

The New Orphic Review

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ISSN 1480-5243

The New Orphic Review, a journal devoted to publishing fiction, poetry, reviews and essays, is published two times per year by New Orphic Publishers. The review accepts no financial assistance from government sources, but will accept advertising.

EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICE:

The New Orphic Review, 706 Mill Street, Nelson, British Columbia, Canada, V1L 4S5. Tel: (250) 354-0494. Please make sure all inquires and manuscripts are accompanied by an SASE and that the return postage is Canadian. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for one month and then discarded.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS PER YEAR (2 ISSUES)

Individuals Canada	\$30 (CAD)	Institutions Canada	\$35 (CAD)
USA	\$30 (USD)	USA	\$35 (USD)

Individual issues \$17.50 CAD or USD as applicable.

ADVERTISEMENTS (BLACK & WHITE CAMERA-READY ONLY):

Full pages:	Half pages:
\$150 CAD, \$150 USD	\$75 CAD, \$75 USD

Subscriptions and advertisements should be sent to the above address. Make cheques payable to *The New Orphic Review*.

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Cover Photo: *Chair, With Infrastructure*
By Ernest Hekkanen

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of over 40 books. The most recent are *The Collected Short Stories of Ernest Hekkanen*, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, *Shadows on a Cave Wall*, *Kafka: The Master of Yesno* and *The Life of Bartholomew G. Hekkanen* is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* (Vol. 240) in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen* (2006).

The Pathetic Habit

Ernest Hekkanen

NOT LONG AGO, someone inquired if he could ask me a question that might strike me as a bit brutal. I told him as long as it didn't have anything to do with my sex life, to go right ahead. "I'd like to know why you keep writing," he said, "when you've had so little success?" I asked him to clarify what he meant by success, and he said, "You know what I mean. Hardly anybody reads your books; that would be my guess, anyway; and that means you can't be making very much money at it, if any at all. So why do you keep writing? Why do you keep flogging that horse?"

Whenever anybody uses the expression 'flogging' or 'beating a horse', I'm reminded of that famous scene from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, in which Raskolnikov dreams he is a young boy and is walking with his father on the outskirts of town, along a road near a tavern. In real life, the tavern has always managed to rouse Raskolnikov's fear, owing to the loud, drunken revelry he has seen spill into the street. In his dream, he witnesses some revelers getting into a horse-drawn cart usually reserved for hauling dry goods and wine barrels. Once they have all climbed aboard, the cart-driver, Mikolka, harnesses a filly up to it, a small gray mare of twenty, one that hasn't galloped in at least ten years.

"At the cry of 'Gee-up!' the little jade began to tug with all her might," the text informs us, "but not only was she unable to set off at a gallop—she could barely manage to move forward at all; her legs skittered about underneath her as she whinnied and cowered under the blows from the three knouts that rained down on her to no effect whatsoever."

A *knout* is a Russian whip used to inflict punishment that often results in death. In his dream, Raskolnikov's younger self witnesses Mikolka and his friends beating the little mare first with knouts, then with a cart-shaft, and finally with an iron crowbar, again and again and again, until, at last, "all her four legs had been cut away from under her at once."

The scene is one of extreme brutality. As I've already said, it is a dream sequence, and it should have forewarned Raskolnikov that it was unwise of him to pursue his plan to kill the moneylender. One would try in vain to find such a depiction in Canadian literature, not because Canadians are incapable of such brutality, but rather because, in this country, we publish 'Canada-positive' literature that declines to examine the dark underbelly of our culture.

I read *Crime and Punishment* back when I was nineteen or twenty years old. The passage that deals with the flogging of the horse is one of the few scenes I recall with great clarity. Indeed, when my inquisitor asked me why I kept writing, and then coupled it with the idea that I was flogging a horse, I nearly overlooked what he was saying, due to the sudden memory of that scene.

When I recovered my presence of mind, I pointed out to him that I number among a small group of Canadian fiction writers capable of supporting himself through his writing. "But, admittedly, it is a rather meager income. I won't pretend it isn't."

"So why do you keep writing, then?"

At this point, I gave him my default reply. "Because it has become a pathetic habit; that's why."

Sometimes this response will suffice, and sometimes not. Sometimes people ask me to expand upon what I mean by 'pathetic habit'. Usually, I begin by delving into what comprises a habit. Most people, precisely because they are human, assume that they know what a habit is: be it a good one or be it a bad one. However, most people balk at the suggestion that speech is a habit, and then I have to explain what I mean by that.

"Most people aren't happy to articulate their thoughts in private," I say. "They prefer to articulate them in the company of other people. When they give voice to their thoughts, they're usually rewarded with a reply and that, in turn, encourages them to say even more. Talking is a social activity that we share with others in our community, and it's almost impossible to avoid. But, nevertheless, it is a habit—a habit we perform in the company of other people, and it is encouraged on a daily, nay, on an hourly, nay, on a minute by minute basis."

Once I've gotten to this point in my argument, I usually add that I don't have many friends and therefore not much of an actual community. "However, I've been a member in good standing of many ephemeral communities," I go on to say. "They're imaginative communities that exist on the page and I find them every bit as intriguing as people do the societies in which they live and work. You might contend that this is delusional of me, and I would admit, quite frankly, that I operate best in the realm of my own delusions—as do most people, by the way. But we mustn't overlook the fact that the first creature who attempted to crawl out of the sea onto dry land must have seemed quite delusional to his

fellow creatures. What made him perform such a hopeless, futile feat? Was it an act of imagination that drove him to hurl his body onto the beach, repeatedly, over and over again? Was it a case of him wanting to become newly terrestrial? That, my friend, is my fate. I enjoy the rarified atmosphere of the imagination and so I keep hurling myself onto the beach of the imagination. It has become a pathetic habit of mine, and it doesn't matter how many people reward me for that activity—you know, by reading my books."

By the end of this rather longwinded reply, I've usually exhausted the attention of the person I've been talking to; his eyes have glazed over and I know, for all intents and purposes, I have lost him.

When I first started publishing *The New Orphic Review*, it was with the intention of getting to the essence of things. It has since become a repository for what I call *the pathetic habit*. The poems, stories and articles enclosed in this issue are a result of this habit—one which began when the first lungfish tried to become newly terrestrial.

The first offering in this issue, namely, "Hard Truths," is the fictional reworking of an episode from Thomas J. Rice's book, *Far From the Land: An Irish Memoir*. Why has Mr. Rice decided to turn this particular episode from his life into a piece of fiction—with completely different results?

I think you'll have to direct that question to the lungfish.

THOMAS J. RICE grew up on a sheep farm in County Carlow, Ireland before emigrating to Sheffield, England and later, the U.S., in 1959. He is Chair and co-founder of The Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) which partners with other non-profits to promote social justice. He attributes his passion for social justice to his rural Irish roots, which he recently explored in a memoir, *Far From the Land*.

Hard Truths

Thomas J. Rice

THE TELEGRAM CAME in the late afternoon on a rainy Tuesday in late April, 1958.

Jimmy Dunphy had been delivering mail to this remote farmhouse in the Wicklow Mountain Range for over 30 years, but he still felt a tingle of excitement each time that distinctive little green envelope showed up in his bundle. Hogan's of Rathdargan was the last stop on his route, and he always looked forward to a relaxed chat with Kitty Hogan, full-figured woman of the house. Sometimes—if she was in a good mood—she'd invite him in for a cup of tea and a scone to fuel the long, uphill bike ride home to his cottage on the other side of Sugarloaf Mountain.

Telegram presentation was one of Jimmy's specialties, one he'd polished to a performance art. Unlike regular mail, telegrams meant something was up—and Jimmy loved to watch the faces of people in the grip of suspense. Today he was bitterly disappointed to see that only young Myles, not his mother, was there to share the moment. Was he going to have to waste a performance on this fourteen-year-old upstart? This younger generation had no appreciation of true dramatic talent; most had never even heard of O'Casey, Behan or Bernie (aka George Bernard) Shaw, born just over the mountain in Carlow. Too busy traipsing to American cowboy pictures and dance halls. Then, again, how were they ever going to learn if their elders didn't show them?

Peering through the rain under his shiny postman's cap and black parka, Jimmy grinned and stepped boldly on to the stage—his own Abbey Theatre. First, he held the prized envelope high for inspection—like a trophy ready for presentation. Rolling it over several times in his arthritic hands, puffing vainly on his unlit pipe, he held the telegram aloft one last time before the final moment of exchange.

Myles Hogan didn't hear the postman's whistle right away; he had his

hands full dosing an ailing calf from a plastic bottle in the cowshed. But the brace of border collies sounded the alarm, nearly flattening him in their raucous scramble for the cowshed door. Myles liked Jimmy Dunphy and usually welcomed his theatrics, but not today. There was too much work to do, he was soaking wet and in no mood to humor the old man.

Finally, with great reluctance, Jimmy surrendered the telegram into Myles's impatient hand. Stung by the rude reception, he turned wearily to face the hilly, wet meadow he'd cut through to reach the farmhouse. No tea. No scones. Not even a glimpse of Kitty Hogan's brunette curls.

Turning abruptly to leave, noticing Jimmy's hang-dog expression, Myles felt a pang of regret and tossed off a quick apology: "Thanks Mr. Dunphy. Sorry to be in such hurry. Hungry calves, ya know..."

Jimmy seized the opening like a lifeline.

"Maybe I should wait till yer Mammie has a chance to read it. Ya never know...She might want to send word back..."

It was a clumsy attempt at ferreting out what was in the telegram; Myles knew how the gossip mill worked and had no intention of feeding it.

"No, thanks, Mr. Dunphy. Mammie's busy right now, but I'll let her know your offer."

Jimmy was not so easily put off, especially by a young bucko getting too big for his breeches. "Maybe we should let the Mammie decide. Ya never know..."

"That's alright, Mr. Dunphy. Thanks anyway." With that, Myles met the old man's eyes with an unsmiling dismissal, turned and raced down the steps, tripping over the tangle of border collies stacked up below him, before righting himself and sprinting for the kitchen, where his mother was baking bread over the open hearth.

"Mammie, Mammie, it's a telegram!" he yelled as he barged into the dimly lit kitchen, borders charging in tow. Kitty Hogan looked up from a deep reverie. She was cranking the handle of the bellows which fed a glowing turf fire. Over it, a covered iron skillet rested. She started, as if coming awake, brushed a wayward curl from her forehead and nervously wiped her hands in her faded, striped-blue apron. A shadow of dread crossed her lined, though beautiful, face.

In Kitty's 44 years, telegrams meant only one thing: bad news. The last one had been two years before, announcing that her beloved Aunt Mary—a second mother to her—had died in New York. The one before that, in October of '55, had summoned her to Dublin where Maura, her youngest daughter, had been run over at a crosswalk near O'Connell Street Bridge. She'd died two days later at the St Vincent's Hospital, without regaining consciousness. Maura was a bright, good-natured girl, just 18—the last of the five sisters at Temple Hill Nursing School—all on meager scholarships. She'd only been in the city a week.

Meeting his mother's hazel eyes, Myles handed her the telegram with

trembling fingers. Kitty hesitated before reaching for it, took a deep breath and walked to the dresser at the back of the kitchen. Hours seemed to pass before she eventually opened the drawer, pulled out a paring knife and slit the green envelope in one swift flick. Even the borders sensed the tension and sat on their haunches, as at feeding time, their gazes riveted on Kitty's every move. She stepped toward the light of the front window, took another deep breath and plucked out the folded, official note, which she read silently to herself, several times; then, finally, aloud:

“Coming home Friday (May 1). 6 pm bus to Enniskerry. Jack.”

Tears streamed down Kitty's pale cheeks, dripping on her apron. She swatted them away as a smile erased the shadow, spreading from her lips to her streaming eyes, then to her whole body. She let out a scream of pure ecstasy. “Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Jack is coming home. Your father is coming home. Oh, My God! Oh, My God! I knew he would come someday. I knew God would answer my prayers...I just knew it...”

She whirled about the concrete floor in a wild dance of joy Myles had never seen before, almost knocking him over as she swung her arms wide. Inspired by her exuberance, the borders started to bark, joining the circular dance. Suddenly, Kitty pulled up, self-conscious and blushing, almost childlike. She smoothed the faded apron, brushed back the curls from her forehead and regained her normal, no-nonsense comportment.

“Now listen, Myles, we have a ton of work to do to get ready. We have only two days, mind you. We'll have to paint the road gate, clip the hedges and cut all those thistles in the Cow Field. Oh, and Myles, you'll have to go up to Billy Roach and get a haircut. What would your father say if he saw you looking like that? He'd think I was raising a teddy boy...” She rattled on in this vein, extending the list in her assertive fashion, but Myles had already tuned her out and was walking toward the cowshed to finish his feeding chores.

This was the moment he'd dreaded for two years, ever since he'd quit Enniskerry National School in the middle of the fifth grade, to help his mother on the farm.

Myles was the only one in the family who seemed to accept the fact that his father was never coming home. He'd heard the story so many times, with so many variations and subplots, that he felt it was just another fairytale. Kitty had tried to make excuses for Jack and present him as a heroic figure, but Myles never bought the fiction, sensing an unspoken truth: the real hero was the woman who stuck with him and his older sisters instead of farming them out to relatives, or worse: Killane orphanage, the workhouse in Gorey.

Kitty Hogan was a maddening bundle of contradictions Myles could never figure out. She could be gentle and nurturing, treating Myles as an equal, a partner. Ever since he could talk, she had sought his views on all sorts of grown-up matters, large and small: Should she sell the bonhams

or fatten them? Should she plant Furlong's Field with oats or lease it to John McDonald? Should she let the girls go to the dance in Bray Sunday night? And she wasn't just humoring a child; she really listened to what he had to say and encouraged him to tell her the truth, especially when it was hard.

Like two years ago when he left the turkeys run open and a fox killed the whole flock; it was their only Christmas cash crop. "Mammie, I have a confession to make." He found her in the middle of baking a cake for supper. "Well, this sounds serious. You look like you've seen a ghost." Myles sat down, fought back tears and spilled the story. "It's all my fault. You told me to lock the gate every time I came out, but I didn't. I just forgot it, like an eejit. And that's when the fox must've slipped in. I never saw him. Just heard the racket and ran in there. It was too late. He'd killed them all and was gone. There wasn't even any blood. Just broken necks. Like I said, it's all my fault and I don't mind if you whip me with the belt. I deserve it ... I'd do anything if it'd make 'em come back...anything."

Instead of a whipping, she gave him her brightest smile, wrapped her arms around him and said, "You're a good man, Myles Hogan. Any fool can tell the truth when it wraps him in glory. It's the hard truth that separates the men from the boys. Now, let's have some tea and scones before we have to break the news to your sisters that we have to cancel Christmas this year." As she said this, her voice broke and she turned away to hide the tears.

This was in sharp contrast to the way she treated the girls, whom she dismissed as a bunch of 'gillagoolies'. His sisters resented this, of course, and took it out on Myles with fiendish creativity. Knowing his fear of the dark, they seldom missed an opportunity for nightly terror games. Once, when he was about seven, they put a small goat in his bedroom, complete with horns; the devil come to claim his prey. Myles promptly went into screaming convulsions to gales of triumphant giggling from under the bed.

The harsh punishments meted out by his mother only made Myles feel more guilty. He tried to make it up to his sisters by currying favor, but to no avail. It was their mother's approval they craved, not his. But, for them, that approval would always be in short supply.

Myles had always been puzzled by the deference people showed his mother. All sorts of people—men, women, prosperous and poor—seemed to speak of her with a kind of reverence, like they might speak of the bishop or prime minister. It had a magical power that seemed to cast a protective shield around him and his sisters as soon as people knew their names. Being Kitty Hogan's son was special in Enniskerry; everyone seemed to understand that, for reasons Myles could only guess at. "Can I give ya a lift? Ain't you Kitty Hogan's boy?" "Sure it's alright. Ya can

have it for five bob. Aren't you one of the Hogans of Rathdargan?" "Yer mother's a great woman. She done a lot for this country. You must be very proud to be her son." Once he asked her what people meant by this but she brushed it off with, "Oh, son, we all did a lot for our country in the old days. It's not worth talking about. Now, run down to the Lower Meadow and bring in the cows!"

But he knew there was more to it. He had seen some of it firsthand.

He recalled the fate of the schoolteacher, Brigid Breen, after she slapped his oldest sister, Nora, for misbehaving in school. For other children, beatings in the National School were expected and accepted. Except the Hogans. Myles remembered the terrible spectacle of Miss Breen falling on her ample knees on the gravel road, pleading for mercy, as Kitty stood leaning against the stone wall, cool as a lioness ready to pounce.

Miss Breen's plea was in vain. With one backhand swipe, the hefty schoolmarm practically flew across the road, landing in a pile of nettles, nose gushing like a crimson fountain. "Now, Miss Breen, let that be a lesson to you. That's how it feels to be slapped by someone stronger than you are. Never lay a hand on one of my children again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hogan. Oh, for the love of God, please... It was just a misunderstanding. It'll never happen again. You have lovely girls. All so bright..."

"Thank you, Miss Breen. I'm glad you approve of them. If they give you any trouble, just let me know. I'll deal with them myself. I discipline my children, not you. Your job is to educate them. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, yes...of course. We all have a job to do. Thank you Kitty... I mean, Mrs. Hogan."

"You're most welcome, Brigid. Safe home, now."

The other episode that puzzled and frightened Myles was the exchange he'd overheard between his mother and the Hannigan twins two years before. Billy and Bobby Hannigan were neighbors. They worked the big family farm and general store in Newtown, just off the Dublin Road, near Sally Gap. They were tall, burly red-heads, popular with the girls and well-liked by one and all. Both were gifted football players, dominating defenders for the senior Wicklow team. They came from a well-respected family. Their father (Sean the Gap, as he was affectionately known) was a feared and famous IRA guerilla fighter. The twins seldom visited Rathdargan, so it was a surprise to hear their voices downstairs speaking in hushed tones with his mother early one Friday morning as Myles was waking.

Billy Hannigan, in his distinctive tenor voice, was speaking softly as Myles came fully awake.

"With all due respect, Mrs. Hogan, what we do or don't do with girls at the dances, that's our own business. I don't see where ya get off summoning

us here to lecture us about Molly Redmond or what happened at the dance in Kilkenny Sunday night. If she has a complaint about any'ing, she should call the Garda."

Kitty's voice, calm and deadly, came back—the same tone Myles had heard her use with Miss Breen. He felt a tightening in his stomach and fought back a wave of nausea. Suddenly, he felt sorry for the Hannigan twins and had to resist an impulse to.

His mother's voice continued the deadly inquisition.

"That's a good speech, Billy. It shows courage, which is admirable, given your situation. Now, Bobby, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Not a t'ing, Mrs. Hogan, except that I'm sorry it had to come to this. Tell ya the God's honest truth, we didn't mean no harm. We had a few pints an' t'ings got a bit out of hand, I s'pose. An' the reason we're here is 'cuz me father has great respect for you 'n what ya did for the cause. We all have. We meant no harm, as God is my witness, Mrs. Hogan."

"Very good, Bobby. God is your witness, always has been and always will be, but we won't need to call on Him just yet. Your brother should take a page from your book, since contrition is the gateway to redemption. But you're both whistling past the graveyard if you think this is just about making nice.

"No. That won't do at all. Here's why: I've known Molly Redmond since she was a little baby. Her mother and I were in the movement together long before you lads were even a gleam in your Daddy's eye. She's a lovely girl and it so happens I'm her godmother—not that you should know that.

"But after the dance last Sunday night, she came by for our little chat, as usual. Only this time, she was hysterical. She told me everything. Everything. About what you blackguards did to her in Kelly's hayshed—or tried to do, I should say. I'm glad you have a few scruples left. Since her mother died in that ferry accident, I'm the one she turns to for advice. Thank God she did. And that's your bad luck..."

The long, ominous silence that followed was finally broken by Billy Hannigan's blustery voice.

"Look here, Mrs. Hogan, like I said, we came over here 'cuz Da respects you—we do, too, don't get me wrong—but what do ya want from us? Molly is no saint; she's a bit of a tayser—if you ask me. So I don't know what you want from us. What's done is done. It won't happen again, I can assure you of that. Is that the sort of t'ing ya want us to say?"

Upstairs, Myles had moved a little closer to hear his Mother's reply. He could see her pacing back and forth through the cracks in the floor boards.

"Oh, I know it won't happen again. That's not what I'm worried about. No, not a whit. But, as I said, it's not going to be as simple as assuring me of your noble intentions. The road to hell is paved with those, as the fella

says. Your amends will be much more tangible than mere words. As a show of good faith, I want 300 pounds in 20 pound notes for Molly's education, with a written explanation to her that this is your way of apologizing to her and her family for the emotional distress you caused. Be sure you both sign your names with Sean, your Da, signing as witness. I also want you to donate one of your best Jersey cows to Pete Redmond to make up for the one that got killed on Dundrum Road last month. It was the only one they had. It's only a neighborly thing to do anyway; I'm sure your Da won't mind.

"Oh, and while you're at it, it would be grand if you cut out five Cheviot ewe lambs and donated them, too. The Redmonds have had a couple of bad years and need a bit of sun to shine their way. You'll never even notice, but it'll make a world of difference to them."

Whatever had happened downstairs, the Hannigan twins went mute. Not a word of protest was spoken, as Myles heard their hobnailed boots scrape the concrete kitchen floor.

"Right so, I see you boys understand me. Much better than calling the Garda, wouldn't ya say? I'll see you at 8 sharp tomorrow. Oh, if for any reason you don't make it, I'll be up by noon for a little conference with Himself. Yer father and I go back a long ways, as you know."

Billy Hannigan was back the next morning at eight sharp, just as Kitty had ordained. He did not come in, but after a quiet conversation at the kitchen door, he walked slowly out of the farmyard. Myles watched him from the upstairs window, red curls flowing over his collar, as he closed the iron gate and walked slowly up the laneway. Even now, Myles remembered his mother's last words, in that menacing 'Miss Breen' voice:

"Don't thank me. Always knew the Hannigans would rise to the occasion. Say hello to your parents for me and tell them there are no hard feelings here. I'm sure the Redmonds won't be pressing charges. That's the kind of thing that can ruin a young man's life. None of us would want that to happen, especially to a Hannigan. Safe home, now, Billy."

Myles recalled his visceral relief at what he saw as a reprieve for the Hannigans. He'd feared the worst for them, like Miss Breen. But they were men, of course. It was different. He couldn't imagine what they'd done to Molly Redmond to make his mother so mad—maybe pulled her hair or tried to kiss her—but he was glad it was over and done with. It still rankled him that this whole village seemed to know something about his mother that he did not. One thing was sure—it struck the fear of God in them. That part was a comfort to Myles; some people deserved to be afraid. Fear was the only thing they understood, like some of the brutal mountain boys at school. But it also scared him, for reasons he could not explain. And he was sick of being called "Young Hogan of Rathdargan." He longed for an identity that he, Myles, could call his own.

He was also weary of hearing the depressing details of his father's

neglect of his family dredged up and embellished, year after year. It was a story the whole community seemed to delight in telling and retelling, with each recitation a little less credible; a little more vicious.

How Jack missed his birth—as he did for all but one of his 8 children born in their two-roomed farmhouse—and came home just in time to find his only son a cadaverous cluster of skin and bones, slumped in a coma. This rare visit had come in October, 1943 as the winter winds were returning to their ghostly antics, herding leaves from the giant oaks into every corner and crevice of the desolate farmyard.

A robust infant, Myles had lost half his body weight to a twin epidemic of whooping cough and German measles that had ravaged thousands of children across Europe. Myles's blonde three-year-old sister, Sheila, had suffocated in Kitty's arms. The local doctor—an alcoholic who practiced without a license—had prescribed baking soda.

Kitty just had to pray and wait “for God to take her,” as she told Myles one chilly afternoon years later by the turf fire, where Kitty often surprised him with her reflections. Father Cavanagh, the parish priest in Enniskerry, was two days late coming to offer last rites and condolences. Uncle Patrick, Kitty's alcoholic brother, had been charged with the job of fetching the priest, but went to Dalton's Pub and forgot.

People never seemed to tire of telling how his penny-pinching uncle Mike—Kitty's grand-uncle—had insisted that the undertaker delay closing Sheila's tiny white coffin until Myles should expire and join her in it. (After three days, when Myles seemed to be hanging on, they went ahead with the burial). True to form, Uncle Mike was calculating the cost of another coffin and Jack missed Sheila's funeral.

But he arrived in time to save Myles's life. Or so the legend went. He'd heard of Kitty's predicament through the grapevine in Birmingham, where he worked on the line at Austin Motor Works. There was talk of a special type of paraffin lamp that worked magic in bringing relief to children stricken by the epidemic. Jack claimed he'd bought one for the family as soon as he got word. It was too late for Sheila; but for Myles, it worked; he got immediate relief and came out of his coma within hours of his father's homecoming.

As far as Myles was concerned, he never believed the heroic rescue story. It just didn't fit the man he'd come to believe his father to be. It seemed just another example of Jack Hogan getting off the hook. If it had been true, why did he leave them the next morning, without a word of goodbye, without leaving Kitty a single penny, or even a boarding house address? He simply walked out and left her to cope with her grief, to face the bleak winter with a house full of children and an empty cupboard.

Myles knew the real story, much less noble; he'd pieced it together from snippets of gossip he wasn't supposed to hear. Jack had lost his shirt gambling on 'the nags' and had abandoned his family when Jim

Dalton and Pete Coady—the local publicans—began to deny him credit for his belligerent binges, tolerated as long as he sang and paid for every round.

Jack's comings and goings were never quite clear to Myles. As far as he could tell, Jack first abandoned Kitty and their six daughters in February 1937, five years before Myles was born. That time, he stayed away for two years and then came home only to dodge the WWII draft. He stayed for three years, then vanished again in February 1942, two months before Myles was born.

After that fleeting visit for Sheila's funeral in the fall of 1943, Jack went missing again, this time for keeps, it seemed. Other fathers who had to work in England came home every Christmas, Easter and for the summer holidays. But not Jack Hogan. While his friends proudly displayed their visiting Da at midnight mass, Myles meekly followed his mother as she marched to the front of Enniskerry Chapel with her brood of six to claim the family pew. No husband. No word. No hope.

Until now.

As word of Jack's heralded homecoming spread, the story of his departure gained new life. The neighbors warmed to the gossip, trumping Kitty's romantic renditions of Jack's adventures with details of their own.

"Now, when was it that Jack left again...?"

"Did he sell the bay mare to Father O'Meara—or was that the black stallion he'd won with at Gowran?"

They recited and embellished every painful detail of the deception. How he'd lied about taking the mare to Foley's blacksmith's shop. Joe Foley told Kitty the shoes had never been fitted. They relived the story of how he'd sold the last brood mare, Dolly, before jumping the ferry to Holyhead, then on to Birmingham.

That Jack Hogan. What a character! Never a dull moment when he was around. It hasn't been the same since...

Myles heard from others how his mother had first got news of Jack—over a year later—and then only because he was accidentally spotted by a cousin singing at a concert in Shrewsbury, England, on a Saturday night.

"Ah, what a wonderful tenor voice he had...Myles, sure some a dat talent musta rubbed off from yer father. Can you sing 'Slievenamon'? It was one of his favorites..."

There were times when Myles really hated him, with a burning, vengeful, damn-you-to-hell hatred. He was baffled by his mother's loyalty to her elusive husband. He hated how the locals kept reminding him of what a great hero his father was in the IRA as captain of the fabled 'flying columns' and their daring assaults on the British occupation forces. Myles particularly resented the constant, invidious comparisons—whether in sports, singing, dancing or work. "Sure yer alright, but you'll never be as good as yer father. He was a great man for the football. Do you play...?"

More complicated was Myles's constant awareness of missing—not the flesh and blood man who was Jack Hogan—but the *idea* of a father and what he saw his friends enjoying with their Das—hurling, boxing, football, prideful glances, tender touches to soothe the bumps and bruises. At such times, Myles longed for his Da to be around, but it was a fleeting emotion—like dreams of winning the Irish Sweepstakes or owning his own team of Arabian horses.

After twelve years without so much as a single visit—Jack was a mere ferry-ride away—Myles had given up, hardening his heart to the notion. The only signs of life he saw from his father over the years were the annual abusive letter pressuring Kitty to sell the farm. No money, not even a pound note; just a rant about how she'd always held him back with her lack of trust. Sneaking a peek at those missives, Myles could scarcely believe his eyes.

She'd once confided, in one of her fireside reflections, that the letters began in the aftermath of Jack's concerted efforts, against Irish law, to sell Rathdargan farm 'out from under her'—without her permission, which he knew she would never give.

After getting one of these letters, Kitty cried for days, trying to hide her heartbreak behind red, swollen eyes. "I have such a problem with the pollen this year" she'd offer, fooling no one.

For all of that, there were still times when Myles tried to will the father of his dreams into existence. One specific incident stood out in his memory. He was about nine at the time. It was fox-hunting season. The local hunters found him indispensable for one reason: Hogans had a terrific little fox terrier, named Nell, a white-and-tan spark-plug with classic markings.

Nell was famous for her ferocity and skill at flushing foxes from their dens—or dragging them out, if they were so foolish as to take her on. During the hunting season, there was a hunt every Sunday and Nell was Myles's front-row ticket to the action. He was proud to be able to tag along, though it was dangerous; loaded shotguns in every hand. He was not even allowed to hold, let alone shoot, the old single-barreled shotgun that hung from its rack at the head of the stairs.

Myles knew it was Nell the hunters wanted; he was along as baggage, resented by some of the hunters for slowing them down. On this particular Sunday afternoon the hunting party was in hot pursuit when they encountered a fast-running brook, three feet deep and four wide. The fox and dogs cleared the brook with no effort. Impatient fathers boosted their own sons over the stream, but, in their haste, forgot about Myles.

He remembered standing on the bank, crying, praying to Saint Anthony—patron saint of lost things—for his father to appear. When he didn't, Myles cursed St. Anthony for letting him down. "The curse a God on you, St. Anthony. Ya never come through when I need ya. An' I'm never going to ask you for another favor as long as I live. Ya can go to

hell.” He recalled his other grievances against St. Anthony when the stakes were high, like the time he’d lost his only hurling ball in the thick brambles behind the barn.

Eventually, Myles found a low spot downstream and waded across. But by the time he caught up with the hunt, he was soaked, bleeding from thorn bushes and sobbing. No one even noticed that he’d been missing. Nell had the fox cornered and her distinctive growls were punctuated by sharp yelps, meaning she was in trouble. It was only when Myles called her off that the hunters paid attention.

Saving Nell from the likely carnage of a cornered vixen meant spoiling their fun. “Sure we were getting along fine until ya came along and ruined it. Maybe next time we’ll just bring the dog...”

Jack Hogan came home to Rathdargan on May Day, 1958. It was a perfect spring day, rare in the moody western Atlantic. It dawned sunny and cloudless, and, for once, never broke. May, Ireland’s greenest month, had once again delivered its bounty.

The upper fields, next to Carrigoona Commons, were ablaze with daisies, their tiny white-and-yellow flowers forming the magic carpet dreamed of all winter. Daffodils, lilies, and forget-me-nots danced in the gentle breeze, blending their fragrance with the massive lilac hedge that formed a purple canopy over the handcrafted iron gateway to the farmhouse.

Birdsong echoed across the valley. The swallows were back—a welcome sign of spring—to reclaim their nests in the eaves of the cowshed. It was an idyllic setting to celebrate a family reunion.

Myles was like a jack-in-the-box at school that day, and was chastised repeatedly by Miss Breen, who found his conduct out of character. Having skipped two grades, he was one of her favorites and she expressed her disappointment in no uncertain terms. Others, for the same transgression, would have been dealt six lashes of the dreaded ‘rod’—a mountain ash plant about two feet long. A standard teaching tool, used more than the atlas or textbook.

In Myles’s case, Miss Breen had her reasons to show restraint. Besides, she genuinely liked and approved of Myles; just not today. “I must say that I find your conduct most unbecoming. Whatever has gotten into you, Myles Hogan? Very disappointing. I’m going to think twice about further privileges for you to go fetch you-know-what.” This was her reference to Myles’s perk of fetching her cache of jelly-filled doughnuts from Coady’s grocery. She gave Myles one for his labor; it was their secret. But everyone knew of Miss Breen’s weakness for doughnuts; it was hard to hide with her 16-stone waddle. And Myles’s pals at school razed him mercilessly for being ‘teacher’s piggy pet.’

Myles bolted from school at the clang of the bell, taking the shortcut across Carrigoona Commons. Normally, he dawdled, taking at least two

hours to cover the two miles. Pickup hurling games, a fistfight to kill the boredom, skinny-dipping at Powerscourt Waterfalls all offered distractions on the journey. This day, he was home in no time, determined to finish weeding his patch of the vegetable garden. He wanted to leave no room for Jack's famous fault finding, which Kitty inadvertently taught him to dread. "Wait till your father comes home. He won't put up with that..."

The mere thought of these encounters infuriated Myles. Who the hell is he to tell me about my duties? Hadn't he neglected his for twelve years running? And haven't I done fine without him all these years? And what about Mammie? Sure she'll just become sad, again, as she always has whenever his name is mentioned? And he'll just leave us again, anyway? Maybe I can just wait him out."

In the midst of elaborate preparations, Kitty had been on the lookout all afternoon. As Myles did when his sisters came home from nursing school, he watched for Ned Delaney's Vauxhall—the only taxi in Enniskerry—to appear on the Carrigoona Road, which he could see for miles from his perch on the Rathdargin ridge.

Kitty wore a bright yellow dress with a brown belt—an outfit Myles had never seen before—and her dark, curly hair blew in the breeze. He'd never seen her look so beautiful, or so happy—smiling and laughing at things that weren't even funny. He guessed she was practicing her new routine.

Five-eight in her bare feet and a strong, athletic figure, Kitty knew how to make the most of her elegant good looks. This day, she wore nylons and high heels that invited disaster on the farmyard cobblestones. The four surviving girls were away at nursing school, so the welcoming party was down to Myles and his mother.

Hour after hour, he watched the Dundrum Road. Most of the cars just kept going, not making that right-hand turn at the crossroads for Rathdargan. Finally, after hours of look-out duty, he spotted Delaney's Vauxhall. It turned right. Knowing it had to be Jack, he sounded the alarm: "Here he comes! They just turned at Doyle's Cross."

With the alert, Kitty went charging toward the lilac canopy, running the full two hundred yards of winding, sycamore laneway, uphill in her high heels. In that moment of euphoria, of hope against hope, all was forgiven: the abandonment; the drunken abuse; the deceptions and neglect. Once again, Jack Hogan was being given a hero's welcome; Kitty's faithful heart greeted him as any loving husband coming home from a normal, essential bread-winning trip.

Myles couldn't stand it; he refused to join the parade. He expected to be coaxed, as usual, but Kitty hadn't even noticed his absence. He sat on the front steps, brooding, while Kitty and the border collies rushed to greet the prodigal father. By the time they emerged jubilantly through the gateway next to the farmhouse—thirty yards away—Myles had arrived

at a plan of action.

His parents strode forward like in a wedding parade. Kitty had both of her arms locked around Jack's trim waist. Myles saw his matter-of-fact mother clinging to this stranger with a distant, dreamy look he'd never seen before. It was as if Jack had never left, as if the cover story had been true all along, and this loyal provider had just gone to the forge to have the mare shod.

Jack's white cotton shirt billowed in the wind and he carried a battered tan suitcase. He was tall and handsome, just as people had been telling Myles all his life. What if he'd been wrong? What if the stories were all true? Jack was laughing, full of life and basking in the glow of Kitty's adoration. They looked like a couple right out *Failte Magazine*, out for a stroll in the lush, Wicklow countryside.

Kitty was cheerfully explaining why Myles hadn't been with the welcoming party at the road gate. Apparently, he was shy. Finally, with a sharp change of tone, she turned toward Myles and issued one of her sharp commands: "Myles, come meet your father, right now!"

Myles stood up and walked slowly toward the stranger, working hard not to betray the terror he felt at what he was about to do. He felt his big, bold plan dissolve with each step, like a slow leak in his bike tire. They met about half-way to the farmhouse, just above the open spring well. The trickling of the running spout in the yard suddenly grew noisy. Myles had to stifle an urge to turn and run.

Their eyes met for the first time, father and son, searching, like boxers in an opening round. No trust; animal suspicion. Myles noticed his father had the same deep blue eyes and dimpled cheeks as himself. Now those older eyes twinkled with mischief, as if Jack was about to tell a hilarious joke.

He smiled at Myles conspiratorially, then reached in his pocket with crowd-pleasing deliberation, saying to no one in particular, "So this is my great big son. I brought you something I think you're gonna like..." With great flourish, he pulled out a gorgeous silver watch, a fashionable Timex. It had a chain about a foot long, with a silver T-buckle on the end. He held it high for all to admire, then lowered it to Myles's outstretched palm.

Without a word, Myles took the watch, gazed at it for a long few seconds, then threw it with all the force he could muster straight at his father's head, yelling: "I don't want yer watch! I don't want anythin' from ya! I wish ya'd just stay away from us..."

He didn't wait to see where the watch landed—just tore down the laneway toward his refuge, the garden, vaguely registering over his shoulder the flurry of apologies from his mother. "He's not like this at all. I don't know what got into him. Oh, Jack, please don't be upset. I'll talk with him...He'll apologize...I'm so sorry...I had no idea..."

Myles had learned from watching Kitty over the years that the best balm for upset is hard work. Now he threw himself into weeding the lettuce ridges, head down, back to the house, where he could hear the subdued voices of his parents. Then he heard footsteps on the garden path. Kitty was coming to reprimand him, to order him to apologize. He didn't turn around, just kept working, bracing for the verbal assault.

It never came. To his surprise, it was his father's voice that broke the silence: "This is a beautiful garden you've grown here, son. So clean. I used to plant lettuce and onions in this very same spot when I was your age. It's the sunniest place in the whole orchard. Did you know we used to call this 'the orchard'? The field over the house used to be filled with apple trees—people would come from all over to pick them. The trees would be in full bloom right about now—all shades of pink and white. We had such great yield, we just gave them away for free. The cattle and pigs ate the rest."

He kept up the monologue, squatting down in the row beside Myles in his polished shoes and white shirt, moving with him up the row. This went on for at least a half hour, during which time Myles kept working but never looked at his father or said a word. The speaker might as well have been invisible. Finally, Jack stood up, dusted off his pants and mumbled something about needing to wash up for dinner before vanishing behind the orchard wall.

Myles waited till he heard the wooden gate close behind him, then broke into tears of confused rage that watered the fledgling lettuce plants, lasting till he finished the row, exhausted and afraid of facing his mother.

At last, Kitty emerged, under the guise of picking scallions and lettuce for supper. To his surprised relief, she assured him that she was not upset, that she understood it would take time for him to get used "to having a man around the house."

It was the last thing he needed to hear. His anger returned, surprising both of them: "I'm never gonna get used to it. We were doin' fine without 'im. And I'm not goin' to call 'im Da either, an' there's no use trying ta make me."

"Alright, a Cushla, I know this is hard for you. But I still expect you to show your manners and to be polite. There's no excuse for rudeness. Promise me that you won't let us down. Do this for me, please!"

Myles dug at his tear-stained face with two muddy fists, promised her without conviction, and went in to wash up for dinner. He was used to being without a father, but now it was beginning to look like he was also about to lose his mother, too—at least the one he'd known up to now. Fine, maybe he'd just run away to England; that would show her about a 'man in the house.' He could find work on the buildings; four of his cousins had already gone to Sheffield and they were only three years older.

Jack Hogan proved hard to resist; he had a magic about him that Myles felt drawn to. Even mundane tasks like shearing sheep or clipping the pony became occasions of performance and celebration. Everyone—men, women and children—even the animals, seemed to vie for his attention. He was charming, entertaining, and loved to make people laugh.

Myles knew his father had won several singing competitions, both in Ireland and England, but he had no idea what that meant. Then, on his second night home, Myles came to understand why Jack Hogan was known as ‘The Voice’.

With plenty of Guinness being passed around, conversations buzzing in the kitchen, the usual suspects had arrived to perform their party pieces. No one was paying much attention—everyone talking at once—until someone shouted, “Hush up! Jack is goin’ ta sing.”

As if someone had hit a master switch, the house instantly falls silent. Jack stands up, steps confidently to the middle of the room, takes a deep breath, and launches.

His selection is Thomas Moore’s classic, “She Is Far From The Land,” a song familiar to all.

From the first line, all Myles’s resentments and plots for escape dissolve. His father’s voice is unlike anything he’s ever heard—sweet, enchanting and almost like a musical instrument in its perfection. Like the rest of the audience, Myles finds himself swept up in the emotion of the moment, crushed by the grief, still embracing it with both ecstasy and anguish that he has never experienced with other singers. By the end of the first verse, several people—women and men—are openly weeping. Some are actually sobbing, shoulders heaving. Handkerchiefs are out, arms clasping shoulders in comfort, and Myles finds himself crying openly with the others, without self-consciousness.

The words, poetry sung from the heart, etched themselves in Myles’s memory, words he would recite and sing in faraway places decades later:

**She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps,
And lovers are round her, sighing:
But coldly she turns from their gaze, and weeps,
For her heart in his grave is lying!**

In full performance persona, Jack swings toward the kitchen audience he’d had his back to for the first verse. His hands form a moving circle in front of him as he sings, making deliberate and lingering eye contact with each person as he delivers the next lines:

**She sings the wild song of her dear native plains,
Every note which he loved awaking;
Ah! little they think who delight in her strains,
How the heart of the Minstrel is breaking!**

He had lived for his love, for his country he died,

**They were all that to life had entwined him,
Nor soon shall the tears of his country be dried,
Nor long will his love stay behind him.**

For the finale, he comes full circle, pauses for several seconds, then turns toward the finish. The silence is perfect as he hits the *pèce de résistance*.

**Oh! Make her a grave, where the sun-beams rest,
When they promise a glorious morrow;
They'll shine o'er her sleep, like a smile from the West,
From her own loved Island of sorrow!**

As Jack finishes on a caressing inflection of 'sorrow,' his audience sits stock-still, mesmerized. Then comes the tears, mingled with self-conscious giggles. The applause is long and loud, everyone on their feet, even Mick Murphy, who never rises unless to relieve himself or to go home. They are uniformly awe-stricken. Shouts of "No trouble taya, Jack! More! More!—Give us *The Foggy Dew*, can be heard in the adjoining townland.

Jack obliges, without coaxing, leading off with the "The Foggy Dew," then "Dawning of the Day," "If I Were A Blackbird," closing with a nationalist favorite, "The Croppy Boy." He delivers his medley of ballads with the same fluid energy, the beautiful voice, the engaging presence. Long before the final song, Myles has been captured by his father's magnetic field, holding onto his jacket, proud to claim him as his very own Da.

The ramblers notice the gesture and applaud that, too, long and loud. In the background Myles can see Kitty, beaming her approval as she busies herself with the tea.

The spring and summer flew by in blur of manly activity. Myles spent hours with his Da, just the two of them, working on blocked drains, collapsed fences and overgrown hedges. Sometimes they just wandered around the farm, like two pals, taking stock of the dilapidation, while Jack displayed the same comedic skills of their aging neighbor, Andy Murphy—mimicry, jokes, foibles, legends—all in a day's work.

Jack had lots of money, spent it freely and seemed in no hurry to find work outside the farm or new ways to provide for the family. No one questioned the source of his largesse. Irishmen often came home from England feeling flush and spending lavishly, even if they couldn't afford it. After all, Jack had been gone for over a decade and might have changed his ways. Rumor had it that he'd won the lottery in Birmingham. Another had it that he had a recording contract with Decca Records and had been given a big advance. Sure, wasn't he "a finer tenor than John McCormick?"

More remarkable still, he never touched a drop of drink all summer. Given the man's reputation, that was nothing short of a miracle. Jack brushed it off with a simple comment that drink "doesn't agree with me anymore" when pressed with "sure one bottle of stout won't kill ya."

Some days, instead of farm projects, they went hunting down in the lower meadows. At last, Myles had his chance to do what he'd been dreaming about for years: show off Nell's skills and his own knowledge of game and fox habitat to his Da. In turn, Jack taught him how to shoot the ancient single-barreled shotgun that had hung unused in the upstairs rafters. Kitty had warned Myles against the dire consequences of even touching the gun, though he sometimes sneaked in and played war games, pretending he was an IRA marksman, killing scores of British soldiers as they came swarming across Sugarloaf Mountain.

That was before Jack came home. Now he was allowed to take target practice openly in the orchard, using a thick wedge of oak nailed to an apple tree as a bulls-eye. Once he got used to the violent kick of the butt against his jaw—which knocked him flat the first time he pulled the trigger—he showed a lightning speed and accuracy that drew praise from all quarters. Soon Myles was bagging pheasant and rabbits weekly, beating his father to the mark when the dogs flushed the game from the furze.

It was on one of those hunting expeditions that Myles came to know another side of his father. He also learned a well-kept secret about his mother that cast her in a whole new light. The conversation began after Myles had downed a pheasant with a brilliant shot and Jack, sensing his son morphing to a man, opened a delicate subject: his years in the IRA.

“You know, son, the crack of a gun always reminds me of when I led the Flying Column down in Bunclody back in '19. We'd been tracking the Black n' Tans for a week after they burned out the whole village of Killealy. Well, we hit 'em at 3 in the mornin'... blew up the barracks where they were billeted, out toward Vinegar Hill. Never knew what hit 'em. Bastard foreign riff-raff... Criminal element turned loose from British prisons and armed on condition they come over an' massacre us. Five of 'em escaped the first blast, but we blew their balls off as they came charging out of the back.”

“What happened after that, Da?”

“They caught us in Enniscorthy four months later, but not before we'd done several more jobs like that.”

“How come they didn't kill you like they did when they caught Padraig Pearse and the others in the Easter Rising?”

“Did yer mother never tell ya the story? Sure, I'm not surprised; it's not like her to dwell on the past. Or to brag.”

Myles was now listening to an entirely different man than he'd known before. Gone was the funny raconteur. In his place was a soldier, focused and gleaming at the memory of battle. This was the real IRA hero, the one he'd never believed existed. Yet, here he was listening to the first-hand account, like a dream come to life. Myles sank down on the stone wall, ready to drink it all in, watching his father's glistening blue eyes harden as he warmed to the story.

“Well, see, we were arrested and taken to the local jail in Enniscorthy. The whole county knew what happened; someone had informed on us, one of our own. We were to face the Tan’s firing squad the following Wednesday. So here’s what happens. We were allowed one last visit from family and friends to say our goodbyes. No men, only women. I was dating your mother at the time, sort of—she was Kitty Cusack then, a gorgeous slip of a girl, but secretly a commander in the local Cumann na mBan.

“I thought only the men could be commanders?”

“Oh, no, son. The women were commissioned, too. Kitty had a reputation—well-deserved, may I say—as a fierce Republican. Absolutely fearless. And deadly. She shows up on Tuesday night, acting the green, gawky country girl—‘Sorry to bother ya, Sir’—with freshly baked brown bread, four packs of Sweet Afton fags and, guess what else?”

“A hacksaw blade?”

“Ha, you’ve been reading too many comics. No—a sawed-off shotgun—stowed under her big winter coat.”

Jack smiled at the memory and lit his pipe, puffing to fill the silence. Myles felt his pulse race. His mother with a shotgun? Was this the same woman who forbade him to even handle the old shotgun gathering dust upstairs before his Da came home? He watched Jack’s face for a few more seconds, before asking, “So did she manage to hide the shotgun from the guards?”

Jack laughed and rolled on: “No, that was not the plan. She had a different idea. The guard, a Tanner, never knew what hit ’im; she fired at point blank range...right through the coat... blew a hole in him the size of yer fist.”

Myles tried to swallow, but felt his mouth go dry and his chest tighten. Then he heard himself say in a faint voice that sounded high-pitched and distant, “You mean ta tell me that Mammie killed the guard... I mean, the Tanner?”

Jack smiled indulgently at the boy’s amazement, continuing calmly, as though telling a bedtime story. He moved in closer to Myles, holding his gaze, warming to the subject, enjoying both the memory and the discomfiture of his audience.

“Oh, absolutely. Dead as a doornail. He made one fatal mistake—didn’t think a country lass would have the nerve to pull the trigger; stupid ejeet dared her: ‘Go ahead, he sez, ya Feinian bitch. I dare ya. Ye don’t got the fucken nerve.’ Sure we all heard ’em yell it from up an’ down the cell block. We knew they’d be the last words the Tanner ever spoke. Didn’t know Kitty Cusack like the rest of us... That woman had nerves of steel; tougher than most of the lads in the movement. Kitty always took care of business. Always got the job done.”

With that, Jack looked off in the distance and paused to relight the

pipe. A long silence followed before Myles broke in, choking back tears.

“I never knew any of that, Da. Mammie never told me... How could she? So how did you escape?”

Another long pause, puffs on the pipe and a resigned sigh. “Well, after Kitty sprung us—all twelve of us... Oh, listen, ’tis a long story, son. We split up. Packie Hayden, Denny Brennan an’ me stayed together an’ got out to Canada; ended up in Montreal. We had contacts and a lot of help up the chain of command. But that’s why yer mother and I had to meet up in New York after it had all settled down years later.

“I’ll tell ya the rest some other time. Sure, Mick Collins and I were best buddies; started out as hand-picked lieutenants in the IRB—Irish Republican Brotherhood—before DeValera and The Treaty tore us all asunder. I can’t bear to even think about the betrayals and treachery; all those fine comrades, men and women, tortured and martyred for...for what? Look what it got us.”

The memory seemed to wilt him. Gone was the aloof storyteller, spinning a yarn. His soft tenor voice broke and tears welled up in the blue eyes, turning gray in anguish. Embarrassed, he turned away, trying to regain his composure. “I’m sorry son. I shouldn’t have told you all this. Promise me ya won’t tell yer mother I told you about Enniscorthy. I shoulda let sleeping dogs lie...”

“I promise, Da. I won’t say a word.”

With that, Jack stood up, stuffed the pipe in his pocket and started up the hill toward the red-tiled farmhouse. They walked the distance in silence, deep in their own thoughts, Myles a few steps behind his father. His mind raced with questions and the dawning realization that his world had just been turned upside down.

Suddenly, the mysteries of deference to his mother made sense.

After each incident, Myles had assumed his mother, a naturally dominant personality, intimidated her targets with sheer force of will. Now, he understood the pitiful pleading, the sudden show of compassion, the ready admission of guilt. They all had one thing in common: terror. They weren’t facing his mother; they were facing Kitty Cusack, legendary commander in the Cumann na mBan and secret enforcer for the IRA.

But did they know the whole truth? That she’d shot a Black-n’-Tan prison guard, and the only living witness was Jack Hogan? Maybe the whole truth was worse. Perhaps she’d shot others? If so, how many? And who besides Jack knew?

Myles was left to ponder these questions alone. He would have to bide his time before he could even broach the subject with his Da, and Kitty was completely off limits; on that front, he was sworn to secrecy.

After that one extraordinary tale of his jailbreak, Jack returned to his other persona: an endless fountain of hilarious mimicry, ancient wisdom, songs and poetry. Myles, in turn, decided to focus on the bright side of

this newly revealed heritage. He was the only son of Kitty Cusack and Jack Hogan, Cumann na mBan and IRA insurgents who'd trounced the Black-n'-Tans, hooligans and murderers all. This was nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, he was proud of his pedigree. After all, Kitty and Jack had put it all on the line for Irish Freedom when it mattered most. He didn't know anyone else who could say that about *both* their parents.

So resolved, he got up each day now intent on making the most of being alone with his Da. He never raised the topic of the IRA again, and Jack avoided all references to his days "on the run." Instead, they seemed to have reached a tacit agreement that Kildargan farm would be their new cause.

Jack taught Myles the verses to all his favorite songs—*Slievenamon*, the *Croppy Boy*, *Dawning of the Day* and, Myles's favorite, *Kevin Barry*. They cleaned out the old car shed, built a workbench, and cut down several hardwood trees—ashes and oaks—for the new paddock they'd planned behind the stable.

At night, Hogan's farmhouse turned into a lively 'rambling house'—the center of community fellowship and entertainment. Gone were the days of isolation when Myles and Kitty wouldn't see a soul from one Sunday to the next. The Voice had raised the ante; singers never heard from before emerged to perform and match their talent against Himself. The same with the music—and all the other performances, including the storytelling, poetry and occasional tug-of-war on the long summer evenings. It was the best summer of Myles's life, far and away. He finally had a father of his own, and one who was supremely talented, great fun and a genuine IRA hero, to boot.

Then, one balmy August evening, their idyllic summer ended.

The ramblers had assembled for another night of music and storytelling, but Jack was still down in Enniskerry on some errand. Myles heard the border collies first, their barking chorus unusually shrill—with Parnell, the big, black alpha, dropping into an ominous crouch, hackles up, slamming against the kitchen door with increasing urgency, as if engaged in some mortal combat with an invisible foe. This was a sound Myles had never heard the borders make before, and he felt a shiver invade his whole body.

Kitty finally tuned in the banging against the kitchen door and turned to Myles without noticing that he'd turned pale. "Myles, will you go out and call off those dogs! They're giving me a headache with all that randy-boo." When she saw his hesitation, she picked up the Tilly lamp and, without further comment, stormed into the dark farmyard to see what all the fuss was about. "Parnell! Shep! Rover! Come to heel! I said, HEEL!"

With that, the dogs went mute; but not quite. They stopped barking, but Parnell kept baring his fangs in an ugly snarl, while the others growled and refused to lie down as they normally would when Kitty took charge.

As one, they paced back and forth, glaring toward the outer gate with baleful suspicion.

Standing just beyond the gate, frozen in fear, was a homely little woman, dressed in black, with a large hat on top of a wizened, little head. As she stepped into the farmyard, Myles could see her large pair of glasses reflect the light as she introduced herself as Fanny Wilcox, explaining that Ned Delaney had driven her up from Enniskerry, but had to go for another fare, leaving her to carry her large suitcase down the long driveway by herself. She looked exhausted, leaning on a cane, and Kitty immediately felt sorry for her. “Well, come on in and have a cup of tea and some refreshments, Fanny. You look famished and sure who wouldn’t be after lugging that suitcase down the lane all by yourself. I’m surprised at Ned to leave a woman in such a lurch. Shame on him.”

Fanny waved this aside with, “No, no—Ned seemed like a nice chap, really. Very polite and friendly, ’e was. I don’t want to put you to any trouble, but I’m looking for Paddy Hogan, and I understand ’e lives ’ere.” Here was an accent Myles had never heard, and could barely make out a word.

“I’m afraid you may have the wrong farm, Fanny. This is Jack Hogan’s house, and he’s away at the moment, but we don’t know any Paddy Hogan.”

Fanny sipped her tea, glanced through her horn-rimmed glasses at the assembled ramblers, and Myles, before speaking. Then, with a condescending cackle and an air of conspiracy, she leaned toward Kitty and whispered, “You may want to ’ear the rest of wot I ’ave to say privately. Can we go into another room, then?” Caught off guard, Kitty blushed and said, “Of course, of course... sure let’s go up to the parlor so that we can talk. Myles will join us.” Myles moved past the ramblers toward the parlor, but as he walked by Fanny, he felt her cold, clawlike hand grasp his wrist and whisper, so that all could hear, “I don’t think we want our knuck here listening to wot I ’ave to say.” Kitty recognized the British taunt: knuck—dimwit, eejet—but hadn’t heard it since her days as a nursemaid in London, when it was used to ridicule Irish country-girls—fresh off the boat—on the “downstairs” staff of her upper-crust employer.

Ignoring Fanny, she guided Myles in front of her as the three of them withdrew to the parlor—the formal room reserved for company—to the gawking silence of the ramblers. Kitty poured some tea and invited Fanny to proceed, which she did with an air of being in a deep conversation with a long-lost friend. Her story, which took over an hour to tell in her halting, Yorkshire style, erased all doubt of its credibility.

“Paddy came to live at Windgate House about five years ago. I’d been running the boarding house ever since me ’usband died in WWII, rest his soul. He was a career military man, you see, Captain Wilcox. A good man; a good provider. Paddy and I grew very fond of each other, and got

engaged a year ago. He told me all about 'is life—about Rathdargan farm, about 'aving a sister wi' six children—five daughters and a boy—who'd lost her 'usband in the war, just like me. He told me how he was helping her out, letting 'er stay 'ere, though 'e was legal owner of the farm. But 'e was allowing his sister—ye—to live 'ere out of kindness—not cuz 'e had to, mind you. And 'e always did say how 'e intended to come back to Ireland to run the farm when the time was right.

“Being 'is fiancée, I trusted 'im with my life's savings, five hundred pounds, which 'e said 'e needed to fix up Kildargan, till 'e could send for me. I was planning on selling Windgate House as a going concern—I'm tired of all the 'eadaches that go with running a boarding 'ouse. You 'ave no idea wot goes on.”

Myles looked at Kitty as the story ended. The only sound in the parlor was the loud ticking of the grandfather clock by the heavy mantle-piece, over which stern portraits of Hogan ancestors across the generations hung. Outside, the border collies were still barking in their high-pitched chorus, and Parnell, the alpha, was pacing back and forth, still growling, disturbed by something unseen in the summer night.

From Fanny's account, there was no doubt that “Paddy” was Jack, up to his old tricks. As always, they'd caught up to him, only this time with his wife and son as stricken witnesses and a gallery of ramblers to spread the gossip as fast as their legs could carry it.

Myles knew trouble when he saw it and this had all the makings. He looked at the intruder with unvarnished hostility. Fanny Wilcox had not been granted her fair share of nature's bounty. In fact, she was one of the ugliest people Myles had ever laid eyes on; more detached observers would readily agree. Under five feet and somewhat obese, she walked with a bow-legged limp, and had one glass eye that looked dead, almost amphibian. To cap it off, she spoke in a high-pitched, Yorkshire dialect, “Gur blimey, a rum lot, eh wot?”—as enervating to the Celtic ear as fingernails on a blackboard.

To Myles's amazement, Kitty finished her tea and, with elaborate politeness, then invited Mrs. Wilcox to stay: “Just for the night.” But Myles was having none of it. “Mammie, I don't believe a word of what she's saying. How do we know she's telling the truth? And why can't we wait till Da comes home? Besides, where is she going to sleep? We don't have any room for visitors, unless she wants to sleep in the hayshed.” He said all this while glaring at Mrs. Wilcox and before Kitty had time to issue a reprimand. Embarrassed by his outburst, she now took control. “Myles Hogan, you will not talk to a guest like that. Apologize at once!” But Myles was in no mood to back down in front of this creature he sensed was up to no good. “I will not apologize. I haven't done anything to apologize for. But I'm going to see what Da has to say before I listen to one more word from either a yez.” With that he bounded out of the

parlor and made an elaborate display of stomping up the creaky, wooden stairs.

Jack came home after all the ramblers had departed. It was quiet in the kitchen when he walked in to the unlovely presence of Fanny, sitting by the fire, teacup in hand. Caught red-handed, ‘Paddy’ came clean and acknowledged that, yes, he and Fanny had “grown fond of each other.” To Myles, listening from the upstairs loft, he couldn’t believe his ears. He’d been wrong and now his worst fears were being realized. This creature was going to stay here, which meant he would have to give up his room and sleep in the dark, dingy parlor on the lumpy old horse-hair sofa.

There was one thing Myles didn’t understand: his father’s lack of taste. Surely, Myles thought, if his father was going to find another woman to ‘date’ he could have picked someone who was at least presentable. Myles just couldn’t imagine his handsome father being seen with Fanny Wilcox in public, or whatever else ‘being fond of’ meant. When he mentioned this to his mother, she simply said, “Men will do strange things for drink, son. I hope you never know what that’s like.”

The comment made no sense to Myles, but, watching his mother’s mouth tighten, he let it go. But he vowed then and there that this ugly and evil creature had to go. He had no idea of how, but he knew he hated her and would stop at nothing to protect his family from this cackling menace.

Whatever was worked out by the adults, Mrs. Wilcox seemed in no hurry to leave. Whenever she went for one of her solitary walks around the farm, Myles could hear his parents fighting. First, his mother’s voice raised in consternation; then, his father’s usually soft tenor voice taking on a hoarse, frightening harshness. Sometimes, too depressed to work, Myles would idle in the hayshed, leafing through a comic book, pretending to be busy. Terrified of losing his Da again, he began to conjure up schemes to rid Kildargan of Mrs. Wilcox.

This took little effort, for Fanny Wilcox—having always been childless—made no bones about her dislike for children, especially boys and Myles in particular. She kept on referring to him as ‘Our knuck’—a phrase he, fortunately, never understood—in her grating, screechy dialect. No one told her to knock off the obvious taunting. Later, she tried charming him, but soon gave up in the face of his silent disdain. Myles went out of his way to be rude, refusing to even be in the same room when she was present.

After a month of brooding hatred, he decided to kill Mrs. Wilcox. It soon became an obsession. At first, he felt guilty, pacing his room at night and imagining his confession to Father Cavanagh. After all, this would be murder, clearly a mortal sin. Fires of hell for eternity; no priest could even offer him absolution.

On the other hand, Mrs. Wilcox wasn’t even a Catholic. She was barely

human; some kind of Protestant. She was going to burn in hell, anyway. Surely it was no sin to rid his family of this parasite; it'd be like killing a rat or shooting a cuckoo to keep it from preying on an innocent robin's nest. God would understand this and so would Father Cavanagh.

Seizing on this line of thought, Myles felt relieved, free to focus on concrete plans.

His first idea was to follow Fanny on one of the walks, push her into one of the sink-holes near the Far Field where no one would ever find her. Myles had seen one of those quagmires swallow a 2000 pound cow; even eight strong farmers pulling on the end of a rope couldn't save her. He discarded the notion only when he remembered how slowly the cow sank; it took at least 8 hours. He could imagine Fanny Wilcox, stuck and screaming in her shrill Yorkshire gibberish that the whole valley would be summoned to witness her accusations.

He finally settled on a concrete plan. It was as simple as it was vicious. He would invite Mrs. Wilcox to go hunting with him in the lower meadow, there would be an accident and she wouldn't come back. He rehearsed his lines for the aftermath.

"I don't know, Mammie. It all happened so fast. Mrs. Wilcox wanted to learn to shoot and I let her give it a go. The borders were barking, which startled her, then the gun backfired and then she was laying there, the dogs surrounding her barking like they'd gone mad...I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have let her use the gun. It's all my fault."

He imagined his mother and the neighbors trying to console him.

"Now, Myles, you shouldn't blame yourself. Mrs. Wilcox was a grown woman, capable of making a decision. I'm sure you were just trying to be nice to her. But I know this must be very hard for you."

It was now only a matter of how to get his quarry in the lower meadow on a different kind of hunting expedition. Never an athletic person, Mrs. Wilcox was not likely to jump at the chance to go hunting; but Myles was determined to convince her.

"Mrs. Wilcox, would you be interested in seeing where the pheasants lay their eggs in the Far Field?"

"Wot is this? A wildlife outin' being offered by our knuck? Well, well, well... wonders never cease. An' I thought ye didn't like me very much. We'll see. Maybe when I'm feeling a little bettah. Not today, luv. Run along now."

"Alright, Mrs. Wilcox, I could even teach you how to shoot rabbits and foxes. Might come in handy sometime if you're going to be around Kildargan."

"Well, it might, at that. I nevah thought a' that. Me, shootin'. Blimey! You 'ave some imagination for a young lad. I may have misjudged ye. I do believe I'll take ye up on it, soon as I'm feelin' a bit more chipper."

Myles smiled and shivered at the ease of his conquest. Now the question:

did he have the nerve to pull this off? He'd killed and seen killing before: Billy Flood butchering a hog; Packie Ryan shooting his old sheepdog, Ben; Peter Doyle putting down the bay colt with the broken leg. No one liked it; they just did what had to be done in the situation. This was no different; just something that had to be done. Another hard truth.

He carefully rehearsed each step until he had it down by heart. First have her handle the gun to get her fingerprints on it—all the detective comics made this point. Then teach her to aim it. Next, take the gun away in mock anger at her awkwardness, start to walk away, turn around, aim and fire at point-blank range. Easy. Like shooting a jackdaw on a fencepost.

For several weeks, as the days grew shorter, Myles began to panic, badgering Mrs. Wilcox about her promise to go hunting. She kept putting him off; it never seemed to be quite the right time. Maybe she was on to him, evil mind reading evil mind. He seldom slept for more than a couple of hours, and when he did, his dreams turned to nightmares of blood and gore from which he'd awake screaming. Even daylight brought no relief, his mind a chamber of horrors: Father Cavanagh's voice condemning him to hell; Mrs. Wilcox's mangled ghost at the window; Myles hanging from a scaffold at Mountjoy Gaol, body twisting in the wind.

He was cleaning out the cowshed when Jimmy Dunphy's high-pitched whistle sent the borders into their frenzied greeting. They knew Jimmy, but never ceased to greet him with full-throated barking, delighted at the chance to show off their guarding prowess. This time, Jimmy was lucky: Kitty was there to greet him with her steady smile, which faded when she saw the little green telegram in his arthritic fingers.

He went into his ritual delivery, which infuriated Kitty and destroyed any chance Jimmy had of being invited in for a tea and scones. Myles came up from the shed at the sound of the borders, just in time to hear Jimmy plead, "Maybe I should wait in case you want to send word back." This time, Myles didn't say anything; he just gave Jimmy a hard stare as Kitty abruptly turned her back on Jimmy and trotted down the stairs, tripping over the borders as they swarmed with the excitement of the moment.

Halfway to the kitchen, Kitty pulled up and said, "Oh, My God, the telegram is for Fanny. Do you know where she is?" Myles had seen her go for her regular walk about an hour earlier, and he instinctively grabbed the telegram and ran in the direction he'd seen Mrs. Wilcox go.

He met her at the hazel corral, walking slowly toward the farmhouse, taking in the warmth of the sun as it rose from behind the Sugarloaf. She looked small and vulnerable, and, for a moment, Myles felt sorry for her and guilty of his wicked design on her life. Seeing him sprinting toward her, she immediately erased his guilt with, "Well, well...if it isn't our knuck, snooping around, are we?" Myles just stared at her in his practiced

nonchalance, held up the telegram and said, "Mammie said this is for you. The postman just delivered it."

Fanny snatched the telegram from Myles's outstretched hand and slit the little green envelope with one sharp flick of her talon-like fingernail. Myles watched her as she read the brief message. After several seconds, she looked past him with her glass eye and muttered, "Oh, Dear. I must go back at once. There's been a dreadful death at Windgate. Poor Peter Boyle, one of my boarders, has hanged hisself in the upstairs bathroom." With that, she turned and trotted toward the farmhouse in her bandy-legged gait, puffing and panting, with Myles walking behind her at a fast clip to keep up.

Mrs. Wilcox quickly related her story to Kitty. Jack was out in the fields, fixing fences, and Myles ran down to tell him the news. He said nothing, just came back to the house, briefly spoke with Fanny, then grabbed Myles's bike and rode off to Enniskerry to fetch Ned Delaney for Fanny's departure in the morning.

Next morning, as the sun's first rays edged across the Sugarloaf Range, Myles staggered downstairs to find Mrs. Wilcox packed, with Ned Delaney's green Vauxhall idling at the road gate. She begged Myles for a hug and, without hesitation, he clung to her and sobbed as though his heart was breaking.

"Wot's a mattah? Don't take on so. I didn't even think ya liked me... Blimey! Our knuck has a 'art after all."

"Bye, Mrs. Wilcox. Sorry we didn't have a chance to go hunting. Maybe some other time—if you ever come back."

"Aye, son. Maybe then. Between you n' me, that may be a while. I doubt I'll be back. But you can come stay wi' me in Birmingham. I know a lot a young ladies that'd like the cut a yer jib, if ya know wot I mean. Take care, lad. Yer not such a bad knuck, after all..."

The Hogan family—all three of them—waved goodbye as Delaney's taxi disappeared around the bend down the Wexford Road. They walked back to the house in silence, like a funeral procession, each in a private turmoil they dared not speak.

Something had died during Fanny's stay; intuitively, they all knew that the innocent laughter and family joy they'd known just a few weeks ago was gone forever. The only question for Myles was how he would get through the next few days without letting his relief, grief and anger spill out all over the kitchen floor. What was he going to say to his Da? To Mammie? To his pals in school? To the snooping neighbors?

Predictably, Jack took the line of least resistance: as soon as the green taxi was out of sight, he promptly changed his clothes, pumped up the bike tires and muttered something about going to Borris to talk to Jimmy Doran about a horse. From the look on Kitty's face, Myles knew she didn't believe a word of it. They had no reason to trust him or believe a

word he said. Myles could see some combination of worry and alarm on his mother's face. It was a new look—one that he had never seen before.

No longer able to stand the furtive look on his father's face, Myles hastily dodged out to the hayshed to pursue his chores. From there, he could overhear his parent's voices, raised in anger. Kitty spoke first: "How do I know you're going to Dorans? You always make up some cock n' bull story when all you're doing is goin' to the Joyce's pub. Or are you going back with Fanny to Windgate? Why don't you just be man enough to tell me this time, not sneaking off, as usual?" Jack, his soft tenor now hoarse with anger: "I'll do whatever I feekin' well please, and no woman is going to tell me where I can come or go. I'm goin' to Jimmy Dorans, but now I think I'll go straight to Joyce's. Why the hell not? Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. It's all the same to the high and mighty Kitty Cusack. You can go straight to hell, woman, for all I care." Myles heard his mother mutter something unintelligible before they broke off with his da slamming the kitchen door behind him and storming into the farmyard with his hat and coat on.

As Jack angrily wheeled the bike toward the road gate, the borders suddenly became excited and barked menacingly at his back, the way they did at departing strangers. Irritated at the ruckus, Jack wheeled on the closest border collie, Rover, and kicked him viciously in the ribcage. The young dog whined and ran toward Myles for comfort, as Jack slammed the gate behind him with a few muttered curses at the dogs.

That night—the first without their odd guest—the rambles arrived at dusk, as usual, their expectations high. The borders kicked up their usual racket, but quickly settled down to enjoy the routine camaraderie. Mrs. Wilcox's presence had not dampened the rambles' spirits or concentration one bit. It would take more than her awkward attempts at participation to do that. In fact, they'd been more than gracious to her—Myles noted with some resentment.

He'd hoped for a show of support; instead, he'd become the target of edgy lectures on the virtues of being polite and 'not letting his family down'. "That's a good one," he thought bitterly. "I'm the one who's disgracing the family by not cozying up to this bow-legged creature from Birmingham."

When Jack was not home as the rambles ambled in, the disappointment and curiosity was palpable. From the forced humor and the knowing looks, it was clear what they were thinking: The worst, the obvious, why not? Had that not been born out since Fanny's arrival in August? Surely, there was no reason to assume things were going to be suddenly hunky-dory. They could barely restrain the winks when Kitty told them that 'Himself' had only gone to Borris to see Jimmy Doran. They knew better. The more Kitty reassured them, the more pity Myles could detect in their ruddy faces.

They knew all along the arrangement couldn't last and, while they felt sorry for Kitty and Myles, they felt even sorrier for themselves. Myles could see it in their sad faces, looking at the door as people filed in, staring past each familiar face to see if Jack might be among them. Then, the shattered look when it was 'only' Packie Breen, Jim Gallagher, Danny Doyle—the regulars.

By eleven o'clock, the neighbors had disbanded and Jack had not come home. With mumbled words of comfort, "Sure, he probably just got held up at Dalton's..." each little group wandered off into the inky night.

About 2 A.M., the borders started up, waking Myles from a deep sleep. He peeked out the window and could see them in the moonlight, swarming around the road gate. It seemed as if someone was trying to come in the gate, someone they didn't know. Who could be coming at this time of night? This went on for some time, about a half hour, then they fell back, growling and seemingly cowed. Then all fell silent and Myles fell back into a fitful sleep.

Around 3 AM, Myles came suddenly awake with an urgent hand on his shoulder. His mother was shaking him, a strange tension in her voice: "Myles, wake up! wake up! Will you please come into the other bedroom with me? Your father's been drinking and I'm afraid." Like he'd been stuck with a hot poker, Myles sprang out of bed. His fearless mother, afraid? He'd never known her to be afraid of anything or anybody in his whole life. What could she be afraid of? What was his Da going to do to her?

As he came in the inner bedroom, Myles could hear the borders, back in their high-pitched barking, some joining Ben in his deep-chested growl. Why were they growling at Da? Would they remember that he'd kicked Rover? Were dogs capable of revenge for one of the pack?

That's when all hell broke loose. As Myles shuffled toward the damp outside bedroom, he heard his father crashing through the front gate. He could hear the distinctive voice over the din of the borders, shouting in a hoarse, drunken diatribe. Myles fought back his fear, thought he might be having a nightmare, an illusion soon erased by the menacing voice descending on the house. Abruptly, the dogs went silent, a silence that was almost deafening in contrast to the howling chorus of a moment ago.

Then came the hoarse, bullying voice: "Get up Kitty! Get up and make me my tay! Goddamn you, woman. You bitch...you whore. Why don't you have the door open for me when I come home? I'll teach you to show some respect when I get my hands on you. How dare you humiliate me in front of Fanny Wilcox—a woman who never done you no harm. I'm gonna show the whole, cockeyed world who's gaffer around here for once and for all..."

Kitty started to cry, first slowly, in a stifled sobbing; then in an anguished, high-pitched confession, in terror of what was about to unfold. The

wailing, desolate sound was unnerving for Myles to hear, all by itself.

“Oh, a Cushla, this is a side of your father I’d prayed to the Blessed Virgin you’d never see. He can be so cruel when he has drink taken. I’m not worried so much for myself, but if he does anything to hurt you, I don’t know what I’ll do...I just don’t trust myself to ...”

As the sentence trailed off in a wail, a ear-splitting thud from downstairs told Myles that Jack had just kicked down the kitchen door, which was never locked. The splintering timber could be heard for miles. Cowering under the blanket, shivering in fear, Kitty and Myles waited for their fate to unfold. Cursing at Kitty, yelling for her to “Come down, bitch... I’ll teach you to ...” Myles could hear his father staggering toward the dark stairwell.

Fighting back panic, gasping for breath, Myles’s own cowardice struck him, like a sharp kick to the pit of his stomach. What kind of man would be hiding like this? What kind of man would be putting up with this abuse? Had his Mammie not just asked him for help? Well, she was going to get it.

A towering rage rose up through Myles’s body at his mother’s tormentor. No longer was this beastly intruder his charming, fun-loving da; this was just a nasty, foul-mouthed animal invading their home. All fear and compassion gone, Myles made a decision then and there: this brute was not going to make it up these creaky stairs even if he, Myles Hogan, had to die stopping him.

In one smooth motion, Myles sprang out of bed, grabbed the old single-gauge shotgun from its rack on the wall, and yelled, “She’s not comin’ down. If ya want the tay, make it yerself.” The words flew from his mouth, like he was channeling a grown man, someone older and braver. He cracked the shotgun, checked the live cartridge—just as he’d seen hunters do before sending out the bird dogs—and stepped toward the stairwell ready for battle.

Hearing his son’s trembling voice for the first time, Jack’s whiskey-fueled anger exploded anew. “Ah, the little bastard is going to challenge his da, is he? Well, I’m going to put some manners on you while I’m at it. You’ve been asking for a good whippin’, and now you’re goin’ to get it.”

With that, he lunged for the stairs.

Myles pulled the heavy shotgun up to his shoulder, hands shaking as he fumbled for the trigger. He aimed the long barrel at the empty stairwell, yelling at the top of his lungs, “Come on! Ya Bastard ! I swear ta God, I’ll blow yer fecken’ head off if ya take one more step.”

From behind him, Myles heard his mother’s voice, calm and steady now—a complete contrast to the wailing victim of a few moments ago. “Give me the shotgun, Myles, right now, and step back from the stairs.” Myles was used to obeying his mother when she adopted that tone; despite his resolve, he reflexively handed over the gun. She motioned him to

back up behind her with a quick snap of her head.

A wintry blast shook the rafters, chilling the dimly lit bedroom. Myles recognized that voice, conjuring frightful images: Miss Breen's bloody nose; the cowering Hanningan twins; the dead Tanner. In a flash, Myles's rage turned to fear—fear for his da and the danger he was in. His mind raced. What should he do—beg her to stop? Jump in front of the gun? Start screaming to distract her?

In the end, he just stood there, frozen at the terrible spectacle before him as Jack kept stumbling closer to the top step. Too drunk to navigate the steep steps, he kept falling down, then dragging himself back up to continue the ascent. He was only one step from the top when he saw Kitty and the shotgun's shadow in the flickering candlelight. Up until that moment, he'd kept up the drunken rant. Seeing the gun, he hesitated briefly, then charged ahead with renewed ferocity.

“Well, well, well...if it isn't the fucken warrior queen herself. Kitty Commandant Cusack, the pride of Cumann na mBan. The vicious bitch who never quite got what she had coming... I've punched yer silly eyes shut before and will again, just for pointing that fucken gun at me. Who do you think yer dealin' with here? The Tans? Do you take me for one of them eejets you can scare the shit out of with yer fierce fucken stare and general's bearing. Fuck you! I'm gonna teach you who's gaffer around here ...”

Kitty's voice cut off the diatribe in that low, calm voice Myles had learned to dread: “No, Jack, that's over. You're never goin' to lay a hand on me again. Not tonight; not tomorrow; not ever!” She said this without emotion, the shotgun steady as a rock, and without taking her eyes off her husband, who stood swaying in the stairwell, still wearing his faded overcoat and rain-soaked felt hat.

For a moment, Jack hesitated, cocking his head to one side—as if considering her words. Undaunted, he lurched over the final step, yelling: “Why, you miserable bitch, I'm gonna take that fucken shotgun n' shove it...”

That's when Myles heard the thud of the hammer and saw his father's white shirt explode in crimson across his chest, his body jerking backwards into the dark stairwell. Everything went into slow motion. He had lots of time to observe the details of Jack's surprised expression, the wordless calm of his mother's profile and the seemingly endless racket of the creaky staircase as it absorbed the crash of the tumbling body.

The borders started up again. This time, the sound had gone from the high-pitched bark to keening—all of them in unison, as if on some invisible signal. They were answered across the valley by other borders, keening back, their eerie chorus reverberating around the Sugarloaf Range.

Myles stared in horror as Kitty's right hand slowly and steadily set the shotgun against the bedroom wall. She betrayed not the slightest tremor

as she picked up the flickering candle and followed her husband's tumbling corpse down into the kitchen. The turf fire was still smoldering in the grate and a moaning wind swept down from the Sugarloaf, rattling the ancient doors and windowpanes. The borders continued to kean as Myles absorbed the horror of the scene on the kitchen floor, the same concrete floor where it all began a thousand years ago, on that first magical evening in May.

An hour later, a somber, rain-soaked dawn was breaking over Enniskerry as Myles pedaled his Raleigh across the Dargal bridge, just a mile from the parish priest's house. Still in a daze, head down against the driving mist, he relived the scene in the kitchen: his father's blood-soaked corpse stretched by the fireplace; his mother calmly blowing the bellows, as if nothing had changed.

"Mammie, what are we going to do?"

"Go straight to Enniskerry and fetch Father Cavanagh!"

"Right now, in the dark?"

"Right now. It'll be light by the time you get there."

"What should I tell him?"

Kitty slows the bellows, then stops, glancing around the kitchen. The borders have gone silent, creeping into the kitchen, subdued, licking Myles fingers and lying down in a circle around Kitty, by the bellows. The ticking of the grandfather clock amplifies the heavy silence; hazel eyes meet blue, holding them in a longed-for caress through the miasma of the smoking turf; then comes the calm, dispassionate response:

"The truth. Tell him the hard truth, like the good man you are."

NOEL KING was born and lives in Tralee, Ireland. His collection *Prophesying the Past* was published by Salmon in 2010. In Canada he has appeared in *All Hallows*, *The Annals of St. Anne De Beaupré*, *Corvid Review*, *Green's Magazine*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *The New Orphic Review*, and many others.

Noel King / Five Poems

Drunk's Wife

She wanted her left
hand to be free,
release the ring
she no longer saw herself in.

It was stuck fast
above the knuckles
until they pulled it off
in the morgue.

Lifting the Latch

you take time out from a nest
hatched: husband, sons; as jets of sun
hit your landscape, light your face,
bless your heart with poems that
have hovered to speak through you.

Storm at my Granny's

By her fireplace
I comfort read
a Christmas annual
the following November,
as barren branches slap window sashes
and though I've since learned the truth
about Santa, I still enjoy the stories,
long to write my own.
Next, I prance up and down
on large patchwork cushions,
denying the deluged garden
this energy meant for it.

There is a new fireplace now
and I still care for the swish
of trees beyond the glass,
but traffic sounds don't dim through double glazing
and the cushions have lost their bounce.

Wisdom

in memorium, Eamon Kelly

Your lips are shapes of moons
that light scenes from a past age,
holding a century of a life;
you can frame a mountain
and take us to dreams
of a world gone except for you.

And when little parcels fall
in our imaginations' doors,
waking in us a strive to storytell,
we can hear your Kerry,
and we'll remember, we'll remember.

The body went old around eyes
of a carpenter's son
who played Broadway and back,
but too show the cool Kerry
of a Coolock, Dublin suburban man.

Wise man, wisdom is what I find
in me, because you beam it
from Kerry rafters
forged in stone-mad lore.
We find in you our core.

The Boss-Man

Behind the cash desk the boss-man peels an orange
while peering – through a glass hole, over the shop.
He throws the rinds in the bin, sections the fruit on the desk.
He rings in,
 gives change,
eats a section,
 rings in,
gives change,
 answers the phone,
meddles with his zipper,
 rolls round in the swivel seat
impatient for the cashier's return from tea-break.

He detours nicely past the cashier's arse
congratulates himself again on the uniform
skirts he – and not his wife/partner – chose for his girls to wear.

His wife/partner is chatting to a woman who smiles
at him, but cocks her nose slightly at the orange smell
and the sight of the short, wet-bald man eating it.

His school-uniformed daughter gets the last bit.
She gulps it then asks for money, banters with the staff
before downtowning to buy secrets.

Later in the shop an orange fart escapes
and the boss-man pollutes the air with cigar smoke,
wonders again at the chances of that new apprentice girl
letting him get up on her in the stock-room.

The scowl of that new apprentice boy displeases him.
Maybe he made the wrong choice taking him on:
a little snob, a little shit. In looks the boy reminds
the boss-man of himself at the same age.

He remembers a boy inside his mother's clothes,
one orange to each cup of a white brassiere.

The New Orphic Review

They sell bras in the ladies' department,
some night alone he could try one on again,

put oranges to his skin again,
excite himself in the mirrors
tinted for customers to buy themselves in.
He can do that, he can do anything he likes,
after all he *is* the boss-man.

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A Special Intention

David Pratt

IT WAS HOLY WEEK in Salamanca. The three other students listened as Petra, the Dutch psychologist, described the procession she had seen the previous day.

"The float must have weighed two or three tons. And some of the men carrying it were barefoot. Isn't that dangerous?"

"No importa," Maricruz, the teacher, said. "If they have made a special intention."

"But there could be broken glass on the street."

"No importa."

Keiko, a university student from Tokyo who rarely spoke in class, asked in her hesitant Spanish, "Do you walk in the processions?"

Maricruz smiled. "No. I have a cousin who belongs to one of the orders. Every year she asks me to participate, but I never have."

Petra's husband Franz looked up from his laptop to remark on the disharmonic Arabic sound of the trumpets in the procession. Charles asked what other traces of the Moorish occupation still remained.

"This." Maricruz raised a hand and lifted a strand of jet-black hair. "There are no true blondes in Spain. Not even as fair as you, Carlos. And this." She touched her cheek. Her skin was the gold of the stones of Salamanca lit by the afternoon sun. A little darker under the eyes, giving her a slightly Eastern aspect. She wore a small pearl stud in each ear. Taller than the average Spaniard. Twenty five or twenty six, Charles figured. Five or six years older than he was.

The classroom was spotless, painted in light cream, with framed El Greco and Goya prints on the walls. Through the window Charles could see red tiled roofs, chimneys, and television aerials. The burning summer had not yet arrived here on the high plateau, but the bright sun and cloudless sky were a blessing after the dark rainy days of spring in England.

"Carlos?" He had not heard her question, and had to ask her to repeat

it. The discussion had moved on to sports.

“What other sports are dangerous?”

“El sexo,” Franz said. Everyone laughed.

Charles felt himself blushing. He felt, sometimes, that he wore his inexperience like a sign on his forehead. “La corrida de toros,” he said.

“Bull-fighting is not a sport, it’s an art,” Maricruz said. “Who’s seen a corrida? Keiko?”

“Una collida?”

“Tip of the tongue at the top of the teeth. Corrrrrrida.”

“Collida.”

“Okay, we’ll work on that together,” Maricruz said. Keiko looked as if she was about to cry. Maricruz set an exercise, and handed their essays back while they worked on it. When Charles looked up, he saw that she had her arm around Keiko, and their heads were close together as she talked through the Japanese girl’s essay.

When she came to Charles, she leaned over his shoulder to point out wrong tenses and confused prepositions, and he became conscious of her scent. Something like orange blossom, perceptible only when very close. She pointed to a misplaced accent. How slim her fingers were!

“You asked me about Miguel Hernández, Carlos,” she said. She pulled a sheet of paper from her briefcase. “This is one of my favorite poems.”

He looked at the title. “Yo no quiero más luz que tu cuerpo ante el mío.” The only light I need is your body in front of my own.

“When did he write it?” Charles asked.

“In prison. When he was dying.”

It was almost two o’clock. “Who is joining the excursion this afternoon?” Maricruz asked.

“Who is leading it?” Petra inquired.

“I am.” They all indicated they would come. They trooped downstairs together. Maricruz bade them a cheerful “Hasta luego,” and Charles, Franz, and Petra looked after her as she walked away toward the Plaza Mayor.

“Qué guapa!” Franz said. What a doll!

“Qué bombón,” what a sweetie, his wife agreed. Charles couldn’t find anything to say. As he walked back to his room, he read the poem by Miguel Hernández. He would need to work a bit with a dictionary. He liked it already, though. Because Maricruz had given it to him. Because she liked it. It was a passionate poem, written by Hernández for his wife, but a poem of love and devotion rather than of desire.

Lunch was lentil stew. Again. He and three other students from the school shared a large apartment, looked after by Pepita, a plump middle-aged woman. If he didn’t eat everything he was served, Pepita looked crestfallen. If he cleaned his plate, she immediately refilled it. Then it was almost impossible to stay awake through the afternoon.

He had an essay to write, but he thought he'd devote a few minutes to the poem by Hernández. His room contained only a bed, a small table, and an upright chair, so he lay on the bed. He didn't know how to interpret the word "abrasada" in the last couplet. It meant scorched, parched, or burned. The poem as a whole was certainly effective, although he couldn't imagine writing something like that himself. It was not the kind of poem that would impress April, the vicar's daughter.

He woke in a panic. But it was only four thirty.

"Chicos!" Guys! Maricruz came up to the school entrance where the four of them were waiting. "Y chicas! Everyone here already! Qué grupo fantástico!" She had changed into a dazzling white shirt and tailored jeans with a leather belt. She was wearing stylish and very dark sunglasses. "What do you want to see? Have you visited the cathedrals?"

They had. Charles was relieved. He had lived too long with Cambridge gothic to appreciate the silver-encrusted baroque known as plateresque. The consensus was to visit the university.

They walked down one of the wide pedestrian avenues. A beggar was in front of them, kneeling in a classical posture of abasement, one hand outstretched, forehead pressed to the flagstones. A card beside him said, 'Help me please, I have AIDS.' Maricruz, her expression intense, bent and put a coin in his hand.

Each time they passed a beggar, she fished in her pocket for a coin. She waved friendly greetings to people she knew. On two occasions, young women, former students, dashed up with excited cries to hug and kiss cheeks.

At the university, they admired the ornately carved façade of the main entrance, and then looked at the library, the oldest in Europe. A sign on the ceiling promised excommunication to anyone who stole or damaged books. In a lecture theater, the narrow benches were scored with the incised names of centuries of bored students. Instead of a dais, there was a pulpit.

"This is where Fray Luís de Leon lectured," Maricruz said. "He was imprisoned for five years by the Inquisition for making an unauthorized translation of The Song of Songs. At the first lecture after his release, he began with the words, 'As we were saying.'"

Franz asked, "Was the Inquisition very active in Salamanca?"

"Everywhere. The bishops competed in burning heretics. The more you burned, the greater your chances of being canonized. The Dominicans were the secret police. Domini canes, the hounds of the Lord. They had to reserve big sections in the churches for all the confiscated property. Anonymous denunciations, torture, secret trials, public executions. Just like under Franco."

They were back outside. Maricruz pointed out the brown antique lettering on the university walls, the names of those who had received doctorates, painted in bulls' blood. The early evening sun was now full

on the buildings of Salamanca. The iron content in the stone gave it a rich golden glow. Everywhere the eye fell, it lit on ancient walls, red tile roofs, ornate towers, and intricately decorated doorways. Occasionally you could see, in a gap between buildings, a slice of green countryside. It must have been from such a place that medieval painters derived their notion of the City of God.

No wonder Uncle Frank had recommended Salamanca. He was in the Foreign Office, and when Charles decided to go to Spain for a month in the Easter vacation before his final exams, he asked Uncle Frank what would be the best place to improve his Spanish.

“Salamanca,” his uncle had said, without hesitation. And he had promptly lent Charles his American Express card for the trip.

The streets were beginning to fill as people came out for the evening paseo. Old women crossed themselves as they left their doorways. Young couples strolled with their arms around each other. Walking was a major activity for Salamantinos. You could tell from the perfectly rounded behinds of all the young women.

“What do you call those birds in Spanish?” Keiko asked, looking up at the storks flying to and from their nests on the pinnacles of the Cathedral.

“Cigüeñas,” Maricruz said. “They bring good luck. They also bring the babies. From Paris, where there is a factory.”

They were back in the Plaza Mayor. The sun was warm, and the enclosed square softened the cool breeze blowing from the snowfields of the Sierra.

A bright black and red football, kicked by a small boy, bounced at the feet of Maricruz. She blocked it neatly, and kicked it back to him.

“Bravo!” Franz said.

“University women’s team,” Maricruz said. She halted, and they thanked her for the tour. The others now bade Maricruz goodbye and headed away in different directions. Charles didn’t want to leave.

“Will you have a coffee with me?” he asked.

“Why not?” They sat at a table at one side of the square, with the sun behind them. She asked for café solo, and he ordered café con leche for himself.

Now that he’d invited her, he was tongue-tied. Maricruz appeared to be totally at ease. She sat with her chair turned from the table, looking out at the crowd in the plaza, her legs crossed. The sandals she wore had one-inch wedge heels. Her toenails were painted silver. He could span her ankle with thumb and forefinger. Charles became conscious that he was staring. He looked up, and found her studying him. She had taken off her sunglasses. Her expression was friendly, and contained, he thought, a trace of amusement.

“Is this your first time in Spain, Carlos?” she asked. “Your Spanish is very good.”

“I learned from a book,” he said. “That’s why my pronunciation is so

bad. And I had to read a lot for my special subject.”

“You’ve never been in a Spanish-speaking country?”

“Only once, a few years ago. I went on holiday with my family to Cuba.”

“My fiancé is in Cuba.” He liked the way she pronounced it: Cooba.

“What is he doing there?” Charles asked. He had to rethink her with a fiancé. Although she wore a number of rings, there was none on her wedding finger.

“He is a doctor, a specialist. He’s doing very important work, training Cuban doctors.”

There was a glow in her face and her voice. Her fiancé was a fortunate man. Charles imagined him as dashing and ultra-handsome. How had he courted and won her? Did he write her lines like, “The only light I need is your body in front of my own”?

Suddenly he wanted to know everything about her. Did she have a bicycle when she was a kid? Had she worn her hair long? What were her parents like? Who was her favorite film star?

“When will you get married?” he asked.

“Next autumn.”

“In Cuba?”

She smiled. “No, in Barcelona. We both come from large families. It will be a big occasion. And you, Carlos, do you expect to marry your girl friend?”

“We haven’t really talked about it,” he said. “I expect so. After we both get established. April has two more years of her program in—fisioterapia?”

“Fisioterapia. And are you in love with her, Carlos?”

It was a question he had asked himself many times. “I love her,” he said. In Spanish, though, it could be taken to mean “I like her.”

Charles sipped his coffee. He wanted time to stop right now, so that he could be forever drinking coffee with Maricruz in the Plaza Mayor in Salamanca in the heart of Spain. The plaza was surrounded by an arcade, beneath four stories of elegant architecture. At one end, the town hall was decorated with the flags and banners of Holy Week. A blind man selling lottery tickets called out at intervals like a muezzin. At a café table, a group of students sat listening respectfully to an older man. Families strolled together. Teenage girls with studded ears and improbable red hair talked into cell phones or lounged on the flagstones in groups. Four old men, each leaning on a stick, sat in a row on one of the stone benches. The arcade that surrounded the plaza was decorated with sculptured medallions of Spanish kings and heroes. They were sitting close to the one that Franco had installed. The stone was a lighter color than the others. Charles asked about it.

“The sculpture has to be cleaned often, because people spray-paint it,”

Maricruz explained. "You know that Franco also insisted on his name being engraved in the Cathedral along with the kings of Spain. He was very pleased when they inscribed it Franco Glorioso. He didn't know that in Latin glorioso means conceited, vainglorious."

"Were your family Republicans?" he asked. She paused a little, and for a moment he was dismayed by his intrusiveness.

"Since Franco died, we have tried to put all that behind us," she said. "My family were good church people. But many priests in Cataluña supported the Republic, and were murdered by the Nationalists. A great uncle of mine was one of them. My own orientation is a little different."

The fiancé in Cuba. "Are you a communist?"

"I am not a member of the Party," she replied evenly. "But I am not personally religious, either. I have not attended church for many years. But I was brought up in a very strict religious home. I did it all, first communion, confession, Daughters of Our Lady."

"I guessed that from your name," he said. "Marie del Cruz."

"María de la Cruz," she corrected him. Mary of the Cross. "Are you religious, Carlos?"

"No," he said. "I mean, I go to church when I am at home."

"When I was nine, I went to confession and was given ten Hail Marys as a penance. My girl friend was waiting for me outside the church, and I said only three. The next day my pet cat was killed by a motorbike. That was the hardest belief to change, the idea that misfortune is a punishment. The penitents who walk barefoot in the processions, they walk for all of us Spaniards. We think we can change God's mind by acts of penitence."

"Such a public act would be impossible in England."

"It is a public act. It is also a physical act. The wounded spirit cannot heal itself. It needs the physical. Like sunshine." Maricruz turned her face toward the sun, now touching the top of the buildings around the square. "A procession. A fiesta. A bullfight. Earth, air, wine, blood."

The differentness: that was what was exhilarating. They had both finished their coffee. "I must go now," Maricruz said. She said it in a way that meant, I've enjoyed your company. "I have four essays to read." They both stood up.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank you for the coffee, Carlos. Hasta mañana." She waved cheerfully as she walked away. He watched until she was lost in the crowds and dense shadows at the far side of the square. He felt suddenly bored. A new movie on Stalingrad was showing in one of the cinemas. Then he remembered the essay. On sports, she had suggested, or anything else. Perhaps he could write something about Miguel Hernández.

The public library was housed in an elegant fifteenth century building. He spent three hours reading about Hernández. A shepherd boy when young, a friend of Lorca and Neruda, arrested in 1939. After the library

closed, he continued to work late in his room, and he was still sleepy when he woke the next morning. He revived himself with a four mile run out of the city and along cart tracks through fields of young wheat.

The first two hours of the morning were occupied by grammar class with a motherly, middle aged profesora with disorganized hair, who, like grammar teachers in every language, had an insensate lust to teach the subjunctive. Charles knew he needed the grammar, but the time dragged. He was also trying to suppress a guilty feeling; yesterday was the first day since he had left England that he had not written to April. He would send her a card this afternoon.

While the class awaited Maricruz's arrival after the coffee break, Franz told a story about a business delegation he had led to Russia. He broke off suddenly, and Charles turned to see Maricruz come in. She did not give her usual excited greeting. She put her bag and briefcase on the table, and took out the text book. "Exercise 15, page 43," she said flatly. Her hair lacked its normal bounce. Her skin looked sallow, and there were dark rings under her eyes. She was wearing makeup, for once. They all exchanged glances. Even Keiko's usually impassive face wore an expression of concern.

They worked woodenly through a couple of vocabulary exercises. Charles could tell that Franz, an incorrigible extrovert, was bursting to ask what was wrong. Maricruz set them another exercise. She took yesterday's essays from her briefcase, and sat down to read them. Charles was sitting near the top of the table, and he couldn't stand it any longer. He took the poem out of his folder and put it on the table between them.

"Maricruz," he said. "I can't figure out this word. 'In my blood, faithfully abrasada by your body, It is for ever night: it is for ever day.'" How should I understand abrasada?"

She didn't answer, and he glanced up. She was staring at the poem, and tears were running down her cheeks, taking with them black streaks of mascara. As their eyes met, she jumped up, grabbing for her purse. She got hold of only one strap, and the purse opened, scattering contents on the table and the floor. Pens, a comb, a packet of tissues, a letter. She and Charles both stooped to retrieve the letter from the floor, and their heads collided sharply. Maricruz gave a sob, crammed the letter in her bag, and fled the room. Charles had noticed the Cuban stamp. The jagged tear in the envelope indicated that it had been opened in haste.

Franz and Petra were talking in Dutch. Keiko's eyes were alarmed.

"Something has happened," Franz said, speaking in English. "Family perhaps."

"She's under a lot of stress," his wife agreed. "Do you think we should suggest canceling the rest of the class?"

When Maricruz returned, however, she was completely under control. Franz asked if she would like to end the class. "No, thank you, it is not

necessary," she said. She proceeded mechanically with the lesson. The four members of the class stole looks at her and at one another. The instant before their heads had collided, Charles had noticed a couple of silver threads in Maricruz's black hair. She must be older than he had thought, perhaps over thirty. Eventually, the sound of other classes in the hallway indicated the end of the day.

"As it is fiesta, no homework," Maricruz said, putting papers into her bag. "I wish a happy Easter to all of you."

It was unthinkable to wait four days to see her again. Charles had to speak to her, find out what had happened, ask if he could do anything. He plunged down the stairs, saw her black hair among the blonde of the Dutch and German students. The street in front of the school was crowded with people heading home for lunch. He stood on the sidewalk, trying to see in which direction she had gone. Then he spotted her walking quickly away down the avenue. He started after her, and felt a hand on his arm.

"I think she needs to be alone." It was Petra.

He skipped supper that evening and went to the Stalingrad movie. It provided only slight distraction. He woke several times in the night, feeling anxious, and then his spirits sank as he remembered that he would not see Maricruz again until Monday. Was she asleep at this moment? Or was she awake, standing on her balcony, looking out at the city through numbed eyes?

Good Friday dragged by. When he tried to read, the image of Maricruz's tear-stained face came between him and the page. On a long run in the afternoon, he had an inspiration. He would telephone her. Just to ask if she was all right. Then he realized he did not know her last name.

He ate late in the evening in a small restaurant in the old town, and decided to watch the midnight procession of La Hermandad de Nuestra Señora de Soledad, the Brotherhood of Our Lady of Loneliness.

When he got to the Plaza Mayor, he heard the band a couple of streets away. The square was crowded, so he walked down to the smaller Plaza de Corriollo, and found a position under a street light where his view was unobstructed. A full moon had risen.

The band came into earshot again, dominated by the discordant trumpets. As the procession entered the square, the trumpets stopped, and the drums continued with a dead march full of solemnity and menace. The band members were mostly young, wearing black and scarlet uniforms, music clipped to their instruments with clothes pegs.

They were followed by the paso, a float bearing the image of Our Lady of Loneliness. The life-sized figure was of painted wood. The platform, heaped with flowers, moved slowly past, swaying slightly to the tread of the bearers. Only their feet were visible under the black draperies that hung from the platform.

Behind the paso walked a double file of nazarinos, or penitents. Their

black robes were cinched at the waist with black cords, and their capes, gloves, and shoes were black. The conical black hoods, reminiscent of those of the Ku Klux Klan, reached down to the shoulders, with oval holes for the eyes. How expressive the eyes were, when you could see nothing else! The crowd hushed as the sinister figures paced slowly past to the beat of the drums. One of the penitents was carrying a big wooden cross, walking very erect, given added presence by the pointed vertical hood. And barefoot.

Charles saw the silver toe nails. His eyes jerked upward, and met hers behind the mask. Those eyes! Black pupils dilated in the dim light, dark liquid irises. They seemed to be the very incarnation of sorrow. For a long second, they were his universe. Then she was past.

The cross was made of two by six inch planks. It must have been twelve feet long, the transverse about five feet. She wasn't dragging it, but was taking the full weight on her shoulder, her customary gliding motion accentuated by her bare feet.

He stood as if paralyzed. He watched, unable to think, as she moved with the procession out of the plaza and down the Rua Mayor. The crowd closed in behind the two Civil Guards who brought up the rear of the procession. Charles came to himself, and began to follow.

Everyone was heading for the Cathedral. The crowd was dense, and the procession now a block ahead. As he moved with the throng into the moonlit square in front of the cathedral, he saw the members of the procession at the far side. They were disassembling. Some had removed their hoods, and were chatting with friends and family. Others were going in or out of the great cathedral doors, where the float must now have been taken.

Charles despaired of seeing Maricruz in the poor light, among so many people. He patrolled the crowd, looked inside the vast cathedral, and decided to keep an eye on the doorway. Once or twice he caught sight of a tall woman, only to be disappointed as he got closer.

He almost missed her. She was walking away across the square, carrying a back pack, wearing a brown leather jacket, a long skirt, and sandals. He was shy of intercepting her. He followed, staying a dozen paces behind. She could not know he was there; although it was almost one in the morning, the streets were still crowded with people. They reached the top of the pedestrian avenue, where the round church of San Marco stands at the edge of the old city. She stopped for the light. When it changed, Charles took a step, then saw that she hadn't moved. The crowd flowed round her. She didn't look back or to either side, just stood there as if frozen, as the light changed again.

Then the light changed back to green, and she stepped forward, and crossed to the Avenida de Italia. Charles followed. After a few blocks, she turned on to a cross street, and then into a smaller street with high

apartment buildings on both sides. Should he catch up to her before she got to her door? Or wait a few moments, then ring the bell? But when she stopped at one of the buildings and unlocked the door, she turned and held it open until he came up. How long had she known he was following? Her face was almost expressionless.

She preceded him up four flights of marble stairs, and along a hallway. With part of his mind, Charles was visualizing a civilized conversation over coffee. Another part was saying, This is it. And with that thought, all the blood in his body seemed to change direction.

She stopped at a doorway, and held the door for him. She turned on a light, and motioned him to give her his denim jacket, which she hung on a coat hook in the hall.

He was struck immediately by the scent of her place. Something of her own orange blossom, as well as another fragrance more like rose petals. Even in the low illumination, the apartment looked light and colorful. Bright textiles hung on the walls. There were white carpets, house plants, a fireplace with two pots of Easter lilies by the hearth. Many bookshelves, neatly filled with books that looked as though they were mostly poetry. She led the way through the dining room and straight into the bedroom.

Neither of them had exchanged a word. Nor did they speak as she unbuttoned and removed his shirt and then unbuckled his belt. Her eyes rarely left his own. Her face was still somewhat pale. She pulled back the covers of the bed. The sheets were a rich burgundy. Obediently, he got in. His heart was banging like a golf ball in an oil drum. She undressed by the side of the bed.

He had never before been this close to a naked woman, and he was unprepared for her beauty. For the absence of angularity, the sculpted breasts, the delicately curved hips, the startling blackness of pubic hair. She climbed into bed, and pulled him to her. Her body was cold, and she clung to him tightly, as if to draw warmth from him.

Gradually, she began to warm and to soften her embrace. Slowly she started to explore him with her hands and her lips, to touch, to stroke, to hold, to trace his shape with her fingers as if she were blind. He tentatively followed her lead.

When she guided him into her the first time, it was very fast. It didn't matter. He moved to withdraw, but she put her hands on his hips to keep him where he was.

He had long known the theory, of course. He had no idea it would be so—so unproblematic. And so multidimensional, touch and emotion creating a language between them that was beyond words and beyond thought.

It was the third time, and she was straddling him. He could not imagine anything more beautiful, as she moved on him like a wave, his trunk gripped by her taut thighs, her hands on his chest, her breasts slightly

mobile, declining a little outward. There was a light in her eyes, which continued to hold his own. Her left shoulder bore a large purple bruise, and the sharp edges of the cross she had carried had cut the skin in two places over the collar bone. She began to slow down, the focus of her eyes changed, then they closed, she raised her head, and finally there came from her a low, shuddering cry, constituted, it seemed, of equal parts of pain and release.

They lay close together for a long time. “*Carísima*,” Charles murmured. “*Bellísima*.” The last time they made love it was slowly and gently. Then Charles fell deeply asleep.

He dreamed that his mother was calling him. “Charles. Charles.” It wasn’t his mother. “Carlos. Carlos.” He opened his eyes. Maricruz was holding out a cup of coffee to him. *Café con leche*. She was fully dressed.

“Time to go, Carlos,” she said softly. She handed him the coffee, then pulled the pillows up behind him. She sat on the bed and held his free hand in both of hers in her lap as he drank the coffee. She stayed sitting there as he dressed. In the hall, she helped him into his jacket, like a wife, and took the lapels to straighten them. He put his arms around her. Instead of kissing on the lips, they kissed cheeks formally, then she stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the forehead. She opened the door.

“*Hasta luego*,” see you soon, he said.

“*Hasta la vista*, Carlos.” She closed the door quietly behind him.

It was just getting light, and the street outside was deserted. He looked at his watch. Nearly eight o’clock. When he reached his room, he fell asleep without undressing.

He was already missing her by evening. It was Saturday, and he would see her in two days, but that seemed impossibly distant. It would be presumptuous to go to her place without an invitation. When he found his steps leading him up the *Avenida de Italia*, he resisted the temptation to search the side streets for her building. He trudged back into the old town, wandered into a cinema, and watched a dubbed American film without attempting to follow the dialogue.

To avoid spending the whole of Easter Day wandering the streets in the hope of seeing her, he took a bus to Zamora, an hour north of Salamanca. He attended mass, visited four or five Romanesque churches, watched another procession. All day, he held an internal dialog with Maricruz, aching every moment to have her by his side, counting the hours until noon the next day.

He knew that her professionalism would preserve appearances in class. But he had to find a moment with her, at least get her phone number. He forced himself to chat with Petra and Franz by the coffee machine at the break after grammar class. He was back at his place five minutes early, his heart beating faster as the minute hand crawled toward twelve.

Promptly at noon, Eduardo, the Director of the school, came into the

classroom. He was a heavy-set, business-like man in his thirties. "Good morning to all of you," he said. "I shall be taking your conversation class this week. Let's look at page 51."

It was Keiko who spoke. "Where is Maricruz?" she asked.

"Is she all right?" Petra asked.

"Maricruz has taken leave por razones personales," Eduardo said.

Stupefied, Charles looked from face to face.

"Yes, she is quite all right, I believe," Eduardo said. "Now, some vocabulary."

He must find her at all costs. At the end of the class, he followed Eduardo to his office. "Maricruz has some work of mine," he said. "Can you give me her phone number?"

Eduardo's secretary looked up from her desk.

"Maricruz has left Salamanca," Eduardo said.

"When will she be back? Where has she gone?"

"She did not say she would be back. She left a message saying she needed to take leave for personal reasons. I don't know where she has gone. I believe her family live in Barcelona."

"What is her last name?" he asked desperately.

"Lopez." There would be thousands of people with that name in Barcelona.

The secretary spoke. "I think she may have gone to Cuba."

He grasped at a straw. "Do you have an address where you send her pay checks?"

"Her salary is deposited directly to her bank," Eduardo said. There was silence for a moment, then Eduardo said, "Charles, I have worked with Maricruz for three years. We are all going to miss her very much. But if she had wanted any of us to know where she was going, she would have told us." His voice was kindly. "Sometimes you have to let things go, Charles."

It was impossible to accept that Maricruz had abandoned him. The next day, he remembered Uncle Frank saying once that privacy became a myth with the invention of computers and credit cards. Of course he could find her! A private detective could track her down in half an hour. He went to the public library and looked up detective agencies in the Paginas Amarillas. There were half a dozen in Salamanca, scores in Barcelona.

But he hesitated. As Eduardo had pointed out, Maricruz was a woman who knew her own mind. She had known she was leaving, and had not invited him to follow. She was not the kind of woman to set him some frivolous test of his determination. He cared enough to follow her. Did he care enough not to?

He stayed in Salamanca two more days. The beauty of the city, every building and every street, brought her back to mind. He yearned for her every moment. He needed the smell of her perfume as he needed air. The

palms of his hands ached with the need to touch her. His mind was filled with her image; her mascara-streaked tears; her eyes behind the processional mask; her body beneath his own; her rapt and ethereal expression as she rode him into that long, low cry.

He told the school that he needed to leave for personal reasons. He used Uncle Frank's credit card to buy a bus ticket to Madrid and then another to Granada. He wandered unappreciatively around the Alhambra, then got a local bus west along the coast toward Málaga. When the bus stopped at a small village, he got out. He walked down to the waterfront and took a room at a pension across the road from the beach.

There was a language school in the village, but he didn't go there. He wrote a card to April, saying they would need to talk when he returned. He had scarcely touched food for a week; he slowly recovered his appetite in the cafes and seafood restaurants along the beach. What was it Maricruz had said? "The wounded spirit cannot heal itself. It needs the physical." He found a little-used road along the rugged coast, and took to running it every day. He followed side roads up to high points where expensive villas stood two thousand feet above the Mediterranean, and down to deserted rocky beaches, where he swam in the cold water and lay in the sun for hours, drowsing to the rhythm of the waves.

His heart remained sore; it felt as though his longing for Maricruz would never diminish. But gradually his feelings of loss and bereavement began to change to a subtler emotion that was akin to gratitude. Time abraded and polished his memories. And the impress that Maricruz had left in his heart achieved a perfection that belongs only to those things we have lost. She was like some precious object, held once in the hand and for a moment deeply cherished, but never possessed.

ROBERT COOPERMAN'S latest collections are *The Ranch Wife* (Turning Point Books), *My Shetel* (Logan House Books), and *Letters to Juliet* (March Street Press). Forthcoming is *Cave Dweller* (Wind Publications). His work has appeared in *The Antigonish Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The North American Review* and *The New Orphic Review*.

Robert Cooperman / Four Poems

Porphyros, on the Night of the Trojan Horse

My daughters have never known, "Before the war,"
never ambled with me beyond Troy's gates
onto the steppes, across Scamander's shore,

never ran in joy in the plains' dawn hoar-
frost, nor wriggled worms on lines for trout-bait
in a carefree time before this long war

I thought would never end, but with the roar
of flames this night that will never abate,
we'll soon all be slain, on Scamander's shore.

I shoved my darling daughters through the Wall,
a chink just wide enough to fit a plate,
or two girls who can't recall before the war.

I thank the gods I had no boys to pour
into the Greeks' war, their hunger not slaked
by all the grass across Scamander's shore.

Just my wife and me left to feed the maw
of death: too big to squeeze through and escape.
May my children forget us and this war,
safe on the steppes, across Scamander's shore.

Pindaros, A Court Musician,
on the Night of the Trojan Horse

My companion and I were ripped from sleep
by such music I'd hoped never to hear,
I grabbed him, my lyre, and rammed my sword deep

into a Greek's guts, took his sword to keep,
and protect my love with, the boy more dear
to me than the gods; I'd save him from death's sleep.

We made our way past corpses bunched like sheep,
flames leaping and twisting like panicked deer,
the shrieks of women, the shouts of men, deep

with rage. Then we stumbled upon two Greeks
raping a girl; rather than freeze and stare,
I slashed those swine into eternal sleep

and dragged the girl with us, the Wall rising steep
as Ossa, but a niche, if we'd but dare:
I shoved them through, followed; we were deep

into the plain, peaceful as if asleep
in my childhood bed, with nothing to fear.
Not like this night of being ripped from sleep,
our world destroyed by foes cunning and deep.

Eleireos, Companion of Pindaros,
a Court Musician, on the Night of the Trojan Horse

Once, he bought me from a brute who beat me,
I'd give my life to save him from this night,
but he's the one who dragged me to safety

along with a girl being used viciously
by two Achaeans, the city alight
with flames and death, screams and shrieks shaking me,

but Pindaros guided us on; then he
urged us through a chink in the Wall, just wide
enough so we could run to safety

on the plain, and kept running, his eyes seeing
in the dark like a cat, like all was bright;
I held his lyre; he led the girl and me,

and urged us on, far from Troy's misery,
Pindaros' hand in mine, warm and light
as a kiss, when he first made love to me,

reading my mind, almost instinctively.
Hiding in the hills, he dared a fire, slight
as a blade of grass, then played soft for me
and Phyla, a tale of our run to safety.

Phyla, a House Maid,
Is Saved from the Night of the Trojan Horse

One moment, the house was finally abed,
after celebrating, me, last asleep;
the next, flames, screams, shouting; the night exploded

with rage; my master and mistress both dead,
their children stabbed; Greeks tortoise-flipping me,
yanking me from the great peace of my bed

to the street, room enough for all, instead:
two going at me as if killing sheep,
laughing at my screams. Then they exploded

with blood, and I was pulled up, the night red,
and told to run. So many in the streets,
it was almost like we were hiding in bed.

And there, before us, the great Wall, we fled
to it, squeezed through the tiniest of chinks,
as all of Troy drowned in blood and exploded.

Now, we three share a crust of mouldy bread,
and I'm shaking too hard to think of sleep;
Pindaros and Eleiros joined abed,
at least they share joy, though Troy's exploded.

J.R. HANSON grew up in North Idaho. After earning a variety of entirely pointless advanced degrees, he taught English abroad and foreign languages in the States. He now writes full-time from outside Philadelphia; his stories have appeared in *Ascent*, *Massachusetts Review* and *The New Orphic Review*.

My Mother Can Fly

J. R. Hanson

SLOWING TO TURN off Main toward his mother's apartment, Phil saw that the supermarket on the next block—one of the reasons she'd moved to that neighborhood—was now the Midtown Antique Mall. A glorified thrift shop, no doubt, like some of the stores he'd just passed driving through downtown, everyone hoping for tourist dollars with the mills closed. He hadn't seen one soul resembling a tourist on the streets of that mountain town late on an October morning.

He parked his rental car behind the tan-brick apartment building, then stood listening to the exhaust ticking in the silent neighborhood. The houses looked worn, tiny, dwarfed by immense stacks of firewood on their porches and under tarps in the yards. He'd known kids around there, their fathers workers at the Atlas mill nearby, but stockpiling so much wood seemed new. At least the sky looked familiar, a big Western blue, although the surrounding mountains loomed improbably, giants when he'd grown used to midgets. Down the street somewhere a chainsaw growled: *welcome home*.

In the hallway, he stretched, stiff after the winding drive from the airport, for a moment indulging easy guilt at how he'd neglected his mother. Gabriella's fault, he told himself, then, shaking his head, took it back and knocked. Hearing movement, he couldn't resist: "Package for Mrs. Morley!"

"Leave!"

"Need a signature, ma'am!"

"Away!" Then silence.

"It's Phil, mom!"

"Ohio! Phil Ohio!"

"Mother, it's Philly! I'm here!"

The door opened, barely—an eye ringed with bruising peered beneath

the chain—then swung open. Bent over her walker, his mother stretched an arm out, a castaway appealing for rescue. Phil’s heart caught. Her hair, always tinted and neatly permed, hung limp, grey. Indignation on her face, she seemed about to launch into a tirade. “Philly!” she cried, voice vibrant with relief, and he realized the look was simply her usual expression now. He hugged his mother and went in.

* * *

When the phone rang in Phil’s lonely Ohio house, he didn’t really believe it was Gabriella, although he could never help remembering how she, as though rushing to shut off an alarm, would lunge for the jangling old phone (an antique they’d found there after buying the place decades before). More likely his daughter Marta, who’d moved out shortly after her mother. *You both left me for other men*, he’d joked, hoping to provide proof of incipient recovery, but Marta had shown no hint of amusement. She hadn’t been coming around much lately, instead making brief, matter-of-fact phone calls; he’d finally understood she was checking on him, making sure he was still capable of life on his own.

“Philly?” a woman asked when he picked up. Only people from way back, from out West, called him that (no one there ever thinking of the Eastern city); he guessed one of his aunts on his father’s side. *S’pose I’d better call Philly and tell him*, he imagined one of them saying to gathered relatives. Then, about to reply, he placed the voice: not an aunt, but Verna, his mother’s oldest friend, Verna, who’d always remembered his childhood birthdays with little gifts, who, for his and Gabriella’s wedding, had given a set of glass objects he’d struggled to convince his foreign wife wasn’t some kind of insult.

“Verna, “ he said, saying the name like pulling out an old snapshot in which young Phil’s still grinning at the world. Then it hit: in all the years, Verna’d never called.

“Philly, did you know your mom was in the hospital last week?”

“The hospital? This is absolutely the first I’ve heard. What happened?”

“She fell. They also said she had a stroke this time.”

“What do you mean, ‘this time’?”

“It’s Betty’s third time in the ER this year. She won’t use her walker, she falls. The nurses’re gettin’ to know your mom pretty well. ‘*Don’t tell Phil,*’ is the first thing she says. ‘*Don’t make him come.*’ I took Julie aside and said you should know. When I was at the apartment today—Betty’s back home now—she wouldn’t say if she’d talked to you. I thought I’d check whether Julie called.”

“She didn’t. I’ll call mom as soon—”

“She won’t answer, Philly. She has trouble speaking after the stroke, she just lets her phone ring. Call Julie.”

“Alright. Although...I don’t think I have her number, I’m not even sure what last name—”

“Jarrry,” Verna said and spelled it. “Her last husband’s name. Had a funny-lookin’ fella with her at the hospital, but the phone’s still under Jarrry.” She read the number off. “You’ll have to come, Philly. Betty can’t stay in that apartment much longer.”

“Verna—”

“Gotta go, Philly, Darryl’s not well, he’s squawkin’ for something.”

“I’m sorry to hear—”

“Do what you can, hope for the best,” Verna said. “Bye, Philly.”

Phil looked at Julie’s number, trying to imagine his sister now, in her mid-thirties. The last time he’d seen her, at their father’s funeral, she already looked well beyond her twenty years. She’d appeared suddenly while the pastor was speaking and, squeezing in among aunts and female cousins from his father’s side, regarded Phil with a skeptical, slightly puzzled look reminiscent of the deceased (*This is my son?* his father’s look always seemed to ask). Phil’d meant to speak to her afterwards but when he was done shaking hands and receiving hugs Julie’d gone and no one had any idea where she was living.

After Gabriella moved out, on the phone one evening Phil’s mother casually asked how his wife’d been and he found himself choked up, unable to answer. He just managed *Gotta go, mom!* and hung up. He didn’t call his mother again for a few months. She had her friends, her bridge parties and restaurant outings, he told himself, they never said much in those calls anyway. Her weekly letters in careful longhand still arrived, he wrote replies in which Gabriella’s departure wasn’t mentioned. When he finally called again the phone was answered by a woman whose gravelly voice he didn’t recognize. “This is Betty’s son,” he said, alarmed. “Is everything okay?”

“Just fine, big brother,” the woman said with—as Phil heard it—a mocking tone. Little sister Julie had reappeared.

Phil dialed the number Verna’d given him. “Hey-up!” a man answered.

“I’d like to speak to Julie, please.”

“Who wants ’er?”

“This is Phillip Morley.”

“And who the—*oh!* Big brother! S’up, perffessor?”

“Well...I wanted to speak to my sister about our mother—”

“Old girl brain herself again already?”

“I beg your—”

“Lemme check Julie’s around.” The phone was set down, footsteps receded, then returned. “Perffessor? Tough luck, Julie’s out.”

“So... when will—”

“Hard to say. Tell ’er you called. So long!” The man hung up.

Phil shook his head at his own naivety. Julie’d always known where to

reach him, his number was posted in his mother's perfect schoolteacher handwriting above the phone in her apartment. At that moment Phil decided he'd be on the next flight to Spokane. His mother always hated the surprise visits his father's relatives got a kick out of—*Surprise! We're here!* He'd see how little sister Julie liked surprises.

* * *

Phil watched his mother inch around the kitchen with her walker while she made coffee. "What happened to your eye, mom?"

"Fell."

"I understand you had a stroke—"

"No!" she said, turning to glare. "Fell. Left walker." For a moment she struggled to speak, got hung up, then managed. "Walker in way. Kitchen, bathroom."

"Use your walker, mother."

"Hate!" she said, scowling. The coffee ready, Phil took her mug to the table beside her lounger and sat on the sofa. In the kitchen, she pushed the walker aside, gripped the counter and drew back as though preparing to leap across a chasm. Then she shoved off. Tilted forward, she lurched past toward her lounger. "Mother!" She stumbled into the armchair, latching on with both hands. By the time Phil'd set his coffee down and scrambled over, she'd wrestled herself around and sat grinning at him. Her wide-eyed fixed expression gave her a wild, demented look.

"Mother, you'll fall again!"

She gestured dismissively. "Not matter! To anyone!"

"It matters to me!"

"You, Ohio! Two years, no visit!" She scrunched her face at him.

"Mom, it has been too long. It's been...difficult. I'll explain. But as long as you're enjoying life—"

"Not!" she cried with deep conviction. "Not enjoy!" She took a deck of cards from the table, tossed it to the floor. "Can't play bridge! Anymore! Can't!"

"Mother—" he started, but no words came. Bending to pick up the scattered cards he recognized them, a gift years before from an uncle employed at a big lumber company, each card featuring a vintage photo of heroic lumberjacks felling giant old-growth trees or manhandling huge logs with pikes. Suddenly Phil had a vivid recollection of Gabriella examining those very cards—his mother had them out for a bridge session—during a visit to the old house. "They're like war criminals of the environment," Gabriella said, shaking her head, that lustrous black hair. His mother'd blinked away another of Gabriella's baffling remarks.

Transfixed by the memory—Gabriella, fierce, beautiful, gone—he sat on the floor holding the cards. Her comment back then seemed to foretell

the end of their marriage, which, twenty-some years earlier, the eager Argentine graduate student had entered into as though she'd won the lottery. Phil looked up to find his mother studying him. "You came," she said.

"I came, mom." Phil got up and brought her walker over. "Use your walker, mom."

"Walker," she said, as though addressing it. "Walker." She leaned back and a moment later was dozing.

* * *

Phil and his mother were sitting at the card table eating the lunch he'd fixed when it occurred to him. "Where's the old dining table from the house?"

"Gave away."

"The family dining table? Who to?"

She strained to recall. "Somebody. I say: like? Take!"

"I liked that old table!"

"Big, apartment," she said, squinting at him. "Want old table, Ohio?"

"Absolutely. You give anything else away?" He was joking, but she pondered seriously. "People come, I give." She waved a hand at the apartment. "Look, see."

"I hope you don't give your money away like that."

"Julie, money."

"You gave Julie your money?"

She shook her head. "Bills, bank. Julie."

"Where's your checkbook, mother? Your bank statements?"

"Julie."

"Julie has your checkbook?"

She nodded. "Julie say, mistakes. Wrong numbers." She grinned, a mad leer. "Teach 'rithmetic, forty years. Now, can't add!" Phil went over to the writing desk—so familiar from the old house, his mother at that desk doing her budget, recording the smallest expense—and opened the drawer. "You always kept your financial things in here."

"Julie," she said, wagging a stern schoolteacher's finger at the phone. "Call Julie!"

* * *

Shortly after his fifteenth birthday, Phil's parents sat him down at the dining room table. He was trying to think what he'd done this time when his mother, then thirty-nine, announced she was going to have a baby. His father sat beaming like Phil hadn't seen in years. As a child he'd heard relatives whisper about why his mother—*Poor Betty*—hadn't had

more children; when they were introduced to people she'd put her arm around him and say, all but apologizing, "We've only the one, little Phil here." Relatives visiting meant a platoon of kids descending on the house, but when they went visiting it was only Phil quietly entering with his parents.

He'd known his parents' marriage was troubled from the sudden explosions around the house, often at the dinner table, over apparent trivialities. His father'd started spending weekends shooting pool or bowling with pals, lately some weeknights too. Now the evening absences stopped. Suddenly, like infatuated teenagers, his parents were spending the evenings watching TV together or sitting on the sofa talking; on weekends, his father fixed up the house, especially the room that would be Baby's Bedroom. When Julie arrived, Phil might as well have ceased to exist.

Julie was nearly four when Phil went away to college. Wrapped around her father's knee, she peered from the front porch while Phil loaded his things into a friend's car, his mother nearby at the curb. His father looked on skeptically, then waved and went back inside with Julie. Phil never spent more than a few weeks in the old house after that, wasn't around when the marriage went bad again. During visits it was clear Julie was Daddy's Girl, but Phil didn't grasp the extent of that preference (*That girl came into this world with something against your mom*, an aunt said years later, *darnedest thing I ever saw*). In his senior year, one of his mother's letters tersely announced the divorce; the surprise wasn't that his mother was keeping the house, but that eight-year old Julie was moving out with her father.

Sitting at his mother's old desk, Phil called Julie (her number, with Verna's and his own, was posted on the wall). "Phil Morley calling," he said when a gravelly female voice answered.

"Big brother."

"Big, little, the difference isn't what it used—"

"One difference is you're back there, I'm out here takin' care of mom."

"Actually—"

"Convenient, havin' me here. 'Course, you weren't around to take care of dad."

"Julie, I never thought he—"

"Better start thinkin', big brother, 'cause me and my partner Wes're about to leave this town. Got an offer to run a lodge—bar, restaurant, spa kinda deal—over in Big Timber. Joint we run here, the Black Barn, it's been pretty slow lately. We're movin' on."

"I see, so—*oh!*" His mother, launching herself from the table, reeled past toward her lounge. Arriving, she wrestled herself around and grinned her mad grin at him.

"You okay, big brother?"

"I'm fine."

"So Wes and me're headin' out. Next time you have one of your vacations, better come deal with mom's situation."

"What situation is that?"

Julie sighed. "She's gotta move somewhere with assistance. Only listens to you, so you'll have to get her to move. That's the *situation*, big brother."

"Julie," Phil said, "I've got a surprise. I'm in mom's apartment right now. She's sitting in her lounger. I flew out yesterday."

"Thought this line sounded clear."

"I was hoping we could get together, talk—"

"We're talkin' now, aren't we?"

"—about the hospital stays I never heard about, and mom's finances. She says you've got her checkbook and bank statements."

"Mmmm."

"Julie?"

"Hold on, there." Muffled voices. "Look, I'm pretty busy, we're loadin' the truck, gettin' ready to take off. Tell you what, Verna don't live far, I'll drop mom's stuff off with her 'fore we go."

"Julie, we haven't seen each other in, what, fifteen years? You're moving to, what'd you say, Big River—"

"Big Timber. Montana."

"—who knows when we'll get another chance to see each other?"

"Hold on." More muffled talk. "How 'bout breakfast tomorrow, say seven-thirty, on our way out of town? You can meet Wes. 'Member the Chuck Wagon?"

"That restaurant with the wagon on top? Where mom and dad used to take me?"

"Before my time, big brother. I ate there lots with dad when we lived in the little house, never seen mom anywhere near the place. But yeah, that's the one. See you there."

* * *

That night Phil slept on the fold-out sofa bed bought so guests could stay over in his mother's new apartment. He'd flown out for the move and, with Verna and his mother, spent several days emptying the old house, including a day in the attic, stirring up dust, laughing at long-forgotten objects; near the end they'd come across a box of Julie's toys in a corner. His mother, suddenly stern, turned away and Verna quietly put the box downstairs with things being donated.

When she was twelve Julie refused to keep making the weekend visits stipulated in the divorce agreement; his mother didn't insist. After that, although living in the same small town, Julie could have been hundreds of miles away. Later, even before their father's death, she started cropping

up in the police blotter and court records in the paper, clippings his mother sent on to Phil without commentary. During visits home Phil came to expect at some point his mother'd take him aside, out of Gabriella and young Marta's hearing, and quietly tell him "*something you should know about your sister*"—Julie'd divorced, remarried, was working in a certain bar. By the time the house was sold even those reports had ceased. He wasn't sure Julie still lived around there until a gravelly voice answered his mother's phone and called him *big brother*. After that his mother started mentioning that Julie'd stopped by, run some errand for her, just casually mentioning, as though reporting Verna'd come by. How nice, mother, he'd say, his mind on life without Gabriella in his empty Ohio house, and that was that.

* * *

In the morning, he peeked into the bedroom. "Awake!" his mother called out. Her head was propped on a pillow against the headboard, only her face and long grey hair outside the comforter. "Awake early, always," she said. "See my mistakes."

"You're supposed to remember the good times."

"Which?"

"Mom! We had lots of good times." Phil bent and kissed her forehead. "I'm meeting Julie for breakfast."

"Goodbye!" she said, recalling a tone he'd known well: *so get going!*

"It's been so long I probably won't recognize her," he said, turning to go.

"Picture!" An arm emerged from the comforter, pointing at the dresser. On top, a collection of photos—grandparents, aunts and uncles, Phil's high school graduation picture and Marta's, three years past but already remote. His and Gabriella's wedding picture, part of the display for years, was gone, which baffled him until he understood: Marta talked to grandma.

"Julie!" his mother called out, pointing at a photo of a woman seemingly in her forties, regarding the camera with narrowed eyes, exuding toughness—a female cop or prison guard maybe. Beside the woman, arm draped around her, ropily muscled, a guy in a tanktop, head back laughing, hair bristly short on top, long on the sides and in back, falling stringily. The woman's short hair was brushed straight back. "Julie! Wes!"

"But mother," Phil said, "This can't be Julie! She's what, thirty-six? This—"

"Hard life! Me, Julie, mistakes!"

* * *

A weathered covered wagon still perched on the roof above the entrance

of the Chuck Wagon Restaurant. Nearby, a bowling alley was boarded up, tall weeds sprouting in the parking lot—this side of town hadn't been spruced up for tourists yet. Once out of the car Phil realized the little house his father'd shared with Julie was indeed only a few blocks away. Near the end of his first trip home with Gabriella—they'd stayed, naturally, with his mother at the old house—his mother'd taken him aside. "You must visit your father," she said with her stern schoolmarm demeanor. He and Gabriella drove over in his mother's station wagon, sat in the dark, cramped living room, watching his father smoke one cigarette after another. Julie, then fourteen, stood behind her father's armchair, chin propped on her hands atop the headrest, staring at big brother and his exotic wife. A couple years later, the last time Phil visited the little house, Gabriella stayed behind at his mother's, and Julie, after seeing him, disappeared somewhere, leaving Phil and his father alone with cigarettes and a hacking cough.

Inside the Chuck Wagon, a decent breakfast crowd but no Julie. Phil sat at the counter drinking coffee until a booth opened up, then moved over and read the local paper. A tired waitress poured a refill. He was about to go look around outside, when a hand materialized over the table. The laughing boyfriend—the same haircut, the rosy muscled arms—stood beside the booth, hand stuck out. "Name's Wes."

"I'm Phil," he said, taking the hand. Suddenly Wes squeezed hard, catching him; Phil grimaced. "Hey," Wes said, sitting, giving a goofy inquiring look: *aren't I funny?* Phil rubbed his hand and looked toward the entrance. "Where's Julie?"

"Spoused to meet us here. You ain't seen her?"

"Not since I've been here." Wes shrugged, taking in women, life: *what you gonna do?* The waitress arrived, looked Wes over warily. "Jus' coffee, darlin'," he said. Phil was hungry and ordered French toast, adding: "Haven't had it in years."

"Hey, chow down." Wes's coffee came, Phil's got refilled. "You a tough guy, perfessor?"

"Me? Are you kidding?"

Something flared. "No, I'm askin' a damn question."

"The answer is: no, I'm not."

Wes nodded in appreciation. "Least you know. Better'n thinkin' you're tough when you ain't." The French toast arrived. Watching Phil eat, Wes said: "Me, I *am* a tough guy. Julie's pretty tough gal, too."

"She must take after our dad—he was a tough customer. I'm more like our mother."

"You're somethin'," Wes said, shaking his head. Finishing, Phil sipped his coffee. Wes looked out the window, head turning with passing cars.

"So you and Julie're moving to Big Timber?"

"Say what?"

“Julie said you’re leaving for Big Timber—”

“Oh yeah. Sure.” Wes finished his coffee and got up. “Nice meetin’ you, professor.”

“What about Julie?”

“Musta been held up. I’ll go see what’s keepin’ her.”

“She said seven-thirty. It’s a quarter to nine, she can’t be—”

“I’ll check it out for you.”

“Wes, I need to talk things over with her. In principle, you’re leaving today, right?”

“In prin-ci-pull,” he repeated slowly. “Yeah, truck’s loaded, we’re hittin’ the road.”

“So you know where she is, right?”

Wes stuck a finger in Phil’s face and leaned close. “You ain’t no tough guy, remember? Don’t push your damn luck.” He suddenly radiated menace, the impression he could hold Phil responsible for every problem in the world. Phil sat, less afraid than astonished at the thought of violence there in the Chuck Wagon. Whatever Wes saw in Phil’s face, he liked, because in an instant the goofy smile was back. Wes cocked his head, winked and walked out.

Phil drank his coffee. Minutes later a shiny black pickup with decorative flames along the hood pulled out of the parking lot and surged away. When Phil stepped outside, his little rental car looked odd, sitting lower than the other cars somehow. Approaching, he understood: all four tires had been slashed.

* * *

Two hours later, on new tires, Phil arrived at his mother’s. She was watching a game show with the volume way up, which she preferred to her hearing aid. She was nicely dressed in a dark blue pantsuit, a blouse with a frilly front, her good purse on the table. He took the remote and turned the volume down. “My show!” she cried.

“You going out?”

“Back now.”

“I haven’t seen you dressed up like that in years. Where’d you go?”

“Bank. Papers. Julie.”

“Julie was here?”

“Say goodbye!”

“But what did she—”

“Big Timber!” She grabbed the remote and turned the volume back up.

* * *

At the bank they tried calling his mother to get permission to discuss her accounts with Phil (unlike Julie, his name wasn’t on them) but she wouldn’t

answer the phone, so he had to take a form for her to sign. Back at the bank it emerged his mother was the owner, free and clear, of the Black Barn, a local drinking establishment. That morning she and the owner, one Julie Jarry, had signed the papers transferring ownership for payments previously received. A few months back the deposit arriving monthly from the annuity his mother purchased with the house money had ceased after she exercised a lump-sum cash-out option. CDs had been liquidated as they came up for renewal; his mother apparently had a penchant for large cash withdrawals. With social security and her teacher's pension, she wasn't broke, but the cushion was gone. At the apartment, over lunch, Phil tried to discuss these matters, but his mother shook her head back and forth and sternly wagged her finger. "Mistakes! Me, Julie, hard life!" Then she removed her hearing aid and kept eating.

* * *

When Phil had to get back to Ohio his mother was still settling in at New Choices Assisted Living. She hated having an assigned seat at meals—easier for staff to keep track of residents—above all her assigned tablemates, who repeated the same stories at every meal every day. She battled the Nursing Associates over their insistence her apartment door be left open so they could check on her by simply walking by. Talking about these complaints upset her so she could only wag her finger and repeat: "Mistake! Mistake!" The manager, Donna, a big Texas gal, assured Phil everyone adjusted eventually.

Preparing for the drive back down to Spokane airport, Phil still hadn't told his mother that the sheriff's inquiries had found no lodge in Big Timber employing anyone resembling Julie or Wes. She stood with her walker in the living room in front of the dresser (her new bedroom was too small for it), the family photos on top. Following Phil's gaze, she pointed at the picture of Julie glaring and Wes laughing. "Julie! Wes!" she said, grinning her mad grin. "Big Timber!"

He'd promised to run some errands for her before leaving. "Wait! Coming!" she said. Realizing she might not get out for a while, he waited. She appeared wearing tennis shoes and an olive-green parka he hadn't seen since childhood camping trips, carrying a tote bag that looked full. "What's in the bag?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said, pointing at the door. "Go!"

He pulled up near the entrance of a shopping mall where his mother filled her prescriptions at a discount drugstore. "You can wait on that bench right there while I park," he said, pointing, then looked around the dashboard to turn on the flashers before helping her out; in the rental car he couldn't find the switch. Feeling a breeze he turned to see her, door open, leaning out, about to launch herself. "Mother! Wait—" She was

off, lurching toward the entrance, a passenger reeling across a ship's deck. At the automatic door, she latched onto the handrail, steadied herself, and disappeared inside the mall.

He parked the car and ran after her. He searched the drugstore, other stores, the food court. An hour later Phil was walking through the crowd with the mall's head of security, a retired local cop he vaguely remembered giving hard looks to longhaired teenagers. "Durnit," the man said, "your mother can't fly, can she?" They walked through the mall, scanning faces and stores, but his mother was nowhere to be found.

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Paul J. Healy / Two Poems

Crawford Notch

At the bright Gates of the Notch,
Where birch shriek at cliff's brink,
In Bartlett a small winter room to rent.

November the loneliest month,

And snow already gusting furious in
Blasts down the mountain pass.

To live here is to leave the world behind,
As Anthony abandoned Egypt's settled land,

To diet on ice and stones and sand,
and dine alone.

Here where the wind shakes the old houses
You are always a vagrant, even
When your purpose is firm.

Here the heart is pummeled by frozen fists;
Choose boldly, strike a light!

Ghostly breaths of ancient canyon ice wither and sting,
Haunting the blindness of night within.

Patristic

Bring the Siren on stage and let her sing,
soft rain is falling on muddy lanes,

it is the sudden spring melt of graying snows,
and this Valkyrie sings of my soul's glorious defeat in battle,

the half flooded horse pastures where the drowned
manure seeps like oily ribbons on barnyard sludge,

and also the rain that falls through fog and mist,
cloaking the silver river's curvaceous angles

remind me I do not say of shimmering veils before a face that's hidden,
because women do not wear veils where we now abide,

but Odin open up Valhalla's door and let this coward slide,
he who took on the Amazons and was cast down.

Let me list the battlefields where poetry still persists,
and praise the gods forget the rest!

To start with, the old Bards who never made it,
eating cat food in their retirement chalets.

Those Furies I've contended with, their wild hair flying
and their fists and tongues, avengers of the blood mother,

and the dazzling Calypso with her salt-water eyes
and her fresh-water cunt, seven years engulfed me in her lusty sea,

until the itch between her thighs seized another at last
and set me free. And Circe whose bewitching words of love

turned all my hopes into swine. And for a word with the dead seer,
I filled a pit with my own blood and steadfastly fended off

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the blood drinking ghosts. They always want blood the ghosts.
And naughty Nausicaa with a mouth like Venus rising,

snuck back when the feasting was at an end,
and I had come through all their snares and tricks it seemed,

only by her snake-like flesh to be hard pinned,
Earth Mother having her sweet revenge.

SEAN ARTHUR JOYCE has been published in numerous literary journals, among them *Canadian Author*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Fiddlhead*, *Whetstone* and *Horsefly*. He was the Featured Poet in Vol. 7, No. 1 of *The New Orphic Review*. His poetry collections, *The Charlatans of Paradise* and *Star Seeds*, appeared under the imprint of New Orphic Publishers. “The Old Gods Home” is an excerpt from his novel, *Signs & Wonders*.

Chapter One

The Old Gods Home

Sean Arthur Joyce

I am prepared to believe six impossible things before breakfast.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

i. ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

THE WHITE STAR Convalescent Home. That’s all I got from my editor Jane Kelly at the *Valhalla Voice*—a piece of paper with the name and address of some old folks home. Gave me that lovely dazzling smile of hers. Said somebody gave her a tip that there was something deeply odd—even spooky—about the place. “We need a feature for our weekend entertainment section. You know, something human interest. Check it out.” My publisher Dan McCullough grinned smugly, plucking the cigar stump from his mouth as he watched me leave. I grumbled and bitched all the way as I drove out the North Shore from the lakeside village of Shannon. “This is what you get for going freelance,” I muttered. “They throw you all the scraps no one else wants.” But I know, I do this because I have to. Some people hear mermaids singing. I hear blank pages screaming out at me in my nightmares. What can I say? It’s a calling. I know, I know, it’s a leathery old cliché. But true. There are days I hate it. There are days I’d much rather have been born a plumber. But not today.

The slip of paper said the home was located east of Shannon at 112 Six Mile Road, just off the highway a block or so. As I drive, my mood improves, thanks to the gorgeous scenery along the twisty lakeshore highway. Every corner seems to open up a new postcard-perfect vista on the lake, with Spirit Bear Glacier glittering on a distant ridge of the horizon. It’s a glorious spring day, with the luminescent green of leaf buds thickening on every branch. The homes perched on the mountainside above the highway and scattered along the beaches are a mosaic of

Kootenay life: a live-and-let-live blend of the historic, the funky and the upscale. I prefer the funky—odd combinations of turrets and bay windows, patched together sometimes over decades, as people could afford it. The new homes all look too prim, too damn suburban.

I turn left onto Six Mile Road by the corner store and motel, as instructed by the head nurse at the White Star home. Strangely, although the store's number was 102, the motel's 106, the next building—someone's ramshackle house—is 114. At first I just chalk it up to Kootenay eccentricity. But as I drive farther up the windy mountain road I get more and more confused: no number 112. I drive back down to the highway and start over again, just to make sure I haven't missed the number somehow. But still no 112. Finally I get to the end of the road—a cul-de-sac. A tiny old holiday trailer is tucked into a hollow surrounded by tall cedars. I decide there's nothing left to do but go ask directions.

As I walk down the gravel driveway I can see a man sitting on a small porch, smoking. He watches me walk up but keeps smoking, as if nothing in the world could interfere with his supreme relaxation. He has shoulder-length grey hair with a bandana on his forehead and wears a thick beard. A tortoiseshell cat is curled up in his lap. By the look on the man's face—a kind of sly, knowing grin—I can tell I'm not the first person to get lost on this road.

"Lost?" he croaks. It reminds me of a crow, or someone with very bad lungs.

"Uh, yeah. Can you tell me where the White Star Convalescent Home is?"

His brow creases deeply. "Why d'ya wanna go there?"

"I'm a reporter following a story."

"Hmmm." He draws a deep lungful of smoke, coughing as it comes up again. "I'll ask again: Why?"

I study his face carefully for any signs of mischief. "Look, I'm just doing my job. I—"

"Not good enough." He strokes his cat, who stares at me curiously.

"What do you mean, 'not good enough'?"

"Does it matter to you? Or is it just another job to you?"

This one stumps me. What is he on about? I decide to play along. "It matters a great deal. You never know where a story will lead. It could be nothing, or it could mean the difference between life and death. How do I know which one it will be?"

"Yep. Y'never know where a story will lead. Light o' the soul, or walkin' death. Good idea to pay attention."

"I'm generally pretty good at that. With my job I have to be."

His laugh is almost as hacking as his cough. "Good man. You just take that dirt road over there—" he points at a barely discernible track winding off from the right-hand side of the cul-de-sac. Why didn't I see it before?

“Thanks, brother,” I say, turning to leave.

“Got any tobacco?”

I stop and turn back to him. “Uh, no, sorry. I quit.”

“Smart man.”

The road turns out to be a snake-track that pounds the living daylight out of my low-bottomed Toyota Camry. I curse Dan McCullough all the way. “The bugger knows I can’t claim mileage expenses on the car. That’s why he was grinning like a hyena.” Reporters are the coal miners of the news world, yet without them the media wouldn’t exist. Welcome to Capitalism 101. But as soon as I say it I know I’m being unfair. Dan and Jane are in it as much for love as money. Otherwise you’d have to be insane to work that hard for that little cash. We have a saying at the office: “Voice of the gods, the pay of dogs. But the perks are excellent.”

The trees at last begin to thin out and I see a large institutional building on the brow of a hill. The grounds are beautifully landscaped, with a gazebo, frog pond and walking paths. The builders had made a half-hearted attempt to make the building look homey by adding plenty of natural wood trim along the eaves, windows and doors. But it’s still an institution where people go to die. No amount of tarting up the place can change that.

I park the car and make my way up the begonia-lined sidewalk to the main entrance. Strange. Some of the people in wheelchairs have a look in their eyes that sends a chill down my spine. Not at all the glazed, filmy eyes you normally associate with people at the end of their tether. These people are quite alive—but appear to be deeply disturbed. My neck hairs shiver.

Automatic doors swish aside as I step on the front doormat. A frail-looking young nurse is busy typing at a computer. Her skin is pale, almost translucent. Her eyes are jade-green and dancing with light when she turns to me. “Can I help you?”

“Yes. We spoke on the phone. I’m Roy Breen, from the *Valhalla Voice*.”

“Oh, yes,” she exclaims, pushing back her chair to extend a delicate hand. I take it very gently for fear of breaking it. “You said you were interested in writing a story about us?”

“Yes. We were told there was something—unusual about the place.”

She giggles. It sounds like tinkling crystal. I make a mental note to get my hearing checked. “I guess you could say that. Where would you like to start?”

“Well, I don’t know—do you have a—guest here you consider fairly typical?”

She giggles again and the glassy sound is the same. Her voice is chipper and clear as a bell, a joy to listen to. “Why certainly. You just come with me. But first, please sign our visitors’ log—” and she hands me her clipboard and a pen. I scratch out my autograph.

She leads me to the end of a pristine white hallway where a pair of metal doors blocks our path. There are no windows or markings on the doors. The nurse slips an entry card into the slot. Doors whoosh apart to let us pass, close behind us. Another shorter hallway, equally brilliant white. She smiles at me as we walk. Tiny wings of glassy protoplasm rustle on her back. Must be an illusion. I blink, hard. But when I open them, the wings are still there. What have I stumbled into here? We're coming to another set of metal doors. Why all this security? Who are they keeping in here? Must be somebody damn important. This time when the doors slide open we're at a T-intersection. She gestures left. "This way, Mr. Breen," she smiles. There's something—ethereal about the way she moves. As if she were somehow propelled by air. When she moves her hands they roll smoothly as stream over stone. This hallway has windows almost floor-to-ceiling—a flood of soft sunlight. There's an inner courtyard much like the grounds at the front of the building, with winding, stone cobbled pathways, well tended islands of shrubs and trees, and flowers exploding with colour everywhere. There are a few dim, hunched shapes in the courtyard, some ghostwalking, some folded into wheelchairs.

"Our clients are VERY exclusive," the nurse chirps. She motions for me to continue following. We get to another intersection in the hallway and a large white door with a round window. She opens this door and ushers me into what looks like an observation room behind two-way mirror glass. I look through the wide panes and see another room bathed in white light from a huge skylight. This must be where they keep—who? Mary, Mother of God? Jesus Christ? For all the attempts at cheery interior décor—potted ferns, even avocado plants and banana trees—the atmosphere of lingering death is pervasive. A few more residents are lolling in their places, each lost in their own world. But these are no ordinary senior citizens. One elderly woman—still surprisingly beautiful and slender, with long silver hair brushed to a sheen—wears a quiver but has no arrows or bow.

I point to her. "Who is she? Why the quiver but no arrows?"

"That's Diana."

"Diana who? Not Princess Diana. She's dead."

"Just Diana, the goddess. We had to confiscate her bow to prevent her skewering young orderlies who reject her advances." The crystalline giggle again.

"What?" I mumble, turning for a closer look at the other inmates. I see a man whose clothes, ragged long hair and beard are all covered in ice. His skin is the pallor of death. He walks around the room in a large circle, muttering something over and over again.

She senses me watching him. "That's Lemminkainen, hero of *The Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic poem—their version of *The Odyssey*."

"What's he saying?"

She mimics an old man's broken voice, not so much weak as wracked by guilt and grief: "Ohhh, the Swan of Tuonela, the Swan of Tuonela..."

"What's he talking about?"

"We're not sure. Something he did that he regrets, best we can figure. We have to warn visitors not to touch his hands or they'll turn to ice. Doesn't look good in the visitor log."

"Can I interview Diana or Lemminkainen?"

She casts her eyes down apologetically. "No, Mr. Breen, I'm sorry. Strict rules of the house. They pay a very great deal to remain here, safe from the prying eyes of the world."

"Then why did you show me in here, if it's all so top secret?"

With a fluid flick of her tiny wrist she presents me her aluminum clipboard. "The sign-in sheet, Mr. Breen. Note the clause by your signature: It reads that by signing you agree to let us inject you with a memory-wipe before you leave. Nothing personal, you understand."

"Yeah, I know—the rules. Great. Why don't you at least give visitors a *choice* before they sign?"

"As I said, our residents pay a lot of money to have their anonymity protected."

"Then what's the fucking point of me being here?"

She ignores my outburst. Her smile is radiant. "The road chose *you* to come here. That means there's some greater purpose at work. A time of great transition and transformation may be upon you." She turns back to watch the tableau of gods and goddesses twisted into grotesque caricatures, sucked up inside themselves.

Except for one, who stands on the far side of the room. There are two—ravens? perched one on each shoulder, giving him a three-headed appearance from a distance. The man is tall and very thin, but possessed of a laser gaze that could pick you apart and steal your secrets one by one. What have I stumbled onto here? A Black Ops government research lab? Some sick, elaborate practical joke by a bunch of rich pricks? I mean really—a retirement home for gods? I gotta be losing my mind. Or hallucinating. Did she slip me something—a little LSD maybe, or some magic mushrooms?

"Let me guess," I say, nodding at the frigid-looking figure, "Odin?"

"Yes. And his two companions, Huginn and Muninn. Thought and Memory."

It's been years since my college explorations of Nordic mythology. But it comes to me: Odin sent the ravens out into the world each morning to report back to him by evening all that went on. This gave him absolute knowledge of events near and far anywhere on the planet. But it also wracked him with worry: 'Daily I fear lest Huginn not return. But the loss of Muninn I fear more.' What good is thought if you can't remember it anymore? Turning to the nurse, I ask: "Do White Star rules allow Huginn

and Muninn to fly?"

"This isn't a prison, Mr. Breen. Of course they can fly. You've seen our open courtyard. Residents may spend as much time as they like there, even on the front grounds occasionally."

"Yes, I saw them there when I came in."

"I have work to do. I must attend to Mr. Jahweh there." She points at another old god hunched in the corner, glowering with the force of a black hole. His lower lip is in constant motion as if rehearsing a speech. Parked by the billiards table, Jahweh coughs on his billionth cigarette.

"Don't offer him a match unless you're up to hearing all about his glory days," she warns me. "Parting the Red Sea, incinerating Sodom and Gomorrah, making the sun stand still over Palestine—the usual stuff. And then there's the lusty affair with Israel." She's suddenly become talkative. Venting job stress, I suppose. "Not enough for him a single entity, the Goddess of the Milky Way. Nope. He wanted it all—holy books (with himself as the author, of course), clouds of incense, the smoke of sacrificed animals, the litany of sins confessed in prayer. Consume, consume, consume. Sucking it all up like the ultimate consumer, the Hoover Deluxe of the Spirit Realm." She sighs sadly but quickly composes herself. It's obvious she cares for this crusty old god, despite her misgivings. "It's nearly time for his therapy. Wait here and observe. You'll be locked in until I return."

I shrug. "But this is NOT a prison."

"Of course not. I must be going—Mr. Jahweh can be a very testy customer, some days."

She leaves and in a few minutes I can see her enter the sunroom through a seamless side door. I fumble for my palm videocam. For my encounter with the nurse I'll only have audio, but it's better than nothing. Now I can get the real goods, thanks to the two-way mirror. God, I hope they don't have a data wiper here. This could be the exclusive of the century!

The petite nurse approaches Jahweh, who is swathed in blue-grey cigarette smoke. "Time for therapy, Jahweh."

He ignores her, but relishes the chance for an audience. He takes her by the wrist so she can't escape. She smiles benignly. "Mr. Jahweh, you know better than that. If I want to get away all I have to do is dematerialize."

"You think it's tough managing a goddess for a lover?" Jahweh hacks between puffs. "Try a whole bloody world. Billions of minds, all at once. All that consciousness banging around like so many toy boats in a bathtub. Total chaos." He spits blood and tobacco into a coffee can on the floor, barely missing the nurse's silky leg. "Humans," he sighs. "Love 'em and hate 'em. I mean, at least ants are single-minded. They get the job done. Humans are too damn unpredictable."

From across the room a paper airplane stamped with a pentagram is

sent crinkling into Jahweh's permanently knotted brow. "Hey! Who threw that?" He glares at the other wizened gods and goddesses but most of them still have enough powers left to fold back Time to the millisecond before the dart was launched. Jahweh realizes he's annoyed but can't remember why. The nurse giggles through crystalline fingers held to her lips.

"Nothing worse than senile gods," Jahweh grunts. "Now where was I?"

"Something about ants," offers the nurse.

"Splendid creatures, ants," Jahweh continues. "You put one idea in their tiny brains and they never stop. Work 'til they drop. I told Council: we ought to think twice before modelling human consciousness on the Big Bang."

"But what wonderful complexity! A mirror of the universe!" the nurse chirps.

"You miss the point, sweetie. Starting tiny minds from a huge cosmic explosion hardly seemed wise, to me. Chaotic in the extreme. But there I was, outvoted again in the Council of Gods." Jahweh grinds yellowing teeth. "I mean, if the whole idea is to create a subspecies strong enough to do the dirty work but smart enough to make and use tools, why bother giving them any higher functions? All it did was give them illusions of godship."

"Not a good trait for a slave, I grant you." The nurse's tone softens Jahweh's platinum stare just enough to make it non-lethal.

"Welllll," Jahweh gargles, "I don't know if I'd call them slaves, exactly. And anyway, they were nothing but grunting apes before we arrived on the planet. We gave them science, art, law, great cities built to last a thousand years. And what thanks do we get? They start moaning about equal rights, shorter work weeks! Whining about self-government, demanding the right to their own nation-states. Pah!"

"In other words," the nurse suggests, "what all of you had before you touched down on Earth?"

"What do you mean, 'all of you'?"

"You know what I mean. Answer the question please."

Jahweh spits through a definite sulk. "No! Er—yes, I suppose. Could we help it if the whole damn batch went rotten on us?"

"Yes, but you made them, did you not? In your image and likeness, wasn't it?" Her tiny diaphanous wings rustle, sweetening air fouled by cigarette smoke. Jahweh's grudging silence is answer enough. "If you give them freedom of choice, you can't complain when the choices they make don't suit you, now can you Mr. Jahweh?"

Jahweh responds with a growl. "Ahhhh—you're just like them—bloody ethics police. Humans! They make idiotic choices, fuck up, and then blame the gods! Then when the chips are down, they pray to us for help. It's

enough to drive any god mad.”

The nurse smiles beatifically. “But your people—the Annunaki—they lacked a certain vital quality, didn’t they?”

Jahweh sucks deeply on his cigarette, stalling for time. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The ability to love. TRULY love. That’s what stymied you, isn’t it? The Annunaki gods lacked that special ability. You might have had giant interstellar ships and anti-gravity craft and labs full of the most brilliant genetic scientists but you barely knew what it is to love.”

“Welll... a minor detail,” Jahweh mutters.

“Then why did you abandon the human race?”

“We—decided our interventions weren’t helping. For every decision there seemed to be a deadly kickback, something we didn’t foresee. We tried to help—at least, my brother Enki the Wise tried—but it seemed we only made things worse in the end.”

The nurse utters her conclusion in a soft voice. “In other words, you blew it.”

“Blew it? Blew it! Bloody pink apes! Enough to drive anyone mad!” Jahweh’s glare forms a unified laser beam, burning a smoking hole through the wall across the room.

The nurse manages a tiny frown to go along with a slightly stiffer tone in her voice. “Now, now, Mr. Jahweh, let’s not have any more of that. Not allowed here. And anyway, I’ve been more than patient. Time for therapy, now.”

He tries to wave her off but knows he dare not risk expulsion from the home. He has nowhere in the universe left to go. “I don’t need your help. I’m not so feeble I can’t walk through a measly black hole to get where I’m going. After all, I did create an entire planet in just seven days.”

“Made a planet *habitable* in seven days. And anyway, we have only your word for it, after all.”

“But I’m God!”

“Mr. Jahweh,” she sighs. “Look around you. Do you think you’re the *only* god here?”

Jahweh snorts himself into a sulky silence. The one thing he still can’t do is lie—at least, not outright. What to do, when you’ve lived so many thousands of years your contradictions catch up with you? She edges a wheelchair toward him. Eyes of ruby and emerald are embedded in its wheels. Ancient Hebrew runes dance and move constantly on the chrome. Jahweh glares and the holy words freeze in terror. Gently she wheels him into the therapy room. The door that slams behind his back has a sign above it that reads: ‘Metaphysical Rehabilitation.’

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. His most recent publications can be found in *The Antigonish Review* (161) and *The Nashwaak Review* (24/25).

Chair, With Infrastructure

Ernest Hekkanen

This photo is a metaphor,
at first impenetrable.
To the left you can see
the painted red bricks
of our fireplace
(hardly every used,
by the way).
The mantel bears
a few trinkets,
one a traveling green Tara,
acquired by my wife
on a spiritual journey
to God knows where.

To the right,
the white trim
of a bay window,
one that frames
the evening dark
(unavailable for viewing
in this picture);
and, of course, the wooden floor,
refinished by yours truly,
to avoid getting splinters
in our feet.

In the lower left-hand corner,
a slice of colorful ceramic pitcher
(doesn't hold water).
The pitcher exists
only during moments

when the eye takes it in
(and then memory recounts
it was made by my stepdaughter,
back when she
was studying art).

Also, for reasons unknown,
a candle with three wicks
(a real dust collector, that)
barely visible amid
a coven of rocks
that serve some sort of purpose
having to do with *feng shui*
(or so my wife has informed me
on countless occasions).

The rocks are common rocks
she has gathered on hikes
with the Laughing Ladies' Walking Club,
rocks which I gingerly
vacuum around,
so as not to disturb
their repose.

And now for the chair
piled high with pillows.
We are chair-sitting that chair,
for a friend who's teaching in China.
We mustn't get attached to it;
it is simply passing through,
on its way to someplace else
(a very common story,
I am told).

The pillows from Turkey
were traded for the hand of the girl
who slab-built the pitcher
(the one that doesn't hold water).
She and the father of her son
lived on a street in Israel,
until a fatal explosion
littered the pavement
with limbs
(one of which

was wearing a bracelet).

The other two pillows were gifts,
I think;
one displays a woman
in flowing gown,
an herbalist, according to the inscription;
but you can't see that,
(nor should you);
for it is lying
facedown
among the other pillows.

And now for the *Tae Kwon Do* belts.
They belong to our grandson,
product of the ill-fated union
above.
The grandson lives with us
twice a week
(sometimes three).
The medal belongs to him, too,
garnered a year ago now
(maybe it is closer to two),
back before the wall
became an altar
to meaningful infrastructure
of this kind.

Oh, and let's not forget,
the woven orange snowflake,
denied a real snowflake's
right to fall;
and, of course, the light switch,
which we employ from time to time
to light the walkway to our house,
when friends drop by.

Consider yourself a friend;
we need the distraction.

DON McLELLAN has worked as a journalist in Canada, South Korea and Hong Kong. He currently edits an award-winning trade magazine in Vancouver. His debut collection of short stories, *In the Quiet After Slaughter* (Libros Libertad, 2008) was a ReLit Award finalist.

Rapture

Don McLellan

Gimme a break, gimme five, gimme a burger and chips. Gimme the benefit of the doubt, gimme one last chance...or, hey, just gimme a blowjob. In the group home they instruct the boys not to say gimme. Mrs. McDermott stands beside the fridge ladling out the fruit juice, singing, Gimme gimme never gets. The boys have to sing it or they don't get any. But it's Lonnie's first day; he doesn't know the drill. Get fucked, he says. I'm not singin' it. That's when he's introduced to Mr. McDermott's fist. When Mrs. McDermott pulls back Lonnie's bedsheets in the morning, it being Wednesday, and Wednesday being change-the-sheets day at the group home, he's gone. In his place is Mrs. McDermott's cat Dolly. Her husband's shoelace is cinched around its neck.

* * *

It's late on a Saturday night. The rain hasn't let up for days. Lonnie's in an alley across from the station. A westbound train arrives, a recorded voice announcing, Collingwood, ladies and gentlemen, Collingwood. He's been on a Rapture binge for days. If he doesn't get more soon things are gonna get nasty. Lonnie ducks into a doorwell. He leans his skateboard against the wall.

The passengers descend the station stairs and dissipate. A few make for the alley. An elderly couple cowering under an umbrella passes; pot-smoking teens trail. Earlier Sweet had called him on his cell. Get over to Rubin's, she says, 'cause Howie Bowles is bring the stuff. Lonnie has never met Howie Bowles, but who gives a? His R is righteous, bro, and the price is right. Nothing else matters. Absolutely nothing.

There's just one problem: Lonnie's shy of coin; it's the story of his short, wretched life. I'm crashing, lover, Sweet says. She'd been the cap-

tain of her high school basketball team, a beauty once. Get here fast, she pleads. Ah, Sweet. Get up, get down, get a grip. We'll get high, then we'll get it on.

A guy wearing a hat and carrying a backpack enters the alley. As he draws closer Lonnie can hear him humming along to a tune on his iPod. Real smart of you, fool: dark alley, earphones, head down. You should hang a sign around your neck saying, Mug me, I'm stupid.

Lonnie slips in behind the guy, taps him on the shoulder. The guy turns, removes the earphones.

Gimme everything you've got, motherfucker.

* * *

You can ingest it, snort it, spike it or shove it up your ass. Whatever the preference, R swoops into the bloodstream like a hurricane making land-fall. The rush starts with a tingling along the soles of the feet before it climbs up the shinbones, sweeps over the kneecaps, explores like lustful fingers the inside of the thighs. Then it creeps up the torso and branches off to the arms, the fingertips, to the raw lining of the throat. When it reaches the scalp, there being no place else to go, it delivers a wallop to the cerebral cortex that can cause a large man to whimper.

Sweet's parents once persuaded her to check into rehab, some five-star facility back East. She said it was like walking through the pages of *People* magazine, all the movie stars. When she's sprung, the first call she makes is to Lonnie. You holding, baby? Can you come over?

When he got busted the first time, intent to traffic, the judge sentenced Lonnie to three months in the correctional centre. His first day there a con says to him, Whattya need, fish? Ain't nothin' we don't got. The second time he got busted, a possession rap, the magistrate sent Lonnie to a rehab facility for 28 days. A few weeks into the program Lonnie says to his case worker, a young fella like himself, No more, I swear—I've learned my lesson. Tell the do-gooders you're going to finish high school, tell them you've got a job lined up, they swoon.

The thing about rehab is that those running the place don't know Rapture. They might be familiar with the other stuff out there, some might even be ex-users. But of R, most know only what they were told at a seminar. Or what they've read. Drug counsellors are like Sunday school teachers: they teach what was taught to them, no questions asked. If you keep doing that, they say, you'll die. Do you want to die? They just don't get it: the people they're talking to, people like Lonnie James, died long ago.

So what does Lonnie do the day he's released? Calls Sweet, of course. I need you, babe, he tells her. Got any? What else is a boy who's 28 days dope sick to do? Where's he going to go? Bowling? Choir practice?

Lonnie sold prescription meds from a corner on Hastings Street; it was the only job he'd ever known. He and Sweet had a squat, the top floor of a condemned building close to the clubs. It was nice in summer, cool, you could smell the ocean, but there was no heat, so winters there were a lot like high-altitude camping. You crawl in through the window and the cockroaches scatter like a swarm of urchins caught stripping a BMW. High, though, the squat was a posh penthouse, the Shangri-freaking-la. That's the thing the rehabilitators can't comprehend: R lives up to its name.

* * *

Lonnie steps on his board and surfs the length of Wellington Road. He enters Rubin's house through the back door. Sweet's in a bad way. She sits, she stands, she sits again. Then she scoots down the hallway like she's off to an important meeting. Every couple of minutes she's back at the living room window. Is it him? she asks. Is it Howie? Ditto with Rubin. A car door slams, a passerby coughs, Rubin's launching an investigation. Lonnie arrives, they don't even notice he'd left.

He'll be here any sec, Rubin says. Howie's never late. Then he starts pacing. Rubin's cell rings while he's in the other room; Lonnie picks up. It's Petra, Rubin's girl, mother of their boy Josh, a sullen twig of a thing who's sitting next to Lonnie shredding pages from a colouring book. Petra serves drinks at a downtown bar. Like everybody else, she's crashing. On her break Petra works her other sources. So far, she tells Lonnie, no luck, the town's dry. Rubin returns from his walkabout; Lonnie tosses him the phone. Feed the kid now! Petra hollers. While you're still able!

There's a girl named Luba in the back room. She's sick, too, and won't come out until Howie shows. Luba's always changing her hairdo. She's been a blond, a redhead, a bluehead. Tonight she's a skinhead. Rubin says some rap singer wrote a song about her. It was on the radio; he'd heard it.

Luba often says things Lonnie doesn't understand, things like: It's easy to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say, then don't say it. Another time she tells him she's an artist. Let's see some of your work, Lonnie says. You're lookin' at it, she replies.

Lonnie dipped into his emergency stash earlier, so he's in better shape than the others. But if he loves Sweet as much as he professes, why not ease her discomfort? Yeah, I love her, of course I do, he'd say...but not *that* much. Besides, if Sweet knew about the emergency stash, there wouldn't be an emergency stash. That's the way things worked: if you can steal it, the stuff is yours, fair and square. Love? It's just a word, man.

Lonnie microwaves a tin of soup he finds in the cupboard, the only

grub in the house, and calls Josh. The kid is so hungry he licks the bowl.

* * *

Here's how it went down in the alley: the guy tells Lonnie to go fuck himself, because he's not giving anything to nobody, especially some snot-dripping dope freak. Big mistake to tell some snot-dripping dope freak who's bigger than you—who's crashing—to go fuck himself. It also signalled to Lonnie that there was something in the backpack worth protecting. The first blow drops the guy and shatters the iPod, but the pipe is wet and it flies from Lonnie's hand, skipping along the alley. Lonnie reaches for the skateboard. Those things are solid—they gotta be; skaters land on them from ten feet in the air. Lonnie starts whacking the guy across the head until he stops squirming.

Another train approaches. He drags the guy into the doorwell. Collingwood, ladies and gentlemen. Lonnie rifles through the guy's pockets and finds about \$200. He's unzipping the backpack when the guy opens his eyes, looks up at Lonnie, a long positive ID kind of look.

Commuters begin streaming into the alley, their shoes clacking on the pavement. Three more swings of the skateboard and the guy slumps over. You shoulda played dead, Lonnie says. Now you can't play at all. He grabs his board and slips in behind the commuters. The guy's hat is in the gutter; it's raining harder than ever, so Lonnie scoops it up, pulling it down over his eyes. Rob's Break & Wheel, it says on the brim. The 'o' in Rob is shaped like a car tire with spokes. Lonnie had almost reached Rubin's place when he realizes he'd forgotten to search the backpack.

* * *

Luba finally comes out of hibernation and giddy-ups to the bathroom. The first person to use up their stuff is always the first to heave; it's like Newton's Law. Lonnie suspects Sweet will be next. Rubin calls everybody into the living room and ignites a spliff; it helps with the headaches. Howie should be here any minute now, Rubin assures the others. We'll soon be the happiest human beings on the planet. Petra will come home, we'll order pizza and wings.

Next time Lonnie checks the clock on the wall, 30 minutes have disappeared and there's still no sign of Howie. That's the thing about R. It's not that time goes fast or slow; it's irrelevant. The only one in the house who could care less about Howie Bowles is steering a plastic fire truck across the linoleum floor.

* * *

A frantic Luba tells them blood is seeping under the bathroom door. Rubin and Lonnie find Sweet on her knees, a crimson spray geysering from her wrist. She's left the razor blade, moist and gleaming, on the toilet seat. Forgive me, baby, she says to Lonnie. I just can't do this anymore. Rubin dials 911. Josh observes from the hallway. The expression on his face says it all: I've seen this cartoon before, Daddy.

The paramedics squeeze into the bathroom with Sweet and close the door. Then the police show up. They enter everyone's name into a laptop, which tells them what they want to know. Sweet isn't looking too good when they wheel her out on a stretcher. Petra turns up soon after the uniforms split. She's scored enough R for everyone. They gather around the kitchen table like it's a birthday party and time for cake. Rubin tightens a length of tubing around his left arm; a vein, like a fat garden worm, rises to the surface of his bicep.

Later, everybody nodding off, Luba notices Lonnie's new hat, Rob's Break & Wheel, the spokes. She says, That's weird. Howie's got a hat just like yours. But Lonnie can't hear her. He's hurtling through the universe faster than the speed of sound, faster than the speed of light, a dumb-assed grin splashed across his dumb face.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Set in Switzerland, *To Travel the Distance* is a novel-length work in progress that has been serialized in the *NOR* for six years. It deals with the nostalgic longings and nagging dislocation of Ulyssa Segantini, a character who first appeared in Schraner's short story, "Dream Dig," published by *The Journey Prize Anthology*, 2001. Her book, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*, was published in November 2006.

To Travel the Distance (The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Margrith Schraner

Chapter 13

THE STAND OF larch trees looked lacy in the morning light. Ulyssa hesitated. Ever since her arrival at the chairlift station, she had felt a mounting sense of pressure behind her eyebrows. She felt uneasy at the thought of what lay ahead—the sheer effort of slogging up a hill denuded of trees, under the blinding sun, followed by even more exertion, untold miles of moving upward through forested terrain and across rocky slopes, all of which would only come to an end once the mountain had been conquered and their little troupe of four would finally be permitted to alight on the small terrace of the *Berghuus* and partake of what Walter had referred to as the pleasures of his Alpine Shangri-La: black coffee served in a tall glass normally reserved for tea, topped up with an obligatory shot of Schnapps guaranteed to heat up one's blood.

Ulyssa felt nauseous at the thought of it.

No one had thought to question Walter. He was their self-appointed guide, having informed them that seating would likely be limited on the terrace of the *Berghuus*. In other words, they would be required to give their best and put in an extra effort if they were to reach the mountaintop ahead of all the others and outmaneuver the horde of tourists who were likely to be coming straight off the chairlift, claiming the attention of the coffee sommelier for themselves and ravenously consuming every last crumb of chocolate croissant on the premises. They should consider it their supreme luck, he added, to be given the chance to leave the chairlift station two hours ahead of schedule. Granted, the temperature was rising,

but luck would be on their side. Already, they were ahead of the game.

Walter had put himself in charge right from the start. He happened to be familiar with the route, he announced, determined now to lead them onward and upward. He set an example by marching along rather briskly, his manly stride marked by an exaggerated swinging of arms, while Tomas, less vigorous perhaps but relishing the thought of spending a full day of walking in the Swiss Alps, made a show of bravely keeping up with him.

Ulyssa and Maria Teresa, who were strolling along arm in arm, began to lag behind. Why do the trek on foot in the blistering heat, Ulyssa wanted to argue, when the top could be reached comfortably by cable car? Ever since her arrival in Savognin a great weariness had begun to settle in her limbs. She would have been only too willing to divest herself of her backpack; every fiber in her body dreamed of plopping down on the nearest rock beside the path.

But Maria Teresa, who fell back into the habit of speaking her native Italian whenever she was in Ulyssa's company, steered her thoughts toward other matters. "You've been living in Canada for a long time now," she began, slowing her steps while formulating her question. "What is it—thirty years?" The momentary, wistful smile playing around her lips made Ulyssa think of the famous Mona Lisa. "I don't know Tomas all that well. Tell me, what's it like to live with a writer?"

"My life with Tomas?" Ulyssa stopped to consider. "I wake up daily to the tapping noise of his computer keys; his office adjoins our bedroom. Tomas never has time for leisurely breakfasts. Quite often, though, he will ask me for advice, how to spell a word—*surreptitious* or *flabbergasted*, for instance. Tomas is what I'd call a diamond in the rough, a Finn—what else can I say?—someone who's come to English rather late in life."

"He's like you, then." Maria Teresa's generous, Italian chuckle was superceded by voices further up along the path. Ulyssa discerned Walter's laughter, sonorous and forthright, supplanted by Tomas's guffaw.

Why was it that everyone's merriment eluded her, today? Ulyssa stared moodily at a spot in the distance, where the path veered off incongruously near an overhang of rocks, not far from a sheep herder's hut. Turning to glance back down the trail at the chairlift station, she noticed that the strip of light cast earlier on the roof by the rising sun had moved and was now extending all the way to the top of the Norway spruce where the crow had been sitting. They should have heeded the crow's cry, she told her cousin, her tone alarmed. Their maternal grandmother, Nona Vincenza, would certainly have done so—Nona Vincenza, who maintained that all crows were fluent in Latin. "Surely, you must remember, Maria Teresa? *Cras, cras*, she would intone, and then translate its raucous cry for us: *Tomorrow will be soon enough*, she would say."

"You mean to say we should postpone our hike?" Maria Teresa gave

Ulyssa a meaningful look. “You’re just not used to the high altitude,” she said, diagnosing the problem. “We’ll take it slow. You’ll adjust.”

Walter’s voice could be heard calling from up the trail—a message to his wife, presumably, the forcefulness of his voice strangely at odds with the broadness of his unhurried, Swiss-German accent, or the deliberate slowness with which he had filled his pipe, earlier.

“Let them go ahead if they must.” Maria Teresa had stopped walking. She allowed her gaze to wander off toward the forested incline that made Ulyssa think of a ski slope. “I don’t try to keep up with Walter anymore,” she said quietly. “And besides, they’ll both run out of steam sooner or later.”

The hint of stubbornness in her cousin’s voice wasn’t new; Ulyssa had witnessed it many years ago, at their grandmother’s house, where their mothers had often taken them on visits. She remembered one such visit in particular, when Maria Teresa had insisted on hiding in the jungle-like garden bed that faced the entrance of Nona Vincenza’s house. They had hunkered down side by side, behind a thicket of blossoms that riotously competed for space with a multitude of sword-shaped leaves. Ulyssa remembered savoring the feeling of unexpected complicity with her cousin—Maria Teresa tittering, while Ulyssa held her breath for what seemed an eternity, attempting to stifle the giggles that were sure to divulge the secret of their whereabouts—while their mothers, frantic and anxious, searched for them, repeatedly calling out their names.

Nona Vincenza had been prompted to come running from the kitchen to reassure their mothers. “They’ll run out of steam sooner or later,” their grandmother had said with a characteristic flick of the wrist, a gesture they had come to recognize over the years, designed to brush off any number of concerns anyone might have.

They’ll run out of steam sooner or later.

Ulyssa stared at her cousin, mystified. How could their grandmother’s utterance have surfaced now, untold years later, and be repeated verbatim by Maria Teresa? Was it mere coincidence? Ulyssa’s gaze was drawn to a sudden glinting on Maria Teresa’s ear lobe. Her hand involuntarily reached out to touch the glint of blue which upon closer inspection turned out to be blue topaz in an ornate gold setting—earrings which had graced the fleshy ear lobes of Nona Vincenza—the very earrings Ulyssa had coveted as a child. How was it possible for something so perfectly obvious to have escaped her notice?

Maria Teresa drew back ever so slightly. “I was wondering when you’d recognize them.”

“Nona’s earrings.” Ulyssa attempted to squelch her envy. What were the circumstances, she wondered, that had led Maria Teresa to receive them? The high luster of the gems brought to mind diamonds, and their shade of blue—iridescent, cerulean and elusive—was unlike any other

she had come across, evocative of a time far removed, when she and her cousin had first come to the Grisons on summer holidays. Surely, her cousin must remember the swath of cloudless, blue sky that seemed to be forever widening over Savognin? Ulyssa bestowed a generous smile on Maria Teresa, hoping to preserve the feeling of camaraderie that had been allowed to bud anew between them, now that she had come back to the Old World for a visit.

“You had already left Switzerland when Nona gave them to me,” Maria Teresa tried to explain, reaching up uncertainly to touch the earrings, as if still unsure whether she had the right to own them.

“They’ve found a perfect home,” Ulyssa told her.

Ulyssa had been sensing for some time now that by venturing out and crossing the Atlantic and settling in Canada three decades earlier, she had lost something that had once been quite tangible, something she had taken for granted. But it was only now, upon glimpsing the sky-blue of the earrings, that she began to have some inkling of what that loss entailed: what she had been forced to relinquish was her feeling of belonging; what she had lost was her central place in the family constellation.

Maria Teresa increased her pace. For the next ten minutes, her stride seemed filled with a newfound sense of purpose. They had been traversing the lower portion of the rugged slope, the wildflowers amidst the rocky outcrops affording them no small measure of diversion, when Ulyssa began to protest, urgently demanding a halt.

“You look like you’re about to faint dead away,” Maria Teresa finally said, a look of concern on her face. “Here.” She playfully stabbed Ulyssa in the stomach with a *Toblerone* chocolate bar she had retrieved from one of the pockets of her backpack. “How about some Swiss military rations?”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like more.” Ulyssa broke off a couple of triangular pieces. It occurred to her while savoring the sweetness that the chocolate with all its associations of richness and comforting pleasure could neither assuage the nascent feeling of bitterness within her, nor diminish the painful feelings of dislocation she was experiencing due to the distance created by decades of absence from Switzerland. The feeling was palpable; it pushed like a wedge between Maria Teresa and herself.

“We mustn’t let Tomas catch sight of this bar,” she told Maria Teresa as she savored the splinters of nougat embedded in the chocolate. “Tomas would gobble it up in one go.”

“Not my Walter.” Maria Teresa, holding fast onto Ulyssa’s arm, urged her to keep up the pace. “Walter’s the sort of person who prefers to munch on apples or carrots any day of the week.”

Just then, Walter’s urgent call could be heard again, rebounding off a rock face further up the slope, it seemed.

“Mr. Hotfoot.” Maria Teresa stopped in her tracks, exasperated.

“Walter’s always in too much of a hurry. It’s in his nature—all that military training when he was young, you know. At one time, he was a driver, in charge of transporting the higher-ups, the lieutenants and the generals, everywhere they had to go. They were always in such a hurry.”

The path was getting narrow again, the terrain stony. Ulyssa followed close behind Maria Teresa, her face flushed from exertion. How could her backpack have grown so weighty? The simple act of walking seemed to require an enormous amount of effort.

“The chairlift from Tiginas to Somtgant carries you up the mountainside in record time—1500 vertical feet in eleven minutes flat,” Maria Teresa informed Ulyssa. “But as my Walter is in the habit of telling me: To scale a mountain and reach the top under your own steam is a radically different experience. What he has in mind, I think, is for us to discover that difference.”

Ulyssa shook her head. She had the sudden impression of having been enlisted in Walter’s mountain-climbing troops. She resented being on a forced march—all of this striving and achieving and overcoming of obstacles in the service of achieving some goal that was questionable to begin with. Only a day ago, she had been looking forward to the hike. She had thought of it as a pilgrimage, had envisioned it as a journey studded with exalted vistas and discoveries. She had pictured all of them together, hiking the paths and slopes of the Surses valley in a carefree manner, meandering along a route that would afford them discovery, diversion, and delight.

But now, each step seemed filled with insurmountable effort. Her breathing became labored. “What if it takes us a hundred years to reach the top?” Ulyssa asked, suddenly quite winded.

Maria Teresa trudged up the slope in front of her. Sighing heavily at each step, she made each footfall a mockery of Ulyssa’s progress. “I learned the art of effortless climbing from Walter,” she finally said, taking pity on Ulyssa. “The secret is this: Allow your heels to peel off the ground as you walk. Like so,” she added, giving a little demonstration. “The forward momentum will take care of itself.”

“Hurry.” Walter was yelling from further up the trail, his insistent voice now seconded by Tomas, which led Ulyssa to suspect they might be missing something of importance. Had Walter spotted some wildlife—some rare, exotic animal only to be found in the Alps? Not as extravagant as a boar, perhaps, but one of the wild ruminants of the Surses valley—a chamois, she hoped, or an ibex, the official mascot of the canton of *Graubünden*.

Surprisingly, the footpath after the initial, steep ascent began to level out. Upon rounding the next bend, they caught up to Walter and Tomas near a cluster of rocks where the trail adjoined a small lookout.

Ulyssa was first to glimpse Walter waving his walking stick. He

appeared to be standing in a pool of sunlight, a deep shadow caught below his capacious rucksack, while Tomas stood off to the side, with the leafy bright green of deciduous trees set off to great advantage by the greater mass of somber, dark-green firs beyond. It reminded Ulyssa of a painting she had seen, not long ago, in St. Moritz.

Walter pointed to the sight below. "Take a look down there," he urged, handing her his rather formidable pair of binoculars.

Appearing in her field of vision, past some spindly, tall trees below, was the very tractor and trailer they had been forced to follow at a snail's pace up the road to the chairlift station. The ramp of the trailer had been lowered, and six cows, one by one, could be observed making their way down the incline, coaxed by the herder who tapped their flanks with a stick.

"Those cows seem to be getting a lot less exercise than we are," Tomas remarked, taking out a cloth handkerchief to wipe his brow.

"Modern times, huh." Walter was once again stuffing his pipe with tobacco from his pouch. He lit his pipe and took a couple of quick puffs. "Shepherds have been leading their flocks up to the mountains in search of summer grass for thousands of years, of course. The only difference is that they're no longer obliged to make the journey on foot."

"Holy cow." Tomas sidled up to Ulyssa, a wide grin on his face. "Wouldn't you like to be taxied up to higher pastureland like that, my dear?"

"What—and pay for my leisure with such mild-mannered obedience? It's out of the question, Mister."

"Cows are naturally docile," Maria Teresa said, as if she had been called upon to mollify a conflict she suspected of brewing. "Swiss cows especially deserve it. They deserve to be treated like queens," she declared. "After all, the country's economy depends on their milk."

Walter agreed. "Cattle that graze on high-altitude mountain grass produce superior milk," he explained, a look of pride on his face, as if he considered himself in charge of promulgating such information. "Alpine milk tastes like no other milk on earth. And the taste of alpine cheese"—he kissed his fingertips for emphasis—"is *non plus ultra*."

In Switzerland, the subject of milk production had always been fraught with superlatives, Ulyssa thought, holding up the binoculars to her eyes once more. Down the mountainside, the herder appeared to have finished unloading some tools and was now busy shoveling manure out of the trailer. There was a sterile, discordant quality to the scene below: It looked deprived of color, as if it had been robbed of its original, joyful quality by a too rapid process of modernization.

How different it was, she thought, from the alpine scene depicted by Giovanni Segantini in his paintings at the end of the nineteenth century. To think that only three days ago, while passing through St. Moritz, she

and Tomas had had the great fortune of being immersed in it as they stood before the *Alpine Triptych*, the most revered of the painter's works. Segantini had resided in Savognin with his family in 1896, when it was originally commissioned by the hoteliers of the Engadine valley, slated to travel to Paris for the World Exhibition in 1900. Sadly, the alpine panorama never made the journey. A year earlier, at the age of forty-two, Giovanni Segantini had succumbed to a fatal illness while working on his masterpiece.

Art is always true, although not necessarily real. Ulyssa remembered Tomas whispering the words in her ear as they stood together in the arresting silence of the Museum's cupola, which had been designed specifically for the purpose of housing Segantini's panorama. The painter's work had captured her imagination; she had come away deeply moved by the faithful rendering of a world that seemed intact—of a landscape unmarred, evoking ancestral memories when man and beast had co-existed in nature.

"We'll continue to follow the footpath that leads up through this little pine wood," Walter announced, looking up from his map. "After that, we'll cross under the chairlift, before climbing the gentle grade to our left that brings us to a ridge of moraine."

Recently harvested logs were stacked neatly in a pile not far from where Tomas was standing. The forest floor was free of debris; there were no branches or needles in sight. One had to look hard to locate the stumps, as the trees had been cut very low to the ground.

"Everything here in Switzerland is so well tended, so orderly," he remarked. "The Swiss seem to be in the habit of raking the slopes right up to the snow line—quite the opposite of Canada, where we have fallen-down trees and lots of debris underfoot, everywhere. Last year, while hiking the wilds of Canada, Ulyssa and I spotted a mother bear turning over rocks and looking for grubs below the cable of a chairlift." He turned to Maria Teresa. "Her two cubs were nibbling on the corms of glacier lilies—quite the sight to see—not a hundred meters from us."

Maria Teresa gave him a challenging look. "It can't have been half as exciting as the time when Ulyssa and I watched a large herd of cows parading along the village street, back when we were both so young. The horns of the cows were adorned with ceremonial wreaths of flowers. The air that day was filled with noise—all sorts of mooing and bleating—remember that?"

Her gaze was fastened on Ulyssa, and she was laughing; an oval-faced, little sunshine.

"I can still hear the lovely, two-tone jangle of the bells—they were goat bells, weren't they?" Ulyssa remembered the sound of intermittent applause, pierced here and there by the unexpected yodel of a herder. A resurgence of memory began to flood over her. Images resurfaced of a

long-ago trip taken with their mothers to some far-flung village set amidst green slopes, where they had witnessed an event marked with much pomp and pageantry and given the importance of a national holiday. It was truly a festive scene, with herders and villagers wearing colorful, traditional costumes.

“We wore the matching blouses that your mother had sewn for us—of white cotton, strewn with a pattern of dancing, red cherries.” Maria Teresa remembered the dairyman who had walked at the front of the procession, along with his prized cows. “The lead dairyman was carrying a wooden milk bucket on his right shoulder, as I recall.”

“What was the name of the village?” Tomas was curious.

“I wouldn’t know.” Maria Teresa shrugged. “It was back before I went to school—before I knew my own address, even.”

“I remember you took a special liking to one the young goatherds,” Ulyssa said, giving her cousin a nudge. It happened so long ago, it was easy to romanticize the occasion.

“Did I?” Maria Teresa seemed pleased. She chuckled.

“No time to waste.” Walter looked up, impatient. He folded his map. “Hop, hop—let’s get going.”

“It was a hot day—just like today,” Maria Teresa continued, ignoring him. “You complained vociferously of being thirsty. Our mothers had gone off together in search of ice cream. I decided to go with them. Somehow, you got lost in the crowd.”

The images that rose in Ulyssa’s mind seemed impossibly far removed—lit as if by a different sun. A single clap of thunder had resulted in the heavens opening up and unleashing a tumultuous rain, forcing them to run for cover beneath the awning of a shop. She had been captivated by the sudden brightness of color reflected in the pavement made slick by rain. The thrill of witnessing the branches of linden trees, tossed to and fro by gusts of wind, had held her in its grip, transfixed.

She remembered now, with great vividness, a large flock of pigeons overhead, suspended in mid-flight, held aloft. Standing amidst strangers, she’d been lost; in the sea of faces that had surrounded her she didn’t recognize a single one. She had been all alone, tears streaming down her face. She recalled the sun’s brightness; the sky had closed and then opened up just as swiftly.

She had been utterly alone for what seemed an eternity, when her mother’s face resurfaced in the crowd. “We were only gone for a minute,” she had said to defend herself. Maria Teresa, triumphant at her mother’s elbow, had held out an extra cone piled high with ice cream for Ulyssa, like a trophy. Ulyssa, dissociated, had only stared—first at the dancing, red cherries on her short-sleeve blouse, then at the tiny hairs visible on her slender arms.

“Ulyssa—?” It was Walter who was walking beside her, now. “You

missed the switchback in the trail. You're going blithely off, into a meadow."

"Oh—did I? Really?"

Only now did she notice that they had long left the welcome shade of the little pine grove. The sun was beating down on them, again. Ulyssa had the feeling that they had been walking for hours.

"Think of our hike as a pilgrimage," Maria Teresa had said earlier on, upon leaving the chairlift station, trying to encourage her. "Pretend you're climbing Mount Olympus. This hike is giving you the chance to compose a question for the Delphic Oracle, whom you'll come face to face with, at the top."

Ulyssa looked around her, bewildered—had they perhaps crossed under the chairlift without her taking note of her surroundings? Visible further off, on the ridge, the roof of a darkish hut was coming into view. Could it be the *Berghuus*? They seemed to be approaching it from the opposite direction, for some reason.

The small alpine lodge, a rustic structure of rock and wood, was now within a stone's throw. Walter scrambled up the grassy incline ahead of them. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced with the flourish of an impresario, "you've now arrived in Somtgant."

"See? Miracles *do* happen." Maria Teresa was elated. She strode ahead full of resolve, up the steps, past the *Rivella* soft drink dispensing machine and onto a porch hung with baskets of wilted geraniums.

"Coffee and croissants *will* now be served," she said, her hand already on the cast-iron door handle, pushing it down, when she noticed the handwritten sign on the door: *Closed due to family misfortune*. She sniffed, annoyed.

"Misfortune?" Walter was incensed. "What a *schlimazel*."

The elderly gentleman who arrived soon afterward with a handcart loaded to the brim with geranium baskets couldn't tell them anything about the family incident that might have resulted in the closure of the *Berghuus*. He merely shrugged as if it were no concern of his, then bent to the task of taking the baskets of withered geraniums off their hooks before replacing them, one by one, with new ones fresh in bloom.

"Modern Times." Walter shook his head.

It was the second time he'd said it that day.

The following narrative is an excerpt from ERNEST HEKKANEN'S novel, *Heretic Hill*.

Heretic Hill

Ernest Hekkanen

ON THE THIRD day out from the nearest village of any size, under a relentlessly blue sky that toward evening would seem to draw a thin veil of haze over its face, my guide, Tarjeet, veered from the path we were following through the hot, dusty, barren terrain, and suddenly my heart began to pound.

"Shouldn't we be going in that direction?" I said, gesturing to the trail to my right. My mind felt dull, dehydrated to the size of a walnut. For all I knew, Tarjeet could have been leading me to an anonymous death.

"There's some shade over in this direction and, if we are lucky, perhaps some water, too. My four-legged assistant—" he fondly cupped his dark, gnarled hand to the cheek of the donkey's head, just below its tall left ear, where a small shadow resided in the opening—"is in need of some rest. I must respect that, or he will die. Then where would we be?"

"Donkeyless," I said.

"Perhaps even worse than that, my friend. After all, we are in a very unforgiving country. You have only to look around you."

Tarjeet's observation was an understatement. The landscape looked as if it had been sculpted by the hands of a vengeful god. In a pique of rage, that vengeful god had tossed countless boulders down on the desert floor, some as large as armored tanks and others as small as tortoiseshells, after which he had heaped them into hills that endlessly marched into the distance—through heat risers, mirages and dust. To my inexperienced eye, the redundantly repeated hills seemed to add to the arid monotony of the place.

Tarjeet led the donkey through a gorge flanked by house-sized boulders stacked on top of each other—a perfect place for an ambush, thought I. Ever since leaving the village of Smoojha, where the road had given out and the driver of the Land Cruiser had put me in the care of my current guide, I had been expecting something untoward to happen. In this country,

the rules seemed to change from day to day, from guide to guide, from destination to destination, and, as a consequence of this, my inner alarm bells were constantly going off.

I followed Tarjeet through the narrow passage flanked by slabs of stone. After ten to fifteen minutes, we arrived at a large enclosure shaped like an arena, where the slabs of stone suddenly fell away on one side and, once more, I was offered an unimpeded view of the arid countryside we had been traveling through for the past couple of days; only now I spotted a crude shelter fabricated of stone, its backside shoved up against a cliff wall. A half-dozen poles stuck out to form a roof atop which some sand-colored canvas billowed whenever a desultory breeze managed to catch the hem. High above the outpost, on top of the cliff, I spotted a metal tower with several microwave drums pointing in different directions, a common sight in the desert, as I had come to discover.

Some other donkey drivers were pulled up at the outpost; five of them in all. Also, there was one of those squat-looking wells with stones ringed around the opening and a metal tripod standing directly over it, from which a rope hung down into the dark hole. My donkey driver greeted the other donkey drivers in the clacking language of their country, a language that always seems to be spoken by dry tongues; and then, with the official representative who presided over the outpost, and who wore a tan uniform rather than the flowing, loose garments the rest of us were wearing, he haggled over the price of the water tax, which always seemed to be arrived at so arbitrarily. As they were dickering, in rather loud voices, my guide gestured to me several times. Each time his gesture produced an explosion of laughter among the other dark-faced donkey drivers, followed by much spitting and drawing of cheroot smoke down into their lungs, succeeded by exhalations of smoke that drifted up from where they were sitting or leaning in the shade of the outpost.

The bargaining apparently done, Tarjeet walked over to where I was standing beside our donkey and informed me of the price of the water tax. I reached into the bag that hung from my left shoulder and gave him the money, but with a slight look of annoyance.

“The price is twenty drachas more than the last place we stopped at,” I told him.

“We are now much further into this vast, dry country of ours, and so the price has gone up.”

Either that, or your kickback has gone up, I wanted to tell him; but didn't. I thought it wiser to be diplomatic. After all, twenty drachas was little more than seventy-five cents back where I came from, and where I came from was very, very far away now.

Tarjeet folded the leaves of currency over the index finger of his left hand, dug into one of the saddlebags draped over our donkey's back and pulled out a packet of soiled envelopes with a blue rubber band stretched

around them. He glanced at the official-looking squiggles on the rectangular document underneath the rubber band and headed over to the man in the tan uniform, who, by now, had also struck up a cheroot. He gave the packet of letters to the official, counted out the leaves of currency into his outstretched palm (I was sure I saw some of the notes disappear into the hollow of his own hand) and then he came back to where I was standing beside our donkey, his left hand stealing itself into the folds of his garment. His every move had been contemplated by the other donkey drivers—out of boredom or, perhaps, because in their hearts they were thieves. As I have already told you, my inner alarm bells were constantly going off.

It was the fourth time I had watched my donkey driver turn over mail to such an official, and each time I had wondered: *Who in this godforsaken country is picking it up, and where the hell do they live—in what hollow, in what fold in the crags?*

* * *

AFTER UNBURDENING our donkey of the saddlebags and the canvas bladders that we refilled at the well (by hauling up a similar bladder that lingered in the dark some two-hundred feet below the surface of the earth) we, like the other men, made ourselves comfortable in the shade of the cliff wall beside the outpost. Tarjeet, like the other donkey drivers, removed his headcloth with the flexible ring around it and flung it on the saddlebags now lying on the ground. Three of the other five donkey drivers were playing a game of chance, tossing brass tokens up into the air and observing which side they landed on on a prayer carpet unrolled on the ground. Tarjeet piled a couple of handfuls of grain on a flat stone about two yards away from us, and our donkey began to methodically nuzzle at it with its lips, and now we ourselves indulged in some sheep jerky and some of that stone-hard goat cheese one has to shave off with a knife.

The gamblers had offered to include Tarjeet in their game, but he had waved them off with a snappy-sounding reply that provoked several guttural, grumbling sounds that seemed none too friendly.

“They are thieves,” he whispered to me as he sat down in the shade. “I don’t play with thieves.”

I couldn’t get comfortable on the ground; in large part, I knew it was due to the fat-assed culture I now hailed from. These men, who were my age or older (that is, at least forty-three), were as lean and tough as desert rats under their flowing garments, and I knew because they could endure so much discomfort—on a daily basis—that we in the West were not going to prevail over them.

As we were sitting, eating or gambling thusly, a distinctive harrumphing

sound came echoing toward us from what I judged to be east-by-northeast. The harrumphing grew progressively louder until finally it could be distinguished as the frapping sound of helicopter blades and then, from around the corner where the stone wall of our enclosure fell away, a black gunship appeared, fairly low to the ground, but still rather distant, the breeze stirred up by the blades causing dust to lift off the ground. The helicopter gunship hovered there for some little while and then, out of the blue, my donkey driver's cellphone began to ring. He reached into his robes, flipped the device open and took the call in the language of his people—or, perhaps, it was one of the many dialects; I couldn't be sure. He spoke for roughly thirty-five seconds and then he folded the phone shut, and soon after that the black chopper came barreling toward us as though preparing to fire a missile, the harrumphing sound replaced by what now resembled a jet engine. Dust billowed up from the ground as it came toward us. The donkey drivers draped their loose garments over their faces right up to their eyes. As I was following suit, the chopper rose quite dramatically, as though aiming to enter the ionosphere, then it soared off over the cliff wall in back of us.

“So what did they want?” I asked my donkey driver.

“It looks as though the men in the black helicopter know everything there is to know,” he replied.

“Meaning what, precisely?”

“Meaning they know you are on your way to Heretic Hill. The rest they can easily figure out for themselves, I'm sure.”

“Is that what you told them?”

“It is best to tell the men in the black helicopters as little as possible. It is best to feign ignorance in most matters.”

“So how did they know you were guiding me?”

Tarjeet gave an immense shrug. “In this land of lies, even a small whiff of truth can be easily detected, my friend.”

Tarjeet was a master of cryptic replies, as many of his people were; obviously, such replies enhanced their chances of survival.

* * *

WE RESTED IN the shade for at least a half-hour, and because in the shade it was only minutely cooler than in the searing heat of the direct sun, I felt constantly on the verge of tumbling off to sleep, a state produced by my current motionlessness, whereas, when we were on our feet trudging through the desert, the forward momentum kept me awake; however, minimally. As I have already told you, my brain had dehydrated to what seemed the size of a walnut, despite how much I drank, which was at least twice as much water as my guide, Tarjeet. I knew there was an observation in this country that had to do with people like me, and which

went like this: *Men from the West are like fish; they need to swim in the water they drink.*

These were the type of thoughts that entertained me as I sat in the shade with my back to the stone cliff that rose at least thirty feet above my head, and then, quite suddenly, I was no longer awake and thinking, but asleep and dreaming, dreaming that I was back in Finland, the country of my birth—on the Upper Bothnia Coast, as a matter of fact—fishing, of all things—with the rattle of birch leaves loud in my ears; and then, just as abruptly, I was startled to wakefulness by the mid-afternoon call to prayers, which came blasting from speakers partly hidden under the sand-colored tarpaulin that covered the roof of the outpost.

Instantly, the gamblers halted their game of chance; they began to engage in prostrations and prayers, and, as I sat watching them, in a somewhat dazed condition, I recalled that I hadn't seen Tarjeet engage in any devotional practices for at least two and a half days. My mild state of confusion left me trying to figure out where I was and how I had got there and, as I watched the men reciting their prayers, my mind began to prepare itself for what lay ahead.

When the mid-afternoon call to prayers finally came to an end, Tarjeet rose to his full height as though he had springs in his legs.

"We must go on now," he said. "Our time on the meter has run out."

I was still a little dazed.

"I must have dozed off," I told him. "I feel a little weak."

"You were breathing awfully heavily," he confirmed. "Rarely does one sleep so well in our country; but *you* did; you slept very well. Are you ready to travel on now?"

"More than ready."

Although, in my sleep-addled confusion, that was something of a lie; a small one.

* * *

TWO OF THE other donkey drivers had already deserted the enclosure and I found myself wondering which direction they might have gone in, as Tarjeet had called them thieves. I wondered whether they were the type of thieves who hid in ambush for unsuspecting travelers, or whether they were simply thieves who took advantage of one in games of chance. The most dangerous-looking of the donkey drivers seemed as if he were getting ready to settle down for the night. As he moved about in preparation of doing that, I noticed he had a considerable limp, perhaps due to a deformity of his right leg.

"His donkey-driving days are nearly over," Tarjeet informed me in a low voice, when he saw me contemplating the man. "A few years ago, a bullet shattered the bone above his right knee."

“What will he do when he can no longer drive donkeys?”

“He will attend to what fate has in store for him.”

“What will you do when you can no longer drive donkeys?”

“Here, in this land, we do not look that far ahead. It is better to watch where you next set down your foot.”

By now, the saddlebags had been strapped to the donkey and the water bladders suspended from the leather, u-shaped fasteners on either side.

“Are we not going back through the passage we came in by?” I said, upon watching my guide take his first few steps.

“This is where our route diverts to the north-by-northeast. By nightfall, we should be able to see our destination; that is, if we are lucky; and luck, my friend, is what heaven either does or does not grant us.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“It will please your readers, if you do.”

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