

# Noman's Land

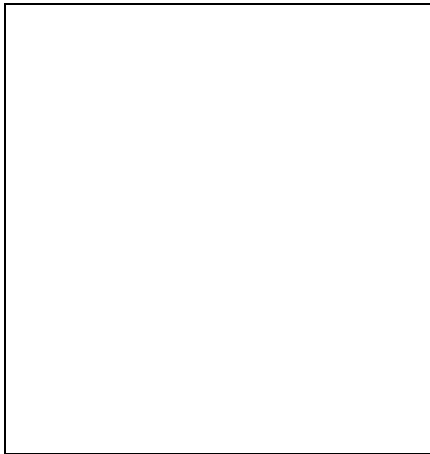
Stories by Gwendolyn MacEwen

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# Noman's Land

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The Loneliest Country in  
the World  
A Horse of a Different  
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Magic Wars  
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The Twelfth of Never  
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'I want to construct a myth,' Gwendolyn MacEwen has written, and indeed she has constructed one. MacEwen is not a poet interested in turning her life into myth; rather, she is concerned with translating her myth into life, and into poetry which is part of it.'

- Margaret Atwood, *Second Words*

The work of MacEwen, more than that of any other writer, has restored the value of mythology to Canadian poetry. For Canadian writers, the most salutary union of opposites MacEwen has achieved is this one in which the mythological and the experimental become inseparable faces of one living reality.

- Frank Davey, *From Here to There*

There are very few Canadian poets with a grasp as broad as MacEwen's of the poetic dimensions of history.

- G. Woodcock, *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature '83*



## The Loneliest Country in the World

He was lost. And he was naked, wet and shivering. He was lost in a rain-drenched midnight Eden, and all the black trees around him were whispering like mad and laughing. Thunder blossomed in the distance.

And something else was very wrong. Then he remembered: he'd lost his memory.

*Oh damn*, he thought, and flung himself through the underbrush. After a time the forest surrendered to the road which glistened like a strip of licorice in the rain. He leaned against a tree and remembered that he had passed under an arch of blinding light, and been struck down by a hand of fire. Then, slowly, the smell of the earth, the awareness of his body, the certain knowledge that he had no idea who or where he was.

He blinked and headed for the road. The sleek metallic rain kept pouring down so his vision was blurred, but at one point he saw, or thought he saw, something which made his blood run cold. It was a huge neon sign shimmering in shades of blue and green. It hovered for a moment over the forest, then disappeared.

WELCOME, it read, TO THE LONELIEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD.

*I'll hitch a ride to somewhere, he thought. But how can I? I'm naked!*

Since it was early Spring the forest was still quite bare, but scattered here and there were a few of last year's maple leaves. They lay on the ground in what had once been wanton splendour; originally they had been golden-red, but now they were dirty orange, shades of rust. He found that he could peel them from the ground like soggy pages of the earth's diary, layers of its skin. He chose one of the largest and held it over the nakedest part of his nakedness. Then he stepped to the edge of the road and held up his thumb. *At least I remember how to thumb a ride; that means I'll remember lots of things later.*

A small red car shot out of the night and came to a screeching stop beside him. The driver, a woman, leaned out of the window and stared at him in disbelief. She was very beautiful; he wanted to die. *She thinks I'm some kind of pervert. But wait - would a pervert be clad in a maple leaf? I'm going to assume control of this situation.*

'Excuse me, Miss, he said, 'I'm in need of help. I've lost three things: I've lost my way, I've lost my clothes, and I've lost my memory.'

'Your *memory*?' she asked. 'Oh come on!'

'It's true, I swear it.'

'Do you mean you have amnesia?'

'Yes, and I'm also catching a cold.'

She began to laugh. It was an unusual laugh; it was almost as though she were laughing in another language.

'Well, if you feel it's that funny, I'll take another car!' he said, offended. 'I have my pride,' he added, clutching the leaf to his groin. 'And I'm in no hurry.'

She opened the door for him. 'It's all right. Come in then, stranger.' She reached over into the back seat and produced an old brown blanket bordered by a geometric Indian pattern; gratefully, he draped it around himself as best he could in a style resembling a toga.

'You wouldn't have a pin or a clasp to hold this thing together?' he asked.

She pulled something from her hair which was made from a sweep of turquoise feathers and shell and bone. With some difficulty he manoeuvred it through the coarse material of the blanket so the toga was fastened at the shoulder. Then he saw that her black hair had fallen free, and it was straight and shiny, and although she wasn't laughing anymore there was a maddening little smile around the corners of her mouth.

'Now,' she said, when they had turned from the road in the forest onto the highway, 'tell me about yourself.'

'But I can't! There's nothing to tell; I don't know who I am!'

'Oh come on!'

'Why would I invent such a story? I don't know where my clothes are, I don't know where I was going, and I don't know what happened to my memory.'

'Cigarette?' she asked, pointing to a pack of Export on the dashboard.

'I don't smoke,' he said, then frowned. 'What am I saying? Of course I smoke.' And he helped himself to a cigarette.

'For the time being I'll go along with you,' she said, casting him a long sideways glance. 'I'll assume you're telling the absolute truth.'

'I swear it, I swear it.' He coughed loudly and put out the cigarette in the crowded ashtray. 'I don't smoke,' he added, and sank back into the brown depths of the toga.

'And you don't remember *anything*?'

'Nothing. Except things like night and day, heat and cold, how to speak.'

She was worried now, not smiling. 'There was a huge electric storm back there. Maybe you were struck by lightning.'

'I felt a hand of fire,' he said, 'here, just across my left shoulder. It sort of slapped me down. And my whole left arm is numb.'

There was a long silence as the miles whizzed by.

'Back there ...' he said finally, 'you say *back there* and I realize that I don't know what you mean. Back where? I mean - where are we?'

'Back there was a place called Kingsmere,' she informed him, 'the residence of a former Prime Minister of this country. We are not far from Ottawa, capital of this country.'

He liked the way she drove; she didn't clutch the wheel like he pictured other drivers doing, as though they expected it to assume a demonic will of its own and steer itself into oblivion; her right elbow on her lap, she guided the car with the merest touch of her fingertips on the bottom of the wheel. Almost no other cars were on the highway, and as they rolled on through the night with the broad thunder receding in the distance, they might have been anywhere in the world.

'I don't want to sound like a fool,' he said, drumming his fingers against the dashboard, 'but - may I take another cigarette? I think I do smoke - but, when you say *this country* I honestly don't know where you mean.'

'Oh *come on!*'

'I'm serious. I don't know where you mean.'

'This country,' she said slowly, 'is called Kanada.'

'Oh. Kanada.'

The second cigarette tasted better than the first. He finished it and fell asleep.

He awoke sighing and talking to himself the way sleepers do when they leave the private country of their sleep.

'Where are we going?' he murmured.

'Toronto. Unless you have some other place in mind.'

She told him that her name was Kali, and that she had an extra room in her little house in the east end of the city; he was welcome to stay there for a day or two until he recovered his memory.

'You're not afraid of me? You don't even know my name. For that matter, neither do I.'

'Then for the moment,' she replied, 'I'll call you *Noman*.'

The next time he slept it was in a voluptuous bed under a dark red cover that felt like heavy ancient velvet. He prayed to the Unknown God - the only god who came to mind, an ideal god for a man in his condition - to give him his memory back. But he woke up the following morning with the flu; the cold wet night in the forest had lowered his resistance to the world. He lay in

bed with a high fever, and Kali made him lemon tea and Marmite sandwiches; now and again she tried to distract him with a page or two of escapist fiction or nature poetry, but he tossed and turned and refused to be entertained. Once in his despair he tried to eat the pillow, and when he saw the lost feathers floating in the air he declared that his mind was a cloud, a snowstorm; he talked of the wings of the angel of death, which were not black, but white.

The second night he woke up drenched in sweat; the bed was a lake of black water where he sank and drowned. He tried to crawl in between the folds of the magnificent suffocating cover and disappear among the layers of dreams that lay between this world and the other.

'Kali,' he said, his face a gruesome mushroom grey, 'I want to be sure that my precious parts go to Science. My brain to the General Hospital in - where was it? - Ottawa. My eyes to Mount Sinai, my heart -'

'There are far worse things than having the flu,' she said, and brought him the fiftieth pot of lemon tea.

'Like what?' He stared at the Japanese maidens on the teapot, walking back and forth over the same bridge, forever.

'You could be lame, paralyzed, blind. You could be a leper, or a mythopoeic poet.'

'I'll drink the tea.'

'Not to mention what fearful diseases of the spirit, or even of your immortal soul.'

'I'll drink the tea!' he cried, his arms outstretched in wild pursuit of the Japanese maidens.

That day the fever played itself out, and the next day as she was standing in front of the hall mirror she turned to see him framed in the doorway, about to go out, the outline of his body fuzzy and unreal in the early morning light. Behind him the blue-grey haze of the strange city rose from his shoulders like wings.

'Kali, who am I?' he whispered, and he was afraid. *'Who am I?'*

He wanted to break every rule in the world, to commit unspeakable but perfectly reasonable acts in an effort to find himself; everything was within his reach, everything was impossible. Surely she knew how desperate he was? But she said nothing; she was absorbed in the complex ritual of braiding her hair and tying it into place. He resisted the urge to shake her so it all came apart again.

'Then who are you? You live alone here. Do you have a family? Do you have a man?'

'I did.'

'And where is he? What happened to him?'

'Oh,' she said, 'he died.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, and of course he wasn't.

*'So am I.' We ploughed through each other's lives, she thought, leaving these furrows a mile wide, these great gashes in each other's souls.*

'What was he like?' He wondered if he should be asking all these questions.

*A kaleidoscope, a collage, a creature who occupied the spaces between moments, sliding in between the folds of reality, his life a room composed of sliding panels and doors.*

'He was quite unusual,' she said.

He studied her. She was not, as he had first thought, beautiful; she was slim and angular. One of her ancestors was a Mohawk, she had told him. When she spoke, her voice took on a low conspiratorial tone as though she had just escaped from a situation that was fraught with danger, or was about to embark on a madly daring and clandestine escapade. Every word was charged with a dark, quiet excitement. In moments of ecstasy or distress, he was to learn later, she insisted on fleeing to India but never went. Although she had travelled in the past she now got no farther than packing her bags. She had told him that she often had trouble deciding which aspect of herself to present to the world - the North American Indian resplendent with beads and feathers, or that other Indian after whom she was named, the dusky and terrible consort of Siva, Kali.

'I'm going out,' he announced. 'But first tell me about that place where you found me. What is this Kingsmere?'

'Kingsmere was the residence of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. Short, fat little man with a brown suit and a little dog. If you study a picture of him it's like studying a snowbank: opaque, inscrutable. He communicated telepathically with his dog, employed mediums to contact his dead mother, and made no important decisions unless the hands of a clock or watch formed a propitious angle. He needed spiritualists, he needed prostitutes. He had dreams and visions of Hitler and was impressed by the Fuehrer's "love of peace".'

'Baffling man,' said Noman.

'He imported pseudo Graeco-Roman columns and bits and pieces from historic buildings and used them to decorate the grounds at Kingsmere. Zap - instant history. But he was wrong; all he did was create a sort of grotesque stage set. But for what play? The place is surreal, with all those arches leading nowhere but to the forest. He tried to decorate the present with relics from the past, and ended up creating a time-warp. The ruins don't belong in that landscape, the landscape



rejects them, they create a tension that's almost electrically charged.' She glanced at his arm, recovered now from the numbing effect of the lightning.

'Is there anything you can tell me about this country that I should know now, before I set out? It doesn't seem quite real to me.'

'Nor to anyone!' she laughed. 'Nor will it ever, until we look inside of what's real to discover what's *real*. The dark myths of the forest. And it won't settle into time, into history, until we know it well enough to make fiction of it, to play with it. Until we take it so seriously we can stop taking it seriously. There is another country, you know, and it's inside this one.' She tied something blue onto her braids.

'What was I doing at Kingsmere the night you found me?' he asked.

'You tell me. '

'I *can't*!'

She went into the kitchen and left him to rendezvous with himself in the mirror. If he had been born, so to speak, at Kingsmere - could he be a reincarnation of the madcap King? But he had no particular fondness for dogs, and politics distressed and bored him. He studied himself in the glass. He was probably in his mid forties, or so his general condition, including that of his teeth - two extractions, several fillings - indicated. He was fairly tall, with a lean and muscular build; it was the body (perhaps) of a dancer or a runner, of someone accustomed to long, lyrical exercise involving endurance and coordination. Dark auburn hair, eyes that changed colour, nationality uncertain. As for his naked self, which had surprised him that morning in the bath, there was an egg-shaped birthmark on his inner thigh and a small scar from some operation on his abdomen; his skin had a faintly olive cast. He had found that he couldn't wear a watch because his pulse interfered with it somehow and made it stop. Kali had given him one belonging to her late boyfriend (as did the clothes he now wore), and the thing gave up on him each time he put it on. Private time subverting world time, he mused.

Who was he? Useless scraps of information, names, places, random data, combined to form nothing he could call a memory. He had no family, he was sure; no one was related to him. Someone had stolen his passport to life, if indeed he ever had a passport. Or else he was merely something that someone had misplaced, someone who was now rummaging through papers in a desk in the Library of Lost Souls in search of him.

He couldn't be sure of anything; of that he was certain. There were no truths, no lies. Everything was very important.

'Well, I'm going out,' he called, and returned to the doorway.

'Do you want me to go with you?' She came out, holding two glasses of orange juice.

'No.'

'I've got to clean these windows,' she said, running a finger down the pane of glass in the door. Then she drew a lion through the film of dirt, and he drew a bird and a dolphin. 'Good luck out there,' she added.

'I don't want luck. I want a past, I want a second name, a social insurance number, a soul.'

'You already have a soul.'

'I've never been introduced to my soul. Souls are cheap. I want to smash this window, I want to fly, I want to write a sequel to the Odyssey, I want to die, I want to swim the lake, I want to break all the rules there are and then make new ones so I can break them too, I want to invent electricity; my needs are simple.'

The world beyond the window as it looked now through the transparent bodies of the animals was a fabulous and terrifying place.

'You can do anything you like, then,' she said as their glasses clicked and kissed. 'There is the city.'

He went to the police and asked them if he was a Missing Person; he went to the library and looked himself up in *Who's Who in Kanada* (he wasn't there); he gave two dollars to a girl with green hair in Yorkville who read his palm and told him that he was at a turning point in his life and things would either be good or bad; he almost wept for joy when a young man asked him 'Do you want to know who you really are?' and he cried 'Yes, yes!' only to discover that he had inadvertently consented to take a Scientology test; he went to a psychiatrist who asked him about his sex life, and he replied that he'd never had one, and anyway he was only six days old. By the end of the week he was exhausted and feeling a little reckless, which was why suddenly, at the corner of Yonge and Bloor, he grabbed the violin from the hands of a young street musician who played there every day, found the instrument familiar and satisfying, and immediately gave forth a brilliant rendition of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Hymn to the Sun*. He felt better afterwards.

He kept dreaming he was swimming in a huge lake with the shoreline nowhere in sight, and it occurred to him that this probably meant that he wanted to swim, so he went to the nearest pool and realized immediately that he was indeed a superb swimmer. His body rejoiced in itself; he did fifteen lengths in an excellent crawl with scarcely any effort. Then he did fifteen more. Afterwards in the shower room he surprised his naked fellow swimmers by breaking out into boisterous lines of Homeric poetry, in the original Greek. Soon he found a job as a lifeguard in a high school pool which was creamy white like old porcelain or a dentist's bowl, streaked along the sides with slippery yellow. In the evening he taught a group of students called The Water Babies, and standing with them, waist deep in the blinking turquoise water, he told them that swimming was just like navigating in dreams. 'Open your eyes underwater!' he cried. 'What are you afraid to see down there - yourselves?' And when the lessons were over he'd circle the pool

and peer into the depths for lost engagement rings, band-aids, jewels. He quit smoking and breathed.

He moved into a room on the third floor of a house close to the lake. It was an odd, circular room with windows looking out in three directions. He called it the tower room. It had silly orange curtains that whizzed across the windows on long metal runners. There was a magic tree outside - Ygdrasil. Marvellous children made hopscotch marks all over the sidewalk in purple and white chalk. Small kids didn't sit on the kerbs after sundown because then the black asphalt became a river, and something called Orca swam down it to bite off their feet. It was wonderful; there were no limits to the world.

Some buildings had signs on them saying JERUSALEM, CAIRO, ATHENS and so on. It was part of a festival called Caravan. You could start off the day with ordinary cornflakes, watch native dancers twirl and beat drums all morning, have a lunch of Lebanese falafel, buy Russian embroidery and Spanish dolls in the afternoon, have Italian pasta and Brio for dinner, take in Ukrainian dances in the evening and wind up with Chinese food at midnight, having seen only one or two token Anglo Saxons all day. You had no idea whose country you were in; it was perfectly Kanadian. It was wonderful. He had never been so lonely.

He began walking around everywhere, looking for his life. In Eatons, everything was inside out; indoors was made to look like outdoors with real trees and fake avenues. He got into a transparent elevator with women who wore black lipstick and musk perfume that turned men into animals. A memory seized him in a stranglehold around the throat; he was in the Eatons of the Forties in an elevator where a woman in a navy blue suit with white cuffs and immaculate white gloves was opening and closing the metal gates that moved like accordions and calling out the floors in a nasal monotone. When the memory released its grip he was left with the image of a white disembodied glove floating in the air, and the sound of sliding metal doors.

But whatever else it was, it was a charmed life. Often he'd find himself on some unknown street, staring in disbelief as suddenly everything before his eyes began to shimmer and glow with a frightening radiance. The hallucinatory *presence* of things. The trees, the grass, the sidewalk seemed on the brink of confessing to him and him alone their luminous secrets. Confronting the miraculous, he could only shake his head and whisper *look at this, look at this*, as a kind of delicious terror gripped him and he was consumed by something he called godfire. But he was also cursed with an awful inclusive vision, the painful ability to see everything at once. Thus the darkness alongside of the radiance, and the sight of his fellow human beings in their pathetic and hilarious attempts to be beautiful, to be important, to be immortal, drove him into a quietness which was at all times between laughter and tears.

And nobody knew him; the high-heeled woman who strode back and forth across the city in purple suede boots, taking up the whole sidewalk, her whole being in pursuit of some lavish dream, didn't know him; the Greeks carrying around the unbearable burden of their own existence didn't know him; the woman known as the Swedish Queen who wore pink harem pants and outrageous jewellery and a gold ribbon that said SOCIALISM across her chest didn't know him; the Chinese and Jamaicans and Hungarians and Philipinos didn't know him; the bag ladies didn't know him; the troubled young woman who cut up playing cards and left the pieces on the

pavement in front of churches and police stations in some sort of private ritual didn't know him. (One morning he picked up a part of the Three of Diamonds and spent an hour looking for the rest because perhaps she was trying to communicate with him by means of a secret code.)

*Kali*, he thought (this in the darkest nights), *I am so lonely*.

He walked all over the city, talking to popcorn vendors from places like Lisbon and Gibraltar and Corinth, to newspaper boys and mailmen and street cleaners. He wore a light brown trenchcoat, and because he looked like such a gentleman and spoke so softly and politely when he asked people if they knew who he was, they often dismissed the idea that he might be mad and were almost sorry that, no, they didn't know him and never had. Finally it was clear to him that nobody knew him and why should they? The world was theirs - or was it? Were they also alone? Was this city somebody's rough diagram of reality, or was it pure mirage? He gazed at the Tower - tallest free-standing structure in the world - and it shimmered in the gray air, a monument to nothing, a spaceship that would never have lift-off, a rocket without a launching pad.

*They didn't know who they were, so they came and built these big cities in the wilderness. They still found it empty, so they stuck up this tower in the emptiness. They were so lonely they didn't even know it, maybe even lonelier than me.*

On one of his walks he learned that he possessed certain magical powers which, although feeble and uneven at first, held promise of greater things to come. The simplest of these powers and the one which was easiest to summon up was telekinesis, and he passed some pleasant moments moving small objects such as pebbles back and forth across the sidewalk. But he soon tired of this, impatient for more dramatic feats.

News made no sense to him because he had no backdrop against which the world's daily drama might be played. He swam and swam and watched the fishy bodies of the other swimmers thrashing around, their vision coloured by red and green goggles, or crawling back and forth doing lengths, doing lengths, covering the same ground over and over like his futile thoughts. Yet there was a seductive loneliness about swimming; the water was easy, opening for him and permitting him passage, offering no resistance. Too easy, he thought. What he needed were huge waves bashing his head, black angry ones whipped up by wind, brutal cold ones thick with froth and plankton from the mouths of seabests, waves so chill and merciless they would pour through the sluice gates of his memory. Not this tame pool he swam in daily, this tepid water. When he showered down after his swim, splashing off the layers of chlorine and blinking the turquoise film from his eyes, the porcelain tiles on the walls of the shower room were as white and vapid as his memory; they were like nascent photographs in a chemical solution waiting to develop. But no image ever appeared on them. *At least I have an open mind*, he told himself. *In your condition*, said a familiar and increasingly perverse voice in his head, *what other kind could you have!*

In the tower room he went to bed early and listened to the tic-toc of bedsprings coming from somewhere in the old house where lovers were creating their own love-clock, a challenge to ordinary time. (Everyone was perishing from loneliness except the lovers. Everyone was walking

around with a list of loves and terrors in his head, hoping to meet somebody with an identical list. Looking for sibling images, flirting with mirrors.) But mostly he listened to the lake when it grew stormy and the crashing of lakewaves, south of his head, against the breakwater.

Kali was a costume designer for a small theatre company which was doing a new version of *The Cyclops*. At a theatre party he met a lot of people who all seemed to be talking about the Alexander Technique and their recent trips to Crete. 'I saw one guy from New York arguing with a cafe owner who'd said, quite nicely, how he liked to please the foreigners,' one man said, 'and the guy turned on him shouting *I'm not foreign, I'm American!* Now a Kanadian would never think of saying that, you know?' He also learned at the party that in Crete people still Tilled the Soil. And the editor of *The Golden Yo-Yo: A Magazine of the Arts* declared to anyone within range of his voice that regional theatre was dead. Noman listened, baffled.

The next week he went to see the play, and one of the actors delivered a line that made his blood run cold. Sweat broke out on his forehead; it seemed to him that everyone in the audience turned toward him. *Jesus Christ, they're doing a play about me*, he thought, and went to the nearest bar and drank himself into oblivion. He wrote NOMAN WAS HERE on the washroom wall, and considered it to be the most suggestive and obscene piece of graffiti ever composed. At two-thirty in the morning Kali got a call from a police station informing her that they were holding a drunk they'd picked up on Bay Street who claimed he knew her. He kept saying, 'Noman they call me, my father and mother and all my fellows.'

She picked him up from the station and drove him back to the tower room. 'All right, Kali, I give up,' he said, because it was clear to him now that of course she had always known him. He was the man who had died. 'Tell me everything. Am I supposed to be dead, is that it? And if so - why?'

'Some people think you're dead; it's easier for them to deal with you when you're dead,' she said. 'But I wouldn't dwell on it.'

'Why didn't you tell me before?'

'When I knew you before you also claimed you had amnesia. It's your old trick.'

'This time it's no trick, I swear it. Aren't you going to tell me anything about the past? '

'Even if it's no trick ... no. You had a thousand pasts. And anyway, if I wait long enough, you'll tell me. It'll come back to you in pieces.'

'Tell me *something!* Was I a murderer, or a poet? Was I rich, was I poor?'

'You weren't rich, you just lived like you were. I thought you were, until you sold everything in your apartment one day to pay off your debts. That was a while ago. You've been away rather a long time.'

'How long? Tell me *something*. What do I love?'

'Mathematics, music, Metaxa brandy, astronomy.'

'What do I fear?'

'The last hour of the night - the hour of the wolf - albinos for some strange reason, comets, quicksilver, fireworks, the last hour of the day.'

'And ?'

'No more. You were always inventing yourself; now you can do it again.'

The tower room loomed above him. He waited for a moment on the sidewalk and waved after her as she drove away. She watched him growing smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror, moving back through private time, retreating into microcosms where all manner of pasts were possible, and therefore all manner of futures. She wondered if he knew how lucky he was. *Yes I know you*, she thought, *I know all about you - all the people you aren't, all the places you can't be found.*

That night it rained and rained. In the last hour of the night he couldn't sleep. He opened the shameless orange curtains, rust-coloured now by moonlight, and looked down onto the street. Some people were walking home, and their multi-coloured umbrellas were codified dots in a computer's memory - *the codes of yesterday*, he thought, *the codes of possible tomorrows* - or bingo chips, or the dots of those crazy modern clocks which had no numbers or hands and lit up in key positions to tell the time. Beyond the street with its anonymous residents, down a steep hill and over an expressway, the lake heaved and sighed. The funny green dinosaurs and purple monsters in the children's playground on the lakeshore were getting drenched in the rain. He stared out, feeling suddenly very afraid. The rain slid down diagonal slots from the sky, the fat trees lurched like drunkards in the wind, the magic tree outside the window shone like a star. The street was a glistening strip of licorice; it became a road in the Gatineau hills. It was the first day of the world, and he was naked and alone.

But he started to fall asleep despite himself. The rain turned into an angel timidly knocking on the doors of his consciousness, then it was a horseman pounding on the door of an inn in Italy in the fifteenth century. Then as he sank into the dark waters of deeper sleep he thought he would die here in this loneliest of countries.

Whose country, what country? For that matter, what world? His mind was at an oblique angle, leaning into nowhere. The darkness drove a wedge into his reason. The wind confided in him all through the last hour of the night, telling him its obscure troubles. He knew that he couldn't face this loneliness much longer. He also knew that he would have to.

He walked along Danforth Avenue a few days before the Greek Easter and everywhere in the butcher shops young lambs hung upside-down, dripping blood onto the steaks and veal chops and grinning pigs' heads. The Greeks were out promenading in their expensive tailored suits with loud ties and pastel shirts (their word for suit was costume), and huge gold rings and cufflinks. The women displayed their shining children, screaming at them shrilly, then grabbing and hugging them so they couldn't breathe. The children stared in rapture at the bonbons and toy bunnies and lambs in the store windows, the red and blue and green eggs in baskets lined with doilies and silver paper. In one window there was an egg the size of a football, and a four foot high City Hall modelled in dark chocolate. In another, a horse made of jelly beans, a cake shaped like a bible, and another shaped like a Boeing 767 with AIR KANADA written in shocking pink icing along the sides.

He passed the Medusa Beauty Salon, the Trojan Horse Coffee House, then another meat store with more sacrificial animals - a counter full of slimy skinned rabbits lying on ice, their wild eyes staring into space. Then stores full of Kalamate olives and capers and sardines and feta cheese in huge stinky vats and bottles of golden oil. He went into a restaurant which had been an ice-cream parlour in days gone by and still had the old glittering chandeliers and high-backed wooden booths. Large jars full of Turkish delights and candy canes and horehound sticks lined the marble-topped counter. 'You speak Grik?' asked the girl who served him coffee, and when he said No, she turned away and revealed a wonderful Minoan profile. The owner was behind the long iceberg of the counter, washing sundae dishes and rinsing out metal milkshake containers. Faded ads for Orange Crush and Vernor's Ginger Ale adorned the walls; a big old juke box gathered dust in a corner, dreaming of Jimmy Dorsey and Les Brown and His Band of Renown. A solitary cockroach climbed into an ashtray and died.

'Haven't we met before?' he asked the owner. He asked everyone this.

'I don't think so. What's your name?'

'John Incognito.'

'I'm Spiros Ikaris,' said Spiros Ikaris. 'But when you talk to me you say Spiro, without the s, because that's how we do it in Greek. Your name in Greek is Yannis, but I'll call you Yanni, you see?'

Business was slow, so he came and sat with him in one of the wooden booths. Within five minutes they were talking politiks and religion, and Spiros was explaining how it was that Saint Paul had made his first great hit in Greece. 'We Greeks love anything new,' he said. 'Jesus Christ was new, so we adopted him. But we also love anything old. We have kept the pantheon, you know; the saints are really the old gods with new names. If a papas would hear me he would call this heresy. I don't care. I have thought much about such things. Life, I have learned, is God's great joke. We Greeks also love to laugh, as you probably know. But most of all we love miracles - did you know that?'

'Why did you come to Kanada?' Noman asked.

Spiros leaned back against the fragrant old wood and sighed. His eyes were closed; this was an old, old story. 'You who are born in freedom cannot know what we went through to gain freedom,' he said. He put seven spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee and went on. 'They cut off my brother's hands, they cut off my uncle's hands as they swam to the boats and tried to hold on ...

I am from Smyrni, in Turkey. Where Homer was from. In 1922 the Greeks of Smyrni tried to escape the Turkish persecution. They swam to the British and French ships and tried to climb aboard. They cut off their hands. Men and women and children fell back from the sides of the ships without hands. I was small, I remember hands falling into the sea. Then somehow I was taken to Greece.

'You Canadians, you haven't suffered. We Greeks are haunted by our dead. In Crete there's a place where the people of the village see the ghosts of horses and riders who died in battle rising from the morning dew. They call them the riders of the mist. There's nothing like that in this country. There are no ghosts here because there is no past. This country is a horse of a different colour, as you say. So why do I stay here, you may ask? I hate it yet I stay, I stay until my own country starts to turn to a dream in my head, and I say I will go back but I never do. Maybe I'm afraid that if I go back to stay, like some of my friends have tried to do, the truth will be so different from the dreams that it will force me back here to this cold, this emptiness ...'

'You still haven't told me why you came.'

'I came here to make money! I thought this city would be full of Indians and I would make banana splits and chocolate sodas for the savages. But the savages were men in bowler hats and women with little umbrellas, and later they were loud teenagers. Because my English sounded strange to them they made cruel jokes about me which they thought I could not hear. They said I was Greek, as though the word was an insult. In Greek the word for foreigner is xenos, which means outsider, which means you are a guest. Not so in this country; nobody is a guest in this country. Who then are the hosts - the trees?'

'It's because nobody invited us,' Noman said. 'We're all foreigners here, we're all illegal immigrants.'

'That's crazy!' Spiros protested. 'You're not from another country.'

'I'm more foreign than you and I'm Canadian. Maybe I'm the only real foreigner here.'

He's crazy, Spiros thought. Trellos. He brought some candies from the counter. Noman was totally unprepared for the shock he received when a butterscotch drop hit his tastebuds. His senses reeled and wave after wave of déjà vu came over him. The past was glued onto the roof of his mouth and the lining of his nose; he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that once long ago he had been in this place, reaching up to the high counter and having his hand filled with small peppermints like sparrows' eggs.



It all came back, the crazy delicacies of childhood, gobs of smells and tastes - caramel BB Bats on a stick, blackballs that turned your mouth licorice black as they wore down layer after layer to the final white which contained a horrible inedible seed, lurid red wax lips that you held between your teeth and were so funny that your friends peed with laughter when they saw you, coloured icing sugar in little triangular bags that you sucked up in a black licorice straw until you sneezed, very sweet little cone-shaped things dipped into something red and tasting like clouds, very tiny red hearts made of wicked cinnamon, so tiny that you had to throw about ten into your mouth at once to get the full effect, and small funny bananas two for a cent that tasted like nothing, and licorice pipes and candy cigarettes and ropes of hideous red licorice and grape popsicles and bubble gum and jelly beans and Smarties and root beer and ju-jubes and chocolate covered raisins ... 'I have Kanadian citizenship yet I am a foreigner,' Spiros said.

Noman looked up to the dusty chandeliers which seemed to be descending inch by inch to the ground. That's how they had looked when he was a child, he thought - like spaceships bringing a race of glittering beings to earth. He owed Spiros something for this wonderful memory.

'The kids never learned my name, they just called me The Greek,' Spiros went on.

'I was one of them,' Noman confessed. 'I remember now.'

'Were you? Well never mind.' Spiros reached across the table and tapped his arm. 'Listen, here's a joke. A Greek goes to a Chinese restaurant and the waiter tells him they have a special dish for fly-day. That's Friday, says the Greek, Friday. All right, Friday, Friday! screams the waiter - you stupid Gleek!'

Noman smiled distractedly. A wild feeling was overtaking him, a feeling from long ago, composed of a kind of madness, a kind of ecstasy, and a terrible kind of power.

'You aren't laughing,' said Spiros. 'That's because like all Kanadians you have no sense of humour. Ah, what a country. No ghosts, no history, no past. No humour, no mystery, no magic. Just this cold, this emptiness ...' He shuffled back to the counter and began to wash more sundae dishes.

Outside in the street the children still gazed at the red and blue and green eggs, the bonbons and cakes and bunnies, the ravishing and elaborate decor of Paskha.

Now Noman laughed.

'If I showed you something you have never seen before, something truly wonderful and beautiful - would it make you change your mind about this country?' he asked.

'I do not think that anything could do that,' Spiros said.

'You told me you loved miracles.'

'There are no miracles here. And no makers of miracles.'

But then Spiros heard a sound like the rustling of wind through dry bushes, and the wind released an aromatic dust that stung his nostrils, and when he raised his head to look into the mirror behind the counter he saw the huge horse, purple as the distant mountains of Crete at sunset, quiet as a night cloud, approaching the soda fountain on careful, velvet hooves.



## Magic Wars

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His loneliness was something that shone from him like light. It was an exquisite loneliness, almost refined. It was a gift; he had been born with it, and it was something that the world could never take from him. He possessed nothing but this thrilling loneliness, and he guarded it with a passion, sharing it only with the blue bicycle in whom he confided all his secrets.

Now thirteen, he had gotten into the habit of peering into peoples' windows at night, his awful pale little face pressed against the panes, his eyes searching for something contained in their secret lives. He couldn't have given a name to what he was looking for.

When he was very young, every day had been a birthday he celebrated in a thousand ways, every moment had been a hole into which he dropped joys and terrors, bizarre adventures. He dreamed he threw himself over Niagara Falls in a barrel, he walked across the Grand Canyon on a tightrope, he sat on the top of a flagpole eating nothing but raisins and sunflower seeds, defying the world, he flung himself through one of the windows at Casa Loma, brandishing a sword and proclaiming to the dancers on the ballroom floor that he was the man in the iron mask. He composed music and played baseball, he was a computer programmer, an astronaut, and he was Darth Vader when all the boys were Skywalker because he preferred the dark side of everything. But now, under the helmet of darkness, his face was brooding and pale. He had become the nightchild, that's what people called him.

It was all because of the night of the rich kid's birthday party. The night of the magician.

The rich kid's family threw a huge party for their son and hired a real live magician to come and perform some tricks. And the magician was wonderful to behold, with eyes that changed colour as you looked at him, and dark reddish-brown hair, and a cape that moved even when he wasn't moving. As he stood there in his dark remote glory, words slowly formed in the child's mind, words which were wordless, words belonging to a superior language he had not yet learned: *Perfect Coordinator of All the Worlds, Emperor of Fire and Water, Magus, Lord of Excellent Lies.*

All during the magician's performance he had felt that he was the only one in the room who understood what the magician was really doing - for he wasn't doing 'tricks,' he was doing something else, something more important and unnerving than anyone knew. When he produced fire he *invented* fire. When the silks were pulled from his wand they were a river of miracles. The other kids laughed, and he hated them. Magic was not a laughing matter, magic was dead serious.

Somehow no one had thought to provide a screen or a curtain for the magician to go behind after he had finished his show, to put away his equipment in privacy. So he had to stand in the bare light in the centre of the room with all his props spread out in naked disarray on the table before him. The child didn't know it, but the magician was inwardly cursing those responsible for this oversight. Luckily, most of the kids had dispersed to other parts of the house, leaving him alone to perform the extremely secret ritual of packing up his equipment in preparation for a future performance. The way in which a magician puts away his wonders is as important as the way in which he brings them out. The slightest little wisp of material had to be folded just so; every single piece of equipment had its own intricate and delicate position with respect to every other piece. It was a long and intricate task, one which the magician had done a hundred times before - but always alone, always in complete privacy.

He thought he was alone now, but suddenly the child was right there in front of him, his luminous little face turned up towards him in terrified adoration.

'I'll help you pack up, sir. I'll do anything -- just tell me what to do.'

'No one can help me do what I do,' said the magician, smiling grimly. 'Absolutely no one.'

'But I can make it faster for you, I know I can!'

'No one can make it faster for me.'

He watched, bewildered, as the magician took forever to fold up a fluorescent orange square of silk. Why did it take him so long? Surely this was the easiest part of his work. Why didn't he just stash everything away and fly off to whatever distant part of the galaxy he had come from, whatever world that glowed red and gold in the light of its several suns?

'Please let me help you,' he pleaded.

'Get lost, you twit,' said the magician.

It was then that the sky cracked into a thousand pieces and fell onto the child's head. Reality took a sharp turn to the left; nothing would ever be the same again. Life, he decided then and there, was a big lie. Life could get lost, life could take a walk.

'You're *Chinese*,' he told the magician. That was the big insult of the year.

'If you say so,' said the magician. 'But in the fullness of time you will understand. In the fullness of time, or maybe tomor-row at noon. Whatever.'

'Give me that wand. Or I'll tell everybody what I saw here, how you stand here for hours folding everything, getting it all ready, how magic is a pile of shit.' He grabbed the wand.

'Give that back!' the magician yelled, and lunged for him. The sudden movement jarred the table and a number of props fell onto the floor. He held the child's wrist in an iron grip and they vied for control of the magic sceptre.

'I'll show you how to make yourself invisible if you give me that back,' said the magician. 'It's a matter of bending light. I'll show you.'

'Fuck off.' The child's wiry strength allowed him to wiggle free. He kicked the magician in the shin and ran for the door.

'You'll regret this!' the magician cried. 'Anyway, that wand is just another prop. It won't work for you.'

'So why do you care then if I've got it or not?' the child sneered. 'What's it to you?'

He got away with the wand and left the magician standing there in the naked light, folding, folding. He looked back once, and the fabulous cape that had first seemed to possess a life of its own had re-arranged itself in limp and lifeless folds.

Outside, he tried to do something with the wand, but it didn't work. He waved it around in circles high over his head, he blew on it and whispered wild incantations, he stroked it and pleaded with it and jumped on it, he dipped it in soft earth and in water, he stole some matches and passed it through fire, but nothing happened. *So it's a dud*, he thought. *Just like him*. He kept it anyway.

Now he peered into people's windows, his face, pale as clay, pressed against the glass panes of their lives, looking for some-thing he couldn't name, for its name belonged to a superior language he had not yet learned.

*Magus.*

*Lord of Excellent Lies.*

Whenever Noman saw the boy, day was just turning into night, so it was neither one thing nor the other but a place in space and time that belonged to the two of them alone. The place had its own rules, its own laws. And there were always fireworks.

The first time was the Twenty-Fourth of May, and he had slept for part of the afternoon and had exhausting dreams which culminated in something he called the voice of sleep. Its messages had the disorder -- or the magical order -- of all dreams. *You've got this cap on your brain, this helmet of bone, this bonnet of steel, this skull to contain your immortal soul, this crown of folly, this nightcap, this cranium that contains the sum total of all you have ever learned. He told the voice to shut up; it went on: If you should die before you wake, pray the Lord your soul to take, otherwise you're in big trouble. What is a logarithm and who cares? Who built the great pyramid at Giza and why? Who are you?*

He opened his eyes and saw the orange curtains gathering light. He lay in bed awhile in the warm compromise between sleep and consciousness, then got up and moved around in the daze of the afternoon. What should he wear? He distrusted all his clothes. Did this matter? Eight zillion Chinese didn't care what he wore. Nothing mattered, everything mattered; it was Monday. He put on a dark green sweater and wondered what today was all about -- this dead queen's birthday. (The queen of what, the queen of where?) Later at dusk he went to Kali's place where people were gathered in the back yard handing out sparklers. Roman candles had been launched like minia-ture spacecraft and were proceeding to destinations in minor galaxies. Multi-coloured sparks, space-rain, fell back behind them and disappeared in the dark grass. *Kali*, wrote Kali with a sparkler across the sky. *Kalikalikal*.

His sparkler smelled like sulphur and nitro-glycerine and pine trees and summer campfires. 'Just when you get to the last letter the first one starts to disappear,' said Kali. 'So if you want to see your whole name you have to write faster and faster and over and over, but there's never one point where you'll get it all down at once.'

Noman, he wrote across the sky. *Nomanomanoma*.

The back yard was ablaze with children and animals and Pinwheels and Burning Schoolhouses. They went inside to find peace, and discovered the TV talking to itself, telling itself the news, then: 'These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its mission: to seek out new worlds, to boldly go where no man has gone before ...'

Kali switched channels. 'What's wrong with you?' she asked him, for his face was suddenly drained of colour, and he had broken out into a cold sweat.

'There's a boy,' he said, 'peering in the window. He's got this pale face and this terrible grin.'

'He's not there now,' Kali said.

'There was a boy out there. A boy looking in.'

'It was probably the nightchild, that's what we call him around here,' she said with a light laugh.

'Who's he?'

'He's a haunted little kid, a real loner. In summer you can see him frying ants on the sidewalk with a magnifying glass.'

'Don't all kids do that?'

'Yes. But then he eats them. He also draws demons all over the Bible.'

'He was horrible, and luminous. He just stared and grinned.'

'He does that to everybody,' Kali said.

'No, it's different with me. He's seen me before. He's seen me naked. Now he's doing it again, stripping me, exposing me.'

'You're taking him too seriously. Kids don't have that much insight.'

'Insight! He's got x-ray vision, he's got laser light coming out of his eyes. For him the whole world is his private holo-gram.'

'You're unravelling,' Kali said.

'No I'm not. It's just that I see ghosts everywhere because everything is haunted, everything. Everybody is haunting everybody else. The whole planet is haunted. And now this kid is going to start flitting in and out and around the corners of my vision like an evil little cherub. Do you know what the definition of a cherub is? A child with many wings and *a body full of eyes*.' He smiled and added grimly, 'When you deal with me, you deal with angels.'

The child's next visitation was on Kanada Day. People milled around the parliament buildings eating five-cent hotdogs and wearing hats that read: I'M HOOKED ON KANADA. Noman and Kali watched TV, and the eloquent box showed a musician in an Indian musical group looking up from his *sitar*, his coal-black eyebrows locked together in the middle of his forehead. 'Well folks -- goodnight for today!' he stammered. 'Any interested bodies should call our program.' The camera started to leave him alone, then changed its mind and lingered on his face. Beads of sweat broke out on his brow. He signed off again, eyebrows knotted in despair. A girl beside him wiped her forehead in an abstract way and smeared her red dot horizontally across it. *War paint*, thought Kali, *now she's a red Indian*. On another channel they learned that Anne Murray was at home in Springhill entertaining her friends and relatives, and Buffy Sainte Marie was at Broken Hand reserve in Manitoba. Then:

-- *Ottawa* -- Parliament Hill. An anonymous hand waves at the country, the palm slowly approaching the camera until the screen is blocked out. Screen clears to reveal an enormous Maple Leaf in front of which Ukrainian dancers whirl and twirl.

-- *P.E.I.* A little boy sings something in slow, dark Gaelic.

-- *Montreal*. Somebody sings 'tu es mon chanson . . . '

-- *Yellowknife*. The midnight sun high in the sky, Indian dancers with horn-rimmed glasses describe slow circles to the beat of the drums, the drums.

-- *Ottawa*. The whole world is on stage in a thousand costumes. Norwegians lean into the wind, impervious to the rain and chill. Armenians dance in a mad swirl of colours. The flags of a thousand nations lose control. 'China!' screams the announcer, and China makes a brief appearance. 'Taiwan!' and Taiwan emerges like magic from behind the Maple Leaf. 'Scotland! Denmark! Lithuania! Germany! Finland! France! Switzerland! Austria! '

'What nationality is the kid we saw?' Noman asked.

'The nightchild? Oh nothing, I guess he's just Kanadian,' Kali said.

And then it happened. The fireworks started to go off at Ontario Place, and the air took on the indistinct purple haze of dusk. Without turning around, he knew the boy was there at the window, and when he did turn, he saw the feverishly bright eyes and the purple light casting shadows on the auburn hair. The boy seemed to be waving something at him, something like a stick or a cane, and his mouth was open in a wide, mocking smile.

'Who is that kid? I'm going to kill that kid!' he screamed, and bolted for the door. But he wasn't fast enough; the horrible child laughed and vanished.

'If we pay too much attention to him we'll give him the evil eye,' Kali said.

'If that means we'll curse him, I already have.'

'It doesn't mean that. In the East if you compliment or pay too much attention to a child you put him in grave danger. That's what those little blue amulets are for -- to reflect the Eye back on itself. You may not wish evil, but your praise or attention attracts it. So flattery in itself is a kind of evil, I suppose.'

'I hate kids. I think I was one once,' Noman said, and his voice trailed off sadly.

'You men,' Kali smiled, 'you are all looking for your fathers.'

The thin, piping voices of the children of a thousand lands on Parliament Hill rose for Oh Canada. He turned back to the window, but it was a dark rectangle of silence like the TV which Kali switched off. Then the children fell silent, the Indians withdrew, the Latvians and Estonians receded into that strange country behind the Maple Leaf. The last images on the screen were the bright signatures of the fireworks against the sky.

Daymares, he thought, are much worse than nightmares, and that is why one should avoid sleeping by day. Nevertheless he slept in late one morning, and the dreadful dreams began. The child burned in his head and hurled vulgarities at him and ran after him, laughing. Sometimes he

was chalk-white; other times he was black. Sometimes he wore feathers on his head like an Indian chief or an Incan king; other times he wore a metal helmet and his laugh had a hellish, sepulchral sound.

Then the child rode his blue bicycle over the rim of the world, and he awoke.

Children were all mad, he told himself later that day as he walked through the park. They talked to themselves all the time, giving themselves crazy instructions, reciting ancient chants. Either that or they lurched around like drunkards. When they played together it was like watching the rituals of a secret society. (May I take one giant step? Yes you may.) And they were not good or bad or anything -- they were transparent.

He got onto a streetcar at King Street and there were a few boys of twelve or thirteen in the back seat. One of them came down the aisle and stood beside him.

He knew immediately who it was.

'Hey you -- do you want to see what I found?' the boy asked.

Then he held out the wand.

'Give me that thing,' he said in a low voice, avoiding the boy's eyes.

'No way. It's mine. I found it.'

'You didn't find it, you stole it. Years ago, you stole it. I remember.'

'Who says I should give it to you, you slob?'

'I say.'

The boy lit a match.

'Dynamite!' somebody screamed. People turned around and started to make little shrieking noises. That morning it had been reported on the news that a large amount of dynamite had been lost or dumped somewhere at this end of the city, and the police were afraid of it falling into the hands of children.

Noman seized the match and blew it out, then grabbed onto the wand and tried to wrench it away from the boy. 'Give me that goddamn wand!' he yelled.

Now there was pandemonium on the streetcar. The driver stopped to let everyone out, and the boy slithered away before he could reach him. Noman squeezed through the crowd and chased the boy down a side street and into a lane. He cornered him in front of a yellow garage, and they stared at one another in fury.



'I hate your guts,' said the boy. 'You turd. You troll.'

'In the fullness of time you will understand. In the fullness of time, or maybe tomorrow at noon. Whatever.' Noman said, and wondered what he meant. 'Meanwhile, give me the wand, because now it really is dynamite.'

'Like Hell it is. It's a dud, just like you. You want it so much -- here, take it!' He threw the wand at Noman, then he swung around and headed down the lane in a swift, strangely unchildlike stride.

Noman had just enough time to step back to avoid having the thing explode in his face. When the explosion came and the wand fell, blackened and smoking at his feet, the boy turned back. He looked puzzled at first, then he broke out into wild, cruel laughter, turned a corner in the lane and disap-peered.

*Bad timing*, Noman thought. *Must get my act together*. He picked up the wand, folded it, and put it inside his jacket. By the time he got to where he was going it was dusk, and thundery. A greasy sort of rain came down, and in the peagreen light the asphalt on the roads darkened to the slick wicked black of the mask of Lord Darth Vader.



## The Demon of Thursday

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A fragile animal was chewing on his eyebrows. He turned his head and encountered two gigantic, indignant eyes. Then the fragile animal attacked the lobe of his ear. The little orange kitten was famished, so he got up and cracked an egg into a saucer of milk, making a mental note that the first thing he must do today was buy cat food. He'd found the mad little beast the day before in High Park; it had been sitting alone in the grass and when it saw him it gave a squeak of joy and immediately ran up his socks and clung to his kneecap for dear life. It felt like a starfish against his bare skin, its legs splayed out in all directions. Gently, he had plucked it out from under his jeans.

'Hi there, Small Change,' he said. 'That *is* your name?', Then he had taken it home.

It had been a beautiful summer morning, and the trees were berserk with green and yellow. He'd been to the zoo in the park and stared at the three buffalo who brooded and chewed and thought

their dark brown thoughts and carried around a heavy dark brown cloud of doom when they moved. Far away from their gloom were the duck ponds and the deer pens and the sexy long-legged llamas with their triple set of eyelashes, and the magnificent, insane flamingoes with their splinterthin legs and their shocking pink auras, who gazed into their pond now and then as though to confirm that anything as gorgeous as themselves could actually exist.

And everywhere there were birds sitting in the branches in breathless silence in the glowing world of their freedom, unlike their exotic cousins who were caged in an indoor zoo with nameplates identifying them - *Cowbirds* (he seemed to remember seeing this somewhere), and *Slate-Coloured Juncos*, and *Toucans* (who looked the same whether they were awake or asleep; nobody could tell the difference), and two old pelicans who he had called Willy and Nilly.

He had stood staring at Grenadier Pond, which was large enough to canoe up and down in and which, according to some obscure Kanadian legend, was supposed to be riddled with the corpses of countless grenadiers. (What was a grenadier?) Then he went to where Kali had told him there was a magic triple-bunked tree called the Wishing Tree where as a child she had sat and, so she told him, dreamed up the world.

And today was Thursday. Thursday was always a dark day; it had a dark purple colour. (He had figured out long ago how the different days of the week had their distinctive colours: Sunday was of course white, Monday was red, Tuesday was green, Wednesday was a sort of dull yellow, Friday was orange and Saturday was a lovely sky blue.) Today he was going to see Kali. They were going to drive out to Marine Land at Niagara and watch the whales and dolphins at play.

'Do you know that these huge dolphins jump and re-enter the water with hardly a single splash?' she had told him. 'It's because of their skin, I read somewhere.'

But when he got to Kali's place he found her white-faced and weeping. She offered no explanation, but jabbed her finger into the monstrous news of the morning paper.

On one of the eastern coasts two dolphins had been found with their eyes poked out and cigarette burns all over their bodies. One was dead, and the other was crying and crying into the blue hole of heaven.

'Somebody wrote that in Kanada we weep for animals who are victims because we ourselves feel like victims,' Kali managed to say. 'They're like a symbol for something. That's what somebody wrote.'

'I don't think they're symbols; I think they're dolphins,' he said.

They did not go to Marine Land that day.

The following Thursday disaster struck again. Three flamingoes were killed in High Park. They were found lying dead around their little pool, their long necks wrung into hideous spirals. Bits of wild pink feathers lay scattered around; their six legs, silly as straws, were splayed out in all

directions. The black beneath their wings was exposed, and one black-tipped beak dipped slightly into the water as though its owner had been gazing at himself for the last time.

'Who is doing this? What demon is at work here?' Kali cried.

'The demon,' he replied, 'of Thursday. There is no other explanation.'

So that when, two weeks later, some maniac opened the enclosures for the buffalo in the park, and the three great beasts wandered out and away in a huge brown haze, he and Kali were almost prepared. They tried to consider rationally the plight of the ponderous shadowy creatures loose and lost in a forest they'd never before known - for the park was enormous, as big as a forest.

'One of them is pregnant,' Kali said. 'They'll die, all four of them.'

'Three.'

'Four, including the unborn one.'

'No they won't,' he said, with unfelt conviction.

'Yes, they will. They'll die of horrible, unwanted freedom. They were born in captivity; what could be worse than this excruciating freedom?'

'What will they eat? People?' He was trying to be funny.

'Buffalo don't eat people; people eat buffalo.'

It was true, he thought - if you're born in captivity, what is freedom? Freedom is a nightmare, freedom is wandering around alone among the alien trees in an alien forest. There was only one thing more terrible than being caged, and that was being suddenly and unexpectedly released.

Silence fell like rain, and rain fell outside onto all the streets of the city, onto trodden sidewalks, onto unseen rooftops, onto the three anonymous buffalo in High Park. It rained until it seemed to him that this was the beginning of a second Flood, and that it was time for all the animals of the earth to be gathered up and saved from extinction. He dreamed all night of beautiful animals in pairs, entering the Ark.

All of the buffalo died the next morning. One of them was seen trying to cross Bloor Street, on a red light, at five a.m. A motorist returning from an all night party, and later described as being in a state of near collapse, had spotted it and called the Humane Society. By dawn, vets had tracked all the animals down and managed to shoot them with tranquilizing darts so they might be transported back to their pens. But shock and fatigue had taken their toll, and one by one the buffalo succumbed.

He heard the news on the radio which he had switched on as soon as he woke up. He lay there listening, Small Change draped across his ankles.

It's the *colour* of Thursdays that I don't like, he thought. That dark purple colour. I never liked Thursdays.

The three buffalo died at dawn. The radio didn't say four buffalo, but he knew that the baby buffalo died in the huge red womb of its mother. The others died in an unknown, unreal forest. Right in the center of the city.

So much for freedom, he thought. And then he found himself weeping, just like Kali. He wept for her as a little girl sitting under her Wishing Tree and dreaming up her world - but not this world, no, not this one. He wept for all the animals who had never made it to the Ark. And then he wept because he knew there was no Ark. He wept for two dolphins, three flamingoes and four buffalo who were doomed to share the same world with the insane animal known as man. He wept for all the beautiful breathless creatures of the earth. And they were not symbols.



## The Twelfth of Never

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Saturdays, white jets slashed the sky like sharks on their way to London, Paris, Edmonton. Saturdays he wished he could travel somewhere, but he had no passport and would never get one until he produced a birth certificate, which was out of the question. Although he had flashes of memory, his amnesia was still his closest companion next to the little cat. Sometimes he felt that his was a privileged condition; it gave him a rare insight into the nature of time, which was circular rather than linear - (only the animals grasped the true nature of time) - but for the most part it was an affliction, nothing more.

July succumbed to August; the summer light drove on into evening. Crazy little squirrels appeared in the branches of the great tree outside his window, and every morning at seven, dozens of them went racing up to the top branches, moving as one body. Ten minutes later they all fell asleep at precisely the same moment, each occupying a separate junction in the tree. Then they'd all wake up together and go charging back to the ground. All the animals of the world were whirling around in their incomprehensible business. Sometimes he awoke to find little gifts left in his armpit by the cat to show its appreciation and goodwill - a bean or a pea or a walnut. Or the little thing would drag cushions into dark corners, purring to them dreamily, uttering heaven knew what words of love, licking them and bumping them with its nose and paw. Sometimes it would squeak and run around in circles or dash up and down the curtains in pursuit of some invisible companion. Out on the lake rabid waves frothed at the mouth, crazed with summer

In this country the seasons were the lords of the land. Everything would perish in the long whiteout of winter, and in the breathless space between winters everything was held in suspension and one was often a prisoner in the absolute present. This summer, on Saturday afternoons at exactly twenty after one the rays of the sun turned everything gold - his hands, his shoes, his hair; time stood still and he learned all he needed to know of eternity. Then from down the street the clear tinkle of the old scissors-grinder's bell would summon him back to the fluid present, to world time. The scissors-grinder was one of those who came from places like Warsaw and Kiev to sharpen knives in the capitals of North America. He had pulled his little green contraption around the neighbourhood for forty years, and now you didn't often hear the whirring of the wheel at its work, only the bell's note growing louder, then softer, then dying.

This Saturday afternoon he went out for a walk. It was a bright day and the Tower was more than usually there, poking a hole in his vision, giving him a pain in the east side of his head, snatching a huge chunk of the sky from his sight. There was something decidedly obscene about it; it was a sort of Up Yours to the rest of the world. It was not, as some thought, a monument to the future, but to the past. He hated it. Towers could only diminish and humiliate you. (He'd read that when it was completed, some workmen had celebrated the event by pissing from the absolute top, all over the metropolis.)

In a park old men lay on benches, their slack bodies wrapped in the distinctively nondescript clothing of the poor - coats and pants the colour of stagnant pools, or pigeon grey and shit brown and moss green. He wished they would all fall to the ground and turn into poppies. It was disgusting to be poor. He wasn't poor. He could pay his rent and keep himself and the cat alive; he could keep his trenchcoat clean and wear decent clothes.

But the city was a city of carnivals. Turn any corner and sooner or later someone would come at you beating a drum or dancing and singing and pulling the brilliant chariots of Lord Jagannatha. Or the Chinese would be having a dragon festival, or the Shriners dressed up as ancient Egyptians or Turks would be having a parade. Today there was music coming from a block away. He turned a corner and in a flash the street filled up with magic black children holding balloons and paper roses. The music drove every thought from his head. It was a steel band pounding a melody out of the guts of metal drums - the West Indian *Caribana* parade. Dancers with sequins on their eyebrows emerged from nowhere, some strapped into costumes which were so heavy that they had to wheel themselves down to the street.

Leading the parade was the Sun King, a great golden disc about ten feet in diameter moving very slowly, followed by an entourage of lesser suns. When he got close, Noman saw that his face - a tiny black circle in the center of the disc - was bathed in sweat. The Sun was exhausted, so exhausted that he couldn't pull himself around the corner, and one side of his marvellous disc collided with a popcorn cart. The Sun cursed and the owner of the popcorn cart cursed back. The lesser suns started shrieking, for now the whole parade was being held up.

'Is there any way I can give you a hand?' Noman asked the gleaming face in the centre of the orb.

'I would be obliged, mahn,' said the Sun in a booming baritone, 'if you would do just that. My knees have resigned from weariness, mahn. Resigned. If you would grab onto one of the ropes on the side of this thing, mahn. And then pull like Hell, mahn.'

Very slowly he pulled the Sun around the corner. The people laughed and cheered and the band coaxed its maddening glorious music out of the drums and hammered it in long steel spikes into the ground behind them. Then a sudden awful silence settled over everything, and it became as black as night. Noman stood trembling in the chill of the air.

'Who are you?' he asked the Sun.

'I am,' said the Sun, 'the king of Barbados. I am Lord of twenty-four countries and slave to no man. Yes indeed, mahn, yes indeed. You may have noticed that I am black as the Earl of Hell. That is because I *am* the Earl of Hell. I am also Lord of the Eclipse, and these are my associates the Sundogs. Now you know who I am. And I know who you are,' he added, flashing him a dazzling smile.

'Then tell me, tell me!'

'No. I have to get this day on the road. Remember this day, mahn. The Twelfth of Never. At twenty past one. Goodbye.'

Then the light returned and the Sun and his associates crept away. He watched the rest of the parade writhe by - little girls in oval costumes which turned them into eggs, dancers drowning in silver sequins, kings and queens and fairies and demons in a long glittering line which danced its way down to the Tower and the lake where there were ferries to take them to the island across the bay. For a moment he considered joining the tail end of the parade, but the moment passed. Instead he wandered off on his own when the last of the black dancers had dissolved and the golden disc of the Sun was a lone dot in the distance. At the end of the day it was joined by that other sun, and there was a spectacular double sunset as both suns slid below the far horizon.



## The Man in the Moore

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Sometimes he couldn't even remember how long he'd had the amnesia. But one of the nice things about not remembering anything was that the world was almost unbearably beautiful; everything

was fresh and new. The city was full of surprises. Right now the wind was flinging itself at him with shameless abandon as he made his way down the tunnel of Bay Street in the direction of City Hall. He headed across the square to where Henry Moore's *Archer* was slowly acquiring its splendid patina, turning green with age and doing so with great dignity.

Here there occurred one of the unpleasant things about having amnesia - one of the hot waves of recognition or nearrecognition of something which was sometimes accompanied by a slight sensation of nausea.

'I have the most extraordinary feeling that I *know* this thing,' he thought, and then realized that he had spoken aloud, as a bum who was sitting on a nearby bench got up and joined him in scrutinizing the sculpture.

'You like this thing?' he asked. 'I don't like this thing. Nobody likes this thing, they just get used to it, that's all. Piece of crap if you ask me.'

'I mean I feel like I *know* it, it's almost as though I've been inside it, you know? I'm the only man in this city who's seen it from the *inside*. God, I probably know this piece better than any man alive. Except the artist.'

'I've heard a lot of comments about this thing,' said the bum, 'but this is ridiculous.'

'Sorry,' he said. 'That's what I get for talking out loud.'

The wind went right through a stop light, turned a corner and proceeded along Queen Street. *The Archer* turned an imperceptively darker shade of green.

He had despaired of fortune-tellers, having gone twice to tea rooms in the east end of town to consult professional readers of cards and palms. They were justifiably upset when he informed them that he wasn't even slightly interested in the future, that it was the *past* which he wished to have revealed to him. The past was something they were wary of, crammed as it was with its dark mysteries, but they bristled with news of the future. He couldn't understand why they couldn't turn their talents with equal success to either end of the spectrum of time; surely, in fact, the past presented less difficulties than the future since it was accomplished, over and done with. (This he argued despite the fact that he knew time to be nonlinear.) But none of them saw things his way. One of them wasted half an hour telling him about her psychic war with Jean Dixon; another offered him a cup of weak tea in which the saddest tea leaves he had ever seen arranged themselves in disinterested patterns of random destiny.

But one day a little yellow-haired girl at the corner of Bloor and Dufferin handed him a leaflet which read:

MISS LISA

CLAIRVOYANT AND

SPIRITUALIST READER

## FROM THE UNSEEN WORLD

## OF SPIRITUALISM

Two images flanked the message - one of Christ holding a cross and a bouquet of flowers, and one of Christ with arms raised, palms outward to reveal the stigmata. Zodiac signs decorated the borders of the leaflet. He turned it over and read:

HERE COMES NEWS OF A REMARKABLE WAY TO CONQUER AND OVERCOME THE DREADFUL OBSTACLES IN YOUR LIFE! LIFT YOURSELF OUT OF THE BLACKNESS AND UNCERTAINTY WHICH ENGULF YOU - VISIT THE EXTRAORDINARILY GIFTED *Lisa!* ONE VISIT AND YOU WILL NEVER BE THE SAME. YOU WILL MARVEL AT HER GREATNESS AND DEEPNESS. SHE SUCCEEDS WHERE OTHERS HAVE FAILED. SHE IS UNLIKE EVERYONE. SEVEN DAYS A WEEK FROM 10 AM TO 5 PM. 93 BELL AVENUE. SIDE ENTRANCE PLEASE.

There were translations of the message in Portuguese and Greek and a few more flowers and Zodiac signs.

It was Sunday when he went to see Miss Lisa.

All the church bells were ringing, and little ladies with beige and white handbags and lace gloves and blue and pink flowered hats were going arm in arm to church to hear sermons such as: *Jesus: The First Hippie!* or *Christ the Woman!* or even: *Christ the Dow Jones Average.* Sunlight was everywhere, except in the dark green lane which led to the side entrance of 93 Bell Avenue.

Miss Lisa was very tall; she wore dark blue nail polish on nails that seemed to have grown out of control, like those of ancient mandarin lords, and many large rings with semiprecious stones. She had plucked out her eyebrows over dark green eyes. She motioned for him to sit at a naked kitchen table overseen by two enormous spider plants. The room was full of flies, all telling him their secrets. He was very nervous.

She sat down opposite him and put an old brown teapot and two frail cups and saucers on the table, then opened the pot to stir the tea - a colourless tea upon which floated an ancient teabag in its second or third incarnation.

'I don't read tea-leaves,' she said. 'They're old fashioned and silly.'

She stared at him and he murmured something as she poured the awful brew. Then out of the middle of nowhere she said, 'No man is an island, you know.'

This gave him such a start that he almost dropped the cup. 'How did you know?' he cried. 'That's my name - Noman. At least that's what I'm calling myself until I find out who I am. How could you possibly know?'

Miss Lisa, who knew that everyone believed what they wanted to believe, said, 'I know what I know,' and dropped her eyelids mysteriously. Then she looked up at him again and added, 'My fee is five dollars for a half-hour consultation.'



'Let's get on with it them,' he urged her.

'You men,' she chided, 'rush rush rush. You must learn to take your time, to savour the time like nectar. I have always known this; in one of my incarnations I was a Greek *heteira*.'

'What have you been doing since then?' he asked as she laid her Tarot cards and crystal ball on a piece of black velvet on the table.

'I was Xenobia. I was Joan of Arc. I was Hitler's mistress. I've been busy.'

He wondered why, whenever people spoke of their previous lives, it always turned out that they occupied some very high position; most often they were royalty. Why did nobody ever reveal that in the past they were peasants, dock-workers, slaves? He didn't have long to dwell on this, for now the cards of the Major Arcana of the Tarot deck were spread out before him. His eyes fell immediately upon *La Lune*, *Le Pendu* and *Le Monde* - the Moon, the Hanged Man and The World. Her eyes followed his eyes, 'Remember which card you are most drawn to,' she said. 'That card will represent yourself as you appear to yourself, as you are in your own eyes.'

'I want you to know something,' he told her. 'I have amnesia, that's why I'm here. I'm only interested in the past. Don't waste your time on the future.'

'The past,' she said.

'The past.'

She raised a non-existent eyebrow. 'You're crazy,' she said. 'For five dollars you can have the future too.'

'I don't *want* the future. Can't you just concentrate twice as much on the past so I'll be getting my money's worth anyway?'

She peered at him under the ridge where her eyebrows had been. Then she shrugged. 'Keep in mind the cards which you were first drawn to,' she told him, as she gathered up the Major Arcana and handed them to him in a small pile. 'Now shuffle and cut these three times and spread them out face down before you. Then you will choose a card blindly, and that will be your card; that will be you. Every Tarot reader has a somewhat different approach. This is mine.'

Her rings flashed - green, amber, red. He took the potent cards and began to shuffle them.

'Are you religious?' he asked. 'You have those pictures of Christ on your leaflets.'

'I won't get any of the Greek or Portuguese business unless I indicate that my work is authorized by God,' she said. 'The women who come to me want to be sure that what I do is clean and acceptable. Of course you and I know that there is no magic without the devil, but they want it both ways.'

'Are all your customers women?' he asked, beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable. He spread out the cards, face down.

'You're the first man who's come here in two months,' she replied. 'Now, choose a card.'

His fingers were drawn like magnets to the card at the extreme left of the fan-shaped pattern on the table. He handed it to Miss Lisa and she turned it over and gazed at it in ecstasy, her nostrils slightly dilated, her cheeks flushed.

'I knew it,' she breathed. '*Le Monde*. On the upper left corner the winged man, on the upper right the eagle, on the lower right the lion, and the lower left the ox. The vision of Ezekiel.'

'What does it mean? Does it say anything about my past?' he demanded.

'The eagle is air, intelligence and action,' she said. 'The lion is fire, strength and movement. The ox is earth, labour, forbearance and sacrifice. The winged man symbolizes the intuitive knowledge of truth.'

'And what does all *that* mean? '

'It is the twenty-first enigma of the Tarot pack,' she went on. 'In the center of a garland symbolizing the cosmic process a girl runs, carrying two sticks; this is the creative activity, the rotational motion of all things created by polarity.'

'I really don't understand any of that,' he protested, although he did.

'Does it really matter?' she asked. She looked as though she were falling into a trance.

'Can we do the fortune now, can we look into the past? Don't you have to spread the cards out in some kind of pattern or something?'

'The past, the past, who cares about the past?' she breathed. 'Ours is the perfect Present, the marvellous and holy Now. You have chosen the card which speaks of the perfection of Man! When a man chooses this card it signifies the quest for perfection through thought. When a woman chooses it, it is the same quest, but through feelings. *I am a woman.*'

'But what does all this *mean*?'

'Who cares, who cares? Even now the Present slips through our fingers!' she cried, leaning over the table and clutching his wrists.

It was a fragile table, and her sudden movement sent the crystal ball off the edge and onto the floor where it shattered internally, making a noise like a smashed egg. Then it rolled away to the corner of the room.

'And so much for the future,' she added. 'The future with its broken dreams.'

'What about the *past* with its broken dreams?' he said, gently freeing his wrist from her taloned grip. 'I don't know anything about it; that's why I'm here.'

'Very well,' she sighed, and shuffled the deck. 'I'll see what I can do.'

She laid the cards out in a pattern with a cross in the centre, pondered them a while and frowned. 'There's a lot of turmoil in the past,' she informed him, 'and a lot of restriction. I see you confined in a very small space. And I see you in some foreign country - somewhere in Europe, I think. You're in a very small space, fighting to get out. Perhaps you were imprisoned in a European country? Perhaps you were a political prisoner, or something of that nature? Here's the Ace of Clubs. Perhaps someone was pounding or beating you - am I right? No? I tend to take some of the cards quite literally. Does any of this bring anything back?'

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I think I'd like to go now.' He felt in his pocket for the five dollars to pay her. His hands were sweating and he felt slightly ill.

'So soon? I haven't finished. You fool, you don't know what you're missing. God, you're so attractive. You must know how attractive you are, don't you?'

'It's eleven-thirty in the morning,' he said. 'I don't know anything, it's too early. Besides, it's Sunday. Besides, I want to go home.'

He put the crisp five dollar bill on the black velvet; she covered it with her resplendent hand.

'I suppose I'm not a very physical person,' he said, not wanting to hurt her.

'You're like me, you're spiritual,' she sighed, and for the first time he noticed what a beautiful voice she had. 'And the spirit,' she went on, 'is the sexiest thing of all.'

Slowly gathering up the tired, powerful cards she added, 'I could look into your previous incarnations for a few dollars more. But you're leaving.'

'Did you really see those things in the cards?' he asked.

'Of course I did. Do you think I'm a fake?' she exclaimed, turning her rings around one by one. 'Nothing is fake, nothing in the world, not even these rings. Everything is *real*, darling, remember that. Real and literal. Everything.'

'I thought you people thrived on enigma and mystery,' he teased.

'We do,' she smiled.

'Goodbye,' he said. 'Thank you.' And he made for the door.

'No man is an island, you know,' she whispered, wrapping the cards up in the black velvet.

'Yes,' he said, pausing for a moment.

'You mean no,' she corrected him. 'I said no man is an island.'

'I am,' he said softly, shutting the door behind him. 'I am an island. I am Noman.'

The same bum was sitting on the same bench when he went back to City Hall square a day later.

'I remember you,' he said. 'You're the guy who thinks you were inside the sculpture or something.'

'It might interest you to know,' said Noman, 'that *I was* inside of it once.'

'Oh come on!'

'I kid you not, my dear man. You see, yesterday I remembered something. It's not much, but it's a start. See down at the bottom where it says H. NOACK - BERLIN? Well that's the name of the foundry in Germany where they cast Moore's stuff - and I was there. Yes, I was there sometime in the Sixties, I remember it now. I visited the foundry, and since I knew something about welding, one of the workers let me crawl in through the square hole in the piece and weld a couple of seams inside.'

'You mean it's hollow?' asked the bum.

'Of course it's hollow. Then the guy outside would talk to me inside with a kind of walkie-talkie, and together we'd smooth out any little bumps or marks on the surface. The guy outside would tell me to move my hammer a little left or right or up or down so he could hammer from the outside without making a dent. God, I remember it like it was yesterday.'

'You mean you were literally inside it? Like in real life?'

'I was. And I remember workers left things like cigarette butts and coffee cups inside. I left a ball point pen in there; it fell from my shirt. I can't prove it to you, but if they ever opened this thing up they'd find the pen in there. A red pen. A Parker.'

'Oh man,' groaned the bum. 'This is too much. Just when I was starting to think you were some kind of real mystery guy. But nothing's mysterious anymore, is it? Everything's a pile of crap, like this piece. Nothing's for real.'

'Oh no - everything's real. Real and literal. Everything.' Noman said. 'Inside is the mystery.'

The powerful wind that had blown a few days ago beat a shameful retreat down Bay Street. He ran his hand over the perfect contours of *The Archer*.

'You know,' he thought aloud, 'she really was something.'



## Looking for the King

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Hello, I'm Jubelas.

Since you haven't heard from me for a while you've probably been wondering what's been happening, or maybe not. Well, it's like this. We are the beekeepers, Omphale and me. After Noman died on us - and I know he didn't really, what do you take me for, an idiot? - Omph and me decided to make our dream come true, so we left the city and got ourselves an apiary and started raising bees. That was thirteen years ago. Most people don't know anything about bees. You have to see them up close, you have to live with them to start to love them, you have to watch all those golden little buggers swarming over your sleeves - then something snaps inside you and it's like a moment of truth. What with me and Omph and the bees and the Great Outdoors, the world is fine, just fine.

At least I think it's fine. See, *he* came back a while ago. Kali phoned and said he's back and would we like to go out, a foursome, like before, because we knew he never really died, didn't we, it was all a joke, ha ha ha. I said OK, but that word foursome sounded to me like a Roman phalanx - that's like a human square that marches along with shields raised and spears sticking out, ready to take on the world - anyway, we went over to her place and drank tall skinny fruit drinks that twinkled with ice and we all sat around twiddling our thumbs and then he walks in and says in that whisper that wasn't a whisper 'Jubelas, Omphale, hello. Where did you get those funny names?' I started to say that it was him who gave us those names, but Kali gave me a look. She had warned us that he'd had some kind of accident and lost his memory - (I thought it must

be *wild* to have no past) - so he wasn't playing with a full deck (was he ever?) and we shouldn't talk about the past, especially about that awful joke when he pretended to die but didn't, which of course I knew all along. He came forward and shook our hands, very formal - he always was formal - but behind the formal part was the wild part and I could still feel it there in his handshake, in his eyes.

'Kali tells me you raise bees,' he says, as though this was a crime, so I was immediately fighting for my life.

'There's nothing wrong with raising bees,' I says.

'God no,' he says. 'I like bees. Although I have never really *known* a bee, so to speak, or seen one up close. But I seem to recall reading something about bees. Ah - bees are like elephants, that was it.'

I waited. This was him all right.

' - In that they are both lunar animals, and therefore symbols of heaven. And the interesting thing is that if the lunar animal is large, its voice is high-pitched, as it is with the elephant, and if it is small like the bee, then it is low-pitched.'

'You don't say,' I says.

'Yes. And the opposite is of course true of earth-symbol animals.'

'Could I have another drink,' says Omph.

Kali said she thought bees slept all winter frozen in a kind of suspended animation and then sort of thawed out in the spring. I told her it wasn't like that at all, then I explained what really happened.

'You don't say,' he says.

We all sat around blinking and twitching in this frenzy of boredom. I said did he hear about the weatherman's strike which means we'll have no weather. He said Maurice Materlinck and Edmund Hillary's father were both apiarists. I decided it was time for some jokes because I myself am a jokemaker, which is very rare. I started the one about Lawrence of Newfoundland which is now very famous and I am working on a whole batch of Cyclops jokes - like the Cyclops pirate with an eyepatch in the middle of his forehead (Noman thought I said *psychic* pirate, he never had any sense of humour) - and a new one is the dentist who went to Venice and came back and decorated his office with pictures of bridges and root canals. ('I like that one,' he says, and I knew he didn't.) 'I bet you wonder where all the great jokes come from,' I says. 'Most of the time you just hear jokes, you never think of who made them up - people like me, people who work alone and unacclaimed, people who take the art of joking seriously, people who are forever thinking up bigger and better puns, smarter and smarter witticisms. And then maybe once in a lifetime one of them really catches on, and Bam - you've got a hit. ('Have you ever had a hit,

Jube?' he asks in that loud whisper that scares me so much. Well if he didn't know, I wasn't going to tell him.) Then I said that sometimes another guy somewhere in the world thinks up the same joke as you do and he gets all the credit for it - like what happened to Darwin and that guy in the States both thinking up Evolution at the same time, both just stumbling on the same idea. There was a silence after that so I started taking big crazy words that nobody knew and sprinkling them like salt and pepper all over the place - big fat juicy words like bucolic and chthonian and Babylonian and polymorphic. 'It's so soporific it's almost remittent,' he says, but that sounded like his normal speech. 'Let's go out.'

So we ended up on the lakeshore at Sunnyside Beach. Omph and I wanted to go swimming in the big pool there but he said there were a hundred kids in it all peeing at once, so we took our beach stuff and sat on the sand. He went to the edge of the water and stood there a long time staring out over the lake. There were dead fish and all kinds of sickening things floating in the shallows. 'What is there in the lake powerful enough to kill them?' he says and came back to sit with us. 'What did they feel when the waves thrust them up, dying, onto the beaches of Kanada?' This is how he talks. 'There are three kinds of sandwiches,' says Omph, laying out little hermetically sealed squares. 'Ham and cheese on brown, salami on rye and peanut butter and jam on white.' 'Positively Sumerian,' I says. 'Absolutely bubonic, if you ask me. Has anybody heard of the United States of Kanada?' We started to eat and then right out of the blue he says, 'I'm going to swim the lake. Next August.'

'Oh don't swim in there, it's full of dead fish. Ugh,' says Omph.

'I don't mean swim in it, I mean swim it. *Swim the lake*,' he says.

Well it goes without saying we were really stunned, but I kept cool and said it was a free country and he could do what he liked. 'There's nothing worse than freedom. It's excruciating,' he says. 'It demands a terrible discipline of its own.' Christ. Then he asked me what were all the things I wore around my neck, and he stared at my lucky charms - the crab, the crucifix, the Star of David, the wiggly thing, the blue plastic eye (I'm taking no chances) - and then can you believe it he grabs it all in his hand and wrenches it off my neck, breaking the chain and everything. '*I hate symbols*,' he says, talking in italics like he sometimes does. I'm telling you I freaked out, I screamed what did he think he was doing, he'd pay for this, and so on like I was crazy, which temporarily I was. '*Aurum nostrum non est aurum vulgi*,' he says. You're wondering how I can spell that. 'Quit talking in some goddamn foreign tongue!' I scream. 'I just meant it's real gold,' he says. 'I know it's goddamn real gold,' I says. 'OK, I'm sorry, I'll get it fixed,' he says' cool as Hell. 'Go jump in the lake,' I says, and he just glared at me, just glared.

Then he stared at the lake as though he expected it to produce a tidal wave or cough up some monster on the shore. 'Turn a map of the world upside down,' he says, 'and you realize that too is the world. Kanada is down there.' The air was getting all crackly like it was full of static, and the light was this weird electric green. With him it's always like the hour before a thunderstorm, but the storm never comes.

'You're absolutely multi-linear, Noman,' I says.

'I know,' he says.

Jesus Christ.

We went walking along to this big pavilion that used to be the changing room for swimmers back in the olden days. We walked around the walls to the front where there was a kind of Byzantine arch with gold and red and blue fish and fancy letters saying SUNNYSIDE BATHS. Omph said it was like a castle and she could see Medieval ladies walking along the upper galleries with their long purple veils flowing in the wind. Kali said it was an Eastern palace filled with dark musicians and dancers. Noman said it was one of the places that would be like a marker when he was coming in to the end of the lake swim. Omph got very upset and said he couldn't possibly be serious about the swim, it was suicide - but one look at his face told her that he was. Then we rode around past the Canadian National Exhibition grounds and saw this big old cannon left over from somebody's war looming up on the opposite side of the road, and a sick rusty old plane beside it poised for take-off into nowhere. 'Which war are these things from?' says Omph. 'There's only one war,' he says. 'It's all in the past,' says Omph. 'Whose past?' he says. 'Our past,' I says. 'I don't like the past, I hate the past,' he says. 'There's not much past in this country,' I says. 'Maybe we should hang onto what little of it we've got.' 'What's so big about the past?' Kali cries. 'What's so great about the past? Why's everybody in love with the past?' And so on. I looked at the miserable hunks of metal, rat-grey in the moonlight, and said I didn't really think there was anything so great about the past after all and I didn't dwell on it myself. The past is over and done with and there's nothing to be gained from dwelling on it, that's what I said. 'I figure it this way - history marches forward and time waits for no man.' Silence fell with a thud and he just glared at me, just glared. 'It's no good harping on it,' I says. 'No good at all. And I mean that sleevelessly.' 'Really,' he says, and turns away. 'How amazing that none of you realizes that there is no such thing as history, that time is circular, and all events are synchronous points on the circumference.'

Back at Kali's place he stood staring at the fish in the aquarium like they were all plotting something together, all making these secret silent plans, him and the fish, their brilliant devious little minds in perfect harmony. Kali made martinis and I proposed a toast in one of the 23 languages I can propose toasts in, then somebody put on a record of flamenco music and Noman took everything off the polished coffee table and got up on it and started clapping and making those crisp staccato sounds with his heels. Then he took a flying leap off the table and knocked over the Bromeliade plant, smashing the pot to smithereens and sending hunks of black earth all over the carpet. The plant lay there battered and broken and in shock, and then it died, giving up little green gasps with its ghost, at least that's what I heard. I looked over to the aquarium because I had this feeling, and sure enough, some of the fish had fainted or were playing dead with their white sides turned up. Kali says *'Next year I'm going to India.'* Nobody paid any attention, we were looking at him, he was turning the world upside down just like before, and then I knew the old madness had begun again. Where I lose myself and end up somewhere inside his head.

So just like before, Omph and I spent hours trying to figure out who he really was and what his nationality was - Russian or Spanish or Greek or Albanian or Arab or Hungarian or Gypsy or who knows maybe even French-Kanadian which is about as foreign as you can get. (When the



Indians said White Man Speak With Forked Tongue they meant the white man was bilingual, that's how I figure it.) But he didn't speak French, because once I tried the back of a label of Libby's tomato juice on him and he didn't bat an eyelid. And he didn't act like any of the foreigners did - the Italians going on and on about some problem from ancient Rome, the Greeks going on and on although they had solved it but couldn't stand to give it up, the Arabs accusing each other of accusing each other, the Portuguese screaming at each other for existing, the Chinese laughing at nothing, the Hungarians eating a lot of red and yellow peppers and discussing books. The hundred and eighty-nine Solitudes.

I knew it was only a matter of time before he came up with some crazy idea or another, so I wasn't surprised when he phoned me up. 'Jube,' he says, 'help me, I'm looking for King.'

'Which King?' I says, humouring him.

'Mackenzie King. I saw him in a dream last night. Short fat little man with a brown suit and little dog. I said: *you can't be a ghost, I don't believe in you.* He said: *Don't you think this country is old enough to be haunted! Don't you think I'm important enough to be a ghost! Come and find me, I'll tell you everything, I'll show you how to survive here.* He has the answer,' he says, and I had to stop myself from asking what is the question. But I didn't laugh at him and I didn't feel sorry for him either. You don't feel sorry for Noman.

What happens next is crazy. We go to Honest Ed's because he says he's seen the king (that's what I call him) outside of the place two mornings in a row. Honest Ed's is this huge crazy bargain store where little old Chinese ladies line up for hours to be the first in and then go surging up and down the creaky old stairs and milling around the counters like bees in a giant beehive. The place is a Tower of Babel, it's awful, we're probably the only English-speaking people there, suddenly I know what it feels like to be in a minority. The doors open and this delicious murmur goes through the crowd and everybody pours in. We all grab grimy plastic shopping bags then go down the old corridor leading to the first floor. Italian and Portuguese women with fierce eyebrows swarm around the paper flowers and pictures made of corrugated plastic that change from Jesus to Mary as you walk by. I think I'll buy a calendar because I like to look forward to the future so I go looking for one and get all screwed up in the kitchenware department with red and blue Yugoslavian pots, iron frying pans, ashtrays with maple leaves on them, skewers, skillets, strainers, broilers, basters, steamers, poachers and things that slice hard boiled eggs. Babies are screaming all around me, all having their teeny little nightmares. *I want a calendar*, I tell myself, *just a calendar*. Egg-separators, beer mugs, toasters, toothpicks, towels, the world is full of *things*. Meanwhile I see Noman heading for the second floor, the people making way on either side of him like he's parting the Red Sea - how does he do that? - so I follow him and two Indian ladies in turquoise saris carrying TV stools collide with me and glare at me from the third eyes on their foreheads and babble and squeal in Hindi. On the second floor there are masses of women pulling blouses and sweaters out of shape and right in the middle of them there's Noman, perfectly still, looking straight ahead at something only he can see, I sure as Hell can't see anything except chaos, then he starts elbowing his way through the crowds and it's obvious he's on the trail of the king. So this wild pursuit begins, him after his man and me after him. He hits the stairway with me right behind and starts down at top speed and crashes into this Indian guy carrying a stuffed snake which slides half way down the stairs, and then we're back on the first

floor and I see him crashing into the counters and things falling all over the place - bargain bread and bargain herring in tomato sauce and bargain beans and hairspray and shampoo and Maalox and Noxzema and typing paper and sample testers of cologne and sunglasses and deodorant and jars of peanuts. I hear somebody say, 'Foreigners, they get worse all the time,' and then I see Noman has pushed his way through the line-up at the checkout counter and is heading for the exit when one of Honest Ed's guards grabs him from behind and stops him dead.

'What do you think you're doing?' he says.

'I'm after him. The short fat little man with the brown suit and the little dog.'

'No dogs in here,' he says. 'You're seeing things.' Then he takes us into the main office where we find out we have to pay for everything that got broken, and because I am big hearted and very stupid and because I know Noman doesn't have much money, I pay for it myself.

When we get outside people are walking around in the rain with their plastic icons and their umbrellas like old black halos. I was depressed, I hated them all, screw them all. Being with Noman makes you more alone than you've ever been because everything bounces off of him, and you yourself bounce off of him like he's a mirror and all he's there for is to throw you back on yourself. He can do anything he wants, he isn't the one who suffers. When you're with him you're on your own. He gets off scot free and leaves your brain looking like the first floor of Honest Ed's. 'I hope you drown in the goddamn lake,' I says. 'I'll pay you back,' he says. We start to walk away. 'That place is like the past,' he says, 'full of crazies, crammed with a cast of thousands.' 'It's because it's full of foreigners,' I says. 'If they were all Kanadians in there it'd be different.' Then he says something funny, he says, 'Do you know why Kanadians are so friendly and shy and polite, so afraid to step over each other? It's because they're the loneliest people in the world.'

I bought two bags of nuts from the nut vendor. Then I tried to convince him that the short fat little man he saw might have been Angelo Lucifori who owns a vegetable store a block or so away, so I took him there and pointed to Angelo and asked him if this was the guy he was running after. He says of course not, and anyway he didn't have a dog. 'I told you I was looking for "the king,"' says Noman, 'and you were no help, Jube, no help at all.' I noticed that he had started to say, 'the king' like I did - somehow it made more sense that way. Then he says the damndest thing, he says, 'Jube, I can see you're not interested in alternative realities.' I said No, and I didn't like modern art either. Then we bought fruit from Angelo and left.

There were other horrible times like the time he dragged me down to the midway at the Exhibition and we stood gawking at the magicians and snake-dancers and the escape artist whose whole body was this mass of gleaming chains, and everything was red and yellow, even the music was red and yellow, and the smell of sweat and mustard and candy floss made you reel. And there was this kid - this I couldn't understand - this kid who kept following us around, a weird little brat who was there every time you turned around, who was there on top of the ferris wheel waving his arms like crazy and laughing. And he was there again when we went up to Casa Loma, his head popping out from behind the huge stones. He started screaming at Noman and calling him names even I hadn't heard and then Noman went after him round and round the walls and I stood there watching them both and wondering if anything would ever be sane and

normal again. If he wasn't chasing the king, he was chasing the kid - or was the kid chasing him? - and as far as I know, nobody ever caught up with anybody.

He had me following him all over the city looking for the king in subway stations and restaurants and even a meeting of a mystical society. WHO IS THE BEAST? said the sign. LET NOTHING PREVENT YOU FROM HEARING THIS DARING DISCLOSURE. He even dragged me to the goddamn Tom Thomson Hall and swore that the first violinist in the orchestra was actually the king, staring at his bow like he hated it, then drawing it over a string to make this note that all the other violins copied until the whole place was a solid wall of A Major. Then the sound went soaring up to the gods, dragging us up with it like we were puppets on strings, and I waited for the silence to come so I could cough into it like casting a stone into a pool and making rings around it, only this made rings of sound and everybody else coughed too so the place became one big lung. Then the music started and halfway through Noman says, 'I hate this stupid concert and I'm getting out.' 'This concert stinks,' I says, and we pushed our way through the fur coats and the knees into the aisle. 'Excuse us, but the first violinist is abominably off key,' says Noman to everyone. And outside he says to me, 'Do you know that violinists eventually go mad? It's from hearing the vibrations on the E string year after year. I myself am a violinist.'

Naturally. What else.

You're wondering why I put up with all this. Sure, I wanted to escape from him, but when he's not a mirror he's a Black Hole. His mind is a Black Hole and nothing escapes a Black Hole, not even light. *The gravity inside is so strong that no known form of energy can break its grip. It's a one way trap in time and space.* That's what I read somewhere. So I was inside his mind, a prisoner. I was walking around inside his brain, able to get signals from the outside, but unable to send any out. Once I screamed into the black plastic ear of the telephone that I was fed up with everything, and there was just this clicking silence like our phones were conversing in static. I screamed and screamed and there was this clicking silence, clicking silence. Finally I heard his voice, very soft like always. 'You see, Jube? For all you know I may not be here at all. How do you know I'm here? Maybe you invented me, maybe I never existed.'

'I hate your guts,' I said. 'Take your violin and your alternative realities and your circular time and stuff them.'

But we kept looking for the king. According to Noman, he was everywhere, which meant we only had to isolate one 'frame' of him and freeze it, whatever that meant. Noman said his face would ease into the edge of his vision like the side of a ship. But he was always one step ahead of us, whether it was on the stairs to the top of the Tower, or behind the glass case which displayed Marilyn Bell's goggles in the Sports Hall of Fame.

'Listen,' I said to him, 'don't you do magic? Kali told me once that you do magic. Why don't you just make this guy appear and get it over with?'

And he says, 'Sometimes the magic is with me and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes I'm just the witness.'

Christ.

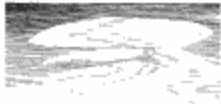
Finally I couldn't stand it any longer, I could feel myself coming unglued. I told Noman to get lost and I came back home. Now there's this awful loneliness and this longing for something I can't name. I'm unsatisfied all the time. Cats and bees are satisfied, so are telephone poles. Why do I want answers when I don't even have the questions? I'm going downhill, I don't enjoy anything anymore, I can't even smoke because he said smoking is a pastime of fools, you try to punctuate reality, to make something happen. So I bought an old typewriter and now I'm writing this all down. Can you imagine - when I started to type the goddamn thing started to throw the alphabet back at me one letter at a time, starting with A, which popped out in my face the very first day. I had to have the thing repaired three times.

I have this horrible cold in my chest and I can't breathe right. Omph says I'm not paying any attention to her. 'Remember the times when we were so close we could catch each other's colds just by talking on the phone,' she says. 'Remember what he told us once, how our faces were made of many circles, faces that had known much laughter.' Well I'm not laughing much these days. Everything's screwed up and I can't concentrate. Time is all distorted, the dates on the calendar from Honest Ed's don't make sense. The bees are all acting very strangely and some of the little bastards have started to sting which they didn't do before, like they're all losing their minds too, all ten thousand of them. And the last time I went back into the city it was awful, cars crashing out of the night like fiends out of Hell. And then when I got into this cab the driver straight away turned around and smiled at me and says 'It's no good, Jube, I'm everywhere.'

Everybody's haunting everybody else, that's what he said.

So my brain's in this place where what's real and what's not real meet or don't meet depending on how you look at it - where things aren't clearly defined and one thing just sort of oozes into another. Some things I'm not sure are real memories, like the time I thought I saw Noman chasing someone round and round those high corridors in Sunnyside Baths, and it was a short fat little guy in a brown suit all right, it was no ghost because I saw it, or did I.

Listen, Noman - the summer's almost here again and it'll soon be August. I don't really want you to drown out there in the lake so I wish you good luck and so does Omph, who is worried about you all the time. Remember, I knew you weren't dead before, I knew it all along. I'm onto you now, you enjoy faking your death, so I won't believe it if I hear you're dead again, you got that? And that's the end of it. When you swim the lake and come out with everybody clapping and cheering I'll come and meet you with a bottle of wine. We'll drink ourselves silly and toast each other in 23 languages and you'll tell me once and for all who you really are and where you come from and what your real name is, for you do have a real name don't you, my indelible friend...?



## An Evening with Grey Owl

---

Kali read from the works of an obscure Kanadian poet:

*There is no chart of his movement through the borrowed  
forest,  
A place so alien that all he could do with it  
was pretend it was his own  
And turn himself into an Indian, savage and lean,  
A hunter of the forest's excellent green secret.*

*For all his movement through the forest was  
In search of himself, in search of Archie Belaney,  
a lone predator in London  
Telling the very king: I come in peace, brother,  
The princess thinking how alien he was, how fine.*

*Stranger and stranger to return to the forest  
With the beaver all laughing at him, baring  
their crazy orange teeth  
And the savage secret - if there ever was one -  
Never revealed to him. Stranger and stranger to return to  
The female forest, the fickle wind erasing his tracks,  
The receding beeline, and the snowbanks moving and  
moving.*

(Anahareo fed the fire with sweet smelling branches. It was the end of summer and loons cried out over the dark lake.

They spoke of how the first man in the world had emerged from the water covered with shining scales which later fell off, leaving only the vestiges which were toenails and fingernails.

They spoke of how the Indians had no opposite of God, how good and evil were not separate forces, but two aspects of one spirit, one reality. He liked that.

They sought themselves in each other's eyes like all the world's lovers since the beginning of time. But they couldn't discover their histories in one another, for when she looked into his eyes she saw only the lost lands of her fathers, and in her eyes he saw the desolate country which was his soul. He claimed that only the natives had a memory, that the white man suffered from a permanent amnesia brought about by his first glimpse of vast and horrifying expanses of snow. She did not know that he was speaking of himself, nor did she know that he was jealous of her; he could see them out on the lake - her ancestors - rippling over the water in their delicate ghostly canoes all silver around the edges. He wanted to claim these ancestors for his own. He said that the white man was always trying to steal the Indian's myths. Wasn't it enough that he could steal their names?

When he looked inside himself, he discovered an imposter.)

*We want to pretend that you are our ancestors -  
you who are called  
Wolf in the Water, Blue Flash of Lightning, Heaven Fire,  
Black Sleep -*

*You who have no devil, no opposite of Manitou.  
You who are hiding behind your names, behind  
closed doors of thunder  
And will not let us in.*

*(Backlit by blue lightning, the silhouette of the wolf  
drinks the midnight river; fire from heaven  
Falls on our sleep and invents morning; the air is thick  
with feathers from surreal birds.)*

*You who never knew the evil in us, you who have  
no opposite of Manitou,  
Come out from behind the thunder and embrace us -  
All we long to become, all we have never known of ourselves.*

*Before you are gone from our eyes forever -  
(you who are certainly not our ancestors)  
Teach us our names, the names of our cities.  
No one ever welcomed us when we came to this land.*

(Archie Belaney thought of winter. 'Surely this is the most silent country on the face of the globe,' he said. 'Silent as death except for the booming of the ice on the big lake.' He looked into

the darkness and added, 'I must write that down.'

Anahareo put more branches on the fire, Anahareo who was dark and beautiful, Anahareo who had taught him to love the animals.

The spoke of how at puberty Indian boys would enter the manitou world by fasting, and how this journey inward was a journey *into* the real world, not away from it. In dreams they would discover their personal manitou, their protector, and an elder might discover a boy's secret name in one of his own dreams, in the mighty reality of the spirit world. Some might call this the unconscious, but in truth it was the kingdom of consciousness. Within the tree was the Tree, within the world, the World.

Grey Owl prayed for his immortal soul.)

*So I must stand away from the stone to enter the stone,  
To dream the idea of the stone, the stone which is all stones,  
the first and final stone,  
Its source being, its manitou.*

*As in puberty I dreamed my lifelong protector, who  
showed me  
How to navigate impossible rivers, who made me as the  
world's  
first person, breathing  
Fire and poetry.*

*The strangers who divided the world into good and evil  
were wrong.  
The Great Lynx Misshipeshu who dwells beneath ambivalent  
water  
is both benevolent  
Lord, and devil.*

*And I am become the powerful dreamer who dreams his way  
through  
To reality, to enter and ignite the stone, to illumine  
from within  
Its perfect paradox, its name.*

Kali got up and kicked dirt over the ashes of the fire. This was their last night of camping out at Algonquin Park.

'I had this bizarre dream,' Noman said. 'I dreamed that a band of Indians broke into my room and took all my possessions - my books, my clothes, my toaster, everything. And when I asked them what they were doing they paraded down the street and said they were just taking back what was theirs, nothing more.'

'It's time to go,' said Kali.

'No more poetry?' he asked sleepily.

'No,' she said. 'Another time I'll read to you from the book Anahareo wrote about her life with Grey Owl. She says, "When, finally, I was convinced that Archie was English, I had the awful feeling that for all those years I had been married to a ghost - that Archie never really existed."'

'How unfair of her,' Noman muttered. 'How awfully unfair. Of course he existed. As surely as you or I. He was only looking for his soul, or for God, or whatever.'

Then he thought of winter and the white expanse of the lake, a whiteness so vast it was almost claustrophobic.

Now it was the end of summer and the loons were crying into the night. The dying fire smoldered beneath its blanket of grey ashes, sending up occasional smoke signals which he could not decipher. He thought that there was nothing to worship in this country but the magnificent indifference of Nature, its broken silences.



## Tennis at Midnight

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You walk along the lakeshore late at night and head eastward from Sunnyside Baths which is a naked castle whose towers guard nothing but themselves, or an Eastern pavilion filled with dark musicians and dancers, along Sunnyside beach and the kids' park with its paper dinosaurs and green and purple monsters gloating in the moonlight, down to the shore where you stoop and find white pebbles almost as thin as communion wafers which you send skimming and skipping across the black water as the silver sliver of the moon skims across the sky. The lake is deliciously, hellishly cold and you think of the thousands of swimmers of times gone by who shed their clothes in the great pavilion and shivering and ridiculous in their navy blue swimsuits ran across the burning sands to the scathing water. Now the fervent voices of the summer people carry all the way down to High Park, from the rides at the amusement park, from the ghosts of the ferris wheel and the roller coaster which lifted them shrieking and squealing to heaven. Farther on is the Palais Royale where the big bands played their brassy satin music and dancers danced until they dropped, then the rowing club and the Masonic Temple of Rameses. All this on the fringe, the shoreline of this most exotic of Kanadian cities.



The tennis courts in the feeble moonlight looked like cages for invisible midnight animals, or ghostly arenas, or boards on which laser-lit figures might play three-dimensional chess games in a futuristic film. Noman and Kali took up their positions on one of them and brought out fluorescent lime green tennis balls. There was no net, so their eyes had to draw the necessary line across the court. The secret mouths of the trees all around them spread the rumours and gossip of the night. The players looked at each other over the imaginary net and laughed and began to exchange the crazy glowing balls which became comets and asteroids dizzily splocked through space, sent spinning on impossible missions throughout the galaxies. They were one with the night and the wicked trees and the soft lisp of the lake as it articulated something which lay at the edge of their understanding. They played their midnight game with no one keeping score and therefore no one winning.

The past was a place of games played with deadly earnest, the terrible arena of childhood. He was very young and he smelled of melting running shoes and schoolyard dust and warm apples and peanut butter sandwiches. The girls at noon bounced hard rubber balls under their knees or flung them rhythmically at the school wall, chanting in girl language: *ordinary, moving, left foot, right foot, curtsies, salutsies, turnsies*. The boys watched them, fascinated and bewildered and afraid. *Apples, peaches, pears and plums!* the girls screamed as they flung themselves in great suicidal leaps into the whirling maw of their skipping ropes. *Tell me when your birthday comes!* And dancing in the frenzied centre they called out the names of the months of the year - this year, any year: 'JANuary, FEBruary...' until the schoolyard was a whirling circling planet of tastes and smells and colours and sounds erupting into chaos like the first dream of his life in which the sky broke up into a jigsaw of faces and figures and mythical animals and then it all fell down.

The boys played their urgent games in another part of the yard, shouting out the latest obscenities, testing newly discovered words which were packed with forbidden knowledge, the beautiful foul language of their bodies. 'Frere Jacques!' they screamed. 'Sonny lay Matina!' And later, alone in their beds, the foam of their dreams, sweet sperm of the night, the glorious vulgar syllables of youth spewed forth, unchecked.

And the past was a place of pools where he swam every day in summer, a place called the Mineral Baths behind the old Roma Apartments between Quebec and Gothic avenues. The Minnies, it was called, and it had two pools - one an ordinary pool into which astounding divers flung themselves, often backwards, from impossible heights, and another pool which for some reason was darker and colder, the water freezing and black, where hardly anyone swam. He'd float in this one on his back and gaze at the big Victorian house on the hill, and wonder what country he was in. He lay there burning with cold, orgasmic cold, in August, and later he would slowly walk away eating ice cream and shivering and blazing with a delicious lonely joy.

The past was the secret and mysterious city, the city within the city, the city of the alleyways and swimming pools and the city of the lakeshore. And the lake, which cared nothing for time, would often cast up strange relics of the future, as well as the past, upon its shores.

A solitary figure moved along the beach behind the talking trees, walking barefoot in the sand and avoiding the dead fish and plastic cups, the condoms and bottles and weird debris of the

night. He was a midnight swimmer, and he walked to the tennis court which was bathed in lunar light and stood there for a long time, staring at the phantom players. Both of them were familiar to him; one of them was himself.

Noman was acutely aware that someone was watching them. 'Suddenly I don't like this place,' he told Kali. And there the game ended. He pulled her away from the tennis court and the inscrutable indifferent lake winking and glittering in the distance, the quicksilver water, the dinosaurs and saxophones and ghostly dancers.



## Footprints on the Ceiling

---

I am Ibrahim who writes.

Of course I should have known from the beginning that he was not like other men. But what could have prepared me for the events I was to witness? I shall never forget that night, the white storm, and him just lying there breathing, breathing. But let me step backwards in time.

When he appeared as he did at the costume party on Halloween, I considered it to be a very bad joke. He had shrouded his person in white bedsheets and fashioned a *burnoose* out of a gold curtain cord. 'You can only kill me with a golden bullet, Ibrahim!' he laughed. 'This is not a costume!' To me, an Arab! He wandered around the room looking as though everyone else was dressed up, not him, and we were all therefore extremely foolish. 'Lawrence of Kanada, I presume?' someone said in an attempt to deflate him. But he merely touched his forehead, his chest, then brushed the floor with the back of his hand and whispered a gracious *Salaam*. Tiny hailstones drummed against the windowpane and the sky was the violet and green of an autumn evening. The smell of winter was in the air.

At that party I listened to many jokes which I didn't understand at all, and still don't, although they were explained to me many times. (When Canadians are not joking, they are saying 'Excuse me.' I do not know what it is they wish to be excused for, but it seems to be something very important.) One very incomprehensible joke is about, I think, a Polish man who lives in Newfoundland. It seems that if you hand him a card which says FOR THE THRILL OF YOUR LIFE TURN THIS OVER, and he turns it over and on the other side it says the same thing, then he will proceed to turn the card over and over infinitely, or until someone restrains him. It obviously means that he has not comprehended the card. I on the other hand, do not comprehend

the joke. And so it is. (I mean only to suggest that for me the English language and its humour is a nightmare. I recall the horror I felt when I first took certain words and phrases literally. A person was *fired* from his job, and I had visions of some great furnace receiving him; the violent Bible proclaiming '*Suffer*, the little children to come unto me.' People laughing when I applied for a job, saying 'I *lust* after this position.')

But I'm being tangential. Let me tell you how I came to meet this strange being called Noman. He rented a room on the top floor of the rooming house where I lived, so we bumped together frequently. (His favourite word was *sideways*, I learned. Winter comes in sideways, and so on.) I thought I understood him better than anyone in the world; I looked and saw the lostness in his eyes. However, it was massively evident that he didn't understand me at all. Once we met in the supermarket and talked about women. I learned that he knew absolutely nothing about women, and I - for I have been in and out of women since I was thirteen - tried to teach him a few things.

I recall I was loaded down with cans of chick peas and ears of corn, and I was thinking to myself, *I shall die in this crazy country. I shall die without ever having been born.* Noman joined me and asked if I was sick. 'No,' I said, 'but my soul is rotting here in this foreign land. My spirit has the measles. I shall die. Unknown and despised. My verses unpublished. I hate this country.' We walked together down the aisles and gathered tins of sardines and pimentoes. Then we stopped at the fruit counter and I picked up a lemon and looked at it with disgust. 'They call this a lemon,' I said. 'This is not a lemon, this is a joke. At home I used to go out every morning and pick a single lemon from the tree outside my door. Think of it. Then look at this.' And at the meat counter I stopped in dismay and cried, 'Look at all this food! In my village when I was five years old I used to come home from school for lunch, and do you know what lunch was? It was my mother's milk! Look at this wealth, this decadence. This is the corruption of all capitalist countries.'

'You hate this country but you stay,' Noman said. 'You stay here, in the dark mysterious West.' He was smiling, but not smiling, and he had a strange way of looking just beyond my shoulder, so I had to shift my position continuously to try to place myself in the line of his gaze.

'I stay to make money!' I protested. 'In my village in Syria is my sister Leila who is sick. I send ten dollar bills in all my letters. I have a cousin in Jordan who has a place called The Holyland Buffet, just outside of Bethlehem. I wrote and told him how much money you can make here and now he wants to come.'

We made our way to the frozen food counter, and it was there that I felt compelled, for reasons which I cannot explain, to tell Noman the absolute truth about myself. 'Look,' I confessed, bending over the Highliner fillets. 'I left my village and came here because for three years I was screwing my best friend's wife.'

In the distance was the ring of a cash register. Noman said, 'Let's get out of here,' and we headed for the front of the store. I gathered more vegetables and at the counter I held out tomatoes and cauliflowers and two gleaming bluish-black eggplants. 'Do you know what the Arabs call these?' I asked Noman. "'*Satan's balls*.'" Some people ahead of us turned around and stared.

'Do you want to know the truth?' I heard myself saying, because somehow Noman, by saying nothing, was forcing me to speak, and I was afraid of his terrible, eloquent silence. 'The truth is I can't go back. If my friend ever found out about his wife and me, he might kill us both.'

Still there was the silence.

'I'm sorry if you don't understand,' I said. 'East confronts West. One Wintario ticket please,' I asked the cashier.

Outside in the street it was clear and cold, as his face with its fine sharp features was clear and cold. 'Look,' I insisted, although he had still not said another word to me, 'in my country we are civilized. I am a modern Arab, I have no prejudices against women. I am betrothed to a girl from my village - Yasmin. When I have enough money I'll bring her here and we'll marry. She writes me two times a day. Once she asked me if it is the law in Kanada that you have to be in love to get married. Consider such innocence.'

I found myself running on and on in a great hurry to tell him everything, even though he showed not the slightest interest in my words.

'She is pure virgin, like the wool. She will not go with every man she sees like the women in this country. And she is not like one of those rich University girls in Damascus who go with men before they are married and then go to a doctor to get themselves sewn up before their wedding night, ah no.'

We stood at an intersection and I thought that the lights would never change from red to green and that we would stand at that horrible corner forever. At last he spoke.

'Here you are, Ibrahim, lost in time, frozen somewhere in the seventh century, waiting for the lights to change. Can you see yourself? Obsessed with virginity, for God's sake!'

He blithely stepped off the kerb in the middle of the red light. I followed him. Several cars screeched to a halt and I swore at them in pungent Arabic. On the other side of the road I turned to him. Our eyes were flashing.

'The point is that life must be full of mystery, and women must be full of secrets. That's what makes them so spiciful. Even if Yasmin tricked me, I would never find out, so the mystery would still be there. I don't understand why this is not obvious to you.'

A large black dog rushed out from behind a tree and stood in front of me, barking at some obscure wrong. 'Do you know how to calm a mad dog?' Noman said. 'Look at it directly between the eyes. Like this,' he demonstrated, bending over and fixing the satanic animal's forehead with a terrible stare. The dog turned away. A chill October wind rustled through the grocery bags and whispered through the ears of corn.

'Listen, I must tell you something, something that may distress you,' I said. 'It's about your lady friend Kali. *She entertains men alone.*'

I then proceeded to inform him that two nights before I happened to be in the area of her house after work, and I called in to say Hello, after which she invited me in for a cup of coffee. I was hurt and horrified when Noman laughed out loud at my words.

'You Kanadian men are fools!' I cried. 'What kind of woman invites a man into her house when she is alone? Anyone can see what that means.'

'It means she saw that you were lonely and wanted company,' Noman said.

'She entertained me *alone* - me, your friend! That means she will do it with others, that means there's no telling what she might do. I was testing her, for your sake, because you are a fool and I am your friend.' I proceeded stiffly down the road, confronting the wind which was growing chillier each moment. I felt as though the whole world was offending me. 'Look Ibrahim, we're friends!' he laughed, opening the door of the rooming house ahead of me.

'Are we indeed?' I said sadly.

The hallway was dark with the particular sort of brown darkness I have found to be peculiar to rooming houses. I invited Noman to my room to share black olives and cheese and bread with me. I told him of how when I first came to Kanada I worked in a factory making parts for bombs which I later learned were sent to Israel. Only in this crazy country could such a terrible thing happen to me. I left the factory and did odd welding jobs and wrote my delicate poetry in Arabic by the light of the forty watt bulb that lit my room by night.

A voice which was both torment and enchantment enveloped us when I switched on the radio to the Arabic program I listened to continually. 'Fairouz,' I told him. 'Fairouz the perfect, the unattainable. She is not a singer but a goddess. At the sound of her voice men weep, make love, go to war. It is not her fault that she is a Christian and a Lebanese.'

Noman smiled. I was becoming afraid of his smile, as indeed I was afraid of him. His smile was not cruel, or sarcastic, or cunning; it was quiet and perfectly still and perfectly contained, like a pool of dark water.

'Do you know any women in this city?' I asked.

'Only one, really,' he said. 'Kali. You know her.'

'Can I have her?' I asked.

'I really don't think so.'

'Can I borrow her for a while?'

'I really don't think so.'

'Is she yours?'

'I'm not sure.'

'So. She plays with you. I can handle that, that's right up my sleeve, or my alley. Whatever. English is such a meagre language,' I said. He asked about my poetry. I said that I was studying the Revolution for the third time, and my poetry was about politics and women. And of course death, because if you are writing about politics and women you are also writing about death. 'But tell me where the women are in this city,' I pleaded. 'The ones who *do it*. Have you ever done it with two women at once? No? Neither have I, but I have it all worked out in my head.'

The voice of the immortal Om Kalsoum came over the radio, and I told him how she used to broadcast songs from Cairo that went on for hours and hours, and that millions of Arabs in different countries would smoke *hashish* and listen all night as her music delivered them to paradise. 'For you who do not understand, the music is an interminable wailing,' I said. 'But for us it is the eternal voice of the eternal East.'

'What makes you think I do not understand?' he asked.

The music surrounded and seduced us, and the voices of the deadly angels who lead men into love and war and death held us captive as the night wore on. We were absolutely stoned, although we had smoked nothing. I remember that on my bedtable was a little ornament of clear plastic with a picture of Niagara Falls inside, and when I turned it upside-down fake snow fell on the upside-down Falls. It seemed to me to be the most significant and profound thing in the world, and I gazed at it in wonder. 'Remember,' I said to Noman, 'that you are a fool. A fool and a Kanadian.' Then I set the piece right side up and more snow swirled around the great gorge. 'But a friend.'

At three in the morning he went upstairs and left me pounding chick peas into *tahini* paste and dashing olive oil and lemon juice and garlic into the mixture which would become the divine and indescribable *humus* on which the Arabs and most of our enemies fed. The last thing he said to me was: 'Ibrahim, my fine mad Arab friend, standing there lost among the voluptuous cauliflowers and tomatoes and satanic eggplants, tears rolling out of your marvellous great mournful eyes - you have just showed me that perhaps there is someone in this country who is more foreign than me.'

Something shone from his eyes, something that made him different from everyone. But when did I suspect that he was almost - how shall I say it - a different *order* of man, another species? When winter came, and we walked through the cold December streets, he would often stop dead in his shoes and stare off into space and dissolve right before my eyes. I do not speak literally, you understand. Once, in a moment of quiet frenzy, he attacked a large snowbank with his hands and demolished it, convinced that there was some 'king' hiding beneath it - but there was nothing beneath it, nothing. It seems he had a fantasy about this king because he had been lost and severely injured in a place called Kingsmere, the king's own forest. I understood this to be some sort of Kanadian fairy tale.

Another time he urged me to accompany him to the art gallery, and drew my attention to something an artist called William Blake had written: *You can see what I see if you so choose.* 'But people choose not to see,' he said, 'for to see means to confront one's own mortality, and it is too hideous, too beautiful. They are terrified and suspicious of anything that speaks of the spirit; art speaks of the spirit, so they laugh and belittle it out of embarrassment and fear.'

'A Western fear!' I cried. 'You know nothing of death and therefore nothing of life! I come from a fiery people, a tragic people, a people who live in pictures of black and white, not grey like you North Americans. We love and weep and kill and get killed and sing and dance and overthrow our governments. Can you understand this? And this man Blake paints angels.'

Noman looked at me and his eyes for one moment were black as obsidian. I confessed that I had rather jumped overboard with my words. 'I must stop this,' I said. 'I must forget who I am. I must lose myself to find myself. Then I will write better poetry. I must merge with people, cohabit and amalgamate. I must forget the Old World altogether. Down with the past; up with the future.'

He smiled.

But then, a few days later, I received news of my best friend Ali's death in Lebanon. I shrank back into myself, I wished only to be alone and disband. I took refuge in a kind of calculated insanity; I started painting portraits on grains of rice - a feat so difficult it almost abolished me. I listened to the radio deep into the night, the musty news of lost worlds, the stinky news of death. I was going nowhere and would never go anywhere again. I would die here in this crazy country. Old suitcases filled my closet, suitcases I had dragged through the teeming streets of Damascus and Cairo and West Berlin, heavy as memory, sorrowful as memory, full of trinkets and old clothes and failed poems. I would carry my brain's old luggage through the awful streets of my life forever.

Noman came down to my room one night and gazed at me with his disorienting eyes. 'You look terrible,' he said, and I jumped to my own defense.

'You think I am morose and mournful?' I cried. 'My people are a mournful people. And desperate, the soul and the body desperate. One of my childhood friends went into the back yard one day and fucked a chicken. The chicken died of course, and he mourned it forever. You smile. Can you understand this? Can you understand horror? Can you understand the cripple-makers in Egypt who take beggars and break their legs or blind them to make them more pitiable? Can you understand Lebanon?'

Noman looked at me huddled over my table with a strong desk lamp at one side and the magnifying glass squinched in my eye. 'Ibrahim, what *are* you doing?' he asked.

I looked up and the lens fell away from my eye. He said that my eyes looked large and liquid, like the sad, wise old eyes of babies, and that I was staring at him with the bright stare of the convert who has left the world far behind.

'Since you ask me I will tell you.' I regarded him with infinite patience and weariness. 'I am painting. Yes, I am painting a portrait of Castro on a grain of rice.'

Noman went upstairs and got a bottle of brandy. When he came back down I was still at work, the single-haired brush in hand and the row of tiny paint pots at my elbow.

'Yes indeed, my friend. I intend to present it to him when I go to Cuba. He will be thrilled. Then I intend to go on to bigger and better things. I might inscribe the history of the world on a chick pea, or possibly a map of the Northwest Territories on a little pebble. I learned patience from the life of Taha Husein, the Egyptian scholar whose mother rubbed some ointment into his eyes to punish him for a childish misdeed and blinded him for life. He nevertheless memorized the Koran when still a child. You smile at my hobby, but you will see. I read about a man in the newspaper who's done more than four hundred portraits on grains of rice. I thought - why not me? This is a large and noble venture. What I am doing is miraculously and intensely *difficult*.' I bent further over my work, but Noman's silence filled the room and exploded within my head, forcing the truth from me.

'Some of my people are fighting the Falangist dogs in Lebanon. My best friend has been killed. I heard it yesterday. The dogs are backed by Israel, as you probably know. It will never end, the Druze will never let it end; they keep fighting and dying, and they don't care about dying because they believe in reincarnation. And Ali, like all good Moslems, believed he would go straight to paradise if he died in battle. I do not believe such lies. I told you about Ali. We were so close we shared the same women, although he never knew. It was like we were doing it together, but through her.'

'I'm very sorry,' said Noman. 'But doesn't this mean you can go back, there's no danger now that he'll find out about you and his wife?'

'You kill me with those words!' I cried. 'Every time somebody looks at me I have the feeling they're accusing me, asking themselves "Why isn't he there fighting alongside of his brothers? Why does he stay here in this godforsaken country? Why is he alive?" And I can't answer those questions, not even to myself.'

'You shouldn't be so hard on yourself,' Noman told me. 'We can't all be fighters and heroes.'

'True. I'm a poet and poets just talk.' I turned away. 'But we were so close he used to tell me his dreams. *Ali*.'

Noman said, 'Just think - you could boil your life's work away in ten minutes.'

'You laugh, you laugh. But if I succeeded in writing the entire Iliad on a strip of macaroni, would you laugh then? You'd probably cry because you're morose, like a potato, you're probably part Irish. I, an Arab, am also morose, but it's a passionate moroseness, it's different. You Westerners, with you I always see apathy in action. What I am doing now is stationary but dynamic, do you see? The truth is I am lost.'



I concentrated on a part of Castro's beard and tried to forget Noman altogether, but this was impossible, for he was breathing very heavily and there was a terrible excitement in his voice as he whispered the next words.

'Nothing dies,' he said.

I asked him what in the name of God he meant.

*'Nothing dies. You'll see.'*

Then he went upstairs and I didn't hear from him for a day or two. I decided he was a madman. I heaved and floundered in my grief. *You're wrong Noman*, I thought. *I shall die here in this crazy country. We all will.*

I decided I had to drown my grief in a woman, but I hate the brazen women of the West who play hard to get while they walk around with their nipples sticking out of T shirts which read *My Body Is Mine*. These cruel little cock-teasers, they can hide their passion and pretend not to be aroused, but how can a man pretend when his own body betrays him with its spectacular display of readiness?

I chose, then, a down to earth female of German extraction who indicated her willingness to hit the bed with me after our very first meeting. She had apricot-coloured talons, and wore pink-tinted glasses and a collar around her neck made with fox - a fox whose plastic head clipped onto its own tail, as if in this grotesque death the animal was forced to devour itself. She unclasped the head of the dead fox and released its awful grip on its own body, then stripped and sat on the edge of the bed.

'With me,' she said, 'no foreplay is necessary, no time-consuming and frivolous diddling around.' Then her muscular mouth began eating my ear and her tongue whirled around in wild circles until I heard a roar of rivers in my head. Her large face loomed above me like a moon. 'Arabs,' she breathed. 'I love Arabs. Scimitars, black horses, swirling robes. *Dominance*. Abraham, most men are only after me for my mind, it's disgusting. I'm sick of women's lib, I want to be a sex symbol!'

*Bloody Western amazons*, I thought, *bloody Western whores*. *My* body was betraying me with a spectacular display of unreadiness. I told her I had an excruciating pain in my abdomen, the result of an old wound I received in a skirmish in Algeria. She was surprisingly nice about it. 'That's all right,' she said. 'Some other time. Apply a cat to the afflicted area; that's an old German remedy.' Then she got dressed, picked up the inert collar and squeezed the dead jaw of the fox open, flung the thing around her neck and clipped the head back onto the tail. She let herself out into the night, leaving me flexing my teeth in frustration.

I thought of the goddesses and the whores of the world, Lorca's blazing angel trailing wings of rusty knives, my virginal Yasmin, and the breasty unquenchable creature who was my best friend's wife. Blood, roses, milk, each with her undercurrent of unspeakable obscenity. I thought of the women of the East in their eternal black.

'Death, woman is death,' I told Noman that night. 'You grow up among a lot of black crows with white breasts and white skin; they make you dwell on death. White milk and black death and the red blood in between which is agony, which is life. Women and blood and war and death. *Ali, Ali.*'

And Noman gazed at a spot just beyond my shoulder with an expression as fathomless as the steel grey waters of the winter lake beneath the sheets of ice that crowded the harbour.

He disappeared before Christmas - (Mithrasmas, he called it, the birthday of some savage ancient god) - and a great blizzard descended upon the city. The visibility outside was almost zero as the white demons of the wind shrieked and swirled like dervishes. It was as though the whole world was turning in upon itself and choking out its own life. It was like a desert sandstorm, but the sand was white.

The eve of Christmas was also my birthday, and I had a party to which only Kali came. Later that night long after she had left I went up to Noman's room to see if he had returned, and in the hallway I heard a ghastly agonized wheezing as though someone were being strangled or sucked into quicksand.

I went into his room and found him sitting on the end of the bed with his hands clutching the mattress, his shoulders raised and his face drenched in sweat. The horrible sound grew louder, and each time he fought to gain a full breath his chest and his shoulders heaved.

'White,' he whispered, 'everything white, the sky and the lake all white, no division, no horizon...'

'What has happened to you?' I pleaded, but he could say nothing coherent. He shivered and sweated and struggled for air.

For some reason I thought of Ché in the mountains of Bolivia. When he had these terrible attacks of breathlessness he would go on smoking his big cigars and talking to people, and when it got too bad he went to bed and drank *matte* and read his way through the tortuous hours. But one could die like this, I thought with terror, with everything going black before the eye, a black cloak lowered before the eyes. Was it not terrible to be drowning without water? And he was drowning without water, he who was a swimmer.

I called for an ambulance, visualizing how the medical men in white would come and take him away on a white stretcher through the white blizzard and give him adrenalin and an oxygen mask. I did not try to speak to him for I had read somewhere that so perverse were such attacks that the more one tries to reason with the afflicted and call them into consciousness, the more acute they become. The whole being must work, must concentrate on achieving the next breath, as oxygen fights its way through bronchial tubes which are being constricted and strangled by uncontrollable muscular spasms. And Noman was working, fighting.

Through all of this there was thunder, thunder in winter, which I thought to be very portentous and foreboding.

'Death is not black, Ibrahim, *it is white*,' he whispered.

And then - my heart cringes when I tell it - then he fell back on the bed and closed his eyes and began to speak loudly and clearly in a voice that was not his own, a voice I knew as well as my own, the voice of Ali.

In pure, faultless Arabic the voice of my dead friend poured forth from Noman's mouth. It greeted me with warmth and love, it told me I must feel no pain or guilt for the mistakes of the past, it absolved me of all my sins. 'Ali!' I cried, and flung myself across the bed. But the voice had ceased, and the body beneath me was motionless.

Two ambulance attendants entered the room. One pulled me away and the other leaned over Noman and touched his wrist, his neck.

'This man's dead,' he said.

He began asking me questions, and the other took down notes. In my shock and horror I do not know how I managed to speak. I told them I thought it was a violent asthma attack, but I could not be sure. They said I would have to accompany them and the body to the hospital for certification of death, and that I would have to fill out forms and give information about the dead man's next of kin, and so on.

'His name is Noman,' I said. 'That's all I know.'

My heart was heavy as they brought the stretcher to the bed. But when they started to move him, one of them gave a little cry and stepped back in alarm.

'This man's not dead,' he said.

Noman's eyes were open and he was lying there breathing, breathing.

I was so happy and angry I wanted to nail him to the floor and dance on his stomach. He gained strength and began to tell me of his ordeal. He had no memory whatsoever of the last phase of it, which convinced me that it was indeed Ali himself who had spoken through him.

'It is as though the storm outside is also inside,' he said. 'And through a wall of white the angel of death comes crashing; its spectacular white wings are white fire searing along your ribs. The white folds in around you, it has become dry ice which imprisons you. There is no exit for the body or the soul. Then it begins, the stone on the chest and the fear, and the stone growing into a concrete slab, your tombstone, and you know what is happening and you can do nothing. The wind outside, God screaming at you, and you are trapped in the cave of your own lungs, and you sit upright pulling your chest up and down and praying *breathe, breathe*, and each breath is a miracle, an impossibility. You want to weep but the effort would kill you, so you pray and work. Your soul goes screaming through tunnels of white mucous and slime, horrible corridors, and the pain of the breathing makes each breath and each exhalation a small death. Somehow it is even

harder getting the air out than in. Your lungs try to burst open in an incandescent cloud of white effluvia, the whole world is enveloped in a sac of ghostly phlegm, an afterbirth.'

Then his voice dropped and he spoke more to himself than to me.

'But there's something else,' he said, 'inside the storm, inside the white, the thrilling centre, the core of absolute quiet, it's this that I must reach...'

He looked out the window to the lake which lay beneath the white sheet of the blizzard and which I visualized now as a huge organ, a lung, dark and diseased.

'It will be death for you,' I said, 'this swim you plan to make this summer. No one in your condition should attempt such a thing.' (My God, I thought, I'm saying this to a man who has already died!) 'It's the kind of monstrous idea that this crazy country gives birth to. Like those madmen who walk on tightropes over Niagara Falls or fling themselves over the edge in barrels. A northern madness, a madness born of desperation and anemia. I despair of you.'

'You may think I am crazy,' he said calmly, 'but I am actually the only sane man here.'

'You will throw yourself into the lake this summer and drown, and you're the only sane man here!' I screamed. 'You want to be a famous swimmer like Barbara Ann Scott or Victor Bauman or Sandy Nikolas who is famous in my country because in 1975 she swam from Jabbul to Latakia. You want to die? Well, go ahead and die! It is probably written that you shall meet your end thus.'

'My end,' he mused. 'I've died so many times I can't remember. I'm always dying, so for me there is no real death.'

'But still I possess the Terrible Knowledge; I live with death. Most people don't know that they will die at all. I have embraced my death and made it part of my living; in a sense my life is nothing but the knowledge of my end. *I know* I will die; thus I am reborn.'

And on that outrageous and mad remark he smiled with such a brilliant delight that I was alarmed, and thought that he was perhaps still feverish from his ordeal.

'Now I confess I don't understand you at all, my friend, and I never have.' I said. 'Is it I who am dead, and is this the afterlife?'

'Where then are the beautiful *houris*?' he laughed. Then this most baffling of men put an arm around my shoulder and said. 'Look, the past is a clamour of voices, the Old World wails in your head like the songs of those singers you listen to. You must find your way into the New World.'

'But I thought I *was* in the New World!' I cried.

'Then you must go home,' he said, adding softly, 'I can't.'

'Home is a dream, home is a picture I carry in my wallet, home is an old woman in black clothes. When Ali died my country died in my head. Now there is only the music.' I found myself weeping with the truth and the shame of my words. I would write to my betrothed, the beautiful Yasmin, and tell her to live her life without me. I would remain here in Noman's land with my despair and my loneliness and my silly hobbies. I would remain wherever Noman was, for he was all I had left of Ali, and all I had left of myself.

I lied before when I said Noman did not understand me, for it is obvious that it is indeed I who have not understood him. I shall never know him, for he is not like other men. His mind works - how shall I say it? - *sideways*. He thrives on paradox. Explain me this man. He bade me goodnight by touching his forehead, his chest, then brushing the floor with the back of his hand and whispering a gracious *Salaam*.

Now I shall never forget that night, the white storm, and him just lying there breathing, breathing. Sometimes just before I sleep I feel ghosts dancing in my head. Last night as I lay in bed a white angel with wings of white fire and the face of Noman came into my room and crept around everywhere, crept up the walls like a bat and upside down along the ceiling, and down again, then out the window where it became part of the white night winter sky.



## The Mysterious Hooded Man

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On the Thursday before Christmas a great wind came from nowhere and sent people flying into the streets and into each other, forcing some to crawl, utterly humbled, on hands and knees to find safe corners from the ungodly tempest. Telephone poles fell, their lines humming with cryptic information, no longer important if it ever was. Men and women otherwise afraid to touch one another in the long hours at the office found themselves falling into one another's arms to find strength in their combined weight. Some mumbled darkly about the Russians screwing up the weather again; others referred to the Russian satellite which had recently fallen, a modern Lucifer, onto Canadian soil.

There were white-outs all over the country; pedestrians and motorists moved through worlds of snow with the bleached, bone-white vision of the dead. The storm, some said, held all the terror of a waking dream, its muffled and only partial reality. Visions of bleached caribou, antlers pointing skyward, pointing northward and westward, filled the wild eyes of children. White dreams moved into Moose Jaw and Flin Flon; everyone forgot about colours.

The wind was fearsome, and stuff was flying all along King Street - bits of ancient birds or pterodactyls, stationery, a faded bra, ticker tape, Wintario Tickets, paper tigers, rubber cheques, dental floss - or so it all appeared to Noman. Office papers fluttered on tree branches - important papers maybe: birth certificates, marriage licenses, records of being, all impaled on the tree by the wind, all bizarre advertisements. The wind stripped everything and everyone of its identity, and no man knew who he was or where he belonged.

Outside of Loblaws a figure moved in the dark white street. It wore a golden hood with fishlike slits for mouth and eyes and it stared at Noman for a very long time. Then the mysterious hooded man made his way down King Street, leaning westward into the wind. Noman followed him through the driving snow to Roncesvalles Avenue. He got colder and colder, and wondered if winter meant only the weird anonymity attained by people wearing hoods. Even the chestnut vendor from Naples was a triumph of disguise with his ear muffs and iced eyebrows and the old coat made from a hundred Italian rabbits which had died when Mussolini was still in power.

The mysterious hooded man turned left at a place where everyone was disappearing around corners, muffled and mute, in pursuit of elusive personal histories, lost in private visions of cold. Winter was a country of phantoms, of shy, elusive ghosts.

The mysterious hooded man proceeded with alarming sureness of foot and presence of mind across the bridge that spanned the ancient railway tracks and Lakeshore Boulevard, towards the lake. Now and again he looked back to make sure he was still being followed. The white of the snow in the air merged with the white of the shoreline, so when Noman got to the bottom of the curved bridge there was no more horizon. The sky and the lake were one; it was awful.

'Hey you, hey you!' he cried. 'Listen, I just want to ...'

The mysterious hooded man turned to him and removed his golden hood and his coat to reveal a dark brown suit. At that moment a small dog, berking hysterically, ran along the blurred shoreline and joined him.

'So,' said King, 'it seems that you have found me.'

'What do you have to tell me?' Noman asked, and the white clouds of their breath began to take on the shapes of tiny animals. 'How do I survive here?'

'By embracing the loneliness,' said King. 'You already have survived. And by being an explorer. The exploration of this country hasn't ended; it never will. Each time you go further into the interior, you find another country.' Then he stepped onto an ice floe, neatly and carefully, as though it were an escalator.

'You cheat! Come back! What other country?' Noman cried.

'I have not cheated you. I have given you something to look for. That's more than enough. Goodbye.' The ice floe moved away from shore. He put the golden hood back on and stood holding the little dog, straight and poised, noble and tragic, the captain of a sinking ship.

'You've got to tell me more, you bastard!'

'Don't insult me, I'm old enough to be your father,' said King, his words turning to crystals of ice in the white air. 'It will all be clear to you,' he added as the ice floe moved farther away, 'tomorrow at noon. Have patience. Time waits for Noman, remember. Just a joke.'

Now the figure glided straight out onto the ice and vanished altogether. For all Noman knew, he might be proceeding in a southerly direction towards America. But if the ice was thin in certain places, he'd be sinking slowly, slowly, until the terrible waters lapped against his golden hood, seeping into the slit of the mouth and the slit of the eyes. Then the hood and the person inside the hood would slide slowly into the lake, dragging down their pasts, their birth certificates and drivers' licences and address books, their diplomas and calendars and secret dreams and diaries and everything they ever owned down with them.

This figure, this gold death had led him to the lake. Sooner or later everything led to the lake. He would remember.



## The Holyland Buffet

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'The most amazing thing I saw in all my travels,' Kali was saying, 'was that streetcar in Cairo.'

'I thought you never travelled,' said Ibrahim who was sitting across the table from her in a new restaurant called Mythological Foods. 'I know that when you get mad, you always swear that you're going to pack up and go to India. But you never go, so I assume you never travel.'

'Ah but I have, you know. I have been to two holy lands - Israel and Egypt. I have also been to Greece, which is not really a holy land. But to get back to that streetcar - '

'Tell me about Israel,' Ibrahim said. 'I want to comprehend the enemy.'

'On my first day there I took a walk along the beach at Jaffa, which means *The Beautiful*. Some boy about eleven or twelve came up and asked me the time - (everybody there asks you the time, don't ask me why) - and when I told him he attacked me and threw me to the ground and started punching me all over. We punched and kicked for a while until he finally got bored and walked away. I never knew what it was all about, except that because I was wearing shorts I probably offended him.'

'Bloody aggressive Israelis,' Ibrahim said. 'That's all they know, how to punch and kick their way through the world. 'The boy was a Palestinian Arab,' Kali said. 'He thought I was an Israeli.'

'Then the story is entirely different,' said Ibrahim. 'It needs re-examining.'

The mythological food arrived at their table and they dug in. Ibrahim showed her how to eat a dish of dark brown powder with an indescribable smell.

'This is *zaatar*,' he said. 'We've been eating it for centuries in the East. You dip the bread first in the olive oil to moisten it, then into the *zaatar* - so.' He popped a piece into her mouth. 'Jesus Christ ate this all the time,' he said. 'He and his disciples. This is the bitter herbs they wrote about. Anyway, tell me more about Israel.'

'It's really the streetcar I want to talk about,' Kali said.

'Never mind the streetcar.'

'Well I was walking through this village called Lifta, outside of Jerusalem, and I was wearing shorts again, so I looked like a *sabra* again, and a whole tribe of little Arab boys came screaming up the mountain path towards me and started pelting me with stones. Stoned outside of Jerusalem, can you imagine, in the Twentieth Century, and me a Kanadian. In the clinic they put something called a spider clamp into my head where the worst wound was, and covered it with bandages that looked like a turban. They said now I looked like an Arab, and told me not to do anything exciting for a few days. I tried not to do anything exciting, but the Israelis are hooked on speed - I mean anything that goes fast, the faster the better. So I had this wild motorcycle ride with a guy who thought he was doing me a favour by giving me a ride up to Tiberias, and every moment I thought I was going to die, which was of course the whole point - the thrill. Then I walked around Tiberias with the spider clamp rusting in my skull, holding my thoughts together as it were, keeping my head from flying apart in a hundred directions. Then I brooded and felt biblical in a small hotel, and the next day another guy offered me a ride in his motor boat in lake Tiberias. I should have known better. He rode at top speed to the middle of the lake and informed me that now two minutes either way meant the difference between Israel and Jordan, life or death. Then he laughed and laughed like a madman and started going around in crazy wild circles. Can you imagine - this maniac in the middle of the Sea of Galilee and us going round and round and the laughter so loud they could probably hear it on both shores ...'

'Bloody insane Israelis,' said Ibrahim, and passed her a plate of ripe green figs.

'Well all the guys are on the make over there,' Kali said, 'and I was a female tourist travelling alone, so what could I expect? Come on, it would be the same in your country.'

Ibrahim addressed his full attention to the figs.

'O wait,' Kali remembered, 'I knew I forgot something, I forgot to tell you about the Holyland Buffet.'



'What!'

'The Holyland Buffet. It was this crazy little place at the foot of the Mount of Loaves and Fishes. Nothing more than a little shack, really, with a counter in the front and a few shelves behind full of orange drinks and cigarettes and *halvah* bars. I must have been the first person the owner had seen for days, because - '

'Wait!' Ibrahim cried. 'Wait wait wait! I have a cousin in Jorden who has a place called the Holyland Buffet, just outside of Bethlehem!'

'Well this one was in Israel.'

'It's impossible that there are two!' Ibrahim cried, his face getting very red. 'It's just impossible!'

'Well I didn't know if the guy who ran this one was Arab or Israeli. Anyway, as I was saying, I must have been the first person or maybe just the first woman he'd seen for days because he leaned over the counter after he served me my drink and clutched my wrists and pleaded, *Come with me to Haifa! The lights, the cabarets, the people!* I said that I couldn't, and I didn't even know him. He said that didn't matter, we'd have a wonderful time anyway. *To Haifa, to Haifa together!* I wonder where he is today, what a beautiful man ...'

'There can't be two Holyland Buffets,' Ibrahim said, and proceeded not to listen to her as she went on.

'And then there was old Ephraim, the painter who lived in the old village of Safed in the mountains. He wanted to seduce me too, although he went on for hours about Eisenstein and Isadora Duncan and Stanislavsky and all the others he had known who were blacklisted in the States. In Israel the tourist bureau warned tourists against having their portraits done by the infamous communist Ephraim, so he ended up with more business than anyone.'

'Let's change the subject,' said Ibrahim, dejectedly sipping a Turkish coffee. 'What about Egypt?'

'At last we're getting to what I wanted to tell you in the first place. The streetcar - '

'Who cares about a streetcar? What happened in Egypt?'

'Well of course it's even worse there for a woman to walk around alone. When I went every day to the museum in Cairo because there was so much to see, the guards thought I must have been playing some really sexy game with them; it was inconceivable that I would go alone to a museum every day - why? What was my real reason? I could not possibly have travelled half way around the world to stare at statues and mummies of the dead lords of Egypt, the gold of Tutankhamon, the most exquisite sculpture imaginable. No, I was indeed a tart, a slut, a whore. So they kept plying me with sugary tea and cigarettes, - and they smiled and joked among themselves, and when I didn't want more sugary tea they offered me *Misra-Cola* and more cigarettes and endless offers of escorted tours around Cairo. Within a few days I had acquired a reputation of being one of the loosest women in the city, a tramp, an easy lay; and of course each

one of them boasted to the others of his conquest of this piece of garbage, this foreigner. I don't know how I got to actually see what I wanted to see in the museum, but somehow I did.'

'I hate Egyptians,' Ibrahim said. 'The first to suck up to the Israelis. Egyptian dogs. Would you like some *halvah*?' he asked. 'It's the lovely kind with chocolate marbled all through it. Here, have some.' And he popped a piece into her mouth. 'Now, what else?'

'The pyramids,' Kali said. 'Not the pyramids themselves - what can one say? But the washrooms, the horrible little washrooms which had no doors on the cubicles and no doors closed to the outside, and you had to pay the guard - a man - to go and pee, and you sat there in the shameless light of day staring at the Great Pyramid of Giza from the vantage point of a toilet seat, for Christ's sake. I remember it well; I have tried to forget.'

The waiter at Mythological Foods produced the bill for the meal, and Ibrahim frowned darkly as he checked it over.

'It's amazing and disgusting what they think they can charge for food which has been eaten since before Jesus Christ walked the earth, before Ulysses set sail from Ithaca, before there even was a Holy Land,' he said.

He paid, and they left. Outside the sky was a frail blue, colour of Roman glass.

'But you come back from these travels, and it's wonderful,' Kali mused. 'You come back to Canada, and the jet going from East to West interferes with the world's turning. You realize that although there are arrested sunsets, moments that go on forever, cities whose walls trap time - it all comes full circle in the end.'

'That bill was too high,' Ibrahim muttered. 'We'd have gotten a better meal at the Holyland Buffet. The one my cousin owns. In Jordan.'

They waited for a streetcar; they were both going in the same direction.

'Now will you listen to my story, the one I was going to tell you in the first place ?' Kali asked.

'All right, but make it fast.'

'Well there I was, standing in the middle of Cairo one afternoon, hot, mad, and completely disoriented with people screaming all around me and donkeys braying and a chaos that exists nowhere else in the world - when what should I see?'

'I don't know. What did you see?'

'What should I see, coming towards me with the slowness and grace of a dream, its colours an unmistakable dark red and yellow, the sign on its metal forehead a magic name recalling a distant, mythic land ...'

'What did you *see*?' Ibrahim's temper was quickly rising.

'A *King Street streetcar*.'

'A what?'

'A King Street streetcar. From Toronto, Kanada. The city gives old ones away to Egypt and I guess other places, when they're too worn out to use here. There it was, coming towards me, this great fabulous beast. Try to imagine it, Ibrahim, try to imagine what I felt.'

But Ibrahim was too angry about the meal, about the bill, about the second Holyland Buffet which was in the country of the enemy, about the coldness of the day in this country of his exile, to pay much attention to what she said.



## Nightchild

---

This is Kali here.

Strange, or not so strange, that all my early lovers were foreigners, that I went with them partly so I could see this country through the eyes of immigrants. For it is never the same country, you know; it keeps changing. And there is another country inside this one, and another, and another, if you look long enough. Exiles and strangers came together in me, enemies came together in me, all of them ashamed of their beautiful difficult names and shortening them to suit a language where even Manitou is a monosyllable. And me nevertheless insisting on calling them by their real names (*Demetrius, Antonio, Ivars*), me the native leading them back to their lands while they revealed to me the many Kanadas mirrored in their eyes.

Then came Noman, more foreign than anyone because he did not come from outside, but from inside this land - Noman who, like the devil, was always a perfect gentleman, who appeared in my life like the demon who lived in the back of an old chair, and who I had never seen until I sprayed the chair with gold paint and his face emerged laughing from the wood. Noman who performs his endless disappearing acts, but always returns after huge lengths of time with his dazzling smile and his dazzling amnesia to throw my life into splendid chaos once again. This plural being with his many lives.

Thirteen years ago he said, 'Let's possess the future as surely as we possess the past. Let's become the masters of time, let's *move into* time!' And then he walked, stark naked, through the

arch at Kingsmere and disappeared. Disappeared from *my* eyes at least, but I heard he was very active during the following years, appearing here and there in one guise or another - (the child saw him performing magic at a birthday party) - in hot pursuit, as ever, of his several selves, living out whatever alternative lives and alternative realities he was forced by his nature to experience. Torn out of time, memoryless, he could imagine himself a master of time, but when he realized that in truth he possessed neither the past nor the future, he returned to me. I do not need to master time; I contain it. I am his fixed point, his sundial; with me he can watch the shadow of himself turning and returning to the same position. I am his compass, I am his sanity.

Let me tell you of the kind of love that endures absences. Even defines itself by absences, thrives on absences. Let me assure you that thirteen years without him had the same *texture* as a day, and it was of little consequence how many moons passed, how many breaths. Time does nothing to you; you do things to time. Criminals *do* time in prison; lovers *make* time. I gathered time, waiting or not waiting, it did not really matter - for I had the child, and the child seized time and swung it round and round his head like a sword.

Nothing occurs that is not miraculous; all of life is an act of magic. So when I drove back to Kingsmere that night and found Noman stumbling out of the forest, I was not surprised. At some preordained signal we both returned to the scene of his disappearance to discover one another all over again. Time had served us well, preserving our selves, our separate identities, leaving us free to introduce each other to our separate, complementary worlds. Neither of us has ever claimed to 'know' the other; the idea is distasteful to us both. We offer each other the priceless gift of our own mystery - for what more do we have to give, finally, than the enigma of our selves? What can we 'know' of one another? Nothing. Men doodle differently than women; women make circles and arcs and men make arrows and knives. Closer to the mystery we cannot come, nor do we want to.

(So I do not want to know him but to know what he is not, all the people he is not, all the places he can't be found. The contours of his absences. I define him only by default, as you must also, and as you will.)

At first I didn't tell him about the boy, and made sure the boy was out whenever he visited. Luckily, he'd been with his grandparents when I first brought Noman back. I wanted to wait until he was ready, until at least part of his memory had returned. But the nightchild - as the neighbours called him - perceived everything right from the start. 'It's him, isn't it?' he challenged me. 'It's that creep, my father.' (The nightchild knows everything; he knows what time it is down to the last minute without consulting a clock, he knows everybody's secrets, he knows the outcome of every major sports event, he knows when the price of gold will drop.)

'Yes, it's him,' I said, 'but he mustn't know yet.'

And then the uncanny child began to follow Noman around everywhere, taunting him and playing beastly tricks on him, relishing his secret knowledge. Noman told me that whenever they encountered one another it was neither day nor night but some place in between, some dawn or dusk when day and night had each other in a stranglehold that seemed to go on forever.

I was afraid they'd end up by killing each other, but no matter how horrible the child's tricks became, Noman desisted from retaliating on any grand scale. He could have turned on his full powers and wiped the boy out with a single soul-destroying stare, but he contented himself with relatively harmless acts such as giving the boy a case of unbearable itching all over his body which lasted for a full twentyfour hours. Meanwhile the boy tried to blow him up with dynamite, kidnapped his little cat and doused it with gasoline before attempting to set it on fire - (Noman rescued it just in time) - filled a large brown envelope full of worms and addressed it to him and put it in his mailbox, phoned him and delivered blood-curdling screams into the telephone, passed a rag soaked in turpentine under his door and lit it from the outside, painted a huge red swastika on the pavement outside his house, jumped him from behind on the street and emptied a bag of white flour onto his head, threw stones at his window and burned his mail.

'Sooner or later,' Noman said, smiling grimly, 'he'll go too far.'

The whole of that summer Noman wandered around in the clouds of his amnesia, but by the Fall things started coming back to him. On Sunday October 23 (the world's birthday, he informed me, the world having been created on that day in 4004 B.C.) he told me he'd had a dream in which a police officer approached him saying 'I'm taking you into custody for killing yourself.' 'Do you mean I'm dead?' he asked. 'Yes,' said the officer, 'several times over, and I want your address and any identification you have on your person.' 'Which person?' Noman asked, and the dream ended.

We went to the lakeshore and walked warily along the beach, drawing together and drifting apart, each of us trying to get a better perspective on the other, only dimly aware that we were performing the steps to a slow, ancient dance. Gulls took off from the breakwater and dove headlong into the sunset, razor-coloured, razor-edged waves scuttled into shore, pieces of driftwood bleached white were the bones of bizarre animals.

'Let's not learn too much about anything,' he said, 'especially about each other.'

'Fire,' I replied. 'My sentiments exactly.'

Then he smiled. 'But I've said that before, haven't I? Before and before ...'

We drove along Lakeshore Boulevard in the sad blaze of the autumn evening. At the Exhibition grounds pastel lights lit the pavilions for food and flowers and automobiles and horses, and turned them into Medieval castles and Byzantine shrines. In that unreal light they existed in their own peculiar dimension in time and space, as we did, as the lake did, wistful now, brooding, bereft of boats. It gleamed like black metal, lit by the magic of carlight.

*Wherever you are, I thought, the landscape is revised.*

Noman read the roadsigns and frowned. 'Why is everything in kilometres? Miles away in the purple distance the shadowy caribou roam. Try saying that in kilometres.' Then he paused, puzzled. 'Kali, do I drive?' he asked. But when we stopped and changed places he stared at the wheel in dismay and decided he didn't.

'All right,' he declared. 'Let's go so far East we'll end up West of ourselves. Let's go to the International Dateline Hotel in Tonga where they advertise that *today becomes tomorrow*.'

The road unravelled before us.

'Consider eternity,' I said. 'The Egyptian hieroglyph which means *thousands and thousands of years* is a string of suns. It looks like the DNA molecule: I discovered that yesterday.'

'The DNA molecule is a yard long film coiled in the cell, and it can be spliced, like editing tape,' he said. 'Maybe our lives can be spliced like that,' he went on, 'edited and endlessly revised.'

The road unravelled before us, endlessly turning.

It was just after the first snow that he became entirely himself again. Around the skating rink at City Hall Square children lay in the snow, making angels or mandalas with the scissor movements of their arms and legs. Noman said he would like to die like that, in the snow, then caught himself, smiled, and said that in at least one of his lives he already had. Purple music poured through the loudspeakers, countless silver blades ate arcs into the ice as the theme from Exodus soared over the square and the pale curved towers of City Hall, which looked like something from another world.

'I don't know if I can do this,' he said, expertly lacing his skates in two seconds. Then he swayed at the edge of the rink, ankles collapsing inward, faking it. 'This is the part in the film where Eva Marie Saint tells Paul Newman that they won't make it, and he walks away into the intermission,' he said. And then - what else - he took off with dazzling speed across the ice. He claimed the whole rink, speed-skating around it counter-clockwise until someone crashed into him and left him flat on his back, splayed out on the ice, making an angel.

'I've decapitated myself,' he announced, gazing at Moore's *Archer*, which was turning greener with age at the far end of the square.

'Did I ever tell you I was inside that thing?' he asked as a flurry of people swept past him, the kids in multi-coloured snowsuits tumbled and slid like fat little jelly beans, the boys shot a puck, the lovers went arm in arm, dazed.

'In fact, did I ever tell you about any of it? It's all come back to me, Kali, my past lives, everything!' he cried, and we both laughed out loud at the relief of it.

'The sky looks wild from down here,' he said, so I joined him on the ice. We lay together on our backs, and the night sky was an inverted bowl of stars. Somebody's skate blade narrowly missed his cheek.

'Christ, what a dangerous country.'

Doctor Zhivago filled the night; the bell of the old City Hall tolled the eleventh hour. He covered me with his mouth, his knees, his skates. The other skaters, very polite and Kanadian, skimmed

by us at a respectable distance muttering *excuse me, excuse me*, and left us lying there in little storms of silver dust.

Now I must tell you of the peculiar incident in December when Noman and the boy had a sort of a showdown and the boy played an awful trick on him. It was an unfortunate episode, but not entirely a negative one, for something between them was finally resolved and an important stage in their relationship was reached.

Noman had realized at last who the boy was, and had approached him seeking a kind of ceasefire in their bizarre war. But the boy did not honour the truce.

'Help me, Kali,' Noman pleaded on the phone to me. 'This is my darkest hour. This time he's gone too far. He's discovered his darker powers; he's learned to bend light.'

'And?' I asked, laughing a little.

'I'm coming over. You'll see. Or you won't.'

I combed my hair and recalled a Cherokee love charm:

*I am wonderfully beautiful  
you have put me in a house of whiteness  
it shall always envelop me and  
no one with me shall ever be lonely  
all the seven clans make you feel lonely  
they are not good looking  
but I am a woman of whiteness  
I stand with my face toward the Sun Land  
with me no one is ever lonely  
I am very beautiful  
certainly I shall never become blue  
the house of whiteness envelops me wherever I go  
with me no one is ever lonely  
your soul has come into the centre of my soul  
never to go away  
I (and now I tell you my name)  
I take your soul*

(But he possesses himself, you cannot possess him, you cannot possess anything, I told myself. You've got to relinquish your hold on everything to discover what is truly yours.)

I looked at myself in the mirror and considered that I had never felt like Eve, but like Lilith, the first woman, wilful and wise. I had good teeth, wolf-white and even and strong, teeth made for softening the skins of animals. I put on an ornament of shells and feathers and an old necklace of blue beads like a string of eyes which stared back at me from the mirror. I dressed carefully, preparing to be divested of all my garments, defrocked, utterly undone. The nervous satin of my skirt trembled when I moved. I turned off all the lights in the house so only the moonlight shone through the windows.

'Kali, I'm here,' he said when I opened the door for him, 'but I'm invisible. The kid has worked some terrible magic on me.'

'Nonsense,' I said, and drew him by the hand into the moonlit house.

'I tell you he's made me invisible, he's *eclipsed* me,' Noman protested as we made our way into the bedroom.

In the darkness my jewels became underground stars. Noman fingered the blue beads on my neck and they remembered his touch. We became the beast with many mouths; we spoke an ancient language, a sort of Linear B. The breath of wolves and the wings of ravens brushed our skin, fabulous figures of angels and animals flew across the ceiling. You could have blown us over with a single breath, we were that delicate. We were as insubstantial as air, as real as fire.

Strange that no one is born knowing how to love. It is a tremendous task requiring great courage, a dynamic surrender to one's real being. The only heroes on earth are the lovers. In love we *achieve* one another. It is a great victory, a terrible blow to the angel of death. They should give a standing ovation to the world's lovers, offer them the Nobel Prize. Ours is the only story worth telling.

Afterwards we lay still for a long time; we had just invented the world and were wondering what to do with it. It was infinitely beautiful, infinitely treacherous. Everything had been revealed to us, and now we knew nothing. Noman and I had become the wisest and most ignorant of beings. We were rude, insolent, vulgar, pompous, self-righteous and insufferable, we were stupid with love, exempt from everything, we were hopeless, we were the lovers, we were above the law. Love *was* the Law.

'We must look as though we've been struck by lightning,' I said an hour later as I went to turn on a lamp.

'Kali, I've warned you ...' he said.

I laughed, and flooded the room with light.

Noman was not there. There was an awful whiteness before my eyes.

'Say something,' I said in a voice not my own.

'I'm here,' came the voice from the bed. 'I told you, Kali. But it won't last long, don't worry.'

I looked at the white walls, and the bed which seemed to have been hit by a cyclone, and the string of blue beads against a white sheet.

'This time,' I said, 'he's gone too far.'



The craziest intersection in the city is where King and Queen and Roncesvalles meet in a mad jumble of streetcar tracks which have been ripped up and rearranged a hundred times in the past. Finally, somehow, one street subtly becomes another. It is hard to tell what happens exactly - Queen devours King? Roncesvalles surrenders to King? Anyway, it all sorts itself out, or braids itself together, depending on how you look at it.

The house where Noman and Ibrahim lived was close to this insane intersection, and it was here that Ibrahim gave his little birthday party, which fell on Xmas Eve. He called it his birthnight party. 'Most people are born at night, night is the great mother,' he said. 'Come in; my spirit entertains its guests! In the East we make our own parties. If someone forgets your birthday it is your own fault because you did not make it known to him. Here everyone is expected to read your mind; it is not just.'

Noman had disappeared a few days before Xmas, so I went alone to the party. There was cold chicken and cantaloupe and pineapple sliced very thinly and arranged in rings. Yellow oil swirled in little eddies on top of the eggplant salad. There were paper plates rampant with cheese and tomatoes and olives. Eastern music oozed through the radio. There were plastic picks with maple leaves stuck into the sardines, and some wickedly rare roast beef. Cherries skied down the chocolate mountains of the Black Forest cake. We drank *araq* out of black and gold zodiac cups. 'I bought all twelve of them,' Ibrahim explained, 'so whoever comes here, I have the right cup for him.'

But no one came and we sat alone, toasting each other. I sang Happy Birthnight Ibrahim, and taught him some carols.

'King forever, ceasing never,  
Over a salt terrain,' he sang. And I sang:  
'O children of the forest free,  
O sons of Manitou ...'

Although he considered that friendship between a man and a woman was yet another corrupt Western custom, and that it was totally impossible for a man and a woman to have a relationship that was not sexual in nature, he had grown to like me. But he was always testing me in a hundred different ways.

'Do you do it ? '

'Do what?' I countered.

'It. You know.' he said. Then he plucked a chicken bone from between his teeth, cleaned it on a napkin and handed it to me through the candlelight. 'Make a wish, Kali. Here is my soul, fragile as a wishbone.'

We snapped the bone, and the better part of it was in my hand. 'Forget it,' he said. 'Perhaps I only love you because of him.' Then he wandered to the window and gazed out, his eyes fixed on some private point in space.

'He's here even when he's not here,' I said.

'I know.'

He turned to me, his soul drowning in his black eyes. The we both fell to silence. Outside the window, the visible absence of Noman, the stark white streets of Xmas.

Noman returned later that night, and on Xmas morning we went to the island, a short ferry ride away from the city. He looked a little shaky and pale and told me he had been ill the night before. It was the end of the terrible storm that had gone on for days, and the waves in the bay were still whipped to a froth by the white wind. On the far side of the island we watched crazed waves roll and dash themselves against the breakwater, then double back, spitting foam. A lone gull shrieked and sought asylum at the lighthouse on the eastern tongue of the island. Our faces smarted from the spray, the cold and brilliant sun. I fished out a cigarette - he had never succeeded in stopping me from smoking - and he lit a match for me, his hands cupped around the flame. Then he froze in the middle of the action and stared out across the water.

'The lake,' he breathed. 'The lake. This summer.'

We walked back towards the dock, and it was then that everything entered another order of time.

In a lagoon close to the dock a lone skater was describing concentric circles, a sort of penmanship on ice. Something in me went numb with fear. I had told the boy that we were coming here, that I had wanted these few hours alone with Noman to urge him to come home with me late that day so that the two of them might be reconciled. But he'd followed us, and now Noman saw him, and now he was smiling a smile which filled me with horror.

'Doesn't he realize how thin the ice is?' Noman asked.

'You wouldn't ...' I said.

'Wouldn't I?' Noman replied.

Then there was a crack like the sound of a hammer striking glass. Then another crack, and the boy disappeared. I screamed and my scream was a horrible black bird being torn out of my mouth.

Noman raced out onto the ice and tore off his coat and without a moment's hesitation lowered himself through the gash in the ice into the black blood of the water.

Just beneath the ice was a layer of trapped light, a blinding prison. The cold was the metallic cold of steel gates and bars. Above him were sliding white panels of ice, terrible doors that opened and closed in insane random patterns. The boy thrashed his way away from the hole and was bashing at the ice with his fists, his mouth open in a soundless scream, a roaring silence. Noman

grabbed him and tried to pull him back, but he resisted, kicking and punching in ghastly slow motion. Their lungs began to burst. Somehow Noman manoeuvred him back to where the sky slashed through the ice in a vivid hallucinatory blue.

I stretched myself out on the ice and held out my arms. When the boy's head broke through the water I felt a sensation which to my shock was one of relief coupled with an absurd sort of *jealousy*. It was only much later that I realized that Noman had given him, with this terrible baptism, a sort of second, greater birth. I can't remember how long it was before they both lay gasping and shivering beside me.

'I hate your guts,' the boy said. 'I knew I wouldn't drown down there. Don't you know how hard it is to drown? I could have been half an hour down there and I still wouldn't be dead. Ever heard of the Mammalian Diving Reflex? Your body diverts your blood from your arms and legs and holds it in reserve to protect your heart and brain. Suspended animation. And anyway I could have found my own way out.'

'Shut up,' Noman said.

Someone had spotted us and called the harbour police, and in a few minutes a cruiser picked us up and wrapped us all in blankets and took us to the city.

'That was pretty good,' the boy told Noman in the first aid station. 'But not as good as Houdini. He went down under the ice all chained up and in a crate. Bet you couldn't get out of that one.'

The stared each other down.

'So what other tricks do you know?' asked the boy. 'I mean except making the ice break.'

'I know a few card tricks,' Noman said.

'You're crazy. There's better tricks than that. Can you bend time?'

And so on. We all went home and ate a golden turkey on a glorious bed of baby carrots and raisins and orange slices.

Later I said, 'Why, Noman, why did you have to do it?'

'I was merely teaching him a lesson,' he replied.

'It's not fair,' I said. 'Women give birth to a child's body, but men give birth to its soul. A mother teaches him how to tie his shoes, and a father teaches him astronomy or magic. It's not fair.'

I was furious.

'Yes it's fair,' Noman said. 'It's perfectly balanced, the power is equally divided. Thirteen years ago at Kingsmere I asked you to come with me, under the arch. *Let's move into time*, I said. And you didn't come - why?'

'I didn't have to,' I smiled. 'I already contained the future.'

On New Year's Eve we went to a Greek nightclub called Ithaki, and drank *retzina* and *ouzo* and dipped bread into *taramasalata*. I toasted the lean and anguished looking *bouzouki* player and stared in amazement as his fingers flew up and down the resonant strings with a will of their own. Ibrahim stared at the singer in her transparent red dress, her nipples peering back at him like eyes. Noman cried, 'Here's Spiros!' as a large man began fighting his way through the chairs and tables towards us.

'So it's you, my friend the hypnotist, or should I say the illusion-maker?' said Spiros. 'I haven't seen you since the day in my restaurant when you almost had me fooled into thinking I was seeing a vision. It was very convincing.'

'What have you been doing since then?' Noman asked.

'Making money. Tell me, Yanni, do you still think you're more foreign than me?'

'Absolutely,' Noman said.

'*Trellos*. You're *trellos* - crazy!' Spiros laughed, and ordered another round of drinks. 'Do you know the poem by our great poet Cavafy with the same name as this club? *Ithaki has given you the marvellous journey. Without her you would never have set out. Now she has nothing more to give you.*'

'You're wrong, there's much more,' Noman said. 'The journey hasn't ended.'

Someone with a Polaroid took pictures, and in an instant it was possible to distinguish the Kanadians from the Greeks, for while the Greeks grinned and faced the camera head on, the Kanadians, for reasons known only to them, turned away to smooth their hair and consider their response.

My two crazy friends Jube and Omph showed up, though I hadn't expected them to, and the singer in the red dress whose fingernails were painted five different colours came down from the stage and sat in Ibrahim's lap and spoke to him in low thrilling tones. People started throwing money and plates onto the stage, and some non-Greeks mistakenly threw dirty plates so there were bits of rice and lettuce flying around everywhere until they were informed that they had to ask for cheap plates to throw, and to pay for them all.

Noman climbed onto the stage, threw fifty one dollar bills into the air, and danced a spectacular *zembekiko*, that tragic, brooding, fiery, hilarious, difficult dance, a dance of life and death where

one circles around oneself, seeking one's centre in the centre of the dance, a dance which can only be performed properly by one man, alone. He danced through the spaces between the broken plates and the money, turning around himself, dipping towards the floor, his arms outstretched like the wings of a glider, soaring, crashing.

*Next year, I thought, I am going to India.*

At midnight the lights went out and everyone screamed and embraced. The band broke into a Greek rendition of Auld Lang Syne. At two in the morning we tacked ourselves onto the end of a long drunken line led by Spiros, and danced our way down the stairs of the club called Ithaki and out into the street. The music swirled around us and we found ourselves tossed up like driftwood on the sidewalk as the rest of the dancers wove their way back upstairs.

We went to the ravine near by, a long wound in the city where in the past Noman had staged another of his 'deaths'. The moonlit winter sky was turquoise and mauve and some new colour only just invented and as yet without a name. The hum of traffic along the viaduct over the ravine was visible sound, a line of tangerine orange light that curved from the past to the future with no beginning and no end. We went down the flight of stairs into the bright darkness, and stood in a place where space and time became one single, indivisible reality.

'If you look long enough,' Noman said, 'you will see that the snow is every colour of the spectrum. Kali, this is the most exotic country in the world.'

Now he went into intensive training in the pool for the lake swim. He did eight kilometres morning and night in a powerful crawl, his arms moving like oars, and sometimes he'd put on a jacket and do an extra kilometre or two with the added weight. Swimmers' hieroglyphics were chalked up for him on the big blackboard beside the clock: *Pull 800 f/s - 200 Br, swim down. 400 f/s, 8 x 25 sprint on 30. Kick 400 f/s*. He was an aquanaut; his body bit through the water, devouring time. He felt the world washing over him, and he was pulled along in the marathon of history. But some days he felt as though he were crawling over a sea of quicksilver. He crawled until the slanting light from the windows high up on street level darkened, and the cruel electric light of evening and the chlorinated blue light rippling in bands through the water were the only lights to see by.

The white of winter collapsed and the ice broke up into little pieces, but the lake, unfreezing, was as dark and menacing as ever. As spring came and the marathon swim got closer, I was filled with terror. One night I drank about 97 gin and tonics and put on gobs of violet mascara and threatened to go to India and join Phoolan Devi, the notorious bandit queen who was a sort of female Robin Hood, champion of the lowest castes. Ibrahim and I exchanged horror stories about swimmers in the Cuba-Florida swim who were pulled out of the water when their shark cages fell apart, their faces stung by jellyfish and their tongues swollen to twice their size, swimmers in the past in Lake Ontario vomiting and fainting and swimming around in horrible crazed circles.

'Fools,' said Ibrahim. 'Sound and fury signifying nothing. Cuckoos.'

The child asked Noman why he couldn't just teleport himself across the lake, why he had to swim it, like an ordinary human being, and Noman replied that teleportation was very advanced magic and even he hadn't yet mastered it.

Then Noman was doing 16 kilometres a day in the lake itself, sometimes more, under a bright aquamarine sky and in an awful unreal cold that burned like dry ice right in the middle of summer. The lake expanded, became a sea. The swim from Niagara on the Lake to the Exhibition grounds was 51 kilometres; the prize was \$25,000. (Swimmers were required to have completed 16 kilometres in a previous swim to qualify; I have no idea how Noman proved that he had done this.)

His coach kept reminding him that the top swimmers in the world were from Kanada, and warned off manufacturers of swimwear, molasses, honey, high protein drinks and granola bars, while Noman threw up defenses against the coming ordeal. He memorized long passages of poetry and equations relating to nuclear fission; he invented lengthy games of logic to prevent him from yielding to the temptation of sleep, for he feared sleep more than the lake itself. Sleep alone could defeat him.

Then the day arrived. There were thirteen swimmers in two buses going to Niagara on the Lake, four of them women. Women have a certain advantage over men in marathon swimming because female subcutaneous fat is an insulation against cold, and provides buoyancy and endurance. All of the swimmers were friendly, joking that they hoped the lake would be cold enough to finish off the cold haters. Ibrahim, who had insisted on being with Noman throughout the entire ordeal, struck up a conversation with an Egyptian swimmer and in two minutes they were screaming at each other in mindless fury. 'The dog believes in peace with Israel,' he told me later. 'I told him I hoped he would drown. I spit on him. I gave him the worst curse of all - *may all your dreams come true.*'

The child and I waited on the beach, as Noman had asked. Thunderclouds gathered, but I remembered that storm or no storm, they could not abort the swim if the swimmers were more than eight kilometres out. I maintained a total silence for the last few hours of the marathon, a silence which was a kind of magical discipline meant to ensure his safety. At times I would hold my breath and count up to the highest number possible until my lungs were ready to burst. I prayed to all the gods I knew to calm the lake, but the storm came anyway and drowned my prayers. That night and that day took longer to pass than thirteen years.

Now that it is over, life has returned to normal - whatever that is supposed to mean. Noman and the child get along quite well, that is, they have stopped trying to annihilate each other, although occasionally the child still tries to set him on fire. He gave Noman his wand back, the one he stole at the birthday party some years ago, and in return Noman is transferring esoteric knowledge and power to him by degrees. They take long walks together and Noman teaches him mysteries and secrets which they think I do not know. ('Make sure you know who you are before you fall asleep. Guard your mind. Lay weapons of steel and gold beside your pillow to defend your dreams. Honour the morning.') Just yesterday they went into the forest to practice bending time and to dream up their real names.



## The Other Country

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'There is no such country as Kanada,' said the lady reporter.

'Yes there is,' he told her. 'Right across the lake.'

'You know what I mean. I mean no such country as Canada spelled with a K, like you just told me. Just Canada with a C.'

'Well maybe I'm looking for the other country,' he said cryptically, turning away.

'What do you mean?' She was laughing at him now.

'Never mind.'

She scribbled something down in her notebook. *Nerves*, she thought. *He's a bundle of nerves, they all are. God, you'd think there were easier ways of killing yourself than this. He wants to find another country; most of the others just want to win this crazy marathon. Well I guess they all have their reasons for what they're doing.*

In tents set up along the shore of the Niagara River twelve other swimmers were resting, waiting for midnight and the final weather report. There was still time for a few more interviews.

'Good luck!' she called after him. 'Hope I see you on the other side!'

At eleven-thirty good weather conditions were confirmed, and the beach began to reek with the smell of sheep as the swimmers were smeared with the lanolin which would cool the friction created when their pores would no longer be able to sweat.

He stood alone on the beach, having sent everyone - including his trainer - away to the dinghy waiting offshore. Ibrahim came up to him with some last minute words of encouragement. 'You stink to high heaven,' he said. 'And although I am an atheist I will pray for you. This is a difficult thing for me to do, but I will manage. Allah listens to me. Even though there is no Allah. You see what I mean.'

'Get lost, Syrian jackal.'

As he said this he saw the water behind Ibrahim's shoulder turn dark and luminous as a black pearl, and the lake was breathing, breathing.

'No, I mean - do that then. Pray for me, atheist.'

The minutes slid towards midnight, and black grease shone all over his body. Chemical lights of a lurid, phosphorescent green were attached to the swimmers' suits to make them visible to the dinghies accompanying them, from their first thrust into the lake until the rendezvous with the pilot boats. Then the lights would neutralize themselves and die out.

Suddenly everyone was gone, including his friend. Everybody was gone, it was five minutes to midnight, and he was standing there on the beach looking like a spaceman or the creature from the black lagoon - absolutely alone. Some of the other swimmers were making nervous jokes and running around in nervous little circles, but they were somewhere else, in some other incomprehensible dimension of reality, they weren't where he was.

Everybody was gone; they had gone to another planet, and taken his passport so he couldn't go with them. They had stolen his soul, and left him beached on this foreign shore. They had run away with his soul. On some planet in a distant galaxy they were wining and dining and laughing at him. Them and his soul. His soul was laughing at him, and being wildly entertained. His soul had cuckolded him, his soul was having a ball, his soul had left him in Hell.

A gun went off behind his left ear, and through a green haze the thirteen swimmers charged down the beach and into the waiting water, screams and applause pursuing them, the water a black pearly bosom gathering them in - the heroes, the lemmings, the fools of midnight.

It took a while for him to fully realize that what he had trained for during the past few months was now a reality - he was in the lake and the marathon was on. His trainer shouted to him from the dinghy and pointed his powerlight at the buoy ahead of them which marked their position. He could scarcely remember the first strokes that had swept him down the river and into the lake, and he had only been dimly aware of linking up with the pilot boat. But now full consciousness was his, and it was the consciousness of utter and horrible darkness. He had committed himself to a limbo shared only by a very few. During the long night some of the cruisers would use no lights, because they had a strobe effect on the swimmers as they lifted their heads out of the water to breathe several times a minute hour after hour.

But after a time it seemed to him that the darkness almost became its own kind of light. The lake was a pleasant twenty degrees, and he was doing sixty strokes a minute through flat water. The operator of the pilot boat communicated by radio with the three accompanying boats which carried life-guards, medical experts and supplies, and media people.

'I heard once that the lake is a lady, and she can turn on you when the sun rises,' Ibrahim told the captain of the cruiser. 'Especially after a really quiet night like this one. One of the swimmers said before they started that they had seen the lake like this before, and they didn't like it.'



'They're all a bunch of superstitious children,' said the man at the wheel.

'How can he stand it hour after hour,' Ibrahim murmured, leaning over the rail and scanning the black water, 'not being able to see us most of the time, seeing nothing, going on, going on ... ?'

'He knows what he's doing,' said the captain. 'Otherwise, why would he be doing it?'

Ibrahim turned and smiled. 'That is a more interesting question than you might think,' he said. 'He's my friend, but I do not know him. It's all for the folly, perhaps. The folly and the glory. Forever and ever amen,' he added grimly.

The night filled up with timid stars and the static of marine radios as the cruiser captains kept in touch with the dinghies and guided them on their proper course. The swimmer propelled himself through a blue-black world of weeds and fish and lamprey eels, through the ink and slime of the night. At intervals he stopped and treaded water and took time to sip Lucosade through a straw or swallow Dextrose tablets, or wonder if anyone except himself really cared what he was doing. He floated on his back for two minutes and considered the bland stars. And because they didn't care one way or the other, he turned and pulled forward with extra force, just to spite them.

He must not sleep; he must not sleep and dream- that was the great danger. *Pick up strokes, thrust forward, think of advanced calculus or nuclear fission. Not too fast or you'll go into an oxygen high. Get this thing you call yourself together. Why have you come to this, why are you in this terrible dream: Don't ask this, or you'll fly apart. Thrust forward, thrust forward ...*

Ibrahim was lakesick for the hundredth time since he had been aboard the cruiser. The captain's voice came from behind him as he puked pitifully over the rail.

'Guess what? Weather report. Thunderstorms coming up. Ain't that grand?'

*This is it, Ibrahim thought. Now everybody's worst dream comes true.*

The Tower and many other places along the lakefront had kept their lights on all night to help guide the boats. Now in the first hour of the dawn they were turned off and the lake was once more the domain of the sun. The swimmer had been in the water for six hours, and now he couldn't believe it, but he was almost halfway home. During the night someone had jumped into the water and paced him for almost an hour, but his ghostly companion finally got out and left him once again alone. Now he realized that somehow he had passed through the terrible hour of the wolf, the hour before the dawn, and his mind and body were raging against the night's ordeal. As the darkness lifted he was subjected to bouts of cramps and nausea. He vomitted several times and kept swimming off in meaningless directions; his trainer had to shout him back on course over and over again. Then he started doing circles in the water, nothing but circles.

Now someone was waving a large square of fluorescent orange material at him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see it fluttering in the wind. The wind from where? All night the lake had been calm, now suddenly there were waves all around him, teasing him, flirting with him. He

knew that he would have to get away from that big ugly piece of orange cloth - it meant that they wanted him to come out, to give up. He stroked purposefully away from it. His trainer read his intention and started shouting at him.

'No!' he yelled back over the rising wind. 'I'm not coming out, I'm bloody not coming out!'

The silly orange square disappeared. The anger had drawn him away from his endless circles, and now he was back on course. They were letting him stay in - for how long? He lost all track of time and the morning fell into another dimension of time altogether.

Later the sky began to darken and once again the wind rose - a sickening wet green wind that whipped the waves up to more than three metres high. They were only six kilometres from shore; a short while earlier someone had held up a sign that read: *7.5. km*; this was the signal for him to commence the final sprint that would take him to shore. This was the time to summon up the body's last resources, to bend the will beyond all its limits.

But he did not know who he was; he did not know his name. His name had drowned and had sunk to the bottom of the lake.

In a few minutes and waves rose to four metres and all hell broke loose. The wind shot up to twenty-five knots. Thunder and lightning tore the sky wide open and released a deluge of enormous hailstones.

'Bring him in, bring him in!' screamed Ibrahim. 'This is madness, you are all mad!' An hour before, he had joined the others in the dinghy; now as the storm reached its peak the lake sent up sheer walls of water between them and the swimmer.

'Shut up!' the trainer yelled. 'I can't even see him to bring him in! He's veered off course a hundred metres, he's lost all sight of us!'

'We're losing him!' Ibrahim cried into the wind. 'Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,' he moaned, hanging onto the edge of the dinghy for dear life as a wave caught them broadside. It threw him clear into the water where he thrashed around blindly and roared at God. Someone managed to pull him back in.

Back in the cruiser the captain was listening to the radio. 'One boat's just been swamped,' he heard. 'Others are way off course, heading for Scarboro Bluffs. One guy's radio is knocked out. Pray we hold together, just pray.'

'He's lost,' Ibrahim sobbed. 'The word is coming to an end in this terrible lake. I should never have come to this crazy country. Oh God, oh God.'

The first time he went down he was looking for his name. Somewhere at the bottom of the lake was his lost name, his drowned self. He sank into the awful world of water, only to discover that his body bobbed up again of its own accord. The second time he went down to explore the spaces between life and death, to find what lay there in the self, in that other country.

*Take me to the absolute depths, he prayed, let me give over at last. Let me offer it all up to the black water - the lost loves, the broken dreams. I'm dragging it all down with me to the bottom of the lake; the past, the future, everything.*

But his lungs betrayed him, forcing him to the surface with repeated bursts of fiendish energy. Could it be so incredibly *difficult* to die? Could it be that death didn't want him, and the lake wasn't interested in his offerings? What then? He was buffeted by mad waves and hailstones. Hailstones, for God's sake. In the middle of summer. What else?

Suddenly he began to laugh because it was all so goddamn funny. What a colossal irony - he couldn't die now when he tried, he who had 'died' so many times in the past. Was it a luxury to even consider death in the midst of life, an unearned luxury? No, it was more than this - it was an error. It was as he had always known. You *couldn't die*. Now he laughed and laughed, his whole being running on pure oxygen. He was higher than the lightning, higher than the Tower which materialized in the jagged light. He knew that he was immortal; he knew it with absolute certainty. He had always been here, and always would be.

It occurred to him that since he was alive he may as well do something about it. And following upon that thought was another - that as long as one was alive, one may as well do it *right*, period. It was as simple as that; it always had been.

He was off course, but it was not difficult to correct himself. The Tower beckoned him, and he would not be lost as long as he could see the Tower. He knew now that he was going to make the last few kilometres. He was filled with a wild certainty that he could do anything in the world, and that the world was his. He would not be beached like a dying whale, washed up on the shores of life like all the flotsam and jetsam and dead fish and discarded junk that lined the beaches everywhere. He was painfully, magnificently alive.

'There he is!' screamed Ibrahim during a moment of calm between the waves. 'We've got him, we've got him!'

The dinghy was soon alongside of the swimmer. 'He's doing eighty strokes a minute,' said the trainer. 'He's not human.'

His only acknowledgement of them was a wave.

'I don't even think he needs us,' said Ibrahim sadly.

And it didn't really matter to him what he needed or didn't need; he lived in a moment torn away from time and in a world lit by another sun. As he approached the breakwater and the buildings that looked like Byzantine pavilions and Medieval castles along the shore, he was entering the most exciting and mysterious country in the world, with his past behind him and his alternative futures lying in wait ahead.

The sunlight appeared at intervals, bright stripes of time arrested and held within the fluid, changing present. The sky became a naked blue. He remembered something he had once read about that colour. *Blue was darkness made visible.*

He entered the breakwater and began the last short stretch of his journey, along the shore from Ontario Place to the Exhibition grounds. Many people were crowded along the shore, laughing and whistling and clapping; some threw red and yellow flowers into the water, some took photographs, some just stared at him in frightened silence. They knew he had come from another place.

'When you touch the ramp, turn right around and come back to the dinghy,' his trainer had warned him. 'Don't let anybody near you; don't let anybody touch you. Your body is going to be a raw nerve.'

He forgot all about that when his fingers reached out and touched the land. He didn't know where his fingers ended and the land began. He was an explorer who had discovered a new country and he claimed it in the name of all that was wondrous and real. He stood up out of the water very slowly, and a great roar arose from the crowd and cameras clicked all around him. He stood half naked and wet and shivering, water falling from him like quicksilver.

Ibrahim and the others rushed ashore to isolate him from the more persistent reporters. Ibrahim, who was weeping, put a towel over his shoulders and he almost shrieked from the touch of it on his skin. It was nine minutes past one in the afternoon; he had made the swim in just over thirteen hours, and set a new record. Two hours later the Egyptian would come in, and later an American and a Mexican would take third and fourth place. The other swimmers had been beaten by the storm.

The police shooed most of the reporters away, and a medical team arrived to determine whether or not he was still alive. He knew that if he stood on his feet much longer he would probably faint. As they started to put him on a stretcher he caught sight of the woman reporter he had spoken to on the other side of the lake.

'Congratulations!' she cried, fighting her way toward him. 'You know, I thought you wanted to die out there.'

'What country is this?' he asked her as the darkness began to fold in around him.

'This is Canada,' she smiled. 'Spelled with a C.'

'Oh. Kanada.' he said. He pronounced it his way.

'What motivated you to attempt such a difficult feat?' she asked, her pen poised in the air. 'I mean, my question is really just a simply why?'

'It was the only way I knew to come home,' he said.

A policeman took hold of her arm and began to draw her away. 'Let me finish my story on you,' she begged. 'Did you find the other country?'

'Yes I did.'

'What was it like? Where is it?'

'Right here,' he answered. 'There is another country, you know, and it's inside this one.'

They moved him away on the stretcher.

'God,' he said. 'God, the world is beautiful.'

He smiled as the darkness claimed him.

Kali was waiting on the beach with the boy. They saw him emerge from the lake, his body covered with shining, watery scales. A week later they all watched as the fireworks at the end of the Exhibition wrote bright signatures across the sky. Then the particles of fire fell back into the lake like rain.