeks. The edges of her massive hair hung in wisps over her forehead. She had a child's face and body with a woman's desire and a prostitute's expertise.

"Where did you go?" I whispered. "Why--"

"I can't talk about that, it's better you don't know. But believe me, I couldn't help it."

Again the long kiss, like a delightful drug, the hands caressing me, the wiry body gyrating against me. Then she broke off.

"We changed our minds, driver," she called out. "You'll forgive us, won't you? Please turn around here. Make a U-turn." And she gave him an address on the other side of town.

"Who's paying the fare?" I half-kidded. In the pit of my stomach I was counting the money I had left.

She wasn't listening. As we turned she had her eyes on the windows, alert as a rabbit peering from its burrow. After a few blocks she settled back.

"We're going to a friend of a friend," she said. "Now listen. It's very simple. I have to pick up a briefcase there, but you see I'm supposed to be in Italy. It's a long story, I can't tell it all to you. But if you would just get out of the taxi and pick it up for me. Yes? Just say you're picking something up for Sylvana, that's all. It's all arranged, there's nothing to worry about. They'll just give it to you."

"What's in the briefcase?"

"It's better you don't know."

"I have to know."

"What for, darling? You're just picking it up for me, it's nothing, it's just holding it for about thirty seconds." She pecked me on the lips. "It's nothing bad, Warren, believe me. I wouldn't do anything bad. I just think it would be better for you not to know."

"I have to know," I repeated.

She sighed. "I have to know, I have to know," she mimicked me. "Am I in love with a broken record?"

I took both sides of her face hard in my hands and stared at her. "Are you in love at all?"

She shrugged, and even in my grip smiled her lovely dimples, her white, white teeth.

I let her go. She kissed me, a long, tender kiss. The taxi stopped in front of a row of clean, well-kept apartment buildings that had somehow escaped the general devastation.

"Number 72," Sylvana said. "Apartment 32."

I didn't move.

"Please, Warren. It's nothing. You're saving me a long walk up the stairs. You're being gallant. That's all."

She was giving me excuses to feed my superiors. I could almost hear myself saying them at my court-martial. They sounded convincing. I would look like a fool, nothing more.

"The taxi," she whispered.

I got out, made the long climb, knocked on the door. An elderly white-haired woman in a bib apron opened and handed me a briefcase. I said nothing, stood there holding it. The old woman smiled at me apologetically and closed the door in my face.

I took the briefcase and started downstairs. It crossed my mind to open it but I didn't. Perhaps Sylvana was right; it was better that I didn't know. I handed it to her in the taxi.

"How wonderful of you, you're such a sweetheart!" she said. And she kissed me on the cheek. "Now we go back to the train station. Yes, driver? The train station."

As we started off she came into my arms, kissing my neck, nibbling my ear, moving her hand lightly over my knee. "Here, here," she whispered, pulling her sweater down off her shoulder. I kissed the bare shoulder just off the neck, and she moaned with pleasure.

"Ah, Warren! You're such a lover! Again, please. Move your tongue on my shoulder. Ah! Yes, like that! Warren, you're so good. You make me crazy, do you know it?"

Another long kiss, then she pulled away.

"Now, Warren, dearest, just one more thing. You don't have to do it if you don't want to. But it would be so helpful to me if you would."

"What's that?" I asked warily.

"You don't sound willing. Never mind then, don't do it."

I took the bait. "Don't do what?"

"It's nothing, I'll get someone else." She moved to the opposite window.

"Really. Tell me what it is. If I can do it--"

"You can do it."

"Then what is it?"

"Will you really do it, dearest?" She was back next to me, holding my hand. "Really? I don't want you to be cynical about me. I would rather you do nothing, OK? I can get someone else. I really can. I don't want you to do these things against your will or . . . just for me. If I ask you to help me, it's because I'm helping others and I can't do it myself."

"Tell me what you want me to do," I begged.

"You're a darling, Warren. And I'm grateful. Believe me, not for this, I know you haven't said yes yet. For what you've already done and for your feelings. I know your feelings, Warren, and I love them. They make me feel something back, and for me that's wonderful. It's like a miracle, darling, I can't tell you--"

And she kissed me, crying. I felt her tears against my cheek. She began to sob against my chest. I didn't know what to do with her. To be used by a delightful, charming child-coquette was one thing, to be assaulted by apparently phony hysterics was another. It was as if I were working with an actress who suddenly, without warning, switched scenes on me. I felt confused, even a little annoyed. Could she really expect me to believe this?



Eventually she broke away and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Now, please, tell me what you want me to do," I said for the fourth or fifth time.

She sighed, having difficulty catching her breath. For just a moment the hope shot through me that she hadn't been acting, not entirely.

"It's very simple, believe me," she said, still wiping her eyes. "You take the briefcase to a restaurant in Rome, I'll tell you where, and you leave it under a table. That's it."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"And how am I supposed to get to Rome? I have a job here, I get orders from my superiors. I can't--"

"Don't worry about that, darling. It's all arranged." She smiled and squeezed my hand.

"Your boss . . . this Colonel Loftis . . . has already decided to send you."

"What? Why?"

"To find me, dearest. It's so simple. I told you I was supposed to be in Italy. He got a tip that I was there."

My God! What a labyrinth! Now I was certain that Rosen had had no mistress, that the whole story had been concocted to get me down to Ancona, that Shimshon had only pretended to be interested in money in exchange for his story. Some Zionist group needed an American officer to run their errands and had chosen me. Beautiful Sylvana, who had worked in Rosen's lab and could therefore plausibly be touted as his mistress, was the bait.

"This can't work forever," I said harshly. "He's not going to believe that I came away without testimony a second time."

"You'll get what you want, darling, I promise. Don't be angry. And your twenty dollars. And your cup of tea. And whatever else you want, dearest, believe me."

We were coming near the station. She kissed me long and ardently, as if to leave no doubt as to what I was being promised in Rome. "You're a dear person," she whispered. "I'm know I'm not being fair to you. Be patient with me, please. What I'm asking is not for me, it's for others. But for me I only beg you to be patient, darling, and to understand."

"Understand what?"

"I'll try to tell you, sweetheart. In Rome."

In Rome, of course, I got no explanation, no testimony, no twenty dollars, no cup of tea, it all being postponed to Bologna, where two unopened boxcars of "milling machinery" were waiting to be shipped to Cyprus. After greasing the way, I flew to Athens to help untangle some problem with a shipment of automobile parts from Czechoslovakia. Soon I had been discharged from the army and was working full-time for the Zionists. I was no longer traveling blind; in fact, I participated in planning several rather hallucinatory schemes myself. I relished the adventure and believed in the cause. I had no regrets about what had happened to me. But the lure was still Sylvana; I still hungered to see her. And she was still teasingly elusive.

I met her fleetingly--in a café in Piraeus, a hotel lobby in Spezia, an apartment in Bari, the watchman's hut in Ancona. She would kiss me, hold my hand, move her hands over my body, whisper suggestively, play the usual coquette. It was delicious, if frustrating. I knew I was a fool, but I wanted whatever I could get. To me she was a half-fantasy, one that beckoned in the marvelous flesh and then, unfortunately, had to bring me to fulfillment in a less lucid form. But she was better than anything I had ever dreamed of before.

One afternoon in Ancona, however, I forced the issue. This was insane, I told myself. Suppose she's just waiting for me to take charge of her, to play the man. It was all a cultural thing, a game, the rules of which I was stupidly ignoring.

As we stood kissing I pulled up her shirt and held her naked breasts. She tried to pull away. I encircled her and lowered my head to kiss her nipples. I was out of my mind with desire, I had no idea what was happening to her. She would want me, too, I knew it, once I broke through the teasing pretense. She was still struggling, though I thought less. I lowered my hand down her belly.

"No, Warren, please!" she begged, pulling my hand away.

"Why not, Sylvana, darling?" (It was the first endearment I had ever given her.) "I love you, I want you so much."

She stopped struggling. I pulled her head against my chest, kissed her hair, moved against her belly, lifted her face to kiss her. It was wet with tears.

"I've waited too long," I told her.

She shook her head no, kept shaking it.

"What's the matter? What are you feeling?"

She kept shaking her head, backing away. She got to the bed and sat down, all crumpled up with pain. I followed her, sat down next to her. I didn't know what to do. The pain seemed awesome, it was as if she were being cut open and rearranged without anesthetic. She gripped herself fiercely, squeezing her shoulders, moaning. Then she started retching violently, but nothing came up.

"Oh, Warren!" she cried out. "Please forgive me. Please. I can't stand it! Please!"

Again she doubled up with retching, collapsing to the floor, still squirming with whatever it was in her belly that wouldn't let go. She was white, in a sweat, moaning, almost growling, as if locked in combat with whatever was inside her. Then she passed out.

I never found out what really happened that afternoon--what combination of fear, horror, disgust, even viral or bacterial infection, indigestion, food poisoning, who knows? caused that violent spasm. But I never again made an advance towards her. And she, too, changed. No longer did she play the coquette. She became tender, almost like a sister, no longer playful or suggestive. To me it was a loss. I missed the former excitement, even frustration, the longing, heightened and sustained by being toyed with, by the eternally unfulfilled promise of ecstasy. Yet I still loved her and, as always, took what I could get.

The end came, inevitably, when it was Sylvana's turn to be nailed into the crate by the dock in Ancona. I wasn't needed that night--there were several young men in the party that was shipping out--but she asked me to come over anyway, about an hour before Yosef and the others were to arrive.

"Warren, I've been very unfair to you," she explained as soon as we had kissed hello in the fraternally affectionate manner we had fallen into. We sat down on the lower bunk of the bed in the back room. Sylvana was pale, trembling. Her hands and knees shivered beyond control.

"I'll miss you," I said.

"Please . . . this isn't easy. I wish we didn't have to speak in German, Warren, I really think that if we could have spoken in English . . . well, it would have been easier. That's all."

"What would have been easier?"

"Everything. Oh, Warren! I want to be fair to you, that's all. I made promises . . ."

"Yes?"

"And you were very patient, very patient, as I asked you to be, dearest, but . . ."

She burst into tears. I took her in my arms, patted her on the back, made some crooning sounds as one does to a distressed child. I had no idea what was the matter, other than that she was upset by our parting.

"Warren, I want to be fair to you, I don't want you to remember me . . . badly, you know?"

"I won't remember you badly."

"Yes, you will, I'm afraid you will, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

Suddenly she grew stiff. She sat back away from me, her face shuddering.

"What's the matter?" I asked, taking her hand. It was tense, like a heavy spring, and she gripped my hand until it hurt. She was white. Wisps of dark hair clung to her forehead.

"Please, Warren," she said tightly, her enormous eyes staring at the bare mattress. "I want you to make love to me."

What happened next is beyond my power to explain. I froze. I believe my heart literally stopped beating, and for a long time I didn't take a breath. Why? I don't know. I can't tell you what thoughts raced through my mind because I stopped thinking as well. All I remember is an image that came into my head, I don't remember exactly when. The image of the bloody stump of a penis with the cut off end bleeding in Sylvana's mouth.

"I shouldn't have stopped you last time," she went on quietly. Since she was still staring at the mattress, she seemed oblivious to what was happening to me. In fact, I believe that both of us were so frozen in our little cubes of fear that neither had any idea what was happening to the other. "I used you so shamelessly. But you must know, Warren, that I intended . . . I really liked you, darling, it wasn't all false. And now . . . please say something, darling! Kiss me, hold me, something!"

I didn't move. At last she looked up. "Warren," she said softly.

"You don't have to pay me," I finally said.

"Don't make it difficult, please, my love."

"I won't think badly of you, believe me."

"You think badly of me now, I can see it."

"I don't think badly of you. I just--"

"I know I'm doing this clumsily, Warren, you have to help me."

"Help you what? I don't know what you want. I mean what *you* want."

"I want to please you, darling, that's all. I want to give you what I've been promising all along."

"You don't have to give me anything. I want that to be clear. I did what I did because I wanted to, not because I expected payment, of any kind. I wanted you, Sylvana, but not as payment."

"Then please, darling, forget I ever said anything about payment. It was my mistake, I don't know how to do these things. Just forget it and make love to me."

"Sylvana," I said, a little more coldly than I intended. "Do you want to make love to me?"

She started crying bitterly, almost like a child over its mother's grave. Uncontrollably, inconsolably. I couldn't figure out what I had done so wrong to provoke such a reaction. I was confused, even annoyed, not so much at her as at the fact that our parting had been ruined.

I held her hand silently as she cried, and then she stopped and we sat for a while. She cast me several glances, not daring to say anything more, and as for me, I had no idea what to say. It was ruined, that's all, and I held my breath until it was over. When the others came we all went

down to the truck, and in the confusion there was no time for a proper goodbye. I kissed Sylvana on the cheek. She gave one of her enormous sighs and said, "Warren, darling, I'm . . . I'm very glad I knew you. Please . . ." And she shook her head, got into the truck, and was gone.

From the moment the truck disappeared, I regretted what I had done. What had seemed reasonable, even necessary, moments before now seemed pig-headed and ridiculous. Why had I insisted on her saying outright that she wanted to make love to me? Why this ungovernable need to make certain that not even a smidgen of obligation or gratitude tainted the purity of her desire? Was my male ego so gigantic? Or was I merely a frightened squirrel scampering up the nearest tree?

Most distressing was the knowledge that I had treated her as less than a whole person, not just in that last hour, but throughout every moment that I knew her. I had enjoyed the myth of the child-sophisticate that she had played for my pleasure, or for whatever other reasons. But at the moment it was about to be played out I turned dishonest.

No wonder she had been confused. It was OK for me to fantasize enjoying her bought-and-paid-for body, but when a real woman called to me I couldn't continue the game. Nor had I the sensitivity or the courage to break through to the reality on the other side of the screen. What I had done was chicken out. At the crucial moment I failed her, I failed myself. It was not a pleasant conclusion to reach.

In the years following I had a disastrous marriage, which lasted a year and a half, and a number of cool affairs, the kind in which no one mentions love or commitment or fidelity and the couple parts good friends, never to see each other again. The only woman I ever loved was Sylvana, and in the sleepless dead of many nights I have gone back to her, back to the bitter moment of my failure to take what was offered me, and to the tortured soul just stumbling into light.

I see her as she glanced timidly at me, fearful of saying another word, the huge dark bun of hair too heavy for the slender neck, the dark eyes filling incredibly the fragile face. Or again at the truck, as she realized that it was over, scarcely believing that once she had found the courage to make love to me, I had not taken her into my arms.

Oh, how I could have been so stupid is unfathomable! And yet I know, cursing myself in the darkness, that my regret is just another costume of my cowardice. For not once did I attempt, during a number of trips to Israel, even so much as to ask after the health and happiness of the flesh-and-blood woman named Sylvana Sofit.

## CHAPTER 16

## In Which Warren Hill Plays Detective and Later Is Confronted by the Real Thing

I was awash in nostalgia and regret. Sylvana and Ania, though a generation apart, seemed evanescences of a single woman, a frail, dark-haired victim, transfixed by the horror of some memory most of us would be incapable even of imagining.

They represented a myth that had haunted me half my life, seductive and dangerous, for on the one hand the mystery makes the woman romantic, calling forth dark dreams which we would otherwise dare not dwell upon. On the other, we are seduced by the temptation to be Christ, to bring salvation to the sufferer through our love, and thus to enjoy the extremity of gratitude and devotion that salvation inspires.

Ania's achievement merely magnified the myth, since it made possession of her more precious, her suffering more acute, her dark, romantic image more alluring. Not that I had any hope of possessing her other than imaginatively. But that was seductive possession enough, as can be seen by how thoroughly she possessed me.

My first order of business was to deal with Gen Sum's letter, which I unhesitatingly steamed open, having already violated his privacy sufficiently to place myself, so to speak, well within the gates. The letter was very short, written in the same exquisite calligraphy I had seen on the hotel register:

*Rachael dearest,*

*Why you have finally called out to me in your anguish only you can know. I will wait one week.*

*Gen*

I pondered the meaning of this as I replaced the letter in its envelope and glued the flap closed. What was most puzzling was the arrival of the letter--and the man--some two years after Ania had disappeared. Was he monumentally slow in responding to such calls for help? Or had she written him recently and omitted to mention that she had changed her address two years earlier?

No matter which way one turned this jewel, its center was cloudy. The ludicrousness of its timing seemed of a piece with the pretentiousness of its prose--I could just as easily have said "pose." There seemed to be a healthy slice of Pooh-Bah in this Gen Sum.

And then he says he will wait one week, prepays at the hotel for two weeks, and disappears after one day. Granted that his disappearance may have been involuntary. But why did he pay for two weeks yet offer to wait only one? Perhaps he thought an offer of two undignified. After all, he'd already waited several years for her finally to call him. But the note, after all, was undated. So why pretend to wait one week when you clearly intend to wait two?

Quite a character, this Gen Sum. I tend to cringe whenever I see the male ego so mercilessly exposed. Like the male organ, it strikes me as ugly and ridiculous just hanging there. Yet some women seem to crave men with large egos, even the most sensitive and intelligent women. However brave and independent their hearts and minds, between their legs lives a slave.

The next morning I dropped the letter off at Lorelei's. Now there was a woman I couldn't imagine anyone's slave. Quite the opposite. I was afraid she was going to eat me alive.

"Come in, come in!" she insisted, taking both my hands and pulling me over towards the bar. On the white Formica top were a cup of black coffee and a half-eaten slice of toast.

She was wearing a long brightly flowered kimono which was entirely open down the front, revealing her bronzed and athletic body sheathed only in beige see-through panties and a loose, sheer, see-through top.

She seated me at the bar and poured me a cup of coffee. "What did you find out?" she asked avidly. "I must know everything. You know, things easily become a passion with me. Do you need money?"

"Pardon?" I said.

"For your research. We can become partners. I'll pay your expenses. What do you say?"

"I'm . . . uh . . . thank you, very much, but I have sufficient funds."

She collapsed on the stool opposite me, giggling uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry, Warren," she finally got out. "It's just the way you said that. 'Sufficient funds.'" And off she went again.

I waited for her to finish.

"People are so much like cartoons," she said. "Me, too. I know how I come across. You're so old-fashioned. Quaint. Where are you from, Warren?"

"Connecticut."

"Where? A small town?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"Hilton."

"Hilton! What a beautiful town! That's right on the New York border, isn't it? Full of old houses. I love it! And your family's been there how many umpteen years?"

"Over three hundred."

"Over three hundred!"

"The town was originally the family farm."

"Originally? I love it! Originally! So you're rich?"

"No, no. We were . . . well off up until about a hundred years ago."

"And then some black sheep--"

"No. No one lost our money for us. There were just too many, and the holdings got smaller and smaller. And New Yorkers came in and developed the town."

"Oh, that's very sad," Lorelei said. She seemed genuinely affected and suddenly, in the harsh sunlight, quite old. "But you're sort of the town historian, I bet. Is that what got you into history?"

I blushed. To be read so easily and so completely is not a pleasure.

"Well?" she prodded.

"Yes."

"Go on. Did you write a history of the town?"

"Yes. It was my doctoral dissertation."

"A tricentennial history?"

I nodded.

"How wonderful! I love reading local histories! Is it still in print?"

"I'll send you a copy."

"No, I want to buy one. And then you must autograph it for me."

"It hasn't been in print for over twenty years."

"Then I'll buy one from you."

"Please allow me to present it to you as a gift."

"Oh, charming! I don't believe you. 'Please allow me . . .' Of course I'll allow you. And now you must tell me what you found at the King Alfred Hotel. Was this person there? Did you speak to him?"

"No. He checked in and then disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean left."

"No. He paid for the room for two weeks, but after he checked in he never returned. His things were still there."

"So he's a missing person. Did you check with the police?"

"No."

"Listen." She put her hand on top of mine and squeezed it. "Let me in on this, OK? I know it's yours, but I'm living in her apartment and I'd like a piece of it. Let me hire a detective, I know a good one, to track down this Gen Sum. And whatever other little things detectives are good at. What do you say?"

"You don't need my permission," I answered stiffly, drawing away.

My first reaction was fear. My own hands were not entirely clean. A stolen manuscript sat glowing in the bottom drawer of my desk. And wouldn't a detective be able to tell that the letter from Gen to Ania had been steamed open?

"What kind of answer is that?" Lorelei asked, her mouth open in a huge, painfully pasted-on smile. "I'm asking nicely. At least you could give me a decent answer. Just say no, that's all."

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just--. All right. I took--. The letter you gave me. I opened it."

Lorelei laughed. She held up the envelope. "Pretty freaking good job," she giggled. "Hey, Warren! You're not embarrassed, are you? I mean, what for?"

I turned my head miserably to the window. Suddenly she got off her stool and came over to me. I felt her breasts against my ear, her fingers raking gently the opposite cheek.

"You're so quaint, I love it!" she crooned. "You do this all the time to dead people, don't you? Go through their private things. Publish all kinds of crap they'd die twice if they thought anyone found out. That's your job, isn't it? Well, so? I'm going to open this letter. You think I'm going to wonder my whole life what's in it? And what kind of detective do you think I'm going to hire? Some freaking professor of criminal justice?"

I pulled far enough away from her so that I could see her face shining down on me like a withered moon between the white hills of her breasts.

"You're obsessed with this thing!" the moon whispered. "I love it! I am, too. Come on, Warren, waddayah say?"

I spent the afternoon tracking down leads in the memoirs. Rachael Hudson, néé Miller, had attended the Boston Preparatory School and the Bronx High School of Science. The Boston Preparatory School was no longer in business, and at Bronx Science there were no available records and no memories.

"Too far back," an assistant principal told me. "We've moved since then, you know." He was a cheerful, bald-headed young man by the name of Art Hopewell. "If there were any reports on her by a school psychologist they would be at the Central Board. But you don't want to go there. You know what they do with records down there? They stack them in unmarked cartons in the basement. Thousands of cartons in absolutely no order. It would take you years to find them. If they're there."

I did, however, pick up one piece of interesting information from him.

"You know, someone else came by asking about Rachael Miller," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes, about two years ago. Said he was a relative and that she had disappeared. Is that true?"

"Is what true?"

"That she disappeared."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Anyway, there was nothing we could do for him, either."

"Do you remember his name, what he looked like?"

The assistant principal screwed up his face elaborately, as if in pain. "I'm sorry. I don't recall his name. He wasn't tall, I remember that. Dark-haired, middle aged. Well built."

It sounded like George Sampson. Or Gen Sum. The first initials were the same and the descriptions were not far off. But if Gen Sum were George Sampson, he would have known that Ania no longer lived on N. Moore Street. So why would he have sent the letter there?

Back to that muddle. All I knew was that I was following in someone's footsteps, and the trail was two years old.

Hopewell was able to show me her picture in the 1960 yearbook. Precisely. A younger version of the Rachael Hudson I had met. Plump, unattractive face. Blank stare. The mouth a perfect non-communicative line. According to the yearbook she had been vice-president of the Physics Club, and the motto in italics under her picture said, "To unveil the mysteries of light!"

I took a picture of the picture in the yearbook, then hurried down to NYU, where I took a picture of a picture in another yearbook, this one from 1964. In this yearbook she was already Rachael Hudson, fatter, blander, even more like the Rachael Hudson I remembered. All semblance of ambition seemed to have been drained out of her by her marriage.

I got a jolt when I showed the yearbook pictures to Peter Sommers.

"They're not her," he said after merely glancing at them. "Not even close."

"Are you sure? Look at them in better light."

We were standing in the hallway. He was dressed in black leather pants and a blue undershirt, the old style with straps over the shoulders. He looked like a tough from the set of *Carmen*.

We went into the gym, where he did me the favor of looking at the photos more carefully.

"Sorry," he finally said. "I can't see any resemblance at all. This is no more Ania than you are."

"She took off a lot a weight," I prompted. "Changed her personality."

"Did she change her eyes? Her nose and mouth? This just ain't her, man. What can I say?"

Upstairs, at the Levkins', I had better luck.

"Yes, of course that's her!" Patty exclaimed. "A little heavier. And God! What a drippy looking person! Now I see what she ran away from."

"But are you sure it's her?"

"Yes, I'm positive. This is marvelous! How did you find out so much about her so quickly? Can you tell me anything?"

"Well . . . Her name was Rachael Miller. Then Rachael Hudson. She grew up on Central Park West, went to Bronx Science--that's this picture--"

"Let me see," Stan said, taking the photos from Patty and staring at them long and lovingly.

"So?" Patty asked. "What do you think? Isn't it her?"

"How am I supposed to know? I never saw her when she was here."



"Don't exaggerate, Stan! You saw her. In the elevator, on the street. Lots of times!"

"Saw who? Who was there to see?"

"Ania. Ania Marmosa. You stared at her ass hard enough when she lived here. That was real enough for you."

"So this is what her face looks like!" Stan mused.

"Oh, he's impossible!" Patty complained to me. "Is it her? Just tell the man, is that Ania Marmosa?"

"I can't tell from the face," Stan said. "I'm not familiar. Now, if you had a closeup shot of her ass . . ."

I went upstairs to Lorelei. She was with a short, compact, muscular young man who I knew was a detective. He was handsome, sunburned, with pale blue eyes in a dark face, a thin black moustache, perfectly cut thick black shiny hair, a sharply pressed blue suit, maroon tie, almost blindingly polished black shoes.

"Brad Fallon," he introduced himself with a crushing handshake. "I take it you're Warren Hill."

"Yes. How did you know?"

He gave me a professional wink.

"I've retained Brad to find Gen Sum," Lorelei said.

"Oh," I said.

"You agreed to it, remember?"

"Yes."

"This morning?"

"Yes."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic, Warren," Brad said. "Are you hiding something?"

Christ! I thought. Is it that obvious?

"What are you hiding, Warren?"

"Nothing. Do you always jump so fast to half-baked conclusions?"

Brad straightened his shoulders. "Just asking," he said. "Why don't you two sit down? We've got a lot to talk about. This will take some time."

He motioned me and Lorelei to two fat white leather chairs which faced a fat white leather sofa. He, however, did not sit down on the sofa, but perched on the arm, adjusting his razor-pressed slacks with expert nonchalance. One polished black shoe swung in the afternoon light with a glare that might temporarily have blinded a sun god.

"Why don't you tell me, Warren, why you want to find this Gen Sum?"

"I--"

Actually, I had no desire to find Gen Sum, now that I had Ania's journal. In fact, I preferred not to find him.

"You've got to level with me, Warren. I can't work if there are things you know that I don't."

"Well, the truth is that I'm not particularly interested in finding Gen Sum."

"But Gen Sum must know something about Ania Marmosa," Lorelei said. "He's the only lead we have."

She leaned forward with an anxious smile, trying hard to prevent a gap from opening up between me and her detective friend. Her breasts hung like fat sausages underneath her loose, low-cut gown, a sheer white satin gown, the sort that looks precisely like a nightgown though

you know it couldn't be because . . . well, because you couldn't possibly imagine that anyone would have the audacity to pass off a nightgown as a gown.

"I told you that I have no objection to your hiring . . . Brad here to find Gen Sum. If you find him, I'll be happy to interview him. But I'm not in the business of finding people."

"I realize that, Warren," Brad said. "That's my business. But I need your cooperation. Now if the missing person is Ania Marmosa--"

"I'm not looking for Ania Marmosa, either."

"Then who are you looking for, Warren?"

"I'm not looking for a person. I'm looking for a personality. As far as I'm concerned, Ania can remain hidden as long as she likes. I want to know who she is, not where she is."

"Aren't you disturbing her privacy even more that way?"

"Perhaps, but--"

"If I find her physical body, her privacy remains intact. We're not interested in shaking her down or inviting TV cameras in. Just in talking to her. But you, Warren, what are you after? What do you plan on doing to her?"

"I just want . . ." I paused. What was I after? I was sitting on her private journal. I knew that once I had checked out the details and interviewed the people who had known her, I had every intention of publishing the results. Not the journal itself, of course, but what I had found out by following its leads. I saw that as the natural function of a scholar--to reveal the human context of a work of art. And yet . . .

"Why are you doing this, Warren?" Brad repeated.

"I'm not sure."

"That's bad, Warren."

"Why?"

"Because when you're not clear on what you want, you tend to make mistakes."

That was true. I thought of Sylvana.

"Let's just say I'm curious, then."

"Let's not just say anything, Warren. Let's get at the truth of what you want to do and why."

"Sometimes the truth is a bit more complicated--"

"The truth is never complicated, Warren. We're just sometimes confused. When we get clear, we see that things either are or they aren't. That's all the truth is."

"Well, maybe I'm not clear."

"There are no maybe's, Warren. Maybe means you don't have the guts to decide. Either you're clear or you're not clear."

"I'm not clear, then."

"Good. Then let's get clear. Why are you doing this, Warren?"

Each time he said my name, it sounded like an accusation. Yes, Your Honor! I can't deny it! My name is Warren! Take me away!

"I have a number of reasons--"

"No you don't, Warren. You have one reason. The rest are all considerations."

"OK, then. I have a number of considerations."

"I'm not interested in the considerations, Warren. Just the reason."

"What makes you so positive there's only one reason?"

"Once you get clear on what the reason is, you'll know."

"You mean I'll believe."

"No. You'll know. It's an experience, Warren. When you're clear, you've got it. And you know."

"Well, I guess I don't have it."

"Don't guess, Warren. That's all part of the same bullshit. You know you don't have it. Why say 'I guess'?"

True enough. There was no need to guess. I didn't have it, that was clear.

"Why are you doing this, Warren?" Brad repeated, as if asking a million times would somehow bully me into finding the answer.

"I want to be famous," I said.

I have no idea where that came from. It just spilled out, like water from a tipped glass.

"Ah!" Brad said. "Very good!"

"I mean I--"

"Don't try to back out, Warren! You've got it. You know you've got it, even though you don't like it. All your life you've been inventing pretty reasons to cover up what you're really after. That's why you rarely get what you want. The pretty reasons get in the way. You've been scared shit all your life that people won't think you're wonderful. So you make up this bullshit ideology to protect your pretty reasons. You make the truth all mysterious and complicated because you're scared shit to face it."

He sat perched on the arm of the sofa staring blankly at me, unblinking, with the pitiless self-possession and indifference one would normally expect from a god.

And yet, I had to admit, there was a lot of truth to what he said. I did want to be famous. My profession was to live off the fame of truly creative people. No one read my books on Thoreau and Rodin because of me. I was a parasite, a sucker of other people's fame. The ultimate instance was Ania: she had created the most magnificent work of art perhaps in the history of human endeavor, and here was I, swimming hard to catch up to her and suck a little of her fame . . .

"So what are you after, Brad?" I asked, hoping perhaps to make a tiny crack in those stony eyes.

"Money," he said simply, jumping off his perch with an athletic little wiggle, straightening out his maroon tie.

"Why?"

"I like living in a two-bedroom condo on the 45th floor. Just for me. I like having about twenty expensive suits hanging in my closet at any given time. I like screwing rich, beautiful women."

"So for that you would help me disturb Ania Marmosa's privacy."

"Yes."

No hesitation. No trace of embarrassment. No "considerations."

"Suppose we have some drinks," Lorelei suggested, getting up herself. It seemed that now that I had been thoroughly humiliated it was time to take a break. I remained seated.

"Don't you feel even a little guilt?"

"What for?"

"Not for a purpose. Just--"

"Listen, Warren. Don't lecture me. You're the one who's hiring me, remember? So you can spread the poor woman's private life out in magazines for everyone to see. So you can gossip about her on TV talk shows."

"I don't plan--"

"To publish what you find out? Bullshit!"

"I mean, to publish it without her permission. If she says no, it's no."

"And what if we can't find her?" Lorelei asked.

"I . . . I don't know. Look, I don't know what I'll do, that's the truth. And I really don't know why I'm after her, no matter what I said just now. Fame is only part of it. I'm also curious, not in a superficial sense. I want to know her. I want to know what kind of person could have done what she did. Whether I publish what I find is a decision I'll make later."

Brad made a face as if he were about to throw up.

"You see if you can find her," I went on. "That's fine with me. You do your thing and let me do mine."

"What is your thing?" Lorelei asked, a little tenderly, I thought.

"His thing?" Brad rasped unpleasantly. "We find her, he screws her. That's his thing."

## CHAPTER 17

## In Which Warren Hill Meets Paul Hudson

What was I looking for? I couldn't deny I had said "fame." The word was there, lying in the gutter for everyone to see. Obviously I wanted it, no matter what I told myself, no matter how things seemed to me.

I felt no desire for fame; I had been intrigued by Ania purely professionally. I wanted to possess her the way an archaeologist is excited by a potentially fabulous find. Is it the desire for fame that grasps his spine--is that the ecstasy that holds him in its icy hands? Certainly the desire for fame is there, but is it foremost? Yes, he feels possessive of his discovery--*his* discovery--but isn't there, more powerful than the desire for fame, the more humbling awe . . .

Oh, my! With such twistings and turnings I occupied an entire flight from New York to Paris, defending myself against the charge that had dropped from my own lips.

Why was it so horrible that I was pursuing Ania because I wanted to gain some notoriety and make a buck out of her celebrity? If that was what it was, then why not simply look it in the face? After all, Rodin and Thoreau were classics, but Ania was headlines. Perhaps I had had enough of being a respected scholar. So what if I was out to be a best-selling journalist? Time to cash in on my one lucky break . . .

But it wasn't true! It couldn't be! If it were, I'd stop what I was doing immediately. There was nothing wrong with enhancing one's own life, but not deliberately at someone else's expense. There had to be some principles, some restraints. We couldn't all be crocodiles basking in the sun.

I wanted to discover who this fabulous person was, to unravel that mystery. I was obsessively curious, the way one is about the solution to a puzzle that refuses relentlessly to give way. Or as a techie is obsessed with a glitch in his computer program. Of course money and fame hung on the horizon, but those were not the sources of my obsession. It was more a divine discontent . . .

Well, off I went again, anxious enough, I suppose, not to believe I was purely self-seeking, since if I had decided I was, I would have had to take the next plane back. I had my principles. However, the real question was whether I would actually adhere to them or merely adjust my perceptions to fit their requirements. If the latter were true, then I'd be better off without them. But how could I know, short of giving up my search for Ania, a course which even in the depths of my mortification I never seriously considered.

I met Paul Hudson at a café on the Champs Elysée, a few doors down from his office. He was seated in a corner just outside the awning looking up towards the Arc de Triomphe, which was barely visible through densely leafed trees. He had already ordered and was nursing a glass of white wine. The waiter was delivering a plate of sizzling escargots.

"Please forgive me," he begged after I had introduced myself. "I wasn't sure when you were coming."

"It's my fault entirely," I assured him. "I'm sorry I'm late. I hope I haven't inconvenienced you."

"Not at all. Please sit down. What would you like? You're my guest, I insist. Please. Jacques, the gentleman would like to order."

He insisted I receive my food before we began to discuss business. And he didn't touch his until I had received mine, although he couldn't resist taking little sips of his wine.

He was a short, rotund man with a ring of neatly clipped black hair semi-encircling a shiny bald head. He wore rimless glasses, a dark blue pin-striped suit, a light blue tie. His face was nearly as blank as his wife's, except that there was a gentleness in his expression, a readiness to break into geniality, a desire to please, that had been absent in the more tightly clamped Rachael.

There was also, when his face was relaxed, when he seemed for a moment to forget the obligation to be attentive to his companion, a quiet melancholy, that of a man who has lost his happiness and who, whenever he can spare a moment, sneaks back deep inside himself to savor his sadness.

"You said it was personal," he began once we both had been served. "May I ask--"

"It has to do with your wife."

He began to shiver violently, put down his wine, took off his glasses to wipe tears from his eyes.

"You must excuse me," he begged after a moment. "It's been many years. I can't . . . How is she? Can you tell me how she is? Is she well? Is she happy?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her."

"Then what--?"

"I have reason to believe she is Ania Marmosa."

He stared at me a moment, as if I had said something utterly unconnected to the conversation.

"I said I think Ania Marmosa is your wife."

"You mean the woman who . . . ?"

I nodded.

"I don't understand."

"Your wife, I believe, is Ania Marmosa. I don't know how else to say it."

"What do you want? Do you want money? Is that what you're saying?"

"Money?"

"Yes, money."

"What for?"

"I don't know what for! How should I know what for? Look, how much do you want?"

"Who said anything about money? I'm talking about your wife!"

He began to sob, right there at the table. People turned to look. He tried to stop, straightened up, but couldn't. His body continued to quiver.

"Your wife is Ania Marmosa," I said again. "Is that so impossible for you to believe?"

He nodded, still unable to speak.

"Why?"

"Because . . ." he finally got out, "she . . . wasn't . . . anything . . ."

"Yes?"

"She wasn't anything . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean like an artist," he said.

"She collected art."

"That's nothing like--"

"And she was a physicist."

"A physicist?"

"That was her degree, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but so long ago!"

"Perhaps all those years she kept her interests to herself."

"She kept most things to herself. But that doesn't mean . . ."

He paused, losing his thought in the high grass of contemplation.

"Listen, how do you know this?" he finally said. "Where did you find this out?"

"I've read her journal."

"Her journal!"

I nodded.

"Her journal? Oh, my God! Can I see it? I don't know if I want to. Isn't it private? Where did you get it, anyway! Does she know you have it? What gives you the right--!"

"I can't tell you where I got it. And as for showing it to you--"

He shut his eyes tight and swept his hands rigidly off to the side of the table.

"I don't want to see it! Not unless she wants me to. She's not dead, after all. We're talking about a live person here."

"I have no intention of showing it to anyone," I assured him. "Not at the moment, anyway. My only interest is in finding Ania Marmosa--your wife--"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to find her?"

Again, that question.

"I'm a student of art. I have a professional interest."

"And you want money."

"What was that?"

"Money. For your search. Why have you come to me?"

"I thought you could help me."

"Of course. I'll do whatever I can. But you must promise me something."

"What's that?"

"That if you find her . . . you won't force her to do anything."

"Believe me, I have no intention--"

"I mean, if she wants to remain pseudonymous and doesn't want anyone--myself included--to know where she is, you must promise to respect her wishes."

"Of course. That's precisely what I mean to do anyway."

"Then promise absolutely."

"Absolutely."

"Good." He gave a little sigh.

I felt so full of good feeling that it was overflowing my eyes. There was nothing crass here; all was delicacy. I felt grateful to Paul Hudson. There was no moral ambiguity about him. It was simple: he respected his wife's rights. And that was that.

"How much will you be wanting?" he asked.

"I'm not looking for money. And . . . I think we have to clear something up."

"What's that?"

"If I don't find her . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'll want to tell the world what I know."

"You mean the journal?"

"Perhaps that. But also what I find out from you and from anyone else who knew her."

"You mean publish it?"

I nodded.

He fell silent, thinking.

"You know?" he said, sitting forward with sudden enthusiasm. "This sounds strange, but I think that if somehow the metamorphosis took place, and my wife is Ania Marmosa, she wouldn't mind. There was something very grand, really flamboyant, in what that woman did. No one could call it shy or retiring--mysterious is the word. And mysteries invite solutions, don't they?"

"Yes, they do," I agreed.

"Yes. I think if you don't find her, I mean after making every effort, every possible effort, then you must tell the world what you know. She's a public figure now, she's made herself so. She can't expect privacy--not without making a request. The request, of course, we would honor--" (I noted the "we.") "--but without the request . . ."

"I'm delighted you see it that way."

"You know, the more I think of it, the less impossible it seems."

"What seems?"

"My wife being Ania. You say the connection is clearly established in the journal?"

"Absolutely."

"Well. My God, that's really something."

He beamed with pride, like the father of the valedictorian.

"I'm so happy for her. I'm so glad she's gotten what she wanted. She was never happy with me, you know."

"Did you know?"

"Yes, I knew. It was not pleasant to know it. I comforted myself with the thought that she would never have been happy anywhere, with anyone. I devoted myself to making her less unhappy than she might otherwise have been. But that was obviously not enough. It was better for both of us that she did what was necessary--"

He choked up again, his eyes beginning to ripple.

"Please go on," I urged. "This is what I came for, what I want from you. I want you to tell me everything you remember. Can you do that?"

He nodded, still unable to speak. Then he grabbed my hand and clasped it, squeezing hard. "God bless you!" he said. "I'm so grateful she's in your hands. You're a decent person, you won't mistreat her. I'm so glad, believe me!"

I clasped his hand in return. The labyrinth of Tribeca melted away like ice in the sun of kindness and decency and common sense.

It was clear to me, as I'm sure it would be immediately clear to anyone, why a woman of the genius of Ania Marmosa had to emerge like a butterfly from her former life as Rachael Hudson. How drab and utterly unremarkable, how stifling life with Paul must have been! His very attentiveness and absolutely flawless niceness must have been like a pillow pressed to her face.

And yet it must have been difficult for her to abandon him, this Adam before the Fall, this sweet, loving, reasonable person. To hurt him was like hurting a child, and she must have known that his dogged sense of loyalty would make absolutely certain that the wound would never heal.

Well, I liked him, this Paul Hudson, better a thousand times than that offended rooster, Gen Sum, or those Nautilus-hardened robber barons of N. Moore Street. He was like an old



stump in the woods--hardly imposing, but firmly rooted and nearly impossible to move. He would always be there; no matter how many slivers you chopped out of him, he would remain. And for that I was grateful.

## CHAPTER 18

### In Which Paul Hudson Tells the Story of His Love for Rachael Miller: Part 1

"I met her in Washington Square Park, early March. It was a warm evening. She was dragging a folding chair with a folded bridge table tucked under one arm and holding an easel with a large sketch pad tucked under the other. She got about five feet and then the sketch pad fell to the ground. As she stooped to retrieve it the bridge table slid down her side and balanced on her foot.

"She was wearing a white dress with ruffled lace, the kind of thing a five-year-old wears to a birthday party, and shiny black pumps. Her face was sweaty, glowing under wispy dark brown hair. I don't know why, I was enchanted. I felt emboldened to approach. It was the first and only time in my life that I approached a strange woman who attracted me."

"What about her attracted you?" I asked.

He paused to consider.

We were in his office, perhaps, or at his home, on the streets of Paris--I don't recall. We spoke, or rather he spoke, more or less continuously for the entire weekend, with a few hours off for exhaustion. I had opened a gate and the ocean poured through. What follows is a selection from this tumbling chaos of memory, a few pages from the many I scribbled down as he talked.

"It was the child's dress, the adult shoes, the sweaty, determined face. Maybe the hopeless disparity between the task she was attempting and her ability to carry it out. She was vulnerable. She needed me. That was what gave me the courage to approach her."

"Did you think she was beautiful?"

Paul hesitated. "No . . . not in a conventional way. If I had thought that . . . well, I wouldn't have gone near her. She was overweight, pudgy is the best description. And her face was inexpressive, though I couldn't see that then. But there was beauty underneath, a private beauty, locked away, so to speak, in the drab cabinet of her physical presence.

"I preferred it that way, because that way it was mine alone. It came out in unguarded moments, when she was daydreaming, musing, lost in some sort of pleasure. Rare moments when her face was relaxed, or when she was asleep."

"But at the moment you first saw her--"

"No, not beautiful. She seemed soft, though, fleshy. I was excited by the thought of her. I asked her if she needed help. No, what I really asked was whether she minded if I helped her. She said of course not, and I took the table and chair and accompanied her westward across Sixth Avenue.

"'You're an artist?' I asked, just to start the conversation. The answer seemed obvious.

"'No,' she said. 'I wish I were.'

"'Then why--?'

"She laughed. 'These aren't mine. I'm doing a friend a favor. He got an inspiration.'

"The 'he' made my stomach sink, but I struggled on.

"'What kind of inspiration?'

"'I don't know. He said he had thought of something and had to try it out. And he asked me if I would watch his things. But then he didn't come back. He's a sidewalk artist. He does charcoal portraits in the park.'

"'You know him well?'

"She stopped and smiled at me. It was a friendly, affectionate smile which saw right through me.

"Not very well. I met him just last week in the park. I asked him to do a portrait of me. He refused.'

"He refused?'

"He believed I was too immature, there was not enough for him to draw. Perhaps he'll draw me later, when I become more completely formulated.'

"He just wanted to see you again,' I suggested.

"She blushed. 'I don't think so. He's a strange person, he says exactly what comes to his mind.'

"Do you think you're immature?'

"Yes, I think so. I've led a pretty sheltered life.'

"You don't look immature to me.'

"She stopped again. We were walking down West 4th towards Sheridan Square and stood for a moment parting the stream of people flowing down the narrow sidewalk.

"Do I look under-formulated to you?' she asked. 'I mean really. He said I didn't exist. I can't see myself. I need another opinion.'

"At that moment, in the pale yellow streetlight, holding her face steady in an anxious, self-conscious pose, she seemed beautiful to me. She had deep, wide-set brown eyes, a lovely, modest nose, thick, shapely, very full lips. Her beauty was merely submerged in a mask of inert flesh.

"I wish I were an artist,' I said. 'I would draw you as I see you, and you would see how beautiful you are.'

"I wish you were, too," she laughed. 'You're very good with words. But you could never be an artist; you're too considerate.'

"We continued walking.

"I don't know that an artist can't be considerate,' I said defensively. Did she want me to be inconsiderate? Like that bohemian friend of hers who left her to drag all his paraphernalia home from the park? Well, then . . . but I knew I didn't have it in me. I had no desire to be inconsiderate. I didn't see the point.

"An artist has to be honest,' she said. 'Sometimes ruthlessly honest. And obsessed. His work is more important than being nice to people. Take Gregor. Even in these stupid portraits he does to make money he's honest. Sometimes I wonder why people pay for them. But he wouldn't care if people didn't pay for them. He'd be honest anyway.'

"You admire him very much?'

"She nodded. 'He's the first person I've ever met who does what he wants, says what he thinks, and always tells the truth.'

"His name is Gregor?' I asked stupidly.

"Gregor Sampo. Would you like to meet him? He lives here.'

"We stopped in front of a red brick townhouse just off Sheridan Square. Inside, the rows of buttons revealed that the once elegant house had been subdivided into rooms. Gregor's was, predictably, on the top floor.

"We arrived at the top of the stairs breathless, two well-padded, pale, sweaty, out-of-shape college students greeted by a dark, lithe, cat-like person, a boy who looked no more than fifteen, the now-famous sculptor Gregor Sampo.

“As soon as I saw him my worries vanished. He would clearly never be interested in my darling . . . well, I didn't even know her name yet. He was far too handsome, far too obviously beyond her, to want the poor girl as anything but a convenient slave. And therefore, even if she were in love with him, it would come to nothing, and I would be in a position to pick up the pieces.

“What are you doing here?’ he called out from the door. ‘I asked you to watch my things, not bring them over.’

“You've been gone two hours. It's dark. I couldn't wait any longer.’

“Well, just a minute. Don't come in. I have to do something first.’

He stepped into his room, closing the door in our faces, then came out again and ushered us in. It was a small room, the only furniture of which was a sleeping bag open on the wood floor. It had, however, large windows, with neither curtains nor shades, filled at the moment by an enormous rising moon. In the center of the room was a piece of sculpture covered by a white sheet. A bare bulb was screwed into the high ceiling.

He took the table and chair from me and put them, along with the easel and sketch pad, into a near-empty closet. Then he sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall, motioning us to join him.

“You two can sit on the sleeping bag if you don't want to get your clothes dirty,’ he said.

I liked the ‘you two,’ and I liked even more helping the girl down onto the sleeping bag. Immediately there was us and him, a trio composed of a duet and a single. And so it remained for the three years we knew each other. I was aware that she would probably have preferred him--in another body, in another life. But as it turned out, she was mine, and she seemed to concede it even then, even before she knew my name.

“You two look all dressed up,’ he continued, again placing us together. ‘Was there some kind of party?’

“We exchanged an embarrassed glance.

“Don't you remember?’ Rachael asked Gregor. ‘I was wearing this when you asked me to watch your things. I told you I was just coming from my mother's birthday party.’

“I don't remember,’ Gregor said. ‘How was the party?’ he asked me.

“I didn't go,’ I answered.

“I wouldn't have gone either,’ he said.

“I mean, I wasn't invited.’

“Lucky you.’

“I mean . . . actually, I don't know this young woman at all. We're strangers. We just met--in the park. I offered to help her--’

“Rachael,’ he said. ‘This young lady's name is Rachael. Rachael Miller.’

“I took her hand. ‘Paul Hudson,’ I said. ‘I'm very pleased to meet you.’

“She shook my hand, smiling, blushing.

“So you're both all dolled up by coincidence,’ Gregor said.

“I was coming from the law library,’ I explained. ‘In the law school--’

“So how old is your mother today?’ Gregor asked Rachael, cutting me off as if I hadn't been speaking. At the time I thought simply that he was rude, which of course is true, though later I began to understand and even admire his refusal to waste the limited time allotted to us all on anything that didn't interest him.

“Sixty-seven,’ Rachael answered.

"Sixty-seven!" I exclaimed, surprised. 'Isn't that rather old? She must have been nearly fifty--'

"She's not my real mother. Both my parents were killed in an automobile accident in Israel when I was a child. The Millers are my step-parents.'

"I'm terribly sorry. I didn't mean to . . . It was stupid of me . . .'

"I would have liked to rip my vocal cords out of my throat. What in God's name was wrong with me? Here I was, desperate to make a good impression, and--

"Can I take you out to dinner?' I asked them both, raising my hand vaguely. 'Please, I would like so much for both of you to be my guests. It's getting late and I'm hungry and I really would like some company while I eat. You'd be doing me a favor.'

"I was hoping that Rachael would accept and Gregor, perhaps sensing the situation, would refuse, but unfortunately the opposite occurred. Gregor accepted eagerly while Rachael said that she had stuffed herself at the party and now needed to go home to rest.

"Perhaps come with us for some coffee or dessert,' I begged. My eyes must have said: Don't leave me with Gregor; I only invited him to be polite, and she agreed to come along. I was so pleased. We went to Toby Wetzel's, a small place on Bank Street that served excellent American food with a home-cooked taste.

"Gregor looked at the menu and then at me. 'You have a lot of money,' he said.

"Yes. Don't worry about the money, please. Order what you want.'

"Rachael was studying me. I became embarrassed, red. I wondered whether she thought I was showing off. I didn't want her to think I was trying to buy her. But somehow I knew she didn't think that. From the very beginning I sensed she was charitable to me in her thoughts, which was why I felt comfortable with her, why I soon needed her so much.

"I looked up at her and she smiled. Her face was inexpressive, yes, but not for me. I think she saw my nervousness, and this made her comfortable. It must not have been often that she was courted by a man who was more anxious for her than she for him.

"You're a law student?' she asked after our food was served. Gregor buried himself in the 12 oz. steak dinner while I had onion soup and salad and Rachael sipped a cup of tea.

"Yes, third year. My father's a tax attorney, and I plan to join him.'

"That's nice. Have you always wanted to be a tax attorney?'

"Yes. You see, it's a family business. My uncles have offices in London and Amsterdam, and I'm supposed to open an office in Paris. After I get my Master's, of course.'

"And you've always wanted this?'

"Yes, I've looked forward to it. It's like building a dynasty, in a way. Most of my cousins will join the business, and then our children . . .' I laughed. 'I know it sounds grandiose, but the idea is to manage taxes world-wide. For multinational corporations. You see, eventually they'll be able to locate anywhere in the world and never leave the family. We'll know precisely what they should do in order to save the most money. The idea originated-- Am I boring you?'

"No, not at all.'

"Are you sure? Well, you see, the idea originated with my father when he first started out in practice and discovered how much money could be made with a knowledge of the quirks in the tax laws of various countries. You know, whether it makes more sense to base the company in Brussels and call the New York office a branch or vice versa. Our family had been in the diamond business for years and had offices in New York and Tel Aviv and Antwerp and Johannesburg, all run by uncles or cousins. So it was only a small step to envisage a similar operation in tax law.'

"That's a very interesting idea.'

"Yes. It was a brilliant inspiration, really, far ahead of its time. Business is becoming extraordinarily multinational, and my family is right in on the ground floor. We represent some of the largest corporations in the world. They pay us millions and we save them much more.

"Do you have any idea what a difference it makes when you move your manufacturing capability, say, from Georgia to Hong Kong, whether you set up a subsidiary or contract out to an independent company? And if an independent company, whether you capitalize its operations by making it a loan or by buying some of its stock? All these decisions have tax implications, and our job is to advise the client on the tax advantages and disadvantages of each option.'

"It sounds very interesting,' she said again.

"I'm afraid I've bored you with all this.'

"No, not at all.'

"Then what is it?'

"It's nothing.'

"No, really.'

"Really, I just-- It's just so strange to me. I wouldn't . . . care whether this or that company paid more or less in taxes.'

"Neither do I.'

"Then why are you going to devote your life to it?'

"I'm not. I'm going to devote my life to my wife and children. This is just a job, a way I know I can make a lot of money. It's an interesting job, yes, and one I'll enjoy. But I'd be a fool to devote my life to it.'

"That sounds so lovely!' she exclaimed. 'So clear and sensible. My family's very different. I never even considered having just a job. In my family only stupid or unfortunate people have jobs. Real people have vocations. To admit that family comes first would be like admitting defeat.'

"Defeat? Why?'

"It would mean you had given up on making an impact on history. It's not that family isn't important, but it's too small an arena, and too selfish as an end in life. The point of working is to make the world better for all people--everywhere, forever.'

"That sounds very noble.'

"It's hypocritical, that's what it is. My parents despise people like you. They'd never admit it, but they do. Don't worry!' she laughed. 'I don't care what they think. But it's amazing how much their hypocrisy has rubbed off on me. Here I am, criticizing you for nothing. And your answer was so nice. You just explained yourself, you didn't take offense.'

"Why should I take offense?'

"Well, here you are laying your life out in front of me, and I'm suggesting it's no good.'

"Maybe there are problems with it.'

"Yes, but why do I feel compelled to criticize? That's what bothers me. What a stupid thing to do! Just what my parents always do. Anyone who isn't like them is inferior.'

"Perhaps you judge them too harshly. I'd really like to meet them. Do you think they wouldn't like me? And then, an act of daring: 'They couldn't be all bad if they raised you.'

"Oh, Jesus Christ!' Gregor exploded, emerging from a chocolate fudge sundae. 'Even a free dinner isn't worth this bullshit! Why can't the two of you just screw? Why do you have to convince yourselves you're such nice people?'

"We both turned red and sat absolutely silent. Gregor stared at us as he wiped fudge off his fingers with his napkin.

"You can leave any time you like,' I finally said. I felt responsible for rescuing Rachael from this assault. 'Why do you feel you have to insult us?'

"I'm doing you a favor, friend,' Gregor said as he got up to go. 'That's in return for dinner. Watch out for bullshit. The two of you are in danger of being buried in it.'

"And he left abruptly, banging into the waiter on the way out."

"And did you see him again after that?"

"Oh, Gregor knew a meal ticket when he saw one. He wasn't going to let me go with one meal. A few days later Rachael and I were walking in the park and he suggested a free portrait as a peace offering. We got to talking as he worked, and before it was finished I had invited us all to dinner again.

"The portrait was striking--not at all flattering, but shrewd and insightful. My face was a blur, the outlines like hot taffy, all except the eyes, which glowed with an intensity I could never decide was avarice or passion. It must now be worth something over \$100,000. I have it hanging in my bedroom, and I look at it as a corrective to my bathroom mirror. To know Gregor was a privilege well worth the money it cost, even though he was abusive and utterly selfish. He's a genius."

"Still, you didn't heed his warning."

"No. How could we? I think we both believed this might be our only chance. We were afraid to risk tampering with our illusions. But even if I had known the future, I don't believe I would have given her up. I had fallen in love with her instantly, and not for a moment in my life, not from that day to this, have I stopped loving her. I knew early on that she was a troubled spirit; I didn't go into our marriage blind. But I've never regretted loving her, only my inability to make her happy."

"You say you discovered she was a troubled spirit early on?" I asked.

"Yes, a few weeks after I met her. I went with her to see her mother in the hospital. She hadn't said that the sixty-seventh birthday party had been in the hospital. Her mother was in Sloan-Kettering dying of cancer.

"She went to the hospital every day for four months. I loved that in her: she was a totally devoted, totally loyal person. I believe that in the final analysis she hated her mother, and her mother treated her abominably every time she went, but she went anyway because it was her mother, and her mother was dying.

"Her father came three evenings a week, and after visiting hours they went out to dinner and then he took her home. This routine continued unbroken the entire time, and Rachael fit me into it.

"I think she brought me so early in our relationship because no one knew how long her mother would remain fully conscious, and she wanted her mother to meet me. Or perhaps she wanted to show her mother that she had a man and would be taken care of. It was a mistake but it was done for good reasons, with a good heart.

"I went on a Wednesday afternoon, a grey dreary April day. Her mother looked much older than sixty-seven, looked beyond age altogether, a white-haired, blue-eyed woman as wasted and brittle as a survivor of the camps. But her spirit remained animated, or perhaps the appearance of a stranger revived her.

"She spent much of the time talking to me, I would almost say flirting, telling me about all her accomplishments, her extraordinary success with almost hopeless patients (naming

names, confidentiality having apparently flown out the window into the cold drumming rain), her theories and articles and papers and influence on younger therapists who were to be the bearers of her immortality.

"I excused her in my mind because she was dying, though I suspected she had been thoroughly taken up with herself all her life. What I found harder to excuse was her mistreatment of Rachael.

"'You'll find she doesn't control herself very well. As you can see, she turned out fat,' she said to me in front of Rachael, a remark unprompted by anything other than parental disappointment and an uncontrolled desire for revenge. 'You should have seen her as a child-- slim and beautiful, extraordinarily beautiful. Who would have believed she would ever look like this?'

"'She looks lovely to me,' I said gallantly, looking over towards Rachael, who had withdrawn behind the bland, totally expressionless mask I came to know so well, a kind of abandonment of the wreckage and pain around her into some quiet, mist-filled forest within.

"'Don't lie,' her mother commanded with the authority of illness and age. 'If you don't care how she looks, that's one thing, but don't deny the obvious. She could be very attractive and she's not, that's all. She's almost nineteen, and you're the first boy she's ever been involved with. Look at the way she dresses, like a child. How can she expect to attract men like that?'

"'She's attracted me,' I pointed out.

"'Well, yes,' she admitted, and then she went on again about Rachael's looks, her clothes, her inability to smile, her sullen unsociability, the whole catalog of ways in which she was unsatisfactory. 'And you know she can't have children,' she concluded.

"I must have turned pale because both Rachael and her mother looked at me alarmed. Then Rachael hid her face in her hands, just like a child, and raced out of the room.

"'My God!' her mother shouted. 'She should have told you. What's the matter with her? When did she want you to find out?'

"I excused myself and went out after Rachael. She was standing at the end of the corridor, her hands still over her eyes, her forehead pressed against the wall, like a child counting slowly to one hundred.

"It was at that moment that I knew I was never going to have children of my own. Never. It was a shocking realization, but I would no more have told Rachael that I was abandoning her than I would have slit her throat. It seemed that cruel, that immoral, that impossible. I was with her for better or worse, it was quite that clear to me.

"I put my hands on her waist. 'Rachael, I love you,' I said. It was the first time I had said it. 'I would rather have you than children.'

"She said nothing, remained pressed against the wall.

"'I know you would have told me,' I went on. 'We've only been seeing each other three weeks. I don't blame you for not telling me, not at all. I shouldn't even be saying these things; it's premature. But I want you to know you're more important to me than children. You're the most important thing that's happened in my life. Please, Rachael. It's all right.'

"I had expected these words to reassure her, to heal the wound at least enough for her to turn around. But she remained stock still, her forehead pressed against the wall. It was as if I weren't there.

"That shook me more than her inability to have children. There was something eerie here, weird, chilling. I kept trying, but what more could I say?



"I love you, darling, please turn around and talk to me. Say you're all right. I don't care about children, I care only about you."

"She wouldn't turn around, wouldn't answer. I made a slight effort to pry her from the wall. She made no resistance. It wasn't a sulk or a flight or a holdout or a bid for attention. It was wholly an abandonment. When I turned her around her eyes were open and she was staring over my shoulder at the opposite wall. 'Rachael,' I called to her, but she wasn't there. 'Rachael, it's all right,' I repeated. But the words weren't registering.

"In her own quiet way she's a very manipulative person," her father explained later, after she had recovered somewhat and we had taken her home. Her father and I went into a bistro on Bleeker Street and sat down over Irish coffee and pastries. 'It's incredible how she changed! As a little girl she was slim and lovely, but then, around puberty she suddenly got fat and dreamy, like this. No sign of it before, believe me, no sign at all. She was a happy, well-adjusted child, except for being an orphan.

"Dora--Mrs. Miller has a theory that she's punishing her parents for dying, for abandoning her, by abandoning us, the symbolic stand-ins. You can see the signs of symbolic death in her behavior. By punishing the symbolic parents she can both get back at her real parents and join them at the same time.

"But I think it's more likely that she's having trouble handling her sexuality. It's not uncommon that at puberty a girl makes herself unattractive so as not to have to face the issue of sex. To her an orgasm is symbolic of the parental death she has tried for so long not to think about. And look how she dresses and behaves! It's all prepubescent stuff, an attempt to get back to a time when she didn't have to face the intimate connection between sexuality and death.

"Look at her manipulations, just like a child! Watch out! she's saying. Treat me extra nice or I'll go off the deep end, and then won't you feel guilty! It's her way of retaining power even though she's made herself so unattractive that she fantasizes the possibility we'll abandon her, almost daring us to abandon her in confirmation of her deepest attitudes towards herself, and now that her mother is dying, again, for the second time--"

"He broke off, suddenly choked up. I had stopped listening somewhere back there, but now I was genuinely moved.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. 'It's just . . . hard to understand . . . how . . .'

"He never finished, and I never prompted him to go on. Instead we just sat on either side of the small, round, dark wood table until the waitress placed the check face down exactly between us and I picked it up.

"Please," he said, reaching for it. 'I understand you're a student.'

"I have plenty of money. My family's very well off.'

"Still," he insisted. But he lowered his hand. I could see he was impressed.

"I paid, and we left the café in silence. I walked him to Sixth Avenue and helped him get a cab, treating him as if he were my own father. Something seemed to have been settled between us. As he got into the cab and I murmured my 'It was nice meeting you,' he clasped my hand and said, 'I'm very glad, very grateful, that you and Rachael . . . She's about to be abandoned again. You seem to care for her very much.'

"I do," I assured him.

"She needs someone. Sometimes I'm afraid she'll withdraw from the world and never come back. Who knows what the first six years of her life were like, what happened to her then? Dora and I have given her all the love we can, but she came to us badly wounded and we haven't been able to heal her. When she gets like this I'm afraid for her future, I'm afraid . . . I'm just

afraid. She's a wonderful person, a beautiful woman, but she's so timid. The slightest thing and she draws back.'

"I know,' I said. 'Please don't worry about her. I'll take care of her.'

"Thank you. Bless you.'

"There were tears in his eyes. I closed the door of the cab and it pulled away.

## CHAPTER 19

## In Which Paul Hudson Tells the Story of His Love for Rachael Miller: Part 2

"Suddenly I was shaking," Paul continued. "I was alone and able to let my emotions go. I could barely make it back to the café. My future was in pieces. I would have no children. I would be married to a woman close to insanity. What was I doing? I had met Rachael only weeks earlier; there was no commitment even spoken of, nothing to hold me to her. No one, not even Rachael, would blame me for pulling back now.

"I ordered a lemonade, quieted myself. I was determined to think it through. I knew what my family would say. I knew the adult thing to do. I should call her the next day and explain that I had thought it over and decided that it just wouldn't work. I wanted children, my own children. It would be better to break it off at this early stage before either of us was too deeply involved.

"Then I imagined her waiting by the phone. In my imagination it was late the following afternoon. She had been crying, fearful all day, and now the sun slanted directly into her window and revealed harshly what she had been avoiding. It was over. Whatever call came now would not be from a solicitous lover. It would be better if the phone didn't ring, never rang again.

"And sitting there in her sorrow she seemed unbearably beautiful. I can't describe it to you. It suddenly seemed hardly to matter whether I called or not. I loved her so completely and intensely that if I had died right there I would have been satisfied that I had experienced everything of life. I began crying, at that little round dark wood table on the sidewalk, I was so unbelievably happy. I loved her. Nothing else mattered, nothing else was important.

"It seemed impossible that moments earlier I had been making calculations, pondering decisions. It was like standing in front of a beautiful painting preoccupied with the question of whether to buy it. What could be more beside the point? My love for Rachael was a gift--how could I even think of turning away from it? I was blessed, I was flooded with light. And then . . ."

"Yes? What then?"

"Then . . . I destroyed it all. I can't believe what happened. I was beside myself, I wanted to call her immediately, right then. But I didn't. It isn't my nature to be impulsive. I called her late the next morning. Considerate as always. We had both composed ourselves by that time and the conversation was ordinary. I asked her how she was. She apologized for her behavior. I told her no apologies were necessary, except perhaps from her mother. She pointed out that the woman was dying. Neither of us said anything about her inability to have children. We avoided the subject entirely."

"You didn't say anything about . . . what you just told me? Your love for her?"

He shook his head no. "You can't imagine how I blame myself. Of course at other times I told her I loved her--appropriate times. But this burst of beauty, this revelation that she was my life--no, I never told her. It was like creating an extraordinary work of art for her eyes alone and then never showing it to her. How many of us do that! We make ourselves beautiful museums with closed doors. She was like that, too, even more. She needed a liberator, and I was a co-conspirator.

"I'll give you another example. When I asked her to marry me. This was about two years later. I had often kissed her and we always held hands while walking together, but that had been the extent of our intimacy. We saw each other nearly every day. Right after her mother died, her

father moved to Florida, and she was alone. Falling into my hands. She never said a word about what she felt for me.

"It was spring, May 20, to be exact. We each had one more year of school, she to her Bachelor's, I to my Master's, and it would have been possible simply to let it wait, but I believed the time was opportune. She was intensely lonely, I could feel it.

"I took her to dinner at Manuel's, an especially expensive place in the '50's off Third Avenue. We went out to eat often, but this was unusually classy, and I suppose she was prepared for something to happen. I waited till the end of the meal, as we lingered over coffee, and then I said, 'I want to marry you.'

"She was silent.

"'I love you and I want to marry you,' I said again. 'Here.'

"I pulled out a diamond ring and put it on the table. That was also all wrong, but I was shivering with excitement and didn't know what else to do. Her silence was maddening, tremendously disappointing. I was afraid I might be turned down.

"'You'll never have to worry about anything again, ever. Believe me. I'll take care of you for the rest of your life.' (What was I? A nursing home?) 'You'll be comfortable. I'll make you happy.'

"I was running out of things to say. Even then it was obvious I was saying all the wrong things, but I couldn't help it, they came out in a stream. They were a substitute for what I wanted to say: I love you more than my life, you're the most beautiful, wonderful thing that ever happened to me, I can't lose you, my life will be nothing if you say no. But I said none of that.

"What she was listening for, or what she heard, I don't know. But eventually she said, 'Yes.' Just that: 'Yes.' And what did I do? I kissed her on the cheek, like a puppy dog, and slipped the big, heavy diamond on her finger. And then we held hands silently, waiting for the check.

"That was our entire marriage, all twenty years of it--holding hands silently, waiting for the check.

"Gregor hit it right on our wedding day. He refused to come to the wedding. Instead we arranged to take him out for breakfast. It had to be early because Rachael's father was flying up from Florida and we had to pick him up at the airport and then go out to Southampton where my family--and the wedding--was. So it was around nine on a Sunday morning, a real sacrifice for Gregor.

"He came into the restaurant with an absolutely lovely hanging thing made of copper--interlocking rings of various sizes on chains of various lengths. Whether that was meant to symbolize anything I don't know. But then he made us a toast with a glass of fresh orange juice. He said, 'May sleeping dogs lie.' He said that the pun was intended, but that was all we could get out of him. Then, as we were leaving the restaurant, he pulled me aside and said, 'What will you do if she ever comes out of her coma?'

"I said, 'What?'

"'I hope for her sake she does and for your sake she doesn't.'

"'Then I also hope she does.'

"'It's possible that you do. Now. Have you screwed her yet?'

"'No, we decided to wait.' Which wasn't true. I hadn't even made the attempt. I looked forward to my coming rite of passage with fear and trembling.

"'Don't screw her too often.' Though why he gave that advice I still haven't figured out. Then he went over to Rachael, put his arm around her shoulder, and said, 'Goodnight, Baby,' kissed her on the cheek, and was gone."

"You said he hit it right. What exactly . . ."

"She was in a coma. I knew it. And I was sincere in hoping she would one day awaken from it, even if it meant losing her. But I was obviously not the Prince Charming calculated to awaken her, and I did nothing toward that end. Which was my failing. Which is why I lost her, deservedly.

"I surrounded her with all the luxuries that would serve as inducements to sleep. She was responsible for nothing. We had no children, we had a housekeeper do the housekeeping, mostly we went out to eat. She spent most of her time shopping for clothes, for furniture, for paintings. She read a great deal and listened to music. Everything went in, nothing came out. What kind of life could that have been?

"One afternoon at dinner I was tempted to bring it up. She used to meet me at my office at around 6:00 and we would go out onto the boulevard and eat at one of our favorite places. I don't know what possessed me that day, why I was depressed or thinking about the quality of my life. It was late spring, maybe ten years into our marriage.

"She was no different than always--quiet, plump, tastefully dressed. She came to my office in a lemon silk dress with a kind of lacy veil over her head, a double strand of pearls around her neck, diamond earrings, the big diamond ring she always wore. She looked like what she was--the young, somewhat unattractive wife of a young, wealthy, unattractive attorney.

"It was one of those moments when you step outside yourself and look at your life with wonder. Is this me, is this happening to me? I loved her intensely, yes, yet at that moment I knew our marriage was all wrong. Whether she sensed something unusual I don't know. It was impossible to tell what she was feeling; she was impenetrable.

"We talked about her day (we rarely talked about mine, since business was simply a way to make money and not part of our marriage), and then, which was not unusual, we fell into what was normally a comfortable silence. But this time I was in a torment to say something like, I love you so much, let's talk about what's wrong. Are you happy with me? Tell me the truth. But I said nothing. Then she said:

"'I've been reading Thoreau again.'

"'Yes? Are you enjoying him?'

"'Yes, very much.'

"'Good,' I said, patting her hand. It was something I did often.

"'He says things that affect me deeply.'

"'I'm glad.'

"She stopped, and once again I was thrown into turmoil, on the brink of leaping off the cliff. Rachael, I love you and want you to be happy. Are you happy? I mean really happy. What can I do to make you happy?

"'There's a passage about sleepers,' she continued.

"'Yes?'

"'You know, the wooden ties that rails rest on.'

"'They're called sleepers?'

"'Yes. Thoreau uses them as a metaphor for people.'

"'I read Thoreau such a long time ago.'

"'People who are not awake to their lives, and who therefore get ridden over by trains.'

"'Yes? What sort of trains?'

"'Society. History. The people they live with, they love. Even people who love them. They've given up and are content to sleep while others roll over them.'

"Yes, Rachael. And you? I was tempted to say. And us? Are we asleep? Can we awaken together, perhaps, and . . . I don't know what. But I said nothing. The duck á l'orange was served flambé.

"Again silence. Again I patted her hand. A nervous habit, something I did at the time hardly noticing it, and now I miss very much. As much as I miss anything. I wanted so much to say something. Even just I love you, you look so lovely today, I'm so happy to be here sitting with you eating duck á l'orange served flambé. But there it was sitting before us, and we fell to it, and the conversation ended."

"What prevented you from saying anything? Didn't you ever--"

"Of course I did. But, you see, only at the appropriate times. On her birthday, on our anniversary, the rare times we made love. I did everything at the appropriate time."

"Why?"

"Because then it was safe. It was expected. At other times I was afraid. It was like standing on a very high diving board and deciding not to jump. What was I afraid of? I've thought about that a lot, and I can't tell you. The simplest answer is that I was afraid of being rejected. Perhaps I would pour out my love, my concern, my passion for her happiness, and I'd get back the cold truth that she didn't give a damn about me. Or worse, I'd get back some insincere protestation or nothing at all.

"But I don't think I had that fear, not with Rachael. I think what I feared was the opposite, real intimacy, facing together the blankness that was our life. There lay the possibility of real devastation. Yes, she might say, I love you, too, and want so much for you to be happy. And for a moment there would be bliss, a high point from which thereafter we would descend.

"To what? No longer would our present comfort suffice. Do you see the danger? What would be expected of me after that moment? What demands would true intimacy make that perhaps I could not fulfill? That's what frightened me, more than the possibility of rejection. I was afraid of creating expectations that I would not be able to satisfy. I couldn't do it. I couldn't open up the door. Not without knowing what might come out.

"So I hushed her. I kept her silent. I patted her hand. I was the worst thing for her. And all I wanted was her happiness. But I was afraid.

"Now, of course, it all seems like madness, but then it was just normal life. I don't want to give you the impression that I was desperate. On the contrary, most of the time I was quite satisfied, complacent. I was reasonably happy and I thought Rachael was as happy as she could be. Perhaps she was."

"Apparently she wasn't."

"That's not the point. What I stole from her was not happiness but life. Perhaps we needed to be less happy, more upset. We needed to leap from the window and lie bloody on the sidewalk, in pain. I was her co-conspirator in sleep. The blankness of her childhood had to haunt her, like blank spaces on a map. She was missing something vital, happiness or no. It was something she had to have, and I did nothing to encourage her to get it. It came accidentally, through me, but--"

"What came accidentally?"

"The stimulus, the thing that awakened her."

"Came through you?"

"Not intentionally. I had always wanted to go to Israel, but she resisted. 'It's too hot,' she would say, or 'It's too dangerous.' Finally, I pushed her into it. This was nineteen years into our marriage. We booked a two-week tour, everything first class. She refused to be excited. When

we landed--I know this sounds trite--I felt like kissing the earth. Some people on our tour did. I was crying. After two thousand years of exile I was finally coming home. Yes, for a two-week luxury tour, it didn't matter. 'Rachael, you lived here!' I begged her. It did no good. She was as determinedly placid as a cow.

"And then, on the third day of the tour, we were traveling by bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. We were approaching the old British fortress at Latrun, the one that overlooks the Jerusalem road before it begins to climb into the mountains. We were to make a stop at Latrun, and the bus had swung off the highway, when suddenly Rachael pointed out the window, whispered, 'Oh, Good God!' and shouted "Stop the bus! Please! Stop the bus! I must get out here! Please!"

"What is it?" I said. 'Rachael, what--?'

"She turned to me with such terror in her face that I thought, this could be the place where her parents were killed, and she must have witnessed it. It was as if it were happening again before her eyes.

"Please, Paul,' she pleaded. 'I must get out here.'

"I went forward and got the driver to stop. We would take a taxi to Jerusalem and meet them at the hotel. But this was the middle of nowhere, the tour guide protested. No taxis here. I gave the tour guide \$30, which he refused, and the driver \$10, which he accepted. Then Rachael and I got off the bus.

"We were, as the tour guide had said, in the middle of nowhere. In front of us, about 15 kilometers distant, was a line of low hills, with a monastery sitting beautifully on the ridge surrounded by slender olive trees. To our left was the squat turret of Latrun, with the tour bus pulling into the parking lot in the distance. All around us was dry, burnt brown tall grass, with a cluster of shade trees on a knob sticking up from the plain. A narrow, rutted tar road led off in that direction, with a rusty blue sign in Hebrew pointing the way.

"Rachael stood on the spot transfixed. For the first time since I knew her light radiated out from her face. She wasn't crying, but her eyes glistened with tears.

"Is this--?' I started to ask, but she impatiently motioned me to be quiet.

"There weren't so many trees,' she said. She started walking up the road that climbed the knob.

"Of course it didn't last. Within two kilometers or so the sun and the unaccustomed exercise did her in. We sat in the shade by the side of the road. She needed water. She felt faint. Not a single car passed by.

"Is this where you were born?' I finally got the courage to ask.

"I don't know where I was born,' she answered, and then she began to cry. It started slowly, and then she began to sob, there in my arms, sitting in the dust in the shade off the road. I said nothing, choking back questions, just let her cry. When she was finished she said she wanted to go back to the hotel.

"We have a new hotel,' I reminded her. 'In Jerusalem.'

"There then,' she said.

"Eventually a car came by going to Ramla, and from there we got a taxi to Jerusalem. Rachael would say nothing about her experience, shutting me out completely. 'It was nothing,' she said. 'I thought I remembered something. I was wrong.'

"Considerate as ever, I said nothing. Gregor would have said bullshit and gotten out of her what he wanted. I hovered over her like a waiter desperate for a larger tip. She had a headache. I plied her with aspirin and ice for her forehead.

“She went to sleep early. The next morning we missed the tour through the old city, the western wall, the mosques on the temple mount--really the high points of our stay. The afternoon of the following day I begged her to come to the Herschel museum and Yad Vashem.

“You go,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to ruin your vacation. I’ll be fine here.’

“I don’t want to go without you. All I’ll be thinking about is how you’re feeling. We’ll both go together or not at all.’

“I don’t want to see Yad Vashem.’

“Why not?’

“It’s unpleasant.’

“But it’s important. Every Jew should see it. Every person.’

“It’s not necessary for me.’

“Please, Rachael!’

“Eventually she agreed to come. But when we got to Yad Vashem she became hysterical in the parking lot and refused to go inside.

“Rachael, Rachael, what’s the matter?’ I tried to hold her but she pushed me away.

“I can’t go in there!’ she insisted. ‘Don’t try to make me, I won’t go!’

“People on the bus shook their heads sympathetically. A survivor, they assumed. She went through the Holocaust in real life. Why put her through it again?

“Of course I won’t try to make you,’ I said. ‘Come, we’ll take a taxi back to the hotel.’

“No. You go. I don’t want you to miss anything more because of me.’

“Rachael, I don’t mind--’

“You want to see this. I can’t. Let me wait for you.’

“Are you sure? Why don’t you take a taxi--’

“I’ll just sit down somewhere. Don’t worry about me. I’ll have something to eat in the cafeteria. I’ll be all right, I promise you.’

“In the end, that’s what she did. I went to the museum of the Holocaust and she went to the cafeteria. I believe it was the first time we had separated like that to do separate things. We had always been together. I know I’m being foolish, but I mark that moment as the beginning of the end of our marriage. I shouldn’t have gone.

“I came back all out of tune with her. When I emerged from Yad Vashem, feeling as though my own bones had been charred, my own flesh turned to ashes, and had wept before the awesome statue of Janusz Korczak and his children, and had wondered at the magnificent love which would lead someone to choose death over even the most forgivable, most justifiable betrayal, I found Rachael quite cheerful in the cafeteria, her brightness, which would normally have made me happy, painful. I’m sure it was only that emerging from darkness I had to blink a few times to adjust to normal light. Still, I have to admit that I found her good mood distasteful.

“This is Chaim,’ she said, introducing me to an old, toothless, bald man wearing a black yarmulke. ‘Fascinating person. He’s from Iraq. Do you know that there were pro-Nazi governments in the Middle East during the Holocaust? That Mein Kampf was translated into Arabic? That the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem was a friend of Hitler and Himmler?’

“The old man looked up and smiled a toothless smile. I smiled back, though I saw nothing to smile about. I couldn’t figure out what had happened to Rachael. She looked bright and active, like a board woman in charge of fund raising. It was as if I had missed one short meeting and had returned to find the name and whole purpose of the organization changed in my absence.



"She remained reasonably cheerful for the balance of the tour. The moment of terror at Latrun, the hysterics at Yad Vashem, were over. When we visited Haifa, and the guide pointed out the University of Haifa main building on top of Mt. Carmel, she said, 'What a monstrosity! The mountain has an erection!' And the whole bus started laughing. It was so unlike her.

"When we returned home she seemed to go back to our normal life. But I could tell everything was different."

"What was different?"

"She was preoccupied. That had never happened before. Withdrawn, yes. But she was not escaping, she was seething, as I sometimes am when I'm forced to put down something urgent and complex on a Friday afternoon. Also she began to be away for more hours during the day, not meeting me for dinner, things like that.

"I never talked to her about it, of course. I never talked to her about anything significant. I could tell our marriage was going to hell, and like a sheep in a holding pen I just gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and waited for the axe to fall.

"One day she tried to say something. It was in this room, right here, late on a Sunday afternoon. I had just emerged from the financial pages of the Herald Tribune.

"Have you noticed I've lost weight?' she said.

"Yes. I'm happy for you.'

"You've always been happy for me, Paul. I'm grateful for that.'

"What's there to be grateful for? You make me happy, too.'

"I'm glad. You're an unusual person, Paul. A fine person. I admire you.'

"I don't understand why we're talking like this. It's Sunday afternoon. I've just finished reading the newspaper.'

"I didn't mean to upset you, darling. I just--'

"I'm not upset. I'm always glad to hear about your feelings for me.'

"I love you, Paul. I'll always love you and be grateful to you.'

"We exchanged a smile, a space ending a paragraph. Time started up again. I felt relief. Another escape from the high diving board. Why hadn't I said, I love you, too? Even that little miserly reply? Nothing! I said nothing! I've just finished reading the newspaper. That was the best I could manage!

"I can't tell you how many times I've prayed to have that moment back. Now I realize she was saying goodbye. It would have done no good at all, I believe, but at least I could have told her what was in my heart. Just that one last time. But I missed my last chance. The next day she disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Well, left. We had arranged to meet at Brouille's, a place we both particularly liked. When I showed up at 6:00 the head waiter handed me a note. It said:

*Dear Paul,*

*I'm terribly sorry. I can't live with you anymore. You've given me twenty years of happiness, for which I'll always be grateful. But I'm a different person now, and I must find my own way. Please forgive me.*

*Love,*

*Rachael*

"Is there something wrong?' the head waiter asked.

"No,' I answered. 'It's nothing. We've just had to . . . I'm terribly sorry. Please forgive me. You'll have to cancel our reservation.'

"I started walking aimlessly. I couldn't face going home. I walked and walked, crying. I couldn't believe it, even though I had known it would happen. Oh, Rachael! I thought. If only I had told you how much I loved you! I had smothered our marriage in fear. With all my love for her, I had never made the lover's choice. I had never leapt mindlessly to my own obliteration. I had given up children for her and had buried myself in her life. But myself I had held back.

"I took a hotel room and lay in bed weeping. It was a week before I could force myself to go back to life. Then I called Gregor in New York. I believed she might have gone back there, but he hadn't heard from her."

"You looked for her, then?"

"No, no. Nothing beyond the phone call to Gregor and a few other mild inquiries I couldn't resist. God forbid if she wanted to go I should try to drag her back. She knew where her home was. Our bank account was there for her to draw upon. It's still a joint account. But she's never drawn from it. She has plenty of money of her own, left to her by her mother.

"A few years later Gregor came to Paris and looked me up. He was a famous artist by that time, and I was flattered by his attention. It was good to talk to him. I hadn't really talked to anyone about . . . what had happened. I told him everything I just told you. He said he was glad for Rachael and sorry for me. I told him not to be sorry for me. He said I had manure in my veins. Then he said he could do her portrait now.

"If you see her,' I said.

"I don't have to see her,' he said. 'She's the sculpture contained in the block of stone you married. I can do her by intuition.'

"I'd like to see the portrait.'

"You will,' he answered."

"And did you ever see it?"

"Not yet. That was two years ago. But Gregor is a strange person. Thirty years from now he could show up with it. And it could look like anything outlandish, except that if you keep looking at it, eventually it will look precisely right.

"In some ways I would rather see the portrait now than the real person. It's been . . . let's see, over five years since Rachael left. The Rachael I loved is dead, and I'm not sure what the new one would have to say to me. The portrait would probably tell me more. I'm not angry at all--as I said, I haven't blamed her--but there's a certain . . . repugnance. I don't think I'd like to see her again, not unless it were her back again, the one I loved and married. But that's impossible. I'm different, too. Our marriage is something very beautiful that I've wrapped up carefully and put away. I don't think I want it disturbed."

"And yet you'd like me to find her."

"Yes, yes. I'd be very happy to know she's doing well. There's always been the fear that something tragic happened to her, that she's dead and I'll never know. Or that she needs money or some kind of help and is too proud or ashamed to ask. Please give her whatever she needs. I'll reimburse you. I want to do right by her. But not see her. I don't think I want to see her the way she is now."

## CHAPTER 20

## In Which Rachael Meets Gen Sum

After I left Paul, I set myself a strict schedule. Up at six, exercise till eight, write in my journal till ten. At ten I ate my one daily meal, then went out till two. I walked. I sat at cafés and sipped tea. I spoke to no one.

At two I returned to dream. I lay in bed with my journal and disciplined myself to wake up after each dream and write it down. I placed great hope in this method but was disappointed. None of my dreams stirred early memories. They were all woven of events with which I was already familiar.

In one I would face my mother propped up in bed opposite me. I would pull things out of a shopping bag--a hammer, an iron, a cast-iron skillet--and she would shake her head no, it wouldn't do. I was in a panic because I was sure there was nothing left in the bag to show her, but there always was another object in the bag and it would never please her. I would panic again and again with each refusal, until I could no longer bear it and I began to scream, no words, just pure hatred.

Or I would dream that I woke up crying, holding Paul, trying to comfort him, but he would not be comforted. I would realize that his mother had fallen out of the bedroom window and was lying like a smashed porcelain doll in pieces on the sidewalk below, that this horror was true, not a dream, and there was nothing anyone could do to redeem it, and I sobbed so violently that I woke myself up from that false awakening and wept for a long time after.

Around midnight I got out of bed and walked the quiet streets. I remembered much of my life with Dalit, with my parents, with Paul. Of my life before Dalit I could remember nothing. Only pain penetrated that wall, searing, twisting pain that knotted in my uterus and crawled in deeper and deeper, until it crouched within the core and gripped hard, like someone trying to crush your hand in a powerful handshake, and I became nothing but pain, sitting down on a park bench and writhing with it until it receded, slowly, and once again I could feel the cool damp night air.

For months I searched for shards of an earlier time, memories, perhaps, that might have left tiny splinters behind. I believed I would know whenever I came upon a piece of truth, just as I had known when I saw the monastery on the low ridge across the golden valley. There were doors, and when I reached them they would open. But to reach them I had to continue walking directly into pain.

As I grew thinner men began to stare at me. My face turned angular. My hair became long and flowing. My body emerged sculpted from the massive block of flesh in which it had been encased. I enjoyed and was repulsed by these stares. Some of the men excited me. Mostly, I was afraid.

One afternoon I sat at a table on the sidewalk sipping tea. The autumn sun was warm, just for those few hours in the afternoon, and I took off my jacket and let it beat down on my bare shoulders. I closed my eyes and gazed at the black masses swirling across the yellow and orange fire inside my lids. Perhaps for a few moments I dozed. When I opened my eyes one of the waiters (not mine) was staring at me.

He was a short, stocky man, muscular, with an exotic face. He had large brown eyes, a wide nose, thick lips, yellow skin, cheekbones that gave his European features an indefinably Asian cast. Within moments he was at my table.

"Do you want anything?" he asked.

I shook my head no.

"I asked Chun to switch with me."

I smiled, not comprehending.

"Your waiter. I'm your waiter now."

I blushed.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

I stared at the table, fiery red, waiting for the thunderstorm to pass.

"I'm an artist," he went on. "I have a studio. I'd like you to see my work."

I shook my head no, still staring at the table. This was the first time a man had tried to talk to me. I couldn't keep my hands from shaking.

"Forgive me," he murmured, bowing slightly. "I had no intention to intrude."

I felt him walk away.

The next afternoon I went again to the restaurant, and he came over to take my order for tea, which, as usual, I ordered by pointing silently at an item on the menu.

"Please forgive me," he said after he had brought the tea. "I didn't want to make you uncomfortable yesterday. I'm just terribly attracted to you. I can't help it. Will you forgive me?"

He remained poised over me, a slight smile on his face, as if waiting politely for an answer.

I stared at the table until, again, he went away.

Once, when I had the courage to raise my eyes, he was staring at me. I quickly lowered my head. Immediately, he came over to the table.

"Yes?" he asked.

I shook my head no.

"I thought you called me."

I shook my head again.

He glanced around quickly and took the seat opposite me.

"What's your story? You're like a rabbit in the middle of a street. Relax. What are you afraid of?"

I shrugged. I considered saying something, but I was shaking too violently.

"Have dinner with me later. We can't talk now. Can you come back at six? That's when I get off. Yes? Yes? Say something. Nod."

I shrugged.

"Please. I don't want you to walk out of my life. Besides, I think it will be better for you to come back and talk to me. I know it will."

He reached out his hand and cradled my cheek, so quickly I had no time to pull away. I blushed again, but the hand felt good, strong. Then it was gone.

"I'll hand you over to Chun now," he said, getting up. "See you at six."

At two I didn't go home. That was my concession to what had happened. His phantom hand still rested against my cheek. I knew I wouldn't go back at six. I would have tea there again, and he would invite me a second time, and then, perhaps . . .

It would be painful, perhaps impossible. A door might open to memories more terrifying, more agonizing, than I could stand. Too late I might wish it had remained closed.

Poor Paul! I had never allowed him into me, not in twenty years of marriage.

Occasionally I would turn my back and allow him to satisfy himself against my rear, burying his hands in my breasts. Less often, I would stroke his erection until, with enormous and unseemly

gratitude, he came all over my hands. The few times he tried to touch me I pulled him away. Too quickly he had acquiesced. He had been so understanding that he hadn't understood.

That evening I spent hours fantasizing sex with the waiter, with much kissing and caressing, not daring to allow him past my thighs. His hard erection seemed the embodiment of my pain. I could not even imagine it without feeling an agonizing ripping inside.

Still, I couldn't help fantasizing. Each time I returned from the brink of torment I would start again, playing with the formalities, moving luxuriously through affection, then slowly, my body rigid with approaching terror, across the shifting line between enticement and sex, crossing from pleasure to agony, with a moment in between during which the two were so intensely indistinguishable that I was just barely aware I was still alive.

The day I returned he wasn't there. I knew from my disappointment what would eventually happen. That afternoon I dreamed a strange and different dream. I was in a forest. It was dawn. A cold grey light penetrated the trees. The trees creaked quietly in the wind like doors. I lay on the damp ground naked and cold, waiting for someone to come. The person I was waiting for was late, though I'm not sure how I knew this since I was not wearing a watch. I grew impatient and began to cry with frustration. Then I awoke.

It was only after I had awakened that I realized I had been waiting for death. This was not a deduction, just a bit a knowledge left over from the dream. The knowledge shocked me. I was not aware of any longing for death; on the contrary, I believed that in leaving Paul and attempting to recover my past I was searching for life. At midnight I did not go out for my usual walk. I lay troubled throughout the long night.

At dawn, lying in a greyness which resembled that of my dream, I knew that I had dreamed about my life before Dalit. I became excited and hurriedly rewrote the dream in my journal, not wanting to miss a detail, though there was no way of being certain what was memory and what dream. I was an adult. I felt no pain. My hair was long and thick black, just as now. The trees were pine, the ground soft with brown needles.

The pines were related to my pining for something, they represented the usual punning of dreamwork. The cold grey light was the coming of the waiter, opening just slightly the creaking door. I was impatient for him, which was why in the dream he was late. But why should I have known so certainly that the person I was waiting for was death?

I returned to the restaurant in the late afternoon. I sat down and kept my eyes sightless on the menu.

"I'm glad you came back," the waiter murmured. "I was afraid I might not see you again."

I said nothing.

"I can get off in an hour. Wait for me."

I didn't nod. I gave him no confirmation. But I waited. I sipped my tea and looked out at the boulevard, my mind a kaleidoscope constantly churning slivers of colored glass. I thought so many things that I thought nothing. In front of me shapes and colors swirled like leaves before an approaching storm.

He knew I was terrified of what I wanted, he would not let me get away with refusal. Once I went with him I was in for it, all the pain, the memories of rape or torture, the burden of an experience I had so long so effectively shut away. He was understanding in a way Paul had never been, understanding of what was necessary to get what he wanted, brutally certain that whatever he destroyed was a wall better battered down than left standing.

At the end of the hour he came over to me.

"I paid for your tea," he said. "Come."

I looked up at him.

"Come," he said, placing his hands on my shoulders. "Let's go to my place. What's your name? I'm Gen."

Smiling nervously, I shook my head.

His studio was spotless and absolutely empty, save for the draped easel in the center of the room. Two skylights and a floor-to-ceiling window flooded the room with light. The walls were lined with closed, chest-high closets. Everything was painted white.

"When I work I want nothing in my way," he explained. "One moment."

He opened one of the closets and pulled out a futon. Behind the futon I saw stacks of canvasses. He spread the futon on the floor and closed the closet. Then he took my hand and pulled me down onto the soft slippery fabric.

"After," he said, "I want to paint you nude."

I said nothing, lying rigid beside him, waiting for the hissing snake to strike. He buried his hands in my hair and kissed my forehead, pressing his pelvis against my thigh. His arms were strong, large biceps popping up when he bent them moving his hands down onto my cheeks. He pulled off his shirt, then his undershirt, revealing a muscular chest with just a thin triangle of hair at the center. Then he kicked off his sandals and pulled down his pants, revealing the hard straight line of his erection underneath his white shorts going out from his body at 45 degrees.

I moaned, beginning to feel pain take possession of my groin.

"Yes! Yes!" he whispered excitedly, misinterpreting my cry. "You're so beautiful. Where did you come from? You look like you just dropped from heaven. You haven't even learned to talk. Is this your first time?"

I shrugged, concentrating on holding down the pain. I would go through with this no matter how much it hurt, I would smash my way across this barrier and know what had happened to me and who I was.

"Is it? Where have you been all your life? Aren't there any men there? How could they have passed you up?"

Keeping his shorts on, he lifted my skirt, got on top of me, and gyrated, sliding his still-clothed erection slowly up and down my naked leg.

"God! Are you good! My darling. I'm going to go very slow, very easy. You make sure you tell me if it hurts."

He kissed my neck, my ear, then moved down towards my breasts, unbuttoning my blouse as he went. I felt a delicious chill, like the wind off a glacier, but I couldn't enjoy him, I was too rigid with concentration. It was as though someone had thrust a harpoon deep into me and was now moving it slowly in and out. With each outward motion the barbs dug deep into the walls of my insides, cutting, tearing, bathing my passageways in blood.

"Ah, my sweet, my sweet!" he murmured. He pulled my blouse up over my arms, unhooked my bra, then buried his head in my breasts, licking, taking tiny bites, sucking in on my nipples, moaning his pleasure. I began to feel my excitement rise, and as it rose the pain increased, growing rapidly as yeast rises, breaking me open, ripping my abdomen apart, as I became wet with desire.

He left my breasts, moving down to my stomach, unbuttoning the few buttons at the side of my skirt, pulling my skirt down over my sandals, pulling my sandals off my feet, kissing his way back up my legs, nibbling at the edges of my panties.

I moaned again with pain, and again, it was deep in me now, past my sexual organs, like a snake jammed squirming in my guts. I clutched my stomach and kept moaning, my body

gyrating with pain, and again he misinterpreted, pulling down my panties, groaning his pleasure, and then the pain exploded inside of me like a grenade and I screamed and screamed, pushing his head away, screaming as if my insides had been blown out of my body and lay splattered over the room, death screams, writhing helplessly on the floor, just barely noticing that he was still there looking on in shock, like a passerby staring at a body just mutilated in an explosion. I tried desperately to hold my erupting insides in, writhing, screaming, finally retching a thin green viscous liquid onto the floor, retching on and on as the pain inside of me tired, became slightly duller, ebbing, and I could turn once again to him and look at his face through tears.

One night I was awakened by the realization that I knew what the forest looked like. I don't remember what I had been dreaming, only that I remembered the forest, and that if I didn't wake up immediately I would forget.

I awakened to the bright moonlight and Gen's steady breathing. Through one section of skylight I saw the moon's face cocked slightly sideways. I got out of bed, took my notebook, and sat on the floor to write by moonlight.

It was the vision I had had in Israel. White birches, slender, and a cold mist through which sunlight was attempting to break. My pain was far below me, I floated as in a balloon over the silver tops of birches slanting downwards towards a ravine through which babbled the thin red line of my pain.

Yes, that was it! I remembered now! In this moment I left my body and . . . something else happened. I would remember it soon.

I began to cry with happiness. That moment in the forest was the moment in which I had sealed off the early years of my life. I was certain of it. Now I could go back and undo it. I saw the little girl in the forest, lying in pain. Was I alone? With people? I didn't remember. But I remembered clearly the sensation of leaving my body, of floating above myself, above the forest, above my pain.

The little girl was waiting for me, waiting for the magic words with which I would rejoin myself. And I knew the magic words! I could go back with them! They were beauty and pain, the pain of reliving what the child could not bear, and the beauty, as an adult, of beholding the truth, of understanding, of acceptance, even, finally, of love. That would be my triumph, to transform whatever horrors were done to me into something of value to me, to others, to make it a gift rather than a curse, to give it beauty.

And as I wanted so much to hold the little girl, and to love her, and to know everything that happened to her, I became one with my own mother, of whom I had no memory at all. We both looked at the little girl lying in pain on the forest floor, in the desperate act of separating in two, and we wept together for her, felt the same feeling, strangely, of happiness, of being joined at last, mother and daughter, even though we had been cut off so long ago, earlier than memory.

This was the most beautiful thing that happened to me that night: that I rejoined my mother, I looking back, she looking forward, with the same hope and the same love and the same pain.

I could no longer hold so much beauty. I got dressed and walked rapidly through the night. Whatever was done to me I forgave. I didn't even know what it was, and I forgave it. I forgave the fact that for me sexual excitement brought unbearable pain, perhaps always would. I forgave the suffering that had been so great that the only way I could survive it was to shut the door of memory. I had been deprived of my mother, yet here we were arm in arm, sisters in love with the same child, walking the streets together, sharing the same tears of happiness. And at the same time I was also the child, bathed in my mother's hope and love.

I wanted to cry out to my mother: Do you see? Whatever you feared came true, but whatever you hoped came true, too! I'm alive! I'm alive and I'm so full of life I could burst, and I think of you, my dear, dear mother whom I never knew, and I'm happy, very happy! So you can be happy, too! And together we will heal that little girl and make her whole, and every moment of pain she ever felt will burst into color like a rainbow made from the light of her joy shining through tears!



## CHAPTER 21

## In Which Rachael both Imagines and Remembers the Sun Sculpture

I did not at first consciously set out to recreate my childhood. After I left Paul I spoke to no one because there was no one to speak to. But as the days passed I realized that I was living silently, just as I had before Dalit, and then later before my mother brought me back to speech. I even ordered in a restaurant or bought groceries in a store by pointing to what I wanted. I decided to continue being silent as an act of solidarity with the little girl I once was. I thought it might help me remember.

The pain I felt with each sexual encounter with Gen grew duller, or perhaps I just got used to it, but it remained. Each time I felt my sexual excitement rise I felt the pain increase, too, like a fist in my abdomen tightening its grip. The more excited I became the fiercer the grip until I could no longer bear it and had to break off the encounter.

To avoid breaking it off, I began to concentrate not on my excitement but on my pain. This strategy kept the excitement down and therefore lessened the pain. Still there was an extraordinary intensity in these sessions with Gen, so strong that it drained the color out of many other moments in my life.

Very quickly, Gen adapted his behavior to mine. He no longer attempted to please me. Instead he used my body as a pillow for his pleasure. He put his erection everywhere but in the most natural place, where I could not bear the pain, and gyrated himself to orgasm, muttering harsh words in Chinese, his native language, and coming all over me--my stomach, my back, my buttocks, my hair, my face, my mouth, my breasts, my neck and chin, my arms, my hands, even my toes.

As the months passed Gen began to speak of himself. Perhaps he felt safe because I never answered, never gave him the distorted reflection of himself, the fear of which keeps so many people silent when the truth seems too complicated to express.

He was a strange person, as strange in his own way as I was in mine. His mother had been a Chinese prostitute in the Cholon district of Saigon. She died when he was a child. He had no idea who his father was. He was brought up in an orphanage during the Japanese, then the French occupation, and left for Paris after the French were defeated at Dienbienphu. He had never for an instant considered himself Vietnamese.

When he wasn't working as a waiter he spent most of his time painting. "Music painting," he called it, the precise abstract depiction of emotion. Some of his paintings were movements of string quartets, others of symphonies, still others marches, minuets, movements from piano trios, popular songs.

He did a nude of me he called a nocturne, in which, of course, there was nothing that even remotely resembled a human figure. All of his paintings were extraordinarily delicate miasmas of color and line, extremely detailed, so that if one examined them with a magnifying glass one would find the same complexity and care in execution on the microscopic as on the macroscopic level.

Gen never showed these paintings to anyone. After he finished one, a process that could take months, he put it away in the chest-high closet that lined all four walls of his studio. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of paintings were stored there, none of which, to my knowledge, was ever hung on any wall.

One evening he brought home some friends. I was surprised he had any, since he spoke so little and spent so much of his time painting. They were all Asians from the restaurant-- several other waiters, one with a girlfriend, a cashier, and an elderly woman who introduced herself as the owner.

"I would imagine that if Gen ever found a woman it would have to be one who didn't speak," she said. "Can you write your thoughts down? We can have a conversation on paper."

I shook my head no. The idea hadn't occurred to me.

"Perhaps you're illiterate. Do you read? You can answer by shaking your head yes or no."

I kept my eyes on the floor.

"You simply don't want to communicate! That's wonderful! A refusal on principle. Keep it up, my dear. You must learn a great deal about people. People say anything to someone who doesn't answer. It's like talking to a pet cat or dog. Gen, she's marvelous! A magnificent woman and you never have to listen to her. What perfection!"

Gen simply smiled. I wondered why he had brought his friends to see me. He must have been very sure of their reactions. He was not someone who revealed anything of which he was not certain.

"You must have told her all kinds of things," she went on. "You know she'll never tell anyone. My dear, we must find a way for you to talk to us. No one knows anything about Gen, he's as much a mystery as his paintings. Two people who don't communicate! What a pair!"

Gen said something to her in Chinese and they moved away.

One of the other waiters came up to me and introduced himself. "I'm Kim," he said. "Korean. Gen told me a lot about you."

I smiled, said nothing. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Gen told me you were extraordinarily beautiful and that you didn't talk. I guess he was right on both counts."

I blushed and looked away.

"You like Asian men? You can just nod or shake your head."

I looked at the floor.

"Look, I'm going to make a pass at you. I hope you don't mind. Gen certainly won't, you can't tell him about it."

He gave a nervous little laugh.

"I'm really an expert on Oriental techniques. I mean for me it's a study, a discipline. I know exactly how to please a woman. I've got all kinds of sex toys at my place--Indian, Japanese. Are you interested? I can just show them to you, some of them you can use by yourself, in private. Yes?"

The cashier came over and introduced herself as Ching-Lu. "What's Kim whispering to you about? He's telling you about his toys, is that it? He's pulled that on me, too."

Kim laughed, again nervously, and looked around to see whether Gen was near.

"We're a very close bunch, as you can see. A bunch of Asian weirdos. What are we all doing in Paris, working at a sidewalk café? Is that what God intended for us?"

"Why not Paris?" Kim said. "If you don't like it, nothing's stopping you from going back to Hong Kong. What would you be there? A prostitute?"

"You wish. Then at least you could buy me."

"I wouldn't waste my money," Kim said, and left abruptly. Ching-Lu looked after him as he walked across the large room towards Gen and the owner.

"What a child!" she said, turning back to me. "What he knows about sex he's read in books. Now, Gen is another thing. Did you know we were lovers? For two months, last summer. He knows what buttons to push. But talk about weirdos! Does he show you his paintings? He never showed me. Not even the nude he did of me. He's the most egocentric person in the world. I think someone must have cut off all his antennae.

"Look at this room. There's nothing in it but him and the painting he happens to be working on. And now you. You live here, don't you. I never stayed past the morning. What does he do with you while he's painting? Does he stuff you in the closet with his other things?"

As she spoke, I wondered what it had been like for me to be silent when I was a child. Not the same as this, I supposed, though there must have been resemblances. In my effort to remember I lost track of Ching-Lu. She went on to say some other things and then, when I looked up, she was gone.

Then I had a memory, an extremely vivid one which removed me from that house and city. The most powerful image, which was the last, came first, and then the rest, instantly, like a narrative painting all in front of me at once.

I was in bed with Dalit, my head buried in her breast, and she was rocking me and stroking my hair, as she did often to put me to sleep. I wanted very much to say her name, just to say "Dalit" so she could hear it. It was a strong desire, and I tried a few times to work up to it, but I was afraid that at the first word I uttered I would have to come down, and coming down meant rejoining my pain.

And then Dalit said to me, while stroking my hair, "Hatikvah, dearest, dear Hatikvah," and I wanted more than anything to cry out, "Dalit!" but I remained silent.

"You are lovely," a woman said. Chun and his girlfriend had come over to me.

"Are you interested in art?" Chun said. "This is Reiko. I imagine that anyone who gets mixed up with Gen must be crazy about art."

"What kinds of things does he paint?" Reiko asked. "Well, I guess you can't tell us. You're a perfect partner for Gen. As secretive as his closet."

I moved my head out of Dalit's cleft so that I could breathe better, and she stroked my cheek and studied my face in the moonlight. She must have seen some ripple of the turmoil going on beneath because she said, "Don't speak until you're ready, Hatikvah, not until you believe it's safe to come out. Do you hear, darling, you mustn't say anything until the words come of themselves, until they flow like a stream."

And I wanted to say to Dalit, "I love you," but I remained silent.

"Have you seen Kleber's light sculpture yet?" Chun asked. "It's fascinating stuff. He plays with spectra, taking off from Fromard's experiments with colored light."

"She can't hear you, Chun. Can't you see? She's in another world."

And then the point of the memory, the thing I remembered first so vividly: I actually believed that I broke through and said what I wanted to say. I uttered Dalit's name, and then I said, "I love you so much!" But nothing came out. I knew that nothing was coming out, it was as though I were saying it through thick glass that prevented all sound from penetrating. I said it again, and again nothing came out, and I started to cry, and Dalit, as she often did when I cried, kissed my eyes.

"I know, my darling, I know, I know," Dalit murmured. "I know . . ."

Gen and I went to see Kleber's light sculpture with Chun and Reiko. Now that he was more comfortable with people's reception of me, Gen was happy to walk down the street with a beautiful Caucasian woman on his arm. He was extremely cautious but also vain, and in those

rare times when he could convince himself that something worked he was ready to play it again and again. We went to the cinema twice, once to a gallery, and now, ten days after I had met his friends, to Kleber's show at a disco in Montmartre.

"Have you seen Fromard's work?" Chun asked me, without, of course, any expectation of an answer. "It's quite wonderful. He mixes colors in the air. You see blue and yellow beams converge, and at the angle of convergence there's green. The colors are extraordinarily pure. I hear Kleber does the same only with spectra to get purer and more varied color."

The disco was crowded, dark, with perhaps five hundred people sitting on folding chairs. At the end of the show it would revert to its usual function. Kleber himself, a short, intensely blue-eyed man with short-cropped red hair, dressed entirely in faded denim, raced here and there adjusting his equipment while he talked non-stop to a dark, well-built man walking next to him-- Gregor Sampo!

He would never recognize me. Certainly not here, not in the dark, among five hundred others. Still, I blushed and pushed myself down in my seat.

"What's the matter?" Reiko asked. "She looks frightened."

"I don't know," Gen said. "Are you all right? She sometimes gets like this. Not completely here."

I had heard, of course, of Gregor's notoriety since he had completed Nymbus a month or two earlier. I had seen a picture of the sculpture in the Paris edition of the Herald Tribune. I was very happy for him. I even had thoughts, now that men considered me beautiful, of going to see him. But I wanted to be complete as a person first, complete enough for him to draw a sketch of me, as he had of others in Washington Square so many years ago.

He came very near me as Kleber was explaining something to him about a strut in rapid French. I hadn't seen him since he was a boy. He had never come to visit me and Paul in Paris, as he had promised. I was still in love with him, as always. It wasn't sexual excitement, it caused no pain. It was affection, a strong desire to touch and hold him, as Dalit had held me, and to erase his unhappiness.

"Isn't that Gregor Sampo?" Chun whispered.

Gen nodded.

"Wonderful sculpture, don't you think? I mean Nymbus."

Gen smiled.

"Really, Gen. What do you think?" Reiko asked as Kleber and Gregor moved away.

"You're thoroughly jealous of him, aren't you? Stop smiling when someone asks you something, you're as bad as your friend here."

"When one's thoughts are confused, it's better to say nothing," Gen said.

"Confused? What do you mean?"

"I haven't completed an opinion of Sampo's work. I'm not sure what I think."

"If you waited till you were sure all the time you'd never say anything."

"That would be preferable to being inaccurate."

Suddenly, without warning, the few dim lights at the sides of the room were switched off, and we were in total darkness. The murmurs stilled. A string quartet by some modern composer began, all raucous quivers and misplaced pizzicatos. Then a beam of white light, thin and intense, flashed above our heads and disappeared into the opposite wall. Then another, and another, from different angles, always synchronized with accents in the music. Finally, one beam remained, as if riveted into the black sides of the room. Then another beam at right angles to it, forming a cross. The cross held as the music rose to a crescendo, bows crunching hard on rasping

strings, and then, at the climax, both beams became quivering rainbows. At their intersection was a jewel of shimmering color so beautiful that the audience gasped and burst into applause.

Another quivering rainbow shot across at a different angle, then another and another, and with each beam the jewel in the center grew, shimmered more, became more beautiful. The number of beams and the rate of shimmer was adjusted precisely to the requirements of the music, increasing, fading, shading blue or red. The only problem was the mechanical jerkiness of the quiver. The whole thing looked more like a robotic toy than a natural jewel.

A second movement followed, this of a Brahms sextet, with the beams widened to soften the effect. By this time the novelty had worn off enough so that one could pay attention to the delicacy of the adjustment of light to music as the variations unfolded.

The third movement, the final movement of Bach's double violin concerto, had the lights playing rapidly in different directions, intersecting all over the room and creating brilliant balls of color. The effect was similar to that of fireworks, as was the audience's response, which was to crane their necks and ooh and aah at each burst of color.

At the end there was much enthusiastic applause, and Kleber was brought back again and again.

"It was wonderful," Chun murmured under the applause. "Wonderful. This is the art of the future."

"Interesting," Gen said, "but not sculpture. This was theater. Look how it ends. With curtain calls."

"What's the difference?" Reiko said. "You men, you're always categorizing. It gives you the illusion of control."

"All language is categorization. Do you mean to live without language?"

"I mean to enjoy this without caring what you call it. Take a tip from the silent one here. She doesn't call anything anything."

"In her mind she does. Just like you and me. I can't even imagine what language-less experience would be like, can you? It would have to be entirely fluid. One sensation would flow into another with no more differentiation than drops of water in a stream. It's unthinkable, we can't even talk about animal experience without attributing language to beasts. It's as difficult to imagine an experience without language as it is to comprehend death or eternity."

"So what's the difference whether you call this sculpture or theater? How does that affect your experience of it?"

"Very much. Essentially, in fact. You see, theater is an art whose medium is time, a chronological art. It uses space, of course, but within definite parameters of time. The audience experiences it step by step as it plays itself out. Sculpture is an art whose medium is space, a plastic art. We experience it in time, of course, but in any way and from any direction we choose. It's an object like any other--a rock, a tree. To apply the wrong word to it is to become confused about what you have seen. Applying the right word determines the clarity of your experience."

"Wake me up when you're finished," Reiko said.

"Precision in language," Gen went on, "means grasping and expressing the heart of things, the truth behind appearances."

"And how do you know when you've grasped the truth behind appearances?" Chun asked.

"There's a mystical connection between words and things."

"That's just faith, Gen. There's nothing whatever to base it on."

"Like all faith it's rooted in experience. We're talking about something quite natural and everyday, but miraculous nonetheless. The ability of the human mind to grasp something beyond

sensation. Are we always right? Of course not. Perfect sincerity is impossible. I define sincerity, by the way, as passionate fidelity to the precise expression of experience."

"But isn't there something to be said for the notion that experience is fluid while language--or art, for that matter--is static and dead? Can't you kill experience by the very act of expression? Aren't words the ashes of sensation?"

"Yes, like the two of you are killing this experience by talking so much about it," Reiko said.

Nearly everyone had left. Kleber, accompanied by Gregor, was dismantling the last of his apparatus. Chairs were being stacked on carts and wheeled out of the room. We got up to leave. Gregor looked my way for just an instant and my heart slammed shut, then he looked away. Chun waved goodbye to him and Kleber but neither of them seemed to notice. My heart opened again, slowly, and I had an insight that seemed, strangely, to have passed from Gregor to me in the instant his eyes, unknowing, met mine.

As we left the disco for a nearby café I remembered my high school experiment with prisms. It had been a child's experiment, measuring more the effect of the crudity of my equipment than anything else. But it seemed to me that bouncing spectra off mirrors, as I had done, was the way to turn Kleber's theater into sculpture. One merely had to pass the sun's light (or moonlight, starlight, any light) through crystals, and then, using mirrors, focus the resulting spectra at a variety of angles on a single point. One could have dozens, even hundreds or thousands of tiny crystals and mirrors, producing a ball of light much larger and more various than any of Kleber's, and permanent--as long as light from any source reached the Earth.

I became so excited with this idea that I began to walk ahead of the others, and when they reached the café they had to call me back. The colors of the ball would change constantly as the sun moved across the sky, changing the angle of light, or as clouds came and went, as the atmosphere thickened and thinned. It would work! Why wouldn't it?

I began to imagine what it might look like, to see a ball of color glowing so purely that I could not possibly give it a name. It had no precise color, only moods which shifted so rapidly one could not know them before they were gone. All emotion danced in this ball, all experience, all yearning, all love, all sadness, all joy, so wonderfully and rapidly played that they became one emotion, and that was life itself, knowing itself with an intensity it can reach only on the edge of death.

"She's off again," Reiko said when we had been seated at the café. "Somewhere else. Isn't it creepy, Gen? How can you stand it?"

"Let her be. I want to be clear to Chun--and to myself--about this problem of fluidity and expression. Experience is fluid, expression is static. How then can expression be precise?"

"How indeed!" Chun said.

"By getting at the truth behind the fluidity. The controlling truth. So that the fluid experience becomes a symbol of something that never changes."

"Never changes?"

"Let's say, is relatively stable. The more precise the expression, the more universal the truth. So that you and I, Reiko, even the silent one here, if precisely described, captured in words, becomes a symbol of every soul who was ever on this earth."

"Still, how does one know whether one has grasped a symbolic truth when all one experiences directly is sensation?"

"One knows, that's all I can say. There's a glow to truth. The trick is not to give up till you get it."

"Is that why you keep all your paintings in your closet?" Reiko asked.

But I had seen it before! I knew I had! As I imagined the colors the sun-sculpture would create, it seemed to me certain that I was remembering something, that I had seen something so beautiful that to see it only once would make someone permanently in love with life. And yet somehow I had forgotten it. Why? When had I seen it? How could I have forgotten such a marvelous thing?

And then I thought: perhaps I had made a mistake. I had assumed that something terrible had happened to me in the forest, so terrifying and painful that in that moment I had escaped into silence, leaving my mutilated self behind. But what if it had also been a wonderful moment, so miraculous that I found returning to the world of pain unbearable? When I had felt the desire to speak to Dalit I thought of it as coming down. Coming down from where? What if in this moment of greatest agony I had a vision so beautiful that I refused to return completely to life?

## CHAPTER 22

### In Which Rachael Becomes Ania and Searches for the Scene in the Forest

I left Gen. Since we had never communicated there was no need for explanation. I went east to Poland, the former heartland of Jewish life, hoping to see or hear something that would open another door.

Looking at a map of Poland, the name Wowolnica struck me as familiar. It was a village on the road between Kazimierz and Lublin that I had never heard of, yet it seemed to draw me to it and would not let go. Wowolnica.

Leaving most of my luggage in Warsaw, I took a bus to Bochotnica and then another to Wowolnica. On the road between the two villages, twisting upward from the Vistula river, there was a patch of woods with tall, slender birches, bare trunks all the way up to a flowering of branches and pear-shaped, twinkling leaves at the top. I became excited. Was this my woods? But there must be thousands of birch forests in Poland. I would have to find the exact spot. How else would I know?

I got off the bus in the main square of Wowolnica and nothing looked familiar. There was a large, red brick church up a steep rise, a small triangular park, a road lined with low houses climbing a small hill. Beyond the town were wheat fields stretching to a dark line of woods. I sat down on a bench in the park next to a large green pump. This was crazy. Was I going to travel to every small town whose name seemed familiar? Search through every patch of woods that contained birches? Poland might not even be the right country. I might have been a child in Russia or Czechoslovakia or Rumania or anywhere.

Still, Wowolnica sounded right. Maybe the church did seem a bit familiar. Maybe one of my parents came from here and mentioned the name over and over.

Nothing. I remembered nothing. I walked around the town, which lined the highway like two rows of flies on gummed paper, and there was not one house, not one view of fields or woods, that looked familiar. After about two hours I took the bus on to Lublin.

In Lublin also nothing looked familiar. Much of the town, of course, was new, but when I walked through the old town I had no sudden thrill of recall. And there was much--a palace, a large square, churches, a grand gate--that I might well have remembered. I felt very foolish. What was I looking for? In Israel, a very small country, it was not illogical to hope--or fear--that I would see something that would open up memories. Here I had all of Eastern Europe to search through. Besides, in Israel I had been a good deal older than when I was here. If I was here.

I took a hotel, had dinner, went to sleep. Early the next morning I had a dream. In my dream I was sitting alone at a table in the restaurant where I had dinner the night before. It was an elegant restaurant with low lights and widely spaced rectangular tables. A well-dressed gentleman with dark hair and eyes and a deeply lined face requested permission to sit opposite me, to which I assented. In my dream I knew that he was a young man, and that the deep lines in his face had been caused by pain.

"You must forgive me," he said, speaking hurriedly in German. "I will not be able to tell you anything about your childhood. It was all destroyed in the war, you see. All the records. There is nothing left."

"I don't need any records," I said. "I have memories."



The young, dark man with the heavily lined face shook his head slowly, smiling. "I'm afraid not," he said with great authority. "There is no chance. Your memories were all completely destroyed. There was a good deal of shelling. Here. I'll show you a photograph."

He put a black leather attaché case on his lap, snapped it open, and pulled out a manila envelope with the name, "Ania Marmosa" typed on a gummed label in the center.

"But that's not my name!" I protested.

"Yes, yes. It's your name," he insisted. "Here. This is all that is left of your memories."

He pulled out a large, glossy photograph and put it on the white tablecloth in front of me. It showed a rubble-strewn yard in the middle of a new housing project, the sort of prefabricated high-rise housing one sees in Eastern Europe. The yard was almost leveled, with small mounds of bricks and stones and here and there a piece of wood sticking up from bits of ground-up cinder. Weeds had sprouted throughout the yard, some quite tall. A small metal sign, rusted white with blue lettering, said in Polish (which nevertheless I could read): "Ania Marmosa, 1942-1947. Please leave undisturbed."

Suddenly I was not looking at the photograph but standing in front of the yard. It was raining lightly, and the elegantly dressed young man with the deep lines in his face was holding an umbrella over my head.

I dropped down on my knees, weeping, and took fistfuls of ground-up cinder in my hands. Then I rubbed them against my face, as if scrubbing my face with them, rubbed hard until blood began to flow. The young man tried to restrain me, grabbing my wrist.

"Don't be foolish!" he said. "There's nothing here for you. You must start a new life all on your own. What difference does it make what happened to you long ago?"

But I kept on, throwing his hands off me, scooping up more ground-up cinders, scrubbing my face raw and bloody with them.

I woke up crying. The wetness on my face was not blood but tears.

The following afternoon, after a morning of more fruitless wandering through the city, I had another idea. I got into a taxi near my hotel. The driver asked me something in Polish. I asked if he spoke German, which I had learned to speak on numerous trips to Paul's relatives in Bonn.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Where do you want to go?"

"I want to find a forest near here where I was a child during the war."

He turned around and looked at me. He was an old man, like many people of his age in Poland missing most of his teeth. His skin was a network of wrinkles and he had white stubble like the heads of tiny pins all over his face.

"I'll pay you what you ask. This may take some time. I'll pay you for the rest of the day, whatever you make normally. I'll pay you more."

He turned back and looked ahead, out his windshield.

"You know where this forest is?" he asked.

"No. We'll have to search a little."

"There are many forests near here where people were in hiding during the war. It will take more than an afternoon to see them all."

"Then perhaps we'll continue tomorrow," I pleaded, feeling foolish again. After all, I had no special reason to believe my forest was anywhere near Lublin.

"Do you have some idea which direction? North? East?"

"No. I'm afraid I don't."

The driver threw up his hands.

"Listen. Were you here during the war?" I asked. "Maybe you remember a place where Jews were hiding. Believe me, this is important to me. I'll pay you well."

"I don't know anything about it. I was living in Sandomierz when the war started, then I was a partisan in the mountains near Nowy Targ. I'm sorry. I don't take money for nothing. Try someone else."

I started to get out of the taxi.

"Wait," he said. "I know someone who might be able to help. I'll drive you there, you talk to him. If it's no good I'll take you back, no charge. OK?"

"Yes, OK."

The driver started off. "This man was a partisan near here. He's very well known. His name is Pawel. The Russians hate him, he fought them and the Germans both."

We drove out of town and through several villages that lined the road. At a roadside crucifix we turned left onto a dirt road and bounced into a cluster of houses surrounding a mud square.

We left the taxi in the square and entered a compound formed by a low plastered wall, a small house, a barn, and a shed. The driver knocked on the door of the house and another old man answered, toothless, stooped, grizzled, an older version of the driver. He invited us into a small room with a wooden bed, a two-burner stove, and a rough bare wood table with three backless stools. It took only a moment to see he was drunk.

He and the driver spoke in Polish with much nodding and smiling while I waited in the doorway. He outlined the body of a woman with his hands and he and the driver laughed. Then he looked over at me.

"Come, sit down, please," he said in German.

As I sat down on a stool he slapped the back of his head violently and pulled his hand roughly over his hair and across the top of his head. He repeated this numerous times during the day, muttering angrily to himself in Polish. Then, as if nothing had happened, he went to a closet and took out some vodka. "You'll have some, yes?" he said. "Then we talk."

I motioned for just a little. He and the cab driver had large glasses full. They spoke some more in Polish, laughing. I regretted that I had come.

Then Pawel turned to me and spoke in German.

"So," he said. "Hoiwro tells me you were a little Jewish girl hiding in the forests near here. There were many, many just like you. Tell me more, please. Perhaps we can find the place. I know all the places here as well as I know this house. I fought in all of them. Germans, Russians, Jews. I fought them all."

"You fought Jews?"

"Of course. Most of the Yids were Communists. They were with the Russians. But then the Russians gave them a good beating, too!"

He and Hoiwro laughed.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "For Jews it was a bad time. For us, too. It is nothing to laugh about."

I thought: this man might be the murderer of my parents. He might be the person who caused my pain.

"Tell me what you remember of the forest, please," he said.

"All I remember is lying in the forest in tremendous pain. All around me were birches. I remember that very clearly. And there was a clearing nearby, the sun was breaking through the mist."

Pawel shook his head, staring at his glass. "There were many massacres in the forests in those times. And hundreds of clearings near birch trees. Many are gone now, turned into fields, into high-rise apartments. Yours probably, too."

He said something to Hoiwro in Polish. They both laughed. Then he downed his glass of vodka.

"Come," he said. "We try. I show you some clearings."

"How much . . ." I began to ask.

He shook his head no, putting his hands on my shoulders and his face near mine.

"Nothing. Gratis. A beautiful woman. Let's say you're my daughter."

He pulled me to him and planted a wet kiss on my cheek. I felt the scrape of his grizzle. In a second it was over and he was at a proper distance.

"I would rather--"

He waved me away. "We will try, that's all."

We drove east, Pawel sitting with me in the back, a little too close. Occasionally he would take a nip of vodka and give me a wink.

"There were many large forests here during the war," he said. "Many are gone. I know a few places that might meet your description. You don't mind a little walking."

"No, not at all."

Pawel said something to Hoiwro in Polish. Hoiwro made a turn onto a dirt road. We bounced along for a while, then turned right onto a forest road and stopped.

Pawel offered me some vodka. I refused. He took another nip, then passed the bottle to Hoiwro, who took a healthy gulp. He said something else to Hoiwro in Polish, then we got out of the taxi.

"Come," he said. "There was some fight here in '44. The Germans swept this forest and we made them pay, believe me. There were Jews here, too. This may be your place."

We started into the forest. Pawel pointed silently to craters on the forest floor. As we went deeper I began to feel even more strongly the futility of my search.

"In a moment," Pawel said, "we come to a clearing with birches. I show you."

We went slightly down hill, then climbed a bit. There was no trail or road. The forest floor was nearly bare beneath the tall slender trunks of the trees.

"Here," Pawel said, pointing to a clearing.

About fifty feet away was a meadow leaning down to a brook. At the fringe of the meadow were birches, deeper in were pines.

"No," I said. "This is wrong."

"Tell me more," Pawel said. "What is wrong? Then I'll know better."

"The birches weren't in the clearing. They were here, in from the clearing. And the clearing was smaller, just enough for the sun to break through the mist."

I was remembering now! I was remembering more!

"What kinds of trees were just at the edge of the clearing?"

"I'm not sure. I was lying among the birches. The trees at the clearing were thicker, darker trunks, bigger leaves."

"What else? Any roads? Trails? Fallen trees?"

I shook my head no. "I don't remember. All I remember is what I saw."

"Think again."

Again I tried to imagine the scene.

"Yes, there was a little mossy place with mushrooms and . . . tiny blue flowers."

"Where?"

"In front of me. Leading to the clearing."

Pawel shook his head. "There are so many forests, so many clearings. I don't know this place. But we try, yes?"

He took another nip of vodka. I thought he had left the bottle with Hoiwro. Then I realized he had two.

"The Jews, you know, were all in here." He waved his arm. "We cleaned them out." He nodded his head, then slapped the back of his neck and moved his open hand over the top of his head again, muttering nastily in Polish. "Yes, yes, that's the way it was. I'm not lying to you. Only so much food. And they brought the Germans in. A nuisance anyway." He took some more vodka. "Terrible times, yes?"

"Yes."

"Better to forget."

"Perhaps."

"Much better to forget."

By the time we got back to the taxi, Hoiwro was drunk. Two drunk old men. Murderers of Jews.

"I think we should go back," I said.

"Only one place?" Pawel asked in surprise. "We looked in only one place! There are others. Don't lose heart!"

"I'm tired."

"You're afraid. You don't have to be afraid, good lady. I'm an old man. Besides, when I'm drunk I'm weak as a fly. And Hoiwro here, he drives better when he's drunk. Yes?"

Hoiwro nodded enthusiastically.

"Besides, you are so beautiful, the most beautiful woman. I want to help you."

Again, he threw his arms around me and gave me his quick wet kiss on the cheek.

He opened the door of the taxi. I got in. He got in next to me and gave some instructions to Hoiwro in Polish.

"Terrible times," he repeated, as Hoiwro drove through the countryside. "First we fought the Russians. Then the Russians retreated and it was the Germans. And the Jews. And the Russian partisans. Then we were told, cooperate with the Russians. The Germans are our enemy. So we cooperate. We stop killing Russians.

"Then the uprising of '44. The Russian army sits on the east bank of the Wista and watches us get massacred by the Germans. Tens of thousands of Poles slaughtered while the Russians watch. And laugh. And when we're all dead the Russians enter Warszawa over our bones! This is cooperation! Didn't I know? I told them, we are Poles, fighting for Poland. We kill Germans and Russians and Jews."

"Where did you kill Jews?"

He swept his hand over the back seat of the taxi. "Everywhere. The forests are full. What do they eat? They have nothing to eat, no clothing. The Jewish partisans fight well but have few guns. The Germans sweep the forests, catch them up like sardines in a net."

"Did you just kill them? Or did you do . . . other things?"

"Me? I kill them. Clean." He took a gulp of vodka. "We don't waste bullets, we put a bayonet in the throat. But others, no. They do other things. There is so much death they think God hides his eyes. There are corpses everywhere, and people laughing, and bodies are like toys,

and people aren't real. It is a terrible dream and nothing is real. So they do things they never do when God is there."

He said something in Polish to Hoiwro and we pulled off the highway. On either side were woods.

"Come," Pawel said. "In here to the left."

We went into the woods, Pawel walking so unsteadily I was afraid he'd fall on the uneven forest floor. Deep in was a clearing, but again it was wrong.

"Dear lady," Pawel said, swaying back and forth on his drunken legs. "I do not believe you will find your special place. There are too many forests, too many clearings. I am very sorry for you. You will have to go away disappointed."

I had to help him back to the taxi. He settled into the seat and took another swig of vodka. Then he fell asleep.

"Take me to the hotel," I told Hoiwro. "Please. And then take him home. Yes?"

"I'm sorry. Please, I must apologize for my friend. He really is very knowledgeable--"

"Yes, he is. I don't blame you at all, Hoiwro. Please, let's just go back."

Hoiwro started back. I stared out the window. So many forests! We passed through villages, through farmland, through forests that lined both sides of the road.

Back at the hotel I paid Hoiwro, went up to my room, and fell immediately into a deep sleep. Much later, restless in the dawn, I saw myself as a child, slender, lovely, with long black hair. I was in an orphanage, and I refused to speak or to understand what was being said. I sat apart from the other children, staring at whatever was in front of me.

I dreamed that what I saw in front of me was a beautiful woman, with beams of all the colors of the rainbow flashing from her eyes, her lips, her hair. I could not take my eyes off her as the colors flashed and played in the light. "You see how beautiful she is!" the little girl thought excitedly. In the dream we communicated directly, without speaking. "So lovely! I can think of nothing else."

"There is so much else!" I thought. "Please, don't shut yourself off from life. There will be time to see the woman of the sunbeams. Come down now, to this world of joy and pain."

In my dream the little girl I once was became the little match girl. I remembered how people mistakenly pitied her because they were unaware of the beauty of her vision as she died. She smiled at me to watch what was to come and struck her first match.

In the flame of the match I saw the naked bodies of my mother and father--I knew them in the dream and loved them--burning, burning alive as they screamed in agony. I struggled to wake up, but I did not wake up. In my dream I became convinced it was not a dream, it was real. Before my eyes they shriveled up into ash, crackling like the bodies of insects. And the match went out.

Still smiling, motioning with her head for me to look again, the little girl I once was struck her second match. In the glow of its flame I saw the forest and the clearing I had been looking for, exactly as it was in my memory. Pawel was there, and Hoiwro, and a number of other people, all standing in a grove of birches.

Pawel took a nip of vodka and handed the bottle to Hoiwro. Then he took out a long knife, with a blade as long as a man's arm, and stabbed a man in the throat, and the man, a short man, pudgy, with a black goatee, fell to his knees and toppled over, holding his throat with both hands like a man trying to hold back water in a gushing pipe, banging his forehead against a thick root. Other men were stabbed in the throat and toppled over while the women wailed their sorrow, hopelessly, not even considering the possibility of mercy.

Then it was the women's turn. Pawel and Hoiwro ripped off the dress of an old woman and pulled off her underclothes. Numb, she was like a cloth doll in their hands. Pawel placed his knife at her groin and looked back at the other men and grinned. Then he thrust it in, twisting, twisting, and pulled it out red and dripping. The woman was left to her pain. She dropped to her knees, then on her side, holding her bloody groin with blood-spattered hands, screaming and writhing grotesquely in the motions of love.

Some of the men with Pawel and Hoiwro laughed. Then they moved on to the other women, ripping off their clothes, fondling the young ones, raping them, in the end plunging the long blades deep into the women's groins, twisting, plunging in and out, until all of the women lay on the forest floor, blood dripping from their fingers down their bare legs, moaning, screaming as they held themselves helplessly with their hands. And the second match went out.

Smiling triumphantly, the little girl I once was struck all her remaining matches at once. I closed my eyes and covered my face with my hands. "Come down! Come down!" the little girl mocked me. "Come down to the world of joy and pain!"

It made no difference that I closed my eyes and covered them with my hands. In my mind I saw clearly Pawel and Hoiwro move on to a little girl, younger than I was at the orphanage, not even three, a little girl who both was and was not me. They and their friends pulled off the little girl's clothes, beating her with their fists while she screamed.

When she was naked her face was bloody and one eye was shut and she breathed huge, heavy breaths. One of the men pulled down his pants and put himself into her, huge as he was for her, and ripped and ripped in and out while the others passed the vodka and waited their turn. Then another and another. The fourth took a stick off the forest floor and shoved it deep into her, swiveling it there, and other men took twigs and mud and pebbles and leaves and laughing shoved them in with the stick, as if loading a cannon through the muzzle. The men stood around the child laughing and shoving forest debris into her with sticks and fingers and gun barrels until they tired of it and went away.

In the last glow of the remaining matches I saw a young woman, herself holding her bleeding groin, crawl over to the screaming child and take her in her arms.

## CHAPTER 23

## In Which Ania Creates the Sun-Sculpture

The next morning I awoke to the memory of that dawn in the forest. I remembered it completely and wrote it down just as it appears at the beginning of this memoir. Then I left Poland for New York.

I chose the name Ania Marmosa from my previous dream and took a studio on N. Moore Street, where I began work on the sun-sculpture. To me it seemed something of a miracle that the vision I had had as a child was so precisely the realization of what I was setting out to create. Perhaps every artist feels this sense of being a divine messenger, but my mission seemed particularly clear because I had already seen my final product whole. All that remained was working out the technique for giving the vision substance.

I saw it as a message to life from death, since I believed that when I saw the woman of the sunbeams I had died and she had sent me back to life. The message was this: that life is extraordinarily beautiful, more beautiful than any living thing can begin to appreciate. There are a few moments when we understand what has been given to us, the most compelling of which is the moment of death. I had been privileged to live through that moment and to return, bringing with me a vision of beauty that few have had the opportunity to recreate.

The task, however, was more difficult than I had thought it would be. I spent months reading about characteristics of prisms, the effects of mirrors on light, the materials available for the creation of spectra, and so on. I made many calculations, drawings, and designs, and several miniature prototypes that produced quite lovely results, but not the unearthly effect I had seen as a child.

I would be satisfied with nothing less and kept working, expanding the design until it required over 450 crystals and mirrors. I was tempted to stop there. Who knew, after all, what the ball of light would look like once the sculpture had been completed full size? Perhaps the prototypes had fallen short simply because they were prototypes, smaller and less precisely cut than the real thing, made of inferior materials. But I knew better.

One night I had a dream in which I saw the ball of light high up on a distant mountain. It was dark, and I remember in my dream thinking that without sunlight it was impossible for the ball of light to be so bright. I made my way towards the mountain on a rocky path that forced me to grip boulders on either side. Below was a city by the sea. An enormous semi-circle of blackness cut into the heart of the lights.

It's Haifa! I thought. Then this is Mt. Carmel! I was certain that when I reached the top of the mountain I would be taken up to heaven to live happily and surrounded by beauty forever.

As I got near the top I found the woman of the sunbeams walking beside me. She put her arm around my shoulder and said, "You did an excellent job, Ania, really excellent. I knew you would, of course, even when you were a child. You fulfilled all my expectations of you and more. I'm very proud."

I glowed with pleasure. The light from the woman of the sunbeams, combined with that of the ball of light, restored daylight to the mountain, even though it was still dark below. I ran up the last few hundred yards of the trail, which zigzagged steeply up a smooth, grassy slope, and arrived at the top breathless, looking down at the ball of light, which was clearly not my creation.

It was set at the bottom of a shallow pit lined with a spiral ramp. The pit was shallow enough so that rays of light emerged above its lip, but the ball itself was far more intense and beautiful than the light that could be seen from the bottom of the mountain. I stared at it, overcome, as the woman of the sunbeams came up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders.

"As you see," she said, "my light is only a spark from this inferno. And the light you've created, lovely as it is, is only a reflection of that spark. Here is the light of Creation, naked, so that you can see directly the source of all things."

I stared at it, thinking joyfully, then I've died, and at last I've been allowed to come home. But the woman of the sunbeams, reading my thoughts, shook her head no.

"You must go back," she said. "We've brought you to see this so that you can return and do better. Up to now you've worked only with the vision of me, but now you will work with a far greater vision. Look at the light! Look!"

I looked, and what I saw amazed me. This fireball of creation, seething with color, was surrounded by the branches of a very ordinary greasewood bush that seemed serenely unaffected by the awesome, tremulous energy which it encased.

"Life and matter, body and soul," the woman of the sunbeams sang behind me. "Do you see now, do you see why people were created, do you see why we did not permit you simply to die?"

I saw and understood, though there was no way I could put it into words. And in my dream I thought: I must remember to write this down! But I had no idea what to write down.

"There is no light," the woman of the sunbeams said, answering my thoughts, "without the burning bush."

I awoke immediately with the intention of writing this down, but I lay motionless on my quilt for a long time, going over and over the entire dream. I had been able to create a ball of light that seemed to hang suspended in air--pure color, encased in nothing. The crystals and mirrors were all below and to one side, apparatus hidden so as to give the illusion that the ball was ethereal, come from a non-material world. Whereas the woman of the sunbeams--and the burning bush of my dream--were embodiments that glowed with color.

That was what was missing from my sun-sculpture--substance, matter, death. I was on the wrong track. I needed a sculpture to surround the light.

But how to sculpt it? For the next several months I was elated and depressed. Everything had to be redone, which elated me. But I was no sculptress. I had no idea how to shape metal gracefully. I spent several weeks measuring and producing exact drawings of various bushes, allowing Nature to be my sculptress. But the product invariably was ordinary. Nothing seemed commensurate with my ambition.

I finally gave up trying to create the form of the bush and concentrated on my mirrors and crystals. This approach seemed more workable. I created branches as I needed them, bouncing light here and there wherever I desired. The branches, so to speak, grew of themselves, as did the trunk and legs, in response to the increasing energy of the ball.

I was happier at this time than I had ever been. Each day the sculpture grew, as if it were a living bush in spring. I approached my work as if entering a sanctuary, with the happy sense that this day I would create something precious, however small. I believed that the whole would eventually be so beautiful that anyone who saw it, even if beset by a profound sorrow, would fall in love with life once again. I was lonely, but my loneliness only heightened my everyday ecstasy. I had stripped life near to nakedness, and I held it luxuriously close.



On the day I finished the prototype of the sculpture, and put it in the center of my room, and watched the ball of light engulf the branches, and saw that it was good and wept with gratitude, I met Gregor Sampo once again.

It was, as at first, in Washington Square, late on an April afternoon. The sun which had lit my tiny sculpture so gloriously hours before was now only four stories high, pitching its orange light underhand through side streets and alleyways. Gregor was sitting on a bench with a friend, bathed in orange light, as his friend pointed me out on the other side of a wide strip of concrete.

Gregor stared at me as I made my way towards him. I smiled, enjoying his enjoyment of me. His friend also stared, but as I approached I kept my eyes steadily on Gregor. When I got close Gregor waved hello and grinned.

"You don't recognize me," I said.

He shook his head no. "Believe me, I would. I've never met you."

"I'm Rachael Hudson."

He shook his head no again, smiling a superior smile. "You may have been Rachael Hudson at one time. You're not anymore."

"Gregor! You recognize me now, don't you?"

"I'm telling you, sweetheart, you're not Rachael Hudson. Not even a smidgen. You're Venus arising from someone's wet dream. This is Howard, by the way. He paints gauzy, R-rated wet dreams. Maybe you just escaped from one of his paintings."

I turned to Howard and shook his hand, letting Gregor be Gregor. Was he happy for me? Proud of me? Amazed? Astounded? There was no way I could tell.

Howard smiled and said, "I remember you. Rachael Hudson. I'd never forget anything as gorgeous as you. Just remind me where we met."

"We've never met."

He was a spaniel-looking man with a gentle, lined face, wide-set eyes, and a thick, droopy moustache.

"In my dreams, then."

"Perhaps. Gregor, you owe me a portrait."

"I don't owe anybody anything. Except God, for my life. Except that fortunately there turns out to be no God, so I'm back to the first proposition."

"And all the times I carried your things up to your apartment?"

"You've been amply repaid."

"How?"

"With the pleasures of anticipation. Howard, it was a nice afternoon."

"Can't I look a while longer?"

"Stare at her ass as we walk away."

He got up, took my arm, and guided me across the park towards Sixth Avenue.

"You still have the same apartment?" I asked.

He nodded. "Rent controlled. The bastard goes ape every time he sees my rent check. I can buy all his buildings and him along with them, and all I pay is a hundred and twenty bucks a month."

"Gregor, you knew I was Rachael Hudson. Aren't you happy for me?"

"Happy, sad, what's the difference? You woke up. I knew you would. You must have gone through hell. I saw Paul in Paris."

"How was he?"

"The same. Sit on my face so I can eat your shit. Blames himself for everything."

"I hoped he wouldn't."

"Why?"

"I think it might be easier for him if he--"

"Blamed you? Not been Paul Hudson? Easier for you, you mean."

"Yes. Easier for me."

"How come you're still buried in bullshit?"

He guided me into a greasy spoon on Sixth and ordered two cups of coffee. I changed mine to tea.

"So now that you're gorgeous," he said as we sipped cold water, "do you screw?"

I shook my head no.

"All screwed up?"

"I always will be."

"Freaking shame."

We got our hot drinks and sipped them silently.

"And how are you doing?" I finally asked.

"Lousy."

"What's the matter?"

"I haven't done a freaking thing since Nymbus."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"Too scared."

"Oh, Gregor!"

"I don't need a mother," he said.

"What do you need?"

"A whore."

"Gregor, I'm in love with you. I always have been. What you want to do with that love is up to you."

He sat quietly looking at me, thinking. "I don't want to touch it," he said.

"Why not?"

"I'll just screw it up."

"No you won't. You can't."

"What's your name nowadays?"

"Ania. Ania Marmosa."

"Classy name. Classy broad."

"I love you, Gregor. It's not a demand, it's an offer."

"I appreciate it."

"Do you?"

"Yes, really. When I'm old and sick and need someone to visit me in the hospital--"

"You need someone now, Gregor."

"Yes, but I want to be alone."

"Really?"

"Really. I'm not bullshitting you."

"No, I don't think you are."

Again, we sat silently.

"Will you do my portrait?" I asked. "I'll pay you for it."

He shook his head no.

"Why not?"

"There's still nothing to draw."

"What do you mean? I'm a person now."

Again, he shook his head no.

"Why not? What's wrong?"

"I told you. Venus just arisen from a dream. You don't even live in the world. Where are you living now?"

"I've got a loft on N. Moore. I'm doing--"

"You don't have to defend yourself. You're a lovely dream. Really lovely."

"But how can you say--"

"I can say anything I want. I don't have to give a shit what you think about it."

"But I respect your opinion, Gregor. Maybe more than I should. You were right before. I'm afraid you're right now."

He leaned over to me and touched my face. "Don't be afraid, Ania, or whatever your name is," he said. "You know you're not all there. I don't have to tell you that. Maybe you'll never be. Go ahead and dream."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Dream something really beautiful. Stupendous. None of us are all there, we're all only partial people, living less than half in this world. You a bit more than the rest of us, that's all. You're not so different."

"Then why can you draw other people and not me?"

"Because, Ania, if I put you down on paper you'll disappear."

He was right, as always. He had put his finger on the essential thing. It took me a long time to understand what he meant by that remark. And when I understood it, I became very afraid. I didn't want to think about what would happen to me once the sun-sculpture was finished.

I was still happy, still absorbed in my work. But the creative part was over. All the specifications had been drawn. Now it was simply a matter of cutting, grinding, shaping, most of which I gave to craftsmen. I decided to bring the sculpture to Israel ready to assemble. I had the site chosen, the plans drawn. It was still exciting to imagine how the world might receive my gift. But a piece of my mind was free to stare at the blankness that was my future.

Ania Marmosa would definitely disappear. Who would succeed her was the question. Where would I live? What would I do? I began to realize just how totally this obsession with my past had taken up my life. In a way, like my marriage to Paul, it had been another form of sleep. Gregor had seen that. As always, he had provided the sketch in which I had seen what I needed to see.

The sun-sculpture was my letter of farewell. How wonderful at last to say farewell! Why else bring my tortured past before me, if not to be able to say farewell? Not to the memories, not to the little girl in the forest, but to the obsession, to the sense of having betrayed something, to the controlling dreams.

And turn to what? I was nothing except my past, and once that had been put down I would disappear. Nothing I could think of would be one hundredth as intense, exciting, miraculous, beautiful as what I had just been through. How could I stand being reborn into an ordinary life?

In the days before I left for Israel I carefully effaced every bit of evidence that I was Ania Marmosa. I painted the walls and ceiling, waxed and polished the floor, washed the windows and appliances, took everything with me that I had come with or acquired. At four on the last morning I went downstairs, got a taxi, and went to Gregor's apartment. I gave the driver twenty dollars to wait for me and went upstairs. Fortunately, he was home. He didn't seem the least surprised or put out that I had awakened him.

"I'm leaving," I said. "I want to say goodbye."

"Goodbye," he said.

"I understand what you meant. As usual, you were right."

"Meant?" He seemed puzzled.

"When you said that if you put me down on paper I would disappear."

He laughed. "It looks like you're disappearing anyway."

"Yes, I'm going to put myself down in a different way. I'm very excited, I feel like God about to create a new world. I can't stand the waiting, I want it there already, in front of me. But once it's there, there'll be nothing for me. Do you understand?"

"Come in," he said, stepping aside from the doorway.

I entered his bare apartment. The only change from the time he had been a teenager was that there was no draped work-in-progress in the center of the room. We sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. He was wearing a pair of baggy dungarees, no top, barefoot. His middle-aged face was still puffy from sleep. A crumpled quilt lay on a straw mat in the middle of the floor.

"What's the big deal?" he said. "Every artist feels exactly as you do."

"But I'm not an artist. This is my one shot. After this there's nothing."

"Nothing," he said, "is the most exciting thing of all."

I thought about that. Of course, again he was right. Why hadn't I realized that? Why didn't he realize it himself?

"Then why are you afraid?" I asked. "Why have you stopped working?"

"It's easy to talk like a guru. The trouble is one acts like an ordinary shthead."

"Now who's full of bullshit?"

He shrugged. "Say what you want. I try. Nothing worthwhile comes out."

"Be patient. Have faith. It will."

"I know."

He stared at the black window. "Nymbus was my *magnum opus*. I don't feel capable of surpassing it. And I don't have enthusiasm for doing anything less."

"That's how I feel about my work."

"Good. Then let's make a deal."

"Yes? What kind of deal?"

He smiled and moved just a bit further away. "Let's both become other people, completely. Totally new. OK? Then neither of us will have to worry about what we did before. Our pasts will be one hundred percent behind us. When you're finished with your *magnum opus* disappear completely. No trail, not a single connection, not a trace. If we meet again, don't say, 'Remember me? I'm Rachael Miller/Hudson/Ania Marmosa.' Say, 'Hello, who the hell are you?'"

"But I can't become a totally new person. The person I invent will still be me."

"True enough. But you will also become the person you invent. And that's exciting. Don't you think?"

"Yes. That is."

He got up and helped me up. "Is it a deal?" he said, keeping hold of my hands.

"The new me will still love you," I said.

"As you wish."

"And who will you become? What sort of person? You're so famous. How will you reinvent yourself, leaving no trace behind?"

"The person I'll become," he said, "is you."

## CHAPTER 24

### In Which Warren Hill Meets a Woman Who May Be Ania Marmosa

While I was in Paris I searched for Gen Sum but found nothing. The café where Ania met him seemed not to exist, or at least I couldn't find it. No one knew of a café run by an elderly Asian woman with mostly Asian help, which was strange. Even if such a café had been closed for years, someone would remember it. But although I questioned many café owners in various arrondissements of Paris, no one did.

I went to Ulm. The orphanage, of course, was long gone, as were the women who ran it. One elderly woman who was reputed to have worked there turned out not to have. The orphanage records were in neither the municipal archives nor the local library.

Working back the other way, I traced Rachael Miller through U.S. immigration records to an orphanage in Tel Aviv, also long gone. Their records, too, were no longer available. A person was, though--Rivka Hurwitz, who had been registrar for eight months in 1948-49.

"No silent ones that I can remember!" she said with a laugh. "They behaved like all children behave! Can you imagine? After what they had been through? You should have heard the noise in the yard!"

We sat in her garden behind a stucco house in the Tel Aviv suburb of Bat Yam. The air smelled of the sea. She was about seventy, wrinkled and vigorous, as were many elderly Israelis. We spoke in German.

"Were they disturbed? Of course! Who wouldn't be? But they were children. I know some of them now, still. They're just people. Isn't it strange? To live through something like that and then to grow up to an ordinary life."

"The children from Ulm--"

"They came from everywhere, went right through. We kept them as short a time as possible. Everyone was taking them, it was a *mitzvah*, you know? And many went to kibbutzim."

"Which kibbutzim?"

She shrugged. "Whichever."

I visited kibbutzim, starting with the one directly across from the British fortress at Latrun. Unfortunately, Kibbutz Maccabee had not been in existence in 1948.

"I can't imagine where such memories could have come from," said Ephraim Levine, the American-born manager at Kibbutz Maccabee. "This kibbutz was set up after independence as a frontier post. I don't remember getting kids from anywhere."

"She might not have come to the kibbutz until, say, 1950 or '51. She was a special case. She may have been called Hatikvah. Do you remember anyone here by the name of Dalit?"

"Dalit who?"

"I don't know."

"A member? A hired worker?"

I shrugged.

He shrugged back.

In the far north of Israel, at Kibbutz Dan, I struck some pay dirt. A number of the kibbutzniks had come from the orphanage in Ulm.

"Yes, of course I remember her!" a woman named Devorah said excitedly. "Yes, she was here! Esther, you remember the girl who wouldn't talk!"

Esther nodded enthusiastically.

"She was a real case. Just stared in front of her, all shut off. She came into the orphanage at Ulm like that."

"When?"

"I'm not sure. Soon after me, with other children from the east. Then we all came here together."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know. Do you remember?" she asked Esther.

"Lots of children went other places from here," Esther said. "I don't think she could have stayed here long because she was a problem. They had to have someone watch her all the time, she kept wandering off. In Ulm they used to tie her to the banister with a long string."

"Where might they have sent her?"

Both Esther and Devorah shrugged.

"What was her name?"

"No one had any idea," Esther said. "We gave her a name."

"What name?"

"Chava."

"Chava who?"

"We just called her Chava because we had no other Chavas."

So there was another name to add to Hatikvah, Rachael, and Ania. Not very helpful. The net result of seven weeks of inquiry was pretty close to zero. Not that I had expected to find much. I was just filling holes.

I went back to Rivka Hurwitz with the little I had learned. "She might have been called Chava," I said.

"Chava who?"

"I don't know. She may have come to you from Kibbutz Dan in the north. Or she may have regained her speech and come from Maccabee, in which case her name would have been Hatikvah."

"Maccabee? Maccabee was started after I left the orphanage. If she came from Maccabee I didn't know her. You say she was unusually beautiful, dark eyes, long dark hair. Chava, yes?"

She made an earnest effort to remember.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I--"

"She was found in a forest with heaps of corpses, the only one alive. She wouldn't talk, wouldn't look at anyone, just stared in front of her. They sent her to Kibbutz Dan with other children from Ulm but she was a problem, always wandering off, so they took her away. I believe that they gave her to a woman named Dalit at Maccabee, maybe soon after Maccabee was founded, and Dalit cured her."

"Cured her?"

"Brought back her speech."

"She wasn't sick, you know. That was a misconception of so many people who worked with these children. Their reactions were normal, healthy, considering what they went through."

"But inappropriate once they were here."

"Yes. They learned that, often slowly. All they needed was time--and love. That's what I said, but some of the psychologists wouldn't leave the children alone."

"Did you happen to meet or know of an American psychologist named Dora Miller?"

"Of course. Who doesn't know of Dora Miller? She came to the orphanage right after independence. Stayed for two years."

"Did she take any children?"

"She worked with many children."

"Yes, but did she take one home with her to America?"

"I don't recall. I left the orphanage while she was still there. Got married a second time. My second husband was killed in '67."

"I'm sorry."

She laughed nervously. "Everyone suffers. Then you get over it. You live without whatever you thought your life depended on. The truth is that your life doesn't depend on anything except bread and water. You continue to live, the pain throbs more and more dully, other people, other things move in to fill the void. Only at night the ghosts come to you, to look at your healed wounds, to see how deeply you have buried them. I'm sorry, I'm talking too much about myself and you want to talk about . . ."

"Chava."

"Yes, Chava. I'm sure I would remember her. I remember so many children. I've heard hundreds of stories, heart-rending, every one. Dr. Miller had a theory. She believed that the only way these children could be normal again would be to turn their faces exclusively to the future. Of course she had many willing accomplices at the orphanage, no one wanted to talk about the horrors they had gone through. Her theories quickly became the rule.

"It was a rule I often broke. You have to go back, these are things you can't leave behind you. When the ghosts visit you at night you must have something to say to them. There wasn't one child there who didn't leave some unfilled promise behind that required unearthing and reburial."

After I left Rivka I decided to lay to rest a ghost of my own. I drove up to Kibbutz Oreil off the Haifa road to see Dov Berman, who had been my contact in Athens during my days as a smuggler for Israel.

We sat on the sun-washed deck of the communal dining hall, a deck which extended on thin legs far out over a steep wooded hillside. Across the ravine was another ridge climbed by two Druse villages, and beyond that, glimpsed through a saddle between the villages, was a bite-sized chunk of the Mediterranean.

After catching up with the six or seven years since our last correspondence, I asked Dov casually, as if the subject had just occurred to me, "Whatever happened to Sylvana Sofit?"

Dov laughed. "I don't believe it! It took you over forty years to ask that question! What makes you suddenly wonder? What happened between you, anyway?"

I felt myself sweating, turning hot and red. "What do you mean?"

"We all assumed you were in love with her. That's why you were helping us. Isn't it so?"

"Partially. I also believed in--"

"Listen." He stretched out across the corner of the table and put his hand on my shoulder. The sympathy in his eyes made me even more embarrassed, more uncomfortable. "When you first came to Israel--when was it? '57? '58?--I waited for you to ask me about Sylvana. When you didn't, I decided it had been too painful for both of you. Sylvana never said a word about you, either. So what makes you ask now? Has it finally been long enough?"

"I suppose . . . But tell me, what about her? Is she alive? Is she married?"

He shook his head no. "She died about twelve years ago. Lung cancer. Soon after she came to Israel she began to smoke and eat obsessively. She became dumpy. Would you believe? Then she married a diamond cutter. They lived in Tel Aviv. You'd never have guessed she was once a beautiful woman."



"When did she get married?"

"About five years after she got here. After independence she opened a tiny jewelry shop on King George Street, which is how she met her husband. Ran it for over twenty years. She never had children. Maybe she couldn't after her experiences."

There was a long silence. I thought of Rachael and Paul, of children playing noisily in the yard of a post-war orphanage, of my own unwillingness to ask after Sylvana for forty years. We cannot look. It will sear our eyes.

"Isn't it strange," Dov said, "that someone who went through all that could live such an ordinary life?"

When I got back to my hotel there was a note from Lorelei. It said: Brad and I are at the Hilton. Call right away. We've found Ania Marmosa.

"She lives in Haifa," Lorelei told me, dressed in a mesh white robe over an electric blue bikini. Brad, always professional, wore a dark suit and tie. "Works in a boutique on Arlozoroff Street."

"How do you know she's--"

"Oh, it's definite, Warren. You can count on it. We showed her picture to Peter and Patty. They both agreed right away. No question."

Brad, sitting forward in a pink leatherette easy chair, squared his shoulders.

"How did you find her?"

"Brad had a specialist come over and draw her picture on my computer. Peter and Patty kept saying yes or no until it looked just as clear as a close-up shot of her face. It was fascinating, like playing a game of hot and cold. Then Brad came over here and started showing the picture around. He's a genius, he knew just where to go. A teacher at an *ulpan* in Haifa recognized her. Brad called me and I flew over for the kill."

"Wipe the green shit off your face, Warren," Brad laughed. "There isn't going to be any kill. I found her, which is all I was hired for. The rest is up to you."

"You'll let me in on it, won't you, Warren?" Lorelei pleaded. "I want to be there when you interview her. At least for part of the interview."

"She's living under the name of Ulana Chertok," Brad said. "Supposedly a Russian emigré from Balakovo, a small city on the Volga River. Divorced. She arrived in Israel two years ago on a TWA flight from New York. Date checks out with the date she probably left Lorelei's apartment. She has an American passport."

"You questioned her?"

"He hasn't gone near her, darling!" Lorelei gushed. "Be pleased! He took this marvelous photograph of her face from so far away I could barely make her out. I told you we wouldn't interfere! Brad, show him the pictures."

Brad snapped open a black leather attaché case that lay on a glass table. He held up two pictures, one a close-up photograph, the other a drawing. They were strikingly alike--a lovely, slim, haunted face with large dark eyes, large sensuous lips, long black hair flowing freely alongside narrow cheeks.

"Beautiful woman," I murmured.

"She has too much sadness in her face, don't you think?" Lorelei said. "Would you like to live with such gloom?"

Since Lorelei had her metallic blue tit pressed against the back of my arm, I suspected she was jealous. "She couldn't be nearly as lively as you," I said.

"Liveliness isn't everything," she answered, just barely suppressing a smile. "Anyway, we flew back to New York to show the picture to Peter and Patty. Then we flew back here to meet you. You'd better believe this cost a bundle."

I reddened. "I'm very grateful."

"So you'll let me talk to her, yes? After you start things off?"

"Well, let's see how--"

"Make sure you don't scare her," Brad warned. "She's still living a reclusive life. Single. Has a studio apartment two blocks from the boutique. Rarely goes out. Goes to movies alone. There doesn't seem to be anything in her life except the store."

"She owns it?"

"No, she runs it. The owner comes in a few times a week. I think it's a cover."

"A cover?"

"She had plenty of money in New York. Spent a fortune on materials for the sun-sculpture. I think she's rich, she doesn't need a job. Why does she work so hard? Why does she devote herself so exclusively to this tiny shop she doesn't even own? She's trying to look ordinary, like a bagman covering a pile of dough in a brown paper bag. My advice is to go slow. Get to know her, don't tell her right away what you're looking for. She'll disappear again."

"But I can see her, can't I?" Lorelei begged. "I spent so much money--"

"Of course," I assured her. "If she's Ania Marmosa. And if she agrees to see you."

"It's Ania Marmosa," she said confidently, straightening the knot in my tie. "And I'll bet that within two days she'll be doing anything you say."

I called Patty from my hotel.

"No, I never said I was sure it was her," Patty said. "It looks like her, I admit. But it's been two years since I've actually seen her. You know, when we were all sitting around the computer, and Holden--that's the specialist Brad brought in--was pressing me to remember this or that about her nostrils or jaw, I could feel my memory buckle and shift, like those liquid rocks deep in the earth. So that by the time we were finished, the computer drawing had replaced my memory of her, had become my memory of her. It was like a wall, making my earlier memory inaccessible."

"We all created her, sitting around the computer, a consensus memory that blotted out the individual memories. When Lorelei showed me the photograph of the woman Brad found in Israel, the computer drawing was all I could compare it to."

"Did Peter have the same experience?"

"Oh, no! You know Peter. He was definitely, absolutely sure it was Ania. No question. He hardly glanced at the photograph. But I still can't make up my mind. Show me the woman's face from a different angle and I might have a totally different idea."

I drove up to Haifa that evening. Brad had said the store closed at 7:30. I timed my arrival for 7:15.

It was a narrow store, no more than twenty feet wide, on a busy street about halfway up Mt. Carmel. In the window was a tasteful display of light frilly dresses, lace tops, silk slacks, kerchiefs, cosmetics, cheap flashy jewelry. I felt the femininity of the place like a whiff of strong perfume.

Inside was the woman of the photograph. She smiled as I entered, standing behind a small glass jewelry counter, more beautiful than the photograph, different in some vibrant way. Her full lips were dark red, her eyes were heightened with blue lids, she wore large thick gold hoops in her ears.

"I can help you?" she asked in heavily accented English.

"Are you Ulana Chertok?"

"Yes?"

I held out my hand. "Warren Hill. I'm a biographer."

She laughed, shaking my hand. "You are writing my life?"

"Yes."

"Yes?" She opened her eyes wide, half amused, half shocked.

"Someone told me you were Ania Marmosa. I came to see for myself."

She chuckled, a little nervously, it seemed to me. "People say no one know who this Ania Marmosa is. How you know how she look like?"

"I know people who knew her. They were fairly positive you were her. What do you say?" I smiled. "Are you Ania Marmosa?"

I watched her face closely. She smiled back, agitated. Her body gave a little shake.

"You make fun," she said.

I shook my head no.

"I tell you truth, I glad to die now, right now, to be her! You know?"

She began to cry, bending her head, closing her lids, resting the fingers of her right hand on each side of her nose.

"I'm sorry--"

"Please forgive, OK? I want so much--"

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to distress you. Can I take you to dinner? We can discuss this--"

She shook her head no.

"Please! What's the matter? Tell me!"

"I am nothing, nothing, shop girl, nothing, not know what mean to be great artist! To be Ania Marmosa one second only I give soul to devil--"

She went back to crying, leaning heavily on the glass counter, trying desperately to stop. I cursed myself for not taking Brad's advice. Time, of course, mattered. It was only luck that the media had not yet seized upon the snippet in *The Villager* and would soon be on my heels. But I could tell nothing from this storm of tears. Was it overdone? It seemed genuine. Yet it was too convenient.

"Let me explain, please!" I begged her. "Don't you want to know how I came to you?"

She stopped crying. "How you come?" she demanded.

"It's a long story. Please. Come with me. I'll explain the whole thing over dinner."

"You want dinner with me it not necessary--"

"It's not a line," I insisted.

"Line?"

"A lie, something to get you to go to dinner with me. Believe me, I wouldn't lie to you."

She looked at me for a long time. I locked eyes with her, smiling hopefully, and watched her soften. Something lovely passed between us.

"OK," she said finally. "I go to dinner with you. Mr. Hill?"

"Warren."

"Warren. I believe, Warren. You know, you are very beautiful. What is word? Distinguish."

I blushed.

"We are friends, yes? I believe. Look happy, yes, Warren?"

She waited anxiously until I smiled. Then she closed the shop and we walked a few doors down the street to a café that had a balcony jutting out from the side of the hill. The sun had just set behind the sea, and the lights of the city below glowed against the purple water and violet sky. Disappearing towards the horizon was a cruise ship, like a tiny birthday cake packed with candles headed for the darkness.

"Ah, so beautiful!" Ulana exclaimed. "You like?"

She sat sideways to the view, motioning me to sit facing it, a little piece of consideration that touched me with unexpected power. I couldn't remember the last time any woman had put me first.

We ordered our food, then she sat expectantly, looking at me steadily with her large, blue-lidded, dark eyes. She was at least well into her forties, with a face that was unusually smooth for her age but mature, completely formulated (to use Rachael Miller's word). She was wearing a pink fluffy knit top with a deep V cleft, exposing a small but graceful bosom, and loose black silk slacks. It struck me as almost tragically wasteful that so beautiful and worldly a woman should live so reclusive a life.

I told her everything, the entire story of the memoirs and of my search, watching her face for signs of recognition. I saw only intelligent interest, sympathy, compassion. When I told her that a detective had her under surveillance and had taken a photograph of her I saw a slight shudder. She blushed and lowered her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's not right to invade your privacy. That's why I'm telling you--"

"He is very boring, this detective, yes? There is nothing happening to me. I go from flat to shop, shop to flat. Warren, I wish you would be right, you know? I am shop girl, nothing. In Soviet Union I am in kiosk, I sell newspaper and cards. Now you tell to me I am Ania Marmosa. I swear I kill myself right now to be Ania Marmosa. I--"

Again she started crying, putting her hands over her face, then reaching into her bag for tissues and wiping her eyes dry.

"You're very beautiful," I said stupidly.

"Thank you. Is not good for me. I have no . . . creativity."

"The shop--"

"Yes, is nice, nice. My kiosk, too. Very nice. Forgive me, it is not your business to listen to this."

"Please," I said, reaching over to grasp her hand. She squeezed mine, forcing a smile, her eyes enlarged further by tears.

"I make big mistake coming here," she said.

"Why? I'm terribly sorry if--"

She laughed, wiping her eyes again, tossing her hair away from her face. "No here. I mean Israel. I make mistake. In life I make many."

"You'd prefer to be back in Russia?"

She shrugged. "I no like Israeli men. My life is joke. I divorce husband, he say I can not be Jew, so I come here and no like Jewish men. Israeli men are animals. You are gentleman, lovely gentleman. Not Jewish, yes?"

"No. Not Jewish."

She sighed.

"It is very bad joke. I make mistake, I marry wrong man. To him Jewish bad thing. When it mean something to me he get very angry, say terrible thing. I leave. I no want hurt him for my apply to leave. I still love. Is crazy, no?"

"You still love him?"

She shrugged her shoulders, then started crying again, burying her face in the tissue.

It seemed too banal to be true. My doubts returned. This was a shop girl talking. Of course she could express herself only primitively in English--if, indeed, her accent was real. Still, her tragedy was such soap opera I had difficulty believing it. I had difficulty believing she was just a shop girl. She seemed too sophisticated, too mysterious, too alluring.

"I am sorry, Warren," she said, emerging from her tears. "I not good company tonight. Later I am better, promise."

Now it was her turn to take my hand, which she did slowly, suggestively, caressing the backs of my fingers with her forefinger, throwing me a quick, tearful smile.

"Did you come here straight from Russia?" I asked abruptly.

"No," she said. "I come from United States."

"Why?"

"I go first to United States. You see, I learn English there badly, yes?"

"Not so badly."

She laughed. "You are gentleman. My friend say me go to United States first, get citizen, then Israel citizen. Have both, better than one."

That made sense, explaining the flight from New York.

"Why don't you go back to the United States?"

She shrugged. "I think, maybe. I have job here, flat. It not so easy."

"Would you mind meeting some people who knew Ania Marmosa?"

Her face froze for just one second. "No," she said. "You not believe?"

"I believe you," I assured her, not exactly telling the truth. "I need to satisfy other people. The woman who paid for the detective wants to meet you. And someone else, too."

The person I had in mind was Gregor Sampo.

## CHAPTER 25

### In Which It Is Determined that People Know What They Know

"She's a dead ringer. A twin. What can I say? She's not Ania Marmosa."

"You're positive," Brad said.

"You want to give me a lie detector test? Listen, Warren, where'd you get this troupe? A trapeze lady and a refugee from late-night television. Give them the hook, will you?"

Lorelei reddened. Gregor's description was unpleasantly apt, as she was wearing a gauzy blue kimono edged with gold over a tight pink body suit.

"Two people who knew her well in New York say she is," Brad responded coolly.

"So to them she is and to me she isn't. Maybe she's two-thirds Ania Marmosa. Work it out that way."

We were sitting in a private room at a Tel Aviv restaurant, quiet, dimly lit, intimate. I was host. Gregor and I sat together on one side of the table, Lorelei sat at the head, and Brad was opposite Gregor. Next to Brad was Ulana, and opposite Lorelei, at the foot of the table, was Gregor's friend Channah, looking shockingly like an old, used-out woman of the streets.

While the dispute over who Ulana was raged on in English, Ulana and Channah spoke quietly in Hebrew, like children ignoring adult table-talk. Channah, I gathered rather quickly, understood very little English, which made her the perfect mate for Gregor, who undoubtedly preferred his women bound and gagged. Ulana, I was certain, was grateful for the opportunity to hide with Channah behind the language barrier.

"How well did you know Ania Marmosa?" Brad asked.

"That depends. When she was Rachael Miller I knew her well. Then she became Rachael Hudson, moved to Paris, and I didn't see her for years."

"And as Ania Marmosa?"

"I met her again in Washington Square Park, which was where we first met. Gorgeous lady. I didn't recognize her at all. She said she was Rachael Miller Hudson. I couldn't believe it."

"Why not?"

"Rachael was a sleepy slob. A blank. Ania was straight out of Klimt."

"Who?"

"Klimt," Lorelei repeated impatiently.

"But she was Rachael. No doubt about that. We went to a diner on Sixth and talked for a while and she knew all kinds of things--casually--that only Rachael would know."

"What kinds of things?"

"Things we'd said to each other. Alone. She was all anxious to prove to me what a person she'd become. Then one night she came to me about four in the morning to say goodbye."

"When was that?"

"I don't remember exactly. Two years ago."

"Did you know about the sun-sculpture at that time?"

"I had no idea what she was doing or where she was going. A few days later I saw in an article in *The Villager* that she had disappeared. I posed as a relative and went over to her place on N. Moore. But I didn't find out much more about her than I already knew."

"Why did you want to find out more about her?" I asked. There was one mystery solved. Gregor shrugged. "Curiosity. She was one gorgeous woman. Maybe I was flipped."

"Did you carry your investigation further?"

"Investigation? What are you talking about?"

"You visited her former school, didn't you?"

Gregor stopped to think, obviously jolted.

"Yes?" Brad asked, sliding in quick as a shark.

"Oh, yes. I visited Science."

"Why?"

"I told you. I was flipped. She was a beautiful woman and she disappeared. I knew her as a baby pig. She's a case, isn't she?"

"She certainly is," I agreed.

"It's amazing how much like Ania she looks," Gregor went on, motioning towards Ulana. "From a distance I'd swear she was Ania. I have a theory about that. I think everyone has a twin, at least one, walking around somewhere."

"You really think so?" Lorelei asked excitedly. "That's fascinating! You know, when I was twelve I went to summer camp for the first time. And when I went into my bunk, nervous and shivery, two girls came up to me and started talking about what we all did last summer. It was really creepy, let me tell you. When I insisted my name wasn't Donna they thought I was playing a joke on them."

"Be that as it may--" Brad tried to break in.

"Did you ever come across your twin?" Lorelei asked Gregor.

Gregor nodded. "A used car salesman from Bayonne. Would you believe? Name of George Sanders. Even the name was close."

"Ever hear of Gen Sum?" I asked, everything suddenly clicking into place.

"Gen Sum? No, I don't think so."

"Ania's lover?"

"Lucky man."

"Disappeared from the King Alfred Hotel a couple of months ago."

"Not so lucky, maybe."

"Like Ania Marmosa," Brad remarked.

"So? What do you want me to make of that?"

"I think you're hiding something. I know it as sure as I know anything. What are you hiding, Gregor?"

Gregor smiled. "I killed them both, OK? Buried them side by side pelvis to mouth. Sixty-nining under the earth. Forever. Think what future archaeologists will make of that! A cult of post-mortem sex! Burying lovers in the position of maximum bliss!"

"Why do you keep throwing us off the point, Gregor?"

"Your point isn't my point."

"What's your point?"

"That you're an asshole. Good food, though." He took a sip of champagne.

"So there's no reason to believe your testimony about her," Brad said, rolling his head towards Ulana.

"I never saw any reason to believe anything."

Brad looked at me. "He's a waste. Mind if I ask Ulana some questions?"

I waved my hand towards her.

"Ms. Chertok. Ulana. Excuse me, please. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

Ulana looked up from her conversation with Channah.

"Would you mind telling me where you lived in New York?"

"Yes?"

"In New York. Your address?"

Ulana shrugged.

"Do-you-know-where-you-lived-in-New-York?" Brad repeated slowly and loudly, carefully enunciating each word.

Ulana shook her head no.

"Come on, Ms. Chertok. You speak well enough to understand me. I have you speaking on tape, if you'd like to hear it."

"Tape?"

"Tape." Brad reached for his attaché case, but I motioned him to stop.

"That won't be necessary, I'm sure," I said.

"Where did you live in New York, Ms. Chertok?" Brad asked a third time.

"I . . . I no remember."

"You don't remember?"

Ulana shook her head no.

"How can you not--"

"Which borough?" Lorelei asked gently.

"Borough?"

"Manhattan? Brooklyn? Queens?"

Ulana looked inquiringly at me.

"You don't remember where you lived?" Brad asked incredulously. "Anything about where you lived?"

"No," Ulana said, blushing, looking down at the mauve tablecloth.

"How long did you live in New York?"

"I was here since two years--"

"No, not here. In New York. How-long-did-you-live-in-New-York?"

She shrugged.

"This is clear enough," Brad said. "Isn't it? They're both hiding something. She knows I can easily check her answers. So she prefers not to understand. You want proof? This is as good as any."

"I'm not looking for proof," I said. "This is not an inquest. It's a dinner. I'm glad we all came here to talk. It's my suspicion that we've all learned a great deal, though we each may have learned something different. As far as I'm concerned, we can leave it at that."

"You're the client."

"No, Lorelei's the client."

"Well, I'm satisfied!" Lorelei exclaimed, smiling happily. "Brad, you were wonderful! I know everything I need to know. Ania, believe me, your secret is safe! I admire you so much! I wish . . . well, this is good enough!"

Ulana stared at her, still blushing, quivering slightly, as if in a spotlight holding a tight, tight circle.

"And, Gregor, your secret is safe also."

"What's my secret?"

She waved him off. "It needn't be said. You'll only deny it, as you must. But it doesn't matter. I know what I know."

"Don't we all," Gregor said.



Later, after Brad and Lorelei had left, I dropped Ulana at my hotel and drove Gregor and Channah back to Channah's apartment in a slum near the Shouk Carmel.

"I'll tell you what I think," I said to Gregor as we drove. "You needn't answer. I have no proof one way or the other. Just a good deal of circumstantial evidence."

Gregor nodded.

"I think you helped Ania pull this off."

"What makes you say that?"

"I know who Gen Sum is. And George Sampson. And Roger Gompsa. You tipped me off when you told the story of your 'twin,' George Sanders."

Gregor nodded, smiling.

"I think when she left Paul she came straight to you. You're the one she always loved. And you in essence sculpted her into what she is now. You don't have to answer."

"I have no intention of answering."

"And you know where she is now."

Gregor bowed slightly in the passenger's seat, as if in deference to my skill.

"That's what I intend to tell the public," I said.

"What? What do you intend to tell them?"

"The truth. That I don't know who Ania Marmosa is, but that I believe you do. And that I cannot tell what in the memoirs is truth and what fiction."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course not. That's what I plan to say finally. The memoirs stand by themselves, like the sun-sculpture. When one looks at the sculpture it makes no difference who created it, just as it makes no difference when one reads the memoirs what is real and what invented. All that matters is the story, which is real in a way no life can ever be. But I regret that I'll never write a biography of Ania Marmosa."

"What will you do?"

"I'll publish the memoirs exactly as I have them. By themselves, with neither an affirmation nor a denial of their authenticity. Just this is what I found and here is what it said. And then I'll publish an account of my search for Ania, ending with the conversation we're having now."

"And what about Ulana? What will you say about her?"

"I don't know. I don't think she's Ania. If she were, you wouldn't say so."

"No, I wouldn't."

"But I don't care about that, either. Who she is, is beside the point. The Ania I was obsessed with finding is the Ania of the memoirs, the beautiful, haunted woman who created the sun-sculpture out of her suffering, and that Ania I have found and will present to the world as she presented herself."

"As you wish."

"Just one question I'd like you to answer, though of course you're free not to."

"Of course."

"Your twin, George Sanders, from Bayonne. Who is he to Gregor Sampo?"

"You're quite right," Gregor said. "I'm free not to answer."

"About this, too, I have my ideas."

"You are also free."

"I will have to take this further. I have a duty to posterity."

"That's your call."

"Yes. It is."

We entered the labyrinthine streets near the shouk, and Gregor had to guide me as we twisted right and left. When we stopped in front of Channah's chipped and battered entranceway, he got out of the car, opened the rear door, and coaxed Channah awake. She staggered reluctantly out, her face as wrinkled as raw hamburger. Supporting her with one arm, Gregor leaned through the passenger's window.

"Goodnight," he said. "Thanks for the lift. And the dinner."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Sorry for what?"

"Sorry to tell people things that you might not want them to know."

"Oh, that!" he said, smiling. "Well, as long as you tell them this, too."

"What?"

"That there's much more here, my dear Warren, than you have dreamt of in your biography. Make sure you put that in at the very end. And let this be the last line: that just when you think you finally understand something and are about to bray your wisdom to the world, you've probably got your pants down around your knees, your head dangling between your legs, and your asshole flush up against the soft mesh of the mike, ready to expel the pile of shit you've made of all the sweet offerings of the earth."

## CHAPTER 26

## In Which We Loop Back in Time, and Gregor Considers His Next Major Work

*Feb. 20*--What I should do is buy a castle somewhere near Hoboken and sculpt like wild just for me. A private museum. Nobody allowed in. Fourteen Dobermans foaming at the mouth. Tales spread of this fabulous collection. Richer even than Picasso's last years. Everybody waits for me to die. And waits and waits.

Thousands of masterpieces pour from my liberated mind--more than any sane person would ever want to look at, not to speak of study and explain. Scholars wring their hands. Curators plan new wings. Female Ph.D. candidates line up just for a glimpse. Oh shit! Why don't I do it? Am I afraid I'll open up the floodgates and only a trickle of piss will seep out?

*March 18*--A whole week in Paris and every freaking day I feel the pull: go see Paul Hudson, the poor sonofabitch is bleeding, remember how he wept over the phone, you're tired of screwing Maria anyway, bored out of your gourd, even Paul Hudson can't be as tiresome as getting her to come one more time. And so on.

Boy, was I wrong! Listening to that poor sap whine was worse than screwing a grandmother in a coma. Even comatose Rachael couldn't stand him. Living with him must have been like being on an ocean voyage that never reaches land. After a while you're ready to jump overboard and ring a little dinner bell for the sharks--anything rather than let him be nice to you again. One afternoon was more than I could stand, and then he dragged me through an evening as well. How did Rachael survive it for twenty years?

Interesting story, though. I wonder what happened to her.

*April 3*--Strange. I get back from Paris and there's a little item in the *The Villager* about a gorgeous broad named Ania Marmosa who disappeared from a loft on N. Moore after two years of living there as a recluse. What gives me the creeps is that now that Rachael's left Paul I can finally imagine doing a portrait of her, and Ania Marmosa is that portrait! I don't freaking believe it! Just as I would imagine it. White empty loft. Cascades of sunlight. Long slim body, gorgeous aquiline face. Sitting there alone for two years figuring out who the hell she is. The time fits, too. Creepy, yes?

*April 5*--Called Paula and said I had a scoop for her. Had nothing to say. Just horny and wanted to get laid. So she hops over and into bed and we screw and now it's time for me to pay off. Only I'm a freaking blank.

Ask me questions, I say. You mean there's no scoop? No, I just wanted to get laid. Ask me questions. Something will come up. Screw you. One free come is all you get. OK. The scoop is I'm creating a new form of sculpture. Yes? Yes, it's called . . . life-sculpture. Instead of creating objects I create people. Sorry, Gregor. It's already been created. It's called fiction. No, no, you don't understand. I'm talking about real people. Real people? How do you create--? Hands off, Gregor. I'm here to write an article. You want to screw around-- So write an article about how big my dongle is. Sorry, Gregor. I don't want to embarrass you.

*April 6*--I can't believe it. I just wrote a poem by someone else. Real life-sculpture. One day I drop a name, just kidding around, the next it takes form and plucks me out. I was sitting in Ania's

room. Thank God it wasn't rented yet. Said I was some kind of relative, no problem, they let me in.

So there I was, looking for inspiration, on the bare floor, the sunlight flowing gloriously through three skylights, thinking about the two years she spent in this magnificent emptiness, when she seized me to write a poem for her. I heard the words. It was in my voice, but I wasn't saying them. *Bones and fire, fire and bones--we cannot look! It will sear our eyes!* Just like that.

I said to myself, Good God! I wrote it right down, and as I wrote it the next lines came: *Even here is beauty, the ashes of love.* I couldn't believe it. I knew I was writing about the Holocaust, had she been through the Holocaust? She was the right age, perhaps, as a child. That would explain--. I was on the wrong track. Shut up! I said. Just shut up. But I had ruined it, she had gone away. I had no idea what came next.

So I sat there for a while trying to make my mind as blank as the walls. No go. I was struggling so hard to keep the door closed that even she couldn't get in. I tried rewriting the poem a few times, but my mind wandered. So I gave up trying, doodled with my ballpoint pen a little, and the woman turned out to look like a Klimt model in blue.

And then she returned, I felt her lay her hand on me, it was like ice on the back of my brain, and I wrote: *To see you truly, I would have to die.*

For just one flash I remembered a conversation I had had with Rachael. This was nearly twenty-five years ago, just after I met her, before she had met Paul. I had told her earlier that I couldn't draw her portrait because she didn't exist, and the next day she came to me crying and said she had never existed, she didn't even know where she had been born, who her parents were, the whole first six years of her life were a blank, and I said they weren't a blank, they were a wall that someday she would have to break down, and she cried out no, never, it would kill me to do that.

Just that flashed in my mind: *To see you truly, I would have to die.* And then came to me the beautiful possibility that Rachael Hudson really was Ania Marmosa.

*April 7--*Went off again on the wrong track. Visited Rachael Miller's old schools, looked at yearbooks, shit like that. Dead, dead, dead. For all I know, Rachael is dead. Ania is dead. Liz is dead. All the man-handled, baby-raped women in the world are dead. I'm no freaking biographer/historian. Leave that to Warren Hill. He positively delights in getting something straight. My delight is bending it till it's graceful.

More freaking bullshit. I'm lost. Let me just admit it. I did my piece of life-sculpture, handed it to the blowsy lady downstairs from Ania Marmosa's apartment, and split. So the world will think forever that Ania Marmosa wrote a poem I wrote for her. Big shit! This is what you call a new form of art?

*April 8--*Went out with Edith last night. Around 3:30 in the a.m., both of us smashed, I told her I was giving up art. Too freaking difficult being famous. Everything I do people either love (to prove they have good taste) or despise (to satisfy their jealousy). My work has become invisible behind my name. Invisible sculpture, invisible painting, invisible words.

She begged me, for the good of all future generations, to change my mind. I told her I'd think about it if she let me screw her. She slapped my face. OK, just eat you. She started giggling. Do mankind a huge favor and let me eat you. She shushed me. People in the bar were watching us. I'd probably been pointed out. Screw them. We'll put up a plaque in the museum. Here's to the pussy that was responsible for the following great works of art.

By this time Edith had gotten me to the door. Some shithead had gotten out his notebook and was writing this down. For the edification of future generations. I can't stand it! Even my drunken farts are gold! One good thing about being famous, though. I get my pussy for the night. Since the cover story in *Time* screwing has been up an average of 237%.

*April 23*--The Guild did a one-man show for Frank Rosoulos. Finally. The poor jerk's deserved it for decades. Been painting the same freaking picture since World War II, and suddenly stuff he couldn't even get a sanitation man to haul away is like shitbricks of gold.

So what did it? One freaking page in an article by Warren Hill, one name tossed into what Hill calls a "school" of "detachment." So suddenly Frank's trendy, and the young lawyers and stockbrokers line up to invest in his dreamy swampescapes illuminated by some mystical tinkerbelle from below. Hard to freaking believe. A "deliberate refusal to look at life, a primitive, infantile withdrawal into a misty Eden of dim sunlight and poetic trees." Poetic trees! Holy bullshit, Warren, watch your freaking language! Still, nice for Frank. The poor sonofabitch made a blowup of the article--all seven pages--and posted it at the entrance to the exhibition.

I had no stomach to look at the paintings, which all look alike anyway, so after a polite little tour I re-read the article and was struck by the illustration Warren gave of detachment. He described a three- or four-year-old girl he saw in an orphanage in Ulm shortly after the war who had shut off the world, eyes open but refused to see anything, like infantile Frank retreating into a misty Eden of poetic trees. Though how lieutenant little peach-fuzz Warren saw past her stony eyes is a mystery to me. If Warren were Paula, I'd assume he made the little girl up to serve as a sentimental tie-in to Frank, just the sort of crap that sells articles. But this is Warren Hill, so the girl was there, pretty much as he described her.

The bullshit is Warren's leap behind her eyes to find . . . an infantile swampescape by Frank Rosoulos! Makes me want to puke! Of course crafty Warren throws in all the appropriate qualifiers (seems as though, one might imagine that, and so on), but the dastardly deed is done. Frank's painting is ennobled in the private grotto of an extraordinarily riveting little girl. How'd you like to rape a little girl's mind to sell an article? Serve the bastard right if the little girl came back and told him--

And then it struck me that I had someone new to add to my collection. A third little zombie, the missing piece. Rachael didn't remember her childhood. Who says she wasn't raped in some Eastern European swampescape and hauled over to the orphanage in Ulm? And then went to Israel, was adopted by the Millers, married Paul Hudson, left him, and disappeared from a loft on N. Moore? Who says?

Wouldn't it be a gas if I resurrected that stony-eyed orphan to tell Warren Hill what was really on her mind! Why shouldn't she take her rightful place in the libraries of history? And Warren Hill her biographer! Serve the bastard right! Poetic trees! What more perfect seal of authenticity? A biography by Warren Hill. Filled with rubbish heaps of documentation no one bothers to look at because it's Warren Hill. Poetic justice! The stony-eyed orphan's revenge!

Oh, I love it! I freaking love it! What irony! Warren will never know what a fool he's been made of. To let him know would ruin the life-sculpture. The created person must be real for all time. Harder than steel, more enduring than stone. Too bad. Warren Hill, a fool only in the stony eyes of God. Oh crap! What freaking nonsense. It's because I'm all dried up. A juvenile practical joke. I can't think of any more stimulating way to waste my time.

*May 13*--Paula called, asked me what I was working on. I said an erection, would she like to come over and help me erect it. She said really, I said really. So the bitch pointed out that I hadn't produced anything in the year since I'd made the cover of Time. Too busy screwing, I said and hung up.

Actually the problem is that I'm frozen. Why am I frozen? I'm hung up on being Gregor Sampo. People prey on my mind. They wait for my thoughts like groupies at a stage door. I'm looking for a side entrance and all I see is walls. I need a disguise to sneak past.

But Gregor Sampo is already a disguise. So it should be easy to dream up another one. Bleach my hair. Wear blue contact lenses. Put in buck teeth. Become an unknown named Lance Maypole. Start all over from zero. One problem: who'd want to screw Lance Maypole?

*June 9*--Last night I dreamed of Liz, first time in a long time. Maybe it's the time of year. It was a beautiful dream--no guilt, no terror. Liz was a tall graceful woman with long black hair, gaunt, somber, at peace. She was sitting in an empty room flooded with sunlight, and around her head flashed rainbows, as if she were wearing a crystal crown.

I said, Liz! and began weeping, and she turned to me and smiled and took me in her arms. I'm so glad to see you, she murmured, so glad after all these years. I could say nothing, I was weeping so violently, and she took my face in her hands and kissed my eyes. I hushed, laid my head in the curve between her shoulder and her slim lovely neck. And then I awoke indescribably light and floating, and I looked at the ceiling in the brightness of the morning sun. And I thought, I'm in love, and then I remembered it was Liz and a dream and my mood turned sad again.

*June 9*, later--What struck me is that the woman in the dream was in heaven. Does that mean she's dead? I did the same thing two years ago with my mother when I dreamed she was drowning. I don't believe any of that crap but I'm also quite ready to believe it. Is Liz dead? Is that why she was so beautiful and at peace?

*June 11*--Again. I was alone in the sunlit room praying. On my knees. The elevator door opened and out came Liz dressed in a toga with bundles in her arms. She had just been shopping and her face shone with the excitement of her purchases.

Praying? she exclaimed. Oh, George, I'm so glad! You've got your faith back, then. Isn't it wonderful? I nodded, smiling, and woke up smiling, nodding, overjoyed. I've got my faith back, I thought. How could I have forgotten it and wasted all this time when everything was so beautiful and simple? It would be all right now, I thought. Everything from this moment will be all right.

## CHAPTER 27

## In Which Gregor Falls in Love

*June 22*--Would you believe I just thought of the problem of why Warren Hill would give two shits about this life-sculpture I'm creating? I don't know why I assumed he'd be falling all over himself to write another biography. Which solves another problem I've been struggling with. The sculpture will have to be a sculptor, so to speak.

But what will she sculpt? It has to be something monumental, something that will rivet the attention of the world. Her name has to be a household word, her life a total blank. I'm wasted, I couldn't create a mobile for a cradle. If someone's going to get us out of this pickle, it'll have to be her.

*June 23*--It's so hard to be devoted to the work of art and to nothing else. My mind keeps chortling with the beauty of my joke, and then I leap ahead to people's astonished reactions, to the words of reviewers, and my concentration is lost. And I don't even know what this masterpiece sculpture will look like yet.

There's a world of difference between just creating something and seriously working on it, the difference between being outside and inside what you're doing. I'm outside, which is why everything I do seems worthless. The trick is to get inside and make it glow and screw what it's for or what happens to it once it's finished. The joy is in the process and it's just an extra kick that someone might actually be interested in looking at it. Which is total bullshit. Who do I think I'm kidding with this Zen nonsense?

*July 18*--I'm struggling to create the bitch and maybe she's already there, whole, complete, ready to roll. So let me give the pen to her. Here, bitch. Take the freaking pen and you struggle with this bullshit for a while.

My first memory is of sunlight and trees. Holy shit, poetic trees! Hey, Warren, you were right! The light merges with the mist and dances, for a moment it becomes a woman with a brightly shining face and long dark hair. She approaches me weeping and kisses my cheek. I cannot believe those dazzling lips are kissing me, they are so cold. Oh, what shit! This is freaking awful. I'm like a swimmer who holds his breath, I can go only so far and then I've got to let out the stale air. It's no good. It's like squeezing hard little pieces of shit into a toilet.

*July 27*--I was at Corsaro's with Lenny when I saw Warren with a beautiful blonde at the bar. So up I go and it turns out she's Judy Barron, the broad who's just started covering pop music for *Tonight*. Now whenever I read about pop music in *Tonight* I'll get an erection. So I wonder: Is Warren screwing her? No way to tell with good old straitlaced Warren, they look like just friends.

Warren introduces us and her eyes light up. She tells me Nymbus is the most beautiful object she's ever seen. I think: I've got an even more beautiful object for you right here under my pants. But I just say thank you because Warren's right there and I don't want to play up to his girl. Shmucko me. So Lenny comes over and starts right in with her, some asinine bullshit about the Beatles and minimalism, and in a second they're talking animatedly in a booth, leaving me and Warren sitting like twin toadstools at the bar.

Holy shit! Lenny's got his leg right up against her, smothering her mind with an avalanche of pabulum while below he makes his move. And there I am with Warren, who I was so considerate of, who I now notice is slightly crooked and probably wouldn't have given a shit if I had laid Blondie out on the bar and screwed her inches from his sharp Yankee nose. In fact, he seems quite amiably ready to talk to me while his dynamite erstwhile companion sits intimately entangled in a dark booth with my erstwhile friend Lenny getting her leg stroked by the hand of a famous artist . . .

But it's too painful to see Lenny operate in places I could have been, I don't want to look, so I ask Warren whatever happened to that little orphan girl he met in Ulm, and he smiles in his slightly smashed friendly way and says he hasn't the faintest idea. Not the faintest? Well, he knows that many such places were emptied out eventually and the kids shipped off to Israel. And that the Brits intercepted some and held them in camps in Cyprus. But that particular little girl might have ended up anywhere.

She'd be in her forties now. Would she remember anything? Might she have recognized herself in his article? Possibly. Could he let me know if he hears from her? Of course. But he doubts he'll hear from her. There's another woman he's been thinking about all these years, hoping and fearing that she might get in touch with him. He's never heard from her, either.

And then he goes off into a long and complicated story about his days as a gun runner for Israel, a story I'm sure I'd never have heard if he were sober. I was astounded. Warren Hill? Court-martialed? Jailed? Dishonorably discharged? Disobeying orders, betraying his country? And all for a Jew bitch, alleged mistress of a Nazi maniac, who was obviously using him for purposes of which he was still unaware. All of which proves that the most urbane, cultivated gentleman can turn into the most unmitigated asshole when the right woman comes along.

I asked him whether he had any interest in seeing her again and he said no, he didn't. Wasn't he curious? Yes, of course he was curious. But afraid. Afraid of what? Memory is a form of fiction, he says, a myth which seals experience tightly in meaning. Wouldn't want it all to come spilling out of its wrapper. And what about Blondie over yonder, practically screwing my former friend Lenny in the darkness of the booth? How does Warren feel about her? Is he abstinent because he's still in love with his Jewish slut, or is he still in love with his Jewish slut as an excuse for remaining abstinent?

All right, Warren, we won't ask you to answer that. It all comes to the same thing anyway. The thing is you're a gooey-eyed romantic fool, and we can make use of that. Yes, indeedly. You're going to fall in love with a life-sculpture. A fictional memory all wrapped in meaning. One that can never be punctured by reality and spill out messily all over your clean, bare, sand-scrubbed Yankee floor.

*Aug. 12--*Sometimes I get the creepy feeling that this life-sculpture is real. I mean that putting together the stony-eyed orphan, Rachael, and Ania amounts to discovery rather than invention.

Why not? Why shouldn't Stony-Eyes grow up into comatose Rachael and then disappear in a puff of Marmosa smoke? Wouldn't it be a kick if they were all the same person?

Then Warren wouldn't be the fool, I would. I would go to my grave thinking I had made a fool of Warren Hill, when the truth would be that my own creation had made a fool out of me. Bitch Ania using me to tell her story, to create her *magnum opus*, to bring her out of the swamplandscape and give significance to her life.



It happens, it happens. Aren't brain waves electromagnetic? Don't psychics tell us they float in the air around us like radio or TV waves? We pick them up on our soul sets even when they don't register in our minds.

We know all kinds of things we'll never know we know. Maybe that's how the notion of reincarnation was born, we pick up the old, dying brain waves of some medieval cobbler in Lower Saxony and think we've lived a previous life. That's why we all can speak in tongues.

Who knows how long these brain waves last, how far they travel? Maybe we're living in a soup of brain waves, if we could turn the dials there'd be 44 billion channels out there all going at once. I was a grocer teamster teacher fisherman in China Iowa Venezuela the Congo and died very early late in middle life in infancy and loved hated adored was unspeakably bored by life until one day I was raped strangled mashed by a runaway truck choked by the mucus of my own lungs and now I wander the airwaves until one day you will be the ear that will hear my voice.

And what subtle influences affect the tuning of the soul? How do we pick up what we hear? How do the gravitational influences of the moon and planets and stars pull on the tides of this primordial soup of thoughts? Wonderful! We believe we invent, but it's all from this sublime subliminal source. How we feed on everyone else's dreams, the quick and the dead, the more powerful thoughts thrashing like fish in this soup, this Uber-thought, emerging here and there into the consciousness of some superbly arrogant, ignorant idiot who claims it as his own!

A world-wide soup, of which our thoughts are mere emanations. And I am plucked out to tell Ania's story, my own little soul-set is tuned into that channel, picking up the electromagnetic waves of a certain frequency that runs from some swampscape in Eastern Europe to Ulm to Tribeca and ends in nothingness, the total effacement of a freshly painted, empty, sun-filled loft. But not quite. Because the *magnum opus* has yet to be created, and so I have become the hands through which it will be created, the host of a ghostess. Hey! Does that mean I can play hump the ghostess? Know why I'm jerking off like this? I haven't gotten laid in two months! Where's Paula? Hey, Paula! I've got an interview for you-u-u-u-u-u . . .

*Aug. 17--*Ah! Twelve straight hours of screwing Channah and suddenly I'm not seeing double anymore. Everything has stilled, has stopped vibrating in the summer sun. Man was not made to satisfy himself. That was what woman was made for. To provide a moist little velvet glove for him to spill into. Any woman. Even Channah, who must be pushing sixty, and who has a dark, lithe, muscular body beneath a wrinkled, world-weary face.

The earth breathes quietly once more, the mind can return to higher thoughts, now that the balls are dry with pain. Oh, Channah! Never have I seen a woman so hard and cynical. The women here are tougher than the used-out whores on Times Square. Channah knows the score, which is lopsided against her. The men here are vile, and her life is mean and empty.

I picked her up outside a felafel stand on Dizengoff. She came cheap--a light dinner, a few drinks, a "loan" of about \$20. Not a prostitute. She works, believe it or not, with retarded children. Loves screwing. A real enthusiast, marvelous hands. A thick, flat tongue. As I screwed her, I kept thinking of that enormous erection I saw atop Mt. Carmel. With that inspiration I was able to hold it an amazing amount of time, jamming that gigantic skyscraper in and out while Channah hammered her nails into my back.

I'm supposed to meet her again tomorrow with a gift. She said she didn't care what it was, she wanted to be surprised. When I look at her heavily lined, over-made-up face I wonder what I'm doing with her, there must be better stuff around. But there's something sad in her I'm attuned

to, something I want from her, strangely--not to be soothed and comforted but to be drawn into a world in which happiness is merely a respite from more or less permanent tragedy.

I like the way she scrounges, her little demands for loans and gifts, the generosity of her sex, the bitterness of having absolutely nothing, zero, at an age when beauty is moving slowly, permanently away. She believes in nothing but her power to give me pleasure, which is her only resource in life, which will soon pass and leave her an ugly old woman with no money, no family, no faith.

There are many women like Channah in Israel--not men, who seem at any age to rest in a sort of permanent puddle of pride at the wars they have fought, but women, who are treated roughly by the men and then thrown away. And I feel weepy and sentimental over them, their heavily rouged, hard faces, their sunburnt bodies on sale for nothing at all, like the old used shoes, not even in pairs, on sale at the Jaffa market for whatever at all anyone wants to pay.

*Aug. 25*--I came to Israel to meet Ania on her home ground. But instead I met Channah. Almost time to go home but I'm not going. Screw everything. I'm in love with Channah. I'm beginning to see the fascination of being a Jew, feel the pull of the Holocaust. Not that Channah was actually there. Her father was a Turkish Jew, her mother from Iran. She was born in Tel Aviv and spent the Holocaust pleasantly enough growing up in a sunny Jewish neighborhood by the sea.

None of that matters, the smell of charred bodies is in her flesh. She knows what it means to be chosen for extermination, to have nothing between herself and nothingness but the whim of a stony-eyed God. What the rest of us have--history, culture, children who will live after us, the thousands of little rivulets that carry our sediments onward--she knows what it means to have lost. There is a looming emptiness beneath her that has no bottom, a horror that makes her sympathies for life immeasurably rich.

There! Don't I talk like an asshole in love? I don't believe it! With a battered old Turkish whore! What's come over me? We hardly talk. Her English is awful. Mostly we screw. My balls are withered apricots. But she's a drug. I dote on her. I want to hold her and hold her and cry. Life has never been so black and hopeless and beautiful.

*Aug. 29*--In my more lucid moments I look at Ania's memoir and want to throw up. Which is fine because it's not me writing it. Which is as it should be. When I write it I'm in a bath of tears. What a sad life! Why does it have to be so sad? Why can't I make it happier? I can't, that's all. It isn't. I have no sense that I'm inventing anything, it's all discovery. Ah, so this is how she felt, so this is what really happened! That's the way it unfolds, as if I were reading someone's memoirs rather than writing them.

All but the central question, the *magnum opus*, the thing that will make all this shit fascinating to the outside world. That I've not invented, discovered, whatever. And Channah or no, I really must be getting back soon. Though I have no idea why. Maybe just not to disappoint Channah. I told her from the beginning I was leaving soon. So she's going all out, sprinting for the finish line. I've never been so completely, thoroughly, and consistently pleased. After five comes I get like an empty metal cylinder with thin walls. And down she goes on me with that thick tongue of hers and believe it or not a few drops of tired oil still spurt to the surface. Which is fine for a temporary fling. But how much longer can either of us keep it up?

*Sept. 10*--Late afternoon I was writing, as usual in a bath of tears, when I had the strange sense you get when you know without seeing that someone is looking at you. So I looked up at the rich

light flowing from the sea into my hotel room, orange light swimming in motes, and of course there was no one there. I went back to writing, but the sense that someone was watching would not go away.

So I began to think: Who is it? My first thought was Liz. But then I thought of the sun-goddess Ania had seen in the woods as her first memory, and I knew it was her. She was visiting Ania, now within me, as Ania was writing the story of her life. But no, not Ania. She was visiting me. She had come to show herself to me. She was the *magnum opus*, it was that first vision of her that Ania wanted to give the world. Her dead mother, her gang-raped, strangled, gassed, stabbed, or decapitated mother who died in anguish not for herself but in a greater torment of fear for her baby, returned in a vision of the most serene beauty--that was what I had to give enduring form.

The thought excited me tremendously because it was the first time I had gotten even the faintest whiff of what the sculpture might be. Of course that's what Ania would do! The fairy godmother arising fully formed from the sea of humiliation and horror. Again I looked up at the sunlight, growing deeper and deeper orange, flooding across my hardwood floor, but no fairy godmother there. And anyway, a statue of a fairy godmother? Where would I put that? Disney World?

*Sept. 11*--In a dream I saw a grown-up Liz on a lovely lawn shading down towards black water. And she turned to me and smiled and her lips danced with sunlight. As is common in my dreams nowadays I began to cry with happiness, and she pulled me down beside her and kissed me with her sunlit lips. How did you get like that? I asked her. Have you really died? Did you die last spring, when I saw you in heaven? She nodded yes, but hushed me and said it was wonderful to die and I shouldn't be sad. What happens when you die? I asked. Why do your lips sparkle? When you die, Liz said, everything horrible that ever happened to you is transformed into sunlight and dances within you. It's all joy, George, pure joy, everything. And all your anger and fear are gone.

*Sept. 20*--I went to surprise Channah outside the school where she teaches in Jaffa. No gift, I don't give her gifts anymore. There's an unspoken understanding that as long as we're together I'll take care of her needs. She says she needs \$30 and I give her \$50.

The school is an old French école from Turkish days behind a high wall, on one of those narrow eyeless streets that look so sinister in movies about the Middle East. I stood on the corner across from the entrance and was surprised to see emerging from behind the heavy door a tall slim woman in her forties with long black hair. She had an arm around a little girl of about ten with the wide, flat, permanently bewildered face of a retard.

Why was I surprised? Because for a moment I could swear the woman was a thin version of Rachael Hudson. It was the bare structure beneath the edifice that had once been Rachael. Of course it couldn't be. For one thing, where would the child have come from? Unless Rachael/Ania were living with someone who had a child.

I followed her and the child down the street. Forget Channah, she wasn't expecting me anyway. We went down, down among large stone houses that stepped towards the sea. It was about 1:30 and the sunlight was intense. Halfway down the hill Rachael/Ania and the child turned right and began threading through a warren of short narrow streets, the remnants of a miniature casbah. One of the streets ran into a tiny dusty square graced by two cafés on either side, a few round tables and chairs running onto the sidewalk.

When I entered the square the woman and her child had disappeared, perhaps into one of the houses that fronted the open space, perhaps down one of the narrow side streets. I sat down at a table and ordered tea and baklava. Clearly, following the woman had been a waste. I couldn't go around thinking that every tall graceful dark longhaired woman was Ania Marmosa. Or Liz. I had to get off this obsession. But I couldn't control my dreams, obviously, and . . .

And I looked up and there was the woman sitting opposite me, staring with determined fear. Why are you following me? she demanded. Who are you, what do you want? I thought you were someone I once knew, I said. I'm sorry if I frightened you. You speak English like an American. Yes, she said. I'm from Baltimore. If you thought you knew me, why didn't you come up to me? What good does following me do? I shrugged. It was an impulse. You're right, it doesn't make any sense. I'm sorry. I . . . Excuse me, were you in the Holocaust? I mean as a child.

I don't know you at all, she said. I'm not the person you're looking for. But were you in the Holocaust? I asked again. What do you mean? I mean a survivor. In the camps, in hiding somewhere in Europe. We're all survivors, she said. All of us who are alive. I don't mean that way. What way do you mean? she demanded.

When we look into the eyes of God or the heart of man, she went on, what do we see but stone? Go to any geriatric ward, doesn't it remind you of Dachau? Where is the difference between what the Nazis did to children and what God has done to my child? Can you tell me that? He took her brain, what more bestial could even the Nazis have done? We know that Auschwitz was not the last death camp, that the only possibility of ending the torture and murder of children is the extermination of the human race. But will even that end the merciless, cold, calculating reign of God?

I'm sorry I stirred all this up for you, I said. You're angry because of your daughter. I understand. Angry? she asked. She began to weep, sitting up at the table, tears flowing down her cheeks. What good is anger? The Nazis you could fight. What does one do against God? Please, I begged. Your daughter is happier than you think. She's filled with sunlight. Believe me, it dances within her. All the anger and fear are within you. In her there's joy.

And then I realized that the description I had just given the woman was the state Liz had described in my dream as being dead. And it came to me that the little girl in the misty woods somewhere in Eastern Europe had refused to come down into this world not out of fear but out of longing, a longing for death, which at the crucial moment, yes!, she was denied.

## CHAPTER 28

## In Which Gregor Is Drawn Closer to Channah, God, and Love

*Sept. 13--*Here I am on this goddamn concrete football field in the shadow of the giant erection at good old Haifa U. This is where it's got to be, no question. A freaking fairy godmother with dazzling lips. Big enough to take care of that gigantic erection.

The whole thing is hopeless. I'll have to wait for Ania. She'll have to settle this mess. And let me tell you, this waiting's a freaking drag. Art is supposed to be play. When play isn't fun you're in with the tuxedo crowd, the polite murmurs, the slightly awed sophistication, art as bullshit.

Can you imagine creating something and not having fun? Might as well have sex to have children. Or eat to stay healthy. A freaking waste. This bullshit is no longer fun. It's turned into a goddamn crusade. What am I out to conquer? The holy land isn't anything that has to be conquered. It's more like a hot chick waiting to be screwed. And here's his flabbiness getting exasperated as he waits for his leavened bread to rise.

*Sept. 16--*Rosh Hashanah. I can't believe old Channah rolled out of bed and went to a synagogue. Every freaking body's in a synagogue. What for? They don't believe in God. Not anyone I know except the freaks in black. So why are they all pumping up and down like ninepins on a string muttering bullshit? Then back old Channah will come into bed and we'll sixty-nine to glory.

So where is God? In the freaking synagogue where nobody is welcome if they don't fork over dough, and everybody aches for the swifter passage of slow-motion seconds? Or here in bed with quicksilver bliss? Where, I ask you, is God gazing at His work and relishing the joy of life?

*Sept. 17--*Channah and I had an unusually long talk. At least two minutes. We sat down to tea and baklava on Dizengoff and I asked her, what do you want from me? A strange question for me to be asking, since generally I don't want to know. As far as I'm concerned, it's up to the other person to ask for something. If he doesn't ask, that's his freaking problem. I'll ask for me and he can ask for him. It's tough enough to live your own life.

But for a couple of days I've been wondering. She hasn't asked for anything in a long time. Not gifts, not loans, nothing. So I'm getting worried. Maybe it's the season, the fact that God's book is open until next Thursday, but I've been wondering what she wants me for.

Maybe I'm afraid. Maybe I'm getting to want her too much. I've never been so happy, so continuously satisfied. She goes down into the desert and brings up a gusher every time. It's like I'm living in a seraglio wrapped lovingly in hot wet towels. I keep wondering when does this end, when do I get slapped with the bill? There's a bill, I know, there's always a bill.

But good old Channah, sometimes I think she's no shopkeeper, and by now for me there's no charge. That she loves me, and not with any hope of holding me but just with the pure pleasure of having me now. The net effect of which is to make me feel tenderness for her and more than a little guilt. The bitch! So this afternoon across the little round table on the sidewalk I ask her what she wants from me and she smiles her dirty sexy little smile, crooked, knowing, and says you cut it off before you go. I put it in the bottle with the pickles.

*Sept. 25--*Channah has been in shul all day. I don't know why I stay at her place. A room on the third floor of a crumbling old building near the Shouk Carmel. While my suite at the Hilton

overlooking the water remains empty. Maybe I'm trying to avoid the fairy godmother with the dazzling lips. Channah has her own dazzling lips. Her place befits a Turkish whore, full of old, faded, dusty velvet and lace.

She had children once upon a time, a husband, too, and family pictures adorn the walls and surfaces. I gather the husband split and the son was killed in some war. What happened to the daughter I've never been able to get clear. I sit at the table and try to write, but Ania, after all, is Jewish and refuses to work on Yom Kippur.

So I doze right there, my cheek against the stained off-white lace, and I'm in a dark forest, it's night, but somehow there's a kind of ghastly illumination from below. I've wandered away from my unit and I'm trying semi-hysterically to get back when I stumble onto a clearing. The sky above swirls with northern lights. In the middle of the clearing Liz has her cheek pressed against an enormous block of ice, maybe 100 feet high. She's weeping.

Liz! I cry out. What's wrong, my darling? Tell me what's wrong. Oh George! she says, holding out her arms towards me. Do you see what's happened? It's God's heart! It's turned to ice! What will we do now, George? What will happen to us?

Suddenly another Liz takes my hand from behind and leads me away. We are walking through space towards some cataclysmic event. Stars, planets, moons, comets all hurry by us, racing to get there first. What is it? I want to know, but Liz says nothing. We hurry on.

And then it's there, a huge black hole devouring the spiraling stars like candy. Oh my God! I think. I feel the tug of its hunger. I try to dig in my heels, but I'm in space, there's no ground beneath me, and I am pulled inexorably towards it. Liz! I cry out. What do I do? How do I stop myself? You can't! Liz says. Don't you see what's happened? There's no heart at the center of the universe, the heart's collapsed, and all of us are doomed to be crushed in the vortex of nothingness . . .

I awoke pushing against the table in an attempt to stop myself, stunned that I was no longer rushing rapidly towards death. In the long moment it took me to figure out where I was, I kept hearing all of us are doomed to be crushed in the vortex of nothingness and thinking, God, it's out of a bad comic book, how awful! Then I laughed. Woken up just in the nick of time by bullshit prose! Saved by literary taste! I chuckled the rest of the afternoon, still stunned by the horror of that black hole at the center of things swallowing the stars like spiraling M&M's.

*Oct. 23--*I can't believe I'm still here. Here being Channah's place. Or Israel. Or acting as Ania's amanuensis, waiting for her to come up with what to put on top of Mt. Carmel. I know what the trouble is. I decided that she had to create a *magnum opus* up there to take care of my problem. But what does she care what happens to me? She's got her own shit to deal with.

We're almost up to the time Ania enters her empty loft on N. Moore street and there's still no magnum opus. The story's got to end soon, in emptiness, in total annihilation. The door shuts. Left behind is this glowing masterpiece.

Who says? Not Ania. That's me talking. If she doesn't come across, I'm the one who's screwed. I got these piles and piles of pages she made me write and not a freaking soul will have the slightest desire to read them. So screw you, bitch! This is for you, too, isn't it? This is your legacy to the world. Don't you want anyone to read it?

*Oct. 25--*This morning I was walking on the Hilton beach when up comes one of those freaks in black and starts talking to me. From Shamokin, Pennsylvania. It took me almost five minutes to realize that he thought I was Jewish and was trying to convert me to freaky blackness. But what

scared me most was that it took me almost thirty seconds to realize he was wrong, that I wasn't Jewish, and I could get rid of him just by saying so.

So I said so and he said, really? and for another second I had to search my mind to be sure. Really? Holy shit! Didn't I know? Since it doesn't seem to mean anything special to be Jewish, what does it mean not to be Jewish? The freak in black seemed to think I could be Jewish without knowing a freaking thing about Judaism, or about Jews, or about anything at all. In fact, all I had to do was tell him I was Jewish, and that would be that. I would be Jewish.

I could become a freak in black and bob up and down like a ninepin muttering like the rest of them. Tell them my mother's name was Rebecca Weinberger. She died fourteen years ago in Tucson, Arizona. Old white-haired, blue-eyed, wrinkled waspy looking woman in white gloves. Her mother was Judith Finstein of Ogallala, Nebraska. Father an immigrant from Austria-Hungary, ran a dry-goods store on Main Street. No synagogue. No rabbi. No kosher. No nothing. For three generations no nothing. But I'm a Jew. A no nothing Jew. Hey, freaks in black! I'm a Jew! Come and get me!

*Oct. 26--*Now that I'm Jewish, I've got a lot of serious responsibilities. Chosen by God and all that. Why not? I've suffered as much as most American Jews. I've had my own private little family Holocaust. I'm as atheistic, as bitter, as cynical, as screwed up as most Jews I know.

So why shouldn't I be a Jew? I became a gypsy pretty easily. Gregor Sampo from Romania. Put myself through the Holocaust just to add a pinch of pity. Not much of a switch to be a Jew. Then I could marry old Channah. No problem. Never be horny again in my life.

What a woman! I was walking yesterday in Yaffo in the late afternoon. Went right by her school around dismissal time. All right, I was lonely, I wanted to get a glimpse of her. Maybe walk her home.

I saw her standing by the entrance, her magnificent ass packed into a tight knee-length skirt, talking to one of the mothers. Standing next to her was another of those flat-faced mongoloid little girls, and as she spoke Channah caressed the girl's shoulders with both hands, tenderly, as if in the afterglow of love, as the child leaned against her. It was as natural as a dance, it was Channah's profession, loving, and she did it unconsciously, superbly.

As I drew closer I could see that the mother was crying, about what I had no idea, and Channah took her hands off the girl's shoulders and drew the mother to her, for a moment they seemed like mother and daughter, and I thought, what a wonderful woman! And then, she's mine! And then, with pride, how lucky I am!

I couldn't believe it, a character in a soap, my thoughts plagiarized from the *Ladies Home Journal*. But there I was, glowing like the man of the family in a life insurance commercial. And I thought, what is Ania doing to me? And I thought, can it be that after all these years I might finally get back what my parents took away from me? And then, with a sudden chill, but what might I lose?

*Nov. 7--*There's nothing like these Israeli Sephardi women, they've got all the others beat. The repressed passion of the Arab coupled with the inhibitions of a Swede. What they're missing is the devotion of the Greek, the total enslavement, murderous passion. I catch it in another woman's snatch and I kill her. Then I kill you. Then I kill me. Old Channah would heave a world-weary sigh and go back to her table at the Dizengoff café.

There's a sad, autumnal feeling between us, in keeping with the season. She has no idea why I'm here over two months after I had said I was leaving. It's enough of an explanation for

her that I like the screwing. Sooner or later I'll get tired of the screwing and that will be that. She's almost impatient for it to happen so that she can get on with her life.

I tried to explain it to her the day before yesterday. Naked in bed, all tired out. Channah, I said, do you have any idea why I'm still here? You like the screwing, she said, snuggling into my chest. I like the screwing, too. When you go I put your little man on a stick, like a lollipop, yes? No, I tell her. I'm here because I can't figure out the end of something I'm writing. Asshole! she said. I love her English. Obscenities make up about three quarters of her vocabulary and she's crazy about them. The end they screw, she said. All stories, yes? Happy after. Like us.

*Nov. 9--*I woke up in the middle of the night shaking, about to burst into tears, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what I had dreamed. Nothing. It tolled like a bell with no sound. Beside me slept Channah, looking old, old like an ancient child, like a little mummy child handed down from five thousand years ago, her wrinkled face pushed in around her exhausted lips. And I felt enormous pity for her, and wept for her, as if she were my child and I was powerless to prevent the pain about to befall her.

And I thought: we are all children, all pitiful bewildered children stumbling into night. I wept for all of us, for everyone, children in sealed cattle cars destined for death. For the wasted gauntness of old age, for the torture of chronic disease, for the surgeon's knife dismembering us bit by bit as we struggle to remain alive one more turn around the sun. I wept.

And then I thought: but we are sheltered in God's love, lodged in His heart. God loves us all as children, as a parent loves his child, as I love Channah in this moment. And this thought was so comforting that I yearned to believe it, I wanted to believe it more intensely, it seemed, than I had ever wanted anything, not only for myself, nor even primarily for myself, but for Channah, for whom I wanted desperately to do something protective.

How wonderful! Even as I wept I saw the beauty in this, as if I had been lifted from one world and placed down upon another, one infinitely more painful, where my suffering would be a thousand times magnified, yet infinitely more full of life. Thank you, I murmured aloud. Thank you, oh, thank you, thank you for loving us and allowing me to love. I have never loved, never before. And I began sobbing.

But the strength of my sobs made me realize that I was dreaming, that I had not yet fully awakened, and in an instant I was awake and feeling ridiculous. What am I crying about? What am I saying? What is all this God shit? Am I going nuts? Why don't I just write a letter to Santa Claus and tell him what I want for Christmas?



## CHAPTER 29

## In Which Gregor Has a Vision of the Burning Bush

*Nov. 12*--I proposed to Channah, kidding, and she turned me down. No, she said. So I said I meant it seriously. We were, as usual, naked in bed, in between screwing. That's the way we spend 90% of our time together. That and asleep.

I seriously also, she said. No. Why not? What's the matter? She leaned over me, her hair dangling in my face. No shit, she said. What you say? I want to marry you. I want you to come back to the States and live with me. She smiled. You full of shit, she said. I'm not, believe me, I'm not.

I pulled her face down against my chest and felt two little wet spots that were her eyes. I love you, I said. It was the first time I had said that to anyone ever. A debut. The words sounded alien, but they were out there, swimming like silvery fish in the blue water of our thoughts.

Gregor, she said, calling me one of the rare times by name. I love you, yes, but no marry. She kissed my face, now her tears really flowing, her face an absolute wreck as they flowed down along the channels of her skin. No way, she said. You know this shit? No Jewish, no marry. But we live together, yes? We screw all night. I take your thing to work with me in my bag, stick it back on later. You no screw around with beach girls. OK?

So I thought I understood what the problem was. Channah, I said, in the States we don't have to be married by a rabbi. We can-- She laid her finger against my mouth. I no marry Goy. No. She shook her head back and forth like a little girl telling herself not to touch the radiator. I live with you, I screw with you, no marry. I . . . No, Gregor. You want to leave me now? It is OK, you . . .

And then she looked away, at the far wall, and started shaking. I said nothing. I'm still in shock. The first proposal of my life, to a worn-out, old, impoverished Turkish whore, and I get turned down. And why? Because I'm not Jewish. Being Jewish doesn't mean a freaking thing. It's not a color, a language, a culture, certainly for most Jews I know not a religion. It's absolutely nothing but some stubborn empty memory of the way some other people thought of themselves two or three generations ago. But there it is, palpable as a carborundum wall. No Jewish, no marry. Well screw you, Channah. You're certainly not going to find any Jew crazy enough to marry you.

*Nov. 13*--I must be going fuzzy inside. It's that bitch Ania. She's turning my head whacko. Last night I actually considered becoming a Jew. Seriously. A little freaking muttering ninepin. So I could marry--marry!--a used-up withered old Turkish whore. Probably has had more guys inside her than a garbage dump has plastic bottles. But I'm not good enough for her. A freaking Jewish wino who pisses on the geraniums is OK because he's circumcised, but one of the greatest artists of his generation--

Holy shit! What's happening to me? I'm going pompous! I'm turning into apeshit! You know what apeshit is. You take the *Ladies Home Journal*, the *New Yorker*, the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, scripts from a dozen soaps, a sampling of museum catalogues, and one or two volumes of the minutes of the Hoboken City Council. Then you put them all into a blender with 4 1/2 gallons of prune juice and feed the resulting paste to an ape. What comes out is apeshit. Which is what I'm full of right now.

I've got to get off this. Sorry, Ania. We've got to wind this up. I can't take you anymore. Writing sentimental garbage five hours a day is turning my brain into a rotten cantaloupe. Enough! Figure out what you're going to put on top of Mt. Carmel and then get out of my life! Hurry up before I turn into Norman Vincent Peale or Liberace or some sunlit guru with a compassionate face and a foam rubber thing.

*Nov. 17*--Nothing is simple. You'd think if I told a rabbi I wanted to be Jewish he'd be overjoyed. If he really believed in his nasty little religion he'd want to share it, spread the glory. Not these stingy bastards. I'm not talking about going out like Jehovah's Witnesses to sell the good word door to door. I'm just talking about being minimally civil to the poor sap who walks in on his own.

I wanted it as a Hanukkah present for Channah. After three or four weeks or whatever bullshit they decided to put me through I would show up in a yarmulke and light the candles with the appropriate prayer. Then I would kiss her shocked lips, take out a diamond ring, and ask her to be my bride. Cut to the next soap commercial.

But that gauzy dream was promptly zapped by the sonofabitch rabbi, a youngish, plumpish, baldish, snappy looking type from Brooklyn, the grownup version of the fat kid with the big mouth that back in Bayonne we used to enjoy beating up.

What can I do you for? he asks as I enter his study, motioning me to a chair facing his littered desk. Copies of sociological journals, memos, reports, newsletters, scribbled bits of paper.

He sits on the desk, his fat ass spread out across a patchwork of papers, his goatee pointing straight down at me, and readjusts his velvet royal blue yarmulke in a nervous motion he repeats about forty-two times during the short interview. His shiny black pointy shoe dangles inches from my knee. He's wearing a sharkskin suit, a maroon tie, a gold watch chain tucked into his vest pocket. With his tiny sparkling black eyes he looks like a spiffy woodpecker just barely holding himself back from pecking greedily at the desktop for grubs.

Yes? he repeats eagerly. What can I do you for? I want to become Jewish. What? Jewish. I want to become-- You mean religious or Jewish? You're not Jewish? No. If I were Jewish, I wouldn't have-- So you want to convert? Yes, I want to convert.

He readjusts his velvet blue yarmulke on his brilliant bald spot for the seventh time, wrinkles his brow, snorts, readjusts it again. May I ask, he says, a subtle but powerful magnetic shield in his voice, appropriate to a people whose most sacred religious site for nearly 2,000 years has been a blank wall, May I ask what you are? Nothing. Nothing? Yes, non-religious. So you're shopping, is that what you're doing? No. I sincerely want to become a Jew.

Another pause, more readjustments of the yarmulke. Is it so difficult to keep on the head? Will I have to wear one fastened to my thinning hair with bobby pins day and night? What am I, crazy? Why am I sitting here beneath the pointy shoe and goatee of this peckerwood begging to become a Jew?

May I ask why you want to become a Jew? he says. I know enough to know that the wrong answer is that I want to marry Channah. So I say, It's a wonderful life. Yes, he says, for a Jew it's a wonderful life, a holy life. For a non-Jew it's like being a dog with a horse's tail. You want all your life to be a dog with a horse's tail? I want to become a horse, I insist patiently. Incredibly patiently. Listen, Mr. . . .

Castrado, I tell him.

Mr. Castrado. Listen, Mr. Castrado, he says.

Up sweeps the hand to lift the little yarmulke into the air and plop it down once again upon the bald head. Let me tell you something about the laws of Israel. The laws of Israel say that it's my duty to discourage you from becoming a Jew. Why? Because we are a national religion. A religion of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people has been chosen by God to be His holy people. Why? I don't know why. It's an incredible burden. It's a very difficult life. Sometimes I would like to say to God, we've had enough, now try someone else. The Hottentots down in the Kalahari Desert have been having an easy time of it these past 3,000 years, why not pick on them for a while? But for whatever reason, it's an historical fact that thousands of years ago God chose the Jews to be His holy people and dictated to Moses His holy laws, which we have kept, with some lapses, from that day to this.

He is lecturing. I'm getting a warmed-over sermon. He throws me a quick beady little glance to see how it's going.

Now, he continues, it's clear that some people, non-Jews, might here and there be tempted to join the chosen ones and live this very restricted, regulated, disciplined life. We don't say absolutely no. We say, this life is for Jews, because God has chosen them to live it. It's not a religion out there in the marketplace with Christianity and Islam and Hare Krishna and God knows what else, claiming to save anyone's soul. It's just for Jews. If you want it, you're going to have to fight for it. You're going to have to show us how badly you want to live a Jewish life. We'll convert you, but very reluctantly. Do you understand?

Yes, I said, still not knowing where all this bullshit was heading in practical terms. What was he going to ask me to do? Roll over ten times and bark on cue? I never heard anything so freaking condescending, insulting, in my life. I felt like putting a little drawstring around his balls and pulling with all my might. The smirking sonofabitch! Beg! Let me piss on your shoes. Eat a little of this shit I just warmed up in the microwave. Then maybe I'll consider putting you on the team.

You want to marry a Jewish woman, he said. Is that it? No, I lied. Well, the first thing you have to do is separate from her completely. No more sex. No more intimate physical contact at all.

I have nothing to do with Jewish women, I insisted.

Not until your conversion is completed, he went on. How long might that be? I asked. At least a year. A year! Why a year? There's a lot for you to learn. You'll have to learn Hebrew, the laws, the prayers, to read from the Torah--

A year! I exclaimed again. It was like a door slammed shut in my face. You mean I'm not allowed to--

You can't touch her for at least a year! he crowed, triumphant. Not until you're married under Jewish law. I told you this is no bed of roses. It's a very disciplined, restricted sort of life. You'd better think it over.

The little peckerwood is grinning. Gotcha! Hadja all along, you freaking Goy bastard! That's for all the beatings you gave me after school, all the times you chased me home throwing rocks and insults, all the times you called me kike and Jew bastard and laughed your secure, healthy, cruel gentile laugh. How freaking stupid could you have been, crawling in here to beg me for something? Didn't you know I was going to stick my big toe up your ass? You've got such a thing for some withered old Jew bitch that you're ready to come in here, bend over, and spread your cheeks for me?

*Nov. 19--*Channah and I went walking on the beach this afternoon. She came home from work and changed into long pants and a heavy sweater and put a blue bandana over her black hair. For some reason she looked more beautiful than I've ever seen her. In the orange sun she looked like one of those old crumbling cathedrals in England, exquisite even though rough and pitted with age.

I squeezed her hand and put my arm around her waist and nuzzled her neck as we walked in our bare feet just above the wash like an old couple, our children grown and gone, re-romantic, enjoying our time alone. I felt grateful for having her as a possession, which was OK because I also was hers completely, each each other's, free to play with and please each other every day and every night--

Channah! I begged. You must marry me! I can't stand this! I want you to come back with me! You no go, she said. I have to go! And when I go back to the States, you can't stay with me. They won't let you stay unless we're married.

She stopped and turned to the water, to the enormous orange sun sitting just above the dark waves, not responding, holding her head still as if holding her breath. I put my arms around her waist and buried my face in her neck. No, she said quietly. No, my darling. You not go to the States. You stay here. We screw all night. Then you stay home and wait for me. We screw all afternoon. I make you happy. No marry. Why you want that bullshit?

I can't stay here all my life, I said. I want to take you home with me. We'll get married in the States. You can stay Jewish, I can stay nothing. In the States it doesn't matter, nobody gives a shit.

No. I sorry. Live with you, no marry. Why not? For Christ's sake! What's the difference? Is different, she said quietly. Marry is with God. It not just you and me, my darling, is more.

She was still looking at the ocean, gripping my hands hard at her waist. I no marry anybody, my darling, I be just for you, yes? You and me we screw all the time. We hide from God. We not enter His sight. OK, we no bother Him. Anyway, if He see us screwing, He smile. Jew and Goy OK, no family, just screwing. He like screwing. I hold you in my heart, my darling, I never let you go. You stay there, nobody see you, you be mine, I come home to you, open up my heart, you there, yes? Yes?

She had turned around and was hugging me, ankle deep in the water, the waves washing our feet gently, the sun blushing deep red as it hightailed it below the horizon. Now what am I going to do? Stay in Israel locked in Channah's heart? Go back to loneliness in the States? I know I've found the perfect woman for me. No annoying chatter. No desire to use me for fortune and fame. No jealousy of my success, no petty ambition, no pettiness about anything. Just excellent screwing and pure affection. And honesty. And warmth. And acceptance. Patient, tolerant, uncomplicated acceptance. And whatever else I've always wanted and never had.

*Nov. 21--*Oh, Ania, I knew you'd come through! I love you, baby, I love you! OK, so she had help. I had help. Last night I had a dream. I dreamed I was standing on top of Mt. Carmel, on the deck of the aircraft carrier beneath the great erection-in-the-sky, waiting for God to come and reveal to me what Ania was going to do.

I kid you not. It was so clear to me that God was going to come and reveal this to me that I remember chiding myself for not having done this earlier, for not having made the appointment with God to meet me here long ago. What a dope! What a freaking waste of time! God knew all along what Ania was going to create here, and all I had to do was ask Him.

So I stood on the enormous concrete deck beneath the enormous erection gazing at the sparkling lights of the city beneath me and the stars above, cold in the stiff wind that blew over the ridge. And in my dream I fell asleep, standing, and had a dream, except that this one I knew all along was a dream, all the time I was dreaming it, and I wondered how I could be sleeping standing up and dreaming this dream.

I was sitting in a rabbi's study, but it was not the study of the nattily dressed little peckerwood. It was a shabby study with a worn green carpet, scuffed old heavy furniture, the walls lined with old books, books sitting on the desk, the chairs, the lamp tables, the floor, wherever there was a surface an uneven precarious little pile of books. And large old heavy amber ashtrays filled with the ashes of pipes and cigars.

In comes the rabbi, an ancient, shriveled little man dressed entirely in black, his face buried in long white hair. All that peeked out were two sparkling blue eyes, merry, like Santa Claus's. He spoke with a heavy old-European accent, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, all mixed together.

I've just come from heaven, he said. And there's something I must tell you. No one knew, but when God heard of the plot of the Nazis to annihilate His chosen people, He sent His angels down to witness this event. He wanted to know what was done, what was said, how it felt.

And His angels fell like snow into every village, every ghetto, every camp. Some became children who were gassed and burned, and others drew the bodies of children out of gas chambers and threw them into fiery ovens. With pliers they pulled gold teeth from corpses, and with whips they parted screaming families and hurried their victims along. They were among rabbis who died with their congregants and among guards who machine-gunned all who tried to escape. All the while, following God's instructions, they were heartless, and did nothing themselves but follow the passions of those they were with. And when the killing was over they returned to heaven and reported all they had seen and felt.

And God was furious at them and said to them, how could you bear to witness such things? How could you do nothing to stop them? But Lord, they pleaded, we merely followed your instructions. You told us we were to become as the people below and report to you all we saw and felt.

And so you have, He said bitterly, and went below to His study, and still has not reappeared. And all in heaven await Him, and stand about in a frenzy, and know not what to do. That is the situation in heaven, my friend, and you come to me and ask me what we must do here on earth. And I tell you, how can we have the slightest inkling what to do when God Himself is locked in His study, weeping and praying and knowing no words, no acts, that might heal this wound?

The heart of the universe is empty, it is a black night of driven rain, and so for now each of us must become its heart, must feel a little extra love and pity and compassion, just until God can recover from the Holocaust, and come out of His study, and take once again His place in heaven.

Astounded I awoke from this dream-within-a-dream, weeping, and looked about me, fearful that God would not be able to keep his appointment with me because he was still locked in his study. But that was only a dream, I thought, chuckling with relief, a dream I dreamed standing up.

Still, I could not shake my grief. And as I waited on the windy parapet, standing between the twinkling stars above and the lights below, a small sun appeared in the black sky, the size of a dime, and shone just upon the top of the mountain. And in its rays was a burning bush, a bush

of pure gold enveloped by a ball of fire, and it came closer to me and spoke to me in colors, changing subtly with each ripple of the air.

How beautiful! I thought. The most beautiful thing in the world! My grief vanished and my heart was filled with delight. What beauty there still is! I shouted with joy. You see? It's extraordinarily wonderful, you have no idea! I laughed out loud, very loudly, and suddenly found myself awake, in bed, the sun streaming in on me, Channah already gone to care for her flat-faced mongoloids in the old lycée.

## CHAPTER 30

## In Which Ania Disappears

2:00 am. I am asleep. Somehow I am aware that at 4:00 I will awaken, put the sun-sculpture in my rental car, and drive it up to its place on top of Mt. Carmel.

I have one more dream before I take my pain and set it out before the world as beauty. In my dream I am in a park by a dry fountain. Above the fountain the sky is orange-pink from the glow of tiny creatures that feed off the waste products of my breathing. They form a floating kerchief of light against the dark sky, bobbing and quivering in the soft breeze.

Nor is color their only beauty. Their murmurous chatter is like the hum of an orchestra tuning, too subdued to be cacophonous, with flights of melody breaking free. The atmosphere is heavy with their fragrance, as if one were entombed in a bed of orange blossoms. Even the breeze does nothing to lighten the sweetness of the air.

In my dream I think: How marvelous that these creatures live off my waste products! What joy we give each other without the slightest sacrifice or effort, not out of love or feeling, but as a natural result of being what we are! So perfectly fitting! It is beautiful in the way Eden must have been, and for a moment I am uncertain whether this is in fact Eden, but I know it cannot be because the fountain is dry, its concrete oval is cracked, and pages of newspaper skitter across the uneven pavement.

Even so, it is wonderful. As with a man and woman. What brings pleasure to the man also brings it to the woman, so that when they make love they take and give in the same moment. Love and gratitude are superfluties, a running over of full cups, since giving is nothing more than a joyful by-product of getting.

Which is as it should be. I am grateful not to the tiny creatures, who merely follow their own laws of gratification and survival, but to whatever created this profound harmony in all things. The world is exquisite music, and I am both player and listener. I am filled with joy.

But I feel an agitation in the little creatures of the air. They are abuzz with fear, vibrating, the little kerchief trembles. Out of the night huge bats swoop down to feed on the creatures, sweeping across the kerchief of light like winged shadows. The light dims as the helpless creatures are devoured, their music is replaced by the bats' screeching, a sour smell like urine replaces their fragrance, tiny drops of blood splatter the concrete oval of the fountain.

In moments the creatures are gone. All that remain are the bats, winging dark on darkness, searching for a stray morsel in the devastated air.

I am furious. I want to know why! What was the point of creating these bats, whose fulfillment requires the destruction of creatures so beautiful and innocent? The stupidity of it appalls me. It is obviously a blunder, easily rectified by the annihilation of these--

But one of them has me by the throat! Out of the darkness he has come, sinking his teeth deep into the vein just above my larynx, drawing, drawing painfully through two thin sharp needles.

I push hard against his rough, furry skin, grasping his chest, his throat, his wings beating against my fingers. I squeeze with all my strength, trying to crack his thin shoulder blades, but my strength flows out quickly from my wounded throat. I feel his hard round skull against my chin, bobbing up and down as his jaws open and close, his furry ears tickling my lips. His head jerks this way and that as his teeth shift for deeper penetration.

I fall to the asphalt, dying. Merciless, he comes down with me, draining the last drops of blood. He pulls away from me, exultant, jaws and cheeks dripping with the remnants of my life. In his eyes I see not the slightest regret or pity.

Down I go, down, down to the underworld, weeping in bewilderment at my lost life. I land in a clearing in a forest. Around me are birches gleaming in the summer sun. It is the same forest in which I saw the woman of the sunbeams on that cold painful morning so long ago.

There are people waiting for me in the clearing. In front are my mother and father, holding hands and smiling. I rush towards them, once more a little girl. My father lifts me up and kisses me. I feel his long, flowing beard against my cheek. My mother comes round the other side. They hug each other with me between them, my father kissing my face, my mother burrowing into the back of my neck. We are all crying with happiness.

From all sides pour people--uncles, aunts, cousins, friends. They crowd around, kissing, hugging, crying, laughing. So this is home! I am happy in a way that I have never been. Only Dalit is missing. I look for her but she is not there.

In my dream I realize that it is this scene that I was deprived of so many years ago, when the woman of the sunbeams told me that I would have to return to the world of pain. This was what I longed for through all those years of isolation, until my mission on earth could be accomplished and I could return to my interrupted fate.

People are so foolish! What Holocaust do they grieve over? What sadness is there in death? Aren't we all together now? My tragedy was that I was left behind! But what does it matter? I am happy, completely happy! I am home! I will never go back, never! I have found my loved ones, and I will stay!

And so I awaken, weeping with happiness, with determination. It is a shock to find myself alone in my hotel room. What is this? How could this be? I can't believe that I have lost my family once again, this is a dream, let me just--

But they are gone. My weeping turns to bitter grief. I sob and sob for what seems like hours, though actually I have fallen asleep again, and in my sleep I realize that my dream is skittering away and I must awaken and write it down if it is to survive.

It is four o'clock. I don't care. I take out my notebook to write down my dream. As I write the dream cools, becomes ashes on paper. The life that moved me so intensely is gone. I am writing words.

4:30. It is too late to deliver the sun-sculpture to the mountain. I will do it anyway. I don't care if someone sees me. I want to be rid of it.

I dress, splash some cold water on my face and neck, take the box containing the sculpture out to the car. It is remarkably light. I feel no excitement. It is as though I were delivering paper towels to a restaurant.

I drive up the deserted streets quickly. Up and up and up. It is dark, but framing the mountain is a darkness just a bit lighter than that which hangs over the sea.

What I am doing strikes me as ridiculous. I know that the sun-sculpture is beautiful, but not so beautiful as to justify the pretentiousness of its delivery. To leave it so mysteriously on the mountain top? To demand the reconstruction of an entire university campus? What would prevent someone from merely tucking it under his arm and taking it home? And that would be that.

It is laughable to assume that this is what will prove the antidote to all the death and destruction of the Holocaust, the monument to humankind's urge to life, the eternal light! With instructions for an inscription to be carved in stone! What puffery! It's a nice sculpture, but . . .



It's all I can do to continue up the mountain. But I must. I will simply close my eyes, clench my teeth, and go through with it. Too late to think about it now! Any thoughts are likely to be the deranged products of my hysteria. I can't trust anything but my original instinct. I have no choice but to carry this through.

I turn left off the highway. The sky is whitening now, the stars obliterated in the east. The road runs by the skyscraper on top of the mountain and along the edge of the concrete platform that is its plaza. Both are scheduled for demolition in the grandiose plans I will place beneath the sculpture's front left strut.

I stop the car just a few yards beyond the building. No one in sight. A pale pink line beneath the clouds on the opposite side of the valley. Some stray chirping of birds in the otherwise deserted silence.

It is already too light to do this. If anyone comes I will be seen.

I open the trunk, pull out the box containing the sculpture. Still no one. I open the box, put on my gloves, and lift the sculpture out. The pale light of morning strikes the crystals and I am immersed in the purest pink I have ever seen, with flashes of dark blue and orange. The light is subdued pastel. I begin to weep.

My God! but it is lovely! The air is incandescent, it dances around me as if it, too, was in love with being. What a mystery that my feelings are so touched by the light!

As the sky becomes brighter the colors also brighten, bright orange-red, burning, dancing, singing, colors of joy! What in my soul responds to these colors as if in a mirror, moving, vibrating, glowing in perfect symmetry?

I must tear myself away but I cannot. I know, I am certain, that I understand something fundamental that previously I had been searching for, that I had not understood, but I haven't the slightest idea what it is. Again the sky brightens, the white sky turns blue, the slit between the clouds and the mountains turns molten, the sun is about to make its entrance into day.

Hurriedly I carry the sculpture to the front of the skyscraper, setting it down not far from the revolving glass door. I slip the envelope containing my message to the world underneath the front left strut. I straighten up. A guard is sitting just inside the glass entrance. He is fast asleep, his head rolled uncomfortably to one side. In a moment his discomfort will jerk him awake.

I step away, walking backwards towards the car. It is done.

I get in. The sculpture blazes in the direct light of the sun. It is a warm, loving green with flashes of angry orange. I cannot bear it. It is too beautiful. I must leave but I cannot. It is impossible for me to believe that this is my creation. I am too small. It shatters the window through which I look upon the world. I am infinitesimal, and I understand nothing.

I look once more, then drive the car slowly alongside the plaza. In the side mirror the ball is deep purple, then violet and blue. I am a husk, the meat of me has been torn out. What does it matter who I am or what I was? My life sparkles in the dancing light. My nightmares of pain, my crippled, crippled life with my parents and Paul, my love for Dalit, for Gregor--it all dances in the plaza, in me it is gone. I am empty, nothing. Slowly I unravel, dissipate, disappear . . .