



Love Cats

J. K. White

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HE THOUGHT back to their beginning as he sensed her at his side, hearing her whispered words and wishing he could feel her heart beside his again. Oh to have that day back, that day when everything had changed.

“Paul? Paul Goodman?”

“Yes?”

Myra Glass stood in the doorway, twisting a recalcitrant strand of hair into a small knot between her fore finger and thumb, her other hand clenching a sheaf of notes by her side. “Yes, well, it won’t take long, but you’ve been put forward for promotion—International Division. I need you to fill out an *ap*.” How her blue eyes fidgeted with the world around her, her mouth in control yet not, her words ringing like bells from her lips.

“I’m Myra. Myra Glass.” *Myra*. If only he could return the past.

He had seen her again that first day at a drinks party for Jan de Witt, who had been learning the ins and outs of tele-banking at Green Bank’s main Buffalo office. Unabashed by his obvious attempt to save her from the chattering accountants, as always rattling on about rising and falling this and thats, he had gone up to her. Hopeful.

“Did the groundhog see his shadow?” he had asked.

“No, not yet, but there’s hope. There’s always hope,” answered Myra, her sing-song words cueing in his head again like bells. Hope.

He imagined holding her as she twisted another string of blonde into a perfect loop, as if by holding her he could somehow hold her fear. *His* fear? He thought how best to word an invitation, wondering could he speak such thoughts so soon. But how could he at a business drinks party for Jan de Witt? They had only just met.

As the morning light crossed his face in streaks of confusion, Paul remembered next the Falls, having finally screwed up the courage to ask her that day. “The Falls asleep in snow,” he remembered Myra saying as she smiled at his forwardness, “I’ve never been in the dead of winter.” And soon they were there, arms dangling over the railing, dots of mist connecting their faces, the bent perspective of their inclined torsos belying danger. How lightly they spoke their lines—of life, of past and future, of worlds colliding.

And then, walking hand in hand, in the leaky caverns underneath, as they lingered behind the tour, the teeny sweet guide gushing out the stream of numbers—“One hundred thousand gallons per second. More water falling than anywhere in the world, crashing with perfect certainty.” And finally, their first kiss, as the whole of Niagara above stopped, their lips wetted with mystery.

As the cold sun blazed full in his eyes, Paul remembered each moment as if he was stuck in a slo-mo dream. The office lights flickered through his thoughts in refractive wonder. Had it been seven weeks since that day? *Seven weeks*.

His boss ducked in. “Paul, I need the Friday report for the meeting,” said Wayne Templeton as he fingered his watch before adding mockingly, “It was due *Friday*.”

“Sorry, I’m still working out the numbers. I want to run them past the others—Frank from Marketing, Mark from Head Office, April from PR. Can you give me an hour?”

Wayne Templeton nodded. “Okay, an hour, but no more. And I’d like an answer to that *other* matter we were discussing. Remember?”

Paul winced. As if he could forget.

Maeve called round soon after to remind him about the group outing after work. Had he forgotten? Jane wondered if he was still playing squash.

Julia Reddy dropped by next to finalize the ap. As Green Bank psychiatrist, her job was to screen the undesirables, the malcontents, the not-yet-readys. A specialist in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis with a Ph.D. in advanced transactional analysis (Doctor Doctor), she could know something was wrong by the way one adjusted his tie or pulled at her hair.

“Are you ready?” Julia asked.

Paul shifted in his chair, his eyes cast on the dark mole on the underside of her chin. The cold sun beat through the wall of window behind her.

“Ready? Sorry?” returned Paul, casually tucking the short end of his tie into his pants.

“Yes, well, I imagine you have a lot on your mind. It’s a big step.”

“Yes, big step,” nodded Paul.

Julia had a few questions, just formalities. “You seem to have everything in order. Gus has some legal work and you’ll have to do some training, but I see no reason why Head Office in Washington won’t approve. *International Division*. Very impressive.” She flipped through the ap, scribbling notes in the margins as they talked, Paul studying her face as she eyed his past in the folded-out pages of his life: 27, first in his accounting class, a job at Green Bank straight out of college. True blue American. “Seems fine,” she continued. “Everything okay otherwise? Happy? No swings?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Are you sure? I find that some accountants feel like machines lost in the confines of a big bank, doing what they’re supposed to do instead of what they want to do. It’s okay to let it out. Talk. Confess.” Julia Reddy’s mouth stretched sideways in a smile. “How’s Myra?”

“Myra? Fine thanks,” said Paul flatly, his heart quickening.

“*Unh huh*. Well, I think that about covers it. I can’t imagine any problems.”

Julia Reddy rolled up the ap into a tightened scroll, indicating with a casual tap the direction of the door, before disappearing down the hall, her heels click-clicking with each step.

Thinking he had passed whatever test he had been given (he had spoken clearly, had said only good things about his colleagues, and hadn’t appeared nervous), Paul relaxed, his body unclenching as he surveyed the sky outside. The snow swirled in the wind, Buffalo alive now as if held captive in some giant snow globe. Well, she did ask about Myra. But, of course, she would have had to ask.

Although there had been no formal betrothal, no family gatherings (impossible in any case; parents all dead), they had been together every day since they met, made all the usual exchanges (flowers, chocolates, various particular stones and shiny metals, lists of favorites, a few obvious hinted-at surprises, and two flower tattoos only each other could see), and had said the word *love* twice (her first, followed by him, and again together *sotto voce* in the midst of an adventurous afternoon amour). They had even planned a trip to Myra’s sister Nell and family in the primrose path of Ithaca, but an hour’s drive along the interstate. Everything had been going well—not yet in their thirties, living their future, her ‘M’ and his ‘P’ monogrammed together in the yes of love. He had every right to wonder.

He watched more as the swirling snow outside stiffened, wondering not for the first time what it would feel like to fall, surprising himself at how much he enjoyed the image, his arms outstretched, buffeting himself as he passed each of Green Bank’s thirteen floors, a body, compelled to fall in perfect double time, yet ending, as always, with a thud, a splat, a news item above the fold.

Again he thought back to their beginning: the Falls, the kiss, the line above her thigh where the sun had dared not touch. He wondered was he to blame, remembering when he had raised his voice, but she had been unreasonable, expecting him to change his plans without notice. And of course they had argued that once when she demanded he come to her after a night out with the boys. He had only been to the casino on the Canadian side, big deal, out to midnight. But he had said no. Was that it? Was that why she was being so uncooperative? Or was it all because of last night, when he had joked about marriage, saying what he had said after she had first tested the waters. Was that it? A slip? Was he forever to question the riddles of love's ups and downs?

He checked his e-mail. There were nine, the first an ad for pheromones, a sticky substance conveying natural body odor—"One jot of pheromones grabs women, turning them into hot she-dogs." "*She dogs?*" chided Paul. "As if." The second was a regular solicitation—"You may already be a winner"—requesting that he, Mr. P. D. Goodman, preferred gold-star customer, send \$9.99 to P.O. Box 666, Twocowtown, Nebraska, attention *Winner*, to receive step-by-step instructions ... about setting up a mail-order business, telling others how they may already be winners. E-mails 3 through 8 were all jackpot lottery wins, for which, if he added them up, he had won over 100,000 million dollars, no questions asked, provided he immediately send his bank details and biographical information to the beneficent host institution (clearly marked as not the sending institution). He laughed as he noticed the overly casual spelling of 'lucky' recipient as 'licky' recipient in one and Mr Goodman as Mr Godman in another. As he opened the last e-mail, his adrenaline spiked.

Myra - Re: Tonight

Thank you for your note and the flowers you sent to me this morn. I have thought about what you said last night. Perhaps, forever is too big a step--day upon day, living ever more the same. I'm sorry. I thought a step to more. Yes, we are young and in the small of time and, indeed, forever is so much more. As for tonight, I'm sorry, but I told you I have this thing with Warren Jones. Remember? ... From Acquisitions and Mergers?
Regards, Myra.

So it was last night, when he had taken her bubble gum ring and one-upped her on bended knee, pretending to ask for her hand. But Warren Jones from *Acquisitions and Mergers?* Come on. And who signs affection with *regards?*

After reading and rereading Myra's e-mail for any supposed slant, he wondered had he missed a sign, overlooked the obvious? The Falls, that carnal vortex entwined with the bliss of new tried love—"Yes, yes, you are the one." It had never been as good as that first time, the two of them, rising and falling. *100,000 gallons per second*. Had she forgotten already when they first said yes together? Or had last night upended everything, when he had told her that he had no intention of being tied together like all the others? Was that it? And now, as if forever suspended in that moment, wishing he could somehow return the past. When he had meant without meaning.

Outside, the snow swirled faster. "Together. To-get-her," he mused. Was he to wait, give her time, each unrequited moment click-clicking in a hell of wishful thinking. Was that it? Was he to give her space, to be both distant *and* near, to come *and* go as a woman wanted? To be there, and not? Was that it? How had the simplicity of their beginning become so entangled?

He put on a good face at the meeting. He was losing Myra or had lost her he didn't know. Wayne Templeton asked if he was okay, the others wondering why he had been so quiet when his report was rejected. As they talked on about increases in the decreases and shortening potentials in the lengthening expectations, Paul drifted away, remembering again the Falls, and when Myra had asked "If you knew the exact moment you were going to die, would you live your life differently?" The way she smiled, having caught him out—a *yes* and she would ask why he didn't, a *no* and she would say he was a liar. "Imagine if you knew the time. Imagine if it was tomorrow." He couldn't think to concentrate. To hold her again. To have her. To fall.

"I'm sorry to reject the report," said Wayne Templeton, "but the numbers predict a surplus when we want a shortfall to put inflationary pressure on the weakening dollar."

Paul was only half listening as the others waited for him to answer. Even the snow, it seemed, had slowed in wait. "Yes, sir," Paul finally replied. "Shortfall."

Wayne Templeton continued, a gentle smile breaking across his face. "Paul, we can afford to be patient and see what the Fed does. Remember, all good things come to those who wait." But Paul didn't answer, as he gazed up instead at the clock hands, glued together at twelve. The others nodded their agreement. To wait. To let the world pass by. To never question silence, thought Paul.

"Yes, to wait. I understand," Paul finally answered.

And with that the meeting was adjourned, the others piling out the moment Wayne Templeton had cued the end. As Paul lingered, still unsure, Wayne Templeton asked him if he had given any thought to the *other* matter they had been discussing. They were idling by the door.

"You're serious?" asked Paul. "You want me to *watch* others?" The words sputtered out. "Report back to you? *Spy*?"

"Oh, I wouldn't think of it as *spying*," said Wayne Templeton. "I only want you to pass along any untoward behavior you might come across or overhear. You know, suspicious activity in the normal course of a day. Can't be too safe these days."

Not quite spy versus spy, thought Paul, uncovering infidels, the Hun, code book in hand behind the water cooler, blinking coordinates and jump parameters to his commander-in-chief. But not *his* mission, nonetheless.

Wayne Templeton fingered his tie, his authority ripening as he brought the two strands together. He mentioned the promotion, the *ap*. "Well, Paul, you let me know okay? ... by Friday. I'll be waiting." After Wayne Templeton trundled off, Paul was left alone, again, with the uncertainty of his thoughts.

Suspicious activity? Untoward behavior? What had that to do with accounting, wondered Paul as he returned to his office? And how was he to get the numbers right if the numbers were always changing? Where was the sense in that? And Myra, whose eyes and mouth and face imploded in his head like an A-bomb, transmuting love, what had become of her? Of them? How could everything have changed in a moment?

He fired off an e-mail to the Green Bank president, William Connors, questioning how he could report on numbers that were always changing. He knew he shouldn't have, but there it was, he had. He then sent another e-mail to Wayne Templeton, saying no to that *other* matter—he would be no boss's boy, no office snoop. In a moment's crush he even sent off a reply to the last lottery larcenist, thanking him and asking for *his* bank details, so he could turn the tables to see how that would stick in *his* craw. And then, instead of responding to *the* e-mail, the one he

hadn't stopped thinking about since the moment he had received it, the one from her, he walked the forty feet to her office.

Myra was typing at her desk, her long blonde hair trailing behind her, her body erect and as noble as the Sphinx. The daisies Paul had sent her that morning sparkled in a vase by the window.

"I think you owe me an explanation," started Paul calmly, his nervousness he believed only he could see. A sprig of sideways hair stuck out at a most peculiar angle.

"Paul, come on, we've been through this. I told you," said Myra. "Warren asked me out long before I met you. It's his grandmother's 88th birthday." Paul jiggled from side to side on the balls of his feet as he listened.

"I'm not talking about *Warren*," he interrupted, the words bunching together as he continued. "Last night, you know I didn't mean what I said. You know I was only joking." But it was no use as he tried to make sense, to undo, to go back, to begin anew.

"Paul, it has nothing to do with ... *last night*," said Myra, her voice trailing uneasily.

That was when the window broke.

Modern skyscraper windows are constructed to resist any ordinary blow—otherwise there would be many more tales of paperweights and the like falling from height—but, in this instance, something had gone wrong and, before the paperweight could fall the thirteen floors to the ground, the noise brought a buzz of people to Myra's office. Most said the noise was like nothing they had ever heard, a sonic boom distilled only by the sound of falling shards. One person said it sounded like the end of the world.

What happened next was unclear. Myra was shouting at Paul and when Warren Jones arrived, he too shouted at Paul before running to Myra.

"What the hell's going on?" exclaimed Warren. A dribble of spit arced from his mouth.

"Paul," cried Myra, her voice trembling more in sadness than in anger. "What have you done?"

Indeed, what had he done he wondered as he stood now at the edge of a windowless office, the blistering wind pushing against his face and spurring him on to who knows what. He had loved her. He had told her there was none above her in the starry sky. He had held her in his arms and stroked her hair when she had asked without asking. He had placed her in the heavens, where no other star or galaxy resided. Not one. That's what he had done. And she had said yes, and they had said yes together from the very day they had met. As if by plan. Yet, there beside her in the embers of his world, lit by the rush of wind and swirling snow, he was as far away from her as forever. Myra, the one who had given herself to him.

He didn't remember much after that. It must have been he who had thrown the paperweight (the one he got at the Falls gift shop with the flower petal imbedded inside and marked down half off), but not to get back at Myra as everyone would say, but because she had no reason to keep it. If it didn't mean what it meant when he gave it to her, why keep it? What was the reason? But the mind can't keep up with the heart in the moment. It doesn't stand a chance. Paul didn't stand a chance as he stood staring at the emptiness around him. He certainly didn't mean for everything to come crashing down, as if anyone would believe him.

As the stillness stretched and the snow swirled faster in the shook-up world around him, he thought of proposing, then and there, for real, hoping somehow to

undo last night when she had sprung her *surprise* on him, that stupid pink plastic bubble gum ring, her ha-ha attempt at love's teasing as she laughed about how a man had to be all those things a man had to be—attentive, ever flattering, eagerly patient, and most importantly *spontaneous*—and he, in a fit of mad *spontaneity*, joking how he couldn't imagine a life tied down in a repetition of days (*repetition of days*, he had used those very words, *repetition of days*) before quoting a list of sorry statistics on marriage. What if he *were* to bend his knee *for real*, and swear to her his undying love? Is that what she wanted—to be princess to his heroic musketeer? Would that make right the past?

And what if he agreed to spy for his *über* master, Herr Templeton, keeping America safe from the mujahedeen stock room thieves and time terrorist early leavers, thereafter rising up the Green Bank rungs until his pensioned end? What if he did everything they wanted? Was the day-to-day so bad, the heaps of certainty piled on in a crush of sameness, the never-ending *repetition of days*? What was a fall, but another beginning?

The Green Bank volunteer floor fire warden eventually called for Paul to step away from the edge and follow appropriate procedure for broken windows. No good ignoring procedure he said—it was at just such times as these that procedure was needed, as written in the *Green Bank Rules of Evacuation*—but Paul stayed still. To fall. To break free. To change everything in an instant. It was an opera of noise as they all blathered on, their radiating peaks and troughs interfering perfectly in a symphonic mix of indistinguishable discord.

The only calm voice in Myra's office that day was Wayne Templeton. Broken glass and romantic affairs didn't matter to Wayne Templeton, nor did Paul's seeming reluctance to eye spy his co-workers, but what did matter was the who's who order of the universe, that pigeon-toed, follow-the-leader game of games. "Nothing personal," Wayne Templeton said, "but rules are rules. Anarchy is no way to run a company." And in an instant, Paul was fired. He was dismissed, canned, let go. He was exterminated, released, sacked, cast out, downsized.

"Too bad," announced Warren Jones, "but you can't e-mail presidents. You have to go through channels. Who does he think he is?"

"You can't go around breaking windows," the volunteer floor fire warden reminded all who would listen. "You must respect the order. Where would we be without procedure?"

Most, however, said Wayne Templeton had had it in for Paul. Most said it had only been a matter of time.

Julia Reddy comforted Myra, telling her that she could join her bi-weekly counseling session, where she could tell all and name her pain, her voice notching in sympathy as she turned through the pages to Paul's kind, a hint of unstudied confusion skewing her brow.

"You must be strong," she said. "He is obviously sick and compulsive. His id and ego are as unmatched as his eyes." His eyes thought Myra.

The others told her to be strong, that time would wend its story of forgetfulness and once more change dusk to dawn.

Building security finally put an end to the Code White situation (declared immediately in the event of broken windows) and after suspending their practice abseil down the north wall of the south tower, where they had been conducting a live simulated terrorist exercise, Paul was lead from Myra's office, his life apprenticeship in Green Bank, Inc *kaput*.

The Green Bank gossip roared immediately about “the incident on the thirteenth floor in the north tower” as Paul was forcefully led from the building. That is until the next week when Wayne Templeton forgot to indicate his intention to exit the freeway on his way home and was rolled over by a truck hauling canned tuna. Most said Wayne Templeton didn’t deserve to be crumpled up by a truck hauling canned tuna. Most said that life was as cruel and unknown as the weather.

Here is the truth, thought Paul as he crumpled up in front of the television at home—the sudsy drama of failed existence laid bare for all to see. How neat. How clean. How modern. He changed the channel: 1, 2, 3. *The Vampire Buddy Files*, a repeat *Celebrity Moo-lah Millions*, the latest opera reality show *Mi Mi Mi*. How perfect the numbers circled round. 4, 5, 6. The talking heads, the quiz, the ad for the very same executive starter unit as his, showing the happy twosome living together, perfect Myra and perfect Paul. *Freedom* the unit was called, the number one style going that year—everything anyone could want in one room for \$99,999. Freedom.

Of course his thoughts turned again to her, always her, golden hair trailing behind her rock-like pose as she slowly twisted strands of hair forever. He went through his books, anything he thought might help: *Living and Loving in a Loving Living Way*, *Why Animals Eat Each Other*, *Letting Go of Love to Get Love Back*, *When Good People Get Hit By Bad Trucks*. He didn’t understand a word.

“Women and men are different. We’re from different planets. I understand that. We have different chromosomes. We’re wired differently. But...”

He cycled through *the others*, trying to make sense of his patterned past, something, anything—Annabel in school behind the garage (she was the first, though they hadn’t ended up being the friends she said they would), Beth, who had made plain her country prejudices, Carol, the college freshman, who sat behind him in Calculus (a little too calculating), and all the other do, re, mis of his spiked amour, ..., but none were like her, the noblest ancestor of his past. Myra Glass.

He tried the complimentary *scratch ‘n win* that had come with the *Times* that day, knowing full well the impregnable odds and that two stars, two suns, two moons, two gold bars, two happy faces, two bold JACKPOTS, and not the required THREE (praise be to God), were the likely certainty. All were losers—‘try again’ teasing twos the lot of them.

He wrote a poem.

But what of *this* and what of *that* my love?
 What of days that follows night unspoken?
 The heart that launched me has gone away.
 Mars laughs, that angry warrior of the sky
 While Aphrodite, naked, cries her tears.
 The heart that ever launched me has slayed me dead.
 Dead, dead, dead.

As the sky unfolded, Paul stood gazing out from Freedom, wondering, imagining, questioning. Anything, everything. He tried all that he could to understand, not noticing the repossession notice under the door until morning. Paul Goodman was being thrown out of Freedom.

“Where’s the success in this?” he yelled. “What can be the reason?” He ran through all that he remembered, from the size of Mount Everest to the population of Timbuktu, from the smell of a flower to the color of a dream, from the number of atoms in the universe to the end of infinity. Myra. Nothing made sense.

And then in an instant, he decided. Why should he play the game? Especially when the game had no rules, or no rules he could tell—4 years of college, 3 years of 9-5, a 35-year mortgage to pay back twice the principal on a no-bedroom apartment where he could barely swing a kitten. *Enough. Ca soufit. Genug.* He put his life in storage—the pull-out couch, the television, his collection of suits and floral ties—and de-registered his savings, the straight-laced, college-kid, Green Bank fund manager, only three years younger than himself, explaining that Paul’s previously diversified strategy would go to pot by his sudden tom foolery and that, if he kept his money right where it was, he could more than double his after-tax, pensionable earnings before the next downturn. Even after the overly nice senior fund Green Bank manager only three years older than himself urged him to reconsider, telling Paul that, historically, stocks went up and money went down, he was still sure as he trickled down the first of his savings to a travel agent (furthering her trickle down when she bought a deluxe, wide-screen plasma television at the mid-winter Consumer World cash back sale). Freedom, however, would be sold at a loss.

It took some doing, but when the calm finally returned after the madness of that day, he was on a plane. He looked down at the briny waters below, his wide smile reflected in the starry window, his eyes, one green, one blue, twinkling back.

“Imagine if you were to die tomorrow,” he mouthed. “Imagine?” As he sat and thought about what his life had become, Paul Goodman couldn’t wait for tomorrow to begin.

Myra - Re: Love?

Dear Nell,

Sorry I haven't written in a while, but things around here have been rather crazy of late. Paul broke my office window and got fired for e-mailing the Green Bank president. I don't know what he was trying to do, but I haven't heard from him since, and he isn't answering his phone. Just when I was thinking he might be the one. I know my cards said I wouldn't meet Mr. Right for another year, but maybe the cards meant I wasn't going to *marry* Mr. Right for another year. I don't know. It got all confused between us when the subject of marriage came up--everything went wrong. Anyway he's gone, pop like a balloon. I think he thinks because I initiated the relationship that it's my responsibility to make it right. *Men?* All I said to him was "Hello?" He was so funny, pretending to be so blasé. I could hear his voice quivering. But I'll never forget our first day at the Falls, and that stupid heart-shaped glass flower he got me at the dumb tourist shop. And all the days we spent together. I hope he hasn't given up on us. Yes, I know, I mustn't dwell on the past. As the poet said, no point ending up like Miss Havisham.

I just read that you can lose more weight watching television manually changing channels than going to the gym--something about the in-out caloric equation. Why didn't they tell us that years ago so we don't have to try all these fad diets they trot out all the time?

Hope the snow isn't piled too high in Ithaca, Sis. See you all at Easter.

OUT

*Me thinks in northern light
Me sinks in aurora borealis
The wonders of the world
Where the sun and planets call home*

FOR ALL his organizing, Paul had gotten the wrong people to sign the wrong papers and was detained in Schiphol Airport upon arrival. He told Dutch immigration he had European heritage, that his people were from Europe, that America meant *from Europe*. They looked right through him. He said his great grandmother was Dutch. She made shoes. Nothing. He said his great grandfather was Irish, a fisherman. *Het geeft niet*. He didn't know his great grandfather from a pole, but it wouldn't have mattered. They stuck him in a room without a window.

As he waited for the right people to come and sign the right papers, he read about the Netherlands. "The Dutch are the best in the world at reclaiming earth from water, building houses, roads, and whole towns on the sea. The Netherlands means 'land under the sea.'"

Wakayo Damassa, an Ethiopian house painter, told him more. Wakayo had been in Schiphol a year. They had stuck him in a room without a window when he arrived with the wrong papers. He didn't have any papers.

"I'm Ethiopian, but I'm hoping to get the right papers to stay in Holland forever. Right now, I'm stuck."

"Stuck. That's exactly the right word, Wakayo. *Stuck*. You and I are stuck."

"The Dutch are the best in the world at many things," Wakayo told Paul, his big white smile filling his face. "Millions of people come and go through Schiphol every day. It's built on water. If not for the walls, the sea would swallow them whole." Paul and Wakayo could see the crowds ticking back and forth through the great hall from the room where they ate and stretched. "There's a big rush in the morning. That's when the trains come. And then again in the evening. More trains. I've never seen any planes." Wakayo's smile was bigger than his head. He didn't know he had been in Schiphol a year.

Paul saw that Wakayo smiled at everything. Here in Schiphol, where Wakayo had a bed and a room and three meals a day and watched the people traffic coming and going when they let him out to eat and stretch, he had more than he had ever had. It was not at all like home. There he had nothing.

Paul read more: "In the Netherlands, everyone lives on top of each other and so the Dutch are the best at respecting privacy and individual freedom. The Dutch are the most liberal people in the world. At the same time, because walls break without notice and destroy houses and roads and whole towns, the Dutch are also the most religious. The Dutch are always right with God because they do not know at what hour God will take them away."

"The Dutch grow tulips up the wazoo," said Wakayo as he and Paul ate and stretched and looked out at the people in the great hall. "And cheese and wooden shoes. I've never seen so many people wearing wooden shoes. It's amazing. In my village in Ethiopia, we don't have tulips or cheese. We don't have shoes."

Paul asked Wakayo if he knew he wasn't actually in Holland, that Schiphol was an airport and that he had been detained until they could verify that he wasn't illegal or wanted by the authorities for some unknown crime.

"I know. I'm stuck. They're working on my papers. Did you know the Dutch were the first to think man was in charge, that the world belongs to man? The Dutch are the most enlightened people in the world. They have accomplished great and many things." Wakayo's smile spilled off his cheeks. "My village doesn't even have water."

Paul smiled. His brochure had said the same thing.

That day the right man with the right papers came, and Paul was put on a train for Amsterdam. He had to leave Wakayo behind. He wasn't even permitted to say

goodbye. As he departed Schiphol airport, Paul wondered how long Wakayo Damassa would be stuck in his room without a window. What would he think when he got unstuck? When they finally let him go? What would it be like to be free? Wakayo had no idea.

2

PAUL STUMBLED directions to Hotel Erasmus in Rembrandtplein and after checking in, went for a walk along the ripple-tiered canals of Amsterdam, in and out of the stuttering crowds, excited to be free and among people again. The late night hung in the air. The canal circles brought him past the girly-girls posing in the windows, their glows scented red fluorescent, and the baby-boys tittering and smoking as they eyed outside. They smoked rocket-ride hydroponic cannabis that did to the cerebral cortex what pheromones did to the pituitary glands. Paul's eyes were a mile wide. He had never seen girly-girls blowing kisses at baby-boys from behind sex-painted windows. He had never smelt rocket-ride hydroponic cannabis before.

As he walked back to the hotel, he spotted a familiar face—Jan de Witt, the Dutch client he had met at Green Bank. They made their introductions, commenting on their chance meeting, and bounced news at each other.

"I was sorry to hear you got fired," said Jan. "That was madness."

Paul stared down the canal, wafts of red neon streaking across the store fronts. They were in the Old Centre, the gabled buildings held up at odd angles by each other.

"Indeed. All because of an e-mail." Paul replayed the events. He didn't mention Myra. He was showing strength.

Jan suggested a drink at the Wild Bull and they settled into the dull dark of a Red Light district bar, the beer brought by Jan's nod. A band of boys in familiar baseball caps and over-sized clothes were crushed at the front, their weekend spilling overtime.

"Amazing how things change. It's barely two months since I was in Buffalo," said Jan. The drinks party, remembered Paul. Myra. The day they had met.

Jan told Paul about Wayne Templeton. "Turns out he'd been financing his own deals with client money for years. He had a mistress and a house in Vegas. The fat bastard even had a place in Monte Carlo." Paul sat blank-faced as the shock sunk in. "Still, he knew the ins and outs of sheltered investment. Can't have been *all* bad."

Paul thought of Myra again, wanting to ask Jan if he had heard anything, but instead said nothing. Not talking about her showed he didn't care, that he had moved on. He hadn't. He had thought of little else. At Schipol, he had called out her name in the middle of the night. His eyes glistened in a rush before he shook himself and looked up at Jan. "I can't believe we ran into each other," he said.

"Who knows how to explain chance? Imagine if I hadn't decided to walk through the Old Centre tonight? We wouldn't be having this conversation. Imagine if you'd been in that car with Wayne Templeton?" Jan laughed as the question trickled out. "You'd be canned tuna."

As they talked on (mayonnaise on fries, pickled herring and onions, white beer), at that very moment Myra was sitting in a café in Paris on Rue Descartes near the Panthéon. She was drinking red wine and looking down at the twin towers of Notre Dame Cathedral. She had put aside her travel book, thinking how lucky she was

to be there after dreaming of going for so long and deciding, finally, after the debacle of that day at Green Bank, to go. A man sitting at a table across from her smelled the wine and sniffed the evening air and was about to ask her the exact same thing Jan was about to ask Paul, "Why don't you come and work for me?" Afterwards, the man walked her to her hotel and gave her his card, casually pointing out the Panthéon as they passed by, saying, in his low guide voice that, in the Panthéon, the earth had been shown to move. He didn't know the details, but he knew, as everyone did, that night and day were caused by the turning earth. He knew even though it seemed so obviously otherwise.

Jan raised his glass to Paul. "You know, you could come and work for me? I could use your help with the accounts."

"Actually, I was planning on doing some travelling," answered Paul, casually questioning his resolve as he held his glass aloft.

"It's an e-biz," continued Jan. "There's stock. Could be truckloads of money." Jan nodded for another round of beer, eyeing the waitress up and down as she retreated from their table. The baseball boys were swelling at the bar as the entertainment now strutted on stage, Miss D's sultry song and dance encouraged to excess by the boy's whistles.

Paul continued with the same resolve, saying he had come to Europe to travel and learn and see a little of the past in the pages of a real Europe.

"There's venture capital and government seed money and a Nasdaq float," urged Jan. "Did I say stock? I have the phone business already—chat lines, psychics, quiz games, the usual—all charged by the minute."

"You do the quiz games?"

"Sure. Start them off easy—Who discovered America? Julius Caesar, Isaac Newton, Christopher Columbus, Paul Newman—and work them up to the population of Timbuktu. It's a license to print money, the user's credit card account wired straight into the bank." Jan explained the ins and out of the lodged credits and debits—all subcontracted—the deposits and withdrawals, plusses and minuses that added up to money in the bank, as long as lonely men needed propping up, as long as the forlorn desired to know the future, as long as trivia offered hope to the quick witted. "As long as the consumer needs to consume," smiled Jan as he raised his glass. "As long as everyone pursues their own interest. It's a winner."

And so Paul became a director of the numbered company 149162536, a division of Rode Hoed BV, a handshake and two shots of sweet *borreltje* Dutch gin sealing the deal. Paul laughed, "All because I was in the Old Centre of Amsterdam at the same time that Jan de Witt was walking home. Who knows the future? Who knows chance?" He had forgotten that being detained in Schipol with Wakayo Damassa had delayed the sweet order that chance was making of his life. "Who knows fortune and luck?"

The offer of half-off drinks had not filled the Wild Bull on a Tuesday night, but there was now a dozen baseball boys, their shouts growing louder as Paul looked up from the table, noticing the counter-sunk stage and Miss D, freed of all but her matador's cape. Indeed, Buffalo was not nearly as liberal or religious as Amsterdam. Paul and Jan watched as an argument broke out after a photo flash went off in the middle of Miss D's noted bullfighter routine, during her now-you-see-it, now-you-don't 'tora tora' bit, and the bouncers moved in to retrieve the camera.

"The Dutch are very particular about how things are done," said Jan, as the fracas turned into a round of heated name calling with demands for refunds if the camera wasn't returned.

Management was called and after determined negotiations a deal was settled by an exchange of a *Dodgers* cap and two *Stars and Stripes* key chains for the camera, the baseball boys congratulating themselves with backslaps and high fives about their deal and the supremacy of Rule Americana.

“It happens all the time with the young boys,” smiled Jan. “First time away from home. They think they can take photos for nothing.” Jan explained how Miss D had her own photographs to sell.

After one more round, Jan and Paul left the Wild Bull, Jan walking Paul to the Rode Hoed offices, his pace deliberate as he stepped lightly over the cobbled streets. Jan was tall and slender and he easily slipped aside to let others pass in the occasional confrontation of bodies. His hands were forever stroking his sprouting chin.

“*The city in the trees*, that’s what Erasmus called Amsterdam,” Jan told Paul as they walked. “Crews of men knocking wooden piles into water with nothing more than ropes and pulleys and the sweat of their brow. ‘*Hup the hoe high*’ they sang as they worked, happy in their simple labor and the hope of a drink when the day was done.” Jan stopped in front of a modern red brick building, astride the more ancient and crooked. “Rode Hoed or Red Hat,” he announced. “For now, the eighth floor. Tomorrow? Who knows? It’s a winner.”

They arranged to meet in the morning and Paul retraced his steps to the hotel, remembering his route through the cobbled and lit-up bridges and landmarks Jan had pointed out. He surprised himself by not getting lost. The narrow canal streets seemed indistinguishable, but Jan’s markings guided him. He saw the Anne Frank House. Paul had never heard of Anne Frank. Rembrandt and Van Gogh—he had heard of them, but didn’t know their paintings—something about fat girls and starry nights. As he neared the hotel, the red lights buzzed again. He saw the baby-boys and the girly-girls. He smelled the burning weed. The night lingered. The sun slipped forever west.

Perhaps his life was falling into order after the madness of that day? Living in Europe? A job with stock in a publicly-traded company? Buffalo seemed light-years away.

Paul smiled as he lay his head down that night, the whistle of the trees enmeshed in the still simmering street sounds below. “It’s all the way you look at life,” he thought. “What is choice, but one of an infinity of possibilities—the one taken as real? Isn’t life what we make of choice? What we do when the road diverges, when life bends?” He wasn’t thinking about tragedy, about losing one’s job, or being crunched up in a car. He wasn’t thinking of Myra.

3

A CRAZE of bright red tulips traced the window sills of the Red Hat board room. Familiar Dutch prints hung from the walls: Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch*, the dark light focussed sharply, Vermeer’s *The Letter*, striking colors in simple camera-obscured style, Van Gogh’s *White House at Night*, the bright star behind, illuminating stillness, and the Mondrian, the one that everyone liked to hate, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, with its grid of reds and yellows and blues. Paul hadn’t been interested in art before, but seeing them each day in a city of strangers, somehow he felt connected, as if familiarity was knowing.

“Good. Everything is on schedule,” said Jan, pointing around the room as he assessed the to-do tasks. “Paul’s checking the counters, Hugo the servers. Hugo? Fully tested?” The Red Hat launch was a week away.

Hugo, the head technician, glossed quickly over the details about backbones and bandwidth and load times. Beside him, Rob filled in the details. Laurens was next, talking wattage and power and matching impedance. He was the engineer. They wore polyester plaid shirts and striped pants and wore their beards in goatee style similar to Jan’s. They all loved working.

Paul thought of them as bugs, always busy, always flittering about. Hugo worked non-stop to and fro between the Red Hat room and the operating room like a bee. Rob was the ant, performing tasks one at a time, lugging computers and cameras on Hugo’s command, his clawing tools constantly at work to separate and join, and Laurens was the spider, arranging the lattice of cameras and trails of wires. The more Paul saw, the more he thought of them as bugs, each evolved according to a task. The perfect functioning human—designed specifically for work.

Paul’s job was the accounting statistics, counting up the users on each camera and billing them accordingly. There were thirty-six cameras in the Red Hat room and any of the thirty-six angles could be dialed up to get the feeling of interaction. At the forefront of interactive internet and television technology, the Red Hat room was like being there. The format was well known, but had never been tried in an adult environment and was generating immense interest. In four six-hour stints per day for one year, thirty-six actors at a time would be followed by a camera doing whatever struck their fancy so as not to be one of the three weeded out each week by the public taste. There had been no trouble getting actors—everyone wanted the prize. As for Red Hat, at one euro a minute per user, they’d be swimming in it. When Red Hat went public, there wouldn’t be wheelbarrows enough to cart away the money.

“The user can get up to eight angles at once,” said Paul, continuing with an explanation of the accounting methods, before Jan took over—Red Hat was definitely Jan’s show.

“Obviously the statistics will show us who is popular and who is not,” Jan began, “and so we’ve decided to roll out continuous numbers on each actor to give the user the feel of a game. We know competition fuels this kind of show. Besides, we have to count them anyway—we wouldn’t want to *over* bill anyone.” The tech boys, Hugo, Rob, and Laurens, laughed on cue, their in-out guffaws filling and emptying their torsos in a flutter.

A discussion on cabling logistics followed, Hugo explaining in English, before turning to Dutch. The office language was English with Paul there, Dutch otherwise or if the details were too pointed.

As the boys batted around the tech talk, Paul became drawn into the Mondrian. Why didn’t they like it he wondered? The colorful symmetry had a quieting effect he thought. It looked easy. Colored reds, yellows, and blues in black squares. Grids, right angles, like counting in color, like ordered numbers. It reminded him of the Partridge Family bus. Maybe that was it. Didn’t seem much like art thought Paul. Was it too simple next to the detail of Rembrandt—the chicken girl amid the shooting party in illuminated somber light? He eyeballed the Vermeer and the girl writing in earnest, feeling he was intruding on a private moment. He hadn’t noticed the scrunched up letter on the floor before. What was she writing? To whom? How important it seemed to get it right.

Saskia, the office manager, called in with messages. “Black or white tie for the launch?” she asked. “The mayor’s office wants to know.” She waited in the doorway,

Paul wondering if she and Jan had something going by the way their bodies slumped sympathetically when near. She shifted her weight in anticipation of Jan's response, before departing in the same breezy way she had entered.

Next, Jan and Paul discussed the billing details. They were by the *Rembrandt*, Jan watching Paul's eyes move back and forth as they talked. "It's a *day* painting," said Jan finally, his tone deepening as he interrupted himself. "It should be called *The Day Watch*."

"Sorry?"

"It was a portrait of the civil guard on day watch. But it hung above a fireplace for over two hundred years. When the Rijksmuseum acquired it they thought it was a night scene because the soot had obscured the light. When it became famous, they called it *The Night Watch*." Paul pushed out a smile. "They only figured it out recently. Quite extraordinary—turning day into night."

"Why don't they change the name?" asked Paul.

"It's not that easy. Everyone knows it as *The Night Watch*," smiled Jan. "They say the guard standing in the back is Rembrandt himself."

"Really?"

"Yeah, a Renaissance Hitchcock, nodding and winking for posterity." Jan twiddled a coin as he spoke, slipping it under and over his fingers and in and out of his palm.

"Interesting."

Jan returned the conversation to the launch. "It's looking good Paul. Start getting the buckets ready. Remember, a good idea is one thing, but the *application* of a good idea, now *that* is the making of a good *business*." And then, after telling Paul to keep up the good work, Jan was gone.

The day before the launch, the cameras rolled in-house for a final test, and the office buzzed with excitement, the trade word spreading that Red Hat was a possible next best thing. There had been a news crew in that morning and three profiles already in the business pages, a whole page in *De Tijd* on Red Hat's projected rise.

As Paul checked the counters in the operating room with Hugo, Jan directed movements in the Red Hat room, fastidiously ordering new camera placements and rearranging furniture.

"Okay, Hugo, next counter," instructed Paul, squatting under a row of consoles as he called out the numbers.

"There's definitely something about virtual images that makes people behave differently," said Hugo as he dialed up the next counter and yelled back the numbers. "I don't know. Maybe the distance and the closeness at the same time obscures the meaning." Hugo buzzed to the next console, turning the dial as Paul prescribed. "Whoa. Check out Miss Papua New Guinea."

"*What?*" Paul's back was corkscrewed most indiscreetly on the floor as he looked up.

"B2. From Indonesia. You know, the usual trying to get her papers."

B2, as she was known by her camera, or *Mary* as she would soon be known in the Red Hat room, was the clear office favorite. Her metabolism overheated and her smile rippled out from her peach-tanned face as her skin shone happiness.

"Imagine when she meets Olympus Mons," continued Hugo as he dialed in her counter. As Hugo explained to Paul, Olympus Mons was the established late-night Dutch television star hired to generate the early buzz—camera E5 or *Thaddeus* on the show. He had made his name as the first person in line to buy a Playbox II game console after a three-day wait, parlaying that fame into a cancer charity phone-in

show call answerer, and then to a late-night adult talk show host. Hugo zoomed in Olympus Mons's camera and then Mary's camera as she lay on the couch in the Red Hat room, pushed prone into the seat cushions, her wide smile divined by the actors beside her. "It's unbelievable how the camera plays her. Forget the others. They haven't got a chance."

Paul looked up and eyed Mary in close-up on her console, her virtual pheromones pouring out in buckets.

"What console did you say?" asked Paul as he faked a smile. "B2?"

B2. Mary. Whatever she wanted to call herself. It didn't matter. As long as the buzz about Red Hat was correct, there would be more money than stars.

At dinner that night, Jan and Paul went over the last minute details of the launch. They were in the restaurant side of the Wild Bull, having left the others to their pre-launch celebrations. Jan uncorked the champagne and filled two glasses, offering his glass in an extended *prost*. Paul asked again about the legality of what they were doing.

"I know you Americans are squeamish about skin, but the Dutch have been doing this for centuries. You're in the land of Erasmus and liberalism." Jan stroked his beard between his fingers as he talked. "Hell, Rembrandt drew scores of nudes—in the bath, on the toilet, couples in the act. And now they hang him in all the great museums of the world. Are we doing anything differently with the technology of our time?"

"Yeah, I suppose," said Paul, scoring his apprehension as tiredness from a month of long days and short nights.

"Hey, there are bad things in the world Paul, don't get me wrong. Anne Frank hiding in a room for two years and getting carted off to Belsen, that's horror. Paying six million for a bunch of colored squares, that's an atrocity. But watching people in a room doing what people do in a room? Please. You should ask yourself why some people have nothing better to do than watch others do what they should be doing themselves. Who are we not to get their credit card numbers to help them along the way?" Jan's laughter trickled out as their glasses clinked. "The whole world watching at one euro a minute."

"You're right," replied Paul. "One euro a minute."

"It's not like we're forcing anyone to participate," continued Jan as he refilled the champagne. "Imagine *that* world. Or if someone was watching and you *didn't* know? At least, Red Hat is a choice." They knocked back another drink as Jan refilled the glasses and offered up another toast.

Red Hat was the beginning, he told Paul, the beginning of an adventure, unimaginable to most. The world was full of people afraid to dream, their jobs defining not only their work hours, but their whole existence, without which they would cease to be. Wouldn't he rather live trying to succeed, than die a failure with all the others? Wouldn't he? "Red Hat is a dream, Paul. What is life without a dream?" Paul nodded in agreement. "To success. To one's own vision of the future."

As they continued to discuss the details for the launch, Jan placed a package on the table and instructed Paul to open it, saying it was a keepsake for his hard work, something to remember after the hoopla died down.

"It was called a looker," he explained as Paul lifted the copper-covered telescope to his eye, his face lost in wonder. "Everyone knows Galileo stole the idea for the telescope from the Dutch. Actually, it was two Dutch children playing. They stuck two lenses together and saw the world magnified for the first time. Imagine, one of the greatest inventions ever, an accident. Pure chance." Jan raised his glass. "But

success is no accident Paul. Believe me, hard work, dedication, and focus are the pillars of great achievement. You must never be afraid to succeed.”

Soon after, the conversation turned to women, Jan again doing most of the talking. He was a very good talker. “If you put a woman above you, she looks down at you,” he said. “If you treat her badly she wants you. What’s a man to do?” Jan nodded to a woman across the room with a man beside, fixed to her words, seeming by his look to indicate to Paul his derision. “Endless insecurity in an endless game of Snakes and Ladders.” Jan told Paul that he and his girlfriend didn’t go for games, that they didn’t impose expectations on each other. “We’re not into the politics of relationships. Who do you want to lie with? That’s all you need to know.”

“I never thought about it like that,” said Paul, his thoughts tripping through his past. Expectations? Snakes and Ladders?

“Forget this Romeo and Juliet nonsense. *Forever?* Forever is far too long a time. Hendrickje and I don’t compare needs. We don’t make equal the unequal.”

“You know, I thought you and Saskia had something going?” asked Paul.

“*Saskia?*” laughed Jan. “Life with Saskia is *all* Snakes and Ladders. She wants to change men. I don’t need to be changed. Besides, she’s too thin and precious.” Jan proceeded to explain, as if amour was a painting, the gobs of flesh color layered on in the inventive mind of the artist under the influence of a roly-poly tryst beyond the canvas. To have what one sees painted in one’s mind.

With desert came Jan’s beginnings. He didn’t tell much, his story as guarded as his love affairs. He had grown up in Delft, the porcelain city of kings, and gone into business to please his father. He had studied art for a term in Amsterdam, before the parental decree had been read aloud. He let on that he preferred to forget more than remember, changing the subject with an order of more champagne. He had been married once before to a writer. A long time ago. Passion subjugated in work, thought Paul—was that Jan’s story? The mysterious man, who talked but did not tell of love.

As they talked on, Paul’s thinking became more disjointed, the drink popping out unwanted thoughts, and he finally asked Jan what he had wanted to ask since the night they had first met in the Old Centre. He asked about Myra.

“That’s right. I remember the two of you were together.” Jan twilled his champagne. “I don’t think she got fired. She was in Human Resources, wasn’t she? Nothing to do with Wayne.”

“Yeah. I suppose,” said Paul.

“I heard she was getting married.”

“*Married?*”

“Some guy in Acquisitions and Mergers. I don’t know. Maybe I heard wrong. I got it from Frank Jones I think. Or was it Warren Jones?”

No time is long enough to explain a reaction, though uncoiled in an instant, Paul managed to stage an answer—the negative posed as real. “Hey. We broke up,” he said. “I’m happy for her. I wish her well.” He smiled and changed the subject, off-handedly, trying not to show interest in what he had pointedly declared didn’t bother him. If he had had more time, perhaps projecting a less guarded and controlled manner, he might have said, “Oh, is that so?” or “Well, isn’t that interesting?” or “Married, you say?” but the best he could offer on the spur, under the lens, as Jan eyed his tell-tale facial fissures, was a safe, blanketed denial. It made him sick he wanted to say. Acquisitions and Mergers? More like Clearings and Appropriations. Oh, the god-damned irony.

Soon after, Jan and Paul departed to the cool night air, Paul shaking out the stiffness from his legs. *Married?* At least he knew. Wasn’t that better than not

knowing, though he couldn't think how being doused in a deluge of enlightenment was better than blissfully not knowing, buried to one's head in the sandy beach of ignorance. He didn't want to think. He wanted to be sick.

They walked on along the canal into the Old Centre. "You okay?" asked Jan, Paul's pace falling out of step with his own.

"Yeah. Fine." His lie as it lay in the air seemed less bold.

Paul slowed for his turn.

"Where are you going?" asked Jan. "You're the next bridge."

Paul returned his pace to Jan's, feigning disorientation. Even in his worn and intoxicated state, Paul's understood by Jan's question that he had been meandering his way to work each day along the same route they had walked that first night, in and out of tourist spots and over and back across the canal, for fear of getting lost down some untried route, and only now realizing that he had been walking miles out of his way each day. *Next* bridge? He turned his stupidity to laughter. "Yeah, I know. I like to get some air." *Air*. That was a good one.

After Jan left, Paul lingered by the canal, eying two stars in the twilight overhead, familiar enough now to locate them at a glance, always there, like two eyes peeping into the lives of man. Success. Failure. Must he be served both together? What was success without her?

That night, he poured out the contents of his stomach. *Married?* How could she be getting married? It couldn't be. And to find out on the eve of the Red Hat launch? How cruel was that? No, she couldn't have fallen for another so soon. What did a past mean if it could be undone in a blink? The snot streamed out from his nose. Maybe it was the champagne? Champagne had never agreed with him.

4

FOR THE LAUNCH, the thirty-six Red Hat screens were front and center in a six by six grid atop the marble and brass of the Citizen's Hall of the Royal Palace, the place packed with the clothed haute and neder style and techie set, the two needing no telling apart. Jan and Paul were mingling among the crowd, Jan throwing his hand and deep smile around, Paul following after in his wake. Saskia and Hugo were at the door handing out plastic loot bags—a red miniature wooden shoe key chain, a porcelain Delft pin of soft cameo flowery vine and grapes, and a Red Hat fridge magnet with logo and web address—while the tech boys, Rob and Laurens, ran the consoles outside from the mobile truck in Dam Square. They were all dressed in starlit red ties with white dinner jacket regalia. The room was decorated up the wazoo in tulips.

In a circle with Jan and the mayor and his wife and the mayor's aides and their wives, Paul listened patiently, his thoughts racing with anticipation. "You know, you're onto something here," said the mayor to no one in particular. "This electronic viewing is quite popular. You can hardly turn the channel nowadays without some such show or other."

"Yes, Mister Mayor," agreed Jan, nodding politely. "Reality is everywhere."

"And I'm glad to see that it isn't just the English. They really are the last sort to be showing the Dutch these things. All so prim and proper. So hung up on their roles." A ripple of laughter passed around their circle. "The Dutch know about these things—*ripe and red*, that's what I say. I can't think the last time my wife and I were

this excited.” His wife nodded his acknowledgment of her presence, her legs bending in the minutest of thrusts.

“Thank you indeed, Mister Mayor,” returned Jan.

“You know,” added Paul, seeming rather statesmen like, “Nothing like this has ever been tried in the States.”

“Yes, well, I’m afraid, Mr. Goodman, the Americans are not the best at everything. The Dutch, small though we are, have always reminded the world of its truer conscience. Always practical in our morality.”

“Indeed, Mister Mayor, I have learned much about the Dutch. Earth from water. Night from day. The world from nothing.” As they spoke, the mayor kept himself in profile, ever eyeing the possibility of a photograph.

“As the first great world power, the Dutch know a little of what works and what doesn’t. We know about engineering and law making and the needs and wants of our citizens.” He spoke as though all were listening. “It is important to promote our rich liberal heritage, our common human nature. As old as man.” The ripples resounded back and forth around the circle. “*Hup the hoe high*,” he yelled. As old as woman, whispered his wife to no one in particular.

Paul thought of Rembrandt’s company in light preparing for the action as they paused for a photo, before the mayor clapped Jan on the back and brought him to the circle of journalists now assembled together by the champagne table.

“I forgot how much the Dutch love to talk about themselves,” whispered the mayor’s wife to Paul, before he was left standing alone after she too dissolved into the crowd.

Soon after, Paul found his way to the door with Saskia and Hugo. He complimented Saskia on her smart evening wear and Hugo on his pressed new jacket. He had never seen Hugo in anything but polyester plaid. They both eagerly eyed the Red Hat screens as the countdown clock counted down.

“Everyone talks as if Holland is in the sixteenth century,” remarked Paul. “They all say what a great day it is for the Dutch. The mayor even compared Red Hat to a Flemish painting.”

“It is impressive,” said Saskia, her hands sliding up and down the sides of her satin skirt. “A great accomplishment for man.”

“The world is about to change,” said Hugo, stuffing his mouth with a large cheese cube and a cut-out wedge of apple. “You might as well turn back the sea than stop tonight.” He shook apart a sliver of chicken and another cube of cheese and filled his mouth again as the countdown clock turned through the final seconds.

On the stage below the screens, the mayor introduced Jan and said that Red Hat was the electronic equivalent of the Red Light district and hoped that it would bring more tourists to Amsterdam. “It’s a great day for the Dutch. The lowlands go high tech,” he yelled to a chorus of applause.

A flurry of pumped-up music by the Britpop band Flood brought a wave of anxious cheers from the crowd, the band crashing their crescendo with a shrill *Star-Spangled Banner* electric guitar riff as the screens flashed the Red Hat room, now slowly appearing in light. Wild shouts greeted the actors.

“There she is, top and left,” smiled Hugo, scraping clean with his finger a mixture of cheese and cracker from his mouth. “B2.” Mary.

Paul watched the screens with all the others as the action started out tame and taut, the actors, all strangers until yesterday, making their way in and out of casual introductions. Even though most had worked in the industry in some fashion or another, no one knew exactly how the ice would break. Jan had said that the

competition—the weeding out of the *unpopulars* as he called them—would determine the action and that soon the clothes would come off, but how and between whom or *among* whom was still to be determined. The push-button, popularity bible on Red Hat had not yet been written.

“Who can account for public taste?” said Jan. “The unknown is part of the mystery.”

Mary had the stuff, that was obvious, but so did the more demure Lucy and the white-haired Thaddeus, the rugged Olympus Mons of Dutch television fame. Lucy, or Val Marineras, known to all from her four-year stint as the government sex trade minister and a local advice to the lovelorn columnist, was also a favorite. In opposite parts of the Red Hat room, they had yet to meet.

Hugo eyed the slow moving action, his mouth agog. “This is unreal.”

Saskia whispered to Paul with a giggle, “I asked him once if he knew that food didn’t come from a refrigerator. He grunted. *Techies*.” She put her hand to her mouth to hide her whisper. “Don’t let him start with the magazines. He’s into them all—*Conspiracy Theory Monthly*, *Aliens Unlimited*, *Army Secrets*. Supposedly, we come from space spores.” Her flash of disdain seemed oddly insincere thought Paul.

“You know, I thought you and Jan were together,” whispered Paul, the action still unmoved on the screens.

“*Jan?* Good God no. He’s too controlling. We did have a fling, but that was ages ago. I don’t know, he likes his women, well, how do I say, *fuller*. His girlfriend is here somewhere, probably sitting alone in a corner. She’s a nurse—psychiatry—one can only wonder.”

After Saskia answered Paul’s question, her questions began—the usual romantic tennis, having thought Paul’s question a serve—though, sensing after an awkward three-question non-return that Paul wasn’t interested, she let it go.

“Men,” muttered Saskia, her attention returning again to the screens as Lucy moved toward Thaddeus in the bottom right. “Olympus Mons,” her mutter continued, “now there’s a real man. Tall and rugged. Attentive.” She snapped open her purse and touched up her face with a quick dab of shadow and blush, undaunted by Paul’s intrusion into her world.

As the drama ripened in the roomful of strangers, the buzz droned louder in the Citizen’s Hall, the conversation excitedly heavy again as their skin shimmered pale sweat. Red Hat was working, the prurient interest and suspense of when so and so would meet so and so and get it off a natural mix.

For the launch, the guests at the Royal Palace were invited to work the screens and a line had formed on stage. Any camera could be blown up and zoomed in or out to get the best view or shown in split screen with another angle. At the console, the mayor’s wife had dialed in the dark-haired, boyish Simon—C3—with the shrunken shirt talking to Mary, their angles split as they lounged on the main couch, drinking and chatting. Blasting out over the speakers, their intimate talk quieted the Citizen’s Hall, the occasional knowing cheer drowning the obvious lines.

They made their introductions, trotting through their backgrounds, before Simon chanced a kiss, Mary casually turning her cheek away, knowing, it would seem, that by pretending not to want, not to be watched, that she was more wanted, more watched. Paul, for the most part, had not been watching closely, though he looked up now at Mary and Simon. As Jan had told him, it wasn’t the physical, the roaming limbs or peacock struts, the aggressive rasp of suggestive words, but the underneath, the hidden, the mystery, the not-yet-determined *finale* that drew one in. It

was as if the climax, the end, the *raison d'être*, was not what was desired, but the build-up itself. The being in the moment. The game.

“The night is long,” cooed Mary to wild applause as she turned Simon away, a shushing wave immediately quieting the citizen’s claps. “We’ve only just met. I want to get to know you better.” Her fingers gently clawed his chest, a round of laughter and hisses filling the hall before being stilled yet again by another, prolonged shushing wave. Paul laughed, thinking only for a moment of the meaningless of her remark. To meet. To know. To forever chance the future.

Despite her small size, her seeming insouciance holding back the arms of Simon, Mary was in perfect control. She was a goddess, a shrine, a fully blown-up blow-up doll. She had only to play her part.

At the consoles, the mayor’s wife dialed out Mary and Simon, the screens showing all thirty-six actors again. Calls for action hurried her indecision as Lucy and Thaddeus made their acquaintance in another corner, kissing and dancing slowly in rhythm to a muted boy band song.

The mayor then took his turn at the console, eager to exploit the photo op for the morning papers, his wife having to be pulled away by two anxious aides, and he dialed in a close-up of Lucy and Thaddeus in split screen. A cheer greeted his dexterity at the controls and then another at the sight of Olympus Mons kissing the ever-popular Val Marineras as the light and shadow fell across their bodies. But their movements remained tame and hidden, and the citizens urged for another view. All were shouting Mary’s name.

After more twiddling, another couple’s slow *amore* began and then fizzled out and the mayor’s wife stole back the controls, dialing up Simon and Mary, now kissing on the couch. The citizens yelled their encouragement as Simon’s hands rolled up and down Mary’s back, Mary encouraging his flickered forays underneath. Soon, the hall turned quiet as a church.

“The trickle has begun,” said Jan leaning into Paul, his tall, slender body bending to meet Paul’s ear. “I just talked to Laurens in the truck. Eighty-eight million people are watching on line.”

It is all a matter of size. If the big screen is big enough, a boy and a girl can be eight stories tall, their blood pumping through thirty-six meters of veins, vessels, and arteries, in and out of the aorta, through ventricles across the coronary valve, 100,000 times a day, blown up as big as trees—boys divining girls in the pumped-up heat of adrenaline. It wasn’t until the seventeenth century that man knew the purpose of the beating heart was to circulate blood. Man as machine, the parts working in context with the whole. How the heart became entwined in love is another story.

C3 took B2 from behind, shown in split screen by the mayor’s wife. All could see Mary’s head and upper back cupped by Simon’s body as he moved in and out in beats, their faces blown up full on camera. The sounds echoed in unison as the Citizen’s Hall erupted in screams of ‘Mary.’ The whole of high and low Dutch culture watched, their hearts beating in rhythm, as C3 and B2 moved in and out, the rapture running throughout the Citizen’s Hall.

The citizens cried out for more and, as the camera angles were exploited more adroitly, the “good scenes” as they were being called got better. No one wanted the night to end. Saskia was so taken by the moment she ended up in a hotel with Hugo, his first *amore* in years. You could no more turn back the sea. Red Hat was a winner. The next day, *De Tijd* would make Mary and Simon equal frontrunners at 8-1 to win top prize.

When Paul walked home that night in the early hours of the morning, the streets were drunk with desire. Never had so many watched together what was sanctioned as culture, and the new virtual group experience was seen as freeing. Strangers approached each other asking had they seen it and did they want to see it *together* as if a shared festive living had broken through the porous walls between them. Red Hat was a success beyond all expectations. More money than stars thought Paul.

He eyed his two stars, temporarily tied together in the sky, unaware that he was gazing at Jupiter and Saturn. The money. Could he count that high?

The next day as he walked to work through the Old Center, he saw her in the window. She was sitting alone. He craned to see her, her head buried in her hands. He knew it was her, the watery skin, her fire eyes, her hair caught like wind. She had been crying. Paul walked on, stepping past with little thought as to why she was there, alone. After a few uncertain strides, he returned his steps.

As he took the seat next to her, he realized he didn't even know her name. "Are you okay?" he tried. "*Mary? B2?*"

"*Felicity*. My name is Felicity." She spoke clearly, the consonants clipped by her accent. Indonesian, thought Paul? She was Surinamese.

"Sorry. Are you okay, *Felicity?*" Felicity was in obvious dismay, her head bobbing about. He saw the weariness of her face, lined in sad drudgery. He asked again if she was okay.

"My sister was wrong."

"Your sister? I'm sorry? *Wrong?*"

"It makes no matter."

Felicity had been working in Amsterdam for two years in the underground economy, with nothing to back up her residency. Her thoughts raced between her papers and her sister. Paul passed her a napkin. It seemed the thing to do.

"I started here at the Wild Bull and did some cubicles before I met the nice man. He gave me work on the phone lines to help with money. I worked day and night. He promised me my papers."

"Papers? I'm sure you don't have to worry about your papers," said Paul. She was younger than he thought and prettier than on screen, her bright, cherry red lips unable in person to mask her youth. Paul wondered how old. Sixteen?

"I just wanted to meet a man, and get married, and have children. That is why I came to Holland. I thought he would take care of me." She went on about her sister being wrong, her head flailing back as she banged the ground with her foot and crossed herself.

"*Who? Who* would take care of you? *Jan?*" asked Paul.

"My sister said it was okay, because he watches over all of us. She said it was okay no matter what, and that he would forgive me as long as I got my papers. He is Lord of all the sheep." Felicity's lips were quivering. "But I know it is wrong. I should not have done it. I should not have listened. My papers. And now a show."

"But you chose to be on the show?" tried Paul. "Do you not *want* to be on the show?" Paul was having trouble understanding what she was saying.

Felicity banged on the table and screamed through her teeth. "*Show? What* difference is *show* to me? I make nothing and now I must work *another* year to get my papers." She screamed again. "And for what? In a year, they'll find something else to say it isn't so."

Paul passed her another napkin. She was on drugs he thought, her talk disconnected from one moment to the next. We all make choices in life. She had

made hers, he had made his. Paul told her that if she won she wouldn't have to work, that that was the system, the weeding of fame and fortune. "Don't you understand the show?" he said. "One hundred thousand euros if you win?" Paul told her there was every possibility. A star.

Felicity screamed again through her teeth. "You and your pitiful stories. A star? Is that what you think?"

Was it up to him to understand someone else's life? Their choices? Paul had enough to worry about in his own life, the causality of chance and choice that had led him away from home. From her. Chance and choice? The spread of uncertainty made certain.

He left Felicity on her own, unable to understand her disregard for the reality of her life.

White light is a closed rainbow, spraying cosmic colors, first Potassium red, the bottom, the lowest, vibrating pleasure. Any less is heat.

5

ALTHOUGH THERE WAS concern in other countries about the morality of what Red Hat was doing, Jan told Paul that the big telecommunication players were just jealous of their success. The stock value rose and rose. When Red Hat floated, Paul would have his fortune. More money than stars.

But as sure as day follows night, the numbers didn't last. The market got shaky. Tech stocks bled money. And there was the issue of other less liberal countries, 143 countries signing an international treaty banning Red Hat. The Securities Commission shut down hits from outside the Netherlands, and in a week the flood slowed to a trickle and then a drop. Nasdaq called it Red Tuesday. Jan called it business.

Jan and Paul were in the boardroom, Jan twiddling his coin in and out of his fingers. "Easy come. Easy go," he said. "Win some, lose some."

Paul had vomited in the bathroom when he had heard the news. He had gone from nothing to a multi-millionaire to nothing all in the space of a week. "But the market will go up again. We just ride it out. Right?"

Jan ignored. "This is the one you like, isn't it?" he asked. They were standing by the Van Gogh print. "*White House at Night*."

"Yeah, so?" Paul eyed the star in Van Gogh's painting, overhead the house.

"The star is Venus, the closest planet to earth."

"Jan, we've lost everything," said Paul. "What does it matter about a painting? Stars, planets. Who cares?"

Jan stared out the window, finding Venus dangling above the trees, the lentil-shaped glass pushed against his face. "Imagine, thinking a planet is a star?" He smiled, pausing as if to enjoy Paul's worry. "Did you know that someone worked out the exact time when Van Gogh painted *White House at Night*? Down to the minute, all from the angle and the brightness of Venus from where Van Gogh lived in Auvers-sur-Oise?"

Paul scrunched his face, still uncertain of Jan's meaning. "Jan? What the hell has this to do with anything?"

“Paul, Van Gogh sold one painting in his life, *The Red Vineyard*. One bloody painting, and today they sell him on everything from coffee mugs to pencil erasers, and from T-shirts to video games.

“Jan?”

“One painting! He went mad trying to capture his world. And for what? Who can count the clouds? The painting is a photograph, the bookcase is a door, the planet is a star.” Jan lifted his hand to Paul’s, pressing his palm firmly into his. “Don’t go crazy over money Paul. It comes and goes.”

As they walked out into the street, Jan continued about the happenstance of chance, saying that failure wasn’t an obstacle but a stepping stone. Funny, it didn’t seem so in the midst of failure, thought Paul. In the midst of having one’s world swept away.

Paul looked back along the canal, remembering that night, the night he had decided to pour himself into work, the night he had found out about Myra. When day had turned to night.

“How can this happen?” he shuddered. “How can life change so easily?”

Jan told him not to worry, that being a player meant taking chances, taking hits, but most of all knowing when to let go. They separated at the bridge—the same bridge Paul had walked past that first night and everyday thereafter until Jan had pointed out the short cut. Paul had no idea.

In the morning when he checked, the market had stalled completely. Red Hat was down and out. The officials showed up and carried off the equipment and pulled apart Red Hat. They put Paul in a room with no window and he was given a court-appointed lawyer. There were serious allegations about the affairs of Rode Hoed BV.

“Mr. Goodman. I’m with the Securities Commission,” began the head officer. “We have been unable to find Mr. de Witt, but I am afraid until we do we will have to detain you.” He continued on about insider trading, Paul’s lawyer madly scribbling down the details.

“What? This is crazy.”

“Mr. de Witt sold eighty-eight percent of Red Hat stock after the initial flotation, which, although perfectly legal, would be most curious if he had any fore knowledge of Red Tuesday.”

“Fore knowledge? How could he? It was a hemorrhage. The entire tech industry tanked.”

“Well, it is most fortuitous that he acted as he did. Perhaps a roll of the die, but we must investigate.”

Paul believed in cause and effect as sure as he believed in the order of the universe, in gravity, in the clockwork of the heavens, in all that he had been told. He couldn’t believe he had done wrong.

“I didn’t know,” he said.

“The fine print, Mr. Goodman,” offered the officer. “You had no problem advertising your price in unreadable text, I’m surprised you didn’t read your own contract.” The irony red-ripened as the officer continued. “Our records show that an eight-year old boy watched Red Hat for thirty-six hours straight. I don’t know how anyone can stay up that long let alone watch that crap, but there you have it, an astronomical bill. You should count yourself lucky. You only lost what wasn’t yours.”

Paul’s heart sank at all the money he had lost, at the possibility of jail. The next day, however, Jan’s lawyer cleared up the misunderstanding. Jan smiled and told Paul not to worry, that failure breeds success, that tomorrow is another day.

“Easy come, easy go. Is that it?” smiled Paul. He had no idea.

Myra - Paris

Dear Nell,

Great to see you at Easter. Little did I know how my life would change so quickly when I got to Paris. You were right--just what the doctor ordered. I met this great guy Fabio and he gave me a job right off working in the film biz. I can't believe my luck. I know what you're thinking, but it's not like that. He's tall, dark, French, rich, and all that, I guess what every woman wants, but he doesn't seem interested. Maybe gay? All the best ones are.

Even so, I'm not ready, still hoping to hear from Paul. 36 days. No luck so far. I found out he was working with Jan de Witt in Holland and sent him an e-mail telling him I was in Paris, but I haven't heard back. I keep checking my in box, but nothing. Not so easy to wash that man right out of your hair (yes--I did it, it's orange and sheared short). I cried for a whole week when I got here. Ah, enough of that. I promised I wouldn't cry anymore.

Paris is amazing. It's true, the men go for anything with a pulse and very quick with the lines. Fabio's accent is to die for. My French is getting better every day, enough so I can pass myself off without sounding too American. Everything you read about the French is true. Guess I'll have to keep my head out of the clouds for a change.

I still can't believe I got a job right off. I met the whole cast of *The Vampire Buddy Files* and have been hanging out with Jasmine. She has the most amazing wardrobe. We hung out in Cannes for a week at the festival. *Incroyable*.

6

THE MUSIC built slowly to a series of sustained one-note reverb piano presses in vague melody, sounding everything to all. He hadn't heard until the traffic stopped. Elton John? Jani? Zamphyr *Stairway to Heaven*? *Wonder Love* by Flood? He ordered another coffee, *café au lait* with milk. He waited. *Café Mer* was on the Seine, an insider Parisian joke no American would get. Paris was full of traps thought Paul, hating and loving in the same breath, ignoring meaning respect.

He could see Pont St.-Michel through the window. He didn't want to seem over eager, but his mind fast forwarded to her coming. Would that the clock would fill up soon with time. He asked for the same again. *Café au lait* with milk.

He was eyeing the traffic stopped outside, peering into cars and wondering what was ahead, behind. A life, stopped, in stasis, as was his. His was expectant. How so the others? The smoker. He dropped his match between his legs and cursed behind when honked. He was on his way to meet a lover thought Paul. The nervous look of excitement, double puffing. Out of time. Stuck in place. The polished woman between appointments. She had money and was on her way for more. Sleek and undisturbed by her own surround. The mobile recoiled quickly from her pocket and she talked and changed and pushed on unaware of her dexterity. She didn't see him. The tired man passed Paul a sigh of shared wishing he was anywhere but there. Caught in orange, his future known to a tick. Could his life ever change as quickly as a light? Could he be free? Paul played at thinking, his own ahead turning soon. Where had they been, where were they going, would they love again? He hoped, but then, what then? Their future. Her smile. The dark?

It made him think of the *Mona Lisa*, so close across the bridge according to the map. He knew the numbers from leagues of *Moo-lah Millions* on television: Leonardo da Vinci, 1503, *La Gioconda*, the blurry lines dissolving dark and light, the smile. *The* smile, so many times in advertisement: anti-aging cream, long-term investment wisdom, long-lasting deodorant, whiter than white toothpaste, cottony soft toilet paper. "To taste beauty? To smell a dream? To touch a life?" Was she indeed so near? What would it be like to enter the sacred? He sipped his milky coffee, waiting, seeing himself standing in adoration. And then the light sank and she disappeared, alone, in dark, again.

A mobile phone brought him back. It was time—the clock said.

She was late but he didn't care. He breathed her smile. Paris. Spring. A quarter turn since their first beginning. She threw her arms around him, all giggles when they kissed, the world undone again.

"Of course, you could have told me."

"I just did." The forgiveness was beginning.

How could he say no when she made bombs go off in her eyes and twisted her hair like that, now Orange Passion—number six on the color scale, with spiked black tips.

"You're not mad at me?" The first kiss lingered. He wasn't.

On the Seine, she told her story. "Warren," giggled Myra. "He wore off. It wasn't what you think. I'm sorry. I should have explained better. Warren asked me to go to this thing before I met you and I couldn't say no. And then you said what you said that night and I, I . . . we got our wires crossed." The bells rang up and down the

river. "I'm sorry. It was his grandmother's eighty-eighth birthday. I couldn't say no." How could Paul?

The sounds rolled by. Her eyes, her smell, so many rooms to enter. All his thoughts at once. Her hand, assuredly, in his. It was like falling without thinking, as they sat on the riverside, the sun dancing in and out of the busy crests and troughs. Together.

"I'm working with the Hollywood producer Fabio Negra. I was very lucky to meet him," Myra continued. "He's French and splits his time between Paris and Los Angeles." Myra was his personal secretary she told him, responsible for everything and permanently on call, though there were perks—catwalk wardrobe, provincial wines, take-out French fries from the Ritz. "They turn anorexic super models into gluttons." She lived in his luxury apartments overlooking the Seine—separate, of course. She had already met Maxwell Montes and Diana Chasm from *The Vampire Buddy Files*, Fabio's hit television series, and the double Oscar-winner Jake Jones. The model Jasmine and she did aerobic kick boxing together. "We're doing a movie in Paris while *VBF* is on hiatus—*The Fabulous Five Musketeers*. It's a life made in heaven."

In the luxury apartments, Myra introduced Paul to Fabio the producer, who was far too busy to stop and chat. Sunglasses permanently hid his eyes. Fabio would meet them tomorrow, precisely as always in his usual café where he and Myra had first met. They could see the sights and tell him all there was to tell. Then. Not now.

"Paris is never what the American thinks," said Fabio as he hurried to the door. "It's not the same as the video. You have much to unlearn." He was overly polite and quick, here and there at once, rattling off a list of names for Myra to call for Tuesday's shoot. "We're set for two o'clock on location." It wouldn't do to be late, he intimated in fatherly tone as he nodded up and down to Paul. He reminded her of their arrangement. Arrangement wondered Paul?

Paul readied a question, but before he could ask, Fabio was gone.

"He's always like that," said Myra. "You get used to it."

She told Paul about the shoot. They would be filming the *grande finale* to *The Fabulous Five Musketeers* up Boulevard St.-Michel to the famed Jardin du Luxembourg, scene of many a musketeer moment, where Antoine the fabulous fifth musketeer saves the princess from the altar, swashbuckles his way through the priestly swordsmen, and then rides out with her draped on his shoulder, a league of bad French guards in mad pursuit. Myra had arranged the church, got the permits for the street, made sure all the extras were in the right seventeenth-century garb. All that was left was the shooting.

On the Seine-side balcony, Myra pointed out where she and Paul had met and the path where they had walked. "There's Pont St.-Michel and, beyond, the tunnel where Diana died. People still leave flowers." The whole of Paris gently floated past.

"Quite extraordinary the view," said Paul. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Fabio's been very good to me. I can't believe I'm here."

It seemed their past had been forgotten, although there was an awkward moment when Myra told Paul of the arrangement as prescribed by Fabio. Theirs was a business relationship and, although fine to have a friend over on occasion, there could be no carry on. Fabio the producer. Fabio the host. Fabio the *chaperone inconnu*. Paul was put in the east wing, a block from Myra. Exhausted as he was, he made no claim, Myra's kiss sending him softly to his sleep.

In the morning, the fresh May blew in the sounds from the streets and sun-lit Seine. They breakfasted on the Tower-side balcony with full compliments of fruits

and cakes and ices and specialty Ethiopian plunger-pot coffee. Paul noticed her hair. He commented on her clothes, her skirt, her comfortable Parisian panache.

“Even the Coca Cola tastes better,” laughed Myra. “Real glass bottles, though I really ought to be drinking Pepsi. It’s in the contract. I suppose it’s just the same—water, sugar, color. All the stuff one *shouldn’t*.”

“Why Paris?” asked Paul.

“It was a dream. You tell me—Buffalo or Paris?” She offered him half an orange and poured more coffee.

“And you met this Fabio character by accident?” Paul hadn’t meant to sound so bold.

“Just like that.”

Paul told her how he had met Jan in Amsterdam.

“Just like that.”

“Who can explain chance or fortune?” He told her about Red Hat, about the money, the madness, before the calm returned again to their inquiry and they shared the eagerness of the silence, like lovers. Again.

Myra broke away a piece of left-over Easter chocolate, dangling it in her hand, her lips moistening as Paul watched. “The chocolate is amazing—*pépité de chocolat, pain au chocolat*, truffles. How can American chocolate taste so different?”

Paul stared out over the balcony at the Tower he’d seen so many times in pictures. He couldn’t believe he was in Paris with her. A dream?

“*Le jour attend, mon amour,*” said Myra. “*Allons-y.*” The sights. As if there was anything else to see but her.

7

THE VENDORS flew paper planes up and out and around in wide sweeping arcs imitating loftiness with precision from the mounted Sacré-Coeur. Gulls cooed as the piped organ drifted through the air. A tourist asked Paul to take a picture and he waited for a break in the passing people, before holding them still within the lens. Away, they stood by the railing and watched the distant Paris in landscape. Inside, sitting still among the devout, the stained-lit ceiling stole across her face.

“If you wanted me, why didn’t you say?” he asked. “And if you didn’t, why didn’t you say that?”

“But you left? I couldn’t say *anything*.”

“I had just lost my job and you ran off with Warren.”

“I didn’t *run* off with Warren. I told you he had invited me out.”

“I didn’t leave you.”

Their outrage rose and fell.

“Remember the Falls?” she asked. The organ piped in scale.

“I remember.”

“The layers of ice water covering the trees and street. The mist, spraying up and out over the bank, mesmerized by the cold. It was like a fairytale in slumber. You and me.”

“I remember,” he said, before she continued with the happenings of that day, the two of them lost forever in sunny, snowy smiles.

Their memories weren’t the same. Paul said he had suggested the Canadian side of the Falls and the hotel where the Queen of England had once stayed. Myra

said the hotel was her idea. It was she who had read about the Queen of England in *The Times*. Since when did *he* care about kings and queens of England? They rose and fell again, their lives hurtling forward again as one. They both remembered the endless breakfast served in bed and, then later, underneath, in the caverns. To love. To stop time. They both agreed the Falls coated in the white of winter was far better than in the swarming tourist days of summer.

“It was like heaven frozen over,” she said.

“The Falls, just you and me.” Their smiles met. Nothing could erase that day.

The Sacré-Coeur service ended and the priest filed past behind the cross, the organ soothing each breath of air. Paul leaned in for a kiss, still remembering their first day. So many thoughts, so few words to speak them. As their lips pressed together, she felt the water again like thunder, multiplied by echo up and down the Gothic chamber. Was he the one? Was she?

They returned by Metro to the Seine, and strolled arm in arm up the Champs Élysées, before walking under the circulation of cars to the Arc de Triomphe, Paul counting steps as they clicked forward with the throngs.

“I love it here,” she exclaimed. “Paris, you can feel it. The Champs Élysées, La Défense, and there, look, the Tower.” Her hands pointed out the proud edifice. “Is there anywhere like here? I could hold it forever.” Her face was full of song as she stared out over the sights, her body pressed to his.

Paul’s thoughts were more intense, his smile contained. He wanted to take more in, not so sudden at pronouncement. Leaning back, his face falling into hers, he whispered, “Paris is nothing compared to you.” Such words to tell another.

“There’s more,” she said, and like all good men, he was thinking of what came next. Below, Myra read the inscription to the Unknown Soldier, the flames shooting out in honor.

The Louvre was next they both agreed. Inside, the walk was brisk, too much to take in all at once. They crossed carefully the infinity of captured sights: Venus de Milo (adoringly disarmed), the bright orange and yellow melancholic Fauvist flower women, Leonardo’s beauty—the *Mona Lisa*. *Her*. No Paris without her smile. They pushed forward and settled in front, their bodies joined like spoons. There were hundreds angling for the best of views. Couples astride the smile, all mad about the Mona.

“You know, Da Vinci was an alchemist,” whispered Myra. “He wrote things backwards to avoid detection.”

“Really?”

“All artists are taught to look at things back to front. Not so hard.” Paul held her closer. “Look. Up a bit.” She pointed to a corner. “They say there is another painting, hidden underneath. Imagine, underneath the *Mona Lisa*, *another*?” She smiled, Paul’s gaze intensifying as he outlined her lips. “Some say she may even be Leonardo dressed as a woman.”

“It’s more impressive in person,” he said. “Even underneath all the protection.”

“Oh. Indeed, much more so.” She pulled his hand across. “Look, there, in the middle, the face, the deep wonder. Oh, and the smile. So wonderfully soft, so content, so gorgeous.” Her words slowed. They were all gushing by Mona’s side.

Outside the Louvre, she called him to her arms. “Paris. So easy to fall in love.”

They walked along the Seine twinned again in hand, drifting nearer Notre-Dame. The sun played along the noisy water and becalmed traffic, as tourists mingled in metronomic Paris beat. Notre-Dame was not so full, thankfully, they said, after an

afternoon of crowds in Montmartre and the Louvre. They walked the steps, Paul counting as they climbed. Atop, by the bell chamber, they stared at the ever-slipping river.

“Look. You can see for miles. And the Tower. So bold rising up from among the trees.” Paul leaned his head back prone, an eager orange breaking through the distance. He stood transfixed.

“It’s beautiful. I wonder how tall it is?” she asked.

Paul knew the figures. “It was the tallest structure in its time until the Empire State Building. Built by Gustav Eiffel in 1898. Some say man’s greatest triumph.”

“Really?” Myra’s eyes brightened at the stiffened view, a bird fluttering as the clock hammer clicked forward and the bells suddenly rang out the time in twos, a gong and then an echo rippling on.

The sound startled them. She laughed and moved closer in embrace, not wanting their togetherness to end. Descending down the stairs, they both mouthed the same—the Tower itself was next.

On ground, he brought her near, making an attempt at words. “It takes your breath.”

“Yes. Paris. You and me.” To love and walk she thought. To be alone with him. To have him, hold him. “To be.”

They crossed the Seine at Pont St.-Michel and meandered up the boulevard, Myra pointing out the church where they would be filming on Tuesday the storming of Paris by musketeers of old. The light was beginning to dim, but the sun still poured its brightness and the cafés still bulged with people as the streets brimmed fun. They decided a break was due and stopped in the Jardin du Luxembourg. No better place to end a film than the old palatial gardens between Notre-Dame and Montparnasse where the Sun King and his court lived and entertained in days of glory. Myra said again how lucky she had been. Fabio had been brilliant, taking her here and there, introducing her, showing her, telling her. Fabio the ever-ready guide. Monsieur Michelin, thought Paul.

They took chairs to the back and to the left in the concrete strand, an array of trees keeping them separate from the crowds. They watched as families in Sunday clothes played by the *Fontaine de Medicis*, the sun splashing in and out. A game of men’s boules stirred on the clay walk afoot.

She stroked his hair and whispered for his silence and they slept a while, before the sun-splashed shrieks pierced their ears again. Myra leaned back and let the light fall full across her face, digging a brilliant warmth as her mouth turned aglow. She could see a little boy playing with a boat in the water. She smiled as he splashed around. Her eyes lit up a playful dance.

“Do you like it?” asked Myra. She wanted him to like it. “I adore it here,” she soothed.

“It’s beautiful,” said Paul, the sun playing on his forehead as he filled his lungs again with breath. “*You’re* beautiful.” He laid his head again by hers.

“Ah, I can feel it shining through.”

She held him closer in caress, before their faces met again in smiles.

They giggled when they realized they had been at it for hours, walking and wading in the gentle life of Sunday Paris.

“Next stop the Tower?”

“Yes. The Tower.”

When they arrived at *Tour Eiffel*, the crowds had thinned, but there was still a wait. They waited locked in embrace as the line grew closer. They took the stairs—

349 the first level and 359 the next—and then the elevator to the top and, with the others, spun spoked Paris round, before returning to the second level and the quiet of a less-discovered view. They settled on a corner of the North, the holed La Défense in sight.

“That’s toward Sacré-Coeur,” pointed Myra. “Remember?” She smiled. “Can you see Fabio’s? Are we as high?” asked Myra.

Paul did the numbers as he stared down, his heart skipping at the openness below. “Well, you’re on the fifth floor and we’re at about 200 feet, so at about forty feet a floor ... about the same.”

Their hearts were hurtling together once more.

It was Myra’s idea to get the string of pictures in the Photomaton and they stayed inside the curtain forever kissing and taking pictures. Didn’t everyone do that? And then they danced, slowly in circled trance as the sights swirled, both wondering how the tower had grown so quiet and how the crowds had disappeared so quickly.

“Paul? You know, I think we’re alone,” whispered Myra. They stilled their dance and listened to the nothingness blanketed around them. The tower had closed down.

“Alone?” whispered Paul. “*Together.*”

“You and me atop the world,” she laughed, her blue eyes firing flames.

Holding her in his arms, he called out his stars. “I’ve been following them since I got to Europe.”

“How do you know they’re the same?” she asked.

“Because they’re always there. Look. Just there.” He traced her hand with his and pointed with a smile. “I don’t know their names. They could be you and me.”

“Us.”

Paul’s stars were easy to spot, even if the earth had moved in turn since Holland. The latitude and longitude difference from Amsterdam to Paris was minor, but the orbiting earth had put them four minutes higher in the sky each day. Since the first time Paul had seen them, they had moved two hours. In half a year, they would oppose the sun and disappear from view, but for now, Paul’s two wandering stars, Jupiter and Saturn, were just there. Already, Paul had forgotten Venus, setting in plain view behind La Défense.

There was no mistaking what came next. Their love was slow and lasted until the sun-rayed dawn. Making love in water and now in air, they were twined in space, two as one stopping the rush of time.

With the Photomaton curtain for a blanket and the candle Paul had stolen from the Sacré-Coeur, they shared the night, falling in and out of sleep and love and pressed together like flowers in a book. Music soared above the city. Venus fell and rose. Nowhere was higher in the sky.

“Did you know that time flows?” said Myra.

“Sorry?”

“Most people think time ticks, because of their pulse, but in fact time flows.” As they lay together wrapped in arms, she told him the story of a doctor who replaced broken hearts with motors. “The electric motor sends out a continuous stream of blood. There’s no pulse to count the beats. If you feel for a pulse you won’t feel one, but instead you feel a stream pushed like water in a river.” She laughed. “It’s just the same with time.” Who else but Myra for him to share his soul? Time and love like rivers?

The candle flickered as they made love again, the metal tower clanging in the wind. As Myra watched him move on top, Paul watched her face and saw bright Paris

alive inside. In the center of man most triumphant, draped in a hollow pyramid of rusted metal, their story sang.

“Did you know that because the universe is infinite, we are always at the center?”

Here, in the in between of time, she thought, their love could last forever.

Myra woke first. They had ascended and descended, but the love was over. A morning schoolgirls’ tour was beginning.

“Ah, the pose. Man descends morning naked,” smiled Myra. Her face was full of life and spring.

“A beautiful day,” said Paul. Fabio’s name had come up only once.

8

ON THE SEINE-SIDE BALCONY, he finished his coffee at the same time as the clock hands met and believing this to mean something very great he told her. She said the same. They had said so a week ago that morning atop the Tower. She liked to hear it and knew if he said just so before Notre-Dame rang out, then their love was real. He had wanted to say it when he first awoke, but Fabio was still forbidding of any nightly encounters. Theirs was an outdoor love and indoor propriety. No matter, Paul had said he loved her when she had wanted. As champion, he had performed as promised upon request.

“Nothing is chance,” said Myra as they strolled up Boulevard St.-Michel. “It is all by plan. I believe that. As for the film business, rain is always to be expected.”

They were in the fifth day of shooting the final five minutes, having been delayed by the too-fresh May. The production chaplain was inciting prayers for the sky to hold as the cast and crew swallowed coffee and waited in the Café Mer for battle. Another truck dumped a load of dirt over the anachronistic details of post-musketeer Paris. Fabio was being wildly snippish. As producer, his job was to see that the unscheduled didn’t happen. On headset, Myra waited for any word.

“One hour, everybody,” she yelled. “We have the all clear for one hour. Rain or shine.” Rain was hurriedly being written into the script.

There was some worry that Athos and Porthos had not yet shown, having spent the night carousing in an all-night club on an anniversary of sorts. As professionals, no one doubted their eventual reappearance, but the sand was falling. Myra and Fabio called in fretted turns to ascertain their whereabouts.

In the corner, Jake Jones, who played D’Artagnan, and his agents were negotiating new deals with Fabio’s team of lawyers. Diana Chasm, who played the female Arama, was breathing deeply in and out, tuning her performance motivation and repeating to herself, “I am Diana Chasm. I am Diana Chasm.” She wasn’t taking any chances with this part, her first major minor movie role in five years. And she was up for the part of *Mother Theresa—The Middle Years*, another Fabio Negra Production. A good review here would do her well. Antoine, the fabulous fifth musketeer and token Frenchman, was doing yet another interview for TV5. Spread out on a makeshift bed, Maxwell Montes was asleep. They were all in costume, puffed up, ready at a moment’s notice for the call to action.

“Such a fanciful city, Paris. Chevaliers, dashing men of arts and letters,” said Fabio, his orange paper cotton suit pressed in perfect fashion. “Who can say no to a

swashbuckler—the ne'er do well who stakes honor and chivalry for all?" Paul strained to see into Fabio's eyes.

Myra giggled. "I always thought swashbuckling was code for sex, Fabio. Boys with toys, you know, fascination with weapons."

"Well done my dear. At the core of a Frenchman's dream, a woman."

"I think, she meant *boys*, ... *Fabio*," said Paul.

"Oh, I think not. It wouldn't do to apply modern American gutter thinking to the works of romantic adventure. Just because we have an idea what they're up to *behind* the camera, doesn't mean we know their character any more." Fabio's dismissal came with a cold aside to an overloaded underling.

As the talk turned to the ethos of Fabio's success, Paul could see the stirring. Fabio's show, *The Vampire Buddy Files*, was number one. Fabio was the new *it* in Hollywood.

"Americans think vampires are real," announced Fabio, straightening his cuffs and collar as he talked. "And so, by natural extension, vampires must have real lives, the whole talk show list of valid feelings and repressed emotions. In America, vampires must have friends."

"But not well-adjusted enough to escape their urges?" smiled Myra.

"Precisely. And since vampires are bad, we must hunt them down and kill them. America where everyone is beautiful and yet full of sin. No one goes unpunished for their perfection." Fabio smiled and leaned over as he whispered. "And, of course, all laid out within the hour."

Right off, they hadn't liked each other, Paul and Fabio, dislike repelling dislike, though if Paul thought about it, *his* dislike of Fabio was more *Fabio's* dislike of him. Must he defend his honor?

"I thought there were only *four* musketeers?" said Paul.

"Three actually, but who's counting? In America, as long as they have friends and save the princess, everyone's happy. So what if it's made up? Hang Dumas and history. Americans like the personal, the battle *within*. Besides, we need the numbers for the sequel. In the sequel, it will be revealed that Antoine is D'Artagnan's long-lost, illegitimate son. And Arama his twin." Fabio stared outside as the rain continued to scribble down the windows.

"And women have no place other than as princesses and damsels in distress?" smiled Paul. He hadn't cared, but it was all he could think to say to continue their parley.

"We are all Prince Charmings to an endless cast of Cinderellas. But that's where Diana's Arama character comes in for the little girls who like to play at swashbuckling. Hollywood covers all the angles. I see a spinoff Saturday morning cartoon."

"I never thought of the musketeers as the original *Mod Squad*," replied Paul.

"If only—*The Mod Squad* played five years," laughed Fabio. "Hey, it's business. In the end, it's always down to numbers."

"Of course, nothing in itself. Only a means to satisfy the appetite for more."

Paul thought his foray apt, although Fabio had the upper hand, and let the subject fall, rebuffing the young Paul without word. He tucked his flowered cravat into his bright orange chemise and turned his head. Fabio had the perfect foil, the work at hand, thousands of dollars rolling per second. He turned to Myra, in conversation on the phone, still hunting for the missing musketeers. Athos and Porthos were still nowhere to be found.

But as Paul asked the waiter for another *café au lait* with milk, Fabio's sneer brought an instant reply.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Paul.

"Nothing?" said Fabio.

"No come on. You were laughing."

"It comes with milk. Milk is *lait*. *Café au lait* means coffee *with* milk. One doesn't *ask* for milk." Myra's eyes crossed Paul's.

"I'm talking to security now," Myra called out, stuffing a long chocolate bunny head into her mouth as she talked. "They have two oddly attired men claiming to be musketeers ... I don't believe it ... they're still in costume."

Paul poured his milk into his *café au lait*.

"*Non*, you must not do this," said Fabio. "Please. One can not drink coffee like this."

Paul called for the waiter with his hands.

"*Non, non*. One does not *snap*. Please."

"They're okay. They haven't been to bed, but they're on their way," continued Myra, whispering as she un-huhed Fabio's requests. The missing musketeers were being rushed on set. "Why do you want to upset him," Myra whispered across to Paul. "You should apologize."

"*Apologize?*"

"Next, you'll be challenging him to a drinking contest. Honestly Paul."

The news about Athos and Porthos began ringing out like bells as Fabio clapped for the crew to depart.

"You know, love is the most egotistical of passions," said Fabio, drawing in a last sip of coffee before preparing his departure to the set. "The ego is overblown lest we mistake anger for the heart. That's what we do in film ... *Paul*. We play the romance that is in everybody's heart. It's no mystery. We sell dreams. We sell the heart." Fabio the flaming philistine philosopher. Paul nodded his defeat. The rain scribbled down some more.

Fabio smiled and invited Paul to the church to watch the final scene. Paul was instructed exactly where to stand.

Places were called and, as the cameras readied, the sun broke through, seen by all as a great sign of good fortune. Action was called and the young Antoine threw open the church door. Seeing Maxwell Montes the Cardinal at the altar with the princess, the young Antoine called for the wedding to stop and the *Inseparables cum Mod Squad* unsheathed their swords in unison. The fight began.

All were happy with what they saw. Myra imagined the sex, swords standing in for the unmentionable of seventeenth-century custom. Paul was in awe as the static came alive in Hollywood real. He couldn't believe he was there, behind the scene, to the back and to the left of the church as the action passed, and would be, *evermore*, like an unseen cherub in the corner. Fabio did the maths—that is, how much *The Fabulous Five Musketeers* would take in: eighty-eight screens first week in full American release and, thereafter, worldwide. And then re-released in video. If all went well, he could finance his plans for a *Vampire Buddy Files* movie.

Alas, the scene had to be redone as Porthos stumbled on Antoine's lines and then again when Athos failed to unsheath in time, having struck himself in the head with the butt of his sword. The blood could stay, the director said, it was a fight scene after all, and the editor would cut out what didn't work. Diana Chasm, the girl-pulling Arama, was her usual perfect self and Maxwell Montes, as always, a paragon of stars. He didn't play Richelieu, he *was* Richelieu.

“Of course, the question is,” whispered Fabio to Paul as the action swept past the door, “What would you give up for love? For what would you fight another at the altar?”

“What?” said Paul.

“Love is simple. The ups and downs of *l’amour, bien sûr*, but what would you give up for love? ... Forsake all others? What of sickness, or poverty, separated by time or place? Betrayal?” Fabio smiled. “Or nothing half so complicated as the repetition of days.” By any definition, what can a man go *without* for the love of a woman? The ultimate test of love.” The repetition of days remembered Paul.

Paul eyed Fabio suspiciously as he readied his reply. The test of love? To be there, to honor, to respect, to love no other. Alas before Paul could answer, Fabio disappeared again on set.

After five more takes to cover the excesses and missed lines of the over-celebrated Porthos and Athos, the grand entrance scene was wrapped and they turned to the exit scene, the grand finale up *ancien* Paris. The rain was now lashing as the mud streamed in channels down the street.

Myra explained to Paul. “We do this scene from eight angles and cut it together afterward. The rain is okay, it creates a feeling. The editor will cut in the sunny close-ups in studio. As Antoine and the princess ride away, it will appear that the sun is beginning to shine—everybody’s happy ending as the lovers ascend into ordained light.”

The anti-nuke demonstration had been planned for months as well and had also worried about the rain. As Antoine rode out with the princess, they turned the corner onto Boulevard St.-Michel, sounding more fizzled than fanfare behind their banner and drumming band. There were one hundred thousand who had come from across France to protest the transportation of radioactive waste through town and pastoral countryside. It was their right, their duty, to say no to a government they believed had gone mad. As the heavens lashed down, demonstrator met musketeer. Horses stumbled in the mud and broke their reins. Antoine dropped the princess. Ever distrustful of authority, the demonstrators mistook the musketeers and Richelieu’s guard for the real *gendarmarie*, and began a hand charge. All for one was a free for all. The director had not yet yelled “cut.”

When the *gendarmarie vérités* came, the street was a soup of muddied confusion. Paul and Myra were caught in the middle, pushed forward to the Seine by the fighting demonstrators, some now brandishing captured swords, and pulled back by the *gendarmarie*, who were clearing people by the truckload from the street. The beasts had gone wild. It was a seesaw of carnage and cinematic wonder. Riderless horses brayed and stormed about smashing windows and overturning carriage props. Demonstrators chased extras, unsure who was who. In the crowds near the river, Paul pulled Myra up onto a statue to keep her from being crushed and they watched the madness from above. The demonstrators sang *La Marseillaise*. The *gendarmarie* locked hands. The street poured mud and rain.

The day’s shoot made the news. It wasn’t Myra’s fault, but Fabio did suggest that she had had other things on her mind. Myra’s job was to know about such demonstrations during shooting, even with all the delays. Paul was mentioned, Fabio questioning if their arrangement had been kept. All in all, Fabio knew the publicity was good. He knew Myra had done well. He knew he couldn’t buy publicity this good. Hundreds of demonstrators were thrown in jail, a real rebel cardinal among them and the story made *Live at Five*, the top infotainment show in Hollywood. Fabio’s maths were getting better by the minute.

9

THE NEXT DAY in Café Mer, Paul and Myra replayed the day's adventure, a movie in itself, until the quiet talk returned and their thoughts drifted to another replay of their past. It seemed they hadn't replayed enough.

"I wrote you a poem," said Paul. "You were Aphrodite."

"I tried writing you but I couldn't. Every letter I crumpled up. I couldn't get the words to come out right," said Myra.

Then came the paperweight. "I didn't throw it. It fell. I'm sorry. I couldn't believe the window broke."

He saw her eyes beckon his. She had tried to call.

"A kind word, easily given, easily taken. You left without a word," she said. "What was I to think? Where was I to find you?" What could they give up for love?

"If you loved me why didn't you say? Why the limbo?"

"I e-mailed you in Holland."

She explained the chance that led her back, Jan's e-mail inquiring about Wayne Templeton. She had been on a list. He told her that he hadn't got her e-mail until his last day in Holland. They told their stories. They came clean on what had been said and *not* said between them.

"Jan made it all so attractive. I should have known. It was impossible to say no."

"I was looking just as we are now at Our Lady when I met Fabio."

Their minds mimed significance. How in all the world had they ended up here in Paris together? Imperfect Paul, imperfect Myra, in perfect Paris. Could they follow and lead in equal parts? Circle each other, back and forth. What were they willing to give up for love? She saw once more the morning sun atop the metal tower with her naked man, ascending.

"I waited here that first day for you," said Paul when the rain had finished.

"Sorry?"

"I was waiting here in the café before we met at Pont St.-Michel. Just here."

"You're saying I was late?"

"No. I wasn't saying that."

That was how it started *then*. Headlong in their own, they forgot the other. It was a continuation from the shoot the day before when she said he had insulted Fabio and the day before that in the Jus d'Orange when Paul and Fabio had disagreed on a painting. And then Paul had made a list and given it to her. The list. He knew he shouldn't have.

"You're saying I'm *always* late."

"I'm not saying that. Come on, Myra. People are looking."

"They're French."

"So?"

"So, they don't understand."

"You don't have to be French to understand an argument. Besides, one doesn't *look* in French."

Myra scrunched her face. "You don't *look* in any language."

"Exactly. Come on. You're making a scene."

"A scene?" she yelled.

The cater-cornered tables looked on. An American television writer, who was scouting locations for a movie, pricked up his ears. He was wearing a bright orange and white tie-dye shirt, his graying pony-tail tucked in the back of a *Giants* baseball cap. He wrote down every word he heard.

“Myra. *My love.*”

“*Love?* Love is honor. Love is respect.” She poured *her* list. “Possessed by possession. You don’t know the meaning.”

“I can’t believe you. I don’t know love? Well, love is meant to stay.”

“*Stay?* *You’re* one to talk,” Myra yelled in mocking tone.

He had said the wrong thing, meaning one, saying another, then trying to undo, but too late and, now, having to explain the meaning to what was said but not meant, instead of what wasn’t said, what he had *meant* to say.

The argument circled again. “I didn’t mean that. Can’t we go back?”

“Go back?”

“Yes. Back. Rewind. Cut. Edit. Remember?” But they were thrown forward and the stiffness spiked. They rose and fell. She, the heave of the shoulders and dewy hint of tears, and he, the brow of desperation for what he had done, followed by the crossed eyes for how he had done what he had done. The flood of sorrow held back by the gate of contrition as they navigated the lake of indifference. *Quelle triste.* The cause and effect of love. What could they give up for love?

They drank their coffees in silence. Until the next.

“Myra?”

“And another thing, I wasn’t trying to make you jealous. You said you didn’t mind if Fabio came with us.”

“And what was I supposed to say when you announced that he was coming? As if I can say what a Matisse painting means with Fabio the Frenchman telling me he’s practically related. I’m sick of Fabio the fantastic, Fabio the ever present. So my father and Matisse weren’t friends? The painting meant what it meant *to me.*”

“But you said you didn’t mind him coming.”

“I said that because I did and I wanted you to see that.”

“Oh really Paul. And now I’m a mind reader?”

The fight was not as ugly as it could have been, Paul and Myra conscious of their nationality, world super power and all, *pax Americana* and the accompanying reputation, but her looks were ice-queen perfection (“Didn’t he know what she was going through as an assistant producer of a Hollywood movie?”), her batted eyes topping his frowns of confusion (“Didn’t *she* know what it was like to play the extra, stuck in with the costumes and left-over bread sticks and pea soup?) Apparently not. Apparently, neither knew the other’s burden.

On they argued, as they traipsed along the Seine, the hidden revealed, the pulling pushing perfection. She wanted to take the scenic boat and he didn’t. He wanted to spend the night together, without worrying about the arrangement. Next was her makeup and his fashion, her forthrightness, his defensiveness. They searched their pockets for the sticky tack, the Super Glue that held their love together. What was the compound, the equation, the chemistry, the physics? He grabbed her hand, wrapping her palm uneasily in his. What could they give up for love?

THE CHANDELIER wasn't crystal, but the crown glass still bent light, throwing blurs of stretched color across the party-goers. "All for one and one for all," cried Porthos as the light sprayed bright reds and greens and blues. Athos caught him when he fell, kissing him full in mock favor. The wrap party in Fabio's apartment was a mad success.

"Ladies and gentlemen, *Mesdames et Messieurs*," the star Jake Jones called out, "May I introduce to you our host, the Emmy-award winning and hopefully soon to be Oscar-winning producer, from his modest beginnings in the salons of Paris, doctor, lawyer, *connoisseur d'amours*, *artiste extraordinaire*, Monsieur Fabio Negra."

Warm applause dribbled through Fabio's welcoming remarks as the fish sandwiches sliced in *pain de mie* and individually-wrapped in grease-proof edible Japanese paper were passed around by the Miss Ethiopia Hospitality Service, their black and white tight outfits playing delicate counterpoint to the film set's fashion extremes. The service guaranteed each hostess had been a bona fide pageant contestant and that one in fact had been a real Miss Ethiopia. Another had been a fifth runner-up Miss World Miss Congeniality.

Paul and Myra were talking to the model Jasmine on the Tower-side balcony about the latest yoga styles, Jasmine having just finished a shoot in the streets of Addis Ababa for her new *Jasmine Yoga Lotus Wear*.

"Oh, we discount for the Third World. We can mark everything up fifty dollars and still be swimming in it," she said, chomping away on a chat stick dipped in cheese. "It only costs five cents to make a full-length body suit. But advertising eats everything." She looked nothing like the May *Pout* magazine cover spread thought Paul, her black hair bleached of color, though, as he thought about it, perhaps white was her natural color.

Paul was trying to look cool. Myra had dressed him with a new buy, and they both wore black, he a suit and she a Jasmine sheer original yoga dress. Her orange lipstick was her only makeup. They had made up in the *Promenade des Plantes*, awakening in love again that morning, their silly lovers' tides forgotten.

"I brought out my own collection because I was tired of throwing out new garments every week," continued Jasmine. "I wanted something I could wear more than once a season." More light sprayed up and down the walls as Athos caught Porthos again.

Jasmine's new man, the fabulous fifth musketeer Antoine, whose real name oddly enough was Antoine, was standing with them on the balcony. "Myra, you must come and visit me in the country," he said. "The south of France is completely different than here. You would adore it. You and Fabio."

"Yeah, it's *south*," said Paul, though no one heard. He was used to being ignored.

"Why thank you Antoine," said Myra. "Of course, I would love to."

Paul knew he was superfluous to the conversation, but stuck it out anyway, thinking that silently extricating himself would be more discourteous than interrupting and then being ignored. Eventually he asked, "Did the film go well, as films go?" No one heard.

"Oh, I'm so looking forward to playing a vampire next season," smiled Jasmine, dabbing freely at an uncooperative excess of cream cheese on her tongue. "I think Fabio's amazing for giving me a part."

"You'll be the best *un-dead* who ever lived," said Antoine, squeezing his hand up her back. No one had heard when Paul had said just the same.

In another orchestrated recitation, Maxwell Montes thanked Fabio on behalf of all the cast and crew and called for a short meditation moment, before the inimitable Fabio made another speech, thanking among others the delicious Myra.

Afterwards, in circle again, Fabio produced a small set of glittering earrings, which he clipped to Myra's ears, Paul watching her blush appear and recede in equal astonishment.

The horoscope talk came next, everyone applauding Myra for her abilities to keep the cast and crew in wonderful Libran sync.

"I'm a Gemini," said Jasmine. "I'd have the actors screaming at me in seconds."

"No complaints from this actor," sparkled Antoine, Jasmine's faux slap turning their faces flush with laughter.

"Well, sometimes, I think I must be anything *but* Libra," said Myra. "You know, I'm so naïve, always having to be cruel to be kind."

"In this business, you need everything you can get," said Fabio, his hand extending above Myra's back. The light from the chandelier was now fully eclipsed by his stance above her. "I see great things ahead for you, my dear."

Paul knew he was no good at playing *regardez-moi*, smiling on cue, saying the scripted lines, and so excused himself, slipping out during Fabio's rehash of Myra's greatness, her handling of the *grande finale* up Boulevard St-Michel. In the corner of the Seine-side balcony, he found Diana Chasm standing by herself.

"Fame, fortune. It didn't used to be," she said. "It used to be about story, love of art. Now, it's all celebrity. Who's who."

"Sorry?" said Paul.

"When did we get so full?" she said.

Paul told her that his presence there was by association. "I'm an outsider. I wouldn't know an actor from an extra. Fabio Negra? Who's he?" He hadn't recognized her in the dim night light.

"Oh, Fabio's okay," she said. "*Soupe du jour*, real B.O., but at least he knows it. You have to play it up while you can in this business. Believe me, he's one of the better ones. I've seen worse, my dear, much worse." She pointed out the bustle and intrigue of who would end the night with whom, actors fighting for the extras, boys and girls in rented clothes looking for a leg up the production ladder. "It's not as chivalrous as you might think. There's no '*She has given her pledge kind sir and I accept defeat. Pray enjoy each other.*' No, life here is taken like a slice of fruit. But it's film. Everyone loves the twinkle."

"B.O.?" asked Paul.

"Box office my dear. *Real* box office."

Paul's heart skipped a beat as he finally recognized to whom he had been talking "*Diana Chasm? You're Diana Chasm?*" It was all he could think to say.

"Yes I am. I am Diana Chasm." The words echoed in his ears.

He saw her sitting top and left in her seat on *Celebrity Moo-lah Millions*, where she had been for five years before her role on *The Vampire Buddy Files*. What was the line from her famous commercial he tried to recall? What was it? Come on. The line?

She continued with the most recent intrigue of who was sizing up whom. Did Paul know that two actors had changed partners in the middle of filming? *Live at Five*, bless them, were already two liaisons and five weeks out of date. "Why do men always go for the puffy-lipped, big-breasted, giggling blondes," she said, her face stretched in disdain as she eyed Maxwell Montes snaking on the dance floor with his

latest, a 2nd assistant script girl. “All he needs is a life to go with the lifestyle,” she chided in whispered breath.

That’s right, remembered Paul, they had been married before—Maxwell Montes and Diana Chasm. *Incroyable*. Here he was, Paul Goodman, standing beside Diana Chasm *and* talking to her about Maxwell Montes. But the line. What was the line?

As Diana continued itemizing her ex’s past infidelities, Paul remembered. Yes, the Liberty bar commercial: *Fluff so light, ... you’ll float away*. That was it. He wondered would she say the line and, in a blurted moment, he asked, wishing immediately that he hadn’t.

“*Moi*, Diana Chasm? My dear, the past is past?” *L’étoile* come and *l’étoile* go.

Paul saw a sparkle fade across her face. Why had he asked her to say the line? *Fluff so light, ... you’ll float away*.

“Did you know, he’s seeing Jasmine?” said Diana Chasm coldly, having forgotten already, it seemed, Paul’s gauche misstep, his sycophantic dalliance.

“Really? Maxwell Montes is seeing Jasmine? I thought Jasmine was seeing *Antoine de Gascon*?” he replied. “And ... didn’t we just see Maxwell Montes with ... some girl?”

Diana Chasm laughed. “Please. Fabio knows the publicity. Antoine is the new star. He has to be shown in light for tomorrow’s tabloid.” Diana Chasm poured back her drink. It wasn’t like that in the old days she continued. Not like that at all.

What old days, thought Paul? Black and White, the machine gun adventure, buddy-buddy decade of he-man stars, parts I, II, III, the blockbuster, cross-over, feel-good weepies with the soft-lens starlettes and retro-soundtrack, dance-hall remix Sensurround, Smellavision? To what era could Diana Chasm be referring to as *old* days? She couldn’t be *that* old.

“If you want to know what is really going on, my dear,” she added. “Look to the love scenes. The eyes never lie.” The eyes, thought Paul as he left the faded drunken star alone on the balcony.

Eventually, Myra came looking for him and she and Paul spun around the floor in dance, her new earrings bouncing sparks of light. They transited a square, the dancing spilling in and out of party rooms. They moved among the bodies, trading blissful eyes and exploding smiles.

“Did you know that Foucault turned the world?” said Myra in the quiet in between of songs. “In the Panthéon, he hung an iron ball from the ceiling and watched the earth move, turning ever-so-slightly as the pendulum swung back and forth.” Paul told her he had never heard of Foucault. “Neither had I until I went to the Panthéon. The Greeks thought the earth was round—they even calculated the circumference—and Copernicus determined the earth went round the sun, but not until Foucault did man prove the earth turned on its own axis. Imagine, night and day made from earth and not the heavens.” They were kissing as she spoke. “I met Fabio there. The day my life turned from night to day.”

“*Fabio*,” said Paul. “Do you think we could have one conversation without you mentioning his name? *Monsieur Fabio the Magnificent*.”

Myra ignored, laughing as she pulled him closer. She told him to forget Fabio, that she was there with him, that she loved him and had always loved him. To be slain by the simplicity of words.

They could have stayed locked forever trading feelings, but after more impromptu speeches by various cast and crew, the trouble began. Always kind Fabio, as Myra called him, had been robbed. The *gendarmérie* were on the way.

Fabio was talking to Paul, having cut in on their dancing, redoing his dramatic bit on what a man could give up for love. "Love makes fools of us all," he said. "Some spill their love in words. Some look down, others up. Some love in hopelessly forgiving arms." He added that *l'amour malconstrue* comes when love was mistaken for comfort. *Pas de problème* for Fabio the Stylist, *avec sa mise en plie*. "Some must move to be still," continued Fabio, letting drop that suspicion about the robbery fell on a certain character, an Aries whose jealousy had got the better of him.

The necklace had been on loan for the evening and was worth a king's ransom. A Fabio Negra Production through and through. The script was being rewritten as the cameras rolled thousands of dollars per second.

"The only battle is with oneself," said Paul, nobly, ready. He didn't believe Fabio was serious. "Honest, I haven't got a clue what you're on about." Could he stand and fight? *En garde. Touché. Point*. Could he take on the inimitable Fabio, Monsieur Elegance? But if he did, what of Myra? And what then of the shambles of her world? To understand what one could give up in a second. No, best retreat, thought Paul. Best to understand before heeding any call to battle. "Surely, you must be mistaken. Why would I?"

"Money is as good a motive as any. But no, I think not." The accusations grew more unsettled. "Instant gratification is the mark of a psychopath," announced Fabio.

Myra urged Paul to say nothing, her calm blue eyes rounding her well-formed mouth, putting harmony to the test. She knew Fabio's excesses and had seen underneath the exterior, but what was that to a career in film? She had not yet gauged the seriousness, the intent. Yes, Paul was her love. What could she give up for love?

"Are you sure Fabio?" tried Myra. "There must be an explanation. Why would Paul ..."

Fabio cut her off in mid-word. "*Sure?* Myra, I don't make up stories. *Je n'accuse pas.*"

Myra again suggested calm, but as champion and in his haste to do right, Paul saw no other option but to take flight, impatience ever the betterment of man. He was no thief, but Fabio was bent on some form of humiliation in front of all. The stage had been readied. There was no corner in which to hide. No dignified exit. The musketeers were nowhere to be found.

After a commotion by the door, Paul slipped out, hiding in the shadows of the hallway as the *gendarmarie* climbed passed in hurried step. He lowered himself out a window and scurried down a drainpipe, Myra meeting him minutes later in the street.

"Paul what have we done?" she said. "I can't believe it. This is madness. My job. My life." She struck his chest and screamed loud screams, Paul knowing that in this case her words meant love. As they stood on Pont St.-Michel, where they had met that day when they had first found each other again, her screams turned to kisses. And their love rose and fell.

They hurried along the Seine, stopping to catch their breath.

"Did you know that Jasmine was seeing Maxwell Montes?" quizzed Paul.

"I thought she was seeing Antoine de Gascon?"

"I know. So did I."