

Stars Seen Through Stone

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I was smoking a joint on the steps of the public library when a cold wind blew in from no cardinal point, but from the top of the night sky, a force of pure perpendicularity that bent the sparsely leaved boughs of the old alder shadowing the steps straight down toward the Earth, as if a gigantic someone directly above were pursing his lips and aiming a long breath directly at the ground. For the duration of that gust, fifteen or twenty seconds, my hair did not flutter but was pressed flat to the crown of my head and the leaves and grass and weeds on the lawn also lay flat. The phenomenon had a distinct border—leaves drifted along the sidewalk, testifying that a less forceful, more fitful wind presided beyond the perimeter of the lawn. No one else appeared to notice. The library, a blunt nineteenth century relic of undressed stone, was not a popular point of assembly at any time of day, and the sole potential witness apart from myself was an elderly gentleman who was hurrying toward McGuigan's Tavern at a pace that implied a severe alcohol dependency. This happened seven months prior to the events central to this story, but I offer it to suggest that a good deal of strangeness goes unmarked by the world (at least by the populace of Black William, Pennsylvania), and, when taken in sum, such occurrences may be evidence that strangeness is visited upon us with some regularity and we only notice its extremes.

Ten years ago, following my wife's graduation from Yale Law, we set forth in our decrepit Volvo, heading for northern California, where we hoped to establish a community of sorts with friends who had moved to that region the previous year. We chose to drive on blue highways for their scenic value and decided on a route that ran through Pennsylvania's Bittersmith Hills, knuckled chunks of coal and granite, forested with leafless oaks and butternut, ash and elder, that—under heavy snow and threatening skies—composed an ominous prelude to the smoking redbrick town nestled in their heart. As we approached Black William, the Volvo began to rattle, the engine died, and we coasted to a stop on a curve overlooking a forbidding vista: row houses the color of dried blood huddled together along the wend of a sluggish, dark river (the Polozny), visible through a pall of gray smoke that settled from the chimneys of a sprawling prisonlike edifice—also of brick—on the opposite shore. The Volvo proved to be a total loss. Since our funds were limited, we had no recourse other than to find temporary housing and take jobs so as to pay for a new car in which to continue our trip. Andrea, whose specialty was labor law, caught on with a firm involved in fighting for the rights of embattled steelworkers. I hired on at the mill, where I encountered three part-time musicians lacking a singer. This led to that, that to this, Andrea and I grew apart in our obsessions, had affairs, divorced, and, before we realized it, the better part of a decade had rolled past. Though initially I felt trapped in an ugly, dying town, over the years I had developed an honest affection for Black William and its citizens, among whom I came to number myself.

After a brief and perhaps illusory flirtation with fame and fortune, my band broke up, but I managed to build a home recording studio during its existence and this became the foundation of a career. I landed a small business grant and began to record local bands on my own label, Soul Kiss Records. Most of the CDs I released did poorly, but in my third year of operation, one of my projects, a metal group calling themselves Meanderthal, achieved a regional celebrity and I sold management rights and the masters for their first two albums to a major label. This success gave me a degree of visibility and my post office box was flooded with demos from bands all over the country. Over the next six years I released a string of minor successes and acquired an industry-wide reputation of having an eye for talent. It had been my immersion in the music business that triggered the events leading to my divorce and, while Andrea was happy for me, I think it galled her that I had exceeded her low expectations. After a cooling-off period, we had become contentious friends and whenever we met for drinks or lunch, she would offer deprecating comments about the social value of my enterprise, and about my girlfriend, Mia, who was nine years younger than I, heavily tattooed, and—in Andrea's words—dressed “like a color-blind dominatrix.”

"You've got some work to do, Vernon," she said once. "You know, on the taste thing? It's like you traded me in for a Pinto with flames painted on the hood."

I stopped myself from replying that it wasn't I who had done the trading in. I understood her comments arose from the fact that she had regrets and that she was angry at herself: Andrea was an altruist and the notion that her renewed interest in me might be partially inspired by envy or venality caused her to doubt her moral legitimacy. She was attractive, witty, slender, with auburn hair and patrician features and a forthright poise that caused men in bars, watching her pass, to describe her as "classy." Older and wiser, able by virtue of the self-confidence I had gained to cope with her sharp tongue, I had my own regrets; but I thought we had moved past the point at which a reconciliation was possible and refrained from giving them voice.

In late summer of the year when the wind blew straight down, I listened to a demo sent me by one Joseph Stanky of McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Stanky billed himself as Local Profitt, Jr. and his music, post-modern deconstructed blues sung in a gravelly, powerful baritone, struck me as having cult potential. I called his house that afternoon and was told by his mother that "Joey's sleeping." That night, around three a.m., Stanky returned my call. Being accustomed to the tactless ways of musicians, I set aside my annoyance and said I was interested in recording him. In the course of our conversation, Stanky told me he was twenty-six, virtually penniless, and lived in his mother's basement, maintaining throughout a churlish tone that dimmed my enthusiasm. Nevertheless, I offered to pay his bus fare to Black William and to put him up during the recording process. Two days later, when he stepped off a bus at the Trailways station, my enthusiasm dimmed further. A more unprepossessing human would be difficult to imagine. He was short, pudgy, with skin the color of a new potato and so slump-shouldered that for a moment I thought he might be deformed. Stringy brown hair provided an unsightly frame for a doughy face with a bulging forehead and a wispy soul patch. His white T-shirt was spattered with food stains, a Jackson Pollack work-in-progress; the collar of his windbreaker was stiff with grime. Baggy chinos and a trucker wallet completed his ensemble. I knew this gnomish figure must be Stanky, but didn't approach until I saw him claim two guitar cases from the luggage compartment. When I introduced myself, instead of expressing gratitude or pleasure, he put on a pitiful expression and said in a wheedling manner, "Can you spot me some bucks for cigarettes, man? I ran out during the ride."

I advanced him another hundred, with which he purchased two cartons of Camel Lights and a twelve-pack of Coca-Cola Classic (these, I learned, were basic components of his nutrition and, along with Quaker Instant Grits, formed the bulk of his diet), and took a roundabout way home, thinking I'd give him a tour of the town where he would spend the next few weeks. Stanky displayed no interest whatsoever in the mill, the Revolutionary War-era Lutheran Church, or Garnant House (home of the town's founding father), but reacted more positively to the ziggurat at the rear of Garnant house, a corkscrew of black marble erected in eccentric tribute to the founding father's wife, Ethelyn Garnant, who had died in childbirth; and when we reached the small central park where stands the statue of her son, Stanky said, "Hey, that's decent, man!" and asked me to stop the car.

The statue of William Garnant had been labeled an eyesore by the Heritage Committee, a group of women devoted to preserving our trivial past, yet they were forced to include it in their purview because it was the town's most recognizable symbol—gift shops sold replica statuettes and the image was emblazoned on coffee mugs, post cards, paperweights, on every conceivable type of souvenir. Created in the early 1800s by Gunter Hahn, the statue presented Black William in age-darkened bronze astride a rearing stallion, wearing a loose-fitting shirt and tight trousers, gripping the reins with one hand, pointing toward the library with the other, his body twisted and head turned in the opposite direction, his mouth open in—judging by his corded neck—a cry of alarm, as if he were warning the populace against the dangers of literacy. Hahn did not take his cues from the rather sedentary monuments of his day, but (impossibly) appeared to have been influenced by the work of heroic comic book artists such as Jim

Steranko and Neal Adams, and thus the statue had a more fluid dynamic than was customary ... or perhaps he was influenced by Black William himself, for it was he who had commissioned the sculpture and overseen its construction. This might explain the figure's most controversial feature, that which had inspired generations of high school students to highlight it when they painted the statue after significant football victories: Thanks to an elevated position in the saddle, Black William's crotch was visible, and—whether intended or an inadvertency, an error in the casting process that produced an unwanted rumple in the bronze—it seems that he possessed quite a substantial package. It always gladdened my heart to see the ladies of the Heritage Committee, embarked upon their annual spring clean-up, scrubbing away with soap and rags at Black William's genital pride.

I filled Stanky in on Black William's biography, telling him that he had fought with great valor in the Revolutionary War, but had not been accorded the status of hero, this due to his penchant for executing prisoners summarily, even those who had surrendered under a white flag. Following the war, he returned home in time to watch his father, Alan Garnant, die slowly and in agony. It was widely held that William had poisoned the old man. Alan resented the son for his part in Ethelyn's death and had left him to be raised by his slaves, in particular by an immense African man to whom he had given the name Nero. Little is known of Nero; if more were known, we might have a fuller understanding of young William, who—from the war's end until his death in 1808—established a reputation for savagery, his specialties being murder and rape (both heterosexual and homosexual). By all accounts, he ruled the town and its environs with the brutal excess of a feudal duke. He had a coterie of friends who served as his loyal protectors, a group of men whose natures he had perverted, several of whom failed to survive his friendship. Accompanied by Nero, they rode roughshod through the countryside, terrorizing and defiling, killing anyone who sought to impede their progress. Other than that, his legacy consisted of the statue, the ziggurat, and a stubby tower of granite block on the bluff overlooking the town, long since crumbled into ruin.

Stanky's interest dwindled as I related these facts, his responses limited to the occasional “Cool,” a word he pronounced as if it had two syllables; but before we went on our way he asked, “If the guy was such a bastard, how come they named the town after him?”

“It was a P.R. move,” I explained. “The town was incorporated as Garnantsburgh. They changed it after World War Two. The city council wanted to attract business to the area and they hoped the name Black William would be more memorable. Church groups and the old lady vote, pretty much all the good Christians, they disapproved of the change, but the millworkers got behind it. The association with a bad guy appealed to their self-image.”

“Looks like the business thing didn't work out. This place is deader than McKeesport.” Stanky raised up in the seat to scratch his ass. “Let's go, okay? I couldn't sleep on the bus. I need to catch up on my Zs.”

* * * *

My house was one of the row houses facing the mill, the same Andrea and I had rented when we first arrived. I had since bought the place. The ground floor I used for office space, the second floor for the studio, and I lived on the third. I had fixed up the basement, formerly Andrea's office, into a musician-friendly apartment—refrigerator, stove, TV, etc.—and that is where I installed Stanky. The bus ride must have taken a severe toll. He slept for twenty hours.

After three weeks I recognized that Stanky was uncommonly gifted and it was going to take longer to record him than I had presumed—he kept revealing new facets of his talent and I wanted to make sure I understood its full dimension before getting too deep into the process. I also concluded that although musicians do not, in general, adhere to an exacting moral standard, he was, talent aside, the most worthless human being I had ever met. Like many of his profession, he was lazy, irresponsible,

untrustworthy, arrogant, slovenly, and his intellectual life consisted of comic books and TV. To this traditional menu of character flaws, I would add “deviant.” The first inkling I had of his deviancy was when Sabela, the Dominican woman who cleaned for me twice a week, complained about the state of the basement apartment. Since Sabela never complained, I had a look downstairs. In less than a week, he had trashed the place. The garbage was overflowing and the sink piled high with scummy dishes and pots half-full of congealed grits; the floors covered in places by a slurry of cigarette ash and grease, littered with candy wrappers and crumpled Coke cans. A smell compounded of spoilage, bad hygiene, and sex seemed to rise from every surface. The plastic tip of a vibrator peeked out from beneath his grungy sheets. I assured Sabela I'd manage the situation, whereupon she burst into tears. I asked what else was troubling her and she said, “Mister Vernon, I no want him.”

My Spanish was poor, Sabela's English almost nonexistent, but after a few minutes I divined that Stanky had been hitting on her, going so far as to grab at her breasts. This surprised me—Sabela was in her forties and on the portly side. I told her to finish with the upstairs and then she could go home. Stanky returned from a run to the 7-11 and scuttled down to the basement, roachlike in his avoidance of scrutiny. I found him watching *Star Trek* in the dark, remote in one hand, *TV Guide* (he called it “The Guide”) resting on his lap, gnawing on a Butterfinger. Seeing him so at home in his filthy nest turned up the flame under my anger.

"Sabela refuses to clean down here," I said. "I don't blame her."

"I don't care if she cleans," he said with a truculent air.

"Well, I do. You've turned this place into a shithole. I had a metal band down here for a month, it never got this bad. I want you to keep it presentable. No stacks of dirty dishes. No crud on the floor. And put your damn sex toys in a drawer. Understand?"

He glowered at me.

"And don't mess with Sabela," I went on. "When she wants to clean down here, you clear out. Go up to the studio. I hear about you groping her again, you can hump your way back to McKeesport. I need her one hell of a lot more than I need you."

He muttered something about “another producer.”

"You want another producer? Go for it! No doubt major labels are beating down my door this very minute, lusting after your sorry ass."

Stanky fiddled with the remote and lowered his eyes, offering me a look at his infant bald spot. Authority having been established, I thought I'd tell him what I had in mind for the next weeks, knowing that his objections—given the temper of the moment—would be minimal; yet there was something so repellent about him, I still wanted to give him the boot. I had the idea that one of Hell's lesser creatures, a grotesque, impotent toad, banished by the Powers of Darkness, had landed with a foul stink on my sofa. But I've always been a sucker for talent and I felt sorry for him. His past was plain. Branded as a nerd early on and bullied throughout high school, he had retreated into a life of flipping burgers and getting off on a four-track in his mother's basement. Now he had gravitated to another basement, albeit one with a more hopeful prospect and a better recording system.

"Why did you get into music?" I asked, sitting beside him. "Women, right? It's always women. Hell, I was married to a good-looking woman, smart, sexy, and that was my reason."

He allowed that this had been his reason as well.

"So how's that working out? They're not exactly crawling all over you, huh?"

He cut his eyes toward me and it was as if his furnace door had slid open a crack, a blast of heat and resentment shooting out. "Not great," he said.

"Here's what I'm going to do." I tapped out a cigarette from his pack, rolled it between my fingers. "Next week, I'm bringing in a drummer and a bass player to work with you. I own a part-interest in the Crucible, the alternative club in town. As soon as you get it together, we'll put you in there for a set and showcase you for some people."

Stanky started to speak, but I beat him to the punch. "You follow my lead, you do what I know you can..." I said, leaving a significant pause. "I guarantee you won't be going home alone."

He waited to hear more, he wanted to bask in my vision of his future, but I knew I had to use rat psychology; now that I had supplied a hit of his favorite drug, I needed to buzz him with a jolt of electricity.

"First off," I said, "we're going to have to get you into shape. Work off some of those man-tits."

"I'm not much for exercise."

"That doesn't come as a shock," I said. "Don't worry. I'm not going to make a new man out of you, I just want to make you a better act. Eat what I eat for a month or so, do a little cardio. You'll drop ten or fifteen pounds." Falsely convivial, I clapped him on the shoulder and felt a twinge of disgust, as if I had touched a hypo-allergenic cat. "The other thing," I said. "That Local Proffit Junior name won't fly. It sounds too much like a country band."

"I like it," he said defiantly.

"If you want the name back later, that's up to you. For now, I'm billing you as Joe Stanky."

I laid the unlit cigarette on the coffee table and asked what he was watching, thinking that, for the sake of harmony, I'd bond with him a while.

"*Trek* marathon," he said.

We sat silently, staring at the flickering black-and-white picture. My mind sang a song of commitments, duties, other places I could be. Stanky laughed, a cross between a wheeze and a hiccup.

"What's up?" I asked.

"John Colicos sucks, man!"

He pointed to the screen, where a swarthy man with Groucho Marx eyebrows, pointy sideburns, and a holstered ray gun seemed to be undergoing an agonizing inner crisis. "Michael Ansara's the only real Vulcan." Stanky looked at me as if seeking validation. "At least," he said, anxious lest he offend, "on the original *Trek*."

Absently, I agreed with him. My mind rejoined its song. "Okay," I said, and stood. "I got things to do. We straight about Sabela? About keeping the place ... you know? Keeping the damage down to normal levels?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Catch you later."

I started for the door, but he called to me, employing that wheedling tone with which I had become all too familiar. "Hey, Vernon?" he said. "Can you get me a trumpet?" This asked with an imploring expression, screwing up his face like a child, as if he were begging me to grant a wish.

"You play the trumpet?"

"Uh-huh."

"If you promise to take care of it. Yeah, I can get hold of one."

Stanky rocked forward on the couch and gave a tight little fist-pump. "Decent!"

* * * *

I don't know when Stanky and I got married, but it must have been sometime between the incident with Sabela and the night Mia went home to her mother. Certainly my reaction to the latter was more restrained than was my reaction to the former, and I attribute this in part to our union having been joined. It was a typical rock-and-roll marriage: talent and money making beautiful music together and doomed from the start, on occasion producing episodes in which the relationship seemed to be crystallized, allowing you to see (if you wanted to) the messy bed you had made for yourself.

Late one evening, or maybe it wasn't so late—it was starting to get dark early—Mia came downstairs and stepped into my office and set a smallish suitcase on my desk. She had on a jacket with a fake fur collar and hood, tight jeans, and her nice boots. She'd put a fresh raspberry streak in her black hair and her makeup did a sort of Nefertiti-meets-Liza thing. All I said was, "What did I do this time?"

Mia's lips pursed in a moue—it was her favorite expression and she used it at every opportunity, whether appropriate or not. She became infuriated whenever I caught her practicing it in the bathroom mirror.

"It's not what you did," she said. "It's that clammy little troll in the basement."

"Stanky?"

"Do you have another troll? Stanky! God, that's the perfect name for him." Another moue. "I'm sick of him rubbing up against me."

Mia had, as she was fond of saying, "been through some stuff," and, if Stanky had done anything truly objectionable, she would have dealt with him. I figured she needed a break or else there was someone in town with whom she wanted to sleep.

"I take it this wasn't consensual rubbing," I said.

"You think you're so funny! He comes up behind me in tight places. Like in the kitchen. And he pretends he has to squeeze past."

"He's in our kitchen?"

"You send him up to use the treadmill, don't you?"

"Oh ... right."

"And he has to get water from the fridge, doesn't he?"

I leaned back in the chair and clasped my hands behind my head. "You want me to flog him? Cut off a hand?"

"Would that stop it? Give me a call when he's gone, okay?"

"You know I will. Say hi to Mom."

A final moue, a moue that conveyed a *souçon* of regret, but—more pertinently—made plain how much I would miss her spoonful of sugar in my coffee.

After she had gone, I sat thinking nonspecific thoughts, vague appreciations of her many virtues, then I handicapped the odds that her intricate makeup signaled an affair and decided just how pissed off to be at Stanky. I shouted downstairs for him to come join me and dragged him out for a walk into town.

A mile and a quarter along the Polozny, then up a steep hill, would bring you to the park, a triangular section of greenery (orange-and-brownery at that time of year) bordered on the east by the library, on the west by a row of brick buildings containing gentrified shops, and, facing the point of the triangle, by McGuigan's. For me alone, it was a brisk half-hour walk; with Stanky in tow, it took an extra twenty minutes. He was not one to hide his discomfort or displeasure. He panted, he sagged, he limped, he sighed. His breathing grew labored. The next step would be his last. Wasn't it enough I forced him to walk three blocks to the 7-11? If his heart failed, drop his bones in a bucket of molten steel and ship his guitars home to McKeesport, where his mother would display them, necks crossed, behind the urn on the mantle.

These comments went unvoiced, but they were eloquently stated by his body language. He acted out every nuance of emotion, like a child showing off a new skill. Send him on an errand he considered important and he would give you his best White Rabbit, head down, hustling along on a matter of urgency to the Queen. Chastise him and he would play the penitent altar boy. When ill, he went with a hand clutching his stomach or cheek or lower back, grimacing and listless. His posturing was so pitifully false, it was disturbing to look at him. I had learned to ignore these symptoms, but I recognized the pathology that bred them—I had seen him, thinking himself unwatched, slumped on the couch, clicking the remote, the *Guide* spread across his lap, mired in the quicksand of depression, yet more arrogant than depressed, a crummy king forsaken by his court, desperate for admirers.

On reaching the library, I sat on a middle step and fingered out a fatty from my jacket pocket. Stanky collapsed beside me, exhausted by the Polozny Death March he had somehow survived. He flapped a hand toward McGuigan's and said, hopefully, "You want to get a beer?"

"Maybe later."

I fired up the joint.

"Hey!" Stanky said. "We passed a cop car on the hill, man."

"I smoke here all the time. As long as you don't flaunt it, nobody cares."

I handed him the joint. He cupped the fire in his palm, smoking furtively. It occurred to me that I wouldn't drink from the same glass as him—his gums were rotting, his teeth horribly decayed—but sharing a joint? What the hell. The air was nippy and the moon was hidden behind the alder's thick leaves, which had turned but not yet fallen. Under an arc lamp, the statue of Black William gleamed as if fashioned of obsidian.

"Looks like he's pointing right at us, huh?" said Stanky.

When I was good and stoned, once the park had crystallized into a Victorian fantasy of dark green lawns amid crisp shadows and fountaining shrubs, the storefronts beyond hiding their secrets behind black

glass, and McGuigan's ornate sign with its ruby coat of arms appearing to occupy an unreal corner in the dimension next door, I said, "Mia went back to her mom's tonight. She's going to be there for a while."

"Bummer." He had squirreled away a can of Coke in his coat pocket, which he now opened.

"It's normal for us. Chances are she'll screw around on me a little and spend most of the time curled up on her mom's sofa, eating Cocoa Puffs out of the box and watching soaps. She'll be back eventually."

He had a swig of Coke and nodded.

"What bothers me," I said, "is the reason she left. Not the real reason, but the excuse she gave. She claims you've been touching her. Rubbing against her and making like it was an accident."

This elicited a flurry of protests and I-swear-to-Gods. I let him run down before I said, "It's not a big deal."

"She's lying, man! I...."

"Whatever. Mia can handle herself. You cross the line with her, you'll be picking your balls up off the floor."

I could almost hear the gears grinding as he wondered how close he had come to being deballed.

"I want you to listen," I went on. "No interruptions. Even if you think I'm wrong about something. Deal?"

"Sure.... Yeah."

"Most of what I put out is garbage music. Meanderthal, Big Sissy, The Swimming Holes, Junk Brothers...."

"I love the Junk Brothers, man! They're why I sent you my demo."

I gazed at him sternly—he ducked his head and winced by way of apology.

"So rock-and-roll is garbage," I said. "It's disposable music. But once in a great while, somebody does something perfect. Something that makes the music seem indispensable. I think you can make something perfect. You may not ever get rock star money. I doubt you can be mainstreamed. The best you can hope for, probably, is Tom Waits money. That's plenty, believe me. I think you'll be huge in Europe. You'll be celebrated there. You've got a false bass that reminds me of Blind Willie Johnson. You write tremendous lyrics. That fractured guitar style of yours is unique. It's out there, but it's funky and people are going to love it. You have a natural appeal to punks and art rockers. To rock geeks like me. But there's one thing can stop you—that's your problem with women."

Not even this reference to his difficulties with Sabela and Mia could disrupt his rapt attentiveness.

"You can screw this up very easily," I told him. "You let that inappropriate touching thing of yours get out of hand, you *will* screw it up. You have to learn to let things come. To do that, you have to believe in yourself. I know you've had a shitty life so far, and your self-esteem is low. But you have to break the habit of thinking that you're getting over on people. You don't need to get over on them. You've got something they want. You've got talent. People will cut you a ton of slack because of that talent, but you keep messing up with women, their patience is going to run out. Now I don't know where all that music comes from, but it doesn't sound like it came from a basement. It's a gift. You have to start treating it like one."

I asked him for a cigarette and lit up. Though I'd given variations of the speech dozens of times, I bought into it this time and I was excited.

"Ten days from now you'll be playing for a live audience," I said. "If you put in the work, if you can believe in yourself, you'll get all you want of everything. And that's how you do it, man. By putting in the work and playing a kick-ass set. I'll help any way I can. I'm going to do publicity, T-shirts ... and I'm going to give them away if I have to. I'm going to get the word out that Joe Stanky is something special. And you know what? Industry people will listen, because I have a track record." I blew a smoke ring and watched it disperse. "These are things I won't usually do for a band until they're farther along, but I believe in you. I believe in your music. But you have to believe in yourself and you have to put in the work."

I'm not sure how much of my speech, which lasted several minutes more, stuck to him. He acted inspired, but I couldn't tell how much of the act was real; I knew on some level he was still running a con. We cut across the park, detouring so he could inspect the statue again. I glanced back at the library and saw two white lights shaped like fuzzy asterisks. At first I thought they were moving across the face of the building, that some people were playing with flashlights; but their brightness was too sharp and erratic, and they appeared to be coming from behind the library, shining through the stone, heading toward us. After ten or fifteen seconds, they faded from sight. Spooked, I noticed that Stanky was staring at the building and I asked if he had seen the lights.

"That was weird, man!" he said. "What was it?"

"Swamp gas. UFOs. Who knows?"

I started walking toward McGuigan's and Stanky fell in alongside me. His limp had returned.

"After we have those beers, you know?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"Can we catch a cab home?" His limp became exaggerated. "I think I really hurt my leg."

* * * *

Part of the speech must have taken, because I didn't have to roust Stanky out of bed the next morning. He woke before me, ate his grits (I allowed him a single bowl each day), knocked back a couple of Diet Cokes (my idea), and sequestered himself in the studio, playing adagio trumpet runs and writing on the Casio. Later, I heard the band thumping away. After practice, I caught Geno, the drummer, on his way out the door, brought him into the office and asked how the music was sounding.

"It doesn't blow," he said.

I asked to him to clarify.

"The guy writes some hard drum parts, but they're tasty, you know. Tight."

Geno appeared to want to tell me more, but spaced and ran a bearding hand through his shoulderlength black hair. He was a handsome kid, if you could look past the ink, the brands, and the multiple piercings. An excellent drummer and reliable. I had learned to be patient with him.

"Over all," I said, "how do you think the band's shaping up?"

He looked puzzled. "You heard us."

"Yes. I know what I think. I'm interested in what you think."

"Oh ... okay." He scratched the side of his neck, the habitat of a red and black Chinese tiger. "It's very cool. Strong. I never heard nothing like it. I mean, it's got jazz elements, but not enough to where it doesn't rock. The guy sings great. We might go somewhere if he can control his weirdness."

I didn't want to ask how Stanky was being weird, but I did.

"He and Jerry got a conflict," Geno said. "Jerry can't get this one part down, and Stanky's on him about it. I keep telling Stanky to quit ragging him. Leave Jerry alone and he'll stay on it until he can play it backward. But Stanky, he's relentless and Jerry's getting pissed. He don't love the guy, anyway. Like today, Stanky cracks about we should call the band Stanky and Our Gang,"

"No," I said.

"Yeah, right. But it was cute, you know. Kind of funny. Jerry took it personal, though. He like to get into it with Stanky."

"I'll talk to them. Anything else?"

"Naw. Stanky's a geek, but you know me. The music's right and I'm there."

The following day I had lunch scheduled with Andrea. It was also the day that my secretary, Kiwanda, a petite Afro-American woman in her late twenties, came back to work after a leave during which she had been taking care of her grandmother. I needed an afternoon off—I thought I'd visit friends, have a few drinks—so I gave over Stanky into her charge, warning her that he was prone to getting handsy with the ladies.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, sorting through some new orders. "You go have fun."

Andrea had staked out one of the high-backed booths at the rear of McGuigan's and was drinking a martini. She usually ran late, liked sitting at the front, and drank red wine. She had hung her jacket on the hook at the side of the booth and looked fetching in a cream-colored blouse. I nudged the martini glass and asked what was up with the booze.

"Bad day in court. I had to ask for a continuance. So..." She hoisted the martini. "I'm boozing it up."

"Is this that pollution thing?"

"No, it's a pro bono case."

"Thought you weren't going to do any pro bono work for a while."

She shrugged, drank. "What can I say?"

"All that class guilt. It must be tough." I signaled a waitress, pointed to Andrea's martini and held up two fingers. "I suppose I should be grateful. If you weren't carrying around that guilt, you would have married Snuffy Huffington the Third or somebody."

"Let's not banter," Andrea said. "We always banter. Let's just talk. Tell me what's going on with you."

I was good at reading Andrea, but it was strange how well I read her at that moment. Stress showed in her face. Nervousness. Both predictable components. But mainly I saw a profound loneliness and that startled me. I'd never thought of her as being lonely. I told her about Stanky, the good parts, his writing, his musicianship.

"The guy plays everything," I said. "Guitar, flute, sax, trumpet. Little piano, little drums. He's like some kind of mutant they produced in a secret high school band lab. And his voice. It's the Jim Nabors effect. You know, the guy who played Gomer Pyle? Nobody expected a guy looked that goofy could sing, so when he did, they thought he was great, even though he sounded like he had sinus trouble. It's the same with Stanky, except his voice really is great."

"You're always picking up these curious strays," she said. "Remember the high school kid who played bass, the one who fainted every time he was under pressure? Brian Something. You'd come upstairs and say, 'You should see what Brian did,' and tell me he laid a bass on its side and played Mozart riffs on it. And I'd go...."

"Bach," I said.

"And I'd go, 'Yeah, but he faints!'" She laughed. "You always think you can fix them."

"You're coming dangerously close to banter," I said.

"You owe me one." She wiggled her forefinger and grinned. "I'm right, aren't I? There's a downside to this guy."

I told her about Stanky's downside and, when I reached the part about Mia leaving, Andrea said, "The circus must be in town."

"Now you owe me one."

"You can't expect me to be reasonable about Mia." She half-sang the name, did a little shimmy, made a moue.

"That's two you owe me," I said.

"Sorry." She straightened her smile. "You know she'll come back. She always does."

I liked that she was acting flirty and, though I had no resolution in mind, I didn't want her to stop.

"You don't have to worry about me," she said. "Honest."

"Huh?"

"So how talented is this Stanky? Give me an example."

"What do you mean, I don't have to worry about you?"

"Never mind. Now come on! Give me some Stanky."

"You want me to sing?"

"You were a singer, weren't you? A pretty good one, as I recall."

"Yeah, but I can't do what he does."

She sat expectantly, hands folded on the tabletop.

"All right," I said. I did a verse of "Devil's Blues," beginning with the lines:

"There's a grapevine in heaven,
There's a peavine in hell,

One don't grow grapes,
The other don't grow peas as well...."

I sailed on through to the chorus, getting into the vocal:

"Devil's Blues!
God owes him...."

A bald guy popped his head over the top of an adjacent booth and looked at me, then ducked back down. I heard laughter.

"That's enough," I said to Andrea.

"Interesting," she said. "Not my cup of tea, but I wouldn't mind hearing him."

"He's playing the Crucible next weekend."

"Is that an invitation?"

"Sure. If you'll come."

"I have to see how things develop at the office. Is a tentative yes okay?"

"Way better than a firm no," I said.

We ordered from the grill and, after we had eaten, Andrea called her office and told them she was taking the rest of the day. We switched from martinis to red wine, and we talked, we laughed, we got silly, we got drunk. The sounds of the bar folded around us and I started to remember how it felt to be in love with her. We wobbled out of McGuigan's around four o'clock. The sun was lowering behind the Bittersmiths, but shed a rich golden light; it was still warm enough for people to be sitting in sweaters and shirts on park benches under the orange leaves.

Andrea lived around the corner from the bar, so I walked her home. She was weaving a little and kept bumping into me. "You better take a cab home," she said, and I said, "I'm not the one who's walking funny," which earned me a punch in the arm. When we came to her door, she turned to me, gripping her briefcase with both hands and said, "I'll see you next weekend, maybe."

"That'd be great."

She hovered there a second longer and then she kissed me. Flung her arms about my neck, clocking me with the briefcase, and gave me a one-hundred-percent all-Andrea kiss that, if I were a cartoon character, would have rolled my socks up and down and levitated my hat. She buried her face in my neck and said, "Sorry. I'm sorry." I was going to say, For what?, but she pulled away in a hurry, appearing panicked, and fled up the stairs.

I nearly hit a parked car on the drive home, not because I was drunk, but because thinking about the kiss and her reaction afterward impaired my concentration. What was she sorry about? The kiss? Flirting? The divorce? I couldn't work it out, and I couldn't work out, either, what I was feeling. Lust, certainly. Having her body pressed against mine had fully engaged my senses. But there was more. Considerably more. I decided it stood a chance of becoming a mental health issue and did my best to put it from mind.

Kiwanda was busy in the office. She had the computers networking and was going through prehistoric paper files on the floor. I asked what was up and she told me she had devised a more efficient filing system. She had never been much of an innovator, so this unnerved me, but I let it pass and asked if she'd had any problems with my boy Stanky.

"Not so you'd notice," she said tersely.

From this, I deduced that there *had* been a problem, but I let that pass as well and went upstairs to the apartment. Walls papered with flyers and band photographs; a grouping of newish, ultra-functional Swedish furniture—I realized I had liked the apartment better when Andrea did the decorating, this despite the fact that interior design had been one of our bones of contention. The walls, in particular, annoyed me. I was being stared at by young men with shaved heads and flowing locks in arrogant poses, stupid with tattoos, by five or six bands that had tried to stiff me, by a few hundred bad-to-indifferent memories and a dozen good ones. Maybe a dozen. I sat on a leather and chrome couch (it was a showy piece, but uncomfortable) and watched the early news. George Bush, Iraq, the price of gasoline ... Fuck! Restless, I went down to the basement.

Stanky was watching Comedy Central. *Mad TV*. Another of his passions. He was slumped on the couch, remote in hand, and had a Coke and a cigarette working, an ice pack clamped to his cheek. I had the idea the ice pack was for my benefit, so I didn't ask about it, but knew it must be connected to Kiwanda's attitude. He barely acknowledged my presence, just sat there and pouted. I took a chair and watched with him. At last he said, "I need a rhythm guitar player."

"I'm not going to hire another musician this late in the game."

He set down the ice pack. His cheek was red, but that might have been from the ice pack itself ... although I thought I detected a slight puffiness. "I seriously need him," he said.

"Don't push me on this."

"It's important, man! For this one song, anyway."

"What song?"

"A new one."

I waited and then said, "That's all you're going to tell me?"

"It needs a rhythm guitar."

This tubby little madman recumbent on my couch was making demands—it felt good to reject him, but he persisted.

"It's just one song, man," he said in full-on wheedle. "Please! It's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises."

"Come on! You'll like this one, I promise."

I told him I'd see what I could do, had a talk with him about Jerry, and the atmosphere lightened. He sat up straight, chortling at *Mad TV*, now and then saying, "Decent!," his ultimate accolade. The skits were funny and I laughed, too.

"I did my horoscope today," he said as the show went to commercial.

"Let me guess," I said. "You're a Cancer."

He didn't like that, but maintained an upbeat air. "I don't mean astrology, man. I use the *Guide*." He slid the *TV Guide* across the coffee table, pointing out an entry with a grimy finger, a black-rimmed nail. I snatched it up and read:

"*King Creole*: *** Based on a Harold Robbins novel. A young man (Elvis Presley) with a gang background rises from the streets to become a rock-and-roll star. Vic Morrow. 1:30."

"Decent, huh!" said Stanky. "You try it. Close your eyes and stick your finger in on a random page and see what you get. I use the movie section in back, but some people use the whole programming section."

"Other people do this? Not just you?"

"Go ahead."

I did as instructed and landed on another movie:

"*A Man and a Woman*: **** A widow and a widower meet on holiday and are attracted to one another, but the woman backs off because memories of her dead husband are still too strong. Jean-Louis Trintignant, Anouk Aimée. 1:40."

Half-believing, I tried to understand what the entry portended for me and Andrea.

"What did you get?" asked Stanky.

I tossed the *Guide* back to him and said, "It didn't work for me."

* * * *

I thought about calling Andrea, but business got in the way—I suppose I allowed it to get in the way, due to certain anxieties relating to our divorce. There was publicity to do, Kiwanda's new filing system to master (she kept on tweaking it), recording (we laid down two tracks for Stanky's first EP), and a variety of other duties. And so the days went quickly. Stanky began going to the library after every practice, walking without a limp; he said he was doing research. He didn't have enough money to get into trouble and I had too much else on my plate to stress over it. The night before he played the *Crucible*, I was in the office, going over everything in my mind, wondering what I had overlooked, thinking I had accomplished an impossible amount of work that week, when the doorbell rang. I opened the door and there on the stoop was Andrea, dressed in jeans and a bulky sweater, cheeks rosy from the night air. An overnight bag rested at her feet. "Hi," she said, and gave a chipper smile, like a tired Girl Scout determined to keep pimping her cookies.

Taken aback, I said, "Hi," and ushered her in.

She went into the office and sat in the wooden chair beside my desk. I followed her in, hesitated, and took a seat in my swivel chair.

"You look ... rattled," she said.

"That about covers it. Good rattled. But rattled, nonetheless."

"I am, too. Sorta." She glanced around the office, as if noticing the changes. I could hear every ticking clock, every digital hum, all the discrete noises of the house.

She drew in breath, exhaled, clasped her hands in her lap. "I thought we could try," she said quietly. "We could do a trial period or something. Some days, a week. See how that goes." She paused. "The last few times I've seen you, I've wanted to be with you. And I think you've wanted to be with me. So...." She made a flippy gesture, as if she were trying to shade things toward the casual. "This seemed like an opportunity."

You would have thought, even given the passage of time, after all the recriminations and ugliness of divorce, some measure of negativity would have cropped up in my thoughts; but it did not and I said, "I think you're right."

"Whew!" Andrea pretended to wipe sweat from her brow and grinned.

An awkward silence; the grin flickered and died.

"Could I maybe go upstairs," she asked.

"Oh! Sure. I'm sorry." I had the urge to run up before her and rip down the crapfest on the wall, chuck all the furniture out the window, except for a mattress and candles.

"You're still rattled," she said. "Maybe we should have a drink before anything." She stretched out a hand to me. "Let's get good and drunk."

As it happened, we barely got the drinks poured before we found our groove and got busy. It was like old times, cozy and familiar, and yet it was like we were doing it for the first time, too. Every touch, every sensation, carried that odd *frisson*. We woke late, with the frost almost melted from the panes, golden light chuting through the high east windows, leaving the bed in a bluish shadow. We lay there, too sleepy to make love, playing a little, talking, her telling me how she had plotted her approach, me telling her how I was oblivious until that day at lunch when I noticed her loneliness, and what an idiot I had been not to see what was happening.... Trivial matters, but they stained a few brain cells, committing those moments to memory and marking them as Important, a red pin on life's map. And then we did make love, as gently as that violence can be made. Afterward, we showered and fixed breakfast. Watching her move about the kitchen in sweats and a T-shirt, I couldn't stop thinking how great this was, and I wanted to stop, to quit footnoting every second. I mentioned this as we ate and she said, "I guess that means you're happy."

"Yeah! Of course."

"Me, too." She stabbed a piece of egg with her fork, tipped her head to the side as if to get a better angle on me. "I don't know when it was I started to be able to read you so well. Not that you were that hard to read to begin with. It just seems there's nothing hidden in your face anymore."

"Maybe it's a case of heightened senses."

"No, really. At times it's like I know what you're about to say."

"You mean I don't have to speak?"

She adopted the manner of a legal professional. "Unfortunately, no. You have to speak. Otherwise, it would be difficult to catch you in a lie."

"Maybe we should test this," I said. "You ask my name, and I'll say Helmut or Torin."

She shook her head. "I'm an organic machine, not a lie detector. We have different ways. Different needs."

"Organic. So that would make you ... softer than your basic machine? Possibly more compliant?"

"Very much so," she said.

"You know, I think I may be reading you pretty well myself." I leaned across the table, grabbed a sloppy kiss, and, as I sat back down, I remembered something. "Damn!" I said, and rapped my forehead with my knuckles.

"What is it?"

"I forgot to take Stanky for his haircut."

"Can't he take care of it himself?"

"Probably not. You want to go with us? You might as well meet him. Get it over with."

She popped egg into her mouth and chewed. "Do we have to do it now?"

"No, he won't even be up for a couple of hours."

"Good," she said.

* * * *

The Crucible, a concrete block structure on the edge of Black William, off beyond the row houses, had once been a dress outlet store. We had put a cafeteria in the front, where we served breakfast and lunch—we did a brisk business because of the mill. Separate from the cafeteria, the back half of the building was given over to a bar with a few ratty booths, rickety chairs, and tables. We had turned a high-school artist loose on the walls and she had painted murals that resembled scenes from J. R. R. Tolkien's lost labor-union novel. An immense crucible adorned the wall behind the stage; it appeared, thanks to the artist's inept use of perspective, to be spilling a flood of molten steel down upon an army of orc-like workers.

There was a full house that night, attracted by local legends The Swimming Holes, a girl band who had migrated to Pittsburgh, achieving a degree of national renown, and I had packed the audience with Friends of Vernon whom I had enjoined to applaud and shout wildly for Stanky. A haze of smoke fogged the stage lights and milling about were fake punks, the odd goth, hippies from Garnant College in Waterford, fifteen miles away: the desperate wannabe counter-culture of the western Pennsylvania barrens. I went into the dressing rooms, gave each Swimming Hole a welcome-home hug, and checked in on Stanky. Jerry, a skinny guy with buzzcut red hair, was plunking on his bass, and Geno was playing fills on the back of a chair; Ian, the rhythm guitarist, was making a cell call in the head. Stanky was on the couch, smoking a Camel, drinking a Coke, and watching the SciFi Channel. I asked if he felt all right. He said he could use a beer. He seemed calm, supremely confident, which I would not have predicted and did not trust. But it was too late for concern and I left him to God.

I joined Andrea at the bar. She had on an old long-sleeved Ramones shirt, the same that she had worn to gigs back when my band was happening. Despite the shirt, she looked out of place in the Crucible, a swan floating on a cesspool. I ordered a beer to be carried to Stanky, a shot of tequila for myself. Andrea put her mouth to my ear and shouted over the recorded music, "Don't get drunk!" and then something else that was lost in the din. I threw down the shot and led her into the cafeteria, which was serving coffee and soda to a handful of kids, some of whom appeared to be trying to straighten out. I closed the door to the bar, cutting the volume by half.

"What were you saying?" I asked.

"I said not to get drunk, I might have use for you later." She sat at the counter, patted the stool beside her, encouraging me to sit.

"They're about to start," I said, joining her. "I've only got a minute."

"How do you think it'll go?"

"With Stanky? I'm praying it won't be a disaster."

"You know, he didn't seem so bad this afternoon. Not like you described, anyway."

"You just like him because he said you were a babe."

I took a loose cigarette from my shirt pocket, rolled it between my thumb and forefinger, and she asked if I was smoking again.

"Once in a while. Mainly I do this," I said, demonstrating my rolling technique. "Anyway ... Stanky. You caught him on his best behavior."

"He seemed sad to me." She lifted a pepper shaker as she might a chess piece and set it closer to the salt. "Stunted. He has some adult mannerisms, adult information, but it's like he's still fourteen or fifteen."

"There you go," I said. "Now ask yourself how it would be, being around a twenty-six-year-old fourteen-year-old on a daily basis."

One of the kids, boys, men—there should be, I think, a specific word for someone old enough to die for his country, yet who can't grow a proper mustache and is having difficulty focusing because he recently ate some cheap acid cut with crank—one of the *guys* at the end of the counter, then, came trippingly toward us, wearing an army field jacket decorated with a braid of puke on the breast pocket, like a soggy service ribbon. He stopped to leer at Andrea, gave me the high sign, said something unintelligible, possibly profane, and staggered on into the club.

It had been Andrea's stance, when we were married, that episodes such as this were indicative of the sewer in which she claimed I was deliquescing, a.k.a. the music business. Though I had no grounds to argue the point, I argued nonetheless, angry because I hated the idea that she was smarter than I was—I compensated by telling myself I had more soul. There had been other, less defined reasons for anger, and the basic argument between us had gotten vicious. In this instance, however, she ignored the kid and returned to our conversation, which forced me to consider anew the question of my milieu and the degradation thereof, and to wonder if she had, by ignoring the kid, manipulated me into thinking that she had changed, whereas I had not, and it might be that the music business was to blame, that it had delimited me, warped and stunted my soul. I knew she was still the smart one.

The music cut off mid-song and I heard Rudy Bowen, my friend and partner in the Crucible, on the mike, welcoming people and making announcements. On our way back into the club, Andrea stopped me at the door and said, "I love you, Vernon." She laid a finger on my lips and told me to think about it before responding, leaving me mightily perplexed.

Stanky walked out onto the stage of the Crucible in a baggy white T-shirt, baggy chinos and his trucker wallet. He would have been semi-presentable had he not also been wearing a battered top hat. Somebody hooted derisively, and that did not surprise me. The hat made him look clownish. I wanted to throw a bottle and knock it off his head. He began whispering into the mike. Another hoot, a piercing whistle. Not good. But the whisper evolved into a chant, bits of Latin, Spanish, rock-and-roll clichés, and nonsense syllables. Half-spoken, half-sung, with an incantatory vibe, scatted in a jump-blues rhythm that the band, coming in underneath the vocal, built into a sold groove, and then Stanky, hitting his mark like a ski jumper getting a lift off a big hill, began to sing:

"I heard the Holy Ghost moan...
Stars seen through stone..."

Basically, the song consisted of those two lines repeated, but sung differently—made into a gospel plaint, a rock-and-roll howl, a smooth Motown styling, a jazzy lilt, and so on. There was a break with more lyrics, but the two lines were what mattered. The first time he sang them, in that heavy false bass, a shock ripped through the audience. People looked up, they turned toward the stage, they stopped drinking, their heads twitched, their legs did impromptu dance steps. Stanky held the word "moan" out for three bars, working it like a soul singer, then he picked up the trumpet and broke into a solo that was angry like Miles, but kept a spooky edge. When he set the trumpet down, he went to singing the lyric double

time, beating the top hat against his thigh, mangling it. The crowd surged forward, everyone wanting to get next to the stage, dancing in place, this strange, shuffling dance, voodoo zombies from hell, and Stanky strapped on his guitar. I missed much of what happened next, because Andrea dragged me onto the dance floor and started making slinky moves, and I lost my distance from the event. But Stanky's guitar work sent the zombies into a convulsive fever. We bumped into a punk who was jerking like his strings were being yanked; we did a threesome with a college girl whose feet were planted, yet was shaking it like a tribal dancer in a *National Geographic Special*; we were corralled briefly by two millworkers who were dancing with a goth girl, watching her spasm, her breasts flipping every which way. At the end of the song, Jerry and Geno started speaking the lyric into their mikes, adding a counterpoint to Stanky's vocal, cooling things off, bringing it down to the creepy chant again; then the band dropped out of the music and Stanky went a capella for a final repetition of his two lines.

Applause erupted, and it was as idiosyncratic as the dancing had been. This one guy was baying like a hound; a blond girl bounced up and down, clapping gleefully like a six-year-old. I didn't catch much of the set, other than to note the audience's positive response, in particular to the songs "Average Joe" and "Can I Get a Waitress?" and "The Sunset Side of You"—I was working the room, gathering opinions, trying to learn if any of the industry people I'd invited had come, and it wasn't until twenty minutes after the encore that I saw Stanky at the bar, talking to a girl, surrounded by a group of drunken admirers. I heard another girl say how cute he was and that gave me pause to wonder at the terrible power of music. The hooker I had hired to guarantee my guarantee, a long-legged brunette named Carol, dish-faced but with a spectacular body, was biding her time, waiting for the crowd around Stanky to disperse. He was in competent hands. I felt relief, mental fatigue, the desire to be alone with Andrea. There was no pressing reason to stay. I said a couple of good-byes, accepted congratulations, and we drove home, Andrea and I, along the Polozny.

"He's amazing," she said. "I have to admit, you may be right about him."

"Yep," I said proudly.

"Watch yourself, Sparky. You know how you get when these things start to go south."

"What are you talking about?"

"When one of your problem children runs off the tracks, you take it hard. That's all I'm saying." Andrea rubbed my shoulder. "You may want to think about speeding things up with Stanky. Walk him a shorter distance and let someone else deal with him. It might save you some wear and tear."

We drove in silence; the river widened, slowed its race, flowing in under the concrete lees of the mill; the first row house came up on the right. I was tempted to respond as usually I did to her advice, to say it's all good, I've got it under control, but for some reason I listened that night and thought about everything that could go wrong.

* * * *

Carol was waiting for me in the office when I came downstairs at eight o'clock the following morning. She was sitting in my swivel chair, going through my Rolodex. She looked weary, her hair mussed, and displeased. "That guy's a freak," she said flatly. "I want two hundred more. And in the future, I want to meet the guys you set me up with before I commit."

"What'd he do?" I asked.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I'm kind of curious.... Yeah."

She began to recite a list of Stanky-esque perversion—I cut her off.

"Okay," I said, and reached for my checkbook. "He didn't get rough, did he?"

"*Au contraire.*" She crossed her legs. "He wanted me to...."

"Please," I said. "Enough."

"I don't do that sort of work," she said primly.

I told her I'd written the check for three hundred and she was somewhat mollified. I apologized for Stanky and told her I hadn't realized he was so twisted.

"We're okay," she said. "I've had ... Hi, sweetie!"

She directed this greeting to a point above my shoulder as Andrea, sleepily scratching her head, wearing her sweats, entered the office. "Hi, Carol," she said, bewildered.

Carol hugged her, then turned to me and waved good-bye with my check. "Call me."

"Pretty early for hookers," Andrea said, perching on the edge of the desk.

"Let me guess. You defended her."

"Nope. One of her clients died and left her a little money. I helped her invest. But that begs the question, what was she doing here?"

"I got her for Stanky."

"A reward?"

"Something like that."

She nodded and idly kicked the back of her heel against the side of the desk. "How come you were never interested in the men I dated after we broke up?"

I was used to her sudden conversational U-turns, but I had expected her to interrogate me about Carol and this caught me off-guard. "I don't know. I suppose I didn't want to think about who you were sleeping with."

"Must be a guy thing. I always checked out your girlfriends. Even the ones you had when I was mad at you." She slipped off the desk and padded toward the door. "See you upstairs."

I spent the next two days between the phone and the studio, recording a good take of "The Sunset Side of You"—it was the closest thing Stanky had to a ballad, and I thought, with its easy, Dr. John-ish feel, it might get some play on college radio:

"I'm gonna crack open my venetian blind
and let that last bit of old orange glory shine,
so I can catch an eyeful
of my favorite trifle,
my absoutely perfect point of view....
That's an eastbound look,
six inches from the crook
of my little finger,
at the sunset side of you...."

Stanky wasn't happy with me—he was writing a song a day, sometimes two songs, and didn't want to disrupt his creative process by doing something that might actually make money, but I gamed him into cutting the track.

Wednesday morning, I visited Rudy Bowen in his office. Rudy was an architect who yearned to be a cartoonist, but who had never met with much success in the latter pursuit, and the resonance of our creative failures, I believe, helped to cement our friendship. He was also the only person I knew who had caught a fish in the Polozny downstream from the mill. It occupied a place of honor in his office, a hideous thing mounted on a plaque, some sort of mutant trout nourished upon pollution. Whenever I saw it, I would speculate on what else might lurk beneath the surface of the cold, deep pools east of town, imagining telepathic monstrosities plated with armor like fish of the Mesozoic and frail tentacled creatures, their skins having the rainbow sheen of an oil slick, to whom mankind were sacred figures in their dream of life.

Rudy's secretary, a matronly woman named Gwen, told me he had gone out for a latte and let me wait in his private office. I stepped over to his drafting table, curious about what he was working on. Held in place on the table was a clean sheet of paper, but in a folder beside the table was a batch of new cartoons, a series featuring shadowy figures in a mineshaft who conversed about current events, celebrities, etc., while excavating a vein of pork that twisted through a mountain.... This gave rise to the title of the strip: *Meat Mountain Stories*. They were silhouettes, really. Given identity by their shapes, eccentric hairstyles, and speech signatures. The strip was contemporary and hilarious—everything Rudy's usual work was not. In some frames, a cluster of tiny white objects appeared to be floating. Moths, I thought. Lights of some kind. They, too, carried on conversations, but in pictographs. I was still going through them when Rudy came in, a big, blond man with the beginnings of a gut and thick glasses that lent him a baffled look. Every time I saw him, he looked more depressed, more middle-aged.

"These are great, man!" I said. "They're new, right?"

He crossed the room and stood beside me.

"I been working on them all week. You like 'em, huh?"

"I love them. You did all this this week? You must not be sleeping." I pointed to the white things. "What're these?"

"Stars. I got the idea from that song Stanky did. 'Stars Seen Through Stone.'"

"So they're seeing them, the people in the mine?"

"Yeah. They don't pay much attention to them, but they're going to start interacting soon."

"It must be going around." I told him about Stanky's burst of writing, Kiwanda's adventures in office management.

"That's odd, you know." He sipped his latte. "It seems like there's been a real rash of creativity in town. Last week, some grunt at the mill came up with an improvement in the cold forming process that everybody says is a huge deal. Jimmy Galvin, that guy who does handyman work? He invented a new gardening tool. Bucky Bucklin's paying his patent fees. He says they're going to make millions. Beth started writing a novel. She never said anything to me about wanting to write, but she's hardly had time for the kids, she's been so busy ripping off the pages. It's not bad."

"Well, I wish I'd catch it," I said. "With me, it's same old same old. Drudgerie, drudgeroo. Except for Andrea's back."

"Andrea? You mean you guys are dating?"

"I mean back as in back in my house. Living with me."

"Damn!" he said. "That's incredible!"

We sat in two chairs like two inverted tents on steel frames, as uncomfortable as my upstairs couch, and I told him about it.

"So it's going okay?" he asked.

"Terrific, I think. But what do I know? She said it was a trial period, so I could get home tonight and she might be gone. I've never been able to figure her out."

"Andrea. Damn! I saw her at the club, but I didn't realize she was with you. I just had time to wave." He leaned across the space between us and high-fived me. "Now maybe you'll stop going around like someone stole your puppy."

"It wasn't like that," I said.

He chuckled. "Naw. Which is why the people of Black William, when asked the date, often reply, 'Six years, two months, and twelve days since the advent of Vernon's Gloom.'"

We moved on to other topics, among them the club, business, and, as I made to leave, I gestured at Rudy's grotesque trophy and said, "While those creative juices are flowing, you ought to design a fishing lure, so I can watch you hook into the Loch Polozny Monster."

Rudy laughed and said, "Maybe if I have a couple of minutes. I'm going to keep working on the comic. Whatever this shit is, it's bound to go away."

* * * *

I was fooling around in the studio one evening, ostensibly cleaning up the tape we'd rolled the previous weekend at the Crucible, hoping to get a live rendition of "Stars Seen Through Stone" clean enough for the EP, but I was, instead, going over a tape I'd made, trying to find some ounce of true inspiration in it, finding none, wondering why this wave of creativity—if it, indeed, existed—had blessed Rudy's house and not mine. It was after seven; Stanky was likely on his way home from the library, and I was thinking about seeing if Andrea wanted to go out, when she leaned in the doorway and asked if she was interrupting. I told her, no, not at all, and she came into the booth and sat next to me at the board, looking out at the drum kit, the instruments, the serpents' nest of power cords.

"When we were married, I didn't get what you saw in this," she said. "All I saw was the damage, the depravity, the greed. Now I've been practicing, I realize there's more or less the same degree of damage and greed and depravity in every enterprise. You can't see it as clearly as you do in the music business, but it's there."

"Tell me what I see that's good."

"The music, the people."

"None of that lasts," I said. "All I am's a yo-yo tester. I test a thousand busted yo-yos, and occasionally I run across one that lights up and squeals when it spins."

"What I do is too depressing to talk about. It's rare when anyone I represent has a good outcome, even if they win. Corporations delay and delay."

"So it's disillusionment that's brought us together again."

"No." She looked at me steadily. "Do you love me?"

"Yeah, I love you. You know I do. I never stopped. There was a gap...."

"A big gap!"

"The gap made it more painful, but that's all it did."

She played with dials on the sound board, frowning as if they were refusing to obey her fingers.

"You're messing up my settings," I said.

"Oh ... sorry."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just you don't lie to me anymore. You used to lie all the time, even about trivial things. I'm having trouble adjusting."

I started to deny it, but recognized that I couldn't. "I was angry at you. I can't remember why, exactly. Lying was probably part of it."

"I was angry at you, too." She put her hands back on the board, but twisted no dials. "But I didn't lie to you."

"You stopped telling me the truth," I said.

"Same difference."

The phone rang; in reflex, I picked up and said, "Soul Kiss."

It was Stanky. He started babbling, telling me to come downtown quick.

"Whoa!" I said. "If this is about me giving you a ride..."

"No, I swear! You gotta see this, man! The stars are back!"

"The stars."

"Like the one we saw at the library. The lights. You better come quick. I'm not sure how long it'll last."

"I'm kind of busy," I said.

"Dude, you have got to see this! I'm not kidding!"

I covered the phone and spoke to Andrea. "Want to ride uptown? Stanky says there's something we should see."

"Maybe afterward we could stop by my place and I could pick up a few things?"

I got back on the phone. "Where are you?"

Five minutes later we were cutting across the park toward the statue of Black William, beside which Stanky and several people were standing in an island of yellow light—I had no time to check them out,

other than to observe that one was a woman, because Stanky caught my arm and directed me to look at the library and what I saw made me unmindful of any other sight. The building had been rendered insubstantial, a ghost of itself, and I was staring across a dark plain ranged by a dozen fuzzy white lights, some large, some small, moving toward us at a slow rate of speed, and yet perhaps it was not slow—the perspective seemed infinite, as if I were gazing into a depth that, by comparison to which, all previously glimpsed perspectives were so limited as to be irrelevant. As the lights approached, they appeared to vanish, passing out of frame, as if the viewing angle we had been afforded was too narrow to encompass the scope of the phenomenon. Within seconds, it began to fade, the library to regain its ordinary solidity, and I thought I heard a distant gabbling, the sound of many voices speaking at once, an army of voices (though I might have manufactured this impression from the wind gusting through the boughs); and then, as that ghostly image winked out of existence, a groaning noise that, in my opinion, issued from no fleshly throat, but may have been produced by some cosmic stress, a rip in the continuum sealing itself or something akin.

Andrea had at some point latched onto my arm, and we stood gaping at the library; Stanky and the rest began talking excitedly. There were three boys, teenagers, two of them carrying skateboards. The third was a pale, skinny, haughty kid, bespotted with acne, wearing a black turtleneck sweater, black jeans, black overcoat. They displayed a worshipful attitude toward Stanky, hanging on his every word. The woman might have been the one with whom Stanky had been speaking at the Crucible before Carol made her move. She was tiny, barely five feet tall, Italian-looking, with black hair and olive skin, in her twenties, and betrayed a complete lack of animation until Stanky slipped an arm around her; then she smiled, an expression that revealed her to be moderately attractive.

The skateboarders sped off to, they said, “tell everybody,” and this spurred me to take out my cell phone, but I could not think who to call. Rudy, maybe. But no one in authority. The cops would laugh at the report. Stanky introduced us to Liz (the woman lowered her eyes) and Pin (the goth kid looked away and nodded). I asked how long the phenomenon had been going on before we arrived and Stanky said, “Maybe fifteen minutes.”

"Have you seen it before?"

"Just that time with you."

I glanced up at Black William and thought that maybe he *had* intended the statue as a warning ... though it struck me now that he was turning his head back toward the town and laughing.

Andrea hugged herself. “I could use something hot to drink.”

McGuigan's was handy, but that would have disincluded Pin, who obviously was underage. I loaded him, Stanky, and Liz into the back of the van and drove to Szechuan Palace, a restaurant on the edge of the business district, which sported a five-foot-tall gilt fiberglass Buddha in the foyer that over the years had come to resemble an ogre with a skin condition, the fiberglass weave showing through in patches, and whose dining room (empty but for a bored wait-staff) was lit like a Macao brothel in lurid shades of red, green, and purple. On the way to the restaurant, I replayed the incident in my head, attempting to understand what I had witnessed not in rational terms, but in terms that would make sense to an ordinary American fool raised on science fiction and horror movies. Nothing seemed to fit. At the restaurant, Andrea and Pin ordered tea, Liz and Stanky gobbled moo shu pork and lemon chicken, and I picked at an egg roll. Pin started talking to Andrea in an adenoidal voice, lecturing her on some matter regarding Black William, and, annoyed because he was treating her like an idiot, I said, “What does Black William have to do with this?”

"Not a thing," Pin said, turning on me a look of disdain that aspired to be the kind of look Truman

Capote once fixed upon a reporter from the *Lincoln Journal-Star* who had asked if he was a homosexual. "Not unless you count the fact that he saw something similar two hundred years ago and it probably killed him."

"Pin's an expert on Black William," Stanky said, wiping a shred of pork from his chin.

"What little there is to know," said Pin grandly, "I know."

It figured that a Goth townie would have developed a crush on the local bogeyman. I asked him to enlighten me.

"Well," Pin said, "when Joey told me he'd seen a star floating in front of the library, I knew it *had* to be one of BW's stars. Where the library stands today used to be the edge of Stockton Wood, which had an evil reputation. As did many woods in those days, of course. Stockton Wood is where he saw the stars."

"What did he say about them?"

"He didn't say a thing. Nothing that he committed to paper, anyway. It's his younger cousin, Samuel Garnant, we can thank for the story. He wrote a memoir about BW's escapades under the *nom de plume* Jonathan Venture. According to Samuel, BW was in the habit of riding in the woods at twilight. 'Tempting the Devil,' he called it. His first sight of the stars was a few mysterious lights—like with you and Joey. He rode out into the wood the next night and many nights thereafter. Samuel's a bit vague on how long it was before BW saw the stars again. I'm guessing a couple of weeks, going by clues in the narrative. But eventually he did see them, and what he saw was a lot like what we just saw." Pin put his hands together, fingertips touching, like a priest preparing to address the Ladies Auxiliary. "In those days, people feared God and the Devil. When they saw something amazing, they didn't stand around like a bunch of doofuses saying, 'All right!' and taking pictures. BW was terrified. He said he'd seen the Star Wormwood and heard the Holy Ghost moan. He set about changing his life."

Stanky shot me one of his wincing, cutesy, embarrassed smiles—he had told me the song was completely original.

"For almost a year," Pin went on, "BW tried to be a good Christian. He performed charitable works, attended church regularly, but his heart wasn't in it. He lapsed back into his old ways and before long he took to riding in Stockton Woods again, with his manservant Nero walking at his side. He thought that he had missed an opportunity and told Samuel if he was fortunate enough to see the stars again, he would ride straight for them. He'd embrace their evil purpose."

"What you said about standing around like doofuses, taking pictures," Andrea said. "I don't suppose anyone got a picture?"

Pin produced a cell phone and punched up a photograph of the library and the stars. Andrea and I leaned in to see.

"Can you e-mail that to me?" I asked.

Pin said he could and I wrote my address on a napkin.

"So," Pin said. "The next time BW saw the stars was in eighteen-oh-eight. He saw them twice, exactly like the first time. A single star, then an interval of week or two and a more complex sighting. A month after that, he disappeared while riding with Nero in Stockon Wood and they were never seen again."

Stanky hailed our waitress and asked for more pancakes for his moo shu.

"So you think the stars appeared three times?" said Andrea. "And Black William missed the third appearance on the first go-round, but not on the second?"

"That's what Samuel thought," said Pin.

Stanky fed Liz a bite of lemon chicken.

"You're assuming Black William was killed by the stars, but that doesn't make sense," said Andrea. "For instance, why would there be a longer interval between the second and third sightings? If there *was* a third sighting. It's more likely someone who knew the story killed him and blamed it on the stars."

"Maybe Nero capped him," said Stanky. "So he could gain his freedom."

Pin shrugged. "I only know what I read."

"It might be a wavefront," I said.

On another napkin, I drew a straight line with a small bump in it, then an interval in which the line flattened out, then a bigger bump, then a longer interval and an even bigger bump.

"Like that, maybe," I said. "Some kind of wavefront passing through Black William from God knows where. It's always passing through town, but we get this series of bumps that make it accessible every two hundred years. Or less. Maybe the stars appeared at other times."

"There's no record of it," said Pin. "And I've searched."

The waitress brought Stanky's pancakes and asked if we needed more napkins.

Andrea studied the napkin I'd drawn on. "But what about the first series of sightings? When were they?"

"Seventeen-eighty-nine," said Pin.

"It could be an erratic cycle," I said. "Or could be the cycle consists of two sequences close together, then a lapse of two hundred years. Don't expect a deeper explanation. I cut class a bunch in high school physics."

"The Holy Ghost doesn't obey physical principles," said Stanky pompously.

"I doubt Black William really heard the Holy Ghost," Andrea said. "If he heard what we heard tonight. It sounded more like a door closing to me."

"Whatever," he said. "It'll be cool to see what happens a month from now. Maybe Black William will return from the grave."

"Yeah." I crumpled the napkin and tossed it to the center of the table. "Maybe he'll bring Doctor Doom and the Lone Ranger with him."

Pin affected a shudder and said, "I think I'm busy that day."

* * * *

Pin sent me the picture and I e-mailed it to a gearhead friend, Crazy Ed, who lived in Wilkes-Barre, to see what he could make of it. Though I didn't forget about the stars, I got slammed with business and my consideration of them and the late William Garnant had to be put on the backburner, along with Stanky's career. Against all expectations, Liz had not fled screaming from his bed, crying Pervert, but stayed with him most nights. Except for his time in the studio, I rarely saw him, and then only when his high school

fans drove by to pick up him and Liz. An apocryphal story reached my ear, insinuating that she had taken on a carload of teenage boys while Stanky watched. That, if true, explained the relationship in Stanky-esque terms, terms I could understand. I didn't care what they did as long as he fulfilled his band duties and kept out of my hair. I landed him a gig at the Pick and Shovel in Waterford, filling in for a band that had been forced to cancel, and it went well enough that I scored him another gig at Garnant College. After a mere two performances, his reputation was building and I adjusted my timetable accordingly—I would make the college job an EP release party, push out an album soon thereafter and try to sell him to a major label. It was not the way I typically grew my acts, not commercially wise, but Stanky was not a typical act and, despite his prodigious talent, I wanted to have done with this sour-smelling chapter in my life.

Andrea, for all intents and purposes, had moved in, along with a high-energy, seven-month-old Irish Setter named Timber, and was in process of subletting her apartment. We were, doubtless, a disgusting item to everyone who had gotten to know us during our adversarial phase, always hanging on one another, kissing and touching. I had lunch with her every day—they held the back booth for us at McGuigan's—and one afternoon as we were settling in, Mia materialized beside the booth. "Hello," she said and stuck out a hand to Andrea.

Startled, Andrea shook her hand and I, too, was startled—until that moment, Mia had been unrelentingly hostile in her attitude toward my ex, referring to her as "that uppity skank" and in terms less polite. I noticed that she was dressed conservatively and not made up as an odalisque. Instead of being whipped into a punky abstraction, her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The raspberry streak was gone. She was, in fact, for the first time since I had known her, streakless.

"May I join you?" Mia asked. "I won't take up much of your time."

Andrea scooted closer to the wall and Mia sat next to her.

"I heard you guys were back together," said Mia. "I'm glad."

Thunderstruck, I was incapable of fielding that one. "Thanks," said Andrea, looking to me for guidance.

Mia squared up in the booth, addressing me with a clear eye and a firm voice. "I'm moving to Pittsburgh. I've got a job lined up and I'll be taking night classes at Pitt, then going full-time starting next summer."

Hearing this issue from Mia's mouth was like hearing a cat begin speaking in Spanish while lighting a cheroot. I managed to say, "Yeah, that's.... Yeah. Good."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I'm leaving tomorrow. But I heard you and Andrea were together, so...." She glanced back and forth between Andrea and myself, as if expecting a response.

"No, that's fine," I said. "You know."

"It was a destructive relationship," she said with great sincerity. "We had some fun, but it was bad for both of us. You were holding me back intellectually and I was limiting you emotionally."

"You're right," I said. "Absolutely."

Mia seemed surprised by how smoothly things were going, but she had, apparently, a prearranged speech and she by-God intended to give it.

"I understand this is sudden. It must come as a shock..."

"Oh, yeah."

"...but I have to do this. I think it's best for me. I hope we can stay friends. You've been an important part of my growth."

"I hope so, too."

There ensued a short and—on my end, anyway—baffled silence.

"Okay. Well, I ... I guess that's about it." She got to her feet and stood by the booth, hovering; then—with a sudden movement—she bent and kissed my cheek. "Bye."

Andrea put a hand to her mouth. "Oh my God! Was that Mia?"

"I'm not too sure," I said, watching Mia walk away, noting that there had been a complete absence of moues.

"An important part of her growth? She talks like a Doctor Phil soundbyte. What did you do to her?"

"I'm not responsible, I don't think." I pushed around a notion that had occurred to me before, but that I had not had the impetus to consider more fully. "Do you know anyone who's exhibited a sudden burst of intelligence in the past few weeks? I mean someone who's been going along at the same pace for a while and suddenly they're Einstein. Relatively speaking."

She mulled it over. "As a matter of fact, I do. I know two or three people. Why?"

"Tell me."

"Well, there's Jimmy Galvin. Did you hear about him?"

"The gardening tool. Yeah. Who else?"

"This guy in my office. A paralegal. He's a hard worker, but basically a drone. Lately, whenever we ask him to dig up a file or find a reference, he's attached some ideas about the case we're working on. Good ideas. Some of them are great. Case-makers. He's the talk of the office. We've been joking that maybe we should get him to take a drug test. He's going back to law school and we're going to miss...." She broke off. "What's this have to do with the new Mia?"

I told her about Rudy's cartoons, Beth's novel, Kiwanda's newfound efficiency, the millworker, Stanky's increased productivity.

"I can't help wondering," I said, "if it's somehow related to the stars. I know it's a harebrained idea. There's probably a better explanation. Stanky ... he never worked with a band before and that may be what's revving his engines. But that night at the Crucible, he was so polished. It just didn't synch with how I thought he'd react. I thought he'd get through it, but it's like he was an old hand."

Andrea looked distressed.

"And not everybody's affected," I said. "I'm not, for sure. You don't seem to be. It's probably bullshit."

"I know of another instance," she said. "But if I tell you, you have to promise to keep it a secret."

"I can do that."

"Do you know Wanda Lingrove?"

"Wasn't she a friend of yours? A cop? Tall woman? About five years older than us?"

"She's a detective now."

The waitress brought our food. I dug in; Andrea nudged her salad to the side.

"Did you hear about those college girls dying over in Waterford?" she asked.

"No, I haven't been keeping up."

"Two college girls died a few days apart. One in a fire and one in a drowning accident. Wanda asked for a look at the case files. The Waterford police had written them off as accidents, but Wanda had a friend on the force and he slipped her the files and showed her the girls' apartments. They both lived off-campus. It's not that Wanda's any great shakes. She has an undistinguished record. But she had the idea from reading the papers—and they were skimpy articles—a serial killer was involved. Her friend pooh-poohed the idea. There wasn't any signature. But it turned out, Wanda was right. There was a signature, very subtle and very complicated, demonstrating that the killer was highly evolved. Not only did she figure that out, she caught him after two days on the case."

"Aren't serial killers tough to catch?"

"Yes. All that stuff you see about profiling on TV, it's crap. They wouldn't have come close to getting a line on this kid with profiling. He would have had to announce himself, but Wanda doesn't think he would have. She thinks he would have gone on killing, that putting one over on the world was enough for him."

"He was a kid?"

"Fourteen years old. A kid from Black William. What's more, he'd given no sign of being a sociopath. Yet in the space of three weeks, he went from zero to sixty. From playing JV football to being a highly organized serialist. That doesn't happen in the real world."

"So how come Wanda's not famous?"

"The college is trying to keep it quiet. The kid's been bundled off to an institution and the cops have the lid screwed tight." Andrea picked at her salad. "What I'm suggesting, maybe everyone *is* being affected, but not in ways that conform to your model. Wanda catching the kid, that conforms. But the kid himself, the fact that a pathology was brought out in him ... that suggests that people may be affected in ways we don't notice. Maybe they just love each other more."

I laid down my fork. "Like with us?"

A doleful nod.

"That's crazy," I said. "You said you'd been plotting for months to make a move."

"Yes, but it was a fantasy!"

"And you don't think you would have acted on it?"

"I don't know. One thing for certain, I never expected anything like this." She cut her volume to a stage whisper. "I want you all the time. It's like when we were nineteen. I'm addicted to you."

"Yeah," I said. "Same here."

"I worry that it'll stop, then I worry that it won't—it's wreaking havoc with my work. I can't stop thinking about you. On a rational level, I know I'm an animal. But there's a place in me that wants to believe love is more than evolutionary biology. And now this thing with the stars. To think that what I'm feeling could

be produced by something as random as a wavefront or a supernatural event, or whatever ... It makes me feel like an experimental animal. Like a rabbit that's been drugged. It scares me."

"Look," I said. "We're probably talking about something that isn't real."

"No, it's real."

"How can you be sure? I only just brought the subject up. We can't have been discussing it more than five minutes."

"You convinced me. Everything you said rings true. I know it here." Andrea touched a hand to her breast. "And you know it, too. Something's happening to us. Something's happening to this town."

* * * *

We stepped back from that conversation. It was, I suppose, a form of denial, the avoidance of a subject neither of us wished to confront, because it was proof against confrontation, against logic and reason, and so we trivialized it and fell back on our faith, on our mutuality. Sometimes, lying with Andrea, considering the join of her neck and shoulder, the slight convexity of her belly, the compliant curve of a breast compressed into a pouty shape by the weight of her arm, the thousand turns and angles that each seemed the expression of a white simplicity within, I would have the urge to wake her, to drive away from Black William, and thus protect her, protect us, from this infestation of stars; but then I would think that such an action might destroy the thing I hoped to protect, that once away from the stars we might feel differently about one another. And then I'd think how irrational these thoughts were, how ridiculous it was to contemplate uprooting our lives over so flimsy a fear. And, finally, having made this brief rounds of my human potential, I would lapse again into a Praxitelean scrutiny, a sculptor in love with his stone, content to drift in and out of a dream in which love, though it had been proved false (like Andrea said, an animal function and nothing more), proved to be eternally false, forever and a day of illusion, of two souls burning brighter and brighter until they appeared to make a single glow, a blazing unity concealed behind robes of aging flesh.

The world beat against our door. Pin's photograph was printed on the third page of the *Black William Gazette*, along with the news that the University of Pittsburgh would be sending a team of observers to measure the phenomenon, should it occur again, as was predicted (by whom, the *Gazette* did not say). There was a sidebar recounting Black William's sordid history and Jonathan Venture's version of BW's involvement with the stars. The body of the article.... Well, it was as if the reporter had been privy to our conversation at the Szechuan Palace. I suspected that he had, if only at second-hand, since my wavefront theory was reproduced in full, attributed to "a local pundit." As a result of this publicity, groups of people, often more than a hundred, mostly the young and the elderly, came to gather in front of the library between the hours of five and nine, thus depriving me of the customary destination of my evening walks.

Stanky, his ego swollen to improbable proportions by two successful performances, by the adulation of his high school fans ("Someone ought to be writing everything Joey says down," said one dreamy-eyed fool), became increasingly temperamental, lashing out at his bandmates, at me, browbeating Liz at every opportunity, and prowling about the house in a sulk, ever with a Coke and cigarette, glaring at all who fell to his gaze, not bothering to speak. In the mornings, he was difficult to wake, keeping Geno and Jerry waiting, wasting valuable time, and one particular morning, my frustration with him peaked and I let Timber into his bedroom and closed the door, listening while the happy pup gamboled across the mattress, licking and drooling, eliciting squeals and curses from the sleepy couple, an action that provoked a confrontation that I won by dint of physical threat and financial dominance, but that firmly established our unspoken enmity and made me anxious about whether I would be able to maneuver him to the point where I could rid myself of him and show a profit.

* * * *

A gray morning, spitting snow, and I answered the doorbell to find a lugubrious, long-nosed gentleman with a raw, bony face, toting a briefcase and wearing a Sy Sperling wig and a cheap brown suit. A police cruiser was parked at the curb; two uniformed officers stood smoking beside it, casting indifferent looks toward the Polozny, which rolled on blackly in—as a local DJ was prone to characterize it—"its eternal search for the sea." Since we were only a couple of days from the EP release, I experienced a sinking feeling, one that was borne out when the man produced a card identifying him as Martin Kiggins of McKeesport, a Friend of the Court. He said he would like to have a word with me about Joseph Stanky.

"How well do you know Joseph?" he asked me once we had settled in the office.

Kiwanda, at her desk in the next room, made a choking noise. I replied that while I had, I thought, an adequate understanding of Joseph as a musician, I was unfamiliar with the details of his life.

"Did you know he has a wife?" Kiggins was too lanky to fit the chair and, throughout our talk, kept scrunching around in it. "And he's got a little boy. Almost two years old, he is."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Poor little guy nearly didn't make it that far. Been sick his whole life." Kiggins's gaze acquired a morose intensity. "Meningitis."

I couldn't get a handle on Kiggins; he acted as if he was trying to sell me something, yet he had arrived on my doorstep with an armed force and the authority of the law.

"I thought meningitis was fatal," I said.

"Not a hundred percent," said Kiggins cheerlessly. "His mother doesn't have insurance, so he didn't get the best of care."

"That's tough."

"She's on welfare. Things aren't likely to improve for the kid or for her. She's not what you'd call an attractive woman."

"Why are we talking about this?" I asked. "It's a sad story, but I'm not involved."

"Not directly, no."

"Not any damn way. I don't understand what you're looking for."

Kiggins seemed disappointed in me. "I'm looking for Joseph. Is he here?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know. Okay." He put his hands on his knees and stood, making a show of peering out the window at his cop buddies.

"I really don't know if he's here," I said. "I've been working, I haven't been downstairs this morning."

"Mind if I take a look down there?"

"You're goddamn right, I mind! What's this about? You've been doing a dance ever since you came in. Why don't you spit it out?"

Kiggins gave me a measuring look, then glanced around the office—I think he was hoping to locate another chair. Failing this, he sat back down.

"You appear to be a responsible guy, Vernon," he said. "Is it okay I call you Vernon?"

"Sure thing, Marty. I don't give a shit what you call me as long as you get to the point."

"You own your home, a business. Pay your taxes ... far as I can tell without an audit. You're a pretty solid citizen."

The implicit threat of an audit ticked me off, but I let him continue. I began to realize where this might be going.

"I've got the authority to take Joseph back to McKeesport and throw his butt in jail," said Kiggins. "He's in arrears with his child and spousal support. Now I know Joseph doesn't have any money to speak of, but seeing how you've got an investment in him, I'm hoping we can work out some arrangement."

"Where'd you hear that?" I asked. "About my investment."

"Joseph still has friends in McKeesport. High school kids, mainly. Truth be told, we think he was supplying them with drugs, but I'm not here about that. They've been spreading it around that you're about to make him a star."

I snorted. "He's a *long* way from being a star. Believe me."

"I believe you. Do you believe me when I tell you I'm here to take him back? Just say the word, I'll give a whistle to those boys out front." Kiggins shifted the chair sideways, so he could stretch out one leg. "I know how you make your money, Vernon. You build a band up, then you sell their contracts. Now you've put in some work with Joseph. Some serious time and money. I should think you'd want to protect your investment."

"Okay." I reached for a cigarette, recalled that I had quit. "What's he owe?"

"Upwards of eleven thousand."

"He's all yours," I said. "Take the stairs in back. Follow the corridor to the front of the house. First door on your right."

"I said I wanted to make an arrangement. I'm not after the entire amount."

And so began our negotiation.

If we had finished the album, I would have handed Stanky over and given Kiggins my blessing, but as things stood, I needed him. Kiggins, on the other hand, wouldn't stand a chance of collecting any money with Stanky in the slam—he likely had a predetermined figure beneath which he would not move. It infuriated me to haggle with him. Stanky's wife and kid wouldn't see a nickel. They would dock her welfare by whatever amount he extracted from me, deduct administrative and clerical fees, and she would end up worse off than before. Yet I had no choice other than to submit to legal blackmail.

Kiggins wouldn't go below five thousand. That, he said, was his bottom line. He put on a dour poker face and waited for me to decide.

"He's not worth it," I said.

Sadly, Kiggins made for the door; when I did not relent, he turned back and we resumed negotiations,

settling on a figure of three thousand and my promise to attach a rider to Stanky's contract stating that a percentage of his earnings would be sent to the court. After he had gone, my check tucked in his briefcase, Kiwanda came to stand by my desk with folded arms.

"I'd give it a minute before you go down," she said. "You got that I'm-gonna-break-his-face look."

"Do you fucking believe this?" I brought my fist down on the desk. "I want to smack that little bitch!"

"Take a breath, Vernon. You don't want to lose any more today than just walked out of here."

I waited, I grew calm, but as I approached the stairs, the image of a wizened toddler and a moping, double-chinned wife cropped up in my brain. With each step I grew angrier and, when I reached Stanky's bedroom, I pushed in without knocking. He and Liz were having sex. I caught a fetid odor and an unwanted glimpse of Liz's sallow hindquarters as she scrambled beneath the covers. I shut the door partway and shouted at Stanky to haul his ass out here. Seconds later, he burst from the room in a T-shirt and pajama bottoms, and stumped into the kitchen with his head down, arms tightly held, like an enraged penguin. He fished a Coke from the refrigerator and made as if to say something; but I let him have it. I briefed him on Kiggins and said, "It's not a question of morality. I already knew you were a piece of crap. But this is a business, man. It's my livelihood, not a playground for degenerates. And when you bring the cops to my door, you put that in jeopardy."

He hung his head, picking at the Coke's pop top. "You don't understand."

"I don't want to understand! Get it? I have absolutely no desire to understand. That's between you and your wife. Between you and whatever scrap of meatloaf shaped like the Virgin Mary you pretend to worship. I don't care. One more screw-up, I'm calling Kiggins and telling him to come get you."

Liz had entered the kitchen, clutching a bathrobe about her; when she heard "wife," she retreated.

I railed at Stanky, telling him he would pay back every penny of the three thousand, telling him further to clean his room of every pot seed and pill, to get his act in order and finish the album; and I kept on railing at him until his body language conveyed that I could expect two or three days of penitence and sucking up. Then I allowed him to slink by me and into the bedroom. When I passed his door, cracked an inch open, I heard him whining to Liz, saying, "She's not *really* my wife."

* * * *

I took the afternoon off and persuaded Rudy to go fishing. We bundled up against the cold, bought a twelve-pack of Iron City and dropped our lines in Kempton's Pond, a lopsided pond stamped into the half-frozen ground a couple of miles east of town, punctuating a mixed stand of birch and hazel—it looked as if a giant with a peg leg had left this impression in the rock, creating a hole thirty feet wide. The clouds had lowered and darkened, their swollen bellies appearing to tatter on the leafless treetops as they slid past; but the snow had quit falling. There was some light accumulation on the banks, which stood eight or nine feet above the black water and gave the pond the look of an old cistern. The water circulated like heavy oil and swallowed our sinkers with barely a splash. This bred the expectation that if we hooked anything, it would be a megalodon or an ichthyosaur, a creature such as would have been trapped in a tar pit. But we had no such expectation.

It takes a certain cast of mind to enjoy fishing with no hope of a catch, or the faint hope of catching some inedible fishlike thing every few years or so. That kind of fishing is my favorite sport, though I admit I follow the Steelers closely, as do many in Black William. Knowing that nothing will rise from the deep, unless it is something that will astound your eye or pebble your skin with gooseflesh, makes for a rare feeling. Sharing this with Rudy, who had been my friend for ten years, since he was fresh out of grad school at Penn State, enhanced that feeling. In the summer we sat and watched our lines, we chatted, we

chased our depressions with beer and cursed the flies; in winter, the best season for our sport, there were no flies. The cold was like ozone to my nostrils, the silence complete, and the denuded woods posed an abstract of slants and perpendiculars, silver and dark, nature as Chinese puzzle. Through frays in the clouds we glimpsed the fat, lordly crests of the Bittersmiths.

I was reaching for another Iron City when I felt a tug on the line. I kept still and felt another tug, then—though I waited the better part of a minute—nothing.

"Something's down in there," I said, peering at the impenetrable surface.

"You get a hit?" Rudy asked.

"Uh-huh."

"How much line you got out?"

"Twenty, twenty-five feet."

"Must have been a current."

"It happened twice."

"Probably a current."

I pictured an enormous grouper-like face with blind milky-blue globes for eyes, moon lanterns, and a pair of weak, underdeveloped hands groping at my line. The Polozny plunges deep underground east of the bridge, welling up into these holes punched through the Pennsylvania rock, sometimes flooding the woods in the spring, and a current was the likely explanation; but I preferred to think that those subterranean chambers were the uppermost tiers of a secret world and that now and again some piscine Columbus, fleeing the fabulous madness of his civilization, palaces illumined by schools of electric eels controlled by the thoughts of freshwater octopi, limestone streets patrolled by gangs of river crocs, grand avenues crowded with giant-snail busses and pedestrian trout, sought to breach the final barrier and find in the world above a more peaceful prospect.

"You have no imagination," I said.

Rudy grunted. "Fishing doesn't require an imagination. That's what makes it fun."

Motionless, he was a bearish figure muffled in a down parka and a wool cap, his face reddened by the cold, breath steaming. He seemed down at the mouth and, thinking it might cheer him up, I asked how he was coming with the comic strip.

"I quit working on it," he said.

"Why the hell'd you do that? It was your best thing ever."

"It was giving me nightmares."

I absorbed this, gave it due consideration. "Didn't strike me as nightmare material. It's kind of bleak. Black comedy. But nothing to freak over."

"It changed." He flicked his wrist, flicking his line sideways. "The veins of pork.... You remember them?"

"Yeah, sure."

"They started growing, twisting all through the mountain. The mineworkers were happy. Delirious. They were going to be rich, and they threw a big party to celebrate. A pork festival. Actually, that part was pretty funny. I'll show it to you. They made this enormous pork sculpture and were all wearing pork pie hats. They had a beauty contest to name Miss Pork. The winner ... I used Mia for a model."

"You're a sick bastard, you know that?"

Again, Rudy grunted, this time in amusement. "Then the stars began eating the pork. The mineworkers would open a new vein and the stars would pour in and choff it down. They were ravenous. Nothing could stop them. The mineworkers were starving. That's when I started having nightmares. There was something gruesome about the way I had them eating. I tried to change it, but I couldn't make it work any other way."

I said it still didn't sound like the stuff of nightmares, and Rudy said, "You had to be there."

We fell to talking about other things. The Steelers, could they repeat? Stanky. I asked Rudy if he was coming to the EP release and he said he wouldn't miss it. "He's a genius guitar player," he said. "Too bad he's such a creep."

"Goes with the territory," I said. "Like with Robert Frost beating his wife. Stanky's a creep, he's a perv. A moral dwarf. But he is for sure talented. And you know me. I'll put up with perversity if someone's talented." I clapped Rudy on the shoulder. "That's why I put up with you. You better finish that strip or I'll dump your ass and start hanging with a better class of people."

"Forget the strip," he said glumly. "I'm too busy designing equipment sheds and stables."

We got into a discussion about Celebrity Wifebeaters, enumerating the most recent additions to the list, and this led us—by loose association only—to the subject of Andrea. I told him about our conversation at McGuigan's and what she had said about the outbreak of creativity, about love.

"Maybe she's got a point," Rudy said. "You two have always carried a torch, but you burned each other so badly in the divorce, I never would have thought you'd get back together." He cracked open a beer, handed it to me, and opened one for himself. "You hear about Colvin Jacobs?"

"You mean something besides he's a sleazeball?"

"He's come up with a plan to reduce the county's tax burden by half. Everybody says it's the real quill."

"I'm surprised he found the time, what with all those congressional junkets."

"And Judy Trickle, you hear about her?"

"Now you're scaring me."

"I know. Ol' Juggs 'R' Us Judy."

"She should have been your model for Miss Pork, not Mia. What'd she do? Design a newfangled bra?"

"Lifts *and* separates."

"You mean that's it?"

"You nailed it."

"No way!"

"She's been wearing a prototype on the show the last few days. There's a noticeable change." He did a whispery voiceover voice. "The curves are softer, more natural."

"Bullshit!"

"I'm serious. Check her out."

"I got better things to do than watch *AM Waterford*."

"I remember the time when you were a devoted fan."

"That was post-Andrea ... and pre-Andrea." I chuckled. "Remember the show when she demonstrated the rowing machine? Leotards aren't built to handle that sort of stress."

"I knew the guy who produced her back then. He said they gave her stuff like that to do, because they were hoping for a Wardrobe Malfunction. They weren't prepared for the reaction."

"Janet Jackson's no Judy Trickle. It was like a dam bursting. Like ... help me out here, man."

"Like the birth of twin zeppelins."

"Like the embodiment of the yang, like the Aquarian dawn."

Rudy jiggled his line. "This is beginning to border on the absurd."

"You're the one brought her up."

"I'm not talking about Judy, I'm talking about the whole thing. The outbreak."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, we're way past absurd if Miz Trickle's involved. We're heading toward surreal."

"I've heard of five or six more people who've had ... breakthroughs, I suppose you'd call them."

"How come I don't hear about these people except from you? Do you sit in your office all day, collecting odd facts about Black William?"

"I get more traffic than you do, and people are talking about it now."

"What are they saying?"

"What you'd expect. Isn't it weird? It must be the water, the pollution. I've even heard civic pride expressed. Someone coined the phrase, 'Black William, Pennsylvania's Brain Capital.'"

"That's taking it a bit far." I had a slug of Iron City. "So nobody's panicking? Saying head for the hills?"

"Who said that?"

"Andrea. She was a little disturbed. She didn't exactly say it, but she seemed to think this thing might not be all good."

He tightened his lips and produced a series of squeaking noises. "I think Andrea's right. Not about head for the hills. I don't know about that. But I think whatever this is, it's affecting people in different ways. Some of them emotionally."

"Why's that?"

"I..." He tipped back his head, stared at the clouds. "I don't want to talk anymore, man. Okay? Let's just fish."

It began to snow again, tiny flakes, the kind that presage a big fall, but we kept fishing, jiggling our lines in the dead water, drinking Iron City. Something was troubling Rudy, but I didn't press him. I thought about Andrea. She planned to get off early and we were going to dinner in Waterford and maybe catch a movie. I was anticipating kissing her, touching her in the dark, while the new James Bond blew stuff up or (this was more likely) Kenneth Branagh destroyed *As You Like It*, when a tremor ran across the surface of the pond. Both Rudy and I sat up straight and peered. "T. Rex is coming," I said. An instant later, the pond was lashed into a turbulence that sent waves slopping in all directions, as if a large swimmer had drawn near the surface, then made a sudden turn, propelling itself down toward its customary haunts with a flick of its tail. Yet we saw nothing. Nary a fin nor scale nor section of plated armor. We waited, breathless, for the beast to return.

"Definitely not a current," said Rudy.

* * * *

Except for the fact that Rudy didn't show, the EP release went well. The music was great, the audience responsive, we sold lots of CDs and souvenirs, including Average Joe dogtags and Joe Stanky's Army khaki T-shirts, with the pear-shaped (less so after diets and death marches) one's silhouette in white beneath the arc of the lettering. This despite Stanky's obvious displeasure with everyone involved. He was angry at me because I had stolen his top hat and refused to push back the time of the performance to ten o'clock so he could join the crowd in front of the library waiting for the return of Black William (their number had swelled to more than three hundred since the arrival of the science team from Pitt, led by a youngish professor who, with his rugged build and mustache and plaid wool shirts, might have stepped out of an ad for trail mix). He was angry at Geno and Jerry for the usual reasons—they were incompetent clowns, they didn't understand the music, and they had spurned the opportunity to watch TV with him and Liz. Throughout the hour and a quarter show, he sulked and spoke not a word to the audience, and then grew angry at them when a group of frat boys initiated a chant of "Skanky, Skanky, Skanky...." Yet the vast majority were blown away and my night was made when I spotted an A&R man from Atlantic sneaking around.

I was in my office the next morning, reading the *Gazette*, which had come late to the party (as usual) and was running a light-hearted feature on "Pennsylvania's Brain Capital," heavy on Colvin Mason quotes, when I received a call from Crazy Ed in Wilkes-Barre, saying that he'd e-mailed me a couple of enhancements of Pin's photograph. I opened the e-mails and the attachments, then asked what I was looking at.

"Beats me," said Ed. "The first is up close on one of those white dealies. You can get an idea of the shape. Sort of like a sea urchin. A globe with spines ... except there's so many spines, you can't make out the globe. You see it?"

"Yeah. You can't tell me what it is?"

"I don't have a clue." Ed made a buzzing noise, something he did whenever he was stumped. "I assumed the image was fake, that the kid had run two images together, because there's a shift in perspective between the library and the white dealies. They look like they're coming from a long way off. But then I realized the perspective was totally fucked up. It's like part of the photo was taken through a depth of water, or something that's shifting like water. Different sections appear to be at different distances all through the image. Did you notice a rippling effect ... or anything like that?"

"I only saw it for a couple of seconds. I didn't have time to get much more than a glimpse."

"Okay." Ed made the buzzing noise again. "Have you opened the second attachment?"

"Yep."

"Once I figured out I couldn't determine distances, I started looking at the black stuff, the field or whatever. I didn't get anywhere with that. It's just black. Undifferentiated. Then I took a look at the horizon line. That's how it appeared to you, right? A black field stretching to a horizon? Well, if that was the case, you'd think you'd see something at the front edge, but the only thing I picked up was those bumps on the horizon."

I studied the bumps.

"Kinda look like the tops of heads, don't they?" said Ed.

The bumps could have been heads; they could also have been bushes, animals, or a hundred other things; but his suggestion gave me an uneasy feeling. He said he would fool around with the picture some more and get back to me. I listened to demos. Food of the Gods (King Crimson redux). Corpus Christy (a transsexual front man who couldn't sing, but the name grew on me). The Land Mines (middling roots rock). Gopher Lad (a heroin band from Minnesota). A band called Topless Coroner intrigued me, but I passed after realizing all their songs were about car parts. Around eleven-thirty I took a call from a secretary at DreamWorks who asked if I would hold for William Wine. I couldn't place the name, but said that I would hold and leafed through the Rolodex, trying to find him.

"Vernon!" said an enthusiastic voice from the other side of creation. "Bill Wine. I'm calling for David Geffen. I believe you had drinks with him at the Plug Awards last year. You made quite an impression on David."

The Plugs were the Oscars of the indie business—Geffen had an ongoing interest in indie rock and had put in an appearance. I recalled being in a group gathered around him at the bar, but I did not recall making an impression.

"He made a heck of an impression on me," I said.

Pleasant laughter, so perfect it sounded canned. "David sends his regards," said Wine. "He's sorry he couldn't contact you personally, but he's going to be tied up all day."

"What can I do for you?"

"David listened to that new artist of yours. Joe Stanky? In all the years I've known him, I've never heard him react like he did this morning."

"He liked it?"

"He didn't like it..." Wine paused for dramatic effect. "He was knocked out."

I wondered how Geffen had gotten hold of the EP. Mine not to reason why, I figured.

Wine told me that Geffen wanted to hear more. Did I have any other recorded material?

"I've got nine songs on tape," I said. "But some of them are raw."

"David likes raw. Can we get a dupe?"

"You know ... I usually prefer to push out an album or two before I look for a deal."

"Listen, Vernon. We're not going to let you go to the poorhouse on this."

"That's a relief."

"In fact, David wanted me to sound you out about our bringing you in under the DreamWorks umbrella."

Stunned, I said, "In what capacity?"

"I'll let David tell you about that. He'll call you in a day or two. He's had his eye on you for some time."

I envisioned Sauron spying from his dark tower. I had a dim view of corporate life and I wasn't as overwhelmed by this news as Wine had likely presumed I would be. After the call ended, however, I felt as if I had modeled for Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel mural, the man about to be touched by God's billionaire-ish finger. My impulse was to tell Stanky, but I didn't want his ego to grow more swollen. I called Andrea and learned she would be in court until midafternoon. I started to call Rudy, then thought it would be too easy for him to refuse me over the phone. Better to yank him out of his cave and buy him lunch. I wanted to bust his chops about missing the EP release and I needed to talk with someone face-to-face, to analyze this thing that was happening around Stanky. Had the buzz I'd generated about him taken wings on a magical current? The idea that David Geffen was planning to call seemed preposterous. Was Stanky that good? Was I? What, if anything, did Geffen have in mind? Rudy, who enjoyed playing Yoda to my Luke, would help place these questions in coherent perspective.

When I reached Rudy's office, I found Gwen on the phone. Her makeup, usually perfect, was in need of repair; it appeared that she had been crying. "I don't know," she said with strain in her voice. "You'll have to.... No. I really don't know."

I pointed to the inner office and mouthed, *Is he in?*

She signaled me to wait.

"I've got someone here," she said into the phone. "I'll have to.... Yes. Yes, I will let you know. All right. Yes. Good-bye." She hung up and, her chin quivering, tried several times to speak, finally blurting out, "I'm so sorry. He's dead. Rudy's dead."

I think I may have laughed—I made some sort of noise, some expression of denial, yet I knew it was true. My face flooded with heat and I went back a step, as if the words had thrown me off-balance.

Gwen said that Rudy had committed suicide early that morning. He had—according to his wife—worked in the office until after midnight, then driven home and taken some pills. The phone rang again. I left Gwen to deal with it and stepped into the inner office to call Beth. I sat at Rudy's desk, but that felt wrong, so I walked around with the phone for a while. Rudy had been a depressed guy, but hell, everyone in Black William was depressed about something. I thought that I had been way more depressed than Rudy. He seemed to have it together. Nice wife, healthy income, kids. Sure, he was a for-shit architect in a for-shit town, and not doing the work he wanted, but that was no reason to kill yourself.

Standing by the drafting table, I saw his waste basket was crammed with torn paper. A crawly sensation rippled the skin between my shoulder blades. I dumped the shreds onto the table. Rudy had done a compulsive job of tearing them up, but I could tell they were pieces of his comic strip. Painstakingly, I sorted through them and managed to reassemble most of a frame. In it, a pair of black hands (presumably belonging to a mineworker) were holding a gobbet of pork, as though in offering; above it floated a spiky white ball. The ball had extruded a longish spike to penetrate the pork and the image gave the impression that the ball was sucking meat through a straw. I stared at the frame, trying to interpret it, to tie the image in with everything that had happened, but I felt a vibration pass through my body, like the

heavy, impersonal signal of Rudy's death, and I imagined him on the bathroom floor, foam on his mouth, and I had to sit back down.

Beth, when I called her, didn't feel like talking. I asked if there was anything I could do, and she said if I could find out when the police were going to release the body, she would appreciate it. She said she would let me know about the funeral, sounding—as had Gwen—like someone who was barely holding it together. Hearing that in her voice caused me to leak a few tears and, when she heard me start to cry, she quickly got off the phone, as if she didn't want my lesser grief to pollute her own, as if Rudy dying had broken whatever bond there was between us. I thought this might be true.

I called the police and, after speaking to a functionary, reached a detective whom I knew, Ross Peloblanco, who asked my connection to the deceased.

"Friend of the family," I said. "I'm calling for his wife."

"Huh," said Peloblanco, his attention distracted by something in his office.

"So when are you going to release him?"

"I think they already done the autopsy. There's been a bunch of suicides lately and the ME put a rush on this one."

"How many's a bunch?"

"Oops! Did I say that? Don't worry about it. The ME's a whack job. He's batshit about conspiracy theories."

"So ... can I tell the funeral home to come now?"

Peloblanco sneezed, said, "Shit!" and then went on: "Bowen did some work for my mom. She said he was a real gentleman. You never know what's going on with people, do ya?" He blew his nose. "I guess you can come pick him up whenever."

* * * *

The waters of the Polozny never freeze. No matter how cold it gets or how long the cold lasts, they are kept warm by a cocktail of pollutants and, though the river may flow more sluggishly in winter, it continues on its course, black and gelid. There is something statutory about its poisonous constancy. It seems less river than regulation, a divine remark rendered daily into law, engraving itself upon the world year after year until its long meander has eaten a crack that runs the length and breadth of creation, and its acids and oxides drain into the void.

Between the viewing and the funeral, in among the various consoling talks and offerings of condolence, I spent a great deal of time gazing at the Polozny, sitting on the stoop and smoking, enduring the cold wind, brooding over half-baked profundities. The muted roaring of the mill surrounded me, as did dull thuds and clunks and distant car horns that seemed to issue from the gray sky, the sounds of business as usual, the muffled engine of commerce. Black William must be, I thought, situated on the ass-end of Purgatory, the place where all those overlooked by God were kept. The dead river dividing a dying landscape, a dingy accumulation of snow melting into slush on its banks; the mill, a Hell of red brick with its chimney smoke of souls; the scatters of crows winging away from leafless trees; old Mrs. Gables two doors down, tottering out to the sidewalk, peering along the street for the mail, for a glimpse of her son's maroon Honda Civic, for some hopeful thing, then, her hopes dashed, laboriously climbing her stairs and going inside to sit alone and count the ticks of her clock: these were evidences of God's fabulous absence, His careless abandonment of a destinyless town to its several griefs. I scoffed at those who

professed to understand grief, who deemed it a simple matter, a painful yet comprehensible transition, and partitioned the process into stages (my trivial imagination made them into gaudy stagecoaches painted different colors) in order to enable its victims to adapt more readily to the house rules. After the initial shock of Rudy's suicide had waned, grief overran me like a virus, it swarmed, breeding pockets of weakness and fever, eventually receding at its own pace, on its own terms, and though it may have been subject to an easy compartmentalization—Anger, Denial, etc.—that kind of analysis did not address its nuances and could not remedy the thousand small bitternesses that grief inflames and encysts. On the morning of the funeral, when I voiced one such bitterness, complaining about how Beth had treated me since Rudy died, mentioning the phone call, pointing out other incidences of her intolerance, her rudeness in pushing me away, Andrea—who had joined me on the stoop—set me straight.

"She's not angry at you," Andrea said. "She's jealous. You and Rudy ... that was a part of him she never shared, and when she sees you, she doesn't know how to handle it."

"You think?"

"I used to feel that way."

"About me and Rudy"

She nodded. "And about the business. I don't feel that way now. I guess I'm older. I understand you and Rudy had a guy thing and I didn't need to know everything about it. But Beth's dealing with a lot right now. She's oversensitive and she feels ... jilted. She feels that Rudy abandoned her for you. A little, anyway. So she's jilting you. She'll get over it, or she won't. People are funny like that. Sometimes resentments are all that hold them together. You shouldn't take it personally."

I refitted my gaze to the Polozny, more or less satisfied by what she had said. "We live on the banks of the River Styx," I said after a while. "At least it has a Styx-ian gravitas."

"Stygian," she said.

I turned to her, inquiring.

"That's the word you wanted. Stygian."

"Oh ... right."

A silence marked by the passing of a mail truck, its tire chains grinding the asphalt and spitting slush; the driver waved.

"I think I know why Rudy did it," I said, and told her what I had found in the office waste basket. "More than anything, he wanted to do creative work. When he finally did, it gave him nightmares. It messed with his head. He must have built it into this huge thing and...." I tapped out a cigarette, stuck it in my mouth. "It doesn't sound like much of a reason, but I can relate. That's why it bites my ass to see guys like Stanky who do something creative every time they take a piss. *I* want to write those songs. *I* want to have the acclaim. It gets me thinking, someday I might wind up like Rudy."

"That's not you. You said it yourself—you get pissed off. You find someplace else to put your energy." She ruffled my hair. "Buck up, Sparky. You're going to live a long time and have lots worse problems."

It crossed my mind to suggest that the stars might have played some mysterious part in Rudy's death, and to mention the rash of suicides (five, I had learned); but all that seemed unimportant, dwarfed by the death itself.

At one juncture during that weekend, Stanky ventured forth from TV-land to offer his sympathies. He might have been sincere, but I didn't trust his sincerity—it had an obsequious quality and I believed he was currying favor, paving the way so he might hit me up for another advance. Pale and shivering, hunched against the cold; the greasy collar of his jacket turned up; holding a Camel in two nicotine-stained fingers; his doughy features cinched in an expression of exaggerated dolor: I hated him at that moment and told him I was taking some days off, that he could work on the album or go play with his high school sycophants. “It's up to you,” I said. “Just don't bother me about it.” He made no reply, but the front door slamming informed me that he had not taken it well.

On Wednesday, Patty Prole (nee Patricia Hand), the leader of the Swimming Holes, a mutual friend of mine and Rudy's who had come down from Pittsburgh for the funeral, joined me and Andrea for dinner at McGuigan's, and, as we strolled past the park, I recalled that more than a month—thirty-four days, to be exact—had elapsed since I had last seen the stars. The crowd had dwindled to about a hundred and fifty (Stanky and Liz among them). They stood in clumps around the statue, clinging to the hope that Black William would appear; though judging by their general listlessness, the edge of their anticipation had been blunted and they were gathered there because they had nothing better to do. The van belonging to the science people from Pitt remained parked at the southeast corner of the library, but I had heard they were going to pull up stakes if nothing happened in the next day or two.

McGuigan's was a bubble of heat and light and happy conversation. A Joe Henry song played in the background; Pitt basketball was on every TV. I had not thought the whole town would be dressed in mourning, but the jolly, bustling atmosphere came as something of a shock. They had saved the back booth for us and, after drinking for a half hour or so, I found myself enjoying the evening. Patty was a slight, pretty, blue-eyed blonde in her late twenties, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans. To accommodate the sober purpose of this trip home, she had removed her visible piercings. With the majority of her tattoos covered by the jacket, she looked like an ordinary girl from western Pennsylvania and nothing like the exotic, pantherine creature she became on stage. When talk turned to Rudy, Andrea and I embraced the subject, offering humorous anecdotes and fond reminiscence, but Patty, though she laughed, was subdued. She toyed with her fork, idly stabbing holes in the label on her beer bottle, and at length revealed the reason for her moodiness.

"Did Rudy ever tell you we had a thing?" she asked.

"He alluded to it," I said. "But well after the fact. Years."

"I bet you guys talked all about it when you're up at Kempton's Pond. He said you used to talk about the local talent when you're up there sometimes."

Andrea elbowed me, not too sharply, in mock reproval.

"As I remember, the conversation went like this," I said. "We were talking about bands, the Swimming Holes came up, and he mentioned he'd had an affair with you. And I said, 'Oh, yeah?' And Rudy said, 'Yeah.' Then after a minute he said, 'Patty's a great girl.'"

"That's what he said? We had an affair? That's the word he used?"

"I believe so."

"He didn't say he was banging me or like that?"

"No."

"And that's all he said?" Patty stared at me sidelong, as if trying to penetrate layers of deception.

"That's all I remember."

"I bet you tried to get more out of him. I know you. You were hungering for details."

"I can't promise I wasn't," I said. "I just don't remember. You know Rudy. He was a private guy. You could beat on him with a shovel and not get a thing out of him. I'm surprised he told me that much."

She held my gaze a moment longer. "Shit! I can't tell if you're lying."

"He's not," said Andrea.

"You got him scoped, huh? He's dead to rights." Patty grinned and leaned against the wall, putting one fashionably booted foot up on the bench. "Rudy and me ... It was a couple weeks right before the band left town. It was probably stupid. Sometimes I regret it, but sometimes I don't."

Andrea asked how it happened, and Patty, who obviously wanted to talk about it, said, "You know. Like always. We started hanging out, talking. Finally I asked him straight out, 'Where's this going, Rudy?' Because we only had a couple of weeks and I wanted to know if it was all in my head. He got this peculiar look on his face and kissed me. Like I said, it didn't last long, but it was deep, you know. That's why I'm glad Rudy didn't tell everyone how it was in the sack. It's a dumb thing to worry about, but..." Her voice had developed a tremor. "I guess that's what I'm down to."

"You loved him," said Andrea.

"Yeah. I did." Patty shook off the blues and sat up. "There wasn't anywhere for it to go. He'd never leave his kids and I was going off to Pittsburgh. I hated his wife for a while. I didn't feel guilty about it. But now I look at her.... She was never part of our scene. With Vernon and Rudy and the bands. She lived off to the side of it all. It wasn't like that with you, Andrea. You had your law thing going, but when you were around, you were into it. You were one of the girls. But Beth was so totally not into it. She still can't stand us. And now it feels like I stole something from her. That really sucks."

Platitudes occurred to me, but I kept quiet. Andrea stirred at my side.

"Sometimes it pays to be stupid," Patty said gloomily.

I had a moment when the light and happy babble of the bar were thrust aside by the gonging thought that my friend was dead, and I didn't entirely understand what she meant, but I knew she was right.

Patty snagged a passing waitress. "Can I get a couple of eggs over?" she asked. "I know you're not serving breakfast, but that's all I eat is breakfast." She winked broadly at the waitress. "Most important meal of the day, so I make every meal breakfast."

The waitress began to explain why eggs were impossible, but Patty cut in, saying, "You don't want me to starve, do ya? You must have a couple of eggs back there. Some fries and bacon. Toast. We're huge tippers, I swear."

Exasperated, the waitress said she'd see if the cook would do it.

"I know you can work him, honey," Patty said. "Tell him to make the eggs dippy, okay?"

* * * *

We left McGuigan's shortly after eight, heading for Corky's, a working man's bar where we could do some serious drinking, but as we came abreast of the statue, Patty tapped it and said, "Hey, let's go talk to Stanky."

Stanky and Liz were sitting on the base of the statue; Pin and the other boys were cross-legged at their feet, like students attending their master. The crowd had thinned and was down, I'd guess, to about a hundred and twenty; a third of that number were clustered around the science van and the head scientist, who was hunched over a piece of equipment set up on the edge of the library lawn. I lagged behind as we walked over and noticed Liz stiffen at the sight of Patty. The boys gazed adoringly at her. Stanky cast me a spiteful glance.

"I heard your EP, man," Patty said. "Very cool."

Stanky muttered, "Yeah, thanks," and stared at her breasts.

Like me, Patty was a sucker for talent, used to the ways of musicians, and she ignored this ungracious response. She tried to draw him out about the music, but Stanky had a bug up his ass about something and wouldn't give her much. The statue loomed above, throwing a shadow across us; the horse's head, with its rolling eyes and mouth jerked open by the reins, had been rendered more faithfully than had Black William's face ... or else he was a man whose inner crudeness had coarsened and simplified his features. In either case, he was one ugly mother, his shoulder-length hair framing a maniacal mask. Seeing him anew, I would not have described his expression as laughing or alarmed, but might have said it possessed a ferocious exultancy.

Patty began talking to the boys about the Swimming Holes's upcoming tour, and Andrea was speaking with Pin. Stanky oozed over to me, Liz at his shoulder, and said, "We laid down a new song this afternoon."

"Oh, yeah?" I said.

"It's decent. 'Misery Loves Company.'"

In context, it wasn't clear, until Stanky explained it, that this was a title.

"A guy from DreamWorks called," he said. "William Wine."

"Yeah, a few days back. Did Kiwanda tell you about it?"

"No, he called today. Kiwanda was on her break and I talked to him."

"What'd he say?"

"He said they loved the tape and David Geffen's going to call." He squinched up his face, as if summoning a mighty effort. "How come you didn't tell me about the tape? About him calling before?"

This, I understood, was the thing that had been bothering him. "Because it's business," I said. "I'm not going to tell you about every tickle we get. Every phone call."

He squinted at me meanly. "Why not?"

"Do you realize how much of this just goes away? These people are like flies. They buzz around, but they hardly ever land. Now the guy's called twice, that makes it a little more interesting. I'll give it a day or two, and call him back."

Ordinarily, Stanky would have retreated from confrontation, but with Liz bearing witness (I inferred by her determined look that she was his partner in this, that she had egged him on), his macho was at stake. "I ought to know everything that's going on," he said.

"Nothing's going on. When something happens, I'll tell you."

"It's my career," he said in a tone that conveyed petulance, defiance, and the notion that he had been wronged. "I want to be in on it, you know."

"Your career." I felt suddenly liberated from all restraint. "Your career consists of my efforts on your behalf and three hours on-stage in Nowhere, Pennsylvania. I've fed you, I've given you shelter, money, a band. And now you want me to cater to your stupid whims? To run downstairs and give you an update on every little piece of Stanky gossip because it'll gratify your ego? So you can tell your minions here how great you are? Fuck you! You don't like how I'm handling things, clear the hell out of my house!"

I walked off several paces and stood on the curb, facing the library. That rough cube of Pennsylvania granite accurately reflected my mood. Patches of snow dappled the lawn. There was a minor hub bub near the science truck, but I was enraged and paid it no mind. Andrea came up next to me and took my arm. "Easy, big fella," she said.

"That asshole's been under my roof for what? Two months? It feels like two years. His stink permeates every corner of my life. It's like living with a goat!"

"I know," she said. "But it's business."

I wondered if she was hammering home an old point, but her face gave no sign of any such intent; in fact, her neutral expression dissolved into one of befuddlement. She was staring at the library, and when I turned in that direction, I saw the library had vanished. An immense rectangle—a window with uneven edges—had been chopped out of the wall of the world, out of the night, its limits demarked by trees, lawn, and sky, and through it poured a flood of blackness, thicker and more sluggish than the Polozny. Thick like molasses or hot tar. It seemed to splash down, to crest in a wave, and hold in that shape. Along the top of the crest, I could see lesser, half-defined shapes, vaguely human, and I had the thought that the wave was extruding an army from its substance, producing a host of creatures who appeared to be men. The temperature had dropped sharply. There was a chill, chemical odor and, close above our heads (five feet, I'd estimate), the stars were coasting. That was how they moved. They glided as though following an unseen track, then were shunted sideways or diagonally or backward. Their altitude never changed, and I suspect now that they were prevented from changing it by some physical limitation. They did not resemble stars as much as they did Crazy Ed's enhancement: ten or twelve globes studded with longish white spines, the largest some eight feet in diameter, glowing brightly enough to illumine the faces of the people beneath them. I could not determine if they were made of flesh or metal or something less knowable. They gave forth high-frequency squeaks that reminded me, in their static quality, of the pictographs in Rudy's cartoons, the language of the stars.

I'm not sure how long we stood there, but it could not have been more than seconds before I realized that the wave crest was not holding, it was inching toward us across the lawn. I caught Andrea's hand and tried to run. She screamed (a yelp, really), and others screamed and tried to run. But the wave flowed around us, moving now like black quicksilver, in an instant transforming the center of town into a flood plain, marooning people on islands of solid ground bounded by a waist-high flood that was coursing swiftly past. As Andrea and I clung together, I saw Stanky and Liz, Pin and Patty, the rest of the kids, isolated beside the statue—there were dozens of such groupings throughout the park. It seemed a black net of an extremely coarse weave had been thrown over us all and we were standing up among its strands. We stared at each other, uncertain of our danger; some called for help. Then something rose from the blackness directly in front of me and Andrea. A man, I think, and fully seven feet tall. An African Negro by the scarifications on his face. His image not quite real—it appeared to be both embedded in the tarry stuff and shifting over its surface, as if he had been rotoscoped. At the same time, a star came to hover over us, so that my terror was divided. I had from it an impression of eagerness—the feeling

washed down upon me; I was drenched in it—and then, abruptly, of disinterest, as if it found Andrea and me unworthy of its attention. With the onset of that disinterest, the black man melted away into the tar and the star passed on to another group of stranded souls.

The largest groups were those two clustered about the science van. Figures began to sprout from the tar around them, and not all of these were men. Some were spindly as eels, others squat and malformed, but they were too far away for me to assign them a more particular identity. Stars hovered above the two groups, and the black figures lifted them one by one, kicking and screaming (screams now issued from every corner of the park), and held them up to the stars. They did not, as in Rudy's cartoons, suck in the meat through one of their spikes; they never touched their victims. A livid arc, fiery black in color, leaped between star and human, visible for a split-second, and then the figure that had lifted the man or woman, dropped him or her carelessly to the ground and melted back into the flood, and the star moved on. Andrea buried her face in my shoulder, but I could not turn away, transfixed by the scene. And as I watched these actions repeated again and again—the figure melting up, lifting someone to a star, and then discarding him, the victim still alive, rolling over, clutching an injured knee or back, apparently not much the worse for wear—I realized the stars were grazing, that this was their harvest, a reaping of seed sown. They were harvesting our genius, a genius they had stimulated, and they were attracted to a specific yield that manifested in an arc of fiery black. The juice of the poet, the canniness of the inventor, the guile of a villain. They failed to harvest the entire crop, only that gathered in the park. The remainder of those affected would go on to create more garden tools and foundation garments and tax plans, and the stars would continue on their way, a path that now and again led them through the center of Black William. I must confess that, amid the sense of relief accompanying this revelation, I felt an odd twinge of envy when I realized that the genius of love was not to their taste.

How did I know these things? I think when the star hovered above us, it initiated some preliminary process, one incidental to the feelings of eagerness and disinterest it projected, and, as it prepared to take its nutrient, its treasure (I haven't a clue as to why they harvested us, whether we were for them a commodity or sustenance or something else entire), we shared a brief communion. As proof, I can only say that Andrea holds this same view and there is a similar consensus, albeit with slight variances, among all those who stood beneath the stars that night. But at the moment the question was not paramount. I turned toward the statue. The storefronts beyond were obscured by a black rectangle, like the one that had eclipsed the library, and this gave me to believe that the flood was pouring off into an unguessable dimension, though it still ran deep around us. Stanky and Liz had climbed onto the statue and were clinging to Black William's leg and saddlehorn respectively. Patty was leaning against the base, appearing dazed. Pin stood beside her, taking photographs with his cell phone. One of the kids was crying, and his friends were busy consoling him. I called out, asking if everyone was all right. Stanky waved and then the statue's double reared from the flood—it rose up slowly, the image of a horse and a rider with flowing hair, blacker than the age-darkened bronze of its likeness. They were so equal in size and posture and stillness, it was as if I were looking at the statue and its living shadow. Its back was to me, and I cannot say if it was laughing. And then the shadow extended an arm and snatched Stanky from his perch. Plucked him by the collar and held him high, so that a star could extract its due, a flash of black energy. And when that was done, it did not let him fall, but began to sink back into the flood, Stanky still in its grasp. I thought it would take him under the tar, that they would both be swallowed and Stanky's future was to be that of a dread figure rising blackly to terrify the indigents in another sector of the plenum. But Black William—or the agency that controlled him—must have had a change of heart and, at the last second, just as Stanky's feet were about to merge with that tarry surface, dropped him clear of the flood, leaving him inert upon the pavement.

The harvest continued several minutes more (the event lasted twenty-seven minutes in all) and then the flood receded, again with quicksilver speed, to form itself into a wave that was poised to splash down somewhere on the far side of that black window. And when the window winked out, when the

storefronts snapped back into view, the groaning that ensued was much louder and more articulated than that we'd heard a month previously. Not a sound of holy woe, but of systemic stress, as if the atoms that composed the park and its surround were complaining about the insult they had incurred. All across the park, people ran to tend the injured. Andrea went to Liz, who had fallen from the statue and tearfully declared her ankle broken. Patty said she was dizzy and had a headache, and asked to be left alone. I knelt beside Stanky and asked if he was okay. He lay propped on his elbows, gazing at the sky.

"I wanted to see," he said vacantly. "They said...."

"They?" I said. "You mean the stars?"

He blinked, put a hand to his brow. As ever, his emotions were writ large, yet I don't believe the look of shame that washed over his face was an attempt to curry favor or promote any agenda. I believe his shame was informed by a rejection such as Andrea and I experienced, but of a deeper kind, more explicit and relating to an opportunity lost.

I made to help him up, intending to question him further; but he shook me off. He had remembered who he was, or at least who he had been pretending to be. Stanky the Great. A man of delicate sensibilities whom I had offended by my casual usage and gross maltreatment. His face hardened, becoming toadlike as he summoned every ounce of his Lilliputian rage. He rolled up to his knees, then got to his feet. Without another word to me, he arranged his features into a look of abiding concern and hurried to give comfort to his Liz.

* * * *

In the wider world, Black William has come to be known as "that town full of whackos" or "the place where they had that hallucination," for as with all inexplicable things, the stars and our interaction with them have been dismissed by the reasonable and responsible among us, relegated to the status of an aberration, irrelevant to the big picture, to the roar of practical matters with which we are daily assailed. I myself, to an extent, have dismissed it, yet my big picture has been enlarged somewhat. Of an evening, I will sit upon the library steps and cast my mind out along the path of the stars and wonder if they were metaphoric or literal presences, nomads or machines, farmers or a guerrilla force, and I will question what use that black flash had for them, and I will ponder whether they were themselves evil or recruited evil men to assist them in their purpose simply because they were suited to the task. I subscribe to the latter view; otherwise, I doubt Stanky would have wanted to go with them ... unless they offered a pleasurable reward, unless they embodied for him the promise of a sublime perversion in exchange for his service, an eternal tour of duty with his brothers-in-arms, dreaming in that tarry flood. And what of their rejection of him? Was it because he was insufficiently evil? Too petty in his cruelty? Or could it have been he lacked the necessary store of some brain chemical? The universe is all whys and maybes. All meanings coincide, all answers are condensed to one or none. Nothing yields to logic.

Since the coming of the stars, Black William has undergone a great renewal. Although in the immediate aftermath there was a hue and cry about fleeing the town, shutting it down, calmer voices prevailed, pointing to the fact that there had been no fatalities, unless one counted the suicides, and but a single disappearance (Colvin Jacobs, who was strolling through the park that fateful night), and it could be better understood, some maintained, in light of certain impending charges against him (embezzlement, fraud, solicitation). Stay calm, said the voices. A few scrapes and bruises, a smattering of nervous breakdowns—that's no reason to fling up your hands. Let's think this over. Colvin's a canny sort, not one to let an opportunity pass. At this very moment he may be developing a skin cancer on Varadero Beach or Ipanema (though it is my belief that he may be sojourning in a more unlikely place). And while the town thought it over, the tourists began to arrive by the busload. Drawn by Pin's photographs, which had been published around the world, and later by his best-selling book (co-authored by the editor of the

Gazette), they came from Japan, from Europe, from Punxsutawney and Tuckhannock, from every quarter of the globe, a flood of tourists that resolved into a steady flow and demanded to be housed, fed, T-shirted, souvenired, and swindled. They needed theories upon which to hang their faith, so theory-making became a cottage industry and theories abounded, both supernatural and quasi-scientific, each having their own battery of proponents and debunkers. A proposal was floated in the city council that a second statue be erected to commemorate Black William's visitation, but the ladies of the Heritage Committee fought tooth and nail to preserve the integrity of the original, and now can be seen twice a year lavishing upon him a vigorous scrubbing.

Businesses thrived, mine included—this due to the minor celebrity I achieved and the sale of Stanky and his album to Warner Brothers (David Geffen never called). The album did well and the single, “Misery Loves Company,” climbed to No. 44 on the Billboard charts. I have no direct contact with Stanky, but learned from Liz, who came to the house six months later to pick up her clothes (those abandoned when Stanky fled my house in a huff), that he was writing incidental music for the movies, a job that requires no genius. She carried tales, too, of their nasty breakup, of Stanky's increasing vileness, his masturbatory displays of ego. He has not written a single song since he left Black William—the stars may have drained more from him than that which they bred, and perhaps the fact that he was almost taken has something to do with his creative slump. Whatever his story, I think he has found his true medium and is becoming a minor obscenity slithering among the larger obscenities that serve a different kind of star, anonymous beneath the black flood of the Hollywood sewer.

The following March, I went fishing with Andrea at Kempton Pond. She was reluctant to join me, assuming that I intended to make her a stand-in for Rudy, but I assured her this was not the case and told her she might enjoy an afternoon out of the office, some quiet time together. It was a clear day, and cold. Pockets of snow lay in the folds and crinkles of the Bittersmiths, but the crests were bare, and there was a deeper accumulation on the banks than when Rudy and I had fished the pond in November. We had to clear ourselves a spot on which to sit. The sun gilded the birch trunks, but the waters of the pond were as Stygian and mysterious as ever.

We cast out our lines and chatted about doings in her office, my latest projects—Lesion (black metal) and a post-rock band I had convinced to call themselves Same Difference. I told her about some loser tapes that had come my way, notably a gay Christian rap outfit with a song entitled “Cruisin’ For Christ (While Searching For The Heavenly City).” Then we fell silent. Staring into the pond, at the dark rock walls and oily water, I did not populate the depths with fantasies, but thought instead of Rudy. They were memorial thoughts untainted by grief, memories of things said and done. I had such a profound sense of him, I imagined if I turned quickly enough, I would have a glimpse of a bulky figure in a parka, wool cap jammed low on his brow, red-cheeked and puffing steam; yet when I did turn, the figure in the parka and wool cap was more clearly defined, ivory pale and slender, her face a living cameo. I brushed a loose curl from her eyes. Touching her cheek warmed my fingertip. “This is kind of nice,” she said, and smiled. “It's so quiet.”

“Told you you'd like it,” I said.

“I do.”

She jiggled her line.

“You'll never catch anything that way.” I demonstrated proper technique. “Twitch the line side-to-side.”

Amused, she said, “I really doubt I'm going to catch anything. What were you and Rudy batting? One for a thousand?”

"Yeah, but you never know."

"I don't think I want to catch anything if it resembles that thing he had mounted."

"You should let out more line, too."

She glanced at me wryly, but did as I suggested.

A cloud darkened the bank and I pictured how the two of us would appear to God, if God were in His office, playing with His Gameboy: tiny animated fisherfolk hunched over their lines, shoulder-to-shoulder, waiting for a tiny monster to breach, unmindful of any menace from above. Another cloud shadowed us. A ripple moved across the pond, passing so slowly it made me think that the waters of the Polozny, when upthrust into these holes, were squeezed into a sludgy distillate. Bare twigs clattered in a gust of wind.

"All these years," Andrea said. "All the years and now five months...."

"Yeah?"

"Every day, there'll be two or three times when I see you, like just now, when I look up and see you, and it's like a blow ... a physical blow that leaves me all ga-ga. I want to drop everything and curl up with you."

"Me, too," I said.

She hesitated. "It just worries me."

"We've had this conversation," I said. "I don't mind having it again, but we're not going to resolve anything. We'll never figure it out."

"I know." She jiggled her line, forgetting to twitch it. "I keep thinking I'll find a new angle, but all I come up with is more stupidity. I was thinking the other day, it was like a fairy tale. How falling back in love protected us, like a charm." She heel-kicked the bank. "It's frustrating when everything you think seems absurd and true all at once."

"It's a mystery."

"Right."

"I go there myself sometimes," I said. "I worry about whether we'll fall out of love ... if what we feel is unnatural. Then I worry if worrying about it's unnatural. Because, you know, it's such a weird thing to be worried about. Then I think, hey, it's perfectly natural to worry over something you care about, whether it's weird or not. Round and round. We might as well go with the flow. No doubt we'll still be worrying about it when we're too old to screw."

"That's pretty old."

"Yep," I said. "Ancient."

"Maybe it's good we worry." Then after a pause, she said. "Maybe we didn't worry enough the first time."

A second ripple edged the surface, like a miniature slow tsunami. The light faded and dimmed. A degree of tension seemed to leave Andrea's body.

"You want to go to Russia?" she asked. "I've got this conference in late May. I have to give a paper and

be on some panels. It's only four days, but I could take some vacation."

I thought about it. "Kiwanda's pretty much in control of things. Would we have to stay in Russia?"

"Don't you want to go clubbing in Moscow? Meet new people? I'll wear a slutty dress and act friendly with strangers. You can save me from the white slavers—I'm sure I'll attract white slavers."

"I'll do my best," I said. "But some of those slavers are tough."

"You can take 'em!" She rubbed the side of her nose. "Why? Where do you want to go?"

"Bucharest."

"Why there?"

"Lots of reasons. Potential for vampires. Cheap. But reason number one—nobody goes there."

"Good point. We get enough of crowds around here."

We fell silent again. The eastern slopes of the Bittersmiths were drowning in shadow, acquiring a simplified look, as of worn black teeth that still bore traces of enamel. But the light had richened, the tree trunks appeared to have been dipped in old gold. Andrea straightened and peered down into the hole.

"I had a nibble," she said excitedly.

I watched the surface. The water remained undisturbed, lifeless and listless, but I felt a presence lurking beneath, a wise and deliberate fish, a grotesque, yet beautiful in the fact of its survival, and more than a murky promise—it would rise to us this day or some other. Perhaps it would speak a single word, perhaps merely die. Andrea leaned against me, eager to hook it, and asked what she should do.

"It's probably just a current," I said, but advised her to let out more line.

—THE END—

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