

Part Two

“There are no foreign lands. It is the traveler only who is foreign.”

- Robert Louis Stevenson

If I were to die and if my life were destined to become a novel written by some distant biographer, this portion of that book would read as such: "*Homer Miller nearly met his end...*" If I were capable of thinking while in my unconscious state, I would have been brought back to the image of my Angel of Death now walking beside me, escorting me through the gates of Hell, but I did not meet my end and I was not able to think. For some reason, a reason added to the long list of reasons I'm completely unaware of, my body decided to keep living, my heart pleasantly decided not to throw in the towel and my brain decided, hesitantly I'm sure, to keep pulsating. I awoke in a hospital bed a few weeks later. As it turned out Nina was engaged to the young Negro at the dance hall, and they had made a lucrative business out of hustling white men, such as myself, but thanks to Ulysses and his more than candid remarks, they cracked my skull with a lead pipe as well, nearly killing me. Apparently, I was in the alleyway for more than an hour, leaking plasma all over the pavement, until someone found me and called the police. The doctors said I was in a coma, or *vegetative state*, but I truly believe that I was just asleep. The long overdue slumber that I was putting off and putting off finally caught up with me, for when I did awake, despite a throbbing pain in my cranium, I was quite refreshed. You can only deprive your body a necessary function so long before the universe finds a way of providing it for you, and as I've said, I didn't believe in fate, but you couldn't deny an eerie connection to my state of affairs and the answer that came about to correct them. Also, I had just rid myself of Dr. Chin's Angel of Death only to end up in a hospital being pumped full of drugs strong enough to kill a Shetland pony. The irony was enough to make me chuckle to myself while sliding in and out of coherence. Once again fate raised its miserable hand and refused to be ignored, for the realization came that any detoxification from the Angel of Death I were to experience was completely circumvented by my vegetable state. While my body lay still, my insides were experiencing something which had crushed men much stronger than myself, driving some of them to suicide, an option I would have no doubt considered had I been awake. It was as if a dynamic soul was trapped in a corpse and couldn't break out, screaming like a lunatic banshee while being buried alive.

Shortly after I regained consciousness, depression set in. I had lost all the money Graham and Thaddeus had given me. My dreams of going to Europe and Asia were tarnished, dead. I felt helpless, lying in a hospital bed, my head wrapped in a white cotton bandage, my thoughts scrambled and fractured. Escape was impossible now. I could not leave a bed let alone flee the country. My desires, which were so wild and free, had been tamed and quieted, capped and beaten into submission. The thoughts of suicide, now free to roam, ran through my mind, before being forced out by overpowering pains. I was sedated and on medication most of time, falling

asleep and waking at random times, time traveling in a way, for I would open my eyes and it would be morning and then I would blink, open my eyes again and it would be evening. Whole days were stolen from me, chapters ripped from the book of my life and burned. I would now have to show my face to Phineas and Penelope, tell them that all my gloating was premature. I'd have to return to Baybrooke and plead for my job back. It would be humiliating, graveling to Baybrooke like a stinking dog. Of course, he and his Uncle would take me back, but that wasn't the issue, it was lowering myself, coming back with my tail between my legs, my balls shriveled and in my watch pocket. I'd have to stroke their egos, tell them what a fool I had been for leaving. There was a certain amount of stroking that came with any position in life, everyone enjoyed a good stroking and as long as the right people were being stroked, the world kept spinning, the sun kept rising, and the tides kept crashing, but I didn't outstretch my hand forthright, I resisted, I searched for alternative routes through the same dying machine, so maybe I wouldn't have to masturbate my way into a respectable lot. I could pave my own road and follow it, ending up somewhere that wasn't tainted by the ejaculate of god and country, but that seemed hopeless now. The fat, repellent Komodo dragon that was Baybrooke's uncle would lick his greasy lips and snap his suspenders against his belly, giddy with pleasure about being my new lord and ruler, for he no longer needed me, I now needed him. Power must be kept if there was any hope of being treated like a homosapien, because if a person of power is allowed free reign, they will push it as far as they can, degrading the lower half until they are nothing more than a smudge mark, a pair of smoking shoes. Look at poor Baybrooke, a trampled flower, a cracked seed, merely a fraction of the man he could be, and because his uncle dictated a life for him, hid him away from the sun. It seemed as though power drives men mad, give them too much and they destroy, give them too little and they are unable to function, becoming a shell of a man, a hollowed out body, a disappearing vapor of what being a man should mean. It was as if we were an incomplete creation, not equipped with the proper fortitude to function at varying stations in life. No one wanted to be a servant, they all wanted to be King, but they couldn't handle the burdens and responsibilities of being King, so instead they became tyrants, flaccid, inept leaders that didn't know whether to shit or go blind. The world was full of people like this; it was even run by them. The President of the United States was a lowdown crook and why? Because in order to be the leader of a bunch of rotten crooks you had to become a rotten crook yourself. There was no pure soul left at any position of importance, that's why I was content in fading into the background, living my life devoid of any distorted influence. If you were important, it meant you were corrupt. If you were important enough that money could be made from your name, there was an agency for that, if you were running for President, there was entire campaign, which took bribes from special interest groups, perpetuating a world of lies that engulfed our planet like the debris from the moon's destruction... which was only a matter of time now. I took in the moon each evening as if it were the last time, because if I woke up in the morning and read that

the moon had been destroyed to further corroborate a dirty politicians alibi, I wouldn't be surprised in the least, just another casualty, just another expendable thing to keep the curtains drawn and the truth squandered.

I had plenty of time to dissect the nature of man from inside that hospital, shackled to that bed as if I were a criminal. I hadn't had an erection in weeks. My semen was getting backed up within my body, swelling my lions. There was a particular numbness to the head of my cock, as though the shaft itself was full of gravy and all I had to do was give it a little squeeze to relieve some of the pressure. I searched for anyone remotely attractive, holding my breath each time the door opened, even resorting to prayer, clasping my hands together and telling God to send me a beauty to gawk at, a warm face that I could cherish in the lowly hours of the dim night. Contrary to popular belief, there was no such thing as an attractive nurse. I don't know how that myth began. They were all bestial-like creatures, with humps on their backs, and pudgy midsections that bulged from their uniforms. Their breasts were freckled, lined as though ripened, like dehydrated pears, and their intolerable voices jarring you awake at odd hours to collect urine samples. I'll never know what purpose there was in taking as much of my urine as they did, but I was proud to contribute to modern science in any way I could, plus I took an odd pleasure in letting those women straddle my member, taking the little boy between the index finger and thumb, the slight pull provided by the white rubber gloves, and then the strict order to piss. I felt like if I did not piss on demand, they would simply twist it off like the head of a water fountain, so I did what I was told and urinated a thick, brown liquid.

"What is that stuff?" I asked one of the nurses.

"Your urine, sir."

"That can't be my urine. It's brown."

"We've given you a cocktail of medications; it can have that effect on your urine."

I was amazed at how she conducted herself whilst a cock in her hand. She operated as though it wasn't the device for recreation, as though if she gave it a little tug, a tulip would emerge rather than the hot male magma, which she herself was once made. While she fiddled with me, I'd look up at her, admiring the shoddy craftsmanship it must have taken to produce such a monstrosity. I imagined she was born three months premature and then left out in the sun to prune. Boy was she ugly, I mean ghastly, but something about her made me want to have a go. Perhaps it was her detachment or my incessant desire to awake women from sexual apathy, whatever it was, my mind was planning a great scheme, an yet, no movement below, it sat, collecting dust, like a snakeskin. The nurse would be grateful to me, giving her one for free, tossing her a bone. Surely she hadn't been touched sexually, perhaps ever. She was waiting for the slightest touch, just the smallest caress that could rocket her to a quivering explosion, flesh falling off the bone, her entire body reduced to a puddle of liquid on the floor, a tongue reptilian in demeanor, lashing out, almost demonic. These were the thoughts that plagued a man when he was full of his own

sap; it flooded the mind, came out the eyeballs, and if you weren't careful could spew from the mouth, getting you in all sorts of trouble. You were more inclined to make filthy jokes when the dirty deed was on your mind, and usually they came about at the most inappropriate times. I had to hold myself back from making clever comments when she was manhandling my privates; it took all my strength not to say, "Why don't you give it a suck while you're down there?" And for the second time in my life, I felt like I was being used by women. She came in, undid my pajamas, reached in, fiddled a bit, patched me up and was gone, not a kind word, or a flicker of the eyebrows to let me know she liked what she saw, nothing.

Time in a hospital bed is slow time, it slithers by, and watching a clock tick from twelve to one could go on for days. I hadn't much to pass the time besides judging the varying degrees of pain I was in and to fantasize about the nurses and their goiters. My visitors were sparse and infrequent. Not many people knew about my incident and I was thankful for that. Thaddeus had to know, for I was sent to his hospital. He personally took me as a patient and made sure I was as comfortable as you could be in a hospital bed. Lovely Thad, he never mentioned the loss of the money. I felt like such a bastard, but I suppose a pipe to the head mends all wounds, metaphorically speaking of course. Graham found out through his usual channels, a doctor in the hospital he was linked with romantically. Good old Graham, had a man in every corner of town and he played smart, he found older men, men who would foster him, never making him spend a dime of his own money, which I suppose is how he accumulated so much. He was no spring chicken himself, but he wasn't old by any means, and he didn't waste time suckling orderlies. His money allowed him to cherry pick from an upscale rung: doctors, lawyers, successful artists, architects, professional athletes, statesmen, the works. And the higher up they were the more secretive the relationships became, which never seemed to bother Graham. In fact I think the secrecy of it all got him off more than the man himself, he got a kick when seeing fear in his lovers' faces at the sound of each passerby outside the seedy motel room in which they were fornicating- the scandals, the drama, it all was part of the sexual experience for Graham, all an extra twist on something that was already looked down upon, deemed immoral. I wasn't even sure Graham was necessarily homosexual. It was completely in his grasp to be so far gone when it came to perversion that he simply began to fancy his own gender, when the limits had been reached with women, men were the next natural progression. I feared he'd move onto house pets when his interest in men ran its course. But Graham was very comfortable being the man he was, which was something I admired about him, and I had never once seen him hide his slightly flamboyant gestures, or refrain from detailing his sexual life to me, except for when we unexpectedly ran into a business colleague of Graham's one night at our café. The loose posture evaporated, the flimsy wrist hardened, the slight lisp in his speech ceased. He transformed into a straight man before my eyes, grasping the colleague's hand with a firm, masculine grip, talking an octave deeper, and when it was all over, and it was just he and I again, he looked ashamed of

himself, as if I had caught him fluxing between both his lives, caught between the outspoken fag and the withdrawn straight. When he looked back at me, the color did not return to his face, it remained a pale grey; his eyes became beady, darting around, trying to avoid me. I did not say anything to him then or ever about his behavior that night. It was the moment in which I could have finally trumped him, but I let it pass, because Graham lived with something completely alien to me, it was a hatred for something he could not control, a punishment for a crime that wasn't a crime at all, and if I had said something then, he might not have been able to recover. Graham needed to dominate the relationship, otherwise he would crumble, for he was too afraid of becoming *vulnerable*; friends, lovers, it did not matter, he could not lose grip on the persona that he had created for himself, because without it, there was just a man with a cross.

To tell the truth, it was good to see Graham, but his face not only came bearing sympathy, it also came with a look of coy knowing. I already knew what it was about. Graham had found out it was a Negro girl I was taking home and I'm sure he knew my motives instantly.

"Trying the dark meat, eh?" he said.

"I never got to the main course." I replied, still quick on my feet.

"If you wanted a Negro girl, why didn't you come to me?"

"I didn't know you had a stable." I said.

"I don't know if I'd call it a stable, but I'd be able to find one that didn't crack you over the head with a pipe."

"It wasn't her, it was her fiancé."

"And you knew this when you pulled out a roll of money in front of them?"

"No."

"Ah, I see. Poor Homer... And I suppose you planned on spending the money I gave you on this African princess?"

"No, I got some extra bread from my brother. I had decided to visit Italy with your money."

"Italy, eh? That is a mighty beautiful place. I try to get there at least once every few years."

"Listen, Graham, I know what you're doing, and save it, will you? I'm sorry I lost your money. Did you really think I was going to do anything else with it? Now, I don't want to hear about your trips to Italy. Just save it. I'm depressed as it is."

Graham made a face of true shock, although I knew it was an act.

"Homer!" he said, "I'm shocked that you'd take me for such a cruel individual."

"Appalled, I'm sure."

"You thought I came in here to gloat over your misfortune, when in fact, I came to offer you a proposition."

His shocked face resumed a clever smirk.

“Whatever it is, I’m not interested.” I said. How could I be? I was stranded on a desert island, throwing grains of sand at the sun. My life had snapped shut like the jowls of a pit bull, what could Graham possibly offer me that would do me any good?

“Will you let me finish?” he said.

“Finish, finish and then leave.”

“Like I was saying, I try to get to Italy every few years or so...and as it happens I’m planning a trip as we speak...”

There was no way Graham was about to do a good deed. It was impossible that he happened to be planning a trip to Italy and he was now extending an invitation to me because of my incident. If this were the case, there would be conditions, I knew this, and it made my next words stumble out of my mouth in a quiver.

“What’s the catch?” I asked.

“Just a detour, a little adventure before adjourning to Italy, all expenses paid.”

“What kind of detour?” I asked. He was speaking cryptically, while I was speaking plain. I wanted to know what kind of trouble he was going to get me into.

“South America.” he said, “Brazil mainly. There is something there that I covet.”

Covet, I thought... that word made the entire thing seem villainous, and I was afraid to get mixed up in Graham’s obsessions, there may never be a way out.

“And that would be?” I asked.

There was a pause. Graham exhaled and then looked at me with just his eyes.

“I understand you had an encounter with The Angel of Death?” he said.

“How do you know about that?”

“I ran into Dr. Chin. He mentioned that you paid him a visit in the wee hours of morning, said he slipped you something in your tea, and you were so taken with it, that you demanded more.”

“I didn’t demand anything. He gave it to me.”

“And pleasant trips thereafter?”

...I was about to explain the power of the Angel of Death to Graham, tell him how it had ripped me back into my life, shown me all the terrible and ordinary things I had done, but then I realized I could not tell him about my experiences. If he were to know, Thaddeus would surely find out, anyone with two working ears in a twenty mile radius would find out, so I did what came most natural, I lied.

“I wouldn’t know. I spilled most of it on a trolley car.”

“Fool! That was good stuff.”

“Have you tried it?”

“No, but if it’s of Dr. Chin’s concocting, then it must be potent.”

“What does this have to do with our detour?”

There was another pause, longer this time.

“There is said to be a substance which grows in the jungles of South America called *ayahuasca*. Apparently it provides its user the power of telepathy.”

“Telepathy?” I said immediately irritated. “There’s no such thing.”

“Imagine it, Homer; we’ll be able to hold entire conversations without opening our mouths!”

It sounded almost frightening, a man so thirsty for such a power. Hearing Graham speak made me question if I was ready for it, if my mind wouldn’t just cave in under the strain. I sat quietly for a moment and thought about South America. I had never been to Brazil, only heard stories of its strange myths and I know I would be venturing through it on a safari for an impossible drug. How could Graham believe in such a thing? He was one of the most hard-nosed realists I knew. He must have some evidence, otherwise he was just having fun with me and there was a larger, more sinister scheme happening.

“You said Brazil, is that where you find... what’s it called?”

“Ayahuasca.”

“Right, *aj-a-was-ka*... is it in Rio?”

“No, Rio would just be our base of operations.”

“I don’t know, Graham.” I said, turning my neck in uncertainty. I was having serious deliberations, for I knew Graham would lead me on a wild goose chase through some miserable jungle, full of snakes and a thousand different things that could get me killed. We’d end up dead because of some imaginary drug, just in arm’s reach of Italy, seeing it in the distance, looking north across the seemingly endless blue world, knowing that I could have been sipping red wine at the base of the Colosseum if only I hadn’t followed Graham.

“What don’t you know, Homer? It’s a free ride to Italy; all you have to do is come along with me. We won’t be there for more than a few days. I just need someone with me, someone I can talk to, someone I can trust.”

“You can trust me?”

“As far as I know. Come on, Homer. It will be an adventure.

There was that word again: *adventure*. It seduced me as though I were a six-year-old boy venturing out into the yard at night for the first time. The idea of adventure wrapped itself around my heart like bacon around a filet mignon, clinging to me and not letting go, swaying my better judgment, leading me to certain death. But, I would escape my country after all. If I were to make it through Brazil, it was then only a hop, skip and a jump to Italy (two weeks by boat), the place I dreamed of while asleep in that hospital bed, not knowing I was living, but forgetting myself in my dream, wrestling each fantasy out of darkness. I should have known better than to follow a drug addict on a hunt, which Graham was sure to rename it as soon as we arrived.

Telling me about it, it was an adventure, but there, in the wet jungles, it was a hunt, a chase for as

way to cheat human evolution, and I had no choice than to accept his bounty.

Graham bid me adieu for the evening. The bastard had snowed me; I knew it the moment he left. I'm sure he had found out through Thaddeus my aspirations for traveling to Italy, as to explain my low spirits, and that was when the idea arose in Graham's crooked mind. He had finally found a way to rope someone into his insane journey. I knew all this, but I did not care. I was feeling happier than I had in weeks! If it were not for the pain in my head constantly reminding me that I was mortal, I would have forgotten completely, I would have gotten up from that hospital bed and leaped out of the window, hovering over the street, balancing on a light pole, singing at the top of my lungs. As soon as I was well enough to travel, I would blow this joint, I thought. Just a matter of days now, just a few more evenings, and then freedom once more, hope, conviction, words and feelings that I thought were deceased, resurrecting and pummeling toward the great open skies of South America. The women, with their olive skin, and their brunette hair would drive me wild, I would unleash the pent up semen and they'd think it was a tidal wave, the light of God, the snap of a fresh bed sheet in the morning light. I would follow Graham into these jungles and we would find this ayahuasca, take it and engage in the most beautiful, deep conversation never spoken. Our brains would develop and ripen, double in size, become so moist that the juices would have to leak from our ears, which would be filled by the local's music and the slight licks of their tongues when speaking their native language. Yes, my adventure was still alive, still kicking, still beating, and it was upon me, waiting for me as a faithful lover waits for their man to be released from prison. I was so excited I could hardly sleep that night. Who could sleep at a time like this? I too busy living, living, living...

2

Once discharged, I was sent back out into the brutal world, a bandage still wrapped around my head, but hidden beneath my white straw skimmer. I had casually asked Thaddeus when it was safe for me to travel and he looked at me cockeyed.

"Homer, I don't want you getting your hopes up. It isn't good for you."

"Just hypothetically speaking, if I wanted to take a breather to another city, just stretch my wings a bit, when would be alright for me to go?"

"I'd say not for another three weeks."

"Three weeks, that's an eternity."

"You've suffered a very serious head injury, one you could have easily died from. You should be thanking the Lord above for having those three weeks. It is very dangerous for you to do anything. You should remain in bed and rest."

Remain in bed! Ha! I had just been in a bed for close to a month, and now he wanted me to return to my dreary apartment and get in yet another bed! He must have been fully mad to

believe I would do such a thing. I halfway smiled and halfway frowned, lowering my head and nodding to Thaddeus, as to make him think I would take his advice. Now, I was away from his judgmental eye and I found myself back on the streets, hindered, not one hundred percent, but well enough to engage in humanly activities. First off, I was parched as hell. My throat felt like a petrified sea sponge. I decided my first order of business would be to get some tea. There was a lovely café just around the bend from the hospital and it would make for an exquisite trough for me to dunk my head in and take a long, cool drink. Besides my thirst, I was completely awake, my eyes did not beg to close; the lids did not sag, but were jovial. My eyes saw straight and true, they saw a group of scoundrels hanging outside the café as I approached. They were a group of literary types, writers, poets, what have you. I knew them well, through Graham, of course. I truly started to hate the fact that whomever I met, a dark cloud of Graham's reputation hung above me, as though I were his lapdog, and forever after they found it difficult to separate us. I'd often hear things like, "Oh, yes...Graham's friend." They had no idea that I thought Graham was as big a bastard as they did. But I was happy to see the literary group, frankly because I was happy to see anyone. Also, I had never once seen any of them individually, always together, like some weird set of conjoined twins. There was George and Mayhew, Nick, Cassandra, and Byron. Byron was in love with Cassandra, but Cassandra was in love with Nick, who did not give Cassandra the slightest affection in return. George was married and divorced. Mayhew was engaged to a delightful mute with a darling face. I truly believe he struck gold in finding a woman who did not speak. A long and illustrious marriage he would have, his home littered with little torn pieces of paper, his wife's grievances written on them in childlike handwriting. I wasn't sure if Mayhew's bride was a simpleton as well, for the few times he spoke of her it was always with a slight pity, as though he felt for the poor girl and her struggle, but perhaps he was referring to the struggle that came along with marrying him in the first place. Mayhew refused to refer to himself as a writer, only a novelist, although he had never completed his first novel, which he guaranteed would change the world, if and when it were to be published. He reminded me of Xavier, Penelope and I's writer friend, always proclaiming his greatness while having nothing to show for himself. Most artists were this way. George was a writer of all trades. He had written transcripts for radio broadcasts, squeezed out some money here and there, and served as a ghostwriter for a few well-to-do phonies. For himself he had written short stories mostly, often basing them around his own childhood in St. Louis, Missouri. Nick was more of a clever speaker than he was a pen and paper man. He was the most quotable of the group, spouting off impromptu one-liners which resonated with wisdom and poignancy. We even went as far as to nickname him Oscar, after Oscar Wilde, due to his extreme quotability, the ease in which he critiqued the rest of us, as though we were players in his own stage production. It had once been mentioned that Nick had had some of his quotations published in a few literary journals somewhere, but they had long since been forgotten or shuffled up in the mix of brilliant lines

without owners, which was much more common than you'd think. Most of the world's genius utterances were unknown or were so far reaching that the original source ultimately didn't matter. That was the price of universality, you had to give up the selfish desire to lay claim to it, for your words would live long after you, and you'd become that distant name that no one could remember, snapping their fingers, saying "Who said that?" and "What was his name?" ...Nick just wasn't disciplined enough to be a full time writer, not to say that you had to be a disciplined person to write, but you did have to be a disciplined artist, militant about your work. When you weren't working you could be a vandal, a drunk, a flunky, you could lay on the sofa all day long and listen to soap operas, you could look for trouble in the late hours of night, but when you were creating, that's all there was, the universe on that blank sheet of paper, the rest of the world closed down like the folding cardboard buildings of a children's pop-up book, collapsing in on themselves. I had found this out by being in the company of people like George, Mayhew, Nick, Cassandra and Bryon for the majority of my adult life and I endured more rants about what it means to be a writer that any other mortal person could possibly bear. It didn't bother me too much, for I admired the writer. Like I said before, I had toyed with the idea of becoming one myself, but from what I gathered from people like Mayhew, it had to be an incurable sickness, an absolute need, and I had yet to be overtaken with such an all-encompassing passion. And beware if they got to drinking, for then you heard: the paper was your lover! Your only friend! Your mother! Your entire life! It was the only thing that wouldn't betray you, although at times you felt like it did, when the words wouldn't come, when they spitefully corkscrewed through your mind, but wouldn't be set free. The margins looked at you cockeyed and crooked, the keys of the typewriter stung the middles of your fingers, everything was against you, but in reality, the paper stuffed into the typewriter was the only things that would stick by you through the miserable squall, provide you shelter from the hailstorm. Friends came and went, women, ha, left at the first sign of trouble, but the typewriter to the writer was a cross slung over their back, and they would drag it to the top of any mountain and gladly die upon it. Cassandra was a poetess, always scribbling her ideas down on a little notepad she carried around with her. Her ideas were savage and brief, appearing and disappearing almost instantaneously, making her a very insecure person and a blade of grass in the shadow of a sunflower when it came to her love for Nick. I wasn't even sure he noticed how madly she loved him, and I wasn't sure if he did notice that he would care very much. It wasn't that Cassandra wasn't beautiful; she was, terribly beautiful, I had been trying to sleep with her the moment I set eyes on her, but her romance with Nick clouded all of her sexual aspirations elsewhere. It was that kind of love; the kind which blinded all else, turned the cunt off like a switch and directed all its energy to the lonely heart. That's what made Cassandra invisible to Nick, her longing, her desire for him, it took all the challenge out of it, and Nick was a hunter. He didn't eat another lion's meat, he tracked his own, and it was as though Cassandra was a zebra carcass that Nick just happened by. He wouldn't love her out of

principle, which was a ridiculous reason not to love someone, but that's the way it went. Byron on the other hand was a goddamn sap, making himself a puddle to be stepped in by Cassandra. Byron was young, Bryon was sensitive, Bryon wrote poetry. He had not yet discovered that sensitive men were the least attractive to a woman. What should have been a woman's most desired quality was a flat, boring alternative. The robust, dangerous man with a thick cock and a small piece of burnt bark for a heart, that's what the women wanted, someone to mistreat them and service their own self loathing, their own skewed reflections of themselves that they saw every morning in the mirror. Women sought out shabby men because they felt like they deserved less for themselves. Why? It's a mystery, one I was not interested in solving. I watched poor, hopeless Bryon falling over himself, and I watched Cassandra practically beg Nick to abuse her, and it seemed like the complete circle of life, the digestion and vomitus of human love, so backward, deformed and grotesque. I was happy to be removed from it, to have my heart in the palm of my hand, watching it pump fully and healthily, untouched by the foul fingers of another, corrupting it with their bad blood.

I approached the table and was greeted warmly by everyone. I broke up a conversation about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which I was glad about. I did not feel like discussing literature, especially with my head the way it was. I made sure to lower my skimmer onto my skull, hiding the bandage. For some reason, and it's a mystery to me, I was ashamed to be injured. I didn't want them to know what happened. I could have easily said I was mugged by complete strangers and leave Nina out of my rendition entirely, but it wasn't about that, I didn't want them to know about the injury at all. To them, I was a well put together young man. I was plopping out my Johnny and feeding it to the world, nothing could harm me. I felt as though if I came to them in shambles, mixed up, cracked over the head, they would think less of me personally. Of course they would show concern and praise me for my bravery in a speedy recovery, but deep down they would think I was weak, that I was a damaged good, that most people never fully recover from a wound such as mine and now it was a slow and steady decline to the grave. Perhaps it was my paranoia, perhaps I was being silly, but no matter, I pushed my hat all the way to my ears and took a seat around the table.

"Homer, it's been a while, hasn't it?" George asked.

"It has." I said.

"Well, you're looking good." Cassandra said. I saw a brush stroke of jealousy in Bryon's face as she said it.

"Thank you, Cassandra." I said.

"I think he looks rather sickly to Me." said Nick, the bastard.

"Maybe you should find a hotel nearby and lie down." Byron chimed in.

Byron had known from the very beginning that I wanted to penetrate Cassandra. I wore it about my face like a mask. I flirted with her openly, commenting on her blouse, but of course meaning

her breasts. It was childish, but I wasn't that far from being a child. I'd find reasons to touch her, like when walking down the sidewalk, I'd tell her to look toward a store window and admire a woman's summer dress, expressing to her how she would look radiant wearing it, how she had just the right buttocks for it, and I would place my hand on the small of her back, rubbing it softly. Byron would always be a few steps behind us, watching the whole thing play out, building up hatred for me. Of course, I did not care. Byron was no sort of threat to me. Like I said he was weak and sensitive, perhaps he'd write a halfwit poem about me, disguising my name with something similar, yet obvious, like *Henry Millhouse*, but not much else, and part of me relished in the idea of his crummy poem getting published and me, Homer Miller, going down in literary history as a villain, a robber of love. In other words, if luck provided me the opportunity to fuck Cassandra on a table in front of Byron I'd seize it without a moment's thought... Looking at her caught between her *love* and *loveless*, Nick and Byron, made me recall a theory I had once heard about the universe being so large, that it was mathematically probable for there to be multiple replicas of the universe, meaning there was an infinite amount of earths, stretching from one side of space to the other. And not only that, but also there were alternate universes, ones that resembled ours almost perfectly, except there was one, minuscule thing different, like Nick would have a mole on his left cheek for example, or Cassandra would have green eyes instead of blue. All alternative realities realized in the flesh on different planets which were actually the same. It made you think about the idea of individuality and what a lost cause it really was if that theory be true. It would mean that in one of those universes, Cassandra was loved by Nick... and in another she loved Byron, and even still, perhaps in the furthest universe, she loved me and we fornicated like wild monkeys let loose on the Congo. This thought pleased me, for it was as if we had already been lovers, and my devilish desire to enter her lessened, but not by much.

"How have you been?" Mayhew wanted to know.

"Splendid." I said, "I'm leaving for South America soon."

"South America? Whatever could you want there?" asked George.

"Just visiting. I'll be spending most of my time in Brazil."

"Brazil, eh?" Nick sneered, "An adventurous place. Watch yourself. The crime element is overwhelming."

"And the goddamn monkeys," Mayhew said, "they're everywhere."

"Thanks for the advice." I said.

"Brazil! That's so exciting." Cassandra said.

"Yes...exciting." repeated Byron.

"George, there is actually something you can do for me." I said.

"Anything within my means." he replied.

"I have some books I need you to get rid of."

"Get rid of?" he asked, baffled. The others all took on looks as if they were Catholics and

I had just broken a cardinal rule.

“Yeah, give away.”

“But why would you be giving away your books?”

“Well, I’ll be away for a while...” before I could finish Byron interrupted.

“How long will you be away?” he asked.

I looked at him, took a moment of silence before answering, to show my disdain for him, and said, “I’m not sure, maybe five weeks, maybe five years, maybe forever.”

He looked pleased that this. I looked back at George and continued my thought about the books.

“...I thought my books could get more use if they were given away to people who would read them, rather than sitting on a shelf collecting dust.”

“That’s so thoughtful.” Cassandra said. This infuriated Byron. Now I was edging in on his territory, the sensitive card, and making it work. I sensed her panties moistening at my charitable good nature. Byron displayed perfect control. I had never seen a man hide an outburst so well within himself.

“Thank you.” I said, widening my eyes just a bit, telling her just a sample of what I’d whisper into her ear while pulverizing her, going deeper than any man before, marking her the most, bent over onto her back like an accordion, two fleshlings sandwiched together in a sweaty retreat.

“...And generous.” said Mayhew.

“Tell me about it. I’ve seen his collection. It’s rather impressive.” said George. “There’s always been something that bothered me.” he continued, “You’ve read so much, probably more than most of us, why didn’t you become a writer?”

I had been asked this question before, so I had a response ready. I said,

“A writer isn’t made a writer, they are born one. They get a tap on the shoulder from an unknown spirit and I never got that tap. If I were meant to be a writer, I suppose I would be one, but I guess, I am destined to remain a reader.”

“There has to be those, or what we do is fruitless.” said Mayhew.

“Well, not fruitless, but certainly less lucrative.” said Byron.

“Is that possible?” Nick asked, sarcastically. We all let out a laugh.

“So what do you say, Georgie old boy, will you take them off my hands?” I asked, cutting through the remaining laughter.

“Well, yes, I suppose it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Wonderful!” I said, clapping my hands together, tossing sensual looks toward Cassandra and then hateful ones toward Byron the moment Cassandra looked back at Nick.

“I’ll be out of town very shortly,” I continued, “so, I’ll leave a key at the front desk for you. You are welcome to take care of it at your leisure.” I stood up to go.

“Leaving so soon?” Mayhew asked.

“I must.” I said, “Things to do.” Which was a complete lie, of course. I had nothing to do, except wait for the call from Graham and dream about Cassandra’s faultless body pressed against mine somewhere among the cosmos...

3

I footed it to my apartment in a stroll. There was no need to rush, for I had nothing but waiting to do once I got there, but something happened when I arrived home which I never imagined happening: I was glad to see the old place. I stood in the doorway and let the dusty smell make its way to my nose. My modest accommodations had been empty for weeks and I mused that places might yearn for people the way a person yearns for them after being away for a long time. We were two acquaintances which became friends purely because of the time between meetings. This happened to me constantly; people I hardly knew treated me as if we were the best of friends when I’d run into them on the street. I suppose not truly knowing a person aids in your overall judgment of them, for once you peel back the first layer of their personality, the layer which they project falsely to the world, there isn’t much left besides a heap of insecurities and bad intentions. I looked toward my bed and near the bottom, sinking in the mattress, was a pile of newspapers. The landlord must have started the pile once he noticed a small stack of them accumulating in the hallway, which gave off the impression that no one was there, which inspired vandalism and looting. Granted there wasn’t much to loot, unless a junkie of the written word was about, but I somehow doubted that. I walked over to the bed and swiped the first newspaper from the top of the pile. It was that morning’s edition. I opened to the announcements page. I liked to read about the new babies of the world, read their names, get to know them, for as phony as it sounded, they were the future. What a bleak future it possibly was, but there was no denying they’d still be living when I finally kicked the terrible bucket. A little girl named Abigail had been born the night before at a hospital uptown. Benjamin “Benny” Seeder of 1165 Fairfax Ave. arrived at that address this morning. Baby Maureen began her life crying yesterday evening about 8pm. Lucas Hurt was born to Martha and Seymour Hurt, a troublemaker no doubt. Ah, new life! It was inspiring. I then flipped to the obituaries. One had to confront death in order to live with it, I thought. Sometimes I imagined people’s lives were a sort-of currency for the afterlife, that for every life there needed to be a death; it was a fair trade, an exchange, balance- one of the unchangeable rules of existence: money, in any form, kept the red on everyone’s lollipops. Wasn’t that a depressing thought, your soul was a stack of quarters on the bedside table of God. Balance however gave me hope, told me that despite this universe being a gutless, black hole of terror and loathing, it was fair. For every flower there needed to be a weed, for every whisper there needed to be a holler and for every sonnet there needed to be a battle cry. Fair enough, I suppose... The names in the obituaries weren’t very colorful, a few Martins, a handful of Jonathans, a Darcy. These people went their whole lives with a dull brand,

and their deaths most likely matched their boring titles, a few heart attacks, a handful from old age, a stroke. I felt sorry for them, getting cheated like that, even in death. Death wasn't nearly as interesting as living, as those folks were now experiencing firsthand. The great mystery behind the curtain didn't occupy me except in small bursts when the revelation hit me that there would be a time where I no longer existed. It's a hard thing to imagine when you're sitting with yourself, touching the flesh that binds you, sucking in air, "Impossible!" you think to yourself, but there is nothing *more* possible, the newspapers published the figure of its likelihood every day. One day, I thought, I would be among those names, perhaps not as bugled and botched, as Nietzsche would say, but equally as dead.

Lowering the newspaper, I looked toward the only thing in my room beside the bed I was sitting on, the bookshelf. It seemed to be omitting a glow. I half expected to hear a voice speaking out to me, whispering, "*Don't send us away. Please Homer, keep us.*" but no amount of begging could persuade me. I was set in my decision. I had to give up everything, everything that reminded me of the life I was willing to abandon. Sorrow tried to edge its way in when I was so bursting with enthusiasm, but I knew that feeling would soon be gone when I was parting a palm tree with my hands revealing a lagoon in Brazil, or when my feet fell between the cracks of cobblestone streets in Florence. I took a book from the shelf, one directly responsible for planting the romance of Italy in my mind and flipped through its pages. I found a beautifully written passage about Rome. I read it a few times over and decided immediately that Rome suited me much better than Florence and that I should make Rome my base of operations. I took out a map of Europe from a dusty chest underneath the bed and unrolled it across the sheets. Rome put me smack-dab in the middle of Italy. It was only a few hour train ride in almost any direction, so I'd still be able to see my beloved Florence, among other destinations. I was contented. Rome was to be my home, where so many Gladiators' blood had been spilled at the Colosseum, where Caesar was knifed by Cassius and Brutus like two kids mugging a queer in a dark alleyway. How I would breathe in the irony smell from its bloody history! How I would bathe in fountains, hump archways and fondle Roman goddesses! Of course, I was going against my fate, foregoing that silly dart, which landed directly atop Florence. It was a good thing my fate was in my own hands! I laugh at the invisible force that tries to control me! I dare you, you miserable bastard, to stop me from going to Rome! I'd love to see you try!

When I returned the book to its very specific place on the shelf, it felt as though there was something blocking it from fitting as perfectly as it had before. I fingered the little space between books and pulled out a small paper journal. On the front it read, "The Private Journal of Homer C. Miller." My middle name was Cornelius, though I was terribly ashamed of it and regularly left the "C." off any official documentation in fear of it prompting the miserable question of what it stood for. But I was shocked to see the brittle journal, for I hadn't seen it in close to five years. I probably shoved it between the books one night for safe keeping and forgot I had done so. I was

always losing things like that, putting it somewhere specifically so I could remember it then immediately forgetting. Nostalgia rushed through me now as I opened the book and saw my shabby handwriting. This little journal contained the closest evidence of Homer Miller the Writer. I had documented dreams in this book, nightmares, pains and pleasures, anecdotes and random thoughts that were not satisfied with simply being imagined. The idea then struck me that it would be devilishly sweet to mail this little journal to Penelope. *Something to remember me by*, I thought. She would read the journal backwards and forwards, again and again, marveling at how well I could string a sentence together and moistening at the filthy confessions, which I no doubt explained in graphic detail. Maybe it would provide her an insight into me, give her a peace and an understanding of why we never could be. This idea pleased me so much that I stuffed the little journal into my jacket pocket and left my apartment as quick as I had arrived. The post office would be closing soon, so I had to hustle if I was going to make it in time. I also needed to find some money, because at the moment I was completely and hopelessly broke. There wasn't a single sour-faced George Washington denomination to be found anywhere in or around my wallet. It was a lonesome cowhide, an unfilled mouth, a sliver, which if I did not know any better; I'd use to fornicate with. Imagine that, fucking your change purse! At least it wouldn't mock you and call you names, belittle your sophomoric attempts at intimacy and tattle to its friends and colleagues like a woman. That was the advantage to committing coitus with inanimate objects and I envied every man who was perverted enough to do so, for they knew true happiness. Then another brilliant idea hit me, I'd put the postage on old Baybrooke's tab. He often mailed important documents to other firms; divorce arrangements, claims, what have you, and I even accompanied him a few times and flirted with the postmaster (a decrepit, sad thing she was), so there wouldn't be any questions asked when I submitted his name through my lips. The worst they could do was telephone him at the office, but I knew once my name was mentioned he'd more than gladly give permission to send the letter on his dime. Old faithful Baybrooke, like a child, like a saint, like a mench, I owed him more than he'd ever seek.

Luckily for me when I arrived at the post office they had not yet closed, but you could see in the postmaster's vexation at my arrival, for it was five minutes to closing and I'm sure she wanted to rush home, slip out of those bland blue trousers and snuggle up with a few pallets of fried dough on the floor near the fireside. Soon you wouldn't be able to tell what was flesh and what was dough. They'd blend into one indistinguishable mass, cooking in front of the flames emitted by the fireplace, turning flaky brown and breaking away like cigarette ash. I shivered at the image and I tried to shake it out of my head to no avail. The postmaster didn't greet me, but snarled with one nostril flailing open like a skylight. I walked to the counter and apprehended a writing utensil. I took the journal from my pocket and opened to the cover page. There I committed pen to paper and wrote, "*Penelope. As if my living will, I leave to you this journal, containing all the premature and infantile thoughts of a man first adjusting to the passion within*

him. I hope this will provide you some solace and some peace. One day, if you gather up enough moxie, I shall see you in Italy, but until then, something to remember me by. – H.M.” I thought it was rather cheeky, but the truth of it was, I was cheeky. A joke that was tongue in cheek tickled my fancy better than a clever pun or Chaplin and his Tramp. I was always doing things like mailing old journals to girlfriends. I do not know what possessed me to do these sorts of things, perhaps it was my narcissism, my incredible desire to be longed for, even by women I had no real feelings towards. Penelope had labeled me narcissistic, but I never felt any correlation to Narcissus. As Greek mythological figures went, I felt I was more like Achilles. Like him I only had one weakness, his heel gave him trouble, while my weakness was a vulnerable heart, otherwise I was impervious. I’m sure Max considered me neither, she probably thought of me as Hades and she’d know, her and her blue flame, but with everyone’s view of me, some vile, some revered, I dropped the journal into the slender mouth of the mailbox and listened to the soft sound of the package hitting the other letters, and I hoped most of them were written out of love.

*from the private journal of
Homer C. Miller*

August 12th, 1928

I am sick with words. Trepidation fills the tub I soak in. I tremble as I hold this pen; I struggle not to unload myself with lava of the heart and bile of the mind. I am not a writer and don’t claim to be, but I feel the nagging need to commit my thoughts to paper, otherwise I am liable to die, here among my things... If there is any complaint you can make about me, it’s that I am overdramatic...but here I am making excuses for myself to myself, writing in circles to an invisible audience, explaining what could never be understood. I am feeling a heavy heart at the moment, a heart not felt since the departure of Edith. I haven’t felt the yearning for love in some time and I’m worried that the virus has mutated and returned to infiltrate my body once more. It is either that or I am a born artist without means; I am suffering from the quiet illness of the inability to unburden myself. It is like there is a ferocious lion inside my heart and he keeps scratching through the bloody red curtain, but I pretend he is not there.

Today I followed the sudden urge to exercise. I did seven pull-ups, fifteen sit-ups, fifty jumping-jacks and twelve push-ups until my arms gave out and I lay on the floor like a dying fish. I undressed and examined my nude body in the mirror. What a miserable site it was. I somehow figured my little amount of exercise would erase any blemishes on my person, but the whole hot mess was standing before me, my cock and balls hanging down, a cursed, foul thing. I’m lean, almost boney, but I have a little belly fat. It hangs above my genitals like an old, decaying awning of a seaside motel. I then stood on one leg, lifted the other leg in the air, bent down and

looked underneath myself. I had never seen myself, or anyone from that angle and it made me think what odd creatures we were, like a featherless mutant bird. How could anyone love *that*? I thought.

The image of her lingers in my memory and I think of her whenever I reach climax. Out of all the grotesque thoughts, the filthy images, when I am about to spill myself, it is into her basin. And somehow she wipes away all the badness from my heart and pets the lion, which tongues her perfume scented wrist.

...and the artists say that doom and darkness are the only passage to creation, but the truth is, I am not sad and I am not desolate. I am happy and full of life. Truth is not weighed in blood or tears; it is weighed solely by the truth provided by the person looking at themselves in the mirror. Joy or dread, whatever your device, as long as it's done violently.

4

The telephone rang and I was off to South America. That's how it seemed to happen once I arrived there, like a whirlwind, as though a tornado had lifted me up and placed me back down in Brazil. In reality, I had taken many preparatory measures before leaving, only to undo them immediately. I had thoroughly packed a bag before emptying it out and throwing away all my clothes. It would do me no good to lug around a massive suitcase through the jungle. If I needed new clothes I'd have Graham buy them for me, I thought. I planned on using him as much as I could, perhaps until we were both broke, sitting alongside each other on a wall in Paris sharing our last bottle of wine with no way home. I felt it was a fair trade, seeing that I was helping to feed his delusions; I was helping create the world in which he and he alone operated, helping to locate a magical and the more-than-likely fictional drug that we both would ultimately end up getting severely twisted on. Truth be told, I felt a bit rotten about the whole thing, allowing him to go on a sinister crusade just so that I could get a free ride to Europe, but that guilt quickly died once I examined myself in the mirror and saw a man bound by nothing. Funnily enough, Graham's phone call didn't come for another two weeks and George had been by to box up the books, so I ran my fingers along the empty, dusty bookshelf, taking a long, hard look at myself and I liked what I saw. There was an animal below that flesh, a fire so hot it would boil any water that was doused on it. I took off my skimmer. The bandage was still wrapped tightly around my head. I tried to remove it, but it sent a tremor of pain through me so intense I almost vomited. It felt as though my skull was free floating pieces of glass hovering above a pool of temporal lava, searing and burning, digging and stabbing into my temples. I took my fingers off the bandage and decided that it would have to see Brazil with me... From my window I could hear the squeal of Graham's 1931 Convertible Cabriolet horn, which sounded like the noise a pig would make if you placed your foot on the back of its neck and pulled on its tail. Graham was very impatient,

honking multiple times, not realizing that this was a symbolic moment for me. The room in which I had been an inhabitant wasn't even recognizable to me anymore. There was no trace of Homer Miller anywhere, just four walls, the feeling of home completely aloof, as distant and cold as a hotel room. It felt like the first step in many to disengaging myself from the life I had become accustomed to. I closed the door behind me, again symbolically sealing off that part of me, as though shoveling dirt atop my own grave. From that footstep onward I would be carving a new path. I began to get a little erection at the thought of it and I even contemplated stopping by the little girl's room down the hall before leaving to finally have a sample of her. She was a college bound filly, put up in her own apartment by her wealthy father. I would always see her bright eyed, roaming the halls, a satchel for her books in tow, taunting me, although she was sixteen, just a hangnail too young. From what I heard she was exceptionally smart, this allowed her to skip her remaining years in high school and venture off into the world of higher education full of horny boys with education being the last thing on their mind. How I envied them. She had breasts that seem to speak to you; her soft nipples pressing up against the fabric of her blouses, the skirts she wore should've been outlawed, for they could make any straight-laced citizen lose their mind. She wore little black boots with red laces and I would have chewed the leather if it meant I could have a whiff of one of her toots. I felt like Lewis Carroll peeping on young Alice, turning his fantasies of molestation into a story of imagination. The irony blistered off its pages, millions of children tumbling down the rabbit hole into the world of a rapist with a thin veil tossed over it, disguised as a turbulent moral. I saluted the bloke for curbing his demons, for suppressing his urges that after all he couldn't help, but then I thought, perhaps I had too much sympathy for the sexually deranged. I was always quick to tell myself how they couldn't help it, how it was their spoiled mind puppeteering the rest of their body. In all honesty, I related to them a bit, for I had to fight urges myself, something which I believe every man at their core suffers through, but would never admit. Looking upon that young girl at the end of the hall became a habit; I'd step outside to get my newspaper, secretly hoping that she'd skip by so I could catch a glance and her firm, young legs. If she only knew the thoughts I harbored for her, how'd she call her father and beg to relocate, the boys in blue coming to pay me a visit. They didn't take kindly to perverts in prison. I wouldn't go as far to say I was a predator, not by a long shot, I was able to control myself just fine, and we smiled politely, not a trace of awkwardness anywhere. It was not the outward, wide smile of a pervert, but the concealed grin of a friendly neighbor. She was just once piece of tail that I became comfortable with not having, that's all. It was just a matter of saying to yourself, "she's off limits." Once you made yourself aware of the consequences, the choice was simple. I'd imagine that the majority of sexual deviancy was prevented simply by the man realizing the consequences and figuring it wasn't worth it. On the other hand, if there were no consequences, if there were no laws put in place to prevent such atrocities, I believe every man would be a molester in some fashion or another. I had resulted in the knowledge that if a

hole was moist enough, a man would stick his prick into it. Moisture was the defining factor, why the human race continued to exist year after year. All that separated men from dogs was the ability to understand consequences, it wasn't even the fear of guilt, or some moral restraint, just society's laws which kept everyone at bay, from walking on all fours and spreading our disease, injecting our life force into an unwilling host. Consequence was the only screen between man and monster, I was sure of it.

Graham was still pushing down on the horn when I approached the car.

"What took you so damn long?" He wanted to know.

"I was saying goodbye."

"To whom?"

"My life." I said.

"That's right! Kiss it goodbye, old friend. A whole new world awaits us, a brave new world!"

Graham's words excited me. He was good at that, rallying the troupes, heightening the spirits, convincing you of anything. He could have been driving me off to Hell and I would have gone along happily, a smile on my face.

"Aren't you bringing any luggage?" he asked.

"No." I said.

"The man travels light." he said into the air. And that's all the explanation he needed. We hobbled down the road, two expatriates, traders to our own country, heading toward the airfield where we'd board a private, single engine plane that would take us into the heart of Brazil. Then it was only a jaunt through the jungle before arriving in the savage nucleus known as Rio de Janeiro. This is where we would meet Graham's contacts, who would take us by auto to the different parts of Brazil where this ayahuasca was rumored to be found. The plane ride was said to be somewhere near ten hours. That sounded awfully long from where I was sitting, already getting a bit impatient with how long the ride to the airfield was taking. Looking out the passenger side window, I watched the brick road rush past. I began to think how profound it was that the very street I was driving along was connected to Phin's street and Baybrooke's, Thad's too, and also a stranger's on the West coast, the salt from the Pacific Ocean embedded in their pavement. None of us were really too far away from one another, were we? If I followed that road long enough, it was possible that I would end up on anyone of your doorsteps, or my greatest enemy's or my greatest friend's. If I had the time, I could visit every household in America if I truly wanted to, but sadly no auto was fast enough for that trip. It astonished me how massive our planet was. It certainly didn't seem that big when standing on its surface, surrounded by skyscrapers, and the only thing that concerned me about our trip was whether or not I would be able to stay of fit mind for the entire flight. I feared that I would crack up after the seventh hour, rattling like a monkey clashing cymbals, becoming disillusioned with the entire

trip and settling for any mass of land that happen to be below. As strong as my convictions were, they could easily be transmuted and compromised. That was a fact no man wanted to confess. Their passions were much easier to swallow than they lead you to believe. In order for a passion to stay lively, it had to be fueled. If that were a false statement then there would many more happy people in the world, because their passions would overcome their better judgment and they'd forfeit what was easy to do what was meaningful to them. Instead of insurance salesmen with a gluttonous amount of rugrats, there would be ballplayers and painters with the decency to forge their dreams into reality or die trying. Men's weakness had a fierce control over them and their strength, which they were so proud of, was comparable to a dandelion in the midst of a hurricane when faced with that same weakness. It was when men reverted back to boyhood, peeing in their long johns, crying for their mommies. They could go through war, through heartbreak, but it was no comparison to their personal weakness whose only antidote was ignorance. To know it was to fear it, so I chose to disregard the length of the flight and the foreboding claustrophobia I was sure I'd experience, and concentrate on the positive aspects, like the fact that I had never been on a plane before. Ever since going to the movie house and seeing Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* I wanted to set foot on an aircraft, though the film also succeeded in painting a nice yellow stripe down my backside, as well. To think I would be walking among the clouds in a machine that man had built was both a magnificent and harrowing proposition. I had tried to convince Graham to sail to Brazil by boat, but he wasn't too keen on being at the mercy of the ocean, a friendless and foreign graveyard- for all intents and purposes another planet. He also said that it'd take weeks to do what a plane accomplished in mere hours and he couldn't live with that kind of inadequacy. Thankfully he brought along a chess board to pass some of these hours, entrenching us in tactical thought, somehow distracting me from the cramped space of the small specialty plane which we were now hovering in, twenty-six thousand feet in the air.

Graham was a master chess player, something I aspired to be, but I never had the opportunity to play anyone other than him and there was only so much Graham was willing to teach me before the student became the master and god forbid I win one or two matches. We had let games go on for days, Graham leaving the chessboard in my apartment, memorizing all his moves so I couldn't cheat, which I most definitely would have if he hadn't the memory of an elephant. I'd sit up all night and examine the board, admire Graham's last cutthroat move, ponder over the complexity of the game and marvel at what a superb analogy for life it was. Chess, in comparison to all other games, is the most superb example of how life operates, the path it subconsciously follows, except without the messiness and dramatics, of course. If you could take a rag to the world and wipe away all the filth, what would be left was chess; a battle of wits, strategic, beautiful, slow, methodical, but equipped with a final deathblow, just as life, collapsing the King and burying him in his checker print tuxedo. What was even more astounding was a

fact that seemed to take on a universal significance, the fact that chess and life intertwined in such a way as to imbed itself into our very fabric. Inside the male jism there are individual sperm, little suicidal tadpoles which crash themselves with all their hot, white force into the female egg, and in this process only one sperm continues forth, creating with the egg sixty-four single cells. There also happens to be sixty-four spaces on a chess board, each square representing its cell counterpart, its twin, its lover, and thus chess equaled life in a singular and poetic way. However, chess is also an example of war, two armies squaring off on a battlefield, and if you were honest with yourself, as phony as it sounded, you understood that life *was* war, existing in an unspeakably violent universe, a constant battle for power, stature, wealth, love, health and immortality. People were unable to except defeat; they were unable to except death. If someone offered them a serum which provided everlasting life they would guzzle it down greedily without a single thought as to what torture immortality must truly be. Doctors searched for the cure for cancer, but they'd never find it. Cancer was just another moniker for death, a natural thinning of the herd. After all, if we cured cancer and if we cured death, there wouldn't be enough food to go around, millions would starve, and not in the tucked away jungles of Africa, but in front us, at the newsstand in Manhattan, places we couldn't pretend didn't exist. People were quick to condemn cancer or war, but I thought perhaps they had a purpose beyond mortal comprehension. At first glance war was absurd, never warranted, just stupid men killing other stupid men over imaginary lines on imaginary maps, but then I saw the clue, and the camera of my mind pulled focus, it was right in front of me the entire time: the killing of stupid men. That was the solution to this entire mess. If flawed, ignorant, bigoted, violent, selfish, stupid men did not die in battle they would live to give birth to flawed, ignorant, bigoted, violent, selfish, and stupid children. Brainless child after brainless child would immerge from the loins of equally dimwitted women, and if cancer did not run amuck we would be stranded in an evolutionary standstill, as healthy as one another, as sick, as fit, as unfit, nothing distinguishing us, everything covered in a blanket of grey uncertainty. Despite what you may have heard, weak people were just as important to the human race as strong people. We needed the weak to experiment on, to tell us what the human body could and could not withstand, and cancer was just one of those experiments. I still wasn't convinced that there was absolute evil or absolute good in this world, but varying degrees of each and cancer suited this hypothesis perfectly. Cancer, in the traditional sense was never *good*, no one considered the positives in other words, but in an abstract logic, their disease fed a starving child or allowed someone to be born. That was the balance of things, the dubious pendulum we all clung to, not out of choice, but out of necessity. The one thing I was sure of was, we were all interconnected, complete strangers as important to one another as a mother to her newborn, because inside all of us the main ingredient was the same, it was the common element that made up our very existence. To refute that was to be a misanthrope and a complete hypocrite, for whether you approved of it or not, you clung to that pendulum like the

rest up us, carrying the weight of the beams which held up the world... Of course, we'd most likely be the cause of the world's destruction, as well, but at least we'd do it together, as a people, dismantling the machine, passing down the parts, a sense of unity in the demolition. There was one thing that could not be disemboweled, and that was the intangible definition of self, how in being exclusionary it became encompassing of all humanity. The desire to be unique unified us all. Now, the individual had no purpose, this is true. If you picked out a person at random, they could die and everything would remain completely unaffected, but as a concept, each death was nibbling away from the glorious invention of people, chipping away from what we stood for. What we stood for? I couldn't say, but it didn't matter, as long as there was the acknowledgement that we stood for *something*. I really didn't understand it, I'm not sure anyone could, it was just a veiled drapery which hung morosely like a storefront canopy... How awful people could be at times, how nasty, how seemingly evil, but then how warm they could be, how loving, how understanding. The human race was a set of conjoined twins, a Siamese Cain and Abel, the evil blood of one mixing with the good blood of the other, and to separate them was to condemn them. They needed one another in order to survive, to stay somewhere between good and evil, creating a fault line for the rest of humanity to stand. That's why I wouldn't give up the hope of centrality, why I refused to believe in such extremes and why I didn't necessarily wish the banishment of evil. There needed to be one for the other exist, for if the entire world was wicked, we wouldn't know the difference, we would just be engulfed in darkness, our eyes like a bat's, adjusted, appeased, unaware. And with too much light we'd go blind, like staring into the sun, without choice to blink, ending up just as lost in the dark.

I happened to know that Graham had a rather bleak view of existence. He would continue on with hour-long harangues about the austerity of life, and he did so over our game of chess, but I was too busy sitting in wonderment at the fact that I was finally beginning my journey to listen to him, and even smaller still was I amazed at how I was thousands of feet in the air, sailing through the clouds in a metallic slingshot, doing what took people years to do, riding on boats, becoming ill, even dying, only an outstretched hand rotting to bone left in the direction they were going to mark their journey. It was very difficult to denounce the human race when in an airplane, when their genius was so evident, and you couldn't help but look out of the small window, down upon them and wonder how many people were making love beneath you, or dying or being born. Going through a cloud burst, cutting through them like a swordfish, made it seem as though God was hiding somewhere within the white fog and that if you squinted your eyes you'd be able to make him out, sitting on the edge of a cloud, holding his knees like a child and whimpering at all the trouble that has gone on in his name. Of course, the Angel of Death was somewhere out there as well, taking refuge in the thick mist. A tin can with wings we were, packed in the plane like sardines, a convenient tomb for a watery death or a casket soaring through the sky at ridiculous speeds toward a mountain, serving as metal paper to a human

cigarette, entrapping us and boiling us like grease on a skillet. The pleasure outweighed the fear, and the thought of death lingered there, but never overpowered the sense of freedom that came with flying. The miracle of flight! It was like we were all birds let loose from a dank cage and told to fly away. If Graham was able to free himself from his misery, he would have been able to notice the miracle as well, but he was mired in being a son of a bitch and his tirade about the human race being a failed experiment continued almost through the entire flight.

“A cesspool!” He’d say, “Nothing but a bunch of flea-bitten yellow dogs!” That was his favorite: *flea-bitten yellow dogs!* I’d heard him say it one thousand times, and even adopted it myself from time to time. It was the perfect insult in my eyes, for to simply call a person a dog was to define them accurately, but to call them a dog that has been picked over by something as foul as fleas and even *they* deserted you, no longer deeming you worthy to inhabit added insult to injury, and a coward to boot!

“We take all the gifts given to us and we throw them away! For every beautiful thing there is something ten times uglier. For every opera there is a murder! For every poem there is a suicide! For every painting there is a war! It goes on and on, night after night, this dog and pony show, people pretending to be sophisticated, intelligent and good are actually rotten, dirty, evil creatures put on this earth to pillage its natural resources until it is a smoldering graveyard, a disgusting, eroded watch with both arms broken off and stuck at the time of death! We pretend to create when all we do is destroy! I wish I didn’t have to say *we!* I wish I wasn’t apart of *them!* I wish I was superior to them and their wretched ways, but I’m not, I’m a perpetrator of the very crimes I despise, and one of the most efficient criminals! I have sunken to their level, no, they have dragged me to their level, their influence is poison! Like a leper to healthy flesh! Contagious! Their evil is contagious, I tell you! Everywhere I look is squandered potential! You! Homer!”

This is when he became personal.

“You have the mind of a great artist! And what do you do? You let it go to waste! It sits in that skull of yours like a gelatin mold! You are the personification of what is wrong in the world! Apathy! You have the tools, but not the balls! You can, but you won’t! You refuse to use your gifts like a child throwing a tantrum, banging his feet on the floor, wailing like a wench! You are the problem Mr. Homer Miller! You infect me with your apathy! You’re sucking the world of its blood...with fangs! Like some estranged person of the night! If I had a fraction of the raw talent you had I’d be the next Rembrandt, the next Chopin, you could be the next Mozart, the next Balzac, but instead you choose to wither like an impotent flower, you choose to hold the human race back as a species, hell, you enjoy it, don’t you, you sick bastard! You like all this around you! You see beauty, potential, you think things are fine the way they are, don’t you?”

He paused for me to respond, but not long enough for me to say anything.

“Yes! Why should you do anything to help the world when the world hasn’t done a thing

for you, right?

“Graham, will you put a sock in it!” I finally said.

“Fine, fine! You get so goddamn touchy when the finger is pointed at you!” he responded. “You’re just the best example I can think of. You’re a young man! Perhaps too young for your own good, and yet you have a desire to be old! You want an old man’s wisdom, you think you can cram a lifetime worth of knowledge into a few weeks bumming around Europe, but lessons aren’t learned when they’re sought out, they have to be discovered, sometimes harshly, they must jar you awake to truly sink in, they must shake you to the bone, because if not, if you plan a mistake, it is just that- a mistake, one you cannot take back and one you cannot learn from, and those are the mistakes that over time fossilize into regrets...”

Once again I found myself aggravated at the truth in Graham’s words. He said things I believed I knew, and yet continued to disobey. What struck me the most out of what Graham said was that I was perhaps too young for my own good and that I desired to be old. I had never thought about it in such a way, but I think there was some truth to it. I had noticed that this was also true for many young people. We seemed to be split up into two groups, the people that relished in youth, couldn’t see beyond its fences, considered their school years to be their best, preparing the hit their peak at the age of eighteen, and then there were those of us that had this strong desire to be old, to know everything before we learned it for ourselves, and this desire dictated our actions. Many people no longer did things because they wanted to do them, but because they fit into a structured agenda of what it meant to be mature or dignified. There was a great loss of the individual desire to do much of anything; there was always an ulterior motive, a hidden meaning, a secret yearning to be anything but what they were. I didn’t know diddly-squat about life. I liked to pretend I did, give my hypothesis on the great big mess, and that is why my sinister smiles infuriated Graham even more when he’d glance at me midway through his rant, because while he unraveled earth with the ease of a string around the cork of a baseball, I was just glad to be able to listen to him, that my ears heard and my eyes saw, that my nose smelled, and my tongue tasted, that I was a part of the catastrophe, affecting it or not. That was the simple pleasure that most people missed out on, the thing that united us all, the fact that the tickets had been bought, the train had pulled out of the station and we were all along for the ride, sticking out heads out of the windows and screaming to our past at the tops of our lungs, *Goodbye! Farewell! Arrivederci! Au revoir! Auf Wiedersehen! Good riddance!*

5

We landed somewhere around midnight and found the city to still be alive. Rio de Janeiro was fermenting with noise and commotion, the vibration of far off music playing and the sound of one barking dog. It stood to differentiate the sullen streets of America where things closed down at sunset and everything resumed in silent prayer. Things were going on here, they were

happening under the inspection of moonlight. Graham offered to buy the flight crew a round of drinks to celebrate their successful landing of which Graham was eternally grateful. I knew he'd never admit it, but I think flying frightened him, for I could see him trembling as we boarded the plane and the calm that came over him as soon as we touched down. I also think part of his sour disposition during the flight had something to do with his fear, for as we headed toward the bar he was all sarcastic quips and jokes, not a single trace of pessimism, not a ounce of hatred for our brethren. I wasn't complaining of course, I was glad to be rid of Graham's dark side and even more glad to be trudging through unknown territory where something magnificent or something vile could be right around each corner. It was a long walk in the lukewarm night and I was beginning to wonder how much further it was to the bar when we finally arrived. It was a rundown little place, which only added to its charm. I didn't want anything new, fresh and clean, I wanted to see things broken down, used, with a bit of history in its face. America had just undergone a make-over after the war, and only now began to wilt during our tough economic times, so I wanted a place with history, a place whose culture bled from cracks of their sidewalks. The bar itself was darkly lit and smelled strongly of food I was sure I had never tasted. It was called *Café Dumont* and was to be the meeting place of Graham and his connections Juan and Monray, which Graham telephoned shortly after we ordered the first round. He told me they would be down to meet us in a little while and to drink up, enjoy myself. It was obvious that I did not need the aid of alcohol to enjoy myself, in fact I felt rather stupid for being so excited. I desired to have a cool exterior, but I was jittering like a goddamn fool. The café itself, apart from being dark was best described as being moody. Only small flames from candles lit the room and they burned inside little glass holders which were a faded orange color. There were a few strings of lights decorating the place, little golden bulbs connected by a cord mounted on the awnings out front and they emitted a glow which was both soothing and chaotic, combing with the light of the full moon to cast a pale light that filled the café. There was a band in the corner of the room, all standing on a small stage, struggling not to bump into each other, and their music fit the atmosphere perfectly, floating above the tables and planting itself inside your ear as delicately as a mother kissing her child's boo-boo. What I did not know then and would later find out was that the little hodge-podge band was led by none other than a young Ary Barroso, and little did he know, I'm sure, he shared air with none other than Homer Miller, the greatest undiscovered nobody the world had ever known.

Graham and I ordered more drinks. The barmaid was speaking a strange language.

"Portuguese." Graham said.

It was such a sexy language, fluid, came from her lips as if we had busted them open and the words came gushing out. I couldn't help but muse how languages, dialects, slangs were all different, but there was a universal language and that was the passionate grunt during love making. The pig-like grunt that crossed all language barriers and was known by every ear, the

powerful eruption of noise from deep within, swelling the neck veins, gaping the mouth, closing the eyes, almost like an admission of gas, a trigger clutching when the penis thrusts into the vagina like a knife, forcing out and blemished sound, a basic, animal sound. I got a little hard-on thinking about it. My bare penis worked toward the button hole of my trousers parting my urethra like a vacant eye socket. I was hungry with desire, ill with yearning. I was approaching dangerous levels of sexual repentance. I wanted to spill my seed on Brazilian soil; I wanted to plant it deep within the earth. There were beautiful women everywhere; all of them bronze goddesses with arms and legs that defied any rational comprehension of length, as though slippery feelers that reached out and brushed against you from across the room, releasing a scent into the air that derailed all other thought.

“The women here are incredible.” I said to Graham.

He smirked at me.

“Are you going to let me in on it?” I asked.

“What?” he responded.

“Whatever it is you’re not telling me.”

“You just be careful who you take into bed.” he said.

“And why’s that?” I inquired.

“Some of this Brazilian whores are queens.”

“Queens?”

“Men dressed as women.”

Our eyes met.

“Pretty damn convincing too.” he continued.

“Why would they do that?” I asked.

“Because that’s who they are, Homer you repressed fool. They’re women born in the wrong body. Most of them work as prostitutes to save up enough money to make it to America.”

“What’s in America?” I asked, for I knew it wasn’t acceptance.

“A brand new surgery called *gender reassignment*. They make boy parts into girl parts and vice versa.”

“Is that possible?” I asked, sophomorically.

“Apparently so. There isn’t much we *can’t* do these days.”

I sat back in my chair, completely boggled by the concept. Just the idea of a person born into the wrong skin made *me* claustrophobic, let alone those poor souls. It was being born into an eternal tomb made of flesh, like being buried alive, trapped, looking into a mirror every morning and finding a stranger, the sense of self muddied, perhaps never to be found, made impossible by God and nature... And to speak truthfully, I was a bit frightened by the idea of beautiful women walking around with cocks surely larger than my own. What confusion I could potentially find myself in, the horror of sexual doubt, the disconnect between brain and cock that was sure to

ensue, already convoluted and coated in anxiety as it were... The third alien gender had emerged, a cross hybrid of man and woman, baring breasts, lips, bellies, hips, ass, but not the promise land, not the small gully between heaven and paradise. This discovery was like telling me that there was no longer just a sun and moon, but a strange new planet which created dusk and dawn... Fags were a different story, their existence seemed logical to me, but a woman born into a man's body? There seemed to be something spiritual about it, almost existential, like there had been some mix up by the boy's upstairs, sending the wrong soul to the wrong body. Could it be that souls within a body actually belong to someone else? What did that say about souls if they were so acceptable to errors? It made me question whether or not my own soul suited me, or if I had just become accustom to it over many years. And through all my self-loathing, I had a moment of clarity. I felt like an absolute heel, for I realized I characterized a woman, by only the tangible parts I could grope and fondle, not by the inner spirit of the woman, which is what I claimed to be the sexiest part about them... It was all lies, all idealistic hubbub which tarnished at the first mention of transsexuality, a nightmare idea born from apocalyptic fiction. It was the tits and ass I craved, it was the dimply cheeks I wanted to fall between, the nipples I wanted to swirl with my tongue, the moist hole I desire to enter. They might as well have been dead, for the essence of the woman was not of concern to me, just the body... what a superficial dog I was, what a phony bastard... Each woman that passed by our table I now looked upon suspiciously, glancing at their crotches, suspecting what was beneath the cloth. My trance was only broken when Graham's connections arrived. I must have seemed drugged during our introductions, for I now felt like a spy in a sea of operatives, trapped in an inexplicable sexual horror.

Juan was a tall, dark, strapping fellow with shaded eyeglasses worn even though it was night. His oil-like hair was slicked back to his scalp. He wore a thin, sleeveless shirt, letting his muscular arms show. You could tell by looking at his cheek bones that he had seen some things, ugly things no doubt. His nose was permanently snarled as if he always smelled something sour and his eyebrows formed into a unibrow, a long glistening caterpillar atop his face. The grease from his tan skin seeped out of his instinctually as olive oil leaks from fresh bread. I could tell Graham was attracted to him immediately in the way he spoke to him, with a sick, placating tone and abnormal eye movements, as if everything Juan said in his short, hardly audible accent surprised Graham and fascinated him. I wasn't sure if Juan was homosexual, for his shaded bifocals blocked any movement of his eyes, which was usually a dead-giveaway. You could also tell a queer by their hand gestures. Graham had taught me all the tricks on our long flight when chess had lost its luster and there was nothing left to do besides inventing conversations, telling me if you look at a man and he looks back, staring even momentarily, he was more than likely homosexual.

“Is that why you stared at me all evening the first time we met?” I asked him.

“Oh, I thought you were queer for sure. You use your hands like a fag.”

I was quite proud that I could fool Graham, though I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or not.

"And when did you give up hope?" I was curious to know.

"I never give up hope." He said, reaching down and grabbing my crotch. I batted his hand away and we laughed.

"But I knew once I saw you with a woman." He continued. "You were basically drooling over her. I have never met before or since a sexual deviant so unrelenting."

"That was the night I met Max wasn't it?" I already knew the answer to that question, but I had a terrible habit of making other people second my memory.

"Yes, the infamous night when you and Max become *you and Max*." He stopped for a moment and there was a short silence where we both turned our heads to the sky, waiting for the other so say something.

"Do you ever miss the old girl?" Graham finally blurted out.

I thought about it before I answered and I truthfully did not. I began to a bit after Graham asked, but it was one of those superficial moments of melancholy, which hits you like indigestion, the heart sending up a vacant bubble of gas containing the faint smell of the love that inhabited it once upon a time. Max was a good and clever woman, one with a strong heart and true gift. I thought about a painting she had done of me and what kind of arrogance it filled me with while looking at it. She captured the ocean of lust behind my eyes, an impressive feat seeing that she had never unleashed it from me, except maybe for those first few meetings. Thinking about it then, I discovered my dissatisfaction with Max. From the time I met her and until our very sweet ending, Max had not changed. She was exactly the woman I had met and molested that night in the phone booth. It seemed as though she was afraid to change, like she had carved out a persona for herself and felt if she did not abide by it she wouldn't be thought of as the mysterious pale-skinned painter. Her art imprisoned her because she felt in order to do it well she had to live her life a certain way, the way of the artists before her. It was the romantic nonsense shared by so many artists who believe that Van Gogh was just the earless madman, forgetting that he was once a child with naïve aspirations, and he spent many days just working through the gears of everyday life. The romantic notions we have of these people fueled our own lives, but wrongfully so. To be truly true, you had to be a full person, not just a fragment, not just a collection of eccentricities. Real life would always prevail and it was up to history to decide which parts of you to remember and immortalize. I on the other hand was constantly contradicting myself, saying one thing then doing another, believing wholeheartedly and then defecting immediately when something else engulfed me, but that was what brought on the change vital to our development. If one was not in an almost constant state of contradiction then they were not someone I was interested in knowing, because anyone can believe one thing their entire life, but it took guts to abandon what you know and seek out another conviction bound to evaporate just as quickly.

Back at the bar Juan sat perfectly still, raising his arm only to bring his whiskey to his mouth and spoke in small anecdotal remarks, which caused Monray to laugh slightly, revealing the upper right side of his teeth to be missing. Monray was short, stocky, looked to be made from brick. The width of his shoulders looked like a New York City block. Together they seemed to be a comedy duo, but they were barely humorous, cold in guise, reptilian and sleek, conscious of appearing unhinged. Their calculating style made the meeting tense and I did not look forward to spending the next few days with them, especially sifting through the jungle. They could very well kill Graham and me out there among the trees, and no one would be the wiser. Perhaps they'd cut us up and sell our inner organs, or maybe they'd take our genitals as souvenirs, seeing that cocks here were dispensable, just another unwanted organ in the era of sex-change operations, a concept which was still working its way into my thoughts in brutal shoves. Graham bought everyone a last round of drinks, because Juan and Monray were becoming restless with the bar. The Café Dumont was a tourist trap, but I hadn't noticed, because after all I was indeed a tourist and truthfully didn't mind appearing like one. I knew some people, like Graham for instance, that didn't want to seem like a tourist, as if he could plunge into a city with both feet and know all the neat places to go. It was ridiculous, and I knew, as he did, that this stemmed from the base fear of looking foolish. Thankfully I had embraced my foolishness and could enjoy myself, in love and infatuated with everything Juan and Monray considered inconsequential.

We all vacated the Dumont and went further down into the city, which seemed to be located on one giant mountainside. I struggled to walk downhill without breaking into a jog. As we walked the hustle of the people, places, and things gave me a head rush. I felt as Dante must have felt making his way through the levels of Hell, a passenger, witnessing all and yet an outsider, waiting to be condemned, secretly choosing his rung of Hell. Juan and Monray were leading Graham and me, pointing out places and telling their origins, but neither Graham nor I could make out a word of what they were saying. Finally, Juan turned to us and sneered.

"This is the place!" he said.

I was unaware we had a destination, but as it turned out Juan was taking us somewhere special. Graham and I looked toward the sign.

"A fortune teller?" Graham said, "You must be joking Juan."

"I no joke. She the best!" Juan replied.

Jesus Christ on the cross, I thought to myself, sick with pretentious doubt. Of course I didn't believe in such nonsense. People did have intuition, but like all things once money got involved, it became a corrupt enterprise designed to keep the dumb poor.

"There's no such thing, Juan." Graham said.

"Superstition." I said.

Juan shook his head solemnly.

"No!" he said, and then in a quieter voice, "Voodoo."

The way he said it would have convinced you, for it came from his mouth like smoke from the barrel of a gun, twisting into light. Graham looked back at me with an uneasy smirk.

“Let’s humor him.” he said to me.

“Fine by me. I’m game for anything.” I replied.

And we all entered the fortune teller’s through red drapery, which hung from golden rings. A strange music was playing from somewhere inside the building. It sounded a bit like Paul Whiteman’s *Japanese Sandman*, but slowed down and coaxed out, coming from the vents, though my ear couldn’t place the source. The closer we got to the back room the louder the music become and I imaged it was the music played in the Eastern world, played in places they’d never heard of Paul Whiteman, and it combined with the stench of recently blown-out candles to create an atmosphere of strangeness. On the walls were grotesque paintings depicting beheadings and public torturing, women strung up by their feet and decapitated, fields full of slaughtered lambs, the red paint splattered like the blush on an embarrassed child’s face. There were figurines cluttering table tops along the walls, all of them with faces of indifference and obedience. That candle stink now took on a lingering odor of a chalky church stairway, and the cool air blowing in from a broken window seemed to be the cold holy water you dipped your fingers into as a child, before sticking them in your mouth and sucking until the fingertips pruned. We eventually came to a woman sitting behind a table with a crystal ball in front of her. The walk toward her had unnerved me, but now seeing her there, as if some cheap sideshow mockery, I relaxed.

“Welcome Gentlemen.” she said in a put-on voice, which seemed to be a mixture of watered down ingrained Portuguese and a Halloween imitation of a West African princess. We all sat around her table. Juan and Monray had a serious, almost nervous look on their faces as if that glass ball really held their futures. Graham and I looked at each other sideways, doing our best to refrain from busting out in laughter. Here we were, a group of strangers in a room, each one of us searching, some more than others, willing to put stock in nonsense just to have a better understanding of the things around us. What a crowd of desperate fools. Part of me hoped mustard gas leaked into the room, for then at least we’d be out of our misery.

“I am Miss Ursula.” the fortune teller said, looking at Graham and me, then only me. Her eyes fixed with a conniving stillness.

“Miss Ursula comes from Salvador.” Juan said, “The birthplace of Candomblé.” I looked at Graham, unsure of what *Candomblé* meant. Graham leaned forward and in a whisper said, “*Voodoo*.” I sighed and dramatically rolled my eyes.

“Ah, yes. We’ve been told about your powers, Miss Ursula.” I said.

“It appears we have a nonbeliever.” she said to Juan and Monray who nodded their craniums like two bobble-heads, catering to this ridiculous fraud. I suppose it was written all over my face. As much hatred as I was feeling for this woman, my pure lack of feminine contact lead my eyes to wonder to her misshapen breasts and even more so to the wiry black hairs

growing from her lip, which in any other circumstance would have disgusted me, but now were causing my nostrils to snare like a bull preparing to charge. I desperately tried to rid myself of the situation by plunging into my mind, thinking of something else. I did not want to be there at that moment, I would have taken anywhere else. I would have taken my place at my desk beside Baybrooke. I would have taken standing in front of Max sobbing on her knees. I would have taken my first experience with The Angel of Death, Dr. Chin's yellow smile grinning at me. I would have even taken looking into the miserable face of the woman at the taxi stand... An odd feeling of doom was sitting around the table with us. I could not explain it and I could not escape it. I do not know why but I began sensing the intense feeling like I was under scrutiny, and yet no one had spoken... I decided 'to hell with it,' this was the opportunity to challenge my disbelief in mysticism. I wanted to question Miss Ursula about my bizarre abduction into space, perhaps she could shed some light on it, tell me why exactly I was chosen to be yanked from my taxicab and abandoned in intergalactic uncertainty. If there was a reason I wanted to know. I still hadn't spoken a word of it to anyone, besides Phin, and I was a bit nervous to say anything in front of Graham, but at this point I no longer cared how crazy it seemed, for if I could only get a clear answer, if only someone told me that I was mad, then I would be able to put the whole experience behind me. I rolled my lips in on each other to say *Miss*, but I was interrupted before I could speak.

"Then we will have to make a believer out of you." she said, seductively. Perhaps she *was* psychic, perhaps she could sense my raw sexual need, but then again it must have been as evident on me as a strong cologne, leaking from my flesh, making its way to women the way only a sexual vibe could, like the naughty tail of a snake or the innocent floating feather from Cupid's wings.

"Allow me to consult my crystal ball." she continued. What novice attempts to spellbind me, I thought. She continued to look into her ball. We all looked as well. Finally, her face grew grim.

"Here it comes." I said inaudibly to myself. I was expecting something of an eerily similar observation capable of any keen, attentive person. That's how these *fortune tellers* make their money, by general guesses common to any person, perhaps about a loved one. Their living was made from the principle that if someone wants to believe something, they will believe it. If someone wants their fortune to be told, then it was happen, they will unconsciously link these observations to specific moments in their minds, and presto! they are reassured that their life is moving in a direction, that they are not alone, that there is plan, something to look forward to, even if it be terrible, at least they are alive, the universe makes sense, has reason, is full of love and hate, but also rhythm and rhythm was enough. I believe that's why so many people believed in these fortune tellers, it was another way of convincing themselves that there was reason to the world. Any puke, dog, flea, pig, snot, thief, cunt could feel like there was a special place carved

out in heaven for them. I braced myself, confident that this was all a ruse, and that is when Miss Ursula looked up from her crystal ball, a glassy look in her eyes and said,

“You will dead in three days time.”

5 ½

(9) (...mortified, stupefied...hopes dashed like deflating balloons on hot summer days... melting into one another...hearts peeled like potato skins, fried in the afterbirth of animals...(24) young boys with their lives only a few feet in front of them...emerging out of smoke, through purple beads shimmering crystal skulls and wide mouth faith mongers don't lift a finger...music surges instinctually out of the heart, the song of love so suddenly muted...age having a go at youth...cut down in their prime...(1) a flower's stem broken before bloom...anticlimactic waves rolling to child's toes...quiet volcanoes slowly sizzling, lava digested instead of heaved, falling like raindrops to create dime sized plots of land...miniature flags to claim the land...blood spilt upon it...now...living in the shadow of the wings of the Angel of Death and being cooled by their wind...take the hand and follow it to a doorway...clasp tightly the knob and let go...)

6

Upon leaving Miss Ursula's my head was floating three feet above my shoulders. All my better instincts told me it was ludicrous that I would be dead in three days, that there was no way a crystal ball could predict such a thing, that fortunetellers were scam artists and she just wanted to panic me, wanted to suck the enthusiasm from my soul and torture me for a while as some sort of sick joke because I was a tourist. It wasn't out of the question that Juan and Monray had set up the whole thing to have a bit of fun with me. Hell, it wasn't out of the question that Graham was the mastermind behind it all, playing dumb when we first arrived to the shanty. It was very much like Graham to telephone Juan and tell him to arrange a prank that would plague me almost to the point of madness. Despite knowing all this, a deep and unquestionable dread filled me. All my logic and all my rational thinking was thrown directly out the window and I can honestly say I was petrified. It's all well and good to say you did not fear death, but try saying it when you've been given an expiration date.

“You don't believe in any of that nonsense, do you, old man?” Graham said while slapping his hand on my shoulder, purposefully hard to jar me out of my hypnotized state.

“Of course not.” I said.

“Doesn't seem that way. You're as pale as a ghost. Doesn't he look sheepish, fellas?” Juan and Monray nodded in unison.

“I'm sorry for your bad news, Mr. Homer.” Monray said.

“But it's getting late, what you say we talk business.” Juan added.

Sorry? I hadn't lost money on a bad bet or been fired from my job, I had been given a death sentence and no one was acting any stranger than usual, in fact they were ready to move on to the business affairs of Graham's sacred ayahuasca crusade. I felt like shouting, "You can take your damned apology and cram it, you filthy, despicable toad!" I wanted to lunge forward and wrap my boney fingers around his neck and squeeze until he become a dead toad, similar to the one I'd be in a mere seventy-two hours.

It was then happily decided that we'd visit a cantina down the road where we could get a drink and discuss the details of the hunt. My mind would be reeling, as though someone removed the top of my cranium and uncoiled my brains across the floor. My mental well being was inconsequential to Juan and Monray, for they could care less one way or the other if I were alive or dead, because their money to head this wild goose chase was coming from Graham. It was his signature written in blood on the check, not mine, so as long as they got theirs everything was beautiful in paradise. My paradise came to a sudden and permanent halt. I was now incapable of enjoying my surroundings, unable to relish the fact that I was finally free from my own country's borders. How could it be that I was to die now? I thought to myself. I had not done a single thing in my life. I needed more time. Enough! I bawled to myself, enough of this madness! If I were to die, I mustn't consume my last remaining hours with thoughts of it. I had to keep living! What a fool I'll feel like when this is all over and done with, I began to think. I'll never cherish life more than after these three days, but how I'll return to that stinking bitch Miss Ursula and give her a piece of my mind! I hope I die for her sake... Just then when I was imagining laying into Ursula, every obscenity I knew spewing from my jowls, the most stunning beauty all of South America had to offer strolled into the cantina. These were not American woman, worn down, frigid women whose only hope was to become housewives and mothers, no, these were woman who oozed sensuality; it reverberated from them with each sway of their hips, their only hope being to fill that spot missing between their thighs, and not with child, but with the throbbing male member.

I believe I was so taken with this Brazilian angel because she reminded me of an old love of mine and it was always a treat finding an old love's doppelganger, for it's like reliving the experience with the original, getting that last fuck that despite all the hatred you craved. In an odd way it was a form of payback and it whispered to you with moist lips that you had been right all along, and she wasn't so unique, that she was a run-of-the-mill individual with a manufactured soul and even more common looks. This love of mine, Marion, wasn't a particularly sad story; actually it was one of the most ordinary happenings known to men and women. We grew apart slowly and then ended suddenly by her saying nothing and walking out the open door to never be seen again- standard procedure for us so-called evolved creatures. She didn't even have the decency to call me a bastard. I would have understood that. I was a bastard, a terribly rotten bastard, especially to Marion seeing that it was my first real relationship after

Edith had reached into my chest and clutched my heart until it resembled a lump of clay. I was always suspicious of Marion, waiting for the unannounced and unwarranted switch in personality, which seemed to be a reoccurrence between me and women. One day was a beautiful love song; the next was a solemn, cold distance without explanation. Women seemed to get an idea in their head which could not be un-thought and it changed them overnight, extinguishing the once raging fire between us. Perhaps it was something I had said or something I had done, or very possibly something I hadn't done, but whatever the reason women seemed to fall away from me singularly and without cause. But like I said, it wasn't all a mystery, I attributed their leaving to my general lack of interest and my overall coldness toward the female gender after Edith jaded me with her addiction to love. I knew it was unfair of me to condemn people for someone else's cruelty. I should have started anew, breathed air into a lifeless lung and loved like I had never loved before, but that's not how the damaged heart worked. Once it was damaged it lashed out at everyone it could, refusing their warmth and growing an instinct based form of intuition where it predicted the people's eventual and natural coldness, thus refusing to take part in the ruse known as love. Poor Marion, she was a beautiful, charming gal, with a big ol' ass and mind to match. Most women I met were uneducated dullards, but it wasn't their fault, you see, for they were being bred to be attentive wives, like horses were bred to race or dogs to fetch and it didn't take much of a mind to keep a husband happy. In fact it didn't take a mind at all, but a mouth, as long as it remained wet and silent in between bouts of reassuring pep talks and tongue baths of the ego. Marion on the other hand was an intellect, though not quite emerged from the dreadful insecurity which inhibited her from growing her intellect in order to better herself. She resulted in the petty desire to learn trivialities so she could fake her way through conversations and appear intelligent to people at parties and social gatherings. These were the shallow aspirations of almost every person I came into contact with so I was rather numb to it once Marion and I got involved, though it did become one of the principle reasons why I came to hate her. We met in a rather serendipitous way; a way which if looked back on under a magnifying glass would be puzzling to even the most astute detective. In those days the neighborhood boys and I had not yet went our separate ways. To be truthful none of us thought we would go our separate ways, but remain friends forever, perhaps form a posse and rob locomotives, but sadly that's never the case. Anyway, a few towns over a burlesque show was being held at a little nightclub. We were recently all of age and decided to take a day trip by train and see the burlesque show for ourselves. There would be magnificent works of art there, all of them sculpted and painted and written out of flesh. Their corsets would cover just enough to make us salivate, to pull our hair out and to howl like coyotes at a naked moon. My childish, completely inept plan was to seduce and bed one of these women, for surely they'd be older and after Edith I was craving that bumpy skin, those stretch marks, that one grey pubic hair that looked like a piece of silver lost among the grass blades of a hill at night. I had temporarily

quenched this desire for the aged cheese and slept with two other women after Edith, both young girls that didn't know a thing. Take your prick out and they looked at you like you're crazy, with wide, boding eyes. I was a bit arrogant then when it came to the opposite sex and I bragged to the other boys that I had had a woman, a real woman, a whore even, someone who knew just what she was doing, and how could I now settle for the grade school girls, which my dear fellows had been suffering through (how ironic it is that the older you get the younger you want!). But with my feathers cocked, my cronies and I hopped aboard the train and waited for it to depart. Waiting, impatiently, I began to study the faces of those around me. Nothing caught my eye until I saw a beautiful set of eyes through two oval shaped pieces of glass. On the train beside mine, sitting near the window and reading a book was my Marion. The window's shape cut off her chest at the breasts so I just saw a bust, her head lowered, the sun shining through and making her cheek into a peach that I so desperately wanted to bite into. There was that immediate feeling of infatuation that I had felt when first seeing Edith and I would later feel when seeing Max. It was as though a tidal wave crashed into my chest, knocking me backward, somersaulting me through the violent stream and when I broke the water I was in love. Of course, it wasn't love, it was infatuation and they could never be the same thing. I began to study Marion, her bushy eyebrows, her dark eyes whose irises seemed to be fluxing, moving as if some abstract painting had come to life, and her full lips, which slightly parted a diamond shaped hole while intently reading her book. Then, all of a sudden, the train animated itself, the pistons started the pump, the whistle started to blow, the car began to rock back and forth and before I was able to make eye contact with Marion, the train pulled away, moving toward the next city and the burlesque show, which promised to do more than capture our imaginations.

The rest of the train ride was spent in deep daydream, fantasizing about my unknown woman who I was sure I'd never see again. When we finally arrived in town I was in such a daze that my buddies asked if I was feeling all right. "Yes." I assured them and continued on to the nightclub, which was just two blocks over from the train station. The truth of it was I was anything but all right. I had become quite content with being a bloodless bastard and now all those old, familiar feelings experienced with Edith were rising from their graves. I was frightened, I thought I had shaken the notion of love for good, but here it was again, ready to overwhelm me. I also began to feel a touch of nausea, a weird quiver in my gut, the same one I felt when imagining Edith with other men, the same sickly fear which plagued me all my young days. I decided to put this mystery woman out of my mind, to forget her before I knew her, to cast these premature feelings to the lowest part of myself. I put on a strong face and trudged toward the nightclub. This was not a time for sappy sentiments; this was a time for lust! I was going to see women who had no interest in my affection, only my infection. We entered the nightclub just as the announcer took the stage to introduce the ladies. I was feeling a bit better, given my surroundings, and blood unleashed itself from my brain and started to run through my

veins once more. My little caterpillar was crawling again; soon it would wrap itself in a cocoon made of flesh and then emerge as a butterfly. The lights lowered, the music began and out of the mist marched six of the most deliciously buxom beauties those young eyes had ever seen. Their legs kicked, their arms flapped, their behinds struggled to break free, feather boas looked like snakes slithering across the napes of their necks, red ruby bonnets refracting light like miniature supernovas. The boys and I were dogs, transformed in front of the women into swine, oinking and weeing, letting the jism pour from our can-shaped noses. Then, as if a stage door opened directly from Hell, standing in front of me, a part of the deadly six, was Edith. My heart sank to the bottom of my stomach the same as an anchor sinks to the bottom of the ocean, and I could feel it hit, making the most awful sound, a watery *clunk*. Suddenly I became aware of my nausea again and I knew if I did not escape immediately I would vomit on all of the girls' shoes. I quickly covered my face by digging it into my chest as far as it would go and running out of there, bursting through the heavy steel door and into a night as dark and lonesome as the very first night on earth must have been. Not thinking, I began to run. Where was I running? I had no idea. I only knew I needed to get as far away from that nightclub as possible. What if had Edith seen me? How embarrassing that little Homer Miller, now all grown up, couldn't stomach the bloody mistress of Christmas past. I was still a little boy, perhaps smaller than I had been when I first met with Edith in her apartment. Was it possible for a boy to become less of a man? If it was I had done so and now I was running through the streets of a strange town, hot tears running down my face.

I ran for what seemed like an hour, but I ended up at the train station, just a stone's throw away from the nightclub where my pals were no doubt enjoying all that Edith had to offer, the miserable bastards. I stopped to catch my breath, bending down and holding my knees, so out of shape, but when I looked up, seated a few yards away on a bench, appearing just as suddenly as Edith had, my mystery woman from the other train, still drawn in by her book. I composed myself, adjusted the brand new straw skimmer atop my head and strolled over to her, not sure of what to do or say, but feeling an invisible child pushing with all his might against the backs of my legs. When I approached her I allowed my physical presence to make the introduction. She looked up from her book after a few moments and wore a face of immediate annoyance because my fairly tall frame was blocking the light of a lamppost which she was using to see. I smiled, bent down and lifted the book with my fingers. The title emerged out of shadow, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.

"May I sit beside you?" I asked.

She didn't respond, just scooted over. I sat down.

"You know I saw you earlier." I continued.

"You did?" she asked. And those were the first words she spoke to me; thank goodness she had a tongue!

“Yes.” I said, “I saw you through the train window. You were heading west. How is it that you’re here now?”

“Oh, I just like to ride the trains.” she said.

“Back and forth?” I queried.

“Yes, I come here to read. I find the rocking of the train soothing. Sometimes I ride all day. I suppose that sounds silly.”

“On the contrary, I find it rather charming.”

“Oh?”

“Absolutely. It’s very romantic. If I ever become a writer I will use that in of my stories.”

“I’d be flattered.” she said, humoring me.

“I’m Homer Miller by the way.” I reached out my sweaty palm. She took it and sent an electric current through my body.

“Marion.” she replied.

“Lovely name.”

“No lovelier than Beth.” she said.

“No, I suppose not.” I said, “But not uglier than Beth either.”

Her cheeks flushed a bit.

“That’s true.” she said.

“So, where are you headed now?”

“I’m west bound once more. I’m almost finished.”

She closed the book and showed it to me.

“It’s a good one.” I said.

“You’ve read it?” Her voice seemed skeptical; her eyes became almost concerned, ready to be pleasantly surprised. I cleared my throat, straightened my back and clung to my lapels.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...”

Marion let out a little laugh.

“I’m very impressed.” she said.

“Well, those are hard lines to forget.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” She looked down at her lap. Was it possible that our hearts were communicating already? Had my cheap pawning of another’s words worked so well as to have this young maiden in my clutches without an angry word or moment of hesitation? May God damn my silver tongue for using its magic more so for evil than for good.

“Have you read that fellow Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby*?” I inquired.

She shook her head no.

“Well,” I continued, “as it so happens, I’m heading west myself and I’d be more than

happy to tell you all about it en route.”

“I’d like that very much.” she replied.

“Then it’s settled!”

I got up from the bench, went to the small window, emitting a soft, yellow light into the navy blue night and bought my return ticket. The train was a bit in the distance, but I was more than content waiting with Marion. Any trace of nausea from my unpleasant run-in with Edith had evaporated. And then the train slowed, decompressing its loud, vicious steam, and pulled into the station, a far cry from earlier that day when I boarded it alone, now Marion and I boarded it as two children must board a Ferris wheel, giddy, optimistic, nervous, but most importantly, together.

Marion and I were very happy together, happier than Max and I ever were, and I can honestly say that Marion was the most convincing mirage of love I’ve ever experienced. I believed it the most with her and when it was good, it was truly good. Our hearts poured into one another’s and we did not think about tomorrow, how one day we’d have to reach within ourselves and return that liquid, both of us trying not to spill the precious juice the same way you’d tip toe with a glass too full of wine. Sometimes after making love we’d tickle one another and laugh like school children. Terrible, sickening things like that were engaged in on a daily basis, reducing me to one of the sorry sons’ a bitches who neatly fold their manhood and place it in a dresser drawer for safe keeping until they’re allowed to resurrect it after the woman had fled from their life, and only then. Marion and I would speak like babies to one another, even the most dull, regular conversation was done in the voice of an infant, how someone would talk to their dog and each time I did this a little part of myself died. It was like your eyes watching your body do something they couldn’t control; my mouth would open and out would come this cutesy little voice followed by the scrunching of your nose and the squinting of your eyes- grown adults walking around the planet looking as though they had just sucked a lemon, talking to one another like children! It was bewildering to think about and even now I feel the slight tug of regret for my actions. Once you show that side of yourself it is difficult to ever be taken seriously again. Anything you did was modified and simplified into temper tantrums, a baby without his rattle. When Marion and I would argue she’d just laugh away all my anger, which only infuriated me more, but a quarrel is no good unless the other person fights back, otherwise you were just suffering from pain and not inflicting any and what was the fun in that? And all of this was because we had been so vulnerable together. I wasn’t an intimidating, confident man; I was a little boy with a splinter, crying to his mommy, shouting to his bedroom wall. She had seen the worst of me and she blew on it like a dandelion, little particles of my pride floating down to earth. And if her laughter did not work she’d open her legs, as though her pussy was some sort of tranquilizer and I’m man enough to admit that I was dog enough to let it work. As soon as that magic archway parted its gates my anger turned to gasoline for a merciless fuck, a truly death

defying act of fornicating. Marion was terribly sexy. She knew how to use her body to get what she wanted and though I resented her for that at the time, I now greatly admire her for it. And not only was Marion sexy, she was also sexual, a key difference. Some of the sexiest women in the world were the most nonsexual people you'd ever hope to meet, both physically and mentally incapable of reaching orgasm. What a hollowed jail cell their lives must be! But Marion embraced her raw, unapologetic sexuality, chiseling away at human evolution, thrusting and fondling her way into history books, and I can honestly say that I learned how to fornicate during my time with Marion. We'd fuck breakfast, lunch and dinner, morning, noon, and night, Christmas, Easter, and straight through Sunday service. We'd fuck on Jewish holidays and the Sabbath. We'd fuck standing up, sitting down, laying flat on the floor or scrunched in a ball, we'd fuck after bad dreams, after good dreams, after fights and after fucking. She abided no schedule, when she felt the soft flame in her panties she had to put it out with my semen. I was at her beck and call; anytime she wanted me she could have me. Max had her to thank for the sexual awakening that I so graciously bestowed upon her, and the sadness of Marion's leaving didn't happen until I had already met and was involved with Max strangely enough. When Marion left one night to see a play and never returned it was not depression I felt, but relief. That was what Edith had instilled in me, the ability to stay detached enough that when the cataclysmic blow came, I was able to survive. I hadn't invested myself enough to be hurt, or so I thought. Some nights lying beside Max, listening to her breath, I'd pretend it was Marion and I'd imagine waking her to fool around, for she was always game directly from the deepest slumber, and I missed our conversations about literature, how I'd ravage her bookshelf every night, reading the same books two and three times. It was very funny how feelings lingered, painless for years until one little thing reminded you of them, and then how they all came back even more powerful than before. I was experiencing that immense feeling in the cantina with Graham, Juan and Monray, looking at Marion's Brazilian duplicate and wondering if I kissed her whether or not I'd taste the same saliva, or if I stuck my nose in her hair whether or not I'd smell the same scent, or if I put my ear to her chest whether or not I'd hear the same heart beat, or if...

7

The cantina was on its last leg. It must have been three or four in the morning and things were closing down. Marion's doppelganger had vanished into the ever quieting street some time before and it was a miracle that my crotch didn't involuntarily lunge after her, independent of the rest of my body. The only people left in the place were the very intoxicated Homer, Graham, Juan and Monray, who talked over the details of the ayahuasca hunt. We'd all meet tomorrow at the airfields where we'd commandeer a vehicle and drive to the outer limits of the city, then through the jungle where Juan and Monray vowed they knew a man capable of concocting this ayahuasca. All we'd have to do is round up ingredients, which were: banisteriopsis cippi, a vine,

and dimethyltryptamine, which could be found in a specific species of shrub of the Psychotria genus. I only know these terms from looking them up after the fact, for I was far too drunk to understand any of Juan's mumbling, and the truth of the matter was, I didn't have the faintest interest in helping Graham find his magical drug. I just had to wait it out long enough so that Graham became disillusioned with stomping around in the wet jungle and then would willingly take me to Italy where I could finally fulfill my prophecy. However, all of this could have been a moot point seeing that I would be dead in three days time. The Brazilian woman distracted me for a moment, and the alcohol aided in keeping those morbid thoughts repressed, but now that the night was at a close, they were all I could see. Any amount of logic I was holding onto when it came to Miss Ursula's legitimacy as a fortune teller was further than my great grandfather's earliest memory. I was in a state of panic and confusion, agitated and foul mouthed, cursing and shouting at Juan and Monray, Graham putting his hand on my leg underneath the table and squeezing, signaling to be quiet, but it would have taken a gag to shut me up. These were the last words of a dying man! Speak now or forever hold your peace! Finally Juan had enough of my theatrics and excused himself and Monray. Once they departed Graham turned to me.

"What the hell is wrong with you? You're making me look like a jerk." he said.

"You are a jerk, and a fool, and a bastard." I retorted.

"That may be, but you're a man who cannot hold his liquor."

"You got me there." I said, letting out a belch stinking of grain alcohol and cured lamb, which we had ordered to snack on when I realized I was profoundly hungry and had not eaten since before leaving the States.

"I've never seen you so drunk. What's gotten into you? Wait, don't answer that. I already know. You don't truly believe that loon with the crystal ball, do you?"

It was very easy for him to say, for he was not the one being told that the life he loved so much was reaching its inevitable end fifty years too soon.

"I don't know." I said, and it felt good to speak such an honest phrase. I rarely was so honest, even with myself. I was quicker to admit fear than I was the fact that I didn't know something. Graham patted me on the back.

"Why don't we head to the hotel, old sport? We can get some sleep, clear our heads." I nodded and after paying our sizeable bill we walked out of the cantina stupider man than when we'd walked in.

The night was tepid and there was some moisture in my underarms, though the weather was suitable for any person who did not have wool for blood. Graham and I started to walk down the small, curved roads toward the hotel. If Graham were to vanish then I'd be left with absolutely no clue where I was or how to return to the cantina, which was a useless landmark seeing that I had no idea where the airfields were located and no money to my name of any kind. In the blink of an eye I would be homeless on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. Knowing this full

well, I stopped Graham and told him I was going to walk around a bit more before going to the hotel.

“You’ll get lost in less than ten paces.” he said.

“What’s the name of the hotel you son of a bitch?” I demanded.

“*The Beau Rivage!*” he shouted, for I was already ten paces away and completely lost. I was too drunk to care about such matters and it felt good to be lost. After all, that’s what this trip was for. I wandered for a while, trying to sober up, but nowhere near, passing darkened markets and storefronts. How quaint Rio was at night. I could hear the commotion of a bar off in the distance, but otherwise I was completely alone with South America, and what a lover she’d make. Eventually I found myself at the peak of a large paved hill with a road that led to what seemed like an eternal black void. The road itself was crooked, with little side streets jetting out on either side, as though a massive spine from some mythical creature. I sat down on my backside; my knees pulled close to my body and observed the town below me. To my left was what looked like little dominos, all packed together in a box. They were people’s homes, like matchstick houses, and I imagined all the faces of the strangers within those homes, sleeping beside one another, completely bored with this city, which to me embodied freedom. To my right was a mountain overlooking the city, atop it a massive monument of Jesus Christ. His arms were spread as if to welcome a warm embrace, whispering a promise of acceptance that his followers had never fulfilled. I had heard of the statue’s glory, but seeing it with my own two eyes made a faithless man speechless. Its immaculate soapstone reflected the full moon’s light and it washed over me in such a way as to suggest that it was deliberate. I looked at him, studied his face, and then I looked beyond him at an insufferable world full of hate and misery and pain. I then spoke to him and said in a nearly inaudible voice, “*Why don’t you do something?*” ...If I had one wish it would be to abolish all religion, every speck of faith, every trace of God, I would wipe the slate clean of any form of belief, I would promote skepticism and doubt, logic and practicality. There would be no more burnings at the stake, no more sacrificial suicides, no more hateful murders, no more blood spilt in the name of God. I would sacrifice the solace of any number of old ladies on their death beds; I’d forgo the comfort of every person on this planet, because there has been no greater abominated, no greater travesty than religion. I often wondered how human beings could corrupt the words of Jesus so grotesquely, so vilely. Love everyone and forgive everyone, those were the teachings, and yet people still believed the best way to uphold those teachings was to kill. Peace enforced by death, what a concept, what a sickening disease we were to this planet, what a curse. I looked up toward the monument, *Jesus the Redeemer*, the disappointment in his eyes too much for me to bear, and I began to weep. Alone on a hilltop in Brazil, I cried at its beauty and its sadness, irrevocably lost.

As it turned out the eternal black void at the bottom of the mystical creature’s spine was not an eternal black void at all, but the ocean, though I wouldn’t be too far off in describing the

ocean as eternal. I never quite understood people's fascination with that big watery tomb or their uncontrollable need to swim in it. It was the world's largest toilet, home to thousands of different species of shit, and what's worse, the final resting place for countless captains, sailors, pirates and fisherman from all over the world. Would I swim in the ocean? Well, that's like asking would I stroll through a graveyard if it were made of quicksand. No, I would not. I enjoyed my feet on the ground, firmly planted where it was impossible for a shark to mistake them for a sea lion. However, the idea of the ocean's prestige didn't totally elude me. I enjoyed looking out into it, especially at night when you weren't bothered by beachgoers in their black and white striped bathing suits and caps, which made them look like little fat penises, flip-flopping around in artificial webbed feet. There was a solemn quality about the ocean at night, those black waves like devils' tongues, and when I got to the sand I sat down and listened to the noise of the water and peered as far as my eyes would allow out into the wall of darkness where the horizon disappeared and space and earth met in a friendly handshake. I sat for quite a while thinking of anything and everything. I thought about what Baybrooke was up to, if he was brushing his teeth before work, I thought about whether or not Phineas was listening to our French records and crying to himself, I thought about Max and wondered if she had started a new painting, doing one of me and making it honest, I thought about Thaddeus and hoped that he and Mil were happy, that his dogs were winning at the track and that the world kept plenty of sick people for him to help, which of course it always did, and then I thought about myself. I thought about the time I was very young and I thought perhaps my young self would be proud of my older self, for I had truly given life a go, and that's all anyone could expect from themselves. I thought about committing suicide. It would be simple to run into that water and swallow enough of it to do myself in. As it sat now, suicide was my only way of retaining any control over my death, but this thought only lasted a moment, for then I realized that that was always the case. I'd feel just as robbed and just as cheated when I was an old man, lying in bed waiting to die from some unknown assailant or disease. I realized that death was never under one's control, and to make it so was unnatural and the ultimate act of arrogance. If I were to kill myself then on the beach, perhaps I would be depriving myself of meeting a woman and having three more days of passionate lovemaking. So what that my time was up! What difference did it make? I could have just as easily died crossing the street! I began to feel as though a huge burden was being lifted from my shoulders. I needed to remain positive, moving forward, running at full speed and in order to do this I had to no longer think about Miss Ursula's prophecy. I did not and could not care any longer. What I had said before was the truth, I could not waste my remaining life fearing death, and that went for any time, not just those three days which I had thankfully been granted. No, you had to treat death as a future goal, one which needed many preparatory measures to obtain, each championed with your fullest dedication, and those measures were the moments that made up your life. I had sat on the beach long enough! I stood up hastily, brushing the sand from

my trousers and coat sleeves and turned to leave, but when I did, a few yards away was the Brazilian woman from the cantina. She appeared miraculously as if one of those visions of the Virgin Mary you read about. Would there be no end to serendipity of my existence? I thought. When I desired a woman, they seemed to sprout right from the ground like a flower. She wore a sash around her waist and it blew in the soft breeze looking like a matador's cape, and I was her bull charging forward, stupidly, blindly. She gazed toward me, a white shrimp in a ratty suit. A big gust of wind came and blew the skimmer from my head. It fumbled about the beach, stopping then moving, stopping then moving, until halting at her feet. She picked it up before the tide could carry it out to sea. I walked over to her, everything in dead silence except for the relentless waves crashing in and one dying bird squawking underneath the pier.

"Here your hat, sir." she said in a thick, baritone accent.

"Thank you." I said.

"You should get new hat. This one very old."

"You're right, I should."

"All the rim is smashed." she said.

My bandage then caught her eye.

"What happen to your head?"

"I was mugged. Hit with a pipe. All my money gone." I said, poorly imitating her broken English. Her eyes swelled with sympathy.

"That awful. When will you be able to take the bandage off?"

"It's practically falling off all ready." I said.

Now her eyes filled with childlike yearning, a deviant smile on her lips. Her eyes spoke to me that she wanted to help remove the bandage. I felt some anxiety, for I had no idea what shape my head had taken on since the incident with Nina and the Negro at the dancehall, but I nodded for her to go ahead and take it off. She reached her arm up to the side of my head, found a loose piece of bandage and began to unravel. Around and around she went until finally my head was free, liberated and nude. That wind, which was a soft, tranquil breeze a moment ago, transformed into the coldest and most refreshing gust I had ever felt, rushing around my ears as though they were canyons. I ran my fingertips over the wound, still tender, and my hair hurt from being smashed against my scalp for so long, but if that wound could speak it would have shouted *hallelujah!* and sucked in a deep breath of air, exhaling it in the same fashion as cigarette smoke after lovemaking. The Brazilian woman then smiled at me, a full-hearted smile. She took the bandage and let it fall into the tide, which quickly carried it out to sea. I tried to keep an eye on it as it floated away but it soon vanished into the vast ocean.

"Much better." the Brazilian woman said, resuming the stoic pose I found her in, looking off into the water, her chest pushed out as though she was a wooden maiden fixed to the bow of a ship.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she asked.

“Isn’t what beautiful?”

“The ocean.”

My rants about what a cesspool the ocean was would have been vulgar at that particular moment and my infallible truth about the world never seemed to help me get laid, so I relied on my oldest and dearest friend: *the white lie*.

“Yes, it’s beautiful.” I said.

“I saw you earlier tonight.” she said.

“I saw you as well.”

“You were quite drunk.” she said.

I let out an embarrassed laugh.

“You speak English very well.” I said.

“I hope to go to America one day. Are you American?” she asked.

“I am.” I replied.

She closed her eyes and moaned.

“Ahh, what’s it like?”

“America? It’s like any place, I suppose.”

“No, America like no place on earth. Miracles are preformed there.”

“I don’t know about miracles, but America does have a charm to it.”

“I’ve seen pictures of its beauty. Look see.”

She reached into a small fold in her sash and pulled out an old, battered post card featuring a picture of the Rocky Mountains.

“You want to go to the Rocky Mountains?” I asked.

She looked upset by my less than enthusiastic response.

“Yes, they’re so... majestic! What do they say? America, the land of opportunity.”

There was such cheerfulness in her voice that I did not want to spoil her optimism for a place that had lost its luster for me ages ago. Here we were standing on the beaches of Rio de Janerio and all she could think of was the Rocky Mountains. She desired to visit a place that I simply took for granted and that stopped me in my tracks momentarily. America *was* responsible for producing some of the great artists of the world. Hell, we had Mark Twain and that competed with every Michelangelo and Mozart around. I suppose I had been a bit hard on old America, but I guess it just boiled down to the miserable truth that you always want what’s out of reach and ignore the things you already have, countries included.

“What’s your name?” I asked her.

“Miranda.”

“Homer.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Homer.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Miranda.”

I invited her to walk along the beach a bit more and she accepted hesitantly. It was true that it was very late and the sun was due to rise any moment, reaching out from behind the horizon one beam of light at a time, but she willingly confessed to being a nighthawk and staying up till dawn almost every morning, and besides it wasn’t every day that she met an American. We walked more than a mile, leaving hundreds, perhaps thousands of footsteps in pairs of two along the sand. I told her about Graham, though I conveniently left out why we had traveled to Brazil, only saying we had before continuing on to Rome.

“Where are you staying?” she asked, but for the life of me I couldn’t remember the name of the hotel that Graham had shouted out to me.

“I don’t remember.” I said.

“That’s very sorry for you.” she replied.

“I suppose I drank a little more than I am accustomed to.”

Her voice became one of a concerned mother.

“Well, I very well can’t let you sleep on the street. You can come home with me.”

Fate! You snake in the grass! At it again, eh? Well, fine, I’ll play your little game! My lucky streak continued. Miranda would be mine, I was sure of it now. I didn’t even bother asking how a shabby looking fellow like myself could pull in all this ass, because why ask questions when you were on the winning side? Questions were for second place players and people too busy thinking rather than doing. I was a doer, as you can plainly see, never missing an opportunity to plant the seed of life. Marion had described my sex appeal as an unspoken raw vibration that I sent out via the eyeballs without knowing I was doing so, that there was a magnetism, which could neither be explained nor refused. At my current rate, by the time I was dead I’d have an army of children from a thousand different women all over the world, from Singapore to Moscow, from Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine. The globe would become one of my testicles, the other the Sun, and morning would rise with me and night would fall with me and there would never be another lover like Homer C. Miller...

Miranda and I returned to her dwelling, which was taller than it was wide, sandwiched between other houses just like it, salmon colored clay shades on each window and a noisy metal staircase, spiral in design, leading to the second floor. Upon entering she told me to be quiet by placing her finger over her mouth and loudly going *shoosh!* I let out a silent chuckle, for her shoosh was louder than any noise I was making, and once we reached the upstairs she instructed me to tip-toe past many doors on either side of the hallway.

“Everyone’s asleep.” she said.

“Who?” I asked.

“The other girls.” she replied.

Me, still being the naïve boy I was thought perhaps Miranda’s place was a hold-up of sorts for

wayward girls, or something to that effect. The thought never crossed my mind that it was what it was, perhaps it was the drink or the naivety or maybe it was because Miranda certainly didn't seem like the type. In any event, we finally arrived at her room at the end of the hall. The humidity was pouring in through an open hall window, which faced the hill Miranda and I had just climbed. I could smell the odor from my underarms now, taking in a whiff after every hand gesture. I would need to bathe before Miranda and I got into any funny business, despite knowing very well that women who spent their evenings at a cantina and walked along the beach at odd hours of night in this climate would carry with them strange and pungent smells between the legs. Miranda's cunt would probably be laced with grains of sand, feeling to your cock as your father's five o'clock shadow felt to your adolescent cheek, and giving off the foul stench of rotten eggs, but no matter, I would scarf them down happily. The decrepit state of affairs known as the female vagina had no effect on me. I had a strong stomach when it came to their odors and their general lack of cleanliness. Give me black hair bound by grease and the female ejaculate and you might as well have revealed a basted turkey from underneath a silver platter. Other men were sheepish when it came to the stench of lovemaking, but for me it was a stimulant. Sometimes I wouldn't wash my privates for a week, just so I could smell the boy before intercourse and rev myself up that much more. Ah, hell with the bath, I thought to myself. In all likelihood after that night I would never see Miranda again, so why bother going the extra mile? She would have it dirty, or she wouldn't have it at all!

We entered the small room and closed the door behind us.

"All right. Now we can speak." she said in her full, deep voice. Her room was ordinary, plain, and to be honest it reminded me of my own apartment, which disturbed me a bit. There were four walls, a bed, a few furnishings, just as my home had looked. It was terrible finding out that no matter where you went rooms would always be just as suffocating. The four walls were expanding indefinitely and the door was a cruel joke, an illusion that you could leave at any time you pleased. There was no escaping these rooms. They were the free man's jail cell, the human dog cage. The combination of paranoia from the booze and the humidity twisting all my fluids out me as if I were a corkscrew used to open a wine bottle caused me to begin feeling claustrophobic. The room started to shrink, everything getting smaller and smaller until my back was resting flat against the ceiling. Could this be happening? I felt like I was trapped inside a deranged circus funhouse. The lights were flickering; the floor was warping and buckling. I began to question my reality. Where was I? Was I so twisted that I had fabricated this entire evening with Miranda? Was I unconscious somewhere at the mercy of Graham and Juan and Monray? Had I left the States at all? Was I actually in my own room back home, about to wake from this pleasant dream turn nightmare? Dear Jesus, what was going on here? Was this a bad trip on the Angel of Death? Was I still on that distant trolley car? How terrible that would be, but also how wonderful, because then I would have no more death sentence, not now anyway, and

Miss Ursula's fortune would evaporate as quickly as morning smog. Now I was caught between the place of hoping and wishing, hoping I was with Miranda in that room in Brazil and wishing that it was all a silly dream. Just as I thought my heart was going to explode, I was launched back to normalcy at full speed. As my eyes were darting around the ever shrinking room, I noticed there was a Venus Flytrap in a little pot stationed on Miranda's bedside table. I had never seen one before and I knew that this must be reality, for one could not imagine what wasn't planted in him on a previous date. The room restored to normal size, my heart slowed, my mind untangled and my eyes fixed on the flytrap's mouth. It was bulbous and pink, split down the middle, little fang-like thorns along the stem. I then noticed a fly was buzzing about the room. I watched it land in the jaws of the flytrap and be eaten alive.

"Are you feeling all right, Homer?" she asked me.

"Yes, my dear, feeling much better now. Feeling right as rain now."

"Can I get you something?"

"Nothing at all," I said. It was true; I didn't want anything from her except her body, her mind, her heart, and her soul. It wasn't asking much. Now that I was reassured that I was living in the present, certain that none of this was fantasy, my little man below the waste commanded my attention by getting halfway hard and creating a lump in my trousers. I had nearly forgotten about the poor lad. He had been so neglected that I promised myself a good pampering once I returned to the hotel, hopefully with the thoughts of Miranda to fuel me.

"but," I continued, "let me ask you, all those rooms we passed, are they full?"

Now with blood filling my lower half it all began to make sense, why we had to top-toe, why there were so many other doors, and what the identities the other girls were.

"Yes." she replied.

"And who may I ask inhabits them?"

"The other girls."

"Yes, you said that. What do you mean, 'the other girls'?"

"The other Juanitas."

"Juanitas?"

"Prostitutes." she answered.

So it was true, my only recent suspicion was confirmed, what a pitiful Sherlock I would make. All the signs were there clear as day, but I was the first to admit that booze dulled my wits drastically.

"I'm a painted woman, Homer. I thought you knew."

"No, I can honestly say that I did not."

"I'm only doing it so I can save enough money to get to America."

"No need for an explanation. I don't judge people." I said reassuringly, which of course was complete nonsense. I judged people constantly.

“That’s very sweet of you.” she said.

“There was nothing you could tell me that would make me think any less of you. You are my first friend in Rio de Janeiro.”

“I’m happy to hear that, Homer.”

She walked over to me, took me by the hands, signaling for me to sit on the bed. I sat and she sat beside me.

“Don’t worry, it’s free of charge.” she whispered into my mouth before planting her lips on mine. Hers were luscious and wet and her moisture splashed into the cracked, flakey skin of my own, hydrating them in an instant. Her tongue became a torpedo darting inside of my mouth, swirling with the efficiency and grace of a swimmer twirling through water. She licked the backs of my teeth, she prodded the area beneath my tongue, the soft, brain-like area, she flicked the small piece of mouth which hung from the lid, almost making me gag. It was the most intense, passionate and debilitating kiss I had ever experienced. I was unable to move when she finally broke away. My head was spinning with random horny thoughts. I couldn’t decide what I wanted to do with her. Would it be an old-fashioned roll in the hay, or would I change it up, perhaps try out a few perversions which I had been saving up, waiting for the right woman, the right moment?

“Will you excuse me?” she asked.

“Why yes. Take your time, my dear.” I replied, adding “my dear,” because it made me feel like one of those old eastern magicians, the ones with the turbans on their head, topped off with one, giant red jewel. I wanted to mystify Miranda. I wanted to coax her soul out of her, waving my hands like a snake charmer, watching the golden glow of the soul emerging out of her chest and then make love to that. That was my ultimate perversion, the corruption of the soul, or perhaps the purifying of it. I dreamed of elevating sex to the status of baptism. You were born with original perversion and it took the taste of my juices to redeem you, to grant you access to a sexual heaven of my creating. I would try and convert Miranda to my church, and something told me that she would be a devoted follower. I watched her bottom as she glided to the washroom. This was it, my first fuck on foreign soil, what I pined for in my little apartment, haphazardly tossing that silly dart. This was what I suffered for, breaking it off with Max and saying goodbye to my best and dearest friend. And this was what I nearly died for, taking a pipe to the cranium, fidgeting like an idiot in the dark alleyway... As I waited for Miranda to finish up in the toilet, I looked toward her window, which was covered by long flower print curtains, sown from patchy, brown thread. The curtains were slightly parted, opening and closing by the wind outside, and coming through the small crease was the now rising sun. Watching the curtains dance back and forth, letting just a bit of light in made it appear as though I was looking at Heaven from the backstage of a playhouse, peeking out and hearing the audience wildly applauding in white-gloved hands, clutching their playbills for a standing ovation...

I removed my jacket and skimmer, placing it beside the Venus Flytrap on the bedside table, but as I did something startling happened. The Venus Flytrap turned its bloom toward me and began to speak.

“You don’t know what you’re in for.” it said.

Paralyzed with fear I didn’t respond.

“Miranda,” it continued, “she’s not the woman you think she is.”

“She told me she was a prostitute.” I mumbled out of quivering lips.

“That’s not all she is. I suggest you leave here now before she returns.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t.” it criticized, “But listen to what I’m telling you.”

“No, I won’t listen to you. This is impossible. Plants don’t speak.” I said sternly, refusing to take part in this ridiculous conversation any longer.

“But I’m not a plant. I’m your intuition, your conscious.”

“My conscious?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, you know I hate that.”

“But I don’t understand...” I confessed.

“You’ve known there’s been something fishy about this broad all night.”

“Well, there’s something I can’t quite put my finger on.”

“Then get out of here. You know the name of the hotel where Graham is: The Beau Rivage. Sneak out before she returns.”

“I can’t do that. I’m supposed to be going against my better judgment. My better judgment marooned me in America my entire life.”

Before the flytrap could retort Miranda emerged from the bathroom looking as succulent as a rightly seasoned strawberry. I wanted to sink my teeth into her. To hell with what the flytrap said! I was no longer thinking with the head above my waste. My intoxication had reached the point of smooth sailing, everything was beautiful. Miranda came to the bed, my face at her breasts. She then pushed me backward and crawled on top of me. I smoothly turned and flattened her on her back; I was now beside her resting on my shoulder and kissing her neck. I worked downward, reaching her nipples. They were small, brown and pointed, like arrowheads, chewed by thousands of men, I was sure. I took them in my mouth anyway and sucked as though I were a baby receiving milk from his mother. I then proceeded to the southern hemisphere, fingers first, walking past her bellybutton. I slipped my hand into her panties and like touching a hot coal quickly removed it. What I found between her legs was not a cunt, but the flaccid male member.

“What’s wrong?” Miranda asked.

“You’re a...you’re a...”

“A man.” she finished.

“Yes!” I exclaimed.

“Jesus, Homer! I thought that why you came here.”

She moved away from me and covered herself with the bed’s blanket.

“No, I didn’t...” I began. I hadn’t the slightest clue of what to say.

“That’s why I want to go to America.”

I then remembered the surgery Graham had told me about at the Café Dumont and suddenly it all became clear, the deep voice, the wide frame, the prominent jaw, the pointed nipples, the masculine hands. Miranda was a woman trapped in a man’s body, in spite of being a beautiful woman. If it were not for that impromptu discovery, I would have never doubted Miranda’s femininity. She had taken hormones to rid herself of facial hair and injected lard into her lips to make them full. I had been with women with flat chests, so Miranda’s lack of cleavage didn’t send up any red flags. It was the perfect con, although there was never an easy way to erase the rat between all our legs. He kept the world talkative, so he thought it was his right to linger, to latch onto you like a leech and drain you of your blood. My erection became extinct upon discovering Miranda’s true self, but my heart was gushing. She began to cry, turning her face away from me and burying it into a pillow. It became abundantly clear to me that Miranda’s spirit was female and that must have been why I was so strongly attracted to her, because I could sense it streaming out of her pours. What a tragedy her life was, filled with surgeries and disguises trying to reveal the self she felt within. How I loved her for her bravery. I caressed her shoulder softly and she looked back at me, a fresh tear ready to fall from her eye. Three days, I thought to myself and turned out the light...

*from the private journal of
Homer C. Miller*

December 21st, 1930

I was not a complete stranger to sex when Edith parted the red sea between her legs and like Moses asked me to venture through them. I knew enough to fantasize about Edith, to imagine myself doing all sorts of beautiful things to her. I knew too little to realize that beauty hadn’t much to do with sex, the physical act, that is. I am reminded of it now because I have been left only with my fantasies as of late, for all tangible things have run off. A few days ago Marion left me. I am not particularly saddened by this, but it is an adjustment, for I have to figure out what to do with the evening hours. Phineas and I have hardly spoken in months because Marion accounted for all my free time and to be truthful to myself I think he’s rather sore at me. It’s not like Phineas to be sore at me...the world, yes, but not me, his very best friend. The last time we spoke I was a bit hard on him, for I sometimes have trouble controlling my strong personality. I got so used to forcefully giving my opinions to people at parties or at the café that I sometimes forget I don’t have to be so intense all the time. I think that is the one grievance Phin has about

me, because I can see it in his face when I fly off the handle and reprimand him for something silly. He doesn't say anything, which is the dangerous part. He just grumbles and keeps his eyes low like a cowardly dog. I'm afraid he'll one day unleash all his pent up frustrations with me and our friendship will end, all because I'm too stubborn and he's too cowardly.

Anyway, my fantasies have been vivid lately and my dreams consumed with sex, though I'm never able to reach climax in the dream. I imagine that's because I'd explode in real life as well and my conscious and subconscious are playing tug-of-war for control of my impish little member down there. Thus far my conscious has prevailed. The other night's dream was one of the strangest to date. I met a nice young girl with a spacious backside and breasts to match. I was waiting for her to arrive at the tennis court where we agreed to meet. She was terribly late and in the dream I began to think I had been stood up. Wasn't that something? But as I was leaving, there she was, all her graceless flesh bobbling about as she scampered up to me. She was in a bright red outfit, completely inappropriate for tennis. I remember being a bit peeved at her total disregard for our date, but she was now being playful and sexy with her fingers, poking my chest and just sticking her tongue out far enough for me to notice, letting it run along the fronts of her teeth. She began to speak to me as if we had already engaged in sexual intercourse, talking about how wonderful I was and only if she could remember the details. I knew, deep down, that she had mistaken me for someone else, for after meeting her and arranging our date, I departed with Phineas, but there before me was a stunning beauty with all the groundwork finished. I no longer had to buy her a meal, or pretend to listen to her dull stories, I could take her right to bed, because she was under the impression that we had already been there. The dream then quickly jumped, as dreams do, to my apartment and my red vixen and I were already in the throes of lovemaking, yet I could not get a full erection. "What's wrong?" she asked, to which I did not have an answer. I just neatly shrugged, but this girl had seen this sickness in men before and knew of just the cure. She offered me her posterior. She handed it to me as if it were a loaf of bread, as if it were anything other than an intimate body part. However, when I looked down I could see that her anus was slightly agape. I put two fingers on either side of the rim and peering in I could see a mound of soiled, white condoms. That is where my mind ended, I believe, for I awoke in my dark room, alone. What an odd and grotesque dream, I thought, rolling over and suffocating the tiny erection that had sprung up.

I have no clue where ideas like that could've been planted inside my brain, unless the mind is able to create new images and thoughts on its own, and if that were the case what a frightful thing going to bed would become, never knowing what was in store behind those black lids. All the mind would need then is an orifice and it could be a functioning member of society. If it grew a mouth it could run for office. If it grew an asshole it would have enough human form to fornicate with other humans, and I have no doubt there would be a few candidates to do so. I can

see it now, a ripe pink brain rolling down the road shouting political propaganda and winking one sluggish, alien eye at all the boys looking through the outer fence of the schoolyard. It would not take long for the mind to be corrupted by selfish, greedy thoughts, and eventually it would sprout feet and fingers, and wear clothes and drive an automobile, and we wouldn't be able to tell at all that it was at one point just a mind, like our own, completely unaffected by the tragedies of the world and the ugliness of its people. It would succumb to the human need to be loved, to make human connections, shouting to the sky out of its deformed, slimy mouth,
"Love me! Love me! Love me!"

8

It was noon by the time I left Miranda. She had written down directions for me in order to find my way to the Beau Rivage. I followed them exactly as they were written so I wouldn't get lost. It was warm out and the sun was blaring overhead. Rio was boisterous by day, people coming and going every which way, down every alley, up every street, shopping and eating and existing the best they could. When I walked into the hotel Graham was in the lobby talking to two police officers. His arms were folded and his face looked frantic. When he saw me a great wave of relief washed over him and he parted the two officers in order to embrace me.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked.

"It's a long story." I answered.

"Ah, your specialty." he said, smiling from ear to ear. Graham turned back to the police officers.

"Never mind, sirs. This is the chap I was looking for."

The two officers rolled their eyes at having their time wasted and left to resume something equally as stupefying, I'm sure. Graham and I rode the lift to the third floor where our room was located. There was a little man operating the elevator dressed up like a bell hop in a red smock with gold buttons and threading and he had big elephant ears which protruded out two inches from his face. He sat on a stool and never looked or spoke to us, just announced the floor when we arrived there.

"Third floor." he said.

We ignored him and began walking through the hall toward our room, bumping shoulders as each of us subconsciously fought to be one step ahead.

"Jesus Christ, I was worried sick about you. I thought you had been killed for sure." Graham said.

"Not for another two days." I quipped.

"Very good, old man." he said, smirking.

"I have my moments." I said.

"So, what happened to you?" Graham inquired once we got into the room and I sat down

in a corner chair beneath a fan, letting the cool air hit my face and snap my necktie over my shoulder. I was experiencing the odd feeling of wanting to spill my guts about what happened with Miranda to Graham while also wanting to bottle it up inside of me and never speaking of it again. I was perplexed, in conflict with myself, split right down the middle and either side was screaming at one another. What I had done crossed any boundary I had set for myself. I no longer subscribed to mere perversion, I had engaged in a new sexuality completely. I didn't see how I could go on living my life the way I had lived it before.

"Goddamn it, what happened to you?" Graham said again.

I knew if there was a man to confess my deed to, Graham was it. Forget a priest, he'd have me burned at the nearest stake, forget Phineas, he'd try to console me and tell me nothing had changed, but I would know it had. This would change everything between us, it was naïve to think otherwise and my first instinct was to hide, to crawl into a dark corner and brood like a forgotten child... So, this is the torment queers feel when they want to come clean to their families, I thought to myself. There was no incentive except freedom. Keeping your mouth shut meant family, home, love, acceptance. Opening your lips meant fear, hatred, and excommunication, without a place to go, without shelter from the rain, completely friendless. That's why Graham converted to a heterosexual (a shabby one at that) whenever he conducted business. He could have been the smartest man alive, but if he was a fag the world did not care, they only saw what he took to bed with him and they all thought it was something they could catch. I thought I felt differently, but now I wasn't so sure. I had never looked at a man twice, yet I had just come from committing intercourse with one, the body of one, not the soul. Had I contracted the terrible illness? Would I now be given up by my own and turned over to the queer initiative? I felt for the poor lads, especially now that I was one of them, all struggling to emerge out of a primordial pool like the rest of humanity only to have the door closed in their face when they finally made it to the peak of evolution.

"I have a confession to make." I said, so damn ominously that Graham's eyes nearly burst from his head.

"I think I'm queer." I said.

Graham looked at me for a moment, the tension in the room enough to make the bed pillows wince and then he let out an enormous laugh.

"What the hell are you laughing about? This is serious!" I shouted.

"You're not queer, Homer." Graham said before continuing his laughter.

"How the hell do you know?"

Now that I saw what a silly idea it was to Graham for me to be queer I wanted to be queer all the more just to prove him wrong.

"Homer, I know you. When a woman walks by your tongue hangs six inches out of your mouth."

“But I slept with one!” I said.

“With who?” Graham asked.

“With one of those queens you told me about. I didn’t know she was one at first. I spent the whole damn night with her and when I finally found out it was too late.”

I lowered my head in shame, the unsophisticated bigot I was. Graham ceased laughing; he knew I was feeling rotten.

“Homer, just because you sleep with a man, it doesn’t mean you’re queer.”

I looked at him. What he had just said went against everything my mind was telling me. Could it be that he was speaking the truth or was this another one of his tricks to blindsides me at my lowest point? I had never known Graham to be that callous, but it wasn’t a matter of ‘if’ with him; it was a matter of ‘when.’

“I sleep with women all the time. It doesn’t make me straight, does it?” he continued.

“No.” I said, “But why do you sleep with women?”

“Allow me to let you in on something, queer men don’t have anal sex because they particularly enjoy it, they have it because we don’t have a whole lot of options when it comes to orifices. I’m sure if a brand new hole grew from the stomach of a man I’d stick my prick into it.”

“I don’t understand.” I said.

“Add that to the list of the many things you don’t understand.” he said condescendingly.

“Let me ask you a question.”

“Okay.”

“Have you had anal sex with women?”

“Yes.” I said, proudly.

“So what was different about your queen?” Graham asked, very sincerely.

“She was a man.” I replied.

“Right, but the act itself wasn’t queer, just the circumstance.”

Graham could tell I wasn’t quite following him.

“Let me ask you another question.” he said, a bit impatient with me. “Are you attracted to men?”

“No.” I said.

“Were you attracted to your queen once you found out her little secret?”

“Well, yes, I suppose in a way. She was a beautiful person.”

“What did you think about when you were sleeping with her?”

“Max.” I said, involuntarily, without hesitation.

“And if you got up and stuck your prick in the electrical socket, would that mean you were attracted to lightning bolts?”

“No, I guess not.” I replied.

“So, my friend, the only thing you are guilty of is committing the act of sex with a man.

That says nothing about your sexuality. Sex doesn't define you, Homer, you boy, it's the feeling which comes most natural to you. It's when you're capable of loving that person, when they set off that little alarm in your heart and when their appearance is what naturally attracts you to them. Being a queer doesn't mean sleeping with men; it means not being able to live without men, loving them fully as *you* would a woman."

9

What Graham had said was about more than my petty encounters, it was, at its roots, about the essence of man. It was the closest anyone had come to defining the meaning of life, when life certainly did not contain a meaning. It made me feel small and stupid, but most of all it made me feel beautiful and lucky to know him. Homosexuality, and heterosexuality for that matter, was not about whom you made love with, but *why* you made love in the first place. I suppose they called it 'making love' for a reason, one I had lost sight of amidst all the loveless fornicating I had taken part in, and I realized that I had *made love* with Miranda more so than I ever had before with any complete woman. Edith was first love, which in hindsight is hardly a love at all, despite being the most passionate one you'll experience and if I was honest with myself I can admit to not feeling an ounce of genuine love toward Marion, only the unquenchable attraction which carried most physically based relationships through. Max, as you know, was very complex. She was a fixture to me, an object put on a shelf. I loved her in the hollowest sense, because I thought I should. Penelope was the closest thing to real affection, but neither of us would allow one another to cross that line and it left us both teeming with raw emotion. Miranda was the first person whom I commenced the physical act of love when love was most prevalent. I did not sleep with her for myself, for some abstract experience, one I could cheaply cross off a list, or for the base desire to achieve sexual gratification; I did it because I saw in her face the disappointment of her life, the longing to connect with someone, which by her choice in living at that time in the world was impossible. It was a completely selfless fuck, the first I had ever engaged in, and once Graham explained to me in his very particular way that queer was not an act, but a subconscious bequeathing of the sexual identity, I began to feel downright good about what I had done. I felt as if it were an act of charity, but without all the pity that goes along with charitable acts. I had finally done something for someone else with no desire to be repaid. I had gone against my very nature to provide even a moment of understanding for this misplaced soul.

"You better get ready." Graham said, poking his head out of the washroom, shaving cream heavily applied to both his cheeks.

"For what?" I asked.

"We're meeting Juan and Monray at the airfields in thirty minutes."

"Oh, Christ Graham, I've hardly slept at all. Can't you go without me?"

“Are you mad? Why do you think I brought you down here, paid for your plane ticket, bought you every drink you’ve had on Brazilian soil? I did it so I wouldn’t have to be alone with these people.”

“Afraid they might cut you up?” I prodded.

“As a matter of fact I am.” he said.

Just then the room’s telephone began to ring. Graham walked over it, picked up the receiver and put it to his ear, his shaving cream rubbing off on the mouth.

“Yes, connect him.” I heard Graham say. “Juan, how are you?” he continued, then paused and listened.

“I see... Well, we better reschedule... Yes, we’re here at your convenience. Yes, all right, bye bye.” he hung up.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“It was Juan.” he replied, “Said the auto we’re supposed to be picking up is having some engine trouble and we should wait to leave. It would be terrible to be stranded with no way back to town.”

“Perhaps there is a God and he’s begun to listen to my prayers.” I said.

“It’s probably for the better; Juan didn’t care for you very much.” Graham said.

That peaked my interest.

“Oh?”

“Well, who could blame him? After your behavior last night it’s not a surprise. I tried to explain that you were drunk, but once these people make up their mind about you, there’s no persuading them.”

“What a prick!” I said. “Who the hell is he to judge me? He’s lousy bastard and you’re a fool for trusting him.”

I truly believed that. Graham was being a fool by trusting Juan who sent shivers down your spine when he looked at you through those shaded glasses of his. If I had learned anything about life it was that those who seemed villainous usually were. Clichés were a superb judge of character. If you saw a man walking down the street looking as though he wanted to mug you, more than likely he did. Of course this isn’t always the case and at times villains come with a smile, but nine times out of ten a seedy looking bastard was enough for me to consider him as such, and Juan was a seedy looking bastard. I especially wasn’t too fond of him now seeing that he hated me to such an extent, and as much as I hated feeling hatred and considered it the lowest of all human emotions, I enjoyed evoking it in other people. Call me sadistic if you will, but it was the idea of inducing something as passionate as hatred into someone that I got a kick out of. Hatred took more effort than love. You had to fuel your hatred, build it, harbor it and I absolutely relished the concept that all this hard work was being done from someone that I simply did not care about. It showed me that I was doing something forcefully, blind to all else, sacrificing this

individual's personal standard of ethics, and doing it truthfully. You could not stop someone from hating you, so why not look at the silver lining, was my question. Hatred filled the veins of so many people; there was an ocean of hatred pent up behind the eyes of the world's citizens so I saw no use in fighting it. I was positive a good portion of the people I had met hated me with all their black souls, but it didn't bother me any, I slept just as well and ate plentifully, not a single shred of hate in my heart, completely freed of all debilitating vendettas, and dangerous in my indifference.

Graham didn't respond to my claim that he was a fool.

"So I'll just get some shut-eye then?" I asked.

"If you want to sleep the rest of your life away." he replied.

At that point I most certainly did, I wanted to dive into the white cotton bedding and sleep for a thousand years.

"What are you going to do?" I asked Graham.

"I'll probably take in everything Rio has to offer. Be a real tourist. Sure you won't join me?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'll join you this evening."

"Let's say seven-thirty in the lobby?"

"Seven-thirty it is." I said.

"Just a few more days, Homer and we'll be in your beloved Italy."

Graham snapped his suit jacket over his shoulders and looked quite healthy, looked as though he was actually capable of taking in everything Rio had to offer.

"You look sharp." I said.

"Careful, I'll take back all that business about you not being queer."

I looked at him cockeyed and he smiled.

"Farwell for now." he said and walked through the door, closing it behind him. I immediately got undressed and smelling myself decided to take that long overdue bath. I went into the washroom and ran the water. As it blasted through the rusted spigot I became aware of the feeling of heaviness in my chest. For no apparent reason I began to think of Max and what a state of rigor mortis it put me in. I seemed to freeze, the miniature waves of the bath crashing on my chest, the hair like seaweed swaying back and forth, and I stared in what seemed like one continuous yawn of the eyelid at the bathroom wall. As much as you were able to move on from people and situations a bit of their memory always remained with you. It was impossible to completely rid yourself of a person. It was as if they had imprinted themselves in your DNA, and in one regard, they had. Meeting a person affected the outcome of the rest of your life by simply influencing you. A woman's absurdity could make you look at every woman after her in a different light, thus the original woman had commandeered you, changed you, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse, and it made it that much easier for old feelings to resurface

at the most inappropriate times. I knew that one day Max would call on me, write me letter and she'd say something as self-deprecating as, "I don't expect a response from you." just to show me how pathetic she had remained. A woman could hurt you for years, but hurt them once in return and you were the vilest creature to ever walk on two legs. That's how they guilt you into acknowledging them, the timid self-mutilation like a predator who lies still for their prey. Where was your humility when you were twisting my heart through the meat grinder? Where was your remorse when you were straining my intestines as though they were pasta? The thing they didn't realize when composing their pitiable sob stories was that it was those very weaknesses which they thought they masked so well that made them unappealing to me. As much as Edith had destroyed me, I now thank my lucky stars she treated me as she had, for I unknowingly escaped a life of low self-esteem, meager expectations, and lowly goals kept on leashes to starve to death. It became apparent to me that women were inherently flawed creatures, but it wasn't their doing that made them that way, it was nature, bloody, damned nature, as always. Their hormones dictated their actions, not their will. Where men had to fight the outside world, confident and united in themselves, women had to fight internally, their souls were like melting taffy, their bodies craving things, getting fat, betraying them, their vaginas bleeding every month, soiling any number of panties, effecting their moods, making them wretched bitches, then to top it all off children grew inside of them, human beings created within their bellies, punching and kicking inside them. It was no wonder that the female gender was such a cataclysmic mistake. They were only vessels, vessels for men to grow out of. And it was obvious, to me at least, that men were the more efficient gender. I had expressed these ideas to Penelope who called me a misogynist pig. Her defense for the female race was that all wars had been started by men, not women, that males were the gender with the most blood on their hands. Yes, it was true that all the world's wars had been started by men, but that was because women hadn't been given the opportunity to lead. It would only be a matter of time before a war as grisly and gruesome as the crusades broke out when women ruled the world. Violence was the passage into the future, the weak die and the strong move on. It was regrettable, but it was true. Women just liked imagining that they would clear away all the tragedy of existence from behind their bed sheets clothespined to a line in the yard, the sun silhouetting them to a world that simply did not care.

After the bath the pain in my chest subsided (it came and went at its leisure). I crawled into bed, the curtains drawn, the room a muggy grey from the sun's mere presence outside the window and falling asleep almost immediately, I began to dream. What bizarre dreams they were. The first one took place at night. I was walking along a foggy street with streetlamps twinkling like Christmas lights and I was using an umbrella as a walking cane. In the distance, underneath the cone-shaped light of one of the streetlamps, there stood the outline of a hideous creature. This creature was not a creature in the same sense as you or I, but a monster, ten feet tall, arched back with obtruding growths in the shapes of mouths along his spine, and I say *his*

because he was standing nude, completely equipped with male genitalia, or the monster equivalent of male genitalia, whatever it may be called. He turned out of the light to reveal his flesh to be a pale yellow and his veins to be filled with purple blood. His face was humanoid and resembled someone I had seen before, but couldn't remember exactly where or when. I approached him and looked up at his giant stature. His eyes were black orbs and his mouth looked like a misshapen rubber band with no clear geometrical configuration. I turned and continued to walk. He walked beside me.

“Who are you?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. It was the Angel of Death again, but this time he wasn't wearing his menacing cloak. He was naked and exposed, revealing himself to me in such a candid way that I began to feel a genuine emotion toward him. He no longer needed to frighten me for no matter what he did I wouldn't be afraid. Reaching this understanding, I felt as though we had become friends, like his pursuit of me somehow differed from his pursuit of others, and as if he was just a being seeking acceptance same as Miranda or myself in my own way.

“Why do you keep visiting me?” I said to him.

He looked at me and cocked his head like a confused puppy dog. Without telling me forthright, I came to the assumption that I must be one of the few, if not only, people who had completely surrendered myself to death and gave up the useless worrying. He must have admired that about me; perhaps I was the person he had been waiting for all those millennia, someone to just walk beside. I liked to think that things humans took for granted like a late night stroll or simply being in the company of another person were of supreme importance to supernatural beings. I liked to think that despite all their power they craved our dismissible encounters, our shallow interactions because unbeknownst to us those interactions weren't shallow at all, but made up the very fabric of our existence. It made me feel more comfortable knowing that creatures who were weak enough to want things were the leaders of the realm beyond my comprehension. The last thing I wanted was a flawless god. If he were flawless how could he remember to care for us when our problems appeared to be so small and feeble on the cosmic scale? I considered asking The Angel of Death about my sudden and still unexplained journey to outer space from the taxi cab on the way to Phin's, but when I turned around and opened my mouth he was gone and I was left alone in the foggy street, clutching an umbrella.

The second dream began as though I was waking up from the first dream, the old dream within a dream, your mind's way of playing a practical joke on you, and I shot up in bed catching my reflection in the mirror. My reflection was rather standard, nothing out of place. I got up from the bed and walked closer to the mirror. I looked deeply into myself, pressing my nose against the mirror and studying my pupils. There was nothing of any consequence in them. I then backed away and stuck out my tongue as far as it would go. It was deliciously cherry, but a bit dehydrated for the tip was full of white taste buds. An unpleasant and unnerving notion then

stepped out from behind a curtain and introduced itself to me; behind those gooey eyes and that caviler tongue and those modest good-looks was framework made of calcium, as if it was made up from all the glasses of milk I had ever drank, purified and solidified into a ghostly shell of a body. This was when the dream became a violent and irrational nightmare. My dream-self couldn't digest the fact that there was a skull within my face and a skeleton within my body, even though this was common practice for all living people, I just couldn't condone it. To think that something used to horrify small children on Halloween lived beneath my very flesh, that if you were to peel back my layers there would be a bag of bones identical to Graham's bones or Phin's or Baybrooke's. I rushed over to my jacket and took from the pocket a small collapsible knife. Without thinking I jabbed the pointed end into my cheek. The pain was excruciating and blood spurted from the incision the same consistency as teardrops. I then jabbed again before sawing upward leaving behind a serrated, jagged trail. I began to scream from the pain, but I kept cutting, severing the nerves which clung to my cheekbones like grandmothers to a rosary. I was up to my forehead now and I made the right turn at my hairline. The forehead skin sliced easier than the cheek and temple skin and before I knew it I had made it to the other side of my face, bringing the blade downward toward my mouth. I ran the knife beneath my chin and connected the incision, making a lopsided square. It looked like I had been branded, for the cut itself was burgundy red and my face was still pink with blood vessels that had not been drained. I then clinched the loose skin by the eye sockets and both sides of my mouth and yanked it from my head, a terrible ripping noise like a dull butter knife through an orange peel sounded and made my ears send a pain directly through the rest of my body. I shouted as loud as my lungs would allow and I could hear the cracking of my jaw, which had been previously made inaudible by a wall of muscle and hide. I wanted to look into the mirror again and see something different, something new, but when I gazed at myself, I appeared the same as every skeleton I had seen in Thaddeus' medical books, an indistinguishable fossil just as easily broken down by the sands of time...

When I finally did wake I first instinctually reached for my face and was relieved to find that the flesh was still there. Secondly I inspected the room for anything out of the ordinary, because once you experienced a double dream the transition back to reality was a bit nerve-racking and you half expected a giant octopus to reach one of his tentacles into the room and abduct you to another planet. Once I found everything to be normal, quite normal in fact, I relaxed and looked down upon the busy Brazilian street. I had absolutely no idea of the time and I even chuckled when I thought of Graham and I making plans to meet at seven-thirty because he knew as well as I did that I had no way of keeping time without him and his promptly set wristwatch. I'm sure he had realized this soon after leaving and would return to the room to fetch me before launching into the night's activities. Directly after thinking this, I heard Graham's key rattle in the door. I was still standing in front of the window nude, my dong loose from the

humidity and dangling, a dead fish, and my gonads swollen like two ostrich eggs. Graham opened the door and I heard him say something. A female voice responded and before I could duck behind the curtain they entered the room, witnessing the Homer Miller experience free of charge. I took my skimmer from the bedside table and covered my *lewd* areas.

“For Christ’s sake, Homer.” Graham said.

“Oh, don’t cover-up for my sake. I certainly don’t mind.” the woman said sarcastically, yet seductively, holding a cigarette in a black holder between her index and middle finger and exhaling the smoke as though her words were so hot they emitted an after burn. Behind her appeared a debonair fellow in a navy blue fedora hat. He had graying hair, which made him look distinguished, and features that appeared to be carved from the same soapstone as my dear friend Jesus the Redeemer. What a handsome couple they made, approximately in their late thirties, the woman wrapped in an elegant gown shimmering with cream pearls, the man suited to the hilt, nothing too big, nothing too small, but tailored perfectly for his athletic frame. They shuffled into the disheveled room while I scampered to put on clothes.

“This is Blanche and her husband Sid.” Graham said. I reached my hand to Sid and he took it in his supple, moisturized grip. You could always tell a wealthy man by the condition of his skin. If his pours seemed to ooze *crème* when you shook hands, it usually meant there was money in his pockets.

“And this is my young associate, Homer Miller.” Graham continued.

“How do you do?” I asked.

They both nodded their heads with coy smiles painted on their lips.

“So this is the young American you told us about.” Sid said to Graham.

“Indeed.” Graham answered, “Isn’t he adorable?”

“Scrumptious.” Blanche cut in.

Both Blanche and Sid spoke in thick English accents and I immediately felt sorry for them, for the English accent was the hardest drawl to convey passion and sentiment through. It always sounded as though they were lecturing their emotions to you, in cold, calculating wordplay, severely drained of any zeal inspired spontaneity. But Blanche and Sid were anything but cold and I’d soon find out that they had migrated to Brazil from London for reasons similar to my own, an unexplained and irrational desire to explore. I quickly saw that Graham had used his English *background*, if you could even call it that, to weasel his way into the arms of Blanche and Sid, who I’m sure were glad to find a fellow *countryman* in a place as distant and bizarre as Rio.

“Are you folks just visiting here?” I asked.

“We’re permanent vacationers.” Sid quipped, obviously a scholar of witticism.

“We just came for a visit and fell in love with the place.” Blanche mentioned, refilling her cigarette holder with a new fag. She was so mysteriously sexy. Her face looked flushed of all

color, yet it was still charming, humble. I could tell that her body was boney, not to say she was overly skinny, just that her bones didn't sit well inside her body and pushed out like little hilltops. I wasn't immediately taken with her and to be perfectly honest hadn't thought about sex since my encounter with Miranda, which was most definitely a first for me. I was previously convinced that if I didn't think about sex every few seconds that I would simply cease to be, but when something emotional happens it almost becomes depressive to think of sex. Even with Graham's words repeating themselves in my mind part of me still felt anomalous about the whole thing. I knew I was being silly, I knew I should have been rejoicing for finally achieving the sexual middle ground I envied so much, but I couldn't, something inside wouldn't let me. Now Blanche sat, flicking smoke from her mouth like a demonic viper, excreting sexuality and all I could think of was how strange it was for Graham to bring them to the room as he had. It was very much like Graham to meet strangers and turn them into friends in a matter of minutes, but it was strange for him to show me off like a prize pony. I got the uncomfortable feeling that Blanche and Sid were sizing me up for something. They kept raking over me with their eyes and for the first time in my life I felt exposed.

"Why don't we all go out and have a drink?" Graham suggested.

"Splendid idea!" Sid said with gusto.

"Where shall we go?" Blanche asked.

"You're the natives, why don't you choose?" Graham said.

"I know just the place." Sid proclaimed.

"You don't talk too much, do you Homer?" Blanche said.

"Oh, consider yourself lucky," Graham said, "once he gets going, he never shuts up."

How true, as you, the reader knows better than anyone...

"I'm just listening." I said.

"Poor Homer has had quite the visit in Rio." Graham said.

"I'd love to hear every detail." Blanche said, giving me almost embarrassingly lustful eyes, utterly obvious to Sid, who grabbed my jacket and tossed it to me.

"Come on!" he said with such verve that we all looked at him as if he was our leader, our father, our commander and chief, waiting for the next words to spill from his mouth...

"The Rio air is addicting and I need another fix!"

9 1/2

(22) (...centipedes ascending flower stems...grounding guts into stew...the aroma of defeat loiters like stool pigeons spreading wings wide over meadows...the cows cradle low the moon...the radio fizz racket buzzes gloomily near the Christ-child statue in the corner of the barn...Rosemarie keeps glass eyeballs in a jar under the bed...she flicks them into ponds instead of coins and makes dreams instead of wishes...eye for an eye...biblical words spilled as easily as

the blood they caused...violent men living in violent times...a fish gasping for its last breath... somewhere these thoughts must meet...the stars look like roses after midnight...Hydra the serpent snakes through upside down rhinoceros bones...swordfish Cadillacs empty the spit chambers of trumpet players' weapons of choice...sacred ground peeled back the flesh of indigenous earthworms...mud layered clung to boot heels...sacrifices made for self-preservation...I am a man...someone loved me once...the empty chamber of the heart now contains the receipt of tenderness...a father's disappointment echoes in time like God slamming a leather bound book shut...horses that run wildly though burning stables know no fear...envy them and trudge through the thick maw...slaughtering beetles by the thousands...insect genocide occurs beneath our feet...taking a life none the less...)

10

The reckless quadruplet fumbled through the city street, Graham, Blanche, Sid and that's right, you guessed it, me, Homer Miller, the un-baptized American ruffian who was now back to his old self talking away like a clam, removing the flesh from Blanche's ears and using it like chewing gum to blow bubbles with. I told her about the dart and how this whole adventure began, losing my copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*, even about *The Angel of Death* and what a twisted mess it made me. Both she and Sid crackled with laughter like a campfire at all my stories, and my gift with the tongue even had Graham a bit stupefied. It was a long walk to the bar, but none of us seemed to notice because I was keeping everyone so well entertained with my tales of woe, which I managed to make sound less like pitiful confessions and more like courageous tribunals of my heroism and fortitude. The marquee lights painted the sidewalks shades of pink, green and tangerine and we felt like showgirls passing under them, walking sideways, deep in colorful conversation, bumping into mounds of junk which lay waiting to be sold by peddlers and thieves. Finally, we arrived at *A Cabeça Cortada*, which Sid informed us translated to: *The Severed Head*.

"Charming." Graham volunteered.

The Severed Head was soaked in hot, red light and it poured from above through live greenery which was bound to the ceiling in knots. It looked as if Hell would look, for acts of carnal desire were happening everywhere, just the backsides of women visible in the murky room, the cracks in their asses rising in light then disappearing back into darkness with every hump. It stunk with the fetid stench of filthy loins, like blistering leather underneath a bare backside on a summer's day. There was a stage at the front of the room and tables with white cloths surrounding it. We sat down at a middle table with a good view of the stage, because Blanche and Sid insisted. On the table a candle burned, mounted to a metal holder in the shape of a leaf and I watched the flame dance, imagining it to be my spirit. Blanche continued her transfixing stare toward me and now Sid had joined in. He flicked a fountain pen between his

fingers like a baton out of habit. I felt as though the contract for my soul was about to be negotiated and the pen Sid fondled did not contain ink, but the blood of an infant.

“You won’t find a more erotic spot than A Cabeça Cortada.” Sid said.

“And believe me, we’ve looked.” Blanche added.

They went on to explain that A Cabeça Cortada was a den for every kind of sexual deviant you could imagine, which was exciting because my imagination was quite vast. ‘It was a safe haven for degenerates and addicts to the human orgasm,’ they said, and ‘there was no manufacturer better stocked with the purified version of the drug known as lust in all of South America.’

“Graham told us you were quite the liberated chap. We thought this would be the perfect place to spend the evening.” Sid said to me.

“Was I right in telling them so?” Graham asked.

I looked at Graham, choosing my words carefully. I supposed that it was about time I put my money where my mouth was, for I spoke of visiting the underbelly, contested the idea of conformism and relentlessly dreamed of exercising my sexual freedom, and here was the opportunity before me. Something was amiss, the Venus Flytrap in my prefrontal cortex was telling me so, but looking around and seeing the power of lust in action, it wasn’t just my cerebellum that was tingling and I brushed off my anxiety as pure juvenile fright, my mind trying to hang on to its comfortable and content way of thinking.

“Right as always, Graham, my fine fellow!” I said and we all shared a good laugh.

“What do you say we get some drinks to celebrate this meeting of kindred spirits?” Sid purposed.

“I thought you’d never ask.” Graham responded, the drunk he was.

Sid called over the waitress with two fingers. She strutted toward the table as if she were a machine programmed to do so or as if all her aspirations as a child were to take drink orders. She arrived, a statuesque fallen angel. I peeked at her mons to see if we were in fact dealing with a woman. Nothing seemed to suggest otherwise. She leaned over, exposing her bust to me, and listened to the order, which Sid conducted for us all. While doing so he ran those same two fingers along the backs of the waitress’ legs, almost reaching to her plum. I immediately felt like rolling up into a ball and expiring for I was sure that Blanche had seen the blatant act of flirtation, but when I nervously glanced at her, her eyes were still on me, her eyebrows like long dark question marks. She was giving me the look all women gave when they were ready to go to bed. It was a look that pierced through you like a harpoon, completely unmistakable and universal to all women. It was as though females first opened their legs by detour of the face, the eyes, the nose, and the lips, making their cheekbones trashy novels for you to read and enact, showing you a step-by-step tutorial on how to please them, only most men were too careless to notice. Blanche was giving me this look right in front of Sid, burning holes in my eyes with the acidic desire of her stare. How was it that these two could be so flirtatious right in front of each

other? Didn't they get jealous? The entire dynamic was strange to me. They didn't seem to care or even notice each other's disinterest in one another or their bold gestures to others, they just carried on, seemingly happy with one another, like two birds in a nest. It wasn't my place to say anything, of course, I had never married. I had only been given a front row seat to watching one crumble, so I reserved judgment of Sid and Blanche for they welcomed me into their lives with a clarification and sincerity rarely offered.

The drinks arrived and we drank them down quickly. The second round came and again, we inhaled them. When the third round came someone suggested, I don't remember who, that we slow down, otherwise we were liable to drink away the entire night and what a shame it would be not to remember such a memorable night as that one was shaping up to be. That's when the lights lowered and a spotlight appeared on the stage. Music began, slow, methodical sound dispersing through the room like smoke. A girl appeared on the stage. She danced her way into the light, doing what appeared to be a dance of the natives, for her body moved in sporadic bursts and jerked around clumsily.

"You're going to love this!" Sid shouted to me over the music.

The girl was attractive, with a pretty face and long black corkscrew locks. I couldn't make out the color of her eyes because of the spotlight, but I imagined them being green, for green eyes would pop so beautifully against her olive skin. There wasn't much breast to speak of, but her body was still fluxing at the threshold between child and adult. I was only a few years older than her, but those years were crucial to body development and I had grown into a man's figure some time before. The one thing she did have was legs, legs for miles, legs for centuries. They were so perfectly sculpted that I decided if I were ever to become a sculptor they would be the first thing I would sculpt. That was a secret fantasy of mine, to be a sculptor, though I didn't desire any fame or fortune from it. I also wanted to lay the brick of a wall and chop down a tree in true lumberjack fashion, reverting back to creating and destroying, the principals that ran the universe. Perhaps it was the idea of doing something with your hands, or perhaps it was the long forgotten manliness within me trying to escape, but whatever the reason, I had planned to do these things before dying, which by my count was approximately forty-eight hours away.

The girl continued her act for a while, everyone's eyes glued to her and every minute or so you'd hear a random whistle from a man in the audience, but I got the feeling that she was not what everyone was waiting for. I could feel the anticipation in the room, Sid and Blanche leaning in their chairs, eager for something altogether more extraordinary. I looked at Graham who looked back at me just as confused. And then all was revealed, coming into focus with a hasty lucidity... Out walked a little Portuguese man leading a donkey by its nose. Eureka! The crowd went wild! The eruption of applause spooked me and it crashed in like a wave, flooding the entire place with commotion and energy. In hindsight I should have known what was about to take place, but I don't think I wanted to believe it. A giant smile came over the girl's face and she

walked around the donkey, examining it in the same manner a magician would his next trick. What a magician this girl turned out to be, what tricks she'd play on us. The crowd settled down momentarily, everything becoming silent, the tangible anticipation returning to the room like an equalizer. The expectancy in Sid and Blanche seemed to literally pull them forward, for their backs were at a forty-five degree acute angle and their mouths hung agape. They were panting like goddamn dogs. The girl then got down on all fours beneath the donkey. She reached her little hand up and began to massage the donkey's cock, which went from a barely visible lump to a profoundly large membrane, nearing the stage floor. When it descended people cheered adamantly, pure pleasure about their faces. I looked around at the joyous mugs and thought that I surly was in at least one level of Dante's inferno and that Sid and Blanche had been my guides through the dark and dismal forest. How else could it be explained that men and women alike were cheering the lengthening of a beast's cock? I'm ashamed to admit it, but through all my horror, part of me felt like cheering as well. If I were in Dante's inferno, it served me right, for I couldn't look away and I watched as this girl took the donkey's member into her mouth and began committing the act of fellatio. The crowd roared the loudest then! You'd think she had just rescued a child from a well! That she had cured some terrible illness! Sid stood up, giving her a standing ovation, clapping his hands together as if he were a proud parent on his child's graduation day. Then the entire room stood, smacking their hands together, all the while the donkey completely oblivious to the commotion, unable to comprehend the events which were now transpiring. Graham and I stood as well. What a modern marvel! The girl continued to suck, a real pro she was, and as the minutes went on the entire situation became less and less strange. Soon I was assimilated into the atmosphere, morphing into the same devils a moment before I considered sick. I mused that perhaps perversion just needed a little encouragement and with the right support system could blossom to any standard of decrepit foulness. In all my years, which weren't too many, I had never seen anything like what I saw at the Severed Head. I was sure that it happened in the world, humans were capable of anything, but I never imagined that it was considered supreme entertainment, an entire spectacle which garnered such an impassioned crowd, and that I would be seeing it first hand, extinguishing any last trace of sexual wholesomeness I had left...

Now, any logical novelist would end their chapter with the girl performing oral sex on a donkey, because nine times out of ten there couldn't possibly be a more interesting climax, but the truth is, I'm not much of a novelist nor am I logical as either man or inklinger, and above all else, that was not where the evening ended. The spotlight dimmed and everyone turned their heads back to their table mates and if you were to walk in then you'd never suspect such a thing had happened only moments before. It was as if someone suddenly pulled a plug and all the lights of the world went out in one, singular blink. What does one say after witnessing such a thing? Where does the conversation being? Finally my pink muscle had failed me. I hadn't the

faintest idea of what to let fall from my mouth, for be it the wrong thing it could spoil the ambiance like putting a cigarette in a fresh drink. Then, by the grace of God, Sid spoke.

“We’d like to ask you something, Homer.” he said, a bizarre seriousness taking over his voice. I felt like shouting, “*Anything! Just ask me a question and I’ll answer it! Just tell me what to say and I’ll say it!*” but I composed myself and turned my attention toward him, giving him the floor.

“Blanche and I would like to know if you’d be interested in joining us...” he paused, and looked nervously from side to side, “how to be this delicately...in the bedroom?”

“How do you mean?” I asked, playing dumb.

“Well...” Sid began before being interrupted by Blanche,

“We want to know if you’ll participate in a threesome.” she blurted out tactlessly.

“Oh...” I said.

“We’ve been wanting to experiment in this way for some time, you see, but there aren’t many candidates suited for the job around here. Then we met Graham this afternoon and we breached the idea with him and he suggested we meet you.”

“Is that right?” I said, directed toward Graham.

“Oh, I’m too old to be having threesomes with married couples, Homer. Blanche deserves better, a young man, someone to make the experience worthwhile. I couldn’t think of a better man for the job than you. Besides this is the kind of thing you’re always talking about doing. I thought you’d be keen on the idea.” Graham said.

“From what we hear you’re quite capable lover, and of course you and I wouldn’t have sex. Blanche would just take both of us at the same time.” Sid said so calmly that I was waiting for him tell me it was all a joke. We were methodically discussing group sex as though it were a regular conversation about what time they’d like to meet at the cinema. To be honest, I wasn’t all-together shocked by them asking me. I knew there was something brewing between my three cohorts that I wasn’t in on and I was actually relieved that it wasn’t something more serious. I also could imagine how pleased Graham was when he saw the opportunity to get me mixed up in this sort of thing. I was positive that *too old* business was a crock and he just liked putting me in compromising situations. I looked at Blanche, who was fixing yet another cigarette into her holder. Her tongue must have resembled a freshly paved road. I imagined it running along Homer, Jr.

“Is this what you want?” I asked her.

“Homer, we’ve connected with you on a higher level than social formality. We are fruits from the same tree, orchids from the same vine. Yes, this is what I want.” she replied poetically, but coldly through the guise of her English accent.

“And you won’t mind me having sex with your wife? I mean, you won’t you get jealous?” I asked Sid. I thought it was a fair question, but they both let out one of their fits of

laughter, the noise rising up into the smoke filled room and sounding like nickels hitting the basin of a dried-out fountain.

“No, my dear boy. Blanche has been with many other men and I with many women.”

“We’ve just never been three.” Blanche said.

“And we’d like to remedy this with you.” Sid finished, his eyes hopeful, yet anxious that I may be opposed to the idea and lambast them for being such deprave perverts. On the contrary! I was rather flattered and inspired by their proposal! What we were talking about and what Blanche and Sid had just said in particular supported an idea of own, an idea I had thought about countless times but knew society would never let breathe. It was the idea that monogamy was not in our human nature. This was a concept that would surly turn the world upside down, hold it by its ankles and shake loose all its beliefs like they were loose change, simultaneously showing how much they were worth to people when they didn’t suit their needs. Beliefs to the human race were interchangeable, used at their convenience and discarded just as quickly, monogamy included. I was a habitual cheater, a charlatan to the highest degree. I just didn’t see the point in refusing my natural instincts to plant my seed in multiple different hosts. Men were put on this earth to fuck. That was the truth. Our only job was to fornicate, but leave it to the faceless judges of society to go against nature and demonize our God given profession. Some called men *hunters*, but that was just a polite way saying we were careless, heartless fuck machines, scouring wild landscapes looking for bodies to thrash and snatch to devour. The same went for women, only in a lesser form, for motherhood rooted them with sensibilities and filled them with a faithfulness only given to their children. Otherwise they were just as disloyal as men, wanting new and foreign penises inside them, the thrill and adventure of a new man as stimulating as the psychical act itself. This is a gradual realization and before you know romantic love in its true form, a blemish on existence, you consider unfaithfulness as the highest insult, the worst infliction of pain, but as you grow older and get into more affairs you come to realize that to be unfaithful is to be truthful, perhaps not to your partner, but certainly to yourself. It is in our bones, told to us subconsciously and mixed in our blood. I not only condoned women being unfaithful to me, I expected it. I was sure that Max had taken other men into her bed and I did not shed a single tear because after all she was a selfish beast with a hole to fill. We gave ourselves far too much credit. We needed to embrace our innate monstrosity, our complete disregard for other people’s feelings. A person would pass up someone’s soul if it was sitting by itself on a curb, brushing it aside for a reeking orifice without thinking twice, but we continuously pretended that we did not do this, that we did the exact opposite, in fact, priding ourselves falsely on looking for qualities deeper within the person. Why did we lie so habitually? Did it make people feel less shallow? Is that how backward we have become? Diluting ourselves into believing that we cared about their list of good deeds? It seemed like a fruitless game to me, one I never participated in because I was *realistic* about my inadequacies as an earthling. I

wasn't doing anything new by being unfaithful; as a matter of fact I was upholding a long-toothed and well-founded tradition of mankind. What killed me the most, what really made my head spin was we lied to ourselves about people who lied to themselves about what they saw in us. You were a fresh paint job, a decorative outfit, nothing more, and yet we still told ourselves to do right by them, to lie down like a lamb and be sacrificed for a principle that never really existed.

For me it was a liberating truth that monogamy was a façade, it gave me less reason to despise myself, which was what we were taught to do from birth. There were plenty of reasons in the world to scorn yourself, but unfaithfulness shouldn't be among them. Humans would be unfaithful to the moon if it was within our power. We'd go and gawk at another star before losing interest in that one as well, moving on again and again until we'd made an enemy of every shimmering rock in the galaxy... In other words, monogamy was a task to be championed by some other celestial being, not us, because for us monogamy meant sacrifice, it was an endurance test, a finish line placed at the end of your relationship, testing to see who would falter first. I honestly felt a relationship which confronted and accepted this fact would fare much better than one shackled to the pointless rules of engagement set before us by our so-called moral forefathers and I had finally found proof of my theory: Sid and Blanche. They did not pretend to be monogamous creatures; they submitted to their fleshly desires and returned to one another to entwine the veins of their hearts. Wasn't that enough? Did we need to own each other's privates as well? Why was fucking the same person noble? What made solidarity more profound than promiscuity? These were all questions never given a straight answer and if you needed more proof of my hypothesis of innate adulterousness, all you'd need to do is look around in any direction, as far as the eye could see. Unfaithfulness was committed by everyone; a virgin bride eyeing her groom's best man as she walks down the aisle, a married man fantasizing about his waitress while celebrating his sixty-fifth wedding anniversary, a boy imagining someone else as he ejaculates into his new lover or a mother sleeping with the postman. It was though we looked for pain, sought it out by giving ourselves boundaries that were impossible to maintain and then investing all of our trust and contentment into those boundaries. It was enough to make me want to scream or weep or even worse, forfeit my ability to do something memorable. When would all humanity be more like Blanche and Sid? When would the world submit to itself, drop to its knees and be engulfed by the sun? When would people give up the quest for martyrdom and when, oh when, would they be happy?

After accepting Blanche and Sid's offer we shared a few more drinks and with a quiet little buzz going decided to adjourn back to the hotel to see whether or not Sid and I could cross our swords, filling Blanche up with enough imported meat to start a butcher's shop. As we were exiting A Cabeça Cortada I saw a face coming from the other direction, passing through the doorway and being drenched in the incriminating red light. Our eyes met and I unthinkingly

turned away, as if a reflex of my cowardice took hold. It was Miranda and she stopped, reaching out for my shoulder, which I dodged like a snake, losing any spine I might have had to avoid her touch. She called after me, but I ignored her, walking as quickly as I could, never looking back and undoing everything I had done for her the night before. For some reason, I was ashamed to be seen by Miranda, my transsexual lover, especially in the company of Graham, who knew immediately who she was and joined me in ignoring her existence. I wanted to brush her away like a bad dream, I wanted to wish her away like a bad spirit, but most of all I wanted her tongue to shrink and get caught in her throat, just so she'd stop shouting, "*Homer! Homer! Homer!*"

"I think someone's calling after you, Homer." Blanche said, a bit confused and drunk.

"Impossible!" I said, "You are the only people I know in all of Brazil!" I laughed a smug, unconvincing laugh, but it was enough to get Blanche laughing, which in turn made Sid laugh and then our playful drunkenness took care of the rest. Soon the entire event was forgotten by all, except for me, who felt like a rotten, yellow bastard. It would have been kinder of me to act repulsed toward her when I first found out about her manly details, to get up from the bed and vomit on myself like a pig. That way the pain was condensed, part of her day-to-day pain which she had sublimated and tucked away in the darkest regions of her heart. Now I had built her up, lead her to believe that I accepted her, just to shun her like a leaper, to introduce a new kind of pain, to smash everything I had built like a toddler stomping a sand castle, bits of her stuck in my mind like the grains of sand wedged between that fat toddler's toes. Dear god! I disgusted myself! If there was a god he'd never stop crying at his mistake of creating me! He'd never forgive himself for turning a Homer Miller loose on the world... I was walking in a daze along the gutter, Graham, Sid and Blanche scuffling around me like a southern church lady having a spell and shooing a bumble bee away with a fan. I heard my name being called again. I thought it was Miranda chasing after me, getting ready to confront me with the miserable thing I had done to her, but thankfully it was not Miranda, it was Blanche in a high-pitched cockney squeal, "*Homer! Watch out!*" I looked down at my feet and saw that they were in the middle of a rat stampede, being stepped on by vermin as large as Gregor Samsa himself. I hadn't quite noticed it before, but Rio was infested with ham-sized rats with long flesh colored tails and shattered teeth from chewing on bullet casings, and I was now standing atop a river of them. One tried to make its way up my pant leg, but I shook him loose and leapt to the sidewalk, colliding into the Blanche and knocking her to the ground. Any discomfort she might have experienced was thwarted by her drunkenness and she only laughed harder sitting split-kneed on the sidewalk like a trampled daisy. Both Sid and I lunged for her, brought her to her feet and dusted her off.

"Oh, it's so nice having *two* strong men to look after me." she said, slurring her words a bit. I think it was safe to say she was more intoxicated than Sid or I, but that was expected because of her relatively small frame and lack of fat. Sid was a stocky bulldog with plenty of fatty (though never fat) areas for his booze to take refuge in and leave his mind unaffected. I on

the other hand was usually a lightweight, but seeing Miranda sobered me up in a hurry- pour as much liquor as you like on a trembling conscious but it will never get drunk. Sid and I continued to walk holding Blanche's arms while Graham drifted beside us, cut loose from the herd. We were a few blocks away from the hotel and I was thankful for that because Blanche was dead weight. My fingers were wrapped tightly around her arm, and my digits sunk into her soft, cool flesh. The flesh looked like rising dough between my sprawled fingers and I imagined never letting go of her, just allowing our skins to grow together, because at no point had I ever been more thankful for making human contact. The way I had acted at A Cabeça Cortada made me feel undeserving of another's touch, like a cretin with poison in his fingernails, and an unknown cause made me watch to latch onto Blanche forever. Maybe it was the thought that some of her goodness would be transmitted to me, that when we finally did part a morsel of her couldn't escape being imprinted onto my soul and I could live as generously as she had, with love first and foremost in my heart, not just self preservation, which at that point had been my only concern. I spent most of my time disparaging the rest of humanity, but I was the worst one. Even then with all that guilt swimming around me, I was slowly trying to swallow it so I would be able to get a good and stiff hard-on, continuing forth with the threesome, because despite it all I was feeling hornier than ever. My knob was at half-mast and I feared that my arousal did not stem from the fantasy of Blanche, but from the reality of my cruelty to Miranda. Was I so sick to get off on my lack of humanity? This was not Don Quixote. I was not an honorable loon fighting windmills; I was a serpent that belonged in the gutter with those rats...

We made it back to the hotel and rode the lift to our floor, the same despondent operator saying in his same disillusioned voice, "*Third floor.*" What a miserable bastard, I thought to myself. Blanche was now walking on her own and I believe that the long hike from the bar straightened her up some, though her unquenchable libido was now pouring out of her vagina and leaking through her dress. Her hands were quivering and she'd run them over her privates like a cheap hypnotists lulling a sleepwalker, cooing in extreme arousal and purring like a kitten in heat. She was ready. The long awaited sexual experience of two men at the same time was upon her and she literally couldn't contain her excitement. She would fall into me, pressing her back into my chest and her toosh into my crotch, looking upward, nibbling and licking my neck. Her lipstick became smeared and stained my chin scarlet. She would have bitten me if only she could reach, breaking the skin, and lapping up my blood like a vampire. Her distance from my jugular didn't stop her from trying, however and she chomped like a madwoman, seemingly possessed to anyone who did not feel the sexual tension between us and who could've easily mistaken our carrying her to the bed as a means to begin the exorcism, for surely that woman had a demon inside of her and its name was *passion*.

"Watch it, B." Sid said, "We'll have to put a muzzle on you!" Blanche looked at him, a sly smirk twisting just one corner of her mouth, and she chomped at him, the loud crack from her

teeth echoing in the empty hall. Sid went in like a maverick, kissing her passionately, their tongues converging as one. I bent down and planted a large, wet kiss on the back of Blanche's neck, followed by smaller, softer kisses. She broke away from Sid and rolled her head in ecstasy. I began to suck, leaving a welt behind. This caused her to get weak in the knees and I believe if it were not for her undergarments, she would have been dripping onto the floor. There was an ocean of fish oil building up between her legs and soaking her panties. I could almost smell the distinct fragrance of her juices. I wanted to pour them into a glass and drink them like lemonade. Her entire body let out a spasm and she groaned that familiar animal sound, only it was more intense than any I had heard. It must be how the first grunt of carnality sounded and it made my heart skip a beat. I was hard now, fully loaded and about to rip the button thread on my trousers, releasing a fleshy perch for a falcon of lust to roost. And just when all else was becoming eclipsed by the white light of sexual liberation, when I was moments away from throwing Blanche to the hallway floor and having her there, vicious, I looked up to see Graham standing in front of the room with his ear pressed against the door.

"For Christ's sake, old man...hurry it up, will you!" I shouted. He turned around, his eyes wide and his face like alabaster granite.

"I think I heard something" Graham said, "coming from inside the room..."

The white light of sexual liberation began to recoil and break up like rain clouds. Sid and I became silent; Blanche still chuckled for a moment, oblivious. I tried to stay focused and not lose my erection, but there was nothing more difficult than maintaining an erection when having to think of anything other than sex. Erections ran on despicable thoughts, despicable thoughts and blood (in place of gasoline), and with Graham's possibly grim discovery I began to shrink from a ten-pound barbell to an over-ripened fig. We walked to the door and extended our ears to listen in. A few moments passed, but then we all heard the same noise Graham had: a muffled *bump*.

"Could it be a thief?" I asked. No one answered, but Sid unexpectedly and quite debonairly, like a man from the pictures, swiped his jacket to the side with the back of his hand and pulled out a pistol out of a holster attached to his belt. The sight of the gun startled me, for I didn't know a damned thing about them.

"What are you going to do with that?" I asked. Again, no one answered. Sid signaled with his eyes for Graham to open the door. Graham did so slowly, feeding the key into the lock delicately, trying to make as little noise as possible. What a goddamn hero Graham turned out to be, I thought. I was sure it was the booze providing him some liquid courage, for the Graham I knew didn't stick his neck out for a few crummy suits and whatever other junk he decided to bring along on this blasted trip of ours. Sid cocked the gun and I plugged my ears with both index fingers. Graham and Sid then silently counted by nodding their heads in unison. On 'three' Graham swung the door open and Sid barged in, gun drawn and finger on the trigger. Now I was sure we were in the movies. I was part of a raid, busting down doors and capturing the bad guys.

I half expected a director to yell “*Cut!*” and tell Sid to barge in all over again, only this time with more gusto. To our surprise, however, there weren’t any bad guys in our room. Instead there was a little hairy monkey with the reflection of the moon in his eyes. Along with rats, Brazil was overrun with wild monkeys who would come into the city and cause all sorts of trouble, stealing fruit, attacking children, and as of recently breaking into hotel rooms and rifling through Graham and I’s belongings. The monkey was sitting in the chair next to the window holding one of Graham’s suitcases. He looked at us as though startled by all the commotion. Before I could say anything, Sid fired the pistol, just missing the creature and blowing a hole in the windowpane. The noise was painfully loud and smoke spiraled from the barrel in beautiful designs (they actually were quite mystifying if you took the time to notice them, but nobody usually did when they were in a situation demanding a pistol). The monkey jumped from the chair and onto my bed, gripping one of the lamps in its hand and tearing it from the bedside table. Sid fired again, this time plugging a hole in the wall. Now the monkey screamed, followed by a demon-like hiss, showing us his fangs and then leaping out of the window, Graham’s suitcase in tow. Graham ran after him, but the little fellow was long gone, down the street and if he had any sense on the way to a pawn shop to hawk Graham’s designer loafers.

“Come back here!” Graham shouted out the open window, the curtains dancing in the soft breeze.

“Oh, don’t sweat it. It’s just a suitcase.” I said.

“My passport was in there!” he replied, a tone in his voice as if to say, ‘what do you have to say to that?’ because he knew the monkey’s theft now directly affected me, which was the only way I’d sympathize with him. The room became quiet. I didn’t have anything to say to that. I only had a feeling of despair in my gut because I felt as though my trip to Rome was somehow cursed. Things kept happening that moved the entire continent of Europe further and further away. At the rate we were going I’d never make it out of Brazil alive. I would live out the rest of my days like a heat stricken dog, lying on his back, dying in the sun. I felt as though I had been secretly walking along the palm of a giant and he was now beginning to close his fingers around me. Graham sat at the end of the bed and ran his hands through his hair. I walked over to the bullet hole in the wall and examined it. It was a bullet hole, all right. I had seen it, I had smelled it and I had heard it, as I was sure the other patrons of the hotel had. I stuck my finger in the hole and it fit perfectly with just enough room for me to extract it easily, but when I did a little roach emerged and scurried up the wall.

“I better go downstairs and clear things up with management before they call the police.” Sid said, holstering his pistol.

“And why don’t I run out and get us some more to drink? I could sure use one.” Graham said, still a bit sore about losing his suitcase.

“Splendid idea,” Sid replied, “and don’t worry about the passport. I know a man who can

forge any document you can think of.”

“Is he good?” Graham inquired.

“The best.” Sid said with a touch of pride in his voice. “I only deal with the very best of any given profession and this man is no different.”

“I trust you.” Graham said.

“Then there’s no need to worry.” I butted in, “Just go get us some drinks and I’ll look after young Blanche here.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will.” Sid said, lifting his hat and vanishing into the hallway...

11

A bizarre and frightening thing happened when I awakened the next morning. My mind awoke, but my body did not. I mean this in the most literal sense. I could think clearly, but I could not open my eyes or move my body in any way, as though I was paralyzed. Of course, I immediately assumed that I was dead and that this was the afterlife. So after all the speculation it turned out to be eternal darkness, which I expected, but with conscious thought to boot! That was the insult to injury, trapped in a lifeless body, unable to speak, see or move, frozen for an infinite number of hourglasses, locked in a black void for a never-ending number of pocket watches, punished with my own mind forever, perhaps to think about what I had done, or very possibly what I hadn’t done. And the coward didn’t even have the stomach to face me himself so I could tell him what an inadequate God he had been. Cancer to newborns, wars, crimes, hatefulness, despair, poverty and now this, the cherry on his gigantic ice cream sundae of shabby craftsmanship, an assassination while I slept. But just as I was becoming really angry about my current states of affairs my eyes jolted open and I gasped for air. I began pulling my body out of what felt like a thick marsh, as though weights were attached to each wrist and suddenly I was back among the living. Ah ha! Can’t get rid of me that easily! I was panting for breath, covered in sweat, thrilled to be alive, and as coarse as it sounds, I audibly let out a *fuck*, for there was no more fitting word for how I felt. I looked over and Blanche was asleep beside me, Sid was on Graham’s bed and Graham was propped up in the chair, his pants down around his ankles, his little cock illuminated by the early morning light. Everything was as it should have been. I shook Blanche awake.

“What is it dear?” she asked with her eyes still closed.

“I think I just visited the afterlife and it spit me back out like an olive pit.” I said.

“Last night *was* amazing, wasn’t it?” she replied with a smile.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I think I just died, but there must have been some mistake because I’m back.”

“What are you saying, sweetie?”

“It was like I woke up as usual, except I couldn’t move or open my eyes. My body was

frozen, but I could think as clearly as I am now.”

Blanche propped herself up and gave me a less than enthralled face, her bed hair smashed and hanging in front of her eyes. She looked adorable.

“Homer, you’re so dramatic. You didn’t die.” she said, “It’s happened to me before, but I will give you that it’s quite startling.”

“It’s goddamn terrifying.” I said.

“Some people say it happens when a spirit sits on you during the night and others say your brain awakes before your body. This is the only instance that the two are disconnected and it takes them a moment to find each other again. It’s actually rather romantic if you think of it that way. Two things are bound together for life yet are in constant conflict with one another, one telling you to do something and the other telling you to do something else, but in the end neither of them could survive without the other. They need each other to live, so they put their differences aside and coexist. When this happens you become frightened because your mind is worried it may never see your body again. It must be awfully scary to lose your mate, but how joyous it is to find them, right where you left them and no different.”

As Blanche was saying this, she turned from a perverted little girl into a lovely and angelic mother and I turned from a perverted little boy into just a boy, curled up between the warm sheets and listening to Blanche’s beautiful description of my traumatizing experience. She seemed so wholesome and charming in that moment that I couldn’t stand it any longer and I leaned forward and I kissed her softly, the entire room golden with visible floating dust balls curtseying through the air. What a contrast it was from the night before, a night which ranked with the wildest nights in Sodom and Gomorrah. After Sid and Graham left Blanche and I didn’t waste any time becoming familiar with one another’s bodies. She disrobed, her ashen skin showed blue veins running from her hips to her cunt. Her entrance was made up of two supple mounds and they felt like chicken skin when I grabbed a hold of her between the legs and pulled to me, a finger latched in her anus. She fell on me and we both rolled backward onto the bed. I took her teet in my hand and planted a slobbery kiss on her. When our lips parted I said,

“Do you think we should wait for Sid?”

“Let’s have a rehearsal before the big show.” she said, “Take me now, Homer.”

That was all I needed to hear, I unsheathed a pistol of my own and fiercely implanted it inside Blanche, working to fire it within her. It felt so wonderful to be inside a woman again, resuming my position as a slayer, as a liberator, as a god. I tried to think of how long it had been since I had had intercourse with a woman in the complete sense. Prior to my head injury, I thought, but before I could confirm this Blanche went into an erotic seizure. I didn’t know whether to penetrate her deeper or stick a spoon in her mouth.

“It fits so well!” she exclaimed.

I couldn’t take it anymore; I was going to unload my pistol right then and there, turning this hotel

into a crime scene, a blood bath!

“Fill me up! Give it to me, all of it!” she barked.

And with that I released, full force, the contents of my testicles inside Blanche. I ejaculated so forcefully that I half expected to blow a hole out her back and I wouldn't have been surprised if some of my chowder leaked from her nostrils like a nosebleed I had filled her up with so much. If I hadn't of slept with Miranda, I was positive, my avalanche of semen would have been sure to kill Blanche, for I was so backed-up that she'd simply drown. The entire event had lasted two minutes, yet it was one of the best lays I'd ever had. I was completely spent, unsure of how I'd get it up for one more go. I collapsed on top of Blanche, her erect nipples pushing into my stomach, and she shoved me off playfully, lighting another cigarette.

“Top notch, tiger.” she said, “Graham was right about you. You're a fierce lover, all passion and no form. Just what I wanted.”

“Was it good for you?” I asked, curious for the first time if the experience was mutually enjoyable.

“Marvelous, dear.” she said, reassuring me. She walked into the bathroom and proceeded to wash my jism out of her, cupping sink water in her palm and splashing it inside herself. If it weren't for my slight intoxication I would have been a nervous wreck during our little jaunt, for I knew Graham had built me up and Blanche expected something earth shattering, but alas, the deed was already over with and Blanche was cheery, singing to herself an English drinking tune, no doubt. Not a moment later Graham entered the room holding a brown paper bag with the necks of bottles sticking out from the top.

“You don't waste any time, do you?” he said seeing me nude and half asleep.

“Not a second.” I fired back.

Blanche emerged from the bathroom, looking like a Victorian painting, slouching airily in the doorframe, naked as the day she was born, save for some stockings which cut off before the knee.

“A work of art, no?” I asked rhetorically, “Carved by Rodin himself.”

Blanche batted her eyes at me and stuck her tongue out like a spoiled brat. Graham unloaded the paper bag and placed the bottles on the dresser. There were two bottles of red wine, a pint of whiskey for himself and a court of rum. Blanche was a rum-head.

“Where's that pocket knife?” Graham asked, “I hope that damned monkey didn't take the pocket knife too.”

“No, it's beside you on the dresser.” I said. Graham found the knife and dug into the cork of one of the wine bottles. He finally managed to free it and handed me the bottle. I took a long and gluttonous swig, some dribbling down my face. Blanche laughed at my piggy ways. Graham cracked open his whiskey and took a lengthy and meditative drag before tossing Blanche's rum to her and watching as she took a nice gulp, letting out a little unexpected burp

afterward.

“Oh, excuse me.” she said, her cheeks getting flush.

Wasn't that peculiar? A woman I had just fornicated with, the taste of her sweat still on my tongue, a woman who I could explain in graphic detail the texture of her anus was embarrassed by a burp. This world was a place I'd never understand. She came over and sat beside me, our raw hips touching and Sid walked through the door.

“Now it's a party!” he said, taking off his jacket and dropping his trousers to the floor without thinking twice. His member was significantly larger than my own, but these were details that would go on to become trivial in the account of what was about to take place.

“Have a drink!” I said and handed him my wine bottle. He guzzled it greedily, staining his lips maroon. We all continued to drink until every last drop was gone, filling up our bellies and engorging our bladders like water balloons. Sid crashed into Blanche and violently began molesting her neck with his tongue. Then I joined in and together we fondled and groped her, becoming one functioning body with four arms, four legs, two cocks, two tongues, but one mind, complimenting each other and leaving no part of Blanche unattended. When he'd kiss, I'd suck, when he'd go low, I'd go high, creating a vortex of indescribable pleasures. I began to get a second wind, I wanted Blanche with even more passion than the first time, I wanted to leave her impotent and floating in a pool of her own juices, unable to walk straight for a week and forever branding my face into her memory so whenever she felt the soft flame of love she'd think of me. I could not believe that the dirty deed was happening so naturally, what we had planned was now being executed without a single bump in the road. I expected some sort of awkward feeling plaguing the whole thing, me getting cold feet and moving robotically, but it seemed as though lust had overthrown us all and we were at its mercy. The overwhelming power of arousal knew no bounds and could corrupt anyone. I was feeling corrupted right about then, not a doubt in my crop, not a worry in the world, completely free to do anything and to feel everything.

Amidst the foreplay I glanced at Sid. There was a ferocious look in his eye. I could tell that the evening's events were about to culminate and that he was more lion than man at this point, and I was only a passerby to a much greater act of passion by two people in love. If it wasn't so damned perverse it would have been beautiful. Our rhythm became more complex, more sophisticated and without a single improper gesture, I pressed my back against the wall, allowing Blanche to take me in her mouth, bent over in a doggish fashion with her posterior in the air giving Sid his choice of both openings. He dug into her like a bayonet, cutting into fresh soil where all life grew. Graham was watching us, connected like a human train, and between the alcohol and the sight of so many male mallets he decided to take out his lonely prick and begin pleasuring himself. Now it was all out sexual warfare and no one was safe. I could only imagine how sexy the three of us were from an outside point of view. We must have looked like some Picasso painting, limbs flailing, privates smacking, flesh colliding into flesh, an entire moan

orchestra tuning up, the air so hot the wallpaper peeled right from the ceiling... Sid dismounted Blanche and now it was my turn. He positioned himself at her helm and I walked behind her, straddling her rump. With her ass up in the air like a lame horse I got a decent look at her. Her plum looked like two parting curtains and the upside down muff she sported appeared to be the backs of the audience member's heads in the front row of the playhouse. Sid had left her agape, and I felt as though I was a boy slipping into my father's oversized shoe, his monstrous cock a red giant to my white dwarf and Blanche's cunt was the black hole which consumed us all. I decided that I would give Blanche my all this time, that I would fulfill any fantasy she had of this event, making that fantasy pale in comparison to the reality I was about to create. Thankfully Edith had imparted some wisdom on me in the field of feminine gratification before shattering my heart into microscopic shards. A little known fact about sex was that it's neither length nor width that is of any concern when it comes to the filthy act, but angle. The vaginal canal was only six inches deep, so those fellas with nine-inch peckers were shit out of luck, and every sensitive area on a female cunt was right up front, hidden in plain sight. All it took was well angled pressure, it could have been from a dinosaur bone or the bulb of a pinky finger, just as long as you hit the right spot and continued to do so until their defenses lowered and that warm swell of orgasmic ecstasy bubbled over the top of their loins like a mushroom cloud. I placed one foot on the bed to give myself some leverage and then I fired away on Blanche's body, commencing a full scale assault on her clitoris, focusing my dong downward, penetrating and retracting, penetrating and retracting, driving her mad, pounding her like a conveyer belt, it was relentless love, robotic lust, inhuman hammering. If we were to continue like this not only would our loins explode, but so would our hearts and this evening of elation would end as a night of tragedy. Within minutes she began to spasm, the sound of our loving making like leather boots stomping through mud puddles. I was about to explode when all of a sudden an eruption of Blanche's fluids pushed me from her body and she sprayed her romantic juices like a geyser all over me, coating me in a creamy film.

We had made history; we had confirmed the allusive myth of the female ejaculate. The female orgasm itself was like a ghost to most men, but it in fact existed and carried with it a watery proof, a proof I was now coated in. Blanche was still quivering, for only the most powerful orgasms could provoke the squirting of a liquid that was not urine from the female pee-hole. It was a mystery juice, a concentrated version of the moisture which drools out of the mouth of the stimulated clam, one which I liked to imagine was stored deep within the bowls of women and one which only the most veteran penis could open the floodgates for, and I tell you it was like raging rapids. Blanche's eruption was a feather in my cap, a trophy for me to show off. I had conjured this potion and then I had cast it out of her like a witch... Sid approached me and patted me on the shoulder in an almost fatherly and disturbing kind of way.

"Well done, mate. It couldn't have gone better." he said.

I couldn't escape the feeling that we were talking about a job interview, not the physical act of love. That's the kind of language Sid and Blanche had been using. 'It couldn't have gone better.' as though it had been a test, but no matter, if it were a test I had passed it with flying colors and I was a better man for having gone through it. My lack of listening to my conscious had prevailed once again and it led me to an understanding that I wasn't going to find among the paperwork with Baybrooke or inside Phin's apartment. I discovered that love making wasn't something reserved for two people. Throughout the night Blanche, Sid and I and even Graham had all learned to love each other in an odd, but unmistakable way, and as long as love was at the core it didn't matter if it was three people or four or a hundred, it was love making. The experience caused me to reexamine the term love making, which I used carelessly like someone dashing salt on a steak. I had mused about what it meant before, I had applied my own definitions to the term, but it struck me that perhaps the word "making" was in there because sex wasn't quite love yet. You first had to make it and instead of using bricks and nails you used your bodies, laying the foundation for a future love. I thought it was a term coined by someone who hadn't grasped what a profound concept they had stumbled upon. It was a term that was cheapened by overuse, a practice I did not aid in slowing down. I felt like an enlightened soul, my heart once again so full of life it was ready to rupture. Blanche snuggled up in bed, exhaling sweet, invisible flower peddles as she drifted off to sleep and I collapsed beside her, satisfied knowing one more truth about the world: love making and sex were not synonymous with one another and we, the wild children of Rio de Janerio, Brazil had slithered through the cracks of its meaning to experience it in a bold new way.

12

After everyone tidied up and put themselves together it was time for the four of us to part. We escorted Sid and Blanche to the sidewalk and they blew us kisses as they disappeared down the crowded sidewalk, back into the belly of Rio. Before leaving Sid took my hand in his gorilla grip and pulled my ear close to his slippery lips. He told me,

"If you ever need anything, you just let me know, Homer. I have friends with unique skill sets around here."

It was as though he sensed that Graham and I were up to no good.

"When are you boys leaving for Rome?" Blanche asked.

"Not for a few more days." Graham replied. "And then it's back on that blasted air-o plane. I tell you I'm not too excited about that."

"Well," Sid said, puffing up his chest, glad to find a way to be useful, "I know man who works at the shipping yard. For a few dollars he'll get you aboard a freight ship heading that way. It's a bit longer, but you have your own cabin."

"Thanks Sid, we'll keep that in mind." Graham said. Then I turned to Blanche and she

took both my hands in hers. It looked as though she wanted to say something, but she leaned in and kissed me on the side of the face instead, tears gathering at her eyes.

“Jesus Christ, don’t cry.” said Sid, taking Blanche by the arm and leading her away. “We’ll see them again.” he said. Blanche stumbled backward and waved to us, fanning her fingers up and down, a hanky bouncing along with them and Graham and I waved goodbye high above our heads, sending them off with the greatest wishes of joy and success we could muster.

“If you need to find us, we’re at the A Cabeça Cortada every night.” Sid hollered back, before stepping off the curb and into the street. One moment they were there and the next they were gone, like a shadow stepping into a mist, evaporating like a whisper.

What an adventure it had been meeting Sid and Blanche, two mad souls that somehow found one another in this infinitely madder world. If they were to part it could only be that the ground had split in two on Judgment Day, releasing the souls from Hell (just so God could send them back before their feet got cold). And I felt comforted knowing that whenever I got into trouble with women I could just think of Sid and Blanche and imagine their absurd romance submitting to no practitioner, but living lawlessly and without compromise. I knew they would always be there, together, somewhere in the world. It felt good to be able to rely on something. As it was turning out I could also rely on Graham. He had become a trustworthy travel companion and I knew this was because we needed each other equally. No partnership could work if one person needs the other person more than that person needs them, because then jealousy rears its ugly head and entitlement gets involved and while you’re off licking your wounds human idiocy triumphs again. I had yet to run into this problem with Graham and I believed wholeheartedly that he was much softer than he let on. As it appeared to me I was his security blanket on this ayahuasca hunt, which had expanded to so much more than what was originally intended. That was life, I suppose, never caring much for your plans. One thing didn’t make sense, though. I had known Graham to be spontaneous, but traveling halfway around the world for a ridiculous drug even seemed extreme for him. I had never really wanted to question Graham’s motives too thoroughly, because I was so preoccupied with getting to Italy no matter the cost, but here I was, stranded in the middle of a rotting city, utterly ripped apart by sexual crisis and in cahoots with a maniac like Juan. Why would Graham put us in such danger? He certainly wasn’t a dumb chap and I was sure he knew the risks before conjuring up this ill-fated plan. I decided to confront him with my doubts over breakfast. We were eating at an outdoor café with fresh flowers lining the small enclosure separating our table from the street. Beside us a rat was dying from heat exhaustion.

“There’s been something I’ve been meaning to ask you.” I began.

“Yes?” he replied, unaware of the philosophical burden I was about to unload on him.

“Why the hell did we come here?”

He pretended to be caught off guard.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Brazil. Why the hell did we come to Brazil?”

“Why, aren’t you enjoying yourself?” he said smugly.

“I’m serious, old man. What do you have us trudging into the jungle for?” I said it with such unequivocal sternness that the conversation shifted dramatically and gave Graham no other choice than to fess up.

“The real answer to that question may be more than you bargained for, old boy.” He said, then paused and looked at me with wounded eyes. He took a drink of his whiskey and made a face of deep relief as if the liquid had cured all his ills.

“I’m an addict.” he said simply. I don’t know whether or not this ayahuasca is real or not, but it was never about that. I’m addicted to the hunt, to new and dangerous things. An addict is an addict, old boy. We are led to drugs because everything else is used up, passé. I ravaged men and alcohol, opium and fine food. It was only a matter of time that I discovered this rotten stuff out here in the godforsaken jungle and it was the addict within me that brought us here.” I hadn’t expected such a blunt, truthful response and I didn’t say anything for awhile, just mulled it over like a private detective, big time. I now knew that I was in the inescapable grasp of another man’s addiction, though I think it was fair to say that Graham was locked into mine as well. I was an addict to freedom and I had roped him into my fanatical journey. We were both guilty dogs, but we had been manufactured for that purpose and I really couldn’t condemn Graham too badly, for he was a product of his environment. Addiction had become the American way. The great white landscape Graham and I called home had pumped us full of drugs and food and flaccid hope, but most of all it got us hooked on instant gratification. No one waited their turn, no one paid their dues, it was just a free-for-all, whoever could get the most the fastest. Drugs were another main export in the American mechanism, like shoe laces or car manifolds, a way of America keeping its people weak and its pockets filled. I felt for Graham, I truly did, he had been sacrificed for the greater evil, just another pony retired from show business, another disposable entity, and I always had a soft spot for junkies of any sort. After all, the chemicals they ingested fouled up their brain chemistry and once the mind became an enemy they were done for. They belonged to a nation that did not want them and would gladly reap the benefit of their demise. There was a living truth that the hostiles opposed to drugs would never admit to, and that was legal drugs were far more powerful and far more dangerous than illegal drugs, it was just a matter of manufacturing costs, and the lack of control they had when it came to distributing these illegal drugs to every man, woman and child. The campaign against drugs was a sham, a publicity stunt designed and executed by the powers that be, with their long clammy hands over the lips of every hard working drug user. It was a war they would not win, because that’s how they’d designed it, an endless and incredibly lucrative combat where the soldiers spilled money instead of blood. They just needed the poor saps like Graham to keep feeding into

their addictions and they knew they would because of the all faithful reason: drugs were forbidden. It kept going back to the simple metaphor of your mother telling you not to touch the stove. How many tiny, blistered fingers would have to be sacrificed before people caught on that if you made something acceptable, people would simply lose interest? Of course, there would still be the junkies, the people that overdid everything, the consumers and maggots, but that was commonplace. If you outlawed bubble gum, there would be those people that chewed twelve packs a day. Addiction couldn't become extinct, it was in the atoms of the cells in the marrow of our bones, but make something readily available and whatever it was would wilt, become ordinary, and there was no quicker death than becoming ordinary.

So now with a better understanding of the world I inhabited, knowing full well that there wasn't a fly shit's chance in hell of escaping my fate, I relaxed. It seemed as though Graham and I were in it together, for better or worse. We would never forget this journey for as long as we lived and perhaps we'd be old men together sitting on a stoop reminiscing about the trouble we caused in our youth and our cock and balls would be long and stained with the aftermath of a trillion encounters, five-hundred billion for each of us... Breakfast stretched into brunch because when you didn't have any place to go there wasn't much motivation to rush. I suppose we were just waiting on a phone call from Juan, a phone call I was fairly certain would not come. Graham told me that he had given Juan a little advance on his money for incentive and the cheap bastard probably ran off with it, leaving us in the lurch. Very well, I thought to myself. Not only was I against venturing off into the foliage with Juan and Monray, but I was now downright irritated about it. With it supposedly being the eve of my death the last thing I wanted to do was enter a place where the chance of dying was greatly increased. In these jungles were cliffs, waterfalls, poisonous plants, snakes, monkeys with grips strong enough to rip the flesh from your face. What the hell was civilized Homer Miller doing in a bloody jungle? If you had told me that's where I'd be while standing in my apartment back in the States I would have laughed you out the room. I thrived on concrete and brick buildings, tall skyscrapers whose tops disappeared into the sky, the sound of automobile horns and the *ding* of doorbells, that was Homer Miller, not the squawking of some tropical bird, not the *peet* of fat raindrops falling on leaves. I was too busy conversing with my own nature to worry about old Mother. She was there with or without me and she was the only woman that was truly out of my reach. Mother Nature taunted me with her femininity, flashing me her gash with a tornado or thunderstorm, lighting up the sky with a sultry striptease. I imagined her with strong, thick hips and breasts like watermelons filled with cottage cheese. I'd dunk a spoon into them and eat until I regurgitated on myself like an infant. This was just one more impossible fantasy that I did not need. Why couldn't nature be male? Father Nature? Perhaps it was because there was already Father Time and two men joining in a union to control both our nature and time was just too radical for some folks. Mother Nature caused so much chaos, though and I pondered whether that had anything to do with her gully-hole. Did she

suffer from the same hormonal problems that plagued all women? Is that why she caused a hurricane one month and a burst of sunshine the next? Women were so unpredictable emotionally that I thought it a trifle mistake putting one of them in charge of something as influencing and dangerous as nature. I suppose a man wouldn't be much better, to be truthful. He'd use his powers for personal gain, throwing a lightning bolt on the house of an ex-lover or causing a wildfire to burn to crops of an old foe. You couldn't trust a man to put his pride aside. Of course, in reality nature didn't have a gender. Human beings just loved assigning human attributes to intangible things, that's why religion told us that we were created in God's image when the truth was that God was created in ours. We gave him eyes so he could see us, we gave him ears so he could hear us, we gave him a mouth so he could speak to us and we gave him our folly and flaws as well: anger, jealousy, ambition and a severe superiority complex. Anything to make him more like us so we wouldn't feel so bad about habitually committing atrocities, for whenever the guilt became too much you could offer it up to God and rest assured that it all a part of his plan...

When we returned to the hotel room the telephone was ringing. Graham dove for it and answered, a slight ring ricocheting into the air. It was Juan. They discussed the details of the afternoon while I sat down on the bed and daydreamed. I don't particularly remember what I was daydreaming about, but I know that I was completely lost inside my own head. It was most likely a European orgy, me at the center of it, a goblet of wine thrust to my lips. Those were the fantasies that occupied most of my daydreams, when I wasn't making some astute judgment of humanity or engaged in an enlightening conversation. If you saw me with a glazed look in my eye, I was more or less a thousand miles away, inspecting a corner of the universe or the back streets of a woman's body. Only the noise of Graham slamming the phone's receiver shook me back to reality.

"Well," he said, "it's afoot. He'll be here to pick us up in thirty minutes."

"I hope you're happy with yourself." I said.

"No complaints." he replied, as if our conversation at the café never took place.

I thought perhaps I'd take a cat-nap before the boys arrived to escort me to my burial ground, however the room lingered with the stagnant odor of sex and Graham opened the window allowing the humidity to pour in, covering me with a guilty sweat. The notion became expediently believable to me that I was already dead and that Brazil was indeed Hell. I had entertained the concept that all reality was in fact some form of Hell and that people were punished simply for being born, and Rio seemed like a more than fitting location. Of course I didn't buy into the whole goateed character with a tail and horns business, but Hell didn't necessarily have to be the portrait painted by Dante and Satan wasn't limited to the description by Milton. What was it he said? *It's better to serve in Hell than to reign in Heaven*. Personally I wasn't a fan of servitude, and I could understand the reservations about Heaven, but it at least

made partial sense that there was an incomprehensible being capable of getting the ball rolling in terms of existence. Hell on the other hand was so obviously a ruse. What better way to get people to obey than threatening them with fiery torment? And with that simple explanation available, knowing the human race as I had, I could not and would not live in true fear of the dimension known as Hell. I often spoke of what I'd do if I was ever given the opportunity to speak face-to-face with God, but I rarely fantasized about having such a meeting with Satan. To me he was a weak little boy having a temper tantrum. He was depicted as suave, charismatic and seducing, but I knew if he were real, he'd be none of those things. He'd be cowardly, introverted and sexually repressed. I imagined Satan as a chronic masturbator, relentlessly shaking hands with his bright red member, ejaculating fire and weeping afterward like a child. It was obvious to me that someone who spent their time torturing others had a long way to go in the self-acceptance department, so, for me, he ceased being frightening, because I was a much more competent being than he *and* I hadn't laid a finger on anyone. Contrary to the American textbook, violence never resolved violence; it only exacerbated the situation until it was so out of control that tragedy occurred. Then, once a devastating tragedy took place (and only once one took place) everyone sulked with their heads lowered and their eyes watery, uniting in sadness for a week or so. You could always count on people putting their differences aside in the wake of a calamity, but once the newspaper tabloids reported on something else it was back to business as usual, back to treating one another like garbage, back to forfeiting kindness for wickedness, but at least we weren't as vicious as that bad man down stairs, his ear pressed to the bottom of the world, waiting for us to fall like dominos into a whirlpool of sin...

Juan and Monray, who were now en route to the hotel, driving through the accumulating day fog, to take us into the massive and awaiting jungle, a jungle containing all my horrors and nightmares, were not God fearing men, nor were they Satan fearing men. They governed their lives by the barbaric 'eye for an eye' belief and would settle for an *eyelash* if it meant they could exercise their ability to uphold this outdated system. I was strongly opposed to the concept of 'an eye for an eye' which we humans seemed to cling to like our mother's breasts- all of us momma's boys with hard-ons dipped in the soiled diaper of revenge. To kill in the name of revenge was to lower yourself to the same standard as the criminal in question and yet we rationalized murder all the time. Countless numbers of men took the lives of other countless numbers of men because a fat politician in a building thousands of miles away told them to and not a single one of those men were in jail. In fact they are praised, given medals, thrown parades, glad-handed and paid to keep quiet about the horrors they had witnessed. Now, I understand that war demands bloodshed, I am not naïve enough to refute that, and I even respect the soldiers greatly for having the valor to fight and die for me, a man they have never met, but my complaint isn't with them, it's with the despicable leaders of the world who deem this sacrifice necessary. They claim to live by the Ten Commandments, the rules handed down by God himself, but the

last time I checked “*I Shall Not Kill*” was written very clearly in beautiful penmanship, yet still being ignored. Here was another fine example of man amending their *nonnegotiable* contract with God to better fit their needs. Some argue that ‘eye for an eye’ is the very mentality that got the human race out of the dark ages, to which my reply is a reconfiguration of their same argument, for the dear dullards proved my point without meaning to. Yes, it did get us out of the dark ages, establishing law and order with an iron fist, but it was no longer the dark ages, and we sat in comfortable chairs in a city full of modern marvels, cars pattering along down the street, food bursting from ice boxes and police departments more than capable of apprehending criminals without killing them. Sure, we had to pay more money to house them, feed them, hospitalize them, but that seemed like a small price to pay to keep our souls intact, free from any bloody thumbprint which would identify us as murders in the afterlife, a place everyone so desperately wanted to reach and ravage the benefits of. To look around was to see life being snuffed out like a candle, all of us guilty of putting our lips together and blowing...

13

...andway eway oderay intoway ellhay onway orseshay ademay ofway irefay...

14

Our automobile was built to withstand the rugged terrain of the jungle floor and we sped along like men with death wishes, emasculating me as I held the handlebar fastened to the roof, making sounds of fright as we passed beneath each low branch. If Juan had reserved any respect for me it was now surely gone, for I could hear him scoff at me with disgust. I wasn't sure where these men acquired their testicles so full of bravado and courage, but I apparently didn't pluck mine from the same tree. They either truly believed or convincingly pretended that death was the most honorable thing a man could do. I had made my peace with death, but I never saw it as honorable. What was honorable about rolling over and becoming still? Perhaps if it was for a noble cause? But even then it seemed like the incessant human need to be championed, for surly a dead man didn't seek praise (they didn't seek anything for a matter of fact). After all, they were *failing*, weren't they? It made sense to me that it was more honorable to live through a conflict, as opposed to expire along the way. Perhaps it was the living's means of giving reason to the death of their loved ones. It was much easier to say they died sacrificing themselves for something greater than it was admitting they failed to complete the task at hand. Part of me really felt quite repulsed by selfless acts and sacrificial deaths. Imagine the good these people could have done if they were alive, but instead they were in the ground, being eaten and shit out by

insects, not making a damned difference to anyone. But on the other hand, I was glad to be in the company of men like that, searching for this ayahuasca, because if it came down to it they'd be the first in line to sacrifice themselves and I'd be able to escape with my cowardly ass intact. Darwin wrote it, the smart survive and the brave perish, how goddamn true, Dar, you hit it on its big, fat head. Bravery usually stemmed from the inability to comprehend the repercussions of any given act. Those who could foresee what was at risk were less likely to volunteer their assistance, whereas a brave man's last tool was the moist clump of tissue inside his skull. 'Throwing caution to the wind' was the philosophy of a dimwit, yet they were the ones we blubbered over, giving them the moniker of 'hero,' while letting the humanitarian who lived a long and healthy life drift into obscurity and anonymity.

There came a point when the jungle was too thick to carry on driving and we had to continue on foot. I was thankful for this, for besides it being a more tranquil journey, the drive from Rio to a secluded area in order to conduct our hunt in private had been a terribly long one. Graham and I stayed behind Juan and Monray who carried machetes, hacking away branches and vines, creating a pathway of butchered life, greenery that would probably still be flourishing if we hadn't slit their throats. We were now looking for the ingredients required to make the ayahuasca. For the life of me I didn't know how Juan and Monray could distinguish between the floras, but I suppose that's what Graham was paying them for. And as we were walking, foot over twig, carving deeper into the jungle, I began to crave, for the first time, the mystifying drug which had brought us all out here with its insatiable allure. I wanted to be anywhere other than in that jungle, even if it was by way of a mind altering drug. Some of the longest treks had taken place inside the head, I thought, while being mildly disturbed at my newly found enthusiasm. Perhaps it was the addict within me, so thirsty for a taste of the Angel of Death that it would settle for any concoction. I hadn't even thought about Dr. Chin's evil mixture since I arrived in Brazil, but now it was all I could think of as old rain drops accumulated on leaves and fell to the ground, making the noise of a clock. Those *ticks* became unnerving, making each second stretch and contort into a century. There was peculiar tension building between the four of us and the ringing on Juan's machete blade was our only navigation through the strain, reminding us with each swipe that we were in fact too far to retreat, isolated in dense jungle where our screams would sound like monkey laughter against the unrelenting crash of the waterfalls.

We marched forward, the shabbiest army you've ever seen, traveling to a remote spot as far as I could tell, hopefully the promise land of dangerous and stupid components for mixing into powders the consistency of sand to be snorted like phlegm up the nostril and directly into the brain. I speculated that perhaps, somewhere behind two perfectly placed leaves, we'd find the Garden of Eden, the birthplace of all man, and we'd see little Adam and Eve frolicking in the nude. I'd disrobe and join in, seducing Eve and fornicating with her in the soft dirt. She'd have no concerns of virginity or scruples of any kind, for she would be untouched by any modern

stigmas. She'd open her legs wide to me and I would take her with as much zest as I could rally, penetrating deep the first woman and the origin of all trouble. Perhaps I could have a word with the talking snake, as well; who singlehandedly had condemned us all with its slick, forked tongue, damning every child born with a stained soul. At the very least there would be apple trees and I could rest beneath the shade of one, munching like a piglet, even eating the poisonous seeds, leaving but a tidy mound of stems to show my defiance. Perhaps I'd do mankind a favor and set fire to the garden in true cinema fashion by lighting a cigarette, taking one puff and then flicking it, the flames reaching so high they would blister the feet of the first choir of angels. I was very pleased with this fantasy, smiling to myself until very suddenly, a thorn made its way through the sole of my shoe and into the tender arc of my foot. The pain was so intense that I screamed, birds flying out of trees, my voice echoing and distorting in the distance, almost turning to a vindictive snicker when it was far enough away.

"What the hell's the matter?" Juan demanded to know. I bent down, unlaced my shoe and removed my stocking. The crater in my foot was coughing up blood, a watery blood mixed with perspiration that made it look like the consistency of finger paints.

"I stepped on a thorn is all." I said, the pain still profound.

"Hurry it up, we need keep moving." Juan responded, without a trace of sympathy.

"Punished for your thoughts again?" Graham said, looking desperately worn out from the hike. He helped me to my feet and I hobbled forward, quite impressed with my tolerance for pain, already the ache was withering away, the translucent moon looking down on us so friendly that it was difficult to look back at all with the kind of chagrin I was harboring in my heart for my present circumstances.

Already, an hour or so into the crusade and my amble, the sun was beginning to set. How dare you betray us night after night you burning bastard! I'd send you to Hell if I knew it had any effect on you! I watched as darkness crept from the sky like ink spilling over a snow globe, and soon we'd all be in its clutches. I wanted to sprint to the horizon, breezing over obstacles like an Olympic athlete and wedge myself beneath the smoldering planet, anything as to not spend the night, my neck craving the goose down pillows of my bed back home, my back pining for the mite infested spring cushion of the mattress, my member begging to feel the soft caress of the Egyptian linen sheets. However, despite all my intentions of burdening the weight of an entire world set aflame, it looked as though we'd have to make camp, because continuing forth when the only light source was a yellow moon even seemed a bit silly to men as daring as Juan and Monray.

"We be stop here and set up camp while there still some light." Juan announced.

This struck me terribly and I had to resist having an outburst like a child who was told one thing then made to do another. I hadn't even thought about spending the night out there among the wild boar and miscreant vermin. I suppose it was foolish of me, but I assumed that we'd be in

and out in a few hours, we'd find what we needed and we'd be floating high above the city by midnight. It now was abundantly clear to me that that was not the case. What a soul crushing thing it was to know that Juan could be plotting my murder while we slept, and the next sunlight hours would be the day we'd find out the result of Miss Ursula's prophecy, as well. How utterly convenient it seemed to me. Perhaps Juan, Monray and Ursula were working together, a little 'ma and pa' organization of lowly criminals and fat whores, hitmen and conmen alike. She planned the prophecy, you see, and Juan made sure it happened by taking us out to the jungle, beheading Graham and I and then splitting the loot three ways. They'd probably use it to buy children and prostitute them, the scoundrels. I wouldn't even jeer at the notion that they had made up this ayahuasca just to lure two dumb Americans to a place where their terror was not an accepted currency. It was too late to lambaste Graham, I now either confronted fate or it proceeded without me, though I was getting ahead of myself. I was already vexing Juan for crimes he did not commit and if I kept thinking that way I would startle myself out of my wits until sleep was an impossibility. I sat down in the mud, surrounded on all sides by impenetrable, lush greenery, some woven so tightly together that it had the strength of a brick wall. Looking at these lands, allowing them to fill up my eyes, I knew they would remain untamed forever. Human beings, in spite of all their ingenuity and cleverness, would never be able to completely overtake such a vast and wild place. They had succeeded in bottling the soul of almost everything else in the world, but with the forsaken continent of South America, a region populated by tribes that practiced the ancient rituals of their ancestors, they had finally met their match. They would try, you'd could be damned sure of that, but the vines that grew around the heart of the Brazilian jungle were so thick that they had lost all the qualities which made them vines and they became something largely greater- metal arms wrapped in an embrace, sheltering the outside world from perverting its natural and if I was honest with myself, beautiful ways.

Beside me on a branch there was a praying mantis balancing on a shoot, its feelers rubbing together methodically, praying for all us sinners, and full to the hilt with the head of its lover. I found it interesting that the female praying mantis devoured the head of the male praying mantis after sexual intercourse, making it the only creature I could think of that had both a dominate female and a completely efficient approach to relationships. What a happier place the world would be if only women consumed the heads of men after orgasm was achieved. There would be no pesky love involved, no long, drawn out break-ups, no pain or agony or confusion, just the lapping, demonic tongue of sex followed long peaceful slumber. I'd be indebted to them eternally if they sent me off to my negative zone, loins drained and heart racing. Of course, it would get quite messy eating a human head, with the blood and all, and prying the meat from the skull would get rather tiresome, but no more so than a delicious piece of steak clung to the bone, one that defies you every angle of the knife you try. I suppose it was much more practical for praying mantises, they didn't have to worry about the texture of eyeballs, or the fatty parts of the

tongue, or the hair, which would naturally get caught in the back of the ladies' throats. None the less I dreamed of being more like the male praying mantis, being used for a change rather than using. I was growing weary of carrying about with me the inherent coldness of man. I wanted to be able to give myself completely, without reservation or proviso. I wanted to collapse in lover's arms, being held like a baby and murmur "*worship me.*"

Laying there, among the velvety black night, gazing up at the stars, the sky devoid of all surrounding light, making the burning balls of gas fully illuminated against its dark counterpart, everyone else around me snoring like dogs sleeping on the end of the bed, I began to think back as far as time stretched and my mind would allow. A scientific theorist I had once read told of how we humans came to be in the form we presently know, our extremities, our big, bobbing heads atop thin, breakable necks, one big nose and ten little toesies, as it were. He explained to me through his eloquently written words that inside of us were tiny atoms, which were a direct result of stars exploding several light-years away many millions of years ago, and that the energy from those blasts now compiled our bodies, our minds and perhaps even our souls, if there wasn't a divine detail somehow involved. Imagining myself built out of millions of miniature suns, I examined my hand, my eyes adjusting to the darkness and what I saw was rather surprising. I didn't see what is commonly thought of as a hand; instead I saw a boney, bizarre, almost alien in design organic device with fingers squirming and knuckles buckling. It roughly looked like an animal was attached to my arm, a baby squid, perhaps and while mimicking the tentacles of a squid with my digits I asked myself aloud, "How is it that we were equipped with the correct number of fingers?" How indeed? I could not do without a single finger; each one of them had a unique purpose. How did nature know we needed a bulbous and misshapen thumb? Why include an odd outcast of the hand, not even considered a finger? I then looked from my hand to the moon, then back, then back again and I couldn't help but think about what a doomed species we were. I couldn't uncover the mysteries of my hand let alone the universe. Call me morbid! Call me cynical! Both would be true, but I suppose these dreary facts were just too big for me to ignore. If we came from chaos how could we hope to bring order to our lives or peace to this planet? We were the aftermath of an explosion, the rubble of a supernova. It made you feel quite small, like the things you did mattered very little. I was never one to think in such terms, I felt that what we did on earth counted, even if it was for a limited time. You had to be the best person you could be in the measure of minutes not lifetimes, however, while sitting among such giant trees and mountains that would one day be sand because of wind erosion, I thought how could I hope to survive if they won't? What chance did I have of being remembered if a mountain, one that took millions of years to grow, would whittle away into nothingness? What bleak despair I was feeling at that moment, absolutely sacrificed with unanswerable questions, lost somewhere between where reality and imagination overlapped... What happened next couldn't be described as falling asleep as much as it could be called having an awakening. I, for

the second time in my life, was transported to the center of space, ripped from my snug spot on the jungle floor and dragged into the giant, black mouth of God. This time I had lost my clothes in the process and I wasn't traveling anywhere like I had been before, instead I was floating, suspended like a puppet on his strings, looking down on Earth. For a moment I thought that Ms. Ursula's prophecy had come true and I was returning to heaven how I had left it, nude and foolish, but I quickly knew that was not the case and this was the same kind of experience as the one in the back of the taxi on my way to Phin's. I had a view of the entire canvas again and it was an unmistakable feeling. I could see the red glow of Mars and I heard the crackle of the sun's flames coming from behind me, warming my back, but even with so much to see my eyes kept returning to Earth. It looked very strong to me in that instant, a swirl of blue and brown and green like a painter's palette, and I knew then that she would be all right. Earth was resilient, Earth was courageous, it had suffered asteroids, volcanoes and a thousand different species. It had its day in the sun, this was true, but it wasn't ready to be put out to pasture, it did not need pity or special circumstances. Earth would live on after humans and think of us as someone would a childhood illness, confining them to their bed, stricken with resentment, but recalling often the little moments when good memories breached the doorway of their dismal room and said hello. Then a very profound concept made itself known to me: human beings and Earth were very much disconnected from one another. I saw with a great deal of clarity that we treated her the same way poor houseguests treat a friend's home while they're away on vacation. Sure, the house would be a little worse for the wear, but it would be standing long after its inhabitants had expired, and new people would move in and redecorate, making it look completely different than it had before. That was the genesis, the evolution of an inanimate object. Earth was a schizophrenic house with equally important personas: a strict mother, a fragile countess, a stifled debutante, a wanton mistress, all of them wrapped up in one globe, only the tenderness for their creatures in common. I then noticed from the corner of my eye that the moon was looking at me bashfully, its craters like the acne ridden face of an adolescent. It looked as it had appeared in Méliès' "*Le Voyage dans la lune*," with human facial features. His dark seers topped with mischievous brows like thick brush strokes fixed themselves on me. I opened my mouth to say hello but no noise came out. The moon turned to me and opened what appeared to be his all-encompassing mouth. Inside was only a stump of where his tongue used to be. It looked as though someone deliberately cut it out to keep him from shrieking. I thought perhaps that's why coyotes howled at him, because at one time, before human's populated the earth, the moon could howl back. I began to think that human beings could possibly be the source of the entire universe's conformity, that because of our insecurities the very mayhem apparent in all forms of life had muted themselves, everything we knew, trees, stars, everything, was holding back a massive, primordial scream...

When I returned to Earth I was terribly worn-out and fell asleep almost immediately, but

before doing so I marveled at my existence. A man as unworthy as yours truly having the universe open itself up to him, revealing some of its eternal secrets, was truly remarkable. Sadly, the despicable question “*why me?*” cropped up in my cranium again, but upon the second visit to outer space I realized such a question didn’t matter much. On Earth there was always a why, always a reason, but *out there* ‘why’ was just an asinine steam of sound with no significance, just a jumble of words from an equally meaningless mouth. I stretched out on the dirt, content in my purposelessness, an air about me, proud of being chosen for these journeys, feeling impervious by the idea of there being something I radiated which pleased the gods so, and I reeled my mind in to more worldly and fleshly avenues of thought, for, if you could imagine it, I was feeling aroused, my cock commissioned solely by ego... I started to daydream, a daydream that would transfer seamlessly to dream and stay with me throughout the night. The yarn I begun to spin to myself could only be described as a great tragic romance, one that would surly get the stage treatment and have all the socialites applauding with their empty white gloves. It began with imagining myself an officer in the German army, for they always dressed very spiffy, and to speak honestly I was quite jealous of the women they pulled simply because of their duds. So I imagined myself standing tall, my pants falling perfectly above my ankle, my chest broad and covered perfectly in a decorated smock, fitting as tightly around my muscles as the film within an eggshell. This is when my eyes closed unknowingly and my fabulous daydream bled into the subconscious... I walked with the stride of a horse; almost prancing I was so sure of my appeal. Women tossed themselves at my feet; however there was one woman in particular who captured my heart the moment I laid eyes on her. She was a countess from France- Germany’s enemy in the imaginary war in which I had been deemed a hero. It was unspeakable for a French woman to take a German officer into her bed; she would be ostracized by her country, estranged from her family, stripped of her polish and good breeding and turned loose to fend for herself in the cruel and hungry world. We both knew the risks, but everything was eclipsed when we engaged in a series of confessions, our eyes doing all the talking from across a table, where her husband sat beside her. There was only a candle between us, but it served to represent our passion for one another, the flame gyrating in front of her beautiful face as though it were a projection of my soul... Thankfully dreams skip the minor details, for suddenly the countess and I were on a bridge above a canal, bathed in moonlight, our lips fighting to merge. The cobblestone streets shimmered from the golden light coming from lanterns within neighbor’s windows. It was so romantic that if I had seen it in real life I probably would have become nauseous, but alas, this was Dream Homer Miller and I was enjoying every moment of being incredibly clichéd. We walked together until dawn and then we climbed a rope made from bed sheets to her balcony, sneaking into her room and making love underneath the covers, Homer the Great, Homer the Brave, Homer the God, my uniform placed neatly on the canapé à confidente...

14 ½

(1) (... clichéd walkways walked over with the fledgling fingerprint footsteps of young men chock full of desire... ill with yearning... shooing away misery like a housefly... stepping heavy handily through the marsh... insects copulating on shirt sleeves... women tossed into the mouth of Lucifer... the great betrayers... sidesplitting mutiny unraveling the meaning of mayhem... losing your place, having to go back... to go back... reaching the summit... conclusion fumbles about unwillingly... ten paces ahead like a cheap western novelette... superimposed heartbeats fool the dead into living... doctors... lawyers... tax attorneys... the ocean inside a blister... raging sea captain of tomorrow... fag friendly cantina penthouses subjugate fathers rolling over in graves... six feet doesn't seem to be enough to bury hatred... futurist societies made of equality nothing but fizzled and granulated daydreams of optimistic jailhouse inmates... repressed mothers with dusty cunts seek liberation by means of mental stimulation... orifice opens like the slimy mouth of a fish... backbeat overdrive undertones penetrate deep... baby's clutching mothers... apocalyptic herding like sheep... problems never get resolved... instead mutate into unrecognizable halfway, nitwit, compromises... and freedom lives to be cheapened another day...)

15

Dawn was long dissolved before I was anything close to being legitimately awake, though my feet had been dragging through the mud for several hours since Juan had woken me like a boy about to be late for school, the sun yawning and rolling over to the wrong side of the bed. Thus far, and without any help from me, we had located one of the ingredients needed for the ayahuasca potion. I wasn't sure which ingredient, because Juan had only said something in Portuguese to Monray who nodded in response and then nodded to Graham. I was just relieved to be making progress. If this drug did not do what it promised to do, especially after such a wearisome slog, I may have resulted in severing the ties between Graham and me as soon as we set foot in Italy. Arividerchi, you hapless fool! I'd shout at him while speeding away on the back of a tomato truck. Without him I would become more judicious, try anyhow, and I would distance myself a hundred miles from anyone the likes of him. To be terribly truthful, I did desire a separation from Graham because he, if I were beseechingly honest with myself, was smarter than I was and I couldn't stand being around someone who always had the advantage over me. I was the lead in this story, the star, not some lowly secondary character. That's how I wanted to feel anyway, and I suppose I could admit that I was insecure, therefore always looking to be the dominate person in any relationship. What a parasite I was, constantly struggling to prove myself

with the juiciest brain. Somewhere within me I knew I'd never truly find happiness with another person with that character flaw intact. I would always shoot lower than my aim, find someone that I could easily keep below me, never being challenged, because at the end of the contested day, I would rather feel important than happy.

It was midday when Juan brought us to a halt, the sweat beads literally soaking through the underarms of my shirt in droves and if you were to pluck me off the ground and set me back down in an American city it would have looked as though I had been mugged- a child might drop change in my lap I looked so disheveled- but as our halt soon proved, Juan had found the last remaining ingredient. He turned around with the vague trace of a smile on his lips.

"That the last of it." he said. We all jointly let out a sigh of relief. For all intents and purposes, our hunt was over. Graham shot a look at me, a touch of the old deviance he was known for present in his floating, watery orbs. Juan put the ingredients inside a canvas satchel and held it tightly as though it were the Holy Grail. We all stood around, pussyfooting, looking at each other, unsure of what to do now, incapable of putting our prejudices for one another aside and glad-hand for accomplishing what we set out to accomplish. What a little man I was at times, what a little man I was surrounded by dwarves... It was a day hike back to the auto and then another few hours holding onto the faceted handlebar for dear life (while I was not looking forward to this, I couldn't help but be reinvigorated) and the only logical thing to do was begin our journey backward.

"Let take break for a few minutes, then we head back. Have to hurry if we want to make the opening of Carnival tomorrow night." Juan continued.

"I've always wanted to attend." I said cheerfully, which was true, I had read extensively on the mass celebration, but then like a toad croaking or a vulture cawing, Monray opened his mouth and said ominously, "You'll get your chance..." extinguishing any enthusiasm I had been experiencing. I believe it was the second time I had heard Monray speak, but on both occasions he said something absolutely bone-chilling. What an ominous bastard, I thought. The Carnival in Rio was a terribly large affair celebrated by millions of Brazilians each year, held before the Catholic holiday known as Lent, which constituted giving up one thing (could be chocolate, could be opium) for forty days to honor Jesus' fasting through the desert all those years ago. I suppose Carnival began as a way to shake loose all vices like candy in the belly of a Mexican piñata, a way to get out all their recklessness, all their wickedness which was born into them before conforming to the solemn forty-day trial, which reared its ugly head every year. I liked to think that's how it began, anyway, a rebellion of sorts, but a safe one, one not actually rebelling from the *thing* itself, but taking part in the thing's opposite to show where their true desires lied. It didn't violate any laws or Church doctrine, but its voice of defiance was loud and clear. I relished the idea of being caught in the middle of so much rebellion, a tireless ruffian myself, at home in the middle of a sea of people who neither spoke my language nor knew my name. I

thought of Carnival as a rite of passage for any traveler, like being dipped in the local waters or feasting on the native cutlery. In order to be considered a true patron of a country, you had to engage in their rituals, and thus far I had done no such thing in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I had been an awful houseguest, a terrible freeloader, but in my defense I didn't particularly desire to visit Rio under the circumstances in which I had. I was part of a hunt to destroy the human mind, not a voyage to better understand a culture. I had cheapened Brazil into a shadow of itself and I knew somewhere in my heart the land would never forgive me. None the less I was looking forward to rubbing shoulders with the masqueraded millions; a mask for the first time revealing a true identity, for this carnival was the lifeblood of a nation and a sight which burned itself to your eyes like a branding iron to the hide of a cow. I would finally be able to experience Rio as I had known it in books, a rambunctious, sensual place dripping with passion. I had witnessed some of its obscure passion, but for some terrible reason I was consumed by fear. Perhaps it was Ursula's claim of death, or Miranda's one-eyed cobra, or perhaps it was the simple idea of losing my virginity. Yes, Homer Miller, the sexual champion, was a virgin to perversion, and on this trip, which I didn't expect to be as eventful as it had become, had 'lost his cherry,' as a crass young collegian might say, to the wave of perversion, caught in the throes of a sexual revolution I had never considered and surrendered to a sensuality I'd never understand.

Juan pulled out a canteen and drank from it, lifting it a few inches away from his mouth so the clear water could pour down his throat, appearing to be an agua salesman, he made it look so damn refreshing. My lips were dry and my dry tongue ran over them making them dryer. I wouldn't say I was ready to drink my own urine quite yet, but I knew that was the next natural stage in my dehydration. I had read that in life or death scenarios drinking your urine could keep you alive, because such a high percentage of it was water. That was a fact that lodged itself in my brain, one I never imagined I would call upon, but that must have meant I was in the mix of things, living sporadically, now recalling survival techniques. I could only hope that if it ever came to drinking my own urine it would be the clear discharge found after intercourse, as opposed to the dark yellow piss that seemed to lethargically erupt from your urethra. I'd have to muscle that potent juice down, the smell being more bothersome than anything. And while contemplating the odors of my urine, it amazed me that some women, and some men for all I knew, guzzled the yellow stuff like white wine to get a sexual twist. Phin had told me what felt like sexual ghost stories, whispering perversions in the dark, telling me how he'd heard women gargled their own fluids, sometimes soaking raw meats in bowls of piss and letting them sit overnight before cooking them in the morning and serving it to their children. One would assume there was no sexual connection to these acts, but for some, sexual arousal didn't stem from physical stimulation, but the simple idea of a despicable act. I cringed at the thought of mothers crossing their legs while watching their children devour a plate of liverwurst soaked in their pee-pee. What kind of world existed where things like that went on? It wasn't a world at all, but a

jungle, like the one I was sitting in with Graham, Juan and Monray...

After so much thought about the yellow waste I noticed that I desperately had to relieve myself. We had begun the walk back and I informed everyone that I would be stopping for a moment to spill a bit of myself on the ground. With any luck a plant would sprout up from my little pool of urine, a wildly colored flower sticking out the top, almost Jurassic looking and the leaves would be the texture of flesh, thick and covered in pores. Juan told me to take my time, for he had the sudden urge to defecate and quickly retired behind a wide, stout cluster of greenery to do so with a modicum of privacy. I watched him remove his trousers from the corner of my eye and I noticed that he had varicose veins all down his left leg, having it take on a deformed and grotesque appearance. The swollen veins looked like a snake slithering beneath his flesh, or a sinister face wearing a goiter like a clown nose. Could this be Juan's true self, I wondered, a pile of viperous snakes? I looked away and removed my member, pointing it downward on what could have been an entire civilization of insect life. As I urinated and committed the systematic murder of millions, I gazed deeply into the jungle, my eyes carving a little pathway and I saw a thin stream of water in the distance, rocks covered in green moss surrounding its tiny shore and it looked as though it had been painted there, that I was no longer in the jungle, but was standing in an art gallery observing a devastatingly beautiful work of art. The sun's light was almost completely blocked out from tree branches reaching across the stream and locking arms, but lonesome rays made their way in, appearing to be of the masterful stroke of Monet. While mid-stream, I began to think back to the grand memory of seeing a Monet in person, but something crashed my train of thought and startled me so much that I clinched my bladder and the flow of urine ceased like the twisting of a fire hose's wheel. It hurt awfully, the rapids of waste beating at the door of my fleshy knob, but what startled me was the sudden jerk of leaves on the tree beside me. Comically, I feared it was a monkey back to take my manhood. I had read somewhere that the scrotum was the weakest part of male body and with enough strength could be ripped off like wet tissue paper. These were the fears that beleaguered educated people. No fool would worry about the weakness of his scrotum. Anyway, the leaves became still again and after a moment of frozen panic, I released my stream, my boy experiencing a miniature orgasm as the liquid resumed its daring escape. Some creature on his everyday path, I thought. After all I was encroaching on their territory, I was the visitor here, I couldn't expect the indigenous animals of the jungle to rearrange their schedule for me, but then, like some cruel joke I heard the sound of a heavy foot break through vine with a moist crunch. Thankfully my urination was finished and I quickly buttoned up. I turned around to face Graham, wanting to whisper to him that some wretched beast was surrounding us, and that's when I saw the culprit. It wasn't an animal or a beast; it was a young black boy wearing a ragged football jersey. Football was Brazil's most cherished sport, even calling themselves *o País do Futebol*, meaning *the country of Football*, and every boy I had seen while in Brazil wore a jersey for their favorite

team. This boy was no different, weaving through the branches like a football pro himself and he was now making a mad dash toward Juan who was still hunched down like a frog on a lily pad, govno hanging from his rectum like a cigar dangling from the mouth of Groucho Marx. The boy pushed Juan back into his pile of stool, grabbed the canvas bag containing the ingredients for the ayahuasca and ran with the speed of an antelope into the jungle. Juan shot up, pulling his shit-covered trousers around his waist, grabbed his machete and signaled to Monray to follow him after the boy. Everything was happening so quickly that neither Graham nor I could think logically and after a moment of hesitation we followed after Juan and Monray. As we ran through the low hanging trees, the leaves flickered like the bulbs of cameras and they made the sound of bee wings colliding in a fury rushing past our ears, only little diamonds of light flashing and blurring into an indistinguishable green mass of chaos and confusion. I could see the boy ahead of us running with all his might, both elbows slicing backward, his knees reaching his sternum with each long stride he took. Juan was close behind him, gaining quickly, using rage as a means of speed. It looked like a tiger stalking his prey. Monray, a slightly pudgier man was falling behind, losing his footing and fumbling, his machete twisting like uncontrolled water from a hose. I began to feel the sharp pain in the side of my gut and the bottom of my tongue was trembling in pain, but I continued to run. I had absolutely no reason to run, nothing I could do would change the outcome of this event, but I ran anyway, senselessly, running as hard as my legs would allow. Graham was coughing, also clinching his side, the taste of blood on his lips. I could see that the boy's boney legs were no match for Juan whose breath was now beating down on the boy's darkened neck. Juan reached out his arm, grabbed the collar of the boy's football jersey and slammed him to the jungle floor. The boy's thin frame hardly made a noise hitting the ground. Juan placed his right foot over the boy's chest and pinned him, the boy squirming like an insect. Weightless tears gathered at the boy's eyes and fell down his face leaving hot roads behind. His chest was rising as falling, not enough air to breathe, not enough air in the entire sky for him to catch his breath now. Monray, Graham and myself caught up to Juan and the boy. We formed a half circle around them, a morbid audience incapable of doing anything besides watch. Juan bent down, out of breath himself, and retrieved the canvas bag. He then spoke to Monray in Portuguese, laughing in between gasps for air.

“What are you saying?” I blurted out of instinct. They ignored me. Juan then bent down and caressed the boy's neck in his hand, speaking softly to him as if a gentle father. He was speaking to the boy in Portuguese and for the first time the language sounded beautiful to me, but the last word I heard caused the boy to burst with tears he must have been saving since birth. He hollered out to his mother, to God, I don't know, but whoever the cries were for, they didn't affect Juan, who dragged the boy to his feet, shoved him back on his knees in front of a stump, placed the boy's arm outstretched on the rotting piece of wood, lifted his machete into the air and brought it down with a strength that made a shockwave undulate through the air, seizing my

heart and causing it to skip a beat... The machete had separated the boy's arm from his shoulder and his crying had stopped suddenly, without fuss. He reached for his phantom limb, making a face of otherworldly understanding and fell to the ground. Before I understood what had happened it was already over with. The information my eyes captured lagged in my skull resisting the brain for as long as it could, but when it finally hit I felt like tearing my own heart out. It was a surge of pain, not physical pain, though I hurt all over, but of spiritual pain. My soul had been damaged while witnessing Juan mutilate the boy and I put my lips together to scream, to beg for him to undo what he had just done, for the world to reverse its rotation and send us back in time so we could avoid this unspeakable horror. But before I could speak Graham grabbed my shoulder and told me to be silent with his eyes, both of them so watery with oily tears that I couldn't make out the color of his irises. My lips were quivering, acid filled my heart, crocodile teeth slashed through my brain, but I didn't say a word. Juan removed a rag from his pocket and wiped his machete clean. He then turned to us, nothing different about his demeanor, and told us to continue on, somehow expecting us to be the same people we were moments before. There was an unspoken acknowledgement that Juan and Monray were no longer our guides, but that we were now their captives, for they used their weapons to point rather than their fingers, dictating which direction for us to go. I stepped forward toward the boy, Graham reached for my shoulder again, but I shrugged him off. I wanted to see what Juan had done. I approached the boy who was lying still in the dirt, his skinny arm motionless on the stump, his eyes still open as life struggled to remain inside him. I had never witnessed such a horrific scene and seeing it then numbed me in a way I have never been able to shake since, somehow neutralizing a part of soul and removing it as though it were a common surgical procedure. After a while the boy began to convulse and I realized while watching him sputter on ground like a defective firecracker, in an all eclipsing epiphany moment that Mrs. Ursula's prophecy had come true. Though I was still alive, a piece of me had died along with that boy, seeing his body that way, a boy I had never met and wouldn't understand even if I had, but dying none the less, something within me gone and never returned. I looked at the boy for a while longer, time seeming to halt like a traffic jam on a summer day. His football jersey was now covered in blood. I wondered what team he cheered for and if he dreamt of being a player himself. I hoped in that moment that heaven did exist and that he was on his way there, that the theory of heaven being whatever you wanted it be was true, but I knew it wasn't. Then by the pointed tip of Juan's blade, I turned away, not having the strength to look back, leaving him to die in the dirt of his country, *o País do Futebol*.

16

No words had been spoken in several hours when Juan told us to make camp for the night. It was as though our tongues had dried up and crumbled inside our mouths, turning to clay

and breaking apart like leaves in December, none of us having the urge to speak. I don't even think I would have pleaded for my life if Juan decided to turn the blade on me. I was so completely broken at that point that there was no bodily harm you could have inflicted that would have gotten me to beg. Thoughts weren't even forming, no synapses were firing. For the first time in my life my mind was blank. I felt as though evolution had regressed and I was devolving back into a primate as the minutes went on. Soon my jaw would extend and my joints would lengthen and coarse black hair would sprout from my pores and my brain would shrink and my eyes would lose their focus and truths I once knew with certainty would deteriorate into hazy contemplations and I'd run off into the jungle never remembering that I had once lived in a home with a family and walked upright and cared for people and met Max, and met Max... What a hypocrite I had become, because if I were sitting around my snug little pub back home, surrounded by Phin or Baybrooke or Nick or Byron, I would have been certain in my resolve concerning a scenario such as the one I just encountered. I would have said death was a part of life, or some such nonsense, totally cold and positive in my detachment. I knew now that even with death being a part of life that still didn't stop of the pain that accompanies a death, the raw feeling that bottles up inside you making your organs itch, your heart tickle in the worst of ways. You could rationalize things indefinitely, but that didn't change the fact that human beings were irrational creatures and their silly, absurd feelings would always interfere with logic, and in a way that made those silly, absurd feelings credible, important. Love and death were where logic and science failed, where they reached a clearing overlooking a vast valley and where emotions leaped off that clearing, plummeting to their certain demise, bleeding into life, not caring a single iota, not afraid, not afraid of anything.

Graham was the one to break the silence finally, approaching the situation like a diplomat, as always.

"Listen Juan, why don't you take us back to hotel, we'll part ways and call the whole thing honorably settled." he said.

"No don't think so." Juan replied, "You not going anywhere 'til we get our money."

"And the ayahuasca? We don't even have it the proper form yet."

"Well, we will see, maybe Monray and me keep it for ourselves."

"You miserable bastard!" I shouted. After everything that had happened I could bear the thought of Juan cheating us, not that I was necessarily concerned with the ayahuasca, I just wanted what was rightfully ours.

"Calm down, Homer." Graham said. "Just get us out of this jungle. We have a plane to catch and then we'll be out of your hair."

Juan beamed and looked toward Monray who returned a foul curvature of the ghastly vulva he called a mouth. Juan then reached into his trousers and tore from the pocket Graham's passport.

"How you expect to leave wit'out this?" he asked as baleful as the devil himself.

“Where did you get that?” Graham asked, now losing his politician’s politeness and getting seriously concerned about what hot water he and I were in. Instead of answering, Juan stuffed Graham’s passport back into his pocket, bent down and consulted the canvas satchel, which now sported a spot of blood from the deceased boy who had tried to steal it. What Juan pulled from the bag appeared to be the skull of a monkey. He held the skull in his palm, a conqueror, a destroyer, a celebrated vanquisher if only born in an ancient time.

“My little friend here retrieved it for me.” he said, “You may remember him.” Juan’s proxy cheerfulness now hid within the cheeks of his face and he became serious.

“You didn’t think I trust two American bums wit’out little insurance, did you?” he continued, “Oh, and I would not worry too much about that plane, Senhor...a few amigos of mine work at the port and I told them you love Rio so much you decide to stay...” Juan’s words echoed like the slamming of a jailhouse cage and I knew Graham and I were no longer captives; we were now prisoners, trapped inside a cell without walls or bars, left to die like Napoleon on an island, forsaken men because of our own device and Rome all but vanished from the globe, becoming a place I’d never see with my own nostrils, taste with my own ears, hear with my own eyes and smell with my own taste buds...

We arrived at the auto the next morning, close to noon. I knew because the sun was fully above our heads and was keenly judging our misconduct. Still no one was in a talking mood, but I couldn’t tell if I preferred silence or if I knew that Juan preferred it for me. I was indeed a prisoner save for a pair of hand restraints. I even kept my wrists pressed together as if I were wearing a pair, because Juan clearly suggested with the way he held his machete that if I so much as broke wind he’d cut my asshole out and wear it around his neck like a medallion. I had grown quite fond of my asshole and desired it to remain where it was, between the two pale and quivering cheeks of my buttocks, which was now taking a beating on the hard and rutted road back to Rio. While trying to keep my heart in rhythm by attempting to predict each bump, I began to imagine my great escape from this invisible tyranny. I pictured myself in the black and white striped pajamas, digging under a fence or scaling a wall while a siren rang into the night and a massive spotlight haphazardly shined on the yard as two guards tussled over it, each wanting to be the one who captured the great and daring Homer Miller. In the face of all my recent sorrow this thought brought a smile to my lips. How I’d swim through shark infested waters. I’d mug a man on the street for his money, but only to buy proper clothes. He’d keep his life and never know how close he came to losing it. Then I’d take the first woman I saw, wooing her with a charm only a free man could wield. We’d dance until the twilight hour in a restaurant which had long been abandoned by the other customers and she’d never be able to imagine that only a few hours before I was sitting inside a cell dreaming of her face and the softness of her skin. There was a wild spirit still inside me and no matter what the turnout of these rather grim circumstances I knew that spirit would never be slain, my imagination told me so. That’s what I

had that Graham did not, imagination. And it provided to be an advantage, for while he was shitting in his britches, I was inside my own head fornicating with a beautiful woman, the dread still within me, but not paramount, not overthrowing me. Perhaps instead of ejaculate I would spew fear into my fantasy woman's womb, coating her cervix with a thick layer of my inner fright, but whichever juice I was excreting at the moment, I was oblivious. That was an important survival skill to have, denial. Chances were Juan was taking us to get his money and then he'd more than likely kill us, because why have two bumbling Americans around that could identify you as the murderer of a little boy? It would just be simpler to murder us as well. I knew this, but I simply chose not to acknowledge it. Graham on the other hand was dwelling on every bloody detail, the vomit churning inside the flesh caldron of his stomach, waiting to propel itself all over his fine Italian shoes. I began to think of crazy ways of defending myself from Juan. Maybe I'd defecate and cover myself in the excrement. No one wanted to chase after a man covered in his own raw sewage, that was a fact. Or perhaps I would play possum, gather up enough courage and then strike when least expected, grab Juan's machete and plunge it into his neck. I wasn't sure I could take a life, though, even with mine in danger of being taken. I don't think I could handle knowing that someone who once lived was now dead because of me. Call me a coward if you like, but to end a life was a monumental burden, though Juan seemed to be adjusting quite well. Sometimes when riding along in the trolley back home I'd look around and try to guess how many people were murderers, how many had taken a life as a means of self defense and how many had killed as a requirement for their military profession. Not more than one or two each, but all together that equaled at least six people sitting beside me with the awful deed weighing down on them. Between the four of us, Juan, Monray, Graham and myself, two had taken lives I was sure. That was a fifty percent average, half of us were damned, but I found solace in the fact that one day Juan and Monray's consciences would get the best of them and they'd end up old, embittered men with not long to live, still a lifetime away from redemption.

We entered Rio as night was falling on the city, Carnival already in full blast. The sound of drums could be heard when we were still a mile outside of the city, sounding from that distance like the heartbeat of the earth. As the trees parted and the mouth of the city opened we ditched the auto and continued on foot. It was another mile to the hotel, but I would have been surprised if we made it there at all, the streets were so flooded with people, more olive and black faces than I had ever seen, an American policeman's nightmare, I mused. There was dancing and shouting, confetti fell from the sky like rain, bells tolled, whistles whistled, chimes chimed, everything in complete jubilation, a harsh contrast to what I was feeling inside. I wanted to join in, I wanted to leap into the madness, immerse myself in their joy, for I could see the bright white smiles on the blacks' faces, the tears of pride welling up in their creamy eyes. I wanted to hoist a brightly colored umbrella into the air and join in the parade, letting my legs pounce to the constant, unbroken music. The laughter erupting from these people could be heard from space, I

thought. This was a unity I had never witnessed in America, and I was taken aback by it, overwhelmed by the sight of people from all different backgrounds, with different grievances and beliefs coming together to rejoice in the culture which united them. There had been a harmony promised to the American people, but it had never been realized, and watching Rio vibrate with happiness made America seem all the more quiet, all the more sullen and conflicted. It became stunningly clear to me that my homeland was in constant turmoil. We were a country of conflicting interests, always at each other's throats. There wasn't a time when we all, together as Americans, threw down our arms to celebrate. Christmas excluded Jews, Father's day excluded Mothers and it went on and on. Only Independence Day seemed like an appropriate holiday for us to put aside our differences, the celebration of the day the United States became a force in the world, but our hatred toward each other and the fervent hatred toward immigrants (which we claimed to welcome) prevented that. *Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses*, the Statue of Liberty says, while concealing her snatch beneath a copper robe, not liberated at all, hiding behind a broken chain and carrying a torch of ignorance and indifference. America was polished in a veneer which reflected all of our good intentions, but beneath it was the rotten wood of our actions, the splintered, bigoted reality that would one day be our undoing, how Rome was once the center of the world, we too would disintegrate, an amoeba dividing, all ending with the slight sizzle of a cigarette going out and happening just as quickly.

Shoulder to shoulder we inched our way through the boisterous crowd, Graham and I ahead of Juan and Monray, who had sheathed their machetes beneath their jackets. As I walked I let my arm fall open-handed and I ran my fingers along countless women's bottoms. It was deviance of me to hide my identity that way, but that added an extra thrill and for the first time in a long time I developed a little tent in my trousers. I thought the boy was deceased, but as it turned out I was his Doctor Frankenstein and he was my monster, reanimated with a touch of electricity harnessed between the cracks of the female toosh. Now he was walking, arms outstretched, absentmindedly searching for a hairy grave to be buried. At this point any muff would do, even the foul, stinking anus would be wonderful to plant my flag. I desperately wanted to see a woman on all fours, bent over like a farm animal, watching the trail of hair lead up her backside and surround the anus- thin, wavy hairs, as though undulating odor lines. I'd plunge deep, making her moo and nay in pleasure. Perhaps I'd bark like a dog, too. Sadly before I could imagine this fantasy in too much detail, we reached our hotel and the vicious shoving by Juan made me lose my erection in record time, becoming nothing more than balloon bursting. I was terribly glad to see the entrance of the hotel however, a golden arch above the door, mock pillars fixed to ledges with little girls holding onto them in order to see over the crowd, dancing with their little black feet, bare and smacking the concrete with gentle sound. I envied their innocence which I all but enjoyed a night before. Where did it go so quickly? Where did it run off to? Would I ever be able to get it back? It was true that nothing awful had ever happened to me.

Sure, the common childhood issues, but nothing truthfully traumatic. I had escaped young adulthood unscathed and then it was stripped away from me in a single instant, what I held most dear: my own personal outlook on life. Juan had taken it from me and returned it disfigured, mutilated and changed. Wasn't it the American story, a boy losing his innocence? Well, I had evaded it though boyhood and the States. I had to come to Brazil as a man to lose what was giving to me free of charge, and it stung like a wasp bite, aching in the way only a man could, internally.

We didn't spend much time in the hotel. Graham handed over the remainder of the money and Juan gleefully grinned when he opened to suitcase to examine it. After that it was back into the sea of happy people, none of them knowing our terror, and if we were seen from high above, an airplane perhaps, the captain would say to his co-pilot, "look at all those cheerful spirits," never assuming that inside that crowd were two doomed men on their way to an execution. Graham and I had no idea where Juan and Monray were taking us, but we were assuming it was to be a more secluded place with fewer witnesses. All they needed was a darkened alleyway, for with as much commotion as was occurring, a murder could take place in the shallowest shadow and no one would be the wiser. Carnival was an ideal time for clever thieves and bandits, for one man's ignorant bliss was another man's fortune. Anyway, to our most welcomed surprise, Juan directed us into a darkly lit shanty with what seemed to be even more people inside than on the street, all clamoring around in a circle. They were shouting in awful Portuguese at something, but I could see what it was. Sweaty men clinched wads of cash in their ape-like grips, pouring drool from behind sharpened teeth. I soon found that on a lower deck of the shanty was a small, dirt arena with two cobra snakes balancing on their bellies, fighting like two slippery cocks. I had heard of snake fighting in dimly lit shanties, but I could now verify the cliché as authentic. Juan guided us to a slender wooden staircase, which led to a miniature room covered heavily in dark drapery. He told us to wait outside as he entered, a bit of steam escaping the parted curtain. Graham and I did as we were told. We waited patiently like meek little children awaiting their allowance from their mummies and daddies.

"Bloody Christ," Graham said in a whisper directed toward my ear, "What the hell have I gotten us into?"

"A real fucking jackpot, *mate*." I said.

"You don't think they're going to..." he asked.

"Yes, I do." I said.

"Jesus, Homer, how can you be so calm at a time like this!" he exclaimed.

"I've made my peace with death."

"Oh, bollocks! Any man who says that is full of shit. We spend our whole lives running faster and faster away from death, while always getting closer."

"What do you want me to say? I'm terrified? That if there's an afterlife I will never stop

stabbing you in the heart with a dagger for getting me into this mess.”

“That’s better.” he said, crooked as ever. “Maybe you’ll have the opportunity to rip my heart out in this life.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I have a plan. It’s not a very good one, but it’s the only one we’ve got.”

I glanced over at Monray, who luckily was too transfixed by the snakes in the pit to pay attention to Graham and I’s incriminating whispering.

“Is that you why you were so quite in the auto? I thought you had finally lost it.”

I looked at Graham with tedious eyes and spoke up again.

“I suppose it would be foolish of me now to reject any cockamamie, halfwit, preposterous and completely inept plan of yours, so let’s hear it.” I said.

“When Juan returns we persuade him to have a drink. You were too inebriated the other night to notice but these Brazilians love to drink. We get him nice and belligerently drunk, and with Carnival there’s so much chaos outside that when we leave, we make a run for it. We’ll disappear into the crowd.”

“And what do we do after that? How do you suppose we get out of Brazil? Juan said it himself, he had his boys all over the airport.”

“We find Sid at the Severed Head and have him take us to the dock. He’d get us on a ship and away we go, smooth sailing all the way to Rome...literally.” He couldn’t resist being cheeky.

“I have to admit to you Graham, there’s a stroke of genius in there somewhere.”

“I knew you’d like it,” he said with a little laugh. “Now, I’ll pitch my drinks so I can stay in right mind to get us the hell out of here. You’ll have to drink him under the table.”

“Me?” I asked, like some two-bit comedian. “Why me? I can’t drink worth a damn.”

“Because I’m the only one who knows the streets of Rio. If I drank we’d never find our way out of this place.”

What Graham said was true. He had to be the one to stay sober. It wasn’t much of a plan, especially seeing that my skill as a drinker was the linchpin, but it was something. A few moments later Juan emerged. He stopped on the crowded platform, a few inches away from our faces and said,

“My man inside is making the ayahuasca. It will take a while. I suggest sit down and make ourselves comfortable.”

Again, we did as we were told, only this time Graham demurely offered to buy a round of drinks and Juan graciously accepted. Graham was right about the Brazilian sentiment to drink. Juan and Monray took the bait without a moment of speculation or hesitation. A bottle was delivered to the table by a one-armed man whose menacing features would have made him the villain in any crime novel. I felt like Dashiell Hammett, sitting slouched shouldered, making out the room, eyeing suspecting troglodytes with guns for hands. The bottle opened and we were like a band

of horses, off to the races, charging without rhyme or reason, chugging the liquid madness into our gullets. Drink after drink, bottle after bottle, I muscled down the rotten stuff, my gut turning into a washbasin, the lining of my stomach burning away like paper after a fire. Before long I was spinning around the room while sitting perfectly still. The booze hit me all at once like a bomb and I was sent reeling. My eyes couldn't focus on anything, only Graham would come in and out of clarity, his face trying to contain a wild smirk, for he knew I was terribly out to sea, floating on a raft amid an ocean made of whiskey. I'm not sure if it was stupid luck or divine intervention, but just the long fingers of the vomitus in my stomach reached into my esophagus and scratched the backs of my teeth, the same one-armed man as before notified Juan that he was wanted in the little back room with the slender wooden staircase. I swallowed hard, the skin of my face turning green. A few moments passed before Juan returned to the table, carrying with him the canvas bag, which now contained the ayahuasca in its final, dastardly form. It was as though the devil was inside that bag the way we eyed it. Juan stumbled a bit as he got nearer to the table. He was good and drunk. Monray sat quietly in a state of catatonia.

"Time for us to go." Juan said.

"How about one more for good measure?" Graham asked enthusiastically, raising his glass and slightly slurring his words. What a fine goddamn actor he was! He belonged on the London stage, receiving standing ovations and hankies soiled with tears. It wasn't the large scenes that made an actor, the entire exchange in that humid den; it was the subtleties, the slight slur of the word *measure* by Graham that sold this play of ours. Sure enough, proving that a keen enough mind could overcome any piece of steel in the world, Juan bent over the table, took the neck of the bottle and drank the remnants of the corrupting fluid down in the same way I'm sure his fat, repugnant father had taught him. I watched through the stained glass of the bottle as the last remaining drops of booze entered his mouth looking like a volcano in reverse, putting punctuation to his drunken, run-on sentence of existence. Checkmate, you son-of-a-bitch bastard! Juan stumbled backward and brought a clinched fist to his chest. After a moment he belched and I knew if I were to light a match beneath it the entire place would have gone up in flames. We were sucking in gasoline and exhaling ammonium nitrate, all of our souls, if Juan and Monray had one, were aflame, our chests illuminating like a candle behind a handkerchief. Perhaps Juan and Monray's illuminations were those of hellfire. Anyway, we were approaching the moment of truth. Juan was sufficiently drunk and I was free-floating in a distant galaxy. Graham would have to drag me around Rio by my necktie if I were to take one more sip. I suppose both of Graham's motives were accomplished that evening, the interior and exterior, one being the intoxication of Juan (with any luck he'd die of alcohol poisoning) and the other being having a laugh at my expense. No matter how serious the situation Graham always set aside some time to make me look like a complete horse's ass, but yet again, the cross had to be carried back down the mount, for his particularly prickly sense of humor was also saving my damned, insignificant life. We

walked out of the shack, Carnival now morphing into a sadistic mind game as I tried to keep my balance and refuse my body of retching. Apparently, Graham had added another element to our escape plan without telling me. Out from underneath his jacket came one of the empty whiskey bottles. With a fierce and hilariously feminine, now that I look back on it, shriek, Graham brought the bottle over Juan's skull, shattering it into a million pieces, each of which fell to the ground like crystalline teardrops. Juan dropped to the ground and reached for a shard of glass that had lodged itself in his cowlick. Blood was drawn and it was bright red against his midnight hide, dropping the consistency of melted plastic. I somehow managed to synchronize my tongue and lips to regurgitate the words, "What are you doing?"

"Watch Monray!" Graham responded in a wheeze. I turned to find Monray going for his machete. Without thought or technique I lifted foot and placed it between his legs, squarely landing a blow to Monray's testicles with the flat of my foot. I kicked him so hard my toes curled into his asshole and his balls found their way to his large intestine. Graham had shoved Juan to the ground and tore the canvas bag from around his shoulder.

"Let's get out of here!" he shouted. I hesitated for a moment, as only a drunk man would do, and then took off, following Graham through the mass of people, all of which were completely unaffected by scene of violence outside that little shanty where cardinal sins were broken. Drums still beat, confetti still fell, laughter still rang like telephones, waking the sun on the other side of the earth, the only difference was Graham and I were free men once again...

17

The Severed Head or *A Cabeça Cortada* was a few miles away, but that didn't stop Graham and me from running like hell as far and as fast as we could. We were sure that Juan would be after us, but we were also sure that he'd have better luck finding a virgin in New York City than he would finding Graham and I with Carnival consuming all of Rio. Besides, Juan was filled with drink and badly wounded. Graham had really walloped the bastard and I was fairly certain that after the kick I laid on Monray, he would spend the rest of his days ejaculating semen the consistency of snot during a sandstorm, so after a long while of elbowing our way through the crowd we found a dark little alley to catch our breath. I proceeded to vomit a brown, acidic juice and green bile after that. What pleasant flavors I can recall! If I had continued to heave any more, I would have been vomiting bits of my own stomach, for there was simply nothing else to come out. When I finished my spell, I didn't feel any better, my head was still spinning and my stomach still felt cramps like crumbling tissue paper in your palm, constricting my flabby excuse for muscles and causing by bellybutton to howl in pain. Though, I did have a few of my wits about me because I immediately regretted not shouting back to Juan and Monray as we ran off something silly like, "*See you in the funny papers!*" That would have been the perfect little slam to throw in there, or "*I bid you adieu!*" -something to that effect, but I suppose that would have to

remain a missed opportunity and one day fossilize into a regret, because I did not feel the need to go back and give our escape another try, and this time add a snappy exit line... Graham was ransacking the canvas bag, not paying any attention to me, and made a phony *ah-ha* noise when he found what he was looking for. First he pulled out his passport, which was now carried with it the stain by monkey blood, figuratively speaking, of course.

“That should make things a bit easier when we find Sid.” I said.

Graham nodded before pulling out the real prize, the ayahuasca, the substance this entire fucking crusade was about. How unimpressive it looked to me, a small brown substance, powdery like sand, only far more elusive. Sand was available in mass quantities, so much of it spread about the earth, making it ordinary and uninteresting, but this ayahuasca was remote, difficult to find and provided a way for people to escape the drudgery of their everyday lives. As much as people wanted to rely on drugs as a means of artistic creation, the truth was they really participated in mind altering materials out of cowardice. They couldn't face the pain and boredom of existence, they hadn't the belly for it, so they indulged in cowardly shortcuts designed to keep them unconscious while the world happened around them, refusing to take responsibility for anything. It was one of the few subjects I didn't feel was subjective. Drugs were a means of divorcing yourself from life, cutting the nerves that connected you to this plane of existence and it was downright pathetic to watch. Didn't people see the benefit of pain? Didn't they know how important agony and pain and disappointment and boredom were? They were starting points for you to salvage something from this life. They were what reminded you that you were alive. If you willingly glossed over the unsatisfactory parts of life, what stopped you from being dead, besides a heartbeat, which proved to be so arbitrary without conviction. I understood recreational drugs, I participated in them myself, but there are those who defend the use of drugs as some sort of enlightening experience, but it was nothing short of the exact opposite. You gained nothing from drug use, only lost things, because no imaginary vision can substitute the memory of something real and no dream could compare to having it come true.

We arrived at The Severed Head with nothing but the hope that Sid and Blanche were there. Chances were slim with Carnival in full swing, they were probably out among the people, making human contact, Blanche letting her hardened nipples rub against the backs of sailors, Sid's hard-on nudging women's posteriors as he tipped his hat and smiled. We entered the same red light as before, Graham and I's eyeballs darting around the room, frantically searching every nook and cranny. Thankfully I spotted them sitting in the corner drinking, arms locked, their love as intoxicating as it when we parted, Blanche's face covered in a black veil as though she was mourning a death. We rushed over to them tactlessly.

“Boy are we glad to see you, old man.” Graham said.

“Homer, Graham? What a pleasant surprise. Won't you sit down?” Sid said.

“Yes, have a seat. How are my boys?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have time for salutations, we’ve found ourselves in a bit of trouble.”
Graham went on to explain the situation.

“We need your help, old man. Is there any way you can get us to a boat?”

“Why yes,” Sid said. “There’s boats that that leave the harbor each morning at dawn.”

“To Rome?” Graham asked.

“Not too far away. The Gulf of Naples is a main destination for many freight ships leaving the Guanabara Bay. It’s not more than an hour train ride into Rome from there.”

“That’ll do.” Graham said.

“You’ll have to wait until sunrise, I’m sure of that.”

“What time is it now?” I asked.

Sid glanced at it pocket watch.

“A little past midnight. With the streets beginning to clear in an hour so, it will take us another thirty minutes to make it to the dock, you’ll be able to at least get aboard, situate yourselves.”

“We really appreciate this, Sid.” Graham said.

“What friend would I be if I didn’t come through for you now, old man?”

“A friend not worth having.” Graham said.

“Exactly.”

Sid sent Blanche home in a taxi, giving the driver an extra bill to make sure she arrived at their flat safe and sound.

“These damn Brazilians can’t be trusted unless you dangle a little green in front of their faces.” Sid said while lighting a cigarette and shaking the match out with his fingers.

“Shall we be on our way?” he continued.

“Indeed.” Graham said.

“Wait!” I interrupted, “There’s something I’ve got to do.”

“What in god’s name do you have to do?” Graham wanted to know.

“Someone I need to say goodbye to is all.” I said.

“You make friends fast wherever you go, don’t you Homer?” Sid said.

They didn’t seem to want anymore explanation, which was perfectly fine with me. I was still too drunk to speak clearly and the last thing I wanted to do was explain the guilt that was plaguing me. It was still weighing on me what I had done to Miranda outside The Severed Head and I hadn’t been able to get her voice out of my mind, her calling after me to acknowledge her, “*Homer, Homer, Homer.*” I had decided to visit her and apologize, perhaps reclaim some of the glory I had felt when we had made love. I had trampled a beautiful flower and I aimed to set the stem, right my wrong. The only problem was I hadn’t the slightest clue where she lived.

“Where are you taking us, Homer?” Graham asked.

“Back toward the hotel.”

“Back to the hotel, are you mad? That’s the first place Juan will go looking for us.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about him any longer.” Sid said, patting his pistol through his coat.

“Still, let’s just get out of here.” Graham said.

“I have to do this.” I said, each word so full of meaning that my lips weren’t accustomed to it. We walked for what felt like miles, the rats scurrying up and down the street, my feet wanting to break off with each step. The streets were getting less and less crowded, and eventually there were only a few girls walking past with confetti in their hair, and a few boys sitting on stoops shooting the bull. At that moment I felt like I could have been in any neighborhood in the world. It seemed everyplace had female night prowlers and boys on stoops. Men were made on stoops, children born and men made. Any urban city had stoop kids, boys that used them as home bases for games of tag, shadowed refuge from debilitating summer days and a place to congregate with friends. In that respect America was no different than Brazil. Stoops were the equalizers.

After almost a full two hours of loitering around the streets of Rio I saw a building that seemed familiar. It must have been some kind of drunken precognitive sense, for I was drunk when I first saw Miranda’s home and I was drunk trying to find it. As soon as I saw the building I knew it was the right one.

“That’s it!” I said.

“About bloody time.” Graham said, looking over his shoulder, certain Juan was going to find us and reclaim what had been stolen from him. I walked to the door and pounded on it. It was a warehouse so I assumed someone was awake and I didn’t need to use the usual sensitivities that went with knocking on doors in the middle of the night. After a time a young girl came to the door (probably a cock on her the size of the Empire State Building). She was in a little floral nightie and she was rubbing sleep from her eyes with both fists like a child. She said something to me in Portuguese, which I completely disregarded.

“Is Miranda home? Miranda.” I said. The little girl looked at me blankly.

“Miranda.” I said again. “Do you speak English?”

“A little.” she said. “Miranda not here. Carnival...not back. Sorry.”

I deflated like blimp with a bullet hole in the side. I wanted to say something else, something to make Miranda appear before me, but what? There was nothing left to say and I knew then that I would never be able to take back what I had done to Miranda, that she would always remember me as the American that had broken her heart.

“Thank you.” I said. The little girl closed the door and closed along with it the chances of me making it out of this city a good man.

Sid, Graham and I made it to the dock just as the sun was rising. Sid had put a call into his amigo working the harbor before we left A Cabeça Cortada and all the arrangements were

made. The sun was a piece of grapefruit on the horizon line, reaching out arms of fire into the night, coating the harbor in orange light that made everything seem beautiful. There was something about the stillness of the morning. Graham and I said our goodbyes to Sid who left us with a laugh and a puff of smoke from his cigarette. Jesus, he was handsome. The only thing left to do was board the giant, steel behemoth, rocking gently in the black water. A lump in my throat, we ascended up the walkway and set foot on the ship. We walked to the bow and leaned our arms on the railing, the cool mist of the ocean hitting our faces. Graham then looked to the canvas bag containing the money and the ayahuasca. He reached in and took the ayahuasca in his hand, letting it dangle above the water.

“A bag of sand.” I said, and he dropped it in, floating momentarily before resting eternally in its watery grave.

“I’m quite impressed with you for doing that.” I said.

“And I’m quite impressed with you saying goodbye to Miranda. I think there might be a soul in there somewhere.” Graham replied.

“Well, I didn’t get to say goodbye to her.”

“But you tried. There’s some honor in that, I suppose.” and then we fell silent, both of us literally running out of words to speak.

My Brazilian adventure had come to close. It was one of horror and grueling realization, but it was also one of joy and experimentation. I still hadn’t proved my hypothesis of rebellion, my wild heart still yearned for more, but I had met a couple who had replenished my belief in love, and I had engaged in a sexual intercourse that rivaled every social construct put into place up to that point... I didn’t enjoy seeing the boy die; I saw his face whenever I closed my eyes, lying still, so dreadfully still. I knew why Graham dropped the ayahuasca into the surf; it no longer seemed worth it having seen someone die as a result of trying to find it. I knew that Graham was wrestling with the same fact I was, the fact that that boy would still be alive if we hadn’t come to Rio. He’d still be kicking his football and smiling and laughing and experiencing boredom and seeking a way to escape it. But that was behind me and the ocean was in front of me, I could no longer dwell on the past. I had to, as phony as it sounded, look toward the future and anticipate all the tragedy and beauty it would bring. I looked at Graham and tried to count the grey hairs on his scalp, but I lost my place before long. We were young men and we were good men, we had found our crude form of redemption our last night in Rio, salvaging the only thing left to salvage, our souls. And from the bosom of Guanabara Bay to the Gulf of Naples we’d continue to live, to breathe, we’d eat our own guts out if it meant it brought us closer to freedom. And before long the cargo ship made its way out of the bay, the North Star naked behind the blazing sun, leading the way, and we broke the waves toward Rome...

