

Vacation in Dresden

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*For loveliness divine he looks in vain,
Who never looked upon this lady's eyes,
How gently she directs her gaze the while.
Nor knows how one is healed of love and slain,
Who does not know how sweet are all her sighs,
And how her speech is sweet, and sweet her smile.*

—Petrarch

Part I

1.

*E*s ist eine lange Geschichte,” I remember Hans telling me that first day in Berlin while we sat together on the steps of the ruined church. I didn’t know what he meant at the time. I wasn’t really listening either. I was just passing the time, waiting until the group I was with got back from seeing the sights. He was teaching me some German, just the basics like “please” and “thank you” and “What time is it?” Kid stuff really, but I didn’t like not knowing. “*Es ist eine lange Geschichte,*” he told me. A long story indeed.

Mind you, *my* story pales in comparison to his—Dresden, a city destroyed by war on a day struck by love, Valentine’s Day 1945. How could my story mean anything after that? And yet I try to tell my story—of Laura, the girl I had dreamed of and had no earthly place to put her. Laura, *how sweet are all your sighs*. If only I had listened. How can I ever recreate your beauty in words?

Anyway, I don’t want to get too far ahead of myself. I guess it all started on the day I left on my vacation, on the day I woke up in February, 1989, a week before Valentine’s—as always to the screaming schoolgirls outside my window.

Not much has changed since that day. I still live in the co-op across from the school yard. Vax, my neighbour, is running for president again, this time on an anti-junk mail platform. He’s got the whole damn place organized for some walkathon to save the trees. I don’t think about my family as much. It’s been almost eight years. I guess, I found a way to say sorry for *that* day. And I don’t work for the government anymore. Well, actually, I was fired for not showing up for two months. Perhaps, one can tell the difference between one day and the next, after enough days have fallen.

I don’t know if I’ll ever find Laura. *For loveliness divine he looks in vain*. Maybe if I tell her story, our worlds will someday collide again.

Anyway, that day, I was half-awake as I lay in bed, stirred by the schoolgirls skipping in the schoolyard across the street. The other half of me was still dreaming. I don't know how to explain the dream. It starts out normal enough until the bombs start falling. One moment, I'm standing in the middle of a bridge overlooking a quiet river in some ancient, walled town. And the next, the river turns blood red and the town is aflame. And everything is gone. In an instant. There's a girl but I can't figure her out. She's calling to me or something from the river bank, though I can't tell if she's calling for me to come to her or if she's waving me away. I keep trying to figure it out, trying to hear what she's saying but the dream ends before I can reach her. Always. No matter how hard I try.

The schoolgirls are somehow mixed up in the dream, screaming like an oracle to explain the meaning. I can't help but hear them as they shriek the months of the year and a cornucopia of fruit in what might be poetic and rhythmic beauty, at any other time.

Apples, peaches, pears and plums
 Tell me when your birthday comes
 Fascist pigs, imperialist bums

Not that I mind them waking me up. If only they had a snooze button.

My last alarm clock did. It had all the latest features too—drowse time, sleep time, reversible time settings, multiple alarm settings, his and her selectable alarm sound, continuous pitch and tempo alarm sound changes, battery backup, and a power failure indicator. “The latest in state-of-the-art time.” One day the same as the next.

January, February, March, April
 Pig, Bum, July, August

Communist, Capitalist

November, December

I can only imagine these children come from troubled families. Why would anyone want to get to school that early? Where is *that* snooze button? One girl begged for another try in the ropes, screaming that she had been tripped on purpose. Another yells “no” and their simple game becomes lost to an endless round of name-calling.

The remains of the dream are muddled. I can’t tell whether the schoolgirls are calling to me, their shrill voices somehow soothed in song, or whether I can at last hear the girl in my dream. I try rewinding. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. I won’t if you won’t.” I rewind further and play it back fast. “Okay, you first. No. You first.” From the reverse angle. Slo Mo. No go. “Are you happy now!” Stop it! My head hurts. Won’t you let me sleep? Why can’t I hear her? And then as always, the never-ending game unfolds into two sides—both certain they are right and the other wrong. Always.

Alas, the school bell rings and I am awake, my body draped in sweat.

Usually, I am out of bed and on the way to work before the school bell, but the boss is away on his monthly business meeting in the Caribbean with his boss and his boss’s boss. Every month, the heads of all the branches in the Ministry of Labour, where I work as a computer programmer, get together to discuss keeping a lid on government spending. It’s Nassau this month, I think. Or was it Nassau last month?

I shuffled to the bathroom. The apartment is on the small side but the view is okay—downtown Toronto and all that and, of course, the school yard, practically under my balcony. I wouldn’t want to live on the highway side though—I’d never get any sleep.

As always, everyone else’s music leaks through the walls and I can hear Led Zeppelin’s *The Immigrant Song* at full volume. Over and over.

We come from the land of the ice and snow

From the midnight sun where the hot springs flow
Ah ahh ahhh ah Ah ahh ahhh ah Ah ahh ahhh ah

Bathrobe clutched in hand, I confronted today's offending neighbour—meaning only that our apartments adjoined and not that we had to get along. Vax ushered me in, Led Zeppelin spinning on the turntable.

“Cass, buddy. You got to see this. You're not going to believe it.”

“Any chance you could lower the music?” I yelled over Led Zeppelin's manic poetry.

Ignoring me, Vax plopped down a large cardboard box on the floor and, after digging through the shiny metal contents, produced a gas cap from a Volkswagen Bug, his latest prize in his odd collection. Empty containers of Vicks were strewn about. Soon after he had begun his latest collection—car gas caps—he'd become addicted to nasal spray. He told me it eased the pain.

“You don't see many Bugs on the road anymore you know?” Vax continued as he polished a spot of rainbow-coloured tarnish with the tail of his shirt, beating a shine into the cap's grungy surface. “I've been trying to bag one of these for months.” I watched as he took a quick hit up the nose from his tube of Vicks.

“Some achievement Vax. The *music*?”

“I wanted the plate too. It was so stupid—*4EVER*. I tell you, vanity plates get stupider every day.” The stench of gas smeared the room. “Stealing plates is more serious than stealing gas caps, though. To tell you the truth, I don't think I could do it.” He took another hit up his nostril—a slow, satisfied draw—and then slowly wiped his hand back and forth across his nose. “Though, once you set your mind to stealing, I suppose it doesn't matter *what* you steal.”

“The music?” I asked again, though he continued to ignore me. Again Vax jabbed his hand to his nose and, after combing a shock of black hair from his eyes, he rubbed his hands up and down along the legs of his pants, as if somehow he'd come cleaner in the exchange.

“Mind you, just *having* is stealing,” he continued. “So what if I actually *stole* my collection. Does that make me any more a thief than any other collector?” His voice climbed a notch as he asked his *question*.

“Not every collector is a thief, Vax.” I’d given up on the music.

“Is that so?” His voice climbed higher. “You mean putting a Van Gogh in a vault for no one’s pleasure but one’s own, isn’t stealing? Just think how many people will never see that Van Gogh, *that* stolen beauty. Not one lousy glimpse. I don’t care what someone pays. Theft, pure and simple.”

“Whatever you say Vax.”

“You’re still getting me a *Trabi*, right?” He looked up from his collection, his shoulders jerking forward and back in a shudder. A drip of snot shimmered on his lip.

“I said I would.”

“*Nobody* has a Trabant. Not around here anyway. That would be the best.” His hands were now moving quickly from one cap to the next. There were hundreds. I could see a Mercedes, a Porsche, a Volkswagen. “Though, if *you* steal the Trabi, I guess it wouldn’t be right for *me* to call it *mine*. I’ll have to think about that.” A spot of oil vanished from the rusting Rolls he was vigorously working over with a cleaner patch of his shirt.

“I won’t tell. Honest.” I smiled, as if I cared, and nodded to the stereo.

“Still. I don’t know. Maybe, it’s okay. It is after all *my* collection.”

Eventually, he convinced himself that it was okay for *me* to steal a cap for *his* collection, but after he started in with a pitch for some crazed walkathon he was planning, I stopped listening. He was going on and on like a steamroller, telling me how change was the only reason we were free. “We can’t ignore change. Everything changes. That’s what makes the man.” After asking once more about the music, I left. I was having trouble breathing and it’s one thing to listen to someone going on and on about nothing, but it’s quite another if you can’t breathe.

“The Trabi? You won’t forget the Trabi?” Vax called out after I had left.

I suppose I should have told him I had no intention of stealing a gas cap for him. Even if I said I had. Not in East Germany. Not where they take your passport away for thinking bad thoughts. Not where they lock you up and throw away the key. Maybe, I should have told him that. Besides, who collects *gas caps*?

When the Levee Breaks was pounding in my ears as I showered. I decided not to cream rinse, hoping no one would notice if my hair lacked that certain bounce. I don't know why, but as I washed the soap from my hair, I started thinking about what everyone else thinks about in the shower. Do we all think the same things? Though, if everyone thought about the same things in the shower, everyone would be thinking about what everyone else was thinking about in the shower, *just as I was*, and thus, everyone would be thinking about everyone else's *everyone else*. And so on *ad infinitum* until it reduces to just thinking about *one's own self*—a sort of *Bather's Dilemma* where we think we're thinking about a collective *bathed* unconscious when we're really thinking about our own dirt. *Me, myself and I*. Good thing we don't all think alike after all. Good thing the water doesn't last long—that always gets me thinking strange thoughts. Like where does the water go? Or am I showering with the same water that Napoleon showered with? Actually, I read in the newspaper that he didn't even bathe. Josephine liked him that way, or so the article said.

I thought about my family too. Again. I wish I didn't have to think about my family. I really do. My mom and dad and my younger sister Patricia were killed when a runaway Coca Cola truck ran our station wagon into the side of a building. It was eight years ago. So long ago, though it seems like yesterday. They were coming back from the midway at The Ex when the Coca Cola truck was making deliveries on a day the newspapers recorded as the hottest day since 1881. The brakes failed. It still bothers me that I was supposed to go with them, but I had pretended I was sick. My sister Patricia was just a kid at the time, six years younger than me, and I was eighteen, not the family outing sort of age. The official record at the hospital stated that my dad and Patricia were dead on arrival. A day later, I watched as they pulled the white sheet over my mom's head. The policeman at the hospital told me that our

car just scrunched up when it hit the wall. He told me I was lucky I wasn't in the car. Lucky? I just cried. Eighteen years old and I cried like a baby.

I still cry when I think about how they died or when I walk by the building and see the chipped and scarred bricks. I can't help looking at them. I even walk out of my way to see if time has ground them down, polished them, so you can't notice anymore, but they're still like yesterday—the same. And the glass from the broken Coke bottles that no one bothered to sweep up—some still there, though less and less each time. The newspaper reported the accident with a picture on the last page beside an ad for panty hose—I still have the paper—but all I ever look at is the kids in the background drinking Coca Cola from the bottles that didn't break. I guess they just pushed their way through the crowds to see the big amusement on the hottest day in a hundred years. Anyway, I don't want to get into all that. I just wish I didn't have to think about them all the time.

Stairway to Heaven was now blasting in from next door and *Psycho Killer* through the floorboards. Together, the sound was a symphony of white noise knocking on the insides of my gut. Through the fragile air, I could hear the late bell dying in the schoolyard.

Throwing on the same knotted tie from yesterday, I dressed for work, though I took an age trying to find my scarf. I'm forever losing scarves. I've found ten scarves already this year and promptly lost every one. The latest scarf, a long, green woollen one, I found only yesterday. I didn't want to lose it already.

Of course, as soon as I put my coat on, I found the scarf stuffed in the sleeve. Everything I lose is always right where I put it.

The February cold was hell on the skin. I was wearing the green woollen scarf and all—I practically looked like Laurence of Arabia with it wrapped around my face—but the wind poured through anyway. It wasn't much of a scarf. I couldn't even feel my face when I got to work. I suppose I could have stayed underground with all the others. It's not much more than a mile, but I can't take it—not ever going outside, that is.

In the elevator, I saw Irene, whose grandboss is my great-grandboss. She didn't seem at all concerned if the bosses were in Nassau or Timbuktu.

“Hi-dee-hi,” I said, though I knew she wouldn't answer. Something to do with animate and inanimate objects. After too many years, computer programmers can't relate to the living, breathing world any more. People begin to lose shape. There is no edge between the real and the imagined. Everything becomes a fuzzy shadow. I always say hello when I see her, though. You never know.

“Hey, Cassidy. The bi-weekly is cancelled,” yelled Ian Ormsby from over the shared wall between our cubicles as I sat at my desk, rubbing the last bits of cold from my face. “The bosses, you know? Still not back. *Nassau* isn't it?” Ormsby was huddled with a few of his Java friends, their heads poking up and down above the stumpy walls as they talked. “Wong is collecting the Gantt Charts and Action Plans. Join us for a cup?”

I politely declined. No caffeine for me—rocket fuel for the grown-up Coca Cola addicts.

“You sure. One dose in the morning?” continued Ormsby. “Nothing quite like it.”

“No thanks, Ian. You know I don't drink coffee. I'm not big on addiction.”

“That's a good one, Cassidy. Life's an addiction in case you hadn't noticed,” he chortled, enticing the others to join him.

I said nothing, suffering their laughter silently. I wasn't about to butt heads or anything. Ormsby was always picking fights with me. One word about any of his

annoying habits or his height—or lack of it—and we'd do battle, back and forth, like some grotesque chess game stalemated forever.

“Want to get in on tomorrow's lottery? Eight million this week,” he tried again. “We're wheeling ten numbers. It costs seventy bucks to get in.”

I said nothing, hoping he would retreat if I declined his gambit.

“Thirteen million to one,” he pressed, as he jumped up on the adjoining wall, his eyes bulging from exertion. He looked like Humpty Dumpty, I thought. “But only one winner. Thirteen million possibilities and only one winner.” I stared up at the lights, the mid-morning sun lost in a dull wash of fluorescence. Was it that easy? An eight, followed by six zeroes, the eternal circle defying the nothingness beside.

“If you say so Ian,” I answered.

“Remember, Cassidy. Cover your ass and you'll never be cold.”

“Yeah right. Whatever.”

“It's not what you know, it's what others think you know.” He hopped down from the wall, steadying his fall with outstretched arms and a prolonged grunt.

It wasn't even noon yet and already he had used two of his three “rules of government” posted on his wall in shiny, embossed black letters, along with “Ignore it long enough and it will go away.”

“You can't lose if you don't buy a ticket, Ian,” I answered back though I knew I shouldn't have.

“What are you babbling on about?” The laughter continued for which there was no cure.

“Babylon. Babble on. Amazing the similarity.”

But I was ignored, our game settled in Ormsby's mind, his talk now of economic indicators, velocities, and accelerations directed at his cronies—pretend work talk projected just far enough to give an impression of import.

I checked the *in* half of my *in-out* tray, easily separating the wheat from the chaff; almost all was junk. One memo told me today was an office slum-day as if that did any good *now*. As if anyone didn't already know Friday was a slum-day. As if I

could very well go home and change in case I forgot or somehow didn't know. I tightened the knot in my tie, happier for my simple defiance. Another memo was from Personnel, dated yesterday and stamped *Urgent*. Something to do with my vacation again and did I know the procedure for travelling to East Germany. I ignored the memo. That is, I didn't respond—number three of Ormsby's famous government rules.

As I shoved the junk into my out tray, I could no longer hear Ian and his merry men laughing, though I could hear the coffee still drip-dripping like a heart beat. And thanks to the schoolgirls, the *dwarf song* from Snow White was somehow stuck in my brain. Only, as I imagined it, it was being sung by the Mendelssohn Choir, lost on the subway, travelling back and forth forever between termini, unable to find the stop for the concert hall.

Hi ho, hi ho,
It's off to work we go.
We hear the bell,
We run like Hell.
Hi ho, hi ho...

But I regress. Enough of schoolgirls waking me up and the Mendelssohn Choir lost on the subway and Ian Ormsby and his rules for doing nothing. Enough wondering all the time what I was doing.

A light fluttered above. The computer, sprawled upon the desk, purred softly, setting off a crescendo of noise as I worked. I suppose I could quit and live off the inheritance I got when my family died, though the lawyers got most of that trying to sue Coca Cola Enterprise Inc. There's about 10,000 dollars left. I don't know. Work or whatever you want to call it around here somehow offers a respite from my mind. The secret is in the jacket. As long as it's draped over the side of your chair for all to

see, it doesn't actually matter what you do. Attendance or rather the appearance of attendance is the only skill required.

I started dreaming again. The same dream about the girl on the bridge. It started about a year ago. I didn't even know I was dreaming of Dresden until I saw a photograph of one of Canaletto's paintings. Canaletto was a Venetian painter in the eighteenth century—I read up on him after I saw the painting—who everybody wanted in his court. All the kings, anyway, like Augustus the Strong, the king of Poland who got him to paint Dresden. He wasn't actually Polish but he had bought the title to enhance his elector status in Saxony. Amazing, he *bought* the title. That's what the book said anyway.

I can't actually explain how I recognized my dream in a painting or how I could possibly dream of somewhere I had never seen, but the view in the dream was right out of the painting—the buildings perfectly framed in the background, though bigger because I was standing in the foreground, somewhere *in front* of where Canaletto must have been when he had painted it. In the dream, I'm always watching the Elbe quietly falling over itself. And then the bombs start falling, one after another, smashing the buildings into nothing. The Elbe turns red, swelling into the streets, and the tide of blood surges through the rubble. I didn't know anything about the Allied bombing in World War II before the dream. I couldn't believe it when I found out that Dresden had been destroyed.

The girl is a complete mystery. I can see her standing on a terrace, her hair aglow, but not afraid. Sometimes she calls out to me, but I can never make out what she's saying. I try to walk closer, to hear her, to call her away, but I can't. It's as if I'm suspended in the middle of nothing, unable to cross the bridge.

I read some books on dreams, but they didn't help much. They always go on about overcoming compulsions. All I wanted to know was why in my own dream I couldn't cross the bridge. *My dream* and I couldn't cross *my own* bridge. As soon as I found out I was dreaming of somewhere real, I knew I had to go to Dresden. I had to make sense of the dream. Of my life. No matter what it took.

I pounded on the keys for a while, until I could hear the cooling fan humming in and out of my neural range. I started repeating one simple word as I typed. Work. *Over and over* until I began to sound like a duck, *quack-quacking*. “*Work work. Kwork kwork. Kwahk kwahk. Quack quack.*”

I guess life is like Sisyphus rolling his stone. Only we roll our stone into an elevator now to go up and down. And working for the government—Sisyphus never had it so good. Nine-to-five, breaks included. Holidays. Christmas parties. But no matter how soft the cushions, short the hours, or anonymous the responsibility, work is still what separates us from the gods. Poor Sisyphus. Up and down. Over and over. On and on. The gods so benevolent that they pay you now for your soul. Money. *Cashish*. Twice a month. So you can buy and consume and expel and recycle. And go up and down forever.

I suppose life could be worse. We could be living a different myth, where our bodies are stretched out like a canvas over a small island and left to endure the vultures pecking out our livers for an eternity. Day after day after day.

3.

It was afternoon when I finally looked up again. Norman lingered in the open doorway, jiggling his slight build from foot to foot, his thick black-framed glasses protruding uneasily atop his nose. He was wearing the same slum-day clothes as ever—boxer shorts and a Maple Leaf hockey sweater with the number *pi* to six digits scrunched across the back. A fading dark blue baseball cap hid his thinning hair. I liked Norman. He was one of the few programmers who didn't pretend he was actually doing anything. Mind you, he was more than likely not all there.

“Daphne was looking for you earlier. She said something about The Club Apollo tonight. She looked a little peeved Hal.”

“Thanks Norman.”

“Separate holidays? Very Eighties.” He smiled wryly. Norman was always smiling like he knew something you didn’t. Only I think he was more possessed than happy. I always wondered what was so funny, but I never asked. I was afraid of the answer.

Norman sat down beside me, his smile now a wide grin. “Nice to get away from all this work, eh?”

“Work? Is that what you call it?” I grinned back. “More like a game of *Snakes and Ladders* if you ask me.”

He spread a stack of papers along my desk. “Did I tell you about my new program, Conway’s *Life*? The resolution sucks, but it’s pretty cool.” His face was swollen by a now enormous grin. “I just can’t get enough data to keep it going.”

He set his cap down on my desk. His hair, though thinning and receding, bounced lightly as he started jiggling again. “I was hoping you might help Hal.” His eyes flooded me with a scrutinous gaze. “I’ve colour-coded the data instead of using ones and zeros. It’s way cooler with sixteen colours.”

“Does the math *work* in colour?” I asked. “Conway was pretty precise with the rules, wasn’t he? No less than two and no more than three neighbours.”

“Oh yeah. It’s amazing. Instead of one species, it’s like a whole universe competing. Much more like real life.” He chortled, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “I just can’t make it last. It keeps bombing on time.”

“Severity Code 5. That’s not good, Norman.”

“It’s not a Code 6, at least.”

“Sure. I guess if you’re going to make a mistake, then a good mistake is better than a bad mistake.”

Norman shrugged, uncertain if my adage applied to him or not. I began suggesting a possibility for his input file, using text converted to numbers, but

Norman wasn't listening. He was starting to trance—a popular action among the mind-numbed—mumbling on about *gliders* and *shooters*, Conway's elementary bits of life. I didn't disturb him. It's a severe error to interrupt a computer programmer's trance—at least a Code 6. Code 6 errors can reprogram the program, rewire the wiring. I let him mumble on until he had returned from whatever world he had exited to.

I shouldn't admit this, but I didn't like computers when I started. It's not easy to explain why, but when your brain starts humming at the same frequency as the clock cycle, it's time to wonder what's really going on. I only took computers because we had to do a math course in our first year. I was a philosophy student, and I wanted to count the number of souls since the beginning of time. I figured, I needed a computer. I used a simple growth rate, modelled on basic geometric theory from Malthus, and summed up from when the first man walked alone until the present, though I wasn't really sure if anyone ever did walk alone. I counted 8,643,245,271 souls since the beginning of time. Honest. After that, I got a summer job in computers. And the jobs kept coming. It's hard to say no when the jobs keep coming.

Personally, I think he would have been eaten. The first man that is. I mean, did lions and tigers stop being lions and tigers when man came along? Same with the animals on the ark. Or did Noah give the deer and the sheep a head start when the ark landed? "Ready or not here come the poisonous snakes." I got an A on the project, though my program showed that the first man walked alone some time around the year 1087 A.D. I was going to revise the model to include wars, famine, disasters and all that, but the school computer broke down. Too bad. I'm sure I could have kept refining it until I got it right.

I wasn't a scholar or anything. The professor got chucked out the next year for giving everyone an A. As the story goes, the university found out she hadn't looked at a single student project in five years. She'd been reading Pauline Johnson poems about Indian tribes and their rituals, and a touch of the freedom and romance in Robert Service stories of the north. She was an American, from Arizona. I guess she

just freaked out one day. Too much input. Too much handshaking. Too much noise in the brain.

Norman was still mumbling on. Even the food bell made no impression on his possessed state. “Norman. Norman. Time to make more mistakes. Somewhere else. Don’t you have some work you can do? *Somewhere else.*” He grumbled at my suggestive thoughts, not at all interested. “You’ll miss your afternoon donut.” And with a start, he returned. Pavlov to the rescue. The food bell was dying in the distance.

Norman collected his papers and rushed out after the waning bell. He would not be denied his hourly intake of sugar.

What is it about computers? I mean, a computer is just a machine with electronic guts and electric blood. All it does is crunch *ones* and *nots*. Nothing hard to figure out compared to a tree. It makes mistakes just like any other machine. Toronto gone in a second, Canada in a minute, the world lost to eternity in an instant. In the blink of an eye. Soon, nothing more than a well-honed reflex. Like talking without thinking. Like a stream of words without meaning. With computers, we don’t make more mistakes, we just make them more often.

One mistake, two mistake, three mistake, four,
Five mistake, six mistake, seven mistake, more.

Oh, no. I was entering my own trance—Code 6, though not a Code 7. You don’t want to know about Code 7.

Not long after Norman departed, I started dreaming again, but this time, I tried walking *towards* where Canaletto would have been standing, into the space *outside* the painting. I could even see him at his easel, wearing a black, floppy hat like everyone did in the Renaissance. And I could see the people surrounding him as he painted on the bank of the Elbe, each one handing him a brush or cloth as he recorded Dresden from 200 years ago. They were all so aristocratic with their puffy clothes and parasols. I couldn’t help wondering what he would have thought if he knew that what

he was painting would someday be all that remained of Dresden—honest in its depiction, but two hundred years out of sync with what had come and gone.

Eventually, I got so close, I was practically there on the shore beside him, looking at the painting *as* he was painting it. I could see each brush stroke, the contrast between light and dark, for which he was famous. I could see it all being created—the terrace, the dome, the banks of the Elbe, the bridge I could never cross, the future in his past.

As I got ready to walk back towards the bridge in my dream, though, Daphne surprised me, her forceful way jutting into the dream. She was not happy.

“Hal?” Her eyes pried.

“Just think. This time tomorrow, I’ll be on a plane.”

“Hal?”

“Daphne?”

“I know. We’ve been through this before. But it’s not easy knowing you’re going to Dresden because of a girl in a dream.”

“It’s not the girl. I told you that already.” Her soft face clenched as she turned her body away from mine, her eyes falling on the calendar, as if counting each day I would take from her. Her hair strode down her back, unlike her more secretive look on non slum-days. I could see the outline of her breasts as well through her tight track suit. I wanted to pull her towards me, but it was hard enough to keep a distance. “Daphne?” I called, trying again for her to understand.

“Okay. Okay. I know. Your mind is made up,” the anger quieting in her voice.

She slid a small package toward me. It was wrapped in white tissue, tied up in a coloured bow of gold, black, and red. I could tell it was a cassette.

“The German colours are a nice touch, but I wasn’t planning on bringing my Walkman.”

“What? No Wagner in your dream? Surely, there was music. *The Flying Dutchman* was performed in Dresden for the first time.” Her eyes refused mine.

“Why do you turn everything around?”

“Hal, do you have any idea what it’s like telling someone why you’re going?” Her voice rose and then fell again. “I know, I don’t understand. I’ve heard it all before.” She was almost crying. “What about understanding me?”

“Daphne? Look . . .” I tried, though she cut me off.

“Forget it. Forget everything.”

And with that, her last objection, she was gone. I didn’t follow her. I should have but I knew she was right to be angry. To not understand.

We had met just before Christmas. Christmas is always a bad time for me, what with my family and all. It all happened so fast, I wasn’t sure what was going on. We were down at the lakefront near the grain silos, watching the planes take off. The sun was incredible that day, bouncing off the water in a million directions all at once like little tiny suns. I didn’t expect anything to happen, but as we were walking, I took her hand in mine. I don’t know why I did it. I was nervous just thinking about it. She jerked her hand back at first, uncertain I think as much as she was surprised, but soon we were walking, our hands locked together. After not talking for ages, she finally spoke.

“I haven’t held hands since grade five.” And then she laughed, adding after a short silence, “Guys seem to be interested in only one thing.”

That’s when she started with the eyes, stabbing me with ideas. I think she wanted to do it right then and there in the snow, in view of the whole skyline. But I said “no.” It was pretty awkward after that. I tried changing the subject, talking about work, talking about the cold, talking about anything but what she had in mind. She floored me. I mean right after telling me guys were only interested in one thing, she wanted to do it right then and there. It was pretty hard to say no.

I kind of blew it when I told her about the dream. She wasn’t rude or anything. We were back at her place after our walk on the lakefront and she was practically prone upon her couch, her blouse flopped open, her eyes following mine as I told her about the girl and how I couldn’t cross the bridge.

“I prefer the real to dreams,” I remember her saying, her eyes suggesting something more substantial than fleeting.

“I don’t know if I know the difference.”

Anyway, we started going out after that. No boyfriend and girlfriend stuff—I mean, we didn’t have any love names or anything. We did seem to end up on her couch a lot though.

The current confusion started last night, after watching a movie. I told her I would miss her when I was gone, which I didn’t really mean. I don’t know why I told her. We had just finished fooling around on her couch—I guess I had to say something with her practically undressed in front of me. She didn’t believe me anyway. She told me I was the kind of guy who was too into my own world to miss anyone.

After that though she changed her tack. “Getting excited?” She meant Dresden, though she left the interpretation open.

“A little, I guess.”

“How’s your German?”

“Does Hogan’s Heroes count? *Dumkopf* and *Verboten* is about it.”

“I know a nursery rhyme a friend in grade school taught me, but I doubt it will help you.”

Daphne sang her rhyme, a soft glow in her face. I gathered the rhyme had something to do with a cat, that is if *katze* meant cat. She danced a sort of jig as she sang, her hair fanning out from her face and her skirt twirling up and down before she lost her balance and fell back on top of me.

“Curiosity killed the *katze*,” I said after the song was finished.

“Yes. Curiosity,” she mused. “Curiosity.”

We jabbered on a little, talking about *us* as if making out on her couch had somehow entwined more than our bodies. And then we were both quiet.

“I don’t mind,” she said, stopping me when I tried to speak. “We can keep it simple if you want.”

Simple? She was wrong, but I wasn't going to try changing her mind.

4.

After doing a bit more work, I went looking for her. I owed her that. I walked down the ten flights of stairs to her office. No one bothers to walk anymore—not with eighteen elevators in a forty-story building. It's real creepy too with no people, so I always sing to keep from getting spooked. Handel's *Messiah* is the best song I know to get the echoes dancing just right—there are so many highs and lows. Unfortunately, I have to really concentrate to hit the lows and I never quite get past “For the Lord God om-ni po-tent reigneth.” I always end up humming Buddhist mantras to *omnipotent* instead. Over and over. The sound is amazing, resounding up and down forty flights of stairs. Forever. No wonder those guys can meditate so long. Sometimes, I even get back in time to hear the last breaths not yet eaten by the walls.

Daphne wasn't there and, unfortunately, I got stuck talking to one of her co-workers, Connie. That's what I called her. I mean, she wore those fifties, gemmed-glasses with the pointy frames and always had her hair done up in a bun. She just looked like a Connie. There was so much of her tied up in that bun you could practically feel the tension in the clasps of her hairpins. She was pretty creepy as well, calling a paycheck a “goodie package” and all and making sure everyone was informed about the latest courses.

“Cookie, Hal?” she offered.

And she was always giving out cookies. No big deal, I guess, except I got this weird feeling she was offering more than cookies. Daphne didn't like her very much, but once I started talking to her I didn't feel like I could ditch her right away.

“No thanks, I gave them up for Lent.”

“Very funny. You *poor* dear,” she said with a slick smile. She and Daphne worked in economic forecasting. A sense of humour was not a prerequisite.

“Planning to re-hire everyone laid off during the recovery, now that you’re predicting a recession?” I asked.

“Oh. No, no, no, no, no. That’s policy division. I’m in forecasting.”

Five *no*’s. Only two off her record. You can tell a lot about someone by the way she says *no*. I mean, *no* has a very specific meaning. It means *not* whatever someone was saying *yes* to. Just by itself. But five of them, smushed together like some express train, well that meant something entirely different. I wish I didn’t always notice that kind of stuff, but I can’t help it. I mean, if she meant *no*, then why didn’t she say *no*? But no, Connie had to add four more all smushed together. As well, with each *no*, her high-pitched voice transformed, climaxing as a deep-pitched dash of moral disdain, which probably meant *yes* anyhow. The woman never just said *no*.

Tilting her head, ever-so-slightly, she motioned for me to take the seat next to her. “Too bad about the accident in Jamaica.”

“Accident? Jamaica?”

It seems the bosses had burnt down their hotel. One of them had been cooking in his room and had fallen asleep. The entire hotel was gutted. The Jamaicans were not too happy either and were trying to sue everyone in sight. Connie added that a few of the bosses had been badly burned as well and weren’t likely to be bosses again for some time. I didn’t ask who, instead offering the standard apologies.

“And all along I thought they were in Nassau. Who knew they were in Kingston?”

“No, no, no. Nassau was *last* month.” She removed her glasses and stared at me. “I think.”

“I hope it’s not too serious.”

“Everyone’s replaceable.”

“How pleasant.”

We talked a little more, mostly about what would happen now that the bosses wouldn't be back. When she asked me about my vacation I had to go. I couldn't last any longer waiting there for Daphne.

"You will send me a postcard to add to my collection?" Connie instructed as I stood up to leave. "I don't have any postcards from a *communist* country."

She pointed to a cork board, hiding behind a row of fake Yucca trees in her office. Funny, I had never seen it before. Too bad—the postcards, bulging out over the sides of the cork board, suggested something almost living—a window into another world, however glossy and perfectly rendered by a photographer's airbrush. Ormsby's *Three Rules of Government* poked out from underneath.

There was no room for another postcard but I told her I would. She smiled, her hair flailing across her shoulders as she undid the clasp in her hairpin. Hair everywhere. I should have said no. Oh, well.

I rode the elevator back to my office, although I ended up back in the stairwells again humming mantras after I missed my floor. I guess I got distracted by the muzak, a real smarmy, orchestral version of The Beatles' *Revolution*—violins and oboes and all that. I didn't even realize I was on the wrong floor until I saw someone sitting in what I thought was my desk. He had the same sign as me, B-15, hanging from the chipboard ceiling above him, although a slightly different shade of yellowy-orange. Amazing that I missed my floor. *Revolution* in an elevator?

Everybody was buzzing over the news of the burned-out hotel. Especially Ormsby, who seemed to know just which bosses had been admitted to which hospitals and the extent of their injuries. I listened as he giddily rattled off a list of names, happily announcing that both his boss and my boss were among those admitted to the burn unit of a small Jamaican army hospital. I didn't wait for a description of their injuries.

"It's for real. The bosses aren't coming back," Norman informed me. "I'll be back in a month. Some rest and relaxation."

Norman was bundled into an Eskimo parka and tight spandex ski pants. A bright-yellow, fluorescent hat matched his gloves, with mukluks completing the adventure outfit, though when he walked, the oversized mukluks made him look more like a waddling duck than a burnt-out soul-searcher hitting the trails. Good for Norman I thought. There was only one way to cure programmer burnout—change the program.

“Not sticking around for the party?” I asked.

“No thanks, Hal. I have better things to do than party.”

Better things had something to do with sorting out life. And fast. Norman was in the advanced stages of programmer burnout—square eyes, trancing two or three times a day, uncontrolled conversations with sources unknown. If he couldn't re-program himself back to nature's plan soon, he'd be burned-out for good.

“Oh, yeah. Daphne dropped by,” he told me. “She said to meet her at The Club Apollo as planned.” And with a smile, Norman departed, though from somewhere in the maze, he called back. “Sorry about your vacation. Bad timing, eh?” He didn't wait for an answer, leaving me to question the meaning.

Bad timing? Was it bad timing because my vacation now coincided with everyone else's vacation? As if I couldn't enjoy myself knowing what was going on. Or did Norman know something I didn't? Did he actually mean *good timing*? In Dresden, I wouldn't have to face the bare-boned reality of not working for a living. I wouldn't lose the remains of my self-respect. Drive the last nail through the flaps of skin hiding the lies. Touch a nerve for the last time.

Morons with their time-sheets, meetings to schedule meetings, and all that phony sentimentality that we were sharing some common purpose. A never-ending quest to do nothing was more like it. Two hours of work stretched out over seven and one-quarter hours per day and *voila*, every two weeks, one goodie package. Some life.

The light fluttered above my desk again, casting an eerier glow than usual. They were all gone as soon as they had heard the news. No more jarring sounds of computers talking to peripherals. No more pounding keys, chattering like sparrows in

the looming dusk. Only the rushing air from the central air system rattling on. And the coffee drops, pound-pounding one after another in the stillness.

5.

Back at the co-op, I took forever to pack. Unfortunately, I had to suffer through one of Vax's pre-election speeches he was practising, all about the joys of community action and his ever-expanding anti-junk mail walkathon. He wouldn't stop ranting on about rain forests and diminishing resources. I finally had to ditch him after he kept going on about how there were spies everywhere in East Germany and how the revolution had been taken over by the machine. It was crazy syuff. He made me swear not to drink the water. Just in case.

The Club Apollo was not where I would have chosen to meet Daphne, though I'd been there many times as a student when it was known as The Oompah. Before the migrant *artistes* arrived *en masse*. Before the *see and be scene* crowds. Forever older and more derelict than its university student patrons, The Oompah was legendary for its all-night, crazed, drink and dance parties. Back then, the idea of fashion had not yet been formed in our untrained minds, but the idea of cheap beer on tap and a monotone beat crammed the place. Night after delinquent night, the same suspended celebration of life nursed our understanding of Euclid, Von Neumann's axiomatic methods and Hilbert space. It's now an eclectic artist's hangout I'm told. A place where people share different ideas and opinions and talk openly without deference to convention or style. Whatever. To me, The Oompah will always be a good memory of a bad hangover—a home away from a desk full of unfinished assignments.

As I crossed the expanse of University Avenue, the city centre ended abruptly. Row houses of grotty clubs and downbeat cafés replaced the tall buildings. The serious-minded became cavalier. Darkness prevailed, yet the street twinkled in the glow of the nearby bank towers.

It was early when I arrived, though a long line-up had already formed along Queen Street. In packs of four or five, elongated streetcars thundered by, breaking now and again like a parade to let the denizens cross. Rushing between clubs, revellers sized-up cover charges and clientele, attempting to find and define the new *nouveau*. Slowly and imperceptibly over time, as if ordained by nature, grotty and downbeat had become fashionable and trendy. Belonging to the club had its own certainty in uncertain times.

I watched as two worlds met at the door of The Club Apollo. Inside, children posed as adults with a conscience and talked of Nietzsche, saving the world, and other sanitized virtues. Painted faces and the costume jewelry adorning their black-clad bodies spoke of different conscience—more in line with the pictures of rock stars which graced their lapels. Outside, drunken Indians danced, their war-paint long ago discarded. They kept their distance, wavering between pride and need, but soon enough, one would break down unashamedly to beg money for booze and, after collecting a six pack worth, would perform his daily drunken ritual until his great, good spirit ran out over a warm grate. I'd seen it too many times.

I watched as the door swung open and exchanged one body for another and looked for Daphne in the line, now hugged next to the shops for warmth. One puppet, one vote. If their stance in line stood in favour of tonight's entertainment, then the band *One World*, which Daphne had been trying to get me to see forever, was very popular. Black was the colour of consent.

The music poured onto the street as the doors opened and the flock shuffled in. *Click, click. Hi ho, hi ho.* Two-by-two harmony marching on to war. For ten bucks a crack. *Click, ten bucks. Click, ten bucks.* Perfect cadence. Not one objection.

The rock stars were dead, though they lived anew on the chests of the eclectic set as icons to the listeners. Hendrix, Joplin, Morrison, Lennon, Vicious . . . Vocalists of the Word of Rock and Roll. Dead only to the unbelievers. Heathen. Infidel. Mind you, when the revisionists in the corporate *Who's Who* department of modern history count souls, the records will show them as more than just singing poets. Someday, Frank Zappa will be known as *the* Mother of Invention, Creator of Heaven and Earth, Sid Vicious as his Fallen Angel who makes zombies of children uttering His name, and John Lennon as the One who brought love to us all. Why not? Beethoven and Bach were friends—weren't they? Elvis Presley was a Beatle. Wasn't he? Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck were the titan sons of Zeus Disney. In three hundred years, Constantino the Second, president of The World, will make it all so. In an instant everything will change.

Newism, he'll call it. Why not? There are first-hand recordings of the gospel of Rock and Roll to sell. There won't be much to alter. Just think. In Christianity, they sold Indulgences, led armies into war singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*, and evicted everyone but the money-changers from this temple called Earth. There won't be anything Constantino can't do this time around. And no Thomas, doubting.

One potato, Two potato,
 Three potato, Four.
 Five Indulgence, Six Indulgence,
 Seven Indulgence, More.

But for now, today, 1989, the myths march slowly, breaking step at the bridges between generation gaps. Pilgrims to Morrison's Paris grave don't yet rival Mecca and shrines on Lennon's death date outside his New York home are small. A candle is the mark of remembrance, but think of the symbolism when Constantino announces that Lennon actually died in the year *two thousand and zero* not nineteen and eighty. Who could mistake the second coming? A world holiday will be declared. Gifts will

be exchanged. There will be feasts and drinking and dancing in the streets. The President of The World will break down on global television and admit to all that he had been weaned on Led Zeppelin, acid, and Bugs Bunny and formally declare John Lennon as King of All Ages. Hail Constantino. And we'll tell our children so they can tell their children and, in case anyone got it wrong, we'll sell glossy programs of the event to everyone. Imagine. Heaven on Earth. Bought and sold and in the mail. Praise be to Constantino the Good.

What's yours is yours
and what's mine is mine
Love you
Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Click, click. Hi ho, hi ho. The line moved forward again.

Sure enough, an Indian eventually staggered into the line and fell. He was ignored by most, but two revellers, adorned with black sashes wrapped neatly around their heads, picked him up and pushed him on his way. He fought for his balance, his eyes glazed as the swirling crowd watched.

"Go on," someone shouted, "Go and sleep it off."

He blubbered from his nose and called out, "Mibawa. Mibawa," the words spoken from his snot-filled mouth sounding to anyone who listened like the name of some spirit he was calling from the far reaches.

The taller of the two Samaritans spoke civilly to the fallen man. "What are you saying? Do you want something?" he asked.

"Mibawa. Mibawa," he continued as he slumped down, staggering against the cold, hard sidewalk.

The crowd tightened and now watched eagerly as they shuffled. I was pushed along, my suitcase by my side. The brush-cut Samaritan in army boots offered his hand, as if to a fallen comrade, but the Indian resisted, shrieking "Mibawa," in fits,

snot pouring from his burning nose. Undeterred, the army boy jerked the Indian's arm, and drew him up like a set of weights. About the same height, they stood face to face, the army boy and the old man. A bottle was handed to the army boy, filled with pure, emerald-green *Aqua Velva*, which lit up a most unnatural colour for all to see.

"Whoa, old man. This stuff will kill you," chastised the army boy. "Don't you know nothing?"

"Mibawa," he cried, falling once again to the ground. before the army boy opened up the bottle and poured the ghostly elixir into the street.

"You don't need it," he reassured as he play-acted to the unbelieving yet supportive crowd.

Again, the army boy jerked the old man to attention, his strong arms bulging against his resistance. In the army boy's eyes was the evil of the old man's ways. In the army boy's eyes was the cure to all that was impure. The crowd applauded and the army boy revelled in the approval of his crusade to save one man from himself. A few brave soldiers in the crowd gave voice to their approval and shouted a "well done" and a "good for you" as they walked on past the edge and away from such reminders of misfortune. Soon, the army boy pushed on, leaving the defeated man to his solitary world as he watched his life vanishing in the street.

In the confusion, I was pushed inside, fighting to keep a hold of my suitcase. The crowd was still muttering about the *drama*, as the revellers howled with laughter and disdain for the fallen man. And haughty congratulations for themselves.

Further inside, the bodies crushed against me.

As I looked for Daphne, I wished I had done something. All I had done was watch like all the others. They were so sure of themselves, so right in their ways. And I had done the same. Nothing. Here, in The Oompah, late at night, we would drink and when the quiet moments got too awkward, we would talk about the future, the future where we would save the world. And now, here, in the future, when I could have done something, I did nothing. Nothing. What good was saving the world when I

couldn't even save one man. Such precious habits that devour me, time and time again.

The mouse take the cheese,
the mouse takes the cheese.
Hi ho a-derry-o,
the farmer in the dell

6.

In the darkly lit club, I saw nothing as the white-washed afterglow from the street masked my eyes. A stinging bass beat rocked from the four walls of sound around me, pounding my ears.

When my eyes allowed, I saw the tidiness, the bare minimal style. The chairs and tables were sleek, triumphant—not one shape misplaced. Even the splatter paint on the floor and ceiling seemed a perfect work of art. Slogans were stencilled on the patterned-brick walls—*This is Heaven* and *Know Yourself* over and over. The eye had no trouble conjuring up perfection. On one wall, there hung a series of paintings, simple black and white renderings of Christopher Robin engaged in various lewd poses with his animal friends from the Hundred Aker Wood. Drunk with Winnie-the-Pooh in drag. Sodomizing an ever-unhappy Eeyore. And snorting coke with a psychotic Piglet. Funny? Maybe the joke was on me for thinking anything, even childhood, was sacred. The shape behind the gloss was all that reminded me of The Oompah.

As I watched and waited, bodies jammed into others, slithering to the bar or an empty seat. Everyone dressed alike, mostly black leather and solid-coloured sashes worn karate style around the waist. Rock stars on the lapel. Names of favourite beers

and forgotten friends shrieked from all corners. I saw Daphne in front at the side of the stage, but it was she who called out, waving frantically for me to join her. With difficulty I did, following in the wake of a passing bartender.

“Hal. I’d almost given up on you,” she yelled, straining to be heard above the piped-in music.

“I’m sorry. I must have missed you in the line.”

“One World is on in two minutes,” she yelled, suggesting I had better hurry and take the seat next to her. I guess she had decided to forget our earlier encounter. And last night.

I sat down and fidgeted with my collar, trying not to look so much like a fish in the tree of one of those *What’s wrong with this picture* pictures. I nodded accordingly as she introduced me to her friends around the table. There were six people, six names, though I didn’t hear a word. From across the table, one of her friends called out, feebly attempting to compete with the music.

“I’m sorry. I can’t hear you,” I yelled, cupping my hands to my mouth. “I didn’t even hear your name.”

“Jane Wiggins-Gentry,” she yelled back. “And this is Daniel Marsden-Strong,” she yelled louder as she patted the guy next to her. Jane and Daniel looked at each other and then at Daphne and then at me and then at each other again.

“Call me Dan. Everybody does,” yelled Marsden-Strong.

“Dan?” I yelled back. “Hal. I’m Hal.”

“Yes we know. Daphne has told us all about you.” Jane and Dan appeared to be talking in unison.

I didn’t feel like yelling anymore, so I just saluted them. They eventually got the message and saluted back. Soon, everyone was saluting each other, back and forth like some moronic platoon of soldiers, even Daphne’s other friends who hadn’t been eager to join in the shouting match.

“Do you like One World?” Jane asked excitedly during a lull between re-mixed pop hits, bubbling as she said *One World*. I gathered she did.

“I’ve never heard them before,” I answered. “Sorry. I don’t know.”

Jane and Dan looked again at each other and then at me and then at Daphne and then at each other again.

“We like One World a lot,” smiled Daniel as if I hadn’t already gotten the implication.

“Yes. I can see that,” I yelled back.

Jane and Dan nodded to each other, happy now that they knew that I knew that they were understood. Daphne smiled and touched my arm with her hand. I wasn’t sure what her casual touch meant, but I guess everyone else did by the way they kept looking at each other.

Everyone was paired off, that much I knew. Couples, led by Jane and Dan practically calling each other Mom and Dad. “Mind your ashes on the floor, Dad. Don’t forget to itemize those receipts, Mom.” If this was a test, I think I passed just by showing up.

Eventually, the piped-in music faded out and the dim lights grew dimmer until the club was completely dark. Except for the cigarettes, stoked brighter by the incessant puffing in the audience. One World was ready to play.

And play they did. The first three songs were played in total darkness as instrumental pieces. I didn’t think to ask Daphne if anyone was actually on stage. The audience was there, that much I knew as I saw their burning beacons lighting the dark and felt the slithering around me turn to a more pulsating gyration in time to the music.

The songs were okay if you like machines making music in complete darkness. I prefer to see a band. A casual expression, even a rehearsed gesture, says as much as the music, but then that’s probably me. Maybe One World’s music hadn’t grown on me. Some songs you have to hear a million times before you like it. That is if you don’t hate it by then. The third song ended with a bang and the lights came on, shrouding One World and The Club Apollo in a brilliant veil of smoke and light. Standing and cheering, the audience roared their approval.

There were indeed three, live human beings in the band—a singer, a guitarist, and a drummer. Like the audience, the band was dressed in black and sash, though the band wore their sashes draped around their necks. No rock stars on the lapel either—I guess, One World *were* the rock stars. The only other difference between the band and their audience was the stage—a cave-like protrusion, raised just high enough to keep the dancing audience from falling into the band, though in short time practically the whole audience was dancing and falling into the band that they no longer seemed separate, but, rather, an extension of the will and mind of the audience. Somehow, I managed to stay seated, stuck in the corner where I could resist the push and pull.

Through the confusion, Daphne smiled, though I couldn't be sure if she was smiling at me. I guess, to Daphne, One World was the best thing going and as long as they kept on playing, nothing else mattered.

“What do you think?” she asked as the band paused between songs.

I wanted to say I was still there. Instead, I nodded. The lead singer was quite beautiful, that is, when one could see her—either she hid behind her long, crimped, blond hair, pushed over her face, or behind a ten-foot high wall of television monitors, standing front and centre on stage. Her beauty was reason enough to watch, though I wouldn't call what she was doing *singing*. She didn't sing, she moaned words. And the audience ate her up whenever she graced them with her presence and called out her name, “Phoebe.”

I gave up trying to figure out which corner of the video wall Phoebe would pop out from next, so I watched the monitors, all twenty-five of them, arranged in a square grid. State-of-the-art electronics. Each monitor flashed a word, the same word in unison, every few seconds, over and over, as if struggling to send a message. There were only five words in all, reappearing on the grid in a simple pattern—extremely boring after not too long. I got sick of the whole thing as I strained to read *and* follow Phoebe popping in and out of view. As far as I can remember, the words, boldly typed in large white letters against a black background, were *innocence*, *virtue*, *honesty*,

purity and simplicity. I wasn't getting any message. Even Phoebe's hit *song* didn't make much sense:

Rilla Rilla Rilla

Rolla Rolla Rosa

Polka Falla Posa

Ha Ha Sh Sh

Alla Falla Dalla

Sh Sh Sh Sh Sh Sh

I admit I wondered, more than once, what the hell I was doing there. If the songs had a point, it was beyond me. The lyrics were mindless drivel and sounded more like nursery rhymes. But I guess no one cared a whole lot *what* she sang, as long as she did. I could understand. Honest. I mean, each chord echoed softly through the club, carving a groove in space so gentle one could slip inside and stay forever. Each word she sang, she sang like a nymph crying out to be held in passion's arm. Hauntingly fearless. But Mother Goose? The skipping girls in the schoolyard had better songs.

Daphne touched my arm again and smiled, expecting agreement. I didn't smile back. I liked the music; I just couldn't understand why a band calling itself *One World* sang nonsense in the dark and hid behind a wall of televisions. Had I missed something? Was I wrong to think I might be able to touch something other than an electronically induced feeling? Couldn't they answer a few questions instead of asking more? Was I wrong to think that art or music could somehow help me to understand my world?

As the band played on, Phoebe sang more and more nonsense—aside from the occasional “love” or “architecture,” words I heard and understood. I couldn't help thinking that One World and The Club Apollo were having us on. What message? I didn't get any. Maybe the whole thing was a joke, The Great Big Satire, and like all

satire, too many people took it seriously and forgot it was satire. And then, the satirists took themselves seriously and they too forgot. But how would I know?

The rest of what I remember Phoebe singing that night was from the last verse of the last song. Only because I understood the words. Well, sort of.

Iama bom ber ray
Suns do, suns don't
Denka Laura Denka Laura
All for you and I

And then One World walked off as they had walked on—in complete darkness and to the hooting and hollering of their fans. Through the entire performance, they had said nothing—not a hello, a good bye, or a thank you. Not one word to indicate the audience existed. Just music and isolated words sung by Phoebe. But no one seemed to care as they stomped for more.

“She doesn’t do encores,” Daphne said knowingly as if One World were that much better for ignoring its audience.

And they didn’t. With one click of the lights, One World was finished. The video wall was dismantled and the audience filed out onto the street shouting “Phoebe, Phoebe,” with each breath.

Daphne and her friends remained, oblivious to the revellers singing One World’s praises into the cold night, her face glowing with satisfaction as she stretched herself like a cat pondering its next lap.

“Are you happy, Hal?” she asked, having finally stopped her clapping for a band that wasn’t there.

“Am I happy?” I questioned back, unsure of any answer.

“Yeah. It’s a pretty simple question, usually followed by a ‘Yes, I’m happy, thank you,’ or a ‘No, I’m not, but thanks for asking.’ Are you still with us?”

“No, it’s not that. I’m sorry,” I stuttered. “How about an ‘I don’t know’?” I said most assuredly.

“It’s an answer, but not to my question. You can’t *not* know if you’re happy,” she said. “Happiness is everything.”

“It’s not something I think a lot about,” I lied. Well sort of. I mean, I think a lot about things like happiness, but I don’t ask myself *Am I happy?* Certainly not in reference to a band that plays for an hour and says absolutely nothing. “Sometimes I’m happy and sometimes I’m not,” I continued, trying to clarify my uncertainty.

“That may be true, Hal. But ‘Are you happy, *now?*’ I believe is the question,” Daniel interrupted, doffing his glasses and polishing them with a mouthful of spit and a handkerchief.

All eyes pointed to me. I think, I was failing test number two. If I’d kept my mouth shut and never said anything anyone didn’t want to hear, I probably would be happy. At least, Daniel wouldn’t have kept on bugging me.

“Most people are unhappy,” he started. “You’d be amazed how many, really. Doctors, lawyers, successful businessmen. It doesn’t matter. All the surveys indicate how unhappy people are. I for one believe that happiness is the number one concern in life.”

He reminded me just a little bit of Vax, though he had obviously got the better deal on body parts. Daphne and Jane nodded their approval of Daniel the Spokesman. Daphne’s other friends, however, excused themselves after a quick round of goodbyes. I think, they had probably heard Daniel’s spiel before.

“Most people are unhappy because they don’t know how to fit into society,” Daniel continued. “It’s a pity. Life is just too short to worry how one fits in.”

“I don’t think it necessarily follows that anyone who hasn’t fit into society, as you call it, is unhappy.” I had to say something to stop the growing rant.

“A society of one is no society,” he responded quickly, though not terribly elegantly. I would have preferred *No man is an island* or some other clever cliché.

“No, but a society of one is a human being,” I offered with a smile.

“Come, come, Hal,” answered Daniel, his words bunching together in a mumble. That’s the problem with people who open their mouths before they think. Lucky for Daniel though, his other half was here. I was tag-team wrestling with Marsden-Strong the Brutalizer and Wiggins-Gentry the Hipster.

“I think I see what Hal is saying,” Jane began, “but I don’t agree. Man is a social animal. He craves society. And together, there is so much energy between people. Why would anyone not want to be a part of that?”

“Not that it means anything,” I answered slowly. “Asking ‘Are you happy?’ is like asking a child ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ The dreaded question.” I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry. I can’t take myself seriously enough to pretend I know the answer. *I am*, okay? Isn’t that enough? What difference does it make if I’m a . . . happy fireman or not?”

“Daphne told us you were a kidder,” Daniel said after quietly eyeing her for reassurance. He laughed, a fake giddy laugh. “That’s a good one. But what do you *really* think, Hal?”

Daphne looked uneasily at me as she leaned back in her chair and swigged down the remains of her drink. Undoubtedly, she was regretting asking me anything now, though she did nothing to stop Daniel from digging deeper. Jane and Daniel looked nervously at each other, waiting for me to say something, anything to break the hanging silence so they could continue their analysis, anything to make a contest of this wrestling match. Unable to bear the wait any longer, Daniel snapped first.

“No jokes. We’re serious here. We’ve told you what we’re about. How about some give and take?” Daniel persisted. “I’m curious. I want to know the *real* Hal Cassidy.”

“Curiosity?” I mouthed to Daphne. She sank back in her chair, smiling coyly. “I’m outnumbered. The odds aren’t good.”

“This has nothing to do with . . . odds or sides, Hal. I’m talking about life.”

“Okay, Daniel. You win. Where do I sign?”

“I’m sorry?” he queried, obviously puzzled by my answer.

“You’re selling something, aren’t you? Where do I sign? I’ll buy whatever it is you’re selling.”

“Now you *are* joking,” he said uncertainly.

“No, I’m serious. You have to be selling something.”

“What are you talking about?” Jane queried.

“Time sharing in Florida? Mutual funds with green investments? Hair tonic? Is that it? Or, maybe, a miracle spot remover?” I continued, egging him one step closer to the edge. “Or is it religion? You’re a born again Christian? Is that it? Shall we pray now? Hmm? Daniel?”

He may have been uncertain about me, but he was sure of himself as he lashed back. “You’re crazy. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He was real hot under the collar now and more certain than ever that I was the one offending him. Jane held his hand for support. “And if you think I’m a Christian, then you’re not only crazy, you’re stupid.” He looked sideways for more encouragement, adding loudly, though softening his tone as Jane squeezed his hand, “I’m a *humanist*. I take great offence at being called a Christian. I think it was Nietzsche who said it best. *The last Christian died on the cross.*” The final one-upmanship from the eclectic set. The last days in techno-beat colour.

“Look, Daniel. I’m sorry. Okay? You’re getting awfully mighty about what *is* and *isn’t*. Honestly, the only other person who ever asked me if I was happy before was my mother and then only after I had done something I was told not to and sulked backed to her in tears, wishing I had listened to her in the first place. You say life is too short, do you? I say life is too absurd. For crying out loud, Daniel, I’m alive. Can’t we let it go at that?”

But when you’re going nowhere, you’re already there. Daniel Marsden-Strong just wouldn’t stop.

“Hal, I think you’ve got me wrong. Surely, you don’t disagree that happiness is the most important thing in the world?” he asked, though I knew he wasn’t interested in any answer. “Everyone wants happiness. No, everyone *needs* happiness,

but that's not the issue. The issue is how does one become happy? The surveys I've studied all agree that stress and fatigue are the main inhibitors to happiness but, more importantly, the surveys show that man is not the measure of all things . . .”

I can't remember how long he went on or what else he said. As soon as he said *survey* again with such reverence I stopped listening. I can't even remember how I got into the taxi afterwards or if I even said goodbye to Daphne. It didn't much matter after I laid into him. I do remember Daphne and Jane, their mouths agape, as I grabbed Daniel by the collar and shouted at him. And I'll never forget Daniel, white-faced and frozen in disbelief.

“Fuck the surveys. Can't you decide for yourself? Does it really mean anything if the rest of the world is doing something and you're not? Who cares what middle America eats for breakfast? I wish I could be so certain that what your doing has any noble meaning, but, for now, I'll just revel in my own uncertain existence while our great good consumer age, with all its idle chatter, blatant misconceptions, sleazy self-interest, and absolutely irrational prejudices, consumes us all into sterile oblivion. If you don't mind, Daniel, it's hard enough crossing the street by myself without being joined at the hip to four billion other poor souls.”

I didn't mean to rip his shirt. Or knock his glasses off. I wasn't too proud of myself as I played it all back in the taxi. I practically assaulted the guy. I couldn't believe it. And for what? To prove a point? What the hell was going on?

As I stared out at the still and quiet city drifting by in the taxi, I couldn't wait to leave. I was on my way. Finally. My vacation in Dresden could not come soon enough.