

IAN R. MacLEOD

NINA-WITH-THE-SKY-IN-HER-HAIR

The man who sold the sky came to see Max when he was finishing breakfast at the Corienne. It was after nine, before ten; his favorite time of day. The promenade below his balcony was still in shade. Everything was fresh and cool. Even Nina was out of bed after staying on at the casino late last night long after he had left. He could hear her singing in the shower.

Max picked up the hotel phone almost as it rang. A gentleman to see him, the maitre d' said. Business, something to do with the sky. Max saw to it that business never reached him here at the Corienne, but still his curiosity was aroused. He told the maitre to send him up and finished his coffee, watching the white parasols, listening to the sea.

The visitor was small, dressed in a khaki suit that might once have been cream, holding a panama in both hands and turning it around by the brim.

"If you're selling," Max said, mopping up the conserve with the last of his croissant, "I've probably already got it."

"I understand that you are a connoisseur."

"Of what?"

"Of everything."

Max grunted a smile through the crumbs on his lips. It was true enough; when you ran out of specific, individual things, everything was all you had left. He said, "I warn you, if you want my money, you'll have to see my accountants. If you want advice you'll need my lawyers. And they'll both charge."

"I've come to sell you the sky."

Max scratched the gray stubble on his chin. He'd met his fair share of crackpots over the years. But crackpots were like the rest of the world; good, bad -- and mostly indifferent.

"That's impossible."

The little man shrugged and made to turn back toward the door.

"Hey!" Max pushed away his breakfast trolley and lifted himself to his feet. "Don't take it like that. I'm all ears. Really, I'm all ears."

"I have a sample," the little man said, and reached into his pocket.

As usual, Max and Nina took lunch that day at the bistro down in the square. Max

much preferred the dining room at the Corienne, but Nina liked to sit in the splashes of shade thrown by the olive trees. Sometimes they argued about it, but

-- as with everything else when it came to Nina -- Max always gave in. It was a

typical day here on the island. Every day was typical. The sea was shimmering blue between the white angles of the houses and the pavement was hot enough to fry, but still the young ones came and went with their jeeps and scooters, shaking the siesta by its sleepy tail. They always waved at Nina, and Nina waved back.

Max squinted at the finance pages, half eaten bits of squid gleaming like wet paint on the tin table.

Nina, sunglasses stacked on the billows of black hair, the straps of her halter white on deep brown skin, asked, "Darling, what are we going to do today?"

Max gazed at Nina. He dreaded that question. Every day, had to think up something new to keep her entertained, then try to keep up. The alternative was that she went off with the other young people, and he couldn't face that.

Peeling off his cotton sunhat to mop the freckled top of his head, Max suggested they visit the viewpoint at the top of the island. He said, "Won't that be great?"

"Since when . . ." Nina lifted her glass and twirled it to make the bubbles rise

". . . since when have you taken to using silk?"

"Silk?"

She nodded toward his lap. "Blue silk."

It was still crumpled in his big hands, the cloth he'd used to soak up his sweat. It still felt cool. He let it unfold in his palms like a flower, wondering what it was, some napkin he'd picked up. Then he remembered the little man in khaki that could once have been cream or white, the card he'd been given, and had instantly thrown away, the way he did with all business cards.

"Just some guy came this mornings" he said, pushing the cloth back into the pocket of his baggy shorts. "Trying to sell fabric, I think. He gave me a sample

and I sent him away." Max didn't add that Nina had been singing in the shower at

the time, that seeing her coming out gleaming wet, all perfection in the bright

perfect morning with a towel around her hair, was always enough to make his heart ache, that it was a sight he wasn't prepared to share with any other man.

Max watched Nina. He knew there was no way of telling her how much love he felt

without sounding like a fool.

Nina's hazel eyes were drawn away from his and across the square by the barp of a scooter horn.

The young man pulled up. He killed the scooter's engine.

"Good morning, Sir." He flashed a smile at Max, his shorts showing the muscles of his thighs. His name, Max remembered, was Vernon.

Vernon turned to Nina. "You got back all right from the casino last night?"

"Of course. But it's sweet of you to ask."

"You know, Sir," Vernon said to Max, "You're the luckiest man on the island. You have the most beautiful wife."

"I know," Max said. He hated it when Vernon called him Sir.

"Sir," Vernon continued, "you should have stayed at the casino last night. With your beautiful wife. A great time was had by all."

"Sure," Max said, folding his paper. "But we'll look after our own lives, thanks."

"Do you have anything exciting fixed for today, Sir?"

"Well, of course," Max said. "We're off to the viewpoint, the top of the island."

"Not to be missed," Vernon said, smiling widely through his tan. He started up his scooter. "I'm sure you'll both have fun."

That evening, Max sat on the bed at the Corienne, exhausted. The guide book for the island said that there were native lads with donkeys to get you up to the viewpoint from the carpark, which there had been, but they only took you half the way. You had to walk -- climb -- the rest. Max sighed, remembering the way Nina had scampered ahead. How the native lads had ogled her thighs.

Nina wandered out from her shower, her brown body gleaming. She was smiling, singing to herself, some popular tune with words and a rhythm and that he was too old to understand. Soon, it would be time to go out to the casino again.

Max was already two thirds dressed, in his dark suit and trousers, his tie still loose. Getting ready for anything, he needed a good half hour's head start on Nina. He stared down at his shoes, wondering whether now was the propitious moment to bend down and lace them.

Nina opened the windows on the balcony to the cooling air. Max could feel the draft dragging at his skin, getting down into his bones. The sky outside was lavender pink, lavender blue, delicately serrated with clouds. Remembering, Max took out his handkerchief, the sample. He was surprised to see that that too had changed color with the darkening evening. No longer blue. He could feel the play of bruised light on his eyes and face. Perhaps there was something in what the little man had said after all -- he made a mental note to get it analyzed when

he got back to the mainland.

"What's that?" Nina leaned over close to him, pushing back wet strands of her hair, droplets forming at the tips of her breasts, enclosing him in her soapy scent.

"Just the thing I told you about earlier, sweet," Max said, resisting the temptation to tuck it back away in the grit of his pocket like some guilty secret. "The guy that came this morning, he said it was a scrap of the sky."

"That's impossible."

"That's what I told him."

"But it's neat, isn't it? Don't you think it would go well in my hair with the silver gray dress I got down at Mario's?"

"Sure," Max said, although he hadn't the faintest idea what particular dress she meant. But it would look good. Everything looked good on Nina.

"Let me."

He didn't resist as she took it from his hands. She held it up to her shoulders, her face. "It smells like . . . like evening. Like alleyways and the seashore, flowers closing for the night, seagulls up in the air. Sunset, almost."

Max shrugged. "If you say so."

"Oh, I do. I'll definitely wear it this evening. It'll drive all the other girls wild."

And what about the other guys? Max thought, watching her as she did a little twilight dance. Everything with Nina had to be new and fresh --she threw stuff out when she'd hardly even had time to use it, when the scent of her skin had hardly settled on the cloth.

Max made an effort. He stooped down to lace his shoes. But he could still see Nina's perfect brown feet. He loved the curve of her arches, her easy grace, the twinkle of her toes. Was she really getting more beautiful as he got older, or was it just some kind of mist that was settling on his eyes? Twenty, thirty years ago, no woman had lasted more than a season. But now, he was down to one, and that one was -- just had to be -- Nina.

Oh, Nina. Sweet, bittersweet, bitter Nina. The silk chemise settled over her shoulders and breasts as she dressed. Max calculated the moment to stand up. Waiting for the aches to settle, he looked himself up and down in the mirror, the stiff black evening suit that enclosed all the looseness inside. Now that would never go out of fashion; the suit, something hard and dark that you could put on and tie around your neck like a shell. Pity that all the clinics still couldn't get the rest right.

Max watched Nina put on her stockings, effortlessly smoothing them up her smooth, effortless legs. What he wouldn't have given for one imperfection, something he could have in common with her. What he wouldn't give, at the end

of
the day, for her love. Her love. Yes, that was it, straightening his tie in
the
mirror as though anything would make a difference, would stop him looking as
old
as the moon. Her love. And, yes, he knew that inside that sultry casing she
was
grabbing, vain, stupid, uncaring. But he was like all the old men. For some
extraordinary reason, now that the years screamed back at him from the mirror,
he wanted love.

They drove to the cliff-top casino where there was already music and the
promise
of another unforgettable night. Nina wore the scrap of sky tied back in her
hair. Walking across the carpark with the salt breeze lifting from the faintly
glowing waves far below, Max saw that it was now deep purple, playing off the
soft gleam of her lips, the rosy cast of the skin. The first thing you came to
through the high porticos inside was a wall of mirrors. Max tried to look away
from himself as Nina turned.

"Darling." She surprised him with her arms and a warm kiss.

Max hugged her back, feeling a lifting and tightening inside his whole body
that
was more than anything the surgeons had ever managed.

"This thing you gave me." Nina's hand reached to the back of her head. "It's
quite marvelous."

Max nodded. She was right. The cloth had the texture of velvet, dark and
endlessly deep. The tips of his fingers disappeared as he touched it, were
swallowed by the prescience of night.

"Let's dance," she said.

In a happy daze, he followed. The music was the same music they played here
every night. The band was the same band. But tonight it was all new. Max was
only used to watching from the bar, the ridiculous effect it had on the trim
bodies, the graceless contortions. Now he was part of it. Nina twirled. Her
dress fanned out and her body drew him into the beat. The sky in her hair grew
darker as she twirled. It began to glitter with stars.

What, Max wondered, had ever been the problem with this music? The beat was
straight, hard, inevitable. As he danced, he turned in a breeze that carried
the

scent of Nina's shoulders, her breasts and her hair, the dark open spaces
between the stars. And when Vernon came up, his muscles sliding inside his
suit

as he called Max Sir and asked Nina for a dance, Max didn't have to say a
word,

Nina simply smiled and waved him away. That was the best moment of all.

Driving back, his hands and his thoughts easy on the wheel, just enough drink
to

make the tires slide smooth and easy along the white road through the dark
plantations, Nina's hands were smooth and easy too. Around his shoulders, on
his

lap. She pressed close to him and the scrap of sky brushed his face. She
whispered in his ear about all the things she would do to and with and for him
when they got back to the Corienne. A thousand promises. And every one of them

turned out to be true.

Late next morning, Max and Nina sat in their usual place at the bistro beneath the olive trees. And in the usual heat, although Max hardly noticed it. He felt both fresh and tired. Like he'd been for a swim and fallen asleep without drowning. Nina was humming beside him, her fingers playing absently with her blue scrap of sky, shredding it with sharp little tugs. Max watched her, breathing slowly. Her sweetness was still on his skin. I'm just an old fool in love, he thought, smiling.

The food came. The bread was fresh baked, still moist inside the crust. Max ordered more wine to go with the coffee, knowing he could drink what he liked and never get drunk, feeling this way. As the waiter uncorked the cool dark bottle, Max heard the putter of an approaching scooter. It was Vernon.

"Good night last night, eh, Sir?" Vernon said, dressed in his usual shorts, his thighs tensing and untensing still letting the engine rev.

"Not bad," Max conceded, trying not to swallow the dust the tires had kicked up, telling himself that Vernon and his kind were no longer a threat. Nina-with-the-sky-in-her-hair had given him the brush-off. "I've known worse and I've known better."

Vernon looked at Nina. "Say, you left a bit earlier than you used to."

Nina smiled and crossed her legs, leaned her chin on the palm of her hand. "Me and Max, we had things to do."

"That right, Sir?" Vernon's grin grew broader. So did Max's. He was thinking of Nina, the way she . . .

"Tell you what, Nina. The lads and I -- and a few friends -- we're having a party up in the pinewoods. All day, up where it's cool. That's if you don't mind, Sir."

"Maybe we'll drive there," Max said. "Later."

"Pity of it is, Sir, you'd never get a car up that way. Now Nina, she could just hop up on the back here. And off we go. Holding tight on the hairpins, Of course."

Max was looking at Nina. Nina was looking at Vernon. Vernon gave his scooter an extra rev.

"That would be great," Nina said. She jumped quickly up from her chair and straddled the back of Vernon's scooter. She slid her arms around his waist. "You don't mind, do you, Darling?" she shouted over the increasing sound of the engine.

"Sure, I don't," Max said.

Vernon and Nina pulled off. They disappeared amid the white houses and the

sleepy noon. Max stared at his coffee, the untouched bottle of wine. Lying there on the bright tin table were the remains of the little scrap of sky, shredded the way Nina always ended up doing with anything that got in her hands, from silk scarves to beer mats. A faint breeze was coming with the fishing smells up off the harbor. As it tugged at the fleece of blue threads, they tumbled one by one across the square, snagging in the dust like thistledown, in the patches of donkey dung on the splinters of the bare wooden shutters.

Max intercepted the maid and rummaged in the bin back at the Corienne to find the card from the little man in the grubby suit. He wandered the back streets of the port in search of the address. Even in this grim siesta heat, he knew what he was after. The thought kept him busy, kept him from worrying too much about Nina and Vernon.

When he found it, the sign said, SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING. NIGHT AND DAY WEAR A SPECIALTY. It was hanging askew from one hook over a peeling door.

Max went in. The doorbell rang, then fell from its mounting and rolled across the gritty linoleum toward the counter. The place smelled both sweet and leathery, vaguely like the breeze that came out from the doors of the sweet shops that Max had never been able to afford to go into when he was a kid.

"I remember you," Max said, pointing at the same crumpled man in the same crumpled suit standing there. When he was doing business, this was one of Max's greatest compliments.

"I recall visiting your hotel suite only yesterday," the man said.

"I'm here to do a deal," Max said, brushing some of the dust from the counter and leaning his elbows down. "That, er, sample of the sky you gave me yesterday. I've decided I want a whole lot more of it . . . not," Max added, fearing he was in danger of losing his usual financial cool, ". . . that I haven't got other suppliers. But I happen to like you, and I like the quality of the stuff I've seen so far. Believe me, this is the big break you've been looking for."

"Indeed." The man gave the smile of one who has been straight through and out the other side of many big breaks. "How much exactly do you wish me to supply?"

"I'd like enough to make up a dress. And you're a tailor, aren't you? Perhaps you could do the whole package, although I could always get my usual people in for me if you can't be bothered."

"I'm sure I can manage anything that you'd like," the man said.

They began to talk price, and when they had settled on that, the tailor asked Max about Nina's size, which for all his knowledge of Nina's figure, Max didn't know.

"Tell you what," Max said, giving up shaping an imaginary body with his hands. "You're a guy like me, aren't you. Not queer or anything?"

"Not, I think, in the way you mean, Sir."

"Then do you have a vision of a perfect woman?"

"Of course, Sir. Why, long ago on the ferry between the islands I saw --"

"-- I'm not interested in your memories. Just make it that size, and it'll fit Nina fine. A perfect woman. You understand?"

The man nodded. Of course he understood. He wasn't queer. And the dress would be ready for collection late that afternoon.

Nina came home with the evening and the salt-perfumed wind off the sea. Max was sitting out on the balcony of the Corienne, waiting. The dress was on the bed, in a large, thin, rectangular box. As soon as he'd got back with it, Max had opened it up to see inside, then left it that way. Right now, when Nina came in through the door, the colors of it were flowing across the room, making the ceiling glimmer just the way the water was down in the harbor.

"My goodness," Nina said.

"You like it?" Max asked. He was smiling, remembering all the promises Nina had made and kept last night. And he could tell now from the look in her eyes that there were more to come, many other things he hadn't even imagined.

"It's . . ." Nina lifted it up. There was dust and sweat in her hair and on her face, and Max saw that her T-shirt was now on with the label showing on the outside. But none of that mattered.

"Do you love me?"

Nina gave him a kiss that tasted gritty, a little like the side of the road. "Like mad."

"And what about Vernon, all those other guys?"

"What other guys?"

Nina held the sky dress up to her shoulders and twirled. Clouds and the sunset soared out across the room. She was transformed.

They ate alone that night, down by the harbor. Max bought every table in the restaurant to ensure that they wouldn't be disturbed. There was candlelight, music, fish fresh from the boats that had come in with their keel eyes on the flow of the tide that very evening. Nina glowed. Her dress was clouds and moonlight, silver gray sails shifting endlessly on a sea of twinkling black. After the plates were cleared and they and the rough red wine had reached a miraculous balance, they danced amid the empty chairs, the photographs along the walls of cats and dead ancestors. Max kissed Nina's shoulder and ran his hands along her spine, down to the edge of her dress and beyond where her skin gave way to the blue darkness of the fabric night. It felt cool to the touch, like dipping into a clear pool. His fingers strayed amid the stars, feeling Nina breathing beneath. As the music slowed and the candles guttered, Max saw the

white trail of a comet adrift along the curve of Nina's spine. He caught it like a little fish between finger and thumb and cupped it in his palm for Nina to see. She laughed in wonder and the feathery light snagged in the fall of her hair as she leaned close. And there it stayed, still curled and faintly glowing as they walked back arm in arm to the Corienne, as the night took them to their room, as they made and re-made love, as Max finally breathed every sweet salted promise and Nina lay dreaming on the firefly pillow beside him.

In the morning the comet had died. There was only a note. Off with Vernon and a few others of the gang. Hope you don't mind Sweet. See you this evening. Luv Nina. The dress was curled by the side of the bed where he and Nina had tossed it the night before. Even with the windows open, the blue of it looked cheap and artificial, like the chlorine-scented color you got at the bottom of a swimming pool. Max stomped out onto the balcony, nude and old and not caring who saw him. And up there was the bloody sky, right above the bloody sea, just the same color. Tile blue plastic blue cheap fairground blue. The only difference was, there was a black patch at the corner of the horizon. But with all the stuff that had gone into Nina's dress, Max guessed that was only to be expected.

He went straight down to the car without bothering about breakfast. He guessed that Nina and Vernon would have gone up to the hills. Past the shining waterfalls, barefoot into the green dark. He killed the engine where the track gave way to bluish hallways of forest. He got out and sniffed the air. With the birdsong the sigh of falling water, there was laughter. Up over the ridge.

Nina's note had been wrong. There were no friends. It was just her and Vernon. Now, that almost came as a relief -- Max's wilder imaginings had involved most of the residents of the island, including the fisherman, the black old ladies, the croupiers and the saxophonist in the casino band. But it was just Vernon and Nina and a waterfall sliding down amid the dripping green. Cool and bright down the wet rocks, down the smooth buttresses of marble, down her offered breasts, down his thighs. Max watched for as long as he could bear. But he soon got the picture. Sex was like dancing to modem music. It looked stupid and ugly unless you were directly involved.

When Max finally drove back to the Corienne, it was definitely a grayer kind of twilight than anything he was used to at this season and latitude. One or two of the dog-walkers and white-flanneled strollers along the breezy promenade had paused to point out to sea, toward the dark tear at the near horizon. There was even a queue for the coin-in-the-slot telescopes beside the awnings of the beach bars. But the sun was still shining and the air was still warm, and the thing out there on the horizon really didn't look much different from a storm cloud. As Max turned up the road past the smart shops away from the promenade, he took a final glance in the rear view mirror. He smiled. A few real storm clouds were

now actually gathering to join with the rent in the sky. Max pondered whether it was worth putting some music on the stereo for the few minutes of the drive he had left. Decided, no. He felt pleased with himself. He wasn't -- and had never been -- a greedy man. All he wanted was Nina. A little of her love.

Back at the Corienne, Nina, of course, was still out in the hills with Vernon. Max threw his package down on the bed. The little label said SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING.

Checking on the balcony, he saw that the sky was now turquoise sapphire gray. He looked down when he heard the putter of an approaching scooter on the road below. It was Vernon, with Nina holding on tight, her head thrown back and laughing.

Vernon saw him first. "Hey, there's Max! Hello, Sir!" He gave a jolly wave, balancing the scooter against the curb as Nina climbed off.

Max raised his hands: Nina gave Vernon a carefully fraternal kiss on the cheek. Max shrugged as if he didn't care. Then -- moving quickly for his age as Nina headed toward the Corienne's entrance -- he ducked back into the room. He opened the box containing the suit. By the light of the evening he pulled it on. Then he waited for Nina's footsteps, the sound of her key in the lock.

Nina was awed, inspired. She stepped right into his arms. Max was the sky, closing over her with turquoise sapphire gray wings. The room filled with the scent of their passion and all the colors of the evening. And the secret smells of alleyways, too. And flowers closing. And seagulls. And the bells of ships clanging as they came in on a late tide toward the harbor.

Later, they drove down to the casino, dressed in their new outfits. Clothed in the night. A storm was coming in off the sea. The trees were dancing flapping their branches like mad flightless birds. Lightning flared along Max's shoulder as he reached to touch Nina's cheek. He felt the wind in his face, the wind from her hair. When they parked the car, people were already gathering round to admire, to touch and draw away with little shrieks and laughter at the chill electric feel of the gathering storm that came off them.

There was no need that night for Max and Nina to dance. They just swayed in the ballroom. The drapes billowed. The chandeliers chattered their teeth. Max was filled with a joy and terrible power. Who cared about looks, age? What the hell could Vernon do to answer this?

The storm was at its height. He was surrounded by the grainy phosphorescence, flapping curtains, black streamers of wind. With the stars wheeling in his eyes and thunder rolling from his shoulders, he looked for Nina amid the bars and tables, and the other cringing guests.

There was no sign.

He found her eventually. After the storm had died and the others had gone home, leaving him with angry backward glances, muttering about jokes being taken too far. He found her when the first flush of morning was spreading across his back and chest.

He picked his way through scattered glasses and uptilted chairs. Out onto the balcony. He saw Nina, standing with Vernon, kissing. The sunrise was on her skin. So were Vernon's hands. Her dress was a shimmering pool around her feet.

Vernon saw him, and smiled over Nina's perfect shoulder.

"That was some evening," he said, "Sir."

Back beneath the leaning sign marked SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING. NIGHT AND DAY WEAR A SPECIALTY. Through the doorway with the bell that tinkled and fell off, then rolled across the floor.

"How much of the sky do you have?" Max asked. "You must keep a stock --otherwise why bother to advertise? And don't call me Sir."

"I'm sorry. It's merely a politeness that most customers prefer."

"Stop stalling, and give it to me."

"What?"

"Everything. Everything you've got."

Max was in no mood to argue. But the little man nodded anyway, and as he went off behind the bead curtain, Max realized that he still hadn't asked for payment, hadn't even mentioned a price. Max decided that he must have signed up to some system of credit without realizing, even though that would have been totally unlike him. And he realized when he had spoken that his voice was high and uneasy, that his hands and eyes couldn't settle. He was breaking the first role of business, which was also the first role of life: Never Give Yourself Away.

But, even after leaving the shop, there was still so much to do. First, Max went to the bank. The manager seemed surprised at the amount he wished to withdraw, but not wildly so; he'd grown used to the whims of the rich and elderly on this island. Then Max drove down to the harbor, where those who made a conspicuous show of their wealth kept their yachts moored. He walked past the gangplanks, the lounging bodies and the flaccid flags and the bright brass fittings and the hissing champagne, until he found the largest ship, the whitest ship, a great solid ghost of a ship, the one with the widest spars, the tallest masts, that creaked and glowed on the polished water. The owner was an old man like himself, surrounded by riches that had worn so thin that he could barely see or smell or touch them. Max made an absurdly high offer for the yacht, then several higher still. Eventually, they settled.

Max climbed back into the car and drove up from the harbor to the old boatyard

that lay in the wooded bay across the hill beyond town, where the scents of freshly cut wood and tar carried on the air. The hammerings and the planings ceased as his fat tires scrunched the shingle. The weathered men gathered around

him, grinning, rubbing sweat from their eyes. They shook their heads at his request, and at the money he offered. They told him it was simply too difficult,

and that there wasn't enough time. Then he offered more money. So much that the

men began to look afraid, to make the sign of superstition against the evil eye.

So much that they had to agree, and promise on the souls of their mothers that the yacht would be ready to sail by midnight.

Max arranged for all the cloth he'd ordered from South over East to be delivered

to the yard. And he told the men that he wanted her re-christened. A simple paint job. He wanted Nina-With-The-Sky-In-Her-Hair.

Max sat in the bistro at a tin table in the square that afternoon, drinking coffee. He felt more relaxed, now that almost everything was in hand.

Pleasantly

weary from all that he'd done. Relaxing was usually a problem he had with holidays. He always felt more at ease when he was busy.

Max guessed that Nina would have got back to the Corienne eventually, expecting

to find him curled up on the sheets there, having one of the naps that always left him feeling sour and slack and disgusted. But Vernon would be full of himself, keyed up after the soft excitements of Nina. He'd want to talk to his friends.

Max heard the chatter of a scooter coming down the bends through the slow afternoon. He closed his eyes. It was Vernon's scooter. He could tell that, even

listening with his dodgy right ear.

Vernon turned into the square, and saw Max almost instantly. He pulled at the brakes. He swung the scooter round in a billow of dust. He dismounted.

"Nice day, Sir."

Max pointed to the empty chair he'd placed at the other side of the table.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do, Sir. Good of you to ask."

Max watched the way the young man moved. The ease. The grace. The absence of worry or thought. It made him all the more certain that he had to take Nina away.

"I have a proposal to put to you."

"Well." Vernon straddled the chair. Stretching out his arms, he yawned like a cat. For a moment, Max could smell Nina. "Let's hear it, Sir."

"You're screwing Nina."

"I'm sorry to hear you using a word like that, Sir." Vernon looked truly wounded. "Nina and I love each other."

Max scowled at him. "What do you know about love?"

Vernon watched and said nothing as the waiter emerged from the bistro's interior and wiped the table before placing a chilled carafe of white wine and two glasses between them. When the waiter stooped to pour it out, Vernon waved him away. He tipped the dewy carafe into both glasses himself, and raised one to his face, half-closing his eyes as he breathed in the vineyard bouquet of some golden summer in the past. A summer, Max thought, when Vernon probably still had scabs on his knees.

"What I know about love, Sir," Vernon said eventually, placing the glass back on the table with a slight bang, then raising a finger and tapping his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his heart, his belly, his groin. "Is what I feel here, and here, and here, and here, and here, and here, and here."

Max gazed at him for a moment. "You didn't point to your brain," he said. "Assuming, that is, that you've got one."

"That was uncalled for, Sir." Vernon sipped at his wine. Then he looked up, over Max's head and the branches of the fig trees and the roof, toward the sky. "Will you look at that cloud? Exactly what kind of thing would you say that is?"

Max turned and looked. Almost one quarter of the sky was dark, as though everything in it had been extinguished. It was neither night nor day --nor even truly black -- but the kind of gray darkness that Max imagined lay waiting to take him a few years hence.

"It's probably some pollution that's come over from the mainland," Vernon said. "Caused by people like you. People using their brains."

Max shrugged. This was no time to argue. He said, "How much would I have to pay you to keep you away from Nina?"

Vernon looked surprised, but -- like the bank manager-- not wildly so. By now, Max was used to the process of bargaining, and Vernon rapidly got into the swing of it, too. As they soared higher and higher, circling and bickering like two swallows in the blue upper reaches of wealth, Max couldn't help wondering if Vernon hadn't done this kind of thing before. But he felt that it was incumbent upon him to offer a fearfully high price. After all, Nina was Nina. And love was love.

The two men finally shook hands. Vernon climbed back onto his scooter. He smiled and waved. Shouted Good-bye Sir over the clatter of the engine. Max watched him until there was nothing but silence and afternoon dust in the square.

He felt a shadow at his back.

Looking up, imagining wings of darkness spreading over him, he saw that it was actually the waiter, with a bill for two coffees and a carafe of wine crumpled in his hands. Rummaging in his pockets, Max found that he had just enough change left to cover it.

Back at the Corienne, Nina was asleep. Her hair still damp from the shower, soft as the rain. He sat watching her as the light deepened. Finally, she turned on the pillow, and opened her eyes.

He asked, "You had a good time with Vernon?"

She sat up and nodded and pushed the sheets away. Everything about her still slow and sleepy, an invitation to dream.

"But I've settled things with him now, Darling. He won't bother you again. And tonight, we're leaving the island. Alone, together. I've got a boat."

"A boat?"

"It's not just a boat."

"Where is it?"

"It'll be ready at midnight."

"At the harbor?"

"Yes."

"And Vernon?"

"He's a rich man."

She walked across the room. Stepped into her knickers. Reached into the wardrobe for a blue dress he'd never seen before.

"Nina, where are you going?"

"I've got until midnight, haven't I?" She pulled the straps down over her brown shoulders, smoothed the cloth over her hips. "So you'll let me have until then. Just one evening . . ."

She opened the balcony doors. The darkness was settling more quickly than ever, and the sea was whispering and the streetlights along the promenade were starting to shine and the stars were pricking through to join them. She threw back her head and breathed in a way that made him think of Vernon, lifting that glass of white wine. Then she turned back to him.

"It's not much to ask, is it?"

Max spent the evening wandering the streets above the port. He didn't feel

hungry, but then he didn't have enough money for a meal anyway. He found himself pleasantly lost in the back streets, in the dog-barking, litter-strewn alleys where the real people of the island lived their lives. Breathing in the cooking grease, the stale refuse, the bruised purple odor of bougainvillea that spilled over from a tiny walled garden, he thought of the future and of Nina. Nina and the future. The future. Nina.

Further along in the darkness, he found a row of shops, their windows clouded with grime. He peered in, whistling faintly, hearing the sound of some half-remembered tune disappearing up the chill and empty street. There were pale hooked sides of pork hanging like cadavers. Beside that, a shop sold artificial limbs. Arms and legs lay scattered in display like some terrible accident. The half-tune on Max's lips vanished entirely. The wind was against him now, moaning faintly, tumbling empty cans along the gutters, clattering toward him like a huge, unseen train.

The full moon hung over the sagging rooftops. He saw that there was a place of darkness close by it where there were no stars-- no emptiness, even -- or any sense of space. He walked on, hands deep in his empty pockets, trying to think of his beautiful yacht, of the men he'd set to work, of the smell of paint and glue, of the great shimmering bolts of sky-sail lying on the white shingle between the seaweed and the rocks. And by tomorrow, he and Nina, they'd be swooping over seafoam toward an empty blue horizon. But the image wouldn't come.

Not properly. All he saw was the dark shadowed space on the water left by sails, and the cold chasm beneath the hull, and the shade that was without color at the heart of Nina's eyes.

Max checked his watch. Past eleven. He'd been dreaming and time had slipped by the way it always seemed to do. But even as his feet clopped on the damp steps leading down to the harbor and his hands trembled on the loose iron railing, he knew that he'd left it too late.

The yacht was everything that he'd ever imagined. A white dream. The starry night sky billowed and tautened from her spars, filling with a dark breeze as she turned out from the harbor.

Standing breathless in the moonlight at the lapping edge of the quay, Max could easily identify the two figures standing at the helm. Nina with Vernon beside her. They could only have cast off a few minutes earlier. In fact, Max guessed that they'd put off leaving the island until they could be sure that he'd see them. Nina-With-The-Sky-In-Her-Hair tacked against the wind and keeled a graceful twenty degrees, spinning a wake of phosphorescence. Nina and Vernon had seen him now, and were waving. Faintly, he could hear their voices, carrying over the restless water. Love. I'm sorry. Always Remember. Sir . . .

The Nina was out beyond the old lighthouse, and Max ran up the breakwater steps to watch as she turned into the wide sweep of the bay. Away from the lights of

the town, the moon gleamed on the tips of the black-hooded waves. Max sat that it now lay at the very edge of the starless black rent in the sky. He saw, too, that even as her bright halo was swallowed in shadow, the brilliance of Nina's sails increased.

She was going fast now, cleaving the sea, entangled on the wind. And the brilliance of her sails increased as the moon and everything else began to darken. Max could still see Nina, her arm around Vernon, the two of them outlined against the grayly blazing sails. She was waving a final good-bye. It should have been a scene of beauty, yet, wrenched from the sky, the moonlight trapped in Nina's sails made Max think only of arid canyons, of seas of dust without air or water, of bones. Of a dead world.

As the moon was bitten out of the sky, stone by stone into greater darkness, the Nina glowed madly. She became a ghost ship, casting ghostly light from her sails. And she began to lean, slowed and tipped by the weight of those howling canyons, reaching an impossible angle as more and more of the moon dropped into her sails. A spar crashed to the water, was dragged roiling in her drunken wake. Another broke and stuck out and up like the wing of a wounded bird. Over the slap of breakwater waves, Max believed he could hear panicked screams. And splitting fabric, snapping ropes, splintering wood. Suddenly, the Nina keeled over entirely.

Briefly, her sails boiled in the water, spreading a wake of milky light. In another moment, she was gone.

The morning tide bore what was left of the Nma-With-The-Sky-In-Her-Hair into the bay below the casino. Max was standing on the shore, watching as his dreams came in as driftwood. The skysails lifted and fell in the rocky shallows. He waded in, and grabbed dripping handfuls of the stuff. The fabric tore like wet newspaper. The colors dissolved. Faded and darkened in the bright air. Still, he lifted a clump of it to his face, and for a moment he thought he could still detect the damp secret smells of alleyways beneath the reek of the ocean. And flowers opening to the sun. And seagull's cries. And fresh coffee on a hot tin table. And wine. And laughter. And the clanging bells of ships as they came in toward the harbor. Then he looked up, and realized that what he felt was all around him: that it was nothing more than the stirrings of the island.

He found Nina along the shore, wrapped in a shroud of sail. He chased the seagulls away, and untangled her, then turned back her head so that he might look one last time. The currents had dragged her naked, swollen her belly and twisted her limbs. Her eyes were open, glazed silver like those of a fish. Her hair was the most beautiful thing about her now. Gleaming dark and wet like something still alive.

Max wrapped Nina back up in the sail so that no one else might see her this way, then lifted her -- astonished by her lightness, and by his own strength -- and carried her up the cliff steps, along the empty road past the casino. On into town.

The sign said, SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING. NIGHT AND DAY WEAR A

SPECIALTY. It hung askew. Max kicked the door open and backed in with Nina. He saw that the bell had been fixed. It rang brightly, and at the sound of it, the little man came out through the bead curtain.

Max laid Nina out on the counter, and water spilled across the ancient linoleum. The sky that had enfolded her was cheap rotten canvas now. He watched as the scissors sliced it away.

"You're taking your payment, right?"

The little man sighed and smiled. He lifted a damp gleaming tress of Nina's hair, and began to cut.

With what money he had left in the bank, Max saw that Nina had a decent funeral. He would have arranged Vernon's too -- even put them in the same earth under the same headstone -- but despite searches that were organized along the coast of the island, his body was never found. A few of their friends turned up at the service, but they were nervous and embarrassed, torn between giggling and tears. Standing in the graveyard, breathing in the clean smell of the new earth, Max decided that only he and the little man in the grubby suit who stood on the far side of the grave really knew what life was about. He pondered the irony: that you had to live through to the end of things before you discovered what was important, and that by then it was too late.

When the service finally ended, Max debated following the little man, tracing him back toward the shop whose location had now slipped his mind. But the trees were bowing and the weather was cooling as he walked down between the houses, and the leaves were swirling and the shutters were banging outside the bistro in his favorite square. And he was tired.

Max sat down and ordered a cup of coffee at the table that had always been Nina's favorite, watching the waiter as he carried the rest of the furniture inside. He settled with the last of his money. The waiter scowled at him for the absence of a tip. Then Max went back to the Corienne to face the music of his unpaid and unpayable bill.

The maitre d' was surprisingly decent about it all. He offered Max a job in the kitchens, which Max took. And the work was hard and predictable, and after two seasons he got to be a waiter, although the few people he had once known who still came here didn't seem to recognize him. They just complained about the service, and laughed and shook their heads in sad wonderment at the island's decline, that the Corienne of all places should stoop to employing someone as inefficient -- as antique -- as this gray old man. But Max kept busy, which meant that he stayed reasonably happy.

Every few months, he would discover that he had succeeded in saving enough money to go out for the evening, and would re-visit some of the cheaper haunts, places that he and Nina had once loved, although -- even if he could have afforded it

-- he would never have considered going to the casino.

He'd get pleasantly drunk in some cafe, and listen to the music and watch the pretty women. Then he'd walk slowly back to the Corienne, humming to himself, looking up above the rooftops at the perfect sweep of the stars and at the bright, bright moon. On nights like that, it sometimes seemed to him that the moon had a face like Nina's, and that she was smiling down at him, wreathed against the darkness in billows of gently swaying hair.