

Simon Ings
RUSSIAN VINE

ONE

That afternoon in Paris-a cloudy day, and warmer than the late season deserved-they met for the last time. She wore her red dress. Did she intend to make what he had to say more difficult? (He felt his scribe hand tingle, that he should blame her for his own discomfort.) Perhaps she only meant a kind of closure. For the sake of her self-esteem, she was making it clear to him that nobody ever really changes anybody. Even her hair was arranged the same as on that first day.

"And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king."

They sat on the *terrasse*, away from the doors, seeking privacy. The preacher-if that was the right word for him, for he did not preach, but had instead launched into an apparently endless recitation-stabbed them irregularly with a gaze from eyes the colour of pewter.

His testament tangled itself up in the couple's last words to each other.

Connie called for the bill. (He had long since conformed his name to the range of the human palate. Being the kind of animal he was, he was not bothered by its effeminate connotations.) He said to her: "This deadening reasonableness. I wish we had smashed something."

She said: "You wish I had smashed something. I've let you down today."

"And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other."

She said: "You've left us both feeling naked. We can't fight now. It would be undignified: emotional mud-wrestling."

Connie let the reference slide by him, uncomprehended.

"Then spake the woman whose living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine or thine, but divide it."

With a gesture, the girl drew Connie's attention to the man's recitation. "You see?" she said. "Undignified. Like it says in the Bible." She laughed at the apposite verses, a laugh that choked off in a way that Connie thought might be emotion.

But how could he be sure? His ear was not-would never be-good enough. He was from too far away. He was, in the parochial parlance of these people, "alien."

He picked up his cup with his bludgeon hand-a dashing breach of his native etiquette-and dribbled down the last bitter grounds. Already he was preening; showing off his rakish "masculinity." His availability, even. As though this choice he had made were about freedom!

He found himself, in that instant, thinking coldly of Rebecca, the woman who lived with him, and for whom (though she did not know this) he had given up this enchanting girl.

"Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she is the mother thereof."

"And all Israel heard of the judgement which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment."

Still listening, the girl smiled, and bobbed her head to Connie, in a mock bow.

She had done nothing, this afternoon, but make light of their parting. He hoped it was a defence she had assembled against sentiment. But in his heart, he knew she had not been very moved by the end of their affair. She would forget him very quickly.

Hadmuhaddera's crass remarks, the day Connie arrived on this planet, seemed strangely poignant now: "Trouble is, my friend, we all look the bloody same to them!"

"And these were the princes which he had..."

There was no purpose to that man's recitation, Connie thought, with irritation, as he kissed the girl goodbye and turned to leave. There was no reasoning to it; just a blind obedience to the literal sequence. As though the feat of memory were itself a devotional act.

"Ahinadab the son of Iddo had Mahanaim..."

In spite of himself, Connie stopped to listen. The "preacher" faced him: was that a look of aggression? It

was so impossibly hard to learn the body language of these people-of any people, come to that, other than one's own.

So Connie stood there like a lemon, knowing full well he looked like a lemon, and listened:

"Ahimaaz was in Naphtali; he also took Basmath the daughter of Solomon to wife:

"Baanah the son of Hushai was in Asher and in Aloth:

"Jehoshaphat the son of Paruah, in Issachar:

"Shimei the son of Elah, in Benjamin..."

Connie realised that he had given too little mind to these feats of recitation. This was more than a display of the power of human memory. This was more than a display of defiance towards the Puscha invader: "See how we maintain our culture, crippled as we are!"

"Geber the son of Uri was in the country of Gilead, in the country of Sihon king of the Amorites, and of Og king of Bashan; and he was the only officer which was in the land."

Connie bowed his head. Not out of respect, surely, since this was, when you came down to it, absurd: to raise an ancient genealogy to a pedestal at which educated men must genuflect. But it said something about the will of this people, that they should have so quickly recovered the skills and habits of a time before reading and writing.

The man might have been an evangelistic scholar of the 1400s by the Christian calendar, and the subsequent six hundred years of writing and printing and reading no more than a folly, a risky experiment, terminated now by shadowy authorities.

When Connie passed him, on his way to the Gare du Nord and the London train, the man did not cease to speak.

"Judah and Israel were many," he declaimed, from memory, *"as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking, and making merry!"*

It was only twenty years since the Puscha had established a physical presence upon the planet, though their husbandry of the human animal had begun some thirty years before first contact. It took time and care to strike upon the subtle blend of environmental "pollutants" that would engineer illiteracy, without triggering its cousin afflictions: autism in all its extraordinary and distressing manifestations-not to mention all the variform aphasias.

Faced with the collapse of its linguistic talent, the human animal had, naturally enough, blamed its own industrial processes. The Puscha armada had hung back, discrete and undetected, until the accusations dried up, the calumnies were forgotten, and all the little wars resolved-until transmissions from the planet's surface had reduced to what they considered safe levels.

Human reactions to the Puscha arrival were various, eccentric, and localized-and this was as it should be. Concerted global responses, the Puscha had found, were almost always calamitous.

So, wherever Connie appeared along the railway line-and especially at the Suffolk terminus where he drank a cup of milkless tea before driving out in the lorry the thirty miles to his orchard-there was a respect for him that was friendly. He had been travelling back and forth, in the same way, for ten years.

There was a clubhouse at the junction: an old white house with lofty, open rooms, where he sometimes had a quick breakfast before driving onto the orchards. There was also an army station near, and as the pace of Autonomy quickened, the club had become a mere transit camp, with both Puscha and human administrators piling bedrolls in the halls, and noisy behaviour in the compounds. There were often civilian hangers-on there too, and the woman who lived with him now-the woman to whom he was faithful once again (the idea of being "faithful again" made more sense in his culture than hers)-had been one of these.

Her name was Rebecca-a name that translated fluently and comically into his own tongue, as a kind of edible, greasy fish. When he first laid eyes on her, she was drinking cocktails with a party of Puscha newcomers lately recruited to some dismal section of government finance (and who were in consequence behaving like abandoned invaders). Quite how she had fallen in with them wasn't clear. She was simply one of those maddening, iconic figures that turbulent events throw up from time to time: less real people, so much as windows onto impossible futures, no less poignant for being chimerical.

A few days later, on the connecting train to Paris, as he considered where to sit, vacillating as usual, he nearly walked straight past her.

She was sitting alone. She was white-skinned. Her hair was long and straight, gold-brown, and a fold of it hung down over one eye, lending her face an asymmetry that appealed to him.

The seat opposite her was invitingly empty.

He sat and read a while, or pretended to, racking his brain for the correct form, the correct stance, for an introduction. Horror stories abounded in the clubs and classes: a visiting male dignitary of the Fifty-Seventh Improvement, informed that human women are flattered by some moderate reference to their appearance, congratulates the First Lady of the North Americas on the buttery yellowness of her teeth-

And how, after all, could you ever learn enough to insure yourself against such embarrassments?

Eventually, it was she who spoke: "What is it you're reading?"

His scribe hand tingled, that he had left the opening gambit to her.

As for what he was reading-or pretending to read-it was dull enough: a glib verse narrative from his own culture. In his day bag, Connie carried more interesting material: novels from the last great centuries of human literacy; but he had felt that it would be indelicate to read them in front of her.

By the end of the journey, however, she had all too easily teased out his real enthusiasms, persuading him, finally, to fetch from his bag and read to her-eagerly and loudly and not too well-two stories by Saki and some doggerel by Ogden Nash. They were old, battered paperback editions, the pages loose in both, and once a page of Saki fell by her foot. She stooped to pick it up for him. She studied it a moment, while he in turn studied the fold of her hair hanging over her eye; he surprised in himself a strong desire to sweep it behind her ear.

He saw with a pang that she was studying the page upside-down.

"I sing," she told him later, as they passed through the Parisian suburbs. "I am a singer."

He made some callow remark, something she must have heard a hundred times before: how human singing so resembles Puscha weeping (itself never formless, but a kind of glossolalia peculiar to the Puscha species).

"I sing for people," she said, "not for Puscha." (She made the usual mistake, lengthening the "u" in Puscha to an "oo.")

It was not a severe put-down, and anyway, he deserved it. So why did it hurt so much?

It maddened him afterwards to think that she must have drawn him out-she must have got him to admit his interest in her people's literature, and read to her-only so she might sit there quietly despising him: the eloquent invader, drip-feeding the poor native whose own throat he had so effectively glued shut!

But all this was eight years ago, and Connie was too much the newcomer to know what undercurrents might run beneath such stilted conversations.

And on the return journey, the same coincidence! This time, she nearly walked past him-would have done so, had he not called her.

Well, their being on the same train yet again was not much of a fluke. He had travelled to Paris to glad-hand the farmers gathered there, and address their concerns about trade links after Autonomy; Rebecca, for her part, had gone to sing for them.

These days, public events had a tendency to run into each other: a trade fair with a concert tour, a concert tour with a religious festival. They were arranged so to do. A non-literate culture can only sustain so much complexity.

In a society without literacy, the eccentric routines of individuals and cliques cannot be reliably communicated and accommodated; so everything moved now to the rhythm of established social customs-even to the patterns of the seasons.

On their return journey, Connie spoke of these things to Rebecca-and then he wished he hadn't. He had an uneasy sensation of describing to her the bars of her prison.

Suddenly he was aware of wanting to say something to her; to make, as casually as he could, a desperate suggestion.

He began to make it, and then found himself trembling unexpectedly.

"What were you going to say?"

"Oh! It was an idea. But then I remembered it wouldn't-it wasn't possible."

"What?"

"Well-" he said. "Well-I was going to suggest you come to visit the orchard I run, for the weekend I mean. The clubhouse is no place-I mean, it's very crowded just now, and you could breathe. Breathe easier. If you came."

"But why is that impossible?"

"Not impossible. I mean-"

He started telling her about the orchard. About the apples, and what his work with them entailed. The busy-ness of the season. Then, warming to his subject, about the savour apples had upon the Puscha palate, their goodness in digestion. And from that, to the premium his crops might fetch among his kind. And all the time he talked, losing himself in this easy, boastful, well-rehearsed chatter, he wondered at the wastefulness of the world, that animals crossed unimaginable gulfs of interstellar space, only to compare with each other the things that filled their guts, and satisfied their palates.

It was not until she was in the lorry with him, her hands resting lightly on her bare knees, her back arched in an elegant curve, and the fold of gold-brown hair hanging still over her eye, that it dawned on him: she was still with him. Silent. Smiling. Improbably patient. She had said yes.

The orchards fanned east in an irregular patchwork from the outskirts of Woodbridge, gathering finally

along the banks of the Alde and the Ore. The rivers-wide, muddy, tidal throats-gathered and ran for some miles parallel to each other, and to the sea, which lay behind a thin band of reclaimed land. This ribbon of land-more a sea defence than anything else-was not given over to agriculture, but retained its ancient fenland garb of broken jetties, disused windmills and high, concealing reeds.

Rebecca glimpsed it only once, as Connie drove her through the deserted town of Orford, with its view over mudflats. Then they turned away from the coast, the road shrinking beneath them to a narrow gravel track, as it wound its way among the apple trees.

The monotony of the view was broken only once, by the Alde and the Ore, mingling indirectly through a knot of winding ditches and narrow (you might jump across them) surgically straight canals. The land here was riddled with old channels and overgrown oxbow lakes, as though someone had scrunched up the land and then imperfectly flattened it.

A pontoon bridge and an even narrower driveway led Connie and his companion, at last, to his house. Across the front door, someone-a disgruntled worker, or other protester-had painted a sign.

Qi,
ea't

The lettering was predictably feeble: the work of one for whom letters were not carriers of information, but merely designs.

She didn't need to be able to read to see that it didn't belong: "What does it say?"

He pondered it. "It's their slogan, now," he said.

"Whose?" she asked him.

"It says, 'Quit Earth.' " He scratched at the paint with his bludgeon hand. It would not come off.

It was late in the season, and the light died early, that first night.

They sat drinking apple brandy in the darkness, on deck chairs in front of the house. Glow bulbs cast a febrile warmth like a tremor through the chill air.

"Read to me," she said.

So he read to her. He wondered how she bore it: all those V's for R's (R was a letter he found barely audible unless it was rolled on the tongue, at which point the sound struck him as faintly obscene). Not too mention the Z's he had to insert in place of those wonderful, utterly inimitable W's. It wasn't just the phonetic habits of his own language getting in the way (as far as that went, the speech of his ethnic group, the so-called Desert No'ivel, was notoriously fluid and sing-song); there were anatomical differences, too.

He studied the line of her mouth. He imagined her tongue, frighteningly prehensile. The relative chill of it (so, at least, he had heard, though he had no experience of it himself; felt still-or told himself he felt-a faint revulsion at the idea.) Her teeth, their-

What was it again? Yes: "buttery yellowness." He laughed-to the human ear, an all-too-malevolent hiss.

Startled, Rebecca turned to face him. In the light from the warm glow bulbs, her irises were brown grey, like stones under water.

He could hardly bare to sit there, and not touch the fold of her hair.

(In the realm of the erotic, otherness is its own reward.)

Then it came to him: she knew this was what he was feeling.

He wondered at what point he had left off reading.

He considered whether or not she had done this before, with one of his kind, and the thought aroused him. He wondered dizzily whether this made him a "homosexual."

(She resembled his own sex, more than the female of his species. Puscha females are not bipeds. It is only relatively recently in their evolutionary history that they have lost the ability to fly. Their sentience is sudden, traumatic, triggered by pregnancy, and short-lived thereafter. Their abrupt, brief capacity for symbolic thought opens them to the possibilities of language-but they have time only to develop a kind of sing-song idiolect before the shutters come down again over their minds. They are resourceful, destructive of crops, and are routinely culled.)

Rebecca leaned forward in her chair, to touch the feathers about his eyes. The lines of her arm were reassuringly familiar to him, though the tone of her skin was not. He reached out with his bludgeon hand to trace delicately the line of the fold of her hair.

A moment later he heard the voice of Hadmuhaddera calling across the lawn, in the broad Lowland No'ivel accents that he had always faintly loathed:

"Hi there, Connie, where've you been hiding yourself?"

For the rest of the evening, the unctious pedagogy of Hadmuhaddera filled the chair between them. Hadmuhaddera, stiff and small, as though some more elegant version of himself were struggling for release within, spoke volubly of the strange differences and stranger similarities of Puscha and human culture-as though Puschas (or humans, for that matter) were these monolithic, homogenous units!

In the guise of leading Connie through the uncharted shallows of 'human' habits ("*pain au chocolat* is a splendid invention, in that it allows you to eat chocolate for breakfast") he patronized Rebecca furiously.

Connie felt all the pulse and tremor of the evening come apart in the tepid, irregular slaps of Hadmuhaddera's tongue against his broad, blue palate.

Rebecca meanwhile stretched out almost flat in her chair, her water-polished eyes wide and black and bored, her arms thin and white like sea-polished wood against the arms of her chair.

"But set against the narrow bounds of the physically possible-" Hadmuhaddera was growing philosophical under the influence of Connie's apple brandy- "nature's infinite variations seem no more than decorative flourishes. Like that poet of yours, dear-what's-his-name? 'Tall fish, small fish, red fish, blue fish,' yes, yes, yes, but they're all bloody *fish*, aren't they? Every planet we go to: fish, fish, fish! And birds. And crustacea. Insects. Everything is exotic, but nothing is actually *alien*."

"Oh, I don't know. Your womenfolk give us pause," Rebecca countered. "Of course, thanks to your kind Improvements, we will never be able to attain your well-travelled disillusionment." In her quiet way, she was giving as good as she was getting. "Perhaps it is because you are the only aliens we have known-but you seem *fucking* peculiar to us."

Hadmuhaddera gave vent to an appreciative hiss.

In spite of himself, Connie found himself joining in. "Nature is capable of infinite variety," he mused, "but only a handful of really good ideas. Because the rules of physics are constant across the universe, so are the constraints within which living things evolve. Eyes, noses, ears, they're all good ideas. They're economical and effective. Consequently, we all have them. Languages, too-you would think they would be infinitely variable. But the differences aren't nearly as striking as the similarities. The predicating deep grammar-that is universal, or we would not be talking to each other now."

But if he imagined that Rebecca would join in-would become, for a minute, the gossiping groupie he had first seen at the clubhouse-he was wrong. He watched with something like pride-though he had, he knew, no right to such a sentiment-as Rebecca steered their conversation away from the theory and practice of language-that overwhelming Puscha obsession.

He watched her. Could it be that she, too, longed for the moment when they might restart the shattered pulse of their intimacy? He felt his body once again ache for the fold of her hair, and then Hadmuhaddera said:

"Ah, well, I'll bid you goodnight."

They watched him stagger away across the lawn into the darkness. There was no sound in the garden now, except for the stirring of leaves in distant apple trees: in a few weeks, this sound too would cease.

He thought about the apples, the trees, about his work. He thought about pruning. The act of it. The feel of the secateurs in his hands (he was not above getting his hands dirty, though whether he won any respect for it among his workers, he was never sure). He thought about the sound his workers made, as they set about their seasonal tasks.

He thought about gardening, and the fine line the gardener treads between husbandry and cruelty; between control and disfigurement. He thought about the Improvements his people had made among the planets. The years they had argued and agonized over them. The good and pressing reasons why they had made them.

Their enormity.

Rebecca stood up and wandered off a little way. Softly, she began to sing. She had a good voice, a trained voice (he had already learned the difference). An operatic voice.

He closed his eyes against a sudden, searing melancholy. To him it sounded as though she were weeping for the world.

Before the theme came clear, she stopped.

He opened his eyes.

She was looking at him. "Is this what you wanted?" she said.

It hurt him, that she would think this of him "No," he said, truthfully.

She said nothing more, and after a few moments, she began her song again.

They had been together now for eight years.

Every civilization begins with a garden.

The Puscha, whose numerous cultures have bred and battled away at each other for eons, have founded their present, delicate comity upon this simple truth.

Here is another truth the Puscha take to be self-evident: a flower is simply a domesticated weed.

All Puscha "Improvements" are dedicated to the domestication of language. Over the eons of their recorded history, they have confronted languages too many and too noxious to get very sentimental about pruning them. Let a language develop unimpeded, and it will give rise to societies that are complex enough to destroy both themselves and others. Xenocidal hiveminds, juggernaut AIs, planet-busting self-replicators: the

Puscha have faced them all-every variety of linguistic ground elder and rhetorical Russian vine.

The wholesale elimination of literacy is one of the stronger weedkillers in the Puscha horticultural armoury, and they do not wield it lightly. Had they not wielded it here, the inventive, over-complex and unwieldy morass of human society would have long since wiped itself off the planet.

The Puscha care, not for their own self-interest, but only for comity and peace and beauty.

They are beyond imperialism.

They are gardeners.

TWO

He still reads to Rebecca. But over the years, something has shifted between them, some balance has tipped.

At night, in bed, with the light on, he reads to her. Lermontov. Turgenev. Gogol. She laughs at Gogol. He reads and reads. He has perfected a kind of ersatz R. W's will, perforce, always elude him. She lies there beside him, listening, her eyes like pebbles, wide and bored, her arms like stripped and polished apple branches, motionless upon the sheets.

He reads and reads.

He waits for her eyes to close, but they never do.

Defeated, he turns out the light.

Darkness is a great leveller.

In the dark, his books may as well be blank. He is alone. He is worse than alone.

In the dark, he finds himself dispersed and ill-arranged: *loose-leafed*. He cannot find himself-he cannot find his *place*.

Every day he commits his self, unthinkingly, to diaries and address books, journals and letters and the essays he writes so very slowly and sends to little magazines.

At night, lying there beside her, he finds he has held back nothing of himself. It is all spilled, all committed elsewhere, unreadable in the dark.

Able as he is to read and write, the world inside his head is grown atrophied and shapeless. Equipped as he is with a diary and a journal, he remembers little. Owning, as he does, so many books, he cannot from them quote a single line. Deluged as he is every day with printed opinions, he finds it wearisome to formulate his own.

When the light goes off, and they lie side by side in the bed, listening to the leaves of the distant apple trees, Rebecca tells Connie stories.

Rebecca's stories are different from Connie's. His stories belong to the light; hers, to the dark.

She does not need light to tell her stories. She does not need to read or write. All she needs to do is remember.

And she remembers everything.

With no diary, Rebecca's mind arranges and rearranges every waking moment, shuffles past and future to discover patterns to live by, grows sensitive to time and light and even to the changes in the smell of the air.

Lacking a journal in which to spill herself, she keeps her self contained. Cogent, coherent, strong-willed and opinionated, her personality mounts and swells behind the walls of her skull.

(As he lies there in the dark, listening to her, Connie reflects on gunpowder. Unconfined, it merely burns; packed tight, it explodes.)

Rebecca's stories come out at night. They are stories of the camp-fire, of the clan gathered against the illiterate night. Hers is the fluid repertoire of the band, the gang, the tribe, reinforcing its identity by telling stories about itself.

Rebecca tells him about his workers, about their loves and their losses, their feuds and betrayals. She tells him:

"They burned an old nigger in Woodbridge last night."

It is not her choice of epithet that distresses him-why would it? He is from too far away to appreciate such nuances.

It is the fact of it: the growing littleness of the people of this world. This gathering into clans. This growing distrust of outsiders. This reinvention of foreignness.

This proliferation of languages.

(Already, in the eight years they have been together here, Rebecca's trained, operatic voice has taken on a deep, loamy Suffolk burr.)

He remembers something his neighbour Hadmuhaddera said, years ago: how everything that lives, wherever it

lives, comes up with the same solutions, again and again. Hands, noses, eyes, ears. How everything is exotic but nothing is truly *alien*. He recalls, above all, Hadmuhaddera's frustration, that this should be so.

Now there are many, manifestly reasonable arguments to support the Fifty-Seventh Improvement. But Connie is beginning to wonder if those polished arguments might not conceal darker, perhaps subconscious, motives.

Rob a culture of literacy, and rumour replaces record, anecdotes supersede annals. The drive to cooperation remains, but cooperation itself, on a grand scale, becomes impractical. The dream of universal understanding fades. Nations are reborn, and, within them, peoples-reborn or invented. Models of the world proliferate, and science-beyond a rude natural philosophy-becomes impossible. Religions multiply and speciate, fetishising wildly. Parochialism arises in all its finery, speaking argot, wearing folk dress, dancing its ethnic dance.

Connie thinks: We are good gardeners, but we are too flashy. We succumb again and again to our vulgar hunger for exotica.

He thinks: We have made this place our hot-house.

Rebecca says, "They hung a tyre around his neck. A tyre and a garland of unripe hops. The tyre weighed him down and the hops made him sneeze. They hopped and skipped around him, singing. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. Tears ran down his nose."

These are the rhythms of a campfire tale. This is the sing-song of a story passed from mouth to mouth. Connie's heart hammers in time to her playful, repetitious, Odysseian phrases.

Connie recalls that Homer, being blind, had no need of books.

He cries out in fear.

Rebecca's hand settles, light and dry as apple leaves, upon his breast. "What is it?"

"I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear."

She says to him: "The ring-leader ran away in the night. They say he's hiding near. They say he's hiding on our land. Among the apple trees." She says: "It's up to you. It's your responsibility."

A week, this lasts: a week of curfews, false sightings, beatings of the rush beds. At last, exhausted, Connie consults with the military authorities in Ipswich, and abandons the hunt.

At night, with the light on, he reads.

"Rudin spoke intelligently, passionately, and effectively; he exhibited much knowledge, a great deal of reading. No one had expected to find him a remarkable man... He was so indifferently dressed, so little had been heard of him. To all of them it seemed incomprehensible and strange how someone so intelligent could pop up suddenly in the provinces."

With eyes black-brown and bored, she says:

"I've heard this part before."

Yes, and if he asked her, she could probably recite it to him. (He does not ask her.)

"He spoke masterfully, and entertainingly, but not entirely lucidly... yet this very vagueness lent particular charm to his speech."

Connie wonders, dizzily, if Ivan Turgenev's observation, sharp enough in its day, means anything at all now.

"A listener might not understand precisely what was being talked about; but he would catch his breath, curtains would open wide before his eyes, something resplendent would burn dazzlingly ahead of him."

Rebecca does not know what vagueness is. She could not be vague if she tried. Her stories shine and flash like knives. He glances at her eyes. They will not close. They will not close. His bludgeon hand is numb, he is so tired. But still he reads.

"...But most astounded of all were Basistov and Natalya. Basistov could scarcely draw breath; he sat all the while open-mouthed and pop-eyed-and listened, listened, as he had never listened to anyone in his whole life, and Natalya's face was covered in a crimson flush and her gaze, directly fixed at Rudin, both darkened and glittered in turn..."

"Tomorrow," he says to her, when at last he can read no more, "let us go for a walk. Where would you like to go?"

"To the banks of the Alde and the Ore," she says, "where Hadmuhaddera's nephew lost his shoe, and the last man in Orford once fished."

Deprived of records, she remembers everything as a story. Because everything is a story, she remembers everything.

Tonight, in the dark, as he sprawls, formless and helpless beside her, she tells him a story of a beach she has heard tell of, a beach she doesn't know, called Chesil.

"Chesil Beach is a high shingle bank, cut free of the coast by small, brackish waters," she says.

"Like here," he says.

"Like here," she agrees, "but the waters aren't rivers, and the bank that parts them from the sea is much bigger, and made all of stones."

She tells him:

"You could spend your whole day among the dunes and never see the sea. Yet you hear its constant stirring, endlessly, and soon in your mind comes the image of this bank, this barrow-mound, put before you like a dike, to keep the sea from roaring in upon you. The land behind you is melted and steep, and before you the pebbles grind, a vast mill, and you wonder how high the sea water is now. You wonder how high the tide comes, relative to the land. You wonder how long it will take, for the sea to eat through the bank..."

In the morning, as you are eating breakfast, she comes down the stairs. She is wearing a red dress. It is a dress you recognise. It belongs to the girl you so recently left. It belongs to your mistress in Paris.

Even her hair is arranged in the way that your mistress's hair was arranged.

You say nothing. How can you? You can hardly breathe.

"Let's go for our walk, then," she says.

So you go for your walk, down the track, past the gate, into lane after lane, and all around stand the apple trees, line upon line. The gravel slides wetly under your feet as you walk, and the leaves of the apple trees whisper and rattle. She scents the air, and you wonder what she finds there to smell, what symptom of weather or season or time of day. She tosses her hair in the breeze. Her hair is crunched and pinned and high, and the fold of it that you so treasured is gone, the fold of gold-brown that once hid her eye.

Your orchards fan east to the banks of the Alde and the Ore. The rivers run wide and muddy and dark, and seabirds pick over them, combing for the blind, simple foods of the seashore.

The rivers, slow, rich and mud-laden, evacuate themselves into each other through a maze of ditches and channels, some natural, and some cut by hand through the furze. On the far banks, where the land is too narrow for tillage, an old fenland persists, all jetties and rotten boardwalks and old broken-down walls, and everything is choked by high, concealing reeds.

She turns away from you where you settle, shapeless in the grass. She bends, and the red dress rides up her calves, and you begin to ask her where the dress comes from, and what has she done to her hair? But all that comes out is:

"I- I- I-"

She takes off her shoes.

"What are you going to do?"

"Paddle." She lifts the edges of her dress and unrolls her stockings, peeling them down her brown smooth legs.

The tide is out, the mud is thick and brown like chocolate.

"There are terrible quicksands," you tell her, knowing that she knows.

Absently, she traces her toe through the yielding mud.

"If I don't come back," she says, "you'll know I'm swimming."

"No," you tell her, agitated. "Don't do that! It's dangerous. Don't do that."

You stand and watch her as she walks slowly upstream, in the shallow edge of the water. Swishing her feet. When she is gone, you wander to the water's edge, and you study the thing she has drawn in the mud.

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A line from a book comes to you: a book by Marshall McLuhan:

Terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time.

When the rifle shot comes out from the reeds in the far bank, and hits you full in the chest, you do not fall. The suddenness of it seems to freeze the world, to undo the physical constraints that hold you and your kind and her kind and all kinds to worlds that are never quite alien, never quite home.

You do not even stagger.

You stand, watching old abandoned windmills, listening to the rushes, their susurrations clear against rustling of the leaves of the apple trees. You watch the distant figure with the rifle leap from cover behind an old ruined wall and disappear between the reeds.

You choke, and fall backwards. As you lie there, she comes running.

She has taken off the red dress. She has let down her hair. You follow the line of it, and find that it has returned to itself, a fold of gold-brown over one eye. Terrified, you follow the fold of her hair to her neck, to her

breast. Blood bubbles in your throat as you try to speak.

She puts her arms about you, holding you upright for a few seconds longer. "Try not to move," she says. She is crying in the soft, calm manner of her people.

When your eyes close, she begins to sing. *"I hate you,"* she sings. *"I hate you. Oh, how I hate you!"*

Singing, or weeping. You cannot tell the difference.

You come from too far away.

