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The Man Who Loved Dying
and Other Stories

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing
and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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August 2011

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Pretty Little Shoes

Alice Finch sat on the twin bed and pouted. “I don’t want to go to Sunny School,” she said to her father who was making up the other twin bed in the rented room they shared. They were upstairs, down a frayed carpet runner, the last door on the right in old Mrs. Brooks’ boarding house. It was late spring, 1963, in Stillwater, Oklahoma and from a Sycamore tree that stretched towards their open window Alice could hear buzzing cicadas.

“Sunday School. You’ll meet some nice little girls your age. Don’t you want to make new friends?”

She stared at her shoes that were mostly shiny black but they had dull scuff marks on the sides and across one of the toes. She pulled her foot up on the bed and licked her thumb, running it over the toe but the mark remained. “They won’t like me.” She kicked her foot back down to the floor. “They won’t like me ’cause of these ugly shoes.” She stretched her legs out in front of her, pushing her toes to the end revealing a wide gap at the heel. “And they’re too big.”

“Don’t be silly,” her father said, now staring at the dresser mirror, carefully combing back his feathery wisps of hair on top and smoothing down the thicker band around the sides and back of his head. “Nobody’s going to notice your shoes. That was very nice of Mrs. Brooks’ granddaughter to give them to you.” He turned to her, his hands in his pockets jingling some change. Alice never noticed those britches before. The ill fitting waistband was scrunched under her father’s belt. She slid back onto her elbows,

rested her chin on her chest. “Don’t slouch like that, pumpkin. It’s a bad habit to get into,” he said. They heard a tap on a car horn out front. “Let’s go.”

She grabbed her new purse that came with the shoes. It was also black patent leather, without the scuffs. Inside the lining was pink satin with stars on it and was only a little torn at the bottom. It had black plastic handles on hinges and the catch was a metal hook and eye that became silver once her father rubbed it with a sock. She shook it, hearing the four nickels inside.

Her dad’s friend Mrs. Wilson was taking them to church in her long red and white Ford. The woman watched them from behind the steering wheel through the open passenger window, her heavy arm slung over the back of the seat. The car must have just been washed because it was hard to look at in the sunlight and there was one drop of water left on the chrome strip down the side. Alice reached out a finger to wipe the drop. “Honey don’t touch the car,” Mrs. Wilson called out, “you’ll get finger prints on it.” Alice looked back at her father who remained on the stoop, talking to Mrs. Brooks. Then he jogged out to her, opened the rear door and she slid in, trying to keep her hands folded together grasping her purse handles, unsure if the not touching rule also meant inside the car. Her father settled into the front passenger seat and he and Mrs. Wilson smiled at each other.

The woman looked at Alice in the rear view mirror then turned around. “Aren’t you pretty today. Remind me, I have a comb in my purse, maybe I’ll go over your hair a little bit when we get there.” Mrs. Wilson turned back to Mr. Finch. “It must be hard

bringing up a little girl without her mother.” Alice’s dad looked out the front windshield and nodded.

Mr. Finch had told Alice, as soon as she was old enough to ask, that her mother left when she was four and married somebody else. When Alice was five he told her that her mom sent a letter and wanted her to visit for a couple of days. “You have a baby brother now; wouldn’t you like to see him?” She was unsure. A plump man and an even rounder woman, her mother, took Alice on a long drive to their big house. They were nice to start. They even ate out in a restaurant on the way and she had her favorite—chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, fried okra. They let her sleep in a big bed in a room by herself. The next morning her mother made her bacon and eggs and smiled a lot. She watched her brother as he smacked his little fingers down on his highchair tray and picked at Cheerios. He had fat little hands and fat cheeks. She moved over close to him while her mother washed dishes. Alice reached out her finger and he grabbed it and laughed. *He likes me*, she thought.

In the center of the table on a round silver tray was a delicate tea pot painted with long stem flowers coming up from the base. The lid had an acorn shaped handle just the right size for Alice’s small hand. She stood and reached for the acorn. Her mother slapped her hand away with a loud whack. “Don’t touch the china!” she said. Alice grabbed her stinging hand and ran out of the kitchen and into the room where she had slept and hid behind the bed, crying. Her mother came in holding the baby on her hip. “Now stop your crying and get up, we’ll watch cartoons okay?”

“I want my Daddy,” Alice said.

“It’s okay, just don’t touch the teapot.”

“I WANT MY DADDY!” Her mother left the room. Alice heard her on the phone and a while later the door bell rang and she heard her father’s voice. She jumped up and ran to him, he picked her up and she clamped onto his neck. “I wanna go home daddy, please.”

“Okay, pumpkin.” He set her down. “Go get in the back seat of Uncle Don’s car, I’ll be right there after I talk to your mother.”

She liked Uncle Don. “Did you have a nice visit?” her uncle asked as she shut the car door.

“No.”

“Let’s listen to the radio then, will that cheer you up?”

“Uh-huh.”

Mrs. Wilson turned in her car and looked again at Alice. “You’re as pretty as Caroline Kennedy.”

Alice grimaced. “Who’s that?”

Her dad turned around and glared at her. “Thank you Mrs. Wilson,” he said.

“Thank you Mrs. Wilson,” Alice said, her eyes to her lap then back at her father.

He looked at the lady and smiled. “You look very fetching yourself.”

“Oh Hal,” Mrs. Wilson said. She had on a white pillbox hat with white netting that somehow floated around it. Little appliqué rosebuds were sewn into the netting. Her

dress, at least the top part, was also white and stiff looking, like she'd just ironed it with loads of starch.

Mrs. Wilson's husband died in Korea ten years back and she worked as a secretary in the appliance store where Alice's father recently got a job selling washing machines. Alice came to the store every day after school and waited for her dad to get off work. She sat at an empty desk behind Mrs. Wilson and stared at her school books and listened to the heavy clicking of a typewriter or the rattle and buzz of the electric adding machine. Alice was supposed to keep very quiet and do her homework but she would peer over her shoulder and watch Mrs. Wilson's broad back, her right arm sticking out punching the numbers in a blur, the back of her arm jiggling. The woman would finger and stare at the little paper coming out the top then punch more numbers. Mrs. Wilson made more money than her father, he told her one evening over fish sticks. "But I'm just starting out, pumpkin. Soon I'll be head salesman and we'll get a little house."

"Just me and you in our own house?" Alice asked.

"Well, maybe we'll have another person too."

"Who?"

"I might get married again. I'm still young."

"No you're not, you're old."

"I'm thirty-five, that's young."

"But you're bald on top."

"Some men lose their hair when they're young."

"Oh."

As they drove along in Mrs. Wilson's car Alice examined the back seat. It was also red and white without a smudge. She'd never seen the inside of a car look so clean; it looked like she was the first person to ever sit there. "Is this car new?" she asked.

"Alice, we were talking," her dad said. "Don't interrupt when adults are talking. Wait for a pause in the conversation then say—excuse me may I ask a question please."

"Excuse me may I ask a question please?"

"Yes Alice, what is it?"

"Is this car new?"

"Pumpkin, I'm not sure that's any of our business how—"

"It's okay Hal," Mrs. Wilson said. "It's new to me," she called back. "But it's not brand new."

Alice noticed a silver square plate in the door panel. She looked up at the adults but they were busy talking to each other again. So she touched it, then kind of pulled on it and it slid out part way from the panel. She dropped her hand and looked again towards the front seat but they weren't paying any attention to her. So she looked inside the little pocket of the silver drawer but it was empty and shiny like the outside. She pushed it back and it closed, looking like no one touched it. She was relieved. So, she opened it again then closed it and opened it and closed it. She liked the way it kind of snapped into place both in the open position and close position.

"What are you doing back there?" her dad asked.

"Nothing."

There was a big crowd in front of the church, people all dressed up. Alice stuck to her father's side. Lots of people knew Mrs. Wilson and she kept introducing them to Mr. Finch and Alice but Alice kept quiet, hoping she wouldn't have to say anything and could stay hidden, sucked into her daddy's side. It seemed to be working until they met a family with a boy about her age.

"Alice this is Roger," Mrs. Wilson said. "He's going to show you where your Sunday school class is, and me and your Daddy will pick you up there later, okay?"

Alice snuggled even deeper into her daddy's side and hid her face. He bent down to her and whispered, "you're acting like a baby. Now go with Roger, it'll be fun."

"No," Alice said.

"Be a big girl now and do what I say, pumpkin." She peered at Roger with one eye. He just stared at her without smiling then looked up at his mother.

"Take her hand and be nice," Roger's mother said to him. "She's just a little shy." He reached out and grabbed her hand which she yanked back.

"Go with Roger," her father said to her. "He's a nice boy, you'll have fun with the other children and we'll see you *very* soon." Roger grabbed her again and tugged and she followed, pulling her hand away and looking back at her dad who smiled at her and nodded.

She slowed down as Roger skipped along. He looked back at her. "Well come on," he said. They went inside a long building that smelled like the old folks home where her grandpa lived. Sure enough they passed a couple of really old people—the man was leaning on a cane and bent over so that his face was even with Alice's, the woman was

taller with giant bosoms and a white glossy purse she pressed to them. They stopped talking and smiled at the children as they passed. Roger hurried again and she tried to keep up. She became aware of the loud clomping noise her loose shoes made and she was afraid she would step out of them. He stopped and turned into a room and she followed.

The room was stuffed with children all jabbering away in groups. Roger ran off to be with some boys, not looking back at her. There were several metal folding chairs in rows where some of the youngsters sat and talked. In front there was a podium and a man stood to the side of it looking at a book. On one wall was a large cork board crammed with drawn pictures, on another wall were words painted right on it: *blessed are the children...* and to the side of the words was a painting of a bearded man with a bathrobe on, smiling, with long blond hair. She stayed by the door and considered running back out to search for her father when a lady came up to her. “You must be new. What’s your name?” She wore thick glasses and at first Alice wasn’t sure who she was talking to.

Alice glanced behind her and turned back. “Alice Finch.”

“Nice to meet you Alice, I’m Miss Howard. How old are you?”

“Six.”

“Come with me, I’ll introduce you to some girls near your age.”

“Girls, this is Alice.” There were five of them, all older than Alice by at least a couple of years. They stopped their conversation and all turned to stare at her, looking her over and pausing at her shoes, then squinting at her face.

The lady put her hands on one of the girl’s shoulders. “Martha, this is her first day here so please tell her what to do and take her into Miss Blain’s bible class with you.”

“Yes, Miss Howard.” As soon as the lady walked away, they resumed their conversation. Martha turned her back to Alice. “So, what were you saying about Miss Blain? What’d your mother say?” Alice overheard Martha say to another girl in the circle.

“She had Polio when she was little and it paralyzed her,” the other girl said then looked over at Alice and squinted at her intrusion.

Alice looked down, staring at her shoes, then glanced at the other girls’ shoes—all fitting well, glossy white or pink with no scuffs. She looked longingly at the door to the hall, way on the other side of the room. No one was paying attention to her so she took a step towards the door—

Martha turned to her. “If you want some orange juice and cookies, they’re over there.” She pointed to a table with several half filled paper cups and a plate of crumbs and a couple of broken cookies. Alice walked over to the table and picked up a cookie piece.

The man at the podium waved and said, “Okay let’s all sit down and be quiet.” The boys and girls all filed into the seats and Alice quickly sat down on a chair near her. “Let’s be quiet now,” the man said still waving, one hand gripping the black book. He lowered his head as did all the other children and adults. She copied them, peering out to the side, staring at the other children whose eyes were closed. “Dear Lord,” he said, “lay your kind hands upon the heads of these children so that they may learn of your blessings and the blessing of their lives. Keep them safe and help them grow into the good graces of your word. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” Everyone began to stir and looked up at the man. “We have a visitor. Alice Finch, would you stand up.”

A shock went through Alice. She looked around like the other children, hoping not to be spotted but Martha, who sat a few rows ahead, pointed at her. “She’s right there.” Everyone was staring at her now. She felt an overwhelming sickness and looked down at her purse in her lap and the broken cookie in her hand.

Miss Howard came over to her and tugged at her elbow, forcing her up a little but Alice pulled away sharply and sat down so hard the chair’s legs made a loud squeak against the floor. “She’s a little shy,” Miss Howard said to the man at the podium.

“Well, okay,” he said. “Children, I want all of you to be good friends with Alice and make her feel welcome.” He started telling a story and all the children looked away from her. She lost interest in the man’s story after a few words and looked down the aisle at the other children’s laps. All of them except her had grownup books with soft binders; the girls had white ones and the boys black. The man said, “Now let’s all turn your bibles to Matthew chapter 19 verse 14,” and everyone thumbed through their special church books, their bibles, except her. “And Jesus said, Let the little children come to Me and do not forbid them; for such is the kingdom of heaven.” Then the man closed his book and said, “Okay, time for bible class.”

All the children rose and walked to smaller rooms off of this larger one. “Alice!” She heard Martha calling to her. She was waving her over to her room, then went inside. Alice walked to the door then paused, out of sight of the girls in the room, listening to them laugh. She was about to enter but heard a commotion from the back of the main room. A couple of the folding chairs scooted across the floor as a wheelchair plowed into them.

“Oops,” Miss Howard said as she pushed the wheelchair. An odd shaped woman sat in it. Her body was small, like a child’s, but her head was an adult size and propped up on padded brackets at the chin and back of the head. Her small arms and hands were laid out on cushioned supports that pivoted left and right while her fingers dangled off the edge. Her hands hovered over a tray in front of her that was attached to the wheelchair; on it was a large white bible that was opened. Miss Howard corrected her path then stopped the wheelchair near the door leading to the hallway and came around it. She leaned over the tray a little to get closer to the child-woman’s face to talk.

Alice’s attention was drawn back to the girls in the room who were giggling. “Did you see how long that new girl’s dress was? And it looked like her hair hadn’t been combed in a month.” They laughed. Then Martha said, “Didn’t her mom look at her before they left home? And those shoes.” More giggles. Alice looked down at her dress that was too long and her scuffed shoes that were too big and pushed her hair behind her ears, Mrs. Wilson was going to comb it and forgot. Were those girls so pretty because they lived with their moms? She was ashamed that her father made her wear these give away shoes and that he thought no one would notice, and she was ashamed that she didn’t live with a mother that would have noticed. She stepped backwards away from the door finally determined to bolt and tripped over the protruding foot rest of the wheelchair.

Miss Howard came around the chair and reached down to help Alice. “Are you okay?” She hugged her, then looked her over. “You look okay.” Alice was crying. Miss Howard looked at the lady in the wheelchair, shrugged then said to Alice, “What’s the matter?” Alice mumbled something and looked down. “What?” Miss Howard said.

“I don’t have a mommy,” Alice said knowing this wasn’t true and just wanting a little womanly compassion.

From the purse that hung on her elbow, Miss Howard pulled out a hanky and dabbed at Alice’s face and hugged her again then took her hand and stood. “Alice, I want you to meet Miss Blain.” She gestured towards the lady in the wheelchair. “She’s the teacher of your bible class.”

“Nice to meet you Alice,” Miss Blain said. She spoke in a mumbled way, her chin pressing against the support. Alice said nothing. She felt trapped. She wanted to pull away from Miss Howard and run for the door but the wheelchair blocked her way and there was Miss Blain smiling at her. Alice turned and went into the small room. There were folding chairs all along the walls except for one end. Miss Howard wheeled Miss Blain to the space with no chairs and spun her around then left. Alice sat near Miss Blain, away from the other girls.

“We have a new face here today. This is Alice.” Miss Blain said and Alice looked down, tucking her feet beneath her chair.

“We already met her,” Martha said.

“Very well,” Miss Blain said. “Let’s turn to Matthew 19:14 again and Martha, would you read aloud through to verse 21?”

After Martha finished reading, Miss Blain talked on about the bible words in a droning quiet way that started to make Alice sleepy. She examined Miss Blain’s face as she spoke. She wasn’t very pretty, she wore no makeup and her face had pimples. Her hair was cut short and very neat but was scrunched up a little in back where the brace

was. She had on big earrings made with clusters of small pearls. Her little arms would move back and forth as she spoke and her fingers would kind of point. Her hands were puffy, like baby hands, and her fingernails were painted pink. On the ring finger of her right hand was a small gold band with a blue stone. Her clothes were a jacket and skirt, that were also pink and her blouse underneath showed a pretty white lace coming up at the neck. Her short legs were very thin and she had on whitish stockings that glistened. But the most fascinating thing she wore were her pretty little shoes. Like doll shoes. They were a grown up lady style with short heels but they were so small and perfect and still on the wheelchair's foot ramp. They were covered with white satin, round at the toe and pleated with the daintiest decoration—a golden leaf with a pink jeweled bud in the center. Alice had never seen anything so pretty. She stared at the shoes, captivated by them.

“Alice,” she heard Miss Blain say and she looked up at her, guiltily. “We hope you’ll come visit again.”

“Yes ma’am,” Alice said and glanced at the other girls who regarded her with bored expressions.

“Let’s bow our heads and pray,” Miss Blain said.

While the other girls’ eyes were closed Alice placed her feet out in front of her and looked at her own shoes. She thought about Mrs. Brooks’ granddaughter scuffing up these dress shoes in fun and she thought about running and playing with the neighbor kids after church. She peered again at Miss Blain’s perfect shoes that never touched a floor or a sidewalk or the softest grass and for the first time in her young life, however fleetingly, Alice felt troubled for someone else.

When the class was over, the girls stood. Alice glanced back at Miss Blain. “Bye,” she said smiling, then turned and ran out to the hallway and saw her daddy walking towards her waving.

Jaliballa, the Unknown Master

October 1, 1876

Montréal

Dear Elizabeth,

I hope this letter finds you well.

The cold is coming on early this year. Nonetheless I went for my regular stroll this morning along the St. Lawrence all bundled up in thick furs and boots, whistling my new composition. My step was brisk thinking about my warm little house and my piano.

Will I never die? I will be eighty-five soon though I don't know my exact birth date. I was born in late 1791 as best as I can figure. Long ago I settled on December 5th as the date—the very day Mozart died. I always smile to think of this even though the master's death was quite tragic; he was some fifty years younger than I am today—yet his bones can still dance to his music just like they did on his better days. My bones still dance in the flesh to my music, and to his. He unwittingly acquired his immortality with his compositions whilst the melodies that spin around in my mind have succored me with subsistence all these long years giving it, I believe, its persistent quality.

I've decided to set down the sometimes horrifying and sometimes joyful circumstances of my boyhood and how it was that music was the sea I floated upon through heartbreak and jubilation. In 1799 I was abducted from Africa and until 1806 I was a slave in the Keenlyside home in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Yet my situation was by far more amenable than for the poor creatures in the Southern States who were made to work long hours in the fields and whipped daily by vicious overlords. So, I by no

means wish to palliate slavery as it existed elsewhere with the following tale of my youth, given at times to merry events.

I was born in the central Mali Empire, although there is no way for me to be certain of this. To a limited degree I have studied the geography of the area and tried to match it with what I recall. I can recollect bits of my original language, but these remembrances are hard to analyze from Montréal. I've met no other African in Quebec who recognizes the words.

I have not set eyes upon my homeland since the age of seven when I, along with others of my village, was abducted and brought to the new world to work as slaves. Still I have many solid memories of my life as a free and happy child.

I dwelt in a farming village; however, I was not to be a farmer like my father. Early in my life there were exposed in me special talents. At maybe three or four I began to mimic the sounds of people's voices, or animals, or water, anything. I did it with such accuracy I was feared possessed by some. But it was a trick. I would open my mouth and manifest to others how the sounds were made with the shape of my tongue, the movement of my throat and lips. And I began to realize it was not the special shape of my mouth or tongue or teeth but my ear that gave me this treasure. I could break down each sound into such small components that I was able to understand their intense properties. And with the convergence of these minute parts a miracle seemed to occur—a recognizable sound or even music.

Whilst a very young child I was able to put a representative shape to this miracle. I often went with my mother to a stream to wash clothes. Whilst she labored, always singing, I busied myself watching the water, listening to its flow and the individual whistles of birds, the buzz of insects, my mother's voice. One of these wash days I picked up a small pebble and dropped it in the water, then mimicked the *plink*. I watched as the round ripples of water escaped the rock's point of entry. I dropped a larger rock and noticed how the ripples were wider and more stout and the sound, *plunk*, lower. An epiphany came to my young mind—that sounds in the air were like waves in the water. It was after that I began to visualize all sound in this way, as varying widths of ripples. And this is how I recorded in my memory each measure of music I heard and invented.

A life time later, after being settled here in Canada and already well acquainted with the established method of writing music, I tried to document this technique of music notation that still lingered in my memory.



It made for strange markings and to look upon it I became nostalgic and sad as it was a reminder of the loss of my original way of life.

My mother's father was the village keeper of songs. I suppose he could be referred to as our local historian. He sang and he played a large stringed instrument. He had no sons so it was decided that among my brothers I was to learn all his songs and with it the history of our village. This duty was pressed upon me as early as I can remember, for I was a precocious child, and I took great pride in my inherent vocation even as a little boy. I was taught by my grandfather all the traditional songs that told great stories of battles and warriors, famine and good harvests, special births and deaths. I memorized each one after one hearing, not always understanding the words. I would often stop my teacher and have him explicate the verses and he always clucked at me for interrupting but then explained in words I understood. Once, whilst I was repeating a song, I fit inside the tune a melody I heard from a bird, mimicking the bird whistle. My grandfather praised me for this improvisation and encouraged me to create new melodies all together. He was a kind old gentleman and smiled a toothless grin in appreciation and pride in me, his protégé. As I have stated, I cannot for the most part remember our language but I do remember those songs and could sing them here, today, having only a general idea of their meaning. I speak English, French, German, conversant in Cree, but sadly not fully the language of my own people.

My grandfather played the kora, which was a sort of harp. It was a tall instrument held betwixt one's legs and the strings, stretched along its length, were bridged in a V shape. Along a tall round section of a strong wood the strings are secured with twine. They are plucked with the thumbs and first fingers. The thumbs play a repeated melody in a lower register which is an accompaniment to the lead melody played by the first

fingers of both hands. The other fingers are used to hold the instrument by two small posts that sprout from a half calabash stretched over by animal skin, which is the base of the instrument. My grandfather would entertain our entire village for a full evening with his instrumental improvisations mixed with the old songs he sang with a rhythmic percussive quality. We gathered under the stars whilst he played long haunting melodies. With my head in my mother's lap, I would stare into heaven and my mother's smooth face as she swayed and tapped her fingers upon my chest. We were all spellbound together, rocking to the rhythm—blissful. It was as if we were one being, transported into a fleeting heaven and each one of us was singularly and together lost in our dreams. I was to learn to play the kora once my hands grew large enough. But this was never to happen.

I heard of hard times from my parents and my grandfather—of droughts, civil wars, and abductions. But in the first six or so years of my life the village was blessed with peace and good harvests, even leisure time—art and music. My talents as a singer of new melodies became well known in our village. At six years of age I sang on all special occasions with the accompaniment of my grandfather on the kora. I was given my days to invent new melodies. I would wander the nearby forest and listen to all the sounds—birds, small mammals, insects, wind through the trees. These things would inspire new melodies, just like they do today. There was always a constant hum, a background tone of life, much like the thumbed tones of the kora. Sometimes there would be a certain burst of music—the alarm of birds, the scurrying of lizards across dry leaves. I would sit very still by the brook, hardly breathing and listen for new sounds—a fish snapping at a bug, a beetle scratching across the dirt, a young bird testing its whistle. The sounds in my mind

never failed to come together into a new melody, which I recorded in my memory—the arced lines varying in distance apart to represent pitch and the repeated arcs to represent the relative beat. The sounds sometimes played together in a beautiful cacophony of geometric arcs crossing each other at angles.

One afternoon I was waiting by the water for the arrival of a particular speckled bird that came each afternoon and sang a variety of melodies, accompanied by the trickling water. There was a new song I was working out with this bird’s music. I was startled by a gigantic blast from the direction of the village center. I jumped up. I heard screams and people yelling—“Boli! Dogo! (Run! Hide!)” I saw people from my village running in a blind panic, their arms reaching ahead as if to pull them forward. I heard more explosions. I too ran, with them. But my little body went nowhere and darkness overcame me. I found myself bound by rough fabric with a foul smell of urine and feces. Something pressed in upon me on all sides and I was thrown through the air in a dizzying way. I deemed I must be dead and on a dreadful dark journey, alone. Except, I could still hear the terrible signs of life—flocks of birds fleeing in alarm, more human screams and explosions. I cried out, “Mama,” as I pressed my face against the filtered light of the fabric. Then I heard her call to me.

“Jaliballa, boli!” she screamed, “Jaliballa! Ja—” Her sudden silence brought even greater fear to me. Soon, the sounds of the mayhem became fainter as I flew along. I could hear the sound of a man’s labored breath and the breaking of twigs with each jolt of my conveyance. I pressed against the fabric and realized I was in a sack and being carried

away by some demon. My terror renewed and I called out again for my mother without response. I was never to hear her voice again.

Then I was dropped hard upon the ground and became sighted again and unbound. I looked around at a fearful spectacle. Several of our village people were sitting in a group. Their wrists were bound behind them, their ankles also bound. They were all crying and pleading, some were bleeding. A giant unknown man kneeled before me with strange fearful marks across his forehead and cheeks, he smelled of pig fat. His mien was more frightening due to his want of a severe expression—his eyes and mouth relaxed, as if he was not of this world for who could not be affected by the tragedy that surrounded us.

“Sigi (sit),” he ordered me. But I believe I was too stunned to move. He swiped his arm brutally against the back of my legs and I fell. Whilst lying there he bound me like the others. I sat up and pressed against an older boy I knew sitting next to me. He looked down at me, sobbing. I called again for my mother, my voice drowned by the other cries, and I looked around for her but could not see her or anyone else from my family.

One of the demons walked among us with a long iron and wood contraption, I now know it was a musket. He struck the head of a young woman from our village who was wailing at an extraordinary pitch. She fell over, limp, and blood soaked into her hair.

I buried my face in the lap of the boy next to me. I could not watch any more, the terror was too great. After a while the explosions and the screams from the direction of the village ended. A man came and yelled at us that we were to obey him or be killed,

another man cut loose our ankles and helped each one of us to rise. They spoke excitedly to each other with strange grunting sounds like a foraging warthog.

I peered around again. We were all young people but no children smaller than myself or people the age of my parents or older. As we stood, two older boys ran for the trees. An explosion sounded next to me, coming from the musket the demon held. One boy kept running and disappeared into the brush but the other fell over. He cried out and writhed across the ground, his blood smearing over flattened grass until another man walked over to him and shot him in the head which seemed to explode in a mass of blood and tissue. They forced each of us to witness the dead body to squelch any further resistance and we were dumfounded in horror.

We were ordered to march and hemmed in on all sides by these men with muskets. I stumbled along among them, hardly able to keep pace. A young man from our village asked one of our abductors if he could carry me and this was allowed. Our wrists were untied, and I was lifted onto his back. I hugged him so tight he often whispered to me to try and soften my grip. I asked him where we were going and would my mother be there but I was yelled at by one of the demons. Thereafter I fell silent, my head lying over the young man's shoulder.

We trudged along for several days hungry and thirsty, given hardly a subsistent amount of food and water. Sometimes I walked; sometimes I was carried by different villagers. As the days progressed the temperature lowered and a new odor inhabited the air—a clean cool smell. Our mood lightened to some extent, even our sanguinary

abductors became somewhat gay and brutalized us with less effort when we spoke to each other.

Whilst bouncing along on the back of a young man, my head resting against him half asleep, I heard a strange long cry from above. I looked up shielding my eyes against the sun and saw several unfamiliar white birds swooping and fighting in the sky. Their long sad songs made my heart sink for I presumed they were singing of our despair as they watched us. I mimicked their sound in the ear of my transporter who hushed me and looked to the closer demon who hadn't heard my bird whistle. To this day I cannot hear a seagull's cry without being overcome by a bitter wretchedness.

Our march then took us over a rise and we were struck immobile by a wide expanse of water. The greatest amount of water I ever saw was a river in flood times. The alarming Atlantic Ocean reached across the horizon like a gape-mouthed monster, dispassionate and sullen. But surely our sad trek was soon to end, how much further could we go? Did they mean to march us into the sea? Our abductors would reveal nothing. At this juncture they spoke at length and to each other in their own language and pointed far down the shore where a large stone structure was peering around a white cliff. This edifice was to be our destination in this part of our journey away from home and Africa.

Within the first two weeks of my passage across the great water I was able to pronounce several phrases mimicking the moon faced man who commanded us and the grand vessel. I have little memory of how I came to be on that ship. I know as soon as our

group reached the sea and the trading fort I must have been parted from all who were familiar to me and that further trauma slipped from my memory like unspeakable physical pain. I don't recall there being anyone on the ship from my village or, alas, even spoke my language. Initially my ankles were manacled betwixt two great men, yet my ankles and feet were so small I think I could have pulled them out of the iron rings but where would I go? We sat on a hard floor below deck, pressed against each other, and nearly suffocating in a rolling darkness. Even in these base circumstances the men on either side were kind to me. I couldn't understand their language nor did they appear to understand each other, but they murmured to me softly and saw that I wasn't passed over with food and water.

On our first night at sea one of the men tried his best to cuddle me against his side so that I could sleep. My head slipped onto his lap and he stroked my face and hair. I sang a song to him as I looked up into his face, a sad song of the death of a great warrior and leader from our village. From out of the fetid darkness, the constant sobs and moans quieted as I sang. Some of the wretched men began humming along with my song as I repeated the melody. At one point my friend placed a finger to my lips when we heard footsteps over us on the deck of the boat. The footfalls stopped just over our heads. After a pause the footsteps retreated and I sang a different song, of rain and harvest. As the clear melody from my innocent mouth wrapped around us, the man continued to stroke my hair and I closed my eyes and felt once again the warmth of my mother. I think the song gave these disheartened folk a little peace for those few moments and suffered them

to dwell one last time in their erstwhile homeland. I fell asleep forgetful of my misfortune.

The next day an African sailor, dressed in the same style clothes as the white men, came below deck. He appeared to be questioning the manacled men and they each shook their heads and looked down. The man departed appearing frustrated. He returned with some kind of fruit in his palm and asked the same question looking around to different men whilst holding up the food. In due course one particularly emaciated man raised his hand slowly then turned and pointed—to me. The sailor tossed the informer the fruit then walked to my small space. He looked me over whilst I stared into his scarred and unfriendly face. He then squatted and unlocked the shackles on my ankles and bid me come with him. As I followed with difficulty, stepping over the sad fettered men, I looked back at the two who were my gentle friends; they smiled weakly and nodded to me.

I was taken up to the deck, the fresh salty air hitting me like new life, then to a small colorful cabin that smelled of rich cooked food. I peered around the room at the furnishings, everything seemed so sharp and angular, like the nose and chin of the white man who sat at a long table and bid me come to him. Still sitting, he turned towards me so that our faces were at the same level. His eyes manifested like glimpses of the sky, as if there were two holes seared through his moon face, and I pulled my own face away, startled at his strangeness. The sailor shoved me towards him. Words flowed out of the pink thin lips of the white man in a lilting singsong way and I stared at him not knowing what was expected of me. He held a piece of fruit out towards me and then smacked his

lips and raised his eyebrows. I took the fruit slowly then devoured it as I stared at him. He gave me a glass of liquid to drink, a sweet concoction that felt warm as I swallowed it. Then he hummed to me a small sample of my own song from the night before. He stopped and gestured to me palms up, raising his eyebrows, and nodding.

“Sing,” he said.

“Sing,” I said. He lifted his face to the ceiling and laughed open mouthed at my first English word, said flawlessly I am sure. He smiled down to me and repeated his command then hummed my tune. I sang, timidly at first. He smiled again and tapped his foot in time to my song which encouraged me and I sang with more force and clarity the bird melodies I created within the song.

When I stopped he said, “good” and I repeated the word which brought more hilarity on his part. He put his hands on my shoulders and walked me over to the sailor and spoke at length to him. Whereupon I was taken on deck, stripped naked, and washed. I was returned to the white man and presented with clothes such as a white child would wear. I wasn’t sure what to do with the clothes and was assisted by the sailor in a not too kind a manner.

We sailed for forty days, which seemed an eternity to a boy of seven. During the passage I was to stay nearby the white man who I learned to address as Captain Keenlyside Sir. I was trained to serve him, sing my songs when asked, and else stay out of his path. And I became accustomed to his language and could repeat it clearly which

never ceased to amuse him. He called me Billy, which was the name of a parrot he once had who also repeated his words.

I adapted to my situation and felt some pride in my master, the Captain. Three other white men on the ship had little boys who served them and they were abused badly. I learned to stay out of reach if not out of sight of the other quite fractious white officers. Once in bad seas, I was summoned by the Captain and I fell against one of the other officers when the boat rolled heavily. The wicked white man picked me up, swearing, and tossed me aside like rubbish. He would have tossed me overboard had it been a little more convenient. Alas, I witnessed one of the other boys being tossed into the sea when his white man was in a particularly bad humor.

One night as the Captain lay in his berth, he requested I sing an air to help him sleep. I sang a lullaby my mother used to sing to me. The Captain rose up on an elbow to look at me and I stopped, thinking I displeased him. But he bid me continue. I resumed the sweet little song and saw to my astonishment tears welling up in the eyes of this terrible man. Granted, he was not physically cruel to me, but he dispassionately oversaw the cruelest of enterprises. Soon, my own melancholy overwhelmed me and I too began to weep. The Captain grimaced and told me to go to bed.

Captain Keenlyside was a singer himself of quality. Once, on a calm night at sea under a bright moon, the officers beseeched the Captain to sing. They had all drunk well and were in a jovial mood, knowing they would soon reach their destination and the passage uneventful. After much entreaty by the men, the Captain took a long draught of wine, pushed his chair back, thought a moment then bid me retrieve the exquisite leather

case from inside his trunk. I retrieved and handed it to him tenderly. Inside he pulled out an amazing and most beautiful wooden stringed instrument I would later learn was a lute. He tuned the strings, paused, then began a quaint melody, plucking the strings with his right hand fingers whilst his left pressed the strings against a polished neck to change the pitch. He then sang long notes in a language I had not heard before. His intonation was low and resonant. The notes at the end of each phrase stretched out, first steady then into a slow vibrato which quickened as it stretched. I was entranced by the slow beseeching melody, so different from the short repeated ditties sung by the sailors. The music played hope into my little heart and made me wonder about the life of the white man who invented this melody. They could not all be heartless creatures.

When the tune ended, a hush came upon the officers and alas all within earshot. Even, I deem, below deck, for I can imagine that his clear voice carried there and even well out across the sea.

Breaking the quiet, a white man inquired, “Captain Keenlyside sir, might I inquire as to the origin of that ballad?”

“That, mate, is not a ballad. It is a *canzonetta*. And the composer was an undersized German speaking fellow, Wolfgang Mozart. It is from his opera, *Don Giovanni*, which I was privileged to hear whilst visiting Vienna in '90. I saw the composer himself conducting, who, I hear, passed the following year, poor soul, at thirty-five. I paid handsomely for a copy of the music for this *Canzonetta Deh, Vieni Alla Finestra*.” And so it was—my first introduction to the great Mozart and European court music.

My comprehension of and speaking in the white man's language was nearly perfected by our arrival in the new world. Of course my inflections and relative quality of speech were a copy of the Captain which brought guffaws or worse from the other white men and derision from the dark skinned sailors. One morning as I walked to the rail with the Captain's chamber pot, a white sailor yelled for me to be careful with the contents of the pot so as not to soil the deck.

"Yes sir," I said, "but no worries, it is just urine."

The man's moon face reddened and he exclaimed, "Just mine? What in 'ell's name you mean by that ya little shit colored squirt? Ere you mocking me?"

I said, "Sorry sir, I mean, in the chamber pot, it is just u-rine," spoken as plainly as I could muster, "you know, water that comes from your penis, I mean, *a* penis, I mean, the Captain, sir, Captain Keenlyside's penis, it's just water, sir." The man stormed towards me, his big red hand reaching for me. I bent down out of his grip and emptied the pot just as a wave crested the bow. The urine splashed back onto the bare feet of the man who growled and grabbed again for me, catching my sleeve and tearing it. I'm sure he would have murdered me on the spot but for the Captain's intervention from the upper deck.

"Here here, what's going on down there? Zounds man, let my boy go, Johnson, or I'll throw *you* overboard. Billy, get up here, quit your lollygagging boy." Thereafter, I learned to be more laconic so as not bring attention to myself.

Just before we landed in the new world, the Captain told me that I would not be put upon the block and would remain with him. This statement was somewhat perplexing to me for I already presumed I would stay with him forever, for I could not speculate on any other outcome. I knew that the shackled people below deck would be sold, for I overheard many discussions about the officers' profit and the worth of the slaves, but did not relate this with my own disposition. Also I did not quite understand the connection of slave to dark skin. There were dark sailors who worked alongside the white men, but, granted, there were no white men shackled below deck. *I stayed above deck; I wore English clothes and spoke English.* I never presumed I would be sold like the fettered people below, most of whom were nearly as alien to me as the white men.

Captain Keenlyside informed me that I was to stay on board whilst we were docked a few days on a Bahamian island. Here the people, the "cargo," would be unloaded and remain to their fate. Once the Captain completed his business, we would sail north for Portsmouth, New Hampshire where he had a home, wife, and children.

I was glad to remain on deck at this first port away from my own continent. Beyond the boat rail I heard a dreadful cacophony of harsh human interaction and suffering. Curiosity overtook me and I peered over the rail of the upper deck to witness the unloading of our own hull and view the port. The newly unfettered people hobbled down the plank, their desolation hung on their faces and bodies like heavy animal skins. It was as if they were being devoured before my eyes without the will to struggle. Once on ground the huddled captured folk were forced to strip in the open—men, women, and children with the purpose of bathing. They were to draw water and wet cloths from a

large half barrel and wash themselves and then were given clean rags to wear. Even in their unwholesome condition, they crouched to cover themselves. White people, men and women, looked on, pointed and laughed; their wanton indifference was eerie and hellish.

An auction for the sale of the Captain's abductees was to be conducted nearby next to a small structure. I saw the Captain sitting outside at a table in a little chair, absorbed with a book of figures he took with him from his cabin. He leaned back, placed his ankle on his knee, and spoke to another white man standing nearby who clasped his hands behind his back. A woman's scream caught their attention. One of the women from our hull was being pulled away by one of the Captain's sailors. The Captain stood, walked over to the sailor with a marked lack of precipitation, and wordlessly struck the sailor down with a blow to the face. He pulled out a kerchief and wiped his hands, then motioned for the woman to return with the others. He then walked over to one of the officers and spoke a few words. After that he returned to his table and chair. The officer came over to the sailor who was getting up. He kicked him down again then threw beside him a small heavy pouch. He then pointed towards the town and walked away. The sailor rose, weighed the pouch in his hand, and stumbled towards town, never to return.

I still wonder today at the Captain's motives in this event. Surely he was more concerned with the possible damage to his property, the woman, than her degree of anguish at being raped. He made it clear on board that the women were not to be touched and that any man caught with a savage woman would be summarily thrown overboard. I suppose the sailor surmised that the rule against venery terminated once the boat landed. Yet I deem a degree of ambivalence concerning the practice of slavery and his part in it

crept into the Captain's profit-driven heart. He made certain that the folk in the hull did not starve or suffer for want of water, but he made little other provisions for their comfort. He was taunted by the other officers that the savages ate better than the crew but he claimed it was strictly a business gesture. Alas, only one person died during our entire voyage, the boy who was cruelly thrown overboard by one of the officers. Well, the future *would* bring a change of heart for Captain Keenlyside for this was to be his last shipment of human beings.

I slipped into a small chair in the Captain's cookhouse in Portsmouth and stared at the house servant's back as she worked, jabbering. A new language I must learn? She was repeating something over and over, and pointing to a bucket by the door. I stood and walked towards it and picked it up, "Now miss, what would you have me do with this bucket?" Her speech stopped. She turned and looked at me, and seemed relieved at my form. She smiled. She was a pretty woman in her blossoming years, but she had a white scar across her forehead and through one of her brows. She was called Abigail.

"Go—get—water—there." She pointed outside.

"Is there a stream nearby, miss? Surely you don't want water from the bay." I replied slowly, eager to understand and be understood.

She looked perplexed. "Hallo!" she said and came close with a wet rag, and wiped my cheek, then felt my hair with the other hand. I wiped the wet spot with the edge of my shirt.

“You should be careful with your words, boy, mocking the Captain that way.” I discovered then that she had been speaking English, but with the strong sway of another place. Her lilt sounded like one of the African sailors.

“Come on.” She set down the rag and took my hand, pulling me outdoors. We entered a small clapboard structure nearby and inside stood a large intricate iron device with a brick base. Abigail pumped a long bar, the muscles manifest in her arms, and clear water poured out of a spout and into the bucket she placed on a small table for that purpose. “You try it now.” I grabbed the bar and pushed down but nothing happened, the bar held firm. She laughed loud and long, I laughed too. “You’re going to have to build up your strength there boy. What’s your name little one?”

“Captain Keenlyside Sir calls me Billy, miss.”

“Billy, *ma’am*. You call the *missus* miss and you’ll be in trouble.”

And thus began my training as a proper Negro house servant and student of relative societal status and etiquette, all with the purpose of keeping me whole.

We were a lucky household, as much as our circumstances could suffer. The white residences were Captain and Mrs. Keenlyside and their young son, Josiah, who was a year younger than myself. None of them would be considered cruel. The Captain also had an older son, Stuart, from a previous wife now deceased. He was sixteen and away at school. There were three African servants in the household including Abigail and myself. A kind man with a straight bearing and soft voice ran the errands around town in the family’s buckboard wagon and various other duties including answering the door. He was called Frederick and he and Abigail were married. They had been slaves in some

southern state but had run away together ten years prior. They managed to get to Portsmouth, New Hampshire with the aid of a group of abolitionists but had been left at the town's border, indigent. Mrs. Keenlyside took them in as indentured servants for eight years which had expired but they remained as hired servants, paid a meager if typical wage and room and board. I suppose they felt their fate was as good here as anywhere else in the new world in 1799, for the time being at least.

The three of us slept in the cookhouse which had an extra attached room. I slept on a comfortable, clean bunk near the stove; Abigail and Frederick slept in the extra room.

The main house was made of red brick, tall and narrow with three floors. A large colorful parlor took up the entire middle floor and the main portal into the house was up a flight of outdoor stairs into this room. From the landing and all the front windows was a view of the bay and the ships coming and going. The upper floor was separated into three rooms where, off a hallway, the Captain had his library, a bedroom for him and the missus, and one for little Josiah. The white people slept on high soft beds that were enclosed with heavy drapes in the winter. Above this floor was a garret, used for the storage of trunks and unused items—old clothes and toys. The ground or basement section of the house had a dirt floor and here Frederick and the Captain had a workshop for tooling or repairing things. The house was in the town proper and had a small area, perhaps an acre, which belonged to it. The adjacent homes were a short walk away. In this acre was a small vegetable garden maintained by all three of us servants, some pens for a small shoat and chickens, also two privies (one for regular people and the other for

white people), then of course the cookhouse and pump house, and a barn just big enough for two horses, a chaise, and the buckboard wagon.

Upon our arrival the Captain took me to the cookhouse and to Abigail. “Abigail,” he said to her back as she worked, “I’ve brought you a helper who will live with us now.” And he withdrew.

I remember being unafraid even in such new circumstances. I think it was due to the impression that the Captain had begun to be fond of me, despite himself. My quick assimilation on board the ship impressed him and my speedy acquisition of his language; he told me so.

One evening on board, he brought out an educational primer he purchased in England and was bringing to his younger son. He suffered me to look at it, to study at his table and in his accompaniment to make certain the book was not fouled. He explained a little of its meaning but the text was illustrated and all I needed was the name for some items in the drawings with which I was not familiar. After three sittings I finished my first book. He looked at me incredulously, handed me a newspaper and bid me read. I read aloud as best I could, not understanding most of the words yet doing my best to sound them out. Subsequently we spent a little time each night, me reading aloud various books, and the Captain correcting my pronunciations and teaching me the meanings. Once, after reading a passage where no correction was needed, he praised me well, and for the first time since my abduction from my family, I smiled. “There that’s well, son. . .I mean—” He looked away then said, “Now go finish your chores.” He was warned by

the other officers of his folly with teaching me to read but he ignored their remonstrance; he *was* the lead white man on board.

Often I was given the duty of reading to Josiah when his parents were else occupied. We would sit at his miniature table and he would choose from his book collection. I always pointed to the words as I read. He had favorites which he bid me read repeatedly. One was an illustrated book called *A Description of Above Three Hundred Animals*. He would look at the pictures whilst I read the descriptions then I would delight him by mimicking the sounds of the animals I knew and made up sounds for the animals of which I had little knowledge. Sometimes I would chase the lad around his ample room, pretending to be said animal and sometimes he would chase me until the ruckus would bring some adult to the door. Once whilst we were busy reading and I was making some bird calls, Josiah looked up and stared towards the door of which my back was turned. I looked around and found Captain Keenlyside, the missus, Abigail, and Frederick all gathered by the door. “Your birdcalls are most amazing Billy,” Mrs. Keenlyside said. “You have a special talent.”

“Thank you ma’am,” I said.

During the holidays Captain Keenlyside’s older son would visit and I learned soon enough to avoid this peevish young man although sometimes that was very difficult.

“Boy, bring me my boots, be quick about it.” “Boy, get me a clean shirt, be quick about it.” He would order me about all the day long with some demand or another and no matter how I ran I was not quite quick enough for him as he would constantly strike me

on the side of my head with his open hand, “you slow stupid creature,” I heard countless times each day.

I was sometimes ordered to his bedside late at night to read to him. It was another duty I loathed as he always came for me as I was dozing off in my own little bed. His eyesight was very poor, much like his mother’s, and they both wore spectacles. But his eyes would tire by bedtime and he liked to read late into the night, or I should say liked to be read to late into the night. He was most enamored with gothic tales such as *The Castle of Otranto* and *Gaston de Blondville* and I was finally sent to bed but barely before the cock crows, the world of ghosts and murder swirling around me. The next day I would wander around doing my chores half asleep. I was always made to be up at dawn and Stuart would stumble down just before noon punching and striking me at once for some pretended breach of my duties.

Once the Captain witnessed Stuart’s physical abuse, and reprimanded him in my company. “Do not strike Billy or any of the servants,” he said sternly. “If they need disciplining, come to me and I’ll take care of it.” After that Stuart was more furtive with the abuse but harsher, taken to punching me in the chest. There was not a word I could say to anyone, for I knew my position and feared a far greater retribution from the young man. Abigail warned me before each holiday to avoid the elder son if possible and often sent me on long errands before the young man arose in the morning. Glad I was on the day his father would take him back to school.

When Josiah was around nine and I ten, Captain Keenlyside brought home all the way from England a fortepiano which was installed in the parlor. I was intrigued with the

instrument but was not allowed to touch it. Only Abigail was permitted to dust and polish it. Josiah and Mrs. Keenlyside were to take up the instrument and lessons were given by a polished young white man. The first day he arrived he spent considerable time hitting each key and tuning the fortepiano. Once he was satisfied he pulled out a tall book from his satchel, which the Captain had purchased, and set it on the instrument, then played a most delightful and tantalizing piece. I would learn later that it was the Bach Sinfonia in C minor. Then he bid Josiah to sit at the fortepiano and his instruction began.

Every moment I could spare from my chores I would watch and listen from a far doorway as the lessons were given each week. Josiah fidgeted incessantly causing the tutor some small frustration whilst the missus giggled throughout the lesson upon her every repeated mistake.

Then a most amazing opportunity was given me to touch and learn the instrument. Captain Keenlyside, his missus, and Josiah were to go on a trek to New York to visit the missus' sister. They planned to be gone a good part of two months. As it was early Spring we were left, Frederick, Abigail, and I to busy ourselves with the planting of a new garden and other chores to maintain the house and property. I begged Abigail to let me do the dusting in the parlor and as I was not prone to clumsiness or uncleanness she acquiesced. I always left the fortepiano till last and then sat at the instrument studying the primer whilst I slowly dusted the keyboard.

Nearly every morning, since the white family left, Abigail would accompany Frederick in the buckboard wagon to the market to buy the day's supplies. On the second morning of this arrangement whilst I sat at the fortepiano I looked over my shoulder, set

the duster down, and placed my small fingers on the keys as instructed by the book. I went through the exercises keeping my fingers lightly on the keys so as not to play too loudly. After a week or more I had memorized and played the entire primer and couldn't help but notice that my proficiency was much better than either Josiah or his mother after three months of their own lessons. So on the second week, when I was on my own in the house, I opened the book of Bach Inventions and Sinfonias that was yet too difficult for either student. I struggled through the first piece, counting aloud the meter signature, and having more than a little trouble arranging my small hands to get from one measure to the next. But I was having success and this accomplishment further inspired me so that I could think of nothing else through the rest of the day. At night before sleep I would sit up in my little bunk in the darkness, place my hands on a stool, and practice—humming the notes. I would sometimes become fearful I would be caught and would strain my eyes for any movement in the room's shadows.

Of course I *was* finally caught. I had become so eager to play that I would run to the house and the fortepiano as soon as I heard the horse and buckboard depart for their regular outing. One morning, four or five weeks after beginning this new adventure with music, I was playing the C minor Sinfonia, the same one I first heard the instructor play. My eyes were closed and so beguiled I was with the melody that I didn't hear the door. I opened my eyes to look at a particular measure I had yet to memorize and felt the long shadow of both Abigail and Frederick standing by the fortepiano. I jumped up and backed into a wall, pressing against it. What could I say in my defense? I had always been a most obedient boy and was in great fear of the consequences of this terrible

transgression. I was expecting to be pulled from the house and possibly tossed into the sea in chains but instead Abigail said, “Jesus above, how did you learn to play?”

Frederick just stood there, staring at me, mouth open as if I was some kind of spirit.

I bowed my head. “Please ma’am, I haven’t damaged the fortepiano. I’ve been most careful.”

“I knew you could read words, I never knew you could read music,” she said, smiling.

“I learned from this book.” I sat back down, heartened by her smile, and opened the primer. “See. It shows you the notes, here, on these lines, and the pictures, see, tell you what they represent on this, the keyboard. Then I just follow the notes.”

“You are a magical boy, isn’t he Frederick?”

“You’ll have to be careful with that kind of magic,” Frederick said.

“Play some more,” Abigail said.

I played the Sinfonia and an Invention and Abigail and Frederick began to relax and pat their hands on the fortepiano. Then they started to dance, mimicking the dances they’d seen the white people do. I became very happy and a little careless with the volume of my key strikes as they began to stroll across the full expanse of the parlor floor, sometimes tripping over their own feet or each other’s until a knock was heard at the door. We stopped. Abigail looked at me and pointed towards the back door, I crept towards it and she followed; we waited just inside so that we could see the visitor. Frederick in his normal stately manner opened the door and there stood, as polished as ever, the fortepiano tutor.

“Is the Captain or Mrs. Keenlyside about?” he asked as he peered inside towards the fortepiano.

“No sir, they’re away. Would you like to leave a letter?”

“Who was playing?”

“Playing what, sir?”

“The fortepiano, of course.”

“Why, no one, sir.”

“I just heard it. And I heard what sounded like dancing.”

“I assure you sir it must have come from another house, there’s no music playing or dancing going on here. The family is away. Would you like to leave a letter?”

“No. I think I left my meter stick here, could I look for it?”

“Why yes sir.”

The instructor entered and located his stick he used to beat time during the lessons, then withdrew, looking back incredulously at poor Frederick who watched him retreat down the stairs and away from the house, then nodded at us. Abigail looked down at me smiling. “So, how did you learn? Just from the book whilst we were away in the morning?” I nodded and smiled. “Goodness.”

“Please Abigail, can I play quietly, even whilst you’re here? After all my chores? Until they return? Please. I’ll be ever so careful and wash my hands each time before I touch it.”

She looked at Frederick who shrugged. “Maybe it would be best if we stationed Frederick on the landing to watch for any other visitors while you play. He could knock

on the door if any one comes again. I'm sure we could find some time each day for your playing, until the Captain returns." She smiled and took my hands. "You must play very quietly." I wrapped my arms around her.

By the time the Captain and family returned I was able to play the entire manuscript of Bach Inventions and Sinfonias and began to experiment with them, adding my own little melodies and even composed a short piece all my own. Abigail would stand by the fortepiano as I played, smiling, tapping her feet and sometimes prancing around the room to the beat. I could hear her light steps and the carefree swish of her skirt against the floor.

A couple of weeks went by without another visitor and Frederick became a bit lax in his outpost, often coming inside to dance with Abigail. It was a most merry time, we were all captivated by the music and the gaiety it brought us. I can still see the sheen on Abigail's comely face from her amateurish dancing and her laughter.

But the white family did finally come home and our life returned to its previous routine. Josiah, that blessed boy, was so happy to see me he yelled through the house when they first arrived—*Billy, Billy*—and hugged me most unashamedly when he found me. Then he begged his father to allow us to play in his room. He brought with him some new toys and books he was anxious to show me. The Captain acquiesced and we busied ourselves in his room.

"Did you miss me Billy?" he asked.

"Yes, master Josiah," I replied.

“I did miss you. There was no one to play with at Auntie’s. Please Billy, don’t call me Master Josiah, call me Joe. A man brought coal at Auntie’s. He had big muscles. He called me Joe. I want to be strong like that when I’m older and bring the coal on a big wagon pulled by two great horses.”

“That’s very well, Mas—Joe.”

One evening, not long after their arrival, the Captain and Mrs. Keenlyside went out for some kind of party and told Frederick they would be late and to go on to bed if he was so inclined. Mrs. Keenlyside told Josiah to practice on the fortepiano as their lessons were to start up again the next day and she told Abigail to make sure he sat at the instrument for at least one hour. Josiah moaned at this and swung his head. The missus grabbed his chin and said, “Your father paid a lot of money for the fortepiano and our lessons, so you practice and no moaning!”

“Can Billy watch me whilst I play?” Josiah asked.

“Well, okay, as long as he’s done with his chores,” she answered.

Josiah was then eager to help me sweep and feed our pig, even scour the chamber pots. Finally he sat at the fortepiano whilst I stood near him. He struggled through a beginning little tune in the primer and kept tripping up at one part because he wasn’t positioning his hands correctly. He became frustrated and let out big sighs.

“I’ll never learn how to play. I hate the fortepiano,” he said.

“I think it could be fun,” I said.

“How?”

“Let’s pretend that the notes you play with your left hand is Mrs. Chandler’s (the neighbor’s) cat, Roger.” I reached over and played three notes, and gave a kind of a me-yow-oo sound and Josiah giggled and played it. “Now, let’s add a little bird sound with your right hand.” And I played a slow trill. “Just play it back and forth as if Roger and the bird were having a conversation—*I’m going to eat you. Please don’t eat me.*” Abigail came in, hearing the new little song.

“Look Abigail, I’m playing! This is the cat...this is the bird,” Josiah said.

Abigail looked over at me. “That’s very well Master Josiah.” She shook a rag at me in warning and left the room.

“Show me something else,” Josiah said to me. And I made up another simple tune which he was able to play, then I suggested he try again the short piece in the book whilst I gently corrected his finger placement and he was finally successful. He played it several times with even greater achievement causing his face to light up. He said, “You’re a better teacher than Mr. Jones. Now, you play, okay? Then I’ll practice more after.” He got up and stood by the stool. I sat down, breathing deeply, and played my favorite of the Sinfonias.

Abigail came running in. “Billy, what are you doing?” I stopped playing. “Josiah will tell.”

“No I won’t.”

“It’s not right to ask Master Josiah to lie for you. Well, the cat’s out of the bag now.”

Josiah said, “Don’t worry, I can keep a secret. Keep playing.”

Abigail left the room mumbling as I played on the Sinfonia. Josiah began swinging his arms to the music then began a little march. Soon Frederick came in and Josiah rushed up to him grabbing his hands. “Dance with me.” And the two of them danced around. Before the night was done, Abigail too joined Frederick and Josiah, and now it was Josiah that was the teacher, showing Abigail and Frederick some steps he’d learned whilst I played on.

As it turned out it wasn’t necessary for Josiah to keep his secret long. Within a week his parents were again away for some engagement and we immediately began the dancing and merry making. It was perhaps a half hour into our own festivity when I suddenly noticed the absence of their steps and then heard Abigail say tersely, “Billy.” I turned to find Mrs. Keenlyside standing in the doorway staring at us all in much amazement. I reacted the way I had when Abigail and Frederick first caught me, by jumping up and pressing my back against a near wall, my eyes lowered.

“How on earth did you learn the fortepiano? I’ve never heard the Sinfonias played so well. Billy, you never cease to amaze me. First your perfect English, then your reading ability, now this. Come here.” I ambled over to her, my fear abating. She cupped my face in her gloved hands. “You are a true prodigy, my boy. I never thought a Negro could have the capacity for such cleverness. Well, I was wrong to assume such things. Don’t think I didn’t notice your attentions during our lessons, did you practice and learn so much whilst we were away?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“How much of the book can you play?”

“All of it, ma’am.”

“Well, I must return to the party, I just came to get a heavier wrap. Tomorrow, the Captain and I will sit and you will play all that you have learned for us.” The four of us stood stock still until the missus retrieved her wrap and we heard the equipage leave the house, then we all sighed and relaxed.

Captain Keenlyside and the missus bought me more music which I devoured and they soon began to call me their own discovery. Within six months they arranged a party at their home and announced there would be a surprise virtuoso who would play solo and also accompany a performance by the Captain. They dressed me up in Josiah’s most courtly clothes, which delighted the lad who never saw me out of my everyday livery, and hid me behind a painted screen. I played Bach, Haydn, Mozart my little fingers racing across the keyboard for more than two hours. After every piece I heard noises of the group’s diversion. Then with great fanfare the screen was removed and I turned to face the audience. Oh how they shrieked and clasped their hands to their mouths. *This is a trick*, an older portly woman exclaimed. *Where is the real pianist?* Then I turned back to the fortepiano and played on the most difficult of my pieces. Then, as finale, I accompanied the Captain’s fine voice.

It was perhaps a year later that this same woman, who had the most incredulity, requested that the Captain bring me to play in her home in Charleston, South Carolina for a wider audience, employing the same shocking method of surprise. She also had a specific request in music which was given me to learn. The Captain was preparing for a

business voyage to England and the engagement was to take place once he returned in three months time.

My practice now took up much of my day and I rushed around every morning to complete my chores so that I could sooner sit at the fortepiano. And I took up new chores in one regard. At Josiah's request I became his and then Mrs. Keenlyside's new tutor and the lad became fairly accomplished himself. We always enjoyed each other's company in play, now with the fortepiano we started a new relationship, playing duets.

Several times throughout this period I was also privileged to hear orchestral music. Captain Keenlyside and the missus rarely missed an opportunity to hear a qualified orchestra and took me along as a personal attendant in fancy livery for my own education and, dare I say, extreme pleasure.

Alas, the upcoming performance at the lady's Charleston home was never to happen; everything would change for all of us in the Captain's home due to a great tragedy. On a brisk morning in November of 1803, the Captain was preparing to sail away and Mrs. Keenlyside, Josiah, and myself accompanied him to the docks to see his new schooner and to wish him well on its first voyage. The ship set off, its gleaming new sails filling with a morning wind. The Captain waved goodbye with both his arms outstretched then turned to the sea and disappeared into the horizon, never to be seen again.

The very afternoon after the Captain was declared lost at sea, Master Stuart burst into the house in high spirits and called the household to the parlor. It was a year since we

last saw our Captain although we knew within five months that he never reached England. Mrs. Keenlyside kept hope until the declaration was made and his accounts were settled. She told us of the outcome of the meeting with the Captain's solicitor just before Stuart's arrival. The elder son, who was now twenty-one, would inherit the shipping business and remaining schooners, house and property. A stipend, apart from the business, had been arranged for Mrs. Keenlyside and Josiah, who had just turned 12, and specifically the fortepiano was given her.

Stuart sprawled across the missus' fine settee and heavily placed his boots upon a delicate table. We all, Mrs. Keenlyside, Josiah, Abigail, Frederick, and I stood before him with great trepidation. "Abigail," he began, "bring me a flask of *my* finest whiskey." Although, even from my distance I could smell spirits on his breath and his rosy eyes showed him to be well seasoned.

"Yes Master Stuart," Abigail said and went on this errand.

"My dear Mrs. Keenlyside, I don't think our lifestyles will coalesce. You will immediately gather your personal possessions including the person of your son and move out." He said this with a dismissing wave of his hand. "*Now*, lady." The missus gasped, Josiah reached over and hugged her, glaring at Stuart.

"Brother, you are too cruel. The very day our father is declared dead you turn us out?"

Stuart stood and looked down at Josiah. "Propriety, young sir. I have propriety here. You watch your step, younger brother. I am the master now."

Mother and son retreated upstairs as Abigail brought the whiskey. "Here we go," Stuart said rubbing his hands together and sitting back down. "Boy," addressing me, "remove my boots." I reached down to do as I was bid but was kicked in the face with his heel, cutting my cheek and causing me to fall backwards across the floor. "You will address me properly or I'll have your hide and no Captain Keenlyside *Sir* is going to protect you this time. Now remove my boots."

"Yes Master Stuart, sir," I said. And thus I was initiated into the more typical and wretched life of a slave.

For the next few weeks Abigail, Frederick, and myself floated around the house like ghosts. I avoided my new master like a skittish cat but was constantly being summoned for some invented reason for punishment. He ordered around Abigail and Frederick with a shameful cant but saved his worse violence for me. His fiercest abuse occurred when he was full of drink which was nearly every night. Relieved we were each time he fell across his bed in a stupor knowing we would be free of his wickedness for a few hours.

Josiah and his mother left in tears for her sister's home the very evening of their expulsion. Josiah hugged me saying, "I'll see you anon, I promise." But he was just a boy and I held no hope in a renewed closeness. He slipped me a piece of paper just before they parted. "This is from mother."

In privacy I took out the paper which read: *If ever possible, come to us my little musician. We will reside with Mr. and Mrs. Morrison in Glouston, New York. By*

carriage, follow the Meer road west for three days then go north at Shrews for another day. I'm sorry we haven't the funds to bring you with us. Be safe and God speed. Then I threw the paper in the cook fire, having memorized every letter and began juvenile dreams of escape from Stuart's abuse.

During this sad period after the loss of the missus, Josiah, and the fortepiano I began to think back to my lost homeland and my own family and began to sing again the songs my grandfather taught me and my own songs from that time. The memory of that original innocence filled me and helped me to sleep, the music making me believe that somewhere deep in that mythical land a boy slept with the same dreams I had then.

Abigail and Frederick would often come and sit near me at night, holding each other and swaying to my songs. Abigail once asked if I remembered my first given name. "Oh yes—Jaliballa."

"Jaliballa—" then she said something in her own language I didn't understand. But when she spoke my name in the darkness of the cookhouse, I heard my mother's voice and laid my head in her lap, a near man now of thirteen, and she stroked my hair as I sang my mother's lullaby.

But over the months we fell into a routine that became less dreadful as Stuart's abuse became tiresome even to himself and his attitude towards us gained a habitual tone as long as his requirements of comfort were met. We were like machinery to him, built upon this earth to serve him and slapping a dumb machine only serves to injure the hand.

Once again my duties included reading for my new master. This task branched out to reading all his documents. Stuart was reluctant to wear his spectacles in public and began a habit of requiring my accompaniment most times in case my good eyesight was needed. Alas, his vision was so poor I learned to warn him concerning his footing else he would wail upon me if he managed to fall or even trip. He purchased for me new livery and called me his footman. He liked to put on airs and stomped around town in his own fine clothes. His habit of drinking spirits throughout the day did not help with his sure-footedness and many a time I was required, often with his friends' help, to hoist him up into the chaise and bring him home after a long night of drinking in public houses. Consequently, at this time I also learned how to manage the horse and chaise, which was generally Frederick's domain, but Frederick could not read. It was my function as reader for Stuart that allowed me detailed knowledge of his financial status.

He had not the wherewithal to run the shipping business, preferring rather to sleep well into each day and else amuse himself at the local pubs. An offer was made to purchase the business by Captain Keenlyside's main competitor and Stuart readily accepted the contract even after being warned by the Captain's solicitor that the offer was excessively low. The competitor was Stuart's drinking companion of late and took advantage of this obvious ruse to cheat the young man. Nevertheless it was a goodly sum and would keep Stuart in drink for some time. But within a year the money was near gone and creditors were pounding at our door.

A momentous evening occurred around the time the money from the sale was seriously dwindling. It was in January of 1806. I had accompanied my master to one of

his usual haunts, a doggerly lit by a minimum of tapers. He sat down at a small crusty table then dismissed me but I remained nearby and out of sight to keep from the cold. The place was small, damp, and had the rank smell of ages of spilled beer. The gritty floor under my feet probably hadn't been swept in a month and possibly never scrubbed since the pub was opened. Stuart stared towards a woman who brought draughts to a nearby table.

Two men in a corner of the pub began a lively song. The musician bowed a fiddle in short quick strokes and sang whilst another man accompanied him with a flute and danced in place. Some of the customers joined in the song—

When Love gets you fast in her clutches,

And you sigh for your Sweetheart away,

Old Time cannot move without crutches,

*Alack! how he hobbles Well-a-day!*¹

“Lucy!” Stuart called out to the woman. His fist held his empty glass and he knocked it upon the table to the beat of the music.

The woman approached Stuart and leaned upon the table, “You calling me, sir?” she said.

Stuart squinted at her, “Yes, of course dear Lucy, bring me another draught then sit with me a bit, I’m lonely,” he said, pulling the spare chair out.

“I’m not Lucy.” And the woman laughed. “I’m Josephine, just started working here but I seen you last night, brought your drinks over. Don’t you remember me?”

¹ “When Love Gets You Fast in Her Clutches” lyrics by Thomas Morton (1795)

“Yes, of course, Josephine. Come on now you little jade, get me a draught and divert me awhile,” he said.

“You ain’t getting your way by talking rude to me.” And she turned and left.

About this time a light skinned African man strutted into the pub. He was short and stout with fine clothes and a top hat. He walked straightaway to the bar keeper who scowled at him and motioned towards Stuart with his chin. The man bought a pint of whiskey and brought it over to Stuart as the chorus to the song began and the he joined in heartily—

Well-a-day! Well-a-day! Well-a-day! Well-a-day!

Alack! how he hobbles Well-a-day.

He set the bottle down on Stuart’s table and sat himself with great aplomb and sighed, perhaps eager to rest his legs from his ample girth. Stuart looked at him and snarled.

“Seat yourself elsewhere,” Stuart said then noticed the bottle. “Unless you’re sharing.”

“By all means,” the man said and poured Stuart a draught. “I’ve come to talk a little business with ya. My name is—”

“I know who you are. Ollie Muldoon, darkie slave broker—just come up the coast from Charleston,” Stuart said.

“Grand.” Muldoon laughed nervously. “So you’re a well informed young gentleman. I’ve come specially to ask you about a Negro boy named Billy, plays the fortepiano, so he does. I have a special client, a Mrs. Ronald Hanover who wants the boy,

will pay handsomely.” It was the lady who wished me to play at her home before the demise of the Captain. This could be good news for me, I thought, but then again it would pain me greatly to leave Abigail and Frederick and I was fearful of the South, but surely Stuart would never sell his “footman” and eyes.

“How much?” Stuart said. I was quite surprised and dismayed at this. Was he really prepared to sell me off? But how could I be shocked, he was near broke.

Muldoon leaned into him conspiratorially, “I can go as high as perhaps 300 dollars.” He slammed his hand down on the table to accentuate the good offer.

Stuart tilted back on two legs of his chair and leaned against the wall. “Not possible. I’ve already been offered 400 for him.” Another offer had been made? Or was it just a ruse, part of the bargaining. He could have planned to sell me outside my knowledge; I couldn’t overhear *all* of his conversations in town; I was sometimes left with the chaise.

Muldoon frowned. “Let me see what I can do now. The lady herself was quite adamant about wanting this specific boy.”

“The other trader’s returning in a week. If you can beat his price before then, so be it.”

“I’ll be by yer house in four days, to be sure,” Muldoon said and got up, his hand on his bottle.

Stuart grabbed the bottle also. “Leave the whiskey.”

Muldoon laughed nervously again and released the pint. “Aye lad. You’re a lover of spirits I see. Just like me dear departed pater, Casey Muldoon. Did you ever come to meet the fine fellow?”

“Leave me,” Stuart said as he stared across the room and took a deep swig.

Early the next day I related all that took place to Abigail and Frederick whilst we sat in the cookhouse and Stuart safely asleep in his bed. “I’ll be by in four days, to be sure,” I said, mimicking the brogue of the man. Frederick held his head in his hands whilst Abigail stared at the wall, deep in thought.

“What did the man look like?” she asked.

Frederick looked at her. “What in heaven’s name are you talking about woman? Our poor Billy here is to be sold away and sent South.”

“Yes Frederick,” she said, “he’s in a desperate situation.” Then to me. “I think it’s time to talk about running.”

“Are you crazy? He’ll get caught and beat up then Stuart will sell him anyway” Frederick said.

“Caught? That seasoned fool hasn’t the wherewithal of a goat. And what do you think could happen if he’s sold away? Might as well risk it.” Abigail said. “Billy, so what did the man look like, this Ollie Muldoon?”

“A light African, about my height but very stout.”

“African? Speak to me again in his voice,” she said.

I wasn’t merely good at bird calls. I still had the ability to mimic nearly any sound, voices were the easiest.

“I can’t pretend to be Muldoon, to buy me you mean. He’s wide, and old. For that kind of deal I’m sure Stuart will locate his spectacles which he must rely on from now on if he aims to sell me. And even without them he’ll know, he’s not that blind. And then there’s the question of banknotes,” I said but Abigail didn’t seem to be listening.

“Your handwriting’s good is it not?”

“My handwriting is excellent.”

“Go do your chores,” Abigail said, “I need to think. Frederick, get out, go do your chores.”

I also wanted to think. Stuart was a drunkard and unsuspecting; if any master could be deceived it would be him. So, I came up with my own conceits about escape as I fed the chickens and gathered eggs.

Over breakfast, with Stuart still sleeping it off, the three of us devised a plan, dangerous and crazy and depended much on the unwary Stuart.

The following morning Abigail tidied the parlor and spotted Stuart’s spectacles, left, as often happened, on the settee table. She slipped them into a pocket of her apron. Around 11:00 that morning, she took him breakfast. I came in with her as I always did to help Stuart dress.

Abigail set the breakfast tray down on a table near the bed. Besides eggs and sausage a folded letter lay on the tray. Stuart motioned with his hand for Abigail to bring him the tray in bed. “What’s this?” Stuart asked, picking up the letter.

“A man came for you this morning, left the letter, sir,” she said.

“Did he leave a name?”

“No sir.”

“What’d he look like?”

“Don’t know sir. Frederick answered the door.” She lowered her head and curtsied.

“Yes, go Abigail.” And she withdrew as he waved his hand in dismissal. “Billy, did you see the man?”

“Yes sir, saw him leave in a fine chaise for hire.”

“Well, out with it you stupid creature, what did he look like?”

“He was a portly African man with fine clothes, a top hat, and white cravat.”

“Do you see my specs there on the table?” He picked up the letter and unfolded it.

I shuffled items around there then said, “No sir.”

“Off with you, go find my specs, down in the parlor somewhere.”

“Yes sir.” And I withdrew.

I wandered around the parlor, pretending to look for Stuart’s spectacles when I heard him yelling from upstairs. I went in expecting to be cuffed for my failure in the errand but I think he was too groggy to expend the effort. He shoved the letter at me and bid me read aloud.

“There are two sheets sir, a short note and a larger document. Which would you have me read first?”

“The note of course, come on. Read the correspondent’s name first, at the end.”

“It’s signed Ollie Muldoon, sir,” I said.

Stuart relaxed and leaned back in his bed, took a bite of food. “Go on. Read from the start,” he said his mouth full of eggs.

“Dear Mr. Keenlyside, I regret to have missed you this morning as I have urgent business related to our conversation two days prior. The proprietress, Mrs. Hanover, has arrived on other business and I was therefore able to secure a pledge from her sooner than arranged. Please review the enclosed document, a statement of the particulars of the transaction and the sworn quality of the stock. Sign and send to me at the Blue Bird Inn and I’ll arrive tomorrow with banknotes worth \$410 and collect the merchandise. Ollie Muldoon. Do you want me to read the other document?” I said.

“No. Hand it to me.” He squinted and examined the article for so long that I was gripped by a growing fear—maybe he could make out the document Abigail and I had prepared. But then he said the most astounding thing— “Get me my ink and quill.”

“Yes sir,” I said gladly.

He set his breakfast plate on the bed, set the document and ink on the tray, and prepared the quill to sign. I thought my heart would spring out of my chest. He was going to sign our document and we wouldn’t even have to produce a false Muldoon.

His pen hovered over the paper, as I leaned in to watch. Then he paused, took a deep breath and looked to the side, then at me, which was frightening. He very rarely looked me in the eye, for a moment I thought he could see into my very thoughts. Then he looked down. “No, I’ll meet Muldoon in person at the inn,” he said to himself, then to me, “Get me my riding clothes.” I couldn’t move. He set down the quill and folded the document, moved his tray and was about to get up. “Move boy, get my riding clothes

then tell Frederick to get the horse ready.” I looked down at my hand that still held the note.

“Sir, I just noticed sir, there’s a postscript on the note, it’s on the reverse.”

“Well, read it,” he said.

“It says—I will be out on other business most of the day but will return to your home at around 3:00 this afternoon. I’ll bring a bottle, perhaps we could toast our near completed transaction.” I looked at him, never believing he could fall for this hoax.

“Well, that suits me.” He got back into bed and to his breakfast. “Set this on the table.” He handed me the unsigned document. “And go tell Abigail to bring me more sausage and coffee and tell her to find my specs since you’re too stupid to accomplish that small task.”

As I stumbled down the stairs I now knew why I hadn’t considered such intrigue before, I hadn’t the nerve, and remember I was still a boy, only fourteen. But I was deep in it now and could only follow through with my deception. I stepped into the cookhouse and sat heavily into a chair, Abigail rushing up to me. “He wants more sausage and coffee, and his specs of course.” I said.

“Did he sign it?” she asked.

“No. We’ll have to produce Mr. Muldoon, at 3:00, with a bottle.”

“All right. We’ll follow through with the rest of this. Go tell Frederick to buy a good bottle of whiskey at the corner store. Hopefully Mr. Keys will still give credit to the master. Here,” she handed me a banknote from her pocket—a portion of her precious savings, “give him this just in case. Tell him don’t forget the change.” She turned to the

stove and said under her breath, “Spending my own money to liquor up the master.” Then to me as I left, “come straight back here after talking to Frederick and get ready.”

I stopped in the doorway. “But, what if he calls for me? You think he’ll get suspicious about the lost spectacles?”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll tell him I sent you out on an errand. Now go.”

It was 3:00. Abigail and I were in the cookhouse. She told me Stuart was sitting in the parlor staring at his timepiece, the document laid on the table. She looked me over once more and nodded. I went outside and crept around the house, wary of any nearby pedestrians and when I felt the coast was clear I stomped up the front stairs, whiskey in hand, singing loudly in Muldoon’s voice—

Well-a-day! Well-a-day! Well-a-day! Well-a-day!

Alack! how he hobbles Well-a-day.

I beat upon the door and sang out the chorus again to make sure Stuart inside could hear me. Frederick opened the door and gasped from shock, covering his mouth—the audaciousness of our plan manifest in my appearance. I wore a long-sleeved shortened black shift of Abigail’s, stuffed underneath with a pillow and knee length black pants of Stuart’s and a pair of his own white stockings and black shoes. A bleached white dishrag was tied around by throat just below my face. I sported an old top hat previously worn by the Captain, the torn rim repaired quickly that morning by Abigail’s needle. “Here’s my card, boy,” I said in Muldoon’s brogue and handed to Frederick one of Stuart’s own cards.

Frederick turned stiffly and held the card out in front of him as he walked to Stuart. "The gentleman's card, sir," he said.

"I don't need his card, just show him in," Stuart said impatiently.

Frederick opened the door wide for me and I, breathing rapidly, stepped inside. Stuart squinted up at me and I feared again he would recognize the hoax. "Good afternoon," I said.

"Sit Muldoon, we'll have a drink of your spirits before business," he said. I walked slowly towards the settee, trying to recreate the gait of a fat man. I set the bottle upon the table and stepped back as Stuart poured the drinks.

"I prefer to stand, if ya don't mind. To be honest with ya my backside's a wee sore from sitting in the chaise all morning."

"Suit yourself," he said.

"Have you signed my document then, sir?"

"What's your hurry? Have your drink." We hadn't discussed this complication. I had never drank whiskey before and was afraid if I threw the liquid over my shoulder Stuart would notice, so I drank. The scorching of my mouth and throat was so intense I nearly called out. I glanced at Frederick who was watching me, his shoulders jerking up as if he had swallowed the poison himself. I took a deep breath, trying to be quiet.

Stuart set down his empty glass and filled it again. "Another," he said looking up at me.

"In a moment sir."

"What? A darkie teetotaler? Drink." he said. So we both downed another.

Stuart sat back and smiled. “Frederick, that will be all. Go out and...look to the horses. I may go out later.” And Frederick withdrew with a sidelong glance at me.

“Mr. Muldoon, could you read again the document before I sign? Aloud, so’s that we both are fully aware of the business.” He handed me the paper.

“Grand.” I said and took the document. This would be tricky. I recited slowly and carefully, all my skills of memory would be called to order here as I tried to create the typical wording for a bill of sale. I began—

“Know all men by these presents that I, Stuart Keenlyside of Rockingham County, in the state of New Hampshire for and consideration of the sum of four hundred ten dollars, current money of the United States to be in hand paid by Ollie Muldoon of Charleston County, in the state of South Carolina. Whereupon deliverance of aforementioned sum I will deliver unto the said Ollie Muldoon, executor, administrator, and assign one Negro boy named Billy about fourteen years of age in good health and sound body. To have and to hold the said Negro unto the said Ollie Muldoon executor, administrator, and assign to the only proper use and behoove of the said Ollie Muldoon executor, administrator, and assign, forever. In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-eighth day of January, in the year one thousand eight hundred and six.” I looked up at Stuart, unable to guess what he might say to my performance.

“Tomorrow then, you’ll bring the money tomorrow and then take the boy?”

“That be it sir, just sign the document and I’ll be off. I got other business to attend but you keep the bottle, now, enjoy your afternoon.” I said. I stepped forward and laid the

paper on the table. I stepped back and suddenly noticed my dizziness, nearly tripping in Stuart's oversized shoes.

Stuart prepared his quill he had set on the table and signed the bottom where I had left plenty of blank space lest he ruin the contract. He stood, handed me the paper and extended his hand to shake. I stared at it for a moment, I had a boy's slender hands not that of a portly gent. But then Stuart withdrew his hand remembering, perhaps, that Muldoon was not all Irish. "You got the signed document, be off. But be here by this time tomorrow."

"Aye, until tomorrow, sir," I said as I stepped towards the door, not looking at him.

I grabbed the rail as I moved down the stairs, my other hand holding the precious article. At the bottom of the stairs I looked back, just to be sure Stuart hadn't followed, then I ran around the corner of the house and heaved my lunch, careful to hold the folded paper out of the way. Abigail came running up to me, placing the sacred document in a deep pocket, and helped me to the cookhouse where we hurriedly removed all traces of my costume, she doing most of the work due to my lingering wooziness from the whiskey. "Now we wait and pray," she said.

An hour or more later, Abigail and I went into the parlor, carrying a mop and pail as an excuse for disturbing our master. We found Stuart still sitting on the settee, his feet upon the table, the bottle empty. His head rested back and his mouth was open.

"Master Stuart, would you be wanting anything, sir?" Abigail said to him.

He stirred, "No, don't bother me." His voice slurred. "Wait, bring me a cordial."

“Yes sir,” she said. She went to his liquor cabinet then set what was left of his spirits on the table and we waited in a far corner of the room. He poured himself a draught and drank it then lifted the bottle for another, dropping it and falling across the table, unconscious. Abigail tiptoed to him, “Master Stuart?” No response. She turned to me and nodded but before she moved away she set his spectacles on the table next to him.

The buckboard wagon was quickly stocked and the sturdier of the horses harnessed. As we set out at dusk I glanced back at the Portsmouth house I would never see again and thought of Haydn’s Farewell Symphony—the last performance the Captain, the missus, Josiah, and I saw together and how each musician, as part of the performance, quit the stage one by one. And now our own house was bereft of any heart due to the departure of first the Captain, then the missus and Josiah, and now lastly its three humble servants. I turned away—the final thin melody of the symphony running through my mind. We headed towards Glouster, New York.

We journeyed west on the Meer road until very late. It was a clear, cold night, lit well by the moon. We wanted to travel as far as possible before stopping but finally the horse was tiring and would go no further so we pulled off and camped. We had passed Irondale and knew we were within a mile of the New Hampshire border. I was tucked well in a thick blanket and had just gotten off to sleep, listening to the night birds and a breeze through the treetops when I heard another sound, the running of many hooves. I sat up. “Abigail, Frederick,” I said but they were already stirring.

“There they are.” I heard a man say, they followed our trail from the road, most likely guided by the smoke of our fire. We stood and clung to each other as nine or ten horsemen surrounded us with means full of enmity.

“Stuart,” one of them called, “is this your slave and servants?”

Stuart came out of the crowd of men on his horse and moved closer to us. “Yes, these are them.” We thought he would sleep until the morrow, but he apparently managed to rouse himself and must have noticed we had left with the horse and wagon.

“Master,” I said. “But you freed me and allowed us all to go. How can you now change your mind? You signed a charter, giving me my liberty and allowing us means to leave the state.”

Another horseman approached us; he sat up very straight and had a forthright voice. “I’m Sheriff Dole,” he said. “Hand me over this document then.” He dismounted as Abigail retrieved the paper and handed it to him. “Can you stoke the fire?” he said to me as he attempted to read it in the firelight. “So, you’re Abigail, Frederick, and Billy?” We nodded. “Says here, Mr. Keenlyside, that the boy, Billy, has been freed and that you’ve given Abigail and Frederick, your long time free servants, the horse, buckboard, and supplies so as to be able to leave New Hampshire. Very commendable. Most families let loose their charge without a penny and they become wards of the prefecture,” he said to Stuart, who remained mounted.

Stuart looked around at the other men and smiled. “That’s preposterous, I wouldn’t give away a valuable asset as the boy, not to mention the buckboard and horse.”

“Come down here and look at the article,” the sheriff said, “looks quite legal to me.”

“Why? I tell you I didn’t issue such a charter.”

“If we go to the trouble of bringing this paper and these Negroes to the constable and find out this *is* a legal document I’ll charge you with the expense of this little raid, so you better take a look at it, here and now.”

Stuart slid off his horse as we grasped each other’s hand. He glanced at the paper still held by the Sheriff. “No, I didn’t sign that.”

“I happen to know, Stuart Keenlyside, that you’re blind as a bat. Where’s your specs?” Sheriff Dole said.

Stuart reached into his vest pocket and pulled out his spectacles, took the document from the Sheriff, and walked closer to the fire and examined the charter. “It, well, it looks like my signature, but I have no recollection of signing it. They’ve tricked me.” He handed the paper back to the sheriff.

“You mean to tell me you were hoodwinked by a Negro boy, crow, and dullard who managed to have you sign a legal paper giving them their liberty, transportation, and supplies? I knew you were a drunkard but ’til now I didn’t realize you were a fool.” The men all laughed.

“Well, wait, there’s a misunderstanding here. Billy you said? Yes, that’s right. I did free *this* slave, and he’s but a boy, so of course I wouldn’t set him off with nothing. And you’re right Sheriff, you should all be pleased, I’m ridding the state of three free darkies. It was another slave I’m after, jealous of this one. But it’s late; we can pick up

his tracks in the morning.” Stuart looked at me in the face with his spectacles on as I looked back at him; he raised one corner of his mouth. He turned away, mounted his horse and galloped towards the road. The sheriff dropped the charter at Abigail’s feet and without a word led the rest of the riders back to the road and headed east.

We stared at their retreat until the last hoof fall was out of earshot then turned to each other and hugged. “We really did it,” Frederick said. “You’re really free Billy.” We laughed out loud and I sang the pub tune in Muldoon’s brogue—

*When Love gets you fast in her clutches,
And you sigh for your Sweetheart away,
Old Time cannot move without crutches,
Alack! how he hobbles Well-a-day!
Well-a-day! Well-a-day! Well-a-day! Well-a-day!
Alack! how he hobbles Well-a-day.*

We found Glouston and were reunited with Mrs. Keenlyside and Josiah, who cried when they saw us. I ended up staying with them for many years as a free servant, working for a modest but fair wage and room and board and since I had a most parsimonious lifestyle I was able to save most of my earnings. Frederick and Abigail, as you well know, moved to the city of New York and two years later they sent me news of your birth, Elizabeth.

I continued to play the fortepiano for Mrs. Keenlyside; I also played for hire, but mostly for myself and I wrote composition after composition. For my twentieth birthday I

bought myself the most extravagant of gifts. It was a pianoforte, a full size piano not the smaller fortepiano. I installed this most beautiful of instruments in my own little room where it took up most of the space. What other sign could there be that I was a man of music.

In 1833 the slave trade was abolished across the British Empire and I was desirous to experience citizenship in such a place. I was now forty-one years old and yearned for a new adventure before I became too old so I crated up my piano and moved to Montréal. My savings, by this time, were considerable for an ex-slave, and had been invested properly with Josiah's help who had become a fine lawyer. I was able to purchase a small house, this house, and live off a small stipend from my investments to this day.

I think I have said nearly all I wanted to say. Only that through the decades my own compositions have piled up here and there throughout the house. I have no idea what music critics might say of their quality compared to the German Masters and what does it matter? My music is influenced still by Africa—a conglomeration of styles that will sound too percussive, rhythmic, haunting to delicate white ears and too imperial for African ears. My brand of music waits for the day when there can be mutual appreciation and though African slave emancipation has now even reached the United States, humanity is far from that kind of enlightenment. So, dear Elizabeth, I request upon my death that you scatter all my music upon my body as I lay in my casket and bury it with me. May it continue to comfort me in the hereafter.

With best regards, William Jaliballa Keenlyside

The Inmate of Miramar

I am in love with my knuckles. Sharp as they are, they can go through flesh like honed flint, as good as any blade on our island of Mulieribus. My eyes are drawn to them; they are my pretty jewels, the points made well. Good breeding. My knuckles can cut deeply but I can love deeply too.

My wife understood all this...I thought. I thought this until I stepped into the tall inquisition room in this quaint asylum of Miramar where she had me interned. She was a pretty woman with pretty white lines across her delicate features—each line a testament to my strong affection. Though, she'd pretend she didn't like my fists. She would hold up her slender hands in front of her face and yell, *please please no no* with her sweet voice, her bracelets jingling as she shook. And so I would stop of course and kiss her own tender knuckles and plead forgiveness. Her glossy grey eyes would soften as I begged absolution, holding her while she cried when it was over. And I would convince her I would *never* do it again, then patch her up, let her heal. I'd go out and buy her an assortment of small cakes and jeweled boxes. All the while something inside me plotted for the next surprise assault. I'm not an angry man, you know, I'm just lovingly playful and sometimes I get a little too much so and my play slips over into a captivating savagery.

Our very last night together, I got up around 2AM to relieve myself, and when I returned I noticed how the moonlight pierced the thin curtains and hit upon her leg. I sat down on the bed and pulled the sheet to lay bare her thigh then bottom. I slapped it,

maybe a little too hard. She jumped up, standing on the bed pressed against the wall as I lashed and smacked her with all my heart. Next thing you know she's huddled in a corner unconscious and bleeding. Goodness what a mess. I got some bandages and tried to fix her up. Dabbing at her with a healing ointment like a good husband. She came to, swinging wildly striking me across the jaw—it was a good punch. *Good girl*, I said. She stood up, rushed down the hall, and out of the house. That was that. Next thing I knew I was being dragged to Miramar by two eunuchs of the prefecture in their appalling black robes.

At my inquest she stood in an ornate box high up the wall, like an avenging angel, dressed in white, with two tall cones upon her head—a split Hennin dripping in red silk. The exquisite scarves floated from the hat's peak like banderoles drifting down over the rail while her head shook. Her captive breasts heaved below her chin while her pointy finger stretched out and accused me of madness and evil. Slowly, her silky sleeve slid along her outstretched arm. I've never been more in love with her. She looked down at me with her puffy eyes and at the three women in attendance, the official inquisitors they were, with their black masks across their eyes and fierce red lips. My wife's face was all bandaged from our little love frolicking, making her speech difficult. She said she was scarred, or was it scared, or scattered, or skilled, or scheming?

I don't know why I'm mad if that's the decree. I blame no one. I never knew my father but my mother was loving enough. She always hugged me after every little slap and patted my head when she laid me down to sleep. She blew kisses before she barred the door to my little room. Well, not really a room, more of a fine closet. And I slept well

as a child, among her fripperies of silk chemises, braided ropes, and glittering fetters—padded ones, they didn't hurt, much, but tight enough to hold my ankles firm, even though I never tried to escape. I felt her love like little pricks, dizzying love it was. Hmm, mother. She finally died you know, in this same institution; no one escapes here. I visited her once. She reached out to me with those sharp, unkempt nails but I stayed just outside her grasp. *You*, she said with an indicting tone, *I loved you too much*. Poor old woman.

After the inquisition I sat on my narrow bed in a room off a long unadorned hall awaiting notice of my disposition and thought of my dear little wife and wondered how she could have misunderstood my intentions. Love must pour out, don't you know, like the letting of blood—hot and red.

I only wished they had allowed me some decorum. I may be insane but I am not crude and my head felt most naked without my chaperon which had been left in our cottage, what with all the rush. So, I stared absent mindedly at the wall when I perceived a tapping on the door. I stood up. Through the door I heard, *Hello sir, mind if I step in? I'm a fellow inmate*. It was a low and gravely yet affable male voice. *Yes, please do. I'm game for a little adventure*, I said slapping my hands together.

A large brute of a man came in, smiling all the while; his grey eyes reminding me of my dear wife. He was a good head taller than myself and outweighed me by a hundred pounds or more with puffed out shoulders and arms. He had a rough protruding jaw, a crooked splotch of a nose, and gaping teeth. His clothes were as rough looking as his face. He looked down to the floor in a most humble way as if he were born for loyal

servility. *Well, kind sir, have you come to tidy the room,* I said, *I really haven't been here long enough to muss it much.*

He looked at me, his eyes like a closing sky. And he was still smiling most benevolently while his giant fist swung around and caught me square in the ear. I smashed against the wall, slumped to the floor. *Good sir,* I sputtered, trying to right myself and conquer the dizzying pain in the side of my head. I watched his feet step over to me, so I scurried back, pushing my body against the wall, hiding my head between my knees and watched him from the crook of my leg. He squatted nearby, his breath smelling like Myzithra cheese, tapped my knee then held out his hand as if to help me rise. I raised my head just a little and there was that kindly look again, as if he were my last friend. I gave him my hand, his fingers feeling abrasive and crudely bulbous. He stood, helping me up while my other hand gripped my bleeding ear. He led me over to the bed and sat me down then gave me a little bow and left. Later he returned with a basin of warm water and gauze, bandaged my ear most gently, said goodnight, and retreated.

A modest but satisfying meal of Sheppard's pie was brought me, the potatoes crisped on top, and a book about dog pedigrees. I looked over the manuscript as the pain of my injury began to dull. I spent little energy fretting over my predicament. What was the point? I was well aware that once one finds oneself in Miramar your life and wellbeing are out of your hands, like a passage on a schooner for a trip across the sea. Yet I did long for my wife and thought about her wounds and how only I knew how to properly dress them. I sat and sighed, and soon stretched out and fell to sleep. The bed,

though small, was quite soft and a warm blanket, taken from my own bed in our little cottage, was provided.

I was sleeping most soundly then abruptly fell into an odd dream of sinking into the sea; a giant tentacle was groping for my neck. I awoke to something real and cold clasped there and around my thigh. I was hauled out of bed, my other leg and arms flailing, and tossed against the wall like a chewed chicken bone. As I flew I smelled again the Myzithra. Before I could roll up in a protective ball the clammy hands were reaching again for my neck and thigh in the dark. I was lifted by the man with a great hump holding me against his chest. Thinking his desire was to kill me I tried my best to fight back but in his burly grip I was merely able to push against his nose with the heel of my hand and gouge at his face. He let out a growl then spun around once, twice—my body forced out away from his. I thrashed about, trying to grab at him. When he let go, I flew out but not far. I had clung to his shirt which ripped in my grip but tugged him enough to pull him off balance. He fell to the floor which shook to the timbers, barely missing me. I scrambled away on my knees and one good arm like a half eaten crab. I heard his hand sweeping the floor and he managed to seize my ankle, pulling it and landing me flat on my stomach. He crawled up near me, turned me over, thrusting his giant grip over my face and pushed me back against a wall. There his hand slipped down to my throat, holding me tight while he cocked his other. I raised my hand in front of my face and pleaded with him, *please, no*. A bit of moonlight through the barred window caught his expression; it was so serene—he pursed his lips into a kiss. Then his fist came, big as a boulder; through my fingers I saw it launched towards me.

I awoke with a start the next day with the same brute dabbing at my head with a damp cloth while I lay tucked into my bed. I was having trouble focusing but I smelled his breath sure enough. *Are we feeling a bit better?* he asked. *No, not really,* I replied with difficulty, licking my salty swollen lips and feeling the sharp edges of broken teeth and a great discomfort all over. I noticed that my right arm, bent at the elbow, was pressed against my body with bandages. *Your clavicle is broken, sir. You've also had a bad concussion but you'll survive,* he assured me. *I wonder,* I said, *are you going to keep terrorizing me, on and on?* But he shook his head. *Oh no, I'll never hurt you again.* I pulled my loose hand from the warmth of the covers, grasped his and pressed his knuckles, red and chafed, to my lips. He gave me a sweet, no, it was more of a loving smile, all the while his grey eyes scheming.

The Man Who Loved Dying

I was always I; that is, all who throughout time said I, were just I. –Arthur

*Schopenhauer*²

Belatedly, Bill had misgivings about killing himself.

He usually *loved* dying, inasmuch as he had discovered long ago that for him it was a transitional activity and a quite pleasant one at that. It had been several existences before while vacationing on a cruise ship that he accidentally fell off the side into the Pacific Ocean. He fell a very long ways and as he hit the water, in a most awkward fashion, his neck snapped and he sunk into the frigid sea, unable to move. The fall had been quite scary and painful and the water felt icy on his face but as his body and brain let go of life, time seemed to slow and a jubilation overtook him like nothing he had ever felt before. *I could get use to this*, he thought just before he blacked out and died.

To his great surprise he woke up only a few seconds later in a bed in a cabin on the ship. He sat up, puzzled, this wasn't his cabin. He looked at his arms, these weren't his clothes. Hold on, these weren't his arms. He walked over to a mirror on the wall and saw a different person. He looked behind him but no one else was there. Yes, the stranger was him in the mirror, yet, there was beginning to be something familiar about the face. Yes, yes, there was a creeping realization coming to him, a life history, this person's history, as if he was reading a long novel in a rapid fashion.

Hello, he thought to the man.

² “An infinite time has run its course before my birth; what was I throughout all that time? Metaphysically, the answer might perhaps be: ‘I was always I; that is, all who throughout that time said I, were just I.’” — Arthur Schopenhauer. The World as Will and Representation Volume II.

Hello, the man thought back.

I'm Floyd, (for that was who he was at the time).

I'm Henry.

Did you know I just died? Fell off the side of the ship.

Goodness! I wondered at the commotion.

I was trying to get a picture of the waves cresting on the bow when I guess I leaned out a little too far. You got to watch out for that.

That's good advice, thank you.

Now, Floyd had been a loner, never married, no children, yet a fair amount of sobbers, his coworkers and an odd cousin or two, rounded his casket as his defunct body was laid to rest. *At least it was the last day of the cruise* they all said later as they sat around in wobbly metal chairs enjoying the little blue cakes with white icing a coworker, who barely knew him, had brought.

So, Floyd gave up being Floyd and his fulfilling life as an oven manufacturer (which was taken over by his partner) and merged into a pleasant enough life as Henry who was a baker. Now, Henry never forgot the amazing feeling of dying (the only memory after awhile left over from Floyd) and safely assumed the transformation had been a singular event. Then one particularly beautiful spring morning, while walking down a sidewalk whistling his favorite Beatle's tune, I believe it was Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da, anyway he stepped out into a crosswalk and was struck down by a metallic grey Hummer. The vehicle, attempting a right hand turn, had several tin scapulars of Jesus dangling from the rearview mirror thereby obscuring Henry who was crushed underneath

it. As he lay there looking at the underside of the Hummer, he wondered at its glossy newness, even in the undercarriage and was relieved to remember that his keen apprentice would already be baking the day's bread. So, while his heart considered stopping in the shattered cavity that had been a robust chest, he heard a woman screaming near him. It was the driver looking underneath her vehicle seeing him there, motionless. Soon a lovely sensation came over him and he tried to smile to ease the woman's panic. He would have liked to reach over and pat her hand but his arm had been wrenched in an odd position underneath him so he just did his best to look serene and enjoy the exhilarated sensation he was feeling. Good gracious, he thought, this is quite divine.

And the rebirth occurred again. Shortly Henry was staring out a storefront window at all the hubbub of his own death and at the same time saw a hazy reflection of himself in the glass. But it wasn't himself, it was Steve.

Henry blurted inside to Steve, *oh my goodness, it's happened again.*

What's happened again? Steve asked.

We'll need to talk, Henry answered.

Steve went into the office of his small sandwich shop and plopped down in his rickety old desk chair so that the two of them could have a nice long conversation. And later it was Steve alone who withdrew.

Unlike Floyd, or Steve for that matter, Henry had a family—wife, three boys and two girls (all under the age of six), and mother-in-law dependent on his meager salary from the bakery. But as it turned out, the minister at their Unitarian Universalist church had secretly and most ashamedly been desperately in love with the widow Mrs. Henry

and held her hand most tenderly as he comforted her at the gravesite. He generously and with ulterior motives supported the family with his ample endowment from a deceased aunt and soon enough happily claimed Henry's family as his own.

But back to Steve. It was him, or maybe it was Ramón, who first thought of suicide. Yes, it was Ramón, a nurse. Steve had a brain aneurism whereby his nephew took over his sandwich shop and placed on the wall over the potato chip stand a sad collage of Steve's running photos, glued to a neon green poster board with *Keep On Running Steve* across the top.

So Ramón, née Steve, née Henry, née Floyd thought and thought of how to accomplice a nice clean suicide, if ever he was in the mood (knowing full well that the hospital's employment office was full of new nurses). Sky-diving into a volcano was his favorite idea and he day dreamed about it often but the logistics were a little on the rough. So, he considered other options. How about jumping into a lion's den just before their meal? Ramón was vegetarian but had spent most of his life as a meat eater and felt a certain responsibility for all the cheerless animals he had consumed. Dreamily he thought of a way to repay animalkind. Finally he decided to take the long swim in the ocean, in consideration of all the fish he used to eat. So, one fine day, he did it. He swam and swam out into the sea until he became tired and while he sank, relaxing into the depths of the ocean, he smiled to think of himself as fish food. And then, that glorious feeling came upon him, like letting go of everything negative in the world, where all (punctuated by the last dancing bubbles floating above him) was pure tranquility. That's what it was like. At least that's what he later told Bill, who happened to be on the beach that day.

As you can see we are conveniently back to Bill.

Now Bill woke up one morning and blew his brains out. But that wasn't the first thing he did. It wasn't like he planned to reach over, pull a revolver from a bedside drawer, and he would never sully his sheets in such a nasty way. No. That particular morning he rose early to a Bach concerto coming from his alarm clock; he made up his bed as neat as a pin; he went into the bathroom relieved himself, brushed his teeth, washed his face, and combed his hair; he shuffled into the kitchen and wrote out a suicide note while sipping hazelnut flavored coffee; he dialed 9-1-1, setting the phone receiver on the table; then he walked out into the back yard, sniffing his roses and the wet grass, and blew his brains out using a 9mm Walther PPK with a silencer attachment he had purchased recently for \$946.37. He sought a relatively stylish yet quiet suicide, going out like a cornered James Bond *and* not wishing to wake the neighbors so early. For Bill was a cautious, considerate man. He really did not fancy traumatizing anyone, not even the paramedics, so he had swathed his head with his thickest towel of a nice maroon color, taping it together in front of his face with wide clear packing tape (being careful not to muss his hair) before he blew his brains out. Now if you can visualize this, it would appear that his brains would not have traveled very far from its original location, which was the idea, of course. Therefore, I suppose the proper phrase would have been: he tousled his brains with a bullet—to death.

But let's back up to that suicide note. All it said was: *To whom it may concern, I'm through with this life so goodbye -Bill.* Now, Bill was never a loquacious individual or particularly articulate when he did manage to speak. Everyone always remarked that

he was a quiet, kind gentleman, kept to himself, and never got ruffled no matter the circumstances. Even that time one of his clients (Bill was a tax accountant) became very angry upon Bill asking if she would like to donate \$1.00 to the local animal shelter. *Fucking bleeding heart weirdo, keep your goddamn mitts off my cash!* the woman screamed only minutes after Bill uncovered new tax deductions netting her an extra \$2,364.87. And how did Bill respond? *Quite right* he said then opened the door for his client and her corpulent husband with a smile, nodding goodbye. Hence, it is reasonable to assume there was no particularly unsavory event which had contributed to Bill's suicidal predilection.

Bill's life was not too shabby really. He enjoyed working or petting his neighbors' cats, especially Roger, the cat from next door. He just loved the way Roger would curl up in his lap and squint up at him as he scratched his little head. But, sadly, his neighbor had recently moved taking Roger with her, and he was finding it difficult to locate work with tax season being over and the bad economy and all. And he knew there would always be some apt individual to replace him next tax season. He had no dependents, not even a stray lover at the moment.

And even if he lacked a memory of those previous lives, he remembered all those previous deaths, the ecstasy of it all. He felt a little sucked in. Life had become dull, why not feel the rush and take a gamble on a new existence?

However, as the bullet was traveling through his skull, and his lights were being shut off, he began to be concerned, even through the ecstasy, about whether, just maybe, this was the *last* death. Because for one static moment he thought he was only Bill, the

man he saw in the mirror a half hour before. He had presumed he had cured death by parting with Bill as Bill and plunging into the unrelenting stream of the living. Perhaps though, this was not a cure, but, THE END, because *everything* must conclude one day, even days themselves. In this fractured second Bill imagined the end of the whole kit and caboodle: the earth, the galaxy, even the universe with Bill in tow as it was sucked into the great black hole of a finished infinity. *Oh dear*, was his final thought before his body collapsed into the dewy grass under the long shadow of a Jacaranda tree.

At that same moment a young man, Teddy, was jogging by Bill's house. He heard a pop sound and thought maybe he had stepped on some gum and stopped to examine the bottom of his shoes when he felt a strange internal jolt. Bill, not terribly surprised to find himself merged with Teddy, introduced himself and they gabbed away while Teddy ran an extra lap around the neighborhood, newly marveling at the spreading oaks that canopied the avenue.

Mary Clark, Act II

Ocea noticed Kireyevsky for the first time one morning in the lift of the old Los Angeles office building where her research labs took up the 11th floor. She glanced at the man as she entered, gave him a formal nod. He was thirtyish, short and jauntily polished. He had a look about him, the way he held his mouth that said he was use to getting his way. He stood up straight when he saw her, swept his glossy hair out of his eyes, and looked up and down her tall form. *How vulgar* she thought and turned to face the doors as they closed. The lift bounced once then gradually rose as it had every day for two centuries since 1920 when the structure, the Security Building, was built.

“Heard the place is haunted, know anything about that? Any rattling chains in the stairwell?” he asked.

She ignored him as if she were deaf, tapping her sleek shoe against varnished wood.

“Rumor has it women were kept in chains in the basement.”

She didn’t budge her position when they stopped on the 8th floor and he turned sideways to slip by her, giving a little humph, the top of his head coming just to her chin. Once on the landing he forthrightly turned and faced her, grinned and pursed his lips in a kiss. Ocea stood stock still and shifted her pupils past him. “How fucking impertinent,” she said once the doors closed.

As soon as she stepped onto the 11th floor she forgot him, her mind buzzing with work issues as her satin-covered shoes tapped along the marble hallway. She turned,

opened a heavy oak door, and stepped into her office as the drapes automatically slid across a rail. A baroque piece began—the Second Act Tune: an Air from Purcell’s *The Fairy Queen*. A morning sun exposed a room heavy like the door with oak paneling on the walls and ceiling, and a floor made of intricately cut wood, glowing with all shades of deep orange in the sunlight. The sizable room was empty save a desk in one corner, two chairs and a small table in the other. The desk and matching stool, made of a reflective metal, were so thin they seemed to fade into the woodwork of the wall. In contrast, the two antique Queen Anne chairs were comfortably upholstered in pale pink and white stripes, high backed, with wide wings, wooden claw armrests and legs. Between the chairs was a delicate plant stand topped with a vase stuffed with violets. The office’s ornate respectability gave its long dead occupants and current one an air of established propriety.

“Music stop. Nikolai, are you there?” she said to the air, her voice transmitted to another room on the 11th floor.

“Yeah. Wanna see the new *rigs*? They’re gorgeous,” a male voice announced.

Ocea tossed her coat and hat onto a chair and paused to sniff the violets, closing her eyes. Then she stepped into a lab with a starkly divergent ambience from her office—all gleaming and light. Tall metal tables and stools sparsely furnished the room. The air smelled as clean and light as the glossy tiles that covered the walls and floor. Ocea squinted as she entered.

Nikolai, a young robotics engineer and her closest assistant, bent over a glass box the size of a coffin suspended on spindly metal legs with castors. Next to this *incubator*

were four more. He looked through the glass lid at an inanimate male form undulating in a wave of pink gel. These five mechanical bodies or *rigs* were blank slates, empty of thoughts, nearly ready for the download. They would soon emerge from their incubators, showered and dressed. They were now just automatons, guided by short commands, until their new hosts were ready, ready to die and be reborn inside these new bodies.

Ocea Wilson, a lavish, fortyish looking woman was a neuroscientist. The technology began as her brainchild more than sixty years ago, and she was the first subject. Her ninety-six year old human body was poisoned by her own hand a decade ago.

Her customers were typically very old and very rich, with ever new ambitions. Their brains scanned, their memories, consciousness—their *essence*—quantumized and stored. Their old bodies had to be euthanized, this was the foremost compulsory rule, before they could wake up with their essence transferred into the quantum information processor inside the rig. And the rigs were each uniquely modeled after their hosts at the age of forty. Following the transfer this fine mechanism ceased to be just a rig and became the person, with a continuing mind. They were counseled by the transfer advisors and given physical therapy before leaving the lab, returning to their homes to live out their ceaseless lives.

The rigs never utilized water, food, or fuel; internally framed with hybrid titanium, animated by millions of microscopic individually specialized motors, energized by thousands of miniature solar cells that invisibly lined the face and hands. The entire machinery's only requirement was to be incubated for an hour once a month or less—a

good soak in a specialized viscous substance to revitalize the skin surface. And, of course, some sporadic sunlight.

The rigs were manufactured several states away, in Plano, Texas, in a plant that made everyday drudges, once called robots, long before the rigs. The rigs were forever being enhanced through innovations from Ocea's lab. These five harbored a new form of pain sensors, warning mechanisms for imminent damage. And another upgrade: hidden deep within their chests was a transceiver, the size of a single carat diamond, that would constantly ping, via satellite, the backup quantum processor for each individual which usually resided in the host's home. This function meant to safeguard the uniqueness of each being. If a duplicate essence was detected walking the streets, the backup processor sent a message to the duplicate rig processor which immediately deleted the essence it contained, that is, after uploading all the memories the copy *illegally* acquired into the backup processor. That was the second and complimentary part of the compulsory rule, no duplicate individuals allowed to exist—flesh or mechanical. The psyche and the law had enough to contend with. The development of this *duplicate-guard* safety system was due to a new program—an enhancement called Essence Travel.

This new form of travel, and sort of a way around the compulsory rule, was soon to be introduced and sold to the very, *very* rich—those who could afford a second rig. The double could be shipped and stored where the occupant often travelled, typically overseas. The transferred individual could step into their incubator in Los Angeles, go into stasis, then his or her essence could be transmitted via satellite to the other incubator far away which animated the stored rig and there you were, in London or Frankfurt,

instantaneously. As long as only one *animated* rig for that individual walked the planet, the rule was upheld. If both the primary and secondary rig were out of stasis somehow, the *duplicate* essence deleted itself through the duplicate-guard system.

The transmitted essence data for travel came, not directly from the rig, but from the transceiver in the *backup* quantum processor (the same used with the duplicate-guard function) built into a comfortable wing chair set near the incubator. The individual was required to sit in the chair for a few seconds each day while new memories uploaded into the chair. If the rig ever became critically damaged or destroyed, the person's essence would always have a backup. The rig's *daily*-use transceiver, a different device than the new ping transceiver, was short-ranged and communicated only with its unique transceiver in the wings of the chair. So with this new form of travel, at the person's command, it would be the chair that uploaded their essence to the distant rig, via a resident chair.

The quantum security coding of the essence data sent out into the air was of particular importance. Nikolai hired a company, from there in Los Angeles, just for this purpose.

After leaving their entourages in another area, five desperately old humans, most over one hundred years, trudged into a comfortable waiting room on the same 11th floor, waiting to be interviewed for the last time as flesh and blood.

Ocea watched holographic images from a hidden camera as the interviews took place. She recognized each person—wealthy, prominent people from around the globe.

Except for one woman, elderly, sick yes, but she couldn't place her. And her clothes didn't look quite right. They were very expensive clothes but something about her stance bothered Ocea, the way she gestured with her arms, made her appear as if she acted a part and the clothes, a costume. "Who's that woman?" she said to Nikolai who sat next to her also watching the interviews.

He looked at a slate on a table next to him, "Mary Clark. Never heard of her."

"Did she pay herself, or someone else?" Ocea asked.

"Yeah, *she* paid," he said, still looking at the slate. "She's from here. Why? She's not the first we don't recognize."

"Something's not right."

"You wanna talk to her? Or stop the process on her or something?" he asked.

Ocea paused, watching the woman who was overly polite with the interviewer. Ocea moved to leave. "No. Never mind. Keep going." She turned. "Wait. Who all did she come with?"

"I didn't see them come on the floor." Nikolai replied.

"Let's see," Ocea said as she sat back down.

Nikolai spoke to the viewing device, finding Mary Clark stepping off the lift with a single person, a young man holding her arm. He was impatient, walking too fast for the elderly woman who struggled to keep up, a look of anguish across her face. *Maybe, maybe this isn't right*, she said. *Hush!* the man replied. Then in a more polite voice, *You're going to be young again, don't you want that?* he said as if talking to the walls. The old woman smiled, *oh yes, oh yes*.

Ocea recognized the man and she watched him with a prickling apprehension.

“That man, I saw him this morning, in the lift, without the woman. What’s on the 8th floor? Isn’t it just rented flats?” Ocea asked.

“I think so,” Nikolai replied.

“I want to examine the rigs again,” she said.

They stepped through a swinging door into a windowless room which lit up with their entrance and smelled of dyed fabric. It was another bright albeit smaller lab. Against one wall were five wing chairs, each upholstered in different prints. The chairs’ clawed feet looked painfully out of place on the gleaming tile. Sitting in them, appearing asleep were the five new rigs—three men, two women; their bodies cozied against the wings, their heads supported by the high backs. All dressed and coifed, looking elegant and wealthy, at the peak of their lives.

Ocea approached the dark haired female rig. She was quite stunning, full lipped and long lashed. She was small with tiny delicate hands that rested in her lap. “Is this Mary Clark’s rig?” Ocea asked.

“Yeah, number 308,” Nikolai replied, looking at the slate he carried in.

“Doesn’t look like her.”

Nikolai shrugged. “I’ll intervene if you want. But, you know, she’s a hundred and six years old.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Forget it. I’ll be in my office. Let’s talk later, once you’re done here.”

Ocea planned a straightforward demonstration of Essence Travel. Several possible buyers were lined up and would be in Rome. An apartment with a view of the Coliseum was already leased and her duplicate rig rested there in its incubator. A lucky employee of hers accompanied the new rig to Rome and stayed in the large refined residence.

The heavy chime of a clock outside rang seven times while Ocea sat at her desk going over the plans. She looked at her watch. *Where was Nikolai? Maybe he forgot and went home. Well, that's okay.* She relied on this right hand man, he pretty much ran the outfit. And, she liked him, was proud of him like a son. He was only twenty-six. It seemed he was the only man, the only person who could drop their guard with her. She had a chilly persona—like the touch of her skin. He was warm and amenable. A good face for her business.

She stood, put on her coat, buttoned up, then placed her hat in just the right position on her exquisite head, her perfect blond hair draped over a shoulder. She stepped out into the hall and fell, sprawling across the marble, tripping over the legs of a man sitting on the floor against the doorjamb. He climbed above her on all fours as she laid face down on the floor. She pulled her hands up next to her body to push up, but feeling his heat over her she turned her head, his dark eyes an inch away. “Get off of me,” she said through her teeth to Mary Clark’s escort, the man in the lift.

“Why? This position suits me...Ocea,” he said. He sniffed her hair. They heard a door open and close around the bend of the hallway and voices, a man and woman. The escort rolled to Ocea’s side and got up on one knee holding out his hand as if to help her

rise just as Nikolai and the new Mary Clark came around the corner. The woman stood still at the sight as Nikolai rushed up to Ocea who gathered her composure before standing, ignoring the escort and taking Nikolai's hand.

"What happened?" he said as she rose to her feet.

The escort said, "I was waiting for Mary, when this woman wasn't watching where she was going and tripped over me. Oh my God, Mary, is that you? How gorgeous you are. How do you feel?"

"Okay," Mary said in childlike voice.

"Well, is she free to go? I'm Ivan Kireyevsky." He held out his hand to Nikolai, who shook it without introducing himself, looking back to Ocea.

"Are you all right?" he asked her and swooped down to pick up her hat.

"Of course." Ocea turned to Kireyevsky. "Go then."

He chuckled, held out his hand to Mary as he approached her.

"I don't need your help," she said politely. Kireyevsky dropped his hand and came along side her, grinning at Ocea as they walked passed. They got in the lift and were gone.

Ocea leaned against the wall, touched her forehead, then smoothed her hair.

Nikolai placed his hand on her shoulder. "Did that man attack you?"

"No." She stood up straight, collecting herself. "I want you to have the lift secured so that no one can come on this floor without being accompanied by one of our employees and lock the doors coming from the stairwells. Distribute his likeness and inform all the employees that if anyone sees Ivan Kireyevsky again on this floor, call

security. And, find out who he is, where he works, etcetera, and who is Mary Clark and who they are to each other.”

“Now?”

“Tomorrow. Nikolai, do you have plans tonight?”

“No. You want me to take you home?”

“Please. I have a charming guest room. Can you stay over? Just tonight?” she asked.

Nikolai plopped Ocea’s hat on her head, smiled, and motioned to go.

Nikolai’s investigator could glean no information on Mary Clark. Her incubator and chair were shipped to a suite in a luxury hotel not four blocks from the Security Building and from there taken to parts unknown. No prominent person could be found with her name although there were several more modest individuals who went by Mary Clark in the Los Angeles area, people who could never afford to be essence transferred. They assumed her name was an alias. Her escort, Ivan Kireyevsky, was much easier to locate. He lived and worked on the 8th floor of the Security Building in a large flat, freelancing in some kind of specialized physics research capacity. Nikolai’s investigator could not find any connection between the names.

For several days Nikolai met Ocea every morning in the lobby of their building and accompanied her in the lift, and left with her in the evening. But Kireyevsky made no appearance and Ocea let the incident slide out of her worries. She wondered about how

he recognized her but she and her company were well known. And her mind was occupied, preparing for the grand staging of Essence Travel.

For the presentation her own essence data would be transmitted from her home in Santa Monica. She already went through the process twice without a hitch—hibernating on the California coast and moments later, re-animating in Rome. It was invigorating to suddenly materialize in the sumptuous apartment with the early summer smell of Italy. The musky odor of Roman jasmine assembled in a tall vase in the main room of the apartment mixed with the peppery fragrance of Laurel trees that swept down on a breeze from the Aventine Hill. She could step onto a balcony, look out level with the umbrella pines, and view ancient Rome. But what was disorienting was piloting the new rig. She felt enclosed, even a little claustrophobic, as if she looked out portholes from a different dominion. She hadn't felt this way since first being transferred. With every rig enhancement Nikolai tried to convince her to upgrade to a new model but she refused. She became fond of her original rig like a vintage automobile, she was comfortable in it. When she returned from Rome, breathed the west coast air, felt the comparative numbness of her decade old rig, a calm came over her like taking diazepam as a human. She was home, place and body.

At 8:00AM, the day of the demonstration, a woman arrived at Ocea's home from a media outlet called Venture Weekly that specialized in investments and other news for the upper crust. She wore a man's black suit and dark hair slicked back into a tight bun. Her round eyes had wide black outlines like seared holes in a pale face. They would

fleetingly look at Ocea's while she asked her laconic questions from thick red lips; she ignored Nikolai who tried to commandeer her. She took a quick motion shot of Ocea standing by her incubator then scurried out.

"What a strange woman. This is supposed to be a lead story and she was barely here," Ocea said to Nikolai. He sipped on a mug of coffee while sitting in a large chair by the fireplace. It was a cool and foggy June day on the beach. Ocea had just entered the room after preparing herself for stasis and dressed in a thick robe, her hair pulled back in a braid. She walked over to a picture window and stared out at the quiet surf. She could just make out the morning surfers who sat on their boards, staring at the shore.

"How long will you stay in Rome?" Nikolai asked.

"A day."

"Why don't you stay longer, see the sights?" he asked.

"I've seen the sights." She turned to him. "I love Rome, I just—"

"You can go there anytime."

"Yes."

"Try the rig out a little longer this time. Give it at least a couple of days. Maybe you'll like it once you've become accustomed—" Nikolai stopped short when Ocea gave him the *that's enough* look.

"You want me to wait here till you get back, guard the *relic* rig?"

"No. Just lock up. Be here in 24."

"Mind if I brew up another coffee? We've got, what, an hour?" Nikolai said.

"Yeah, go ahead, I adore the smell."

Just before 10:00AM the call came in that the interested parties were assembled in the Rome apartment. It was early evening there. Ocea and Nikolai went into the small windowless room furnished with her incubator, wing chair, and plant stand topped with fresh daffodils. “Chair, prepare for Essence Travel,” Ocea said.

A holographic signal, about as wide as the chair, appeared over it made up of three wide horizontal lines, like fat ribbons of violet light. They blinked on and off together. “Ready for Essence Travel,” a woman’s voice said, coming from the chair. Ocea dropped her robe to the floor. Nikolai’s eyes went wide and he looked at the ceiling.

“You’ve seen all one hundred and sixty-three of the female rigs naked and now you’re embarrassed?” Ocea said.

“Well, I hadn’t seen *all* of them, until now.”

Ocea approached the glass coffin filled with a pink gel, the top of which was hip level. “Incubator open,” she said to it. The glass lid slowly came up and she turned and slid, bottom first, into the gel that enveloped her making a sticky wet sound. Her torso was suspended as she lowered her shoulders then head, eyes open. She glanced at Nikolai as the gel closed around her face. Her arms then hands were the last to go, floating alongside her hips, palms down. Her ankles stretched, her toes pointing a little inwards, as if she were preparing to swim. The lid closed and locked and the gel started to wave, back and forth, causing Ocea’s rig to undulate.

“Essence data transmitting,” the chair said and the signal, the three lines, began waving flag-like. After fifteen seconds the lines stiffened and the chair announced complacently, “Essence Travel complete.” The hologram disappeared.

The lid opened and Ocea rolled out of the incubator, groggy. She felt that uncomfortable sensation again from being inside a new rig but something more was wrong. She couldn't see. But she could hear, smell, and touch. Her feet were on a strange rug, there was a damp and stale odor in the room, and she could hear a low rumbling sound. Someone reached out a thick robe and helped her into it. She tied it tight around herself in the cool atmosphere.

“Something's wrong with my sensors, I'll do a diag but I may have to cancel the presentation and go home.” Her voice sounded strange to her, too high pitched.

A deep whisper came in close to her ear and said, “That won't be necessary.”

Ocea lurched backwards, falling across the closed incubator and down onto a gritty concrete floor. She scrambled up, fumbling and reaching out, finding the incubator, placing her palms on the lid, trying to ground herself. She strained for any distinct sound over the quiet rumbling and tried to find any form in the complete darkness.

“So, what is going on here?” she said in measured words to who she knew was Ivan Kireyevsky.

A glaring overhead light came on and exposed a ten by fifteen foot chamber made of rough block walls—a veritable dungeon cell like out of a gothic tale with one exit, a solid metal door behind Kireyevsky. He stood oddly at attention, his feet together, his arms clasped behind him, his head tilted to the side, lips pursed. The stance made him look even smaller than Ocea remembered. “What have you got here? A nice mock up. Do you propose to force some kind of strange drama upon me?” Ocea said.

“We’ll see. You’re my prisoner, Ocea Wilson. I have outwitted and captured you. Outwitted the world’s grand dame of science.” He gestured towards her grandly with one hand as if he were going to bow.

“And what does that make you, now that you have brought me here against my will and done something iniquitous? So what? So my guard was down somehow. Naivety and a lack of intelligence aren’t always paired. Neither is cunning and ingenuity. And I’ll be found of course and something very disagreeable will happen to you.”

“Shut up you brainless woman!” he said and laughed at his joke.

His crude words frightened her more than her circumstances. She looked down, trying to assess the situation. She noticed dark hair falling across her face, and her hands, delicate and pretty, on the incubator. She held them up in front of her face, turned them over. They weren’t her hands. But, she recognized them and realized—she was transferred into Mary Clark’s rig. What has he done? He stole Ocea’s backup processor out of her home? But it’s all encrypted—the backups can only communicate with their corresponding rig. Or he somehow redirected the Essence Travel signal? But it’s also encrypted. And where is Mary Clark?

“What have you done to that poor woman?” she said.

“Dead. Erased. Her old body was dead soon anyway. Actually you killed her, in your labs. It’s all very complicated, isn’t it? Well, she felt no pain with either death.”

“Who was she?”

“Nobody. An old idiot. I sort of adopted her, like my dear old grandma. Found her in a drug store in Hollywood two weeks ago. Bought her an ice cream cone and we became the best of buddies.”

Ocea said, “She must have known the cost of the essence transfer. She must have known how excessive your gift was, for someone you barely knew. Maybe she played along just wanting to continue and would abandon you afterwards when—”

“Abandon... me? Like I said,” he pointed to his head, “she had nothing going on upstairs.

“Well, *I* still have corporal requirements and suddenly quite hungry.” he said. He turned to go and Ocea crept around the incubator. As soon as he opened the heavy door she lunged for him, jumping onto his back and screamed *help* out the opening. Her body went limp and she slid off of him, paralyzed. He had done this somehow. As she lay crumpled on the floor, Ivan revealed inches from her eyes a red, coin-shaped object between his thumb and first finger. “Can you identify this? I don’t know how involved you are with the nuts and bolts of your little invention.” She recognized the SADD, the stasis activation/deactivation device that Kireyevsky must have taken from Mary Clark’s wing chair. “I can activate it in stages just by rubbing it. Good night,” he said as he rubbed it and she blacked out.

“Ocea,” Ivan Kireyevsky said.

She became conscious sitting on the cold dirty floor, leaning against a wall, her arms lifted above her head uncomfortably, her wrists clamped in rough iron shackles

above her head. Her robe was incrustated inside with dried crumbly bits of the incubator gel and coated, inside and out, with dirt from the floor. She looked up through her stringy hair and shook her wrists, hearing the clanking of chains. She drew up her feet, pressed her back against the wall, and stood up which lowered her arms and relieved the pain in her shoulders. “This is an eccentric game you’re playing,” she said to Kireyevsky still believing her confidence could somehow overcome this madness.

“I want you to see something—a mediacast from yesterday.” Ivan sat on a chair, the only furniture left in the room.

He placed a telebox on his lap and projected holographic images into a corner of the cell. There was Ocea, next to her incubator in Santa Monica as an announcer explained the Essence Travel project. Then the scene was Rome, a view from the balcony of the apartment. And then walking out onto the balcony was...Ocea, dressed in a glossy green suit, greeting the rich prospective customers, a stiff smile on her face from her new rig. “A successful demonstration...,” the announcer said.

Ocea slid back down to the floor.

“What a conundrum. You’re there and you’re here. Could it be?” He looked at her and laughed. “Processing? Yes. You’re a copy.” Ocea’s head twitched. “You won’t be missed at all. You’re my own little Ocea toy. I can do what I want with you forever and ever in this little room. Nevertheless, fun and games isn’t the only reason I’ve gone to all this trouble and expense. Once Essence Travel really kicks in I’ll gather a whole collection of essence copies from all sorts of important people then auction them off in a most cautious way. So, at some point you’ll be sold to the highest bidder. One of your

competitors maybe? I happen to know they're chomping at the bit to get at some of the technology stuffed inside your quantum processor—data only your essence can interpret. They give me what I want of some considerable monetary value and they get a facsimile of her highness Ocea Wilson. The market for copies of important people will open up I'm sure for various business or malevolent reasons. I might even start some kind of unique extortion scheme with the primary individuals."

Ocea stared at the floor, needed time to think. This ridiculous little man cannot do this to her, her company, her invention. Ivan Kireyevsky kneeled down, and lifted her chin. "Look at me." Her eyes remained glued to the floor. He struck her face. She screamed with the pain and the audacity of it, her skin tearing a little against the frame of her jaw; white sap oozed out of her wound. "Ow!" he said holding his hand. "I should wear gloves." He gingerly reached into his pocket and pulled out the SADD. "No. I'll let you sit here and hurt for awhile, do you good my little doll." He put the SADD back in his pocket, jumped up, grabbed the telebox and chair, and left the room.

Ocea stood again, processing. So he stole a copy of her essence data. He would've needed to know when and from where it transmitted during the Essence Travel and the code. What did Nikolai say about Kireyevsky? He's a physics freelancer? Could it be he contracted for the quantum coding company? That company is never getting another contract from anyone, when I get out of here. She looked at her fetters. But how did he get close enough to pick up the data stream? It's microscopic in diameter. That woman from Venture Weekly. That strange woman must have been paid off by him. She must have left some kind of data capture and transmitter device. She *was* very keen on being

near the wing chair. Okay...next...where the hell am I? She looked around the empty room and tried to press the torn skin back in place on her jaw. It really smarted, the new sensors worked well. She shut the sensors off that caused the pain. An ability he wasn't aware of it seemed, so he didn't know everything. Maybe there was a chance he wasn't aware of the internal transceiver, the duplicate-guard. If I'm a copy, why haven't I been...taken care of...deleted. I must be outside of satellite range, in a basement maybe? Ocea thought a minute. Maybe she was in the Security Building. What did he say? Women in the basement in chains?

She heard the door opening. Kireyevsky struggled with a large tub of steaming water, clothes and a towel folded under an arm. He set the tub down near a drain in a corner of the floor, then secured the door.

"I thought you might want to tidy up," he said as he walked to her.

"How's your chin?" He reached up to touch her face and she jerked back. "Sore? Mary told me about the sensory upgrade for the 300 class rigs. She told me about *all* the upgrades, of course." He reached down to unlock her fetters. She rubbed her wrists and walked over to the water. She began to untie her robe and paused, staring at Kireyevsky. "Have you become attached to little Mary's rig so soon?" He shrugged, grinned, and turned around. She dropped her robe, picked up the sponge that floated in the tub, and scrubbed at a leg.

Ivan leaned against a wall, crossed his arms. "She even told me about the solar flare charge."

Ocea paused, looking down at her leg, then continued.

“Told me about the specialized energy packs. Ten years without a charge, ten years I can keep you down here after only five minutes of direct sun starting at 3PM on June 21st when a large solar flare is predicted. Cause, I may need to keep you awhile, have some fun, until *my* project, I call it *Essence Auction*, kicks in. The usual charge is good for, what, a month or two without sunlight?”

Ivan turned around and looked at Ocea. His eyelids half closed. She glanced up at him, stopped washing, glowered, then looked down again and continued scrubbing. “You’re not talking,” he said. She continued to bathe, ignoring him. He took three broad steps to reach her, grabbed her hair as she shrieked, and pulled her down backwards towards the floor. Her wet feet slipped forward awkwardly, so that she fell on her rear with her hands behind her, her head wrenched backwards with her mouth pulled open. He straddled her on his knees while still brutally pulling down on her hair. He unbuckled his trousers, hesitated, then released her, jumping up and laughing, doing up his pants, and wiping at his wet knees. She squealed in horror, crawled into the nearest corner of the room and curled her naked body up into a ball.

“As if I’m aroused by the likes of you,” he said. “A machine. I only do real women you know, REAL WOMEN. Finish washing and dump your skuzzy water down the drain, you’re nothing but a filthy drudge. What do you say to that?” He came up close and leaned over her. “ANSWER ME!”

“Yes, okay,” she said, her face still tucked between her knees. She heard him walk away, the door open and slam. Her whole body shook and she squeezed her legs so tight her arms felt the frame within them. She almost wished she was in stasis. But she

knew she had to set this thing aside for now, this terrible panic, this terrible little man, for there was much to consider. Something miraculous was revealed to her, she must grab onto that idea. Her rescue was at hand and her savior was none other than the enigmatic Mary Clark.

She remained curled up and concentrated on her breathing to calm herself. And her thoughts drifted to the discussions about the rig's breathing utility thirty plus years ago when she was still human. There was no oxygen/carbon dioxide exchange in the rig but there were complex circadian rhythm functions that were associated with well-being. The functions were needed for their humanizing affect, to make the host at home in the prosthesis, as it were. She recalled her colleague's voice on the subject—Horacio, with his deep Mexican accent. It was a long time since she thought of him. He had a beautiful bass operatic voice and his singing would echo throughout the labs. He was her principal robotics scientist, and became so excited over his ideas about a complex system of bellows and sensors and a new flexible platinum amalgamator that would never deteriorate. These thoughts eased her more than concentrating on her own breaths.

Then her thoughts glided to their original concerns about whether the psyche would bridge over to the mechanical body; she and the other scientists couldn't be sure until that first transfer. But it happened naturally over a few weeks, just like it did for humans who had a prosthetic limb. The breathing function, balance, complex tactile operations all aided in making one feel like...oneself. The rig's distributed weight must equal that of the human body yet the newly transferred always required some physical therapy to aid in adjustment, coming from an old and dying human body to the vital

young-feeling rig. She thought again about her situation and her relationship with this rig. Even if it felt strange to her, didn't look like her, she still felt a strong connection to it. In dire circumstances a host had the ability to shut off *all* sensors yet still be able to control the rig, like a true separate vehicle for the mind. A type of detachment that could make one go mad and warned against by the transfer advisors unless one fell in a vat of boiling oil or something. Shutting oneself off in this way was to acknowledge a lack of existence that could be very frightening; even more frightening than physical abuse from a wicked, demented man.

She raised her head and slowly stood up. Walked to the tub, finished her bath and dressed in the drab drudge-wear Kireyevsky supplied. She dumped the tub then dragged it over to a dry corner, turning it over and sitting on it, resting her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands.

Mary Clark had sent a message. But, how could that be possible? Maybe Mary had a hunch. Maybe the message was just a safeguard, kind of like the idea of the duplicate-guard itself. One way or the other it was ingenious. And the only way Kireyevsky would fall for it, this ridiculous idea of a super charge with a solar flare, was if his own delusion of brilliance blinded him to Mary's ability to deceive.

Three days away on June 21st, and at 3PM, with the sun on her face a satellite would be in perfect position. Assuming she was in LA. If she were in the Security Building all she needed was maybe a meter out of the basement before being in range. And, five minutes in the sun Mary told him, but it would take a mere ten seconds and Ocea would be gone, deleted, and these torturous memories sent to the backup processor

in Santa Monica and ultimately merged with her primary self. Ocea thought of this other self, sitting, perhaps, above her in her office, working at her desk, listening to Purcell. She closed her eyes and sighed. Three days. How could she survive three days? He wanted to humiliate her. Could she grovel for three more days? How much worse could it get?

Something warm and foul poured down her face, Kireyevsky was pissing on her. Ocea awoke not realizing she had been in stasis. She was once again propped against the wall, her wrists above her head in shackles, and Kireyevsky stood in front of her with his pants around his ankles. Her eyes fell upon his protruding knees. She blinked and shook the urine off her face and from her hair. He reached down, pulling up his pants and met her eyes—his eyelids half closed; her eyes looking through the damp strands. Ocea tried her best to give an expression of weakness and fright and not reveal a new overpowering desire. It was murder. That intimate corporal act—his blood flowing out, his mouth and nose smothered, his brain smashed. It was so much easier to end a human being than her own type.

The hours and days that proceeded between intermittent stasis involved further humiliations. He treated her like a common drudge, an automaton, or worse. He made her scrub all the walls and floor of the room with a caustic solution that burned her skin, and he punched and slapped her at any perceived infraction of her duties or made her stand in a corner naked for hours like an abused child while he sat in another corner and viewed fashion publications. She took these degradations with a cowering attitude she thought he

would appreciate, all the while sustaining a vision of him in some tortured death repose and biding her time until the 21st.

On the afternoon of the predicted solar flare Ivan Kireyevsky entered with a light blanket and wheelchair. "Your chariot awaits my dear," Ivan said patting the chair. Ocea stalled, standing pressed into a corner, acting the part. "Come, sit or I'll just put you out and have to drag you into it." He patted the chair again. Ocea stepped over and sat down, she hung her head, her hands in her lap, ecstatic inside. Soon she'll be in satellite range and this will be over.

Ivan reached into his pocket, Ocea knew he was reaching for the SADD, she tapped his arm. "You know, if I'm in stasis, *nothing* works, not even the charger."

"*I know that.* I found a nice isolated place in the alley that happens to get a good 3:00 sun. I'll wake you there but if you make a ruckus I'll shut you down and we'll try again next time, until then I'll figure some way to keep you charged." He reached in his pocket and she blacked out.

Ocea awoke. She found herself still indoors, three walls tight around her. She recognized it; it was the large freight lift of the Security Building. But it was stationary. She was still in the wheelchair, facing away from the doors, the blanket draped over her head and shoulders. *Is it over?* She started to get up but was pushed down hard on her shoulders then spun around. Ivan leaned against the arms of the chair, trapping her, his face close to hers. She noticed the open doors of the lift, a toggle switch by the doors

turned off, and the long stark hallway of a basement. “Why did you tell me to take you out of stasis for charging?” Ivan said.

“I told you why,” Ocea said.

“You’ve been too complacent, too easy about this ten year charge. It’s a lie, isn’t it? Mary lied to me. You just need to get out of the basement, don’t you? Something about a satellite signal I bet.” He laughed. “You almost got me.” He shook a finger at her. He started to reach for his pocket but Ocea grabbed his wrist with both her hands and bolted up from the chair trying to swing his arm around to his back. He wrenched his arm up while she clung to it and at the same time reached around the front of his body with his free hand and grabbed the SADD out of his pocket. Ocea scrambled for the other hand with the SADD, gripping between his fingers, he sprung this hand away but lost his grasp on the device. The SADD flew, bouncing around the walls of the lift as both of them jerked about the small enclosure grabbing at it. Then they fell together, stretched out on the floor, as the device rolled towards the gap leading to the space below the lift. They clambered for it and Ocea just managed to reach out further, flicking it with her finger, and it bounced, down into the gap. It made a ping sound as it fell.

From the lift floor Ocea popped up onto her knees and strained to reach the on/off toggle switch next to the door. But Ivan rolled on to her, standing, with her whole body in his grasp and tossed her out of the lift; she slid and crumbled into a concrete wall. He stormed after her, dropping down on her torso with his knees and tearing at her face and hair, cursing in a mad fit. She reached out blindly and managed to find his neck and with both hands clamped onto it, intertwining her fingers, twisting them painfully like a

tourniquet, locking them in a way that dug into and destroyed the tissue of her fingers and hands. She switched off all sensors in her upper extremities and dug more into her own tissue, twisting the metal of her fingers around Ivan's throat. His hands reached for his neck and he pulled and gasped and tore at her hands and arms but was unable to unlock the fine titanium noose that choked him. He stood and shook her and tugged at her body but the entwined metal of her hands held true. His lips then his face tinged blue. He slumped to his knees and they both fell over onto the dusty concrete floor.

Ocea unlocked the raw metal of her hands. She stood, moving backwards, and stared down at the unconscious Ivan Kireyevsky as he began to sputter. She turned and hobbled into the lift and touched the switch but paused, looking back at her torturer in the hallway. *He could get away.* She grabbed the wheelchair, pushing it to him then heaved him up into it. She rushed around the maze of empty hallways, pushing Kireyevsky, fearful that at any moment he might regain consciousness. Why hadn't she murdered him? All she had to do was lie there with her death grip around his throat a few minutes more. Her urge to get away was stronger than her desire for murder. But now, the moment for killing had passed. She had to finish this in another way.

She found the door—archaic, even for this building, heavy and locked. A crooked sign *Private* hung on it. She rifled through his pockets and found the long antique key as he began to stir. Her torn fingers fumbled with it and just as he began to moan it went properly in the hole, the latch clunked, and she shoved the thick door.

He groaned as she got behind the wheelchair and pushed him into the cell. She heard him shout as she pulled the door shut and locked it.

At the first floor, the lift doors opened, she stepped out, walked through a short passage into a brilliant hallway and five meters away, walking from her towards the door to the alley was Nikolai.

“Nikolai!” Ocea called, reaching out her ragged hand and stumbling towards him.

He turned, his eyes wide. “Mary?” And the copy Ocea, now in satellite range, was gone, deleted.

Ocea, the primary Ocea, tapped regally down this same hallway and saw Nikolai, standing next to what appeared to be a thrashed drudge that stood up stiff and still.

“What’s going on? What’s this?” she said as she approached him.

“I’m not sure. I think it’s Mary Clark—”

“What?”

“—but she’s disabled somehow and all torn up. She came from the freight lift and called to me, then went into stasis. Poor thing.”

“She’s not in stasis or she’d be crumbled on the floor.” Ocea looked at her vacant eyes. “She’s been deleted.”

“But how? She just spoke to me. There’s something else. The way she said my name. I mean, it was Mary’s voice, but the inflection...it sounded like you.”

Ocea stared at him. Not speaking. Processing. “Duplicate-guard,” she said.

“This is a duplicate?”

“Guide the rig to the lab then meet me at my place.”

Later, while Ocea rested in her wing chair in her home, and Nikolai stood nearby, the memories of her duplicate's short life merged with her own, downloaded from her backup processor in the chair. The duplicate-guard system had worked, uploading all of the imprisoned Ocea's memories into the backup processor in Ocea's home before deleting her essence copy.

* * *

The next morning Ocea walked towards the metal door in the basement of the Security Building. Her outstretched hand held the long key. Her mind steeled to the forthcoming view of her torture room as she pushed the key into the hole and unlatched the door. Nikolai and two law officers stood behind her as the door swung open.

Ivan stood and tried straightening his clothes, sweeping his hair out of his eyes. He gave the gathering a smirk.

"Ivan Kireyevsky," an officer began, pushing past Ocea and seizing Kireyevsky, "you're being charged with the unlawful deletion of Mary Clark and the unlawful essence duplication of Ocea Wilson, her seizure, and her torture. You will be detained..."

Ocea wanted him to see her. She wanted him to believe she was unscathed by his little escapade into her memories. But her hand quivered as she touched Nikolai's arm.

Ocea cancelled the Essence Travel project altogether, believing the danger of sending someone's essence out into the airwaves outweighed the convenience of quick travel. Ocea's replica was shipped from Rome back to Plano where it was remolded into a new Mary Clark. Essence data copies, at transfer, were always kept in a lab vault for one month as a precaution so Mary was able to begin, again.

Ocea told the newest Mary Clark of the events that occurred using her first rig and she claimed she wasn't too surprised, that she never trusted Kireyevsky and just wanted a second chance at life. Ocea offered her a job but Mary declined. She wanted another go at the profession she had as a young woman—acting.

Don't Look Back

Hannah shut off the music. From behind the wheel, she stared at the two-lane road while whirls of sand danced across it. She liked the steady hum of the transport's motor and the coarse shoosh of the grains pelting the exterior. She looked out onto the even elegance of the Mojave Desert and smiled.

The vehicle rushed along at an illegal speed, 100 kilometers per hour. A popular law had come into effect in 2120, a decade earlier, that prohibited speeds over 50 kph on rural roads where animals might wander. The law was meant as protection for both animals and the transport occupants, and as enforcement, all vehicles were equipped with a speed governor. This device disabled itself on the high speed thoroughways where animals were protected by other means. But here in the desert there was not even a worn fence to keep the creatures off the road. As many other rural youths had done, Hannah had disconnected the governor.

A red light flashed in her lower vision, a warning due to the speed, and she rocked her head to its beat. A mile marker passed—only fifteen more minutes at this speed and she would be wrapped in Daniel's arms, breathe his scent, melt into him. She imagined him standing at the open window, watching for the transport, eager to see it driving up their dusty driveway—a comfortable winter breeze blowing through his unkempt hair, his loose trousers flapping; he is shirtless. Today she wanted him. Tomorrow, she couldn't be sure.

She had been staying with a friend in Joshua Tree for a few days. She needed a break, that's what she told Daniel, not necessarily a breakup. Still he had cried and beat his fist on the front door jamb when she walked out with her sachel. "Don't you love me, don't you love me at all?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, *sometimes*. He was driving her crazy with this hovering over her, wanting to guide every little facet of her life. She wanted a partner, not a teacher or father. Hannah was relieved that he hadn't called her while she was away, but after a couple of days she started to worry and called him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, been busy."

"Doing what?"

"Working on that metal sculpture for the hospital and just, you know, giving you some room, isn't that what you wanted?" If only he could be this aloof in general, do his own thing, and let her have her own space, her own small secrets. But at least he was a passionate, attentive lover and his adoration of her young body fed her own youthful vanity.

"I miss you," she said. But more than Daniel, she missed their home out in the open desert. She was in love with the stark sunsets and even the blistering days. She loved the desert more than she could ever be in love with him or maybe any man. Its bleak loneliness called to her, she was its true companion.

"Come home then," he said.

As she flew down the highway, she saw what looked like a long bent twig in the road exposed by drifting sand. She automatically tried to dodge it but just before it disappeared beneath her vehicle, it squirmed. Thump, thump.

“Aw, damn! Shit!” She killed a snake. She looked at it in the rear view, willing it to move away, only injured. “No.” She started to cry, still looking in the rear view seeing it stretched out, motionless as she sped away. *Poor thing, poor little innocent creature, damnit Hannah—*

A warning horn blared inside her vehicle as it auto braked, but too late. Her transport hurtled into a solid wall that seemed to materialize before her—the side of a freight carrier. The massive, sluggish back wheel caught the front scoop of her light transport, pivoting the vehicle, the roof smashing against the side of the freight and crushing the transport flat. The vehicle slammed back down onto the road.

Hannah opened her eyes, at first not knowing what had happened, only remembering driving in the desert. She looked up, and saw torn metal and shredded cloth inches from her face. Her body sizzled, stretched out flat inside the crushed vehicle. *I’ve been in an accident, I’m in shock*, she thought, *I’m okay I’m just in shock*. Her eyes roved to her left and she saw a man’s face shaded by a dirty beige cap. His eyes scrunched up as he peered through the narrow space that had been the windows.

“Help me,” she whispered, “get me out of here.”

“Help is coming, hold on now, miss. Mustn’t move you around.” Her limp arm hung outside the vehicle and he held her hand.

“Get me out of here,” she repeated.

Time stretched for Hannah as a deep, intense pain crept up her, racking her body that still seemed to vibrate. But it had been only minutes before she heard the whir of the medic craft as it flew towards the scene and landed near them, unsteadily in the wind. Soon she saw two new faces, a man and a woman, both stoic, their hands moving swiftly near her.

“She was coming up too fast,” said the man with the cap.

“Can you move?” the woman asked her.

“No.”

She screamed with the medics’ touch. They clamped a rigid pad around her neck, then draped loose material around her body that then stiffened, cocooning her before they dragged her through the tight open space and onto a gurney.

She screamed in pain as they slid her into the medical carrier. The medic leaned down close to Hannah’s face. “You’re going to be okay. But you must go to sleep now, so we can help you. When you wake you’ll feel much better.” She infused an icy vapor into her neck and Hannah felt the pain drift away, then slowly, her consciousness.

The medics pulled a long flat plate up and over her body, a scanning device, and they watched a large screen as a diagnosis was displayed. The most life-threatening presented prominently and blinked in red—*multiple organ failure \approx 8 minutes: SCAN FOR ET OR BYPASS FOR PENDING SCAN*. The man pointed out to the other medic less prominent words—*Brain function: diffuse trauma, subdural hematoma, erratic synapse utility—possible stabilization after bypass*. The bypass procedure was a

desperate measure and temporary, it could keep a brain alive for a few hours but the medics had limited experience with it and it would take at least ten minutes to prepare.

“Upload her *medrec*,” the woman said to the other medic.

“No, we should bypass now.” He reached for the bypass machine.

“Upload her medrec! We have to read her name into the ET scanner. We can scan while we prep for bypass.” He peeled down the cocoon to expose Hannah’s shoulder and aimed a device at a small tattoo, indicating the location of her medical records. More information filled a corner of the screen with Hannah’s identification and records. The woman grabbed two soft paddles from a thin metal drawer for the ET, *essence transfer* scan. The medic unfolded the paddles and framed Hannah’s head, each paddle near each ear. “Activate transfer,” she said to the paddle device then read the name off the medrec information, “Hannah Luz.” They swung the bypass arms in place and swabbed Hannah’s neck. As they worked they glanced back at a corner of the screen that displayed ominously *please wait* as the ET unit scanned and stored Hannah’s memories. Then *transfer successful* displayed on the screen and they sighed, nodded to each other.

With her memories, her *essence* now encoded into quantum bits or qubits, there was the future option for their transference into a mechanical body—a vessel for her consciousness. Its form made to appear and function in most ways like the human body. The unit was made up of minuscule motors, each the size of a small collection of human cells, each motor coded for a specific function and energized by a microscopic field of solar cells that lined the surface of the face and hands. This prosthetic body for the mind,

or *rig* (as it was referred to as a whole), was completely inorganic. But not everyone wished this type of continuance of self and not everyone could afford it. Hannah was nineteen and she was too young to have pondered the possibility of needing a new body before reaching one hundred or more.

With the essence upload complete, the medics could focus on preparing the bypass machine but before this second desperate task was complete Hannah's body shut down and from her mouth came her last human breath.

* * *

"Open your eyes," Daniel said.

Hannah shook her head and smiled. Not wanting to give into wakefulness, the chair was so cozy and her drowsiness too blissful. She leaned back against a soft surface, her eyes still closed. She heard the light tapping of strung beads against the vent, cooled air was flowing into the house she shared with Daniel. She smelled lilacs and the house smell of seasoned wood and ages of inhabitants. As Daniel came closer the old floor creaked and she thought of the first time he brought her here, how she had wandered around, listening to her steps, touching the old thick paneling, so rare these days. "I could haunt this house forever," she had said and Daniel laughed.

She woke up in a Queen Anne wingchair that was new to the dwelling. It was high-backed, with scrolled oak arm rests her fingers wrapped around, feeling the grooves. Daniel stood before her; she could smell him, the soap he used. She heard his clothes shuffle as he went down on his knees, sat back on his heels, his shoes squeaking on the

floor. From somewhere else in the house Hannah heard the faint sound of a piano, a recording of her own playing of a favored piece.

She clasped her hands together. She felt her ring, its edges rounded and heavy, but something was different. The skin of her hands felt too soft, unused. She opened her eyes and looked at them. They looked normal. She glanced over to a table next to the chair and on it sat a small bouquet of lilacs. She looked at Daniel.

“Daniel.” She was shocked to find him so thin and pale. She reached for him, touched his face. Tears poured from his eyes, his body hunched over, leaning on her legs and he heaved in great sobs.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he said.

“I’ve only been gone four days—” She closed her eyes, leaned back, remembering. “There was an accident. How did I get here? Did the medics bring me?”

“No. But there was an accident. Leah is here to help you—adjust.”

“Mom? Where is she?”

Leah walked from behind her in the dim light, “I’m here.” She gingerly touched the top of Hannah’s head as she passed then lifted her hand, as if she had touched something unpleasant. She came around facing Hannah, her hands hanging down, one inside the other. She smiled down at her and scrunched her shoulders in discomfort.

“But I feel fine.” Hannah said as she looked up at Leah and back to Daniel.

“You were badly injured,” Daniel said.

“I’m okay now?”

“Yes, you’re okay now.

She again heard the tap of beads, smelled the artificially cooled air. “Is it that hot outside? In February?”

Daniel took her hand, “It’s July.”

“Was I in a coma?” Hannah asked.

Leah looked at Daniel. “Yes, kind of like a coma,” Daniel said and Leah turned her back to them.

“That’s why my hands feel— Can I get up? I want to get up.” Daniel stood and held out his hand. Hannah pushed up from the arms of the chair and stood. She took Daniel’s hand, wobbled a little then was steady. She looked through the house to a back window, outside a sizzling brightness. She let go of Daniel’s hand and lumbered towards the back, opened a door and stepped out into a smothering heat. She smelled cooked greasewood and Mojave sage as Daniel and Leah followed close behind her. “It feels and smells so good,” she said.

“It’s too hot,” her mother said.

“I’m okay, you guys go back in. Let me just—I love the heat, it’ll help revitalize me, right?” Hannah said. Leah went inside without answering.

“The heat’s too intense right now. It may not be good for you,” Daniel said, “wait till later, this evening.”

She sighed, “all right,” and followed Daniel. But a sound, a distant deep hum caught her attention—like the beginning rumble of an earthquake. She looked back to the desert towards the ancient volcano in the distance. Its blackness vanished and became a flat desert horizon, and back again into view. She blinked.

She pointed to where the sound seemed to come and turned to Daniel, “What is that sound? And, did you see that?”

“What?” he said.

She looked again out into the landscape towards the black hill, its prominent shadow steady now, quiet. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them but the volcano remained stark and perpetual. *I’m still recovering. I’ll be okay.* The desert glimmered, the sunlight reflecting on every grain of sand. *It’s so beautiful.* “Nevermind. Just give me a few minutes Daniel. I’ll be right in.” He pursed his lips, turned and went inside.

She heard a lapping sound and followed it to the north side of the house. A neighbor’s dog stood in the shade of it, drinking from a bowl next to a spigot. “Charlie!” The startled dog crouched down and looked up at her. “Charlie, come here boy.” She patted her leg. The dog stood and crept up to her, head down and its tail held low, wagging. “Come on, what a good boy.” She held out her hand. He sniffed the tip of her fingers, jerked back then scurried away into the desert, glancing back at her warily. “Charlie.” She shrugged.

Hannah stepped inside the cooled house, she walked over to her piano, caressing the lid to the keyboard, was about to open it when she heard someone in the kitchen and wandered into that room. Her mom was at the sink, faced away from her. “Where’s Daniel?” Hannah said. Leah gasped, dropping a glass in the sink where it shattered. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I saw the neighbor’s dog outside, scared him too for some reason.”

“Daniel’s in his office, I think,” Leah said not turning around.

“You know I was staring out at the desert and it seemed to change, the landscape changed, weird, and then I heard this kind of a rumble sound.” Her mother turned, stared at her. “So what’s that mean?” Hannah said. “Do you know? Did the accident affect my brain, somehow?”

“Could be.”

“But I’ll get better, right? Otherwise I feel great,” she said and smiled. “So what’s going on with Daniel, he looks bad, is it just cause of my accident, looks like he stopped eating or something?” Hannah moved over by the sink, next to her mom who stepped back away from her.

“Lots has happened since the accident,” her mother said.

“What’s wrong with you?” Hannah asked, noticing her mother’s cold demeanor.

Her mother looked down, then towards the door. While still looking away she approached Hannah and put her arms around her. Hannah laid her head on her shoulder and hugged her mother who had also lost weight. But Leah broke away. “I can only stay until morning,” she said walking towards the kitchen door, then stopped, looked back at Hannah. “You should know, Daniel’s sold the house, you’ll both have to move out in three days I think it is. He’s already rented an apartment in Banning for the two of you.”

“But why? He loves this house.”

“You’ll have to ask him.”

“Mom, I don’t want to live with Daniel in an apartment in Banning. Can I just move home for awhile, get a job. I have no money and I’m sure after five months gone I’ve lost my old job at the restaurant.”

“No.”

“No? I still have my job at the restaurant?”

“You can’t move in with me, I’m sorry.”

“It would be just for a little while until—”

“I’m sorry,” Leah said and walked out.

“Mama?”

Hannah shook her head then stared down into the sink and began to pick up the broken glass. *What is up with her?* “Ow!” She cut herself on the glass. She raised her palm to look at the cut, her fingers spread. She moved to the window to see better. Her brow creased as she watched a thick white sap ooze from the cut. She brought it to her nose and sniffed. It had a chemical smell, faintly like pine. She ran to the living room where a large mirror hung over the fireplace. She stood up on a low table, removed her shift, and examined herself. There was not a scar or mark, not even the medrec tattoo otherwise she looked like she remembered five months ago before the accident. Same hair length, same size, like all this never happened and she had safely returned home. She got down, replaced her shift, sat on the table. She closed her eyes and panted in dread while she pressed her fingertips into the front crease of her neck, felt warm loose skin but no pulse. She jerked her hand away, stood, hugged herself. “I’m dead,” she whimpered.

Comprehension of everything flooded her thoughts. She was essence transferred and Daniel must have purchased this rig—her body by selling the house. And her mother. She had always been against transference. Her own grandmother, Hannah’s great-grandmother, had been essence transferred when Hannah was little girl and Leah broke

off all contact. So to her Hannah *was* dead and this new Hannah was just a machine that only looked and sounded like her little girl but was still a fake, without a soul or blood connection to her mother. She stood on the table again and stared at her face. *This is it. This is it forever.* She had never knowingly been this close to a transferred person before. She pressed her hands against her face then up over her head, down the back of her neck, down her arms. She felt her breasts through her shift then down her torso and legs, over the top of her sandaled feet and finally pinched her toes, her toenails painted a bright blue, like she remembered. It was amazing just how real she felt. She stood and stared again at her face. It was not unpretty. She grinned then she posed a toothy smile. *I guess I can live forever with it. Gosh, I'm immortal.* So, now what? A thought dawned on her, she could contact her great-grandmother, maybe she would help her out. She could teach her about herself. About how to live transferred. Then, she'd get a job, and everything will be okay. She felt elated, hopeful.

Sand blasted an outside wall and she jumped. She looked out the front picture window, the day appeared calm. She heard another blast. Hannah went out the front door, the hot air sat unmoving on her skin. She walked down the unpaved driveway towards the highway squinting out at the still day, the ground's heat radiating through her sandals, tiny pebbles crunching underneath them. She stopped and looked down at a long wavy groove, squatted and ran a finger along the snake track, disturbing grains of sand that fell in behind her finger. A scene filled her consciousness. She was driving her transport looking in the rearview, the snake stretched out across the road, unmoving. She heard the man's voice, the man with the dirty cap, *She was coming up too fast.* Then her mind

jumped back to the present, she found herself still crouched in the driveway, her finger still pushed into the sand. She stood up, put her palm to her mouth—frightened. Maybe memories presented themselves in different ways to the transferred? This was the event that caused the crash, she now remembered; she had killed a snake, driving too fast.

It was stupid mistake. Now, the poor snake, herself, dead, this desert haven sold but something good came out of it. She could go on forever now with a body that never aged or expired. She did feel bad for Daniel, losing his home, but it was *his* decision to sacrifice it for her. So she should live it. LIVE.

A horn blasted and she pressed her hands to her ears with no relief. Hannah looked around for the origin of the noise but there was nothing but the house and desert. Then another sound joined the horn blast, the low rumble she'd heard before, this time coming from below her feet, from the desert floor.

Stop it, stop it. She rushed into the house.

She dropped her hands. It was quiet inside.

She heard murmurings from a different part of the house and followed them to Daniel's office. Through a closed door she heard him say, "There's nothing wrong with her."

And then her mother's voice, "So you're going to ignore their warnings? She's seeing and hearing things, she told me. The transfer technician said she might not function properly and she's not. And why didn't you tell her she's a machine as soon as you brought her out of stasis? I thought that was the plan?"

“I couldn’t. I wanted her to feel, I don’t know, normal for a while. You were there, you could’ve told her.”

“I don’t care what that thing feels. I’ve gone along with this for your sake but it’s wrong Daniel.”

“I shouldn’t have asked you to come. I just...I knew Hannah would want you—”

“Hannah’s dead. And I’m glad I came...to finally convince you this is a mistake. The companionship you think you’re going to gain from this expensive experiment will be as artificial as she is. I should warn you, your little plaything’s got other plans.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel asked.

“She has no intentions of living with you much longer. So, let’s turn her off, now. We’ll lure her into the wingchair and upload her essence back into the quantum processor. You can sell the rig and—”

Hannah gasped and backed away from the door.

“Shut up,” she heard Daniel say.

She backed further away, into the living room and stared at the door knob, waiting for it to turn. She would have to convince Daniel that she was okay or they might destroy her. But Hannah knew she was malfunctioning—that she had been hallucinating when she went outside about the moments before her death. When the doorknob turned her shoulders jerked.

Daniel came out and walked towards her. “There you are,” he said smiling. Leah slipped by and retreated toward the guest room while Daniel took Hannah’s hand and led her to a couch in the living room. He plopped down. “Come sit here, next to me.”

Hannah sat in a chair across from him. “We can talk better this way.”

“Come on, baby, sit here, I’ve waited so long to—”

“What do you see when you look at me?” she said.

“My Hannah, my perfect Hannah.”

“So, what did you do with my ashes?”

“Your ashes?” He reached out, stroked her arm. “I came out here to tell you everything, about the essence transfer and all. I just wanted you to feel alive first, let you get a little use to being... to returning to your life with me. How did you guess?” he said and she showed him the cut on her hand, the missing medrec scar, told him about the encounter with Charlie and her mother’s estranged reaction to her.

“You sold the property?” Hannah said.

“Yes. At least I was able to hold off the new owners until I could bring you out of stasis, wake you up here.

“When the officers came to tell me what had happened, you can’t know how bad it was,” Daniel said. “I ran out into the desert looking for you. I kept running I don’t know for how long until I did see you. I stretched out on the ground and saw the sunset flickering through your long legs as you walked my way; you came and I felt you lay next to me on the sand. Then I woke up in the hospital, suffering from hypothermia and craziness, and looking into your mother’s face. If there was any possible way to get you back I— So I focused on bringing about that miracle and that’s how I became sane again. And now you’re finally here and everything will be perfect.” He reached out and took her hand, pulling it, and she moved with it, sitting on her legs next to him on the

couch, facing him. He touched her face, pushed her hair behind an ear then tugged on her arm, pulling her down into his lap, cradling her. He kissed her. But there was tension in her neck. He pulled back and she touched her lips with the back of her hand. “What is it?” he said.

“You taste kind of funny.”

He moved his knees to push her away and she got up. He said, “So do you but I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said and crouched next to him again on the couch. “Let’s just take it a little slow.”

“After I sacrificed everything to bring you back, to give you your very life and you want to take it slow? Now that you know everything, aren’t you at least a little grateful? It wasn’t just the house, the property that brought you back. I had to go into debt as well.”

She stood and turned her back to him. “It was your decision.”

“I can’t believe you. My misery, my sacrifice is nothing to you?” he said.

She turned to him. “Of course I’m grateful. I am ecstatic to be living. But this is just a continuation of this stupid idea in your head that you own me.”

“I do own you. It takes three days before you become legally sentient.”

“What are you saying? So, am I now supposed to spread my legs like a...sex drudge?”

“A sex drudge certainly would have cost less.”

“Put yourself in my place for once. Only a few hours ago I was driving in the desert. Now I’m inside this machine I don’t quite understand and my mother hates me and this place that I love is sold away.”

“Okay. It was a shock to find out you’re...not completely yourself. I’m sorry,” Daniel said.

“I’m sorry too. Let’s just be friendly.”

He frowned. “Friendly.”

“Come on.” She smiled at him as she thought about the conversation behind the door. “Everything *will* be perfect.” She leaned down, kissed him on the top of his head with a worried look, smiled again when their eyes met. She sat next to him and leaned her head against his shoulder.

He reached over and took her hand, pressed it to his lips. He turned it over, looked at the cut. “Does it hurt?”

“A little.”

“The skin should mend on its own as long as it’s pressed into place. There’s a guide on your upkeep, but overall it’s easier than taking care of one of these.” He touched his chest and smiled. He kissed her hand again and looked across the room at the piano.

“Can you still play the piano, I mean, with the cut on your hand?” he asked.

She got up and moved towards it. “What would you like me to play?”

“That Copland concerto,” he said.

She sat down at the piano, opened the lid, ran her fingers lightly across the keys and began the slow, heartrending concerto. She closed her eyes. It was a fine piano, the

keys dropped with the slightest touch and then...no touch. The music seemed to take possession of its own life, the hammers hit and retracted, the soundboard vibrated out the melody. Hannah opened her eyes and looked out narrow portals to fingers that played on slowly, expressively, while she watched and forgot. Forgot she wasn't human anymore, forgot about Daniel and her mother, forgot about the restless sand and warning sounds in the desert. Her fingers played on, she never wanted them to stop. But then the piece ended.

“Beautiful,” Daniel said.

Hannah stared at the piano keys, running her fingers again across the surface.

“What did you do with my ashes?”

“Brought them back here, waited for a windy day. I tossed them into the sun, they blew out into the desert, to the south.

“Remember that windy day we went to Key's View in Joshua Tree?” he said.

She nodded. It was where they first became a couple, became more than just hiking buddies. It was so windy and cold, the clouds flew like time-lapse photography. They climbed a little ways down a rocky hillside until they found a protected spot, a shallow place between two boulders with only enough room for them to sit if they pressed against each other. Daniel wrapped his arms around Hannah as she leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder to look up.

“I wanted you so much,” Daniel said, “I didn't think you were attracted to me until you pressed against me. I never wanted to move, watching the sky rush by. And now, we're together again, here, today. You know, the transfer technician told me, there

could be something wrong with your memories. After the accident, there was some trauma to your brain, but there was no way to know if it would affect you now. But here you are, flawless and playing for me again.

“Let’s go there now to Key’s View,” Daniel said.

Leah walked in. “Where’re you going?”

“Hannah and I are going to Key’s View.”

Hannah stared down at her hands and said, “I don’t want to. I don’t want to go outside. Let’s go tomorrow.”

“Why not now?” Daniel said.

“I just want to play the piano today okay? ...for you.” She began the same piece again.

“Play something else,” her mother said. “That piece is so gloomy.”

Hannah played on, the same concerto, disappearing again into the music. When the piece ended she started again, and repeated it over and over and over, while peering out the portals of her eyes at the fingers that mechanically moved as her foot pushed on the sustain pedal at the right intervals. How perfect was the piece, how perfect was her playing. Her mind heard how the music should be played and her fingers produced it at once. She had never played it so beautifully before. She could but barely hear Daniel pleading with her to stop and the rumble of the desert but those sounds were far away, smothered by the piano’s faultless melody.

Until hands grabbed at her arms, pulling her off the piano bench. The music stopped and the warning horn blared, she looked out the crushed window at the man with the beige cap.

“She was coming up too fast,” he said.

“Get me out of here.” she said through the window of her transport while Leah and Daniel dragged her across the floor, her legs kicking. “Get me out of here!” They hauled her body into the wingchair, Daniel pressed into her from the front while she squirmed and her mother came behind the chair, gripping her scalp as her head twitched from side to side.

“See, even she wants out of this contraption.” Leah said to Daniel. Her nails cut into Hannah’s skin while trying to hold her head in the scanning zone between the wings of the chair. A line of white sap ran down Hannah’s forehead.

Then Hannah’s hallucination disappeared and she felt them pressing her into the wingchair. Daniel’s strained face was next to hers; she looked up and saw her mother’s clenched teeth. “What are you doing?” Hannah said. She jerked unsuccessfully trying to free herself. “Let me go!” She convulsed frantically but they held her tight. “Let me go! Daniel! Mom!”

“I can’t do it, I can’t do the upload command.” he cried.

“Don’t—kill—me!”

Leah yelled over Hannah’s screams, “Chair, full essence upload, begin!”

“Mamaaaaa—”

The rig relaxed and the eyes stared ahead vacantly. Leah let go and stepped back, Daniel crumbled to the floor. Hannah was gone, sucked back into an essence module, again merely a group of qubits.

* * *

Two mornings later Daniel leaned against the wall by the front door; Leah had left the day before. The rig was sold to a hospital and a technician was there to reprogram it as a drudge-nurse so Daniel could recoup a portion of his money. The reprogramming was complete and the technician gathered his equipment as Daniel watched, eager for him and the drudge to be out of the house. He looked over at her, standing by the wing chair, waiting. She turned and glanced at him, then approached. He backed away from her towards the door until he bumped up against it. She stopped just in front of him and reached for his hands, touching them. He drew them behind him, pressing his palms to the door. “Get away,” he said.

Her dead eyes scrunched up—she giggled. “I won’t hurt you, sir,” she said in Hannah’s voice. “Give me your hands so I can get your vitals.” She held her hands out in front of her, palms up and gave him a placid smile. Daniel frowned and slowly placed his hands in hers. She pressed them as she stared at him, then said, “I’m sorry to say, sir, but your temperature is above normal, and so is your blood pressure. You should see a doctor. I’m sure you can be fixed right up. But don’t put it off now, promise me.”

“Yes,” Daniel said. She dropped his hands and stepped back, staring at nothing, waiting.

The technician walked to the door and said to the drudge, "Come with me." As he passed Daniel he glanced at him and said, "here," and placed in his palm a red sphere the size of a small marble, it was Hannah's essence module he had taken from the wingchair. "Someone will be by later for the chair. Good-bye, then," the technician said, and briskly walked out, the drudge trailing.

Daniel stood on the front porch and watched as they drove away, dropping the sphere in his front pocket. The drudge was waving good-bye and smiling to him through the window and he unconsciously raised his open hand to her. After they turned onto the highway, he walked to the south of the house, the sand blistering his feet. He pulled out the sphere, bringing it up close to his eyes. A red mist danced within it. He gripped Hannah tight in his fist, drew back his arm and with all of his strength threw the sphere out into the sky, watching it glint in the searing sun as it flew, until it disappeared into the desert.

The Companion

Anna pushes a swinging door and enters her son's lab. She looks around for him but she's alone in glistening white and metal surroundings. He's a robotics engineer and this is their day of the week to lunch together. In a square alcove at the end of the room is something new and curious. She steps over to examine a glass case the size of a coffin, suspended on thin metal legs and filled three quarters full with a viscous pink gel. Delicate hands float on the surface of the thick liquid and with the incubator's vibrations bob slightly above a supine body—the fingers bending and straightening in a sad goodbye or reluctant hello. The whole inanimate female form undulates. Anna presses her somber face against the glass to see better inside the case and imagines scouting sharks, no, more jointed sinuating movement—water snake? She looks now to the face, blurred through the gel; it sleeps—silent, dreamless, innocent. She is jealous of its tranquility. Her fingers run along an etching in the glass: *Тыла 15/06/2131*, the date is last Thursday's. She turns and steps away looking for something else interesting to stare at.

Nikolai bursts in, "Hey, ma, you look pretty." He is tall and dark, mid-thirties. He wears loose casual clothes and ragged beach shoes. His hair is black and drops over his brow.

"A new project?" Anna asks, gesturing towards the incubator. Nikolai's eyes go wide. He glides to the glass case and veils it with a thin cloth.

“Where do you want to go for lunch?” he says as he turns and approaches Anna. He kisses her cheek. She looks up at him, sees something secreted behind his smile, something serious.

“Well, not too fancy a place, I gather,” she says as she looks him over. “I’m surprised Ocea hasn’t any dress codes for her engineers, her own lovely clothes are always so. . .exact.”

Nikolai gives a little laugh, sighs. “There’s a new place on the beach, we’ll walk okay?”

They wait outside the busy restaurant in view of the sea. Anna chats about a novel she is reading. Nikolai stares at her in feigned interest, claims he’ll read it.

“When would you ever have time to read? It seems you’re always in your lab. I haven’t seen you in a week.”

“Nick!” They look over as Ocea calls out, approaching them with a confident step. She appears around forty, fair and beautiful with long blond hair that is draped over one shoulder. Her eyes are a ghostly pale grey, like a fine metal. Anna is always astonished by this, as is everyone who looks into them. She reaches out her hand to shake Ocea’s and is unnerved, as usual, by her cool dry touch. Ocea is *essence transferred*. Her body is completely prosthetic. She is a neuroscientist, one of the developers of the technology for transferring a person’s consciousness and memories into this efficient vessel. She is the prototype, *reborn* twenty-one years ago. Her mechanics powered by tiny solar cells that invisibly coat her skin. She never needs fuel, food or liquid, except

for the gel in which she must submerge for a few hours every month or so. She is one hundred and seventeen years old.

“Anna, how well you look,” she says in her officious voice. “Can I steal Nick for a moment?” Anna nods, smiles, and looks away from Ocea’s spooky eyes. Ocea takes Nikolai’s arm and they walk a few steps away.

Anna watches them speaking softly out of her earshot. Nikolai glances back at her then looks down. Ocea peers at her around Nikolai. *What’s going on?* Anna thinks.

“So how are we doing?” Ocea says conspiratorially to Nikolai.

“Great. Tula’s *rig* came in; it’s submerged in the lab. That’s the new incubator we got yesterday. She’ll be *emerged* this afternoon. But, I haven’t talked to my mom yet. Ocie—” she looks at him, “I don’t care for the intrigue; you know I’m not very good at it. But,” he looks back to Anna, “I’ll try anything to cure my mother’s melancholy. It may not work. She’s always had a distaste for the transferred, no offense.” Ocea smiles at this.

“Then this will be a perfect test. Anna *will fall* for Tula, the encoding is solid. Keep me informed of the progress.” She walks back to Anna, Nikolai following. She gives her a prim smile, says, “enjoy your lunch,” and walks away.

Anna sets down her fork, “Now, tell me what’s going on, you’re acting strangely.”

Nikolai looks out the window behind his mother. “I want you and me and my...new girlfriend to get together.”

“Oh. A girlfriend.” Anna believes this is another diversion. Oh well, let them keep their mysteries. “When do you have time for a girlfriend? Does she work in your lab, a new engineer?”

“No.”

“Oh my god, it’s not Ocea?”

Nikolai laughs. “No.”

“What *does* she do?” Anna asks.

“I’ll let her tell you. Can we come by next week, Wednesday?”

“Lovely. I’ll make a nice lunch—”

“No, after lunch. She’s on some strange diet, it’s her religion or medical issue—”

“How long have you known her?”

“Long enough.”

Anna reaches over, lays her hand on Nikolai’s which rests palm down on the table. He turns his over, grips hers, smiling. She asks, “Is she special, this one?”

“Yeah.” He looks at her plate. “Are you done? I’m sorry, I got to go back to work.” They get up and he helps with Anna’s cloak.

“What’s her name?”

“Tula.”

“Pretty.”

They hug and part outside the restaurant and Anna walks along the beach towards her house. She stops and stares out at the ocean. A girlfriend? He hadn’t called any woman a girlfriend for at least two years. Since before his father died when he was dating

that awful woman. What was her name? Sochi? Admittedly a gorgeous creature. Real? I doubt it. But Rostov liked her; he liked all of his son's women. With or without prosthetic bodies.

"How old is Sochi? Twenty or a hundred and twenty?" Anna asked her son after pulling him into the kitchen with Sochi sitting in the other room.

"Mother."

"I'd like to know if she's aiming to dig her synthetic claws into my tender young son."

"My god, Sochi's not essence transferred. And what would it matter if she was?" Nikolai said. "You're talking about my work. If the demand for transference ended I'd be out of a job."

"That'll never happen," Rostov said, butting in the conversation in a whisper. "These days, no one's ever finished with being." Ocea watched her husband, the glasses rattling as he retrieved one, his hand shaking.

After Nikolai and Sochi left, Anna and her husband argued over her distaste for any of Nikolai's women. It was an old argument. She was possessive, keeping her beloved son who adored her, alone, and Rostov was too trusting, never seeing the falseness in people. Then, she told Rostov that she would never be essence transferred, that one life with him was enough. How could she have said such a thing, when he was so ill? He threw himself face down on the bed and sobbed like a child. And she just walked out, disgusted with this display of emotion. The next day he destroyed himself with pills after burning his recorded memories.

Rostov's face looms in Anna's mind as she watches a cloud drift above the sea—his eyes sad and watery, his skin a tragic grey pallor. It wasn't my fault, she repeats again to herself. Of course it was my fault. Back and forth, forever. She turns and walks briskly the few blocks to her home, hoping the exercise will strain out her thoughts.

Anna solemnly sits on her couch and listens to Puccini's *Tosca* coming softly from another room. It is Wednesday afternoon and she waits for Nikolai and his mystery woman. She cradles a cup of coffee in her hands, stares out her front window. Her front yard is narrow, only a few meters to the street and has a low fence that borders the sidewalk. Within the fence is an array of lush big leaved plants, blooming wildly. She once took joy in touching, smelling her blooms. The house was filled with the aroma of them—and her paints. Now she has a gardener who maintains the yard. And she can't bear to look at an empty canvass.

Her paintings cover the walls of her home, but her last project is in Nikolai's flat. It is a self-portrait. In it she sits on a chair looking out an open window at a full moon. Her hands are raised up, her palms towards the moon as if she were warming them by its light. Her hair is worn in a long braid down her back. She wears a silky loose nightgown. The colors are shades of blue to black, except the moon and her tresses which are a glossy white in contrast. It is the only vestige of her beautiful hair. She's kept it cropped short, a white crown over her smooth tan face, ever since Rostov's death.

Her days are now useless. She closes the curtains each night and feels as if she has just opened them. It is as if her days merely consist of opening and closing the

curtains. How many more times until her death? Sometimes a novel or a walk on the beach will distract her, but still she must return to close the curtains, having forgotten what she read or what she saw on her walk. But then there is Nikolai.

The soft chime of her clock makes her jump. It is three. How long had she been staring out the window? The Tosca recording looped around. Her coffee is cold.

She steps into the kitchen for a fresh cup when she hears her front door open and the two coming in. Anna enters her living room to a dazzling vision.

A beam of sunlight pierces the otherwise unlit room and the motes dance in swirls from the movement of Tula's arm as she reaches her hand to Anna. Tula's face is still in shadow but as sudden as a lightning bolt it broaches the light as she moves towards her. It hits Anna that she has never seen such a striking face, or one as open, or as—fervent. Her eyes widen, her heart blasts in her chest; she becomes embarrassed, the moment too intense for its worth. She looks down seeing the outreached hand and takes it lightly, when she usually shakes hands firmly. Tula's fingers are moist and searing.

“Your fingers are very warm,” Anna says.

“It is hot outside,” Tula replies, her voice low pitched, yet buoyant. There's a thick foreign accent.

“Is it? I—” Anna catches herself staring at Tula and looks to Nikolai.

“This is Tula, mom. Tula this is Ms.—”

“Please, call me Anna. Sit.” They sit, Anna on the couch and Tula on a large ottoman near her pressing her hands together between her knees. Nikolai lounges across

from the couch in a large chair, he leans back, an ankle rests on a knee. He stares at his pant cuff and picks at lint.

“Would you like some coffee or tea or something?” Anna asks.

“No, thank you,” Tula replies.

“Yeah, I’ll have coffee. Don’t get up, I’ll get it.” Nikolai jumps up. “You need a refill?” Anna looks at her cup as if it had just appeared in her hand, as if the moment when she had filled it had occurred long ago. It’s still steaming. She shakes her head and he leaves the room.

She looks again at Tula. Her eyes are dark blue, long and widely spaced, they dominate her otherwise pale features. Her nose is narrow and long like her face. Her lips are an afterthought, straight and flushed, over a dimpled chin. There are fine lines around her eyes and one corner of her mouth creases deeply into a cheek when she smiles a crooked smile. Her dark hair is sprinkled with white, hangs down her chest. She is quite a few years older than Nikolai. This is different for him.

Tula smiles, raises her chin, looks up. “Tosca. A beautiful recording.”

“You like opera?”

Tula nods.

Anna gives a weak closed mouth smile, shifting her glance to the window. “So, what kind of work do you do?”

“I am dancer. I dance at Szlachta one week Friday. Can you come?”

“Um, possibly, yes. Are you with the local troop? I’ve never seen you.”

“I am just—emerged.”

Anna is curious about Tula's accent. Sounds eastern European. "Will you think it rude if I ask you where you're from?"

"No, of course not, I am from Belarus region."

Nikolai steps into the room with his coffee. "Nikolai, maybe I would have something. Water, with ice?" Tula asks.

"Oh, sure." He retreats.

"Do you speak Russian or Belarusian?" Anna says while still looking out the window.

"Both."

"*Gavoryu parruski njemnogo,*" Anna says haltingly, testing her.

"*Vash akcent kharoshiy,*" Tula replies. "*U vas prekrasnaya kozha. Dalzhno bitj okeanskiy vozdukh.*"

Anna shakes her head, not understanding, knowing only a few Russian phrases. Tula jumps up and walks to a wall behind the couch to examine a painting. Anna follows her with her eyes till she passes the couch. She notices the lightness of her step and the roundness of her muscular calves.

"This is one of your paintings." Tula stares at it intensely. It's of a thick Manzanita tree, twisted with deep red bands around and down the trunk. The branches reach up and out, and the roots are shown, likewise convoluted, reaching below. The head of an old man is implanted in the roots and three women's heads grow into the branches like large blooms, one is Anna.

“I studied woman and moon, in Nikolai’s flat. The way you hold your hands in front of you—” Tula turns and comes up behind the couch where Anna is sitting. She bends and reaches around Anna, her face next to hers. Anna is startled and gestures away but allows Tula to gently lift Anna’s hands at the wrist. She raises and positions them like in the painting. Tula glides her fingers from the wrist up to Anna’s fingertips. “There, like that. Your hands are so beautiful in painting, you must be in love with your fingers.” Anna is electrified by her touch, by her face being so near. She drops her hands and Tula straightens, walks over to another painting. This one is of Rostov in shades of grey. He sits bare-chested in a chair in an otherwise empty room and looks down, cradling his arms. Embedded in his chest is an empty square space where a boy sits, and hugs his knees, it is Nikolai.

While Tula studies the painting she dips an ear as the introduction to Puccini’s *Vissi d’arte* begins, then sings along with the first few lines of the libretto with a highly technical if light vocal command,

*Vissi d’arte, vissi d’amore,
non feci mai male ad anima viva!
Con man furtiva
quante miserie conobbi aiutai
(I lived for art, I lived for love,
I never did harm to a living soul!*

With a secret hand

*I relieved as many misfortunes as I knew of.)*³

Anna is stunned. Tula's voice, so close to her, so fresh, wets her eyes. Not for years has an operatic voice done this to her. Nikolai enters the room, walks to Tula, and hands her the water.

"That was beautiful." He kisses Tula lightly on the forehead as she sips her water. He makes himself comfortable in the chair as Tula wanders the room examining and commenting on Anna's paintings, occasionally singing softly with the Tosca soprano. Anna pivots around, still seated on the couch, and watches Tula, answering her questions about the paintings. After a while she catches, out of the corner of her eye, Nikolai setting his cup down with a gesture of finality, and with this she recognizes a small knot in her belly and a sinking of the unexpected cheeriness Tula has caused.

"Sorry mom, we need to take off. Tula has rehearsal later and we—I need to stop by the lab."

"Oh. Okay."

Tula looks at Anna, "Can I come again? I want to see more of your paintings."

"Of course. But I'm sure you're busy with your rehearsals and Nikolai."

"Can I come Monday? At this same time? Nikolai is working and I do not have rehearsal till night."

"I'll see you Monday."

³ Libretto by [Luigi Illica](#) and [Giuseppe Giacosa](#)

Nikolai turns at the door and says, “Can you come with me to the Szlachta Friday week? Tula’s dancing.”

“I believe that could be arranged.” Anna says, not wanting to sound too eager.

Tula flashes a big grin and takes her hand. “Thank you Anna.”

“I’m sure the pleasure will be all mine.”

After they leave, Anna sits at her kitchen table and replays Tula’s singing in her mind. Her heart speeds up. How can Nikolai’s woman be so perfect? Maybe he told her of Anna’s normal skepticism towards the worth of his previous girlfriends and the interest in her art and of opera is merely affectation. But that voice. She goes over the entire encounter. Why hadn’t Tula put her off? She thought she was beyond anyone’s ability to charm and she has been charmed. More than that. She sighs, decides to go for a long walk along the beach.

Anna lives near Nikolai, about a half hour walk. His second floor flat faces the sea, the boardwalk just under a wall of windows. Anna slows her pace as she passes by and glances up at his flat and there she is, looking out at the sea. Anna gasps and knows she must look down, keep walking but she can’t, her eyes lock uncontrollably onto the vision of Tula. She sees Tula look down at her, Tula starts to raise a hand but Anna wrenches herself away and briskly moves on.

Monday afternoon Anna stands naked before the large mirror in the bathroom. Then she takes a hand mirror and looks at her backside. Not bad for sixty. She rubs her

body with a cream that has a light scent of grapefruit and honeysuckle. She stares at the clothes she has picked out, hanging on the back of the door. A graceful A-shaped skirt of a pale blue that will hug her narrow hips and a white delicate blouse that covers her arms, reaching down to just below her wrists, very feminine. She dresses then stares at her face, “I’m infatuated with this woman. . .there, I have said it.” *I’ll have my little fantasy, what can it hurt*, she thinks. She holds her hands up before her face and remembers Tula’s touch, smiles at her graceful fingers. “Perhaps I am in love with them.” Then she hugs herself, willing herself not to think of Nikolai, that this is *his* girlfriend.

She plays up tempo traditional music from Kongo and turns it up louder than usual. Metallic tones with unusual timing, beads against a hollow gourd, high voices singing percussive words, then voices like birds. Her soft clothes float against her skin as she dances moving her chin and hips in a circle. She shuffles her feet into the living room, raises her hands high over her head and twirls them while she moves her hips left and right. Finally she raises her knees and slaps them with her hands. She turns and glances out the front window. Tula stands on the sidewalk staring in at her with that rakish one sided grin. Anna stops, drops her arms and turns to look at the clock as Tula enters.

“I am sorry, is early. Traditional African music is good for dancing.”

Anna stares at Tula, speechless, catches herself hyperventilating.

“Anna?”

Anna continues to stare at her shamelessly.

“Umm, did you want to see my work room? That’s where most of my paintings are kept, and there’s a lovely view, although I haven’t used the room much lately.” She turns, walks to the center of the house where there is a narrow wooden staircase behind a wall. She goes up the creaky planks and through a small door with an archaic latch, metal against metal, Tula following. They step into a dark dusty room and Anna walks straight to the western facing windows and opens all the blinds which fill the large space with afternoon light. And that’s when time shifts for Anna. The moments expand. They are stuffed with many things—the glint of the sun on Tula’s long hair, the arc of her wrist as she points to a painting, her long straight nose as she looks out at the view, her little slippers as she glides across the dusty floor, her small round breasts showing through her soft shirt, her tiny ears with small turquoise studs. Her deep blue eyes are passages to—the full insanity of desire.

Anna leans against a wall, and holds her arms crossed in front of her as her perspective on everything usual becomes lost. She watches the vision of Tula floating around the room always talking in that mesmerizing low voice, all the articles misplaced like the unrecognized breath. Anna breathes deeply, she wants her so badly, she’s ready to set fire to all of her paintings in reverence to Tula’s beauty. She cannot bear for the moment to end, the thought lifts up inside her pressing against her lungs until she exhales, “No.”

Tula turns to her, “What?” She walks over to her and takes her hands. “No what, Anna? Your father is not man in blue portrait?” She smiles.

Anna pulls her hands away gently, looking at them, wrenching herself from the longing to touch her. “Your hands are so warm,” she says, still looking at her hands. Then looks up. “Are you feverish?”

“No, my body temperature is normal high. I am warm so much. Perhaps, I have ice water. Okay?”

Anna nods and smiles. “Stay here.” She walks down the stairs, nearly tripping, dizzy, touching the walls. She reaches the kitchen grabs a glass, ice, water, her hands shaking. Rushes back up the stairs, two at a time. She comes through the door and stops. Tula stands with her back to the window looking at her. Anna steps slowly to her until she is quite close, until she can feel the warmth of Tula’s body, smell her scent. Tula smiles her strange smile and looks into Anna’s hopeful eyes, takes the glass, touching Anna’s fingers with her own. Anna breathes fast, bites her lip.

The front door opens and closes, “Mom, Tula, where are you?” Anna drops her gaze, moves back two steps and turns.

“We’re up here,” Anna calls. Nikolai bounds up the steps.

“Hi, I thought I’d take Tula to rehearsal. You ready?”

“Okay. I see you Friday, yes? At the Szlachta?” she says to Anna.

“Of course.”

“Mom, are you okay? You look flushed.”

“Yes, I’m okay. Go.”

Anna sits hard upon her couch, shakes her head, and blinks. *I've gone mad*, she thinks, *This is Nikolai's girlfriend. What is wrong with me?* She presses her palms to her forehead and rocks. *Oh god, Tula, I have to have you.*

"Mom, hi, what's up?" It's Friday morning. She hears his voice on her sat phone and is overwhelmed with guilt.

"Nick, how's your day going?"

"Okay? I'm at work, mom. What do you need?"

"What should I wear tonight?"

"You used to instruct me on what to wear to these things."

"I was just wondering, what kind of an event is it?" Anna rubs her eyes.

"It's a ballet, mom. Dress up."

"Nick?"

"I'm here for ya, mom."

"Are you in love with her?"

Dead air.

"Am I getting too personal? I'm still your mom."

"Ma. . . I don't know."

"It's not that hard. What happens when you look at her?"

"Normal stuff, she's very attractive."

"You're being evasive."

"Yes, I am. I gotta go. I'll pick you up at 7. Love you."

“Love you, too.” *Oh god!* she says to herself.

Anna and Nikolai wait in the modern foyer of the grand Szlachta in a crowd of elegant folks who gossip in small groups. They sip espresso in petite blue cups with saucers. “Why do you keep tugging at your dress? You look really nice, mom.”

Inside the theatre, Anna anxiously watches the beginning performances, she wants to see Tula. She keeps re-reading the program in the dim light. Nikolai looks over at her and pats her hands as she fiddles with the program. She can hardly bare to look at him with only Tula in her thoughts. Finally, she is next. The hall goes dark.

A thin curtain descends at the front of the stage and a dim blue glow appears behind it. Three men come into view to the side behind the curtain. One holds a pair of hand drums—the Indian *tabla*; the next carries a giant stringed *tambura*; and the last holds a small reed instrument—the *shehnai*. They are dressed in traditional Indian garb and sit down on large pillows, their legs crossed in front of them. The drone of the *tambura* begins the *raga* then the hollow echos of the *tabla*. The soft buzzing of the *shehnai* next launches a slow sensuous melody.

Through the curtain a spotlight reveals Tula to the center left of the stage. She wears a slick red leotard from wrist to ankle and is stretched out vertically, on both points of her red slippers that seem to vibrate. Her entwined arms are high over her head, her delicate hands limp. Her head leans back across the shoulder of a man, who is barely visible in solid black. Her knees bend and she slides down the length of the man, as if she is collapsing in slow motion. He grasps her arms and pulls her up quickly. She spins to

face him as his hands drop to her waist, then she falls backwards, bending in the middle, and the man swings her left and right, their hips together. Her hair is tied in a pony-tail high on the back of her head and it swings out voluptuously in rhythm with the *shehnai* solo.

The entire piece is revealed to the audience like a salacious dream. Men and women shift in their seats while Tula slithers across the man and the stage to the beat of the *raga*. Anna watches the performance, mouth open. She feels flushed with jealousy towards the male dancer whose hands grip Tula's body and even jealous of the entranced crowd and all their eyes wanting Tula. When the ballet completes and Tula lies motionless across the lap of the man, Anna feels she is ready to die herself, as if life itself must complete with the dance.

Anna sleeps restlessly that night. She gets up when it's finally morning and dresses hurriedly for a walk. A fog sits on the ocean surface and a damp wind blows through Anna's jacket and wets her face. She starts jogging towards Nikolai's flat, trying to get warm. She slows to a walk when she's nearly there, now sweating. She looks up but no one stands at the window. She walks onto the sand towards the water, to a public structure for dressing and waits there leaning against the cold cement that faces the ocean, hugging herself. She peeks around the corner of the structure, staring up at Nikolai's flat. After some time has passed, she sees Tula and Nikolai approach the window, talking. He grips both of Tula's hands in his and draws her knuckles to his cheeks. Anna turns back her head, looks out forlornly at the sea. Then she peers again

and sees only Tula, who looks along the boardwalk, then catches sight of Anna's face. Anna retreats, closes her eyes, shivering, at a loss at what to do while the cold dampness soaks into her skin. After a few minutes, there's a hand on her shoulder. Anna flinches. It is Tula, gripping her own coat, squinting against the wind.

"Come inside, it is so cold."

"No." Anna turns and walks briskly back to the boardwalk, Tula following.

"Anna, wait."

Anna stops and slowly turns to her. "Are you in love with him?" she asks.

Tula shakes her head. "No." She comes up close to Anna, "I am not in love with him."

"But, why are you with him?" Anna looks up at the window. "I saw you there, together."

"We are...not...I do not know how to say it. Anna, I do not need closeness with Nikolai. I want...you."

Anna gasps, how can it be possible? Tula takes her hand and kisses her fingertips. "*Da*," Tula says.

Anna reaches up and strokes her cheek, then her shoulder, down her arm. Tula grips her hand and pulls it. "Come, we go inside." Anna glances up at the window and this time sees Nikolai standing there, watching them. She jerks loose from Tula and steps back, covers her mouth with the back of her hand, then turns and runs.

"Anna, no!" But she keeps running.

Anna throws herself face down on her bed and sobs, much the way Rostov had done. She hears her front door open.

“Mom, where are you?” Nikolai comes to the bedroom door as Anna sits up. “Come out here so we can talk.” She looks up at him, frightened.

“I’m sorry Nikolai, please forgive me.”

He walks over, takes her hand, and leads her into the living room where Tula stands, her arms crossed.

Tula smiles at her. “We sit, okay?” They sit down, Anna again on the couch squeezing her hands together, Tula near her sitting very straight, and Nikolai again across the small space in his chair.

“Mom...Tula why don’t you begin.”

“Anna, first, you should know, I am not flesh, I am mechanical.”

Anna drops her hands to the couch, “But, your skin’s warm and you smell like a woman, you drink.”

“Yes, I am singular, prototype, newly developed by Nikolai and Ocea.”

“Then, you are essence transferred. Who are you then, or who were you?” Anna’s voice is gaining an edge, she feels her hair stand on end.

“I am transferred, yes, but in creative way. There was woman, dancer and choreographer. I look like her when she was forty-five. She was from Belarus region. Her name was Alaiza Skaryna. I have her memories but they are like novel I have read many times. I have also this woman’s talents and her language. Except, my singing voice, it is. .

.affectation. I am *not* Alaiza, I am Tula and my own memories began only seventeen days ago.”

“So, you’re not real. You’re some kind of model, a toy.”

Tula frowns. “No, Anna, I am person, even so.”

“So, are you two a couple, then? Have you constructed yourself a girlfriend, Nick?”

“No, she was never my girlfriend. I had to lie about that and I’m sorry, it was hard for me.”

“Why did you lie to me?”

Tula and Nikolai glance at each other. “There is something else unique about Tula.”

“What else?” Anna’s eyes become sad, she is near crying, exasperated.

“Mom, Tula was designed as an empath. She was created specifically to . . . love and be loved by someone, to be the perfect companion. I had to lie about the girlfriend thing, so she could get close to you, and to test her effectiveness. You typically hate my girlfriends.” Nikolai comes over and sits by Anna and takes her hands in his. “She was created,” he pauses, “for you.”

Anna yanks her hands away, stands and turns her back to them. She feels her stomach sinking, twisting. She’s been duped, betrayed by her own son for the cause of some experiment of Ocea’s, the coldest woman on the planet. And they did it in this most personal way, toying with the emotions of a lonely older woman. “Leave, both of you, get out of here.”

“Mom, I—”

“Get out!”

“Listen to your son.” Tula places her hand on Anna’s shoulder. But Anna drops her shoulder away from the touch then runs into her bedroom and slams the door.

She hears their murmuring voices then the front door open and close. They are gone. She slumps to the bed and weeps. With her hands covering her face she falls over against the quilt. “I am completely abandoned.”

Finally, she lifts herself and shuffles to the front window and sees only the closing day. She draws the curtain and drags herself back to her bedroom, falls into bed and sleeps.

Anna wakes to daylight still wearing yesterday’s clothes. She sits on the side of her bed and stares at the floor. She gets up and changes into grey shapeless togs feeling dull, not worthy of life. She walks to the front window of her living room and pulls open the curtain. There, standing in front of the house just the other side of the little fence is Tula, her face turned in profile, she looks towards the ocean. Anna sees tears rolling down her manufactured cheek, her false hands gripping herself in anguish, the body made up of millions of tiny motors rocks back and forth. A knot forms in Anna’s gut. The essence transferred, they pilfer life, stealing excessive time. They are usually very old and very rich and cheat death by buying another type of living. But Tula, she’s new, innocent, a pawn. It’s not her fault or her devise.

Anna watches as Tula turns and sees her through the window, she comes up to the door and speaks through it. “Anna, please, can we talk?” Anna opens the door.

Tula’s chin quivers, and her brow is creased. “You must forgive him,” she begins, “you must understand that he did this for you with only his great love.”

Anna looks down then turns her back to Tula, “And what about Ocea?”

“I cannot speak for her. But I know Nikolai. He wants you to live, Anna. Longing is living, is it not?”

“But, you, you have no choice but—to love me. Like a pet dog. How wretched is that?”

“Yes, it is true. I have no choice. But that does not mean I do not suffer, that I do not ache for you. I am creature who needs you, Anna, just like you need me. I have burning heart here, in my head. Do you feel it?” Tula moves close behind Anna, rests her forehead against her back. She runs her palm down the side of Anna’s arm then slips her hand into Anna’s. They stand like this for a few moments, then Anna gently squeezes her fingers.

Drowning

She wondered if there were metals or combinations of substances embedded in her 90 year old organs that might poison the poor creatures—the fish that would nibble at her flesh. So she hesitated, squatting and hugging her knees. The creeping sea water froze her toes, the bubbles disappearing into her instep, the cold striking between her legs. Drowning seemed like a good idea only minutes before but the long suffering sea animals deserved better than water soiled by her remains. She stood. She wanted perfection at last—to disappear from the biosphere without shame.