

Brink

by Gregory Benford

Lenin is working night shift, but not for extra pay. He's a salaried supervisor and can't get overtime. Mostly he needs something to do.

The restlessness won't go away. He ducks a personnel issue and slips into his eighth floor office. His thirtieth birthday is coming up soon and it's riding at the back of his mind. At least, he thinks that's what's bothering him. He turns out the lights so he can watch the silvery sprawl of Greater L.A. stretching into the distance like some kind of electrical cancer.

He has been thinking about the Revolution a lot lately and somehow this neon consumer gumbo going on forever is at the heart of his terror, but he does not quite know why. So he presses his balding forehead against the cold windowpane and looks at the endless twinkling glitter in the cool spring night. Abstractly he wonders if this bland mall splendor will stand eternally. And on what foundation? Time and a half for overtime? Even he doesn't believe it, even if the workers under him are benefiting from the boom in business that seems like it will go on forever.

Babes in Blandland, he thinks, but it's easier to come up with a quick put-down than to frame an idea, and he knows it.

The cleaning lady comes in. A little early, she explains, because her son is sick and she has to get home. Stooped, weary, her Latina face manages a creased smile. Lenin feels a red rage at the very sight of her sad, suffering eyes. He gives her a twenty.

The infinite city still looms outside. He picks up the phone and calls his ex, but she has blocked his number. It has been two years since the divorce but he still harbors some dusty hope that it could all work out right after all. Months ago she had told him to move on. But to what?

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Washington is on his way home when his damn cell phone rings. He reaches to answer, stops.

Probably it's a headhunter trying to interest him in coming aboard some hot new company. Word has already spread that he turned around his present firm, HighUpTech, big time. It's going on the AMEX next week with a net value over one-fifty mil when the starting gun goes off. Not bad for just two years of ruthless trimming, innovative product design, and some poker-faced cunning.

Does he want to do that number again? He lets the phone ring.

He leaves the 405 for the run uphill into Palos Verdes and stops for a light. A woman standing on the center divider is selling flowers. Her gaudy spring blossoms are well arranged. He hands her a twenty and waves off the change. She is in the usual dingy uniform of jeans and a rough man's

shirt and smiles at him, her hair an oily tangle. He wonders how many wrong turns she had to make to get this far down.

When he gets home his wife loves the flowers. Her obvious surprise reminds him that he's been distracted a lot lately, not paying attention to the personal basics. She hands him a chilled Esplanade glass filled with his favorite Sauvignon Blanc. He prefers that now to a Chardonnay. Starting to feel the acid in the stomach, maybe a sign of age? But he's only 31. He throws some honey-roasted almonds into his mouth and goes out onto the deck to take in the diamond-sprinkled avenues pointing away toward the Hollywood Hills.

Somehow he no longer finds this view impressive. *Great wealth, but where's it going?*

His wife comes out to him, slips an arm around his waist, and he says something suddenly about how *big* the city is and what the hell it's all about. He has surprised himself and before he can figure out what he meant she kisses him meaningfully and he thinks about bed. Bucks in the day, bed at night, maybe catch some basketball in between the two on the digital cable. He tries to think if there's anything else, maybe something that starts with a B.

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Goldman arrives early to meet the Trotsky guy. She likes the place. It's a homey clapboard coffee place on the beach but the coffee's strictly chain knockoff product. At least it's cheaper than the spotless places the chain usually throws up, and here you can read the newspapers as long as you like without ordering another drink. She has a bagel anyway with her mocha supreme grande and has to count out the pennies left at the bottom of her jeans pockets to get the change together. That's it, she's flat busted again.

And Trotsky doesn't show up on time. She finishes the Newspaper on the table's screen and sips the mocha with extra cinnamon on top, a real perversion, while outside the sunny dusk turns to a crystal night in Venice. A rollerblader comes in, a wiry woman in cutoffs despite the chill. Long hair, kinda dirty-blond in the way she likes.

The woman gives her a glance and there's a little something going on right away. Goldman has been trying to go straight for a while to see what it's like. Not Father Knows Best or anything, but to get the flavor back in her mouth, was the way she thought of it.

The woman sits at the next table and they do some eye stuff. That gets Goldman's pulse up, like always, but then Trotsky comes lumbering through the door and looks around with his jerky head movements and darting eyes, like an eagle on the hunt. That gets to her even more, something electrically predatory. Women don't have that pointed energy.

He comes over to her table and plunks his bony body down. Right off he starts talking about some news stuff, not even saying hello. The owner stands glowering by the cash register, a black guy who makes a point about every customer having to order something. Trotsky catches the look and makes a show of ignoring it, keeps right on talking. The black guy puts on his apron,

some kind of territorial signal maybe. Some quick eye and shoulder stuff passes between the two men. Trotsky gets up and orders an herbal tea.

While he's over at the counter Goldman catches a sidelong from the woman still in her roller blades. Her soft green eyes mingle sympathy and an eyebrow-arching *whassup?* Goldman feels herself getting wet.

Trotsky comes back with his tea. He's angry that they don't have brown sugar and says that if the owner wasn't black he would write a letter to the chain management about it. Goldman has always liked how he sticks to the straight and narrow, even on little things. And he was good in bed those three times, she reminds herself. Wolfish, intense, talked all the way through it, even the oral part. None of the talk was dirty, either. Kinda weird.

Then he has to go to the john and the woman gives her the look again. Decision time. Lots of options here.

The rollerblader would be pretty squishy. Soft, warm, predictable. Playing to her short-term self.

Trotsky was a ferret-faced irk sometimes, sure, but he thought ahead, saw horizons. Which should she go for this time? Maybe a threesome? No, he wasn't the type. Big ideas but tight-wound inside. She stirs her coffee and reaches for more cinnamon.

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Jefferson walks into the board meeting the next morning with a solid, confident stride. The satellite company he consults for has sent him to push the new networking scenarios to these biz types. No sweat, he's done it all before. Which is the problem.

People crowd in around him the moment he's in the room. He sees his friend Washington at the middle of a similar jam. The two of them have joked about this effect. A bio-business analyst from UCLA told them it had something to do with chimpanzee tribalism. People need direction and they flock to people who give off the right signals, the musk of power.

Halfway through his PowerPoint presentation he feels the carpet seem to slide away. He keeps talking, practically knows the lines by heart now. But his Self, as he likes to think of it, is elsewhere. Out there.

He talks on about a big real estate deal along the Mexican border, water rights and pollution guarantees and the rest of it, but the zest is gone. Instead he's thinking about virgin lands and wind-swept forests and big skies. Somewhere.

A raised hand in the audience. "Mr. Jefferson, what's the ten-year rollout on convertible trust deeds here?"

—and the room swims away into deep moist green, towering trunks, rippling waters, dizzy desires all around him.

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Lenin wears a big floppy hat to the demonstration. He tells himself it's to keep down his sun exposure, a man with a premature bald spot at age 29 has got to watch that. But a woman in his affinity group smirks at the hat, guessing that he wants to make it a little harder to identify his face. There's plenty of TV around and there will be footage on tonight's news. That's the point, after all. But he doesn't figure to get himself in trouble at work, either.

They form their lines, keep discipline, shout their slogans. Eco stuff, mostly, with a demand for a Global Minimum Wage. As an economist he wonders what the hell that would mean but keeps his mouth shut.

Pretty soon there's some shoving and chanting and yelling and he gets into it, shoving back. A cop trips him and laughs. All the power of private capital comes rushing up into Lenin's face and slams him in the nose. He rolls over and gets some blood on his black suit, the standard uniform with vest he always wears to these things. A woman runs over and hands him a towelette for the blood and the cop kicks him in the butt. Lenin backs away but catches the cop's eye.

"You can kiss my ass," he mouths clearly enough for the cop to hear but nobody else. The cop's face is a quick study in surprise-irritation-rage, coming just that fast.

The kids around Lenin are all in jeans or sweats and he feels out of place in his suit. They use tactics borrowed from punk rock, warmed over Spanish anarchism, rave culture. Amazon folk songs blend with obscenities. Overexposure has long ago robbed both of any impact on him.

A call went out well before this demo, all about defining principles and goals, skimpy on theory and long on rhetoric. So for weeks he had dutifully spent time with affinity groups fighting for microscopically narrow causes, using consensus-based decision making that took forever. He had thought a lot about their "ways of being"—methods that ranged from the strictly legal, through the iffy quasi-pacifist, in practice which meant tripping cops or throwing paint. He disliked all the phony-talk euphemisms like "diversity of tactics" that really meant old-fashioned street fighting. That negative finger-pointing stuff wasn't the way to go now, somehow.

He walks away from the scramble, confused. His nose hurts and he wonders if the hat looks silly with the suit. Maybe that's why the woman laughed.

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Goldman wakes up early and finds some coffee in a tin. She gets some hot water going but it's a battle in this strange kitchen. The woman with dirty-blond hair, what's her name, is a messy

housekeeper.

With a biologist's eye Goldman inspects the scummy dishes in the sink and scrawny plants on the windowsill. Sunlight slants into the kitchen bright and clean, like a reproach.

Her mental cobwebs are just clearing as she fetches the L.A. *Times* from the driveway. A Santa Ana is blowing, unfurling her hair and making her skin jump. There's the usual mercantile news on the front page so she takes refuge in the comics. There's the one about a woman bio prof that's always good; she identifies with the strip's surreal logic. After she's sucked the juice out of those there's the ritual skimming of the bookshelves, only there aren't many. She picks up *A Primer of Soto Zen* and reads the first entry from Zen Master Dogen (1200-1253). It's about a monk who carried around Buddhist relics in a box until Dogen told him to give them up. The monk refused and next time he opened the box there was "a poisonous snake coiled within." A pretty good joke, she thought, a symbol of the folly of worshiping mere signs instead of the essence.

Just then the dirty-blonde woman comes shuffling in, naked and yawning. The breasts that so fascinated Goldman last night, after she ditched the Trotsky guy, show some sensual sag and big brown nipples.

Without a word the woman slurps up some of the Colombian coffee, hooks a hand around Goldman's shoulder and cups her breast. A warmth climbs up into Goldman's mind, a mingling of sweaty musks from last night and the savory zest of the coffee scent in this cluttered, moist apartment. Then hands sliding over soft skin, sniffs and savors, murmurs, her mouth somehow salty on a nipple.

It stops her thinking, which she supposes is a good thing. Live in the moment, that's what it will be like when the Revolution comes.

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Washington gets out of his Mercedes to see what the crowd is all about. Turns out it's a demonstration against free trade. "Against free traffic, too," he mutters irritably.

A thin guy passing in an old black suit gives him a sharp, pinched-eye look. "We're against exploitation, man," the guy says, and Washington recognizes him.

"Say, did you go to Cal?"

"Uh, yeah."

Washington recalls. They were in the same year and argued with each other in economics classes. There's blood on the man's old-style black suit and a kind of desperate glaze in the guy's eyes. Val, that's the name. Washington always remembers names, had drilled himself to, it was essential in networking.

Val's nose starts trickling blood again. Washington sees that his Mercedes is going nowhere

because masses of people are streaming in both directions. Rag-tag types running from the cops a block away, and media hounds closing in on the scene, hungry for it. Yet somehow Washington doesn't want to turn his back on all this, senses a humming of promise.

He takes Val into a bar to use the john to clean up. Washington sits in a booth and orders them both Irish coffees. It's uncharacteristic for him, no booze before 5 P.M. has been his rule, but he's not feeling like hitting the office today anyway. The same-old same-old won't cut it for him any more. Time to move on.

Val comes back, bloodstains gone from the suit. He is embarrassingly grateful for the Irish coffee waiting. Suddenly Washington is telling Val about how pointless it seems to him, all the deals and perks. "No *scale* to it, you know?" he concludes. Even though he's been in on the birth of two Fortune 500 companies in ten years.

"Been there, done that," Val says heavily. The phrase has called up some private demons for him, too, Washington can see that. "Things looked great for us at Cal, y'know? Then first thing you know, you're running up your frequent flyer plastic and buying a Grass Hog weed whacker at Home Depot and it's all over."

They have three more rounds of Irish coffees and then a sandwich lunch with arugula salad. It's almost like the old Cal days, disagreeing on nearly everything but enjoying it. Washington asks what line of work Val is in and gets a story he's heard before. Econ degree, some grad work, fooled around with politics until the same old games got boring, pointless. Part time professor at some state school, then some startups to learn about *real* economics. "But not at the *center*, you know?" Val says with an almost tearful tone.

They stare at each other for a long moment. "Going nowhere," Lenin says, and Washington knows that he doesn't mean himself, but the world.

They watch a basketball game for a while on the TV. Neither had noticed this is a sports bar. Guys are starting to trickle in, it's early afternoon. Some are in jeans and others in three-pieces. They're all there for the game, getting away from whatever reality they're living in.

He and Val talk over the basketball game, not really interested. They get excited about something and then guys nearby are shushing them, *Hey, you don't wanna hear the game why you here?* So soon enough they're out on the street.

The demo is over, the TV vans packing up their antennas on their roofs. Washington should get on to his office. But there's an electricity between them, sparks from the collisions of frustrations, dreams, ideas. He hasn't felt like this in years.

His cell phone's been ringing all the time. He's been getting offers for absurd chunks of cash. He turns it off and goes for a walk with Val instead.

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Franklin uses his new tunnel phone to make the call. It's a beautifully made gizmo he just had to take apart as soon as it came in from shipping. He tries it out by walking around his office and having his secretary listen to how the mike tracks him and adjusts its acoustic feed. Her voice comes back good and clear on the five-speaker input, too.

He walks over to his view, straight down the barrel of the Sunset strip. His company's media-mogul logo dominates even the big studio signs in view. He ordered it positioned there, so he could glance out and see their latest big deal show looming over the tourist crowds.

The pleasure fades, the way it does a lot lately. *All this talent, just to amuse.* He taps his fingers, makes a decision. His second call on the new phone is to an old girlfriend from back in business school. One night they had a hot-'n'-heavy after a big group report was done. Just one, but he has found himself thinking about her lately.

Her voice shifts from office-official to warm and soft when she recognizes him. She invites him over for dinner. Bingo! He brings a bottle of Aussie Shiraz and a couple pictures of one of his inventions.

She's in a soft blue blouse and willowy skirt with flowers on it, not her usual severe black business suit. Standing in her sandals, stirring vegetables and ostrich meat in a wok, she sips the Aussie wine he brought and tells him she really tries to use only American products. He just nods and moves on to something else.

He tells her about some of his inventions, especially the one to electrocute his Thanksgiving turkey as an act of kindness. For his trouble he got stunned, not the turkey. When he regained consciousness he had said, "I meant to kill my turkey, and instead I nearly cooked my goose." She laughs at the right places and it's going well.

They talk until it's late. She's devoted to some multi-step personal improvement program. He can't follow what it's all about.

She gives him several openings, but contrary to his absolutely solid pattern, he starts making his goodbyes. No fire, somehow. She seems reluctant to let him go. There is a note of desperation in this that Franklin recognizes, he hears it a lot these days. It probably isn't about him and her at all but something else, something they both sense. But he doesn't think climbing into the sack with her is going to help either of them this time.

He leaves, gunning his sports car on the freeway, and gets a ticket. This really ticks him off and to cool down he stops at a frond bar he remembers from years before. This late it's nearly deserted and he sits at the bar and orders from the wine menu. A woman two stools away looks at him and turns a certain way so he can see the outline of her breasts, which are ample, in her silky blouse. He gives her the full 100-amp smile and in a few minutes they're in a booth ordering some of the new Jaipur appetizers. Her name is Emma Goldman and he gets an erection right away.

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Trotsky decided to move to California because he was just too tight-wound in Manhattan.

So he keeps trying the Venice scene, making himself sit in those coffee shops. He even goes roller-blading and throws a Frisbee on the beach, getting a tan in cutoffs. He works as an accountant, some of it under the table for some tech companies to keep the taxes down. Maybe not completely ethical but what is, these days?

He thinks he's mellowed out some since New York but there's the old dissatisfaction simmering behind his eyes. Nothing will make it go away. During one of his frustrating walks on the beach he runs into Kropotkin from the old gang on the East Side. Kropotkin is wearing a baseball cap on backwards, real out of date, and says he's trying to break into screenwriting. Working as a waiter right now, but he's got plans.

Kropotkin gets e-mail from Stalin, who's still trying to find a shady angle in politics back East, something in New Jersey. Trotsky tells Kropotkin to stay away from Stalin, the man is a control freak. They say the usual about getting together real soon now. Each is wearing the new clip-on ID pens that picks up digital info on who you talked to, all automatic over infrared. So they have each other's contact info and all, but as they look at each other Trotsky realizes neither will use it. He still thinks Kropotkin's a pleasant dreamer but, face it, a loser.

The thing with Emma Goldman didn't work out and he can't figure why. He thought he was coming over pretty well. The sex was good. Things started to go sour at that coffee shop meeting and he took her out a week later for dinner at a fish taco joint.

They just didn't click any more. Maybe he wasn't upscale enough. Or maybe, he thinks, he still talks about his ideas too much. About Siberia and all.

He tries getting high, an area he has always scorned. Dope was OK but made him go to sleep. Ecstasy just made him hear stuff in the music of those mixer clubs, themes and resonances that he knew the next day could not possibly have been there. Those meat-rack clubs got to him, too. Everybody wore that retro look, 1940s sleek or the Latino peacock thing. Trotsky was still in black jeans and shades.

So he goes out to a seminar on The Human Prospect. A pretentious title, sure, but he has always been tempted by the big perspectives, things beyond the present. There's a thick folder of handouts, three-color pie charts and dimensional projections.

The meeting is full of the usual futurology elements. Here comes overpopulation, greenhouse climate change, bioengineering, cloning, the whole menu. Everybody nods and an old leftie gets up and somehow ties this to the execution of the Rosenbergs. There's a verbal slugfest over anti-Semitism and racism and Israel.

He gets up and leaves. On the way out he exchanges sour disappointed looks with a guy wearing all black, the usual business signature. The guy makes a sardonic wisecrack and Trotsky comes back with one that makes them both laugh in a wry, sad way.

They stop at a bar to trash the "seminar" they've just been in. Right away they hit it off. Trotsky

has his ideas about a genuine Revolution from below, based on people getting as part of their pay some shares in their company.

"Self-ownership, that's it," the guy agrees, name of Jefferson. "Every man a capital owner."

"And woman," Trotsky adds automatically. Jefferson nods and they have another round of some dark African beer. Trotsky unloads his idea then, a plan so odd that Jefferson at first can't see it. "Take Siberia? How? Why?"

"It's the biggest virgin territory on Earth."

"Virgin? But people are there, left over from the Soviets."

"Okay, call it California virgin. The girls around here, by the time they're in junior high school they know plenty, have done some. But still essentially intact."

Jefferson smiles. "You should have been a lawyer." He is a big guy with an easy smile, the kind people warm to right away. Not like himself, Trotsky realizes ruefully. Jefferson is the sort of figure the Revolution needs.

So he reels off the numbers. Siberia has a tenth of the total land area of the planet. It has big reserves of timber, metals, oil. Two crappy railroads, a few airports. The Russians abused it for four centuries and now the Chinese are infiltrating it, grabbing at the water supplies already.

"The communists never knew how to open a frontier, right," Jefferson says thoughtfully.

Trotsky pounces. "Magic word—frontier. Who owns the imagery? Us! Westerns!"

"You want there to be ... Easterns?"

Trotsky laughs, liking this guy even more. "In time, sure. Rough and ready. There are thirty million people living there, tough people."

"Let's not treat them the way we did the Indians," Jefferson says archly.

"Exactly! This will be a frontier with social justice."

Jefferson frowns. "That phrase usually means income transfers."

Trotsky sees he has to be careful here. Time to show he's not some warmed-over socialist, he's ahead of that, sure. But Jefferson in his black take-me-serious suit and that every-man-a-capitalist idea is going to want economic freedoms. "Okay, got you. We give everybody in Siberia, native or immigrant, shares in the profits."

"Immigrants?"

Trotsky is getting wild-eyed, he knows that. It's the look that puts people off, right away. Maybe that did him in with Goldman. But he can't stop. "Sure, immigrants. From around here, even. Gals who work in factories, guys who thought they'd never do more than pump gas. From everywhere."

"What America used to be," Jefferson says with a distant look in his eyes.

"So these corporate fascist regimes—China, nearly all of southeast Asia—they'll have some real, close-up competition. A solid, worked-out example of another way to uplift people. An alternative, sitting due north of them. On the mainland, not some idea from 'way over the horizon.'" Trotsky stops, realizing that he may have gone too far. But what the hell, this is the Revolution.

Jefferson looks both dreamy and shrewd, an expression Trotsky has never seen before. "So ... how do we get Siberia?"

"See, that's the free market glory of the thing. We buy it."

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Emma Goldman fumes as she leaves her yearly evaluation session. On overall effort she got a 98 percentile and a pay raise. But now the company says to shut down the research work she's doing on the contraceptive and join a team doing "more likely market oriented tasks." And she's just finished the prelim field trials!

She remembers the long hours in the lab, the part of the work she liked best. The nifty ideas that didn't pan out and some that finally did. All that, gone?

She calls her assistant in and tells him to assemble the task group, twenty-three good people. They're waiting in the conference room when she finally gets her head around what she has to do.

"I'm sorry to tell you that our program is discontinued, as of Friday," she opens. There are gasps from her staff. "And I resign."

Out the door she goes, not looking back.

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Franklin brings along Emma Goldman to the dinner with Washington. She's been pretty down lately with the resignation, but tonight she says she's got some venture capital guys behind her at last, and the work can go forward again. She's still mysterious about just what the work is, even though the corporate proprietary rules don't apply.

He forgets about that because she's rubbing against him at discreet moments, giving him the eyes. All in good taste, though. She's just a very sexy lady. Washington has no woman with him, just this funny guy in a black suit. Emma mistakes his name for Lennon.

Washington is at his best, holding forth about this guy Lenin's ideas. The main one seems to be "horizons." Lenin thinks they should be expanding human horizons and uplifting the bulk of

humanity—all at the same time. "You can't do one without the other," Washington says.

"Not by bread alone, I know all that," Lenin says. "But you've got to have bread to say that in the first place. Otherwise, you're too busy."

Franklin is hungry and the bread here is very good. It's a retro-TwenCen restaurant, red meat and martinis, and show business people don't come here.

Washington nods. "A way to unite humanity, that's what we need."

Franklin decides to bring up his agenda, since everybody else is. "Do something *big*, then. Go to Mars."

They all blink over their appetizers. Emma Goldman is the first to speak. "How's that help people?"

"By giving them a focus." Franklin waves his hands. "A huge drama, running three years. Life or death, every day, on prime time."

It takes them a while to get it. Of course it will cost money. Plenty. "Maybe as much as another carrier group for the U.S. Navy," Lenin says sardonically. "Instead of cruising around the Third World, we can cruise to Mars?"

Franklin thinks going to Mars with a manned expedition—Emma says, "Womanned, too," and they all laugh—would pull the whole planet together.

"Why?" Lenin probes.

"Because they'll go to settle a real, important scientific point," Franklin says. "Did life ever arise there? Does it still hold out, under the dried out surface? We all gain a little stature by answering that."

There are looks around the table. Somebody mentions social justice and somebody else says *Why does it have to be either/or?* and Emma smiles at him. *Why can't far horizons and up-close justice work together?*

There's plenty of talk, endless talk, and some joking. But unlike all the gossip and tit-for-tat talk he's heard for decades now, this dinner party discussion is *about* something.

Franklin can see that Washington is waiting until the people around the restaurant table have ridden their individual hobby horses as far as they will go. When the momentum is spent, Washington says, "Y'know, for years now I've had a restless feeling. I thought I was living in the long plateau of an empire. That there was no place to go. But now ... you feel it too, don't you?"

They did. A woman comes in selling flowers, one of the high-priced mannerisms that makes Lenin curl his lip. But tonight Franklin buys roses for Emma and somehow it's just fine. She beams. Lenin goes along with it without making a fuss. "Gotta keep perspective," he admits.

Emma reminds them all that if they're going to promote big ideas, they should remember that people have to stay grounded in their own selves, their bodies. If they don't, it will get all abstract and theoretical. Like the TwenCen. "That's how big dreams turn into nightmares," she says.

"We're practical people," Washington says, "not ideology idiots. Sure, you're in a car, you need to know the general direction—but then it's up to people who know how to steer."

There's some arguing over that, while they cut into thick steaks and have another martini. Emma has had two and she gets a bit giddy. Under probing she tells them that the product her new company is going to make is a male contraceptive. "That's not new," Franklin says.

She leans forward, her dress sliding smoothly over her body. Not by accident, of course; one of the things Franklin loves about her is her direct sensuality, intellect unashamed. She is completely at ease within herself. Nobody else at the table can match her for that.

She says, "Gentlemen, this contraceptive is the answer to population growth in the Third World. It'll sell for pennies, because we'll price it low. No research overhead on it, so my new company can lowball market it. I got the patent rights as part of my separation agreement from my old company. They thought there was no money in it! No demand from guys."

Washington begins, "It's going to sell cheaply? But price isn't enough with most men in the tropical nations, I thought. There was a piece in the *Economist* about it just a few weeks ago."

Emma Goldman nails Washington with a jabbing finger to make her point. "Right! Most men think it isn't their problem, right?"

Around the table there come reluctant nods. "So I designed the tricky part of this product myself. It's a chewing gum. Easy to take."

Washington persists. "Even that's probably not going to make a big dent in the demographics—"

"*And—*" She jabs at Washington again. "—it's addictive. Not harmful, not even narcotic. Just addictive."

The men sit, stunned. Between them passes a very rare event: silence.

Just then the waiter arrives for dessert orders. Still a bit dazed, Washington beckons toward the shadows—and there, coming in for the ending, is an old buddy, Jefferson. With him is a sleek black beauty named Sally and Jefferson seems a little embarrassed about it. They've been seeing each other a long time, it seems, but not in public until now. He's also got in tow a skinny fellow, under-dressed for this restaurant and with hot, darting eyes: Trotsky. They have an idea they want to discuss, they say.

Franklin gets up to go to the bathroom and Emma goes, too. The restaurant has those new unisex johns and they go in together. A matron outside looks scandalized. There was a time when they'd have taken advantage of the moment, maybe just to irk the matron, and actually have sex.

Not now. There is something about this night. They don't want to disturb it, because in the air there seems to hang a certain crystalline note, like a bell that has rung in a distant steeple, the tone lingering on, clear and long.

Franklin notices on his way back to the table that he has an erection. Ahead, the gang is making a lot of noise, arguing and joking, disagreeing and planning. Behind is Emma, a smoldering center of his world. Somehow it all comes together in mind and body for him, soft surges of the heart.

He looks out the window. Diamonds sprawl across the San Fernando Valley. Somewhere out there somebody is bleeding to death and somebody else is giving birth. He leans against the cool window pane and feels the whole vast moment seep through him and knows it is the Revolution.

The End