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THE CARP CASTLE
a novel by MacDonald Harris

Each man is a god imprisoned in a clown

CHAPTER ONE

Romer is running over a meadow, following a white form that emits strong erotic waves, as though it were a radio station, or a Vision of the Grail. It disappears into a thicket, flashes momentarily in an opening in the leaves, and disappears again with the abruptness of those white spots that sometimes dance on a movie screen at the end of a picture. Ahead of him on the grass he sees a nonsense English walking shoe with three rows of laces; its mate, he seems to remember, he encountered some time back. His own shoes are long gone, along with his coat, pants, and shirt. He sprints after Eliza into the thicket, which is full of prickles and thorn-bushes that sting his naked legs. It seems to him that he is moving very slowly, as though his limbs are stuck in molasses, while she is racing along at an astonishing speed for one who seems so high-minded and ethereal, so unathletic, in ordinary life. But he seems to be keeping up with her, so perhaps this is only some kind of hallucination caused by his lust.

He passes a white brassiere hanging from a tree-limb; the rest of her clothes she has strewn behind her on branches and bushes, as though, he thinks, to mark the way for her return, like a child in a fairy tale. Bursting out of the thicket, he catches sight of her again, far enough ahead that she seems a small china doll, clad now only in scrap of linen that twitches to the rhythm of her running legs. This makes him redouble his efforts, while at the same time pondering over the problem of how to remove his own underpants without falling behind in the pursuit. The two of them are careering over the meadow with a view of the Rhine to the left, a fair and pleasant ribbon of blue, flowing as though to define the ancient word meander through the verdant Hessian hills. Interrogating his racing thoughts, he makes the decision to stop for a moment to sacrifice his final garment to this priapic ceremony, if that is what it is. He knows a good deal about women, but not enough to know exactly what she has in mind or how it is all to end. It is possible that she had no idea herself, that she is counting on him to make the last touches of the dramaturge to this playlet of their common fancy. He stumbles or rather hops over the meadow with one foot bouncing in the grass and the other leg doubled up like a ballet dancer in an effort to thrust it through the opening in his underpants. He glances ahead and sees that Eliza, with a parallel problem, has solved it by rending her garment and leaving the fragments floating in the air behind her, but male underpants are made of sturdier stuff. He gets it off the first leg and, after a brief contretemps in which it hangs for a moment on the hat rack, he manages to slide it down the other leg and kick it off.

Now he begins running again, preceded by the prow of his sex. Her white form swims dizzily before him, displaying its cleft as though made with the stroke of a brimming pen, with a little cross-mark under it. His head seems about to split with desire. She turns briefly to look at him, as she has at least twice since they began their chase by the tumbled picnic basket and the motorbike leaking oil onto the grass, and emits a shriek of laughter. He must look silly enough, he imagines. Utilizing her eyes as mirrors, he sees bounding over the meadow his own tall figure with its spindly arms and legs, his face moon-pitted with the scars of old acne, and his uncombed scraggle of black hair with a tuft the same color lower down. His large hands and feet are matched in size by his penis, so that the true symmetry, the true logic, of his body is not apparent when he is going about the world with his clothes on. Has she noticed this? Perhaps this is the source of her laugh.

Ahead there is a woods of beeches and oaks. She disappears into the maze of tree-trunks with another fleeting glance behind her; the last he sees is her elongated face with its freckles and red hair, its diagonal glance, its half-fearful, half-enticing expression of a Botticelli nymph fleeing from a satyr. He plunges after her into the woods, swerves, lunges, adroitly leaps a projecting root that might send him tumbling, and sees approaching him, with a microscopic exactitude and in immense detail, like an illustration in a botany text, the trunk of a large beech; he even sees the minutest striations in the smooth olive-green bark, the tiny flecks of lichen, an insect no larger than an eyebrow.

He has an extraordinary thought. This instant! It is now and he is here, focussing on the gray cylinder of vegetable matter, and that is the only thing he sees, and that is all there is--this is the moment. This instant is the only instant. It is inevitable that this should happen, but he has never anticipated it, for all his recondite studies in universities in America and Germany, his doctoral degree in metaphysics; although, he knows in the same instant, he could not be aware of the phenomenon if it were not for his philosophical training. The classic theories of time in Aristotle and Newton as something which "in itself and from its own nature flows equally" are false. All except this instant is past, which is only a rapidly dimming shadow in the mind, or future, an even more evanescent shimmer which, in fact, doesn't exist.

Once this idea has occurred to him (and it all happens necessarily in less than a wink) everything else becomes unimportant. For what significance can it have that, in the past he was born on a Venezuelan cork farm and had an overweight Spanish woman for a mother, or that in the future he will catch Eliza in the woods and something or other will happen, or that he will not catch her and will go back to the hotel in Mainz on his motorbike with whatever pieces of his clothing he is able to retrieve; or that other things may or may not happen in the future, that he will soar over London in an airship, that he will marry a pygmy in Africa, that he will become a gangster in Chicago, or a pasha in Cairo, or die in a charity hospital in Toronto; it is all moonshine and cobwebs and in reality he is trapped in this infinitely tiny moment, staring at an oblong of beech-bark?

The secret of the universe is that time is a single particle. If only he had known it then, when he was a student of philosophy! The speculations he labored over for so many months, immured in the dusty cloisters of libraries, would have been cast joyously out the window in favor of this universal, all-encompassing, final, definitive end to metaphysics, the doctrine of the Unique and Only Instant. And it would not even have been necessary to write a book about it, only to place a dot on a blank page, or do nothing; simply to allow the eloquence of this discovery to burst on the world like an enormous spark, obliterating history, memory, religions and gods, human consciousness itself, destroying once and for all that tenuous and invisible Thread so much speculated over by deep thinkers and sages, a filament which does not exist once it has been replaced by this tiny atom, the last speck that is left of the concept of time, floating in the air in front of a beech-tree. This tree-trunk, henceforth, is the only book anyone is allowed to read. The word beech, Anglo-Saxon boc, bece, or beoce, German Buch, Swedish boc, means at once a beech-tree and a book. The first books in Europe, the ancient runic tablets, were formed of thin boards of beech-wood.

The ten thousand books he has read! And that ponderous tome, bound in green imitation leather, which he carried so tediously on busses and trains across the landscape of the Middle West. Its greasy surface, its dog-eared pages, its typing mistakes, its odor of mildew, sweat, and fatigue! Its title page on which the e in Angels had slipped slightly as all the identical replications of this letter slipped on his cheap Corona portable, giving the impression that this machine had a kind of speech defect that made it stammer every time it came to this most common of English phonemes: "This is a sampl_e of the work don_e on this typ_ewrit_er." With this beech, this boc in one hand and in the other a prismatic valise whose cardboard entrails were beginning to reveal themselves, he descended from a steaming and hissing green monster into a bus terminal in Ann Arbor stunningly discouraging in its squalor, surely a warning that they who attempt to enter the academic world through this gate should abandon all hope. He paused for a cup of coffee and a pickle from the free jar, all he could afford for lunch. Then on foot, carrying his two fardels, to the university and the philosophy department, with pauses to ask the way from students and others, who stared with curiosity at his tall form with its oversplit legs, his large hands and feet (they couldn't see the fifth monster), and his clutch of black hair.

The interview was scheduled for two-thirty. He was forty-two minutes early when he arrived, and he found himself waiting in another comic parody of hell similar to the bus station: a room arranged like a counting-room in a novel of Dickens, with a yellow wooden counter, much dented and

varnished, running the long way down its center. On one side of the counter was a pair of wooden chairs of the same Dickensian vintage, and on the other, in place of the clerk with his green eyeshade, was a receptionist whose name, as he could see from the oblong of cardboard on the counter in front of her, was Adeline Wayde; he recorded this information knowing that it was utterly useless and that never in his life, even if he got the job and spent the rest of his life in this place, would he call her anything but "Excuse me" and "Miss." Something about her--her dress, her mien, the askew black ribbon in her hair, her odor of nutmeg--radiated pessimism; that is, not that she was pessimistic herself but that she possessed a hidden store of pessimism-gas, like the stink in the gland of a skunk, which she squirted in anyone's direction as soon as he came into the room; at least if he were a former graduate student and now a helpless, hopeless candidate, probably one of dozens, for a position as lecturer in philosophy in this university. Romer already knew enough about universities to know that they are run by secretaries. And she was not going to give him this job.

First, though, it was necessary to go through the formalities of the interview, to be conducted by Professor Winwein, the head of the department, and a search committee hand-picked by him to confirm Miss Wayde's snap judgments and banish the unqualified to the farthest reaches of Ultima Thule, which was probably some college in Montana with the word creek in its name. Romer set down his two burdens, the dissertation and the cardboard suitcase, and took a seat. After the forty-two minute wait one of the varnished doors at the end of the room opened, a sepulchral voice spoke an undecipherable word, and Miss Wayde said, "The committee will see you now." He decided to leave the cardboard suitcase where it was but take the dissertation with him. Passing through the door, he found himself in another room paneled in yellow wood, this one without a counter, in which five chairs were arranged, four of them in an arc facing the fifth, which had an air of wishing to retreat toward the wall. Through the window was the sylvan campus and glimpses of a lake, and in the four chairs were four professors. Professor Winwein was easy enough to identify. He was dressed in a tweed jacket, a white shirt, and a red bow tie, and his hair was cut as straight across his forehead as a Doric lintel. Everything about him was square; his jaw, his hands, his shoulders, his eyes, almost; he seemed to be assembled of pieces from a child's toy that was easy to fit together. Since he was made up of such simple components, it was easy for him to be good-natured. We were in the Middle West, of course, where people are friendly and without ostentation. Yet even though he was a kindly man, his manner suggested, he was one who regrettably had been called by destiny to pass painful judgments. Imagine if you can a good man, a compassionate man, a Sunday-school teacher who had been forced or persuaded by circumstances to become an executioner in charge of a hanging. His basic good nature, and his unfortunate role at this afternoon's interview, strove on his countenance like two spiders.

The other three professors were gray men who may have been alive in their youth but now preferred to remain corpses or waxworks figures.

"Tell us something about yourself, Mr. Gault," suggested Professor Winwein (sympathetically, while mentally testing the drop of his gallows).

"I have a doctorate in philosophy and I believe I am qualified for this position."

"I understand your dissertation was in metaphysics?" Professor Winwein glanced at the green tome on Romer's knees but did not ask to see it.

"It is a study of angels."

Glances from the red bow tie to the corpses. "And what did you say about them?"

"I wouldn't say I said anything about them. The dissertation is a compendium of what is known or alleged about angels, drawn from such sources as Scriptures, the writings of the early Church Fathers, and the Cabala."

"Is it doctrinaire?"

"No, it is not."

"Is it universal?"

"No, it confines itself to the Judeo-Christian tradition, with some ancillary material from Sufi and Zoroastrian texts."

"Did you find these sources consistent on the subject?"

"Yes."

"Which might suggest that angels really do exist."

Romer only said, "It all probably came from ancient Persia in the beginning."

"What part is played in the classification of angels by Dionysius the Areopagite?"

Romer was a little stunned by the erudition of this question. He suspected that Professor Winwein had been looking into the encyclopedia before the interview. However, this was easy stuff after his doctoral examination. "He ought properly to be called the Pseudo-Areopagite, since the historical figure didn't write books. He is responsible for the concept of the Divine Orders, ranging from Seraphim and Cherubim to Angels properly speaking. The book in question is the De Hierarchia Celesti, dating from the fifth century and known in English as The Celestial Hierarchy," he added in what was perhaps a terrible blunder, suspecting that they might take it as a slur on their mastery of Latin.

Professor Winwein let it pass. And now, to Romer's surprise, one of the corpses galvanized into life, opened his mouth, and asked a question. "Do you know how many angels can stand on the point of a pin?"

"Yes I do. As everyone knows, this was a popular subject of debate among scholars in the middle ages. Ultimately, it is a matter of whether angels have a corporeal existence and occupy space, a very cogent question and one that lies at the very heart of the nature of angels. Most medieval scholars, the ones whose arguments prevailed, contended that any number of angels could stand on the point of a pin, that is, that angels have no corporeal existence and do not occupy space. This is comforting to logic but disappointing to the emotions. A minority of scholars, those who lost the argument, believed that only one angel could stand on the point of a pin, but without discomfort. That is, that angels do have corporeal existence and occupy space, but have no weight. The question of whether there could be material substance without weight was one that was left to the subsequent epoch, the Renaissance. It is only in modern times that scientists have discovered that in fact there do exist particles of matter without weight. So, concerning the problem of the nature of angels, the doctrine out of favor since the twelfth century is once more plausible."

A silence followed this lecture. Professor Winwein's kind wrinkles strove with his judgmental ones. The three corpses exchanged glances, but Professor Winwein stared thoughtfully at the floor.

"You a Christian?" grunted one of the corpses.

"No, sir."

"Well," said Professor Winwein, heaving himself around to another position in his uncomfortable chair, "there are other candidates."

"Yes, sir."

"Teachingability is of the essence. You teach?"

Romer wasn't sure whether he meant can you teach, have you taught, or will you teach. "Yes, sir."

"I'll let you know by mail. Be sure to leave your correct address with Miss Wayde in the front office."

"Good luck, young feller," said the corpse who had asked if he was a Christian. "You got a guardian angel?"

"Everybody does."

"Damned right they do."

There were no farewells, just as there had been no greetings. Romer returned to the yellow anteroom, left his address as instructed, and walked out onto the sylvan and green, misleadingly innocent campus. A boy sitting on the grass in an athletic sweater was playing a ukelele for a girl with cherry lips and a bow in her hair. It seemed unlikely that these two would take his course in angels

even if he should get the job. He strode with long paces, his two burdens dangling from his arms, toward the town a short distance away. He had neglected to find out how you got back from the university to the bus station. All the people who had helped him find the philosophy department had now disappeared, probably shunning him because of the dismal results of the interview. A respectable old lady in black went by, carrying a reticule. A nasty little boy who smirked. A campus guard who was dressed like a bobby in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, with a soup-bowl helmet. That explanation was really unlikely; he changed his judgment and decided that it was an actor in costume going to a rehearsal.

Wending down a tree-shaded avenue in search not of the bus station but of someone who would tell him where the bus station was, he found himself approaching a building that looked very much like a church without a steeple, except that it had a flat roof with rounded edges like a Civil War fort, or a badly-made cake; why then did it seem to him like a church when it had no qualities of a church? Something about the atmosphere it exuded, the sickly ivy languishing along the wall, the grass trampled by many feet, the double row of lilacs on the walk leading up to the stout oaken door. According to the sign over the entrance the place was called Amity Hall. In the lawn by the door was a kind of picture-frame set on posts, and inside it a surface of felt into which white celluloid letters could be pressed. What the white letters said was so prescient and yet so ludicrous that his soul responded only with a flat sour laugh.

THE SECRETS

OF

METAPHYSICS

Romer stood on the sidewalk captivated by this naive and confident advertisement for the solution to the mysteries he had pursued through a hundred libraries and a thousand books, secrets that the Fathers of the Church, the German Idealistic philosophers, and the Sufis of the desert had pursued for centuries, starving and praying, tearing their hair and throwing dust on themselves, all the arguments in which Hegel had disputed Kant, Bishop Berkeley with Hume, the midnight lucubrations of Spinoza, Saint Teresa weeping in ecstasy, the epic quarrels of the great councils of the Church, the Revelations of Saint John; and now these white celluloid letters, the ingenious product of the American chemical industry, proposed to have solved it all and to be ready to explain it at seven o'clock this evening, no entrance charge.

Romer sat down on the lawn of the Amity Hall and laughed silently, and after a while he found that this exercise was making tears come into his eyes; he didn't know what this meant but he suspected that such absolute foolishness was so close to God that it made the spirit rise. He abandoned any hope of finding the bus station. He sat for a while longer on the grass (he realized now that he was very tired from his journeys, from the nights without sleep on the bus, and from the strain of the interview now that it was over), then he got up with his two burdens and walked a couple of blocks until he found a German bakery, where he bought a cruller and ate it along with some tap water he stole from a faucet in somebody's front yard.

He was back at the Amity Hall at a quarter of seven and went in and took his seat. There were already several dozen people scattered around in the hall, which was illuminated with dim tulip bulbs around the walls. From his scant knowledge of American folklore he recognized now what the place was, a hall built for meetings of the Chautauqua Institution, a form of popular education which flourished around the end of the previous century. Only in a Chautauqua Hall would they undertake to explain all the secrets of metaphysics in one evening, and go on the next week to The Problems of the Indian Sub-Continent, or The Truth About Evolution. He waited while the hall filled up, first slowly,

then rapidly, with a rush of humanity like sudden bird-wings at the end so that every seat was taken. There was no pulpit or lectern, but at the front of the hall was a small raised platform, a kind of plinth, with a green tapestry behind it on a frame. In the dim light he was aware of a number of young men all the same age, about twenty-five, clad in Greek tunics and leggings, who floated about the hall in an apparently aimless way; and as a counterpoint to them, an equal number of females of the same age, who wore similar classical garb with headbands and stood in fixed places as though they were serving as columns of an imaginary temple.

A stir passed over the hall, then it became silent; then it stirred again, as though the faintest rustle of wings were brushing its walls. There was an odor of varnish and furniture wax, and the usual other unpleasant odors that reminded Romer of churches and religion: candle-wax, stale flowers, lilac, fly-spray, mildewed lace, a faint hint that someone had passed a small amount of intestinal gas about a half an hour before. The rustle died away again and left a silence in which the grains of dust in the air could be heard crepitating and a single fly buzzed against a window. The tulip-lamps around the walls dimmed, then a new light arose over the plinth at the front of the wall, a pale greenish phosphorescence.

Someone next to Romer was breathing. It was a woman, a young woman as far as he could tell; all he could make out of her in the gloom was her eyes, a swatch of red hair, and a face with freckles. To judge from her breathing, this person was at an extraordinary pitch of anticipation, as though she were trembling at the door of the nuptial chamber. Romer was filled with skepticism; he laughed inwardly but discovered to his chagrin that the laugh had somehow come to the surface and burst out through his larynx, making a sound like a fox barking. The freckled girl stared at him severely--he could only see the glowing eyes and the lids that enclosed them but that was enough--then she raised a judgmental finger and laid it briefly on his knee. He was about to object to this, or to lay his own finger playfully on her knee to see what she would do, when all thoughts, feelings, emotions, even the sense of his own bodily existence and his position in time and space were driven from his consciousness.

Skeptical by nature, he strove to identify the source of this sensation or altered state. At first he felt nothing but a green glow in his own body, or in the space where his own body had been just a moment before. Then it came to him, as though it were an extraordinary discovery, that he still had eyes and they were still functioning, and he could go on using them much as he had before. Ears, even. All his senses seemed to be relatively intact, although altered now by some sea-change, as though he were seeing colors never seen before and hearing sounds at previously unknown wavelengths. He was being touched all over, but very gently, by the green glow. He grasped at last (although it was only a fraction of a second later) that all these phenomena were connected with the fact that a previously invisible figure had taken form in the phosphorence before the tapestry, a woman neither young nor old, with a crown of golden hair and a complexion tinged with greenish-gold, wearing a gown similar to those of the vestals holding up the imaginary temple but more elaborate, with tiny specks of something that sparkled, and a braided belt curving down to end in a knot at her groin. The gown was embroidered with elaborately varied forms of the letter M, and there were other ornate M's on the tapestry behind her. Her body seemed emaciated, glowing, faint, as though sustained by spirit. He made out now the source of the green light in the atmosphere; floating in the air over her head, without any visible suspension, were letters that spelled MOIRA in turquoise fire so bright that it seemed to press into his brain.

He didn't notice when she began speaking; she had been speaking for some time before he started to himself and realized that, just as his eyes and ears still worked, so did words still have significance and could be listened to and understood. She was speaking, in fact, of the Wisdom of the East, although Romer couldn't have given a clear factual account of what she was saying and instead received the purport of her message in some subliminal way that transcended language and logic. He caught the terms *Atmān* and *Maya*; she spoke of the ascending nature of the person, of the spirit, the body, and the Astral Body. She went on to speak of the senses. She was saying in her melodious voice

that we believe we have five senses, yet a man born blind believes there are only four. He has no notion of this fifth sense that lies beyond his grasp; he cannot conceive what it would be like to see something, what the nature of that experience would be, whether it would be anything like smell, or touch, or hearing. Sight cannot be described to anyone who has not sight. But in reality we possess not five senses but a hundred; and the discovery of these other senses is open to us, and can lead us through porphyry gates into endless exquisite gardens of instruction and ecstasy. And he knew all at once that this was true; he saw the porphyry gates, he caught glimpses of the shining connected gardens like links on a chain stretching into the distance, and he felt an intuition suddenly what one of these new senses would be like; not all of them, that would be too much for the mortal mind to absorb; yet since this one was revealed to him, vouchsafed to him like a gift, he knew for a certainty that the others existed too, links in the chain to be sought out one by one. This first of his new faculties was in the middle of his head, near the pineal gland, and although he didn't know how to use it yet he knew that its function was to see through the flesh into the soul-gardens of others. All this was only an effect of the lighting, a small rational voice inside him told him. As a skeptic, he was quite well aware that his consciousness was being manipulated by the darkness, by the churchly and mephitic odors, by the motionless maidens, by the fiery legend over the head of the woman who spoke and the phosphorescent pinpoints that buzzed in the air around her like electric fleas; he knew this and he didn't care! It was absolutely unimportant! No matter if she were a piece of cardboard moved by a child's magnet; she had shown his way to the sill where he could catch a glimpse of a sixth power, one that he one day might possess and learn to snap like a whip, to play like a violin, but only if he kept his eyes fixed on this vision in the dark and lucent air.

Moira.

He became aware that she was still speaking, and now that she was addressing him directly, even that she had her eyes fixed on him; like a portrait in a museum, whose painted eyes are fixed always on the viewer no matter if he moves to one side of the room or the other, she had found the trick of catching and holding the eye of each single member of the throng in the hall, so that the room and everything in it was enclosed in one huge Eye as though swimming in a watery planet, seas, realms, lands, cities, forests curved and enclosed in this orb in which everything was mirrored by itself and yet everything was transformed, curved, distorted, bending gracefully on itself, shining like a new coin; and so her words, like the rays from this oblong sphere of mirrors, also enclosed and permeated the hall, speaking at once to all and yet to the most secret listening-ear of the soul: you have sought in many books, you have coursed over the world, consulting sages and poring over musty volumes, you have questioned doctors and pundits, you have sat in lecture-halls until your buttock-bones were sore, and you came out the same little boy that you went in. Your mind is full and your soul is still hungry. Or perhaps these were things that he, Romer, was telling himself. Because she was also speaking out loud, and to everybody.

"Who is Moira, you ask? Moira is your mother, your lover, and your innermost friend. Moira is the comforting shadow that goes always with you, the voice that answers when you cry out in the void. Moira is your other self, the reflection you seek when you go about in the world looking for the eternal Other who is to be your mate in the world and in Heaven."

And then she told a fable, familiar to Romer from his philosophical studies, although he hardly recognized it in her new words, according to which man and woman were once a single creature joined together, blissful and complete, and then an angry god came along and divided them in two, so that they wandered eternally about the world like two wounded seashells, with their naked flesh exposed, seeking, while hardly knowing what they were doing or why they were doing it, to be reunited with their missing halves. She invited them to close their eyes and imagine finding this longed-for other half of their being and becoming one with it again; they would see this vision, she promised them; and they all closed their eyes and saw, at least Romer did; he was not rejoined with his long-lost and yearned-for female reflection but he saw in an advertisement, so to speak, how this would be, in the most vivid of colors, shapes, and feelings, as though he only had to rise and speak, to

offer his soul in humility, to lay a coin on the step of the temple, and this would happen. Her voice went on, melodious and low, so fresh it seemed almost that of a girl; she was speaking now of the Land of Gioconda which takes its name from a smile, where everything is jocund, gay, mirthful, cheery, and joyous—“For where the spirit is, also so is mirth; the spirit is not somber, it is not restrained, it burst out in the gaiety of laughter”--a land perhaps of the soul, perhaps a real land in geography, she was not specific--where the creatures of the earth are intoxicated by warmth and perfume, where the sap of the earth flows freely, where the divided souls portrayed by the Philosopher, she promised, would be at last reunited in bliss.

Then the voice ended, with a small plash like a dwindling brook, and he heard only the breathing of the red-headed girl next to him. His eyes were still closed, he realized, in an effort to catch a final glimpse of the reuniting of this divided and lovelorn sea-creature, half of which was himself; he opened them and saw again the bright turquoise letters in the air and the effulgence of light hovering over Moira's visage, an illumination which seemed to fill the hall as the egg fills the egg-shell, penetrating every corner, but gently and without effort. The five letters of light were bright green, the illumination of the air about her head was pale green, and the energy that filled the hall was a dream-green of so faint a hue that it seemed merely a green thought inhabiting the air. He knew why the color of Moira's power was green, and now he struggled to express this with the--as it now seemed to him--pitiful apparatus of language that his mind had been given to think with. Irish, Ireland, leprechauns, Little People, the fundamental power and provender of grass, the green of the electric spark, the green of the sea, of the salamander, of the lemur's eye, of the most occult of planets and stars, the green flash that, for those who watch carefully, is visible for a fraction of a second in the last thread of the setting sun. But all these were greens of the senses, of the visible world, and fell short like maggots climbing a mountain as soon as they attempted to express this radiant and invisible essence of the nature of Moira. “Gioconda is green,” he heard her saying. He had not been listening for some time. “Gioconda is verdant, fertile, melodious, loving, and healing. Gioconda is plentitude. Gioconda is deep in the earth and it is on the surface of your heart. And now I bless you all, go forth into the world, disseminate your love in dark places, and listen with your innermost ear for the Music of the Spheres.”

There was a glint in the darkness before Moira's figure. A trumpet appeared in her hands; it materialized from the air, or someone handed it to her from behind the tapestry. It was a curious instrument, a long and straight trump of the kind angels play in old paintings, with shiny mother-of-pearl keys in the center. In the hushed silence she raised it to her lips and a slow and haunting phrase of music filled the hall. Then, after a pause, another, then the first phrase again, and this time the final questioning note seemed to hint at some kind of an answer. It was hard to grasp what it was about the music that moved the emotions. The voice that spoke was not human; it had a soul of brass. The final phrase seemed to hang in the air unfinished, yet it suggested to the spirit that by questioning and seeking, by pursuing the trace of that enigmatic final note, one might in time follow in the graces of the music that came after, a music so far unsounded, that led to the final things, to absolute bliss.

The lights came on and the burning green legend disappeared. The audience stirred with a rustle and began rising to its feet. The red-haired girl next to Romer had disappeared. In the suddenly banal light, which transformed everything from its dream-form back into reality, Moira was standing before the tapestry surrounded by a crowd of people. Over her head Romer saw a sterile metal frame of some kind in the shape of the five letters. Feeling dazed and physically numb, he got up and began working his way toward the front of the hall. In the crowd around Moira the young men in Greek tunics mingled with the maidens in classical garb and a dozen or so other people who had nothing much in common except a general look of eccentricity. They were of both sexes and all ages; some were dressed in somber clothes and some garishly. One woman wore a crest of peacock feathers and one man a Mexican sombrero. To his surprise he noticed among them the old lady in black he had crossed on the university campus; she was standing next to Moira and holding the shiny brass trump. He saw now that she had a deformity in her forehead, a protrusion like half an egg under the skin.

Through his vision passed the pale girl with red hair and a light dusting of freckles who had sat next to him during the Séance; in the mere fraction of an instant she stared at him skeptically but with interest.

He was distracted from her by Moira, who had caught sight of him and was looking fixedly in his direction. The others turned as he approached. It was as though Moira awaited him there before the tapestry, and as though the others too knew that he would come and were anticipating his arrival. The crowd around her was no longer a tight knot as it had been only a few moments before. It had reassembled into a semicircle facing him as he approached, or so it seemed to him; there was an element of hallucination about everything that happened in the hall. He stopped a few feet from Moira. They all stood fixed, Romer, Moira, and the others, as though a photographer had asked them to remain motionless for a moment while he adjusted his apparatus.

Behind Moira he made out the red-headed girl, who like the others was gazing at him solemnly and without expression. He knew that he must speak. He had a queer feeling of danger, of portent, of the tremendous privilege of the moment. All his arcane studies in universities came to a focus in this moment in which he was granted the gift of asking a single question, like a boy in an Arab tale. If he asked the right one, all the mysteries he had pursued for so many years might dissolve away in an instant. After all his years of education he still knew nothing, but now he knew which question to ask. Where does spirit meet flesh, how can thought move matter, where was the invisible link between the spiritual and the material world? There were a hundred ways of putting the question, but they all amounted to the same thing: the Noumenon and the Phenomenon, the body and the soul, the stone and the thought. He knew for a certainty that she possessed the sixth sense she spoke of in the stance which could see into the hearts of others, that through this she knew the question he was going to ask, and that through this power or some higher one, still unglimped, she possessed the answer. Abruptly, without any preliminary, as though under a spell or a charm, he articulated the colossal enigma.

"What is the relation between mind and body?"

She smiled faintly, almost imperceptibly. After a moment she said in a low voice, "The Silver Cord."

Nothing more. It was a phrase as round and perfect, as elusive, as a drop of mercury, that said nothing and only left a mystery in place of the question it proposed to answer. And yet Romer was stirred as though with an electric shock. Just as, an hour ago when Moira had told him there might be a hundred senses, he had caught a glimpse of what the first of these might be, as a blind man might imagine a speck of sunlight under the fold of his lid, so he had the intuition, not that he knew the answer to this Question of Questions, but that he stood on the doorstep of the answer and with only a step, if he found the trick, he could pass into the sanctum. There was a Silver Cord and Moira had seen and touched it. If it was not visible to him yet, why this was hardly to be expected, when only a few hours before he was sitting in the gloomy and varnished offices of a university, matching wits with a quartet of professors. The Silver Cord! Of course that was it! The Mind and the Body. On the one hand, in his vision, was a silvery mist that trembled in the air and emitted light, energy, and love, but was invisible so it could only be apprehended by the inner eye, and on the other hand a lump of brown squamous matter that exuded a putrid lymph and smelled of musk; and connecting them a brilliant sinew of light, like the perfect idea of electricity before electricity was invented, and infinitely stretchable, so that the soul and body could be united in the same space or the soul could leave the body behind in dream, in trance, and wander far away to the far corners of the earth, or to other planets and galaxies, while wisdom and love flew up and down the Cord as on a busy telegraph line. A warm wave of gratitude, a spasm of devotion, welled up in him for this priceless gift. With a small remaining scrap of his intellect he asked himself why he believed so thoroughly now that the Silver Cord existed. The answer he found almost immediately: because Moira had told him so. He was stunned to find the way belief had taken up residence in his soul, almost without his knowing it. Only a few hours ago he would have mocked at such a mental state, and would have been capable of bringing to bear a whole complicated apparatus of modern scholarship to demolish it, to reduce it to a

few glittering and naive shards of debris. He found hanging in his forebrain a phrase from one of the medieval fathers, Anselm of Canterbury: Credo ut intelligam, first I believe and then I know.

The crowd around Moira was dispersing. He floated away from the plinth and moved aimlessly among the other silent figures in the hall, now his companions, his sisters, his fellow souls in the Guild of Love: the Frieze of handsome young men, the pale and ethereal Vestals in their robes, even the old lady in black with the bump in her forehead who, as he was to learn, was Aunt Madge Foxthorn, an inveterate disciple of Moira who had been with her as long as anybody knew. The others included Joan Esterel the would-be and unsuccessful lover of Moira; Joshua Main, a rubicund old Australian sailor with a sweet baritone voice and a fondness for the bottle (he was the one in the Mexican sombrero); Cereste Legrand the manager of the Guild; Bella and Benicia Lake, the two sisters from Oakland; and Eliza Burney, the young Englishwoman with red hair and pale skin whose image had struck him powerfully, if only for an instant, as the Séance ended, and who served, it seemed, as Moira's medical attaché, a kind of nurse who wrapped up sprains and stopped nosebleeds for the others. Many other people might belong to the Guild, all those who pressed up to Moira after a Séance and offered a contribution, but they were not included in the elect of the inner circle, those who traveled about the world with Moira. There were about a score of these, as far as Romer could tell, although they floated around in an ethereal way that made them hard to count. All these people, Frieze, Vestals, and the others, accepted him from that first evening as one of their own without any sort of initiation. This seemed to him perfectly natural, from the moment when Moira had caught his eye in the Séance and the green fire had passed into his soul.

When he left the hall with the others that evening he forgot to take the dissertation and the suitcase with him and he never felt the need to go back for them. He would never need the dissertation now to become an instructor in a university. As for the suitcase, in subsequent months he sometimes had a vision of this pitiful collection of objects trying to go on and continue its existence without him: black socks rolled into balls, old-fashioned underwear, a Gillette safety razor, a packet of prophylactics with ticklers, a battered tea-egg, and a device for boiling water in rooming houses; all things which, united by his ownership, had a certain logic to them and filled a place in the world of particulars, but abandoned by him could only degenerate into the most abject kind of non-existence, forgotten in a dusty broom-closet or fingered over in secret by some lascivious old woman. Now he had no baggage or possessions and needed none. As a member of the Guild of Love, traveling around the world while Moira gave her Séances, Romer was happy and wise, in a state of permanent enlightenment, as though a small electric bulb was glowing constantly inside him.

It seemed to him that women and his own amorous yearnings had never played so large a part in his life, even though before he had been far from a neophyte on the subject. On the one hand the spiritual or divine part of him was filled with the vast presence of Moira, who performed in his soul the mysterious function of the Eternal Feminine as described by Goethe. His devotion to her was erotic, chaste, and visionary all at the same time. He sometimes felt a fleeting regret for the philosophy he had left behind, but Moira had completely transformed metaphysics by introducing a powerful new force into it, one previously unknown, or known only imperfectly by sages, mystics, and mediums. She had transcended all previous metaphysics in the way that Einsteinian physics had transcended Newtonian physics. That vision of bliss that the Christians called Salvation, that the East called Nirvana, and that she called Gioconda coruscated constantly in his consciousness like something that at any moment he might reach out and touch.

On the other hand--in the university he had only studied about dualisms on the theoretical level, and now he found himself caught in the grip of one--on the other hand he had fallen deeply in love with Eliza Burney from the moment he had caught sight of her papery face with its beige spangles and its quiet ironic eyes in the darkened hall. In the months that followed he carried on with her an elaborate ballet of pursuit and withdrawal, flight and provocation, which would have exhausted the both of them if they had not been sustained by Moira's enigmatic and smiling approval, which Romer never did succeed in understanding completely.

The Guild of Love moved on from Ann Arbor to Wichita, from Wichita to Boulder, from Boulder to Ogden, from Ogden to Riverside, where Moira gave her Séance in the vast hangar erected for the annual Orange Show. Moira did not take up a collection in the Séances, but she invited those who were so moved to offer a small part of their material wealth to purchase shares in Gioconda, so that they might partake in a vicarious sense of its benefits, its joys, its nourishing fruits, even if they stayed behind for the moment in their accustomed lives, for pure spirit knows no space or time; and they might even, if destiny so approved, move on in physical dimension to join the spiritual pioneers at some later time, when their labors in the earthly sphere were finished and they could gather together and bring with them the small treasure they had set aside for the comfort of their twilight years.

Romer attended everyone of these Séances (here he is in Tucson, in San Antonio, in Lafayette, in Tallahassee, in Augusta, in Charlotte, in Roanoke), even though what took place in the lecture hall, the borrowed church, or the Masonic Temple was always exactly the same, just as the sun sets and rises the same, the planets revolve, the moon eclipses the stars, in no matter what remote spot of the world. It might be imagined that Romer, who had a lively and vigorous mind and a pervasive curiosity about new things, would grow weary of these identical meetings in time, but he sat with the same rapt attention in each. When, in the turquoise gloom, Moira came to the part in which she addressed each listener as though he were the soul person in the hall, the sole other person in the universe ("Moira is the other you, the shadow who goes always with you, the voice that speaks when you question in the night"), he felt always the same prickle of the uncanny, the same spasm of pity for himself and for all mankind that he had felt the first time he heard her speak these words; when she told him there might be a hundred senses when he was only aware of five, he glimpsed at the edge of his vision the barely opened door through which he could see the first of those shining connected gardens where he might enter some day, the doorway into which each time he seemed to set his foot a little farther. And each time, as she described the twinned souls that were cloven and wandered over the earth looking for their missing halves, a premonition of desire and bliss crept into him and he seemed to see, superimposed on the screen of his inner vision, the green glow of Moira's visage and, locked over it and trembling as the two edges met, the pale and papery, solemn, enticing, and petulant image of Eliza Burney.

In the mornings, when they were in a new town, the Woman of Body solaced the bodies of the others in the Guild, dispensing laxatives and squeezing pimples where people couldn't reach them, and in her free time she played with the courtship of Romer, accepting it and then rejecting it in a whimsical and desperate way, so that he never knew who was the pursuer and who was pursued, who was the victim and who the tormentor. Since Moira seemed to smile, out of the corner of her eye, on these amorous yearnings of Romer (all unrequited so far, triple damn), this could only mean that the permission of the soul was given to pursue the body in its most sensual and intemperate forms. Or so it seemed to Romer. Eliza seemed more coy, or less interested in carnal union than in the claims of sentiment. In this they played out the archetypal roles of their two sexes. For Romer it was lust that drove him on, and it was fear of love (tenderness, emotional attachment, cloying verbal formulas) that held him back; for Eliza it was love that drew her on, and it was the fear of lust (male power, pain, penetration) that made her flee.

In Harrisburg, they actually came to the point of renting a hotel room, a perilous enterprise in itself in those days of house detectives and crusading puritans, then ended in a pitched battle over the details of the arrangements, Eliza insisting on turning the lights out and Romer insisting on leaving them on, and Romer proposing that the ceremony be dispensed with in short order so they would have time to attend Moira's Séance in the Odd Fellows Hall at eight o'clock, while Eliza waxed indignant at this hasty dash into what she maintained (he had no idea whether to believe her or not) was her first solemn introduction into the Rites of Hymen. It might be imagined that the two of them could contain their lust and their indignation, sit quietly in the hall while Moira suffused their souls with their daily ration of the Divine, and then return to the hotel room; but the train left at ten for Scranton. This was not the night it was destined to be. In Bangor they rolled in a birch-copse in the

public park until they were routed out of it by a cheerful policeman; in Fall River they found an abandoned boathouse whose shadows, damp-wood smell, and slivers of sunlight enticed them until they found it was inhabited by a family of raccoons who nuzzled them inquisitively and ran over them in the dark with their tiny human-like paws.

It was fall now, six months after Romer had joined the Guild, and Eliza was still technically chaste. Moira now spoke of the vision of the voyage to Gioconda as something that might happen in the spring, or early summer. (She was not a devotee of calendars and preferred to take things as they came, one dawn after another, and it was Cereste Legrand the manager, formerly the proprietor of a traveling circus in Europe, who planned the schedule and wired ahead to meeting-hall managers in new cities, negotiating the small fees appropriate, as he explained, for an organization engaged in spiritual work and not seeking a profit). Moira, accompanied by Aunt Madge Foxthorn, went into seclusion, to meditate and consult her Visions. Before she withdrew she sent several of the Illuminati to various parts of the world to carry out preparations for Gioconda, even though no one had a very precise idea what this term meant and it remained only a beautiful and enticing metaphor, except perhaps for Moira herself and Aunt Madge Foxthorn. Joshua Main was set to collecting antique maps from museums in Europe and America, and two members of the Frieze, Sebastian Kneip and John Basil Prell (who emerged from anonymity and acquired names under the charge of this responsibility) went to Fontainebleau for training in the Gurdjieff Institute. Eliza Burney was sent to study in a College of Spiritual Hygiene and Holistic Medicine in Geneva, and Joan Esterel, the lean and burning devotee from New Mexico whose erotic devotion to Moira was well known, as was the fact that it was totally unrequited), was to take up residence in Cambridge and study international law, with particular attention to the principles of territoriality and national boundaries. Meanwhile Romer was ordered to prepare himself by further studies at Heidelberg. Studies in what?

"The mysteries of the invisible. The world of the spirit. Metaphysics, as you would call it." "But live already prepared myself. I have taken a doctorate and written a dissertation."

"That is of no importance. There are plenty of other matters to be investigated. Theosophy. Transcendentalism. Mysticism. Meister Eckhardt. Jacob Boehme. Madame Blavatsky. And especially Swedenborg."

"And you say I'm to go to ..."

"Heidelberg."

There was no help for it. Romer fell into despair as he contemplated being separated from the almost daily spiritual solace of the Séances (they took place on the average of four times a week) and the delights and agonies of his pursuit of Eliza. He suspected that this was only a device of Moira to keep them apart for a while, or keep them out of mischief. Still, Eliza would be only in Geneva; he was not sure how far that was from Heidelberg. Meanwhile it was said that Moira, along with Aunt Madge Foxthorn, had gone to Lake Constance in Germany to supervise the arrangements for transportation.

In Heidelberg Romer acquired a room in a rooming-house, an oil lamp to make tea on, a studentesque cloak suitable for a production of Faust, a collection of books in Latin, and a second-hand Italian motorbike, a faded red except for the rear fender which had been replaced by a black one. His landlady's name was Frau Matelas, his mentor was Herr Professor Doktor Armin von Arnehm, he took his meals in an establishment called the Schwarzer Pudel just down the lane from his lodging-house, and he acquired another suitcase so closely resembling his old one, even to the cracks in the cardboard and the moss-colored brass fittings, that he imagined for a time it had somehow been miraculously transported from the shabby closet or attic in Ann Arbor where he was sure it had ended up. (After his months of association with Moira and her group his power of skepticism had been severely damaged). Once again he sat in dusty lecture halls while voices droned on about things that didn't need saying because they were easily found in textbooks written by the speakers; once again he hid himself in the dimly-lit corners of tired libraries where he amused himself by distinguishing among the farts of his badly-nourished fellow students, and once again he set himself wearily to writing ponderous monographs in which he dissected tiny, almost invisible fleas in the hope of finding

even tinier fleas inside them. A dreary visit it was to this Land of Cockayne, the world of unnecessary words and empty dogmas, of endless complicated apparatuses to stultify the imagination and reduce the brain to a word-grinding machine, of the fruitless bickerings of pinched paper souls over prerogatives, privileges, and titles (his aged mentor claimed the right to be called Herr Professor Doktor Doktor, since he had two Ph.D.'s). All German philosophy at this time was under the influence of Husserl, who taught at Freiberg that there could be no certain knowledge of the so-called objective world; what we call objects were always structured by the operation of idea. He also read, by command, the mystical texts of Swedenborg and H.P. Blavatsky, but found only dry accounts of what he had experienced in Moira's Séances in the living and burning flesh.

Sometimes after midnight, leaving his studies, he came out from his cramped room with its smell of the lamp and looked in silence at the stars; and then the recollection of Eliza and Moira came to him, their two persons superimposed as they always were when he thought about them not in their presence; and a great Weltschmerz (which his landlady, an ignorant old woman, called a Weltschmalz) swept over him and he despaired that he would ever find his way back to the Eden where Moira had spoken of the Sixth Sense and the raccoons had crept over them in the dark.

Slowly the months went by, the weeks, the days, and at last Romer was out in the muddy lane adjusting his motor-bike, which was to whisk him to the hotel in Mainz and the long-awaited rendezvous with Eliza; and then Newton's obsolete old clock speeded up, pricked on by Einstein, and Romer looks out through his eyes and sees straight in front of him, no more than a hand's breadth away, the gray speckled surface of the beech tree, Fagus Sylvatica. It is the same moment; it lingers still, which it might well do, since it is the only moment, at least for the breadth of a midge's eyebrow. With a snap it is gone; Romer narrowly averts smashing his brow on the tree-trunk, he swerves and plunges, almost loses his footing, and finds himself locked in the next moment, in which he sees framed in his vision a triangular opening in the green wall of vegetation beyond the beech tree, like the open door of a tent, and in the triangle the pale and bifurcated rear projection of Eliza disappearing into the leaves. He is pleased to find that his Wagnerian hero's erection has lasted all this time, through the interview at the university in Ann Arbor, the fateful first Séance in the Amity hall, the complicated subsequent history of his consecration to Moira and her band, and the weeks and months of pursuing Eliza across the erotically glowing four corners of America; and also that his academic and technical obsession with the uniqueness of the passing instant has been broken in some way, perhaps by the imminent collision with the beech tree, so that the moments are now succeeding each other in his mind in the normal way enjoyed by the rest of the human race. Some white glimpses of Eliza flutter like a small school of birds past the openings in a patch of leaves, and she emerges in her full and unconcealed Botticelli-nymph form in the meadow beyond, glances over her shoulder with a coyness that threatens to make his desiring organ burst like fireworks, and curves around on her small flashing feet to lead him back in the direction they have come, since if they continue south along the river in this way they will soon come down onto the well-traveled highway from Nierstein to Schornsheim. The length of a tennis court apart, they flit from woods to meadow, from meadow to thicket, plunging through vines and past berry-bushes, along paths traced by shepherds, wayward children, or countless other lovers like themselves, over the Hessian gardenland. As though the stage has been rolled around on a pivot, there now come into view again the toy villages they passed on their motorbike on the way out from the hotel: Hechtsheim, Laubenheim, Bodenheim, Hackenheim, Marxheim, Ebersheim, Zornheim, and Selzen. Beyond is the skyline of Mainz itself, the six towers of the cathedral, the nine other churches, the pink Kurfurstenpalast, the palace of the Grand Duke of Hesse, the theater, the arsenal, and the government buildings with bizarre towers and German bricabac, looking like a collection of medieval musical instruments, hautboys, bassoons, and sackbuts, a whole trash of archaic woodwinds thrown into a barrel, and on the outskirts of town a half-fallen Roman aqueduct loop-the-looping through the trees.

Eliza looks around again and offers him a somewhat frantic version of her Botticelli sguardo, since she finds herself in a kind of cul-de-sac of tree trunks where there is no way out except to turn

and plunge directly at him, so that perhaps this is to be the great peak and climax of it all; the single-moment-that-exists rushing at him will be the most supreme of all moments, and all his cerebrations and cogitations over instantaneity and the unique existence of the moment will not have been in vain. Whirling, she bumps hard into something hanging from a tree, a bag or a satchel, probably left by a peasant and full of truffles, mushrooms, or nuts. It begins humming and spewing out vigorous dots that soon fill the air around her. Eliza changes her motions abruptly. She still dashes, twists, flees, circles, and flings her red hair around to look in this direction and another, but now her aim is not, as it was previously, to flee from Romer and at the same time to entice him to continue pursuing, but to escape these humming spots that fill the air around her, now rising in a swarm, now diving to orbit her ankles. At each sting she gasps; a sharp intake of air; the exclamation "Ha!" in reverse.

She dashes out into the clearing, followed by the wasps and then by Romer. She twists, writhes, rolls in the grass, and scrambles up, followed always by the humming cloud of needle-points. Romer, still pursuing, only an arm's length from her now that her flight is so badly coordinated, manages to touch her bare shoulder with the tip of his finger and at the same instant his hand is stabbed painfully by one of the tiny stilettos jiggering in the air. He makes the same sucking "Ha!" that she has made several times. He has not realized before that anything could be so painful; it is as though each of the dots swarming in the air were a fundamental particle of pain, analogous to the fundamental particles of matter that make up the physical world. He gyres, writhes, and slaps himself, then continues in pursuit of Eliza who is now describing a wide circle over the green carpet of the meadow. He reaches her again, seizes her upper arm, and is stung again, this time in the crease of his thigh, which makes him double up around the sensitive focus of his groin. The notion of his manhood being stung by a wasp, on the very opening of its tip, moist and pink, is so frightful to him that it drives all reason out of his head. There is only one way to protect the organ in question from this horror; it will be safe the moment it is inside Eliza where it belongs. An instant and it is done; the two white forms roll knee and elbow over the greensward, flop over one last time with him on top, and lie like two pale frogs stretching and writhing their eight limbs against the green of the grass. Eliza is making sounds of ambiguous meaning; no doubt they are meant to express both ecstasy and agony, or perhaps in the end (*les extrêmes se touchent*) there is little difference between them.

The wasps have disappeared. It is possible that they are repelled by perspiration, or that the musky odor of their four mouse-pits is repugnant to their sensibilities. Romer lies for some time, basking in the afterglow of his pleasure, while the two red spots on his body shout their protest. Thank God not there. Tucking it out of harm's way was one of the cleverest things he has ever done in his life. The air becomes cooler and the light weakens; a cloud has drifted over the sun. It is late afternoon. The sweat cools on his body, causing a shiver of pleasure to pass over him. He extricates himself from Eliza, producing a final moan more stretched-out than the others, and rotates himself onto his back, feeling the stiff grass prickle against his spine. Staring vacantly upward while the honey of satisfaction creeps through his body, he becomes aware that the cloud that has chilled the air above him is not a cloud. A great silver shape has moved up from the west and blotted out the sun. It is immense. It seems to fill the whole sky, to dominate and magnetize the spreading earth beneath it. It brings with it a sound, a murmur or hum, that seems to come not from the shape itself but to accompany it in the surrounding air. It is not very high; it is almost as though he could reach up and touch it. As it comes toward him it turns, the nose drifting slowly to the left so that it will pass directly over him. Along its flanks, stuck out on struts, are four small lozenges with spinners that seem far too tiny to propel it through the air. Now it is almost directly over him; he looks up into its belly and sees the tilted windows that line the cabin on the sides, now and then catching a flash from the sun behind it. The drone of the engines is louder now, but still subdued and leisurely, like a sound heard in a dream. The immense shape comes on, nosing through the air, pushing it aside so deftly, so gently that it makes no ripple in the atmosphere. The air passes away behind the fish-tail with its four fins and closes on itself as though nothing has happened, except that it has been rendered imperceptibly phosphorescent by the silver that has passed through it.

Romer is filled with a rush of good spirits, a wave of emotion. He glances at Eliza, hoping to share the moment with her, but her eyes are still closed. These are machines, his soul tells him, that have never been seen before and will never be seen again. In the future, men will not believe in them. They will not believe that mere wisps of gas could lift such heavy burdens into the air. Primitive men, seeing this shape hovering over their heads and hearing its hum, would take it for a god. And for me, he thinks, it is much more likely that this is the shape of God than the shape of God as we imagine it; it is more likely that God is an enormous shiny spindle with fins than a nomadic patriarch whose beard needs trimming.

He raises himself, propped on one elbow, to watch it move away to the east in the direction of Frankfort. He sees now that it is sinking gradually. The four fins of the tail are pointed directly at him; from the rear it is only a circle quartered by two intersecting lines. He watches, unable to take his eyes from it. When it is only a small silver ball touching the horizon he comes to himself and sits up on the grass. His two stings, one on the hand and the other in the crease of his groin, twang like plucked harp-strings and he looks around for some grass or herb to rub on them. Dock-leaves are good, he thinks, although perhaps that's for nettles. Eliza sits up too and begins fussing with her hair, not looking at him. She has apparently not noticed the passing of the dirigible.

"I don't blame you for this, Romer."

"Blame me?" He glances to the east where the silver ball, now even smaller, glints on the horizon.

"First of all, the thing gave me a transcendental pleasure far beyond what I've imagined in my wildest reveries, and I shall be grateful to you for this afternoon for the rest of my life. That said, it seems to me that you might have arranged things better. I know nothing about this part of Germany," she says, forgetting that he too knew nothing about this part of Germany before he arrived the day before on his motor-bike, "but there are probably lots of nicer places. Old deserted farmhouses, quiet streams shaded by willows. I've always imagined it happening under a weeping willow at the brookside, where there's a smell of cress and the current tugs gently at the water-lilies."

She says she doesn't blame him, but she does. "And I don't suppose it occurred to you that going down a bumpy road sitting on the rear mud-guard of a motor-bike isn't the best thing in the world for the part of the female anatomy that's to be honored that day."

"I'm sorry. I don't own a car."

"You could have rented one. It's interesting," she says, "that there's no need to hang the bedsheets out the window, since I bear the badge--the numerous badges--of my defloration on my face where everyone can see them."

There are ruby carbuncles all over her body, several on her face and one on her breast so close to the nipple that it produces in Romer an echo of the same shiver that struck him when he imagined his own most delicate point being stung. He feels a warm flow of sympathy for her, of affection, a higher and more worthy form of love than the raw lust that afflicted him only a few minutes before. He has an impulse to embrace her again, not so brutally this time and with a little more delicacy and sensitivity.

"I don't like the word defloration. It sounds as though I did something nasty to you."

"You did. You did something nasty, and I enjoyed it very much. It was the most wonderful climax of my life. I just wish you'd arranged the details a little more poetically."

"You've had climaxes before?"

"Well of course. Everybody has, old dumbbell Romer."

This disconcerts him a little. But probably she is only speaking of her finger, not a lover.

"I suppose," she goes on, "that if I ever hope to have another experience of this kind, with you at least, I'll first have to find a wasps' nest and knock it open and then wallow on the grass while the beasts sting me. In that case, I've left the Marquis de Sade far behind and I'll probably end up famous in the casebooks of psychopathology."

"Maybe I could just bite you, or flog you with thorns," he says gloomily.

“Oh Romer, I didn't mean that. It's not your fault. I do love you. I really do. “

The both fall silent. She catches his glance and tears well in her eyes, perhaps only from the stings. For the present, the fact is that they are both stark naked and there is not a single one of their garments in sight, either his or hers. There lies before them a far-flung search to be carried out before nightfall, and it's likely in any case that their costumes will be incomplete as they head back to Mainz on the motor bike. He arises to his feet, reminded by a twinge of the sting in his groin, and begins searching around aimlessly and without any real purpose in the stiff grass of the meadow. Eliza, to his surprise, gets up and goes immediately to her round linen hat, a few yards away on the path that leads to the villages, and puts it on. He finds his shoes and a single sock; these, as he remembers, were cast off at an early stage in their chase, as was her hat, and they will have to continue much farther on down the path and into the woods to retrieve the rest.

He catches sight of something gleaming in the grass and stoops to pick it up. It is a lady's gold wristwatch, tiny and fragile with an articulated gold band, set with dozens of tiny gold jewels, a single diamond the size of a bug at the place where the hands join. It is still running and indicating the correct time. At first he thinks it must be Eliza's, then he remembers that she has a large man's wristwatch on a leather strap. It must have fallen out of the dirigible when it passed, he thinks. He keeps it to put in his pocket, when he finds a pocket.