

# Part Three

“A dirty book is rarely dusty.” – Anonymous

# 1

Hugo was naked, answered the door as such. Hugo was the boy Graham put up in order to get his jollies off, fifteen years old and dumb as he was sexy. When he saw me, the young lad sidestepped behind the finely shellacked door as to obscure the visual of his impressive meat. Now you see it, now you don't, as they say. That was as good an introduction as any to the city of Rome and proper foreshadowing for the kind of experiences which would follow during my time there. The male organ was in high demand in the Eternal city and held in the same regard you'd expect of some ancient artifact. It was everywhere, on statues, in paintings and it only made sense that the first thing I set eyes on was the vicious snake itself. This was a drastic change for me, for you see, in America, everyone, men and women were ashamed of their bodies. We were taught to hate ourselves and worship movie stars and clothing models. Sex still had to be seen through parted fingers back home, but fortunes were made and empires were built on the *idea* of sensuality. See, it wasn't gone all together, it was just called something else, given a new name and a new image, but it never stopped being what it was: foul, beautiful sex. We were a nation of subtleties, of whisperers. In Rome, however, they celebrated the human body, they thought of it as God's masterpiece, for even though the entire city was littered with the work of almost every great artist this planet has ever known, God was the most acclaimed of all. And I do believe that the Italians viewed God as an artist first and a supreme being second. He had created something magnificent in man and they honored him by shedding their clothing and showing off his work. Sculptures of muscle bound men were as commonplace in Rome as bowling allies were in America. Humungous fountains depicting Gods and Goddesses centered themselves in town squares, erupting endless streams of fresh, clean water. That was the first thing I noticed when I arrived, even before I was granted audience with Hugo's lengthy knob, that clear, cold water was readily available on almost every street corner. Miniature fountains poured water to the ground, no off switch required, just never-ending water free of charge, ready to be lapped up by any madman who needed a drink. That knocked me off my chair more than the large differences Rome had to offer, the simple and charitable deed that was an unstoppable water fountain, pouring twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, somehow representing the boundless and liberated soul that pulsed below Rome's cobblestone streets.

Hugo was ethnically tan and would have made a fine object of desire for any Caesar Rome had to offer. His chiseled features suggested that had he been born in Rome during a different period of time a war could have easily been started over whose pillow he would lay is jet-black hair on. Thankfully he covered up when Graham and I entered the small apartment,

which would have been a rat's den anywhere else in the world, but was transformed into a palace simply because of its geographical location. Graham informed me Hugo was a nudist, one who practiced the lifestyle religiously around the flat and with a fairly concrete understanding of the philosophy behind it. This only seemed fitting given the circumstance and I would expect nothing less from Graham. Of course he had a fifteen-year-old nudist living in his apartment in Rome. In fact, if this wasn't the case I would be terribly disappointed. I had seen much more of Graham since this journey began and I truthfully felt like I began to understand his interworkings. If he was not shocking, he was boring and he could not live with himself if he was boring. Sadly, or happily perhaps, Hugo was caught up in Graham's bizarre games that were always meant to be played alone. Hugo, like the clothes, expensive accessories and beautiful art, which decorated the apartment, was just replaceable and interchangeable stuff that filled in the empty caverns of Graham's existence. Hugo didn't seem to mind, for he lived for free and dreamed wildly with little consequence.

We sat around the coffee table and rested our bones. We hadn't been comfortable in two weeks. The accommodations on the freight ship were god-awful and I knew I had done irreversible damage to my back from sleeping on a mattress that seemed to be filled with hubcaps and left over bicycle parts. I couldn't sit for long because I was filled with nervous energy, despite the fact that I was unfathomably exhausted. I walked over to a piano, which had a very detailed marble sculpture of a penis resting near the tattered sheet music. I played the first three notes of *Moonlight Sonata* and the out-of-tune keys twanged off into the still night air.

"My new project." Hugo said in his thick accent. "I bought piano other day. Fix it up." Hugo said this cheerfully, almost like an idiot, a big, dumb smile on his face. What was it about foreigners that made them come across so inept? Perhaps it was simply the fact that they did not fully know the language in which they tried to communicate, but there seemed to be something extra in their enthusiasm that reminded me of a simpleton. Graham added to this notion by patting Hugo on the head.

"Fine job, Hugo." Graham said. It was as though the boy was his dog. I looked forward to telling Graham was a sick fucking bastard he was when I had a moment alone with him, though I had a feeling I could say it in front of Hugo and he wouldn't pick up on it. How soulless does one have to be to use a child like Graham was using Hugo? I don't care how good a piece of ass he was, was there no limit? Graham looked at me with embarrassed eyes. He should have been embarrassed, the barbarian. Like I said, Hugo seemed happy enough, but the few remaining scraps of moral fiber within me were gasping for oxygen. Fifteen-year-olds in America were children, collecting baseball cards, checking bubble gum with their mouths open and with any luck masturbating feverishly in bathrooms all over the country. I was willing to bet Hugo had never masturbated in his life. He had never been given the opportunity to partake in that shameful act I called tradition.

Graham and Hugo shuffled off to bed. I was to sleep on the sofa, which I was more than happy to do seeing that a wooden stake would have been a better alternative to the sleeping arrangements provided en route. I laid down on my back and stuck my hands beneath my head: I had done it. I had arrived. What seemed like a laughable dream in my apartment all those weeks ago was now realized in fleshly detail. What determination could do, I thought. It could cross oceans, perhaps not in the noblest fashion, but one can't be too picky when their tools are limited. I had only my instincts, my wits and my desires and I had made it happen. I was officially a globetrotter the likes of Alexander the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte, but even they would envy the speed and grace I exuded when conducting my travels. It took them years to do what I accomplished in mere weeks. Granted I lived in an age which provided me certain technological advantages, but I reasoned that they had money and power and I had only my skill of manipulation and an uncommon amount of luck...I had witnessed horrors too, however, horrors that my young mind was at one time incapable of imaging. Perhaps that was the price of luck; you had to lose a certain amount of innocence. I had asked for it and I had gotten it. I now understood with clarity the saying, "Be careful what you wish for." The wisher never foresees the repercussions of the wish, the shrapnel that's discharged when it finally becomes true. I hoped with a full heart that I had gotten the frightening portions of my trip out of the way. I didn't think I could undergo another incident like the one that happened in the jungle. I wondered if that little black arm was still there. I wondered if an animal had chewed it or if insects had made it their shelter from the harsh tropic rains. More than likely it was now surrounded by brush, slowly decomposing with no memory of the body it once belonged to.

As I drifted off to sleep reality and fantasy merged into one and the ceiling became like the blue waters which my eyes drank in each morning standing on the deck of that cargo ship. It was difficult for me to comprehend that I was actually in Rome, that this room I was sitting in was an Italian room. That may sound odd, but when you build something up in your mind, how I had built up Rome and Europe in general, you all but forgot that they had rooms and toilets and roads and streetlamps and bridges and everything else a normal city would have. How could it be that this room had four ordinary walls? Did this room not know that Rome was outside its window? Didn't that have any effect on it? My picture of Rome became more unbelievable the further we voyaged into the terrible aqua fever dream, as if I expected people to be walking around in togas and spilling vino like blood. I was setting myself up for failure, but I couldn't control it. My excitement consumed all rationality and I wanted Italy to be something out of a dream. When I'd stand on the deck, my arms on the rusted railings, I'd stare down into the water and just below the surface I could see a picture of myself riding in a golden chariot, rose peddles falling all around me, mobs cheering for me as their new emperor. I believed wholeheartedly that I would make a fine Caesar, that I would be good willed and contentious of the people. Wouldn't it be fitting for me to be showered in treasures and handed women like blackberries plucked from

a branch? Strangely enough my delusions of grandeur were tarnished and my mind drifted to other bizarre and otherworldly ideas while looking into the saliva filled mouth of earth. I had heard a theory once about alien life forms living in the deepest depths of the ocean where their presence would be undetectable. I got a cold chill down my spine thinking that while I gazed my goo-balls into an especially black patch of water that a little grey man with a big round head and a little dainty body was gazing back. I wasn't sure my position on the men from outer space, though I was discounting less and less since my abrupt and still unexplained trip through the stars. I had been told wild theories from Phineas that there was evidence of alien life forms having been on this planet since the ancient Egyptian period. He even told me something that stuck in my craw and as of this very day refused to leave, which was that alien beings very well could have played a role in our own human evolution.

"Bollocks." I'd say, but Phin would look straight forward, his fat fingers clinched around the necks of wine bottles and tell me eerily detailed stories about how Martians had come to earth and found primitive man. We were still more monkey than man at this point, according to Phin and for some unknown reason the mysterious star men used their advanced powers to jumpstart our adaptation process, opening up a compartment of our minds that perhaps could have taken a billion more years to open on its own.

"This is why were the only creatures on this planet that have conscious thought." Phin would say. It did get me thinking: why were we the only creatures that had more than two cents rolling around in our skulls? It seemed to me that human beings were defiant by nature. When the rest of the world went off instinct alone, we constituted all sorts of rules that went *against* our instincts. Monogamy for example or celibacy, these concepts challenged the magma in us, why else would catholic priests molest their altar boys, or heterosexual prisoners rape other men? You heard about it all the time, men turning into animals locked in cages, just looking for a moist hole, forgoing sexual preferences and societal rules. It was abundantly clear to me that we were meant to make love as often and as passionately as possible, but when conscious thought took over we became aware of people's emotions and that was the kill switch. That is the irony of it all. It was the human heart which prohibited us from doing what we were meant to do. Love was selfish. It couldn't handle being shared and passed around. When your heart belonged to someone else the very thought of that person even looking at another was enough to break you down into little pieces of anguish and for that reason alone all of our romantic conventions were built. When looked at in that light the heart seemed so primal, so weak. I thought maybe Phin was right, aliens had come down and unlocked our minds, but they left our hearts untouched, slow-witted and archaic. Perhaps that's why we could never get our hearts and minds on the same page; one was light years ahead, while the other one was better suited for a monkey. If any of this be true what a gift and curse to be bestowed on any race, be it in this galaxy or the next, for there was no greater pain than the one that rose from the battle within.

When I opened my eyes the next morning I expected to feel...well, I'm not sure how I expected to feel. I assumed Rome would give off a feeling I would be unable to describe before experiencing it, that I would set foot on Italian soil and I would be somehow changed, but it didn't happen. The night prior I figured I was too tired to feel the full affect and it would be the next morning when I had a good nine hours in me that Rome would open up its mouth and coat me in a thick layer of saliva not unlike a faithful dog. To my surprise I didn't feel any different, in fact I felt rather melancholy. Why didn't I feel different? Maybe I had to get out into the streets and really *see* it, I thought. Maybe I was lacking the stagnant Roman air which rolled off the surf some thirty minutes away. I knew the city would be relatively empty for it was now summer and all the Italians would be at the beach and I figured it would be the most opportune time to get to know the city streets and walkways without worrying about looking like a lousy tourist. That is the last thing I wanted, to be noticeably American. Truthfully, I was ashamed of my origins. They seemed so transient and arrogant in a city as well-rooted as Rome. Where did we Americans get off calling ourselves the best when the entire country didn't have a pot to piss in? The expats of the 20s had the right idea. While America was roaring, they were abandoning ship, deserting a country overran by the religious fanatics who held liquor responsible for all moral corruption. What these faith whores did not know however was that they were creating an underbelly, which spawned a sexual revolution in women and instigated some of the world's best literature, most of it written under the roofs of Paris, though pecked out by American fingers. What a glorious rebellion it was; silent, simple refusal to ride the train any longer. They were abandoned by war home, abroad and inside and while socialites drank their souls away they turned their heads in shame, writing novels almost like diaries. I liked to imagine the original manuscripts were soaked in tears. I too now felt disconnected from my country, but I was stuck in an odd place I never thought existed, a place where lost and found overlapped; I was homeless. I hoped, I prayed that the transition would be seamless, that Rome would take me in like a nurturing sparrow, but it had turned its back on me instead. Where did I belong now? If Rome wouldn't have me was I to return to America, my tail between my legs, like a wet dog, repulsed by my own reflection in storefront windows? Where was all my excitement, why didn't my soul emerge like a ball of fire? I got up from the sofa and walked to the window. The sky was muggy blue and the apartment faced a back alley. The alley could have been from anywhere, I thought while looking out at it. Indistinguishable words came in an echo from down the street. It sounded like an opera singer shouting into a tin can. Italian was a beautiful, but sometimes messy language and very often sounded like a song. Words flowed from mouths like laments, always with an urgency. Hugo spoke so quickly in his native tongue that my eyes rolled like the wheels on a slot machine trying to keep up with him. Depending on what was being said, the words

either sounded strung together, like one, long continuous gullet noise or they sounded like birds pecking at feed, *peck, peck, peck*. Hugo even sounded like a duck when he was lambasting Graham about something. Quack, quack, quacking was little Hugo in his lover's quarrel.

"Do you speak Italian?" I asked Graham.

"Not a lick, but that doesn't stop Hugo from talking." he replied.

How Graham ever coerced Hugo into entering his bungalow, I'll never know. I wasn't even sure what brought Graham to Italy in the first place. Travel wasn't altogether easy and Graham's business didn't require overseas travel anyway. Something surely was bizarre about Graham's little set-up here, but I hadn't the slightest bit of interest in getting to the bottom of it. What did I care? I was sleeping my filthy body on his sofa without a cent owed. The place could have belonged to Hugo's dead parents for all I cared. Their mutilated corpses could've been bound up in the icebox. They were dead and gone and I was alive so that was that. But speaking of my filthy body, I did begin to notice an awful odor coming up from my nether regions that had the potency to asphyxiate a cat. This wasn't a surprise, of course. I hadn't bathed in two weeks. I smelled like fish heads, sea salt and the wretched stench known only as freedom. I almost took my pong as a source of pride. The child in me always wanted to be a rusty tin can sailor and now I had had my chance. My knuckles were black from the billowing engine smoke coating everything on the lower deck in grime. My pits were a brownish-yellow from the perspiration when the sun knew no opposition from the clouds and rectified any and all poor standings with the water. I even got a good burn when lying on the deck like a dead sea monster, my arms and legs stretched out, crisping like bacon. My face had turned near negro brown. I liked it. It gave my mug some character. I sprouted a few lines around my mouth and forehead, leaving the boy in my face behind and replacing it with a man's face. My crow's feet were deepened like trenches of the Great War and equally as muddy, filled with the moist dew that rolled off the waves like giant blue tongues locked in a French kiss. They would work as little pathways for tears to travel into my ears, for that is the only place tears had purpose...

I poked my head around the small flat looking for the wash basin. I didn't have to look far. I came across a white porcelain tub beside a bidet. I closed the door behind me and undressed. The water from the spigot came fast and hot. It felt like a baptism as I slid my body beneath the stream and let the water drench me. A layer of muck broke off my skin from the forceful blast. What a feeling! What liberation! I picked up the bar of soap and ran it over my body. I scrubbed like it was my first bath ever, like my very flesh was rotten and my blood was mold. I stuck my face beneath the water and kept it there, holding my breath. It was so warm and wet and inviting that I felt like a child back in the womb. I almost began to meditate, thinking, thinking about all I had done and seen so far on my little journey. And if you can believe it I thought about Max and the last bath she took before I left. She was so happy. I hoped she was still in such good spirits. If I were to be truthful with myself, I would be able to admit that I

missed her. It wasn't a mistake to leave her, but that didn't change the fact that she had an invisible quality that I yearned for. To be even more truthful, I knew that this quality I spoke of was a direct result of me leaving her broken. She made me realize while lying on the floor in a puddle of her own tears that she thought I was great, and with all other illusions stripped away, that's exactly what I wanted to be. I wanted to be great. I still didn't know how, but I knew that I wanted to be known in life and remembered in death as a great man. I often looked at people I considered great, artists and the like and wondered if I had what it took to be among them. Was I funny enough? Was I insane enough? Were my thoughts big enough and my actions graceful enough? I felt very normal sometimes, as though I could very well get mixed up in the stampede of life, shuffled up like so many who live, die and are forgotten. But then I'd think that great men usually don't know they're great, they only do what's in them to do and the world determines if they're great or not. Max, the poor girl, loved me in her own deformed way, and I thought perhaps that was evidence of the greatness I possibly contained. God knows I didn't treat her as well as I could, I didn't love her as fully as I could have, so then why did she cry so and carry on when I decided to depart? More than likely it was her fear of being alone, of being forced to become reacclimated to empty closets and silent meals, but maybe, just maybe, it was because I was great.

### 3

There was pounding on the door.

"Hurry up in there! We only have enough water for two showers a day!"

It was Graham of course. His voice startled me and I twisted the knobs to off position. The water stopped and steam rose from the top of the shower like atomic aftermath. I felt like a new man. The depression I felt earlier had burned up like the soot beneath my fingernails. There was something about the morning that always brought on a terrible case of depression. It seemed that all of your problems accumulated as you slept and dog-piled themselves on your heart, surprising you with a deep ache upon awakening. It was an emotional hangover of sorts and it took something as mundane as bathing to get you back on the right track, to pull you out of that cage of depression which you unwillingly found yourself in. I wrapped myself in a towel; my hair still wet, cool beads of shower water dripping down the back of my ears, and walked into the small living space at the center of the apartment. Graham was sitting at the little table nibbling on Italian toast coated in fresh jam that Hugo had made from their raspberry bush.

"Come and get something proper to eat." Graham said.

Hugo rounded the corner from the kitchenette, nude as the day he was born, carrying a plate full of fresh melon wrapped in prosciutto, the salty alternative to American ham.

“What’s this?” I inquired.

“An Italian standard.” Graham replied.

I picked up a wedge of melon and brought it to my lips. With no exaggeration it was the finest taste my mouth ever experienced. The combination of salty from the prosciutto and the sweet from the melon made my taste buds swelter and twist, each one of them grew a mouth and shout, “More! Feed me more!” and I gleefully obliged, sucking down three more pieces of the heavenly stuff before sitting down and burping like an ill-mannered child.

“Good, yes?” Hugo asked.

“Yes, Hugo, very good.” I said. I then looked toward Graham.

“I’m going to need some clothes.” I said.

“Already taken care of, my boy.” he replied.

“What do you mean?”

“Go into the bedroom. There’s a new suit in there for you...” Graham then paused and smiled a bit, “and a new hat.” I looked at him strange, got up and walked into the bedroom to see if what Graham said was true. To my surprise, it was. Lying on the bed as if it had always been my suit, as if my body simply evaporated out of it the night before, was a brand new cotton ensemble with a baby blue undershirt and at the head, where I suppose my head would be, a fresh looking triple-bound white straw skimmer. I rushed out to greet Graham, I had a stupid grin on my face as if he was Santa Claus and I was a little boy.

“How did you do this?” I asked.

“I had Hugo go out first thing this morning while you were sleeping and pick everything up.”

“And the hat?” I asked.

“Made right here in Italy.”

“It’s marvelous, Graham. Thank you.”

Graham nodded. He had done well. What a slick bastard he was. I went into the bedroom and got dressed. I looked at my old skimmer, torn, tattered and now appearing almost yellow in color next to my pristine new hat. The sentimentalist in me felt almost guilty about abandoning the old skimmer. It had seen so much with me and been a fair and loyal companion. I resulted I would keep it for sentimental reasons, but I knew somewhere that I would eventually throw it away when I came to my senses and realized that it was just a sweat-soaked piece of straw, if not a hat, eaten and digested by a horse. Despite what you might think, a larger part of me was sentimentalist than I cared to admit. I gave trinkets and articles of clothing special value that almost made them like people. They served as a way of allowing me to remember things a little while longer, to hold on for dear life the small moments of joy or comfort or love I had known. Silly was an appropriate way to describe it, but it was one of my own private secrets, one I carried about with me almost shamefully. There was a small trunk beneath my bed full of items I

planned on leaving to my great love when I finally died. I wasn't sure who my great love was, but I imagined that if she was truly my great love a box of oddities would mean something to her even if the items predated her tenor with me. I had no system or criteria for the items I chose to go into the box, only if they were something that touched me in a simple and profound way, like a pair of sunglasses that Max once left in my apartment. Instead of returning them to her like a normal person, I hid them away within my trunk and lied to her saying that I hadn't seen them and she must have left them at the café. I wasn't sure what about these glasses touched me so, but maybe it was simply that they belonged to Max and I wanted something to remember her by. I also had a little note she wrote me for Christmas one year. It was quoting a poem, a poem I can't for the life of me remember now, but it surely had something to do with love. Also in the box was my grandfather's pocket watch whose gold was worn down from years of his hard fingers rubbing against its casing and whose arms were a light shade of blue. That particular item meant something to me for no other reason than I thought it should. I had never met my grandfather and I had no reason to be connected to his worthless old watch, but alas, I was and down into the trunk it went. There were a few playbills from my first plays when I became enamored with the theater and a few picture stubs from the cinema, which I'd take out from time to time and hold because it made me recollect the magic I felt looking at that tremendous screen. There were a few other items I don't wish to divulge, but on my deathbed, my great love, whoever that may be, had a treasure trove to sift through, perhaps revealing the inner me better than any biography could or any halfcocked memory from some old faceless lover who smelled my neck once upon a time.

I finished off my new outfit by delicately placing the new skimmer on my head and just ever so slightly tilting it how I imagined Cab Calloway would. Now I felt complete. As soon as I fixed that hat on my oblong-shaped head, Homer Miller was whole again. I hadn't truly felt like myself since before Rio, ever since my run-in with Nina, really. Ah, dear Nina, my midnight lover. I wonder if she thought of me. Despite her participation in my attempted murder, her eyes told me things that were impossible to fabricate. I'm sure part of her desired my touch. After all, I treated her with respect. I didn't care that she was Negro and I think she knew that. That had to count for something. As a matter of fact, now that I thought about it, Nina would have assumed I had died there in that alleyway, bleeding like a machine gun wound to the belly. It was by pure luck that I was found in time and brought to a hospital. For all she knew I was a still rotting outside of that dance hall... I wondered if she lived in despair over my death. The evil side of me hoped she did. What kind of miserable bitch lures a man to his demise? ... When I asked this question to myself, looking at the brand new suit on my boney, undernourished body in the mirror, I began to laugh, for I realized the ridiculousness of that question. Every woman, in one way or the other, lured a man to their demise. And while I chuckled, like a sign from God, my wound began to throb. Thaddeus had told me that I might be prone to debilitating headaches as a

result of the injury I sustained at the hands of Nina's fiancé and his cowardly lead pipe. I had yet to experience one of these mind tremors and I hoped that I was one of the lucky few who could avoid them completely, but now it seemed like I had jinxed myself by wishing ill thoughts on Nina. Well, for every headache I endured, I hoped she experienced cramps that bound up her innards so fiercely she renounced her womanhood completely.

When I emerged from the bedroom a complete man, Hugo was also dressed, an admittedly bizarre thing to see.

"Where's he going?" I asked Graham.

"Hugo thought you'd like a tour of Rome. You must be anxious to get out there and see the place you traveled so far to see."

"Yes, I am quite anxious. Won't you be coming along?"

"Oh, no. I've seen it. Besides I have to prepare the flat for tonight's festivities."

"What's tonight?" I asked.

"We're hosting a cocktail party tonight to celebrate my return and your arrival. There are some friends I'd like you to meet."

"Sounds fine." I said.

"Now go take Rome by storm." Graham said sarcastically.

I followed Hugo down the flight of stairs, through the courtyard and through the two large wooden doors that separated us from the streets of Rome. Hugo informed me that we were living in apartment 18A on Via Luciano Manara in the district of Trastevere. It was all nonsense to me, of course. I only knew the city by its infamous handle: Roma. What an experienced mistress she would be. My love for older women was infamous and there was no older woman than Rome. She would know every trick in the book and have a list of fetishes a mile long. I would gladly cross each and every one off with her, becoming more than human in the process... I was only lost in my daydream momentarily when I realized that Hugo was already down the road, his little head covered in curly black hair like eucalyptus leaves bobbing up and down as he walked. Once I caught up with this him I noticed that he was talking rapid-fire in Italian acting like a tour guide, pointing this way and that way at all the notable fountains and fixtures we were passing in a huff. Trastevere was in the heart of the historical district and in walking distance of all the legendary locations Rome had to offer; The Colosseum, the Pantheon, Piazza Navona, where Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers stood, and Trevi Fountain.

"Are we going to see Trevi Fountain?" I asked Hugo.

"Si. Si." he replied.

We shuffled down to the main road and crossed the green river. The road was busy with vendors and salesmen of all kinds trying to sell commemorative souvenirs of Rome and the Vatican, which was also just a mile or so away, but in the opposite direction. I knew then it was the closest I had ever been to God and I was certain that his archangels were circling like

vultures waiting to get a piece of old Homer Miller, a rival second only to the Devil himself. What a superb trophy I'd make for one of those winged creatures, my head mounted up on the wall, my tongue stuck out like some hapless moose, my eyeballs bulging all glassy and mystified. The other angels would crowd around it and enviously gawk at how I had finally been slain and how my rampage of logical questions and healthy doubts had finally come to an end. But what really struck me while passing these street vendors was their shamelessness at selling such cheap renderings of Jesus and the Virgin Mary as though they were marionettes. It made no difference to me, of course, but didn't the God-fearing city of Rome take issue with such hypocritical behavior? Weren't they outraged at how low Christ had become, a knock-off statue sold for peanuts by amoral peddlers with no aim other than to make a greasy buck destined to be spent on the ritualistic sodomy of a slow-witted and disease ridden local trollop? I suppose not, for nearly everyone I saw walking past held a Jesus figurine in their grubby little hands, feeling up on Mary's divine body- O Lord, what a sin it'd be if she remain a virgin...

As we walked and Hugo talked, I realized he was not at all enthused about seeing these mammoth creations of man in which were now passing with speedy efficiency. I was his Dante and he was my guide and he passed the Pantheon; the world's largest dome, as I would the supermarket. Didn't he comprehend what he was looking those olive eyes toward? Then I remembered that he was just a child of fifteen and probably didn't know the Pantheon from Palermo. What an ignorant little shit, I thought as I watched him run over to a group of kids his age and greet them by jumping onto one of their backs and riding him like a lame horse for a few feet. I was then alone, standing beside art in its grandest form: architecture. In the square surrounding the Pantheon was a dense crowd of tourists, all taking short steps, trying not to bump into one another and get a good look at everything, their eyes opened to full capacity. I hadn't expected such a crowd, but it made sense watching them like cattle, funnel into the large doorway of the Pantheon as if it were the world's nicest smelling slaughterhouse. I had to remember that I had arrived in Rome on a plane, not a time machine, this was the modern world, frivolous travel was much easier than it once was and now after all my hassle and after all my hardship to get away from my American brethren, I found myself in the middle of a crowd of them, hearing their terrible English language, words spewing out like razor wire, children complaining about the humidity and stuffy American women calling out to their dumb husbands about how little Jimmy wanted gelato. I certainly wasn't one of these people, especially not with my dapper Italian skimmer, that's what would disguise me. A few others wore hats like mine, but I couldn't believe that there were many made as expertly as the one atop my cranium. The triple stitching was immaculate; the white straw looked like it belonged in a painting by Monet, so delicately blonde. I hoped that if I kept my mouth shut that all the American tourists would assume I was Italian. I was about a half foot taller than the average dago, but thanks to my mother's Italian blood I had that rough flesh, the kind of flesh that could smooth ceramic just by

running my chin over it a few times. My skin was by and large fair, and my body hair wasn't what it could have been, but I did have a wop face- I felt I could say things like "wop" and "dago" because I had this face. It was a rite of passage of sorts, just how any race could use their slurs in a playful way. Of course, I'd never let a real dago hear me say these words, but I liked to use them when describing myself and my droplet of Italian blood.

I trundled over to a ledge beside the Pantheon and sat down. I wanted to take a moment and really concentrate on where I was. That feeling I was unable to describe still hadn't presented itself to me. I thought maybe if I really concentrated and took the time to register what was happening that the feeling I desperately wanted to feel would have an easier time making its way into me. A cool gust of wind blew and my soggy armpits squished a bit and I watched as an old Italian man with a goiter on his face played the accordion. I thought how interesting it was that no matter where in the world you were, the same rules applied. In America it was usually black men with saxophones playing on street corners, their hats upside down on the ground to collect dollar bills and loose change and in Italy it was playing the accordion for a few liras. None of us were really different when you boiled it down. I realized that from my time in Rio, witnessing Sid and Blanche and their mechanism for making their love work. We all wanted the same things: love, affection, understanding and the tangible things: food, water, a place to sleep. All the complexity of life was self-induced. The very spot in which I sat, at one time was just a plot of dirt, before it was Rome, before it was anything. And had I been alive then I wouldn't have cared if it was a plot of earth in this corner of the world just as I wouldn't have care if it was a plot of earth resting on what would one day become America. I thought maybe the feeling I was after didn't exist, that I had been foolish and naïve in hoping that it did. Defeated and utterly unhappy, I waved Hugo over to me.

"I'm ready to go back now." I said. Hugo didn't think twice.

"Come on." he said and disappeared into the crooked street.

## 4

Back at the flat Graham was surprised to see us.

"Home so soon?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm feeling rather sleepy." I said. Graham began to laugh.

"Looks like the Italian air has crept into you already..."

See, in Rome at about two o'clock in the afternoon it was customary for the entire city to close down and the people within her to rest before the grand production that was dinner.

"I've never snoozed as often or as well as when I'm here." Graham said, "Why don't you take the bedroom and Hugo and I will continue preparing for the party."

"Is everything all right, old man?" I asked.

"Yes, everything is fine. Why do you ask?" I was finding it odd how kind Graham was

being to me. There was no trace of his usual sarcastic remarks or his demeaning compliments anywhere. What came from him ever since we arrived in Rome was pure, genuine consideration for my well being. I felt something was strange when he insisted that I have something good to eat and I was downright bewildered when he surprised me with the new clothes and now opening up his bedroom to me without a snide comment or a playful insult confirmed that I was dealing with a completely new person.

“No reason.” I said and went off to bed. I could only speculate, but I thought perhaps Graham’s personality change had something to do with the boy in Rio. I knew I was struggling with it, even having nightmares, my unconscious mind as adrift as the ship Graham and I slept on making our way to Europe. We hadn’t spoken about the incident. I didn’t know if it was because we couldn’t handle verbalizing what we saw or if there simply wasn’t anything to be said. Part of me felt terrible that I was suspecting a friend of foul play when he was only being kind, but Graham was the sort of person that if you didn’t have reason to hate him, it meant he wasn’t your friend. It was very possible that seeing the boy die in such an ugly, grisly way had changed him. I knew it changed me, but I still wasn’t quite sure how. I thought then that perhaps real change wasn’t noticeable at first, but that it started with small things, eventually making up the person you turned out to be. And if there was such a thing to change a person, I believe the tragedy in South America qualified. It still hadn’t quite sunk in and when I recalled it, it felt more like a dream than it did actuality. Where was my Angel of Death then, I thought. I saw him all the time when it was fine to fantasize, but when the cold, repugnant truth of life shouldered its way into the brutal world, Death was nowhere to be found. There was no majestic cloaked figure hovering over the boy. The reality was he died alone in the dirt, gasping for breath with nothing to see but the black soil squelchy with his own blood. That’s what death looked like and Graham and I had seen it and we had no other choice than to come to terms with the fact that it could not be unseen. I hoped for Graham’s poor soul that his affability was just coincidence, that he wasn’t bottling a much darker, much more dangerous emotion within him. It wasn’t beyond possibility that Graham was just at peace here with his faithful lover boy Hugo, that Italy brought out another side of him, but I doubted it very much. Graham would never be content even if we hadn’t been witness to unspeakable horror in the absurd jungles of Brazil, jungles which now could only be described as make-believe. That was one of his burdens. His world view, like Phin’s, wouldn’t allow him the positive outlook needed for a joyous existence. His disposition was too grim, the facts too ugly. In Graham I saw myself, only a few years later, worn down by life. I feared that the veneer I wore about my back would one day rub off and the hideousness of life that I up till then succeeded in ignoring would bear all its weight down on me at once and I would simply break beneath it... My eyes became too heavy to keep open and my brain powered down like a newspaper press, the cogs and gears slowing to a halt. One day I might have become bitter, but living for ‘one day’ was a sure way of obliterating any chance of peace *today*. Fuck all,

I thought as I drifted off to sleep. Fuck all, fuck all, fuck all...

When I awoke a few hours later it was by a cock and not the kind that went *a doodle doo*. Hugo shoved me awake in his youthful tactlessness, "Get up, Homer! Guests almost here!" I did as I was told and sat up on the bed. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

"How long was I out?" I asked. Hugo looked at me blankly. "Asleep?" I said.

"Nearly four hours." he replied as he reluctantly filled into a small pair of shorts. Holy Jesus, I had been dead to the world for four hours. It felt like the blink of an eye, the sign of a truly good sleep. I stumbled into the bathroom and splashed some cold water on my face. I then cupped some in my hands and took a drink, slurping like a pig at a trough. Graham startled me by quietly sneaking up and grabbing my shoulders while my eyes were close.

"Goddamn it, Graham!" I shouted.

"Oh, quiet down, you baby."

Then Hugo, like a bolt of lightning, passed behind us and projected, "Bambino!" as loudly as he could and followed it up with a chuckle that chased him in an echo down the hall. I was living with two queer smart alecks perfectly in league with one another and I was to be the butt of all their jokes.

"Great. Not only am I insulted by you in English, but now I'm subject to Italian insults as well." I said to Graham.

"Did you know you're quite grouchy when you first wake up?"

"All right, goddamn it. Why are you in such a good mood?" I demanded to know.

"Whatever do you mean?" Graham responded, perfidiously shocked.

"Don't give me that. You know exactly what I mean. You've been unusually nice ever since we arrived here."

"Can't a friend be kind and courteous to another friend?"

"Sure, a friend can, but not you."

"Homer, I'm genuinely hurt." Graham said, a small crack in his voice.

"You know what I mean. We're friends. And you're not getting out of it so easy."

"I don't know. I'm just happy to be here, I suppose. It wasn't the easiest trip to make, as you know. And little Hugo, he brings out the best in me. He's so youthful and happy."

"Yes, I've been meaning to talk to you about that. Don't you feel fiendish about what you're doing to Hugo? I mean, he's just a boy."

"Oh, he's much more than a boy. And besides, fiendish ways are the only ways I know."

"But doesn't he get tired of hanging around with an old man all the time?"

"I'm not that old, Homer, my boy. And let me tell you something about Hugo, he's not the innocent dullard you've come to know and love. Not totally, anyway. He's the one who seduced me and you don't want to know what kind of life he lived before he found my charitable ass. I took the boy in off the street. He was motherless, his father died before he could even

remember him. Thievery and deception was all he'd known. At least he's got a place to live, food to eat. Besides, I'm not holding him prisoner here. He can come and go as he pleases and I'm not diluted enough to think that we're exclusive. He has little boyfriends his own age. He's not missing out on anything. You'll meet one of them tonight. His name's Robertino. A handsome boy, maybe a touch slower than Hugo, if that's possible."

"Who else is coming tonight?" I inquired.

"Oh, a fine show of tail, old man, arranged just for you. The love of your life perhaps?"

"Let's not get carried away."

"No, let's do exactly that. Let's get carried away."

Graham then patted my face with his hand, grinned a half-mad grin and stepped into the bedroom to get dressed for the evening.

I made myself a drink at the miniature bar in Graham's kitchenette and I could feel my flesh cobra coiling in my trousers, spiraling down my thigh and constricting with pent up lust. Believe it or not, sex had been the absolute last thing on my mind the past two weeks. It very well could have been the queasy sensation the ocean provided my stomach or it could have been the lumbering nightmares concerning the tragedy, but after our evening with Sid and Blanche, Homer Jr. needed to go on holiday and recuperate. I was so bursting with fertile cr me that my skin took on a new texture, a creaminess that would make masturbation feel like shaking hands with a porcelain beauty, whose paws had never known as day's work. But masturbation was the last resort, for I aimed to bed one or all of the women Graham arranged for me to meet. Here it was, the sexual rebellion I dreamed of. I was about to partake in the indifference of gratification that was so foreign to America, I was about to reach inside the chest of one of these women and momentarily puppeteer their soul, being sure to stop first and caress their breasts, for there were few things more pleasant and utterly rewarding than feeling a warm tit inside the palm of your hand. I was suddenly and unexpectedly brought back to a moment with Phin when we were both in tears, not from our French music, but from laughter. We had decided that breasts, in all their simplistic glory, were the sexual equalizer, because neither Phin nor I had ever come across someone, male, female, queer or straight who wasn't totally and completely charmed by those ample orbs which hanged themselves from a woman's chest. What we were laughing about mostly was how juvenile an observation it was, but something being juvenile didn't disqualify it from being true. Penises were ghastly upon even the quickest glance, and cunts, if not kept, could easily double for a botched surgical incision. Tits on the other hand were our only evidence of an intelligent creator. They were soft, they were smooth, they even produced milk, proving not only useful for mindless pleasure, but also providing the sustenance for life to continue forth. If I were stranded on a desert island, I wouldn't bring along any of the junk most dunces would rattle off if posed such a question, no, I would bring along a fat pair of milky breasts that I could suckle from when thirsty and play with when horny or bored or sad or lonely. I'll tell you, if the rest of a

woman was as stimulating as the zaftig balloons inside their blouses, I'd be married long ago with a litter of children and we'd have to fight over who got to drink next from nature's pink tap.

There was a knock at the door. Hugo nimbly ran to the foyer and opened it and like a parade all of Graham's guests filed into the room. They were all laughing as though right before the door was swung open, one of them made a hysterical joke. Then I noticed that the women carried in their hands glasses of wine and the men open bottles. This was not their first stop of the evening. Graham greeted them all with wide arms, kissing and embracing each of them individually while simultaneously all at once. There was Robertino, Hugo's playmate, a devilishly handsome boy with dark features and thick, black eyebrows as though a centipede latched onto his forehead. He wore a tailored suit that might as well been flesh, for it moved with him like a ghostly dance partner as he stepped about the room, taking Hugo in his arms and dipping him as though a ballroom artiste, spilling some of the wine and causing more uproarious laughter. Then there was Adona, a woman who poured raw, filthy sexual energy from her fingertips. She had the face of a witch, but not the wrinkled, toothless, mole-covered kind, no, the infamously erotic kind, the imposing, menacing, wicked kind as if Greta Garbo's elegance clashed with Marlene Dietrich's bone structure. Oh yes, Adona certainly had a villainy about her long, perfectly plucked brows and her wide hazel eyes, eyes which had the power to cast spells.

"Are you a superstitious man?" she asked in her delicate Italian accent.

"No." I replied.

"We'll see about that." she said, just one finger telling me to follow her into the depths of Hell. Her lips were plump; forming what looked like a little heart instead of a mouth. I immediately fantasized about waking to find heart-shaped black and blue marks all over my body from her pouting lips, every time she spoke breaking a heart, a practice I was positive she was accustomed to. Hogarth was next. He was a tall, quiet fella with a pencil-thin mustache and wide-brimmed hat that covered his beady eyes. They weren't beady in the suspicious kind of way, just focused, as though I could easily read all the bizarre thoughts behind them. He was a fellow American, living in Rome for two years. He smiled at me an open, unabashed smile. He shook my hand so fiercely that my entire body shook, clutching his free hand around my wrist.

"What in god's name am I doing here?" was the first thing he said to me and I knew immediately that we would be friends. Nero and Eva, come to found out, were not *Nero and Eva*, though it definitely appeared so while they shared tongues in the doorway. Nero was an up-and-coming filmmaker, which was a breath of fresh air from so many literary types, but it soon became lost on me when he spoke in abstract language about his craft, though his incredibly thick accent coupled with his limited knowledge of English vocabulary made his ranting incredibly entertaining. His neck veins would bulge and his face would become red, he'd throw his fists into the air, I'm sure explaining his next great film idea and we'd all the while laugh and agree with him, cheering on his silly sound effects and boyish enthusiasm. I admired his spirit,

he seemed like a very passionate man and passion should never be discounted. A man could be stupid, a man could be poor, but as long as he was passionate he was also interesting, the fundamental piece to engaging life. Eva was a fascinating and transfixing woman, sitting back quietly and observing the rest of us acting like fools. Her face told me she knew things I did not, or at least she thought she did. Coy and sultry was her atmosphere, her face a delectable mug, with sunken in eyes and cheek bones that looked more like a pair of love handles than facial features. She had a smiling mouth that was always crooked with a smirk. She was short in height, not quite as short as Penelope, but certainly compact, though I could tell through her silken dress that she had a body chiseled from granite and perky little breasts with what I'd guess were brown nipples, with a bit of grip on them, too. There were few games I enjoyed more than guessing the kinds of nipples that accompanied a woman's breasts. Eva seemed to have the kind that hardened even by their mention, the kind that had little pimples around their areola, making them ideal for a blind man to twist and pull in dark delight. Eva was a writer of feminist literature and a poetess, though she didn't carry with her any of the generic feminist qualities you had heard about secondhand. I tried to ignore speculation of any sort, but it was difficult when you heard such overpowering negativity about a certain group specifically. The Feminists, according to the American man, were subhuman monsters who personally stitched up their vaginas with needle and thread, and who like the female praying mantis devoured a man's head after intercourse. Eva quickly tarnished this imagine with her outward warmth, kindness, intelligence and intrinsic sexuality, which she expressed in small ways, like how she rubbed her pointer finger with her thumb when she thought no one was looking. I was certain while she wouldn't be exactly taken with my love/hate relationship with the female gender and I was positive that she wouldn't think too kindly of my fixation for breasts and bums and slits; I knew her appreciation for women didn't cloud her admiration for men. After all we were an admittedly flawed gender and she, along with the rest of the women, had only nature to blame for the circumstances women found themselves in. How I saw it was, the dawn of man ushered in the groundwork for what we called humanity, and in those early stages society was judged solely on physicality. Had it been intelligence or warmth or compassion it would've been men burned at stakes and deprived of rights and beaten and sexed and trampled, not women. Men, sadly so, were more physically capable than women by and large and in those times it was a matter of protecting the women from goddamn jaguars and other such vicious creatures. That's how it all began, you see. And human beings being the selfish opportunists they were saw a prospect of taking over the world and simply did so. To confirm their dominance men took to writing a book, and what did the book say, you might ask? Well, the beginning was about this nice couple named Adam and Eve. They lived in a garden designed by God and could plunder from all the garden had to offer, except they couldn't eat from one tree, the Tree of Knowledge. Persuaded to disobey God's commands by a chattering snake, Eve ate from the tree and had Adam eat from the tree and

together they created original sin. And so, Eve singlehandedly condemned Man to eternal damnation, staining every clean soul and punishing all women by making them pass through the Valley of Death during childbirth. What followed was men's misguided belief that women were responsible for the chaos of existence, the dark pestilence cast upon them for sins they didn't commit and to exact their revenge women were kept low, kept meek. They were sold off as property, their marriages were arranged, they were set aflame, called witches and the cause of plagues. They couldn't vote nor could they fight on behalf of their country in wars. It became a man's world and was one ever since. I wasn't quite sure what the mystery behind female oppression was for the feminists, it was all there in black and white, in any bible in the world. What recourse they had was unknown to me, but I felt for their cause. I truly did. I felt no distance from women, no superiority. My only complaint was their handling of love. It could be rather sadistic and I wondered if the two issues were somewhere intertwined, if women's sense of inadequacy, which caused them to seek emotional abuse, began with our origins as apes. If that were the case then heartbreak and self-loathing were just part of human nature. I desperately hoped that wasn't the case, I hoped that love and nature could momentarily break apart, giving us a chance at hope, at internal peace. Things slightly began to come into focus, why love was so elusive and fragile, why so many of us were despondent and downcast. The tides were turned against us from the outset.

Finally, there was Dora, who if I had to guess was the love of my life that Graham was talking about. And what a delight it was to see her after the carnival of characters. She was long and delicate. She had frightfully black hair that was cut like Lulu, the character from the Pabst film, and she looked like a leftover flapper, though she couldn't have been over twenty years old. She had very prominent features and elastic skin that stretched over her beautifully pronounced jaw line. Her eyes were moist and brown and contained a seriousness about them that I wished would go away. She had little breasts, but impossibly perky, I was sure of it. She was tall and had the ability to be statuesque, but her posture kept her from showing off her true power. I could tell instantly that she was much more humble than the others in our group and I contemplated how she got mixed up with such a crowd. Each one of us, myself included, was an indulgent mess, extremists of fashion, of status and of personality. But Dora was simple in almost every way, except her interior. Looking at her hinted toward the complexity beneath her flawless skin, which was pale, as though she had no blood at all and I immediately desired to unravel her, to lie in bed together on long weekends and dissect what must be cherished secrets. She hadn't the need for makeup, her beauty was natural, but she still wore some to accentuate as opposed to cover up like Adona, who like all Italian women caked the stuff on as though they'd never again be in front of a mirror- a safe rule of thumb when it came to Italian birds was either they were stunning or they were roaches. There was no in-between. But Dora was not Italian, she was American and new to Rome by only two months. Perhaps we could discover the city together, I thought. I had

never seen anyone quite like her before, but at the same time there was something bizarrely familiar about her. In fact, after a moment I realized what it was that was crawling around my brain like a spider released from a jar: she reminded me of Max. She was more obviously beautiful than Max was, but there was something about them that was identical. Dora had the big hips and long legs of Max; she had the skeletal feet, the same long fingers that were always cold to the touch, but it was something more as well. They had the same presence. I needed to know more about her, I needed to know everything and while everyone drank their merry hearts out, telling stories and laughing, I tried to make eye contact with her. Each time she'd glance my way I'd smile and make funny eyes at one of Hogarth's anecdotes. She'd smile back, but before I could say two words to her Adona took me by the hand and said,

"I want to read your future."

"I've already had that done." I replied, thinking back to Miss Ursula and her mean-spirited trickery.

"Not like this." she replied, turning my hand over and sensually running her fingertips along the lines in my palm.

"You don't believe in such nonsense, do you Homer?" Hogarth asked. Before I could answer Eva spoke, "Oh! Leave them alone, Hogarth! I want Adona to read him."

"Yes! Leave us alone!" Adona added.

"Homer is no stranger to the spiritual side of things, are you Homer?" Graham said devilishly, knowing all too well the dread I experienced in Rio.

"No, no a stranger at all." I said, looking toward Dora and winking. She lightly smiled, but her eyes were uneasy and she looked uncomfortable, immediately getting up from the sofa and walking to the opened window in the kitchenette and standing beside it. I watched her go and panicked that I had done something to throw her. Perhaps I had been too obvious with my glances and looks, perhaps the charm which did me well in the States was failing me abroad, or perhaps she thought I was silly for participating in a palm reading, but I couldn't very well refuse. It would be impolite of me and I'd bring down the spirit of the party. Also, thus far Adona was my best shot at releasing my pent up jism. She was sending me signals that might as well have been in smoke. I knew what the others doubted, that Adona could not actually read fortunes and she was just looking for a reason to stimulate my senses.

"Robertino! Robertino! Get us some champagne!" Nero called out.

"Splendid idea!" Graham said, "Who wants some champagne? Eva? Homer? Hogarth?" We all nodded our heads like little angels. Then Graham turned to Dora.

"Dora, come back to the party." Graham turned toward us and whispered, "She's very sensitive." and then ran over to her, took her by the hand and waltzed her back to the sofa. "Let me get you some champagne." he continued. I didn't look at her, but stayed focused on Adona, who was still studying my palm.

“Well, what’s it say?” Hogarth blurted out. Adona moaned a bit and then paused, looking up at the rest of us with squinty eyes...

“It says that he’s going to be a millionaire and live until he’s one-hundred and two!” Everyone broke out into laughter as Graham finished passing out the champagne glasses.

“Cheers to that!” he said and we all took a swig. It was cold and dry champagne and the bubbles tickled our noses. Dora let out a petite laugh and it was as if a swallow had flown into the room. I now saw my chance to sit beside Dora and strike up a conversation, but once again before I could, Hogarth opened his big mouth. What I took for a quiet chap turned out to be a fucking writer, a word enthusiast, a man who believed words should not live and die on the page, but be spoken aloud for all the world to hear and who, above all else, enjoyed reciting scandalous scraps of poetry when drunk and before an audience.

“I’d like to share a beautiful piece by none other than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.” Everyone applauded as Hogarth got to his feet, straightened himself out and pulled on his lapels. He then spoke the following:

*Yesterday, though, we heard the king of farts  
It smelled as sweet as honey tarts  
While it wasn't in the strongest of voice  
It still came on as a powerful noise  
I now wish you goodnight  
shit in your bed with all your might  
sleep with peace on your mind  
and try to kiss your own behind*

We all went completely mad with laughter. We clashed our glasses, spilling more champagne than we could drink.

“Do another! Do another!” Eva called out.

“Shall I do another?” Hogarth asked, luring us.

“Yes!” we all shouted back.

“Fine, yes! This is one is by old Wolfy as well:

*Lick my ass nicely  
lick it nice and clean  
nice and clean, lick my ass.  
That's a greasy desire,  
nicely buttered,  
like the licking of roast meat, my daily activity.  
Three will lick more than two,  
come on, just try it,*

*and lick, lick, lick.*

*Everybody lick his own ass himself."*

This time Hogarth bowed after his performance. Hugo and Robertino were in tears, laughing with such might that everyone else laughed even harder watching them. Graham wiped tears from his eyes; Nero sat snorting in the corner and Eva sprawled herself on the sofa, her feet up on Hogarth's lap and her head resting on Adona's tummy.

"Are those really by Mozart?" Dora asked me, shrugging off some laughter herself.

"I don't know." I said and looked toward Hogarth. "Are those really by Mozart?"

"Those and Piano Concerto No. 21." Hogarth replied.

"I suppose so." I said to Dora. I was feeling rather drunk, having more than my usual amount to drink. We all were sufficiently high, laughing together as if we'd known each other for centuries. An outsider would have never known we were almost perfect strangers. They'd assume that we were the oldest and dearest of friends and it was a good feeling, because so rarely did people mesh together as effortlessly, even with the aid of drink. I was curious to know how Graham met these folks, how he ever fooled them into believing he was a good and reliable friend. Looking around, I couldn't help but think that these people were Graham's Roman equivalent to George and Mayhew and Cassandra and Nick and Byron. Somehow these kinds of people gravitated toward Graham, though this bunch didn't seem to have the hidden bitterness toward him that his American gang did, perhaps because they didn't see him as often and could just recall him in memories of drunken bliss. Though, I do think I was holding Graham to task unfairly. He was the one who gave me the money to travel in the first place, and he was the one who brought me to Rio on his dime and it was his flat I was currently drinking and laughing in, so maybe it would be fair of me to say that Graham *was* a good and reliable friend. All the bedlam that resulted in Graham's acts shouldn't have allowed me to taint his good intentions, and although the saying was that the road to Hell was paved in such good intentions, intent also turned manslaughter to murder. I was beginning to believe that Graham's warnings to me about squandering my potential were for my benefit more than they were for his. Was it possible that he truly cared for me? All this time I felt as though I was a mouse in Graham's morbid experiment, that he saw a chance to use me for his own advantages, but I had yet to encounter a moment when he truly had the upper hand. Sure, his mad pursuit in Brazil wasn't entirely for my benefit, but he needed me as much as I needed him, and now, back once again in the civilized world, it was I who was reaping all the benefits.

Any wise man would know when to quit. Thankfully I never claimed to be wise, and so while my stomach was in revolt and my brain was afloat in pure gin, I continued to drink, eventually deciding that I wanted to escape Graham's little love den and see Rome by night. I wanted to challenge this so-called Eternal city to a drinking contest and I was determined to win.

"Let's get out of here." I said to Dora and then to everyone, only louder and more

belligerent.

“And go where?” Dora asked.

“Anywhere!” I shouted. “We’re in one of the world’s finest cities! Why should we hang around this crummy joint to waste away like stooges?!”

“Quiet down, Homer. It’s late.” Graham said.

“Late? It’s barely past one in the morning. The night is just beginning!” I croaked. I was prone to saying clichéd things when intoxicated like *the night is just beginning*, but in that moment, I felt that phrase with all my heart. I had closed nights out when other, less interesting gentlemen were on their way to work. I had run to mountain tops and lifted the sun into the sky. One in the morning might as well have been five in the afternoon, but everyone looked at me with faces that told me of their disinterest in my idea. What was the matter with these people? I thought. Hadn’t they any belly? Madmen and fem-fetales indoors, but cowards and shrimps when faced with a taste of real danger!

“Well, if you won’t come along, I’ll go by myself!” I said and got up, making a mad dash for the door. Graham hollered after me, “Come back here, Homer! Let’s not do this again!” I then faintly heard him say, “The boy has a habit of getting himself good and drunk and then wandering about.” “Does he know where he’s going?” I heard a female voice ask, but I was already too far out into the stairwell to know which female it belonged to. When I burst through the large wooden doors, I expected the street to be busy with people, bustling about and enjoying the nightlife, tripping over the cracks in the ancient brick roads and witnessing the famous monuments bathed in Italian moonlight, but to my drunken surprise, the streets were completely empty and the only sound to be heard was the cries of an infant child coming from one of the open windows. I stopped dead, staggering like an idiot, listening to that baby howl like a coyote at a truly indifferent moon. It was rather haunting to be honest, for after a few moments I realized there were no attempts to sooth the baby’s cries. Bloody Italians, I thought, fascists even with their children. Had I known which window that baby’s cry came from, I would have climbed up the water pipe and rocked it to sleep myself, singing *Rockabye Baby* and going *blerp, blerp* like a true wino... Where to go was my next thought. I hadn’t the slightest clue and so I stepped forward and allowed my body to take me wherever it wanted to go. Gravity took over as my body weight swayed like a heap of ore on a rope. Thank goodness for gravity in that moment, otherwise I was likely to float up into the air and never come down. I was feeling weightless, a stark contrast to my earlier feelings of disappointment, which bolted me to the ground. All the sadness I felt previously about never experiencing the feeling I deeply desired was now sloshing around with the booze in my belly and I felt as though I was going to have it out, right there on the street, a fine puking fountain. I would be the great sculpted *Homer de Vomitus*, erected in 1909 and spilling his guts everlastingly. Tourists would come and take pictures beside the grotesque display of self-indulgence; they’d think of me as an immortalization of the famed

gluttony of ancient Rome. I'd have a vomitorium named after me! Yes! I would be commemorated as the world's greatest slob, a directionless fraud who when discovered he had not a soul within him, filled the void with food and drink and women, turning all his talk and all his ambition into the projectile vomit, recognized and commemorated in that fine statue. I felt the foul mess rising in my throat, but no matter how much I heaved the rotten poison would not come up. I supposed I'd just have to carry it with me and it'd probably reappear tomorrow morning out my back end, a discharge I greatly preferred.

My body took me left and I turned the corner, fumbling down a street with many closed eateries lining it. Where the hell was everybody? I thought. The streets were downright chilling now. Part of me feared that this was another one of my otherworldly experiences and that I had fallen into a time warp. This experience, however, was not like the others when I was literally teleported through time and space. Everything here seemed frozen, as though the townspeople were just going about their business and were suddenly evaporated where they stood. This, of course, was not the case. Given the combination of my intoxication and my fragile mental state in general, I wouldn't have been surprised if I got so worked up over my theory of evaporating Italians that I croaked right there in the street. What I did not know and later found out was that the nightlife of Rome usually ended around midnight and that it was common for the streets to be totally empty by one. If I had simply been informed of this, perhaps the frantic terror I presently found myself in could have been avoided, but what is the fun in that? I began to jog down the road, bouncing about from side to side like a true passé drunkard. I could hear my name being called behind me in what sounded like Graham's voice, but I didn't respond, I couldn't respond. My feet took me into a square with a fountain at the center. Stone cherubs were regurgitating water in perfect streams all around the fountain's base and the only sound to be heard was the endless cycle of liquid funneling through their grey mouths. Things seemed very peaceful once I escaped the bottlenecked road and a calm came over me listening to the delicate trickling of the water. To my left was a massive church and in front of it were two sleeping hags. Both their faces were pruned from age and heat and I imagined that all their prayers got lost inside the cracks of their skin before they could reach God and faded out like echoes in a canyon. Perhaps that's why they chose to sleep outside of a church; their prayers had a better chance of being heard. It hadn't seemed to work, though, for they were as pathetic as I ever imagined they could be. What was it that got them here? I thought. What choice did they make, or what choice was made for them that stranded them on this patch of brick, forsaken by both God and Man? In any event, I hadn't the time nor did I have the ability to care for their decrepit situation. I approached the church and was in awe of its size and splendor. One of the hags must have heard my clumsy footsteps, because as I twisted my neck, ogling at the immense grandeur this golden house of worship had to offer, I felt a slight tug on my trousers. I looked down and there was one of the dilapidated bronze arms that looked like bone wrapped in roasted chicken fat pulling away as though I had

stolen the pants from her and she had come to reclaim them. She spoke in a raspy voice something in Italian; a plea, a prayer, perhaps, but what could I provide her? I hadn't a thing in my pockets. For all intents and purposes, I was as poor as she was; the only difference being that I was the beneficiary of luck, something that for her had run out long ago. I backed away quickly and took off across the square into an alleyway. I ran for a while, senselessly, turning at random. I dragged my hands along the buildings and felt the uneven bricks smash into the arches of my feet as I plopped them down. I looked behind me and slowly came to a stop. I then looked to my left, then my right, then straight ahead. I determined, very astutely given my state, that I was lost. Yet again, I found myself at the mercy of mother metropolis, lost in her clutches, acceptable to the criminals that hid between the cracks of her teeth and the strands of her hair. I did not worry, though, for I had been in much more unsettling scenarios in Rio and actually felt rather safe in this tucked away Italian chasm. There was a little water fountain on the corner happily pouring away and I decided I would get a drink and then collect myself. Surely, an intelligent man such as myself could make his way a few blocks, I just needed something to cool my throat and a few moments to catch my breath. When I got to the fountain I noticed a little hole at the top of the mouthpiece. I saw that by placing your hand tightly across the outlet of water, a little stream would squirt out of the hole and shoot directly into your mouth. In my drunkenness I thought this was one of the finest achievements of man. I laughed to myself how ingenious we were and then drank heartily, the pride of humanity in my soul. Looking behind me at the alley in which I emerged, I realized it was relative suicide to track back that way. The tall buildings surrounding the alley made it look like it was designed by a German Expressionist painter: bent, crooked, harrowing and wet. I thought it wise to stick to main roads and if I was lucky, I'd come across a street name I recognized.

As I strolled through the streets I came to the site of an ancient ruin. The ruin itself was sunken into the ground maybe ten or twelve feet below street level and stone pillars surrounded it, I'm assuming to keep foolish tourists from falling in. I was unaware of what the ruin once was and of how important the ground I walked on surely must have been, but I guessed that like all the other places in Rome it was profoundly interesting and deserving of a stop and gander. I rested on the stone pillars and took the sight in, coming up with hundreds of things it could possibly be. Maybe I was looking at where Brutus assassinated Caesar and where those mighty words were spoken: *Et tu, Brute?* Maybe I was standing where Hannibal stood when he invaded in 218 B.C. Maybe I was tapping my toes where a pool of blood once gathered from Caligula's murder. I almost preferred not knowing. The secrecy of things is what made them seductive and without the knowledge of what exactly I was seeing, it could have been anything. I felt it was a very good analogy for life in general. Speculation, speculation, speculation, it's all we had as mortals. We had a million different theories and each one of them could have been wrong. What I liked about our existence above all else was that there *was* in fact a truth to things, just how that

ruin *was* something specific. There *was* an explanation, but all of us equally didn't have the smallest advantage in knowing what it was. Once again, united through ignorance! Unified though stupidity! If only that was enough to quench our thirst, if only humans could digest being small and absurd and meaningless. I had been alone all evening, but in that instant I felt particularly alone, alone with this understanding, which enriched all my earthly endeavors. For being nothing more than an accident, life was beautiful. How anyone could believe otherwise befuddled me. There was a general belief that the more unhappy you were the more realistic you were, and therefore more in touch with the real interworkings of life, but I never necessarily associated negativity with realism. There is no "true" way to approach the human experience, it didn't exist, and being bitter didn't mean you had a better grasp on reality, it just meant you chose to dwell on meaningless nonsense that meant less than flea dung. Life didn't owe anyone anything, you owed it to yourself to seek out and pillage all the splendor it had to offer. If you focused on the negative aspects of existence, you'd be sure to find them. They were plentiful. But that didn't make them anymore intelligent or anymore authentic. You did not unravel the mysteries of the world; you just put your own insecurities on display to be mocked by those strong enough to laugh in the face of tragedy.

I moved on from the ruin, but before I could get too far I heard a strange noise. I paused and waited. It was silent. Then I took another step, but once again as soon as the sole of my shoe hit the ground I heard the noise. This time I waited an extra ten seconds and sure enough, the noise sounded again. It was the soft purring of a cat. Like an idiot, I patted my pockets, as if they were viable locations for a cat to hide. It would appear that my intoxication had yet to wear off. My next effort was getting to my hands and knees and crawling around on the ground as if I *were* a cat. I crawled and meowed and finally a little black cat emerged from behind one of the stone pillars. Thank goodness, I thought. The last thing I needed was to start hearing cats purring in my head. At first it looked as though the tiny feline was winking at me, but when it got closer I could see that it was missing one eye. Then when it got even closer I could see that it was also missing its right hind leg. It hobbled toward me, somehow keeping its balance, and reached out its sandpaper tongue to lick my knuckles.

"What in the world happened to you?" I said aloud. I then made it to my feet and picked the cat up from under its pits. It snarled a bit and its claws came out.

"Don't be afraid." I said and then rearranged the cat so it could rest comfortably like a baby in my folded arms. I started to walk again and figured that I'd just take the cat along with me, for there was no sense in us both being lost on our own. From the looks of it the little crippled cat was an alley cat. It had no collar or tags and its fur was matted and covered in muck. I decided right then I would keep it and give it a home at Graham's place where it could drink all the fresh milk it could stomach and purr away at old, dumb Hugo who would provide it the unequivocal and unabashed friendship only a child could provide. Then I thought I couldn't very

well continue referring to it as “it,” so I lifted the cat up once again to have a look at its unmentionables, but couldn’t for the life of me tell whether it was male or female. I looked into its green eyes next, which looked like a sliced kiwi on a gooey white countertop. It blinked at me once or twice and then yawned.

“I think I’ll name you Cypress.” I said to the cat, who showed no objection to the name. I had absolutely no reasoning for selecting Cypress out of the unfathomably long list of possible kitty names, but it came to me so naturally that I felt no further thinking was required. Also, Cypress was an elegant and dignified name for both a girl and a boy, so I was at peace with my choice. I couldn’t stand when people named their animals generic pet names like *spot*. What unimaginative corpses. What boring fucking misery. Luckily for Cypress I was not one of those dead people, I was alive and colorful and he’d be able to go through life with a noble name that suited his nobility. He’d be the Sancho to my Don, a steely, one-eyed pussy with nothing to lose. He looked up at me, his big kiwi eyes staring directly into mine. I imagined he was telling me he loved me, that it was love at first sight and he had never before been so taken with a human, a tall, boney, American human at that. And so the little alley cat gained a title and a residence and a friend all in one flux of my giving heart, which was so often ignored.

Walking again, Cypress in one hand, I was still completely lost. One taxi cab roared by and I tried to wave it down, but before I could reach my sluggish arm into the air, it was gone and all that was left was some muggy smoke from its exhaust pipe. I didn’t blame the driver for not stopping. I wouldn’t have picked up a man with a one-eyed, one-legged cat clinched to my arm, wandering around aimlessly in the middle of the night, either, so I walked on, one foot in front of the other, left right, left right, left right, falling deeper into the uncharted abyss called Rome that could’ve been somewhere else entirely as far as I was concerned... As I crept along the road, I became increasingly dizzy. The alcohol seemed to drop like a bomb into my lowers and all the fumes from the explosion rose into my skull and polluted my brain. I could barely see straight and poor little Cypress began to meow when I suddenly lost my balance and almost dropped him. I’m sure he would have landed perfectly safely on his three feet, but I scooped him up in time and his claws made a slight ripping noise on the sleeve of my brand new suit jacket. I bent down and placed Cypress on the ground. He sat still and watched his daddy heave like an imbecile. Finally, the venom in my stomach desired to come out. My mouth watered and I lunged over the nearby stone barrier and vomited copiously down into the dark ground, which looked like a never ending pit. When I was through exorcising my demons, I felt as though I could move mountains. All the pain was gone and replaced with strength. That sickly feeling gone as quick as it appeared. Where did it go? Down into the black pit or onto a Pope’s tomb, who cares? It was out of me and perhaps a pungent feast for some of Cypress’s friends that weren’t fortunate enough to run into me. I would be suffering one hell of a hangover the next morning, but that was still hours away. I felt wonderful and now with a much improved mind I

became expediently aware that I still had no clue where I was. The fun enchantment of getting lost quickly became the unpleasant dread of not being able to go home. I looked around and tried to find a landmark, maybe something Graham had pointed out to me on the taxi ride to the apartment, but there was nothing. My surroundings, though shrouded in darkness, were becoming especially ancient looking. Yes, everything in Rome was old, but most of the exceptionally old things were plopped down in the middle of newer things, and now I was under my own steam on a road that seemed directly peeled from the past. Panic struck again. Had I walked into a worm hole without realizing it? Would I be deposited back in ancient Rome, beheaded the moment I was discovered, called a heathen, a witch, a mystic, fed to lions in the Great Arena, sliced up by Gladiators, scarified for Caesar? I felt like dropping to my knees, tossing logic away like an old hanky and accepting the Lord God as my savior, thanking Him for creating internal thought. I knew if I didn't have the benefit of thinking these strange, ridiculous and stupid thoughts privately that more people would think I was a coward and a fool than the ones who already did. Those unexplained journeys through space had made me terribly paranoid. Ever since the first one in the taxi on the way to Phin's, I had been having a difficult time distinguishing my realities from my fantasies. I'm sure the whack on the head didn't help, either, but now I was always second guessing the validity of my consciousness. What was once taken for granted was now questioned and accused of treason. I longed to believe again in what my eyes saw and my ears heard, and thought that perhaps this was the reason for my cosmic voyages to begin with. Perhaps God had sabotaged me vindictively, taking away my willful ignorance we humans took for granted, and was giving me a taste of what hell His existence must unquestionably be. No one took into account the misery of being omniscient, nor did we think of what turmoil God surely was in if he did in fact exist. Perhaps he saw in me a chance to release some of his pent up frustrations with humanity. I talked as though I were God, always running off at the mouth, preaching while damning the preacher, and now he was going to torture me, welcome me to just a fraction of the burden he carried around on his big all-knowing shoulders. As we all know, He didn't like to be challenged (you may ask a handful of Jews with the smoldered remains of a golden calf to attest to this) and it was very possible that he dragged me around the galaxy like a ragdoll just to shake me up, to kilter my holier than thou dependency on what I believed to be reality. As much as I wanted to know what was behind the curtain in terms of life, I also knew my mind simply wasn't capable of comprehending it and if I were exposed to such a truth, I'd simply go off my head. I truly believed that was the defining principle behind what made us mortal and salves to death. We were given by nature only a limited portion of brain power and the gift, or perhaps the curse of being inquisitive. But the curiosity aspect of faith was wonderful, we should always be curious. It just seemed that religion made it so we're no longer asking questions and suggested we use faith as an answer instead of instigation for curiosity. It made it so we were content with outrageous stretches of the imagination and gave us rules to

fight and die for. They would not tolerate doubt, just utter conviction and I believed that was because the more questions we asked, the closer we came to answers, and the closer we came to answers the smaller and smaller role God would play in the scheme of things. God was a forever shrinking explanation, becoming more and more obsolete with every great leap forward in human intelligence. He was a setting sun, growing dimmer and dimmer, lower and lower. Perhaps one day the nightfall of liberation would come when we'd no longer need Him, but until then we'd be stuck in a perpetual dawn, God calling out to us, telling us anything we want to hear, how a liar when confronted will continue to lie, His fingers reaching over the mountains in fiery rays of light...

What was I to do? Keep walking, I suppose. I figured I'd find a nice little spot on the grass and I'd sleep there until morning when the city opened up again or perhaps I'd have the good fortune to get picked up by the police and they'd deliver me to Graham's like rotten package. Whatever the case may be, I had Cypress to keep me company. Just a little bit further, down the ancient, desolate road was what appeared to be a knoll. From where I was standing it looked like a king sized bed with goose down pillows and silken sheets. I walked forward, my head down, as though I had busted a spring. Cypress was already asleep in my palm, hopefully having wonderful kitty dreams about devouring mice or that glorious feeling when they finally hacked up a hairball and a mad gust of air that filled their lungs. Looking at Cypress I found it ironic that earlier that evening I had seen two human beings in need of help, yet they repulsed me with their slothfulness and here I was carrying in my hand a mangy, filthy, decrepit cat that could have possibly carried a whole array of diseases. Why had I immediately helped the cat and not the people? Why was I so disgusted by two humans in need, but not a one-legged alley cat? I thought perhaps it had something to do with the fact that a cat cannot help itself. I had read somewhere once that small dogs and all housecats would be extinct if not for human involvement. They simply would be killed off by bigger, nastier creatures. Humans on the other hand were all born with the same set of tools. If those women wanted to get off the street, they could have easily done so with the two arms and the two legs nature had given them. Why should they get to shirk the responsibilities of adult life while the rest of us had to make a go of it? Granted I wasn't the model participant in society, but I cared enough to skim by, I didn't just refuse it altogether. Part of me felt, perhaps the callus and insensitive part of me, that no matter what circumstance a person found themselves in, they had the power to overcome it. Homelessness, begging, that took exertion to sustain, you had to put forth an effort to remain that helpless. Of course, I knew some were veterans of war and others were feeble minded, and it was a sad truth that the world had turned its back on them, that the well oiled machine of society could not abide their ineptitude, that was clear and that was disgraceful, but I held a sort of vendetta toward everyone else. I'd gladly help a cat, who couldn't possibly live another two years, but I'd leave two fellow humans lying on the ground like cigarette butts. I didn't think

that meant I had given up on the human race, though Phin told me all the time that it was pure evil of me to think such things. But I had made it up in my mind sometime before; the human race was a dichotomy, a cross-section of those who bought in and the ones who never placed a bet.

When I reached my knoll, I lifted my head and what lay before me nearly took the air out of my lungs. Right before my eyes was the Colosseum. It had just appeared out of thin air. The massive arena of death, where battles were held and crowds roared blood thirsty and deranged, sat before me an empty structure, moon beams pouring through its caverns, a true masterpiece of demise, so peaceful and utterly quaint. The towering Colosseum was so large and so grand that it's all my eyes could see, or perhaps it was all they could handle. Nothing else existed as I stared at its brilliant construction, the pale color and its pure size. It looked as though it could have been a bathtub for God, a wash basin for any supreme being, in fact. How strange that a place once so loud with chaos was now so quiet and alone. How could it be that no one else was here? Just I, Homer Miller, was alone with one of the wonders of the world. All my questions about connections with God, with other people seemed so feeble now, standing beside the hulking behemoth. I couldn't even remember them. My mind was erased like pouring hot water over muddy pavement. I placed Cypress down on the knoll and walked toward the Colosseum. I approached its wall, but I was afraid to touch it, for it might vanish and all of this would be revealed as a terrible mirage. I would awake back in my apartment, the dull dart on the floor, dead. The torn map hanging from nothing but a thumbtack on the wall... I held my breath and placed the surface of my fingers on the Colosseum's rough exterior...Real! Yes, my senses were confirming my dreams! I wasn't mad after all, and suddenly, all at once like, that feeling that I so desperately, so completely wished of feeling began to surge through my entire body. Rome had opened up as if a flower and touched me; it told me I was small and beautiful. At last, I was hers and she could do with me what she pleased...

## 5

When I awoke the next morning it was not beside the Colosseum as expected, but in a bed with a nude woman's warm body beside me. Her head was turned away, so I couldn't quite make out who it was. In my heart of hearts, I was hoping it was Dora. Wouldn't have that been a dream come true? No work required, no resistance, not even a recollection of how I convinced her to peel her plum and grant me admittance. What could I have done as drunk as I was to seduce her? If it was anything, it was mostly likely simply telling her she was beautiful. All it took, really, to get a woman into the bed was to tell them directly that they were beautiful and sexy. Though you had to truthfully think so, women could see right through that sort of thing, and I'd imagine you would, otherwise why waste your time talking? There was no violation more worthy of a death penalty than a hollow compliment. And it worked out conveniently that

alcohol took away the nervousness that usually made such a direct compliment impossible to make. I've seen men bend over backward trying to fuck a woman, spending money they didn't have, putting on a whole persona, when all it took was looking a woman in the eye and telling them you desired them. After all, everyone wanted to be desired. And if that woman spat in your face, or laughed at you, you could ease your mind with the fact that she was a complete stranger and she'd live the rest of her days never even approaching the level of intelligence, dignity or class you had ascertained without difficulty. I know you wouldn't think so from this text, but I had been turned down by a woman my fair share of times, but each of those times I never thought twice about it, for little did they know they had missed out on the opportunity and the distinct pleasure of having me inside of them. They'd never know how close they came to experiencing true fire, true passion. What did their opinion of me matter? They hadn't the slightest clue of the things I had done and planned to do. Who were they to reject me? No one, as far as I was concerned, and so it was on to the next person, the next woman who stood a chance of making something truly wonderful with me... Secretly I liked to image that there *was* a particular woman out there who would understand me completely and appreciate me for all I was and challenge me for all I could be. I liked to imagine that when I finally found her she'd take all the pain I had known away and devour it with her own special brand of understanding. She'd take pleasure in just running her fingers through my hair, and she'd encourage me in whatever it was I desired to do. She'd support the risky and sometimes seemingly impractical choices I had to make, because she knew that I had a greater comprehension of things and she trusted me. It was all so cliché, but that's partly what made it so lovely. Was there anything as safe and friendly as a cliché? They were almost collective dreams of the human race. We all wanted the same things. I had once heard people described as snowflakes, because it is said that there are no two alike, but my amendment to that is: in the end we're all snow.

Part of me then wished that it was not Dora sleeping soundly beside me. I could barely remember a thing from the night before, the only image coming in clearly being when I first set my eyes on that glorious testament to man's greatness, the Colosseum, and I knew that I was in absolutely no shape to perform sexually, or even rehearse. I wanted to make a good first impression with Dora; I wanted to be at the peak of my skill, doing things that she was even too ashamed to fantasize about. She was the kind of woman that brought forth the deadly tightrope act of desire. She evoked both urges, the urge to make sweet, beautiful, delicate, transcending love and the urge to fuck like depraved lunatics. You wanted to cradle her in your arms and you wanted to rip apart her legs and plow into her so hard she coughed up a quarter. You wanted to softly kiss the nape of her neck while simultaneously wanting to thrust your cock into her so fiercely and so viciously that the discs in her spine burst. You wanted to look deeply into her eyes, seeing your own reflection, while also wanting to bend her over the bed like a dog and shove her face into the mattress to muffle her screams of ecstasy. This was a very treacherous

way to be, my friends, for you never quite knew how to approach her. Every woman was part saint and part whore. The difficulty arose when needing to decipher which she was being at what time. Mixing them up could be a devastating and irreversible mistake, so you had to compromise both your instincts and play aloof. Women always complained how men didn't seem interested in them, but the truth was we just didn't want to appeal to your whore when you were being a saint, and we didn't want to hold hands when you craved an uncompromising and magnificent fuck.

I looked beneath the sheets and saw that I too was naked, my little knob sleeping peacefully between my legs, though I also saw that my testicles were still the size of cannonballs. It would have taken a miracle for me to achieve orgasm in that state and I certainly wasn't feeling blessed at the moment. My head felt as though hot stones filled the passageways of my face, blocking any and all transit of phlegm and allowing it to harden inside my skull. Also, I still had that swollen feeling in my loins as though the Indian Ocean had turned to jism and stored itself inside my body. I needed release and I needed it badly. So, it was determined that no juices had been swapped and the mystery woman sleeping beside me was empty of my filth. She must have stripped me, perhaps even put me in her mouth, but upon realizing that she'd have an easier time getting blood from a stone, opted to get some rest. Poor girl, she had no idea of the disaster she avoided. If I were to cum then, it would be as if a dam broke, unleashing gallon upon gallon of water onto the town below, sending everyone to a watery grave. She would surely have drowned in my sap, the coroner having to pump her lungs on the autopsy table like a person destined to die at sea... I tried to carefully peek over her shoulder, but she was too buried into her pillow and I couldn't see a damned thing. Then I lifted the sheets again and examined her body, trying to put an ass to a face, but I hadn't thoroughly examined each of the girls' buttocks the night prior, for there was simply too much to feast upon and I couldn't determine a make and model. I sat for a while, my back resting up against the wall and the woman snored away and I watched the sun slowly paint the building across from me with light. After a while, I had had about enough of this game and decided to wake the women beside me and try to piece together what exactly had happened the night before. I gently nudged her at first, but when she only moaned and turned over, I shoved her. That woke her up and she turned to me, clearing the hair from her face, revealing Adona. Of course, I thought. She was the only one of the three that would welcome a stranger into her bed without even the most casual of screening processes. Eva had more respect for the female race than that and Dora was simply too real. Was I suggesting that Eva and Adona were fake? Yes, I was. They were both extremists, committed to the causes of femininity and whoredom more than they were committed to themselves. They let their principles (or lack thereof) govern their choices, where Dora opened her heart, took no allegiances and allowed herself the benefit of being unsure. I had just met her, but I could tell right away that she came equipped with an authenticity only held by those with the audacity to say, "I don't know." I was leery of anyone too sure of anything, even themselves. Adona had

decided as soon as she set eyes on me that I would be going to bed with her. She didn't care if I was drunk, sober or dead. I wasn't complaining, of course, there are plenty of uglier women to go home with and she saved me a sore back from sleeping on the ground. She smiled at me and cleared her throat of several hours' worth of saliva.

"Good morning, Homer." she said.

"Ciao." I said.

"Ciao."

"What happened last night?" I asked.

She situated herself in bed and her spectacular breasts shook free like the heads of sharks breaking the surface of the water. My little fellow became electrified, widening, becoming the texture of uncooked dough.

"You were very drunk, Homer." she said in her adorable accent. "Graham sent out a search party after you. We walk around half the night trying to find you. Finally Hogarth find you sitting at the Colosseo ground. He brought you back to Graham's and I brought you back here. You don't remember?"

"I can't say that I do." I said. "And then what happened?"

A childish grin came about her face.

"We try to make it, but it no happen. You too drunk."

"I apologize for that." I said. She then focused her stare at me. Her eyebrows became like devil horns.

"You can make up for it if you like." she said, slipping her hand beneath the sheets and grasping my cock as though it were a snake about to be defanged. She grabbed it tightly, squeezing the boy mercilessly, slightly digging her nails in him.

"Ouch." I said. She squeezed tighter, my lad like a ragdoll pressed tightly to a little girl's chest. She could have yanked it off if she so desired and I could have done nothing to stop her. It felt good to be handled by a woman again. I felt as though it had been eons since I felt the warm interior of a female hand. Blanche was my last real woman, but I had to share her with Sid and being the selfish person I was, that didn't quite satisfy my hunger, though looking at Adona gripping me, so eager, so indifferent to whose member she was holding, made me think about was a shameless whore she was and part of me wished for the tenderness of Penelope or Max. I did not feel special in the slightest with Adona; because I knew I was completely interchangeable. I could've been only a penis as far as she was concerned, just a bodiless member floating like a barnacle in the sea, and while this was most often the case with women, I didn't appreciate how Adona made it so abundantly clear. I knew deep down that every woman I had been with had taken the knob of another man into her mouth, the very mouth she ate with, the very mouth she said 'I love you, daddy' with and the very mouth she kissed me with, but I was always able to pretend that this was not the case, that she had taken a vacuumed seal off her

lips especially for me. Of course, it was a silly thing to think about, for it was one of the inalienable facts about life that mothers, sisters, daughters, nuns, and first ladies all took it in the mouth, but in exchange, for that same reason, men would always have a sexual advantage over women. Men had cleverly made it seem like we had the advantage intellectually by turning women against themselves, telling them that their hormones made them crazy, but that wasn't the case, entirely. And it was easy for all to see that women were by far sexier creatures than men, how they spoke, how they moved, the texture of their skin and the shape of their features, but men, greasily manipulated women into thinking they controlled us sexually, that all they had to do was shake their caboose and we'd come running, but that was all part of the plan to keep women greedily sucking on our urine valves. The proof of this was men didn't have to engage in any sexual debasement, but for woman, it was practically mandatory to shed a little dignity in the bedroom. Cunnilingus was anticipated, it was downright pleasurable for a man. Hell, I felt as though I could walk on air after sticking my face in that heavenly slit, as though if I parted it any wider, I'd be able to see God signaling to me, proud of the perfect orifice He had created, but it couldn't be ignored that there was something shameful about a prick in your mouth, something degrading, something unquestionably mean-spirited. Once it had occurred in a relationship, I no longer feared being mistreated or cheated on; for I had singlehandedly obtained full dominance. She could no longer harm me with words or actions, or sticks and stones for that matter, because I had put my foul member where she articulated her thoughts. I had stabbed away my flesh sword into her very face and she was powerless over me as a result. If she was so inclined to cheat on me with another man, he would only be sticking his prick where mine had once been and her teeth would speak to one another saying, "That's not Homer, Jr. She must be two-timing him, the wench." and they'd turn against her, planning a revolt with the tongue, perhaps biting down on the poor fellow, drawing some of that red vino Italian birds loved so much. However, Adona was doing a fine job of making me feel emasculated. This was not the sexy encounter I had envisioned the night before; in fact, I was feeling rather rotten about the whole thing. It felt as though she was not handling me, Homer Miller the human being, but the stick shift of an automobile. I had never met a woman so ready and willing. Her smile became almost wicked and she mounted me, eagerly climbing aboard my lap as though I were a ship chartered for the Americas. I reached below to situate myself for entry, but before I could she pushed me with both hands into the headboard. I was stunned. I had never been manhandled so roughly before by a woman. I knew then that it was to be a sexual experience I had never come across before. Europe was keeping her promise. God bless her! It took me a moment to register what had happened. I looked into her knavish eyes and she looked like a mad hyena, panting with desire. I was wide-eyed, waiting for her to make the next move. I was paralyzed, yet excited. The violent push put me in the mood, it had lit the pilot light in my loins and I was now ready to resume my profession as a dastardly gardener, fingering her mulch and planting the seed of love. The

trepidation I felt moments earlier was immediately replaced with thrill. Part of me, the lowly, dark, part enjoyed being out of control. My heart was racing. She then waved back her hand adroitly only to thrash it down upon my cheek with a *crack*. She had slapped me. My cheek stung with pain, but I was not hurt, instead I was energized, I was stronger than ever! What the hell was happening to me? I grinned, my face still buzzing with sensation. I was throbbing above and below. Yes! Abuse me! I thought. The pain from the slap faded away quickly, too quickly, I wanted, no, I needed to feel more.

“Again!” I shouted and before I could finish, again came a blow, this time even harder. The tops of her fingers landed at the hole of my left ear and it started to ring. “Oh! Again!” I pleaded. My tongue had gone renegade. I couldn’t control a single thing that slipped through my lips. I had discovered a new fetish and I was addicted. What bizarre sensations, what lavish complexities running through my heart and mind, so complex in fact that I couldn’t begin to understand why I was enjoying myself so intensely. There were few things more unpredictable than a person in the midst with their fetish. They would do and say absolutely anything, things they’d never say if they weren’t possessed by the sexual demon unleashed from the darkest corners of their mind. There was no use explaining fetishes, simply because there was no explanation for them, they were meaningless perversions with roots too far buried to dig up. I was the living example of this, I had never associated pain with pleasure before, but now like an explosion, it all made sense and yet made no sense at all. It was a devastating car collision of thoughts, auto after auto piled up with the fractured limbs of many hanging from the car windows overcome with smoke.

“Now me.” she said... It was an impossible request, I could never strike a woman, I could never lift my hand into the air only to bring it down upon a woman’s face and yet I was doing so. I watched myself raise my arm, unable to stop myself, my hand slightly quivering. I was possessed. Adona’s slaps had turned a switch in me I was unaware existed. I was a bull who caught a glimpse of the red cape; I was a Tasmanian devil disturbingly screeching at his prey. My hand was suspended in air for only a moment and then down it stuck with the precision of a samurai wielding a katana. A hot satisfaction gushed through my entire body when my hand made contact with her face. I had belted her so hard she turned away; her hair wrapped itself around her visage like black gauze. I feared that I had hit her too hard, but before I could think twice, Adona faced me again, wearing a look I’d never forget as long as I lived, a face of absolute satisfaction, though it went beyond that. She was experiencing something I had never encountered before. It was the pleasure brought on by pain. Now it was her turn, she screamed, “Again!” and again I batted her. “Again!” and again I stuck, this time I followed through. I backhanded her, continuing my stride, my knuckles making a terrible sound on her cheek. I felt inward pain, as though I was committing pure sin, deadly sin. This was depraved, this was vile, but my inward pain only served to enhance the outward pleasure. We were churning milky sin

into buttery crime. She began to grind on me, rocking her hips back and forth. She was bleeding liquid and the bed became wet with our juices. She made a sound, but it couldn't be considered a word, no, it was more of a primal grunt. It had been locked away inside her heart and my slap had broken it loose. Finally, I found my way inside of her. Her hot crevice slid along me like the greased pistons of an engine. There was no grace involved, no smooth metaphors to describe it; we were participating in the basest form of human love known to mankind. She began to bark like a dog, going *ruff ruff* and growling. If I had not been so hypnotized by the experience I would have thought then, what is corrupted about this bird? What mind altering drug had bugged her wiring? But I was unable to think. My mind was blank, totally consumed with the wellspring of mania brought on by my sudden need to be hurt. I wanted to be punished, I wanted to be sullied, I was dirt, I was scum, I was a maggot, why was I allowed to fuck like a man with dignity? What accidental deed had I done? I'd never do *good* purposefully, that was common knowledge! I was a demon made flesh and I needed to be punished for my crimes against humanity. Fifty smacks should do the trick! I didn't even desire ejaculation in the traditional sense any longer; I wanted it to be beat out of me, I wanted to be hit until I leaked onto the floor like a naughty dog that couldn't hold his flea-bitten bladder. How did I communicate this desire to Adona? I dare not say it aloud and my body was unable to stop firing away at her like a jackhammer. I was going to reach climax any moment, I was going to eject the lava of life with or without the aid of my mind. Adona took my hand and wrapped it around her throat. I followed her lead and squeezed her neck until her face became a bright red and the veins of her throat bulged and became as thick as tree branches. Her eyes rolled back into her head. She was cumming. Her whole body shook uncontrollably. It was as though we were animatronic lovers and our bolts had come loose. I expected to smell smoke from our loins they were clashing together so feverishly. I slightly let go of her neck, keeping my fingers in place, but letting oxygen make its way into her lungs. This infuriated her. I had ruined her perfectly timed orgasm and deprived her the light-headed feeling she so desperately needed in that moment. Regular orgasms were no longer enough for her now, they had become obsolete, she needed to reach near black-out in order to quench her perverse physical demands. The lack of air to her brain amplified the intensity of the orgasm by a hundred times, it became the closest thing to an out-of-body experience imaginable and I had stolen it away from her. She belted me across the face so powerfully that if it had been done outside of this little tussle, I would have become irate, but now, it was as though she opened up her anus to me. I came immediately and clamped down on her throat with my entire grip, squeezing so hard I wouldn't have been surprised when I opened my eyes she lay before me dead. Her hips went wild and crashed into my pelvis with a sound that can only be compared to shattering glass. The sheer force of semen exploding from my bayonet pushed the fellow out of her gash and sprayed like a fire hose that had slipped from the marshal's hands, a voodoo snake attacking from every direction, wiping wildly, spraying the white holy

water all over Adona and I, baptizing us, drenching us both in millions, if not billions of microscopic love confetti, as though we had burst a piñata filled with tiny particles of bliss.

As we lie in bed together the thoughts of my worthlessness and my desire to be punished were completely gone. I even felt a bit ashamed for thinking such things and I was partly relieved to be of sound mind again. Something about what Adona had done unleashed what must have been very deeply hidden perversions that only could have surfaced given the right stimuli. Now that the heat of passion was quelled, my body hurt from all of Adona's slaps and a faint ringing in my ear was no longer a catapult for lust, but a minor annoyance that I was immediately fed-up with. That was the most I had ever been possessed in the bedroom. I become someone else entirely, a primitive version of myself while being an impervious immortal who only doubled in strength when inflicted with pain. What a shadowy business we had just conducted. I believe I thought our actions were so dark, not because of the physical element, but because of what I thought of myself in the process, how my entire self-image deteriorated like the chemicals on an old photograph. The picture of myself was altered indefinitely, that was sure, for no one could experience such a devastating event and not be changed, especially when sex was involved. How far the rabbit hole of perversion went was unknown, but I surely had tumbled a ways down that evening. I had truly believed I was nothing more than a manifestation of miserable mischief, that I was one rung above slug and perhaps the ultimate justice would just have been Adona plunging a dagger into my heart as I reached climax. Where had these thoughts come from? I almost felt as though I had betrayed myself. I spent such incalculable time reassuring myself that I had a place in this world and all of that vanished as soon as Adona's hand converged with my cheek. Though, part of me did feel revitalized at the filthiness I now laid claim to. You would be lying if you said Homer Miller was a close-minded individual and that notion excited me. I liked being repulsive, I enjoyed bathing in waters *normal* people would never consider dipping a toe into. In a way it made me feel more civilized, because I was only embracing nature. I was taking my instincts to be a dog and surrendering to them, perhaps getting closer to being one with the universe as any old fool chained to a tree stump ever dreamed of being... In addition to my new found respect for pain and the abnormal feeling it gave me, I was also feeling one-hundred pounds lighter as my fleshy change purse had finally been emptied. It had been a massacre, a true bloodbath, if you were to consider each sperm a potential life, that is. With the amount of fluid I discharged, it wouldn't be outrageous to consider me in the same league as Atilla the Hun or Ivan the Terrible or Vlad the Impaler, for I had certainly impaled Adona, cutting into her so deeply that she'd never again feel so full. No prick or meal could or would fill up the empty space within her, not how I had done, and it wasn't that I was so big either. In fact, I was quite average, but it was the way in which I penetrated her, the way I used passion and direction and force. A penis was an arbitrary tool in the face of raw, sadistic passion. I could have used my pinky finger so long as I wielded it ruthlessly, being sure

to apply pressure where needed, squeezing, twisting, rubbing, pushing, everything with staggering adoration. That's what the common man misunderstood. Sex truly wasn't about the physical act, but the atmosphere that if created properly could hypnotize a woman. In this case Adona had contributed to the hypnotizing, for we both were in a dreamlike trance, but that was something else I welcomed. My needs were just as important as hers and it was not my sole duty to wave a pocket watch in front of her eyes, allowing her to slip away into a world of satisfaction without me. The madness Adona invited into the bedroom was her way of giving something, of continuing the long sexual tradition of sacrifice. The only way to truly experience the joys of sex was to give yourself entirely and hope that the other person gave themselves with the same intensity. The heart played various roles, but sex like the kind I had just experienced with Adona had nothing to do with the red beast locked between your lungs, it had no place in passionate filth. It was the component that turned fucking into love making, but when you wanted to only to fuck, you could gladly remove your heart, place it on the nightstand, and begin the loveless rendition of physical absorption knowing full well in your mind that the secret to a good fuck was generosity.

Laying there, the bed warm with the leftover balm of two wayward souls, a terrible thought struck me- what had happened to poor Cypress, my one-eyed, one-legged feline companion and only living witness to Rome opening up her arms and embracing me at the Colosseum? I feared that in my drunken blackout, Hogarth had found me and seeing Cypress figured that he was just another mangy cat of the night and left him there frightened and alone, thinking that I had betrayed him. It would be impossible to find him if this was indeed what had happened and all the peace I had found, sitting beside the hot flesh of Adona evaporated and was replaced by an unexplained dread. It was just a cat I had stumbled upon, but I felt as though I was committing a real atrocity by leaving it to fend for itself when I had promised it a home and milk to be lapped up. I knew it hadn't understood a word I said, but I still felt responsible for reaching out my pink muscle and flapping it like the tail of a kite on a windy day. It was odd, for I had never felt obliged to honor my words before and that was when they were spoken to human beings, and now I was in a tizzy over a drunken promise made to a cat. Either I was finally cracking up or I had gained some dignity on this trip- unintentionally, of course. I turned to Adona, her breasts were parted by their weight, hanging off her ribcage. The tug of her flesh at her chest was unmatched by the pull of my privates when her areolas became my eyelids. How easily distracted I was! Focus, Homer, your insatiable hustler, think of lowly Cypress, sharpening his claws, licking his fangs, plotting a traitor's demise. I shook my head like a cartoon character trying to concentrate. Thankfully Adona leaned over, blocking my view of her immaculate breasts, and lit a cigarette.

"Adona! Did you see a cat with one leg last night?" I asked suddenly. She looked thoroughly confused by my random question and replied with the cigarette still between her lips.

“I see no cat.” She said and snuggled back into her spot on the bed. She must have been without work, I thought, she must have found men to pay for her food and clothes and apartment, men who could not bear seeing her be anything besides the sexual goddess she was, for she seemed completely content sleeping away the day, if given the choice never leaving that delightfully snug gully she made for herself in the mattress. Her only task was to exhale cigarette smoke in foggy coils and rub her big, sumptuous behind deeper into the bed, making little pleasure noises as she did so. I wanted to make love to her again, but while my member took attach position, my mind was on Cypress, his marble eyes pointed to the sky, welling up with tears. I climbed out of bed and searched for my clothes, which were tossed about the room, surely a result of Adona’s overpowering avidity.

“Where you go?” She said, “Come back to bed.” How I’d like to! If only she knew! I was ready to go again, ready to humiliate and be humiliated. Like a swimming pool, my mind was filling back up with terrible thoughts. I had to get out of there quickly or I was liable to remain Adona’s slave forever. She’d bleed me like a vampire to keep me weak, she’d abuse me out of mere boredom, and the longer I was in the room with her, the more it all sounded so appealing. I finally located the rest of my clothes and was out the door before finishing buttoning my shirt. I called out to Adona to find me at Graham’s that evening as I closed the door behind me, the noise echoing in the hall with the same almighty ripple as a leather bound bible dropping to the floor of an ancient church. There was a lift, but I didn’t trust it, it being as old and sinister as it was, and to avoid getting soggy around the middle I hurried down the stairs and through the courtyard. I wasn’t exactly sure where I was going, back to the Colosseum, I supposed. It was more than likely a madhouse with tourists and admirers and Cypress would certainly be long gone, but it was worth having a look. I also didn’t know where exactly in the city I was or how far away Adona’s apartment was from the masterpiece of death, but I was hoping that intuition and some sort of drunken recall would lead me back in a similar fashion to how I found my way to Penelope’s lair when experimenting with the Angel of Death. I clinched the door handle to exit Adona’s building and pushed the door open onto the street. I hadn’t taken two steps when I saw Cypress curled up in a ball beside the entryway. The little ruffian had followed me and had waited outside all night. I was astonished to see him there, struggling to get to his three feet. I knelt down and greeted him. He rubbed the back of his neck along my knuckles and meowed weakly, but happily, his eyelid like a smashed grape. He must have followed Hogarth all the way back to Graham’s and then followed Adona and I on our long trek to her abode where we selfishly locked him out so she could ravage me in peace. My heart tripled in size being reunited with Cypress and suddenly I became extremely sentimental. I believed in that instant that he was the only creature on this planet that truly loved me. Max had not loved me, despite what she said, she only used me to siphon love to herself. Penelope loved me, but in an improper way. Why had she never given herself to me? I had made excuses for her, saying that the timing wasn’t right or

that we were just too stubborn to be together, but the truth was she was just a coward, a coward incapable of understanding me. Only if Edith could have known what a strong man she had created, if only she could see how tough I was, she'd probably come crawling back. She'd want me the moment I didn't want her, that's how women of her kind worked, infatuated by indifference, compelled by coldness... Why weren't they wanted? That was the question which expanded the universe, the enigma that prompted more shameless women into paths of personal destruction, sacrificing as many hearts as it took. They said people wanted what they couldn't have and they played it off like a cheap cliché, but it went much deeper than that. It wasn't only the absence that made the unattainable so alluring; it was that when someone or something didn't want you, it made you aware of how hungry for attention you really were. The low, almost sickly vision of yourself was highlighted in florescent yellow and you would do absolutely anything to forget the emptiness inside of you. People always needed to be desired, because they believed it meant they were worth something, but nothing could be further from the truth. They were only cheapened by their overabundance of magnetism, because what's rare is what's valuable, not what's common. People who spent their whole lives in shades of love were deadly parasites. They sucked the life out of real people, people brave enough to only accept love when it was authentic, people who only wanted to experience love when it was genuine and pure and selfless. Those were the very same people who comprehended that they stood the chance of never experiencing it at all. Not that love didn't exist, it did, but people didn't know how to fall into it. They abused it and belittled it and perverted it. They downright fucking mutilated it, in fact. The feeling that was supposed to bring solace, brought only pain and suffering. The feeling that was supposed to complete you only dismantled you, because love was not a fixture, it was not a trophy, it wasn't even something meant to be experienced by everyone. You had to earn it, you had to punch it into existence and be worthy of taking part in its glory. You needed to love yourself before you even considered attempting to love someone else and I'm aware of how miserably artificial that sounds, as though it belonged on phony motivational propaganda posters, but I made a life of contrived sentimental fever dreams, I thrived on idiotic utopian fantasies, for what should be, but never could be still needed to be strived for. Fuck realism, fuck practicality, I needed to grumble about what was true and aim for what was impossible, otherwise I could have been chewed up by the monotony and tragedy of this life. I could very well become content in this sadistic goddamn catastrophe, and I'd prefer spending the rest of my days stretching my arms toward something just out of reach, terminally dissatisfied, than accepting that love and life were things to be compromised... No amount of shouting or complaining would change a single thing, but it was what helped to keep me sane. I did not need love... *I did not need love*... I reviled it and held it in contempt. It had done nothing but show how odious it could be, how ugly its face was in the hands of people who did not deserve it, which was the majority. The bad had robbed the good of love, they held it for themselves and corrupted it and I was just another

casualty of the loveless' revenge on themselves. I was another innocent bystander shot down from the stray bullet of love, a man cut in half by the blade of poisonous affection, and though this rant would seem to only prove my bitterness, I did not feel bitter, I just felt sad. That's what told me that I had lost all hope. Bitterness suggested that part of me still yearned for reconciliation, that catharsis lived in the dense shrubbery of my mind, but sadness, the weight in my heart... that was a dead end. I had no place left to go inside myself. I knew I just needed to keep my arms outstretched, wider and wider until my reach embraced all things so that love became so small I wouldn't even feel its sting...

## 6

I felt righteous for thinking such thoughts about love, sitting outside of Adona's apartment, stroking Cypress. I felt justified in that moment of blindness, but I would go on to feel terribly ugly about my philosophy, when my spirits rose gleefully again, which they were sure to do. The human race often baffled me with their understanding of happiness. Most thought of it as a destination, a state of mind that needed to be arrived at and never again abandoned, not a continuously fluxing pool of brainwaves capable of peaking and then just as quickly bottoming out. Moments of sadness, depression and hopelessness were bound to make their way into even the most optimistic soul, when the defenses were down and a foe disguised as a friend presented themselves to you unexpectedly. Every experience encountered throughout a life may not be remembered in its entirety, but ripples from each moment forever rebound in the always growing universe of your subconscious and every now and again you'll see something, or smell something, or hear something or even think something that will make one of those ripples light up and reign down subliminal terror. The real murderer, however, was guilt. People felt guilty for their sadness when they thought they ought to be happy. They didn't take depression as an isolated incident, but a gracelessness and defiance to the happiness they were lucky enough to experience. Instead of allowing the momentary sadness to pass, they dwelled on it, letting it grow into a monster, the spawn of their slippery misery and their putrid guilt. When that happened, the game had been lost, happiness didn't stand a chance. I didn't know what made people inherently consider happiness a luxury, as though they didn't deserve it. Perhaps it was that so many other people weren't happy that even though they had arrived at the sensation properly, they still couldn't let themselves embrace it. How could one be truly content when babies were born with cancer, or wars were being fought? Was it the case that all ugly things had more substance than beautiful things? You rarely heard the argument: yes, there's war and it's evil and dead and awful and sickening, but then peace usually followed. Shouldn't we be thankful for that? Perhaps that we have to first hate in order to truly love was what spoiled it for everyone. To really love something you had to appreciate it as well, and if you did not first know what it's like to live without it and perhaps in some instances even revile it, how could you honestly say you

appreciated it? Was that the catch-22, or was it that happiness needed to be manufactured, occupied, obtained, and misery and sadness sprouted from the ground like weeds? Sadness was left about like the rifles of dead soldiers, ready to be picked up and fired again... To what ends did I ask these questions? I was not to know. Everything had seemed so clear to me, my thoughts, my feelings, my convictions, but the more I prodded, the more answerless questions I seemed to ask. Everything overlapped with contradiction; nothing added up, everything was just one piece short of making sense. I felt myself losing the grasp on the beliefs I felt I once had and I was gaining a better respect for the philosophers I already revered, for the most dangerous job was the process of asking questions...

By now I was regretting not asking Adona for some guidance home, because I still hadn't a clue of where I was and all I really wanted, what I desperately desired, was to lie down on Graham's sofa and snooze while the humidity leaked in like an invisible assassin rendering me comatose. My drunken stampede the night prior had turned into a miniature odyssey and I felt, as I stood vaporized by the stagnant morning sun, as though I'd never see a friendly face again. Cypress was doing fine keeping up with my pace on his three nimble legs, but I still hoisted him up into my arms and carried him along like one of those mad women and their teacup poodles. I trudged along the street with the indignant stomp of a child in the throes of a tantrum and the translucency of a ghost, for no one was paying any attention to my obviously in-need eyes, eyes that practically begged for someone to stop and take notice. Wasn't there anyone who could see that I desperately needed a point in the right direction? Perhaps they mistook me for homeless and figured I had not a direction to fumble toward. Perhaps they could tell I was American and simply didn't have the desire to help me. Whatever the case may have been I had got what I wanted: solitude in a foreign land, though it wasn't exactly what I had bargained for... Then, like an angel sent straight from heaven, I saw a familiar face between the sprawled pages of a newspaper. The face belonged to none other than Hogarth, the amiable chap from Graham's place who shared with us all of Mozart's filthy musings. I was relieved to see him sitting quietly among the Italians, nibbling on a little pastry and sipping a coffee, some of the foam embedding itself between the thin hairs of his mustache. I walked over to him. I could see his eyes dart up from the paper, but not to directly look at me, only to recognize that someone was approaching him. I had to say, "Hello, Hogarth." before he gave me his full attention.

"Homer!" he then cheerfully responded. "Glad to see you survived the night with Adona."

"May I join you?" I imposed.

"By all means."

I sat down at the table with Hogarth and removed my hat, brushing my smashed hair to the side with my palm. The table was shaded by an umbrella, but the sun still touched the tops of my ears and I could feel them smoldering.

“I’m happy I ran into you, actually. I was on my way back to Graham’s and I’m a bit lost.” I continued. Hogarth started to laugh a bit. “You’re right around the corner.” he said, pointing his arm to his right. “Just follow the sidewalk around the bend and it’s the second door.” I let out an embarrassed laugh.

“I must have been really turned around last night.” I said

“You were, but don’t feel bad. So many of the streets look the same around here. You’ll get into the swing of things.”

I felt good to hear Hogarth’s reassuring voice and I relaxed, settling into my chair and letting out a small grin. Finally, I had my North Star.

“Would you like something to eat?” he asked.

“No thank you. I’m afraid I haven’t a cent to my name.”

“Not to worry my new friend, breakfast is on me.”

“Well, if you don’t mind.”

“Not one bit.” Hogarth said and then said something in Italian, getting the attention of the waiting inside the café. The waiter promptly arrived at our table with a nubby little pencil and pad of white paper.

“What’ll have?” Hogarth said, emphasizing the *lul*, relishing in his American accent.

“Whatever you’re having will be fine.” And off went the waiter with our order.

“Do you speak Italian?” I asked Hogarth.

“Not fluently, no. Just a few things here and there that help me get by.”

“I’d like to learn. It’s such a beautiful language.”

“Yes, musical chaos it is. They’re always shouting at something or another. Mostly each other.” he let out a condescending laugh. “But I love these people. Perhaps it’s only an appreciation that an outsider can have. To me they all seem like characters in a play, but as they carry on down the street, pulling their children by their arms, screaming what sounds like musical gibberish, they are just living their lives. There’s nothing unordinary about it.”

“What made you come to Rome?” I asked.

“The same reason as every other American writer. To be inspired. Isn’t that why you came?”

“Oh, I’m not a writer.” I responded. Hogarth looked at me with slim eyes, as though he didn’t believe a word I said.

“Please. Have more respect for me than that, Homer.” he said.

“I’m telling you the truth.” I said.

“If you’re not a writer, what the hell good are you then?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re an awfully opinionated fellow for someone who’s not a writer. What do you do with all your bright ideas if not jot them down?”

“I don’t know.” I said, truthfully taken off guard.

“They have to go somewhere. You might as well write them down.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Think about it.” He said while removing a tobacco pipe from a small leather case.

“Perhaps I will. Got any advice?”

“You must respect me to ask for advice.”

“Let’s cut the gymnastics.” I said, finally rising to his challenge.

“Very good, Homer. As you probably knew before even asking me, no one can give a writer or any artist for that matter a single strand of advice, but I’ll try.

“Please.” I said.

“The last thing Moby Dick is about is a whale.”

And that’s all he said. He went back to reading his newspaper and sipping his coffee. Mine arrived shortly after.

“Thank you, Francisco.” Hogarth said without looking up.

I sat curiously and thought about what Hogarth had said, but I didn’t think too hard for it was advice I knew would lay dormant until rearing up one day and knocking the wind out of me.

What a fine fellow Hogarth turned out to be. I knew his abrasiveness was a way of sizing me up. Perhaps he viewed me as competition, I thought. After all he had been spending much more time with Adona and Eva and Dora than I had. Perhaps he was in love with one of them or all of them for that matter and here Homer Miller comes along to sleep with Adona right out of the gate and take aim on Dora. It was possible, even likely, but Hogarth didn’t strike me as the jealous, malicious type and sitting there, watching him read his paper; I knew that his heart belonged to the written word first and foremost. Unlike Penelope and I’s old friend Xavier who expertly played the role of a writer, Hogarth was a scribbler without effort or struggle. I’m positive he tried to slip it into one of the girls, maybe for no other reason than to accredit a romance story he was writing, but if he had gone after anyone it was most likely Dora. She struck me as a model of Hogarth’s dream girl, a concept I was also positive he had given up on long ago. Something told me pursuing her could bring about some animosity between the two of us, but I decided that it was worth every curse spoken under Hogarth’s breath and I knew he’d forget soon enough. It was true though that Dora was like a nugget of gold unearthed in a pan, surrounded by granulated dirt clusters. If you looked too quickly you’d miss her and she was a rare find, someone to grab onto and never let go of once you got her. I could see why he made a go of it, reinstating his belief in love for the moment and throwing caution to the wind. Alas, he had tried his hand with her and lost out. Happy day! One man’s tragedy is another man’s good fortune... Now, I was speculating about whether or not Dora and Hogarth had swapped fluids somewhere along the line, but even if they had I wasn’t bothered by it. A woman’s fluids were hers to do with what she pleased and if she so desired to mix them with someone the likes of Hogarth I

wouldn't object. She could have very easily blended them with Nero or even Graham when he was feeling frisky enough and perhaps tired of Hugo's boyishness. If it was anyone, I was relieved that it was probably Hogarth. But again, this was all of my creating. Hogarth and Dora could have never spoken two words to one another, but something told me that my abstractly concocted scenario had indeed played out. An unexplainable knowing comes over you when you interject yourself into a situation. You pick up on brain waves similar to how you can physically feel tension in a room and the entire story paints itself on the canvas of your mind. Dora had a way about her that was similar to Max in that people found themselves in love with her after barely spending any time with her. They both had a natural radiance about them that which at least for a little while masked their faults and made them seem almost supernaturally lovable. Some women had this power and I was already feeling the morbid effects of Dora's allure. However, I noticed that unlike most other women I encountered with this ability, Dora truthfully seemed oblivious. She didn't reap the benefits of such a gift; instead it made her feel like a commodity instead of a woman. And speaking from experience, it's true that while most women used this two-faced talent to hide their insecurities from themselves, Dora feared its awesome power of delusion. She knew that love wasn't so common as to be experienced again and again, that most of these men did not love her but loved the way she made them feel about themselves and that is what made her so unique. I hadn't been able to get her off my mind and I was already feeling that slight tug at the bottom of my heart like a child pulling on a balloon string that told me my faithful red muscle had set its sights on her. That's an unmistakable feeling and it's difficult to smudge it out or ignore it. I liked to imagine it takes over the heart the same way colored ink penetrates water, in slow-moving, graceful spirals, your love unraveling like a rolled out tongue whispering a secret, until the entire heart was full of one color, one emotion and confidence is what made it beat more so than blood. I'd soon go home and speak to Graham about her. I'm sure he'd know all the details I'd be greedy to know. She'd soon have forces against her she couldn't even understand and a conspiracy she couldn't fathom. Little did she know I planned to capture her heart the way boys capture a flag, shouting "olly, olly oxen free!" and running so hard their knees rattle... She had no idea that I'd soon be a patron of her bed, a fire to her darkness, someone she'd tell truths to when she'd ordinarily lie. It would seem I had her whole future planned out and she wasn't at all the wiser, but someone had to take action, someone had to move the world and I figured it might as well be me...

Hogarth and I chatted some more about various incidental things. I told him the tale of Cypress and how he came to be my companion. I even told him, against my better judgment, about Adona and the wild morning we shared together. Hogarth did not seem surprised by my filthy relation and even shared one of his own about Adona and the legend that had arose about her inserting the neck of wine bottle into her plum during one of Graham's soirees. This was a rumor which hardly mattered whether it was true or not. The fact that it existed was enough to

damn the woman to a life of ridicule. And the way Hogarth made it seem, to sleep with Adona was to pass some sort of initiation into the group, now making me a bona fide member of Graham's European gang. If I was feeling low about my experience with Adona, which I wasn't, all had been corrected when I heard that. The sorrow of a mistake is lessened substantially when someone close to you has made the same one, and if I was not the first to fall at the hands of Adona then any shame I carried with me had turned to an awkward pride. I still hoped word would not get back to Dora, though she'd be much dimmer of a person than I originally assessed if she had not drawn her own conclusions when she saw me drunkenly carried off in Adona's arms. I decided right then that I would lie to Dora if the subject ever came up. I mean it was my word against Adona's and I could be quite convincing when I had to be, making my eyes glassy, quivering my lip a bit. All it took was a good show to sell any stale deceit. I would tell her that I was too drunk to even lay a finger on Adona and when the morning arrived I was so worried about little, three-legged Cypress that I took to the streets immediately. Blood didn't seem too thick between Dora and Adona anyhow and as long as there was reasonable doubt, I would be able to persuade Dora to believe me. As I've said before, I was a liar, but thankfully I still had the wherewithal to realize I was a liar and admit it to myself. I know it sounds like a cheap rationalization, but the real liars you had to be concerned about were the ones who believed their own lies. That is when things became murky. I still clung to the idea that I only lied when it was in my favor to do so, which at the very least is more honorable than lying for the sake of lying. I was aware of my rotten ways and I did not lie to hurt, I lied only to survive. Max was one of the sad cases that lied so thoroughly it was difficult to classify them as lies directed toward me. Instead she was lying to herself and I was simply being lied to by proxy. This would be a very painful way to live had I cared, but thankfully, for everyone's sake, I did not and Max's lies only existed to nourish my own. Our relationship was never one of trust. At times it was a relationship of love, passion, joy, frivolity and romance, but it was never one of trust. I believe it was our inability to trust ourselves that led to our dishonest union. Max was a sorry case anyway you looked at it. Despite all her good qualities, she was a hopeless case in terms of her own happiness. She had put out a warrant for its arrest long before I arrived in her life. She did so by expecting little for herself. She was a flower bud that was trampled by a careless God. Some minor offense had probably occurred in her childhood when I was somewhere else experiencing my own traumas and because the world has a bizarre, cruel rhythm we ended up finding one another and feeding each other's monsters, the insecurities that prohibited us from being complete people. It was actually quite tragic, if you wanted to say truly what it was, because in Max I had found a doomed love. When one needed to give we only took, when one said yes, the other said no, when I was closed off she was exposed and when I was open she was afraid. We were like trains passing each other in the night or whales swimming beside one another in waters too dark to see and like anything lacking a strong foundation we faltered. It left you with the

question, what else could be done? Like a surgeon who loses a patient, once their blood goes cold, no matter much you want them to live they simply can't.

I was thinking a lot about Max, more than I ever had sleeping in the same bed with her and I couldn't help but think that I was going through some strange sort of mourning period, as though she had died. And in a bizarre way... she had. When I turned my back on her that day outside of her apartment when I first began this journey, I had killed her from my life. I had shoved her with both arms into the margins of my existence, making her nothing more than a memory that could be shaped and molded anyway I saw fit. In life, despite her cold ways, she was a full person with name, size, shape, color, odor, everything, but inside my mind she was whatever I painted her as, a stagnant outline that clung only to her positive or negative attributes, depending solely on what mood I was in. Did I hate her in that moment or did I love her? That was all that determined how she'd be remembered and portrayed to friends and future lovers. She was at the mercy of my fickle recollection, my sometimes brutal and vicious nature and my spiteful attitude. It was a foul and cheap thing to do, for she had no way to defend herself, though it was her prerogative to describe me any way she pleased to others and I had surely given her plenty of reason to cast me in a negative light. Something told me though that she wouldn't speak ill of me even if she was around others who were doing so and that was what tugged at the few remaining shards of guilt still left floating around inside my skull. I did, however, find it funny how roles had reversed. She had once painted me on her bloody canvases and now I was painting her, keeping what I liked and disregarding the rest. It made me question my motives. Was I mourning the loss of a friend? A loved one? Someone who could have understood me had I given her the chance? Or was I feeling the itch of an amputated limb? Or better yet, was I mourning for the sake of mourning? No, I wasn't so awful a person as to do that I don't think. I missed Max. I had gone through episodes already since departing from her, but the spastic and unexpected misery ceased only to be replaced with a steady and almost constant melancholy. This worried me. I was remaining attached to my old life when I should have been exploring the new one I had made for myself. Why were my thoughts on Max when Adona had already redefined the term 'sex' for me and Dora had begun to wipe the cobwebs from my heart? Why was my mind back in that apartment when it should have been splashing around in Trevi Fountain? Why could I not kill that part of myself, annul the parts of me that rooted in forsaken soil, burning Max like an article of clothing after a bitter divorce? Was she so different than a piece of clothing? Why was the image of that black boy's corpse still pasted to the inside of my eyelids? Had I not rectified these events, these people, could I not give them a place? I was drowning in my own memory, held prisoner by the life I had lead and there was nothing I could do to break free. I wanted to hide these things inside myself, I wanted to step forward new and enlightened, but I was caught, bound-up, my experiences becoming the buckles of a straightjacket which was wrapped around me so tightly I could barely breathe. I felt as though

my mind had become a field of crops for a storm of locusts to consume, all of them reproducing in mass numbers, fornicating their way into an army which then destroyed my ability to forget. The only way to rid myself was to set fire and start anew. This was possibly the great flaw of Man, the inability to forget the things you had seen and done, to forever have to feel that pain in your heart when you thought about someone you once loved struggling like a fool. I believed that leaving home would mean meeting so many new challenges that my brain simply wouldn't have the room to dwell on the mistakes I'd made, but unbelievably I found that the brain does not swoon or swell, it continuously doubles in size, like a warehouse forever expanding. There is no end to it and as a result there is no end to the sadness or fondness you can fit inside of it, and it reminded you to act carefully, for you'd live with those thoughts until the walls of the warehouse all collapsed together at once, when they could call you dead.

## 7

After parting ways with Hogarth and having him repeat his directions to Graham's, even though his flat was just around the corner, I set off for some shade. It was only noon or so and I was already completely spent. I think it was the lethargic air tumbling off the ocean that penetrated me so deeply. The salt baked into my skin and my armpits felt as though fresh jam was slathered between them, turning me into an oily snail good and proper. The brim of my brand new straw skimmer was already browned from sweat and my helpless flesh hose, which was once like a young pup, still dripped genital sap like a defeated Cyclops letting out soft, fat tears into the bosom of his mother. Adona had done me in. I knew I'd need more melon and prosciutto in my cast-iron depository before I was ready for another round with her. Like a heavyweight boxer delivering the knockout punch she left me reeling, little imaginary stars and tweedy birds dancing around my head as I hit the mat with a thud. She had marked me all right, as though she was a vampire and that encounter was the first of many to draw my blood and turn me into a creature of the night. If vampires we real, I felt they were certainly Italian. The Italian people had an extravagance about them that fit well into undead lore, a prestige and gracefulness, a certain feminine quality, even, a taste for the theatrics. Plainly, they were dramatic beasts, all hot-heads with fierce tempers that only needed the slightest nudge to blow. They were so goddamn emotional all the time. I was accustomed to the cold, calculating characters in which my friends played, always afraid to show any sort of passion, just in case that passion was somehow misguided. To them excitement was foolish, naïve. The man who had optimism in his heart was just a boy in man's clothing, a sheep that was primed and ready for the abattoir. Life was not an experience to be enjoyed; it was a cruel trick that needed to be reservedly judged from a cold distance. God forbid they were caught allowing themselves to get lost. No, they always knew or pretended to know the vile truth. What blimey fools. I suppose they were being dramatic in their own way, giving such gravity and weight to everything. Didn't they know it

didn't matter one way or the other, that being happy was equally and pointless as being sad, only much more fun? It was as though all the raindrops that fell from the sky were God's tears accumulating into a pool of sorrow for them to drown themselves in. In this regard, I admired the Italians. It took guts to wear emotion on your sleeve; it took a true sense of self. They didn't try to be someone they weren't, in fact they give themselves heart attacks doing the very opposite. Every Italian I'd seen so far looked twice their age, as though life had taken them into an alleyway and worked them over. They stuck cigarettes in their mouths and sucked the smoke into their bulging neck veins. They let the sun cook their already baked skin and boil the grease in their hair, but they were alive in the most elemental of ways. They lived with love and hate in their hearts, no in between, no grey, only blood red.

The door on the street which led to Graham's apartment was locked. It was a large wooden door with bronze knockers. I reached up and knocked three or four times. There was no answer. I then waited a few moments and tried knocking again. Still no answer. Of course the bastard was missing, probably frolicking somewhere with Hugo and Robertino in tow, leaving me at the mercy of the street. I couldn't be too sore at him though, because it was I who stormed off drunkenly into the night with no regard for Graham or geographical location, for that matter. What was I to do now? I didn't want to wander off again. I could go back to Adona's house, but I wasn't sure I could stomach the awkward conversation, the idle chit-chat that two people have when not locked in the arms of coitus. I had absolutely nothing of substance to say to her, nor her to I. If I were to continue this charade, I was certain that sex would be the crux. Every encounter would be laced with superficiality and the sole desire to inject my flesh needle into her eternal wound. Otherwise it simply couldn't survive. How does a house with a foundation of sand expect to stand? There were those male monkeys who thought intercourse was the end all be all, and I know because I am often one of them, but if you hope for a shred of anything more and it is not simply a onetime experience, you must at least establish even the most base foundation for no matter the lust, there will be moments when you must speak to one another. I have yet to meet the woman who is mute or born without vocal cords or born without the desire to converse, who only has the desire to give and receive physical pleasure. My issue is that Adona was part of Graham's circle. I would be seeing her regularly if not often and I couldn't for the life of me conjure something to say to her. There was more beneath me than a desire to be denigrated, to feel the perverted tickle of being made lowly, but how could I share it with Adona, whose mind truly operated differently in every way? Even if I were to open my mouth and let words launch from the pink diving board between my teeth, they'd land upon deaf ears. Adona's philosophy toward life was so severely different than mine that I honestly believe the fact that English was her second language would play less of a role in her not understanding me than simply being unable to comprehend my ideas. She was a victim of beauty, something I thought I left behind in America, but sadly rediscovered in Rome. It seemed this whole world was infected with this

plague, the plague of the false idol of beauty. Because Adona was circumstantially born with a body and face desirable to most men, she had let her brain rot inside her skull, becoming nothing more than something to fill a skull with, because lord knows, it was more about simple volume than it was actual substance. Because she had tits and an ass that most everyone, myself included, wanted to sink their teeth into, she never had to do much of anything in this life. The many were ugly and we championed the beautiful people, putting them on levels so high that they simply no longer had to play by the same rules. Back home I saw men and women who fit into the definition of *beautiful* that media and advertisement had written for us excel with little more effort than keeping their face attached to their bodies. And while this was happening I saw truly beautiful people, but people with perhaps a little too much fat around their bellies, or a few too many with uneven eyes, or just people who didn't fit the generally accepted description of beauty get trampled and forgotten. The American dream was a genetic accident and it gave license to these people to degenerate into superficial, uninteresting, mean-spirited, hateful, dull mannequins. How could you connect to the human race if you'd never heard 'no,' or if your heart had never been broken, if you'd never felt the cold sting of rejection, or never had to work so hard the palms of your hands felt as though they had been skinned? What did you have to offer us besides twenty years of beauty? What was that really worth in the end? What were you when the inevitable onslaught of wrinkles and grey hairs began to descend upon you? Age was the true Angel of Death, it caught up to everyone, but He was not after your life this time. What you had couldn't be considered life; it could only be called a photograph, a still frame of existence. You died long before, but somehow your body kept moving, your mouth kept curling into horrific smiles. How many times had your breasts been fondled, how many times had your behind been squeezed, how many times had the firm cock been slipped into you and was it worth it to be even emptier? How did you rationalize the fact that the closest you'd ever come to being alive was to have a living prick inside of you? If I sounded severe, it's because these people need severity. I, Homer Miller, wanted to shake them out of their apathy and reinvigorate their soul! What lousy, boring scum these people were, but not simply because they were beautiful understand, it was because they were beautiful and satisfied with such an outcome. Where was your desire to experience? Where was your yearning to commence life, to ask questions and find answers? Were you that pitiful to settle for luck? Were you that weak to remain an oyster with no pearl within? I held these *people* in the vilest contempt, but what did it say about me that I'd still make love to them? I won't play any games, it wasn't for a grand reason, it wasn't me proving a point to myself or anyone else, it was me terribly fucking one of them because I could. I sometimes had the opportunity to dance with the upper crust of our gene pool and I'd taken it each time. I was a participant in necrophilia in a sense, because I lied down with the dead- the spiritually dead, that is. I made love to passionless corpses because the shallowness in me enjoyed their exterior beauty. The truth was a big heart and a rich mind didn't bring about the orgasm. It was

despicable, it was savage, but it was true and that didn't mean I couldn't hate them, as well. It only meant that I didn't practice what I preached and that singular fact alone is what assimilated me into the human collective. I will say, however, it is the beautiful girls that fuck like stiffs. They put forth no effort and why should they? They viewed it as a pleasure enough to be penetrating them. They found room in their miniature hearts to spread their legs, so why garner any skills in the bedroom? It was the women with blackened portraits of themselves in their hearts that earned each orgasm like a cashier forcefully punching open a cash register. It was girls that had some reason to doubt themselves who were tender, loving, passionate and skilled when you took them to bed. It was less about two preexisting beauties and more about making a brand new beauty, one that didn't necessarily match up with the meaning we'd come to almost unconsciously understand from the outside world. It was a beauty with some depth and some soul, one that went beyond flesh and bone and I was proud to say that for all my meaningless fucks with mannequins, I had also been a part of that unknown beauty, the only beauty that never settled for the mere reflection of itself.

I was sitting at the base of Graham's door, my elbows on my knees, my head slumped to my chest when I heard a metal ringing on the ground beside me. Cypress let out a soft meow at the noise. I looked down and saw that someone had thrown change on the ground beside me. They must have thought I was homeless, I thought to myself. Was I *that* sheepish looking? Had Adona sucked that much life from me that a brand new suit couldn't stand to fend off people thinking I was a vagrant? Then I realized how broken down poor little Cypress looked and knew had I seen myself sitting how I was with a three-legged cat, I would have pitifully tossed a few coins my way as well. Even though my pride made me insulted, my practical, shameless side was overjoyed to finally have some Italian currency of my own. How was I to blow it? I got to my feet and saw that that presumptuous gentleman had released the equivalent of two full dollars into my company. God bless him. I looked to my right and saw that down the narrow street was a larger main street which intersected. I snapped at Cypress to follow me and he did so down the road, hobbling a bit. When we got to the main street I looked around, a statue of a bearded man to my left and a movie house to my right. It seemed to be destiny. I'd catch a picture while I waited for Graham to return home. It would be an Italian film no doubt, but it'd be good to get out of the sun and see the images flicker on that big screen regardless of if I could understand what they were saying or not. I liked the picture show and I'd go whenever I could back home, sometimes even bringing Baybrooke along with me. He'd watch like an idiot the moving pictures, completely in awe of them. I always thought it took a certain gullibility to be suckered in by the pictures, but Baybrooke after all was a sucker. Like I said though, I enjoyed the pictures, I could just never invest myself fully enough to cry or anything like that, I couldn't detach my brain from thinking that these were all actors on the screen having pretend emotions and saying deep things that were made up by some curly-haired writer in a small, smelly room six months before.

Books were where my imagination ran wild and not just wild, but fast, pummeling forward like a racehorse around the last bend of the track. And it happened seamlessly, as though I was reading a sentence one minute and then spinning my own yarn the next, myself as the central character, of course. It took a constant fight to keep me focused on the story between the pages and not the one in my mind where I was bedding the damsel in distress, making her into a fair maiden, but leaving her distress intact. But maybe, perhaps, since the film would be speaking a language foreign to me I'd have an easier time letting go of reality. Cypress and I walked to the ticket booth. To my surprise they were playing Buster Keaton's *The General*. It was a uniquely American film and a silent one at that. That's what was so surprising to me, why would they show a film set during the Civil War in Italy? But then it gradually dawned on me: how in my tucked away city there were cafés themed like Paris, other parts of the world must have idolized American culture, they must have taken the clichéd tid-bits and blown them up into grandiose wet fantasies, just as America had done to other parts of the world. *The General*, a story I felt could only truly be appreciated in the States actually had more power to captivate in Rome because the viewers would be filled with a much deeper sense of longing. In their difference with the story, they'd find similarities; they'd look beyond the plot and find themes that are common of every human being. Sure, the Civil War was an American conflict, a cancer that befell 300,000 Americans when our country was barely old enough to stand, but the train tracks in Keaton's picture represented a plotted chase that everyone could imagine themselves on, the mechanical sounds of the gears churning, turning and burning, matching the metalwork of their own hearts constantly in chaotic flux. Everyone has desired to be brave in the eyes of one they loved. These were universalities that proved art could suspend the petty barriers set down by land, water and man. So, I eagerly bought my ticket and entered the darkened theater, leaving Cypress on the sidewalk to wait for me. The theater itself was a small, stuffy room as though a black box. The darkness felt good, although the heat may have been worse inside than out. I took my seat in the row second to the front and I sat toward the aisle. Shortly after finding a comfortable position in my dreadfully firm chair, I heard the crank of the projector begin to click. A newsreel began which depicted Italian soldiers marching along like army men in perfect single file lines and all of their faces looked as though they were mad at the world. They marched so fiercely for marching nowhere, only in little squares so the camera could capture them big and strong. They certainly looked formidable, like characters I'd gladly avoid. A voice came from somewhere and spoke feverishly about the images on the screen. I didn't know what they were saying, but one Italian man behind me let out a wretched sound and threw a crumpled up newspaper at the screen and then another gentleman began to shout at him. After that a very funny, very silly looking fat man appeared on the screen. This was none other than Mussolini. There were no cheers or hollers when his face appeared. Instead there was silence and the faint echo of staunch attentiveness. Again I couldn't understand what Mussolini was saying, but he seemed very

pleased about whatever it was. So this is the gentleman Graham told me about, I thought to myself. Where did his passion for county come from? His pride? You could see it dripping off his forehead in the form of sweat. So proud of his heap of dirt. I was an American by birth, but I had forfeited my citizenship, if not formally, most certainly mentally and it was not a hard decision, because truthfully, I never felt any ties to my homeland. Not sincerely, anyway. I hadn't a choice in the matter; I hadn't selected America from a pool of countries after carefully examining the facts. I was simply born there and I didn't find that something that constituted pride- happiness, sure, but not pride. I was gleeful to be conceived and deposited on American soil, the blood and tears of Indians permanently caked to the bottom of my feet upon taking my first step. I saw the entire event as luck. I just as easily could have been born in the poorest province of Africa. This ideology is what proved that I would make a lousy soldier. I believed that what made a truly exceptional soldier was not only supreme skill, but conviction and I totally lacked even the most faint of convictions. I did not believe in a single damned thing, certainly not enough to go and die for it. What had America done for me that it hadn't violated for someone else? What had America given me that it also hadn't taken away? Wasn't my luck the demise of my neighbors'? What about the Negroes? Were we suppose to ignore the fact that our constitution, despite using the phrase 'all men,' only applied to the very few of men? Are we suppose to be blind to the fact that the well which housed the ink that very document was written in most likely rested upon the small of a slave's back? We loved to celebrate our intentions. We glorified all our promises and for a while I did too, feeling my heart swell up with pride as I set my eyes on fabric colored red, white, and blue, but I was born white and male and Jesus Christ, let's not be naïve, those two accidents set me on a path of righteousness. It was easy to be proud of my country being a white man, because the men who came before me were stupid, repugnant, pieces of putrid, miserable shit that happened to share the same skin color as me and used their own ignorance to reserve my stake in the world. We claimed to be capitalists in America, giving every person their fair shot to earn what they deserved to earn, but that was a thoroughly corrupted ideal. There was nothing fair about America. We enjoyed watching people squirm like worms in a balled up fist. We were a country of legacies and reputations, memberships and societies. If you happened to belong to such a group, then right this way, the world was yours, but if you didn't, ha, enjoy the snake pit, our deepest apologies, thanks for playing, bon voyage. If you weren't strong then you were weak, if you weren't the best then you were the worst. We were a country helmed by fundamentalist Christians, the fucking puritans, and the irony bled from the cracks in their bible-thumping hands, for they renounced Darwin's theory of evolution, but they practiced it in their daily lives. Survival of the fittest, make way for tomorrow, 'if you're not with me you're against me,' this was their social philosophy – step on those beneath to get a little higher. They felt they represented the true America, because America called itself capitalist, but we were actually founded by renegade, godless libertines, men who enjoyed women and good drink (my kind of

people), but men who also believed in compromise and moderation. Couldn't America see its contradiction? Couldn't they see they worshiped enterprise and not their intangible God? Jesus, their savior, was a bloody socialist for his own sake. He was the very man who said, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." What did this mean to them? How could they interpret that sentence in any other way and wasn't it horrifying that they could? And what struck me as truly odd about that statement was Jesus' lack of faith in the rich man. The founder of the concept of faith, the man who begged of it from all of his worshipers didn't have a single shred for the man who idolized the almighty dollar. I had heard time and again, "Repent! And be saved. Give yourself to God and you will be forgiven of your sins and granted admittance into heaven." Well, where were these words for the rich man? Was he not flesh and blood, was he not one of God's children, so why the certainty in Jesus' voice? Was it because he knew that a man obsessed by money would always be obsessed by money? Was it because he knew the core of man to be polluted? That was most likely the case. So when I watched that bald, fat Italian man, cross his arms, and yell into a microphone, I did not see terror, I did not see a monster, I saw Man at its innermost truthful, Man succumbing to his lesser desires for power and greed. And what a strange juxtaposition it was to see that man followed by Buster Keaton, broken, alone and poor fighting for ideals that were manipulated and changed by larger fingers on bigger hands that belonged to more powerful people. What kept us from truly rising up against such injustice, for surely not everyone was so pitifully doomed by greed, even rich people; they weren't all as evil as the bible would have you believe. This world was made up of well-intentioned people; people who practically begged to help, but simply didn't have the means to do so. There were these folks that spoke of revolution, but only so far as to make a buck for themselves and feed the ever-growing cyclone of misinformation and deceit that these other well-intentioned people got their noble notions from. Sadly the good were stupid for the most part and they bought into the things they watched and the things they read. They had been conditioned against critical thinking. These hoax revolutionaries criticized the corporate world and the powers that be as the very same powers ran the companies which published their books and put money in their pockets. Anyone who truly condemned *the system* was in fact a spy who worked for *the system* whose job was to create the illusion that there were still people free of operating outside of the system, thus making the system's total and fuck-all control of everything easier to digest. How to truly rebel from the system, in my opinion, was to embrace it and manipulate it as oppose to renounce it outright. If you wanted a decent life, the system could provide it for you, that's what was so brilliant about the whole thing. They had sewn up both ends. To refuse the mechanism was to totally sacrifice every opportunity to live freely and happily, with some shade on your back and food in your stomach. Simply by being born, you were entered into the database and given a number. You didn't have a say, no one really had a say, it had grown beyond that. There wasn't some evil

figurehead behind a desk somewhere who gave all the orders, that was fairy tales, a trite movie plot. No, what was happening was much more sinister. It had come to a point where the rules of the system were being executed by a phantom hand, operating on their own with no one pulling the strings. A system had been put in place by years of refining ideas and submitting concepts – no master plan, no big reveal, just humans’ desire to control things growing so wildly out of control that it was able to stand on its own feet and literally bleed into every corner of the world. I too am realistic enough to know I’ve been processed, packaged and shipped, that I’m constantly standing on the shoulders of midgets, but I’m free now writing these words with no one telling what letters to use or messages to deliver, and I was free then inside that Italian movie theater watching Buster Keaton with a big smile on my face and tears of laughter drowning by eyeballs and it’s because I was free in my heart. That is the only place truly impenetrable. Minds could be controlled; thoughts influenced, but the heart what like a giant whale breaching the sea water and turning on its backside, plunging to depths so dark that no one can find them unless they desire to be found.

When the film was finished, I strolled out of the theater and found Cypress waiting for me lovingly. Whoever said dogs were the only noble creatures? The film had made me melancholy, though I couldn’t say as to exactly why. It ended happily enough, but my thoughts were on Max again and I was starting to become irritated at how she continuously popped up in my brain unannounced and unwelcomed. I kept thinking back to how she fell apart so when I told her time was up, like the petals from a flower bouquet placed too close to a fireplace. Her reaction struck me deeply, like a ripcord, sending an electric current all the way through my body. It was miserable to see a person, any person, but Max especially deflate before your eyes. My ego raged as it meant I had that much power over another person, but I was equally deflated by seeing a woman’s spine dry up and break apart like condensed milk. It was as though she realized all the love she had for me in that moment, but it was already too late. A person could not wait around for someone else to work past all their emotional hang ups, I told myself, walking back to Graham’s. It was unfair of her to ask me to reconsider my feelings when it finally dawned on her that I was something worth saving, that she was in fact capable of love. Where was that love when we spent countless nights together lying side by side in bed like cold fish? Where were her tears when I went out of my way to be sweet to her? Why was she saving them up for the grand finale? Was that it? Were her tears the red curtains of her miserable stage play? Why had your body never moved in such a way before, like ribbons or a broken cobweb drifting to earth? Why had your clam never opened up so wide and suctioned onto me like wet lips around a lollipop? There were many people capable of love, but many who were undeserving of it and Max was one of them, with her famously cold ways. She had her chance! I shouted to myself. Maybe I wasn’t the best lover, maybe I wasn’t the truest man I could have been. Perhaps I was downright awful to the poor girl, but how was I to know she was alive

beneath that pulsing flesh? ...How dare she fill me with guilt from half way around the world! I repeated in my mind as I stormed toward Graham's door. What had happened to her, what snapped inside her mind when she heard me say 'goodbye?' And why did I feel like I was the destructor of something miraculous? It was as though her heart had become a dandelion and to break it only meant putting my lips together and blowing...

## 8

On Graham's sofa I rested, a barbell attached to my heart with fishing wire. Hugo buzzed around the room like a little bee preparing supper.

"I was worried about you, old man." Graham said. "You've got to stop disappearing like that. What am I to tell your brother or Phineas had you drowned in Trevi Fountain?"

"Tell them anything you like." I said.

"What's the matter, old man? Why so blue. You're in Rome. You made it. Aren't you happy?"

There was that word again: *happy*. Was I *it*? Was it an *it* I could be? I certainly didn't feel happy, but then again I had determined that happiness didn't altogether exclude moments of depression. I wasn't happy exactly in the moment, but that didn't necessarily mean I was an unhappy person. No, happiness and unhappiness existed on a higher plane, one that could be judged not by the tedious, but by the grand. Happiness was large brushstrokes and I was currently caught up pencil marks of a rudimentary sketch.

"I don't know, Graham. I've been so down lately." I said.

"That's surprising, especially after spending the evening with Adona." Graham began to smile.

"I've been meaning to hound you about that. What the hell is wrong with you turning me over to such a woman in the state I was in?" I demanded to know.

"I thought given the state you were in, Adona would be just the cure. She had her sights on you the moment she walked into the room. I thought you'd be glad, hell, I thought you might even be grateful given how you complain about your *fleshy knob*, or whatever you call it. I swear to God, a pig never can admit to his piggish ways."

"Wait a minute now, I am grateful you dramatic bastard, I just thought you might have placed me in the arms of Dora instead. I did indeed receive what I was long overdue to receive with Adona, perhaps even a bit more, but you were the one playing match-maker between Dora and I in the first place."

"Dora is a real woman, Homer, not one of the animals you're used to. I think she might have a real chance of fixing your wretched ways, of helping you to leave behind the immature little boy in you."

"You mean how Hugo has done for you?" I said viciously.

“There’s a difference between keeping the company of boys and being a boy, Homer.”

“One day your wit is going to fail you, old man.” I said.

“Unlikely. But don’t look so grim. Hugo is making you a delicious Italian dish for dinner, something his mother used to make him... and when you’re finished and your belly is full, I’ve arranged a meeting for you with Dora...” Graham smiled again, his queer, toothy smile. I jumped up at the sound of Dora’s name.

“Dora! You’re as sly as the devil.”

“Slyer. Now go get washed up.”

And just like that Graham had taken over the role of father to me. Where my own father had failed a million times Graham had succeeded. *Go get washed up*, he says, what a ridiculous little man. How could it be the most devious man I’d ever known had my best interest at heart? How was it that I had become the bastard child of him and Hugo? I was befuddled, but nevertheless, I did what I was told. I went into the washroom and ran my hands beneath the water, washing away the day’s filth. As I was doing so, I heard a feminine squeal, which I immediately knew came from Hugo. I rushed out into the front room to see what the commotion was. Held between Graham’s thumb and index finger was the neck fat of little one-legged Cypress.

“What in God’s green earth is this creature?” Graham asked accusingly.

“It’s not a creature. It’s a cat.” I responded.

“What is a cat doing in here?” Graham said, now like a father more than ever, as though I was his little boy and I had disobeyed him.

“He’s mine. I found him on the street. He needed some companionship.” I said.

“He’s not going to stay here.” Graham dictated, showing me the father I was familiar with.

“What are you talking about? He’s just a cat. The poor fellow only has three legs.”

“I hate cats and don’t want one, especially such a filthy, decrepit one in my house.”

“What do you expect to do with him?” I asked, getting quite heated.

“Throw him back onto the street where he came from.”

“He’ll die! He was barely alive when I found him.”

“And so he’ll be another dead Roman alley cat.”

“No, I won’t let you!” I shouted.

“What could this cat have done to get you to act like such a spoiled child?”

“Listen Graham, you’ve been beautiful to me, you’ve been a saint, let’s not revive the fucking lousy prick I knew back in the States. At least let him live in the hall, outside the door. I’ll put fresh milk out for him every day; it will be as if he’s not here at all. Is that a fair compromise?”

“And where do you think the money for the milk will come from?” Graham asked.

“Don’t be a heel, old man, it doesn’t suit you.” I said.

“Fine. I relent. It can stay, but I don’t want to see it running around here, licking itself all day.”

“The only thing licking itself around here will be Hugo, Graham, I promise.”

Graham tossed poor, helpless Cypress to Hugo who now accepted him warmly and began to caress the cat lovingly. I, feeling unreasonably happy with myself for defeating the almighty Graham, walked onto the small balcony of the apartment, which was decorated with beautiful flowers. In the middle was a small table and resting upon it was a chess board. Ah, perhaps I should try my luck and see if I can’t beat Graham twice in one night, I thought to myself, but then again, no. I should quit while I was ahead and begin getting ready for my rendezvous with Dora. Oh, sweet Dora! The breath of fresh air to my weary lungs! Oh, Dora, you meek little child, so full of womanliness your brazier’s bursting and your panties have unraveled! I cannot wait for our meeting! How I will patch your brazier and knit your panties only to rip them off again! It is time for a good and proper bout of love. I want to return to my position as gentlemanly pleaser, no more stooge for Adona, no more acts of slavery. No, I want to please you, I want to pleasure you; I want to slip between your legs like a snake and bite you with my venomous fangs, Dora. Take me to your chateau and drown me in kisses. You are as Graham described you, real. You are a real woman and I can’t wait to be feel your reality!

Not long after I finished eating Hugo’s delicious meal did I hear a delicate knock on the door with what must have been a smaller even more delicate fist, like a frozen rose beating against wooden shutters during a wind storm. That was my Dora, or who was soon to be *my* Dora. Right then she was just Dora. She lay claimless, but by night’s end she would have a new identity and quickly enough the names Homer and Dora would become synonymous with one another. We’d be inseparable, like two lovebirds touching wings in the sky. I quickly dodged into the bedroom and fiddled with some of Graham’s bedside items as Hugo answered the door and showed Dora in. She took baby steps entering the foyer as though she had never been there before. Hugo called out to me, a fine actor he was.

“Just a moment, Dora, my dear!” I shouted, a voice with no body. I then waited a moment longer, ruffled some of the bottled scents on Graham’s highboy as to appear preoccupied and then appeared miraculously out of the darkened room. There she was, tall, but looking like a tea cup with her adorable slouch. Before I could open my mouth Graham interjected, “Thank you for agreeing to show Homer the area in a proper way, while he is in a right state of mind.” Graham gave me humorously evil eyes.

“Oh, I’m never in a right state of mind, Graham. You should know that better than anyone.” I smiled and Dora let out a small laugh.

“Shall we?” I asked.

“Yes.” Dora said, which I was hoping was the first of many. ‘Yes,’ the skeleton key to unlock all doors of pleasure. It just took a whisper of the word to let loose all that we harbored

inside us. Was it any wonder that your mouth automatically made a smile when saying it? Yes, yes, yes, it was my favorite word, the only word I wanted to hear. It was the word that sprang up from within you during lovemaking; it was the word which consummated all acts of delight and brought about each and every new experience you laid claim to. It, like the term 'love,' embodied so much more than its lettering, it embodied all that was possible in the world, it gave a body to joy and a face to chance. Was there no end to what saying 'yes' could do? And all the while the word 'yes' had an ugly and foul twin. Like Cain, 'no' tried to club 'yes' into submission, bled it of its juices and made it cower in the fear of itself. How much safer 'no' was, how much less courage it took to say... After saying no for so long, you can forget how good it feels to say yes. I hoped I hadn't said my last one, for I had said so many more 'nos' in my life, and I hoped as my time ran out and Death asked me if I was ready to go, I'd have enough breath to say 'yes.'

It was Dora's idea to walk down to the riverbank. Along the river were stands where you could buy cheap charms of the Eternal city, but it was also quite beautifully decorated with white lights hanging on black wire, which because of the night sky made the lights look as if they were magically floating in the air all by themselves. I was uncertain of why, but warm lights were my idea of paradise, to see a square of them off in the dark distance, illuminating a small area with their eggshell glow brought peace to my heart, so I was more than pleased with Dora's choice to walk together. How long into our walk would I wait before taking her hand in mine? Not long. I couldn't resist. I'd have to entwine our fingers or I'd go mad. So as we walked I coyly lowered my left shoulder and lightly brushed the back of my hand against hers. It was like the secret knock of a club house door. Her hand slowly turned itself toward me and I plunged in, mixing our fingers so quickly we were liable to mistake which fingers belonged to what hand and just like that, our innocent tour, which was this outing's pretense, evaporated like water vapor and a first date arose from the mist.

"I hope you didn't think I was cold when we met." she abruptly said.

"No, not at all." I responded.

"I'm just shy. People often mistake it for being cold. I don't know, I just...clam up, particularly when there are women like Adona and Eva there."

"Well, I wouldn't worry too much about them, you're the loveliest. Those broads wouldn't know grace if it propositioned them."

"That's not what you seemed to think last night." She said it with a tongue like an assassin's blade. Dora was no dummy, that was certain.

"Well, I..." I was at a loss for words.

"Don't worry, Homer. It's always the same with every new man who comes around."

"What's the same?" I asked, playing the dummy.

"Adona gets her meat-hooks into them. I'm quite accustomed to it by now."

"I don't know what you mean." I said, quickly.

“Homer, please. You don’t have to...”

“No, I’m being honest. It’s true that I woke up in her bed this morning without knowing how I got that there, but I left immediately. I was mortified to discover her beside me. She swore that nothing happened, that I had blacked out as soon as we arrived at her place.”

“Are you telling the truth?” Dora asked distrustfully.

“I won’t lie to you and say I never lie, but I’m telling you the truth, Dora. Nothing happened between Adona and I and nothing will happen. If I may be so bold, I was actually hoping it was you I woke up beside.”

Dora let out an embarrassed smile and right then I knew that she had believed my lie. She now believed with all her heart that Adona and I had not joined in an unholy union and I had yet again successfully begun a relationship on a foundation of lies. I knew deep down, in my despicable heart, that if there was any chance of dancing the horizontal tango with Dora that evening, she had to believe that nothing had happened with Adona the night before. She had already set up her own defeat in her mind. She knew what Adona had done and what I had done and so she was immediately fighting her instincts to like me, placing me among the low-ranking scoundrels that she had usually made her company. What a sad thing it was to understand that Dora had been passed over in favor of ease, that any man she met had first dined on Adona or Eva, that Dora, the only person with a soul was the least cherished. Even though it was not true, I was happy that Dora believed for once someone had chosen her first. In my defense, I had chosen her first, and it was almost an act of fate that I ended up beside Adona. Was I to tell the truth and once again reaffirm Dora’s inferiority, remind her that her beauty, only guilty of carrying with it substance, deserved the punishment of being everyone’s second course, when our bellies were already full and we just felt like eating more to satisfy our gluttony? Perhaps my lie was an act of charity. The act the lie stood to hide was indeed sinful, but there I was again, lying for the greater good! The truth simply would not do! Dora’s feelings were protected and I was a sexual profiteer, all was right in the world. As I stated before, the world was held together by the glue of lies, when truths melted beneath their own moral light and filled in the cracks that simply existed without rhyme or reason. I did not desire lies to be essential, but they were. As rotten as I felt about lying to Dora I reconciled doing so in my head, calling it a necessary evil, knowing full well that if the opportunity had arisen for her to lie to me first she would have. The adult world was full of lies, something I liked to call ‘the exchange of lies,’ almost like the exchange of bodily fluids, as inevitable as they are poisonous. You could count on people being dishonest to you if it meant they’d prosper as a result, so truthfully, lying was just a defense mechanism fashioned by a cynical world. Sooner or later Dora would’ve removed my heart from my chest and bitten into it, revealing all the untruths that she told me in order to keep the waters from becoming choppy. How much of our lives was truth and how much of it was a lie? It was hard to be certain, the line blurred quickly when lying became part of survival, how killing became second nature when

your own life was at risk. Thankfully for myself and Dora I was a good liar and her feelings would be spared. I resulted then however to never lay hand on Adona again. I did not need her; Dora was more than I'd needed to satisfy any quivering perversion which struck me in the middle of the night. And this was something I aimed to accredit that very evening. Would Dora be the one to unlock something within me that was actually lasting? All the love I had known was fleeting, and honestly, I liked it that way, but somewhere inside was the desire to experience unconditional love. Could Dora be that soul that so surreptitiously bonded with my own, like the air caught between the lips of a passionate kiss? ...Oh, how I wanted to kiss her, how I wanted to suck and bite her lips, how I wanted to let our tongues play with one another like two dogs let loose from the leash, but I didn't want to *just* kiss her, no, I wanted to kiss her so deeply that some of her own soul broke off in my mouth, and I'd swallow it, eating the thing she identified as "soul" with a fork and knife, belching little heart-shaped admissions into the atmosphere, in love the moment I broke away to look into her unfairly vulnerable eyes. What did or didn't she know behind those glassy eggs and would our actual lovemaking compare to the love which was transpiring between our orbs that very moment? We were becoming professionals in visual intercourse, our eyes telling each other everything our bodies wanted, but perhaps didn't have the courage to execute. But then again, our bodies were prisoner to clothes, to the public, just wait until we were alone together in the dark. Then the heat radiating from our gooey spheres would seem like trivial foreplay, a playfulness elongated to the point of hypnotism, stretched out until we both were on the brink of madness. We'd go blind once the lights went out, rendering our eyes purposeless, and all the silent promises I had made would have to be fulfilled by the drunken snail between my legs, who with the smallest amount of stroking would transform into a fire-breathing dragon, a mystical creature thought to be dead for thousands of years returning only to terrorize poor Dora's clitoris without the slightest remorse... I was ready and I could tell by Dora's body language that she was ready too, her toosh pressed up against the rail of the river bank, her magnificent hips lunged forward, her pelvic bones emerging from beneath her flesh. I ran my hand down her torso, stopping to roll my thumb on her protruding knobs of calcium. Then, suddenly, she stops me, looks at me bashfully as though I had embarrassed her with my forwardness.

"I've embarrassed you." I said.

"No...no..." she replies, "Let's just walk a bit longer." She was being bashful. I could tell she didn't know her own sexiness. She had no idea the ocean of lust pent up inside of her. I saw her then like a classical painting, a woman aboard a small rowboat, paddling against the frightful blue sea, all of her own amativeness sluggishly passing beneath the bow. The thought then ran quickly through my mind: how could so many women be so extraverted in terms of their sexuality, like Adona for instance, a woman who knew without a doubt that her cunt was the answer to tirelessly asked questions by the animal known as man, and then others, like sweet

Dora, had absolutely no idea of her power? Where did the crossroads meet? Where, oh where was the event in their life that dictated which kind of woman they'd turn out to be? For a man, I merely speculated, it wasn't so much a matter of being one or another, we were all brute beasts and it was the woman we chose who controlled how much of a scoundrel we turned out to be. I for one knew that if Dora had asked me to make love to her right there in the bitter street, I would have done so. That's the kind of beast I could be. But sweet, shy Dora, would never ask such a thing of me. She was too lovely for that, too wholesome, but that didn't mean she wasn't equally as sexy as Adona, in fact it meant she was perhaps even sexier. It wasn't the act itself that determined the sexual heat of a person; it was the fire they lit beneath each action, the kind of intensity they were able to muster. A kiss could be more tantalizing than the filthiest, lowest perversion if it was done with the proper passion. Ah! Passion! The key ingredient to life! Dora was bursting with passion, I could see the humble glow of inner light through her pores, but she knew well enough to hide it beneath a pious cloak, a coy and timid front, and a plain beauty. I looked forward to peeling back all of her walls. I would be the man reimaging what it meant to experience pleasure. I wanted to give Dora everything I had withheld with Max, with Penelope, even with Adona. First all I had to do was finish this walk, put one foot in front of the other, keep moving forward, but could I last?

"As you wish." I say, hiding the lion in my trousers, honestly glad just to be in her presence. I did, however, walk a little lopsided due to Homer junior's hardhead and tired with all my might to let the romance in the air become my main focus once more. That was a truly difficult task, allowing tenderness to swallow arousal once arousal was let loose. But after we began to walk again, Dora let out a little skip, I suppose because she was so rupturing with happiness that her body had to release it somehow. This was such an adorable little moment of honesty that my thoughts lessened on the subject of penetrating her and resumed their former status of sensitivity. She grabbed my hand and we were off, giggling like children, smirking for no reason at all, which was ironically the best reason to smirk. As we walked, we got further along the river and noticed to our left, up ahead was a photo booth. We saw the flash of the bulb and the immortalized patrons stumbling from inside the booth and knew immediately that we had to be the next pair to freeze time, to be committed to photograph so that the world would in fact have evidence of our existence. If I had to choose an art I was most astonished by, it would without question be photography, for it needn't be conjured up by some artist out of thin air, no, it was simply life at its most base and real, captured by a device built by man, born out of machinery. Of course the photographer needed a keen eye in order to place reality in an artistic context, but when you looked at a photo, there was little more there to see than life, only stuck, as though the bulb's flash had frightened it and all of life, together at once, stood still in a panic. It amazed me that photography was given its credence and purpose by proving once and for all that the entirety of life was in some way art in its own right, and to make art of one's own only

meant to capture life as it was happening naturally. It made me feel as though I was a smear of paint moving about a canvas and all the internal struggles I felt were the themes hidden beneath the brushstrokes. It begged the question, who was the artist wielding the paintbrush? Some would argue that a piece of art needed an artist, but perhaps art was just another name for the beauty we were unable to describe and the art either painted, or snapped or written into existence wasn't so much a form of creation as it was an attempt to harness the understated and often overlooked artistry of life... And with that Dora and I piled into the booth, drunk on happiness, even bumping our heads into one another's and snorting like pigs. The clever photographer, who looked more like a carnival barker than an artist, positioned us and told us to smile. I cracked open the phoniest grin my lips were capable of forming. Dora smiled softly, almost a foolish frown, one a hobo clown would wear, and bent her neck so her head rested slantways over my heart. The picture man told us to hold still and after counting backward from three lit the fuse, locking Dora and I's likeness into eternity. What a happy moment it was, one that would not have been forgotten even if it hadn't of been recorded. When we exited the booth the picture man gave us a ticket and told us to come back in the morning to pick up the photo and that it would cost ninety-three cents. I accepted his bid and took the ticket in good faith. We then walked for a ways, both of us breathing in deeply, taking as much oxygen in our lungs as we could hold. Dora was leading me through the crooked streets. I hadn't the slightest idea of where we were going and that made it all the more exciting. I knew that somewhere at the end of this stroll was her warm, soft bed, and there too we'd turn mere reality into art.

"This seems quite serendipitous, you and I meeting." Dora said.

"Oh?" I replied.

"Yes, I had a dream just last week that I'd meet an American man right here in Rome."

"That *is* quite serendipitous." I said with some hesitance in my voice.

"What? You don't believe me? she asked.

"No, no, I believe you." I said.

"I may not know you very well, Homer, but I know when someone is telling me something just because it's what I want to hear."

"Oh, Dora, how did you become so difficult?" I said. She laughed, stopped walking and swung around so both my hands landed in hers.

"Don't you believe in serendipity?" she asked.

"Why no." I said matter-of-factly. "Do you?"

"Very much so."

"I apologize if I offended you."

"Relax Homer. I'm a big girl. It's ok if you don't believe everything I believe."

"That's quite refreshing, Dora."

"Why, isn't everyone as open-minded as me?" She let out a giggle when she said this.

“Not quite.”

“So why not?” she asked.

“So why not what?”

“Why don’t you believe in serendipity?”

“I suppose because serendipity implies some kind of fate.”

We looked at one another for a moment and Dora looked as though she was thinking intently about something, her thought omitting some kind of warmth, for her eyes looked glassy and they stared into mine.

“Are you sure you’re not a poet?” she replied. I laughed a bashful laugh.

“No. Why?”

“Because everything you say has weight to it, as though its stolen from a book. So how ‘bout it, Homer, do you steal from books to impress the girls?”

“Dora, I’m insulted!” I said jokingly. “If I wanted to impress you so badly I would have just told you I believed in serendipity.”

“Touché.” she said, “Well, guess you’ll have good karma for telling the truth.”

“Oh Christ, Dora, you’re killing me.”

“What? You don’t believe in karma either?”

“Nor do I believe in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.”

“Tell me why. Why is karma so ridiculous?”

“You actually believe that there is a force in the universe that’s controlled by how nice people are to one another?”

“You don’t have to make it sound so foolish.” Dora said playfully.

“I suppose that is a bit unfair.” I said, “I guess I just don’t believe that the bad people of this planet are going to get what’s coming to them, nor do I think the good people are going to get what they deserve. I feel that luck is a much bigger part of our life that we care to admit. Sure, if someone is kind, they’ll most likely have an easier time getting what they want, but only because people respond more to positivity than negativity, not because the universe is a just place. We just get lucky, that’s all.”

“So you think our good deeds go unnoticed?”

“And our misdeeds.”

“Then why not only be selfish?”

“Hopefully because the satisfaction of doing something good for this world is enough.”

Dora looked at me for a very long time with a sweet face, a face of understanding and appreciation.

“So why do you believe in such things?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I think somewhere, deep down, I know it’s silly, but I like believing because it makes the world a less scary place. I mean, if it’s only luck, what if I’m one of the

unlucky ones, and if I am, what is there for me to do?"

"It's true that some people have more luck than others."

"And what about you, Mr. Homer Miller, are you one of those, one of the lucky ones?"

"I truthfully don't know. I've had my fair share of luck I'd say, probably more than most."

"Do you feel lucky right now?" she asked.

"To be here with you, very lucky." I said it with a heavy truthfulness, and she as well as I knew that I meant it. There was a moment of silence as there is before all submissions of self, and during that brief moment, I looked around me, discovering that we were standing before Trevi Fountain. Our walk had put me in such a trance that I hadn't even noticed strolling through the narrow, bent alleyways had brought us to the momentous structure. It was a sight I longed to see for all of my existence, however, right then it was only the garnish to my experience, the marginal side note to a beautiful poem. I looked back at Dora and it felt as though there wasn't another person for a million miles. The lunging horses of the fountain were frozen and silent, the bearded men dead, the water calm and full of coins, all of which housed the hopeless wishes of luckless people within their ridges. For all intents and purposes Dora and I were on another planet entirely... This event would go on to be considered one of the most beautiful moments of my life, something to return to when I was alone, sitting in a snug armchair at home trying to recollect all the truly beautiful things I'd witnessed on one hand. Of course, you don't quite appreciate the beauty of something truly beautiful when it was before you, and I was so intoxicated by Dora in that moment that all else was blurred. I looked deeply into her and she into me, fearless. I leaned forward and with an open mouth and an even more open heart, kissed her. It was the kiss I had hoped for, our hearts beating in our throats, our tongues moving like hummingbirds with the suction of octopus tentacles, our faces so close to one another that our eyelashes threatened to tangle. I half expected to suddenly jerk awake, proving that such events could only take place in dreams, but the jerk never came and to my disbelief this was reality. I knew then that I, Homer Miller, was one of the lucky ones...

Our lips were scarcely apart during the backward, clumsy amble to Dora's apartment. She pressed me up against her door and dug through her coat pockets for the key without ever removing her lips from my own. She magically fit the large key into the lock and unbolted the door. The door itself swung open and we fell immediately into the room's darkness. I could feel that the apartment wasn't very large and after only a few moments we were in another doorway. I looked to my left and could barely see the outline of a washbasin.

"Is that your tub?" I asked in the brief moment our lips parted.

"Yes." Dora replied, a bit confused.

"I have an idea." I said in whisper.

"What is it?"

“Light a candle or two.” I said and broke away from Dora’s mouth, holding her at arm’s length. She looked at me strange, but smiled to let me know she trusted me, and like a good girl, she ran off to retrieve some matches. Upon her return she lit two candles, one on the brim of her sink and the other on the tank of the commode. They lit up the room with a faint orange glow. While she brought the second match to her lips and as she put her lips together to extinguish the small flame, I snaked up behind her and wrapped both my arms around her waist, meeting my hands over her trembling flower. She exhaled so passionately that I expected flames to emerge from her nostrils. I tossed my lips toward her neck and let them land haphazardly over her jugular where I proceeded to suck and chew, twirling my tongue in little circles, causing whirlpools of saliva to gather on her flesh and descend down the nape of her neck. I slowly began to undress her, one article of clothing at a time. Once her breasts were unleashed upon the world, I reached over and began running the water. The noise of the water rushing from the spigot fractured the silence, but it only worked to mirror the frantic primal screams that were occurring in our minds. I returned to undressing Dora, slipping her bottoms past her hips. Her legs, perfectly sculpted appendages that when spread apart uncovered the holy mouth of Woman, the lips begging for me to reenact Bernini’s *Rape of Proserpina* on them, gripping her buttocks and thrusting her onto my cock like a soldier onto a bayonet. I ran my fingers along her claves, letting just the tips make contact with her milky flesh, tickling her like a jackal. When I reached her foot, I grabbed the fabric nearest to her big toe and gradually, seductively peeled off her stocking. First the left and then the right stocking went, tossed over my shoulder, freeing her womanly odors to ascend and mix with the steam from the now boiling bathwater. The masterpiece was complete, she was nude, her curvy, rippling frame bare and shivering with anticipation. I then disrobed, the clown, the fool, the boob, the graceless Neanderthal beside such a staggering beauty. I thought I knew, but I never knew that a woman could be that divine, how that would be the first of many truths revealed to me that evening! She seemed so vulnerable, completely lost in pleasure, her body beginning to naturally grind up and down, the head of my cock gracefully running from top to bottom along the crack of her can, the feeling so delicate that it seemed two tulips were rubbing together, like two pallets of silk were holding hands. I felt the magnetic pull on my prick and the lad swelled up a bit. I parted her buttocks and placed the flaccid head of my cock between her cheeks, closing her on me, feeling them squeeze me. I could almost feel the creases of her anus, but not quite. I parted her buttocks once more to adjust myself inside of her, but when I did, I heard the wet pop of her vaginal seal opening, like the Seventh Seal unleashing the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse; however it was not death that emerged from her, but life! And I knew she was sopping like the head of a mop. I began kissing the back of her neck, moving downward to the middle of her back. I ran my tongue between the dimples of her shoulder blades so quickly you’d think I was moving figurines along a war map, choosing strategic places to strike. I then took her hand and lead her into the bath. I sat down

first, resting my back against the tub's base. She then sat on top of me, back to chest, our feet atop one another's, submerged in the soon-to-be filthy water. I took the sponge and coated it in soap, wringing out the sudsy water onto her taut, erect body, which now shimmered in the candlelight. She arched her back and moaned wildly. It was beginning to be too much. She'd need penetration soon, as much as a baby needed its mother's tit, she'd need it to survive. She would simply die if I did not bury my cock deep inside of her. I would be a murderer and my murder weapon would be the withholding of a proper fucking. I'd plead guilty and hang gladly if Dora were to go lifeless now! I wanted to enter her; I wanted to slip my torpedo unbearably deep, so deep that retraction may've become an impossibility, but I needed to refrain even longer. I needed to draw out this foreplay as long as it could go, to a mind-bending length, the furthest I'd ever gone. Oh, I was vicious, I was sinister! I continued to simply wash her, refuting any and all entry, moving the sponge along her body, letting the thick, white water drip all over her mighty breasts. Had her nipples been made of wood, they would have warped, but thankfully for me they were not made of wood, they were made of chewable, pink flesh and the more water I dripped on them, the harder they got. She was whimpering, no longer able to formulate words, but I was going to make her try. Because she was lying on top of me, the bathwater only reached the bottom of her flower and the rest of it was left floating above sea level, a hairy little island all its own. I reached down and placed my hand between her legs, cupping my fingers around her pussy and rolling them in a circular motion, letting her fleshy parts crumble beneath my touch like an over ripened fig. I bent just the top knuckle of my middle finger and buried it inside her. She let out a noise then that was neither a whimper nor was it a moan; it was a pure bodily shriek, a byproduct of her body collapsing in on itself with pleasure. Her opening was tight and it embraced my finger how a mother would a son who's come home from a long war. Her insides were as soft and inviting as her outside, like I had stuck my finger in warm oatmeal and her fluids rushed out of her, filling up the spaces between my fingers and then pouring into the tub so that we were now bathing in her juices. I reached my other hand around and gripped her neck. I applied the softest of pressures, but she knew I was there. I kissed the side of her face and then the blissful no man's land between her collarbone and jaw line. I don't know why, but this part of a woman drove me mad and I kissed it without remorse or apprehension. After I had my fill of her neck, I brought my lips to her ear and whispered,

“Tell me what you like the most about me. What turns you on, what makes you the maddest?”

Poor Dora, she reached down low, trying to find the words, any words. Finally after a long period of lustful noises she confessed, “Your voice...your voice can almost get me *there* on its own.”

“You want me to talk, eh?” I said, almost evil in demeanor.

“Yes...” she submitted, her eyes tightly shut.

“Do you want me to tell you what a bad girl you’ve been?”

“...Mmm, yes...”

These were lines that in normal life deserved to be laughed at, lines so ridiculous that your tongue would rather shrivel up and die than speak them aloud, but there with Dora they were the only words that could be spoken. In the heat of passion nearly anything could be said, any absurd, trite thing made itself right at home.

“You’ve been a very...very...bad girl.” I said in a seductive murmur.

“*What are you going to do to me?*”

Oh! Now she was asking for it! That was the phrase I needed to hear! I knew now that she had begun her transformation. What transformation you ask? The transformation from the conservative to the liberal, from the upstanding to the downtrodden, the moral to the immoral. Dora was transforming from a lady, a lady whom her mother and father boasted, into a whore before my eyes, but a whore only within those four walls. Her whoredom was all mine. The little slut inside all men and women was being resurrected within Dora. She had indeed been bad somewhere along the line and she now sought out her punishment. No good deed goes unpunished they say, nor does our wickedness and I was the man to make Dora atone for her sins. I hoisted her up into my arms, a combination of water and sap dripping from our loins. She spun around and faced me, her legs wrapped around my body. Her plum was split open and the lips were rubbing against my bellybutton, tickling it, like a child’s lips blowing on hot soup. I carried her into the bedroom. I used some sort of sixth sense to get us there, for the apartment was still pitch black. I laid her on the divan and told her to flip over, showing me her ass. She did as she was told. My voice took on an authoritative tone. I felt around and found another box of matches beside a half melted candle on a small white dish resting on the bedside table. I lit the candle and a small ball of light was born. Dramatic shadows fell upon Dora’s sweet face. I still couldn’t see much, but in the candle’s radius I could see a small gathering of feather pencils beside the candle looking like wounded bird. A brilliant idea cropped up in my cranium, both small and large, and I knew exactly what to do to stretch this until Dora renounced all gods before me. I took one of the feathers and broke off the pencil tip with my thumb. The noise startled her.

“What was that?” she asked.

“None of your business.” I said. “Now, we’re going to play a game. Since you like to hear me speak, I’m going to ask you a series of questions. If your answers please me, you’ll get the feather.” I dragged the feather’s tip along her buttocks. I could see her thighs cave in on her flower, squeezing with all her might so she wouldn’t explode. “But if your answers don’t please me, you’re going to get one of these.” I suddenly brought my hand down on her ass with a *crack*. This was a devilishly conceived game, for neither result was truly punishment. She might have liked getting spanked more than she liked the feather, the filthy girl, and so with each question I

was coaxing raw, sexual magma from her, using both sugar and vinegar. That was the trick, you see. It was a combination of sweet *and* sour that truly cajoled the true essence out of a woman. There was no woman alive who didn't want to be dominated in some way, shape or form, but like all creatures if you gave them only bitterness, they'd retract. You also needed to show them warmth, love, compassion, tenderness and freedom. If you could walk the fine line between imprisonment and sovereignty with your woman, you'd keep her forever and if you could bring those ideals into the bedroom, your lady would never know a dry evening when her cunt didn't cry itself to sleep with tears of ecstasy.

"Are you ready?" I asked, stretching not only this charade, but my very voice, so that the sound of it would bake inside of Dora's ears and roost in her mind.

"Mmmhmm." Dora softly moaned. I paused for a moment and let the tension build, what a bastard I was.

"...Do you touch yourself?" I whispered.

"...Yes." She answered, looking at me with big, wet eyes, curious to see my verdict. I frailly tickled her bottom and back with the feather. She shivered and I could see her eyes rolling back in her head.

"Have you touched yourself to me?" I asked.

"...No." she meekly replied, but before she could finish the small word I fired a smack down on her heavenly ass that made her skin ripple. She bequeathed a moan made up from both pain and pleasure.

"How many men have you fucked?"

She looked at me with worried eyes as though she didn't want to answer. I repeated the question, "How many men have you fucked?"

"...Three." she finally submitted. And the feather was brought down on her, though there was so much force behind each stroke that it seemed I was dragging a brick across her body.

"Have you ever put anything in your anus?"

"...No." she said, a very dirty tone in her voice indeed. I took the feather, reached between her rump and stuck the pencil end into her filthy hole. I then gave her another firm spanking.

She was now whimpering and moaning and convulsing uncontrollably.

"Oh, Homer, please hurry! Enter me, please! I want to feel you!"

"Are you wet?" I inquired

"...So wet..." I continued to feather her.

"Do you want me inside of you?"

"Deep inside of me." The feather tickled the side of her exposed breast.

"When?"

"Now!" she screamed! And with that I flipped her over and mounted her. Ours eyes had

adjusted to the dark and we peered into each other as I adjusted myself below. I felt her hand reach down and wrap itself around my cock. She rammed the lad into her supple gate, but then all harshness became tenderness, we slowed down and everything was once again as romantic as it could be. My urethra must have spoken the correct password, for I could feel her sliding onto me, the majesty of her flower granting admittance and spreading its pedals. We never broke eye contact and soon I was smoothly rocking back and forth, slicing into her, my cock a shark's fin cutting through calm water. Her noises were indescribable, noises I felt ricocheting through my entire body. She kissed and sucked my lips. I put my fingers in her mouth and she took them into her throat with a deadly eagerness. After a while she turned me on my back. The game was over and Dora was in control once again. She slowly worked her way from my lips to my chest to my cock and she took me in her mouth, letting me fill up her face. She sucked hungrily and I felt the internal tug of yearning behind my testicles. My soup was simmering. I pulled her up and laid her on her back.

"My turn." I said, kissing her lips, which from afar looked thin, but were in fact fat and juicy. I went to her breasts and did what came most natural to me, I sucked them and I nibbled them and I took the nipple in between my front teeth and slowly bit down, harder and harder until I heard Dora's hypnotic gasp. Now I wanted to eat her proper, I wanted to taste the flower I had so admired, I wanted to drink the nectar that poured from her, for perhaps it would grant eternal life, it seemed to do everything else. I brought my face before her beautiful cunt and turning my tongue into an arrow, teased her, making contact and then retreating. I moved side to side and bit her inner thighs, gnawing and sinking my teeth into her supple pelt. I then dipped my fingers into her, twisting them. With my other hand I applied pressure to her protruding hip bone and with my devilish pink muscle I fired upon the bud of her flower with a furious vengeance. It was an all out assault. Dora became loud now, downright hollering, shouting out my name, "HOMER!" What a silly name to call out in bliss! But there was no other name to call! It was I who commanded her! I flipped her over so that she was on her knees, her ass up into the air like a joyous statue. I mounted her from behind, looking down into her both her openings, feeling as young Alice must have felt before tumbling down the rabbit hole, thrilled, terrified, insane with pleasure. I then noticed that beside Dora's bed, was a tall mirror. I caught Dora's eyes in the reflection and we gazed unflinchingly. I entered her again and fired away, injecting her with pure love, widening her love crevasse with flesh and no bone. We were one, Dora and I, these were not the acts of two separate people, no, this was the act of two conjoined souls. Feeling myself inside of her felt as though I was returning to a home that was mine yet I had never been. Dora clinched down on me, she was going to make it and the tremendous pressure of her snapping shut triggered my own release. I, without a second thought, set free within her bowels all the jism I had saved from childhood, filling her up as I would a glass of milk, connecting to her fully, and she took it all within her belly, releasing nothing of her own, only internally detonating, drinking

my juice and allowing it to replace whatever part of herself she had forfeited to me in that moment of indescribable happiness...

The next morning I woke suddenly from a deep sleep, which was unusual, for I never slept well in another's bed, especially when their body was pressed up beside mine. The most beautiful body in the world turned to a bag of bones when the cuddling was through and it was time to sleep, but after the magical encounter with Dora, her and I both, wrapped in each other's arms, slept and slept and slept away the rest of the evening and most of the morning. It was almost noon when I was brought back to the realm of the living and my face was squarely facing Dora's when my eyes parted as though we had been dreamed up by some miserable romance novelist and they just couldn't resist placing us in the most absurd scenarios to reaffirm their own fleeting belief in love. I did not mind, however, for what a beautiful sight it was to awake to. She opened her eyes soon after and immediately smiled at me a good, wide smile. I reached beneath the sheet and felt between her legs. She was already moist.

"You belong in the Piazza Navona, beside the Fountain of Four Rivers, my dear." I said, withdrawing my hand and running her juices through my hair. I then gave her my thumb to suck, which she did, closing her mouth into a circular, expandable orifice, which made her eyes look like two melting scoops of gelato atop waffle cones. I couldn't resist comparing her to Italian things, for it was in fact Rome outside her window and it was indeed wind belonging to the Roman sky that gently ruffled the curtains. I had almost forgotten where I was, that all of this was happening six thousand miles away from home, six thousand miles away from my miserable mother and father, six thousand miles away from Baybrooke and that damned firm where he was surely to die, six thousand miles away from Penelope and Phineas and Max... Max was the furthest way, while also being the closest. This was truer than I first thought in that moment, for not a heartbeat later did I roll over to look out that very window standing between myself and Rome and discover a room full of easels with what appeared to be original works of art hanging on them. I hadn't seen them before because the room was so dark, so terribly dark! Could it be possible that Dora was even more similar to Max than I had originally envisioned? Before it was only vague parallels, strange, intangible likenesses, but now to find that they were both painters ran a chill up my spine. Was it serendipity after all that was haunting me? Was it serendipity that brought itself up in conversation the night prior, was serendipity that arrogant, that self-righteous? Then a grave sweat came over me and my mind forced its foot a step further: was serendipity the culprit behind my unexplained trips into outer space, to show me that all was connected and even I, the rouge maverick of the space-time continuum could not escape? I felt a deep nausea in my stomach, as though raw sewage replaced the blood in my veins. It was a deep illness that shook my foundations; the kind of dread only experienced when you discovered something you felt was true was actually a menacing lie. Had Max put a spell on me? Had she uncovered a way to haunt me even without first dying? I quickly got to my feet and walked to

the window, standing bare like a cut-rate sculpture's abandoned project. I needed air; I needed to gather my thoughts. I was again feeling as though the walls were closing in on me, I was experiencing that same claustrophobia felt in my apartment, the terror which prompted me to throw that damned dart against that cursed map.

"What's the matter, Homer?" Dora asked from bed, the morning phlegm still in her throat. I didn't respond. I was too in shambles, but then I remembered something that calmed me instantaneously: I did not believe in that nonsense. The fact that Dora and Max happened to share a common interest was coincidental. There was nothing mystical happening, it was all a creation of my own mind, like that bitch Miss Ursula back in Rio. She had no hold on me, it was I who frightened myself half to the death she had predicted, no voodoo magic, no otherworldly mysticism. This was the real world, and while the real world could often be spectacular, it was lacking magic in the literal sense. The magic was in trees creating oxygen, in bees pollinating flowers, in mothers giving birth to babies, in tides crashing in relentlessly, in the sunrises and sunsets, in volcanoes and cyclones, in people's aptitude for love, not crystal balls, not in invisible forces. Sure, that meant the world was unjust, but that didn't mean it was any less beautiful and I felt that believing in such things, like karma and serendipity only mocked the world's real magic. Were these majestic events not good enough for the people living on Her surface? Were we such a dissatisfied audience that we turned away the evolution of monkey into man and called for something with a bit more panache, throwing ripe tomatoes at the stage of existence, scoffing like an art critic at a child's drawing? Was the subtle adaptation of our species not flamboyant enough for this shortsighted race I was a part of? We wanted amusing parlor tricks, not elaborate plots that spanned millions of years. We were too impatient for that. The earth didn't grow from space dust, it was whipped together in a week, it didn't take countless millennia to mature and develop, it came into being faster than it took one of its inhabitants to grow inside of their mother's belly. And wasn't that magical? Nevertheless, I was once again at peace. I acknowledged the eerie similarities between Max and Dora, but refused to allow them to interfere with what I felt could truly be something memorable with the woman who was presently calling me back to bed. I relaxed, the cold sweat on my brow turned warm again. Serendipity was as dead as it was the night before and I was as free as ever. I turned and gazed at Dora, looking so warm and lovely, wrapped in the sheets still damp with the musk of our love making.

"Nothing's wrong, my dear, in fact everything is right." I said to Dora before leaping back into bed, my small member bobbing along with me. We embraced each other and felt true tranquility.

"You didn't tell me you were a painter." I said.

"You didn't ask." she replied.

"What, I didn't ask if you were a painter? That seems like a very specific question to ask

someone you've just met." She slapped me and let out a little laugh, which floated to the ceiling like a butterfly.

"You know what I meant."

"If you're going to be my girl, you're going to have to be quicker than that."

"And you think just because I fucked you, I'm going to be your girl."

"Don't say it like that, it makes it sound vulgar."

"I wasn't aware anything embarrassed you, Homer Miller."

"I'm not embarrassed; I just don't want to *debeautify* what we did last night."

"Debeautify? Making up words are we?"

"It worked for Shakespeare didn't it?"

"And you're as good as Shakespeare?"

"Better."

"You're a confident one."

"Confident is about all you can say about me."

"And what exactly are you confident in?"

"That's the thing, I don't know. You've got your painting; Hogarth's got his writing, Nero his films. All I've got is talking and talking is not an art."

"Perhaps you put too much emphasis on art."

"I beg to differ." I laughed a bit.

"But you are artistic."

"I am?"

"Yes. There's a great aura of creativity about you."

"But I haven't created anything in my entire life."

"Sure you have."

"What?"

"This persona of yours. The thick layer that hides the real you."

"How do you know so much about me?"

"I don't know, but I do."

"What else do you know?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Now I must."

"Well..." and her voice became soft, as though her vocal chords were bleeding out with understanding. "...I know that you're an introvert in the disguise of an extravert. I feel like you talk a lot, but that there's so much more you hold inside."

Her words were shockingly accurate and hearing them aloud from another person's mouth affected me deeply, in a way I wasn't quite prepared for. I looked at her and she could see in my face how surprised I was to hear something so starkly true about myself. I placed my head on her

breast like a child and let her cuddle me. Some time passed and we were silent together, both our eyes shut, but neither of us asleep.

“May I confess something to you, Homer? Something that might frighten you.” she finally said in a meek and affectionate voice.

“Of course.”

“Well, this may sound sudden, and I feel foolish for saying it out loud, but I can’t help the overwhelming feeling that I’m falling in love with you...”

I paused for a moment, lifted my head from her breast and said, “I know that.”

“You do!?” Dora asked, bewildered.

“Yes. Just a moment ago, when I had my head to your breast I could hear your heart and do you know what it said?”

“What?” she asked.

“Ho-mer, Ho-mer, Ho-mer...”

She left out a radiant laugh that filmed the room with warmth.

“But isn’t that ridiculous? We’ve only just met.”

“If love were rational, no one would be in it.”

“Such sweet insight.” she said and kissed my forehead. I looked at her deeply and said,

“You’re the only thing that makes me want to believe in God.”

“And why’s that my sweet Doubting Thomas?”

“Because I like the idea of an artist in the sky, making all of us how a sculptor would the fountains outside, but you, you would be his masterpiece...”

Dora’s eyes filled with water and she kissed me, holding the back of my head with both hands. I then returned to my position at her breast.

“My little man-flower.” she said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s my pet name for you.”

“Man-flower. Doesn’t sound very manly, does it?”

“You’re not very manly, are you?”

“Only when it counts.” I said.

“Well there you go.” she said.

“I think I like that name more than I should.”

“I think I like you more than I should.”

We lied in bed a while longer until the sun was fully in the middle of the sky and our hunger no longer allowed us to be love bums. If you thought you could survive solely on love you were an idealist, an eventually dead idealist, for as much as love filled the soul, you’d need a meal or two every now and again if you were to fully appreciate all the fruits the sappy emotion had to offer. I got out of bed and admired my naked body in Dora’s mirror. I was looking a bit

more filled out, which I wasn't sure how was possible seeing that I barely eaten a morsel on the entire ship ride into Rome and I'd barely shoveled anything into my mouth since I had arrived, save for that delicious prosciutto and melon. What I'd give to suckle prosciutto and melon out of Dora's honey-pot, how I'd never know hunger again, I thought while watching her search on the ground for her undergarments. After I watched her crawl around on the floor for a while, fighting off the urge to have another go with her, I took a better look at her paintings. They were astonishingly colorful. She was a Van Gogh rip off, but who wasn't? It didn't so much matter what the painting was or in what style it was, it was more how you commanded your viewer through the usage of color and imagery. She was a skilled artist in this regard for I was immediately intrigued by the images on her canvases, especially one of a woman holding a child too big for her arms. It was a very funny picture, the colors vibrant, but the woman's face was one of total discomfort and sadness. Was this a picture depicting a mother overburdened by her child? Had this beastly boy broken the final shred of happiness the poor woman clung to? And the longer I looked at it, the less funny it became. I eventually saw a woman suffocating beneath her life, totally overpowered and outmatched. In fact, I was feeling quite glum after looking at it. I wanted to feel happy again, so I looked down at the fine fellow between my legs. What a fine job you did last night, I whispered to him. You've done me proud. I then noticed, glowing in the sunlight, one of Dora's long hairs wrapped around the head of my cock. It was one of the little bonuses of being with a woman. You'd find strands of their hair days after your encounter, wrapped around your manhood, almost like a little calling card, something so you'd think about them after they'd gone home to their separate lives. I pulled Dora's strange by the follicle and held it against the light.

"Looky here." I said, getting her attention.

"What's that?"

"One of your hairs. I found it wrapped around Homer, Jr."

"Oh, you should have left it. It would have been as though I never stopped touching you."

"You are a filthy girl, aren't you? You play such a sweet little bird, but deep down, you're a scoundrel."

"You've made me out. It's the truth."

We both laughed and I began to dress.

After a spot of breakfast, an espresso and pastry, we decided to walk down to the river together and pick up the photograph we had taken the night before. Like the gentleman had said, to receive the picture it cost ninety-three cents, which I paid obligingly. When he handed us the small black & white photo, both Dora and I were taken off guard by how genuinely happy we looked together. The photo had captured an authentic moment of joy, had snagged it from the turnstile of life and put it inside a flat, 3x3 box. Maybe one day the chemicals that made up that photo would disintegrate and the picture of Dora and I's happiness would fade away, but that day

was so distant that it hardly seemed to matter. I could have been killed a million different ways before that day would come so I turned to Dora and said to her,

“I want you to take this picture and I want you to keep it somewhere special. No matter what happens between you and me, I want you to keep it forever, because this is proof that we were happy.”

“I will.” she said.

“And I want you to do something else, as well.” She waited for my second request. “I should be getting back to Graham’s soon,” I continued, “but I’ll see you tonight...and I want you to go home and touch yourself to this photograph.” She gasped an excited, giggly gasp.

“Homer!” she cried.

“I want you to stick it in the frame of your mirror and I want you to watch yourself pleasuring yourself to it.” Dora bit her lip and went weak in the knees.

“Okay?” I said.

“Okay, Homer. I will. Anything you say.”

And then I kissed her how a man kisses a woman in love. I turned and walked up the long ramp toward street level. There was gust of wind and I felt as though it could carry me into the heavens. What a night it had been with Dora, what a romantic evening, an evening I wasn’t sure I believed in as a philosophy. That night, and all nights after with Dora were fever dreams, fairy tales, things that could not and would not happen in the real world. She loved me, she told me so, but she was under the impression that I was an honest man. She loved the character in which I played, the role of the innocent, but she had seen beneath my disguise and looked clearly into me. What she had said about me was true and it felt good to be so unquestionably understood. It sounded so phony, but there was no greater desire than to be understood without having to give an explanation, to just lie back in lover’s arms and be silent, to begin to speak and have them say, “I know.” Well, I may not have been the honest man Dora loved, but I vowed that I would become him. I pledged to the clear Roman sky that I would never again lie to Dora, that I would never again put my own feelings before hers, that she would be the only woman I was with so long as we promised ourselves to each other. I would defy my nature and be monogamous, and I would certainly, without question or contest, never see Adona again...

## 9

I arrived at Adona’s flat around a quarter past four in the afternoon. My noble promises to Dora lasted for about three hours and were held fastidiously until I received word that Adona wanted to meet at her apartment for drinks. It was no surprise that Adona would call on me, but it was a surprise that I found myself eager to meet with her. Why? I thought to myself. Didn’t Dora have everything I needed? Needed, yes, but wanted? That was a different matter entirely. Some time before I had whittled down my needs and wants and found that I only needed three things:

food, air and sleep and it was everything else that I wanted. Without those three things, I would die, cease to exist and all the things I wanted would die along with me, crumble up and blow away. I would never feel sadness for their departure, nor would I regret never encountering them, because the dead did not want and if they could want, they'd only want to live. But that was just the external, what was it I needed internally? Romantic love? Understanding of another? No, these were still things I wanted, but could survive without. What would really be my unraveling was an insufficient understanding of self, to never really know how to bring myself peace. And it seemed to me that all one truly needed was the knowledge that you needed nothing and was worthy of everything... This clarity of thought however didn't do away with my rotten feelings for sneaking behind Dora's back, especially after such an intimate evening, but the fact remained that Adona's filthiness had struck a chord within me that begged to be struck again. I was perverse guitar wanting to be strummed. Despite all my egotistical desires, my manly need to control, being allowed to let go of the reins and engage in such a frightfully dangerous exchange with Adona was exciting. The sex was dark and mean and wild. I felt for the first time totally out of control, and while part me felt truly disgusting for enjoying such madness, another part of me absolutely relished being so despicable. Hadn't that been what I dreamed about in my apartment, reading about filthy acts in books, but never having any of my own? Wasn't my goal to be as terribly sexually corrupt as humanely possible? But then again, it is easy to dream while snuggled up in your bed, when your mind not only plays tricks, but hosts entire fantasies where hearts cannot be broken and no action has a consequence. I in no way could have predicted the feeling my experience with Adona would release inside me. With Max, with Penelope, with Dora I felt like a man, seizing their bodies and driving them like an automobile, but with Adona I felt like a little boy playing with a matchbox car. It was closer to the feeling I had when Edith, my bloody queen, when she stole my virginity than when I laid Max down and opened her up like a great work of literature. And it was the little boy within me that walked over to Adona's, climbed the stairs to her apartment building and knocked... *knock, knock.*

*"Ciao."*

I entered and followed Adona, who was wearing only a transparent robe that fluttered above her ass as she walked as though a fan was stuck between her legs. She was a perpetual Marilyn Monroe. In fact, whenever I'd see that image, that white dress blowing up from the steam vent, I'd think about Adona and what had come of her. But as I was walking behind her then, all I could think about was what a faithful steed I'd be to her that evening, how I'd let her ride me like an oxen moving west. We'd reenact the Trail of Tears, but they'd be tears of joy. She invited me to take a seat on her sofa, which I did agreeably and she brought me a glass of wine. This was a much more decadent affair than our first meeting. Was she trying to act a lady? Or perhaps she used wine in its other incarnation, the cheap bottled sweat wrung out from the hair of Satan's tail that you could buy at the corner store for less than chewing gum. Its only purpose was to

obliterate any chance of remembering the night prior, however this was still the afternoon. Was she trying to lube me up for something extra devious, something I'd want to forget? I'd know her intentions the moment I put the glass to my lips. I cautiously took a sip and yes, like gasoline the grape plasma burned like acid. I realized then that if I were every truly down and out, without a cent and out of contact with Graham, which was truthfully the lynchpin of my survivable poverty, Adona would make the ideal impoverished companion. She was a low-maintenance tramp that needed little more than rain gutter wine and a lively prick to sit on when she got lonely. She'd always have a little bloated belly from beer and bruises on her thighs from god-knows-where. We could tour the bars together; eat hard boiled eggs until our hearts were content, maybe she'd even be willing to prostitute so we could get a little one bedroom place with no working fireplace. We'd just light our rent slips on fire in a wastebasket in the center of the room. Maybe we could even salvage a little love. Not unconditional love, of course, but circumstantial love, the kind of love that grows out of time and the lack of options. She'd be my partner in crime and sooner or later a love would blossom out of that mutual thankfulness that the other person hadn't swiped what's left of the money and disappeared. We'd become reliant on one another and even if we did things that made the other's blood boil, we'd abide it. There was some tragic poetry in there somewhere. It was almost fun daydreaming about such a thing happening. I looked at her parading around in her little getup like an idiot, thinking she was the definition of sexy, and while I could easily imagine myself slipping it into her, I found her very unattractive in that moment. Her sashays were so phony, her face in a staged state of pre-ecstasy. Sex for Adona had become a regular activity that should've been done out of loyalty to routine. Spontaneity no longer had any place in sex for her, nor did intimacy. I was her present fixation, but it would pass and she'd eventually lose interest when my better sense finally kicked in and I refused to submit to her mechanical demands for sexual gratification. I speculated that perhaps Adona had come directly from the pages of one of Hogarth's science fiction stories, a robotic race that thrived only on the physical process of intercourse. Perhaps if I opened her wide enough I'd find gears and wires instead of organs and veins, perhaps instead of a heart she housed a ticking time bomb between her lungs. Perhaps...

Adona sat beside me and drank from her glass of wine. Her throat must have been accustomed to such putrid fluid, for she didn't wince once, instead drinking it as if it was melted gold. I had myself another sip out of courtesy, sloshing it back and forth in my mouth a while, trying to dilute the taste with my saliva. Neither of us were speaking, exactly as I had predicted. We simply had nothing to say. She had no interest in playing the usual preliminary games so I did what any sensible lad would in that scenario, I leaned over and I kissed her. The hot, burgundy fog from the wine was caught between our mouths as I inserted my tongue. I lowered my hand and placed it on her bare hip, raising it gently to caress her breast. Moments later Adona placed her hand over the fabric of my crotch, but to her surprise as well as mine, the hardest

thing she felt were the buttons of my fly. Homer Jr. had yet to wake from his slumber. I tried flexing the boy, but like a turtle's head, he only recoiled. Fear filled my guts in an instant. Adona looked at me perplexed.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't know." I said. And then as though she were a doctor inspecting a wound, she unbuttoned my trousers and pulled out feeble Homer Jr., cupping him in her grip. He looked so small and weak in her big hand. What was happening? I had never had an issue with getting an erection; in fact I prided myself on my ability to harden almost at once, always a full tank to burn through. Adona, the clumsy strumpet, began tugging away as though it were a lawnmower and by pulling the ripcord she could start me up. When that didn't work she got to the floor and hunched over my midsection, took the shrimp into her mouth. It almost seemed comical her sucking away to no avail, but it wasn't comical at all, it was frightfully embarrassing. Had it been a woman I was mindful of their opinion of me, I would have jumped from the window to my death, but if it was going to happen I was glad it happened with Adona, whom I was certain had entertained enough penises that purely from a statistical standpoint this wasn't her first dead fish. She continued sucking and after an uncomfortable ten minutes, which felt like an eternity, Adona released me and thrust her head to its proper place, making eye contact with me.

"What happening!?" She demanded to know, her Italian temper in full swing, her ugly English words coming out like lug nuts through a meat grinder.

"I'm terribly sorry, Adona. I don't know what's wrong. This has never happened to me before." Ah! There were the awful words: *This has never happened to me before*. Those were the words you heard were always said, the common lie told to millions if not billions of women and here I was spewing it, but this time it was the truth. It really hadn't ever happened before. I felt as though my very manhood was on the line. I closed my eyes and tried to focus all my attention toward getting the blood where it needed to go, but I soon realized that the more I thought about it the harder time I'd have. Things seemed bleak. If thinking about it caused more harm, I could only hope for a miracle. Adona, I could tell, was taking this personally, as an insult to her allure. How dare I go limp in her presence, but it wasn't her fault. I pretended not to know, but I knew the reason behind my lifeless worm, why my flag did not flutter wildly at the top of its pole, I was feeling rotten about lying to Dora. I couldn't help but imagine her sitting in her flat, smiling to herself because once again, or perhaps for the first time, she had been touched by irresponsible love. It was so fresh and so new and already I was violating it. If she only knew where I was, who I was with and what I was doing, she wouldn't hesitate to classify me as a monster. This was bothering me much more than I first realized and instead of this guilt making itself obvious with a doubt in my brain or a weight in my heart, it instead chose to reveal itself below the waist, maybe wanting to embarrass me a bit as well. Perhaps my own subconscious was trying to teach me a lesson, and since its usual warnings had failed with me so many times before, it needed to

move onto something more severe. And what could be more severe than turning off the one body part that muddied all rationale and responsibility? The cock was the filthy culprit, not me. He was the one who fouled up my mind with his venom, blame him Dora! If only there was a way to detach the maggot, to unhook him, that way I could be all heart and mind for Dora, and when she was in a devious mood, I could simply latch him back on. Now that would have been evidence of a divine creator, sensible, practical concepts like that. Instead we're asked to go through life breaking as few hearts as possible while also having personal demons attached to our scrotums whose fingernails bury themselves in our brains and pump the drug of lust into our hearts. That seemed like poor planning if it were indeed a plan. What kind of sick omnipotent being was God to give us pleasure sticks and emotion corms inside the same body? Did he laugh to himself up there, watching us fumble around like insects, literally destroying each other with our own selfishness? While I pondered why God was such a facilitator of cruelty, Adona was still trying to make Homer Jr. give a standing ovation. Finally, out of pure mortification, I ripped Adona away.

"Why you make me stop!?" She demanded to know.

"It's not working. I'm sorry. We'll have to try again another night." I said.

"No, no, no!" Adona shouted. "Tell me what you like." she continued.

"What I like?" I said.

"What turn you on."

"I..I don't know." I said, "This usually works."

"Think Homer. What is something *filthy* you always wanted to do? Anything at all." Her eyes were wild and I truly believed she meant *anything*, but I hadn't the slightest clue of what to say. Yes, she said anything, but that didn't actually mean anything. Every human had their limit, even a whore as rampant and reckless as Adona. A person who was excited by Shetland ponies could very well think a simple, innocent foot fetish was taboo. How could I know what was too far, and would Adona think I was a cowardly boy if I named something too tame?

"Tell me Homer!"

"I have to think on it, Adona. Give me a moment to think on it." I said. "I'm going to go to the toilet and when I return I will tell you." I awkwardly got to my feet and buttoned my trousers. Adona was turning into an animal before my eyes, almost snorting like a boar. There was a sexual demon inside her that needed exercised. She would not be satisfied until juice was spilled. I found her lavatory and closed the door behind me. I immediately brought Homer Jr. into the light, cupping my palm beneath him, cradling him like infant Christ in the manger. He was pale and shriveled and I felt less like I was holding my old, faithful member and more like I was at a funeral service taking one last look at the body.

"Wake up goddamn you!" I said in a loud whisper. I shook the lad again, but like a lethargic drunkard he motioned like he was about to spring to life, only to remain inert. I decided

then that it was no use to continue. Something was blocking me from getting an erection, be it in my heart or in my mind, but either way it had won and I was at its mercy. I knew that Adona was still in the other room, panting and carrying on and like a madwoman. I didn't want to face her, so I figured I'd sift through her things for a while to kill some time, claim I was feeling in poor health and then make a timely escape. There was a series of drawers beside the sink and it seemed like a perfectly fine place to begin prying. The first drawer contained what any woman's top sink drawer would contain: a few cleanliness items, a hair brush and a box of ribbons. It shocked me to find that Adona was a person in the common sense, that she would have a normal drawer full of regular items, that she was not always the sexual object she depicted herself as. She awoke every morning like anyone else, walked to the bathroom, relieved herself after holding it in all night, brushed her teeth and with the natural desire to want to feel pretty, applied a ribbon to her head, threading her silken locks between the fabric of the ribbon and once pulling the knot tight feeling a bit better about herself. How and when did she transform into the beast she currently was waiting for me to return to the sofa? I thought. Was it only on a full moon that she devolved into such a primitive sex junkie? Was she indeed a siren from days of old? If Adona were not fortunate enough to be born in the right century, she would have burned at the stake the first day she emerged from her parent's chambers, swaying those hips as though they were peacock feathers. She would've been accused of witchery, for the seductive way in which she straddled her broom and churned her cauldron. Those old nuts would have torn her limb from limb, but only after making certain of her whoredom, by ravaging her again and again, before the eyes of God no less! Perhaps Adona would achieve sainthood for her trail and little girls would pray to her, emulate her, never knowing her true nature. I chuckled to myself imagining it. The second drawer was even less exciting. It was empty except for a spool of cotton. The third drawer, however, contained a small box, perhaps one that once held a pair of shoes. Upon seeing it, I knew there was something forbidden about it and I got the cheap feeling that being misbehaved granted you. I knelt down and opened the box, feeling like a child rummaging through my father's dirty magazines. Inside was an assortment of strange and completely unrelated items. There was a timepiece, sexual playthings of various sorts, a glass eyeball, a photograph of a man holding a suitcase in one hand and a small boy in the other, a priest's collar and finally a brown button, similar to the brown button that went missing from my new suit jacket just the other day. I examined the button and compared it to the others on my jacket. It was indeed the missing man. It then became abundantly clear to me what exactly this box of goodies was: mementos from her lovers, things that were either given to her or stolen from the men who paraded through over the years. It was almost a scrapbook, something to show her than ultimately she took more from them than they from her, though it had to become clear at some point that it was indeed the men who robbed and swindled Adona until her own sensuality digressed into vulgar sexual debasement. How much power does a whore have over a man? Not

much, I'd care to guess. A woman had infinite power, but once that woman became a whore with little more substance than an object, all of her power turned to weakness. She became the rug men wiped their muddy boots on and stepped over. Sure, she did not feel the pain of rejection, but she felt a deeper pain, the pain of never being loved for what was beyond flesh. The more men she kept in her company, the more alone she became, walking backward into infinite darkness. Whore's too called out in the middle of the night after a bad dream, but who was there to comfort them besides their own ego? From looking at that box I could see that Adona was filled with fragments of men's souls, all puzzle pieces she had stolen from them, a master thief. She was bursting because she had not giving back pieces of her own soul and if she did not learn to do so soon, she'd implode like a black hole...

I had just fixed the lid over the box when Adona knocked at the bathroom door.

"Homer...I come in..."

"No!" I said, but it was too late. I slammed the drawer closed just in time as Adona entered the room.

"You take too long," she said, "so I come and find you." She laughed an almost demonic snicker once those words escaped her lips. I had no place to run. There was one-hundred year old brick making up the walls behind me and Adona like a wild mustang blocking the exit, still not the slightest twitch from my treasonous member. I'll never forgive you for this, I thought to myself as Adona inched toward me. She reached out her five-fingered mitt and grabbed my wrist, firmly planting my hand on her buttocks as she bent over the sink like a mule. Now facing away from me, using her other hand, like a sorcerer, she took my penis between her fingers as though it were lump of malleable clay and released it from my trousers. She then began pushing herself onto me, the lips of her flower spreading with each thrust. The bones of her fanny crashed into the bones of my hips, our genitals two soggy rose stems clashing together during a hurricane. She was moaning, but I knew it was all an act. How could it not be? How could she be experiencing any real pleasure when I was barely even entering her? Her noises we cheap and only made me feeling like offing myself then and there, taking the razor she bought with the intent of shaving her armpits and running it across my throat. At least she wouldn't have wasted the thirty-five cents it cost. After a moment or two longer of Adona making herself look like a total idiot, I stopped her.

"I have to take a piss." I said.

"Do it on me." she said.

"Pardon me?" I asked, bewildered.

"Urine, here." Adona pointed to her chest.

"You want me to urinate on you?" I asked again, simply having to verbalize it for it to process in my mind.

"Yes. It will be the filthy thing to excite you."

I didn't know what to do. I stood paralyzed, as afraid as I was before Edith turned me into a man, even more afraid, in fact, utterly terrified at the concept and even more frightened of whether or not I'd enjoy it. I couldn't very well carry around with me the secret desire to spill my golden nectar on people. That was no way to live. I was certainly an amateur in the ring with a true professional. Adona wanted my yellow stuff emphatically, positioning herself on the toilet and exposing her breasts as though they were targets and I was an archer.

"Just a little pee-pee." she said. I could tell she was in a heightened state of arousal. Had she done this before? Was this one of her perversions? Had this been the plan all along? Did she aim to turn me into a cow, but instead of producing milk extracting my tangy yellow juice? I'd be lying if I said I hadn't conceived it in my mind already, I even had myself a go once with Max, urinating on her rump, but that seemed proletarian compared to what was about to transpire between Adona and I. Perhaps I'd make her feel alive in ways she never thought possible, maybe this *was* what I needed. It was very possible that it wasn't guilt at all that kept Home Jr. from swelling with pride, but simple boredom. I had experienced much sexually on my little journey so far, sharing Blanche with Sid, Miranda, of course, though that was less about sex than it was a gesture of compassion, I'd been man-handled and degraded, I'd stretched foreplay to limits I thought incongruous. Perhaps I simply was so advanced that this is what it now took to excite me. Adona lowered her chin and looked up at me with wanting eyes. There was nothing to lose except my soul, so I aimed Homer Jr., clinched my behind and let loose a hot steam of urine all over Adona's breasts. There was no physical pleasure, but my mind was reeling. How absolutely, positively depraved the act was I was committing. We had left all our human attributes behind and resumed our roles as nothing more than animals. This was disgusting and hideous, the strong stench of urine filling the small, searing room. Adona sighed with satisfaction, loving every moment I made contact with her flesh via liquid gold, however, as my stream diminished so did my excitement. I was still not aroused and my heart pained me more than ever. Unlike intercourse with Dora, there was no poetry here, no exchange, only sour pleasure. I was a long-time believer that perversion had merit within itself, but I think I was beginning to see that a perversion was only rightfully fulfilled if it is explored within the context of mutual joy and understanding. How I'd love to playfully release the yellow waste on Dora in the tub, laughing and giggling, feeling not only dirty, but safe. Urinating on Adona felt ugly and shameful, as though I had distanced myself even further from ever being able to look upon her as anything but a whore. It may sound bizarre, ridiculous and insane, but something as undoubtedly perverse as urinating on someone should be done with a bit of tenderness and love. I too would never think those notions could be compatible, but I now saw the connection emerge without ambiguity. It wasn't so much the act as it was the intention behind the act. Even a kiss given in angst and contempt was a bitter and revolting perversion to the art of love.

Upon leaving Adona, I walked through the apartment building's doorway and passed the smashed remnants of the Leonardo da Vinci bust she had thrown out the window. It had originally been aimed at my head, but because of whatever reflexes I had left I was able to duck out of the way, sending one of this world's greatest minds soaring through Adona's open window. It smashed with a terrible sound on the street below. Rest in peace and pieces, old friend; let the secret of Mona Lisa's smile die with you... She had committed this terrible murder after I failed to get a hard-on, even after engaging in such legendary filth. Adona was convinced that I was seeing someone else and that I didn't find her sexually attractive. She was almost correct on both accounts; however it was true that something strange about her did in fact arouse me, though it very well could have been only that she was strange. I've said it before and I'd say it again, there was a darkness that lived in me and Adona's warped, vicious, sexually felonious nature appealed to it. But all that was history now, for Adona had made it clear, screaming and hollering at the top of her lungs, some in English, some in Italian, that she never wanted to see me again. I was a gutless, cowardly pig in her eyes, a greedy, emotionally stunted joke of a man that couldn't fuck to save his own life. She told me this with the eloquence of an impassioned opera singer, a big, robust queen reverberating the anger and disgust within her soul through her greasy, full lips. It was clear to me now that not only was Adona sexually twisted, but she was also unfathomably insane. I had never seen a woman react with such fire for so little an offense, one totally of her own mental creating. I was only guilty of unsatisfying her, but in her laments she constructed multiple other crimes that had yet to occur. She even began to discharge spiteful, acidic tears. I only stood there and waited for the storm to pass, uninterested in defending myself. I saw this as my way out, as my way to be honest and truthful to Dora only. Without Adona calling on me, I'd have no temptation. Without the ease of Adona proverbially lying nude at all hours of the day, waiting to pleasure me in any way I could imagine, I'd have no reason to be unfaithful to Dora. So I just stood quietly and allowed Adona to continue on, utterly carving her way into a state of mind I shuddered to envision. It was when she clasped items nearest to her proximity and started chucking them toward me did I hightail it out of there, lucky to have my balls and brains. I ran down the stairs and made it to the street. I could still hear Adona calling after me, screaming as though I had fucked her sister and murdered her father. The entire neighborhood could hear. I wouldn't be surprised if Graham and Hugo were listening in as well, gathering the evening's gossip. I peeked out from underneath the doorway and could see that the sun was still fairly high in the sky. I guessed it was around six-thirty in the afternoon. I double checked my fly was buttoned and adjusted my skimmer atop my head, stepping out to face the rest of the day. There was one of Rome's immaculate fountains on the corner beneath Adona's apartment window and the soft crackling of its water hitting the brick road sounded too

appetizing to ignore. I decided to wet my whistle (for what use is a dry whistle?) and while I was taking the refreshing fluid into my belly, the entire volume of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* landed beside my feet with the most horrifying *thud*. A few inches over and it would have landed on my cranium, smashing my face into the metal fountainhead, no doubt killing me instantly. I spun my head around and looked toward Adona's window. She was there, tossing yet another book down at me. I quickly jumped out of the way. I glanced at the title, Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

"Are you throwing the biggest books you can find?" I shouted.

"Yes! To kill you dead!" she shouted back. Next were both parts of *Don Quixote*, like bricks falling from heaven. It was raining literature! After the *Don* it was *The Iliad* and then *The Odyssey*. Fancy that, struck down by my own work! I decided I better depart before she got lucky and knocked me over the head. I skipped off, feeling full of life and glee, Adona's shrieks fading into the background noise of automobiles passing and people talking, nuns praying audibly, dogs barking, Italian children shouting at their mothers, matches striking against their booklets. Rome was alive and so was I! All the excitement had turned my spirits around. What was I to do now with all my balled up energy? It was a beautiful evening. I couldn't waste it sitting inside Graham's shanty, Hugo's naked, boyish body prancing about like a fawn. I felt deep within that I needed to see something beautiful after taking part in something as grotesque as relieving myself on another human being, if you could classify Adona as such. I wanted to be humbled by something beautiful, put in a state of awe, rendered speechless. I was lucky to be in the city I was, where this desire was easily remedied by simply opening one's eyes. And then, feeling as though it were a moment of divine intervention, I settled upon visiting the Vatican and seeing Michelangelo most famous work, *Creation of Adam*. Of course! That would be all I needed and more to cleanse myself of my unclean acts. To stand in the same room where Michelangelo stood! To peer up and with my own eyeballs and register his efforts which left a lasting impression on humanity. Graham had told me to just follow the river north from Trastevere and I'd eventually arrive at the entrance to Vatican City. It was only a few years prior that the Vatican had become its own city, the smallest independent state in the world, through probably the richest. It was a place made of gold and the finest marble. Every stone was mortared with hypocrisy and chiseled from greed. I wanted to see the monstrosity for myself. How strange it was to me that one of the world's finest achievements in art revolved around God, Michelangelo's depicting of the Almighty breathing life into Man. It was such a beautiful story, a romantic story, I could see why people wanted it to be real, even I sometimes wished it were real. How glorious it would be to know you were loved no matter what, when all else seemed lost. When I looked up at that ceiling I would see the breathtaking skill of a genius, but perhaps the man to my side would see more, he'd see a historical document, a picture of his foundation, he'd see the answer the question that housed itself inside every person on this planet. Would it even matter who had done the painting? Was that piece of information, which was almost more

than I could possibly bear, trivial to the man who did not see paint, but God himself? ...I began my long walk along the river. The sun was beginning to set and the Roman sky turned pink and bashful. My feet were sore and my body exhausted, but I kept moving forward, still in disbelief that I had made it, I was in Rome. I had done what I said I would do. This may sound melodramatic to you, my fine readers, but I had never done anything I said I would do, in fact I had usually done the exact opposite. I had failed in every proposition I had been given be it from others or myself. Sure, I was looked up to by little shits like Baybrooke who didn't know any better, but the soft and passionate speeches delivered to me by Graham and Phineas about my character told me that they both had taken a long, hard look at me and saw a boy caught between manhood and perpetual infancy. I had the wherewithal to know I was hurting people with my actions, but not the guilt. I could rationalize my behavior one-hundred different ways, but I could never muster up enough pain to convince me to do anything about it. Perhaps I was a psychopath, I mused. Not a psychopath in the sense that I killed and mutilated others, dug up corpses from cemeteries and used their skulls for my oatmeal, but a psychopath in that I lacked the necessary emotion to empathize. They existed, psychopaths that didn't have an ounce of violence in them, but simply were incapable of feeling, but then I thought how ridiculous that way. I may have been a selfish bastard, but my passion for the emotional things in life superseded all else. I was totally obsessed with the desire to give myself completely to a lover, to life, even to death. No, warm, red blood pumped through my veins like anyone else, and tears the size of raindrops could be extracted from my eyes as easy as anyone else, possibly even easier. I was no psychopath; I was just searching, blind to everything except my quest. I needed to find that one spark that I was lacking, I needed to find my purpose, how Dora and Max were painters, how Hogarth and Xavier were writers, how Graham was an insatiable bastard, I too needed to find my place, and when I found the groove in which I fit, I would repay all the bad debts I had accumulated tenfold.

A long road led you to St. Peter's Square, a large oval forecourt surrounded by massive columns, of which had statues of saints all looking down at you like messengers from the past, quietly judging you with their stone eyes. It was one of the grandest things I'd ever seen, like I was walking into the giant mouth of God, those columns his very teeth. The sheer magnificent size was enough to bring tears to your eyes. I had never felt that small before or since, like an interchangeable pawn piece in a cosmic chess game. I didn't notice the tourists at first I was in such a daze, purely transfixed as though under a spell, but people were buzzing about in droves; some huddled around the obelisk in the center of the square, which shot up into the atmosphere like a piece of frozen light. I had worked up a sweat on the stroll over, so I approached one of the fountains on either side of the obelisk and wet the back of my neck. Some of the water dripped into my shirt collar and rolled to the small of my back. They felt like the cold fingernails of a woman scratching their way down you after the sun had crisped your flesh. I twitched in delight

and enjoyed the droplets until they became the same temperature as my body. I stayed by the fountain and looked around, trying my hardest to comprehend what I was seeing. I was feeling very strange, because I was trying to hold back my admiration for this place in the face of its true sinister nature. I didn't want to fall in love with its perfection because of all the hate it represented, all the blood that made its beauty possible. But I found myself pulled in, absolutely sacrificed by its loveliness. I felt almost self-righteous despite my feelings being justly felt, despite the fact that men and women and children died so these buildings could be built in direct violation of the wishes of the man who inspired the motives for the faith these monuments stood to represent to begin with. I was tired of my own preaching. I wanted not to care. I wanted to be numb and corrupt and just enjoy the masterpiece, say forget the chaos, the tragedy, the hideous carnage and enjoy the façade. No one else seemed to be bothered, so why was I? I saw people in pious humility, I saw people on their knees in silent prayer, but unbeknownst to them it was not God they were praying to, it was a building fashioned from voracity. Didn't they see that? Did it matter to them? What made me so much more superior than these other folks who had their hearts teeming with amazement? Why couldn't I feel what they felt? The deadened gnawing in my guts distracted me, feeling like faint nausea, but my eyes were on the verge of designating because there was simply too much to take in. Did I dare enter the basilica? I'd just fall apart by the molecule; turn to a puddle of goop on the stunning marble floor the sight would be so glorious. I gathered my courage and walked up the stairs toward the towering front doors of the basilica. People were crowded around, all trying to get a glimpse of God. I waited patiently until a man dressed like he was part of the Secret Service ushered me in. He pointed at his head to signal to me to remove my hat. I guess hats were not allowed in the presence of God- a tip for you believers on the day of your death. I removed my straw skimmer and held it over my chest. My hair was shaggy and damp with perspiration. I imagined I looked like the scrawny child, walking pigeon-toed and timid, shuffling around the vast church unsure of even what I was doing there. I half expected to burst into flames when walking through the door, but it would appear I would live to doubt another day. I looked up at the incredibly high walls, walls that seemed to be the height of skyscrapers, and the virtuoso dome ceilings that looked like bended dreams. The artwork was so intricate, passionate and otherworldly, depicting images that only the most inspired man could possibly conjure. I felt an overwhelming fulfillment, so much beauty that I was literally short of breath, a fool among wise men. This was the pinnacle of Man's dreams, this structure in which I stood was the culmination of all the love and hatred every man who ever lived had felt at one time or another, somehow captured or recreated to be splattered on the walls of this building with such grace. Did it matter that it was all a lie? That was a question I wasn't prepared to answer, and possibly could never answer.

As I walked deeper into the church, down one of the corridors I saw that there was a children's choir preparing a performance. I hurried over and found myself an inconspicuous spot

beside what might have been the tomb of St. Peter himself. Then gently, as though someone had released doves into the air, the children's voices rose from a dull pitch to a haunting and beautiful harmony. Their unified voices were angelic, for lack of a better comparison, and so delicate it felt as though they weren't singing words at all, only emitting audible strands of charity and goodwill. I didn't know such beautiful sounds were possible. They awakened something inside me, a certain longing that made me miss home for the first time since I had departed. And then I listened closer to what song it was that they were singing and I realized why I had this sudden and uncharacteristic yearning for home. The choir was singing *God Bless America*, one of my country's oldest patriotic tunes. Why on earth would they be singing God Bless America in St. Peter's Basilica in the middle of Italy? Upon hearing the familiar melody my skin went cold and goosebumps spread across my body like a rash. I was suddenly taking an ice bath, utterly baffled at why such a strange thing was happening. There was a man in front of me enjoying the choir as well. I wasn't sure if he spoke English, but I tapped him on the shoulder anyway. He turned toward me obligingly and leaned in so he could hear my whisper. As politely as I could and as quietly as I could I asked the man why they sang *that* song. He responded in an American accent that these children were part of the National American Children's Choir and they had been sent all the way from the United States to perform in Vatican City one of America's most noteworthy religious tunes. This was a moment that Dora would describe as serendipitous and one I would describe as ironic. Was there no end to the tireless reminders of home? It was almost as if the entire continent of North America was sending out messengers to bring me back. Well, I hate to disappoint you, but it's going to take a lot more than a choir singing an awful, banal song to get old Homer Miller to give up his guns. I might never return! It was possible that I'd stay right there in Rome and marry Dora, and if I was anything like my old man, we could have a full ten blissful years together before squirting out any children...

Once the choir concluded their sickening-sweet lullaby, I wandered over to the first chapel on the right side of the basilica, which housed something of great significance to me, and to the rest of the world as a matter of fact. Inside was Michelangelo's sculpture *Pietà*, the depiction of the Madonna holding in her arms like an infant, the lifeless body of Christ. To see it with my own eyes brought about tears of pure modesty and admiration. I respected so much about the sculpture that the fact of my disbelief in its subjects was arbitrary. No mother should have to bury their son and no son should be asked to make one's mother do such a thing. And if I could be honest, the sculpture did have special significance by being a portrayal of Christ. I admired the man, or at least the philosophy of the man. To see him up there, sprawled out on his mother's lap was like seeing the corpse of Huckleberry Finn propped up and stiff in Mark Twain's arms. Jesus was a great fictional character, perhaps the greatest, for his words transcended fiction, they grew and somehow merged into reality so seamlessly that most put their better judgment aside and believed he actually existed. That was something no writer could ever

hope to achieve. And poor Mary, possibly my favorite character in the bible, the simple virgin, the flower with no bloom, seeing her sorrowful face eternally tilted toward her dead son, chiseled into place for all time drilled a stake right through me. What flabbergasted me the most, however, was how the artist, the grand and impervious Michelangelo was able to create such life, such indelible affection from a piece of stone. Pietà was carved from marble, perhaps the most lifeless substance known to man, and yet he was able to extract a living thing from it, an image of raw and unforgiving beauty. I stared at it for a long time, blinking as sparingly as possible, allowing the contours of the Madonna's drapery to misdirect and confuse my eyes. I was in the presence of greatness and had to leave before someone figured out how truly unworthy I was.

I came to the center of the church, beneath the famous dome. I was feeling lightheaded and rather spent, so I stopped for a moment to rest. While I stood there, gathering what was left of my thoughts, I felt the invisible tug and the unmistakable desire to look up. Hesitantly at first I peered straight up, resting the back of my head on the hump of my back and it was like looking directly into the iris of God's eye, like a stargazer lily had exploded. One million saints with two eyeballs a piece were looking back at me and scrutinizing my most modest twitch. What an audience, what a stable of forgotten good intentions. The magnitude of the art crashed over me like high tides and I was soaked to the bone. The colors formed a kaleidoscope and beams of sunlight shot from wall to wall, creating a matrix of light, every piece of dust illuminated with heavenly glow. In that moment of utter perfection I decided to give God one last college try, for if there was ever an opportune moment for him to enter my life, it was then. I closed my eyes, but kept my face pointed toward the ceiling and with all those saints as my witness, silently shouted to God,

"Come and take me! I'm yours if you'll have me! Just show me you're there! I'm here! Take me! Come on! Take me you rotten bastard! I'll come willingly! I'll be your servant, just show me you are there!" ...but nothing happened and I looked like just another man who was sunbathing in the light that shined through the diamonds in the walls. God had not answered my call, he had not filled my heart, he had not taken me into his embrace and called me son, but neither did he abandon me, for one must first be there in order to abandon...

## 11

By the time I exited St. Peter's it was dark and all the tourist attractions were closing for the evening. I did not fret for I figured I could just come back any other day to see the Sistine Chapel. If Rome had shown me anything, it was that not much was fleeting in the Eternal City. If it was there today it stood to reason that it would be there tomorrow. I figured it was time I started heading back to Graham's anyhow. Hugo would be preparing dinner and I'm sure Graham would want all the details about my evening with Dora (so he could boast about his supreme matchmaking skills no doubt). The walk home seemed shorter than the walk there and I

chalked this up to the fact that I knew exactly where I was going. With a definitive direction a person walked briskly, ignoring the things around them, only concentrating on the destination, but when going somewhere new, each bend in the road was a discovery. You were more likely to saunter, perhaps wander a bit, god forbid, and you kept a keen eye out for landmarks to mark your route. Anyway, after the uneventful walk, I arrived at Graham's, my entire body weak, wanting nothing more to collapse on the sofa and sleep until the dawn of a new century. I had run myself ragged. Between walking everywhere, the evening with Dora, and dodging seminal works of literature thrown from second story windows, my old carcass had the durability of a newspaper soaked in the tears of a widow reading the obituaries. I somehow found the strength to climb the stairs toward Graham's door. My footsteps echoed in the hallway, each pathetic step bouncing off the walls. When my eyes could see over the top step I first saw Cypress balled up on the doormat beside his saucer, but beside him was something infinitely mangier and ferocious... it was Adona sitting in a ball at the base of the door, her mascara hardened down her cheeks, her eyeballs like over-easy eggs. She was like a cadaver sprigging to life on the carving table when she saw me.

"Oh, Homer! Il mio dolce amore!" she ran over to me and wrapped herself around my right leg.

"Adona, what are you doing here?"

"I came to say I'm sorry! I didn't mean what I said! Please forgive me, Homer! Please!"

"Listen, Adona..."

"It will never happen again, I swear it! Please take me back!"

I looked down at her, her face one of such indescribable humiliation that I pitied her. She was begging me like a dog would its master for a treat. I took her arms from around my leg and lifted her to her feet. She looked at me, handing over her pride with such ease that I questioned whether or not she ever had any. Her entire world hinged on my answer, if I'd take her back. Her insanity was much more severe than I first speculated. She was acting how a madwoman in love would behave. Was it possible that she too believed that she was in love with me? What about me lured the deadly emotion of love out of these women, why were they so eager to claim me as their own? Solely from this account you'd think I was a mystic, mesmerizing women with some sort of invisible magic, but I was just a man, a plain man at that, so what about me made women go so absolutely, positively off their rockers? It was easy to seduce a woman, in fact I'd go as far to say anyone could bed a dame so long as they had an ounce of confidence and daring. Women yearned for sexual gratification as much as men, if not more so, but love, that was a different matter completely, a matter not only better understood by women, but championed by them. A woman's love, I'd say was invariably more selfless than a man's, if it were in fact genuine. If it was not genuine then it was incomparably more menacing. I knew of course that most of these encounters of mine didn't offer genuine love. They didn't love *me*; they loved whatever selfish

impulse I was able to satisfy in them and because human beings couldn't stand the guilt of doing something that offered them only unadulterated pleasure they felt they needed to justify it by calling it love. The fool accepted their love and believed it with all their feckless hearts, but not I, no, I refuted it. I did not want their poisonous love. Love from Adona might as well have been a venereal disease. I only wanted real love, the kind where your inner conscious whispered to you that it was a love you'd never find again, so hold onto it with white-knuckled fury. I wanted death or glory, all or nothing. Cheap love was like Adona's cheap wine, it would easily get you as drunk as the sloppiest bum, but it would burn and twist and boil in your guts, kick and scream like an insolent child. It would make you sick and if you drank too much of it, it could even kill you. The only difference I could see between cheap wine and cheap love was dying by drink was a considerably more intelligent gesture than dying from love, or lack thereof.

Against my instincts to run away from Adona as fast as I could, I told her that I would forgive her transgressions and take her back, though I wasn't quite sure we were capable of going *back* when we really hadn't been *anywhere* yet. I knew now without a doubt in my mind that Adona viewed me as her property, that she wasn't the free spirit I had predicted and was instead an emotionally disturbed obsessive. Though if she was such the debutant Graham had described and I knew her to be, where did she find the time to stalk all of her lovers? She couldn't possibly be crying at the doorsteps of all the men she entertained. There weren't enough hours in the day. This put a terrible fear in me that I had specially brought this quality out in her, but I chose to ignore this nagging dread and see what happened. What I knew and Adona didn't was: no one could make me do what I didn't want to do. And so I'd entertain her madness for a while, like my own private mental patient, and when I had had enough of her I'd call it quits and she could cry and beg all she liked, but nothing would change. She could throw Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* at me if she so desired, when I was finished, I was finished. What transpired after my departure was irrelevant; for I'd be gone and could do nothing more than speculate about what was in fact happening in my absence. And since I was positive that this was indeed a hoax love, I was confident that Adona would get over the fracture with relative ease. Also, I wasn't at all opposed to going the age-old route of treating Adona so poorly that she would be the one to break off our courtship, either. The ol' switcheroo, as one says. None of the dirty work needed to be done, none of the shattering of hearts, nothing. You just became the lowest form of yourself until the other person could no longer take it and they freed you like a plantation owner unshackling a slave. You just wore a frown and asked unanswerable questions like "What did I do wrong?" and then you were home free. It was the more time consuming of your options, but that was its only drawback. If you could no longer stand the person it was best to break it clean yourself, just tell them the way things were. That's exactly as I had done with Max. I smashed her like a mirror, which was fitting, because women were like mirrors, harmless when together, a splendid means of seeing yourself, but deadly when in pieces.

I showed Adona home who sealed the goodbye with a kiss. In that moment I was Gary Cooper, falsifying a kiss out of thin air. I was the great pretender of love. She entered her stairwell just as a sane woman would, walking up the stairs, right foot in front of left foot, just as any rational person might have done, but it was deception, you see, for she was in fact a complete lunatic. How her warped brain still was able to operate the rest of her body normally was a total mystery to me. It was as if all of her basic needs were met, but the more sophisticated machinery of her mind had been somehow damaged, short-circuiting and causing her to act out irrationally. Her tears could very well have been gear oil from the grinding of rogue cogs in her skull. The craziest part about her was her seemingly absent coherence to see that she was acting so radically. Her madness blinded her from the fact that she was acting mad and this is what assured me that I was still for the most part sane. I would be mortified to behave in such a way, going berserk one moment and then crying my eyes out the next. I would be able to see how insane that would appear to someone else, but Adona was going to go to bed that evening all smiles, feeling as though she and I were right as rain, as if her carrying on had simply erased her trying to kill me with some of the world's greatest literature only a few hours before. I'm not sure what it was that made me give in and agree to continue this demented carnival ride, maybe it was just having come from the Vatican, seeing all that beauty and feeling sentimental, or maybe it was because I was afraid she'd remove a pistol from her bag and off herself right there in the hallway, right in front of Cypress, if I had said no. Whatever the reason, I had had my opportunity to end things, giving myself an opportunity to dedicate myself to Dora completely, and I had squandered it. I'd have no reason to complain now if Dora found out about Adona and me, though I was going to go to great lengths to make sure that never happened. In fact, I scurried over to Dora's apartment, because I told her I would and I didn't want to disappoint her right off the bat. There was plenty of time for that later on.

I made it to Dora's, feeling as diminished as I had my last few hours before being mugged by Nina and her cohorts outside of the dance hall. I hadn't thought about Nina or my near death experience for a while and as soon as I did I automatically reached up and felt the divot in the back of my skull from where the pipe came crashing down. There was no pain, but a tenderness which was only noticeable to the tips of my fingers. The hair around the wound was growing in nicely, for I never had an issue with growing hair. With the exception of almost being fatally injured, I was healthy as a horse. My fingernails grew quickly, my hair like weeds, my urine was always crisp and clear. I had at least fifty Christmases left on this earth, as I always said, though I could feel that I was beginning to burn myself out and if I continued such a rambunctious lifestyle I could drop at any minute. I had cheated death once, twice even, for it was true that Miss Ursula's prediction was false, but I could have easily been that black boy in Brazil, bleeding to death beside a stump, and part of me wished I had been... I was indeed the matador of death, gracefully dodging it with the twist of my cape, but all I wanted to do in that

moment was hang up my cape on the coat hanger in Dora's apartment. I rang the bell and waited patiently. I looked down at the fabric that covered my immobile dong and said aloud, "Old boy, you can have the night off." For the first time in my entire existence, I did not feel the urge to make love. I just wanted to crawl into bed, press Homer Jr. up against Dora's warm ass and enter dreamland. I was certain I would dream. There was no way, considering the state I was in and the fact that it was an honest-to-goodness bed that I wouldn't fall into such a deep sleep that I'd have vivid dreams, perhaps so vivid I'd mistake them for reality even after I awoke. After a few moments Dora opened the door and embraced me warmly with a huge hug and a kiss. Even my lips were tired and they pressed up to Dora's like dead earthworms.

"What's wrong?" she said after feeling my halfhearted kiss. The tone in her voice made it sound like she was experiencing real dismay. I then thought that her first instinct was probably that I can reconsidered my position on being hers and after all day apart the magic from the night prior had worn off and I had come to my senses. To quell her trembling spirit, I lowered my face into her bosom and squeezed my arms around her back, my words muffled from her body,

"I am exhausted. Let's go to bed. Can we just go to bed?" I looked up at her then with pleading eyes.

"Yes, Homer, let's go to bed." she said with more motherly kindness than my mother ever hoped to achieve. Dora took me by the hand and led me up the flight of stairs and around the banister to her apartment door, which was cracked open and spilling yellow light into the hallway. We barged in and closed the door behind us, home. I stripped immediately, the joints in my needs aching, and jumped into Dora's bed. Her pillows were stuff with goose feathers, as was her quilt and it felt like I was unlatching a cloud and nestling between its vapors. Dora was close behind me, hopping with childish enthusiasm into the spot beside me. I propped myself on my shoulder blade so I was still on my back, but leaning toward Dora. I shut my eyes and they were like heavy metal doors slamming closed, the sound that heavy, deathly boom that shakes the inside of your ribcage.

"Homer?" Dora adorably asked in a voice like a mouse.

"Yes?" I said playfully peeved.

"Do you know that you've yet to tell me I'm beautiful?"

I paused for a moment, thinking about reaching out my pink muscle and paying her the compliment she so rightfully deserved, but then I remembered my principles.

"That's because I don't think it's a compliment that should be thrown around lightly." I said.

"What's funny is you haven't said it, but you make me feel more beautiful than anyone ever has."

That statement didn't need a response and I smiled to myself, letting just our warm bodily noises occupy the small room. The fodder for real peace was stewed about like dew after a

thundershower and we laid in it together, Dora and I, finding something in each other that vanquished any doom that lurked about, and it most certainly lurked about. If I hadn't have been so sleepy I'm sure my thoughts would have kept me awake, thoughts that played before my eyes over and over that I lay in Dora's bed a saboteur. I had deceived the poor girl and then crawled into her bed like a lion, the scent of others in my mane, and on my genitals for that matter. But she blew little droplets of loveliness out of the diamond-shaped hole in her parted, pouty lips as she drifted off to sleep, not having the slightest doubt that I'd do the things I had done. That's what was frightening about people when you really examined it. There was no way to know the person as they were inside their own minds. Luckily for Dora my crimes were crimes of love and nothing more. Instead of urinating on Adona, which was harmless in the scheme of things, I could have been strangling prostitutes or fornicating with children, I could have just buried an axe into another man's head for all Dora knew and she welcomed me into her bed without opposition or inquisition. And I did the same for her. That was the human trust we had to submit ourselves to if we didn't desire holding up inside our homes and never seeing the light of day. I had to trust that Dora, a woman I had only known for a short time, wasn't capable of slitting my throat in the middle of the night, and while the alternatives to my trust were bleak, the fact that we did this time and time again, offered ourselves to strangers like pigs on a platter, was actually quite beautiful. We consciously entered into relationships knowing that we'd never truly know the person we claimed to love, and that was powerful, at least much more powerful than we usually acknowledged. It said something about our unwavering wish to share the passion inside us. And this wasn't being cynical, to fully trust someone was to be superhuman, only dogs were capable of utter trust, for as long as we could conceive the notion of doubt we would have doubt in our minds. Doubt was the function of further developed brains, it was the result of millions of years of deception perpetrated by the mandatory selfishness rooting inside every living creature on this planet and it created an entire world which mysteriously operated inside a clump of pinkish tissue that when dead was no different than the pinkish tissue found in the heads of cattle. It was another unsung beauty of the world, another demonized truth pawned off as fiction. But it didn't matter much to me if the world wanted to live in darkness, for I knew the real state of things and by the grace of some god, I had a lovely, warm woman beside me who believed my lies, cherished my truths, but most importantly, allowed me to sleep beside her...

## 12

I woke up screaming. That's all I remembered, or at least that's all Dora could tell me of what happened when I apparently began shrieking uncontrollably in my sleep. She told me I started to flail my arms and my soft groans quickly turned to hellish screams. I didn't wake easily, either, she told me. She had to scream my name over my deafening shrieks and she eventually took to beating my arms with her fists and slapping my neck and my face with an

open hand. She said I came out of my “terror” how a hypnotized person comes out of a spell, instantly. This is when I came to. I was breathing heavily and I could feel the burn of Dora’s blows to my neck and face, though I wasn’t aware they were the cause of my sensations. I just knew that I had dreamed something awful and that my face was pulsating in pain. I didn’t remember being beside Dora in bed at all, in fact. I think I thought I was in my apartment at home, alone in my little bed. I know this because Dora’s voice startled me terribly.

“...Homer?” she asked timidly. I jumped three feet into the air. “I didn’t mean to frighten you!” she continued. Then there was a long silence before she spoke again and we were two floating entities in negative space, each of us trying to muster of the courage to flap our pink muscles. “...What just happened?” she finally spoke. I turned toward her in the darkness. I reached out and grabbed her, using her to pull myself close to her body. I rested my head on her chest and I could feel the rigidity brought on by sad, brutal fear all the way up her. She hesitated a moment and then wrapped her arms around me.

“I had the most terrible dream.” I said, whimpering like a child.

“What was it?” she boldly inquired. I paused for a while, trying to piece the fractured nightmare together.

“...I was in the jungle... It was evening, but the sky was grey and I was alone.” I began, my voice quivering, “I was...I was searching for something, lost in thick brush... I felt a horrible fear... like something awful was about to happen... As I walked the ground became softer and softer beneath my feet and I had to step quickly as not to get stuck... I began to hear these terrible noises... animals eating savagely, ripping *something* apart... Large insects, larger than I had ever seen were buzzing all around me and I could hear the rubbing together of their hairy feelers... I parted some tangled greenery and stepped forward... It came like a terrible shock, I could see the carcass of the black boy, lying there decomposed in the mud... and animals were all around him, ripping him to pieces, tearing him apart...eating him. I froze in horror and I quickly sank into the mud up to my knees. I couldn’t move... I just had to sit there and watch as they ate the his body...”

There was stunned silence at what I had just described, but of course Dora didn’t know about the black boy in Brazil, how I had seen him die, she thought it was just a dream, something that despite being unquestionably vile, could be forgotten and chalked up as fantasy. This is what she would’ve said in her attempt to sooth me had she been able to speak, I’m sure, but Dora was so quiet that had I not been squeezing her, I would have thought she dissolved into nothingness by the sound of my words. Minutes passed before I heard the snuffle of her nose, trying to rewind the tears she began to shed.

“That’s awful, Homer.” she said.

“I know, Max. I’m sorry to have frightened you...” I said, not realizing the colossal mistake I had made, blurting out my words like an inarticulate fool. I had called her Max, the

very woman she reminded me of and who I had hoped Dora would never discover. The dream had sent my mind staggering, a reckless, drunken mad-dash for understanding. The wrong name had just slipped out from habit. I was accustomed to Max comforting me after a bad dream in her own cold way, running her delicate fingers along my scalp. Hers was the only bed I regularly shared besides my own and after being so disarrayed by that miserable nightmare I said the name most engrained. It was a mistake anyone could've made and once I made it I entered a silent prayer straight to God, wishing with all my soul that Dora would have the good grace to ignore it if it was impossible for her to outright not notice it had happened.

"What did you call me?" Dora asked more puzzled than angry, as though she might've just heard me wrong.

"What?" I said as innocently as possible.

She leaned over and lit one of the candles beside the bed. All of the sudden the night was on probation and the firelight filled the room like a prosecutor in a courtroom.

"You called me 'Max.'" Dora said. "Who's Max?"

I figured being as truthful I could be would serve me the best in this situation. I could have said Max didn't exist, that in my perplexity I had just blurted out a meaningless name, but Dora wouldn't have bought it. So I decided to tell her in an extremely censored version of who Max was and why her name was the name that slipped through my lips.

"Max was my girlfriend in the States." I said bluntly. "We parted ways before I came here. I'm sorry, I'm not thinking straight. I didn't mean to say her name."

"No, it's okay." Dora said to my surprise, though in a way that was a bit disheartened. "You and I are too new to be offended by such things." she continued, being far more rational than I thought women were capable of.

"Thanks for understanding, honey." I said, leaning over and pecking her lips. She blew out the candle and the night once again crept into the room. We rolled our bodies back into sleep position, both of us on our backs and we laid in silence. Our bodies may have been still, but our minds were whirling with thoughts, mine on the dream and the boy and Max, Dora's I was certain on how to ignore the pain from me calling her by another woman's name. I could almost atmospherically feel Dora's question formulating in her brain, cipherring down her head and loading itself onto her tongue. Sure enough the silence was broken when she asked,

"Did you love her?"

Her words penetrated the silence with the same destruction as a rock being thrown through a pane of glass. Dora had asked me an infinitely more complex question than she could have ever imagined. Had I loved Max? This was a question that not even Max and I knew the answer to. Our love was so deformed, and by the end disfigured, that I wasn't sure it could still be called love. Thinking back on it then I felt like someone asked to identify a corpse, only the remains were too mutilated to recognize. The only thing I knew to be absolutely true is that I never gave

myself totally to Max, I always had a secret too dark to share, some bullshit excuse to withhold parts of myself and I wondered if that disqualified any love had it been there to begin with. I wasn't sure of anything, especially in that blasted moment sitting beside Dora. I wasn't my usual keen self, I was blindsided, botched. The lengthy velvet words I was so accustomed to spewing had run out. I felt a torpid pain in me. I was so filled with misery that I thought I'd die. I couldn't hesitate too much longer or Dora would think I was stalling, so I opened my mouth and out came, "No..." It felt like a lie when I said. There's either a great satisfaction or a great pain that came with lying, but both were unmistakable and I was feeling foul enough to expire.

"No?" Dora asked.

"No." I said again.

"Did she know that?"

I paused. What was Dora putting me through such torture? Why did she need to know at that exact moment when my entire body felt unglued and each breath I took felt like I was inhaling my own piteous worthlessness? A patina from the wrung-out tears of my lies started to form on my skin. I was drowning in my own dishonesty and I suddenly had an urge to tell the truth.

"I don't know." I said, "I believe she thought I did and I believe she thought she did."

"Sounds confusing." Dora added.

"It wasn't all that confusing at the time, but it is now."

"I thought loving someone was supposed to be easy."

"It's the easiest thing to want and the hardest thing to do..."

There was a deadly silence, as though I had killed Dora's notions of love, struck them down with one cold blow. She had never heard me speak so cynically and I believe it shocked her to hear my words, but I needed an escape, if only for a moment, from the falsehood that I had made my home. I was in too much pain to be the actor I had trained my whole life to be.

"I'm very tired." I said eventually.

"Go to sleep now, Homer." Dora said, snuggling up beside me. I closed my eyes and laid quite still. I could feel that she was awake, rustling around a bit, wanting to say something, hoping that I'd speak first, but I did not move. Time passed, I'm not sure how much, but soon Dora's voice once again broke the silence.

"I love you." she said. The words lingered in the air above me; "I" like a Greek column, "Love" like a peacock spreading its feathers, and "You" the most meaningful of all words, for what is 'love' without a 'you' behind it? Her eyes were shut, but her ears and heart were open waiting for my response, though she would not get one. I kept my eyes tightly closed, breathed in and out and pretended to sleep, careful not to breathe any faster or any slower. Her words, dripping with heart, disintegrated without entering me, without breaking in. I heard her sigh and finally nestle back into her place in bed.

The next morning I woke before Dora did, which was an obvious sign to me that only my body had rested, not my mind, for I was always known to sleep longer than my female counterparts, leaving them lingering in the breakfast nook as the jam on my toast cooled and the cream in my coffee turned clotted. I watched Dora sleep for a while as the sun struggled to make its way passed the curtain, illuminating all the dust particles in the air as it liked to do. Dora's face was pensive as she slept, as though her dreams were ones less of spirit and adventure and ones more of drudgery and painful reality. What a tragedy, I thought, dreams are where we're supposed to give up the shackles of veracity, but instead poor, thoughtful Dora was too cautious to be absurd even in her nightmares. I got out of bed, dressed, wrote her a lovely note, which I placed on the dimple in the pillow left behind from my generously sized head and ducked out before we had an opportunity to discuss what had happened during the night. It was a horrific thought going over the night's events when I was fully awake, forced to experience every detail in real time and I thought it best to just sweet talk her a bit, use my gift with words and my excellent penmanship to enamor her and then to disappear for eight or nine hours before returning with a bouquet of freshly picked flowers and a hard-on that resembled the Leaning Tower of Pisa. With any luck this would put her into a trance, my scrotum the swinging pendulum that would hypnotize her, and she would forget all about the off-off-Broadway production I had conducted the night prior. I don't know why I was so ashamed, why I hid so from my sudden and unconscious display of emotion, but I was, and when I left Dora's apartment, walking into the pulsing city that was Rome during the day, I was moping around like a dog that had just micturated upon a carpet. I knew I had nothing to be ashamed of, that I had only shed a few tears after a bad dream like a million children had done before me, and after all, human beings are allowed moments of weakness. In fact, that may be the defining factor of our humanity. So, I, like a diligent worker, had saved all of my vacation time, sure never to miss a day, only to then take an unannounced and ill-timed excursion at a moment's notice, but my trip was not to some exotic locale, instead it was into the core of bottled-up sentiment I thought I hid so convincingly within myself. I should have actually felt good about my behavior, especially because Dora had professed such a resounding love for me and it was her ears that this salty lament had requested audience with. I knew a woman as quick to love as Dora was certainly the type willing to abide strange behaviors. They were so desperate to love they'd endure anything and take it upon themselves, like a cross, to mend any broken bone, even if that bone was the hardest and most calcium enriched of all a man's bones, his soul. This should have put me at ease, but again, it did not and I was at a loss as to explain why. I was covered in fear, worrying about what Dora must have thought. She'd concoct a million different theories throughout the day, all of which ended with poor Homer Miller being a piece of damaged machinery. I suppose

that's what bothered me the most, she'd think I was a wounded sparrow, a man within himself and she would take her bloody feminine pity out on me. I despised being pitied, for it was I who pitied others! I was in fine working order and it was the rest of the world who spent their waking lives deader than doornails. I was alive! I didn't want Dora to think otherwise, I didn't want her to think one little outburst was the loose thread that when pulled would unravel the man I had blossomed to be. My episode had just been a nightmare, a phantasm of the mind, a meaningless vision. It was true I had witnessed a terrible event, but that didn't mean I was someone else, I was still me, still the same young stallion, the same fiery raconteur. I could still conjure fire with my bare hands and shoot twenty feet of jism if there was a stiff enough breeze. I resulted to mend my own broken wing and return to Dora a man so confident I would nearly shatter her with my gaze. I stormed off into the city, the hot sun combining with the cold air to red my cheeks and make my brow sweat. I hoped, with all my foolish heart, that Hogarth was sipping his coffee at the café. I had plans for him and me...

When I arrived at the café, Hogarth was indeed sitting at his usual table, sipping some manipulation of bean down his Ichabod Crane-shaped neck, complete with protruding Adam's apple that looked as though he had swallowed an egg that didn't quite make it all the way down. I found him like a soldier on leave from war, calm, but never quite relaxed, always bubbling with an idea that could make for a good story. That much I related to with the writer, for I too was always soaking in every detail and extrapolating it to its most ridiculous conclusion. Sitting there, he looked like a real writer, or at least how I imagined a writer of fiction should look while sitting at a table in Rome. As I approached him I suddenly felt the desperate wish that I was an artist, too, and that we were meeting, like the gang that had met only a decade before us, to hatch our plans as the new American Renaissance of Europe. Perhaps I could be Hemingway and he could be Fitzgerald and we'd take to nicknaming each other Hem and Fitz, but then again, there was already a Hem and Fitz in the world and despite the romance of that notion, our duty should have been making a place in the world for ourselves as Homer and Hogarth. It was actually quite memorable, *Homer & Hogarth*, a nice ring to it and it would be sure to echo if either of us were to amount to anything in our miserable little lives. However, when I arrived at his table I was only Homer Miller, the man, the great puppeteer of love and nothing more, but how grand would it have been if I had something to lay claim to, a novel, perhaps, or even a blasted poem, the lines of which had imbedded themselves into the public conscious. Why wasn't it I who had penned the words, *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways!* Why was it not I who discovered the Wasteland? Or I who could not stop for Death and so the bastard instead kindly stopped for me? It infuriated the labyrinths in my fingertips; the hollow follicles in my scalp in that instant, discovering that I had not created something great in all my twenty-four years of life and it infuriated me even more that I was not held in esteem by anyone. You'd think, purely from my arrogance, that I would seek out some sort of purpose and it bewildered me to realize that my

great pursuit for commonality in terms of life's work was actually quite a humble act in itself, and was there anything more sickening than a humble act? From sheer desire to be praised I should've taken up quill and ink. I, in no way, would be very good as a writer, especially in light of the fact that I had virtually no practice or training of any kind, save for my adolescent journaling (which was now in the safe care of Penelope), this about which I had no illusions, but that hardly seemed to matter when so many jaunty fellows and girls made good, clean names for themselves with drivel no better articulated than the juvenile scribbles of a three-year-old toddler who rummaged into their mother's stationary drawer and with chubby hand spilt the ink well onto a blank sheet of paper. All of this thought culminated in the identifying realization that I was not the kind of man who regretted the things they had done, but rather the things they had *not* done, and so, like an executive, I decided that I would try my hand at poetry. I had seen my fair share of tragedy, I had bellowed a million times before to friends, family and strangers alike, why not do so in writing where, if I could not make a cent, I could at least polish my name? Graham would laugh at me, poetry of all things, but it seemed like the least amount of work and I had grown since traveling with Graham. I learned that if he did not approve of my behavior, it was most likely the best behavior I could exude. But poetry, what a limitless mistress, what a free enterprise it was! A novelist had to learn structure, form, patience, skill, editorial wits. He had to be efficient in the ways of dialogue between characters, had to know his way around grammar and spelling- two things I was never too keen at, truth be told- but the poet was a geyser springing forth, an absolute stampede of words that did not require rhyme or reason, but could if they so desired. Poetry was the literary equivalent of a jailbreak, totally lawless. If a soul could speak, its tongue would be fluent in poetry, not prose, not cumbersome bibles and epics, but the short stanza that represented all while saying very little. Wouldn't that be a fine contrast to my usual lugubrious rantings? So full of clutter, but rarely content! Ha! Here was my chance to leash the wild lion of my tongue, tame him and make him roar only when I commanded, delivering with the same directness as a bullet from a gun and smoking just as ominously, my words smoldering on the page, hot to the touch.

The café was busy with other patrons and it took a while before the waiter, Fernando, came to take our order. I ordered some nonsense – a coffee and a pastry – and Hogarth ordered his usual, which was brandy disguised in a mug so as to appear to be a refill on his morning brew.

“I need the first cup of coffee to wake up, but then I need some brandy to slip me back into the coma-like status required to make it through the day.” he said to me as he let the velvety brandy, as though melted leather bonded with maple syrup and perhaps a touch of tree sap, splash around his mouth, soothing his soul and burning the sensitive parts of his gums where he'd let them soften and bruise due to lack of oral hygiene.

“I've decided something, Hogarth.” I said.

“And what’s that?” Hogarth returned effortlessly, serious enough to seem interested and humorous enough to seem as though he was poking fun at the idea of me deciding anything concretely.

“Well, I’ve decided a few things and they concern you.”

“Me? Oh, no. I was just sitting here minding my own business.” Hogarth said.

“And yet you’re the only one I feel I can trust.” I said.

“That is a sobering sentence.” Hogarth said, I believe genuinely worried a bit.

“Firstly, I’ve decided that I want to try my hand at poetry.” I said confidently.

“You’re doomed.” Hogarth replied.

“Why am I doomed you son of a bitch?” I said.

“Because poetry isn’t poker, you benign polyp, you don’t ‘try your hand at it,’ it must be a pure extension of your soul, unless it’s an exploration of your mind, and ideally it should be both. You don’t get into poetry and give it the old college try, old man, it’s life or death.”

“Why is everyone so goddamn dramatic all the time?” I inquired. “Poetry is just made up ideals and promises like all writing is, only more flowery and abstract. I’ll think about something beautiful or something ugly and then I’ll cryptically write about that beautiful or ugly thing using metaphor that some scholar will spend the rest of his miserable days trying to decipher.”

“I never had much use for it myself.” Hogarth replied, “I’m a period man. My sentences must be clean and have an end. There’s no end to poetry, its punctuation is when the heart reaches crescendo. That’s too much freedom for someone the likes of me. Prose has a beautiful structure that any monkey could follow if they had a hat-full of patience and an ounce of skill.”

“I’m not sure I have either of those.” I said.

“And what makes you so interested in poetry all of a sudden?”

“I’m bursting, Hogarth.”

“Go see Adona for that.” he said sarcastically.

“I’m serious! I’m drowning in the desire to create. Did you know I haven’t created a single thing in my entire life?”

“Who’s being dramatic now? You sound like God before his infamous six days.”

“Good! I feel like God! This is what he must have felt like! What prompted him to get his hands dirty and create such a ragged place as the earth.”

“And don’t forget the rats on the earth.”

“Ha!” I laughed, “Humans – God’s greatest blunder.”

“Are you sure you want to make the same mistake?”

“Well, for all the tragedy and horror humans have caused, they’ve also done some utterly astounding things. Perhaps my poetry will be the same. For all the vile work I’m sure to produce, perhaps I’ll write something beautiful...accidentally, of course.”

“Well, it seems there’s no way of stopping you.” Hogarth said with a look.

“None whatsoever.” I said.

“Well, in that case, I know of someone you should talk to. He’s a poet, a truly great poet, I should say. An Irishman who spends most of his days in Paris.”

Hogarth proceeded to remove his address book from his coat pocket.

“I have his mailing address. Write to him. Tell him who you are, that you’re my friend and that you’d like some *guidance* as an aspiring poet. It can only help you.”

“Will he be like you, and every other writer I’ve ever met, looking to disparage others with similar interests? I tell you, you fellows are worse than the priesthood.”

“No, no. C.G. is a good man, a supporter of all those looking to write. He might be the only romantic left in that regard. He even got my first story published for me. That’s the kind of man he is.”

Hogarth wrote the poet’s name on a small piece of paper along with his mailing address. He then handed me the piece of paper. I read it: *C.G. Flynn* was his name. Sounds like an Irishman, I thought and stuffed the piece of paper in my coat pocket. (From coat pocket to coat pocket! Where all great transfers occur, transmuted only by brand and cut of fabric!)

“Okay,” Hogarth said, “Now what was the other decision that concerned me?”

“Ah, yes. What do you say we get ourselves a couple of prostitutes?” I said cheerfully, knowing full well my tone of voice would dictate Hogarth’s response. He just let out a laugh.

“What brought this on?”

“I don’t know. I just need to be revitalized! I’ve begun to see Dora, Adona is infatuated and I feel the stress of juggling both is getting to me.”

“So you want to add another to the mix?”

“It’s different. I feel I need a heartless fuck. Does that sound heartless?”

“Yes, but isn’t it supposed to?” Hogarth said, so funny.

“I suppose so.”

“Don’t tell me you have feelings for Adona as well as Dora.”

“No, of course not.”

“Then why --”

I cut him off.

“Please, Hogarth. Don’t ask any more questions. I just want a cheap lay and I felt you were the man to accompany me.”

“I’m flattered.” he said sarcastically.

Not for the life of me could I explain my logic, but I felt as though to refuel and replenish the gumption required to be a true and tender lover to Dora I needed to restore my manhood, the disgusting male bravado which drove me to my heartless actions, and the best way I saw to do it was to penetrate a whore, someone who had no heart for me, therefore would not need any gentle caresses or fragile fingerings, just rough, brutal dissemination from start to finish. That was my

plan, to coerce Hogarth into my ridiculous, mindless adventure, the same way Graham had coerced me into stomping through the jungle, the only difference being my reward was much more fulfilling. Why I felt I needed to drag poor Hogarth into my madness I did not know, but I now realize it's the same reason I'd always feel a wave of relief as a boy in the classroom when someone else also forgot to bring in their assignment, I didn't like to descend into Hell alone. There was something about burning together that was soothing, almost fun.

"So what do you say, old friend?" I said.

"I want to show you something." he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Follow me." Hogarth rose from his chair, folded his newspaper and stuck it beneath his arm. I followed him to a back staircase, which lead to apartments above the coffee shop, one of which belonged to him and served as his small den to hang his hat or write when he wasn't out and about with the gang. The stairway was dark and narrow and by the time we reached the top the boisterous noise of the café became a dull rattle as though mice feet scampering through the walls. I felt prompted to say something like, "*where are you taking me?*," as it was totally within the realm of Hogarth's capabilities to lead me into some strange fantasy world through the mothball ridden wardrobe which housed his ratty suits, but I followed silently further into the hallway which seemed to be shrinking the deeper we went. Finally we approached a long, plain door with the number "6" tacked onto it. Hogarth removed a Victorian looking key from his coat pocket and with the ease of a crook slipped it into the keyhole. There was tension building; I'm not sure if it was real tension or if I had invented it in my mind. I glared at the upside down, distorted reflections of Hogarth and me in the shiny doorknob. We were foul renditions of ourselves, warped around the edges. He twisted the knob, which looked like a golden clown nose or a bulb found atop a rich man's Christmas tree, and pushed the door in. The way he pushed the door in, I later found out, was purposefully like the Big Bad Wolf, slowly and with arched back, for what was behind the door and on the bed was something most scandalous. I knew what it was immediately from the smell, an odor which originates from only one place and creates a moisture in the air like nothing else could or would. It was the rancid yet heavenly smell of a stimulated cunt. I looked to confirm with my eyes what my heart already knew, and yes, there was indeed a nude woman pleasuring herself with long-fingered hands, sprawled out on the bed, humping an invisible lover and muffling her moans into a goose-feathered pillow. What surprised me was not that Hogarth was showing me such a sight, but that the young lady did not stop upon our entering. She continued diddling herself as though no one was there at all, every ounce as enthusiastic and impassioned as the moment before our entrance, I was sure. I was no advocate of shame, but where was this woman's? I thought.

"Hogarth, you animal, what's this?" I asked.

"My most beneficial tool." he replied. "When a man is alone with his thoughts for any extended period of time, they will most certainly get the best of him. No matter how foul a

concept I am writing, my mind will wander to the more *pleasurable* aspects of life. If I hope to get any significant amount of work finished I must ejaculate periodically in order to keep my mind clean and clear. So, I pay this young lady to remain in my room during my designated hours of work, so I'm able to write in the café and then pop up here when I begin to drown in my own fluid."

"You mean to tell me this woman stays in your room all day, just waiting for you to come and sleep with her?" I asked, astonished, as though a schoolboy asking an upperclassman about a university myth.

"That is correct."

"And you pay her?"

"As any gentleman would, Homer. This is her profession."

I looked toward the girl. She was still firing away on her bud, strumming it with unsettling precision, an accuracy I now feared I had never achieved, and like the strings of a bass fiddle, vibrating with the same transparent reverb. I could see her juice glistening, as though her pink divide was filled with glitter or any moment would emit a bubble that would float upward to the ceiling, drifting with the delicate glide of a feather and pop against that same ceiling with a wet, slippery sound. She was so very wet, keeping herself in such a condition so when Hogarth arrived in the doorway she was prepared for his cock, which I was sure was as long and knotted as his terrible neck. Had this been her dream as a little girl? Was this what she hoped to aspire to? Or had she just been lured by the ever-present nagging of pleasure? Was she another victim of her own weakness in the face of lustful desire? Had she realized somewhere in life, perhaps while looking in the mirror, that the erupting satisfaction, which started in her cunt like an acorn but detonated throughout the rest of her body like the great unfolding of a tree, was the best life had to offer? Was it finally the knowledge that the soaking orgasm, the boiling water over the lip of the pot, was her only chance at achieving something great and was she honing her skills as a painter would or a butcher learning to cut a pig cleanly in half with one stroke of the knife? Hogarth referred to this as her *profession* and for the first time I saw all the one thousand details that went into dedicating one's life to the mutual execution of pleasure. My disgust for the girl evaporated when I realized that I would gladly strum my knob all day long if someone paid me to do so and it especially evaporated when I realized I had been, up to this point, more or less, strumming my knob all day long free of charge. Who between the two of us was the fool?

"I offer her to you." Hogarth said without taking his eyes off her.

"Pardon me?" I said.

"No need to play meek. You wanted to get your jollies off and I'm offering the finest piece of tail in all of Rome. The finest I could find and afford, anyway."

I had not expected Hogarth to have a prostitute in his room and I had not expected him to offer her to me as though she were some boar's head upon a platter and I were some fat king, but when

he did offer her to me all the gusto I felt about regaining my manhood by greasing the rusted gears of my feeble anatomy seemed to cease rather suddenly. Perhaps how abruptly it had happened is what put me off of it, but whatever it was I no longer felt like falsifying love. This notion was confirmed when I looked north to the girl's face, my eyes like weights dragged through burning sand away from her flowing loins and the small pool of sap gathering between the triangular gap of her buttocks (a pool I wanted to lap up with my tongue) and saw an open sore on her lip, which also gushed a liquid, though one much less digestible. Her delighted face looked impoverished and hollow, and her lips, which had once been full and moist, were cracked and nude, the sore ripped open like bruised apple skin and leaking the mysterious clear human fluid that was neither saliva nor sweat, but some third alien moisture the body produced to glaze over a wound. She was infected with a disease of love, the physical ternary that love could cause, and though repulsed by the sight of it, I respected its presence. So often love only rotted you from within, so often was it only an internal destruction. At least the diseases of love transmitted by sex had the common courtesy to show themselves for what they truly were: badges of the forsaken. When there was no more soul left at the bottom of the barrel to try and scoop up with long fingernails and the name of your lover became the smeared black remains of hot ink on hotel registry slips did your depravity show on your face. The burning pustules and the cankerous boils littered your privates and oozed as though the chemical sludge byproduct of war machines, but the most frightening thing of all was the empowerment these viruses gave to ill people, and not just physically ill or mentally ill, much worse – morally ill, for now that you were infected you had the power to infect, and I knew, as did Hogarth when he reached down to involuntarily scratch his crotch through his wool trousers, that the most expensive whore in Rome had infected him with her sickness. I, myself, miraculously, I might add, had evaded any such poisoning and as far as I knew was clean as a whistle. If you were to blow me, I'd squeal loudly and clearly and I was proud of this fact, offering the information willingly to any new partner to put their mind at ease. It seemed as though every few years some new terrifying and debilitating sexual disease was popping up, diseases that made even the childish joy of kissing something fraught with sneaky terrors as if those cherry lips were poisonous caterpillars, so I took it upon myself to address the matter outright. You shall get no illness from me, young filly! Only pleasure is in your future! The great lover I was, well perhaps not great, but the *accomplished* lover I was and not an undesired drip from mouth or spout. I had heard stories of men whose fiendish fellows had pruned up, turned black and fallen off. The supreme nightmare as I called it. I shuddered at the image of Homer Jr. dried up and dead on the bathroom floor like a mummified finger. Was he not the mouth in which I did all my bidding? Was he not my most redeeming characteristic? Without him I'd cease to be a man, and what's worse, an object of desire. I rather be solely that, a whisper of a desire, than a man. Say what you will about women craving a sense of humor, it was the meaty tube steak they lusted after and held most dear. This

was proven by the fact that most minor discrepancies in the home could be resolved with a good and proper fucking. I had seen it happen one million times with Max. I doubt very much she would admit it to anyone, but if she was still staining her pillowcase with tears over me, some of them, if not all of them, were being shed because her clam was left eternally cold in the absence of my valiant steed. Women may have fooled the rest of the world into believing they were less shallow and fixated on the bits between our legs than men, but not me. I alone understood their base desires, for I was, head to toe, a base desire and saw through the human hypocrisy as though it wore an invisibility cloak. This young monstrosity lying on Hogarth's bed was evidence of my claim. Her heart was split down the middle and grew short curled hair, stinking to high heaven of surströmming just out of the can.

"So what do you say Homer old boy?"

I hesitated. "...Perhaps another time." Hogarth looked at me crossed.

"Homer, I'm shocked. You seemed so gung-ho downstairs."

"I've had a change of heart I suppose."

"That would first require a heart, old man." He fired back.

"You're beginning to sound like Graham." I said.

"Now that's a supreme insult. Don't be hurt my young friend, but make no mistake, you are vicious..." he said and closed the door behind him.

Beneath us at the coffee shop our mutual friend and filmmaker Nero was waiting for us. He looked greasy, or perhaps he'd prefer the description *slick*, but this is my recollection in my book and he looked greasy to me. Whenever I'd insult him by calling him a greasy dago he's smile coyly and sweetly and say in broken English, "No, darling, I'm *slick*." But now history will know the truth: he was greasy, not slick. When I saw him from the staircase I could see his beady eyes darting back and forth in paranoid fervor. It was past noon so it was safe to assume his blood was completely replaced by espresso and perhaps cocaine, a substance he nothing short of abused. His whizzing eyes spotted us and he began to call us over by waving his arms in the air like a madman. I was still getting accustomed to the Italian people and their cartoonish ways. Seeing him there, flailing like an idiot embarrassed me, until I saw a man and a woman beside him reenacting what appeared to be a death sequence from Macbeth, but was instead a normal conversation between two Italian citizens. Comparatively Nero was a subdued understudy to a vibrant and obnoxious leading lady and I was grateful his animation was as subtle as it was.

"Buongiorno, Nero." Hogarth said first.

"Buongiorno a tutti e due." Nero replied.

We took our seats around the table Nero had commandeered for us.

"What pulls you away from the studio?" Hogarth inquired. This caused Nero to launch into a tirade, thankfully every word of it in Italian. I sat like a bystander to an automobile accident, watching in horror something I didn't fully understand. I gathered that he was feeling

frustrations toward his chosen art, something I didn't identify with for my hour-long dedication to poetry had been serving me quite well. Hogarth could see that I was lost entirely, so mid-tirade he turned his head toward me without taking his eyes off Nero and began to translate.

"He says he feels suffocated...the producers...have too much control. Ruining his masterpiece."

Nero then leaned forward and in his slimy way began to whisper to me.

"Let me tell you secret..." I leaned in and turned my ear toward him.

"Film is not art." He paused a moment to let the gravity of that statement sink in.

"I am not artist." he continued. This was so strange to hear, for everyone was striving to prove themselves as an artist and I, the lone renegade, had fought the urge and just then, when I finally caved-in and took up arms with the despicable many, here was a flea-bitten dago saying what it took great courage to say, he was not an artist.

"What are you then?" I asked.

"I'm businessman with a camera."

"I don't understand." I said.

"Thee...thee..." he was struggling to find the correct English words. "The *eccentric*..." He looked at Hogarth to make sure it was the right word and Hogarth nodded to him that it was,

"The eccentric film maker, the artist!...myth. *Bullshit*. No such *ting!*" he was furious, I could tell. He was fuming with disgust and it was about something that as a patron of the cinema I did not realize: film was more a business than it was an art.

"Too much to do...too much work to make film for me to be eccentric artist. All romantic *bullshit*, Homer..."

"But film is some of our finest art, Nero." I said.

"To some. Joke to most, gimmick." Now he seemed exhausted as though his dream was a balloon and it had burst in front of him. His deflated body slumped in the chair.

"You want to know truth?" he asked me.

"Of course." I said.

"All other art...began as art...turn into business. Film...start as business...turn into art. You know why?" before I could answer he shouted, "MONEY! FUCKING COCKSUCKING MONEY! Van Gough could paint with fucking tomato, squash it up and paint. Free. Film? Need money, people, camera, sound, light, money, money, money. You need lawyer, cocksucking lawyer, contracts. No art. Business. Closest I come to art is having idea. Sitting in bed, dream. Dreams are my art."

"Young Homer here has decided to become a poet." Hogarth chimed in. Nero responded with a degrading, condescending laugh.

"What's that for?" I asked angrily.

"You want money, fame. I want art. We should switch professions."

“I’m not interested in money.” I said, “I just want to do something great.”

“Try to live happy. That is greatest of all feats...and we no have to read your bullshit poems.” Hogarth and Nero erupted into laughter, almost bellowing as though their throats and bellies were hollow caverns. I felt very foolish listening to both of them cackle; in fact it was the lowest I had felt in some time. This was no like me, to be the butt someone else’s joke. It was usually I who knew what the others did not. Perhaps, I thought, this meant I truly was becoming an artist. Wasn’t it true that being an artist required taking a risk and wasn’t it true that most risks, if they were truly risks, received ridicule from those who simply did not understand what it meant to be alive? Didn’t every artist play the fool at one point or another in their lives? Wasn’t Mozart thought an overambitious snot when he proposed the Marriage of Figaro? Not that I was comparing myself to Mozart, but then again, why not compare myself to Mozart? If I did not have the courage to compare myself to him, how could I ever obliterate him from history? How could I ever, even though our art forms were completely different, eradicate him from existence so only my name rang loudly through history as the finest creative force since God himself? It became quite clear to me to let them laugh, to save my fury for another day. Go ahead and snort you bastards, I thought. Relish your obscene pleasure at my expense. We shall see who is laughing in the end... I stood up in order to excuse myself from the table, planning on heading home early to Dora.

“Oh, don’t take it so bad, old sport. We’re only having a go.” Hogarth said through his grin.

“Oh, no.” I replied cheerfully, “No hard feelings. I’m just bored of you two.”

“Well,” Nero said, “I just come from Eva. She’s looking for you.”

“For me?” I asked, puzzled.

“Si.”

“I know what this is about.” Hogarth said, “She spoke to me about it last week.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Children playing revolutionaries.” He replied with a thin air of disgust.

I looked at Nero.

“Perhaps Hogarth is right, but you should see for yourself.” he said.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Nero...are you and Eva...”

“What?” he said, almost annoyed.

“Well, does she belong to you?” I asked. Nero smiled at my question.

“Eva belong to me same way a flower belong to the sun. The flower owes the sun its life, but how silly the sun *belong* to *one* flower...you see?”

“I see.” I said.

I left Hogarth and Nero to their devices at the table and decided that I would go and visit Eva, if for nothing else to catch another glimpse of her beautiful neck that I so dearly wanted to

sink my fangs into. What could it be that she wanted to see me about, I thought as I strolled away. I knew it would never be a strictly social visit and as confident (and naïve) as I was, I also knew she was far too much a narcissistic egotist to have me over to simply seduce me. If I were to bed her upon this visit, it would be I who would have to put in the work. I knew within moments of looking at her that Eva knew how exceptional she was. This, of course, was not to say she was anymore exceptional than Max was, for example, but Eva had an edge over most women because she knew how to wield her mind as both a weapon and a tool. This gave her a distinct advantage over most men as well, but her fatal flaw was that she was far too aware of her gifts. The irony that her weakness was also her strength made my lips curl uncontrollably. The toughest people usually had centers of melted caramel and the saddest of people usually had wills of cast-iron, though it most often took something severe to evoke that strength. In Eva's case her intellect had made her cold. It wasn't surprising, for bright women were despised. And it wasn't confusing as to why they were despised; intelligence gave them a more viable chance of being a threat to the status quo of piggish male dominance. As for me, I encouraged the expansion of the female mind, but I did believe their ability to be objectified should coexist alongside their bulbous brains. Not only did I find it necessary to see a woman as an object in the bedroom, I felt it was a fundamental aspect of the primal relationship between Man and Woman. What was so brutish about looking at a woman as a sexual object? Wasn't it complimentary? As long as their emotions, thoughts and needs were addressed when they were vertical, what was the harm in seeing them as a series of moist holes when they were horizontal? I certainly did not mind being looked at as a piece of meat given it's in the right time and place. I didn't want a woman concerning herself with my spirit, my mind or my emotions when she should be focusing on the smooth and pulsating cock jetting from my pelvis with an accusing stare and dribbling from its mouth a clear gel as though saliva from the jowls of bulldog. Call me a progressive if you must, but I called for the all-out abolishment of humanism as a means of sexual equality. We were humans in the kitchen, the living room, the study, but we were dogs in the bedroom and I aimed to keep it that way.

I walked a few blocks north toward Eva's apartment. Nero told me I'd know her building by the towering cherry-wood doors and the pigmy doorman comically juxtaposed in front of them. And surely enough I found a dwarf of a man pulling with all his might on intricately carved doors with heights that challenged the peaks of even the most cantankerous human spirit. I approached them cautiously, getting out of the street and beneath the awning.

"Scusi, parla inglese?" I said to the dwarf, who despite his vertically challenged stature was elegant in stance and poised in posture.

"Un po." He replied.

"Do you know a woman named Eva who lives in this building?" I proceeded.

"Si. Your name, Signore?"

“Homer Miller.”

He didn't hesitate for a moment.

“Welcome, Signore. You may enter.” He smiled and opened the door. I felt as though I were entering Oz as the doors drew open and the dwarf disappeared behind them. Inside the foyer of the apartment building looked more like the grand entrance of a hotel than it did a place for residence who did not mind making a homestead out of a cubbyhole. Even Graham, who lavished his wealth, lived inside a crackerjack box. Eva must have come from money, I thought. Perhaps she would see it fit to give me a small loan. I would no longer have to squeeze Graham for nickels and dimes, I'd be able to purchase something nice for Dora and I'd be able to get a head-start on my career as a poet without having to experience any of the strife common to most poets. Just a small advancement, that's how I'd put it. I'd tell her of Hogarth's friend C.G. in Paris and how he'd already set up some potential publishers when I'd written something of worth. Of course that was a lie, but I'd keep my word about writing and I truly would use that money, not to engage in the frivolities of life, but to keep my belly from whimpering while I explored a craft that had killed so many men before me... This felt good. I never liked entering a meeting without a purpose of my own. Moments before I was at the mercy of Eva's imagination, but now I had motive and I could control the room from the instant I entered it. I wonder if she'd sense it on me like a bloodhound... When I knocked on her apartment door I heard a faint cry from inside that sounded like a ghostly whine, “*Come in...*” I followed my instructions and entered the room, which was as large and grand as the building's doors suggested. There was even a piano in the corner of the room, black in polish and stationary atop what looked like lion's paws that had surely been hand-carved from rich wood. I had never seen such a beautiful inanimate object. The keys were covered in a fine cut of velvet, finer than any scarf or necktie I'd ever owned. I couldn't help but question what a woman of such obvious wealth was doing with a bunch of lowly madrigals such as myself, Nero, Hogarth, Adona, Dora and Graham and didn't it burn Graham's ass to know he wasn't the richest among us? Perhaps he didn't know. Yes, Eva looked fine in her costumes and her earrings were mighty capable of inspiring hatred and jealousy, but nothing about her outward persona screamed thoroughbred. Instead she seemed like a common girl who had found a taste for the finer things at university, when she was allowed to see a bit of the world, and did her best to assimilate into the upper crust of society, never being able to shed her well-ingrained commonality that irrevocably imbeds itself in your person. I was left to stew on the matter longer than expected, as Eva did not emerge for several moments.

“Eva?” I belted inquisitively as though I were lost and trying to find my big sister in a dark house. Finally she made herself visible, looking dashing and sexy in a dress that hugged her body in an embrace that left nothing to the imagination.

“Homer! I've been expecting you.” she said.

“That's what I hear. Actually I'm a bit confused.” I said.

“Confused about what, my darling?”

“Why you wanted to see me. I’m sad to say we haven’t really had a chance to get to know one another since I’ve arrived.”

“Well, why couldn’t that be the very reason I wanted to see you? To finally unravel the mystery of this tenacious young American man who has caused such a stir within our group?” I laughed at this, blushing a bit. “Something just tells me you’re not the type.” I said.

“Should I be insulted?” Eva asked.

“Not at all. You just seem like a woman who appreciates urgency...and I spoke with Hogarth.”

“Ah, so it comes out. What did that stylish brute tell you?”

“Only that you approached him first about whatever it is I’m here for.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“He’s at times more graceful than expected.”

“Eva, I must confess something to you, I’m one for a good mystery just like anyone, but this is becoming quite tedious. Out with it.”

Eva seems impressed with my sternness, impressed but not phased. Instead of telling me why I was there she smiled and bought herself some more time by stroking my ego in the same diminishing way Graham like to do. I was beginning to suspect that my old friend Graham had learned all his devilish tricks from this woman, a true professional in the art of horseshit.

“Well, well, well,” she said, “when did you become this *man*?”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Upon our first meeting, Homer, you showed little promise, fawning over that Dora girl...”

Here was my opportunity to begin the seduction that I so desperately demanded. I lifted my eyebrow and perked my ears at the mention of Dora. My window had opened.

“Do I detect some jealousy in your voice?” I asked. Eva seemed appalled by this.

“Jealous of what?” she produced sharply.

“Of me focusing my attention on Dora instead of you.” I said with a smirk, prepared for a rejection and an insult that I was sure was to be oddly astute and hurtful, but to my surprise...

“Yes, of course I was jealous.” she said. My face must have looked shocked, for she continued, “Do you know that little about women, Homer?” Now it was Eva who was smirking.

“Yes, yes, you do seem to know a thing or two about our bodies, don’t you? But if you knew anything about women, you’d know our bodies were an almost arbitrary obstacle. Of course we derive pleasure from stimulation. We have nerves, don’t we? There’s nothing you can do that my candlestick holder can’t do better unless you learn to navigate our souls, our minds, our hearts, and discover a way to anticipate and accommodate our womanly impulses. I was

jealous of the attention you gave Dora not because you are anything special, but because you are a man and I am a woman and I want to be wanted twenty-four hours a day.”

And suddenly I was a child once again. Eva had reduced me to a man the size of a pea and how I would be the nuisance beneath her mattress as she slept, for I was no longer the slayer of women I had been, but was instead a stooge before a princess, one totally in control of herself and now of me. I didn't respond to Eva, but instead looked down at my shoes.

“What do you want, Homer?” she asked, breaking the awkward, stagnant silence.

“What do I want?” I repeated, a pitiful mess.

“Yes, what do you want from me?”

“I don't want anything. You're the one who requested to see me.”

“Yes, but isn't it true that you came here tonight not because you were *so* fascinated with what I had to say, but because you were hoping to make love?”

I looked at her, but didn't respond. I don't know where the saying “cat-got-your-tongue?” came from, but that slimy feline bastard has certainly stolen mine from behind clinched teeth. I had never felt the sniper's eye so properly fixed on me; I had never felt so cornered in all my life. It was as though she was seeing right through me, but it was more than that as well. Women had previously revealed my game before I had a chance to play it, but never before had a voice so directly unraveled the blocked and unconscious root which spawned the slippery seduction I was known for. It was as if Eva was judging me and peeling back, as though a sheet over a cadaver, the mangled remnants of my disfigured inward horror... I wanted to run away. There is no more effective way to put it. I wanted to run until the bones in my feet were powder, my head was a series of miniature earthquakes and my heart was shedding layers like a dying rose in winter, and then I wanted to run some more.

“You're not as Graham said you were.” she continued.

“What did he say I was?” I said, afraid of what the answer was going to be.

“He said you were a genius and maybe you are, but you're lost.” she replied.

“Lost?” I murmured like a sleepy daydream escaping through a vent.

“I see it in your eyes...” She said it with a note of empathy in her voice. There was a palpable sadness in the air and my heart was heavy for the first time since Edith had left me a cold, broken-hearted little boy on the side of the road. It was a terribly familiar feeling and I had been thankful to forget its unmistakable sting up until that moment.

“I wouldn't think you'd be the kind to say such things.” I said after a long pause.

“Why? Because it sounds like the musings of a bad writer trying to make sense of life?”

Eva responded almost frostily.

“Precisely.” I said.

“Life is the stuff of bad writing.” she said, “People's eyes really do tell us everything and conversations like this really do take place.”

“I’m amazed.” I said.

“And why’s that, darling?”

“Because you’re a romantic. I took you for such a realist.”

“It would appear you had many preconceived notions about me.” she said.

“It would appear that way, wouldn’t it?” I returned.

“Isn’t it delightful when someone turns out to be completely wrong about you?” She laughed a petite, sardonic laugh as though a verbal brushing of hair from above jasmine eyes – so piercing, and then she continued, “I am a realist. I’m incredibly real about my romanticism.” I smiled.

“Go ahead and pity me, you fool, but romanticism just takes effort. I simply choose to live fantastically. Go ahead and fight the sinister tug of the cliché as long as you like, I’ll enjoy them, because in the tired truisms of existence lives the splendor. If I want to swim with dolphins through crystal blue waters, I only have to act and make it happen. That is no way less real than wasting away on the sofa toiled in bills and debts. Life isn’t mediocre as a rule, you sad little thing.”

Eva was giving me a speech, one far too elegant not to be practiced. I wondered if she had given the same one to Hogarth when seeing him a few days earlier, complete with modifications to better suite him, of course.

“I admire your courage to lecture.” I said.

“Too on-the-nose?” she sound in a mousy voice.

“A bit.”

“Oh well, life preservers aren’t usually subtle, they’re big and round and red so the person drowning can see them and latch on.”

“And you think I’m drowning?”

“Hopelessly, Homer. Your parents doomed you by giving you that ugly name. They must have known what was in store for you.”

“All right, enough.” I said. “What charm school did you attend that gave you the footing in life to take such pity on me?”

“Don’t get mad, dear, it’s unbecoming of you. You are going to learn about my body tonight, so you can relax.”

Her frankness was jarring.

“I tell you these things not out of pity, but out of hope.”

“Hope?”

“Hope that you see the error of your ways before it’s too late.”

“I don’t believe in ‘too late.’” I said, feeling for the first time like the wise one in this conversation.

“And you shouldn’t,” she retorted without missing a beat, “but not believing in

something doesn't make it fiction. Sooner or later you will be dead, so dead in fact that you won't be able to remember, let alone regret the infinitesimal nonsense you enacted while alive. That's why I don't hesitate to tell you what's on my mind. I'm fighting for you, only you're too dumb to see it."

"Why don't you want to tell me why I'm here?" I said, thoroughly annoyed at this point. She felt me pulling away and the chill that undoubtedly coated my flesh when I was being told things I didn't want to hear, so thinking quickly, she implored the tool that all feminists such as Eva damned while failing to retire it from their repertoire: the unique feminine power to hypnotize a man with little more than the forbidden malodorous flesh between their thighs.

"There's plenty of time for that." She said with an entirely new tenor in her voice. She then lifted her heeled hoof and fixed it against the corner of the coffee table, spreading her legs and letting the bottom of her dress sink down over her clam as though it were an Indian belly dancers' silk mask. I half expected to see yellow eyes peer out as I was pathetically drawn to the dark, damp place.

"You must really have no respect for me." I said.

"On the contrary." she said, "You've suffered quite enough from the wrath of my tongue and now I simply want to suffer the wrath of yours..."

## 14

I walked out, passed the dwarf, into the warm yellow light of the streetlamps. Eva's juices were hardening into a Glasgow smile around my mouth, a thin film stuck on each end of the stubble that speckled my face like pepper shavings. Now, that was a woman. A worthy adversary! I thought as I lifted my heels and stretched out my arms, cracking my back in an uneven forward lunge; as though I were Jesus Christ on his blasted cross. She had gotten everything from me that she had wanted, though I couldn't help but suspect that the deadly coital kiss I had just given her was solicited out of boredom and little more. Eva's true aim was recruiting, recruiting someone to help in her cause to discredit and dismantle the fascist régime, which now laid claim to Italy. It was inconsequential to her that she left me with testicles the size of McIntosh apples when she reached her Everest, courtesy of my tongue I might add, snapping her legs shut suddenly and effortlessly, transforming into both a politician and a revolutionary all at once. Perhaps it was the way in which she commanded her words, throwing them like darts from her tongue, or maybe it was the result of the slight daze one always experiences after being exposed to the sea air trapped between the legs of a woman, but whatever it was, I was defenseless against Eva's barrage of insults directed toward that fat, bald man Mussolini, which I had so abruptly learned about in part at the movie house and now in full from Eva. She had made him sound like the Devil himself and I couldn't help but get the slightest bit riled up from her impassioned rant, wanting to hate this man with all my soul, though I must admit I didn't fully

understand why. From what I had heard about fascism, it sounded vile, but I didn't know the first thing about politics and was at the mercy of everyone else's barking. I tried to explain this to Eva when she asked me if I'd like to write propaganda for her anti-fascist newspaper, though she dismissed the word *propaganda*, preferring to call it *enlightenment*. I tried to explain to her that she would want someone as passionate as she was, someone who not only could string words together, but someone who could also inject life into those words, give them the same gravity they had when escaping her lips. With me she'd only be getting a craftsman, the words would be dead and it was my opinion that the true meaning she was after would be lost in translation. But Eva was not persuaded and her resolve only seemed to strengthen the more I tried to talk her out of it. The more reason I gave her to choose someone else, the more she made it seem like I was the only man for the job, though I was not so naïve as to believe I was her first choice for the position, a fact she tried her best to conceal from me even though we had discussed that Hogarth had passed on her offer already. This stuck in my mind as perhaps another reason to respectfully decline this daunting responsibility, but I didn't have the doggedness that Hogarth did and while I fished Eva's coiled pubic hairs from around my crooked lower teeth, I caved in and accepted the task on behalf of democracy and in the hope that I would be able to finish what I had started with Eva in the bedroom... It sounds farfetched on paper, a man joining an underground faction against a global tyranny all in the name of some snatch, but in real life, as it happened, it didn't seem ridiculous at all. Eva sat on the sofa, dripping with a solution made up of my saliva and her juice and when she finally asked me straight, yes or no, would I do it, I looked at the black patch of heaven between her legs and bequeathed a pitiful *yes*. I know, I know, despicable, but a man cannot be held accountable when under the influence and I surely was, drunk on my own seed. I was Eva's violin, the strings still hot from being so vigorously strummed. She had hypnotized me as though she were some hoodoo medicine witch, but instead of waving a crummy pocket watch in front of my face, she used the most refined tool ever designed for controlling the mind of a man. She had also cleverly kick-started the production of the white tadpoles before unfolding her master plan so that my mind would be fighting against itself like an exhausted child trying to keep his eyes open during.

By the sound of her voice I felt myself swell up. I removed my hat and inched toward her, getting lower as though beginning to crawl – a fine look for a man like me. Perhaps I'd attempt reentry; I thought then and had thought before. Is that what I truly longed for and why I was never satisfied with one woman, why I could never throw up my arms in surrender? It wasn't penetration I desired, but complete infiltration. Not now, I said to myself, brushing that thought away as easily as a ladybug, sent flying with a flick of wrist. I had more important matters at hand, or should I say mouth? The overhead lighting from the candle chandelier cast dramatic shadow on Eva's legs and made the spot between them a mysterious, pitch-black sliver of negative zone. Maybe this was the gateway I was looking for. Maybe she'd swallow me whole and I'd be transported to the heart of a black hole in outer space. As I inched toward her, I began to imagine that when I finally reached her quivering flesh and stuck my tongue out as far as it would go; I would find something else there instead of a cunt. I wasn't sure what it could possibly be, maybe the face of God or the nest for some great imaginary bird that would transport me to any level of Hell I so desired. Maybe that hole would finally fill the hole inside myself, I haphazardly postulated whilst the hard wooden floors acquainted themselves with my knees. That was the inane unconscious fantasy of every man, I believed, that this moist orifice could somehow save our souls. To come face to face with a cunt, if you're paying close attention, that is, can be more reflective than a mirror, and you told yourself things that in any other normal circumstance you'd be too frightened to speak or think too absurd, all because it was in the guise of something you thought you understood. It gets quite messy, but the female body, while being truly foreign to the man, was something he *thought* he had mastered and he put so much stock into his libido, aggrandizing it to such a degree that he considered it the basis of his existence, that it opened up doorways into himself. I know this to be true, because I felt the exact same way. There I was, on all fours, feeling totally fulfilled, as though I had found my purpose. Seeing myself in that position, I smiled, thinking about every man who had been there before me and all the men to be there after me. You had most likely done such foolish things to get there, situated like a dog, wagging your tail, perhaps you had even lied, and all your body chemistry savagely pulled you toward a meaningless crack as though you were traveling past a mysterious planet and were sucked in by its atmosphere. What issues of the soul, what great tragedies we couldn't quantify into problems capable of being solved by a little gap between skins. It was a true testament to how stupid we were as a race and how much we loved fucking. I was taking in

every last detail, storing them in my mind just in case I found myself, years later, writing a book - the metallic, bodily flavor that only varies slightly woman to woman enters your mouth in such a predatory way, taking your tongue hostage, making you fully aware of the intimacy of this act. It's a flavor that stays with you long after the act is complete, revisiting you through every belch and lick of the lips. There is something wholly spiritual in parting the curtains of a cunt with the transformative hunk of meat between your teeth, something devoid in the reverse procedure of sucking cock and that's why I half expected to find the Creator of All Things in that little opening between Eva's legs. Maybe why I was so drawn to this truly foul place and why it so aptly had *lips*, as opposed to say *lids*, was because it withheld the secret, one it would forever gossip about, but never give-up... Not to say the cunt wasn't good enough, of course, it was jolly well fantastic, in fact, and when I finally made contact with Eva and zeroed in on her swollen bud, I was still quite pleased not to find the face of God or any god like him. It didn't affect me one bit that the hole within me stayed wide and unfilled, thick and hollow enough pass a cannonball through. Unlike some mutant men, I actually enjoyed dining on the source of all Man's troubles, getting me nice and ready for liftoff, swelling me up like a waterlogged crate ten times its normal size. I liked to munch away like a rabbit on a piece of celery and I wouldn't do as some men before me had done, *lick lick* and then abandon ship, no, I'd scarf until my belly was full and until my pink muscle became a victim of rigor mortis, frozen in shock, coated in the clear vaginal clam gumbo. I was a Cajun on the bayou, my face so smattered with discharge that even my earlobes dripped as though they were equipped with tear ducts. I especially liked the girls who poured their juices like the Madonna at the crucifixion of Christ, that way I could fill up my entire mouth and then drink it down in a gulp, making the same pained yet pleased face as when you took too big a swing of moonshine. The tongue and fingers were terrible tools to waste, not only for the women's sake, but for mine as well. I truly got a kick from feeling the supple, moist flesh press against my nose and the warm, velvety feeling of a woman's innards on my tongue, each taste bud scraping along, every one of them getting a mouth full, their little faces, I'd like to imagine, like a dog's while getting its ears scratched, blissful. I devilishly enjoyed hardening my pink muscle to a point like an arrowhead and then entering their flower as though it was a miniature cock, stretching it further and deeper than it ever imagined for itself, feeling the walls slam around me as though a condemned house falling in on itself. I even liked to roll the hardened tip around the opening where their golden waste emerged, bacteria cannonballing into my gullet like Annie Edson Taylor over the great Niagara Falls in 1901, whipping side to side in rapid, unrelenting motion, tickling and crippling. But what was most important was that clump of chewed bubblegum full of raw, pulsating nerves positioned at the front like a gatekeeper, the glorious clitoris. I fired away upon it as though it were my best friend and greatest enemy, concerned most with accuracy and repetition. I let my entire mouth dominate that naked ball of pure sexual energy while I slipped a finger or two inside them, clawing

downward and strumming the ridges that almost feel similar to the ridges found in the top of your mouth that you subconsciously tongue ten thousand times a day without noticing, thorough practice for this doggish deed I was presently performing on Eva. I felt so alive when our bodies were moving together and they're quivering and convulsing beneath my mouth, the same mouth that has gotten me in more trouble, that has cut deeper than any knife, that has broken hearts, somehow that mouth is rectified and redeemed when lashing upon a flower as though some grotesque ancient trial.