

# ON THE STREET OF THE SERPENTS

by Michael Bishop

or, **The Assassination of Chairman Mao**  
as Effected by the Author in Seville, Spain  
in the Spring of 1992  
a Year of No Certain Historicity

## I

This narrative takes place in one of those strange eddies of time that are fed, downstream, so to speak, by the fierce maniacal tributaries of the mind. Though such a notion may frighten or discourage you, don't leave. I cannot leave, frightened of this idea as I am, and for you to do so would be to abandon me utterly to the pull and suck of these psychological whirlpools. I have a story to tell. Therefore, heed me awhile. As a concession to your reluctance, I will lead you into the water slowly — by beginning in the past, progressing to this purely hypothetical moment (this one, this very one) that finds me hunched over a pale blue typewriter, and proceeding, without apology, to a 1992 that may never fulfill itself as this narrative directs.

But one has the right to rape the Muse of History if he adheres to the Aristotelian precepts of structure. Or so I have convinced myself.

The setting is Seville. I know something of Seville because, in 1962, as a callow and shock-haired adolescent, I lived there with my father and his second wife in a high-ceilinged apartment that simmered above the cobblestones of one of the city's back-street plazas. Beneath us was a foyer with a wrought-iron grate and, next to this, a cramped *bodega* smelling of sawdust and olives. My father, a forty-three-year-old enlisted man in the United States Air Force, frequented this establishment religiously and often stood me to a glass of beer or a *vino rojo* costing three pesetas. Rather than lean over the damp counter in the bar's cramped breathing space, we sat at the collapsible green tables on the sidewalk outside the door.

From the sidewalk I could look at the balcony railing that fortified the half-casement of my own bedroom. At seventeen I believed myself a sophisticated amalgam of the late James Dean and the even later Ernest Hemingway: during the day I drank with my father, and, late at night, I brooded in the sheltered place between the casement sashes, imbibing the sounds and stinks of Seville through my very pores.

It was a good time, a time that actually happened.

But there were strange occurrences, too, and some of these have made the sort of indelible striations on the psyche that, years later, call one out of a sound sleep with their raw thrummings.

Upstairs from us there lived the family of a Japanese-American airman whose name was Pete Taniguchi. Taniguchi's wife, a tall blonde German girl with heavy features, put me in mind of a folk-legend milkmaid translated against her will to a land of querulous swarming gnomes, so out of place did she seem. The two of them—Taniguchi and the milkmaid—had a daughter, certainly little more than three years old, who could speak pidgin varieties of Spanish, German, and English. *Elfin* is the word that most accurately describes her, for she had inherited the small bones and nut-brown coloring of her father. I sometimes played intricate little games with her on the rooftop aerie of our tenement, enticing her to put together phrases in odd combinations of her three "native" languages.

The most successful of these may have been "*The gato es schlepping,*" which she piped whenever she encountered my stepmother's cat Toro basking in the dapples under the clotheslines. Pigeons swooped above us, like ghosts cruising between the rooftop crucifixes. The little girl's name was Nisei; I often said this name aloud, testing it on my lips.

Although she was not usually reticent with me, on one spectacular occasion I frightened Nisei into an apoplexy of speechlessness:

It was early afternoon. My father had sent me downstairs to the bar, and I was returning with a bottle of seltzer water in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. I had left the gate in the foyer open. I squeezed through the gate on my way back, pushed it to with my hip, and began to climb the tile steps to the second landing. Outside, the sun burned. The stairwell, however, might have existed in a totally different universe. I climbed through its mosaic coolness wearing khaki shorts, a cotton undershirt, and a pair of bathroom thongs.

Suddenly, Nisei appeared in the semidarkness above me, her small body as naked as a thumb. She flashed against the inlaid tiles of the stairwell, tiles blue and brown; flashed upon some peripheral part of my awareness. The apparition startled me, and, looking up, I fell forward as one perfidious thong slid from my foot and tripped me.

Under pressure, the bottle of seltzer water struck the edge of a step and exploded. Only the fact that the barman had placed the bottle in a wire-mesh hood prevented this explosion from filling me with crystalline shrapnel. The wine bottle also broke. I lay pitched headlong in glittering glass and a sticky veneer of wine.

The wine was red, it smelled sour, and the tall enamel stairwell in which I finally regained my feet seemed a shaft dropping me into another dimension. Sopping wet, I looked up again and saw the Taniguchis' little girl staring at me with unabashed horror. I called her name, and she began to scream, an eerie wail that echoed icily up and down the well. For, after all, I stood there in broken glass, my elbow and chin actually bleeding and my cotton T-shirt drenched with the merciless incarnadine of my father's sour wine. No wonder that she fled inarticulate,

sobbing, up the cold steps. Perhaps she paused at the top to look back down at me—I don't know, for only a moment later I heard the foyer's grating unlatch and felt a hand on my elbow, my uncut elbow.

At my shoulder stood a tall man in uniform. The man was oblivious to the ruin that my stained hands could work on his martial spotlessness; he supported me. This, I realized vaguely, was a member of the Guardia Civil, the Generalissimo's unique national police force. The man smelled of new leather, gun metal, and gabardine; and when I at last brought my eyes into focus, I saw that he had lived only four or five years longer than I—and that his smooth brown face bore upon its cheek the spidery magenta of a birthmark. Beneath the guard's tricornered patent-leather hat, his eyes regarded me with a limpid concern. Slung over his shoulder he wore a sleek gleaming weapon that I could not identify, so alien did it seem.

"You are hurt," he said.

This observation required no comment. I wondered how he had got past the iron latticework because, having bumped the gate with my rear end, clumsily balancing two bottles, I knew that it had shut behind me. From high in the stairwell Nisei's frail voice thinned and died. The young guardsman tilted his head to catch its final dying note.

"*Qué va,*" he said to himself, not even a question. Then: "The explosion of the bottle sounded like a gunshot. And the screaming, of course. Who is screaming, man?" For *man* he said *hombre*, a peculiarity of address which, considering my age, I might have taken for a compliment. In fact, I so took it. Despite the glaring birthmark, the guardsman inspired in me a grateful acquiescence. "Nisei," I said in answer to his question. "Nisei is screaming." But I spoke in English. Then I leaned my full weight against the front of his immaculate olive-drab uniform. Nevertheless, he accepted me and nodded as if he understood. Without starting, without protesting, he guided me through the glass and up the sucking steps, gummy with wine, toward my apartment.

Before we had got very far, I thought, *Members of the Guardia always travel in pairs*, and I looked over my shoulder at the hard pink light that came through the scrollwork of the grating. Looking down, I saw nothing but a square of sidewalk and the shadow of the guardsman's bicycle. Apparently my escort was alone. "Attention to where you place your feet," he said and led me to my door, where my stepmother, who had heard none of Nisei's screaming because of a huge electric fan in the dining room, put two knuckles in her mouth at the sight of me.

The guardsman saluted and took his leave.

I do not remember the exact moment of his leaving, nor do I pretend to know how he once again got through the outside door unassisted. Our landlady, whose name was Consuela, frowned on all trespassers (their legitimacy as civil agents notwithstanding) and kept her building as inviolately secure as the Generalissimo must have kept his private bedchambers.

But the soldier with the birthmark had come and gone as easily as if he had possessed Consuela's keys from the pockets of her housecoat.

My father had been napping. We woke him, and he drove me in our red and white 1955 Buick to San Pablo, an auxiliary air force installation that lay several miles outside Seville. There in the military infirmary, an anonymous doctor sewed the lips of my wounds together and sent me back home with an admonition to be more careful with volatile seltzer bottles.

Riding back in the dark, I could not believe that we were in Spain, a foreign country, the underslung belly of Old Europe. As the anesthetic wore off, the banality of my pain assailed me. I might as well have been in Kansas or Oklahoma, and imagined that I was. Only the faint neon luminance of the *Cruz del Campo* sign, far away on our left, convinced me that we were indeed in Andalusia, that the emptiness I felt had an Old World antecedent. The factory beneath the neon sign manufactured beer. If suddenly it, and the countryside, and the distant city lights, had all dissolved in mist, I would have accepted the phenomenon as a judgment akin to a beer hangover, mustard-yellow and foggy. The Buick hummed.

Later that evening I went up to the Taniguchis' apartment to demonstrate to Nisei that I was no longer the ensanguined monster from which she had so precipitously fled. She accepted this revelation readily enough that evening, but in the following weeks she avoided me as if I were the most heinous of ghosts—the implacable spirit of the *Enola Gay* given flesh. At any rate, I detected something esoteric and cultish in her attitude. Moreover, her mother seemed to me an accomplice in these evasions, and I spent a great deal of time alone on the roof, looking toward the cathedral and spire that the Spanish call La Giralda. Once I thought I saw Nisei watching me from the doorway to the stairwell. If I did see her, she stuck her tongue out at me, a flickering of crimson, and hastily retreated.

In those lonely weeks I learned how to negotiate all the city's twisting back streets and alleyways. My facility at getting from one place to another began to amaze me. About the time that Nisei resolved to accept me back into her fickle graces, I had forgotten the accident that had expelled me from them. But an incident on the Calle de Sierpes, or Street of the Serpents, brought that wellhead of our falling out forcibly to mind once more.

Again, it was a hot afternoon. I had come into the kaleidoscopic human traffic on the Calle de Sierpes from a dirty side street. Vehicles are not permitted, but so insistent are the feet and shoulders on this pedestrian thoroughfare that if one stumbled he would have no more chance than a stray dog on the streaming raceway at Indianapolis. I headed up the Way of the Serpents in the direction of the Hotel Cristina. The heads of the oncoming crowd formed an irregularly budded surface that unrolled continuously, like the tongue of history. The tongue buckled. It glistened. And the faces of a thousand bustling foreigners rode its broad carpet as if they, too, had been swallowed. But there burned a little Spanish in my head that summer, and I tried, knowing my own inadequacy, to comprehend both the strange voices—the babel of sweltering words—and the strange visages.

"*Lotería para hoy,*" a blind man standing in a doorway shouted. "*Lotería para hoy.*"

Then a businessman in wraparound sunglasses and a brown Continental suit apologized when my abrupt stop carried him into my back. He moved on, and traffic flowed around me as if I were a stone, an insentient breakwater. It seemed that I had not quite enough Spanish to comprehend what I saw: a plate-glass window rippled darkly on the façade of a billiard parlor and bar. I saw, through that window, two figures sitting at a white metal table. Even though the awning that shaded this section of the street made it difficult to identify the two figures, I knew jealousy. My mind thudded; my mind blanked out the ubiquitous din of the street. I fought the crowd and drew closer to the window. Gazing in, I felt betrayed.

Nisei sat in one chair. She wore a high-collared navy-blue dress with white trim around the cuffs. Her hands gripped an outsized glass that contained an orange drink of some kind, probably a Fanta. She scarcely reached the edge of the table. She did not see me because she was too busy with her drink and because she was listening politely to the adult who sat opposite her. At her back, like a menagerie of ugly mythological animals, hunkered the dim shapes of the billiard tables and the green silhouettes of the gamblers. The adult with Nisei was neither a parent nor one of the family's favorite babysitters. In fact, I might not have recognized him at all had I not seen the filamentous blotch of color that stained his right cheek.

It was the young guardsman. But rather than his dread uniform he wore a pair of gray slacks and a white shirt open at the collar. With one sandaled foot crossed over his knee, he appeared both worldly and ingenuous. The way Nisei ignored her orange drink to listen to him was disquieting; it indicated that I had a rival of no small consequence. How had he ingratiated himself with her? What circumstances had brought him into her life as more than an impersonal emissary of state?

I went away from the window before they could see me, up the street and into the crowd. But I stopped in a doorway, turned about, and pressed myself against a wall. My head ached.

Perhaps the young guardsman lived in the neighborhood of our apartment building, perhaps on the little avenue of Leoncillos itself. If he had grown up there, he might indeed have a key to Consuela's foyer gate as Consuela's acknowledgment of his social worth. She mistrusted the barmen and laborers in the *barrio*, and it would have been like her to attempt to capture her very own Guardia Civil as a sort of status-imparting footman. On the other hand, perhaps Consuela had a real affection for the boy and wished to demonstrate it through the gift of the key. And since the landlady kept company with the Taniguchis more frequently than with the Bishops, it followed that she might have introduced the guardsman to Nisei's parents, all unbeknownst to me.

But on the teeming Way of the Serpents I had no idea how legitimate these speculations were; they came and went like feet over unyielding flagstone.

Temples pulsing, I watched the doorway of the billiard parlor. At last, Nisei and the young man with the birthmark emerged and melted into the general confluence. Because I, too, stepped into the arcade and followed with my eyes the stiff formal jouncing of Nisei's dress,

they did not immediately disappear. But they did disappear, and with a cold suddenness. Passersby bumped me, shoved me, pushed past like hungry fish in an aquarium.

Standing there gazing wistfully after the guardsman and the girl, I had a vision of the Calle de Sierpes filled with all the unknowable peoples of the globe: Latins, blacks, Scandinavians, other whites of every ilk, bushmen, Eskimos, aborigines, Pygmies, Arabs, Polynesians, Mongoloids; primitives and technathropes alike. And even as this vision worked inside me, my terrible separation from these people swept over me like a salt-estranging comber from the planet's last tidal convulsion. My mouth choked on the brackishness of it all, and I realized that not one, not one, in those thronging numbers shared my language. Nevertheless, turning to face the genuine pedestrians who gave me bruisingly genuine bumps, I tried to put words together, struggled to be understood. But my vision began to evaporate; and when it was altogether gone, I desisted and let myself go, floating on the back of the serpent's tongue. No other alternative remained.

It was a long way home.

I believed that no one could be so lonely and that the summer would never end.

## II

*December 6, 1971*

But of course the summer did end, and my loneliness perished with the coming of the white Andalusian autumn and the beginning of school. Time passed. Now I am twenty-six years old, and my attitudes have changed so alarmingly that the picture of that other self—staring across the rooftops toward the great fifteenth-century cathedral, moving like a somnambulist on the tongue of the serpent, standing drenched in the blood-red wine of what may have been a prophecy—that picture, I say, no longer has significance for me. I am changed. Spain has become a bundle of stored impulses that only infrequently prick me into recollection; it has become a news item.

In today's Denver *Post*, for instance, I ran across an article that had this headline: RUSS-SPANISH TRADE FIRING. From habit, I scanned the columns. "Despite occasional outbursts from the Spanish right," one sentence reads, "there seems little doubt that Spain and the Soviet Union are moving toward establishing diplomatic relations."

Last week, in this same newspaper, I read an article about how a number of Spanish women have begun to protest the traditional masculine-oriented law of that nation. Change, you see, is the only constant. Even the staid Generalissimo, grown grayer and more benign with the years, has allowed the serpent's tongue to touch inside him a responsive chord of metamorphosis. Change occurs in Spain. Still, it is difficult for me to believe that in the eight

years since my departure the Generalissimo has managed to resist the ultimate personal change, the act of dying. Why, the man has outlived Churchill, de Gaulle, Khrushchev! He rules the knotted underbelly of Europe like a mildly shifting, comfortably ancient tumor. One forgets that he is there at all. I have forgotten him innumerable times.

But in these last few weeks the news of the world has been constantly in our minds. The President is going to China. The announcement of that visit, so smugly made and so promiscuously startling in its implications, may well have been the first half-turn of the key that admitted Chairman Mao's grinning retinue into the councils of the U.N. We fought very hard, but that organization did not choose to recognize two Chinas. In fact, a goodly number of our allies, bridling beneath the weight of a ten percent surcharge on imports, took singular delight in chasing the tattered Paper Tiger all the way back to Taiwan, *miaow, miaow, miaow*. Perhaps, after all, we were unrealistic. The Tiger would not have stood still to be decorated with Communist decals (tiny red stars, I suppose), and Mao, rotund as a benevolent cherub, would in no case have permitted the papier-mâché beast to hang ignominiously from his neck.

Perhaps it is best.

I have very little understanding of international relations; the same hatreds, allegiances, and gut fears that move the multitudes move me. So deep do these things run that they exert an archetypal influence. Sometimes I envision a rabid Confucius and a splenetic Christ locked in combat in my bowels, and the suspicion always arises that our erstwhile savior is either lacking in experience or tragically outnumbered. Then the gut fear overtakes me. Nor is it a pretty captivity: it smells of the glands, the bowels, the lily flesh itself. I come back to the world only by imagining the President strolling the parapet of the Great Wall in the company of several genial Chinese. What visceral changes will his visit accomplish? As ignorant of diplomacy as I am, I am certain that our lives will indeed be subtly changed. For isn't the Great Wall, too, as tortuous as the shape of history? Doesn't it have a mystic affinity with my well-remembered Way of the Serpents? I pray that it does.

My prayers, however, are not so altruistically universal in scope as they might seem. I hone them; I refine them. In consequence, they reflect a shining domestic happiness. You see, it will be four weeks tomorrow since I became a father, since I stood by my wife in the delivery room and shared with her, as much as a man is given to share it, the long pain and the exultant fatigue of birth.

And then, a son.

He emerged with a misshapen head, wearing the purple-and-yellow motley of new nakedness; emerged like a small clown from Cathay; emerged into the gloved hands of the waiting Dr. Schindler. Healthy, perfectly healthy, despite these passing evidences of the birth struggle. Miracle it has been called myriad times, and I (even I who once doubted) have contributed a thread to the tapestry that creates itself by endlessly unraveling. Afterward, my wife's face was that of a madonna, and they rolled her on a hospital cart to a room where she

could sleep away her weariness under a blanket that had been warmed under hot yellow bulbs.

Our son's name is Christopher James. Tonight, as I write, he lies uncharacteristically serene in his bassinet, sleeping beneath the bright glimmer of the television. Jeri has left the set on while she works nearby in the kitchen; it functions as a sort of inanimate but garrulous nurse. In fifteen minutes Jeri will take him up to feed him. Awake, he will roll unfocused eyes and make hungry mewlings in his throat as Jeri spoons in the rice cereal, talks nonsense to him, and catches the pasty overage that he tongues back out. In his tilted infant-seat he resembles nothing quite so much as a pale-blue Buddha, swaddled in terrycloth.

I am writing this story for him, even though he will no doubt put off reading it for a time. When he does come to read it, he will not recognize the purely hypothetical entity (the baby Christopher James) whom I have just described. How, therefore, may he recognize himself?

The question fills, brims, overflows.

It may be that he will define himself through a series of metaphysical comparisons with his father, the father who orders this narrative so traditionally. Because, despite the confessional tone of this section of my story, I have not forgotten the reader. Bear with me a moment. The past we have looked at. My infant son is the present. Some, I suppose, would argue that he embodies also the future, for children, like rocket stages, carry us one step nearer our common destiny. However, I don't choose to usurp Jamie's future here. Nor anywhere else. To do so would be to negate the unthinking primordial gift that this gift cannot approximate.

As Jamie eats, I will halt for the night. Tomorrow it may snow, and the month of December looms ahead of us now like a gigantic white package that we will open only to discover newer months, colder months. Still, one must finish what one has begun.

*December 8, 1971*

We have our snow, and I have been away from this narrative for an entire day. The reader, of course, must view this passage of time as largely an illusory thing (unless the break between sections signaled for the reader, too, a logical stopping place); but for Jamie, who little realizes what he loses, the passage of time has been a reality. Certainly he has not counted the clock ticks, but, by paternal proxy, I have done so for him, aware that the day we have lost, the fourth-week anniversary of his birth, cannot be recalled. It pains me to think that he has *lived* this lost time more fully than I, albeit with less consciousness. I merely fretted about the minutes that sifted down around me like snowflakes.

The white space above *December 8, 1971* is even whiter than it appears.

Yesterday evening I found myself grading themes. A prosaic business, this task occupied me for two hours. Outside the snow continued to fall, not wet and heavy, not feathery, but dry and silver like scales of mica from the back of an iridescent reptile. Jeri talked consolingly to



the baby, whom she had placed full length on her lap; and I impatiently flipped through papers with titles like "Population and Subsistence," "The Question of the Universe," and "Man, the Immortal," this last being an extrapolative account of how man may attain virtual immortality within the next 150 years, provided he learns a thing or two in the interval. The Air Force Academy (yea, even its preparatory school) attracts students with strong aptitudes for the sciences; the titles of my themes are testimonials to this fact. Forward-looking young men, my students seldom quail at the thought of leaping light-years or of confronting the next century on its own ineluctable terms. I cannot restrain them, even with a red felt-tipped marker and a hand that brooks no comma splices.

In spite of this, I marked—marked and commented, marked and despaired—hoping by a vivid enough display of red to wipe out their ingenuous prophecies. The winter night urged me to obliterate the futures they predicted, just as the fall of snow had obliterated our lawn under a blanket of slate. I marked and marked. At the end of those two hours I almost believed that all the red on their papers had been tapped from my veins. I put the felt marker aside, empty. Absolutely empty.

It was ten o'clock, again Jamie's feeding time.

Since I could not abide the thought of disciplining myself to a false rapport with my typewriter, I avoided my study altogether. I put a record on. In a well-worn red leather chair in our living room, I listened to Bach's *Brandenburg* Concertos. Eighteenth-century baroque. I know very little about music, but I like these pieces; and Jeri's mother, who was here briefly after Jamie's birth, gave these recordings to me as a belated birthday gift. A pair of introspective Scorpios only three days apart, Jamie and I share November.

Pablo Casals conducts. He, like Franco, is Spanish, but an expatriated Spaniard of even greater age. Sitting in my chair, I listened to the strands of melody that he coaxed from his small orchestra, but listened with a dreaming attention, for Bach, depending on the state of receptivity that the listener chooses to assume, has the ability not only to stimulate but to lull. Exhausted, I chose to be lulled and permitted the music to inundate me with its richness.

After a time I took Jamie from my wife and, still sitting in my tottering red chair, began to give him his last bottle of the day. Cradled in my arms, he rooted for the warm nipple, fists clenched under his chin, eyes fixed uncertainly on the lamp at my shoulder. His small round face, as he suckled seemingly in time to the music, conveyed the impression of a bland astonishment. Again and again the world surprised him. What was he doing in my arms? What forces had compelled him to this attitude of unthinking dependence? Because his astonishment seemed so genuine, I asked these questions for him.

Of course, I had no answers. Not satisfying ones, at any rate. For the world continued to surprise me, too, surprise me with the perpetual dullness of its cruelties, with the familiar clash of its alarms and seizures. Israel wants our jets; we play coy. Pakistan slaughters its own; India prepares for war. Belfast smolders. Meanwhile, having gutted ourselves of all rectitude on the *bluddlefilths* of Southeast Asia, we throw up a sanctimonious façade and persevere in

making our moral commitments on the basis of a coin toss, or worse. In fact, in this matter of the Asian subcontinent we are incongruously aligned with the Red Chinese.

No, I had no answers yesterday evening; I have none now. As I held Jamie and concentrated on his rhythmical ingestion of formula, world politics could not have been more removed from my thoughts. His bottle was a world in its own right, his bottle and my arms. Let the snow come down. Let the global burden be borne by those who have sought to assume it, even if they lead us into moral hinterlands.

Aloof to such considerations, I watched my son drink.

The final concerto advanced solemnly into its second movement. The day was nearly gone, and I had written nothing.

But as Jamie drank, I ran a finger over his silkenly wrinkled forehead. I remarked an oddity. Beneath the weaving of downy hair that covered his scalp farther back, an angry redness gleamed. I let my fingers push the delicate hairs aside to reveal this phenomenon more clearly. The redness, however, was merely a birthmark, nothing more. Although shaped uncannily like our common birth sign, this nevus did not threaten to brand Jamie a freak. Once his hair had completely grown out, it would not show at all. There was no reason for me to feel uneasy.

But I did. I did indeed.

And last night my dreams were surfeited with a single image: that of an armored arachnid with its stinger upraised, dripping poison. The morning came early, and I went to my seven-thirty class weighted down with a briefcase full of themes about the promise of the future. My uneasiness has persisted all day, even to this purely hypothetical moment.

### III

In 1992 I returned to Spain for the first time in thirty years. The world and I had both changed, and in the spring of that year I followed my tired memory to Leoncillos Street and the old apartment building where the Bishops and the Taniguchis had taken their secluded residence, surrounded by an alien city.

I was forty-six years old: gray, disillusioned, a trifle paunchy. But I had come back to Seville with a sense of mission, and when I first looked at the city, it seemed that no time had passed at all. Pigeons still left their feathers on rooftop laundries. Hunched over curbstones, urchins still played at catching dragonflies with reeds. And the bars, of course, remained open long hours into the night, just as before.

In the bright sunlight, I stood looking at the old apartment building. For some time I did not

dare to cross the cobbled street and sound the buzzer inside the shadowy foyer.

I was afraid that no one would answer that buzzing.

The building had a collapsed look, as if it had been empty the entire thirty years since the Bishops' departure. Two huge timbers propped up the face of the building. My old brooding place, the narrow balcony above the sidewalk, was barricaded with cardboard and scrap wood. Red tiles from the roof had fallen into the street. Like Poe's meticulous narrator, I suppose I ought to add that a fissure ran down the face of the building from the cornice to the stone molding at its base. That would not be strictly true. Nevertheless, the emptiness and corruption of that tottering structure would no doubt have delighted Edgar Allan, even if he had had to experience them, as I did, in the Mediterranean coolness of a spring morning. It was *Semana Santa*, Holy Week.

Surprisingly, nothing else on the street seemed to have changed. The pigeons, the children, the bars—all unaltered. Somewhat reassured, I crossed the cobbles, took up a chair at one of those old sidewalk tables, and sat in the midst of the neighborhood noises sipping a *vino rojo*. Of course, I did not recognize the barman, but that was the sort of alteration that time must necessarily work; I appreciated the absence of any need to explain my return to a doddering tavernkeeper who, from some quirk in my behavior, might have deduced my identity. The reason for my return concerned no Old Worlder, least of all an ignorant barman.

Why, in fact, had I come back to Spain?

Because somewhere after my twenty-sixth year either history or I had become so incomprehensible that action had to be taken. The center of things had shifted; the focus of human events had revolved away from the old arenas. Consequently, I had returned to Spain to ensure that my life did not conclude on the distorted periphery of this new lens.

I had come to Spain to murder Mao Tse-tung, Chairman of the New Chinese Communality.

He, in turn, had come to Spain to celebrate with Generalissimo Franco the fifth anniversary of the signing of a Sino-Iberian friendship pact. The original event had coincided, by design, with the festivities of *Semana Santa*, and now the Chairman had chosen this year, this week, to reinforce that pledge with a personal visit. It was said to be his first excursion outside of Peking in eleven years, at which time he had traveled secretly to Moscow to aid in the drafting of the Ecumenical Charter of New Socialism. The most astounding provision in that document had been the abolition of all arbitrary frontiers between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The precedent established by the Ecumenical Charter had had far-reaching effects in both Asia and Europe; the American press made it directly accountable for the breakdown in national distinctions that took place in the succeeding decade. Now, however, our press avoids publicizing these almost daily occurring treaties and conscientiously suppresses any mention of the Chairman himself. In fact, in that year I learned of his visit to Spain from a Chilean-based radio broadcast that our government used to make a halfhearted nightly effort to jam. Although I understood that such broadcasts

deserved jamming, I felt fortunate to have obtained this clue to Mao's plans. The broadcast gave me valuable direction; it steeled my resolve to attempt a restoration of the old balance.

It also hinted ambiguously that only a month before his scheduled trip to Madrid and the Spanish provinces he had undergone a major operation, one of considerable scientific import. At the time, this morsel of innuendo had gone undigested; it meant nothing to me. Since both Franco and Mao were nearly a hundred, an operation probably signified that the Chinese had found a way to reeducate senile digestive tracts, possibly through a variation on acupuncture or some such esoteric Oriental procedure. I had no idea. On the following day, however, the entire bizarre story of Mao's operation was revealed to me in a conversation as improbable as the operation itself. But since artful storytelling involves a respect for chronology (as well as a symmetrical spacing of climaxes), I'll delay transcribing this conversation until it meshes more exactly with my narrative.

On that spring morning I drank my wine and studied the condemned building that loomed up from the sidewalk so imposingly.

I had no place to stay.

My trip to Spain had cost me the last meager residuums of a savings account and the respect of my family, whom, of course, I had told nothing of my purposes in leaving them. Besides, over the years we had come to have less and less to say to one another, so that my physical desertion of them—Jeri, Christopher, and Stephanie—must have seemed a rather anticlimactic *fait accompli*. Why, they must have wondered, had I taken so long to sever the final frayed thread of kinship?

Still, Jeri and I had done better than most of our acquaintances. During the last ten years nearly three-quarters of the couples we had known in the early seventies had either unamicably separated or gone through bitter divorce proceedings. By ironic contrast, our marriage had been a model union. Statistics indicated that disenchantment between man and wife had become a nationwide phenomenon, one paralleled by the increase in racial conflicts in most of the country's major cities.

Perhaps, I mused, feeling the wine uniting with my blood, Yeats's rough beast was slouching toward a Bethlehem of a peculiarly American impress. And I was afraid.

Would Jeri think that I had come to Spain, to Europe, to partake of their spirit of mellow community? I had not, I had not. For no one had seemed to deduce that we suffered in direct proportion to the Old World's steadily accumulating prosperity. The center had shifted. But one right-thinking man might manipulate the circumference of events so as to compensate for the shift. My family would benefit, my wife and my children. Therefore, I had come to Spain, where I had no place to stay, no place to shelter.

But on a subliminal level of consciousness, even while musing about the Sino-Iberian pact and my estrangement from my family, I had been formulating a solution. The solution was right before my eyes. The condemned apartment building. Yes, the condemned apartment

building would house me; it would serve, it would serve me very well.

I finished my wine and left a coin that I could scarcely afford to sacrifice on the moist, grainy surface of the table. It would not be possible to enter the old building until after dark, and I had the whole afternoon ahead of me. Astonishingly, my memory of Seville's back alleys had not become pock-ridden with the long disease of time, nor had the alleys themselves much altered. I navigated them with all the skill of my seventeen-year-old self—but for one thing, that is. Now I was encumbered with a piece of luggage, a stout leather valise. It contained a change of clothes, some shaving equipment, several paperback books, and the sinister but uncomplicated paraphernalia with which I would effect Mao's assassination. The weight of the valise, its aching pull on my arm, forced me to shift it from hand to hand as I walked or to stop now and again on the fatiguingly uneven cobbles. Children stared at me. Outside a hole-in-the-wall *pescaría*, from which the smell of frying fish floated on hot gusts, a swarthy little girl briefly looked me over and then showed me the mottled pink tip of her tongue: a tiny contemptuous snake. Immediately she was gone. With the fragrance of fried octopus (*calamares*, the Spanish had called them) haunting my leave-taking, I followed the shadow of her shadow down the long canyon of the *barrio*.

Almost at once I was on the Way of the Serpents.

The feeling of *déjà vu* that I experienced then probably had its foundation in the simple fact that the street had been frequently in my dreams during these last thirty years. Yes, I had been on the street before; but never had I been on it when it teemed with so heterogeneous a population of human beings, even though—strangely—I felt that I had. The people who streamed about me might have constituted one shambling amorphous company of fashion models, each model flaunting, or casually presenting, or merely moving in, the costume of a different nationality, so that the shadows in the street rippled with so many undercurrents of color and foliage that I believed myself a hunter in a tropical jungle rather than a pedestrian on the Calle de Sierpes. Granted, working Spaniards comprised the largest number of these people, but the abnormal incidence of other foreigners could hardly be attributed to *Semana Santa* alone. However, at the moment, that was my conclusion. I could reach no other.

Dizzied by the reeling procession, I shifted my sight from sarongs to muu-muus, from kilts to kimonos, from pyjamas to jodhpurs, from fezes and berets and bowlers... to slickly gleaming tricornered hats.

These last belonged to members of the Guardia Civil.

A pair of state soldiers strolled toward me against the lesser flow of traffic, both young of face and vigorous; both, to my surprise, neither gripping nor wearing any sort of weapon.

Although unarmed, these men made me nervous. With moist hands I caught up my valise and held it in front of me, a conspicuous shield, until, not seeing me at all, they had passed and fused with the costumed throng.

I had forgotten about the guardsmen. They were perhaps the most telling obstacle to the sure completion of my plans. But my near meeting with two of the Guard's members snapped my

mind to attention. I had come to the Way of the Serpents for a reason, a reason connected with the Guard. Consequently, I ignored the thoroughfare's distractions of color and movement in order to find the sightless, stationary man who would enable me to thwart La Guardia.

I found the man I was looking for: the blind man who sold lottery tickets from the doorway of one of the street's many shops.

He was a lean man of middle age, with a square forehead and tall graying temples. He wore his hair in a backward-combed flattop which, in combination with the exaggeratedly erect posture that his blindness apparently demanded, gave him the look of either a stern military man or a genial Frankenstein monster. His head scarcely moved. When I touched his arm, his yellow-tinted sunglasses cut not a fracture of an inch toward the pressure. The white tip of his cane, rigid as the staff of a caduceus, remained fixed on the same damp spot of sidewalk. Nothing in the man flinched.

In English I said: "I want to talk to you."

"*Quién es?*" he said behind his motionless lenses.

In English I said: "Someone who wants to talk to you."

He tilted his head back a very, very little and pursed his lips as if savoring a taste he had almost forgotten. But something in his unmoving attitude indicated that his tongue might at any moment come awake to that old experience. I waited. The hum and scuffle of the street made me put my face a breath away from his in order to hear.

"An Englishman?"

"No," I said. "An American."

The hard yellow glasses turned toward me, coruscating like mirrors. I felt that the eyes behind the lenses had momentarily regained their sight. Then the blind man's face revolved back to its original set.

"Do you wish to purchase a lottery ticket?"

"I want to talk to you."

"You are the first American who has spoken to me since the bases were removed." His brow contracted; the yellow glasses rose in response. "*Más que doce años.*"

"What?"

"More than twelve years it has been. How goes the world in *los Estados*? Has your government finished the walls?"

That set me back. Then I remembered. He referred to the nearly three-hundred-mile-long

barricade that had stretched from the northeasternmost extremity of New Hampshire across Vermont to the Saint Lawrence Seaway in upper New York: the Canadian Wall. In the mid-1970s the residents of these three New England states had begun to agitate for a closed-door policy when a heavy influx of French-Canadian youths flooded their cities and hamlets preaching the gospel of Continental Reunionism. (Almost self-mockingly laconic, the citizens of Maine had accepted this unique foreign incursion as if it were no more unusual than a clambake.) Erected by a strange hysteria, the “walls” began to go up—at first, nothing but intermittent sections of chicken wire and old lumber possessing not even the continuity of a tune played on a jew’s harp. But eventually the sections began to connect, and the three state governments replaced the chicken wire with stone.

When the two Germanies reunified in 1983, the Canadian Prime Minister suggested that it was time for American contractors to place bids on the fallen Berlin barricade; after all, these bricks, these pieces of rubble, would make a neatly symbolic contribution to our own structure. For most Americans, the Prime Minister’s angry radio speech marked their first knowledge of the collapse of the wall in Berlin. The knowledge shamed us. The hysteria subsided. We let the Canadian Wall crumble of its own accord—although this news had apparently not reached the ears of Europeans like my blind friend.

“There’s no longer a need for the walls,” I said. “The countries that border us respect our territorial integrity.”

Reminiscently, the blind man nodded.

“I want to talk to you,” I said again. “Not here.”

“Buy me a drink, *Americano*. Anisette would be very good.”

“I don’t have enough money,” I said, embarrassed. Then I tried to explain: “It’s true. I spent most of my money getting here.”

The yellow lenses glinted. “Oh, I believe it’s true,” he said. “That is not a difficult thing to believe now.” He touched my coat sleeve. “I will buy *you* a drink. *Venga!*”

He stepped into the crowd. I also entered the torrent of voices and feet. We walked up the Way of the Serpents until the white tip of his cane, like a divining rod, led him to the entrance of a nameless establishment. We went inside. The darkness of the place required some visual adjustment, but the blind man sought out a table without even pausing to determine if it might be occupied. His tapping cane guided me to the same table.

Seated before a smoky plate-glass window, I looked around and saw that we were in a combination billiard-parlor-and-bar. My pulse quickened.

The blind man ordered two anisettes. When they came, he took a careful sip and raised his yellow sunglasses so that they rested on his forehead. His irises had no color whatsoever, and his pupils looked like exploded drops of ink.

“What do you wish to talk?”

Now that the man sat across from me, intimate and cooperative, I did not know how to broach my purpose. In fact, I could not talk about my purpose at all. What I wanted to know would have to be pulled from the blind man by indirection and finesse, like a magician deftly removing a victim’s shirt and disencumbering him of it through the sleeve of his sports coat. Maybe not quite that difficult, for the blind man appeared talkative enough, but I would have to be careful. As the anisette coated my throat with a licorice warmth, the blind man waited.

“I want to know if you always sell your tickets from the doorway where I found you today.”  
*Very little indirection there; almost no finesse.*

“Why?”

His question gave the liqueur I was sipping an unexpected sting. I put my glass down. “So that I can find you again if I need to.”

“*Sí,*” the blind man said. “What for?”

“To buy lottery tickets. When I have the money.”

“No,” he said. “A sickly reason. You wanted to talk to me, you did not want tickets.”

I sipped my drink, the ancient smell of the felt billiard tables hovering over us. “Listen,” I said, leaning forward. “I came to Spain to see the Chinese leader and your own Generalissimo in company together. America plays me false; nothing happens there anymore. If I can see these men—these two distinctly different statesmen—on the Calle de Sierpes, I intend to applaud them publicly and denounce my government for its isolationism. On my flight from Lisbon I heard that the street will be cordoned when the Generalissimo initiates the tour. The rumor I heard suggests that only the businessmen on the Way of the Serpents will be permitted to remain between the cordons. I believe you are one of these?”

“Yes,” he said. “A merchant without a shop.”

“I want to stand beside you on the day they come through. I want to stand at your elbow as would a helpful relative.”

“I need no help. Nor are you a relative.”

“But if you had been ill, it would be reasonable that you should wish someone at your side in case you began to feel faint. The authorities would not question a relative at your side under such circumstances.”

“Why ought I to pretend that I have been ill?”

“So that I can make my declaration to Chairman Mao and the Generalissimo, to prove to them that the New World is not made up entirely of idiots. If you care at all about International Reunionism, you must abet me.”



I took no delight in these fabrications; they were clumsy and nonsensical, but the necessity of gaining an ally outweighed my disgust at deceiving the blind ticket-seller. Worse would follow. The alliance (as I had no way of knowing while we talked) would become a sordid usurpation of his identity.

"I could do what you ask," he said. "It would not be difficult."

"Will you do it? You hold the key."

The blind man pushed his sunglasses back into place, a courtesy for which I was grateful. Slowly, he said: "For the reasons you give me, I will do it. The reasons are mad ones, but we have always been a people susceptible to the charm of madmen. The great Don Quixote is my personal patron saint, *Americano*."

"Good," I said. "Good." I relaxed a little and began to enjoy my drink. "What day will the dignitaries tour your street?"

"*Viernes*," he said. "The day that follows tomorrow. Friday."

"That gives you very little time to feign illness."

"For you I will miss working tomorrow. One day will be sufficient. Because I have no family in Seville, no one will be surprised that my *relative* has an unfamiliar face." He laughed. "Do you resemble me at all, friend?" His laughter was deep, coarse.

"I don't think so. Not very much."

"Not important," he said. "At this time of year everyone is every other one's brother. There is great reconciliation."

"Of course," I said. "*Semana Santa* and the *Feria*."

"And the election this year, *señor*. The election that will be held at the completion of these festivities."

I had heard absolutely nothing about an election. As I have said, news did not flow freely between the European continent and the United States. I put my glass, empty, on the table. "What election?" I asked. "What sort of election in Spain?"

"To determine if the Generalissimo should remain in power or step down in favor of a successor voted upon by the people. The ballot is open to anyone who registers his name before the end of the *Feria*. Already there are a hundred names on the ballot, and the Generalissimo promises to give way to any candidate who achieves a plurality. He promises to give way for the purpose of a runoff in the event he does not earn fifty percent of the people's support. It is a democratic celebration in the honor of the Generalissimo's one hundredth birthday. Why, even Juan Carlos must run if he hopes to succeed to rulership! Spain has never experienced such a thing."

"No," I said. "I realize that." In 1962, I remembered, I had talked to a man, a simple laborer, who had come into the bar beneath our apartment; with him was his three-year-old son. The man had made a prediction. "*This boy,*" he said, touching his son's tousled hair, "*will be the president of Spain one day—if we have a president.*"

"There is great reconciliation," the blind man went on. "The renowned Picasso has made public his intention to return to Spain for this election, and the Generalissimo has extended the artist his personal assurance that he may return in safety. The people rejoice."

"I thought Picasso had died."

"Not so. He has nearly one hundred eleven years, certainly—but it may be that in his new incarnation he will never die. *La muerte no es tan poderosa.*"

"What 'incarnation'? What are you talking about?"

"Another drink!" the blind man called. The waiter came and poured two more thick dollops of anisette into our glasses. When he had gone, the ticket-seller told me the story of Picasso's new incarnation, the first of two bizarre tales that I was to hear in a thirty-hour period. Somehow the smoky warmth of the liqueur made the account palatable, and I did not question very much of what the blind man said.

On the verge of death, the artist had lain semiconscious in his home in France. Europe had prepared to mourn. ("This all took place," the blind man said, "about seven years ago, perhaps eight.") When all hope appeared gone, an emissary from Peking—where, so far as I knew, they had always thought abstractionism decadent—arrived and gained a bedside audience with the dying Picasso. That same evening a number of indefatigable hangers-on and tourists saw a flag-draped bier emerge from the artist's home, accompanied by the Chinese emissary and his silent henchmen. Rumors flew. The Master had perished; had asked for burial in the People's Republic; had been borne away by efficient representatives of something called the Resurrection Guard. Nearly all the rumors were without foundation. For the Chinese government had made a highly confidential arrangement with a surgeon of cybernetics at a large hospital in the southwestern portion of the United States; their officials, in fact, had obtained grudging permission to fly the artist to these facilities, and at a bleak cold hour before dawn their hulking jet had arrived in this great southwestern city.

"What *southwestern* city?" I asked, irritated. He had used the word twice, both times with a kind of mocking emphasis.

"Dallas. Where your young president was killed."

In Dallas, the surgeon in whom the Chinese had placed an inordinate trust began to earn it. Working without rest or food for thirteen consecutive hours, he directed his five-man team through the ticklishly minute details of the transfer procedure. At the end of that time Picasso

existed—nay, *lived*—in the platinum turret of a wonderfully animate computer system. He saw, heard, smelled, tasted, felt. Moreover, he had the ability to move of his own volition and to attend to his own needs more capably than most athletic young men. Inside the platinum turret, his brain, like an embryo in the womb, floated in an electrotonic gelatin under the conditions of near-vacuum. The wine of oxygen rose to his brain from the supply of circulating plasma maintained in the computer system's plastic torso. Beautiful, this contrivance, beautiful. The only thing denied the Master, the blind man told me, was the questionable blessing of speech.

"Speech!" he said contemptuously. "Who would miss it? Certainly not he! Other means of expression Picasso has." The blind man laughed. "Why, he is more fortunate than I!"

"But his art? How did he resolve to give it up in this way? Wouldn't he have preferred death?"

"He gave up nothing, for the surgeon gave him the most fantastic—how do you say it?—*prosthetic* hands, hands such as artists are not born with: strong, delicate, nimble. Fantastic hands!"

"Then he's still capable of working?"

"Prodigies come from his easel, miracles blossom at the tips of his fingers! Three years ago he did a mural larger than his famous *Guernica*, but this time in primary colors—a mural which is meant to be the antithesis of that earlier one. *Americano*, it is as if Brueghel had returned as a neocubist and painted the new millennium with his drunken life's blood. Our papers ran full-color reproductions of this masterpiece, and now Picasso himself is coming back to us."

"Seeing? Hearing? Experiencing all his senses, even though he no longer has the necessary organs?"

"He has the brain, which is the seat of sensation. And his doctor made him rich in experience through the clever interlinking of the many, many nerve cells."

"Meanwhile," I said, "the surgeon made himself rich in money. And no one in America ever knew that anything had happened."

Laughing, the blind man said: "Yes, yes. The Chinese paid your doctor much money, no doubt, and then returned Picasso to his home in France. We suppose that their motive was goodwill, perhaps the payment of a kind of debt." Again, the coarse laugh.

I shoved my chair away from the table, but did not get up. Dust motes swam in the cognac-like dimness of the billiard parlor; and I had the upside-down notion that the room, in its dark sentience, desired *to get out from around me*—not for me to leave, understand, but for the room to displace itself somewhere that I was not. Nonsense, I freely confess; but I was both angry and a little drunk. Across the table, turning his yellow sunglasses on me like tracking discs, the ticket-seller somehow read my mind. I gave him no opportunity to

question.

"Thanks for the drinks. I'm going on a tour of my own. When your working day is over, I'll be back for you. You can spend this evening and tomorrow at my apartment on Leoncillos."

"I have a place to stay," he protested.

"I'll be back for you," I said. "At six o'clock."

With that, I left the bar and reentered the blinding shadows on the Way of the Serpents. All afternoon I walked the city. Lugging my valise from one plaza to another, I killed the hottest hours of the day. With the anisette as a propellant I climbed the switchbacking ramps inside the tower of Seville's lofty cathedral. My legs ached. I came down and strolled beside the Guadalquivir River. I walked by the bullring. Early in the evening I found a low-ceilinged bar in the vicinity of the Hotel Cristina and sat down on a bench out of view of the barman. The marbled, pink carcasses of hams hung from the low rafters, as did cheeses and garlic strings. It was like resting in a pungent crypt. At six o'clock I returned to the Calle de Sierpes and the blind seller of lottery tickets.

"Come with me," I said.

"It's too early to leave, *Americano*, too soon to retreat."

"You're not feeling well," I said. "Come on."

"First, something to eat," he said. "Then I'll go with you gladly enough. I buy, of course."

We ate fish and salad and drank beer at a sidewalk table as the streets grew gradually darker and the sky filled up with needlepoints of light. Then, gripping his elbow, I led the blind man through the alleyways to Leoncillos.

In the evening chill we found the foyer of my old apartment building and entered it like two thieves, for no one had gone to bed yet and people milled about restlessly in the cul-de-sac of the square. Transistor radios reverberated with a music that sounded like an endless succession of polkas; no one seemed to mind either the music's tastelessness or its overweening volume. Inside the foyer, our voices echoed. I tore several boards away from the iron gate and saw that it would not be too difficult to get past it to the pitchy stairwell. The gate's latch was broken, rusted inside its iron sheath.

"*Qué va?*" the blind man said. "What sort of building do you live in?"

"A very old one." I took his arm and led him through the heavy gate, now groaning inward on its hinges. The blind man moved reluctantly and tensed against the sound and smell of the building. "There are some steps here," I said. "We're going up three flights to the top."

His face tightened. Enough light fell through the stairwell for me to see the pale green

prominence of his cheekbones and the moist hollow under his bottom lip. His feet shuffled through the debris of some fallen tiles; the toes of his shoes stopped at the base of the first step. I stood poised over him on that first step; the arm I held was raised toward me somewhat defensively, like the arm behind a shield.

“Who are you?” he asked suddenly. “Who are you?”

“We’re going to the roof. There are beds in the laundry shack up there. Beds and blankets. It’ll be cold in one of the apartments. The heat’s off and the floors are like stone.”

The acrid odor of animal waste came down the stairwell on a chill gust of wind. The building stank; it moaned disconcertingly. The blind man turned his head toward the street, toward the concert of surrealistic polkas that oom-pah-pahed from countless transistors. The color of thin milk, his face flowed into the set of its controlling emotion: fear. He feared me, he feared me beyond anything else in the entire liberated hemisphere. I had not sought that reaction.

Hysterically, he began to shout in Spanish. “*Ayúdame!*” he called. “*Ayúdame!*”

I swung my valise awkwardly, striking him under the chin. He fell backward into the wall and slipped into a clattering heap of tiles. His glasses twirled away. Struggling to rise, he continued to call out in Spanish. He held his exploded eyes fixedly on my face and called out like an infantry sergeant. I struck him several more times with the valise until he had ceased calling and the street’s incessant beer-hall music threatened to spill into my heart.

Then I leaned over the blind man’s body and put my ear to his chest. Certain that he was dead, I wept. I had planned to lock him in the laundry shack until Friday, not to kill him. The sordidness of the deed made me physically ill, and I squatted beside the blind man’s body trying to hold back the raw congestion in my throat. Squatting there, I wept.

Several minutes went by. I got up and rummaged through the debris on the floor until I had found the yellow sunglasses. The lenses had not been broken. I put the glasses in my inside jacket pocket.

Then, realizing that my position in the foyer was hardly an intelligent one, I managed to lift the body from the floor and balance it clumsily against my back. The arms hung over my shoulders like two ropes. Holding them, I climbed the stairs all the way to the roof. At each landing I rested, but the hard knot in my throat and the exertion of the afternoon had begun to empty me of strength. When I reached the roof, I dumped the body on the stones and coughed up a thin stream of bile. I couldn’t vomit; the food I had eaten would not dislodge itself.

A number of cats were miaowing on an adjacent roof, their silhouettes prowling back and forth along the cornice.

The door on the laundry shack refused to open. I kicked it aside, then carried the dead man into the mildewed stink of the laundry cubicle. A piece of moon grinned down through the doorframe, and I saw that the bed (there had never been more than one up there) had been

removed and that the concrete sink in the corner stood pooled up with a sheen of water. It would be impossible to spend the night in such a place. If I left the body there, however, no one would be likely to discover it for a while. And one of the apartments downstairs would accept me as an occupant as willingly as it accepted the rats that skittered between its cold, vacant rooms. After removing his wallet and papers, therefore, I left the blind man in the laundry shack and pulled the broken door to.

But I did not go downstairs at once. I went to the building's parapet and looked across the city toward the cathedral. Ancient, dark, remote, its tower seemed nearly as indifferent as God. I thought of my wife and of Stephanie and of Christopher James, too, who was then studying medicine at the first totally integrated university in South Africa. The fear that they would not understand my motives, not forgive my blunders, not accept the legitimacy of my gift, stilled me on that high rampart and took away my conviction. But I gripped the stone ledge until these doubts had grown as pale as my knuckles. How far away the spire was, how far away my family.

Faint music came up to me from the streets, this time the spirited flamenco of the Spanish gypsies. They were one people, at least, who had maintained their sense of identity.

A little revived by the night air, I descended the three flights of steps to the foyer and retrieved my valise. Then I climbed to the second landing, tried the door to my old apartment, and stood back as it collapsed off its hinges in a choking billow of dust. A cat, surprised in the act of hunting down vermin, streaked through the living room. Seeing the open door, it turned and sped by me up the steps.

In the settling dust the apartment was as dead as a bombed-out museum. I almost expected to meet myself—my adolescent self—emerging from the bedroom doors behind which, thirty years ago, I had kept the pitiful artifacts of my growing up: books, photographs, notebooks full of unfinished poems, a distorted self-portrait in oils, and the typewriter on which I am recording this narrative. Because no one emerged from those french doors, I went through them and frightened away two or three more four-legged shadows. Otherwise this room, too, was empty.

That night I slept in a corner of my old room. Wrapped in a torn bedsheet smelling of turpentine and resting my head on a nest of crumpled toilet paper, I slept without dreaming.

On Thursday morning I awoke with a headache and a frightening absence of memory about the previous day. Sunlight, streaming down through the unevenly spaced slats on the front window, fell on me with the weight and consistency of mucilage; it glued me to the floor. My body ached. When at last I recollected the situation, I sat up painfully and pulled my valise over the tiles toward my improvised bedclothes.

My hands wavered like a pair of ugly medusoid sea creatures. Consequently, it took me a moment or two to undo the latches. The valise opened. I saw the dried blood on the bottom lip

of the case. Brown like Spanish earth, that encrustation reminded me of what I had done. Never before in my life had I killed another human being. That remorse for the man's brutal execution might negate my sense of purpose became a real possibility. Because the horror of the act had reasserted itself, I turned quickly to business.

"Let's enumerate," I said aloud.

I took items one by one out of my valise and laid them on the floor: three paperback novels, a dry-shave kit, a clean shirt, and a small package containing the last of my Spanish money, perhaps three hundred pesetas. But these were the mundane items. Under the shirt, the socks, the underwear, lay the essentials with which I would rectify three decades of misdirection and embarrassment.

These things, too, I took from my valise, and arranged on the filthy apron of the bedsheet. For the task before me it was not a particularly profound assemblage of instruments: three hollow cylinders that slipped one into another to form a convincing replica of the blind man's white-tipped cane.

A single difference existed.

Into the bottom segment of the "cane" I wedged an intricately shaped firing mechanism. If one jammed this concealed mechanism violently against another's body, the system exploded a cartridge that shattered bone and tore flesh. Of course, one could not afford to fail on the first attempt. For that reason I had selected a cartridge of savagely high caliber, a bullet for the diaspora of mankind back into its proper camps. I assembled the segments and jabbed the weapon listlessly at the tall front window where the morning sunlight tumbled in.

"Ludicrous."

Someone else, after all, ought rightly to have been doing what I—a dilettante, an academician, a failed writer—proposed to carry out the following morning on the Way of the Serpents. Yesterday's exertions had already come to haunt me in the flesh of my middle age; I didn't belong in the role I had scripted for myself. Someone, however, *must* be the protagonist; otherwise, events go aimlessly in search of a power to bring them about. That the task had descended to me by default disappointed and bewildered; it bordered on farce.

To complete the emptying of the valise, I took one final thing out and held it contemplatively between my fingers. A cyanide capsule. It, too, was ludicrous and seemed to prove how quickly farce could turn into melodrama. But after murdering the Chairman, there would be no escape. I fully intended to use the capsule, even though the act of biting through its thin outer shell had a certain artistic paucity about it—for I would not be questioned. I would not be made to justify!

Slowly I disassembled the cane and put it back into my valise.

For the rest of the morning I read one of the paperback novels and thought vaguely about getting something to eat. Neither polkas nor flamencos disturbed my reading.

Now I come to one of the more improbable episodes of this story: the conversation that I mentioned several pages ago, and the entirely fortuitous encounter that occasioned it. Here you must go on with me, suspending your doubly offended disbelief, or else you must altogether cease to trust this account. I refuse to apologize for a parallel time's murderous assault on credulity, especially an assault by a parallel future time. At that moment in my high-ceilinged old bedroom, shut off from the currents of time, I sought apologies only from the world I knew. Momentarily isolated, I had no way of preparing for my random encounter with Mrs. Euralinia Weik.

It happened because my conscience prodded me out of the torn bedsheet, out of my bloodstained shirt, out of the plaster silt of my old bedroom. Newly dressed and shaven, I climbed to the building's roof and emerged into a sky as pellucid as quinine water; its thin blueness hurt my eyes, and the air stung with the chill of early spring.

I went to the laundry shack.

The broken door hung there like an upraised palm, halting me. I didn't want to flout its unequivocal DO NOT OPEN; I didn't wish to have proof that last evening's nightmare had come true in the light of day. But I overcame these negative scruples and pushed the weather-ruined door inward. The beginnings of a very basic smell had begun to taint the laundry shack's wonted atmosphere of concrete and dirty water.

On the floor, the blind man lay just as I had left him. But the sink had overflowed, dripping, dripping, and a damp grayness outlined his corpse. The slow dripping went on monotonously in the shack's far corner. I thought, *This room is a limestone grotto*. And the word *grotto* sounded in my head like a small bell, triggering a strange association; I thought of the Spanish word for cat: *gato*. This thought, in turn, summoned up the object itself, for when I looked closely at the blind man's corpse, I saw that perched on his back, as if attempting to homestead an island, there was a black kitten with murky gold eyes. It stared at me. It made no move to dart past me onto the roof. Whether indolence or ignorance made it docile, I don't know; but I picked the creature up and carried it out of the shack thinking how hideously, how pathetically gothic was its presence in that place. A blind man and a cat, locked up together. The cat did not protest my cradling it out of the darkness.

Absentmindedly, I stroked the animal and listened to its acquiescent purr. I went to the parapet and faced the cathedral; the cat went to sleep, purring a nearly inaudible counterpoint to the wind. Again, I stood there transfixed by the distant tower and all the hazy rooftops in between.

A voice said, "*Hola. Qué haces aquí, hombre?*"

I turned. "What?" A noise more than a word.

"English," the woman said, coming onto the roof. "Very well. I merely asked what you were



doing up here. Looking at this building from the street, I didn't expect to find a soul anywhere in it—much less on the roof appearing affluent and pensive at once."

I looked away from the woman's face, blurring her features—looked toward the door of the laundry shack. The door stood partially open. My pulse began to work in both temples. Would the smell give me away? Would I have to protect my interests in Spain by still another act of violence?

I let my eyes go back to the woman's face, a brown face framed by dark hair, but still did not really see her. I said: "Affluent, no. Not that."

Suddenly she was approaching me. Her small body moved in a knee-length leather skirt, flat shoes, and an unattractive jacket that buttoned at the collar; the skirt, the shoes, and the jacket were all gray. With a conscious effort I tried to measure and weigh the emotions in the face above these clothes. But it approached me so quickly, looking not at me but at the cat in my arms, that I could determine only that the woman had a small mouth and eyes with delicate epicanthic folds. Her hair shone like a helmet of polymer, bravely.

I stepped back.

"Oh," she said, reaching out. "*The gato es schlepping.*" She stroked the animal.

"Nisei?" I said.

She turned her face up. I am not a tall man, but she had inherited the diminutive stature of Pete Taniguchi rather than the Amazonian proportions of her mother; consequently, I dwarfed her. But the upturned face now belonged to a woman well into her thirties, and its Oriental openness had suffered a closing in of small crow's-feet, of probably much larger disappointments. A brave but imperceptibly bruised face. Even then, confronted with the crisis of her being there, I took time to decide that she was not as attractive an adult as she had been a child. Her clothes didn't suit her; her face, though brave, looked altered away from the familiar.

"No one calls me that anymore," she said. "Except my parents. And they live in Germany."

"That was all I ever knew to call you."

"Who are you?"

Since she had continued to stroke the cat, I carefully shifted the animal into her arms, where, awake, it eyed me with golden indifference, and then let its lids slide shut.

I told her my name. I put my hands in my pockets and sauntered along the parapet, talking. "We lived in the apartment just below yours when your father was in the air force. My father, too. One of your favorite expressions was '*The gato es schlepping.*' I scared you nearly to death one afternoon when a seltzer bottle broke and wine went all over my clothes." At the laundry shack I turned and faced her. "Do you remember that?" Casually, I pulled the door to and

remained there for a moment letting my heart run casually down.

"No," she said, "I don't remember that. But I think I remember you. I remember you riding me on your back on this same roof."

"Yes, that was me. A different me, but the same one."

She laughed. She nodded her head, humoring the dead adolescent. "Very profound. 'A different me, but the same one.' "

"Please don't ask me to make consistent sense, Nisei." I came back toward her. "The world confuses me nowadays, and occurrences such as this one put gray in my hair."

She tilted her head and studied me, strained to see my temples. "You've experienced this sort of thing many times, then." A pause. "Aren't you older than your father was when our families lived in this building?"

"Yes." I gave a startled laugh. "Yes, Nisei, I am."

"My name isn't Nisei anymore."

"No, I suppose not."

"And I don't want you to call me that if you can help it. As soon as I was old enough to know what it meant, I began to hate the name."

"Why?"

"Because it's not a girl's name. It's not even a boy's name—it's a generic term for a child born in America of immigrant Japanese parents. It doesn't have anything to do with me, and I can't understand how my father could have given me such a name."

"Somehow it fit you when you were little. What's your name now? I'll call you by it if I can remember."

"Euralinia," she said.

"Taniguchi?"

"No, *Weik*. Euralinia Weik."

I didn't say anything.

Stroking the cat, she asked: "You're not surprised that I married, are you? Am I so unattractive?"

"No," I said. "I was thinking about your name."

"And?"

"The name is unattractive."

This comment stilled her hand on the cat's electric lampblack fur. It put an angry but evanescent charge in her eyes. Looking into those eyes, I regretted the remark but understood, too, the rightness of my evaluation. The name was grotesque. The syllables of the first name sounded well enough, but the word they created had something wrong with it; something dissonant despite the fluid vowels. And her last name suggested the hard iron thwack of the conqueror's sword, implacable and mocking. I felt cut down by her eyes.

"I don't like that," she said. "It's unkind. Rude. It's the sort of comment that doesn't have to be said aloud."

"I apologize."

"You mouth an apology, like an eel caught out of the water."

Still holding the cat, she turned. She walked along the parapet. She put the animal, half-asleep, on its own feet. Then looked back at me.

"Why don't you go downstairs now — *Mike*, is it? You've had your turn. I came up here because I hadn't seen this old building since our families moved out. My parents gave me the address, and when I found the gate downstairs open, I had to come up. I didn't expect to interrupt a reverie—but since I have, it's my turn to start one of my own. I don't see any reason why we should both be up here at the same time."

The cat, overcoming its sleepy surprise at being abandoned, lay down in a wide patch of sunlight and began indelicately to preen itself. I couldn't leave Nisei — *Euralinia Weik* — on the roof, not while the corpse of the blind man decomposed fleshmeal in the damp heat of the laundry shack, an insult to justice, yes, but a mephitic menace to my assassination plans. The woman's indignation had to be dealt with, soothed, siphoned off.

"I agree with you," I said. "I don't see any reason why *either* of us should be up here. Let me buy you something to eat."

Turning her back on me, she gripped the handrail and stared toward the cathedral, La Giralda. Three pigeons dipped coolly down from the sky over an adjacent rooftop, fell between the clotheslines, and strutted in the sun with iridescent breasts. Nisei stared at the cathedral, watched the pigeons, totally ignored me. "A real apology," I said. "Not an eel's involuntary mouthings."

"I'm not hungry."

"A drink, then. Downstairs at Antonio's bar, or *whomever* it belongs to how." The inflection was for levity's sake. "Please, Mrs. Weik. Forgive me my lack of tact. The quality seems to disappear in me whenever I have proofs of my age."

In a moment or two she had accepted my apology, and together we went down to what had

once been Antonio's *bodega*, where we found a sidewalk table and sat down opposite each other. The small black cat stayed on the roof; Nisei—surprisingly, I thought—voiced not a single protest about our leaving it there. She obviously liked cats, but she behaved as if this one ought by rights to be exactly where it was, alone and undisturbed on the roof of a collapsing apartment building.

On the sidewalk beside that building, we drank wine and talked about our lives since our departures from Spain in 1963—although, by no design of my own, she did most of the talking, beginning almost from the summer of our departure. As she talked, I looked into my wine glass and saw the image of two golden eyes hovering in the liquid redness there. But Nisei held stage-center, and the illusion disappeared with the dregs of my wine.

"We left Spain because Papa had been reassigned to the States," Nisei said. "We were sent to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and I can remember that for a long time I did not truly realize that we had left Spain. We spent many days on the hot white beaches between Fort Walton and Panama City, and to my simple mind those beaches—so glittering and sea-warmed—were merely extensions of the sands that formed bright aprons around the cities of Cádiz and Torremolinos. The Mediterranean and the Gulf of Mexico were one and the same for me.

"Five years later Papa was reassigned again, this time to Lincoln, Nebraska, and things began to fall apart for us as a family. I remember seeing snow for the first time and walking home from school through the dirty slush by the curbs. Mama argued with Papa about all sorts of things from the weather, to her homesickness, to the foolishness of his job; and he argued back. Sometimes I left the house and went out into the snow to be away from their shouting. Then one day Mama told me that she and Papa had had a divorce and that just the two of us would have to love each other. That seemed to me even stranger than the fact that the beaches near Cádiz and Panama City were not on the same continent. I did not see Papa again for nearly seven years, until I had become a grown woman of nineteen and a serious university student."

"You and your mother came back to Europe?"

"Yes. We returned to Mama's home in Munich and lived with her parents until Mama could find a job of her own. In some ways, of course, Munich reminded me of Lincoln"—here Nisei giggled and whirled the wine in her glass—"but really only in that both cities slumbered in the wintertime under fat quilts of snow. I missed my father very much, and I had to work hard at recovering the German I had lost. But somehow, Mike, the snow in Munich seemed friendlier, even when seething across the streets and hissing angrily between the houses. It always seemed to sweep down over me like an unraveling sheet of gauze, white and calming."

"I get the same feeling after too many brandies," I said. A falsely jocular remark. Nisei nodded distractedly. Then I asked: "Is your father still alive? You said that you saw him again."

“Oh, yes. He and Mama remarried when I was twenty. They’re living together in Munich now — although when I was little Papa used to swear that Germany was a land of barbarians and warriors and that he wouldn’t dignify it by settling there. Mama told him Japan was the same way, and the United States, too. This made Papa swear; not comically, but like a person raised in the gutters on onions and sour bread. It was frightening. And he had never been to Japan in his entire life.”

“But now your parents are remarried and living in Munich?”

“Yes.”

“How did this miracle in human relations come about?”

“Mama’s parents urged her to write ‘Mr. Taniguchi’ in the States and tell him the news about his daughter. Mama argued that ‘Mr. Taniguchi’ had not written her and that he probably hoped his daughter had gone into the streets for want of paternal guidance. But my grandparents prevailed. Mama wrote. First, she had to write the big air force base in Texas where they keep the addresses of all their American servicemen, and through these people she found out that Papa had been sent to a duty station in California. Then she wrote Papa. The two of them exchanged letters for three years, and finally he came to Munich.

“We welcomed him home — yes, *home* — on a gauze-gray day filled with streamers of snow, like the ticker tape they toss out of windows for the parades in New York. I missed my university classes, and Papa told us that he had left the air force for good, only two years away from his pension. Less than two years away from his pension, in fact. We laughed. Then we wept. We wept together like a family.”

“Probably because he had forfeited his pension.”

“Oh, no,” Nisei said, but she acknowledged this second forced witticism by raising her glass and clinking it against my own. “We wept because we were so happy together, together again. The marriage came so much later only because Papa would not establish a home until he had a secure position. He became the executive foreman of one of the biggest automobile service-centers in Munich. Mama and I taught him the language.”

“A garage mechanic,” I said. “Glorified, of course.”

“Yes, a garage mechanic.” She blinked. “Then a foreman.”

This aspect of her narrative irritated me; it shared a covert but very real common denominator with the turnabout in European history, a turnabout that dated from the early seventies. I tried to make my voice the instrument of a new seriousness: “Your father left the service with less than two years remaining, Nisei. That was irresponsible. He might have been drawing a comfortable allotment right up to the present day had he simply thought for a moment. He wouldn’t’ve had to worry about becoming an ‘executive foreman.’ Don’t you see, Nisei?”

"A man can die in two years' time."

"I realize that," I said. "I realize that."

"And my name isn't Nisei anymore."

"No. You're a grown-up girl and you're married. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, *Mrs. Euralinia Weik.*"

On the dusty sidewalk, no longer able to maintain any sort of composed veneer (either haughty or schoolgirlish), sitting there in full view of a hundred pedestrians, Nisei broke down and cried. At the moment I believed my inadvertent boorishness to be the cause of her tears, and I tried to calm her by leaning forward and apologizing again and again. But she shook her head, indicating that the fault wasn't mine. She shook her head and wept as if to stop would be to still her heart.

I sat back stiffly in my chair. The barman came from behind his counter to the open doorway and looked at us. So did the table-sitters around us. When Nisei at last managed to control her convulsing shoulders, the barman returned to his den of warm sawdust and soap-filmed glassware.

"I'm sorry, too," Nisei said, wiping her eyes.

"You did get married, didn't you? You're not still a Taniguchi."

"Yes," she told me. "But my husband is dead. My husband's dead, and I can't... I can't make myself accept..." She broke off, but her voice dovetailed into a feeble sob, avoiding the inarticulate shrillness of her former weeping. The barman stayed behind his counter.

"Oh, Nisei."

She looked me straight in the eyes, her eyes filled with a defiant lambency, her jaw set. "But what makes it worse—what makes it a thousand times worse—is that he *isn't* dead. He's dead, Mike, but he isn't. His walking about is the terrible thing, the thing I can't accept, knowing that he's dead. Knowing that he's..."

Again, the slow rhythmic sobbing that forced her face into her hands.

I had to wait. I waited five minutes. Ten. Occasionally I spoke to her under my breath, mouthing the ritualistic hurt-softeners that have no meaning outside of their audible proof that someone is near. We drank no more wine, but I bought a bottle and had it brought to the table as an excuse to remain where we were.

The story of Nisei's marriage and its wholly fantastic aftermath came out haltingly over the period of the next two hours. Nisei spoke in a voiced whisper, and I ignored the high passing of the sun, even though the sidewalk had no shade and the early afternoon had lost its coolness.

In the university at Munich (her story went), she had majored in languages. By the age of twenty-three she could speak fluent German, Spanish, English, French, Italian, and Russian. She was conversant with the classical languages and had enough of several Slavic tongues to be able to read them with good understanding. As easily as leaves come to a tree, words came to her lips and budded in patterns of beautiful coherence. No one, it seemed, stood outside her ability to communicate. In the snows of Munich she planted the tender green shoots of language and watched them grow out of that whiteness into myriad interlocking vines.

As something of a prodigy, she moved into the arena of communicating her skills, and her perhaps incommunicable deftness, to others. She was not a teacher, but others sought her out. The experience frightened Nisei, and she backed away from many of these people—particularly the young Oriental men who expected her to speak with them in Japanese, or Amoy, or Korean, and who invariably concluded by berating her, always in the mildest and most humorous of terms, for neglecting the linguistic heritage of her father (who himself, as they had no way of knowing, had long since forgotten the tongue of *his* fathers). These young men, bright as scrubbed copper, represented the vanguard of a continuing influx of Eastern exchange students; sometimes it seemed that their earnest faces had usurped every study nook, classroom, and seminar discussion in the university. An uneasiness took possession of Nisei. Although these copper faces crowded upon her with the message of something left incomplete, she refused to acknowledge the incompleteness. In hallways and empty lecture rooms she declined supper dates from these young men and clotured, unilaterally, their attempts to drill her in the rudiments of Mandarin. She would not learn from them. And it did not take them long to give her the distance she seemed to want, leaving her to all the fawning and incestuous scions of the Indo-European persuasion. She would not cultivate the exotic shoots of the East, and Munich's snow during this winter began to dinge—so that it reminded her of another time, another place.

Then she met Theodor Weik.

At thirty, Theodor Weik came into the university system with a startlingly consummate command of the Sino-Tibetan languages. He resembled, Nisei told me, the tall ascetic-looking actor, blond and gaunt, who had worked in so many of Ingmar Bergman's films. But Theodor Weik had spent the major portion of his life not in the cold northern reaches of Scandinavia, but rather in the teeming British colony of Hong Kong, where his father had worked as an international correspondent. (Of course, the British had long since departed—those British in administrative positions, that is; but many remained in the city, in sharply diminished roles, for sheer love of their obstreperous port.) As a boy little more than twelve, Weik had learned all the major dialects of China and more than a scantling of Vietnamese. This last he had learned, surprisingly enough, from the American soldiers who had been sent to Southeast Asia by their government, but who came on leave to Hong Kong by personal choice. His father knew many of these men, and young Theo digested the crudely imparted fragments of vocabulary and grammar they had to offer and combined these into a mosaic of intuitive symmetry.

His talent with the Sino-Tibetan languages was commensurate with Nisei's understanding of the European tongues. When they met at the university in Munich, it was as if each one had found his tally, the opposite but complementary half of one's being that Plato permits Aristophanes to speak of in the *Symposium*: the pursuit of the whole which he, Aristophanes, termed Love.

"After we had married," Nisei said, "we spoke in just this way about our coming together and laughed at the seeming absurdity of it. But, on a subsurface level, I don't believe we thought it so ridiculous an analogy. For, although we were completely different, we found each other and married—just as the Greek playwright explains the comical process in Plato's dialogue."

For three more years the Weiks remained in Munich; for Theo had become one of the young lions of the language faculty, a lion with velvet manners and the intense, reconciliatory instincts of a woman. Many of the Oriental young men whom Nisei had rebuffed, he invited to their home. In a small upstairs apartment furnished more after his tastes than hers, they sat on the floor, the Weiks and their guests, and talked long into the night; they talked, in fact, in the dialects she had once fled from. Out of necessity, Nisei heeded the strange cadences, the emphatic vowels, the changes in pitch. Laughter punctuated their discussions of politics and literature and the new science, and she moved easily through her own laughter toward the languages that were the vehicles of their gentle hilarity.

Things fell into place; the center of her life expanded, from a point to a circle, from a circle to a solid sphere.

Then Theo talked with her about his goals and decided that the time had come to change directions. With strong recommendations from the senior members of his department and from a Chinese diplomat whose son had been under his tutelage, Theodor Weik went to the ambassadorial secretariat of Reunified Germany. He asked for a position in the Far East. The staff of the secretariat interviewed, tested, cross-examined him. In less than a month's time they had approved his application and had assigned him as a "diplomat apprentice" to the German consulate in Peking. Nisei and he left Munich in the summer of 1986, of one ambitious mind to confront and encompass the ongoing revolution of their time.

"He achieved everything he wished," Nisei said. "Always."

Mesmerized by her own story, she held her hands folded on the table. A slanting of shade cut across her head and hands. Despite the fact that I was sweating in the one remaining triangle of sunlight on the walk, I did not interrupt her.

"Always," Nisei continued. "In a year's time he had met and conversed with all the leaders of the Communality, including the Chairman himself. The Chairman developed a mentorlike fondness for Theo. Toward me he behaved like a father who had once deserted his children but who now hoped to rectify things by all sorts of silly attentions. I could not imagine him working as a librarian, as he had once done, or organizing a peasant army, or penning the sententious little sayings that sound as if they were written by a middle-class Machiavelli. He



joked with us. He teased. He was very nice. Almost twice a month we ate with him privately, with him and his third wife. Theo challenged him with an Occidental mind that had transcended its origins, and it also pleased Mao to tease me about marrying a blond neocapitalist. Sometimes our conversations wearied him and forced him to retire before he would have liked, but he continued to invite us. Soon he would talk to no one in the German diplomatic corps but Theo.

“Like a Shansi version of the Cheshire cat, he grinned at other emissaries but faded into silence when they approached him. It was amazing, the access to his person that he granted us. No one could believe it, and just before our third full year was over, one of the German ‘elder statesmen’ returned to Berlin for good and Theo was immediately appointed to succeed him.

“ ‘Nisei,’ he told me, ‘now I can pull down the walls.’ ”

I laughed. “He called you Nisei, too, then?”

“Oh, yes.” She echoed my laugh and unfolded her hands. “I never minded the way it sounded when Theo said it.”

But we were getting near the end of her story, and Nisei abruptly stopped smiling. With her forefinger she drew interlocking circles in the dampness on the tabletop. I waited—waited a minute—waited two minutes—waited until her finger spiraled to a standstill and her head came back up.

“Last year,” she said, swallowing, “last year a disease—a growth—a viral cancer struck Theo and grew through his brain like a weed sending roots into a clump of moss. It gave no indication of its presence except a slight recurring headache that Theo ignored; in fact, he didn’t even tell me about the headaches until they had been going on for three or four weeks, and then we put off determining their cause for still another three or four weeks. Theo was too busy... too busy pulling the walls down.

“Even though the diseased cells had not spread through his bloodstream to other parts of his body, the localized cancer was enough. He would die. All they could do was irradiate the surface tissues of his brain, slow the malignancy a little, prolong his life a small nasty bit, and ultimately... inevitably... let the cancer grow into the unaffected tissues outside the brain.” She stopped for a moment. “He was going to... going to die. All very clinical, all very final—despite what they claim they can do now.”

What they could do was quite a lot; not, by any means, what Nisei would have desired, but quite a lot.

The Chairman, though himself in a weakened and febrile state, took a personal interest. He installed Theodor Weik in a red-draped hospital room and visited the stricken man in a prim avuncular way that excluded, for long stretches, even Nisei herself. The two men conferred. Ill but spirited, they shared the community of their diseases and of their dreams. At last Nisei

heard of their jointly formulated plan, the product of these colloquies; and her husband, adamant in his decision, argued with her the better part of a night until two white-frosted attendants came barging through the door in response to her hysteria and denied Nisei her supposedly unrestricted visiting privileges. The voluted draperies moved eerily, she noted, as they forced her from her husband's bedside. Her eyes were full of acid.

The plan itself she felt was inhumane, unnatural. Granted, the plan involved trust and sacrifice—but the sacrifice would be Theo's, while the trust, if he could muster it, would belong to the apprehensive but undaunted Chairman. Nisei stood alone on the periphery, forgotten.

On the night after her expulsion from her husband's room, a great gleaming aircraft, lights coldly atwinkle, landed on the longest runway at the airfield outside Peking. A convoy escorted the deplaning passengers into the city. These passengers were a surgeon of cybernetics of undeservedly small renown and five highly trained specialists with whom he had long since established an uncanny rapport. They arrived at the hospital at a bleak, cold hour just after midnight. In a circular amphitheater located two floors below ground level, they discovered a facility to rival the one they had left: an operating room lit as if by klieg lights, and instruments of poignant stainless steel.

"They had decided to effect the transfer," Nisei said slowly, "before Theo's cancer invaded some other part of his body... before it made his... his *corpse*... uninhabitable. Since he was doomed to die no matter what he chose, that would have been a shameful waste, a sin against the people. And Theo—Theo, God forgive him—agreed."

Her voice was no longer hers; it rose huskily on an undercurrent of remembrance.

"I don't know how long they took, how long they cut and probed and stitched and played witch-doctor gods, but Theo didn't let me see him again as himself, didn't give me a moment to lie next to him before the knife came down.

"When he awoke, he didn't awake. His eyes opened with somebody else behind them; and his brain, all cancer-ridden and horribly aware, they killed with electricity and incinerated in a stainless-steel cylinder. Theo had become a nearly one-hundred-year-old man. His eyes didn't belong to him anymore, and he had forsaken me—forsaken me by leaving in his stead a brutal doppelgänger who will never, no matter how pitifully I beg him, never forsake me.

"Oh, God," she said. "My dear God."

"Are you telling me that your husband walks about only because his mind has been usurped by the Chairman's intelligence?"

To herself she said, "My dear God," and fell silent, the noise of her grief and incredulity no more audible than the purring of a kitten. Again, I gave her a minute or two.

"Has he attempted to take your husband's place?"

The question made a slow assault on her understanding. She lifted her head. "No," she said. "No, he hasn't."

"But the Chinese must see such an operation as a traitorous perversion of their identity. Do they know of it? Do they accept it?"

"Expedient. The Chairman admits that it was an expediency — also the supreme gesture of goodwill toward the West. Deliberately assuming the body of a Nordic." With some bitterness she said: "He doesn't touch me. I couldn't stand... couldn't tolerate... so he never touches me. But he is solicitous, always solicitous, and it's so damnably eerie, so frighteningly cruel."

"Won't he let you go home to Munich?"

"I've been home briefly. I came to Seville because I wanted to. I had to see where it had all started."

"Just to see this old building? Is that what you mean?"

"No. Not just to see this old building."

"What else, then?"

Abruptly she pushed her chair back and stood up, a gray Oriental woman with whom I shared nothing in common. Heads at other tables turned toward us. She lifted the blue-black curtain of hair against her left cheek with a quick hand and let it drop behind her shoulder. Exposed fully in the noonday glare, her face in no way resembled that of the little girl who had screamed in the stairwell. She said, "I have to go."

"Where? Are you staying with your husband?"

"My husband's dead!" she shouted, and began to move away.

"With the Chairman, I meant." Trying to get up, I knocked the wine bottle over. "Nisei, I'm sorry. I meant, with the Chairman." In front of so many unabashed onlookers, I felt naked. The beginnings of a migraine unbalanced me; I swayed. I set the wine bottle back on the table, still half-full.

"The *Chairman* is in Madrid today," she said. "When he arrives here tomorrow, I'll meet him. Just meet him. That's all." She was now in the thoroughfare, facing me across the cobbles. I had turned 180 degrees to follow her angry retreat. "That's all!" she shouted.

"Nisei!"

"Don't call me that!" She waved her arm. "That old building," she waved her arm again, "isn't my building. Goodbye, Mike. Go back to where you belong. Go back."

A small automobile went by her. Two men in the bar across the street exchanged what

sounded like either threats or obscenities. But Nisei simply turned her back on me and walked until the battered side of a bus advertising a Spanish cognac interposed itself and caused me to lose sight of her among the faded blue shirts of several pedestrians. Then, undoubtedly, she was gone from the dirty plaza—and I could do nothing but stare at the façade of a rundown drugstore and look at the movie posters pasted on the bricks.

I sat back down, the center of some unasked-for attention, and poured from the bottle of wine. Everything but the wine and the task before me, I ignored. First, the blind man's story of Picasso's new incarnation; now, this account of the Chairman's relocation of intelligence in the body of a Caucasian. Both stories were troubling—intensely so now that the blind man lay dead in the laundry shack and Nisei had disappeared like a wintry apparition back into her own place in time. I could question neither the blind man nor the woman any further; they had been taken from me, driven from me. Nevertheless, all I really wanted was a more detailed description of what the Chairman now looked like. He looked like Nisei's dead husband; yes, like an actor who had once worked in the pearl-bright films of Bergman.

I wished I had asked Nisei if she had a photograph.

For in the morning, I would strike down the venerable Chairman of the Community, no matter in whose borrowed flesh he continued to walk about. I had come too far—we had all come too far—to be denied retribution by this grotesque duplicity of skins, this hideous doffing and donning of another's bones. It didn't matter. I would kill Nisei's husband again, if that was what was required.

I went back into the building.

In my old room I settled down for the heat of the day. For a time I slept; for an hour or so I read. When the room began to grow dim and murky with evening dust motes, I dared to tear down three or four of the rotten slats that covered my casement window. This made an inevitable cracking noise—alarmingly acute to me—but the transistor radios had begun playing again and the people on the sidewalk at Antonio's *bodega* were engaged in animated debate. No one looked up.

By the thin light from the window, I assembled the parts of my cane and inserted the concealed firing mechanism that would end the Chairman's second go-round at youth and power.

I rumbled my suit. I put on the blind man's yellow sunglasses. I walked around the rubble-strewn floor practicing the smooth halt-and-hitch of the blind man's walk. When the light had almost gone (attenuated nearly to extinction behind the yellow lenses), I stopped and checked my pockets. Inside my jacket I found the blind man's identification papers. These I unfolded, squinted at, folded again, and replaced in the pocket next to my heart.

The last thing I found was the capsule of cyanide. In the dark, shining with a hairline plastic

scar, it seemed even more ludicrous than it had that morning. My heart did timpani rolls, muffled beatings. My hands began to sweat.

As near to midnight as I could gauge, I left the apartment, descended the stairs, and struck out haltingly toward the Street of the Serpents. I wore my glasses. Even when night falls, a blind man's sight does not return, and so I emulated the reality. Few people were about, the alleys were ill-lit, and at every uncertain step I fought the urge to abandon my role and heed Nisei's advice to go back where I belonged. But my other senses asserted themselves as if I were indeed blind, and reaffirmed in me my commitment to go through to the end: the cold bricks under my fingers, the smells of baking bread and stale laundry, the cries from the courtyard tenements, the taste of my own saliva. By these signs I knew where I belonged, where I was going.

At the foot of the Calle de Sierpes, preparations for the morning's tour had already begun. Men in uniform, members of La Guardia, moved about like olive-drab specters; they directed the workmen who were setting up sawhorses and tying off every entrance to the street with ropes of plush red velvet. The street itself, except for the presence of an occasional guardsman, lay before me as inviolate as new snow, a broad, vacant swath stretching toward the distant avenues where motorized traffic was permitted.

The moon hung in the sky like a candled egg, lopsided and warm.

Voices echoed in the empty street; and, hollow of will, I approached the first barricade, tapping my cane, regretting my poor command of the language. No one questioned me until I had gone past a pair of ropeless sawhorses into one of the pools of light that shimmered on the street.

*"Alto!"* A man's face bloomed in front of me like a giant rose with sagging petals.

Through my glasses I could tell only that the man was angry, that his jowls labored flaccidly under the weight of the admonition he was giving me. His hands gripped my shoulders. Another man came up beside him. This second man I had time to scrutinize, and I could see that he was a young officer with considerably more poise than his comrade. I tried to keep my head still, my eyes steady, my posture expectant. The young officer engaged the rose-faced man in a brief discussion, and then turned to me.

*"Señor. Cómo se llama?"*

A challenge. But in some ways my confrontation with the guardsmen was the finest self-acquittal I managed in that seventy-two-hour period. I gave them the blind man's name and rummaged inside my jacket for his papers. The angry man checked my name against a list of the shopkeepers on the Calle de Sierpes, while the young officer, singing a popular song under his breath, summarily looked over my identification. He was untroubled, and I searched my memory and constructed a phrase or two in Spanish to keep him so. It was remarkably easy. When he asked me why I had not been on the street that day, I answered, *"He estado enfermo — muy enfermo,"* speaking the vowels like a true Andalusian. Neither man

so much as looked up to examine my face.

The officer returned my papers and dismissed his heavy-jowled comrade—who went sullenly back to directing the placement of sawhorses and the stringing of red velvet.

The officer asked me why I had come to the street at so awkward an hour of the night.

*“Quiero esperar el Generalissimo y su huésped distinguido,”* I said. *“Si posible, quiero conocerlos y hablar.”* The words came full blown into my head; and if they had a certain foreign awkwardness, my confidence in speaking them deceived the young officer—who laughed and said, *“Bueno, bueno, bueno.”*

Still laughing, he indicated that I could proceed to my accustomed place on the street and cautioned me that it would be a long night, one lacking in any real amusements. I nodded, said, *“Sí, comprendo,”* and began tapping my lethal cane toward the doorway where I could await the Chairman’s coming.

All night I stood in that doorway, intermittently dozing.

When the morning came, it spread a pink watercolor wash under the low clouds, over the brick gray buildings, through the netting of canopies that hung furled like sails above the Street of the Serpents.

Traffic noises, far away and joyous, set the pavement humming under my feet. I saw the Guardia at both ends of the thoroughfare checking papers and admitting shopkeepers. Grinning nervously and rubbing their palms together, these men hurried to their shops, lifted the grates over their doorways, and opened for the Generalissimo’s pleasure. A few hailed me cursorily, and I lifted the top of my cane a little in reply.

Everyone was too busy to stop and talk, but somehow I believed I could handle any conceivable difficulty, should any businessman decide to greet me at closer range and, failing to recognize me, challenge my right to be there. I had the language in my mouth, the cunning in my head: *“The ticket-seller of your acquaintance is ill, señor, but the Guardia wish the street to appear as it always does. Consequently, I am here in his stead.”* When fate ordains that one complete his mission in life, no power may arise to thwart him.

So it was with me on that spring morning as merchants babbled, policemen strolled, and the sounds of opening shops made metallic moan. At one point, a busboy from the nearest bar brought me a glass of anisette with the compliments of his employer, and I accepted it with trembling fingers and a nod. The boy stared at me for a moment, but went away when I began to sip the cloudy liquid, my tongue caressing the rim of the glass.

The two hours that I waited after the arrival of the shopkeepers seemed even longer than the seven or eight hours that I had waited that night.

But presently a commotion at the head of the street told me that I would need to wait only a little longer. In one of the street’s shadowy S-coils a party of dignitaries emerged into my

direct vision. A great many people swelled the bottleneck where they strolled abreast, unconcernedly jabbering. There was laughter.

Once past this narrow place the party came on with maddening slowness, for the stoop-shouldered man about whom the other dignitaries revolved took very small steps and paused at frequent intervals to gesture with his hands or point out things of interest. He wore a uniform with shoulder boards and ribbons and a brilliant loop of braid. His face was birdlike. I knew him immediately for the Generalissimo. But the men around him had no distinction for me, blurring one into another like eidolons. I saw other uniforms, vaguely Oriental faces, business suits, pale exposed wrists, perhaps even the hem of a woman's skirt. Flashbulbs scoured these people's clothes with brief bursts of light, but still I could not tell if the Chairman walked with them.

I sought two different faces, one Mongoloid, one Nordic.

But neither one appeared among the faces that descended upon me at such an enragingly leisurely rate. Had the blind man lied to me about the Chairman's visit? Had Nisei, to punish my boorishness, concocted the bizarre tale of Theodor Weik's death and resurrection? Standing there, I realized that all the information I possessed had come to me secondhand. Doubt took hold, and I cursed my trust in the dead and the deceitful.

Tapping with my cane, I stepped out of the doorway.

Almost at once I saw a tall figure with graying blond hair, a man with sunken blue eyes and a long jaw. He moved from behind a knot of smaller men and took up his place beside the Generalissimo. Incongruously, he wore the high-necked jacket and the loose trousers of a member of the Chinese Communalism. It was Nisei's former husband, now merely the living husk in which there resided the locust mind, the insatiable maw, of an unparalleled villain.

*"Lotería,"* I cried. *"Lotería para hoy."*

They saw me and smiled. Shapeless, slow, hungry for novelty, the group of dignitaries and reporters came rolling toward me. The sensation of their spreading approach was claustrophobic. I would have precious little room to strike Theodor/Mao, not an inch in which to retreat. Their bodies would be upon me in an instant. But like a basketball player among school children, the Chairman towered over his Spanish hosts, his Chinese comrades, and strode toward me with impetuous boldness.

*"Lotería,"* I cried again.

The Chairman halted, spoke something over his shoulder, laughed, and came on relentlessly. The others crowded behind him, and suddenly their infuriating slowness had become one great tidal rush. Men and flashbulbs surrounded me. I stepped back. Looking up through the opening between my face and the lenses of my glasses, I saw a pigeon floating in the slit of blue sky. I longed to fly into that vacancy with it, free of the self-imposed onus of assassinating a man who no longer resembled himself. The actor drew near.

He looked over his shoulder again. "Generalissimo," he said in Spanish, addressing the aged homunculus in the majestic uniform, "this man need not remain blind. No one must. We have the means to restore his sight."

Blond as northern wheat, supple as a lean cat, the Chairman extended toward me his beautiful hands and smiled an otherworldly benediction. I could see no one but him. All the others might have been cardboard figures meant to dress a prosaic backdrop. And all time—past, present, future—condensed into that moment and ran in my veins like a fiery serum.

In English I shouted, "Die, you monster!" and sprang forward so violently that the sun dimmed, the air burned, and the earth heaved under the pavement in volcanic shudders; all creation aghast at the magnitude of my deed.

Up came the tip of my cane as I swung the weapon first sideways and then unerringly forward. It split the space between the Chairman's outstretched hands, homing on his heart.

Several flashbulbs exploded.

The Chairman's body turned; his head went back. A sound like steam escaping a kettle filled the causeway as the accompanying dignitaries let their astonishment slip past their lips. I twisted the cane and banged it against the Chairman's breastbone, a trifle off-target because of the twisting he had involuntarily done. But the cartridge tore into his chest, ripped away the facing of his gray garment, burrowed into the hollow that his lungs bordered. Shouts overrode the hissing sounds of the crowd.

The recoil of the weapon shoved me down; the weapon fell from my hands. Falling, I saw the plush red stain on the Chairman's torso and then stared for a moment into his water-blue unbelieving eyes. Two men supported his tottering body. But the intelligent blue eyes watched me fall and then rolled into their own milky whites before closing. The body sagged. Still, I had a fraction of a second in which to note that the effect had been all wrong, the expression not at all what I had desired. It came to me instantly that perhaps I had made a mistake. *A mistake!*

This thought died at once, for a man's knee came up under my chin and cracked my head against a storefront.

My yellow sunglasses skittered away—but somehow I got my hands under me and crabwalked frantically along the concrete molding of the shops, retreating from my pursuers. A pair of heavy knees—in olive-drab gabardine, above shiny lubricated boots—bore down on me. The gleaming boots were almost in my face. I kicked out at one of them and took advantage of their stumbling to lever myself up to a standing position.

Desperately, I tried to extract the cyanide capsule from one of my trouser pockets.

"No!" a woman's voice screamed. "You mustn't let him do that!"



The man who had momentarily stumbled was upon me. He wore a tricornered hat and appeared to be an extremely important officer in the Guardia. With one brusque sweep of his forearm he broke my jaw and sent the flimsy pod of plastic sailing into infinity, irrecoverable. The man was older than I, I saw, but demonstrably stronger. He gripped my lapels and pushed me along the façade of storefronts until my back was to a wide tinted window. I knew what was coming, read the direction of his rage.

He spat in my face. "*Hijo de noche.*"

Then his forearms stiffened against my chest, powerfully, like coiled springs, and thrust me into the collapsing wall of glass so that shards dropped around me, sprigs of crystal caught in my hair, excruciating powders abraded my back.

I lay sprawled, legs up, in the darkened serving area of the billiard parlor where the blind man and I had discussed the Chairman's impending visit. Now the Chairman was dead, and the jagged opening above me filled with curious faces, all somehow secondary to the stolid angry face of the guardsman.

With the back of his hand he knocked several more pieces of glass out of the window frame and climbed in toward me. I was conscious. My jaw throbbed like the rail over which a huge engine has just passed; my body was riddled as if with bee stings and laser holes. In thrall to his anger, the guardsman would kill me and end my suffering.

The prospect did not frighten me; I welcomed it.

But I was conscious, too, of the barman and busboys inside the parlor and their pleas that my assailant desist so that the wreckage not become more general. Jerked to my feet, I listened to these cries as the guardsman slapped my head from side to side and whispered a hissing torrent of obscenities with every blow. It seemed that I was being struck by an anonymous retributive power, for the man, so far as I knew, had no face—only terrible extremities, the boots I had fled from and the bruised hands that battered me.

Like a plucked harp string, a woman's voice sounded in the shattered opening: "No, Vicente, no. The Chairman is dead. This man's death won't alter that."

Vicente, the guardsman, chopped at me with the edge of his hand. He held me erect. He prepared to strike me again.

"For the sake of love," the woman cried, "stop yourself!"

At these words, Vicente backed away from me and gave me an unobstructed view of the people crowded in the window. The woman, of course, was Nisei. She had both her hands to her face, several fingers twisted through the silk curtain of her hair. Her eyes strained at the relative darkness we inhabited. Clearly, she did not recognize me—though I could not tell why. When my knees began to crumple and my eyes to glaze, the heavysset guardsman grabbed my sleeve and shook me into another moment of awareness. Held erect once more, I saw that my jacket was gone, my shirtfront bloodied, my chest outlined beneath the sucking

wetness. Pain riveted me upright for a horrifying second. "Nisei," I said. Then I slumped again. This time Vicente let go of me.

Having penetrated my identity, Nisei began to scream.

I toppled into the carpet of dull glass and heard the larger pieces go *crack* under my body, indifferently cutting. Again, Vicente's head came down. His hands reached for my absent lapels and tore my shirt. My consciousness was going. I fought to fix my tormentor's face in my mind; I struggled for a last remnant of lucidity. The man's breath touched my lips and nose. Straining to focus, I turned my head toward him and looked up at his swollen jowls.

Although thirty years had passed, one thing made this man readily and forever familiar: the spidery magenta birthmark on his left cheek. It was with this image in my mind that the guardsman and all the spectators in the window faded into inconsequence. My pain faded, too. For the certain knowledge that what I had accomplished was no mistake spun a web of silver for me and trembled in the gathering dark.

And as the darkness fell, a pigeon hovering in the blue space between the canopies over the Street of the Serpents disappeared; disappeared without moving. The serenity of old cathedrals was finally mine.

## Epilogue

As this document proves, they did not kill me. Do not ask me why. Instead they committed me to this great prison. When I first came here, there were other men behind the walls. Now, however, I am the only one, for year by year the number of prisoners has decreased with pardons, natural deaths, and finally, at the turn of the new century, a general amnesty. Only I am not released—though I may go walking through any corridor I choose and even spend a morning digging in the prison gardens.

From the window of my cell I can look down on olive trees, gnarled little hardwoods that cast crooked shadows. I write and think.

In the election of 1992 the Generalissimo won a resounding victory over his many opponents. This year he won his ninth consecutive springtime election. The guards keep me apprised. It is by his decree, I am certain, that I remain here—deferred to, humored, well cared for, but always aware of my status as a prisoner. The guards, you see, do not tell me everything, only the news that pertains directly to Spain. For instance, after the Generalissimo's last election they informed me that Picasso had painted a commemorative mural entitled *The Dream and the Truth of Franco* and that this mural now hangs in the Museo del Prado. Sometimes I believe that the guards are liars, that the blind man was a liar, that even Nisei must have deceived me.

I know nothing of what happened in China after I killed Theodor/Mao. Of the momentous reactions of the world at large I am completely ignorant. They keep me this way. The guards conspire to see that I continue to go about in the dark. Beyond daily pleasantries and a little gossip about Franco, they will not venture.

They leave me to write and think. Consequently, I have only one more brief episode to relate.

After my incarceration eight years ago, the authorities permitted me a visitor. The elder of my two children, Christopher James, flew up from Johannesburg and came with a strange reticence into my cell. He was not yet twenty-one, and it had been so long since I had last seen him that I was surprised to note how tall he was. He did not sit down, but stared at me with his hands folded in front of him. So young, so young! His face had a healthy adolescent thinness, and his hair, worn at a moderate length, fairly shone. Even the palpable gloom of my cell could not quench that sheen—the vigor and sheen of his youth!

He would not talk to me about himself, although I asked him questions about his studies and even joked with him about the possibility of his becoming my personal physician. (At that time, my wounds still had not completely healed, and my jaw occasionally ached with a cruel fierceness.) None of my banter moved him. He stood looking down on me, passing judgment. When I asked him news of the world, he said, “They told me not to discuss that with you. And I won’t, Father, because it isn’t important.”

“What do you consider important, then?”

“Your reasons for taking a man’s life, for killing another human being. I’d like to know those things.”

As briefly as I could, I explained. With some eloquence I laid all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle before him and then proceeded to fit the edges together into a coherent pattern. When I was through, he shook his head and began to pace the flagstones beside my cot.

“Your family still loves you,” he said at last. “But you aren’t Moses. Your people aren’t the Chosen People.”

I laughed a little at that and then went on to say that just as I did not resemble Moses, he did not resemble Minos, one of the Greek judges of the dead. I would permit my children to sit in judgment of me, however, if they would agree to having their allowances curtailed. This nitwitticism—they had had no allowance from me for several years—unexpectedly broke the ice, and we fell into some pleasant, if slightly self-conscious, conversation.

An hour passed.

Jamie, summoned by a guard, told me goodbye and left me sitting disconsolately on my cot. The cell filled up with darkness. The sound of my son’s footfalls faded. And in the intervening years I have not been permitted another visitor.

Still, I regret nothing. Though the years have wrinkled me as they will wrinkle even the

youngest, I regret nothing. I killed a monster for my wife and children, and there is nothing in that to regret.