

Memories from Beyond the States

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A sad and dangerous eccentric, creature of hell or heaven, this angel, this proud fiend, what, then, is he? Can it be, he's an imitation, an insignificant phantasm, or else a Muscovite in Harold's mantle, a glossary of alien vagaries, a complete lexicon of words in vogue? Might he not be, in fact, a parody?

-From Eugene Onegin, A.S. Pushkin

One only truly describes one's own heart by attributing it to another.

-From The Genius of Christianity, François-René de Chateaubriand

For Marie

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Chapter One

My one regret in life is that I am not someone else.

-From Without Feathers, Woody Allen

‘To seize her in an immediate embrace: wrapping his arm around her delicate shoulders, moving his hand about her waist and underneath her shirt, all the while paying her lips the passionate disservice of passing directly, open-mouthed, to her tongue, with his own — *dent à dent*, as they say — so as to give that exquisite *française* the eponymous kiss she so deserved...’

‘No.’

‘But?’

‘No.’

‘But what if?’

‘NO! It just won't work.’

‘To kiss her on the lips then? Just on the lips as a start, to see where things go. That would give her the chance to open them if she likes — if she likes! — or... or... to dash with one crass, pouty stroke the thousand phantasms of bliss imagined during their tenure apart. That brief, interminable tenure apart!’

‘You see, because then, she would have the option. Could it be wrong — how could it be wrong? — if she had the option?’

‘Except, well, no. Or? OR... OR...’

‘No! No, No, NO! It's *still* a faux pas.’

‘Oh what to do? What to do! What would Chateaubriand do?’

‘No — what would *I* do?’

‘Oh agony of this plane! I could do anything, I could do everything, so long as I wasn't sitting here with this tennis racket case wrapped around my neck. I think it's actually choking me. But no: I need a plan. I need to know what I'm going to do when I get to Paris, to Marie, home.’

These were the thoughts of a young American on his way to Paris. Alan Stuart was his name. Most names say little about a person. They fit poorly, like dress coats whose ambiguous tailorings are equally ill-suited for both the fat and the thin of a particular gender. In this regard, Alan Stuart's name was an exception. It was chosen by me — your humble narrator — as an homage to the great comedian and post-modernist Woody Allen, whose name used to be Allen Stewart Konigsberg. Now it goes without saying that many of us would have loved it if we had been named after a talent like Woody Allen. But for Alan Stuart, the hero of our story, this name was an ironic and unfortunate burden. For you see, Alan Stuart did not much like Woody Allen.

It will take the better half of our story to figure out exactly *why* Alan Stuart didn't like Woody Allen. The full answer has something to do with his attempt to make an identity for himself against the identity he was given at birth, with becoming a successful person on his own terms — matters we will examine in due course. But there is a simpler explanation, which may be inferred even from this brief exposure to his thoughts. Constantly interrupting himself, lusting after a foreign woman, given to neurotic sexual fantasy, experiencing an oddly literary/metaphysical identity crisis: Alan's dislike for Woody Alan stemmed from his recognition of himself in the the great humorist. It was, therefore, essentially a symptom of a profound self-hatred. Which, it must be pointed out, only served to make him all the more “Woody Allen.”

But enough with fleeting insights and reductionist psychology. Misery defies explanation. It is a temptress, who seems to say yes to each, yet always demands more. It is a con man, who tricks us into playing a game we have no idea how to win. It is a black hole, whose gravity threatens to consume us *in toto*. As such, we will have to approach Alan's misery more obliquely, via the scenic route. But which scenic route? There are so many scenes and so many routes: there exist a nearly infinite variety of strategies for getting to the same place, none of which will leave us the worse for wear. Of course, *the fashion* of our day would have us search out the origin of Alan's misery in his distant past, in either his nature or its nurturing. But turning against the day's prevailing winds in a self-conscious and reaching fashion has also come into *the mode*, and is much more my style anyway. Therefore, I will begin our investigation into the misery of Alan Stuart with its most concrete and proximate cause: his tennis racket.

It was not a new racket. Nor was it a racket that had sentimental value for Alan. It was simply a racket, with no case, that had taken up lodging in his basement. There, it had wintered, and probably summered, and probably wintered and summered before that. It was a solid, unobtrusive racket, whose principal merit was its capacity to fit into the same case that Alan's

sister had used when she was seven. When Alan failed to find any other spare racket covers in his house, this advantage had proved decisive. It would simply be irresponsible to take a tennis racket somewhere without providing it with proper protection from the elements.

So it was that Alan had arrived at the airport with the tennis racket slung across his back, sheathed in a case that had in childhood belonged to his sister. In terms of character, the case was the polar opposite of the racket it covered. The case was flamboyant, mercurial. It was made of a shimmering silver fabric, which had been embroidered with an assortment of dandelions, whose colors were drawn from the entire range of the pastel rainbow. Blue sparkles, gold sparkles, hot pink sparkles — the design equivalent of raw sugar — were cast at random across both sides of the case.

In spite of the racket covering's charms, Alan decided to take the racket and its case with him on board the plane. This decision had been a mistake, and indeed a serious one, though Alan would not appreciate exactly how serious for quite some time.

The first signs of trouble came during security check. There, Alan had taken off his shoes, hoping that by doing so he would facilitate his passage through the metal detector. This it may have done, but only at great cost. With no place to sit on the other side of the checkpoint, a painful blister on his heel, and the constant jostling of other passengers against his body, Alan found it impossible to put on his shoes. He repeatedly tried jamming his foot into his sneaker. Because he was still standing, however, it seemed that he could not get his angle of attack exactly right. The shoe's tongue bunched uncomfortably against his toes; the instep dug painfully against the balls of his feet. The heel refused to clasp itself lovingly around Alan's achilles' tendon, preferring instead to lose all structural integrity and fold in on itself like a crushed aluminum can. So long as Alan stood next to the x-ray machine's conveyor belt, there was no hope of getting his shoe to fit properly.

Alan found a discrete corner of the security checkpoint where he could sit and put on his shoes. After he finished tying the first sneaker, he looked up. Standing before him was a security guard, with a thick, high mustache and unevenly sized eye-sockets. He was leering at Alan uncouthly.

“Nice bag princess,” the guard remarked sarcastically.

It is often assumed that bullying is a phenomenon that disappears with age. In actuality, bullying survives through all ages, only becoming increasingly compartmentalized over time. Whereas in childhood, the largest boy with a disturbed home life naturally developed an absolute monopoly over the use of mockery and intimidation at school, in adult-life there is a veritable pantheon of bullies. At gyms there are cocky body-builders, at bars there are the belligerent and drunk “regulars.” In restaurants there are pretentious waiters and snobbish sommeliers. It seems

that dental technicians, merely by virtue of their occupation, are required to be bullies.

Even though adult bullies are, as a general rule, confined to a specific milieu, there is at least one circumstance in which that grand old variety of universal bullying can still thrive. Whenever someone, particularly of a young age, has a possession that is gender inappropriate, he invites all the adult bullies of the world to come forth out of their compartments and make a disparaging comment about his sexual orientation.

“It’s my sister’s bag,” Alan muttered. The man snorted, indicating his disbelief.

“You don’t believe me?” Alan asked sharply. Alan was entirely average in terms of physical power for a man of his age. He had no training in martial arts and did not even know how to throw a punch. Nevertheless he was not threatened by the security guard, who was short, fat, and, all in all, looked more like a sea cucumber than a predatory mammal.

The guard shook his head, “No, I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?” Alan demanded. “What kind of a man would own a tennis racket case with pastel dandelions on it?”

“A dandy,” the guard replied smugly, “A real London dandy.”

“What does London have to do with it?” Alan wondered to himself. Perhaps the guard had made a pun that Alan was missing. He tried out the possibilities in his head, “London Dandy, Dandy London. Dandy Lion. Dandelion? There’s no pun here! This jackass is just blurting out whatever free-associating nonsense comes through his thick head!”

“Well, I’m not *from* London,” Alan retorted, cleverly, bending down and picking up his left shoe. He walked away, limping because he was still half-shoeless. Putting on the remaining sneaker, it occurred to Alan that by only disputing the suggestion he was from London, he might have inadvertently admitted to being a dandy, or a homosexual, or whatever the man had meant to insinuate. “I lost a game of wits versus the free-associating subconsciousness of an airport security guard,” Alan thought to himself, “Pathetic.”

Yet the travails and tribulations for the sake of the racket had not ended in security check, for that would be to pass too quickly from the great irony of suffering for pleasure, which complications with tennis rackets might symbolize. Yes, instead of boarding in a timely and organized fashion, thereafter conveniently slipping into unconsciousness just before take-off, rendering himself effectively just another piece of luggage on an international flight, as is every passenger’s dream, Alan had absent-mindedly missed his boarding call and ended up being the last person in his section to get on the plane. Walking back through the aisles, he had noticed an

empty seat in the back, next to a heavy-set orthodox Jewish woman and her imp-like progeny. He prayed silently that the seat not be his, that there would be still another unoccupied seat he had not yet noticed. Nevertheless, he knew in his heart that the seat definitely was his... that immediate proximity with Judaism in its most elemental form was to be his fate. Looking at the woman, he could only think about how deeply he knew her type. He walked slower, thinking, “The kind of middle-aged Jewess who reads into even a fleck of interest the unlimited right to *shmooz* or *kibbitz* for as long as I might care to listen.... No, far longer than *I* would care to listen, as long as *she* likes.”

Alan stopped walking, thinking that no matter how hard he might try to indicate his lack of interest or discomfort, she would continue. Alan heard her son wail. She cried out “Oy Mikey! Stop!” and hit his butt firmly. The boy cried louder.

Alan turned around. He began searching for a flight attendant, hoping to see if it was too late to change his place. He found a stewardess standing in a galley, filling out paperwork in a cubby against the bulkhead. Alan hesitantly asked her, in English, “Excuse me, Miss?”

“Yes, Monsieur,” she replied, turning around as she did so. When he saw her, Alan felt as if he had been punched in the stomach... like his abdomen was sliding down into his bowels. Somehow — he had no idea how this was possible — it seemed that Marie was standing before him. Marie, the one for whom he had been veritably ill with longing and indecision for months on end. How he yearned to throw himself upon the woman now standing before him! To smother her with a thousand kisses... to grasp her so tightly that neither could breathe... to drift with her aimlessly, yet forcefully, to a place where they could consummate their love. Which, in the present context, I suppose meant the nearest lavatory.

The moment passed. No, Alan realized, the stewardess was not Marie. She looked like Marie: a French girl in her twenties with milky-white skin and wide green eyes, with flowing brown curls and a lithe physique. For all Alan knew, the stewardess might even be named Marie. Practically all French girls are named Marie, although they are not especially known for being virgins. And yet the stewardess standing in front of Alan, whom he had already started to think of as Marie, seemed, just like Marie, to be an incarnation of perfect femininity as he understood it. It was not just that she was physically frail and beautiful. It was that her presence, her personality, was also frail and beautiful. She was reserved: a little shy, a little quiet, a little polite. But not *very* shy... not *very* any of those things, for to be very anything would be too strident, and therefore inelegant and unfeminine. No, it was not easy to define her personality positively. And yet, one thing that you could definitely say is that she was positive. She was happy, joyful, and vibrant. She was not funny, she did not like to tell jokes, but she had a beautiful laugh which she could use if necessary. She also had a lilting voice that sounded like the lullaby of a warbling bird. Come to think of it, she was very much like a bird. One that had been injured long ago, healed perfectly, and yet was still to this day incapable of flight. For this reason, it choose to sit on a tree branch not far away, contentedly chirping day and night a thousand impromptu

symphonies, each more beautiful than anything man ever composed. A perfect woman as the Romantics saw it. It is a pity, but Westerners still think of female beauty in much the same way today.

It occurred to Alan that the stewardess had already been facing him for some time. His only response to her attention had been engorging himself upon her appearance and fantasizing about his love Marie. Self-conscious, he prematurely sputtered out the first phrase that came into his head, “Um, hi.”

“Hello,” she replied. He noticed a slight weakness in her enunciation of the “h,” a bit of over-softness in her “l,” an over-elongation of her “o.” Now he was sure she was French.

“Hi,” Alan said again. “Sorry,” he added, in a superfluous exercise in apology. He blinked again. Then, gaining composure, he blurted out, “I was wondering if it would be possible to sit somewhere else.”

“No sir, I am sorry but the flight is completely full so there can be no changing of seats.”

“Completely full?”

“Completely full.” Alan squeezed his lips into an oversized frown of consternation. He shot his head out into the aisle and caught a glimpse of the Jewish woman once more. She was shaking backward and forward in her seat. “Then she’s going to be there like that the whole flight, *davening*, or whatever.” He shook his head and faced the stewardess once more. He stepped closer. She looked up at his face. She smiled quizzically. She blinked several times. He noticed that she had sparkles around her eyes. He also noticed that she was looking at him directly, focusing very intently on his pupils. His heart leapt, the two of them were standing together so intimately. It was the perfect occasion. He would do it. Yes, he would do it! He would speak French!

“But you see I just have to sit somewhere else,” he whispered, *“My seat is very... uncomfortable.”*

“All the seats are the same,” she replied in English, for some reason whispering as well. She moved her chin back an inch, not breaking eye-contact. It looked as if she were trying to examine Alan’s eyes from a different angle.

“No, it’s just that there’s a woman sitting next to me,” Alan continued to whisper in French, making up a good excuse, *“and she has a small child who may be screaming quite a bit for the duration of the flight.”*

“Yes, I noticed him,” she nodded slowly, still appraising Alan’s eyes and murmuring *sotto voce*, “He looks like he has very strong lungs. You’ll probably hear him wherever you sit on the plane.”

Alan frowned, putting his hand to his nose and rubbing the top ridge with his index finger. Why wasn’t she replying to him in French? She definitely understood everything he was saying. Maybe there was something wrong with his speech though? What could be wrong with it? He knew French. He knew that he knew French. Maybe she noticed something though — an accent? He probably had a slight accent. Did she not think he was confident enough to reply? Alan switched back to English.

“Look, fine. I admit it; I didn’t want to say. I am afraid of sitting in the back of the plane.”

Suddenly, the woman snapped to attention. She shook herself, blinked, and closed her eyes. She nodded her head left and then right. Then, she straightened her posture, tilting her head upward at an erect, yet comfortable, angle. She made firm eye contact with Alan. She pursed her lips into a slight frown of concern and seemed to speak more confidently, as if she were reciting a block of text from memory.

“Of course, Monsieur, I understand. It is very normal to have anxiety about flying for long periods of time. But you must realize there is nothing to fear. This plane, which as you can see is a Boeing, which is the very best, is going to land at *Aéroport Paris Charles de Gaulle* at 2:30 PM Local Time, I promise you.” She nodded her head up and down slowly. Her eyes were glazed, as if looking without seeing. Alan slowly felt himself nodding as well, with the uneasy sense that he too was following a script written by a team of Airline Customer Service Associates years before.

The stewardess continued, more informally, “And also, there is only one seat open on the plane. That one there,” she pointed to a seat attached to a bulkhead, “Which is mine. Now I would of course invite you to make an exchange of seats with me, but this is, as you people like to say, not kosher.”

Upon hearing the word “kosher,” Alan’s cheeks flared. He felt as if the skin on his chest were being pulled tight. What was she insinuating, putting the words “you people” and “kosher” so close together?

“Quel people?” Alan demanded sharply, loudly, in French, so as to be sure that he was understood. “*Which people is it that you think like to say kosher?*”

The stewardess snapped her head backward in response to Alan’s reflexive show of

hostility. “*Americans,*” she said defensively, “*of course.*”

Alan suddenly felt stupid. “*Oh yes, Americans,*” he said. “I’m an American,” he parroted dumbly. The woman once more looked at him quizzically. Alan continued to stand before her, saying nothing.

“But you speak French very strong Monsieur,” she replied, smiling politely. She turned back to filling out her paperwork against the bulkhead.

And so Alan had found himself trundling back toward his fate, backpack slung across one shoulder, tennis racket around the other. Alan noticed that he was being sized-up by the flush-faced man in the seat immediately before his own. Middling thirties, blondish hair, the man was wearing pin-stripe pants and a starched, salmon-pink dress shirt. The color of his shirt was alarmingly similar to his thick neck-flesh. Alan could have sworn he saw the man’s lips mouth the word “gay-rod.” Alan shook his head, thinking, “I guess you can’t always draw aces.”

As Alan took the few final steps toward his seat, a deep sense of foreboding settled upon him. He eyed the Orthodox woman unhappily. Beneath his frown, his teeth were clenched. She looked up at him. Their eyes met. On reflex, Alan looked away. Suddenly, a burst of insight: if he could avoid making eye-contact with her, then she wouldn’t be able to start talking to him. Even she, this veritable embodiment of tactlessness itself, would need some form of eye contact as a cue to enter a conversation. Yes, if he were careful — no, *meticulous* — then he might — no, *would* — be able to avoid speaking with the woman entirely. For the first time in several minutes, he felt hope. And yet, he chided himself, it would not be easy. In the constrained space of an aircraft aisle, there would be little room for error. He would have to consider every movement before actually acting. Like an astronaut, for whom even one false move might insinuate an endless tumble through the impenetrable void, so too was Alan imperiled. Except in his case, the void he confronted was not so much immaterially vast as concretely annoying. And Jewish. Also, unlike astronauts, Alan had to worry about *eye* as well as bodily movements. Suddenly, Alan’s heart fluttered with alarm.

“Where are my eyes? Are they looking near the Orthodox woman? I haven’t ruined it already, have I? No. No, I haven’t. My eyes are directed at the ceiling. Good. Safe. No chance of *that* eye-contact leading to a conversation. Unless it looks like I’m confused or weird because I’ve been staring at the ceiling for ten or fifteen seconds now, and that in turn leads to her taking it upon herself to try and help me. Which she might actually do, as a *mitzvah*, or a *tzedakhah*, or whatever. Damn. I need to direct my eyes somewhere else. Where? Don’t know. Where *should* they be looking? Not at the Jewish woman, obviously. Where specifically? Damn. How can I not know? Think! Wait, what am I doing? I’m avoiding the Jewish woman. No! What am I *supposed* to be doing? You have very legitimate reasons for trying to avoid the Jewish woman. NO! *What am I supposed to be doing right now, in a general sense?* Sitting in my seat; putting my luggage away. Should I move my eyes to the overhead compartment? Yes.

Wait! Can I envision what the unforeseen consequences will be? I don't know. If they're unforeseen, how can I envision them? If I use the compartment on the side opposite her, then my back will be towards her. That's an unambiguous improvement in position. Do it. Check!"

Alan turned his back toward the center aisle and shuffled horizontally the last few feet to his row. He breathed deliberately as he considered his next move. How could he sit down without facing the woman for the several crucial seconds before he was in his seat? He could walk backwards towards his seat, of course, slowly, carefully, feeling behind himself with his hand like a blind person. Ho ho! What if he pretended to be blind, would that help avoid a conversation? No, it clearly wouldn't. She would still be able to talk to him. Indeed, it would likely give her all the more reason to talk to him. She wouldn't expect to need eye-contact to start a conversation. And there would be just *so much* to talk about: how courageous he was to fly on a plane by himself as a blind person; how her cousin Sasha who lives on Long Island went blind for several days once upon a time; how her husband Morty is, not in any literal sense of course, obviously, and who could wish for or even joke about such a thing, but still, she digresses, so thick-headed that you'd never know he wasn't blind! Sometimes it seems like you couldn't pay him to find the nose on the front of his face, which is very big by the way since he's so Jewish! Ah, and, of course, for the *coup de grace*: *how very good the blind and disabled have it in Israel, have you thought about moving there?*

"Oy!" Alan thought, "NO! Not oy, not oy... Oh! Oh, it would never end!" He would have to be deaf to avoid conversation with this woman. And he couldn't get away with that: she must have seen him talking with the stewardess.

Misery wrapped her arms around Alan, her fingertips stroking the pound of flesh above his heart. It was hopeless, he thought to himself. How was he going to avoid looking at his neighbor for the entire flight? He drew a blank. A second "Oy!" began percolating up from the depths of Alan's consciousness, which he suppressed with great effort. He was beginning to worry that he was looking strange again, just standing in the aisle, where he had probably been now for about a minute. He noticed that the man presently sitting in front of him, his future neighbor to the left, was scanning Alan's own figure and smirking. "Bizarre man," Alan thought. His pallid skin looked as if there was a thin layer of film on it, similar to the wax one finds on old lemons. He had a very thin, wet, black mustache that he had shaved down the middle. There was a tiny soul patch underneath his lips, which he stroked devilishly with his right hand. The thinning, but still ample, black mop on top of his head was very greasy, and combed forward and upward into a poof. Alan noticed the man's left hand was fondling a deck of playing cards on his tray-table. "What an unusual dexterity," Alan thought, "His left hand can cut and shuffle an entire deck on its own." Alan did not notice that every time the man cut the deck there was a fresh ace at the bottom. Alan nodded at the man, who promptly nodded back several times and smirked ever more widely. After a few moments he directed himself forward to his cards, which he resumed shuffling.

Alan opened the overhead compartment, took his backpack in his hands, and stowed it away. Then, he took his racket in his hands. Just as he was about to stow it, however, he realized that the racket covering's area was bigger than his face. Moreover the case, with its horrendously pastel dandelion pattern, was completely opaque. He could hold the racket in front of his head as he approached the woman, find his seat under the racket's aegis, and then use the racket as a visual barrier for the duration of the flight. Of course he didn't want to be too obvious about the fact that he was trying to hide his face. He would have to pretend to fumble with it naturally. Alan grew nervous. What if he didn't do it right? What if he dropped the racket on the way down? If he had to pick the racket up, it would force him to make eye contact with the woman.

Not taking chances, Alan slung the case back around his shoulder. Then, deciding the shoulder was too risky, he took the racket off his shoulder and placed it over his neck. He breathed in and out quickly and then, deciding that this sort of thing was like removing a band-aid, turned around and sat in his chair as fast as he could, closing his eyes several seconds before his butt impacted the cushion.

When he opened his eyes he found that he had sat just as he had intended, with racket up against his right side at face level, blocking completely the Jewish woman from view. Alan sighed in relief.

Alan put on his headphones and tried to force himself to sleep. A vague dream involving Marie caressing his body began to take shape. She was stroking his arm, and then shaking his shoulder. Oh Marie! What an alluring *mélange* of *savoir faire*, *joie de vivre*, and *je ne sais quoi*! Or, to say it again more frankly, and less Frankishly: what a fetching *rag-bag* of *know-how*, *good-cheer*, and *X-factor*! Alan reached his neck forward to kiss her. He had intended for his eyes to remain closed for the kiss, but he decided now that he would sneak a peak. There she was! Not in dream, but in the flesh, on the very plane! His heart leapt.

A second later, Alan groaned. He had made the same mistake again. It wasn't his Marie, but rather, the stewardess.

"Monsieur, if you would like to keep your racquette on you for the flight you must put it in your lap." Alan squinted at her angrily. In addition to not being *his* Marie, which in his semi-conscious haze for some reason offended him, she was completely ruining his ingenious stratagem for avoiding contact with his neighbors. Moreover, the torsion required to dislodge the racket from behind his flank would bring his face dangerously perpendicular to the Jewess's present position. The stewardess squinted back at him firmly, uncompromising.

"Uh! Fine!" he sighed. Rather than twisting toward his right, he turned towards the attendant, pulling the racket over his left flank. Reflexively, a guttural retch cleared from his lips, as the thin straps attached to the racket case were drawn tight against Alan's throat. The racket case was choking him, sort of, not really of course, obviously, since he could breathe. It was just

extremely uncomfortable. Alan looked up at the stewardess with an expression on his face that seemed to ask, “Are you happy?” The stewardess looked at him quizzically and left.

After the plane had achieved cruising altitude, Alan once more tried to sleep. And indeed, he kept trying for more than an hour. What was holding him back? Perhaps it was anxiety over his date that evening with Marie. Perhaps it was the fact that his racket case was mildly asphyxiating him. Maybe it was simply not yet late enough in the evening for Alan to be tired. We shall not know. At some point he started watching a special French news report about the latest, dangerous craze electrifying the French youth: “Le Duel.” Alan found the report so engrossing that he hardly minded the ongoing refusal of his neighbor to change her child’s diaper.

By the time the news report had ended, it was already several hours into the flight and Alan was almost half-way to his destination. Half-way through is an uneasy time to be aboard a plane, precisely because it is such an easy time to be bored on a plane. It is usually around this point that some passengers will take it upon themselves to strike up a lop-sided conversation with their neighbor. These are conversations where one speaker belabors indefinitely a subject only of interest to him, demonstrating enormous tactlessness, especially when one considers the fact that the audience is quite literally strapped to their seats. The one presents his commentary on the economy, his analysis on the government... whatever it is. The other nods thoughtlessly, wishing there was a way to turn the page or change the channel.

Fortunately for Alan, it seemed relatively certain that he was not going to fall victim to an aggressive conversationalist. The waxy-skinned man to Alan’s left was embroiled in an intricate game of solitaire on his tray table. Meanwhile his neighbors to the right, the Jewish woman and her son, had fallen asleep. Alan settled his eyes on the boy, who was napping peacefully on his mother’s belly. Like most people, Alan’s heart would usually well up with paternalistic emotions whenever presented with a sleeping child. Looking at this boy, however, all Alan could think about was how slovenly and disorganized his hair was. Alan tried not to think the word *disheveled* because he — incorrectly — believed that it was derived from Yiddish. He noted how stained the boy’s shirt was, how ample were his cheeks. Meanwhile, he dared not look upon the mother. What if she woke up suddenly, and, catching him unawares, struck up a conversation? Nevertheless, Alan could see her hand laying on the boy’s shoulders. Alan imagined her thick, clumsy hands, covered of course in flour, running over his nose. He could hear in his head, “How your Bubbele loves you dear Alanchik! Such a beautiful nose you have! How worried I was that you wouldn’t look Jewish!” And then she would pinch his nose to emphasize how hooked it was, or rather, as he secretly suspected, to make the hook even more pronounced. Presently, Alan ran his index finger along the top ridge of his nose, pushing down firmly on its curvature, as if with only a push he could flatten hardened cartilage and reverse whatever damage his grandmother might have done.

Alan decided that this moment afforded as good a chance as any to get up, disentangle himself from his racket, and go to the bathroom. Standing up, he began to unwind the case,

finding no better way than to circle the entire racket body around his own. As the straps loosened, they revealed wide, red depressions in his skin. These indentations, which throbbed in time with his pulse, looked as though they would itch.

The hope that he would soon become free of the racket case caused Alan to become frantic. He twirled the racket around his body as fast he could, without the carefulness that behooves such delicate maneuvers in the confined space of an airplane. Without intending to, Alan swung the racket case in such a way as to graze the head of the person who sat in the seat directly before his own.

“AH! Jesus!” the man cried, spinning his head around fiercely. “What the fuck are you doing playing tennis on an airplane!”

“What are you talking about?” Alan asked in all earnestness, for the brush had been so slight that he hadn’t even noticed that he had, indeed, hit the man.

“You HIT my FUCKING HEAD!” the man shouted. Sleeping passengers began to stir.

“No I didn’t.” Alan said, curt and defensive.

“You *HIT MY FUCKING HEAD!*”

Alan was unsure how to respond further to the accusation that incidental contact may have occurred between his floral racket bag and the man’s “fucking” head. On the one hand, he was fairly sure he had not hit the man’s head. On the other, it occurred to him that, if he had, the man would have deserved it for mouthing the word “gay-rod” at him during boarding. Indecisive, Alan stared at the man blankly and sucked in his cheeks. The fleshy man interpreted Alan’s expression as a sign of impudence. His face swiftly took on mild shades of purple. He narrowed his eyes at Alan. Thereafter, without looking, as if upon the impulse of a second nature, he reached for the orange call button. The stewardess suddenly materialized by Alan’s side, as if emerging from thin air.

“*Parlez-vous francais* speak English?” She asked Alan, lightly holding her hand to his shoulder. “What, had she forgotten who he was?” Alan wondered indignantly. “Had he really made so little impression on her?”

“*Both,*” said Alan tartly, in French.

“*Very good Monsieur. I would like to inform you that the playing of tennis aboard the aircraft is strictly not permitted for the duration of our flight.*”

“I wasn’t playing tennis — my racket was choking me.”

“Hey! Hey! English!” the man cried. “I don’t like it when people talk about me behind my back in another language in front of me!”

The stewardess and Alan both turned towards the man. Unsure of what to say, given that they had not, in fact, been talking about him, they both sucked in their cheeks. Again, mistaking confusion for impudence, the man curled his upper lip and bared his teeth at the two. The thin red vessels in his eyes began to dilate.

“Monsieur, I was just instructing this young passenger to put his racket in the overhead compartment.” With that, she opened the overhead bin, took the racket out of Alan’s hands, and placed it neatly above a brown roller. She remarked, as if to herself, “Voilà, a très jolie spot for a très jolie racquette.” She closed the bin and dematerialized as quickly as she came.

The man harrumphed at Alan and turned himself face-forward. Alan headed to the back of the plane in order to use the toilet.

After returning from the bathroom, Alan tried once more to sleep. He craned his neck at a 63 degree angle relative to that thing that goes for a cushion on the top part of an airplane seat. The tension in his neck became unbearable. He switched his head over to the opposite side. The cords on this side of his neck soon felt overstretched as well. He flipped back to the other side. And back. And forth. And back and forth, as he had gone for much of the flight. Finally, with a sigh of exasperation, Alan gave up.

Thus, Alan found himself returning to his major project for the flight, staring ahead unblinkingly at the upright tray-table and thinking about what to do when he first saw Marie. What he wanted of course was for her to jump into his arms the moment that he opened his apartment door. He would then have full discretion to tear off her clothes and throw himself on top of her on the bed. What would it be like to join with her for the first time? Towards the beginning of the flight, Alan’s fantasy had assumed passionate, almost violent tropes. He pictured each of them desperately, impossibly, trying to physically join together, as if it were the ritual motions of hips and torsos that was closing the geographical gulf that had so long separated them.

As the flight drew on, however, and as desperation began to exhaust him, Alan’s prevision changed. No, their reunion would not be characterized by violence or passion, but rather by stupefaction and relief. Neither Alan nor Marie had ever been able to admit to the other how deeply each was in love. When they had met, in America a few years prior, she had had a boyfriend, with whom she had been an item ever since she was very young. Alan would not have imagined that anything between himself and Marie would have been possible. And yet he

would catch her looking at him sometimes, and sometimes she would catch him looking at her. It had become a game of theirs, to play in between their conversations or at dinner parties. Their little joke, their little secret. Soon, they added other games: kissing hellos and goodbyes far too often, hugs held far too long, compliments about the other's physical appearance becoming ever more aggressive. Their conversations had become intimate. They shared with each other their memories, their passions, even their fantasies and desires. Just as Alan felt that something was going to happen, her time in America had run up. The only thing Alan had left of Marie was a boyfriend who would occasionally ask Alan if he wanted to go out for a drink. It had been necessary for Marie's boyfriend to stay in America in order to continue his study of economics.

Alan and Marie had kept in touch. They traded messages filled with epistolary analogues of the games the two had played before. Alan never imagined anything would happen between them: the two of them would never be in the same place, and in any event she had a boyfriend. And yet Alan loved the distraction she offered, would fantasize about the games that the two would play. It made him feel like a character in the novels he loved: a young Werther or a René, loving a woman with whom he could never hope to be. He kept her letters and made copies of his own. He even imagined that one day he might turn the collection into an apprentice novel he would like to call *Alain*. One day, however, he had discovered that he had been accepted to a prestigious program in Paris, where he would be going to do research. When he informed Marie, he found that the messages she returned had a new and exciting air of instability. She told him that she and her boyfriend had agreed to take a break, that she was free, and yet also for the first time terribly lonely. She dreamed of someone coming in to town and stealing her away, someone with whom she could at last experience true love. Alan was certain that she was referring to his person.

And yet he knew that when he landed, when he saw her, the veil would be lifted. As soon as the two embraced, they would have overpowering physical confirmation of the fact that they had been right about the contents of the other's heart. They would move, as if guided by an invisible hand, each caressing the other. They would slowly fall together, enveloped in a moment of crushing intimacy and unlimited tenderness. Each would be so devastated by the moment, both in body and in mind, as to lose the capacity to utter words. They would be unable even to think. Strength to remove their clothes would fail. Each would tumble, the one curled up in the other, onto Alan's bed. Slowly, they would find a way to fit themselves together. And then, he would begin: meandering, tepid thrusts that caused uncontrollable convulsions in both their bodies. They would tremble with weakness from joy and joy from weakness, rivulets of tears running down both their faces.

Alan tried to hold the image of this moment in his head as he closed his eyes and returned to the excuse for a pillow. In point of fact, Alan knew the secret to falling asleep on planes: one needs to fixate oneself completely on another place and time. One has to fill the reservoir of one's mental space with imagination, drowning in fantasy physical complaints, annoyance with one's neighbors, whatever distractions there might be. The cords in his neck complained louder

and louder, providing a somatic accompaniment to the engine's dull roar. Alan held his neck firm, tensed his muscles even stiffer, until he was straining so hard that he could no longer remember what it was like to not be in stupendous pain. Something in his mind buckled and broke; images at last occurred to him unbidden.

Since our protagonist is asleep, I can finally do what I've been aching to do for quite some time now: divulge some of our introvert's deepest, darkest secrets.

First, Alan is an anti-Semite, even though his father is Jewish. The reason is simple: Jewishness derives from the mother, and therefore to many Jews, Alan was, is, and always will be, a second-rater. Among the chosen, he was not; unfortunately, because he was half-chosen, he was exposed to those who were quite frequently. Alan felt that there was neither sense nor justice in this disparagement, and so held a grudge against the people who had concocted the regime of chosenness in the first place.

Second, since Alan has always refused to play a game he cannot win, he decided to spurn the legacy that was half his own, opting instead to identify wholly with the Frenchness of his mother's side. Alan was thus French in his own mind, not Jewish, and resented enormously anyone who suggested otherwise. Which few did, for in America one's identity is what one claims it is, as long as one can sustain the posture that identity demands.

And yet, Alan must have felt uneasy about his choice. Imagine that you were given two cups, one that was half-empty and one that was half-full. Now you might be tempted to mix the two contained liquids, in the hope that the resulting concoction would net a whole cup. But let's say, for the sake of argument, that you knew the miscegenation of the two particular beverages would never work. What would you do? Well, one thing you might do is to refuse on principle the half-empty cup, instead taking whatever steps were necessary, in reality or in spirit, to make the half-full glass whole.

In Alan's case, the half-empty portion was the chosenness of the Jewish people. Though the French may be many things, I do not believe any one of them thinks that they, by virtue of their nationality, had been singled out as anything special in the cosmic order of the universe. And yet this is precisely what Jews have always thought they possessed, above all other groups, and that which Alan, whether he liked it or not, also believed that he acutely lacked. He could not close the gap through Frenchness alone, so he had to add something special, in order to endow himself with a uniqueness far more wondrous than the quality he had always lacked by birth. Which is to say, the solution to Alan's identity crisis was Chateaubriand.

There are many possible ways to embody the idea of reincarnation. One version claims

that there are a few archetypal personalities — the Warrior, the Poet, the Fool, etc. — which manifest themselves in different bodies, contemporaneously or at different times. Another says that all people have individual souls which inhabited different bodies before and will inhabit still others in the future. One can even cook up a scientific plausible variation on the idea: if “PERSONALITY X” arises from formative biochemical experiences on an underlying genetic material that codes for “X's brain,” then if one took similar enough code and put it through similar enough chemical processes, or maybe different code but used a process that compensated for those differences properly, one would produce the same “PERSONALITY X.” If this train of reasoning is sound, then personalities do indeed have the capacity to inhabit different bodies over time.

To which of these beliefs did Alan subscribe? You will forgive me, but I do not want to get into the specifics of Alan's spiritual views. In truth, they were a partially baked salad of tired religious dogmas, popular sayings, and New Age wishful think. From Alan's perspective, the important thing was not the mechanics of reincarnation, but what it meant: that since he simply *was* Chateaubriand, he had an illustrious legacy in the past and a destiny to realize in the future.

To understand the personal calling that Alan believed was his, it is important to know a little something about the legacy of Chateaubriand. Chateaubriand was born at the tail-end of a cultural epoch dominated by forms of expression, symbols, and motifs ultimately derived from the Greeks and Romans. Literature and culture were stilted, tired, and totally removed from contemporary concerns. Chateaubriand, on his own, created a new kind of literature, connected to the values and concerns of the European life of his time: nature, passion, the imagination, and Christianity. Almost overnight, literature was reborn; the legacy of his Romanticism was the search for new ways to connect writing ever more intricately to the times at hand.

And yet, this legacy ultimately proved pyrrhic. For Chateaubriand's achievement became the aspiration of every French writer for the next hundred years. After Chateaubriand, a deluge of new types of literature, cascading ever more quickly, until a century later every artist was expected to have an idiosyncratic answer to the question, “What can and should art be?”

Nothing is inherently wrong with such a state of affairs, except that it made a certain kind of answer inevitable. Art does not have an abstract or esoteric definition, a group of people one day claimed, an object is art so long as someone prominent says it is. Even a toilet can be art if it's placed in a museum. These individuals called themselves Post-Modernists, and implemented a diabolical program, wherein they manufactured garbage, called it art, and sold it through intimidation. These “artists” were astoundingly successful, to the point where a great swath of the public now believes that there is no difference between the exceptional object and the ones from everyday life. Today, the most artistic film-maker is the one who makes his film least like a movie. The most artistic novelist is the one who makes his story the least like a book.

And here it was that Alan saw his own *raison d'être*. For the problem of Post-modernism

is its deadening of imagination, its dampening of passion, its industrialism, and most of all its daring leap into irrelevance. The problem with Post-Modernism, as Alan saw it, was that it was the antithesis of Romanticism. What everyone wants from literature and art is to feel something, to be taken away to a different time or place, while at the same time feeling as if they are being addressed personally, that what they are viewing is meant for them. But all one finds today is Post-Modernism: a dyspeptic, bulimic, autonomous artistic garbage disposal. Alan knew that if he could learn to express his romantic vision of life and of the novel, he might be the impetus for a revolution in thought, a true Renaissance in arts and letters. This was Alan's secret goal in life: to be a suitably French version of the Messiah.

Oh Alan, fortune's fool! Or at least, mine. For unbeknownst to him, he has been made the protagonist of a novel, which is decidedly Post-Modernist in sensibility. And yet, Alan should not despair, but rather take consolation in the fact that his story is not of the insipidly Post-Modern variety (if it proves to be insipid, it will be for entirely different reasons entirely), but rather is a hybrid of a Post-Modern and Romantic sensibility, one which celebrates the individual and adventure, imagination and nature, and above all passion, Passion, PASSION! A kind of novel not much written these days, but not without illustrious precedent... Unfortunately, Eugene Onegin, a name in Russia on par with Hamlet, is generally unknown in these parts. So much the better, for fewer will suspect the tragedy soon in coming.

“Oy my God Michael! What have you done!” Alan woke to find a roundish face in his own. It was the boy Michael, whose doe-like eyes now looked at him expectantly. Alan noticed that a yogurt-like liquid was dribbling down his mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” the boy’s mother said. Alan looked toward her. Her face seemed elongated. Her lips were pursed. The lower one was trembling. Her eyes were filled with tears, reigned in just shy of crying.

“I’m so sorry,” she said again, weakly.

Alan looked down at his shirt. There, directly over his heart, he saw a whitish liquid with the consistency of yogurt, which matched the very substance now dribbling out of the boy’s mouth.

“AH!” Alan shouted at the top of his lungs, “TA GUEULE!”

The boy’s head bobbed curiously. Alan felt his blood boil. How wronged he felt! How despicable everything about the boy seemed, from his unreasonable flabbiness to his basketball-themed yarmulke! Alan looked at the mother, imagined those hands touching his face again,

taking a large abrasive towel and rubbing it violently against his cheek. How he had the impulse to yell at her, “Why are you all like this! Always vomiting on me love or guilt or apologies or kisses! And now vomit too!”

But Alan held back for a moment, then a second, and then two. He felt his lips crease and his anger crest. His raised arms descended to the seat. He fixed his head forward, bared his clenched teeth, and aspirated a barely audible “ugh.” With nothing better to do, he began to bob the boy up and down on his knee. The boy smiled broadly and clapped his hands several times.

“Oy, Mikey, you’re terrible!” the woman said again, “So lucky that it was such a kind and understanding young man!”

Alan looked at her, smiled weakly, and with every fiber of his being cursed. GEVALT! One mistake! One mistake and he was sucked down into that impenetrable, vapid void. Checkmate.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Here, let me find a napkin.” She pulled out a napkin in which she had stuck some gum. She folded the napkin once over and handed it to Alan. Alan looked at it and bit his lip.

“Here, if you want me to do it,” she began, struggling to get out of her seat. She made as if to open her seat-belt buckle, but Alan stopped her. “No, no, no. No, it’s fine, thanks,” Alan insisted, “I just need... more napkin.”

“Oh, of course, dear. Let me call the stewardess.” With that, she pushed the orange call button. “In the meantime,” she said, “give me my Mikey.”

Alan handed her the toddler. She held him in her arms, put him on her expansive stomach, and summarily spanked him. The boy’s mirth continued unabated.

“Oy, such a nightmare you are!” she scolded. She turned to Alan and explained, “One day you’ll understand, when you’re a father.” Alan did not have time to confirm, deny, or even acknowledge the woman’s thought, before he was already being asked the next question. “What did you say your name was?”

The corners of Alan’s lips descended into a deep frown as he fixed his blank eyes upon the bridge of the woman’s nose. Was it actually happening then? He thought of turning his head forward and pretending as if the last two minutes had never happened. He could simply ignore her request to know his name. He imagined himself staring ahead doggedly, as the baby and the mother looked on amazed, perhaps scandalized, at his unabashed indifference to social etiquette. How could he get away with it? Wouldn’t she keep pestering him? How long would he have to

hold his stolid demeanor as the veritable eyes of Israel laid themselves plaintively upon his person? Of course, if he held long enough she would eventually assume he had autism. But could he really ignore her so long, with the baby's spit-up still dribbling down his shirt onto his pants? He closed his eyes and held his hand to the bridge of his nose. With his face once more directed at the woman, he said, "My name is Alan Stuart."

Alan did not open his eyes as the woman continued to question him. "Hmm... Stewart like the English kings, with a *w*?"

"No, no," he said shaking his head back and forth gently, "With a *u*."

"Hmm. And Allen is like Ethan Allen?"

"No, it's A-L-A-N," Alan said absent-mindedly. Yes, it was happening. The tedium was starting. It would begin with spelling his name and no doubt would soon turn to spelling hers. And then her son's. Soon they would go back and forth taking turns spelling names for each other. No doubt he would have to wait in vain for the infant to live up to his mother's boast that he was such an intelligent child that he could spell even at his young age.

"Two first names... very unusual," the woman remarked, "Do you have a middle name?"

Alan opened his eyes and squinted at the woman. Why the curiosity about his name? What difference did it make to her?

"Konigsberg," he said, thinking to himself, "Would you like me to spell it?" Mirth flitted across the woman's face.

"Oh! Alan Konigsberg-Stuart: you must be Jewish!"

So *that* was the reason for all the curiosity about his name. He breathed shallowly, hoping that if he stayed calm the moment might pass. He tried to focusing on something else, anything else. The only thing he could only bring to mind was the vomit still dribbling down his shirt. Why wasn't the stewardess responding to the orange call button? Wouldn't Marie come rescue him from the Jewish woman's clutches?

"Of course I thought you were Jewish but I didn't want to assume. And then when you said your name was Alan Stuart I was scared for a minute that you might be *All-en Ste-wart*, which is, I don't know, which sounds to me like a terribly waspy name. Although, there are many Jews with two waspy first names..."

“I’m not Jewish,” Alan said quietly, still not looking at her. She stopped speaking and took a moment to digest the statement.

“You’re not Jewish?”

“No.”

“You aren’t Jewish?”

“That’s correct.”

“Really? With a name like Konigsberg?”

“It’s not a family name.”

“What?”

“It’s not an Ellis Island name; my family isn’t from Konigsberg. My parents picked it...” the last thing Alan wanted to do was to get into a discussion of his namesake, “because they thought it sounded, um, distinguished.”

“Huh.” The woman said, sitting back in her seat. Was this all it took to get rid of these people? Were these the magic words, “Not Jewish,” that had eluded him for years on end? Could he, the next time he found himself next to a doddering Jewish chauvinist, root out all hopes of conversation with a proper introduction: “Hello, my name is Alan and I am not a member of your tribe. How do you do?” No, it wouldn’t work, the woman had recovered from her shock and was once more taking up the charge.

“You’ll forgive me, it’s just that you look *so* Jewish!”

A tremor wore its way down from Alan’s forehead to his cheek. He clenched his jaw tightly, forcing his neck muscles to grow taut. He said crisply, “Well, I can’t be Jewish because my mother isn’t Jewish.”

“So you’re *part* Jewish,” the woman said.

“More not than Jewish, as I like to say,” Alan said ruefully.

Alan watched as the Jewish woman shook her head. He knew perfectly well her train of thought. Such a pity! Three thousand years of perseverance against the greatest of adversities:

Nebuchadnezzar, pogroms, Hitler, all that struggle and beautiful tradition about to be lost by the selfishness of the most recent generation of American Jewish men. We Jews, we hang on merely by a thread — and yet some today choose to drop the needle! Of course, maybe the men were not to blame, for goyische women are sirens: blonde and thin and hairless, grabbing poor innocent Jewish boys with their legs and exchanging that most addictive of substances, sex, for a chance at the most valuable treasure yet hoarded by the Jewish people: their seed. But the real tragedy, the real *shanda*, is what these men do to their children. They create boys and girls who will see themselves as Jewish but will never be Jews. What does one do with such children? Bring them back into the fold, diluting our stock, or push them away forever? Dilemmas, Hashem is not at a loss to provide them.

Alan could tell that she had taken offense at his tone. She was now sitting forward and scratching her shoulder absent-mindedly, a pouty frown drawn across her face. “It must bother her that I’m proud to turn my back on her people,” Alan thought to himself, “But what, should I accept it as the curse she thinks it is? I didn’t choose to not be chosen. Why should I feel guilty about it?” He shook his head. Forget it, of course it was her just desert to feel dejected; her disregard had ruined his shirt. And still no offer to pay for dry cleaning! Well, forget her then, he didn’t have to care if she was unwilling to make a gesture of restitution. He was the wronged party, not her.

Alan turned around and looked down the aisle, hoping to spot the stewardess. Not seeing her, he turned around and looked down the other side. No sign of her. Perplexed, he sat back once more. He considered pressing the orange call button himself, but did not. He was afraid of how hurt he would be if he called her and she didn’t come.

It was at about this point that Alan realized his neighbor to the left was looking at him amusedly. Noticing that he had caught Alan’s eye, the man with waxy skin nodded at Alan curtly. Alan nodded back. The man pursed his lips and made a sad face at the stain. Alan looked down at his shirt and shrugged his shoulders. The man’s face suddenly brightened, as he shot his index finger up into the air while mouthing “eureka!” He shoved his hand into his breast pocket and slowly pulled out a white handkerchief. Just as it was almost clear of his pocket, however, it became stuck. The man looked at the napkin bemusedly. He yanked at it several more times. Nothing gave. He shrugged his shoulders and looked at Alan expressionlessly. A moment later he shot his hand upwards for a second time, mouthing “eureka!” He pointed his finger at Alan, and then motioned toward the handkerchief.

Forgetting himself, Alan leaned over and grabbed the white cloth with his hand. He pulled gently but the fabric did not budge. The man across the aisle displayed his arm and hit his bicep with his hand. Apparently he wanted Alan to pull harder. Alan tried again, still without success. Now the man motioned with both his arms, calling for still more strength. The man breathed in and out heavily, as if preparing himself for a physical blow. Alan tried a third time, now putting in real effort. Suddenly, the man’s entire face seized in pain. In horror and

confusion, Alan stopped, only to discover that the man was now breathing a heavy sigh of relief. Draped across the aisle was an entire chain of differently colored handkerchiefs, each tied end to end with the next. Alan laughed.

“Can I use it?” Alan asked the man, point at the chain. The man shook his finger at Alan angrily for a moment. The man corrected his posture dramatically. He held his left hand up towards his head, as if stabilizing an enormous hat, and nestled his right between two buttons in his shirt, just above his stomach. Still holding his chest upright, he moved his body up and down in his seat as if galloping on a horse.

“Napoleon?” Alan asked.

The man made a leading gesture with his hand and then flapped it back and forth, making it look like a speaking mouth.

“*You want me to speak in French?*” Alan asked the man in French. The man smiled broadly.

“*Are you... a mime?*” Alan asked.

“*Of course not,*” the man said blusteringly. The suddenness of his outburst took Alan by surprise. The man continued, more subdued, “*I just like to play games, that’s all.*” He smiled at Alan knowingly. Alan backed his head away slowly. The man’s smile broadened.

“*Do you like to play games?*” he asked Alan.

Alan replied slowly, “*Not... usually.*”

The man was dramatically taken aback, “*But it’s bizarre isn’t it? You have the air of someone who dares, someone who risks. You look like someone who would very much like to play games.*”

Alan smiled at the flattery, “*You think so?*”

“*But yes, of course, I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t think so. Except perhaps it’s just my bias: you look very French.*”

Alan chuckled humbly. He said, sheepishly, “*Well, my mother is French.*”

The man said, “*And your father?*”

“*Not French,*” he said quickly.

The man laughed, and patted Alan on the shoulder affectionately. “*Unless he was a particularly cunning French, which one can never always discount.*” Alan laughed politely, part of him thinking to himself, “now wouldn’t that be convenient?” and part of him wondering why he had the faintest sense as if the strength of his shoulder muscles had just been appraised. A second later, a guilty feeling crashed down on him. How could he have wished for a different father?

Apparently, Alan’s sudden change in demeanor had been visible. His neighbor’s enormous grin very shortly descended. He began to apologize exaggeratedly, “*Oh excuse me, I was just making a joke you know. I would never insult your mother’s honor.*” Alan felt as if the man was looking at him very closely to see how he would react. Alan’s response was to look back at the man, nonplused. The man smiled again, “*But I see you’re not upset about that. Well, whatever I said to make you so upset, why don’t we play a game to make ourselves feel better?*” Alan found himself nodding slowly.

“*It’s free, of course,*” the man said nonchalantly, “*so why not?*”

Alan’s curiosity at the idea that one would pay for a game did not last long, however, for it was soon replaced by wonderment. He watched as his neighbor took three cards from the deck. Without looking, and using only his left hand, the man bent each card in half. Then, he took a bit of the napkin his drink was sitting on, spit on it, and rolled it into a ball.

“*Voila,*” he said, “*you must know this game?*” The man began pushing the ball of paper back and forth across his tray table, intermittently covering it with different cards. “Pretty abysmal angle for playing this game,” Alan thought, “I can actually see underneath the cards.” After fifteen seconds of moving back and forth, the man stopped and asked, “*So, you know where it is?*”

“*I can see it right there,*” Alan said to the man. The man’s pallid skin lost whatever hint of color it had previously. The man moved his head so as to approximate Alan’s point of view. Evidently, he did not like what he saw. The man cursed loudly, before saying tightly, “*Well, I’ll just have to try better won’t I?*”

They played through several rounds. Each time, Alan picked the card which was obviously covering the paper ball. Alan was not much interested in the game, but decided he might as well play along. He picked up the chain of napkins that had fallen on the floor and began wiping his shirt. The man appeared to take no notice. He was focused solely on the

motions of his hands. After a few rounds, he stopped

“Would you like to play the St. Petersburg variation of this game?” he asked.

“Sure, what is it?” Alan asked.

“Oh, why don’t we just play and you’ll figure it out as we go. It’ll have more of an effect on my movements than anything necessarily different for you to do.”

They began playing, but Alan could hardly perceive any difference in the game. If anything, it was now easier for Alan to spot the napkin ball. Either way, Alan did not care much. The thing that did interest Alan, however, was the fact that clouds were now visible through the window beyond his neighbor’s head. It meant that they were descending. It could be less than an hour until they landed. Strange, the calm that settled upon Alan now. He would have thought that descent would have so filled him with anticipation that he would hardly be able to stay in his seat. He must be tired, Alan thought to himself, and yawned. He began to look around the cabin. Strange how few of his neighbors’ faces had made an impression upon him: merely the two prize-winners to his right, the red-faced man to his front, and the game-player to his left. In fact, he realized, he had not the faintest idea of what anyone sitting in the row behind him looked like. For seven hours or more he had been within a meter of them, yet he knew not even the faintest details of their existence. They would leave and he would never meet them again and none of them would be any the wiser. It probably made no difference that he didn’t know anything about their faces. What reason did he have to think that those sitting behind him were different from all the other random people he might have met by chance at a given time? But then again he had also met Marie by accident, by serendipity. He might have missed her, too, if she had taken a different French literature class, for example, or if her boyfriend had decided to study at another American university. Alan closed his eyes, “No I could not have. For some chances are not by accident, but inevitability. Nothing is absolutely written; there is always a way to write one’s fate. If I wanted to I could know any number of faces,” and then, as if to prove the point to himself, he turned around in his seat and stuck his head over the would-be head-pillow.

Just as Alan established a sufficient perch upon which to appraise his rear guard, he found himself pulled strongly towards the seat to his right. The plane had at last begun the gentle pitching that signaled imminent descent. What had previously been to Alan’s right was now more or less below him. He looked out the window and saw that they were indeed over land. Looking out the window he had the terrible, vertiginous sense that he might fall out. He suppressed the feeling and turned to his left, which given the present orientation of the plane, was also up.

A resplendent and blinding afternoon sunlight suddenly struck Alan squarely in the face. Taken by surprise, Alan shielded his eyes too slowly, so that they filled with the surprising pain of light impacting itself in full against his pupae. With vision marred by numerous discolored

spots, Alan saw for the first time the most peculiar elation of the most peculiar gamesman to his left. An enormous ear-to-ear grin contorted badly the muscles of his face, revealing a full set of massive teeth packed together tightly against his narrow jaw. His two wispy pieces of mustache stood up at their ends, as if joining his face in smile. Even the little soul patch beneath his lips stood erect and pointed towards Alan. His eyes were wide with a child-like fascination. They glittered with the illumination of the very bright sunlight refracting off the back of his cards. The cards themselves he threw higher and higher, each spinning length over length, end over end, before catching themselves for gentle, bouncing landings on the surface of his tray table. There was no pretense of hiding the ball at this point, only joy at the superfluously supple rotation of the cards. He flipped the card more and more quickly; they tumbled through the air lower and lower, each somehow landing with perfect aplomb, like miniature acrobats.

A bing rang through the cabin. The man's face froze and, with mouth open, he suddenly stuck his hand upward. The pilot announced that they were beginning their final descent.

“My dear friend, it looks like our game is at a close. Which one will you choose?”

Alan blinked at the man. He had not been paying any attention to the game, and had missed something important. The man had tilted the cards ninety degrees, meaning that it was no longer possible to simply see what each card covered. Alan had no idea where which one hid the rolled-up napkin ball. Alan held his breath. Why was he so nervous about the choice? What did it matter what he picked? No, he knew it didn't matter. It was just his partner's intensity, that was all. Alan pointed toward the card in the middle.

“But no!” the man exclaimed, *“I took you for one who dares! Why did you pick the safe one — the middle one — the conservative choice nonpareil!”*

Alan grinned. In truth, he had hardly thought about the choice, and maybe indeed had picked the middle card out of a sense of safety. But now he saw that his choice had indeed been brilliant. His opponent thought for sure that Alan was not the type to pick conservatively, and hence had hidden the ball in the most conservative place. Alan, however, had picked against his own picking tendencies.

“And if I'm the one who dares, then you would know that I would never make the safe pick, thus making it the perfect place to hide yourself.”

The man's fop bobbed up and down as he smiled jubilantly. *“Very good, my young friend, but you still have much to learn about playing games. Games are not just about reasoning, but are about things like assumptions and trust. You, my friend, may be willing to dare, but you also trust your assumptions a bit too much!”*

The man squirmed delightedly, flipped over the right card, and showed the ball of paper. Alan murmured his shock. He shook his head in disbelief. For a moment, he sat in silence. Anger rose up in him. What was he doing playing this stupid game anyway? And why was he getting upset about it! This was his moment of victory, his arrival to Paris! to Marie!

“The game is arbitrary,” he muttered to himself loudly, *“There’s no point in strategizing.”*

The waxy-skinned man scrunched his lips and held them upward. *“That’s precisely how all losers talk,”* the man replied tightly, *“Not strategizing is the way that games become arbitrary.”* He scowled at Alan. *“Listen to me well: for any contest, there is always a winning strategy. That’s logic, that’s mathematics, that’s simply common sense.”* Alan was taken aback by the man’s sudden pugnacity. He regarded the man diffidently for as much as thirty seconds, during which time the man held Alan’s gaze hostilely. Finally, the man broke the silence.

“So do you have cash on you or will we need to visit an ATM after the flight?”

Alan felt a cold thrill shimmer up and down the length of his spine.

“What do you mean?”

“We were playing the St. Petersburg variation of the game.”

“So what? I don’t see how that makes any difference?”

“But no, it makes all of the difference! We weren’t playing for money before!”

“What?”

“My God, don’t act so dumb now! I can’t believe that right after losing you’d pretend that you didn’t know we were playing for money! The St. Petersburg variation is always for money, you knew that!”

“What in God’s name are you talking about? I thought you said the St. Petersburg variation only changed how you play!”

“But no, I said it mainly affects my movements. Which it did, certainly, when one has this much money riding on it, it naturally affects one’s movements.”

“And if I had known there was money riding on it, then it certainly would have affected mine too! My God, did you see me moving my head around, closing my eyes, watching the sky

out the window! What did you think, I was crazy?"

"But now you see exactly why I thought you were so daring! But I didn't for a moment think you were so daring as to try and cheat me out of 40,000 big ones!"

"What!"

"What, you act so surprised? You can do the math as well as I. One starts with five and then plays double or nothing every round. We played fifteen rounds, which is two times itself fifteen times, two, four; eight, sixteen, etc., eight-thousand one hundred ninety two, times five, which is forty thousand nine hundred and sixty. Which is how much you owe me, unless you'd like to play another round after we land!"

"You must have lost your mind. I don't have that kind of money!"

"Well find it! I don't know, that's not my problem. Start with what you have and then ask your people for some money," he nodded in the direction of Alan's right, *"I hear that you people have rather a lot."*

Anger seized Alan. *"Which people?"* he shouted violently.

The man smiled surreptitiously, *"Americans, of course. Him too, he is definitely American."* The man pointed at the seat in front of Alan.

"That isn't what you meant and I know it!" Alan shouted. He could go no further in French, he didn't have the words, and was too angry to struggle for them anyways. He shouted at the top of his lungs, without regard to time or place, **"FUCK OFF YOU ANTI-SEMITIC CON ARTIST! I'M NOT JEWISH AND I'M NOT GOING TO GET TAKEN IN BY YOUR SCAM!"**

Perhaps it was a sudden slowing of the engine. Perhaps there was a brief respite in the wind outside. Whatever it was, there was a sudden breathless silence on the plane for a few moments. And then, seemingly out of thin air, the stewardess at long last appeared by Alan's side.

"Excuse me sir but we would appreciate if you would refrain from yelling for the duration of the flight."

"But no my dear Marie — Marie is your name, correct?" Alan interpreted her lack of response as affirmation. *"I will not stop shouting as long as this man is harassing me for money."*

“Why are you asking him for money?” the stewardess switched to French.

“No no, my dear girl, I’m not asking him for his money, I am asking him for my money, which he has. You see, I was sitting here minding my own business, when I decided to ask this fine gentleman if he would like to play a little ball game for cash.”

“That’s a lie!” Alan shouted, *“Liar!”*

“But I asked you if you wanted to play the St. Petersburg variation. It’s apparent that’s for money! Everyone knows that!”

The stewardess responded, *“I didn’t know that.”*

“But, of course, you’re a very pretty, nice little girl. What reason would you have for knowing about manly things like games?”

“Monsieur!” she exclaimed, *“This is not an appropriate way to talk in public.”*

“And what, the way he talks is any better? He has accused me of being an anti-Semite. But no, me, I accuse! He is an anti-Semite. Him, he is the anti-Semite! I saw him, he insulted the Jewish woman and her son!”

At this point the orthodox woman interjected her two cents, *“But how could he be an anti-Semite? He’s a very nice Jewish boy!”*

The stewardess was flustered, *“Monsieur, Madame, whether or not this passenger is an anti-Semite or Jew makes absolutely no difference. The point is that there is to be silence on the plane for the rest of our descent. Furthermore, our company does not permit gambling aboard its aircraft whatsoever.”*

“Your company lacks jurisdiction over the air. It is a valid bet,” the gamesman said.

“Monsieur, I have asked you not to be difficult. Now please, prepare for descent.” With that she pushed up the two belligerents’ tray tables and brought their seats into an upright and locked position.

Alan looked straight ahead and put on his earphones. He knew the stewardess wasn’t coming back, knew that the gamesman was probably mouthing obscenities in his direction. So much the better, he would block the gamesman out entirely by forcing himself to dream. He imagined himself as if he were a plane himself, with arms outstretched, gliding slowly towards

the earth. He held to that image relentlessly, not daring to open his eyes or turn to the left, until the moment he heard the screech of rubber against concrete.

Chapter Two

Misunderstandings and neglect occasion more mischief in the world than even malice and wickedness.

– From The Sorrows of Young Werther, Goethe

Ah arrival, what gratification she brings! For travel plants in the mind a certain image: a prevision of oneself as already being present at one's destination. Moreover, this image has a tendency to grow in obtrusiveness through continued exposure to monotony, a resource never lacking on any trip of substantial duration. As the seeds of expectation take hold in the mind's deepest recesses, they sprout tubers that swiftly enlarge into thick, knotted, thorny vines, winding their way through the brain's myriad pathways, pressing their pointed sides against the brain's numerous axons and dendrites, causing the traveler to feel at first rambunctiousness, and then later despair.

And yet! As soon as one finds oneself present at one's destination, the thorny growth of anxious expectation is uprooted, suddenly and completely, as if it had spontaneously vanished into the air. The brain returns to functioning at full vigor, too quickly, and an unimpeded flood of endorphins course through the manifold pathways previously preoccupied by pointless anxiety, causing in some laughter, and in others tears. Sweet release, what wonderful compensation for suffering! For though the memory of anticipation fades and perishes, the memory of release lingers in the mind forever, a constant reminder that one has really achieved something worth suffering, which is to say that one has really lived.

Shame then, that arrival should be yet another gratification modernity has left by the wayside. For in olden times, when journeys took far longer to complete, and were filled with fewer diversions and far greater dangers, the anxious expectation of coming was far heightened, and the corresponding psychological release far greater.

Consider the case of the intrepid ocean passenger of old, trapped on a wooden thimble for weeks upon end, with only the power of the wind at his back to spur him forward across the boundless watery plane, beneath which teemed all manner of mythical beasts, from Mermen to Kraken to Octopi. His only form of distraction was broken conversation with the other crew members, at best a motley assortment of Genoans, Portugese, and Dutch — nationalities not known for producing conversationalists of any note. No wonder that upon arrival sailors used to jump off their ships and, delirious with gratitude, deliver their incontinent lips to the ground to sprinkle it with kisses. This was the true ecstasy of arrival.

Sadly in our day, the only very long journeys one can take necessarily have the flavor of novelty. Consider the ocean cruise, for example, wherein the destination one tries to reach is the state of being on a cruise ship. Because the cruise passenger is always in the process of traveling, he can never feel as if he has arrived. And yet because he always *has* arrived, since his goal in the first place was to be on a cruise, he constantly feels as if he should have already had his release. The nagging suspicion that one should have already released, but that one can never actually recollect having done so, stays with one for the duration of a cruise and is only brushed under the rug with the help of unlimited free food and alcohol. Then, when the cruise is over, and one has spent the majority of one's vacation in a state of super-satiated annoyance, one experiences a curious satisfaction at the cruise ordeal having ended, which confuses some travelers enough to dare the process again, and again, and again...

No, distance is no longer the obstacle it once was, as airlines have made fractions of the globe navigable in roughly proportionate parts of the day. Yet, even as flight has made the indefinite journey a thing of the past, it has itself created a new kind of interminability. For when a trip has a roughly estimable duration, never any more than a few thousand seconds, one can hardly avoid marking the passage of each instant in the back of one's mind, a procedure well-known to bloat and thicken time, imparting upon the passenger the sense that they are living through eternity to arrive at their destination. Thus, the seeming endlessness of airplane travel contains within it the embryonic potential for something approaching the arrival gratification of yore. And indeed, the potential is heightened by the fact that air travel is not without its dangers, albeit ones more psychological than scientific. For we are accustomed to thinking of air as a substance which provides no resistance at all, as one can verify with merely a flick of the hand. And yet, physics tells us that in the face of sufficient momentum this most immaterial of things, air, will buoy tons upon tons of thickened steel. There is a certain gap in intuition then, which is intriguing to think about when one is looking out the window of an airplane cruising five miles above the earth, "How can it be that floating on air actually works?" One is subsequently confronted with a choice: either accept the intuition or accept the physics, of which I can say the latter is the better choice. For if one accepts intuition, it will not be long until one is confronted with the horrifying epiphany that all one really is at that moment in time is a sad monkey who has managed to get himself trapped inside a pressurized metal cylinder full of other sad monkeys, whose only hope of survival is that the cylinder runs on a kind of magic beyond their simian powers of comprehension.

And so my argument, which is probably too long in coming, reaches a climax. For in modern times, the airplane is the one and only place where one might hope to experience the true gratification of arrival, it being the only place where the critical ingredients of terror and tedium remain in sufficient quantity. Yet, critically, and dismayingly, gratification is not to be found on airplane either, for the simple reason that the airline industry contrives to delay and defer the joy of arrival for as long as possible, until it withers and dies like a potato in the sun. Upon landing, the pilot begins the arduous task of finding a suitable berth for the girth-some metallic object under his command. This process is made easier in some, but not all, airports through the aid of

such practices as “having foresight” or “advance planning.” In the absence of these, I presume the chore of taxiing resolves itself into an exercise much like parking a car on a busy street.

If an appropriate gate is found, the pilot saunters his plane into its immediate proximity. His goal is to maintain an appropriate distance from the limp and tuberous appendage known as a “gate,” for despite the extreme difference in mobility between plane and airport, the airplane ultimately must play the passive role in their coupling ritual. And so the captain and the crew must wait, while a worker is fetched to steer the airport’s flaccid encumbrance to its appropriate position alongside the aircraft hull.

Once this task is complete, the disembarkation procedures may begin in earnest. The passengers must proceed single file, each one removing his or her bags in stow. Custom dictates that all the people in a row must clear themselves before the next row may begin clearing, which delays those in the very back of the plane, the coach of coach, as one might call it, sometimes upwards of twenty minutes.

Finally, when the passenger does leave the plane, he finds himself not upon firm land, but rather within the airport. The airport, however, is much less a real piece of land than a kind of surreal fantasy space concocted by the arbitrary union of corporate convenience and municipal tax-mongering. Everywhere there will be lines in which to loiter, shops in which to avoid paying one’s duty, interrogations and random baggage searches at the hands of airport police. One will pass over these, walk over miles upon miles of intricately designed walkways - a veritably Escher-like complex of stairs, escalators, and moving sidewalks - in order to have a chance at reaching the most psychologically taunting part yet of the air-journey: baggage claim. For there, one will stand, one’s destination looming just beyond a pair of glass doors, while the luggage of one’s fellow passengers moves past at a crawl, like dishes on a Lazy Susan. They pick up their things, they walk out, and at last they are at their destination. And yet one is kept in the suspense that the unthinkable might have happened: one’s baggage may have been mixed up, stowed in some bulkhead on the other side of the globe, never to be seen or heard of again.

Ah yes, one final ironic insult: the airport is nearly without exception located in the greater reaches of a city’s metropolitan area, so that one will need to take yet another journey to get where one wants to go.

But why am I so long in coming to this conclusion? For no other reason than a basic assumption I am trying out in the pages that proceed and follow, that a story’s presentation should somehow mirror its content. Since the major theme of this chapter of our story is gratification delayed seemingly without end, I thought it would be fitting to ruminate a bit too long on the theme of delayed gratification before returning to our disgruntled protagonist. For though Alan was aware his arrival at Charles de Gaulle would by no means constitute the end of his journey, he had expected to feel a certain tingling in his spine at the mere fact he had landed. Perhaps there would be a certain bounce in his heart moving in time with the gentle buoying of

the plane as it taxied across the ground? Somewhere in his heart, he had even entertained the hope that he would turn to look out the plane window and see in the distance, past the lifeless concrete of the airport and the even more desolate *banlieue*, some recognizable mark of Paris: the Eiffel tower, the cathedral Notre Dame.

Instead, upon arrival, Alan found himself directing his closed eyes straight ahead, trying to stop his heart and make his body disappear. For he knew that to his left he would find only the scurrilous gaze of his waxy-skinned neighbor. Alan opened his eyes for a moment, hearing the sounds of the airport's grossly distended appendage coupling with the airplane's hull. In the center of his field of vision Alan found the peculiar v-shaped nub that held his tray table in its upright and locked position. Nevertheless, his true focus was the distracting and unpredictable play of light he perceived from the corner of his eye, a light which presumably came from the backs of the gamesman's playing cards. Alan turned his head to look out to the right window, but couldn't see past the brown-wigged head of his Jewish neighbor. He redirected his head forward and closed his eyes, breathing slowly and deliberately, trying to escape in mind his unfortunate present scenario.

Minutes later, the final section of the plane began to deboard. He unclenched his eyes and thought about standing up. The Jewess and her son stood, but Alan waited. He didn't want to get up, because doing so would necessarily entail directing himself towards the gamesman. He secretly hoped that the man would leave first, allowing Alan to get his bag without having to face his accusing eyes, or potential threats of physical coercion. Of course, if he allowed the gamesman to go first, then he would also sacrifice the initiative. This would be a critical loss in two strategic senses. First, the man could wait for him just outside the door of the airplane, or just past customs, or on the other side of baggage claim. Second, even if the man wasn't going to lay in wait for him, Alan would be nervous about the possibility. He would never be able to suppress the fear that the man might jump out of some hidden corner at any moment. No, it was better for Alan to keep the initiative and leave the plane first. Of course, if he could shake the suspicion that his neighbor was out to get him, then he could simply relax and go back to agitating about Marie. Alan resolved that it was better to be certain about what he was dealing with.

Very slowly then, Alan rotated his chin to the up and left, while at the same time tilting his forehead down. He snuck a peak at the man's right hand, which was shuffling a pack of cards rapidly. Alan craned his neck upwards further, searching out his neighbor's face. The gamesman was looking in Alan intensely, without blinking. Alan turned his head rapidly, too rapidly, back towards the tray-table nub. He had settled it: the gamesman was still intent on collecting his debt. Thus, it behooved Alan to maintain the initiative and, furthermore, to take whatever measures were necessary to avoid confrontation. That meant, first of all, not looking directly at the man's eyes, and second of all, more importantly, not looking as if he was avoiding looking directly at the man's eyes, as showing weakness would invite further conflict.

The Jewess to his right now grabbed her bags. The passengers behind her already were assembling in the aircraft's right aisle. Alan detected no movement on his side of the plane. None of the passengers behind him had decided to stand, nor had his threatening neighbor. The light continued to dance across Alan's face irritatingly.

Just then, the v-shaped nub in front of Alan rocked back and forth as the pink-shirted man came to his feet. Alan looked up at the red-faced person, who noted Alan's existence with a cursory bat of his eyes.

At that moment, Alan achieved a critical insight that was to have an ominous effect on the proceedings that followed. For the brisk expression on the face of his pink-skinned neighbor had reminded Alan that he had in his possession a blunt, hard object — his tennis racket — which might be used to his advantage in any altercation. Indeed, Alan reasoned, his possession of a tennis racket radically transformed his strategic calculations.

“If he goes for my wallet, I can always hit him in the head with my forehand. Then, if that isn't enough, I can always hit him again with my backhand. Of course it will be important not to hit him too hard lest the racket become a weapon of assault as opposed to defense.”

Naturally, Alan didn't want a conflict with the man in the first place. Yet the racket might be of use in this regard as well. For, Alan reasoned, “Perhaps the main leverage the racket gives me is not force, but rather the capacity for subterfuge. I can put the racket in front of my face, pretending to do so absent-mindedly, thus blocking my eyes from view and avoiding conflict. At the same time, it won't appear as if I am trying to hide my eyes from view. Thus, I'll avoid looking as if I'm avoiding conflict. Then, I can open the latch on the bulkhead, grab my bag, and be the first out the plane: maintaining initiative and avoiding an altercation entirely.”

Alan sensed that this course afforded him an unambiguous improvement in position. Acting decisively, he, in one continuous motion, raised his racket in front of his face and stood. Unfortunately, while Alan had been cogitating deeply on the matter of whether to hide behind his racket while pretending not to hide behind his racket, he had also failed to notice that the pink-shirted man had moved into the space separating Alan from his would-be debt collector. Nor did the pink-shirted man sense Alan moving into said space, for he himself was preoccupied with the task of retrieving a bag from the bulkhead directly over Alan's head. Thus, when Alan stood up and swung his racket upwards to shield his face, he did so directly into the chin of his unsuspecting red-cheeked neighbor.

“Ah Jesus!” the man cried, staggering backwards in shock. He held his hand to his chin and winced. He opened his eyes, filled with pain and anger, and looked accusingly at Alan. “

Again with the racket!” he shouted.

Alan, surprised by the fact that he had inadvertently caused pain, could only mumble a diffident “sorry” and settle his eyes on the floor. He peeked at the man, who was still staring at Alan with cheeks flared. Alan could not be certain how angry he was since his face had looked quite red for the entire flight, even when he had been asleep. The two stood opposite each other for several moments before it occurred to Alan that the thick pink-shirted torso before him was, at present, providing him the perfect cover to grab his bag and leave the plane. The visual barrier provided by a human being was far more convincing than that of a tennis racket bag, no matter how cleverly the bag were held. The strategy advantage the present landscape afforded could not be sacrificed at any cost. Alan directed a half-smile at the man, said quietly “No hard feelings?” and, without waiting for an answer, reached his arm towards the compartment just beyond the red-faced man’s head. This action had the unfortunate effect of bringing Alan’s chest into the famous of the red-faced American. “What the fuck are you doing?” the man demanded, face ominously engorged.

“I’m grabbing my bag,” Alan said curtly, still intent on grabbing the latch.

“No you’re not!” the man replied. He swatted Alan’s hands down.

Alan considered his options. Sizing up the man, he decided that a confrontation between the two was unlikely if he acted purposefully enough. Moreover, unless he acted quickly he would lose his temporary advantage in negotiating his quandary with the gamesman. He reached again, more purposefully this time, past the red-faced man. He flipped the bin latch open. After a few seconds of disbelief, the red-faced man grabbed Alan’s wrist.

“HEY!” the man shouted, “What did I say?”

Alan scowled back at the angry man for a few moments, before noticing a peculiar glint of light off the side of the man’s head. There were several loose strands of oily hair sticking up above the red-faced American’s shoulder. Looking down and to the right, Alan noticed a dexterous hand reaching around the flushed torso, toward Alan’s very own back pocket. Alan intuited the hand’s destination. Seizing the moment, Alan twisted his body so that his right hand might reach freely up and open the bulkhead, and so that his wallet pocket would be further from the gamesman’s facile grip. The fleshy man resisted this motion however, grabbing Alan’s whole body in a bear-like grip. Alan was only able to reach up and barely grasp the edge of his bag in the cupboard, before he found himself sprawling across the armrest of a seat behind him and to the left. A curious patois of French, English and Yiddish shrieks resounded through the cabin, which Alan hardly noticed. Instead, he was focused on the hands of the red-faced man clawing at his shirt, and also upon his bag, which was tilting precariously on the lip of the overhead bin. Just as the red-faced man looked as if he was about to raise Alan by his shirt, the suitcase went over the precipice, falling two or three feet before contacting the back of the red-faced man’s

neck. The man bellowed in pain. He fell to the ground, knocking his right cheek on a metal arm-rest. Reflexively, the man kicked into the air behind him. This space, at that moment, happened to be occupied by the gamesman. The gamesman, face curling in pain at the blow, remained a grim study in determination, as he proceeded to roll his back over the doubled-up red-faced man, land in a sprinter's crouch, and finally pounce upon Alan, grabbing him by the shoulder. He reached over into Alan's pocket. Alan looked face-to-face with the man for a moment, before weakly attempting to raise his racket against the foe. The gamesman, however, had anticipated this maneuver. He snatched the racket handle away from Alan and swung the racket case over Alan's very neck, twisting the racket several times over so that Alan was once again choking on his case. The man pulled tighter, and tighter still, until Alan could not breathe. Overwhelmed, Alan nevertheless saw the red-faced man behind the gamesman, dead-lifting Alan's enormous backpack. The enraged American shouted a deranged war cry and, investing the full weight of his body into the bag, hurled the object at the gamesman. Alan, exerting whatever feeble energy remained in his command, ducked his head, squeezing the bands of the racket case still tighter. He felt his head fill with blood and his eyes nearly pop. A cold and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

"Is this to be the end?" Alan wondered, closing his eyes, "Not shot to pieces in some lover's quarrel, or aged in bed, resting upon my laurels? Ignobility as my end, and thereby at my beginning too: never a Chateaubriand, only a fool!" A wave of revulsion seized Alan, an enormous "No!" bubbling up from the depths of his soul. He opened his eyes, a final reserve of extraterrestrial strength granting his limbs power of action. He moved his hands to the straps and heaved with all his might. Alas, he grabbed the wrong part of the strap, and by pulling actually made the knot around his neck still tighter. Alan's special reserve evaporated, and once more he lost control of his limbs. Soon his eyes closed. All that was left to him was to prick up his ears, in the hopes that by following the myriad conversations on the airplane he would prevent himself from falling into a sleep from which he might not wake. The sounds around him were so confused, a jumble of words and exclamations belonging to so many distinct languages. Only one thread Alan heard distinctly: "Oy mien gott, you're killing him! You're killing him!" Alan thought to himself that he'd wished that woman would stop making such an embarrassing fuss. Soon, however, Alan's hearing vanished, his eyes rolled into the back of his head, and his body slumped limply in its place. And so it was that twenty minutes after landing, for the first and only time during his flight, Alan fell into a deep and satisfying slumber.

Alan flicked his eyes open. No thoughts occurred to him. No emotions affected him. He only registered that there was a powerful light before his eyes, and also that his corneas felt as if they were burning. He stared ahead doggedly, unblinking, failing to infer any causal connection between the two phenomena.

As the pain in his eyes grew, Alan began to recall certain things. In one way or another,

his memories concerned a flight to Paris. Alan was relieved by that. He recalled planning a trip to Paris. And yet, since he had often had dreams about going there, he was not sure that his memory was entirely credible. There were too many dream-like elements in it: the anxious feeling that he needed to fall asleep but could not; the mime playing three card monte on his tray table; the red-faced man in a starchy salmon-pink shirt yelling at him to stop playing tennis on board an airplane. He must have been dreaming. His flight to Paris must still lay ahead of him, not yet lived. Except, if he was still at home, in America, what was the light above him now? He did not recognize it. It was too strong. Perhaps he was still in a dream. Maybe the flight had only been an entrée act, a reverie within his still ongoing reverie.

Alan, having established his bearings and concluded that he was asleep, now focused his attention on the light he had been staring into for the past few minutes. He tried to will the light away, make it dim, or at least diminish the pain it was causing. Alan's attempt to place his mind over the matter of the world failed, however. On reflex, his eyelids closed. Realizing that he was not only awake, but also had a splitting headache, Alan groaned.

“Be happy you blacked out, you missed the worst of it.”

Alan cracked open his right eye. The pink-shirted man was sitting on a metal chair next to him. Alan saw that the skin under the man's right eye had been badly bruised. His hands were cuffed to his chair. Startled by the sight of handcuffs, Alan tried to turn. He was unable to do so completely. He only managed to move his head over his right shoulder. Peering down, he saw that his hands were cuffed together behind his body, while his tennis racket and backpack were hanging from the back of his chair. Alan frantically twisted in the opposite direction. What he saw caused him to yelp. Sitting in another metal chair, with legs crossed in sardonic comfort, was none other than the gamesman.

“*Et bonjour à toi aussi!*” the gamesman said in response to Alan's panicked shriek. His pronunciation was as precise and enthusiastic as that of an actor in a language-instruction video.

“You were trying to steal my wallet!” Alan shouted in English, still trying to disengage himself from his chair.

“*My dear friend,*” the gamesman said smugly in French, “*I did steal your wallet. But that was before we were apprehended by the authorities.*”

Alan stopped still. He asked, apprehensively, “*The Authorities?*”

“*But of course, what do you think? A riot like that on an airplane. We were all taken into custody immediately!*”

“*Custody!*” Alan exclaimed, “*Where was I?*”

“*You were experiencing a kind of death, I don’t know which: big or small... medium perhaps. It doesn’t matter – you were unconscious.*”

Alan was about to ask more about the nature of his unconscious experience, but he was interrupted.

“Psst!” Alan’s other neighbor said. Alan turned to the right. The red-faced man was looking out of his swollen half-open eyes in the direction of Alan and the gamesman. “Hey, what’s he saying?”

“What?” Alan asked.

“We are talking about the *weather*,” the gamesman replied curtly.

“*Why did you say that?*” Alan demanded in French.

The gamesman rolled his eyes, “*Never mind, listen to me and listen well: there is one and only one strategy which gets us out of here with our liberty intact.*”

“*What?*” Alan asked, still more bewildered.

“*There will be a charge that we, all three, but especially you, have disturbed the peace, put the safety of others in jeopardy, and committed assault, all of which amounts to several compounded felonies.*”

“*WHAT!*” Alan shouted. Frantic, he started clawing at his hands, trying to use his nails to peck off the few layers of skin that, presumably, were all that separated him from escape.

The red-faced man cleared his throat loudly and squinted beadily in the direction of the French speakers, as if closer visual inspection would help him penetrate the thick fog of language which prevented him from understanding what was happening. Neither Alan nor the gamesman noticed.

“*Wait, wait,*” the gamesman continued as Alan gave the man less than half his attention. Instead, Alan’s major focus remained his improbable stratagem of defeating metal handcuffs by scratching off the skin around his wrist. The gamesman, sensing Alan needed something further to draw his attention, began shouting. “*There is not much time my dear child! If we are clever, and ruthless, we may develop an account of what happened that places the blame squarely on*

that fat American over there!”

“Hey! Hey! He’s talking about me, isn’t he?” the red-faced man asked Alan anxiously, “What’s he saying?”

“Then, if we stick together, the American will take the fall for what happened on the plane. The police are French, I am French, you are a bit French.”

Alan’s attention was snapped away from his wrists. He shouted vehemently, “*I AM French!*”

“Of course, of course, you are French,” the gamesman replied apologetically, before pressing his point with renewed vigor, *“And him — he is not. So we can hang him out to dry like a wet bathrobe!”*

At last, Alan understood the gist of the gamesman’s offer. He did not have long to consider it, however, because his attention was soon drawn to the conspicuous psst-ing of his red-faced neighbor.

“Psst, Johnny Mac. I don’t know what the mime is saying to you but hey, listen, whatever happens, we’ve got to stick together in this. We’re Americans. We may have our differences, but when the going gets tough, we stick together. Especially against the Froggies!”

Alan could feel his heart beating in his neck. He looked around the room desperately. He felt that his hands were hot, but his forehead surprisingly chill. Where was he, really? Penetrating the glare induced by the powerful bulb above his head, Alan saw that on the walls there were pictures of several kinds of airplanes and a diploma from the *École Militaire*. Standing in the center of the desk before him was a figurine of a lithe and delicate young woman, wearing a blindfold over her eyes and holding in her hand a scale. For a vertiginous moment, Alan had the eerie sense that the statue depicted not Justice, but rather his love Marie.

“Hey, hey, keep it together,” the man in the salmon-pink shirt continued, “We’ve been in tougher jams than this. This is no different than arguing your way out of a DUI.” He smiled at Alan boyishly, “Me and you, we’re going to be real pals after this, have a good war story to tell. Hahaha!” He continued laughing enthusiastically, almost hysterically, to himself.

“He is absolutely a moron, isn’t he?” the gamesman remarked matter-of-factly, *“Look at this sub-human, he deserves to be in prison anyway. Can’t you see in his teeth that he has the air of a rapist?”*

The gamesman nodded to himself before turning to Alan, *“What will you risk for him?”*

Your life? Your career? Come on, let's put him behind bars where he belongs!"

Alan was about to retort that it was the gamesman himself who belonged behind bars, when the door behind Alan opened. A man in a blue blazer with gold trim and buttons, clearly an officer of either the military or the police, entered the room. He looked at neither Alan nor the other detainees. He held in one of his hands a small brown espresso cup. In the other hand, he held its accompanying coaster. The officer walked deliberately around his desk and to his seat. For several seconds, he sat at his desk blinking. Finally, he looked up at the searing fluorescent bulb above. The intensity of the light bleached the man's appearance, rendering his hair and skin a uniform pewter. His eyes were light and empty, like that of a blind person, while the heavy wrinkles of his skin gave his exterior a torrid energy, similar to what is found in the sculpture of Rodin. What a rich contrast the officer was with the elegant representation of blind and impartial justice sitting on his desk! It was as if contingency herself were alluding to a profound irony, that when justice removes her blindfold one finds that she is not an incarnation of divine and immaculate beauty, but in actuality a tired, ghoulish, blind, and, one can only assume, incontinent old man.

The officer pressed a button under his desk and the light above switched off. The room was momentarily shrouded in total darkness, during which time each of the detainees attempted to make an escape. The officer pulled a cord attached to his desk lamp, not appearing to notice that the three men before him all were caught in a bad attempt at looking inconspicuous. He began to peruse some papers on his desk. Alan noted that the officer was actually a well-kept man of around sixty, with light blue eyes and copper-colored hair that had gone the way of tin with old age. The man's features were angular and long, except for the bulbous and curiously red nose affixed to the center of his face.

The officer frowned and reached into his breast pocket, pulling out a metal flask. He screwed off the cap and poured a tablespoon of its contents into the espresso cup. Alan noted that the liquid coming out of the flask had a color inconsistent with that of any creamer he had previously encountered.

The officer spent at least five minutes looking through his papers. Finally, he said in French, nonchalantly, as if to no one in particular, *"Well Jacques, how is business this time of year?"*

Alan thought that perhaps the officer was talking to himself. Three or four seconds later, however, the officer lifted his gaze and indicated with the tops of his eyes that his question had been intended for the gamesman. The gamesman smiled politely,

"Mmm, a bit slow of late. But I have high hopes for the coming holidays."

"I'm sure," the officer remarked, a tinge of irony perhaps visible. He took another sip of coffee and asked, *"One of these two was your mark?"*

"Mark? Mark? What is a mark?"

"If you want to waste my time with your games, go ahead," the officer stated flatly. Under his breath, he remarked, *"I won't fight you."*

"Oh Gerard, playing games with you is never a waste of time."

The officer cleared his throat and addressed himself to Alan and the man in the pink-shirt.

"Bonjour et bienvenue à Paris, Charles de Gaulle," the officer's smile was chilly, but polite. *"By your passports I can tell that you two are Americans, although it seems you yourself are carrying a genuine French passport."* He motioned towards Alan and asked, *"Do you understand French?"*

"Yes," Alan said with automatic hastiness. He cursed himself. It would have been much better if he had come up with a witty response to the question. The obvious retort of "Do you?" immediately sprang to Alan's mind. He thought to himself that it was not yet too late to say it. Nevertheless, he held his tongue. The remark could be considered offensive. It would be better not to make his interrogator hostile.

The officer continued, *"Très bien. Et toi?"* He pointed to the red-faced man. The American understood that he was being directed a question, but he knew not which. The officer groaned unhappily and coughed. Slowly, and with a heavy accent, the officer asked the man in English, "You do not speak French?"

"No, English," the American barked.

"You speak English," the officer muttered back. He exhaled deliberately and began shuffling through a cabinet in his desk. He said several times, under his breath, alternating between French and English, "There is a problem.... *There is a problem....*"

Eventually, the officer found what he had wanted: a large index card covered in dust. He blew on the card, revealing a flowing script written in blue ink. The officer began to read from the card slowly, like a child sounding out each and every syllable.

"We must choose a language in which to conduct these proceedings. It is customary to conduct the meeting in the language of the majority of detainees, with the assistance of a

translator if necessary.”

Alan nodded through the officer’s speech, though the plodding pace did little to hold his interest. Instead, Alan was surreptitiously brainstorming witty responses to the question of whether or not he spoke French. It had become clear to Alan that asking “*Do you?*” it would have been a serious mistake. An accusatory “*Do you?*” was exactly the kind of insipid, knee-jerk remark the red-faced boor to his right would make. No, he should have said something more sardonic, more witty. Something more, for lack of a better word, *French*. Something like, “*Just as well as the queen.*” Of course France had no queen, and hadn’t had one for over two hundred years. Perhaps that added an element of sarcasm, however, an element of irony? Alan’s train of thought was interrupted as the gamesman started shouting.

“I object to this egregious infraction of my rights. How dare you, an officer of the government, impinge upon the rights of a French citizen for the sake of this American here. France is for the French! And her language for her people, her police, and her government!”

The officer looked at the gamesman tiredly and sighed. He remarked to Alan,

“My old acquaintance here is insisting that I conduct the interrogation in French, a request with which I, by law, must comply. This will not pose a problem for you, I understand,” the officer said looking at Alan, who nodded in agreement, a tremor of excitement going through his body at the thought that he would again have the chance to say something witty. Alan had nothing at hand, however, besides “*I speak French like Marie-Antoinette.*” This retort was doubly-stupid, however, since, first of all, Marie Antoinette was totally disconnected from what the officer was saying and, second of all, though probably no one at the proceedings would know this, Marie-Antoinette actually was an Austrian by upbringing and spoke French rather badly. The time for a clever remark passed, however. The officer said to the red-faced American, “If we speak in French, you shall not understand nothing.”

“Exactemente,” the pink-shirted man replied, evincing enormous satisfaction. Alan sighed to himself. He felt morose. He had missed his chance. He would not be able to make a witty rejoinder. Frowning, Alan buried his head in his shoulder.

The officer did not notice Alan’s discouraged state. He only nodded to himself, digesting the American’s use of the Spanish word for exactly. The officer looked down at his index card and continued to plod through the pre-written text, “In the event that a person demands the interrogation proceed in French, the law grants any person who does not speak French a right to an interpreter if he likes.” He pointed at the red-faced man, “You may elect not to speak until you have access to an interpreter. This is your sole warning that anything you say may be used against you, and it will be assumed that if you speak it is with full comprehension of what your

words mean. Do you understand?" The red-faced man affirmed that he did.

Alan sighed again, a much lower and deeper sigh. An interpreter would join their meeting, slowing the proceedings, as well as taunting Alan by rendering impoverished translations far inferior to what Alan himself could produce. He would hear inexact matches of idioms, or even outright grammatical errors. Then, he would be forced to bottle inside all his frustration at the fact that he *knew*, just simply *knew*, what was being said better than everyone else. Except... what was to prevent Alan himself from acting as the interpreter? He had done simultaneous translation when his mother's mother came to America. He had performed rather flawlessly in his humble estimation. What was the difference? Alan perked his head up and sat straight in his chair. Yes, he would make the offer to interpret for the red-faced American. Moreover, he would make the offer cleverly, thus redeeming himself for his previously missed opportunity to make a knowing quip. But what to say, how to quip? He had no idea. Nevertheless, Alan realized it was important to start the quipping process immediately, lest the opportune moment pass. So it was that Alan opened his mouth, stuck his tongue in his cheek, and hesitated. The officer noticed Alan looking at him and furrowed his brow curiously. He prompted Alan, "*Is there something you would like to say?*"

Terror swelled up inside Alan. He had only a fraction of a sentence in mind and wasn't sure whether his idea was coherent. And yet, cursing himself, he realized that he had nothing better. He cleared his throat, shifted in his chair, and decided he would have to speak now or never. Straightening his posture, Alan pronounced with the poise and eloquence of someone redelivering a famous piece of oratory, "*The one who has two equally facile tongues at his disposal is either a snake or a devil. Unless of course, he is me.*"

The officer looked at Alan thoughtfully and hemmed. He squeezed his lips together, before finally guessing, "*Chateaubriand?*"

"*What?*" Alan was startled. It was, for Alan, almost as surprising as a total stranger correctly guessing his first and last name.

"*Who said that?*" the officer asked insistently, "*What you just said, it is Chateaubriand, isn't it?*"

"*No, I don't think so,*" Alan replied slowly, "*I think I just came up with it now.*"

"*Really? It sounds very much like something he would have said.*"

"*You think so? Maybe, I have, well,*" Alan felt a simultaneous rush of pride and diffidence, "*I have read quite a bit of Chateaubriand. He is, something of a model for me —*

perhaps I read it somewhere and forgot.”

“Or perhaps you have picked up his voice through all your reading,” the officer’s face brightened, his cheeks reddening to match the color of his nose. He said proudly, *“I myself went through a period where my conversational style was heavily influenced by the writing of Alexandre Dumas.”*

“Really, Gerard, that is so fascinating. Every time we meet I learn something new about you.”

The officer shot an annoyed glance at the gamesman, before returning his attention back to Alan.

“Pay no attention to him,” the officer said, *“Men of letters are rarer and rarer these days, especially in France.”* He looked at the pink-shirted man, who had taken a break from trying to understand what was happening in order to practice flexing his forearms. *“And from the looks of it, America as well,”* the officer continued. The officer shook his head, looked into the distance, and reached down with his left hand to grab his coffee. He had a sip, eyes remaining in the dreamy distance. *“I haven’t read Dumas since I left Indochine,”* he said. Some moments passed before he finally came to his senses.

“Where were we?” the officer asked.

“Oh, well,” Alan started eagerly, *“I was just going to offer to be the interpreter for my compatriot over here.”*

The officer steadied his azure eyes on Alan. He held them there for a few moments, before blinking and looking down at the papers on his desk. He said to Alan, *“A generous offer — ask him if he will accept it.”*

Alan turned to his American neighbor and asked, “Do you want me to whisper what everyone is saying so that you can understand?”

“You’d do that?” the red-faced man asked Alan, a grateful expression on his face.

“Sure,” Alan nodded, beaming with delight at the new turn in events, “it would be my pleasure.”

“Very good,” the officer remarked. He began to speak slowly and clearly to facilitate Alan’s translating. Alan whispered the words to his neighbor, who shifted his eyes back and forth from Alan to the officer as the former continued translating the latter’s speech. *“Then allow*

me to proceed with the interrogation. Firstly, let me be clear about the reason that you have been detained. A fight upon an airplane at any stage of the flight is a grave threat to the safety of the vessel. One may be charged, in either France or America, with a felony for insinuating such a fight. It is up to the chief of security at the destination airport or the airline company upon whose plane the flight occurred whether to press charges. The captain has already informed me that his company will not file a claim, though I have not yet determined whether Aéroport Charles De Gaulle will pursue this case. In addition, it is possible for any one of you to assert your rights as victims of assault and press your charges against the others. Would any of you like to do so at this time?"

Alan finished translating the officer's last line and congratulated himself on his own performance. He had the sense as he was translating that he was speaking smoothly and faithfully on a phrase-by-phrase basis, though in a more general sense he had no idea whether he was rendering the gist of the officer's remarks. If Alan had been asked to describe himself in the previous scene, what would have come to his mind would be an image of himself as a fanciful industrial automaton. Alan had taken as his raw materials French words and, through the miracle of robotic dexterity, transformed them into refined, precise, and eloquent English. In serving this capacity, he had necessarily made himself indifferent to the words he said and heard. If he retained them in his head it would have only confused him, making mistakes inevitable. As a result, Alan had hardly any idea of what either the officer or he himself had said. So it was that Alan stared back at the officer dumbly in response to the latter's question, unsure why there had been a break in the conversation.

"I reserve my right to press charges, though I will not do so at this time," the gamesman remarked brusquely. The officer gestured to Alan, as if prompting him. Startled, Alan translated the gamesman's remarks.

"And how would you two respond?" the officer asked.

Alan felt a tremor of fear in his spine. He had no idea what the question was. The red-faced American replied, "I'll wait to press charges." Alan blinked several times, he hoped that by playing dumb he would manage to get through. The officer nodded his head at Alan, who shook his head "no," hoping that if he did so the officer would pass over him.

"Very well, it is as I expected," the officer remarked. Alan was relieved, eager to return to the task of translating. Alan felt that he had gained the confidence of the officer. The latter was no longer speaking slowly, or over-enunciating his words. Alan, not wanting to disappoint himself or the officer, redoubled his efforts to stay focused on what was important during the task at hand: translating perfectly. *"I have already spoken to several witnesses and it is my understanding that the following course of events took place. At some point in the middle of the flight, there was an altercation between the two Americans relating to whether one had hit the other with his tennis racket. That would be you, Alan, who hit the other, Reagan. Is that*

correct?”

“That’s right, he hit me,” the red-faced man said.

The officer looked at Alan for his take, but Alan once more had no idea what he was being asked. He looked eagerly at the officer, awaiting more French words.

“Did you hit him with your racket?” the officer asked.

“Did you hit him with your racket?” Alan whispered to his English-speaking neighbor.

“No, he wants to know did *you* hit *me* with your racket,” the red-faced man replied.

“What?” Alan asked, wondering why he was bring up the issue.

“You did!” the man yelled at Alan.

Alan had not expected the man to yell at him. It was for this reason that he parroted, in something between a statement and a question, “I did.” A moment later, however, Alan came to the fearful realization that he was being asked for his account of what had happened on the plane. Moreover, he was allowing the red-faced man’s version of events to go uncontested. Not a good idea, as one might infer from this man’s account that Alan’s behavior had caused the fight on the plane. Alan stammered, “But... but...but only at the *end* of the flight.”

“Not during the middle?” the officer asked sharply. None in the room noticed how quickly the officer had responded to Alan’s remark, which had been made in English. Alan said, *“Not during the middle.”*

The officer nodded, before continuing to speak, *“And so it was related to me that neither of you had come to a consensus as to whether an altercation had actually taken place. Fine then. Moving forward, at some point in the flight the young gentleman before me began gambling with this fellow here.”*

“Exactly right. We began gambling fair and square,” the gamesman replied with a steady self-assurance that Alan tried to convey as he whispered to the American.

“Although it was mentioned that the young gentleman did not understand the terms under which he was gambling,” the officer rejoined, an edge of anger in his voice.

“Ignorance of the rules is no excuse; one must obey even if one doesn’t know!” Alan

unconsciously aped the gamesman's outraged tone in translating.

"So I understand," the officer acquiesced, before retorting smugly, *"Of course a contract entered into under a regime without contractual law, as in airspace, also has no guarantee of enforcement. It is for this reason that gambling between customers on airplanes has never become commonplace."*

The gamesman blinked rapidly and then coughed. For the first time in the proceedings, the gamesman betrayed bodily discomfort. Alan thought, just for a second, that he could see the corners of the officer's lips raise into a smile. The officer, seeming satisfied that he had won the argument, now spoke with more cheeriness than he had before.

"Shortly before landing there was a dispute over whether the two had actually been gambling, with the young fellow before me again denying any part in the proceedings. After landing, there was a physical altercation between the two Americans, which the Frenchman joined for reasons we are hitherto unaware of, although I have my suspicions given that this was found on his person." The police officer gestured to a wallet on the desk, which Alan, with a start, realized was his.

"The younger of the two Americans lost consciousness after being partially asphyxiated by his tennis racket, while the other two detainees continued to stand opposite each other, trading sporadic blows. When the airport security entered the plane, the American attempted to run out the back and open the hatch, apparently in the hopes of escaping, while the Frenchman yelled at the officers that the criminal was trying to flee the plane. The American, unable to escape the vessel, fought in vain against the riot police, who clubbed him with their rubber batons until he was subdued."

"That's right," the red-faced man replied smugly.

"Now all this I suppose was known to everyone in the room, with the possible exception of Alan. The question is, in which direction does this information leads us?" Alan and the officer came to a pause. The room grew silent. Suddenly, the gamesman issued a rapid burst of speech that caught Alan completely unawares. He translated none of it, and for the first time in the entire interrogation, actually paid attention to the meaning of what someone in the room was saying while they said it.

"But don't you see my dear officer, there is no information here because the story is a blatant falsehood! First of all, there was no gambling aboard the aircraft, the dispute that the stewardess witnessed between myself and this fine young gentleman here was of a purely mathematical nature: I was merely trying to demonstrate to him the dangers and advantages of

iterated double-or-nothing betting.

“What’d he say?” the red-faced American demanded in a whisper.

“Um, nothing, sorry,” Alan whispered back absent-mindedly. It had finally dawned on Alan that in his present situation his words and actions might have consequences, which it behooved him to consider lest they prove unfortunate. The red-faced man looked back and forth between the gamesman and Alan, waiting expectantly. Alan mumbled to his neighbor, “I lost the thread. I’ll catch it as soon as I can.” Meanwhile, he listened intently to what the gamesman had to say.

“Secondly, the young Mr. Alan was strangled only because I was knocked down by the oafish American there. As I fell, I inadvertently held on to the strap connected to his case, as it was my only source of leverage. This action unfortunately had the effect of pulling the strap much too tightly around Alan’s neck, causing asphyxiation. As you can see, I played some role in this... gallimaufry... but ultimately it was the American’s fault that Alan lost consciousness.” There it was: the gamesman had decided to offer an alliance. It would be idiotic to decline it, Alan thought to himself. The gamesman was correct that the two were at an advantage in the proceedings, since they shared a common language that the third party couldn’t understand. Moreover, the American had foolishly made himself linguistically dependent upon Alan, an advantage which Alan might exploit in the proceedings. The gamesman concluded, indignantly, *“Finally, I did not try to steal Alan’s wallet. I merely picked the object up so that it would be available to him during interrogation. I feared that if it were left aboard the plane, it would be lost for good.”*

The officer continued to nod, looking not at the gamesman but at the wall next to him. Alan had the impression that the officer was nodding less at the gamesman’s words than whatever monologue was proceeding in his own head. When the gamesman finished his speech, the officer pressed his lips together and pointed his finger at Alan.

“You have stopped translating.”

“Oh, have I?” Alan remarked.

“Could someone tell me what’s happening?” the red-faced man asked anxiously, looking alternately at Alan and the officer.

The officer replied absent-mindedly, but not without confidence, “He says the riot was your fault.”

“But that’s not true!” the fleshy man insisted, “It wasn’t just me, it was Alan!”

“Hey!” Alan shouted, scandalized. The red-faced man made a steady motion towards Alan.

“Look, but that’s not, that’s not what the real problem is. A little rough and tumble shoving on the plane isn’t what caused the riot. See, because after I pushed Alan, he twisted to get away from me – like a running back trying to break a tackle. Then, he gave me the stiff arm.” As he spoke, the red-faced man tried to pantomime these football motions, but it was difficult to do so given that his hands were cuffed behind his back. He tried to give the best approximation that he could.

“Then, he threw himself against another passenger sitting down, and just as I was about to grab him, this guy over here kicked me viciously in the back. There I was, sprawled out and wincing in pain, watching as this French prick over here starts choking this guy to death with his own tennis racket case. So I, you know, I’m trying to save the day right, so I picked up a bag lying around and slammed it on the Frenchy’s back.”

The officer continued nodding, not looking at any of the detainees. Alan wondered whether the officer could follow what was happening. Maybe the reason the officer seemed so dismayed was because he was discouraged by the state of his own English.

“I see.” The officer turned himself toward Alan. “*He says that it was the fault of Jacques here?*” the officer asked. Alan nodded. The officer closed his eyes heavily. He brought two fingers to the bridge of his nose and pinched tightly.

“*So what will it be?*” the officer asked Alan, “*The two accounts point in opposite directions, each blames the other and saves you.*”

What was the officer saying? That he wanted Alan to take the blame? But why would he want that? “No, the officer wants an arrest,” Alan thought, “And if two people blame the third then the third has to take the fall.” No matter what happened, Alan’s first loyalty had to be to himself. Therefore, he would have to blame one of the other two for starting the riot if he wanted to get free. But what account should he give? On the one hand he understood that he could simply agree with the version of events that the gamesman had presented. He could probably manipulate the proceedings that would follow so that the red-faced American would have no idea that Alan had sold him out for the sake of a quick escape. Moreover, the gamesman would owe Alan a real debt of gratitude, more than sufficient to cancel the spurious gambling debts the former had invented on the plane. Which is to say, Alan reasoned, that if he blamed the

American he would walk away from the flight ordeal entirely free, except for the sullen guilt that he had betrayed his innocent neighbor. “Who is not so innocent after all,” Alan thought, “Who is, in fact, a jerk.”

What was the alternative? To tell the truth: that the fight had become serious only after the gamesman tried to stick his hand in Alan’s own pocket, that the gamesman was the true criminal who deserved to be in prison for behavior. Alan thought of the gamesman’s pallid hands as they wrapped around his neck. Alan shivered. If he told the officer the truth then the gamesman would know whose fault it was that he was in prison, would know that Alan had spit on the very hand that the gamesman had extended in friendship. No, the gamesman was hardly the type he would want holding a grudge against him.

The officer was watching Alan intently. Alan thought to himself, “He must suspect the calculations going through my head. The officer must know that it is to my advantage to blame the American. He thinks I’m going to do it. Maybe I am. Maybe I should. I will.” Alan began to open his mouth, but then coughed. What was he thinking? Why was he cutting against the truth, the innocent, what was just? Because he was afraid of the gamesman, which is to say he was picking convenience and calculation over courage and rectitude. What kind of romantic personality would do that? “No,” Alan thought, “A romantic collects mortal enemies like post-masters collect stamps; a romantic suffers any ill for the highest and most profound good.” Alan sat up in his chair as straight as he could. He announced, with more than a hint of defiance,

“This man to my left is lying through his teeth. He tried to rob me, and it was my resistance to that, and my resistance alone, which led to the fight.”

The police officer laughed incredulously as the gamesman shouted, *“Traitor! Liar! Villain!”*

“What? What? What?” squawked the red-faced man, sounding not unlike a parrot. The officer stopped smiling. *“Silence!”* he shouted, a word in French similar enough to its English equivalent for the red-faced man to understand. The officer sat high in his chair, rising on the balls of his feet, as he propounded upon the waxy-skinned gamesman the following words,

“Oh Jacques, how fitting that our long stand-off should end with the truth announced at last, that you are a thief! There will be no escaping it this time, it’s signed and sealed, attributed twice over.” The gamesman’s soul patch stood on end. His torso was hunched over his stomach, as if deep inside he was suffering a terrible pain. The officer turned to Alan jubilantly, *“Oh my beautiful boy! How I have longed for the day when this would happen! For you see, the man to your left is in actuality a vicious criminal, who tricks tourist into gambling for all their savings when they least expect it: aboard an airplane. How many times has he sat in this office, sitting smugly even under arrest, with the certainty that nothing could be done against him, that he had by reason committed no crime against law, only against nature and morality, which I sat here*

powerless to prevent. I went so far as to ban him from my airport; he sued me and convinced the court that my airport should pay him damages! No more Jacques, the testimony of these two individuals, together with that of the other witnesses on the plane, is more than sufficient to put you where you belong. You shall never fly again!”

The officer sprang to his feet and approached the two Americans. He first disentangled the red-faced man from his cuffs. The man shook his head gratefully while at the same time rubbing his wrists. The officer directed the man to the door, which he presently ran out of like a frightened baboon. Alan shook his head and looked briefly at the gamesman, who was returned his gaze hatefully. Alan turned to face the figurine of justice, as the gamesman snarled at him,

“I shall never forget what you’ve done to me. You have stolen my livelihood, my freedom, at the very moment when I stretched out my hand in friendship.” With that, the gamesman spit on the floor. *“This is vendetta!”* he screamed. Alan trembled in his chair.

“Oh Jacques, let him be.” the officer said, bending down and freeing Alan from his seat.

“Never. You’ll never be rid of me,” the gamesman whispered, *“I’ll chase you to the ends of the earth!”*

“Jacques, enough!” the officer said, putting his hand on Alan’s back and patting it. With his other hand the officer grabbed Alan’s underarm softly, like a gentle grandfather helping a toddler to his feet. Alan turned and faced the officer, who put his hands on Alan’s shoulders.

“Thank you, my dear boy. It was very noble of you to tell the truth, even when it would have been easier to blame the American. I know how difficult it must have been to stand-up to this con-artist; he has a presence about him that is thoroughly unnerving.” The officer cocked his eyes at the waxy-skinned man, before returning his gaze to Alan.

“I have lived quite a while my young man, and let me admit that it is a rare thing to meet someone in the possession of such an extraordinary gift as the one you have with these two European languages. Rarer still is it to find in such person the magnanimity to stand up for what is right and true against what is easy. Rarest of all, however, is it to find someone with the instinct to appreciate the greatness of what is old and past. I can tell you must have this instinct Alan Stuart. May it serve you well.”

With that the officer stuck out his hand and opened the door for Alan. Alan shook his hand, looked softly into the officer’s light, approving eyes. *“It would be a pleasure to see you again,”* the officer said, *“I hope we do so in better circumstances.”* Alan smiled, but said nothing. Instead, he picked up his backpack, his tennis racket, and left.

Alan left the office and found himself at the end of a dark corridor with sporadic lighting and linoleum floors. He walked to the end of the hallway and saw that there was a door to the right-hand side that led to an ascending flight of stairs. He took these and found himself just behind the ticker-tape to get into customs. The line was empty. He walked back and forth through the line's snake-like pattern, before coming to a bored-looking customs official. Alan waved his French passport at the officer, who responded by motioning for Alan to go ahead.

Alan walked and walked, passing shops for food and a line of SWAT police holding fearsome dogs. After several wrong turns that resulted in his taking two unnecessary sets of escalators and a moving walkway, he at last found himself approaching baggage claim. He looked on the bulletin board to find out which carousel his flight had been assigned. His flight had disappeared off the registry. There were fifteen or twenty carousels stretched in a row on this floor, he assumed that his bag had to be on one of these. He walked to the end of the floor and starting at carousel number one proceeded onwards towards the last, hoping to catch sight of his bag somewhere along the way. As he past the thirteenth carousel he noticed that, of the last seven carrousels, the only one with an active conveyer belt was number eighteen. Alan went over to the eighteenth carrousel and stood watching the luggage go round, hoping that his bags were somehow mixed up with those belonging to a flight from Reykjavik. He stood watching the bags turn and turn across, one by one getting picked up and taken away. After twenty minutes, he found himself standing alone with three or four other weary passengers, and five or six miscellaneous bags that no doubt belonged to several poor and soon-to-be naked tourists in India.

Alan sighed and looked down at the remaining two carousels. Standing in front of a stopped carousel Alan noticed a short, rotund, Asian man. The man's eyes were closed and he was rocking on the balls of his feet slowly. "Curious, sad, stoic figure," Alan thought. For several moments, Alan appraised the man thoughtfully. "What's he doing hanging around the airport," Alan thought, "It looks like he's already collected all his bags." Suddenly, Alan bristled with anger and confusion, for he realized that each of the bags in front of the man resembled one of his own. "Hey!" Alan shouted at the man angrily. The man didn't notice. Alan continued to shout loudly at the man as he approached. The man did not notice, but rather continued to sway peacefully on the balls of his feet. Finally, when Alan was within arms reach of the man, he turned, revealing a piece of paper he had been holding to his chest. The man, who Alan now realized was actually a few years younger than himself, squinted at Alan and tilted his head questioningly.

"Aaron Stewit?" the man asked, shaking the piece of paper slowly in Alan's direction. Written on the piece of paper was Alan's own name.

Chapter Three

Modern man is rather correctly represented as having an immoral soul, selfish and dry, measurelessly given to dreaming... an embittered mind boiling in empty action.

– From Eugene Onegin, A.S. Pushkin

“*Where did you get my name?*” Alan asked, as much to himself as the round-faced man before him. The young man fluttered his eyelids rapidly. He leaned forward on the balls of his toes. With an expectant expression on his face, he said nothing. Alan decided to begin with a more fundamental question, “*Who are you?*”

The man’s eyebrows shot an inch upwards as the fluttering of his eyelids intensified. His honey-yellow cheeks reddened and he asked, “Do you mind if we speak in English?”

Immediately, Alan recognized that the man’s accent in English was not French, but rather East Asian. It was clear that, whoever the young man was, he had not grown up in France. And yet, it seemed equally clear to Alan that the man could not be a tourist. He was too calm, too comfortable in his surroundings. He had no cameras, no bags of his own, and was not traveling with an enormous herd of other Asian tourists. He was even dressed like a French teenager, although all the articles of clothing he was wearing were, without exception, shoddily manufactured knock-offs of expensive French brands. For example, the “Y” in the monogram on his jacket had been rendered so badly that the logo now read from top to bottom ‘ESL.’ “If he’s not a tourist, then he must have at least some French,” Alan thought, “Why not use it?” Alan surmised an answer. Probably, the man’s ability to understand French was dependent on remaining in the narrow milieu in which he was used to operating. No doubt, everything besides the Parisian French of a very particular social strata posed him grave problems. By contrast, in learning English, the man had likely acclimated himself to the American English that Alan spoke. They would both have relatively fewer problems communicating in English. Nonetheless, Alan was annoyed at the fact that he would now be in France and still speaking English.

“No,” Alan said slowly and clearly, “I don’t mind speaking in English. I just wanted to know who you are and why you have my bags.”

“Ah!” The honey-skinned man replied excitedly, the loose skin on his face now growing taut over his prominent cheekbones. His tightly-pressed smile curved upward sharply, like the rind in a slice from a small cantaloupe.

“I was sent by the academy. I am your research associate.” Upon those words, the individual before Alan made a furious motion that took Alan completely by surprise. The man dipped his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. With knees locked straight, he

bowed his head so deeply that his torso and legs made a right angle. He stretched his hands out in front of his body, holding the envelope. He looked at the object curiously: it bore insignias consistent with those he had received previously from the *Collège de France*.

Alan opened the envelope and read its contents. It was a letter explaining that Alan was to be matched with a personal assistant, who would support him in his studies and help him acclimate to Parisian life. Alan vaguely recalled reading a paragraph somewhere amidst the great mound of program materials he had been sent also alluding to the fact he would have an assistant. Alan had assumed that this associate would be met later, however, when Alan's own ideas about his project were better defined. He had hardly expected to find someone waiting for him at the airport.

Alan raised his eyes from the letter and noted that the man was still bowing with his head down. His hand also remained outstretched, waiting for Alan to return the letter. "*My God* that's servile," Alan thought. Alan folded the letter and placed it back in the opened envelope, which he deposited in his assistant's hand. The man looked up and said officiously, "It is an honor and a privilege for me serve you, Aaron Stewart."

With that the man bowed his head curtly and sprang to his feet. Alan hesitated to correct the man's pronunciation of his name. It hardly seemed appropriate to respond to the man's affirmation of their future partnership by nitpicking his pronunciation. At the same time, Alan foresaw that once the initial impression had formed in the man's head it would prove impossible to correct in the future. In other words, he would be stuck with the name Aaron in perpetuity. How it would gall him to carry out protracted discussions, nodding politely as his research associate repeatedly referred to him as Aaron, Aaron, Aaron. Never Alan! Perhaps others would hear the man's mistaken pronunciation and, considering it correct, adapt it as their own. "Moreover," Alan said to himself as he made his decision, "Aaron is a name infinitely more Jewish than my own."

"One thing – my name is Alan, not Aaron," Alan said, feigning offhandedness. The man's cheeks reddened severely. A wave of tension rippled through his face, as if he were experiencing a mild stroke. He bowed his head,

"I am so sorry sir that I have mispronounced your name: it is not Aaron?"

"No, it's Alan, with an *l*," Alan said quickly, almost glibly, trying desperately for the fellow's own sake to brush aside his grievously embarrassing mispronunciation as an easily made mistake.

"Yes, Aaron with an...", here the man paused and slowly, deliberately, voiced a guttural, dissonant, abomination of an English consonant. It was a vocalization that can be described

exactly in the international phonetic alphabet as ælɫ, but which I am at a loss to render in English orthography any other way besides ewlrll.

Alan shut his jaw tightly as blood began rushing to his face. Tremors wracked his body as he suppressed a deep belly laugh. Oh, it was too much for Alan, to see this... to see this... *homo-molunculus* tell him, in all earnestness, as if his life and all his worth in the universe depended on it, that the letter *l* was pronounced “ewlrll.” Alan almost wanted to ask him to repeat the sound, just so that he could hear it again. *Ewlrll, ewlrll*. It kept running on repeat in Alan’s head; he couldn’t stop it. Finally, giving up, Alan bent at the waist, directing his face towards the floor. He laughed uproariously, throwing in the occasional cough to protect the man’s ego. He stayed doubled-over, voicing towards the floor a demented, cackling cough. He continued doing so for a full thirty seconds. Thereafter, he stood upright and said, “I’m sorry for that. I don’t know what came over me. “

“Are you alright?” the man asked, brows knit in concern.

“Yes, yes, just a cough,” Alan said quickly, “It happens from time to time. Too bad it happened during our introduction, which I am sorry I interrupted. We were saying that I am A-“ here Alan in mind used the assistant’s pronunciation of the letter – *Aewlrllan* – “That I am Alan,” he said while tittering. He breathed in and out and asked quickly, “What is your name?”

The assistant replied, as naturally as if he were breathing, a sound completely alien to Alan. Alan gulped. “What was that?” He did his best to reproduce it.

“E?” Alan asked.

“No, *E*” the man pronounced heavily, stressing what Alan thought was a kind of “Y” noise that Alan hadn’t noticed the first time.

“*Yee*,” Alan said carefully. The assistant scowled horribly in response to the unconscientious brutalization Alan had perpetuated against the delicate sounds of his native tongue. The man repeated the “Y”-like sound, which Alan tried to mimic. The man shook his head again, this time more sadly. Alan reddened as he continued to produce the sound, now without pause, rolling progressively louder and softer in an ebb and flow. It was as if the man were crooning a kind of lullaby. Alan repeated, trying to shape his mouth into a circle as he saw the man doing, but it hardly helped. He couldn’t master it.

“E,” Alan said with finality. The assistant half-nodded, evidently agreeing it was the best possible approximation that Alan could produce.

“It will be nickname,” he said with a polite smile, “You may call me E.”

The two faced each other, Alan ashamed that he hadn't pronounced the man's name correctly, more because it indicated a lack of capability on his part than because it might have given the man offense. The silence continued, in time becoming awkward. Alan decided to say something. “Well E, it was very generous of you to come out here to help with my bags, since your only actual responsibility is research.”

“It is the most I can do,” E replied with a humble smile. Alan wondered for a moment if he should correct the man's idiom, but decided that, given the recent fiasco with their names, he should simply let the sentence be. In point of fact, Alan would soon find out the young man had indeed spoken correctly. There was not much else that the young man could do to help Alan's research besides moving items from point A to point B.

Alan moved to pick up his nearest suitcase, but E gestured for him to stop. One by one, E placed the baggage in a pile. Alan stood passively, watching as E put Alan's three large duffels each on top of the other. This task completed, he took out of his breast pocket a thin piece of twine that he threaded underneath the bottom bag. He wound the twine up to the top bag and tied a firm knot. Together, the three bags made an enormous, unwieldy bundle. Alan wondered what exactly E was hoping to accomplish by tying the suitcases together with such a flimsy piece of fabric. Suddenly, the man thrust his arms out, grabbed the top of the fiber, and, in a furious motion, heaved the combined mass of bags into the air. Alan yelped, shocked that his assistant would maliciously throw his bags in every direction. Much to Alan's surprise, E's hands held firm to the twine. The bags swung lazily around his body, landing upon his back. E teetered on the balls of his feet for a moment, absorbing the weight of impact. When his balance was secure, E bent over horizontally so that his back was perpendicular to his legs and parallel to the ground. Gravity now held the bags in place on the man's back. He released one of his hands from the twine and removed from his jacket a much thicker rope. This cord he threw over his back and let dangle down his other side. He now grabbed the other end in his hand and pulled it taut against his chest. When E returned himself upright the bundle of bags hardly moved. The man seemed completely comfortable, no less at ease than when Alan had first noticed him. The assistant motioned for Alan to give him the racket, which Alan still held swung around his shoulder, next to his backpack. Alan shook his head incredulously.

“No, I'll hold onto this,” Alan said. The assistant shrugged, indifferent.

And so it was that Alan emerged relatively unencumbered from the baggage claim, in the company of a young man known to Alan only by the deceptively challenging name “E.” Alan walked excitedly through the airport, scouring every billboard for indications of where to catch the metro to Paris. For the first time in months he had a palpable ability to shape the course of events in his life vis-à-vis Marie, a capacity to take positive steps towards increasing the likelihood of their conjugal union. Understandably, he brimmed with excitement, rapidly

reviewing once more the possible courses their evening might take.

“She will arrive at my dormitory at seven, that much is certain,” Alan thought, “And indeed, that is the only part that is certain. Unless, of course, she is late. But even if she is late, it doesn’t matter, because the course of events branches identically from the moment we rendezvous for the first time, whether that moment be at seven exactly, or seven and one second, seven and fifteen seconds, or even eight o’clock. Now obviously, the most preferable future, at least in terms of quenching the excruciating yearning in my breast for hers, is for her to rush towards me at first sight, for us to seize each other immediately, powerfully, after which we either drift aimlessly or dive headlong towards intercourse, depending on where along the violent-pacific spectrum we happen to find ourselves. But, equally obvious, I cannot guarantee that she will reveal her desire so immediately. Perhaps she will play coy; perhaps she will demand that I seduce her over the course of an evening. We would be playing a game then, wherein my goal would be to fire her imagination once more, to evoke for her the intimacy we shared not much more than half a year ago.” Alan shuddered as he thought, “Of course, there is the other possibility... that she doesn’t care for me, that her affection was a ruse, a lie: just one more turning wheel in her demented, womanly machination.” Alan felt a tension growing in his chest. What if he had misread everything? What if he was about to make himself a fool? Before his idol, no less: the most exact incarnation of French beauty he had ever encountered, besides, of course, his mother. A grave sense of foreboding settled upon Alan, which sat with him for some time as he walked. Eventually, however, he was able to tuck the anxiety away with the following thought, “Whether she plays at indifference or actually feels it is indistinguishable from my perspective. I will have to seduce her all the same. And if I perform my role appropriately, as I will, she will give in to me in the end.”

Alan continued to walk briskly through the airport, devoting a modicum of attention to ensuring he was still heading towards the Metro stop, while the greater part continued analyzing the problematic sketched above. Meanwhile, the young man serving as Alan’s sherpa fell further and further behind. The assistant did not seem perturbed by the fact. Instead, E continued to trundle along, pausing on occasion to look at an interesting advertisement or piece of architecture, completely indifferent to the pressure of time or space.

At last Alan came to a Metro stop, finding himself overlooking a number of escalators descending onto a pavilion. In the center of the pavilion, hanging down from the ceiling, was an enormous billboard displaying destinations and departure times. Alan turned and said, as if to E, “This must be where we take the train to Paris.” E was not beside Alan, however. In fact, the assistant had fallen so far behind that he was still at the other side of a long tunnel Alan had passed minutes before. Alan cursed himself. He had been so focused on getting himself to Marie as quickly as possible that he had ignored all the extensions of himself he would also need to get to Marie in order to get his proper self to Marie. And yet, his annoyance at himself quickly transformed itself into impatience with E, as Alan realized the man was lackadaisically preoccupied with studying every advertisement that he passed. “My God he’s self absorbed!”

Alan exclaimed privately as he waited for E to catch up.

When he was within hearing distance, Alan shouted at E, “Is this where we take the train to Paris?” The mass of bags on his assistant’s back shifted upwards in such a way that Alan could not be sure whether he was shrugging his shoulders or merely redistributing the weight. Alan decided that it was not worth his time to determine whether E had information to offer or not. Alan stepped onto an escalator that would take him down into the pavilion.

After reaching the bottom of the escalator, however, Alan quickly became confused. Underneath the escalators, to his right, were a pair of doors leading into a tourism office. In the center of the pavilion floor were several rows of machines, which officious looking people were approaching self-confidently, subsequently pushing several buttons and swiping their credit cards. Evidently, what they took away from the transaction were boarding passes. Alan approached one of the machines. E, having himself reached the pavilion moments before, preferred to admire the rapidly flipping flaps on the overhanging billboard rather than helping Alan make his purchase. After several failed attempts at buying a ticket to Paris, Alan realized that the machines were used to buy tickets for the bullet train from Paris to destinations in the North and West of France.

“These are for trains heading to the countryside,” Alan turned and said to E, “Where do we go to catch the train to Paris?” The ponderous assistant stared back at Alan impassively. “Of course, he is a Parisian,” Alan thought, “In some not wholly French, but presumably still authentic way. He must know where to catch the train.”

Alan repeated, “Where do I get my Metro ticket?” E looked as if he didn’t understand. Alan sighed: there was clearly a serious communication problem between him and his research assistant, which Alan could only hope would diminish in time. Of course, if the problem was not really language, but simply a grossly out-to-lunch personality, or even outright stupidity, then there could be no chance of improvement. Perhaps a different assistant could be found, one who had a stronger grasp of English, French, or reality.

With no better alternatives available, Alan decided to head into the tourism office to his left. He motioned for E to stay behind as Alan stood in the rather substantial line waiting to approach one of several tellers. He paced back and forth, outwardly manifesting a far more agonizing inner circumambulation occurring in his head over the approaching evening’s events. After spending approximately twenty minutes in this manner, our trepidatious protagonist reached the teller.

“I would like to go to Paris,” Alan said.

“Wrong line.” The teller replied in English, “Back and to your right, against the wall.”

“Thank you,” Alan replied curtly. He walked away smarting. What was it about his presence that had betrayed him as an outsider? It had been nothing in his accent, he knew that for sure: he had listened carefully to his own diction. Without noticing it, Alan put his finger to his nose and rubbed its upper ridge, continuing to do so absent-mindedly as he walked out the door of the tourism office and towards a glass wall to the right. He made no indication towards E, who followed Alan dutifully, first with his eyes, and then with his feet. It did not seem to bother E that was ignoring him

When the two arrived at the glass wall, they saw that beyond it was a pair of train tracks and Metro turnstiles. There was also a machine that could be used to buy a fare. Alan went over to machine and punched the touch screen buttons brusquely. After switching the machines language from its default English to his own preferred language, French, he decided to buy a single one-way ticket to Paris. He put his money into the machine and took the tiny slip of paper it produced. With that, he hurried over to the turnstile, determined not to miss the next train. As he was about to swipe his ticket, however, Alan realized that his companion had merely stood dumbly watching the back of Alan’s head the entire time he should have been buying himself a ticket.

“Aren’t you coming through?” Alan asked curiously.

The man grimaced and bowed his head.

“I cannot buy ticket,” he said huskily.

“What?” Alan asked incredulously.

The assistant clutched the rope about his chest and reached into his pant’s pocket, turning it inside out, revealing that it was empty. What was he trying to say? That he had no money? How had he expected to get home in the first place? Was the sole reason he had waited around so long for Alan was that he had no other way of getting home?

“So you can’t pay for the ticket?” Alan asked exasperatedly.

The assistant’s face grew bright red once more. He bowed his head, evidently unwilling to admit that the answer was indeed “no.”

“How did you get on the train in the first place, if you didn’t have a ticket?” Alan demanded. Alan wondered what the use was. The man hardly seemed to understand even his most basic questions; Alan had grave doubts about E’s competence in either French or English.

Much to Alan's surprise, however, E's response was by both direct and intelligent.

"In city one jumps over the rail," he said, pointing to the turnstile. Now Alan understood the problem. The turnstiles in Paris were no doubt similar to those in American subways. The ones here at the airport, however, had plastic doors that barred access unless one paid properly, at which point they would swing wide open.

Alan harrumphed. He had no desire to pay for the assistant's trip, which was actually quite expensive. And yet, if Alan didn't pay, what would the man do? Stay at the airport indefinitely? Or maybe just until he was taken into the city to stand trial for vagrancy? Perhaps the young man would be able to beg for money and eventually earn his way back to Paris. Alan sighed, this individual was going to be his work associate, at least until Alan could request a change. He couldn't leave him stranded here: it would make all of their encounters thereafter debilitatingly awkward. He would never be able to look E in the face again without thinking of all the resentment that must be hidden on the other side of his forehead. He would never be able to send the boy out for food, for fear that he would perform unspeakable acts to it. Alan would constantly fear that his assistant was about to perpetuate a fatal sabotage of some kind. He would spend all his time thinking about ways E's revenge might be effected, rather than doing actual research.

So it was that Alan found himself grudgingly returning to the machine and buying a second fair. He gave the metro ticket to his bagman and the two went through. The two stood together silently for several minutes on the platform, until the train to Paris arrived at last.

Alan sat himself on the outside of a pair of seats, forcing E to sit in a seat across the aisle. E relaxed his grip on the rope which held the mass of bags against his body so that the enormous bundle slid off his back. Alan didn't feel a particular need to pay attention to his assistant, his patience for the man's bumbling awkwardness having worn thin long ago. Instead Alan looked at the grey sky and grassy flats out the train window, once more thinking about his impending rendezvous with Marie.

"If our rendezvous is at seven o'clock this evening, and the train takes roughly an hour, then I will arrive around five-thirty," Alan reasoned, understanding immediately the corollary implication that there would not be much time to establish himself in his apartment. He would need to act quickly. He would put down his bags and dig out his already selected evening attire. He would shower in whatever mean facility had been provided him. Then, he would take up the arduous challenge: perfecting the delicate alchemy which was his own appearance. All told, he should have liked to spend an hour-and-a-half on it: establishing the ideal balance of scents on his body, over-working the tousel in his hair so completely, so immaculately, that it looked as if he had paid it no attention at all. He needed to shower, needed reserve time in the event that he

made a mistake like over-squirting himself with musk. Also, it was necessary for the whole composition he was planning to settle itself; he should like to spend twenty minutes to read the paper nonchalantly before Marie arrived. He hardly had time for all of that, though he imagined that if he planned the order of tasks with enough deliberation and determined the optimal order of their completion, that he would still be able to perfect himself in time for dinner.

Alan began to make a grand list of all the tasks he had to perform. He pictured himself going through the tasks, closing his eyes and moving his body back and forth rhapsodically. Alan had no idea that he was doing so in time to the musical speech of a dour-faced African woman who sat in the seat in front of him. All the people aboard the train were shut completely out of his mind, as he scanned a continuum of potential futures, out of which he intended to effectuate only the best one.

Oh, what wonders Alan missed by closing himself off to the world, flattening time by reducing it to tasks, collapsing space into the skeletal contents of his future world! For it is the case that our most fitting and profound insights come only during those moment in which we expose ourselves to the new. Moreover, since nothing is so wonderfully fresh as the routine to which we have never been exposed, and since there are few things as routine as the commute from one part of the city to another, it follows that commuting in a foreign land is one of the best ways to achieve insights into the roteness of our very own existence, to return wonder even to that which is least wondrous in life.

What would Alan have seen had he attuned his ears and eyes to the minute and indifferent? What would he have learned? The first thing that should have struck him is the radical dissimilitude of the outlands of Paris from those of an American city. For the verdant pastures one speeds past on the Paris light-rail are reminiscent of those that might be found in, say, Wisconsin: huge tracts of land, heavily tilled, which cattle and horses mosey about lazily. And yet there is a difference, for the silos and farms one spots by the side of the road in America may show signs of dilapidation, but they do so in a way totally different from their French counterparts. It is not uncommon there to see a rustic cottage that has been blown apart by an artillery shell, or lands razed in the rush of an invading army. To think that such devastation could be visible even on the train ride into Paris from its international airport! But, as one discovers, this is not the only way in which the penumbra of the city of lights is disturbing, depressing, and dark. For after one passes from the rural hinterlands closest to Roissy-Charles de Gaulle, one meets the Parisian analogue of what we Americans would call “greater suburbia.” Except, whereas the far suburbs of an American city witness the endless repetition of McMansions and strip-malls, cardboard cutouts of a fanciful and carefree way-of-life we all recognize as distinctly American, the distant suburbs of Paris are ghettos, filled with impoverished immigrants and those otherwise without a stake in society. The walls of all the buildings are covered in graffiti, English obscenities and Swastikas. The American who passes through the *banlieus*, as such places are known, cannot help but feel that they are an unfortunate parody of that most idyllic part of the American geography. Which in turn leads the American to

wonder, “Is there something deeply naïve about our way of life? What if the true nature of the world were more sinister than the doll-house in which we were incubated?” One wonders what corollary implications would follow from these basic misconceptions about the way the world works: mustn’t Americans’ conception of their own identities be just as fanciful, wishy-washy, and impractical as the suburbs from which they came?

At last Alan had memorized by rote his plan to prepare himself physically, and thereby in an illusory sense prepare himself mentally, for his evening with Marie, he opened his eyes. There had been a change in the light entering around him; their train had gone underground. A recorded voice announced that they were pulling into a station, Gare du Nord. Alan tittered at the notion that he was finally within the city limits, that he was now only a few stops from his own. The thickened shell of concentration in which he had insulated himself for the duration of the train ride at last began to crack. He tried to refocus on Marie, to recapitulate once more the details of his plans for conquest. The noise of the Paris metro was too powerful, however. It poured into his consciousness, louder and louder, until he could think of nothing else.

The tracks screeched and threw off sparks, the long-trapped air of the subway bent about the trains bow and wailed as it went past. The noise from the people on the train! Alan noticed it now for the first time. Nowhere else is there to be found such a spectacular creole as a Paris metro train. To be sure, the French as a rule do not talk aboard the train – it is not uncommon to find oneself on a car completely full and silent, except for the three or four Americans, who shout and laugh, completely indifferent to the fact that inside the Paris metro one is expected to look and act as if one were attending a Holocaust museum. Occasionally, however, the whole car springs to life. The rhythmic, rolling oscillations of the Africans’ French provide the central melody. The Arabs of France, having preserved the strength of their native consonants, and being generally unafraid of calling an “*en*” an “*n*,” cut through this rolling base, contouring its sound, endowing it with sharpness and brilliancy. Similarly the Asians aboard the train pour in outstanding, crashing notes as they steadfastly refuse to speak anything with each other besides their native tongues. The clamor of these languages is dampened, however, through the addition of a traditionally French dialect, a nasally Parisian or soupy Provençal. Another romance language, usually Spanish or Italian, adds a certain sensuality to the composition, which is completely and utterly ruined by the abrasive sounds of either German, English, or Russian. The cockney brand of English is especially heinous in this regard, while a Southern drawl may in some circumstances prove complimentary.

The train that Alan was on that day had none of these undesirable sorts on board. As such, it was a terrible shame that Alan had until now paid no attention to his fellow passengers. For, unlike the great majority of Americans who have ever ridden this train, Alan could understand the language of spoken French like a native, and so could have learned in one sitting a million little facts about the various constituencies of Paris, inferred them based on manners of speech, manners of dress, and matters of conversation. Such a flash immersion in culture cannot, for most Americans, be experienced anywhere outside London. Pity that all Alan’s advantage

was to be lost, for already the hurtling train was shuddering to a stop. A voice came over the train's speakers and announced that the present stop was Chatelet -- Les Halles, the central hub of the Paris Metro, perhaps the greatest concourse of subway trains in the Western World.

The doors of the train opened. In a few moments, the entire train emptied and then refilled, a complete transfusion of passengers, except for Alan and the taciturn E. And then once more they were off, the next stop being Notre Dame, and after that the famous Luxembourg Gardens, and after that the auspicious-sounding Port Royal. But the most important stop for Alan was the one that came next, Denfert Rouchereau, where he would find the dormitories in which he would be staying. Alan stood in anticipation, causing the daydreaming E to rise out of his reverie, stand once more on the balls of his feet, and shuffle his body and the weight on his back towards Alan. After a few minutes of standing next to each other without exchanging words, the train came to a halt and the two disembarked.

Alan scanned the platform left and right, searching for the nearest exit. There was none to be seen.

"Which way do we go?" Alan asked.

"You go that way," E motioned to the center of the platform, "If you want to go to room. I will go longer way..." he nodded at the other side of the platform.

Alan analyzed E's face skeptically. Why would he suggest a different way for himself?

"Why won't you go the short way?" Alan asked.

For the first time since they had met, Alan saw a genuinely emotive expression on E's face. The young man grimaced deeply and stuck out his tongue, while at the same time shutting tightly his eyes. It looked as if he were trying to spit out an exceedingly sour and bitter fruit, while at the same time trying to suppress a deeply disturbing memory from childhood. The young man smacked his lips and stuck out his tongue again. He grimaced and shook his head. Finally, E unclenched his left eye, while the other remained firmly shut. He said to Alan, whispering secretly, with lip trembling, "There is... a sound."

"A sound?" Alan asked skeptically.

"Yes, a sound," E said, shuddering once more.

Alan was not at all sure that E knew what he was talking about. A sound? Most likely, E

simply was mistranslating some word from his native language. There was no way to figure out what word he actually meant, the important thing was for Alan to decide as quickly as possible whether he should go with E or go the quicker way. As far as he could tell, it would hardly be any improvement in terms of preparation to separate himself from his things, which he needed in order to prepare himself. Unless there were some tasks he could accomplish without any of his luggage — for example, going to the bathroom. But did he have to go? Yes, he realized, he had been so ridiculously focused on releasing his pent up feelings for Marie that he had hardly noticed how desperately constipated he was. Moreover, he hadn't considered the time it would take for him to go to the bathroom into his calculations for preparing for Marie. The simplest way out of this quandary was clearly to arrive before he had expected himself to arrive, in order that he might prevent himself from being distracted later. Unless, of course, he decided to avoid going to the bathroom entirely, or at least until after he had achieved intercourse. But was that a tenable plan? Surely under normal conditions he could prevent himself from unloading on his own for an indefinite period of time. But what if something extraordinary happened? Alan imagined himself sitting on the couch in his dormitory, next to Marie. They were sitting on the couch sipping wine, with him acting collected in spite of the huge urge pressing upon his abdomen. A moment later, she would make her move, taking her index finger and rubbing it in small circles on the small of his back, then down into the waist of his pants, sliding down... and there he would be, in complete and utter ecstasy at the erotic turn of events. Unless of course he had not taken the precaution of relieving himself earlier, in which case he would be utterly terrified that she might indeed continue on to towards his terminus, therein discovering the abominable cargo he had been hoarding.

Alan shuddered. He nodded at E and, not waiting for a response, moved determinedly towards the exit. Soon he had joined the great mass of people trying to leave the platform, fighting against the tide of entering traffic. Alan danced around the crowd, hoping to find some gap through which to pass. He did not succeed, however, and was forced to trundle forward slowly with the rest of the crowd. Soon there were several rows of people behind him and his place in the crowd was solidified. He turned his head back. What he saw immediately caused him to shout in outrage. E was leaning over the edge of the platform, scanning the rails in both direction, and altogether looking as if he were about to jump. What was he doing? Trying to kill himself, along with all of Alan's things!

“Arretez-le! Arrete!” Alan shouted to the crowd while gesticulating wildly in E's direction, “Stop him! Stop!” Several members of the crowd turned and cursed. “*He's going to kill himself!*” someone screamed. The exclamations “*Shit,*” “*My God,*” and “*Whore*” soon filled the air. E remained oblivious to these shouts, however. He jumped.

Alan braced himself for the woosh of the train rushing past, the screech of metal tires breaking against the tracks, the shout and scandal surging from the crowd. And yet a second passed, and then another. Nothing came, except for a kind of shocked laughter coming from the

tall man to Alan's left.

"He is mad," the man remarked with more than a hint of admiration. *"Absolutely mad."*

Alan couldn't see what was happening; the heads of the people in the crowd blocked his view. Alan saw someone to his left pull out their camera and point it in the direction E had been,

"Call it 'The Urban Kamikaze,'" someone said to the photographer. Alan pushed his way through the crowd and ran over to the edge of the platform, where he found the rotund E running briskly across the tracks with sixty pounds of luggage on his back.

"E!" Alan shouted. E, quite understandably from my perspective, ignored Alan. Instead, he ran to the opposite platform with breakneck speed. When he reached it, he deftly heaved his back, sliding Alan's bags onto the ground of the opposite platform. A second later, E heaved himself up onto the platform, teased the rope back underneath the bags, and once more lifted the bundle onto his back. He was met with stupefied applause by those on the other side, one bystander coming over to him and offering a few bills in gratitude for his display. E looked at the man uncomprehendingly, but nevertheless took the money. Alan shook his head; if his assistant intended to risk his own life and limb, then that was his problem, but to jeopardize his own property for the sake of a few bucks was totally inappropriate. Alan intended to give him a full piece of his mind when he met him outside the station.

With nothing better to do, Alan went back to the exit and once more found a place in the crowd. Soon Alan found that there was a mass of people behind him, trudging forward and exerting upon him a dull pressure, forcing him to fill the empty space left by those marching ahead. Alan let the tide of commuters carry him down into the station. There was something mildly irritating in his ear, however. A noise, very shrill, very high frequency, which grew louder and louder the further he walked. Alan looked around, searching in vain for the source, covering his ears as the intensity continued to grow. And yet it was no use, covering his ears helped nothing — the sound was too high-pitched — it cut right through his flesh. Twenty feet into the station and it became overwhelming; Alan could hardly think about where he was and what he was doing. Conveniently enough, the current of people seemed to be carrying him in some direction. What was the sound? It was torturous. Perhaps it was somehow connected to a terrorist attack: a sonic torture device devised to maim, cripple and kill those in its radius. And now it was being released upon Paris, upon Alan, the first day of his arrival, typically enough. Yet, Alan darted his eyes around, no one else seemed to be experiencing the same effects. Was he alone? Was he sick? What was it?

Alan bent over. He couldn't bear it. It was incessant. It was relentless. It was like the piercing blare of a high-speed drill boring through concrete or steel. He could feel it entering his ear and crawling down his spine, tingling nerve endings all through his back and down to the tips of his limbs. It was uncomfortable, and was getting more so as the sound's volume grew.

He could feel the resonance of it in his jaw. The back of his incisor was vibrating. Alan grabbed for the wall. He was becoming debilitated. He could hardly focus on putting one foot in front of another, let alone hold in mind his goal, his future. As he drifted towards the wall, it seemed to him that he could perceive the wail as a brightening at the corners of his vision. He felt as if the coloration of the world before him were becoming vague and disturbed: blues seemed to him violent and sensual, as if they were red, while reds now seemed to him warm and soothing, as if they were deep purple. He grabbed for the wall again, too desperately this time. He fell down.

The crowd diverted itself around him. Alan had a vision of himself being trampled by the indifferent Parisians. Serious, thin-faced men dressed in fine business suits, fatherly-looking types, walking arm-in-arm with women, beautiful young Parisian women, also indifferent to him. Totally oblivious, stepping on his face as he died pathetically under their very toes. “No,” Alan thought, “I will not be trampled under the heels of the indifferent masses.” Alan pushed himself up from the ground, refusing to let himself become a part of the daily grind. He staggered about wildly, trying to rush in any direction at all without falling. The mob, understanding him now as the raving, mentally ill variety of commuter -- a not unpopular type in Paris -- bent its path around him. Alan tried to stay with the tide, keeping himself in the middle of it, hoping that it would lead him up and out, away from the sound. Sure enough, an interminable minute later, Alan stepped through the station door.

The moment he stepped outside of the station the sound stopped. Waiting for him was E, still swaying patiently on the balls of his feet, not looking in any direction in particular. Alan bent over and panted, before approaching his preternaturally calm assistant.

“How could you let me go in there with that sound?” Alan demanded.

E reddened and stammered embarrassedly. He finally managed to say, “Sir, I not know you will hear. Not everyone hears.”

Alan huffed. It was true, Alan hadn’t seen anyone nearly as affected as he was. Of course, it was a self-selecting group, perhaps people who were affected didn’t go there, for the very reason that they knew they would be affected. “Whatever,” Alan thought, “There will be time to figure it out later. The important thing is to get to the dormitory as quickly as possible.”

“So, shall we go?” Alan asked. E nodded and began leading the way. The two were walking on a great plaza, a concourse of five or six major streets, in the center of which sat a large black statue of a lion. The sky was ominously grey. Alan had hoped for good weather so that the he and Marie might go for a walk, either before or after their first bout of sexual intercourse, depending on how events turned. Alan and E walked without speaking, heading in the way opposite the lion faced, up towards a street called Denfert-Rouchereau.

Alan walked hurriedly, stepping as quickly as possible towards the address that he had memorized long ago. “Eighty eight Rue Denfert,” he repeated in his head, “*Quatre-vingt huit, Rue Denfert.*” It is common for one who is hurrying some place, rushing towards either an abstract goal or concrete destination, to experience what might be called a tunneling effect upon their consciousness. The individual pushes aside everything extraneous to the end at hand. Barriers are placed at the corners of their mind’s eye, siphoning off from the world a certain part of consciousness, redirecting mental energies constantly and relentlessly towards their goal. With sufficient necessity, this shell of concentration may be buttressed into so adamantine a bulwark that nothing outside the area of focus becomes presented before consciousness in the first place.

One would think that such a shell had gone up around Alan as he walked the final hundred meters separating him from his apartment. Indeed, it should already be clear that Alan was a person in possession of an unusually strong mental myopia, a peculiar proclivity for burying his head under the ground and burrowing relentlessly towards his end, while simultaneously disregarding the essence of his task at hand. So it was that had Alan misunderstood a his ride aboard the train as the time to memorize an ordered list of things he was going to do that evening, his interrogation by the police as an opportunity to demonstrate his mastery of French, his game of three-card monte with a strange man on the plane as the chance to score a personal victory against contingency itself, etc. Without digressing from Alan’s obsessive focus at the moment -- getting to his dormitory with enough time to clean himself up for Marie -- it will nonetheless be helpful to here and now diagnose Alan’s tragic flaw. I will do so by analogy. If one were to think of each of the scenarios mentioned above as a kind of game, each with its own objectives and rules to win, then one might say Alan’s habitual mistake was in deciding for himself the terms of the game he was playing. This is a mistake: the sad fact is that, in life, one is always playing some sort of game that the world presents. Therefore, one always has to deal with the payoffs and penalties the world assigns, and operate within its constraints. One might hope that this were not the case, that one could somehow define for oneself all the terms of the game: in other words, to cut out the world and thereby guarantee the outcome of the game one plays. This is impossible. For the rewards of a contest to be worth anything at all, they must be out there in the world. Thus, there must be some chance that the world says “no,” that one fails, that one doesn’t get the payoff for which one hoped. At some level, Alan must have understood this, for despite all his self-absorption and romantic individualism, he was nevertheless desperate to find reassurance that his vision of himself and his future was right.

Such an omen Alan was about to find, though its origin was either coincidence or contrivance, rather than providence of the divine. It is interesting to note that for all the narrowness of Alan’s mental vision, for all his callowness to everything having to do with anything besides getting to Marie, he still managed to appreciate a minuscule and wondrous artifact in the world that others might have easily missed. Which I suppose means that the blockage around his consciousness, even in that most desperately-focused moment when he was walking from the Metro station to his dormitory, was not complete. Although, I suppose it is also

possible that the blockage was complete, and that even in pursuing Marie, he had some higher, more precious goal in mind.

The omen Alan was about to find was a notice indicating that 88 Rue Denfert had a passing literary and historical significance. Alan and E briskly walked past the alabaster walls of the compound in which Alan would live, approaching a metal gate bolted by a lock to which both Alan and E possessed a key. Alan noticed that just beyond the gate was written in bold a familiar set of letters. Alan's pulse quickened as he saw it, his eyes widening and his jaw trembling with anticipation. He swallowed abruptly and jogged over to it, shutting his jaw tight and sprinting in earnest when he became certain that he had read the name correctly. What name could provoke such a reaction in our protagonist? "Alan Stuart"? "Woody Allen"? Who else: "Chateaubriand."

He stood now before the sign, reading its contents, which affirmed that this building had been the primary residence of Alan's idol for the mature years of his life. It had, the sign noted, at the behest of M. & Mme. Chateaubriand, later been transformed into a home for the young and blind. Tears sprang to Alan's eyes unbidden.

"Could it be?" He wondered. His knees weakened. He felt as if he were losing feeling in the muscles below his femurs. He lowered himself to his knees, feeling warmth growing steadily in his chest, a lightness loosening his jaw and turning his evenly-pursed lips into a smile. He felt his chin floating upward and a brightness hovering above his eyes, which remained only open enough to see a vague outline of the name, whose presence he now felt himself before. His eyes began to water as he kneeled in supplication before the old metal gate, underneath a grey and foreboding sky.

Alan had long fancied his trip to Paris as less a visit than a return. His essence, he understood, at some fundamental level was not Jewish, not American, but rather French. Moreover, he believed his own Frenchness was not of the quotidian variety, not plebian, nor hypocritically foreign like that of French Jewry or the Bourbon Kings. His essence had to be *utterly* French, a kind of Frenchness that had only ever subsisted in the old nobility, a kind of Frenchness whose foremost exemplar was most certainly François-Réné, vicomte de Chateaubriand. And yet Alan had no way to prove his claim to oneness with this semi-divine, hypothetical spirit of Gaulic nobility: the same spirit that he believed had once resided in his literary hero. All he had to show of his connection was intuition that it was indeed so. Hence, one may understand why finding that his home had previously been occupied by Chateaubriand was so meaningful for Alan. It was as if Providence herself were signaling that it agreed with his take: by producing so profound a shared worldly experience as having had the same home, it implied that there resided between the two an even deeper spiritual connection.

Alan remained on his knees, arms stretched out perpendicular to his body so that he in body made the figure of the cross. His face raised to the sky, he allowed the feeling of oneness

with Chateaubriand to wash over him. E stood several feet from Alan, watching curiously, not intervening. Finally, Alan opened his eyes to the sky. Still holding his arms out, he reached his right arm over to his right eye and wiped away his tears. Then, stretching his right arm out again, he performed a similar cleaning motion with his left. With arms still outstretched, he came back to his feet and brought his arms to his side slowly.

He turned to E and said, a mischievous smile on his face, “I think my date is going to go well.”

E led Alan through the courtyard past the gate, towards a spiral staircase against the far side. Alan motioned for E to hurry and E seemed to walk with a new spring in his step. “Maybe I should have told him I had a date earlier,” Alan thought. When the two reached the stairs, E motioned for Alan to go first. Alan, seizing the wrought iron banister, bounded up the stairs, seeing that the first landing twelve feet above ground corresponded with apartment number one. Discerning the pattern, Alan bounded to the third floor and, fiddling in his pocket, found his key. He heard E trundling up the stairs behind. He decided not to wait.

Alan entered the apartment and moved through it rapidly, trying to make sense of its layout. It was a genuine two-bedroom, with a living room and kitchen. This bothered Alan: he had expected a studio. “Maybe I have a roommate,” Alan thought. He cringed. A roommate would seriously complicate his conjugal visit with Marie later that evening. Moreover, it would make it very difficult for him to walk around the apartment naked with her on forthcoming weekends. “But none of the program materials said anything about roommates,” Alan thought. “Perhaps it’s for scholars with families,” he suggested to himself, “Or maybe there’s been a mis-assignment.” It hardly mattered. The essential thing to do was to begin his preparation. What was his first task? On the train he had decided to begin by taking a shower, and yet in the station he had decided that he would use the bathroom. He decided now to use the bathroom, and then afterwards to shower, deciding that this was the more sensible order in which to do things.

Sitting on the toilet, Alan heard E enter the apartment. He heard a soft thud of baggage impacting against the living room floor, and then the sounds of a zipper opening up. “He’s not going to put my clothes away – is he?” Alan wondered, “He’s not supposed to be my butler for God’s sake! On the other hand, if he doesn’t know that, why should I disabuse him of that notion? Moreover, who am I to suggest that being research assistant doesn’t involve menial tasks that I don’t want to do: washing clothes, buying groceries, etc. That all takes time, time which I could spend thinking, pushing forward my research project, and so on.” Alan nodded. He would see how the arrangement worked before he put a stop to it.

Alan refocused his attention back to preparing for the date. Perhaps it would be possible for him to combine steps? Alan could hardly see the harm in brushing his teeth. He took his

toothbrush out of his backpack and put some toothpaste on it. He began to brush thoroughly, roughly. His burden released itself satisfyingly and Alan resumed brushing vigorously. Just then, with mouth full of froth, he heard something which made him spit the entire pool of liquid out of his mouth all over the floor: a ringing phone.

Alan stood immediately and, struggling to pull up his pants, opened the door. He saw E moving towards the phone to pick it up, but Alan motioned him off. Holding his pants together by their front button, with upper posterior exposed and shirt untucked, Alan grabbed the phone excitedly. With trembling hand he lifted the receiver slowly up to his ear.

“Hello?” a familiar female voice asked hesitantly on the other line.

“Alo?” Alan replied, voice also trembling.

He heard a gasp and a giggle of anticipation at the other end of the line, “*Alan, is it really you?*” She had pronounced his name *Alain*, as if he were truly French. His name sounded so beautiful in her mouth.

“*Yes, Marie, it’s me,*” he tried to say the phrase with as much confidence as he could. She was early. She had come early for him, to wait. Alan knew that anticipation must be doing to her exactly what it had done to him.

“*Oh,*” she gasped. She remained silent for a moment. Alan allowed the strength of feeling he could hear on the other side of the telephone fill him. Finally, she whispered, “*I can’t believe it. I’m so happy.*”

“*Believe it, Marie,*” Alan said forcefully, before choking up on two words he could hardly believe he was saying, “*I’m here.*” He smiled to himself, imagining her smiling also at the other end. But there was no time to waste, he asked quickly, “*Are you downstairs?*”

“*Yes, by the gate at 88 Denfert.*”

“*I’m coming down,*” Alan said, trembling. With that, he hung up the receiver and immediately ran for the door. Meanwhile, the befuddled E was left standing in the middle of the room, holding a half-folded sweater.

Chapter Four

“How you will pity me! How wretched my perpetual anxieties will seem to you! You who have passed through all the hardships of life, what will you think of a young man with neither strength nor moral courage, who finds the source of his torments within himself, and can hardly lament any misfortunes save those he has brought on himself? Alas! Do not condemn him too severely; he has already been harshly punished.”

-From René, François-René de Chateaubriand

He descended the staircase quickly. In the courtyard, he found that the ominous overcast of the afternoon sky had since then descended to the earth. The ground was now covered in a thick fog, which had dulled the edges of the landscape, softening its colors. He saw that she was standing on the other side of the gate, in an ink-died trench coat and a matching beret. The contrast between the blackness of her clothing and the lightness of her skin made the latter all the more ethereal and luminous. He ran to her, finding that the fog made her face seem limp and cold; she had the visage of a ghost. The only color on her face emanated from her fierce, emerald eyes. How easily they cut through the darkness in order to pierce Alan’s very heart!

Alan ran to her, wanting nothing more than to immerse himself in her physique. He saw that she was smiling, ready to absorb the shock of his embrace. She was so close now, only a few more steps and a barred gate away. He would have to open the gate immediately, or else their first embrace would have to be from opposite sides of wrought-iron grating. “Perhaps that’s good,” Alan thought, “The imagery of us embracing between the grating, as if on opposite side of prison bars, would symbolically mirror the striving of our spirits against the geographical barrier separating America and France.”

“*Alan!*” she shouted to him. No, he decided, no more would he allow himself to be separated from Marie. He ignored her call and ran directly to the latch, which he opened with a forceful smack. A burning protest from the left-side of Alan’s hand wound its way up his wrist and arm, all the way to his shoulder. Alan paid it no attention. Immediately, he turned to face her. She ran to him. She was preparing to embrace! He moved his hands and arms to receive her. She jumped towards him. He positioned his right hand so that it would be about level with her waist, while his left hand went to receive her upper back. She pulled herself in. Alan pursed his lips. He saw that she was puckering hers as well. Their faces moved closer and closer together. Already her body was his, in his hands, so supple and warm, trembling with the energy and anticipation of heat – to think that just a moment before Alan had feared she looked lifeless! He saw that she was closing her eyes and decided that he should also close his. “It’s the moment,” Alan thought. “It’s happening!” He nearly fainted from excitement as he felt his lips

make contact.

How glorious she felt in his arms! Oh, it was beyond even Alan's most feverish imaginings! Although actually, truth be told, Alan had hardly expected her kiss to taste so tart. Also, her lips were surprisingly lacking in protuberance. "Well, they are thin," Alan thought, concluding that to make his beauty's rather macerated lips put out properly he would have to kiss much more firmly than usual. He noted that something still didn't feel right. He tried poking his tongue out further in order to initiate contact with hers. They were two French people in France, after all; they obviously had to kiss like it. But tongue contact was not forthcoming. Indeed, it was now clear to Alan that something was wrong. He could feel tiny hairs on her lips, but lips are, generally speaking, hairless. Alan opened his eyes and realized that he had been making out with Marie's cheek for several seconds.

He disengaged himself from her, pulling back his face from her cheek and trying to look as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. In fact, it has always been a customary greeting between male and female friends of any age in France to kiss each other on the cheek. Except, when one kisses one is only supposed to feign labial contact. One is not actually supposed to touch lips to any part of the body, let alone slobber the other person's face with one's tongue. Obviously, Alan knew this rule, but he could also, if he acted nonchalantly enough, pretend that he had not. It was galling for our intrepid Francophile to have to affect unfamiliarity with such basic French etiquette. He felt his cheeks grow hot and red, belying his ignorant pose.

"Alan, it's you!" Marie said enthusiastically, stepping back to look him over again. *"I am so unbelievably happy that you are here!"* With that, she hugged him again. Alan concluded that she was unlikely to mention the egregious infraction he had just perpetrated against French etiquette.

"I'm so glad to be here as well."

"I've missed you terribly," she splurged, *"I've been so lonely since I left America."*

"Well you won't be lonely any longer," Alan replied.

She laughed again. Her obvious eagerness to see him was quite effectively blunting his embarrassment over what had just happened. Alan didn't fear for a moment that she lacked interest in him. He was sure that she simply had not expected Alan to be so forward, that she was still intending to jump into his arms the moment they entered his apartment.

"Come, let's go inside. I can show you my room," Alan said.

"Yes, please, I want to see," Marie said. The two walked together to the staircase at the

back of the courtyard. Alan lead the way forward, placing his hand on the small of her back. For her part, Marie was digging for something in her bag. Alan looked on curiously as she produced a small bottle of wine.

“I wanted to get you a house-warming present,” she said.

“Oh my,” Alan said, leading her onto the staircase, *“Can we drink it now? Together?”*

“Of course!” Marie said enthusiastically, *“We must! You’ve had a long flight.”* Then, almost under her breath, she said sadly, *“And I’ve had another day in my life, which is also arduous in its own way.”*

Alan laughed, albeit with discomfort. Alan was used to thinking of Marie as a tidy bundle of positivity, reservedness, and Frenchification. And yet, here was Marie, in the flesh, forthrightly admitting to depression. Neither positive nor reserved people did that? No, Alan realized, the map wasn’t fitting the territory. Unfortunately, such occurrences are all too common whenever one navigates either geographical or human landscapes. Sometimes one encounters things the map does not mention; sometimes the map alludes to things not really there. It will always be this way, and no amount of time or energy will ever make it possible for the two to always, absolutely agree. What to do about the sad fact? Well, certainly, one can say that the solution isn’t to stay at home in one’s robes, quietly perusing ones maps, any more than it’s to throw away the map, go commando, and head into the jungle. Rather, what one needs to think about is how to draw maps such that one will navigates well, under the consideration that following the map and getting where one wants to go are only part of what makes someone an excellent navigator.

Alan, being about as good at navigating human landscapes as at playing games, had concluded that Marie was not acting like her self. He figured that something was deeply upsetting her, which was causing her to act so differently from his expectation. The problem, in Alan’s mind, was the territory, not the map, and all that was needed for the former to agree with the latter was a little daylight. Once he raised Marie’s spirits, the jaded, depressed mannequin would transform into the sweet, reserved, happy French doll whom he loved. It was for this reason that he spoke, he did so with an almost vaudevillian enthusiasm, *“Long flight: you have no idea! Firstly, even before I take-off, I’ve already been made fun of by two different guys for carrying an effeminate tennis racket. Which would be bad enough. But then, on the flight, I sit next to a Jewish woman who asks me a million stupid questions, before her son finally vomits on top of my shirt.”*

“Ay ay ay!” Marie exclaimed. *“And of course, I was so excited about seeing you tonight that I hardly slept,”* Alan said, watching Marie’s reaction carefully as he said these words. She did not seem perturbed by them, in fact she seemed to think that they were perfectly expected and natural. *“But then towards the end of the flight,”* Alan said dramatically, *“I got into a fight*

with a con-artist.”

“*What!*” she demanded, so stupefied that she stopped right in place. She opened her eyes wide in shock. She blinked her pretty eyelashes rapidly. Her immaculate, pencil thin eyebrows shot up her face as her jaw dropped to the edge of dislocation, elongating her already elliptical visage. There, Alan thought, he had caught her interest. She was seeming more and more like the ebullient, reserved girl with whom he had fallen in love.

“Yes, he went for my wallet and I tried to dodge him,” Alan related excitedly, *“But then another American on the plane was also involved and I ended up getting asphyxiated.”*

Marie gasped in horror. Alan felt his upper lip curl upwards, his masculinity curiously satisfied by the fact that he was describing how he had mastered the prior ordeal. *“That’s terrible!”* Marie exclaimed.

“I woke up in handcuffs with the charlatan sitting next to me. But luckily the other American was there and I managed to convince the police chief that it was the con artist who was the criminal.”

“*Wow!*” Marie said with wide-eyes. Alan pushed her forward and the two climbed the remaining steps. Once inside, he would be able to ask for her coat and beret. Her luscious brown curls would cascade out of their hiding place, down onto her exposed shoulders. He would take her coat and put his hand on the small of her back, a loose layer of chemise fabric now being the only impediment to the consummation of his desire. He would take her to his bedroom, under the guise of showing her where it was that he wanted to place her coat. Then, when the bed was before them, he would embrace her once more, tell her that all he wanted in the world was to be with her, and she would kiss him passionately, aggressively, as she should have done when they first had seen each other at the gate. He was resolved. It would happen. Alan opened the door.

Standing just beyond the door, with a massive bundle of folded laundry in his arms, was the affable-looking, if taciturn E. He smiled brightly at Alan and bowed his head at Marie. With that, he went into Alan’s bedroom, presumably in order to put away the clothes.

Alan cursed silently. He had completely forgotten that his assistant was still hanging around the apartment, performing servile tasks in a flat-footed effort to curry his favor. The only thing that Alan wanted of E at that moment was for him to disappear. Alan resolved to tell him as soon as possible to vacate the premises, in order that he and Marie could be given space in which to conjugate.

“Is that your roommate?” Marie asked, turning her head backward to look at Alan even

as she entered the room.

Alan shook his head, thinking “Thank God that insufferable busybody isn’t my roommate: if he were, I might actually have to talk to him.” Was there anything E was good for? Actually, it occurred to Alan, there was a way to turn the inconvenience of E’s presence on its head. After all, how many people in their early twenties were sufficiently meritorious that the French University system would hire them a butler! Surely, this testimony to his capabilities would make the prospect of being romantically involved with him all the more palatable.

“No,” Alan said, pushing Marie forward into the room, “*He’s my assistant.*”

“*Your assistant?*” Marie asked wondrously.

“*Yes, when I arrived at the airport he was there, waiting for me to take my bags. My understanding is that he will be taking care of things for me here so that I can focus on research.*”

“*That’s incredible!*” Marie exclaimed in a whisper.

E reentered. Alan and Marie now stood on one side of the room, next to an old couch whose orange upholstery had the consistency of burlap. Across from the couch, on E’s side of the room, was an old wooden table with matching chairs. E went over to one of these chairs and stood facing Alan and Marie. His eyes were directed towards the floor. Alan realized it was his place to introduce the two.

“E, this is Marie,” Alan explained. He was annoyed to find that he could only elaborate further by saying, “She is my friend.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Marie, this is E.”

“*Enchantée, Mademoiselle,*” E replied, an accent clipping his otherwise comfortably spoken words. He bowed his head politely to Marie.

Alan was taken aback by E’s mastery of French greeting. Perhaps he had previously worked in a job where he had learned French pleasantries.

“*Do you speak French?*” Marie asked. E shifted side to side on the balls of his toes, before giving his utterly inconclusive answer, “*Sometimes.*”

Marie smiled at him and E smiled back. Alan looked at the Asian, absolutely flummoxed. He was an utter enigma, this curious Mister E. What he knew, what he thought, what he even *saw* – it was a black box, whose operational parameters Alan had no actual interest in

determining. Alan shook his head and turned to Marie.

“Well, should we drink?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Marie, *“Where are the glasses?”*

“E!” Alan shouted for magisterial effect, even though his assistant was only a few arm’s lengths away. “Two glasses!” E nodded deferentially and moved towards the kitchen.

“Don’t you want to offer him a drink?” Marie asked, with a slight tone of indignation. “Damn,” Alan cursed himself. He had come off precisely as callous to his underling as he actually was. He scrambled to come up with a cover.

“Oh, of course, for some reason I assumed that he doesn’t drink.” Marie nodded understandingly, although Alan wondered if she had really believed him. If he was sufficiently kind and respectful to E over the coming minutes, he could probably convince her that he hadn’t had any ill intention in the first place.

E returned to the room bearing a tray with a motley assortment of glassware. It was clear that the young man had no concept of how one was supposed to drink wine: he had even brought a shallow plate that one would have to lap at with one’s tongue if one wanted to drink. Alan rolled his eyes, taking care that Marie couldn’t see the obnoxious expression. He approached the tray with wine bottle in hand. As he prepared to uncork the bottle with the opener E had brought, he asked his assistant if he would like a drink.

“Yes,” E replied humbly. The young man picked up a round coffee mug, which he held in his hand like a soup bowl.

Alan popped the cork and poured two wine glasses for Marie and himself, before finally topping off E’s unfortunately chosen cup. He handed one of the glasses to Marie and proposed a customary toast, *“To us!”* Alan took a sip of wine and pushed Marie to join him on the couch.

After sitting down, Alan once more directed himself towards E. In the few seconds since he had taken his eyes off his assistant, something drastic had happened. The assistant’s skin had gone from a smooth honey-brown to an uncomfortably pumpkin orange. Alan asked him, “E, are you feeling alright?”

E nodded quickly and took a sip of wine. He grimaced as he swallowed. A curious transformation ensued: whatever orange hue had been previously visible now turned aggressively red. It was like watching a Tahitian sunset viewed a hundred times fast. Alan could almost feel the heat of his companion’s cheeks pulsating against his skin, could almost perceive a

reddish aura illuminating the walls. Alan bit his lip anxiously as he saw E take another sip. He turned to Marie and looked at her silently, feeling the thermodynamic pressure on his own cheeks continue to build.

Marie smiled at Alan warmly. The two looked at each other, wordless. Alan reflected on how poignant silences such as these were often resolved by a significant romantic gesture, which in turn would give way to lovemaking. Alan cursed E once more, although part of him wondered what the difference was. Why not throw a shade over the red-lantern to his left and make a dramatic advance upon Marie then and there? Alan was considering whether there was any plausible way to make this move happen, when Marie pointedly broke the silence.

“So Alan, it’s amazing how well you’ve been established here!”

Alan said, rather smugly, *“I had no idea it was going to be so elaborate. I guess they’re trying to impress the people in their program.”*

“Who?” Marie asked.

“The College de France,” Alan said.

“That’s odd,” Marie opined, *“Most universities in France could care less about their students.”*

“Well, maybe it’s because it’s not just a normal university program, but also connected to a lot of population politics.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” Marie said slowly.

“You know that the French government has all these incentives designed to keep up the birthrate, increase the population, etc.” Alan said.

“Right, right,” Marie said, before continuing in a mocking tone, *“French women aren’t sufficiently pregnant! French people are becoming a minority in their own country!”*

Alan laughed uneasily. Marie was talking quite explicitly about a subject which could prove offensive to the young Asian immigrant sitting to Alan’s left. Alan glanced at his assistant to see if he was offended. In fact, E was squinting at Alan with such a perplexed look that Alan could not be sure he was following the conversation. Alan continued, *“Well, you understand then: the government will spare no expense to keep France French. So, what’s the easiest way to*

get a hold of a product you can't make enough of yourself?"

Marie shook her head, *"Now you're starting to remind me of François."*

Alan was taken aback by the statement. It seemed to Alan that her tone had indicated mild disgust. "So she's angry with her ex-boyfriend," Alan thought. "That's probably a good thing." By the same token, however, the fact that he reminder her of François was almost certainly *not* a good thing. What could he do to indicate the difference, to separate himself from the young economist she had once loved? On the surface, there were an obvious number of things he could say. And yet to probe the depths and identify something profound, what was there? François was an economist: a rationalist who saw opportunism as the driving force in human endeavors. Alan was a Romantic: an opponent of reason, prudence, and associated notions. It was pivotal for Alan that he seize the present opportunity to remind her of that difference. Nevertheless, at that moment, Marie was not going to give him the chance.

"Sorry," she said, *"You were saying that they want to import French people from outside France."*

Alan smiled tightly, *"Yes, exactly. Everyone in my program has at least one French parent. The idea is to show us what the French academy has to offer, with the hope being that we will stay in France to complete our doctorate and eventually repatriate."*

"I see," Marie said, nodding, *"But Alan, don't you already want to immigrate?"*

"Well, they don't know that," Alan said with a certain rascality. Marie smiled politely. After another moment of silence, she continued her questioning.

"So you'll be in courses here for the year: writing papers, reading books."

"Well I suppose so," Alan admitted, *"But I'm not exactly sure. You know the strange thing is that the College de France is open to the public and as a result its courses are not really like classes with homework and readings and so forth. But we're encouraged to go to as many lectures as we like, and at the end produce a long paper that will be appraised by a committee. I'm also under the impression that a number of the professors will take advisees and oversee their papers."*

Marie nodded, *"So, do you know what courses you will be taking?"*

"I'm not sure," Alan began again, *"I want to write about Chateaubriand, obviously, since my college thesis was about him."*

“And of course he is your hero,” Marie added.

“Yes,” Alan nodded, though part of him was irked at the suggestion that his relationship to Chateaubriand was merely one of worshipper and idol.

“So there must be classes on French literature that you can take,” Marie prompted.

“Yes, there are, but I’m not really interested in taking them,” Alan said, “I have something else in mind.” He paused evocatively. Marie raised her eyebrows curiously, puckering her lower lip and tilting her head away from Alan. Alan smiled, *“Nokitoff is visiting for the semester.”*

Marie gasped, *“No! That’s impossible! Nokitoff is a recluse: he never leaves his hotel in the Swiss Alps, not even for food or water.”*

“Nevertheless, Nokitoff is coming to deliver a series of lectures. You’ll never guess the title.”

Marie seemed to be in a state of suspense.

“Literature,” Alan said definitively.

Marie laughed incredulously.

“Excuse me,” E interrupted, “Who is Nokitoff?”

Alan turned to E, stunned that he had followed any of their conversation. Alan did not have long to ponder how it was that E had intuited what they were discussing, for he was struck, quite viciously, by the overwhelming flushness of the Asian’s face. It looked like someone had drawn a smiley face on top of a Red Hot. Once more Alan had the fierce urge to laugh derisively at his assistant, but decided that he absolutely could not do so if he wanted to maintain appearances in front of Marie. Instead of laughing, he resolved to look at the space above his assistant’s head. He knew that, by talking, he would risk laughter. At the same time, if the information he conveyed was sufficiently solid and familiar, he might manage to squelch his need to laugh.

“Vladimir Nokitoff: Russian National, son of a Soviet Diplomat, his whole childhood was spent alternating between Zurich, Moscow, and New York City. At home his family spoke French, making him a native speaker of four languages: Russian, English, French, and German. At twenty-seven, he achieved notoriety for writing the horrifying and poignant confessions of a necrophiliac, the infamous Filbert Filbert. Since then he has established himself as perhaps the

world's foremost literaturer, although somehow the Nobel Committee continues to snub him."

E pursed his lips together and nodded. Alan had the distinct impression that the man either had no interest in what he had just said or had not understood a single word. Alan's urge to laugh derisively had been effectively replaced by distaste. "He's a philistine," Alan thought, "My research assistant in humanities is an illiterate boor."

"And so you want him to be your advisor?" Marie asked.

Alan blushed and said seriously, *"It would be an incredible honor. I have enormous respect for him and he could, with the slightest gesture, establish me in any number of positions that would help me do what it is I most want to do in life."*

"There's no doubt about that," Marie agreed, *"But I imagine he's extremely hard to impress."*

Alan sighed and clucked his cheeks. *"It's true,"* he said, *"It's also not even clear that he's taking students. Even if he is, I expect the competition will be very fierce."*

Marie nodded. The room grew silent again, before Marie, squinting her eyes and tilting her head, realized that part of Alan's story did not quite fit. *"But Alan, I'm somewhat surprised. You hate contemporary writers, you're always ranting about them. What's that thing you're always calling them?"*

"Trashmongers," Alan replied instinctively, *"Almost every writer of the past hundred years has been passing off his mental detritus as literature, and the public has been gobbling it up."*

"But Nokitoff is not?"

Alan paused for a moment, mulling the proposition over, considering how to explain. Finally he began to speaking, aping a professorial lecturing style, *"Well, you'll forgive me Marie for explaining to our friend here in terms that a person unfamiliar with literature might understand."* Alan turned to E. Realizing that he was being indicated, E nodded appreciatively. Although it is possible that E would not need to understand French to know he was being talked about, it seemed quite likely to Alan that he was understanding what he was saying quite perfectly. This fact would have irked Alan immensely, were he not so interested in finishing his thought, *"First, most writers today are what one would call "Post-Modernists." They try to show that there is no such thing as art, and they try to do so by creating artworks that are not art. For example, the most famous and successful Post-Modernist, at least in America, is Woody Allen,"* Alan spit a tiny bit as he enunciated the "d" in the comedian's name, *"Whose films*

essentially consist of the most sniveling, despicable caricature of an American Jew talking in front of the camera about how he's talking in front of a camera, and then pretending as if that fact somehow demonstrated that life is essentially meaningless, and so therefore one might as well go out and have sexual intercourse with children."

"Come now Alan, he's not that bad," Marie challenged. When had Marie become such a contrarian? Contrarianism was, quite clearly, the antithesis of shyness, positivity, and acceptingness — all the character traits in Marie which Alan loved. It seemed to Alan that for the depression she had alluded to earlier to disfigure her personality like this, it must run very deep indeed. It would not be expunged with a few jokes and good conversations, but only through a prolonged romantic, psychological, and sexual engagement.

"Oh yes, he is that bad," Alan replied.

"I know you're very angry at him, that you blame him for making popular a lot of bad things. But he's not as bad as you say! All his comedy, it's about things being of one nature, taking on a second nature, and then working out the problem of being a composite of the two. You know, it's a bar of soap that gets molded into a gun, which scares the police until it melts in the rain! It's a moose that gets taken to a costume party and becomes a guest, where it ends up getting second best in the costume-competition, to a couple dressed as a moose! He's funny Alan, and he always has some ideas he's playing with. What could be better than that?"

Alan felt, for a moment, a kind of *deja vu*. He had forgotten that the two had actually carried out the same argument before, on multiple occasions, back in America, almost word for word. Here she was representing the position she had always held, and here he was holding his line. One of the very first things he had liked about her, besides the obvious facts that she was French and that she was pretty, was the fact that she knew enough to talk intelligently about subjects like literature and art. It was probably the condition of their later friendship that she had opinions and was sharp. Since then, however, it seemed that all Alan had talked about with her were personal matters, which made it possible for Alan to reduce her to a positive, accepting, and encouraging force. The fact that now she wasn't accepting his ideas irritated him, since he was so used to her accepting all his personal thoughts.

"I'll tell you what could be better, and I'll tell you why he's not funny. The problem with Woody Allen is that he makes a mockery of life, of art, of literature, and these are not things that one should lampoon. There is nothing inherently deep about a joke, nothing profound about a satire. And it is precisely that effort to pretend as if humor were meaning, that wit is genuine brilliance, that stultifies our spirits. One wonders why our culture is so insipid! Especially in America, but everywhere, actually. They say it is because no one reads anymore, and that the television only caters to the lowest common denominator. But that is not the case: the denominator has always been abysmally low; if anything the masses are more sophisticated now than ever. The problem is the numerator; Marie, not the denominator. All the talents out there

are focused on showing their brilliance by their irony, which most often they do by means of writing badly, but at the same time giving us a knowing wink that they know what they're doing is bad. As if that made up for it! Today in America all that one can hope to be as a writer is a Woody Allen: he is the model. Which is to say, all that anyone expects out of high art is a few silly one-line jokes, a few decadent protagonists, and a general message of despair and negativity. But what if art could be more? What if literature challenged our imagination, inspired our passions, made us to feel more deeply our own existence, challenged us to live more grandiosely!"

"Which is where you come in?" Marie prodded, a tone of admiration in her voice. One of the things that Alan most loved about Marie, one of the things about her which he did indeed get right, was that she encouraged him to dream.

"I hope! For you see, there was once a time when art was equally banal, when there were a few sporadic geniuses fighting against a tide of insipidity. And then a voice came, which illuminated a path: that imagination and passion could be the center of art. And indeed, that those notions must be the center of art. That man was, as you know, Chateaubriand."

Marie nodded thoughtfully, *"Which is who you hope to be, but for our time."*

Alan was elated; she had remembered his dream exactly as he had told it to her! Perhaps in time he would feel comfortable enough to reveal to her his spiritual beliefs, that in point of fact he did not want to be the Chateaubriand for our time, but rather that he believed himself to be the Chateaubriand of *all* times — a reincarnation of the 19th century Romantic. For some reason, E looked at Alan with an air of transfixed wonderment. Alan squinted at E warily, though the Asian seemed not to notice.

Marie prompted, *"And so you think Nokitoff can help?"*

"Well, yes. For Nokitoff is not exactly a Romantic, but his art has the sensibility of those artists who came two or three generations after Chateaubriand: Flaubert, or Proust, or whoever. His art is decadent, Modernist, but at least it is a vision of art. He is one of the few craftsmen that remain, and there is a great deal I can learn from him."

"Well, good luck Alan!" Marie said enthusiastically. Alan nodded thankfully at Marie and took his final sip of wine. Marie finished her glass as well. Alan decided that since he wouldn't be able to seduce Marie if E was in the apartment, he should say something to E before he and Marie left for dinner. He also had to be careful to make sure that E didn't try and tag along on the date.

"Marie, do you mind if my assistant and I excuse ourselves for just a moment? He's been

unpacking my things you see, and I would like to know where he's put everything." Marie indicated that they should go ahead. Alan motioned for E to join him in the bedroom.

Alan walked calmly into the bedroom, even going so far as to touch his assistant's upper back in a gentle show of camaraderie. With all due deliberateness, the two entered Alan's room. He closed the door gently behind them. The room was dark; the only source of light was a dim lamp sitting under a heavy shade. Alan checked that the door was closed once more, before whirling on his heavy-set Asian assistant and angrily grabbing him by the lapels of his knockoff sport coat. E pulled his head back defensively, although he hardly seemed surprised by the unexpected show of fury from his master. Alan shouted with sufficient hoarseness that none of his words could be heard by the pretty girl sitting in the adjacent room.

"Now I don't know what game you're playing by pretending not to speak French but I won't stand for it!" Alan insisted. *"You're going to speak French with me whether you like it or not!"*

E returned Alan's request with a mild shake of his head left and right.

"Quit playing dumb!" Alan said even more forcefully, *"You followed the whole conversation back there word for word and I know it!"*

E remained expressionless. A few awkward seconds passed, before he admitted diffidently, "Sir, I do not understand what you say."

Alan gulped angrily. So it was a game of chicken. Alan would insist that E understood and E would insist that he didn't until one or the other decided to relent. There was no telling how long that would take, however. Worse, every second he spent roughing up E was time that he could potentially be using to grope Marie. He would be the first to relent, he realized, so he might as well relent now and walk away with his time. Nonetheless, he didn't want E to get away with this charade. He decided to ask the assistant a pointed question in English.

"Well explain this E: if you don't speak French, how did you know we were talking about Nokitoff?"

Without batting an eye, E answered, "I can guess that Nokitoff is a name by its position in sentence and fact you repeat it so much. Also, Nokitoff is word that does not sound French. It is word that does sound Russian."

Alan cursed. The response was good. Indeed, very good. Probably, it was too good. How had E composed such a reasonable response in English so quickly if he hadn't already anticipated the question? Oh, how devious the assistant was! Now Alan began to feel

embarrassed as he realized the dilemma of his situation. Either the man didn't speak French and Alan had embarrassed himself by accusing the man of something he hadn't done wrong, or he did speak French and Alan was a fool. Alan fumed, in either case he was beaten. He pursed his lips angrily at the assistant and flared his nostrils. His breathing quickened. The air rushed angrily out of his nose onto his assistant's face.

This vexed exercise in deep breathing soon led Alan to regain his composure. He realized that if the man didn't speak French, then Alan had not actually communicated any accusation. The man had not actually been called a liar, so he would not feel bad, nor would Alan have any reason to be embarrassed. On the other hand, if the assistant did speak French, then he knew exactly what Alan thought of him, and Alan had expressed his outrage effectively. In either condition, Alan had conveyed no more and no less than what he wanted to convey. He could relent without having been beaten.

"Alright fine," Alan whispered grudgingly, "In that case, I want to give you your first task. As you can see, there is a beautiful girl who has come to meet me, and I very much want to copulate with her."

"Copulate?" E asked.

In an instant Alan's entire face tensed to its maximum. He made an OK sign with his hands in front of E's face and pushed his index finger through the O-hole maniacally.

E nodded seriously, "You want to have sex."

Alan's face relaxed all at once. He was confused. What had come over him? He needed to calm down. He hyperventilated several times and smiled widely. He nodded pleasantly at E and put his index finger to his closed lips, indicating to E that they needed to keep quiet.

"Now E, Marie and I are going to eat dinner. I'm going to invite you to eat, but I don't actually want you to come. So, no dinner, got it?"

"No dinner?" E asked incredulously.

"That's right E, no dinner, even if I ask you to come eat."

E gulped and nodded seriously. Alan smiled again: it looked like his assistant had got the message.

"Second E," Alan ordered, "I want you to finish unpacking, and then after you're done to

leave and go home so that I can have the apartment to myself.”

“But sir,” E replied questioningly, “This *is* my home.”

A dull horror descended upon Alan. What was the assistant saying?

“What?” Alan exclaimed in a whisper.

“Yes,” E replied factually, “This is two-bedroom apartment. I am in other bedroom. I live here too.”

An enormous cough retched up from the base of his belly to his throat. Alan coughed for several seconds. Though gasping, he managed to speak some words, “But you’re supposed to be from Paris! Don’t you have family here?”

E nodded weakly. “Then there’s a chance he’ll leave!” Alan thought.

“Go to them,” Alan insisted.

E shook his head in refusal.

Alan insisted further, “Just for tonight. After tonight we’ll work something out.”

E stood with back straight and faced Alan directly, “I cannot do that.”

Alan was moving his hands slowly, almost as if he wasn’t noticing himself do it, back toward E’s lapels. He said slowly, “Why not, E?”

E stood even more resolutely, in spite of Alan’s encroaching hands. He explained forcefully, “If I go back to my family home tonight, my family will think you have reject me as assistant. Even if I say you tell me to go home and to come back tomorrow, they will not believe.”

Alan cursed. So he was refusing to do his job because of pride. Oh what insolence! “But no,” Alan thought, “In his culture, people take their sense of self-worth in front of their families very seriously. Indeed, very seriously. There’ll be no arguing with that.”

Alan asked considerately, “What if I wrote a note?”

E shook his head back and forth quickly, “They do not read English. Anyway, they will

think I write note myself to hide disgrace.”

He was incorrigible then. Alan had only one recourse. Mustering all the powers of guilt-induction that his Jewish upbringing had placed at his disposal, Alan said heavily inflected word, “E.”

E blinked. He replied steadfastly, mimicking Alan’s tone, “Aaron.”

Alan insisted, “Go home E. I’m ordering you, as your boss.”

E shook his head, “No Aaron. I cannot go home. I must honor my family before I honor my job.”

Alan’s temper flared. It was completely illogical. He spoke quickly, outraged, “Let me understand this. You honor your family by performing your service well. You do that by doing exactly what your boss asks.” He pushed E a little as he spoke.

“Exactly,” E replied.

Alan continued, “But if you do what your boss asks, then your family will believe you have performed your service badly, hence you will have dishonored them.

“Exactly,” E replied.

“Thus, to make your family believe it is honorable you have to dishonor your family!” Alan prevailed upon E.

“Now you understand situation you put me in,” he replied.

Alan stood facing E angrily for a few moments. Marie was waiting. It was becoming rude of him to leave her there for so long. He would have to compromise with his assistant.

“Very well, E,” Alan instructed, “I will allow you to stay here for the night. But you must do so by remaining in your room until I say it is ok to come out.”

E fell to the floor with a thud and bowed his head to Alan’s feet. He said, loudly to be sure that Alan could hear, “Thank you, sir, for changing your order.” Alan cursed once more. He would have to hope that Marie hadn’t heard that.

Alan and E stepped out of the dark bedroom. Marie was still sitting on the couch, her

thin legs curled up against her body. She looked in the direction of the room apprehensively.

“What was that noise?” Marie asked worriedly.

“Suitcase!” Alan said enthusiastically, face beaming at Marie. Marie nodded and smiled back at Alan, amused by his palpable excitement.

“What’s so funny?” Marie asked.

Alan continued, smiling broadly, *“Nothing, Marie, nothing’s funny. Would you like to go eat?”*

Marie nodded, *“Sure! There are many restaurants at Place Denfert.”*

Alan turned to his assistant, who was wobbling on his toes anxiously. Alan asked, almost theatrically, “E, are you sure you don’t want to come to dinner with us?”

E shook his head back and forth in the negative. Gesture completed, he retreated quickly into Alan’s bedroom.

Marie looked after the young man with concern, *“What came over him? He looks like he’s scared out of his mind.”*

Alan snorted, *“E? No, no, he just gets like that about work. I already asked him if he wanted to go to dinner and he wouldn’t hear of it until he’d finished putting all my things away..”*

Marie pulled her chin up towards her neck and pursed her lips mightily downward, *“O-K. Orientals are so serious about their work, aren’t they?”*

“You have no idea,” Alan replied sarcastically, although feeling quite uncomfortable by Marie’s use of the antiquated racial term. In Europe and in America, the way people think about race and cultural different are quite akin. In the States, however, there are very different rules for how one talks. Racial stereotyping is coded in extremely intricate and delicate language, which ostensibly offends no one and yet nevertheless talks about “what is really going on.” It is quite shocking for the American who comes to Europe to hear how it is that Westerners really think and talk about race. And quite silly, when the American reflects on it, that America’s discussions of race are so obsessed with the magical powers of certain language and words.

Alan and Marie descended the stairs quietly, listening to the rhythmic and resolute sound of their footfalls bouncing against the staircase walls. They stepped into the courtyard and were soon walking out the gate. Alan decided to mention the remarkable notice on the front of his building.

“*Did you see the sign?*” Alan asked, pointing to it. Marie shook her head and approached.

“*Interesting. That’s a nice coincidence!*” Marie remarked.

The two turned from the sign and started walking back towards the Place Denfert-Rochereau. Actually, despite the night’s unpleasant combination of humidity and cold, despite E’s behavior that afternoon, despite the inconvenience his existence had posed that evening, and despite even the most frustrating fact that he and Marie had not yet had sex, Alan was positively elated. Think of it: he was walking with Marie; they were going on their first date; soon, he would be unburdened of his feelings for her and they would join into one. He smiled contentedly as he walked, conversation now materializing with ease.

“*It’s strange, you know,*” Alan remarked, “*I can’t recall Chateaubriand writing anything about this place anywhere in the Memoires from Beyond the Grave.*”

Marie was tucking her hair into her beret as she walked. With her hands still on her head, she turned her face towards Alan and smiled slyly, “*That’s because this place was not always called Denfert. It used to be Place D’Enfer,*” she pronounced the words “Place D’Enfer” with a tone suggestive of the diabolical, “*which sounds exactly the same but means something very different.*” Alan understood now, Denfert, presumably the name of some long-forgotten hero or general, was pronounced exactly the same as D’Enfer (lit. “of hell”).

“*What an odd name for a plaza.*” Alan said.

“*It’s not so strange,*” Marie replied, “*Considering that this is also the place where one enters the catacombs. You know about them?*”

Indeed Alan *had* heard of the catacombs. They were an abominable place: a stone quarry transformed into a storage facility for the exhumed remains of a hundred thousand corpses. The only justification for this horrific violation against human decency was sheer necessity: at the time, the earth underneath Paris literally had no more room for human remains.

“*Yes, I know about them,*” Alan replied quickly. He picked up his pace, as if moving away from the place the topic had been broached might simultaneously lead to a change in

subject matter.

Marie quickened her step as well, however. Without skipping a beat, she continued discussing the point of interest, *“You see, Alan, we’re entering the plaza now. That means they’re here, just a few hundred feet below us: skeletons and skulls stacked one on top of the other, perfectly anonymous.”* She nodded in the direction of two large buildings on the plaza’s south side, *“Want to go in? The entrance is over there.”*

Alan shook his head quickly. He didn’t like Marie’s tone, nor he did he enjoy thinking about his proximity of his dormitory to the world’s largest mass grave. He asked Marie which way they were headed. She pointed to the plaza’s south-east, pointing out a back alley full of restaurants and shops. Alan desperately wanted to take up a new topic: it had strayed from an area with which he was enormously comfortable, Chateaubriand, to a kind of conversational netherworld that seemed fraught with an acute, yet somehow vague, danger.

“Alan, do the catacombs make you uncomfortable?” Marie asked teasingly.

“No, Alan replied reflexively, “It’s just that they have nothing to do with me, with my life, so I don’t have anything to say about them.”

Marie stopped walking and Alan was forced to stop. Marie stamped her foot and revealed a completely scandalized expression.

“Alan! How can you say it has nothing to do with you?”

Alan knew from experience that her demeanor was completely affected. He nodded in the direction that they were traveling and within seconds Marie’s offended air had completely dissipated. She resumed the topic of conversation, *“It’s fascinating, isn’t it, to think about them down there and about us?”*

Alan hoped that if they sat down they might at last be able to talk about something new. They were now in the alleyway. He pointed at the nearest restaurant and gestured questioningly towards Marie. She shook her head and pointed at a restaurant half way down the block and toward the left.

“For example, Alan, when I see the catacombs it makes me think, ‘How will my fate be different?’” Marie said, indicating that the restaurant to which they were headed was just in front. *“And when I have no answer, it makes me wonder about everything in my life, what is it for, why am I doing what I’m doing?”*

“No answer?” Alan said, holding the door for Marie so that she could enter, *“Marie,*

everyone down there in the catacombs was a peasant who died two centuries ago. And that's at the earliest. You're going some place much better, I assure you"

"Alan, you're ignoring the point," Marie said, shaking her head.

The two briefly stopped talking as they put their coats on a rack near their table and sat down. The table was dark, even though it was next to a large window looking onto the plaza and the bustling alleyway that adjoined it. Marie's face had the luminous softness of moonlight reflected upon water. Alan could only assume that his eyes were sparkling magnificently in the candlelight. The Maitre D' handed the two menus and began pouring their glasses of water. Alan opened the menu and had just begun scanning it over when he was blindsided by Marie.

"Alan, we are born as dust, we will die and become dust. At first our absence will be felt, then less, until with sufficient time we will become an inconvenient piece of garbage that no one will throw out because of vague superstition."

The Maitre D' placed the carafe of water on the table and raised his eyebrows at Alan questioningly. *"A bottle of wine, Monsieur?"* Alan nodded and said that they would have the fixed price menu.

Marie looked at him expectantly, almost demandingly. As she continued to stare, the beauty of Marie, the poignancy of her words and the earnestness in which they were delivered suddenly made an impression upon Alan. *"It's not she's depressed and negative,"* Alan said to himself, *"It's that she's deep, genuine, and thoughtful."*

"You have the mind of a poet, Marie," Alan said suddenly, overcome by admiration.

Marie exhaled quickly from her nostrils and smiled widely, although she didn't open her lips. *"Flattery will get you everywhere Alan,"* Marie said in English. She took out a cigarette, which she lit as the waiter brought out two glasses of wine and the remaining bottle.

Alan looked at Marie approvingly as she smoked. Her light-colored scarf hugged her neck, draping lightly over her chemise. He took a sip of wine and decided that, rather than being a topic he wanted to avoid, such philosophical matters as life and death were exactly what he wanted to be discussing with his *amour*.

"You present the problem very nicely, Marie," Alan began seriously, *"We are mortal, we will all in time meet our oblivion."* Marie nodded and took a sip of wine, visibly pleased that Alan was addressing her preferred topic.

"Except there is one thing you miss," Alan explained, *"For indeed, not every individual's*

origin is dust, but some are born with a spark, or a fire — an intensity which is immortal and timeless. This energy draws those who possess it towards a means by which they may establish a legacy: something that will illuminate the endless night of the spirit, recalling their personality from the anonymous catacombs that would otherwise be their fate.”

“*You really believe that, Alan?*” Marie asked skeptically, putting out her cigarette as the salad course arrived.

“*Absolutely, I do. Moreover, there is no other belief that is possible, let alone reasonable,*” Alan insisted with vehemence. He impaled a piece of radicchio with his fork and shook it in front of his face as if to prove further his point. “*Chateaubriand is not dead, for example. He wrote his entire life into that book of his, those Memoirs from Beyond the Grave. He finished it at exactly the moment of his death. His entire essence, as it evolved and grew over the totality of his lifetime, is distilled on those pages – it speaks to the world today, as authentically as if he himself were live before us.*”

“*Maybe Alan,*” Marie said, pushing away her barely-eaten salad and lighting a second cigarette. She questioned Alan pointedly, “*But do you think people will still read his book in a hundred years, in a thousand? And if no one is there to read it, what difference will it make if he distilled his essence perfectly?*”

“*Absolutely people will still read Chateaubriand in a hundred or a thousand or ten thousand years. And even if they didn’t, it wouldn’t matter. His essence would still live on!*” Alan insisted forcefully, realizing that he was becoming too involved in the conversation, and that he had better consider his larger aims in talking before trying too hard to prove his point.

“*But exactly how would his essence live on?*” Marie asked, “*It’s that old problem, if a tree falls in a woods, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? If a book is in a library that no one goes to, does the book say anything at all?*”

Alan vehemently shook his head “no.” In the first place, if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, then it obviously still makes a sound. In the second place, the analogy was totally ridiculous: an autobiography is not the same kind of thing as a tree.

“*You cannot compare those things Marie,*” Alan replied, “*Let me ask you this, Marie: if I’m alone in the forest, do I exist?*”

“*Yes,*” Marie said deferentially.

“*Of course I do. Because the point is no matter how alone I am, as long as my heart still beats, my essence remains in the world and I still exist. It’s the same with Chateaubriand’s book.*”

As long as it is there to be read, his essence is still in the world. As long as his essence is in the world, he will continue to exist,” Alan said definitively.

“But how is it any different than the corpses and cadavers under our feet?” Marie interogated, “Their bodies are as much their essence as anything else. And yet they are not here, with us, in the world in any way at all. It is the same with a forgotten author: if his book remains covered in dust, in the back of some library, untouched and unread by anyone, I ask you to explain to me in what sense his existence is more present than those people down there?”

Alan frowned. She had a point. Alan pressed his lips tightly together, trying and failing to think of an articulate response.

Luckily for Alan, the waiter came with their main course and refilled their glasses of wine, taking with him the finished bottle. In the few seconds that the waiter had provided distraction, Alan decided to strategically concede the point.

“Well Marie, you’re right, if the Memoirs fade into obscurity then Chateaubriand will be dead, the same. But it will not disprove the principle, it will only show that the spark that was in him, though strong, was not sufficient to separate him from the dust.”

“But who has that kind of spark Alan?”

“I do,” Alan thought, though he only said diffidently, *“I don’t know.”*

Upon those words a certain somberness descended upon the dinner. The two finished their plates in silence, although Alan mentioned that he thought the place she had picked was delightful. Marie smiled politely and returned her gaze to the window, looking out at the hazy lights on the street and the bundled-up night-walkers. Oh Marie! How sad and pitiful she looked, thinking at that moment that there was no reprieve from the end which faces all mortals, that the only task allotted us is to go quietly to our fates. Meanwhile Alan was angry at himself, for he saw that underneath Marie’s dark train of thought, which originated from her erroneous belief that fatality was inalterably fated, was as beautiful and light a nymph as ever was. He could not help but admire her as she stared out the windowpane, so sad and pensive, her thin cheeks glowing iridescent in the candle and moon light. “There is something timeless about her character,” Alan thought, “She is like me.” All she needed was for the onerous and blinding veil above her face to be lifted, so that her light would spring forth, cheerful and earnest – as infinite a being as there ever was upon the earth. How Alan longed to be the one to lift that veil!

“Well Marie, we seem to have gotten very philosophical very quickly,” Alan said.

Marie smiled tightly and took out a cigarette.

"I haven't even asked how you are." Alan noted, surprised himself that he had gone so long without asking.

"Ha," Marie laughed ironically, *"I thought you wanted to lighten the conversation."*

Alan frowned and asked earnestly, *"What's wrong, Marie?"*

"Nothing is wrong, besides what's always been wrong," she said quickly, putting out her unfinished cigarette and taking out another, *"We don't need to talk about it."*

"Tell me Marie. I'm your" — here Alan stumbled — *"friend."* He continued, *"I want to be there for you."*

"It's my love life Alan, it's my family life. It's the fact that I can't separate one from the other," Marie seemed to be having trouble looking at Alan directly. Meanwhile, Alan was extremely distraught by her words. For he had thought it was certain that the old impediment to their romantic affections being realized was gone for good.

"But I don't understand Marie, you did separate it," Alan insisted anxiously, *"François and you finished. He went to America for graduate school and you refused to join him."*

Marie shook her head and the pit of Alan's stomach emptied, a blow that he could feel sticking in his throat and crawling down into his intestinal tract. She said sadly, still looking at the window, *"He came back three weeks ago."*

The sentence was like a thunderclap firing at once all through his back. He nearly retched. Marie didn't seem to notice the impact her words were having, instead continuing to stare off in the distance and speaking absent-mindedly, *"He finished his courses with breakneck speed and will continue his dissertation from abroad. His father will pay for whatever trips to America he needs. He has returned to Paris, for good."*

Alan thought now of François, whose tall thin body conveyed a forceful yet effortless masculinity. François who, despite his sharp facial features, and his long, erect, full-bodied locks of hair, somehow achieved an appearance completely devoid of Hebraisms. He looked older than Alan, yet somehow his skin had a radiance and youth that Alan could not find on his own face. Maybe it was because he was rich, like Marie.

"And so what! You want to be with him?" Alan demanded, repeating an indignant

question he had often asked himself long ago.

“No,” Marie replied, turning to face Alan directly.

“*So why Marie, why?*” Alan demanded. He felt that he was on the point of tears. He had to get a hold of himself. He was not going to get to sleep with her by crying. He would have to be dashing, forceful, everything that François was and more.

“*Because Alan, I must do it,*” Marie said with a kind of preternatural calm one only expects to find among the suicidal, “*I promised him that if he ever returned we would be together again, that my love would not fail. And now he has returned, at great expense to himself, to his career, and to his family.*”

“*But your love did fail Marie!*” Alan responded, “*How is it fair to François to lie?*”

“*It’s not Alan, but it seems even less fair to break my promise! Plus there’s not just François to think about; my parents have always held out such hope for François and me. You know my mother adores François and his family — she almost married his father. Meanwhile my father is obsessed with what the marriage could mean for his business. It’s all he talks about: the capital and the equity and the business know-how François has at his disposal. They were so disappointed when he left. The only thing that consoled them was our promise to reunite once more. They were so enthused when they heard that he has returned so soon. They would be furious with me if they knew I was the reason it ended. I don’t know what they would do to me.*”

“*They would threaten you?*” Alan asked, a horrified.

“*Not physically,*” Marie explained, “*But they might cut me off.*”

“*Even if your parents don’t support you, you must leave! You don’t need them!*” Alan tried desperately to prevail upon her.

“*And how will I live? What will I do? I can’t live without money Alan, it’s not as if there is a billionaire waiting in the wings to steal me away. Even if there were, would I love him enough to disappoint François so much, to disappoint my parents so deeply, to put all our relationships through such an ordeal?*”

Alan gulped and began to tear at the corner of his eyes. She was so selfless, Marie; so honest and self-effacing and good. An iridescent creature of divine imagining, who was casting herself out of the heaven she might experience with him or some other beloved, so that others might get what they want. A Romantic heroine if indeed there ever was one. Marie saw Alan’s tears and understood that they were meant for her. She also began to cry a little. She took a

fresh cigarette to her mouth.

“But Alan, you must know, François is not so bad. He’s not a monster Alan.” She hyperventilated for a few seconds and then stopped. She smoothed the creases on her clothes and then smiled tightly. She continued, more resolutely, *“He’s my friend Alan, my dear friend, from childhood. We’ve always known what was going to happen to us.”*

“But you love him?” Alan demanded, insisting on clarification of this most fundamental point.

Marie shook her head “no.” *“Like a friend from childhood,”* she said, *“Not less and not more.”*

“Have you made love to him since he’s returned?” Alan asked insistently.

Marie wobbled her head back and forth, *“It’s been hard Alan, you must understand. It is not easy to make love to someone you have known so long, are so familiar with, but have grown so distant from. We haven’t had sex, no. But we have slept together. Our parents pressure us to, to show passion for each other. To sleep over at each others apartments.”*

Alan fumed quietly. So he had touched her naked skin, felt her immaculate breasts pressed against his chest, held her in the kind of loving embrace Alan had so long fantasized about. “That self-important prick,” Alan thought, “That lucky bastard.” Alan took some satisfaction in her insistence that she had not yet had sex with François, though he didn’t quite believe it could be true.

“So you have slept together!” Alan accused.

“There’s nothing sexual in it, Alan,” Marie continued, tiredly, absent-mindedly, without any defensiveness at all, *“Imagine if you were to sleep in the arms of your sister. How would it feel?”*

“Marie, it is not the same,” Alan replied vehemently, *“My sister is fat and slovenly, so Jewish-looking that it’s hard to imagine anyone finding her attractive. And moreover, even if she were as thin and elegant and vivacious and stunning as you”* — Alan realized that this was the first time he had ever lavished Marie directly with such praise — *“even if she were all those things, she would still be my sister, my blood. There are some lines no man will cross. But you and François! I assure you, that is a line he is trying very hard to cross!”*

Marie looked at Alan with consternation. Eventually she nodded, acknowledging his insight. They sat for a full minute in silence, Marie ruminating and Alan watching her and

growing more and more red-face. *“Even if he is,”* Marie said finally, *“so much the better. I may not love him in a proper sense, but he is still my dear friend. If holding me gives him a thrill, then so much the better for him. I’m glad that my life can bring some happiness into the world.”* Whatever composure Marie had held until that point suddenly splintered apart. She said, haltingly, *“But me, I am utterly, totally, completely indifferent to him! And yet I must be with him! Which is to say that I’m doomed, Alan! I don’t know why I don’t just go and crawl up in those catacombs right now!”*

The two sat at the table wordlessly, Marie crying and Alan fuming at the injustice of of her fate and by proxy his own.

“Now where’s that chocolate desert!” Marie demanded.

Alan smiled politely but continued to stew. Oh the injustice of it all! Perhaps it was the case that she loved him. Perhaps it was the case that she did not. In either case, she would be blind to him and his desire so long as François was the intended. Which is to say that with respect to Marie’s love, Alan was, and always would be, unchosen. There was nothing Alan hated so much as being unchosen.

The waiter arrived with the check and Alan immediately took out money to pay. Marie refused to let him do so, however, insisting that the evening should be her treat. They decided to split the bill and a minute later were walking out of the restaurant wordlessly.

As they came around to his side of the plaza, Alan weakly asked Marie if she would like to come up to his place.

“Only for a moment, perhaps to use the restroom. I must go, François is waiting for me.”

“How had this happened!” Alan privately despaired. He should have checked before he left America that she was definitely still single. He should not have taken at face value those messages she had sent him, the ones complaining endlessly of loneliness and isolation, and longing for someone to come sweep her away. He should have made sure that François really had completely left the picture. As the situation was, he was a fool. What concrete gain had he achieved by the planning, the longing, the endless kibitzing over how to win the magnificent object of his affection — Marie?

He led Marie up the stairs to his building, sliding his feet rather than stepping. How ruefully Alan thought now of the hours past, when he had felt so full in spirit and body, when it seemed as if his heart could leap in a single bound from the earth and embrace infinity. And now, where was his heart – did it exist any longer? Or had he, without noticing, excreted it down

his leg and out his trousers.

Marie came into the apartment and immediately headed for the bathroom. Alan noticed that E was nowhere to be found, and that the door to his assistant's room was admirably shut. "Perhaps there is still a chance," Alan hoped, "at the very least we have our privacy."

Marie stepped out of the bathroom and stood in front of Alan.

"Well Alan, it was a very nice evening. I'm sorry it got so intense when we talked about my life," Marie said. Alan thought it looked like Marie was about to start crying again.

"No Marie, it's not your fault. I was the one who asked," Alan said softly.

Marie nodded. She looked at Alan and smiled. She held her arms out so that they could embrace again, this time in farewell. Alan held out his arms as well and soon felt her tender skin and frail body against his own. He said softly into her ear, *"I'd like to see you again Marie."*

"I want to see you too, Alan," Marie replied, rocking him as they hugged.

"I'd like to see you often, Marie," Alan said again, in a tone that seemed to indicate his meaning had not been fully understood the first time.

Without breaking her embrace, Marie moved her head back. Alan scanned her face. She blinked quickly several times at him. She held his gaze unflinchingly for a few moments. And then she blinked again and looked at the floor. What Alan found so remarkable about Marie's gesture was its spontaneity and naturalness, in stark contrast to her normal theatricality. Though he couldn't see her face, Alan could tell that she was tearing again. She drew herself to Alan once more, wrapping her arms around his back slowly. He moved his hands around hers, though he held her lightly, not passionately, intuiting that she had no desire to be ravaged. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Alan at the top of his cheek, near the corner of his eye. She tilted her face against his forehead. He could feel a small tear sliding down.

"We can only see each other as often as possible, Alan. I'm unfortunately very occupied these days." She squeezed Alan tight with those words, and then removed herself from his embrace. Alan smiled tightly, weakly.

"There is a party François is throwing at the end of the week," Marie said, *"You should come. I think you'll be a great hit with his friends."*

With Marie still facing him, Alan said, “*Adieu, Marie.*”

Marie smiled tightly, opened the door, and left.

As soon as the door closed, Alan took his hands to his head and grabbed his hair. He winced and slowly walked, or maybe fell is more accurate, toward the couch. He curled up against the garish upholstery and started crying. He should not have let her leave without telling her he loved her. The only hope he had of winning her was to press her on the point of love. The longer that he was around without conveying his absolute and total admiration for her, the more normal the state of denial would be. She would grow accustomed to receiving his admiration and yet not being with him. She would come to accept it. His only hope of being with her was to make their situation unacceptable. He had to make it egregious, to make it an elephant in the room, to make it something she had to address now or forever hold her peace. But he had not done that. Why hadn't he? Well, primarily, because she might have done something unpredictable as a result. She might have said it was impossible for him to see her again. She might have ended their friendship then and there. He had, without intending to, decided to play the long game, thereby allowing the anxious indecision to linger.

Alan noticed that the door to his right was open just a crack, and that the darkness therein had a certain tint of honey-brown. It was E, Alan realized, he had been watching his pathetic behavior. Alan quickly brushed his tears aside and yelled, as if E weren't already at the door, “E! You Can Come Out Now!”

Very slowly E opened the door and crept on his tiptoes over to the couch. He sat down very lightly. After a few seconds of inconspicuously trying to say nothing, he asked Alan pointedly, “Sir, did you have sex?”

Alan shook his head, wishing he could be left alone to his misery. The assistant slid closer. Alan buried his face in his hands. The Asian took his hands to Alan's shoulders and, before Alan could brush him away, began to give Alan a massage. The strokes were warm and deep. Alan felt his back seize, but the seizing itself was immediately caught in his assistant's powerful grip. He pushed it down, deep into Alan's back. He pushed it further, and then further. Soon it seemed to melt into oblivion. Alan's back collapsed into a state of total relaxation.

“She is very good look at. She is very hot.” E remarked as he performed the soothing operation upon Alan. Alan turned towards E, practically unable to think, thanks to the overwhelming soothing pressure upon his back.

“I know, E,” Alan said. The sensation on his back was so enjoyable that he was struggling to breathe, “But it's not just that. She's wise... and profound... and deep.”

“Sure,” E said, moving his hands to Alan’s lower back. “So, why she go home?” E gossiped. Even the reserved and spacey E correctly understood that the role of masseuse, like the role of hair-dresser or nail-polisher, required making light conversation.

“She’s not going home, E,” Alan said absent-mindedly, “she’s... she’s going to marry.”

“Now?” E asked. He was so surprised that he had stopped his massaging operation.

“No E,” Alan said, reaching around to tap E’s hands to make him keep going, “later.”

“Good,” E said, “You still have chance.”

“There’s no chance E!” Alan started crying again, although his heart was barely in it. The massage was sapping away all his anxiety, “She’ll never do it.”

“Love will conquer all,” E said definitively, “Have you ever seen a Hollywood Romantic Comedy?”

“Not really,” Alan said absentmindedly, “Though I do like Romantic novels...”

“I watch many Romantic Comedies. I love Hollywood Romantic Comedies. You know why, Aaron?”

“No E,” Alan said.

“Because Hollywood Romantic Comedy says that any person, not matter how shy, can get person he love to love him back. All he need to do is tell her he love her. Then, she fall for him.”

“Is that so?” Alan asked abstractedly.

“You tell her you love her?” E demanded, not unpleasingly poking Alan now in the ribs to emphasize his point.

“Not really, E.” Alan said shaking his head glumly.

E abruptly stopped massaging Alan’s back. He threw his arms up exasperatedly, “So what you expect Aaron!”

Alan was startled. He started blinking profusely.

“What guy in romantic comedy ever get girl without saying he love her?”

Of course the point E was making was absurd. His life was not a romantic comedy, the world did not work according to the farcical imaginations of Hollywood. On the other hand, it was related to a deeper point that Alan himself could respect. According to the proscriptions of the late 18th and early 19th century Romantic novel, as typified by Wuther, Atala, and René, the beloved female might or might not fall for the adoring male after he informed her of his affections. On the other hand, the protagonist, always being a man in touch with the profound, refused to consider reality pragmatically, and decided to face any obstacle with a stubborn, often foolish, courageousness. Thus, the romantic protagonist always confessed his love and dealt with the consequences later, however awful they might be. Alan asked himself now whether he would really play the game of love pragmatically, calculatedly, or in an absurd leap of faith reveal himself to Marie? Would he be a Romantic, or a mathematician?

“I’m going to catch her E,” Alan said firmly, “She can’t have reached the station yet... I can catch her.”

E beamed at Alan, “That’s right Aaron! You are hero of your own Hollywood Romantic Comedy!” Alan blinked several times. Had he really confessed in all earnestness his problems to his pathetically bumbling, absurdly inadequate, utterly foreign assistant? Never mind, Alan thought, he couldn’t waste a moment if he wanted to catch Marie.

Alan moved towards the door of his apartment, an emotional inertia still affecting his physique. Though his mind wanted nothing more than to catch Marie, his anatomy wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and continue receiving a massage from the ample, powerful hands of his Asian assistant. Alan moved out the door like a horseman trying to reign in an obstinate steed, which is to say he exited the apartment unsteadily. He took to the stairs, landing on the first several steps heavily. The impact of his heel against the inelastic stair-top surface sent shivering impulses up through his ankles and calves. His dulled and depressed reflexes began to snap to attention. The arches of his feet raised higher and higher with every step, until he was now landing on the balls of his feet, and then on his toes. Higher and faster his mind commanded. He touched only the tips of his toes to the ground, and now the barest sliver. He was flying down the stairs now, skipping every other. The risk that he would trip was tremendous, but his concentration was out of necessity raised to preternatural heights. He thought nothing of the possibility he would fall. Without a moment’s hesitation, he was into the courtyard and running towards the gate.

The thickness of the evening air made the wind shear with deafening volume about his racing body. Inside Alan’s head, however, there was a remarkable quiet. He could hear the noise

of tearing air, but it was as if his skull were a thickly pressurized hull which sound could not penetrate. And yet, he was bothered by sounds, not from the noise of the air, but rather the drumbeat of binging interjections in his head. “Stride longer,” “Breathe lighter,” “Before you get to the station, compose a sonnet of Shakespearian quality to woo Marie.”

He passed the gate and the streetlights pulsed at him jarringly. But like the rustling sound in his hair, the lights seemed to be the remembrance of annoyances past as opposed to present and pressing irritations. The plaza before him beckoned, luminously. He reached his swinging arms out towards it, making a grabbing motion with each one as they reached their greatest extension from his body. He found that if he ran with arm swinging as broadly as he could, in a full windmill motion, he could move faster. His feet now hardly touched the ground as he ran; he spent the greater part of his stride in the air. As he came upon the plaza he had an airy revelation, “I can probably pass off a spot-translation of a lesser known Shakespearian sonnet as my own.”

He ran into the plaza and onto the concourse of roads. Cars blared around him angrily, but the concerns of traffic were now at a distant remove from his consciousness’s present altitude. He looked to his right as he completed a semi-circle around the lion statue in the middle of the road. It was a talisman, duly appointed by a long deposed government, whose duty it was to watch over for all eternity the old Gare d’Enfer (lit. the Barrier from Hell). Alan followed the callous and indifferent gaze of the statue to its object. On the right there was the entrance to the catacombs and on the left the entrance to the Metro. Alan flew into the later headlong.

Upon entering the station Alan noticed the whirling, metallic buzzing in his ear. In no way did he lament its appearance, for he knew that he wouldn’t be bothered by it this time. He would fly through the station to Marie faster than the sound’s speed. When he found Marie, the necessity of the moment would inure him from any and all sonic pressures on his psyche. At the moment, the important thing for Alan was to get through the gate. Being as bereft of time as he was of ticket, Alan choose to vault his body over the turnstile, as E had said was often done in Paris.

Alan ran from the gate. Whether or not an outraged guard was yelling at him to come back, he had no idea. Once firmly inside the station, however, he was presented with a dilemma that forced him to stop himself mid-flight. There were three tunnels that he could take: towards the 4 to his left, towards the RER B to his right, or straight-ahead towards the 6. He had no idea which train Marie had taken, nor did he know which tunnel was the longest. Essentially each was a black box, any one of which might contain his prize Marie. But choosing to run down any particular tunnel and investigate if she were at the other end would cost him time. If he selected incorrectly, it was likely she would use that time to board her train.

To Alan, it seemed that before him was a completely arbitrary choice. There was no point in developing a strategy; he simply had to take a guess and do so as quickly as possible.

And yet, above the whirling grate of the station, despite the thumping beat of his heart in his neck and ears, he could not help but hear a condescending and hostile retort, *“Not strategizing is the way that games become arbitrary.”*

A sense of self-consciousness overwhelmed Alan. It seemed to him that there was a venerable personage watching over him, an invisible arbiter scrutinizing his actions. Perhaps he was delirious from over-exertion, but Alan suddenly noticed that a mime was standing to his right. The mime had foppish hair and the pallid, waxy skin of an old lemon. Alan nodded at him gravely. The mime smiled and showed Alan his outstretched hands. They were holding three model subway cars. He communicated to Alan without opening his lips,

“Would you like to try the Paris Variation?”

Alan felt himself, against his will, nodding “yes.” The man smiled broadly. He began to juggle the model trains, at first lazily, then with more determination. Suddenly Alan heard a familiar feminine voice from one of the trains.

“Save me, Alan! I’ll fuck you!”

It was obvious which train the voice had come from. Alan pointed at it but the mime only shook his head sadly. He juggled the trains faster and closer to his hands, until he reached a speed where Alan could no longer differentiate between hands and trains. It was like watching a fan’s blades turn. Finally, the mime stopped. He held out his hands for Alan to choose.

Alan still had no strategy for the game. The center one was the most natural choice, obviously, and as a result it was also the most risky one. The only remarkable feature Alan could identify in the left and right choice was that they weren’t the middle. That was either a liability or a boon for each, depending on how one appraised the value of the center. And yet, he had no real way of doing that. Three choices, which to pick? For whatever reason, he had an impulse to pick center. And yet it occurred to him that by doing so he would make himself akin to the player of Rock-Paper-Scissors who always selects rock.

“How do I win?” Alan asked the mime helplessly.

The mime shook his head and Alan heard the word *“Play.”* The man was right. Alan had to choose. He pointed towards the center train. The mime smiled broadly and gestured towards the corridor leading to the 6.

Alan shook his head and closed his eyes. He shouted angrily, running headlong down the center tunnel. As he ran he had a sinking feeling, a growing certainty that he had picked wrongly. There was no choice now but to run to the end. He ran ahead, down through the tunnel.

There were two staircases in the corridor, one leading to an uptown and the other to a downtown train. It didn't matter; if she was on either platform he would see her across the way. He ducked into the nearest corridor. When he reached the landing, he surveyed the platform. There was no Marie.

“GEVALDT!” Alan cursed at the top of his lungs. The four or five people waiting at the station shot startled looks in Alan's direction. For whatever reason, cursing had irked Alan even more. He shouted incoherently, indecipherably, as if speaking in tongues. He turned around and ran towards one of the other trains, the whole while blustering a series of French curses. And not just normal French curses, but curses that were really especially French: curses that had not been in fashion since the 18th century.

The fact that Alan was more focused on swearing in French than on figuring out which path to take soon took its expected toll. For the station at Place Denfert, like many of the bigger Metro stations in Paris, was an the Escher-like complex of stairs up leading to stairs up leading to corridors leading to more stairs down. In the end, if one played one's cards right, the manifold path would terminate in arrival at another train platform. If the airport is a surreal fantasy space concocted by the arbitrary union of corporate convenience and municipal tax mongering, then surely the Metro station is the banal and confusing fruit of ad-hoc civic necessity. After two minutes of failing to reach another platform, Alan realized he was completely loss.

This recognition dealt a fatal blow to Alan's hope of getting to Marie. The noise of the station, which at first had seemed like a whirl, was now a metallic roar. A blaring, screeching cacophony that made Alan feel as if his head were inside an airplane turbine. He noticed that once more an aura was creeping in upon the corner his vision. It seemed to him that all appearances before him were affected by a rolling, watery blackness. Except, it was so much darker than that: the darkness of the Atlantic Ocean at night was nothing compared with the darkness now consumming Alan. Alan recognized it as the kind of blackness he had only previously intuited when looking at the void-like surface at the center of his own eyes. It was, unlike the ocean, an infinite depth. It was this kind of blackness which now enveloped him. Meanwhile, the noise had become like a propeller blade hitting his scalp and cutting down to his heels. Alan staggered under its blow. He reached for the wall in order to support himself. He missed.

And so it was that Alan tumbled to the ground, so emotionally and psychically frustrated that he hardly noticed the pain of his fall. The darkness was irresistible; Alan had to release himself to it. Two thoughts occurred to him while losing consciousness. The first was that he had never wiped himself after going to the bathroom that afternoon. The second was that he had forgotten to take his wallet with him, meaning he was now completely without identification. Alan Stuart: an anonymous, unkempt person lying unconscious in an obscure corner of the

catacomb-like Paris Metro Station on the Rue D'Enfer.

Chapter 5

My education was dismal. I went to a series of schools for mentally disturbed teachers.

-Attributed to Woody Allen

In the back of a lecture hall at the Collège de France, a door opened. A portly young man dressed in a frog-button shirt hesitantly stuck his head inward. The morning light which entered the room's small, high windows was feeble and yellow. The young man returned his head to the other side of the door, checking that the classroom number was indeed correct. A second later, and the man entered the room.

The young man moved past row after row of oddly blue desks. In his left hand he held loosely the strap of a burlap backpack, while in his right he held a slim notebook. Lodged securely between the notebook's pages was a pamphlet not more than ten or fifteen sheets thick. Also folded in the notebook was a calligraphic pen. The man continued descending the rows deliberately, until he came to one in the middle of the room. He cut into this present row and settled himself in the middle seat. Gingerly, he placed the notebook on the desk and his backpack on the adjacent seat. Flipping the notebook open, the pamphlet's front cover now hovered directly in front of his oblong eyes.

The young man began to leaf through the pamphlet, finally settling on a page toward the end. Though ink sparsely covered the page, this young reader examined each blot seriously, as if with sufficient severity he could internalize their contents. A second person entered the room, but the young man paid him no attention. Instead, he maintained a dogged squint at the characters before him. A few minutes later and he shut the pamphlet carefully, took out his pen, and tapped it several times on the blank notebook before him. The page refracted a uniform paleness upon the man's round face, a relative brightness demarcating the page and face from the rest of the room. But for the fact that he was dressed in a traditional Chinese garb, the man could have belonged in the religious portraiture of the old.

The young man continued to stare at the page gravely. Several other people entered the room, dispersing themselves evenly across its space. It was as if each of them were operating under the force of a uniform repulsion, like electrons in a vacuum. The man frowned at his page and tapped his pen angrily. He looked toward the light. For a moment, it seemed as if he were in anticipation of a great revelation. The moment passed, however, and the man once more resumed looking at the page. There was now a slow and steady stream of people entering the room. Somehow, each person found a seat equidistant from all those who were already seated. The man sighed. He began to draw lightly, rendering with thought and emotion the very characters which had been typed on the pamphlet page he had just put away.

By now the room had become so crowded that some were beginning to stand in the aisles. Among these one might single out an intrepid young man, with black hair and a very mildly protuberant nose, who moved with determination towards the room's center. The row in which he decided to find his seat was completely occupied, except for the one seat in which the young calligrapher had deposited his sack. The young man approached the empty seat. Touching the calligrapher's shoulder, he said a one letter word: "E."

The calligrapher looked up from his page suddenly and, seeing who had touched him, scrambled to his feet.

"Aaron!"

The young man smirked tightly. Indeed, too tightly. It was almost a frown.

"It so late I was worried you not find room."

"No, no worries. I found it perfectly fine. Thanks for coming early to grab a seat."

Alan sat down. E took out of his burlap backpack a small covered basket, which he put on his own desk. From this basket he removed several items: a checkered red napkin, which he put on Alan's desk; an earthenware plate, which he placed on top of the napkin; a metal knife and fork, which he placed on top of the napkin, adjacent to the plate; and, finally, a croissant, which he placed on top of the dish.

As soon as E had finished setting the place, he nodded at Alan, who in turn nodded back appreciatively. Immediately, Alan took the knife and fork into his hands and began eating as quickly as possible. Actually, this was a very reasonable way to eat, given that the lecture was supposed to start quite soon.

When he was about half through with the pastry, Alan said, mouth still full of food, "E... E. Next time try to get the *nature*: n - a... n - a - t - u - r - e. The *au beurre* is too heavy."

Alan glanced at E as he was about to put one of the remaining few bites in his mouth. What he saw caught him off guard. He began coughing so hard that he had to put down his fork. Still coughing, he carefully took the napkin out from under the plate and wiped his mouth. When he had at last achieved a modicum of composure, he asked, "E, aren't you going to eat?"

E shook his head vigorously in the affirmative. With startling speed he removed from his bag two semi-spherical globs of an unusual leavened material. Each one was approximately twice the size of Alan's croissant. He tore into the first of these, consuming a full half of it in a single bite. In the center of the bun was a ball of over-cooked, fatty meat. E smacked his lips loudly as he ate.

"You were hungry then?" Alan asked.

E nodded heartily. He continued to eat, albeit at a more refined pace.

“But you insisted last night that you weren’t hungry,” Alan countered. E gulped mightily. He shook his head right and left slightly and took what remained of the bun to his mouth. He nibbled at it timorously.

“You know E,” Alan began, “When I said no dinner I just meant not to go out with Marie and me.”

With more than a hint of indignation, E replied, “You say no dinner even if you ask me to eat.”

Alan shook his head, annoyed. He didn’t look at E, who soon resumed eating. After a few moments, Alan shrugged his shoulders. He took out his notebook and pen and sat impatiently at his desk. Finally, he began to survey the room.

There are many types of people who come to lectures at Universities. If one attends a large enough lecture, one is bound to find representatives of all the types. The lecture in which Alan and E found themselves was no exception. Now a few years ago, Laurence Sterne, renowned author of a very strange book called *Tristram Shandy*, took it upon himself to provide a taxonomy of travelers, separating them into such categories as *Idle Travelers*, *Vain Travelers*, *Splenetic Travelers*, *Delinquent and Felonious Travelers*, etc. Not to be out-done by the great Post-Modern Romantic, or Romantic Post-Modernist, or whatever Sterne was, I would like to here and now present my own scientific taxonomization of lecture attendees — the species of hominid more formally known as *Homo Praelectus* (*lit.* Lectured Man).

Praelectus consists of three races. How can they be differentiated? The separating principle, as it turns out, is the extent to which their attendance at a given lecture relates to their more general occupations. Of course, a great number of lecture attendees do not have an occupation. Unsurprising then that this condition distinguishes the first race of *Praelectus*, which we may scientifically dub *Homo Praelectus Vacuus* (*lit.* Unoccupied, Lectured Man). One may further decompose this race into: the Homeless (*Vacuus Vagabundus*), the Elderly (*Vacuus Senilis*), and those whose vague political beliefs for some reason preclude employment (*Vacuus Ambiguus Politicus*). As a taxa, the “Vacui” are united by that most formidable of evolutionary forces, convenience. For them, going to lectures neatly resolves the twin problems of having little disposable income and much disposable time. Attendees of this type have no real interest in being at the lecture. In fact, many would quite rather be someplace else. Often, they will realize this fact during the lecture, at which point what they’ll do next is anyone’s guess. Falling asleep is by far their most popular choice. Talking out of turn about a topic totally disconnected from the proceedings is also a frequent selection. Getting up and leaving the lecture is, although reasonable, a decidedly rare occurrence.

The next two species of *Praelectus* are comprised of those who have occupations or, if not necessarily occupations in a *strict* sense, genuine interests or pursuits. These “Occupied” persons will attend a lecture because of its connection to their more general life-project. Amongst these, one must distinguish by the intimacy of this connection. Once one does so, it becomes perfectly clear that the seemingly irreducible “Occupied” class cleaves apart into those who are “Presently Profitably Occupied” (*Praelectus Competentis*) and those who are “Otherwise Profitably Occupied” (*Praelectus Incompetentis*). Someone who stumbles into a classroom because he or she is lost, for example, has very legitimate reasons for being in the class. However, those reasons have nothing to do with what the individual is doing in a general sense. Hence, they are *Incompetentis*. On the other hand, a building maintenance person called in to fix the light above the podium is acting in accordance with his or her current general occupation. Hence, he or she is perfectly *Competentis*. The most common varieties of *Incompetentis* are “Lay Experts” (*Curiosus Particularis*), “Liberal Thinkers” (*Curiosus Vulgaris*), Prospective Students (*Scholasticus Futurus*), and individuals who have become either lost or confused and wandered into the classroom by mistake (*Perplexus*). Meanwhile, the largest class of attendees in any lecture is almost always the *Competentis*, the most notable subtypes of which are Professors (*Doctor*), Current Students (*Scholasticus*), Building Staff (*Ianitor*), people with specific political agendas that for some reason necessitate going to a particular lecture (*Politicus Particularis*), and book narrators (*Fabulator*).

Although Alan did not have the benefit of the extremely recent advances in taxonomical science just described, he nonetheless had enough sense to be appalled by the assortment of attendees gathered around him. A group of seven or eight *Vacuus Senilis* had occupied the front row of the lecture hall and were now talking boisterously — or, at least, loudly — amongst themselves. *Senilis* have a tendency to clump in the front row of lectures because deterioration in their grey matter makes them generally unafraid of embarrassment, because of their weak hearing, and, most importantly, because they know that other *Senilis* will choose to sit near the front. The man to Alan’s left — late thirties, no notebook on his desk, restlessly scanning the room and tapping his foot — was clearly a *Curiosus* of some sort. Meanwhile in front of Alan, there was a man standing resolutely in front of his chair, seemingly without the slightest inclination to sit. He was short, thin, and wearing a faux-camouflage tunic. On his head he had a large black beret and on his face aviator sunglasses. *Politicus*, definitely; *Ambiguus*, quite probably. With approval, Alan noted that there were no *Vagabundi* in the room, which made sense given that this type has a tendency to avoid crowds. Alan, now finished scanning the room, looked in E’s direction. Alan noticed the writing E had done in his notebook.

“What’s that?” Alan asked curiously.

E smiled politely, “Chinese.”

Alan nodded, “Yes, but I mean, you wrote it?”

Now E smiled more broadly, his face glowing pink, “Oh, no. Well, yes. I write it using my own pen, but the words are Li Bai.”

Alan nodded as if he understood, although he had never heard of the man before. Alan looked as if he might have asked further questions, for the first time displaying genuine interest in E’s existence. Alas, it was not to be, for presently a door at the front of the classroom opened. A hush fell over the room as a very small man entered. Standing no more than five feet, weighing no more than a hundred pounds, the gentleman had swarthy skin, jet black hair, and a terrible looking scar. The scar descended from the temple above his left eye, down over his eye, all the way to the flap of cheek over his left incisor. The scar’s coloration just below the eyebrow was a sickening admixture of purple, red, and aqua blue. He was very expensively dressed in a slim white Italian suit. The suit was not very tasteful, however. It was intermittently studded with rhinestones.

This spritely, pugnacious man faced the audience. He glanced left for a few seconds, then glanced right. Finally, he proceeded inward, assuming a position at the left side of a large flat desk in the center of the room, on top of which was placed a lectern. As the man moved toward this position, a second man emerged from the door. This one was at least seven feet tall and probably weighed upwards of 300 pounds. If one believed the indication given by his tight-fitting, grey t-shirt, almost all of that weight was composed of muscle. His skin glowed like waxed marble. The top of his meticulously shaved head was especially shiny. This second man went over to the right side of the podium. He motioned for whoever was on the other side of the door to enter.

Almost immediately everyone in the room began to applaud, recognizing the entrant as the very reason they had come today. He was of normal stature, wearing a cheap felt cap and an oversized brown corduroy blazer with patches on its arms. With eyes directed forward and toward the floor, he put his hand up and waved slightly. It was unclear whether he was acknowledging or dismissing the praise. The enormous man smiled leerily at the audience, while the small one continued to grimace distastefully. The audience continued to clap thunderously as the lecturer took off his hat and brushed his hand through his thin, silvery hair. He stuck his hand up again and the room slowly quieted.

“Merci,” the man said in such a way as to convey neither acceptance or disapproval, “Merci.” The room was at last fully quiet and the lecturer took a few seconds to compose himself. He glanced out the window at the morning light now streaming in, and then returned his gaze to the center of the room. Finally, he spoke, enunciating his words briskly, crisply, and with studious precision.

“Greetings to you all. Many of you already know who I am, but I will not assume so much. My French name is Vladimir Nokitoff, while my English appellation is Vladimir Nokitov. Both of these are gross parodies of my autonym’s proper elocution, which as a native speaker of English, slights me all too acutely. If you pronounce my cognomen as if it were idiomatically synonymic with ‘Stop-It,’ you’ll forgive me if I neither speak nor look at you again, but instead kindly ask my dear friend Misha here to defenestrate you.” Presently Nokitoff pointed at the larger of the two men standing before him. He let the statement settle for a moment, before continuing to his point, *“The emphasis in my name, as any speaker of a musical language, either Russian or Italian, will tell you, must be placed on the middle vowel. It is a strong “ee.” The last letter is a short “o,” which makes it properly pronounced “ah.” The first “o,” I admit, is regrettably misleading. It is an accident of 16th century orthography, when one of the more abominably addleheaded Hapsburgs perpetrated a gross violence against orthoepy by misspelling my primogenitor’s name, forever scuppering its Latinate spelling. Its sound is an “eh,” not an “ah,” as foreign spellings suggest. The name means “Of Nikita,” which itself is from Νικήτας (Nikitas), a Greek word best translated as “winner.” It is a paronym of Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, and namesake of half the world’s sneakers. And yet in this room, none shall dare trod on it by calling me “Knock It Off!”*

Few in the classroom could have felt the impact of the words “Knock It Off” as strongly as Alan did. For although there were quite a few attendees who understood the meaning of the phrase, they hardly could have registered the special hostility Nokitoff’s pronunciation carried. *“Knawk! Ihd! Awff!”* he had said, as if he were a cabbie from the Bronx shouting at a homeless man washing his windshield.

“I am not much in the habit of speaking about literature. I have managed to avoid whoring myself out to every third rate English department in the United States by finding gainful employment in Geneva as a Heterocerist, i.e. a moth expert. I don’t intend to start abasing myself now by talking to those who deem themselves ‘experts’ because they have perused a few... what’s the word?... centuries of books. This class will be given at the highest level; anyone who is not up to that mark is now kindly asked to leave, so that someone with a more longstanding and deeper commitment to the field may follow this course more easily. For example, by being given a proper seat and room for their things.”

No one in the room made to leave, although the man to Alan’s left appeared to fidget more rapidly. The man who had been standing in front of Alan quite conspicuously, now decided to sit.

Alan heard Nokitoff mutter to himself something that sounded roughly like, “Gee-zus Krice.” A rapid burst of what sounded like Russian came out his mouth. The tall bald man chuckled heartily, casting an approving glance back at Nokitoff. The mean-looking, impish fellow to the

left merely smirked. Nokitoff smacked his lips. He looked hostilely at the audience for a few moments and then slammed the desk with his fist. He shouted at them angrily. Indeed, so angrily that even Alan had a hard time understanding his English.

“Dihd ewe hea’ wahd I sayd? We ah tawkin’ about litriture heah! If ewe dohn no shiht about it, scram! Beet iht! Geht the fuhk owd of my class ruhm, so suhm-one else cayn half ah fuhkin’ playce to sit!”

No one moved. Nokitoff’s face was red as a beat. A vein by his upper left temple seemed to throb painfully. He scanned the lecture hall, his eyes casting a wide net which seemed implicate everyone. After twenty seconds more his eyes settled on the front row. He spoke now to them in particular.

“Mesdames et Monsieur, *if you do not speak English fluently I will kindly ask you to leave. Thank you.*”

The seven or eight elderly people in the front seemed to look at each other for a moment, then looked back at Nokitoff. Finally, a portly bald man of indifferent expression shrugged his shoulders and motioned to his neighbors that he would leave. Soon, the entire middle section of the row had reached a collective decision and began packing up their things. As they noisily trundled out of the room, a few people sitting toward the back decided to join them.

The exodus of the *Senilis* was not enough to placate Nokitoff, however. He muttered angrily to the large man — Misha — who turned around and seemed to tell him something encouraging. The bodyguard stuck out his enormous paw for Nokitoff to grab. Smirking, Nokitoff threw out his hand and the two squeezed their fists together. “Uurah!” the larger Russian said, pretending to bend his arm backwards, as if losing a game of arm wrestling. Nokitoff was evidently pleased by this antic.

Once more the lecturer faced the class and began to speak. He spoke more calmly now, and Alan seemed to have less trouble understanding his words.

“So, the French masses have proved less willing to surrender than I would have thought. Very well.... Allow me to explain in the hope that I may get through your thick fucking skulls. It’s a not unpopular view that each book of fiction is its own universe. Free-standing. Independent.” Alan took out his notebook and began writing — one of the few in the room to do so.

“But that view, popular though it may be, is totally and utterly wrong. You think you can understand physics by looking at one measly atom? No. No way. If you do that, you are going to understand absolutely nada. Squat. Zipp-oh. Next thing you’ll tell me that you can climb the exterior of a sky-skrapper without any suction cups. Literature is immense, gargantuan,” here

Nokitoff seemed to once more descend into incomprehensibility, “I mean ihts fuhkin’ *uge!*” He stuck his arms out wide and shook his head looking back and forth at each of his fingertips.

“Most importantly, literature is a *system*. Each of its parts can only be understood through reference to the whole, and vice-ah versa. In order to understand literature, it’s clear to me that you need to have a view of the field in general. If all you’ve seen before is fucking trees, no way in hell am I going to be able to tell you anything interesting about a god damn forest. And if I can’t tell you about a fucking forest, why the hell are you wasting my precious time sitting here in the foyst place?”

People now began to stand up at the edges of the room and leave. Nokitoff noticed this and stopped. “Brah-vo! Brah-vo,” he shouted at them, clapping firmly. He resumed speaking again.

“More over, it’s clear to me, that there is no way you’re going to have any fuckin’ *clue* about literary fiction unless you’re able to understand English, French, Russian, Latin, and Greek. German, Spanish, and Italian might be useful in this regard, but they are not necessary, nor even especially relevant. So let me tell you, my first instinct in walking through the door — seeing all these people who obviously don’t know English well enough to tell the difference between a fucking spade and a god damn shovel — my foyst instinct is to give a linguistic aptitude test which would include material from the core five literary languages.”

Alan and E gulped uncomfortably. Neither of them knew Russian, Latin, or Greek. They weren’t the only ones looking uncomfortable at Nokitoff’s words.

“Unfortunately,” Nokitoff continued, “I have been informed that such draconian measures contravene the spirit of this venerable institution, which has been designed to serve at the pleasure of, pardon my French, “Jean Q. Publique.” Still, I have been informed that I can, that I may, and even that I might, conduct lectures in English. Moreover, I can throw anyone in the class who I have reason to believe doesn’t speak English out on their fuckin’ ass. Now would I do that? No, of course not. But Misha, my Brobdingnagian associate over here, coytainly — which is to say certainly — will. And if you come back, you won’t have the luxury of a second ass throwing, but rather, you’ll just have a nice little talk with Grisha here. And by “talk,” I don’t mean talk. If you’re not sure your English is quite up to snuff, I’d kindly ask you for the third fucking time to leave.”

Now there was a great rush of people moving toward the door. Alan and E remained firmly in place, although E seemed distraught. The man to Alan’s left did not leave either, but he was now sweating profusely. E looked at Alan and asked, with the intonation of a child, “Aaron, what if I not speak English good enough?”

Alan looked at E cautiously for a few seconds. Finally he tilted his head back and forth and said, evenly, “Don’t worry E. I’ll cover for you.”

“Aaron?” E asked, his concern not entirely placated.

“Yes E,” Alan replied.

“Sometime I have trouble to understand what he say.”

Alan looked at E fixedly for a few more moments. He pursed his lips, before finally saying, “Don’t worry E, it’s just because he’s from New York. It’s normal to have problems understanding New Yorkers.”

E nodded and directed him back to the front. Nokitoff seemed pleased with how the room was thinning out. Indeed, he had a right to be. By purging the useless races of *Praelectus*, he had reduced over-crowding and dramatically increased the living-space for the remaining, desirable class of *Competentis*. Although it is hardly P.C. to admit it, I imagine that everyone has at times wished for a lecturer with the ruthlessness to conduct a good purge of the *Vacui* and *Incompetentis*. Still, Nokitoff was intent on winnowing the ranks further, making sure that no secret *Incompetentis* had the audacity to try and remain in the class incognito.

“Though we have already spent far too long on Mickey-Mouse games with attendance, and the class now looks a lot better than before, I want to be as sure as I can be that the people I’m talking to actually know something about literature. So, I’m going to go around the room and ask each of you a question. Give me a line of poetry, *English* poetry, and do not repeat the line of anyone before you. If you misquote the line, misattribute the poet,” here Nokitoff pointed at the titan to his left. “I’ll give you a minute.”

Many of the remaining people began to write busily in their notebook, while more than a few immediately stood up and left. Alan, however, realized that he had to think carefully about his choice, for this was a major opportunity to separate himself from the field and curry Nokitoff’s favor. Unfortunately, however, Alan only knew some of Nokitoff’s opinions about literature, and they mostly had to do with fiction. Alan knew that Nokitoff was a fan of Dickens but thought Doestoevsky a fool, for example. He also loved Joyce but hated Faulkner. Alan didn’t know what Nokitoff had to say about poetry. Of course there was Poe; everyone loved Poe. But what if Nokitoff hated Poe because everyone else loved him? In any event, Poe was no way to get ahead, since everyone knew about Poe. The same might be said for Whitman, Frost, T.S. Eliot, and Shakespeare. Perhaps Shakespeare was on the right track, however. Since Nokitoff would recognize Alan as an American by his accent, if Alan selected a line from British poetry it would perhaps reflect a more universal mastery of literature written in English. He could pick something old, like Ben Johnson. Or maybe Alan should pick something closer to his own, personal tastes; something that revealed to Nokitoff who he was. In any event, Alan decided, he had best come up with a safe line which he could fall back on in the case that he could think of nothing better. Alan jotted down, “Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore.’”

Alan continued mulling over the problem of what name he should drop, when he realized that E was trying to get his attention. Alan met E's gaze and he heard E tap a pen on his own notebook page. Alan looked at it, looked back at E, looked back at the paper, and then, gravely nodded.

Nokitoff had begun the process of going around the room asking people for their lines. Currently he was on a thin young Frenchman, with a melancholy disposition, droopy eyes, and a nervous habit of blinking too much. The Frenchman stammered mightily.

"Hey buddy! I haven't got all fuckin' day!" Nokitoff interjected.

"To, to, to," the young man stammered, before coughing loudly. He began again, "To be... or" he paused, squinted tightly, hyper-ventalated, and said, finally, "or not to be. - Shakespeare."

"Conveyed with genuine uncoyainty, brilliant," Nokitoff said, continuing down the line. One fellow asked if it was too late to leave. Nokitoff enthusiastically replied that it was not. A full quarter of the remaining people shot up out of their seats and left. Now Nokitoff came to a sloppily-dressed man with a tie-died neck tie and a bandana.

"No beatnik poetry," Nokitoff started.

"My line wasn't written by a beatnik," the man replied, by accent revealing himself to be an Australian. Nokitoff nodded and motioned for him to start.

"Imagine all the people/Living life in peace — Lennon"

The two bodyguards, who had seemed utterly bored by the examination thus far, suddenly snapped their attention toward the disheveled gentleman.

"Who?" Nokitoff demanded.

"Lennon," the man replied.

"I was not aware that the distinguished founder of the Soviet Socialist Republic wrote English poetry," Nokitoff said sarcastically.

"No, *John* Lennon," the man clarified, "The Beatle."

Nokitoff murmured something to the larger Russian. The behemoth had seemed to anticipate the order, already encroaching on the man with the tie-died neckware. The latter tried to grab his bag quickly and head out the door, but there was no use. By the time the disheveled man had grabbed his things, the Russian was already at the end of his row. The Beatles fan tried hopping up the rows toward the back. Unfortunately, however, the second he stepped up onto the armrest of the row behind him, the Russian grabbed his thigh. The Russian lifted his arm upward; the man hung from the Russian's outstretched limb like a broken branch from a tree. Everyone in

the room seemed to hold their breath, wondering what unspeakable violence was about to be perpetrated before their very eyes. It turned out, however, that the juggernaut was quite gentle. He easily maneuvered the man onto his shoulder and held him securely by the lower back. For his part, the man didn't resist, but merely let himself be carried out the door. A few seconds later, the large man returned, walking down the stairs to his master's side.

Now came a third great exodus of people, included in which was the nervous man to Alan's left. Nokitoff waited for the room to clear before continuing. The few people who remained must have had a great certainty that the class was meant for them. They said their lines quickly, all of which met with Nokitoff's approval. A notable exception to this pattern was the man in camouflage tunic and sunglasses sitting in front of Alan and E. When asked to deliver a line of poetry, he snapped to his feet. Like a gladiator saluting Caesar, he raised a clenched fist to Nokitoff. He declared, "Workers of the world unite! - Marx."

Nokitoff covered his face and motioned limply for his assistant Misha to remove the man.

"*Hey! Hey! Don't send him after me!*" the man demanded in French, "*I said it correctly!*"

Nokitoff moved his hands from covering his face to resting on his cheeks, which somehow made him look as if he belonged to the portraiture of Edvard Munch.

"*It isn't poetry,*" Nokitoff replied.

"*To me, it is,*" the Marxist shouted back.

"*Fortunately, that is irrelevant,*" Nokitoff replied.

The Marxist's strategy for evading capture was radically different from that of the previous man. Instead of running from Nokitoff's behemoth, the Marxist tried to reason with him. He informed the approaching colossus that he was under "a false consciousness" caused by "the effect of wage slavery." Furthermore, the behemoth's only hope for "radical freedom" was "to expropriate the expropriator" by "joining in solidarity with the revolutionary elite," which apparently meant the Marxist himself. The Russian, however, seemed to take great offense to these attempts at mediating their impending conflict. He handled the Marxist very roughly, dislodging the sunglasses from his face, stomping them, and lightly tearing the man's shirt. A few seconds after he had left the room, the Russian returned wearing the Marxist's beret. Nokitoff seemed to think quite highly of the new hat, congratulating his assistant on his new acquisition.

Finally, it came time for E to speak. Gulping mightily, complexion once more taking on sunset tones, E pronounced, "*Lomeo, Lomeo, Whele Fole Alt Thou Lomeo. - Shakespeale*" Alan had the terrible urge to laugh at E, but one look at Nokitoff's face was enough to suppress it. The lecturer's right eye was open so wide that it seemed to be coming out of its socket. Meanwhile,

his left was narrowed drastically, as if he were squinting. He fiercely scrutinized E like this for a full thirty seconds. A few people coughed uncomfortably, while E visibly squirmed in his chair.

Finally, Nokitoff said, “Well, the English out of your mouth was better than the Russian that came from Pasternak’s pen.” He made a motion with his hands indicating he wanted the next in line. E breathed an enormous sigh of relief. A few seconds later he was sitting up straight in his chair, chest puckered out, a proud and satisfied look on his face. It seemed that he had taken the comparison to Pasternak as a great compliment.

Meanwhile Alan’s head was spinning with possible lines and poets to quote. No one had mentioned Poe thus far, and it seemed to Alan that “The Raven” was an elephant in the room which needed mentioning. Yet to quote “The Raven” would be to take the road more easily traveled, thus making no difference between himself and other students. It would be going out with a whimper, and not a bang - making the past ten minutes of brain-racking a sound and fury coming to absolutely no significance. Moreover, Nokitoff was now looking at him expectantly. Alan felt as if something cold and deathly were wrapping its hands around his larynx. He had to speak. Gathering himself, he held himself upright, cleared his throat, and said, assuredly,

“Truth is strange; stranger than fiction.”

Nokitoff puckered out his lower lip and nodded thoughtfully.

“Byron,” Nokitoff said. His eyes turned to the light of the ceiling for a moment and he muttered to himself, “A true poet.” After a few seconds of looking he turned back to Alan and asked, “You’re American?”

“Yes,” Alan said.

“*But you speak French?*” Nokitoff asked.

A thrill ran through Alan’s chest. Of course it was not long ago that he had, at quite some length, deliberated about how to answer such questions. At this juncture, Alan could hardly remember what the result of his deliberation had been. He had a vague recollection of comparing himself to Marie Antoinette, though what end that comparison could serve Alan now he had no idea. Deciding that it was less important to be clever than decisive, Alan replied, “*My mother is French. I have been reading in the language my whole life.*”

Nokitoff nodded approvingly, directed his head to the floor, and slowly paced to his left. After a few seconds of aimless pacing, Nokitoff suddenly shot his head in Alan’s direction and pointedly asked, “*And who is your favorite Frenchman to read?*”

Without hesitation, Alan replied, "*Chateaubriand*."

Nokitoff nodded approvingly and said, "*A magnificent liar and a brilliant writer. Chateaubriand's triumph was in discovering a basic truth: literature is not, in fact, concerned with saying something true about the world, but rather it is concerned with lying about the world in order to say something about oneself.*"

Alan was not sure what to say. On the one hand, it hardly seemed to be a correct summary of Chateaubriand's artistic project. It sounded, frankly, like Nokitoff was calling Chateaubriand a consummate liar and narcissist. On the other hand, Nokitoff already seemed to be moving on to the quiz the next person and it would hardly be appropriate for Alan to stop Nokitoff and browbeat him about his interpretation of Chateaubriand. Soon the moment for action had passed and Alan was resigned to the idea of bringing up the topic privately with Nokitoff at the end of class.

A few tedious minutes of quoting poetry elapsed and already attendees of the lecture were looking at their watches, realizing that they were approaching the end of their allotted time. Nokitoff himself looked bored with the procedure; the only quote he had found remarkable enough to comment upon was the one Alan had provided. When the last attendee passed Nokitoff's little test, Nokitoff checked his watch and motioned to the shorter of his assistants. The man reached inside his suit and produced a thick stack of papers. More than a few must have thought it remarkable that the man's jacket was so well-furnished with storage space.

"Well, it took all goddam day but we cleared out the trash. So, here's what is going to happen. My assistant Grisha is going to give you a syllabus which has a list of background reading for the course as well as the books you should reread before each lecture. Note that above the first lecture there is a book title in bold. You may ignore this piece of information if you are auditing the class for no credit. If you are a student enrolled in the course, I would like you to write a 5-10 page paper for our next session about a topic of your choosing relating to the book whose title has been bolded. I suggest you write on something important."

Nokitoff's smaller assistant moved quickly through the rows, which were now quite easy to navigate. After passing one of the syllabi to E, Alan opened the one he had kept for himself. The first two pages were double-sided, three-columned, and had quarter inch margins. The text that was written on the pages had size eight font on the first three sides. On the last side, the font was size six. This dense block of text consisted entirely of reading students were expected to have done before enrolling in the class.

Alan gulped mightily: not only were there quite a few books he had never read by writers

working in English and French, there was an entire swath of books whose titles had been written in untranslated Cyrillic. Alan himself had no concept of Russian literature. He had heard Tolstoy was important. Alan did not feel overwhelmed by this lack of expertise, however. Instead, the possibility and, indeed, the likelihood that he was grossly underprepared for the course only served to firm his sense of resolve. After all, Alan reasoned, the important thing was not having a wide-ranging knowledge of literature, but rather having a good intuition for literature. Alan was certain he had acquired this intuition through his connection with Chateaubriand. What gave him some concern was not that he might lack sufficient understanding of literature, but rather that he might get somehow tripped up in discussion and reveal that he was posing as knowing more than he did. And indeed, there was quite a long list of books to read, many of which he knew next to nothing about. At the same time, it was obvious to Alan that there was no actual need to read the whole list of books and form idiosyncratic opinions about each of them. Indeed, such idiosyncratic opinions could prove disastrous if one misread, as was likely in reading books from a foreign literary culture or unknown genre. The prudent thing to do was simply to know what other influential readers had said, so as to plausibly fake that one had actually read things in the first place. To do that, he would need books *about* literature, especially Russian literature, which were only likely to be found in libraries. Suddenly, Alan realized that there were no doubt several other people in the class thinking along the same lines as he was. They would be racing towards the library immediately after class. Since depriving potential competitors important resources was almost the same as gaining resources for oneself, Alan needed to make sure he was the depriver and not the deprived.

“E,” Alan whispered quietly, “I want you to go right away and, as quick as you can, to the library. I want you to check out for me as many of the books on this list as possible. Also, I want you to ask the librarian for the most prominent overviews of Russian literature that are available in translation in either French or English. I will go to the bookstore and do the same.”

Alan’s assistant nodded and quickly packed up his things; he was out of the room within the minute. Meanwhile Nokitoff was watching the last of the syllabi being handed out. He noticed E stand up, but the event did not seem to inspire in him great emotions. When all the syllabi were distributed, and the smaller of Nokitoff’s assistants returning to the front of the class, Nokitoff remarked that the class was finished for the day and that the seminar would continue next week. A mass of hands immediately shot up from members of the class, but Nokitoff ignored them. Instead he put his hat on his head and folded away the piece of paper on the lectern from which he had been reading. When it became clear that Nokitoff would not field any questions, a few members of the class jumped to their feet and began to approach him, in the

hopes that they could personally ask him their questions. By the time the first of these was down the stairs, Nokitoff had already packed his things and was moving toward the side entrance from which he had first emerged. His two assistants stood between their boss and the swiftly approaching horde of lecture attendees. For his part, Alan had identified this moment as an inappropriate time to ask a question; he would appear less opportunistic if he asked a question that was actually relevant to something Nokitoff had said. He packed up his things, watching as a few more aggressive students tried to move past the bodyguards. The guards, however, were not to be surmounted. The larger of the two retreated into a football player-like crouch, throwing his arms wide. The majority of the would-be questioners decided that the larger assistant constituted an insurmountable blockage. Instead, they tried to bypass the smaller of the two guards. In response to the potentially overwhelming bum-rush, the Lilliputian assistant had taken to unpredictably hopping back and forth across the large swath of space around him. The strategy proved effective. The great number of would-be questioners were forced to back off, fearing that at any moment he would jump into their body and perpetuate some horrible act of violence against their person. The stand-off between guards and questioners lasted only twenty or thirty seconds, however, as Nokitoff was soon out the door, with the guards not long behind him. Within a few minutes Alan himself left the room.

Chapter 6

*With a jar of wine I sit by the flowering trees.
I drink alone, and where are my friends?
Ah, the moon above looks down on me;
I call and lift my cup to his brightness.
And see, there goes my shadow before me.
Ho! We're a party of three, I say,—
Though the poor moon can't drink,
And my shadow but dances around me,
We're all friends to-night,
The drinker, the moon and the shadow.
Let our revelry befit the spring time!*

-From "Three With the Moon and His Shadow," Li Bai

Alan went directly from the lecture to the nearby Place St. Michel, an area well known for its large number of book stores. He spent a good while looking through the largest of these, Gibert Joseph, taking away a good swath of books potentially important for the course. Unfortunately, he was not able to find the book about which Nokitoff had assigned a paper. He tried several other nearby bookstores without luck, before a clerk suggested he try a Russian-owned book store in the neighborhood Montparnasse.

South and West of Paris's center, Montparnasse is a neighborhood that was once well-known for its expatriate artists. Hemingway once lived there, for example, and was known for shooting pigeons in the park, which he would take home to cook. A more typical resident was Chagall; typical in the sense that Russian Jewish émigrés dominated the neighborhood in the early part of the 20th century. In the 1970s, much of the historic neighborhood was cleared away, in order to make room for a massive skyscraper: the Tour Montparnasse. The tower fundamentally changed the texture of the community. It was a great disfigurement to the Paris skyline from any vantage, but in Montparnasse it was especially heinous: an obelisk which one could not help but notice everywhere one looked. The more interesting residents left. As a Paris locale, it became generic. Still, a few of the old residents remained.

The shop which Alan found was old, small, and dusty. It was the kind of bookshop which has too many books to allow one to peruse comfortably. Which is to say, it was a shop that had so many books it couldn't sell any at all. An old fat man, with a frog-like face and equal demeanor, sat at the front of the room, reading a book about chess in the weak light emanating from the yellow window. When Alan entered, the man appraised him leerily. Perhaps he was

entertaining the notion that Alan would breathe new life into his business. Alan smiled back at the man. This, it turned out, was a terrible move for getting customer service. For it is the case that real Russians do not smile much, if ever. They consider signs of happiness to be an invitation for bad luck. By smiling, Alan had picked himself out as a foreigner. The man went back to his book about chess.

Alan tried to wander through the store, but he found that he could hardly move without coming dangerously close to knocking down the large stacks of books scattered across the floor. Alan wondered how the place stayed in business. He noticed that there was a thick wad of money next to a large stack of Russian newspapers. “He must be coasting on the fact that he’s the only source for Russian language news in the area,” Alan silently hypothesized.

With no better options apparent, Alan went back to the counter and asked the man for help. The bookseller did not look up from his chess book. Alan cleared his throat. The man still didn’t look up. Finally, Alan decided to start speaking.

“Excuse me, I am looking for a book.”

“I not have your book,” the man immediately answered.

“I haven’t even told you what book I’m looking for,” replied Alan, annoyed.

The man looked up from his book. He was extremely jowly and looked like he had tears in his eyes. He also had a large pimple growing out the side of his nose. A flock of strange sounds flew from his mouth. Alan shook his head uncertainly.

“See, I tell you already. I not have your book.”

Alan felt that the man was very rude. But for the fact that he needed the book immediately, Alan would have left. Instead, he tried once more to get customer service from the bookseller. *“I am looking for a Russian book,”* Alan said, *“My professor assigned it.”*

“Professor? What kind of professor?” The man questioned loudly. His tone jarred Alan, as did the fact that the man was leaning so far forward in his chair.

“Vladimir Nokitoff,” Alan replied. The man made a strange guttural sound indicating that he did not understand. Alan tried once more, to no end.

“Vladimir Nokitoff! You must know! Norbert Norbert: the guy who likes dead people a little too much?”

Suddenly the man started laughing and shook his head. He pointed at Alan and then slapped his own head with the bottom of his palm. *“He is called Neh-keet-ohv,”* the man

emphasized every syllable, *“But he is not your professor. Your professor is liar; Neh-keet-ohv never leave Shveitzaree.”*

Alan was once more prepared to leave. Not only was the man wasting his time and making him feel like a fool, he was also insinuating upon no information a massive conspiracy at the most prestigious institution of learning in France. Alan replied tightly,

“Well whoever he is, he has assigned me this book,” Alan took out the syllabus and pointed to the book in question. The man snorted, *“This is old book. No one read this book now. Two hundred years ago few people read it. I advise you not read this book.”*

With that the man turned back to reading about chess. Alan, feeling defeated, started to leave in a huff. He moved back towards the door, rudely knocking over a few book stacks as he passed. He opened the door.

“If you want I have,” the man said, not even looking up.

Alan stopped, shot a glance back at the bookseller.

“In French?” Alan asked.

The man laughed, *“No, in Russian. This book not exist in French. Book barely exist in Russian.”*

Alan looked at the man skeptically. How could Nokitoff assign an essay about such a rare book that had no translation? Thinking back on the lecture, however, Alan recalled Nokitoff lamenting the fact that the Collège de France had disallowed him from requiring that his students know Russian. By assigning an essay on a book that was difficult to find, and ultimately untranslated, he would strongly incentivize many students to drop his class and switch to another subject. It was a second test: a test of whether one was clever enough to know Russian or wily enough to figure out how to write an intelligent essay response without having read the book.

Alan bought the book from the frog-like shopkeeper, as well as a primer on Russian grammar for French speakers, a Russian-French dictionary, and a Russian-Russian dictionary as well. For some reason, the man had also insisted Alan take with his purchase the day’s newspaper and a mealy looking apple. Alan rode the train back to his dormitory, avoiding the stop at Denfert-Rouchereau even though it meant an extra eight minute walk. When he returned home, he found that E was waiting for him with a large bag of books. Alan surveyed these approvingly; E had managed to track down the entire backlist and a few comprehensive-looking overviews of Russian literature. Alan decided to trust the young man with an even more urgent task.

“E, there is a problem. It seems that the book Nokitoff has assigned is not translated in French; it only exists in Russian. I would like you to go back to the library and find out if there really are no French or English language translations of the book. Even a Spanish or Italian version would work in a pinch.”

E left the apartment once more. Alan began to read through the overviews of Russian literature. Unfortunately, he found nothing particularly relevant to his essay. He did notice, however, something interesting about the books he was reading: they came from two different libraries, the Collège de France’s own and the main branch of the national library of France, which was situated several miles away from campus. How had E managed to find the books in the short time that they had been apart? Alan began to appreciate the resourcefulness of his assistant.

With no particularly relevant information at hand, and nothing pressing to do, Alan spent the next several hours reading about Russian literature. He had trouble focusing on the books, however, for his thoughts invariably returned to Marie. He had not talked to her since their date, mainly because he had no idea how to act with respect to her. There were two obvious strategies. The first was to play aggressively, to tell her of his undying affection, and to insist that he would not stand to see her with someone she did not love. Then, she would have to answer for the injustice implied by the fact that he occupied so much of time by pining for her, while she kowtowed to the happiness of another man. This was the strategy he had, thanks to the prodding of his assistant, hastily decided to pursue after his date with Marie. Since he had not managed to catch up with his love, however, he had a chance now to reevaluate his options. To wit, the second strategy was more subtle. It was to pretend that he had accepted her rebuff lightly, that he no longer had any real interest in her, but to quietly push his agenda nonetheless. In the guise of friendship, he could sow doubts in her head about the necessity of her being with François; identify the major differences between François and himself; and finally convince her that the former’s qualities were unappealing, while his were extremely attractive. Then, he would only have to wait for her to come to her own conclusion that he was an unmissable chance. The only drawback of this approach was that it would take a long time, and might, in the end, not even work.

Alan was not able to resolve this dilemma, so decided to switch to another compendium of Russian literature. This book failed to keep his attention, however. Nor did it lead him to particular insights into his own personal problem. Alan decided he would have to delay his strategic decision until François’ party a few days in the future. Some time later, while Alan was leafing through a third book on the same subject, and also examining the fabric of his couch absent-mindedly, E returned to the apartment. He looked distraught. Alan was happy that E had

returned. Perhaps his assistant would break up the tedium and distract him from his anxious thoughts. He motioned for the young man to have a seat next to him. E remained nervous.

“Aaron?” E asked.

“Yes E.” Alan replied.

E seemed as if he was gathering his strength in order to say something difficult. Alan decided to simply expose what the assistant was hiding.

“You didn’t find anything did you?” Alan asked.

E blushed deeply and bowed his head. Alan patted his assistant’s shoulder.

“It’s alright E, I wasn’t expecting you to find it. If it doesn’t exist, it doesn’t exist. I’m sure you did the best that could be done.”

It seemed that E, shaking his head and back forth, did not agree. Clearly, Alan’s underling was in serious need of encouragement.

“You’ve done a good job today, E!” Alan said, shaking the assistant’s shoulder harder and, in a somewhat awkward gesture, rustling the hair on his head. E looked up at Alan sheepishly. Alan decided that his assistant needed to succeed at a task in order to feel better about himself.

“Listen, if you want to do something to help, why don’t you get dinner together and pour me a glass of wine?”

E nodded quickly and sprang to his feet. A few minutes later he brought a platter carrying the following items: Jambon Crû and Brie sandwich for Alan, a dish of microwaved, stir-fried vegetables for himself, and also a coffee mug for Alan’s wine. The wine bottle Marie had given Alan the night before was still sitting on the living room table, unfinished. E grabbed this bottle and unplugged the cork. As E poured wine, he asked a question, “Aaron, what will you do if you cannot find the book?”

Alan clenched his lips, “I’m not sure E. I suppose that I can try reading it with a dictionary, but I’m worried that I won’t be able to do it fast enough. It’s over two hundred pages of a language I can’t even read yet, and whose grammar is supposed to be about as similar to French and English as Chinese.”

E sat down. Alan began eating. E did not start eating, however, but rather held his hands together in front of his chest. He pushed his index fingers together with sufficient force that the arches collapsed.

“Now Aaron,” E began, “What will you say if I produce for you an English translation of the book?”

Alan smirked at his assistant, who now seemed to be acting like a time-share salesman. Alan replied, “I’d say great, but that’s impossible because a book doesn’t exist.”

E looked confused. He bit his lips and moved his left cheek muscle as if he were squinting.

“But I say I produce for you an English translation of the book?” E tried to clarify.

Alan reiterated, “Like I said, that’s impossible, because you can’t find an English translation of the book.”

E nodded quickly and went back to eating his food. He directed his eyes downward for a few moments. Finally, he looked up at Alan.

“Aaron, what does verb mean ‘to produce?’”

“It means to make something,” Alan replied definitively, “For example, a product is something that is made.”

E nodded at the answer, but nevertheless looked deeply confused. He played with his vegetables listlessly. Suddenly, E blurted out, “Aaron, why can I not make for you an English translation of the book?”

Suddenly Alan understood E’s confusion. He wasn’t just offering to produce a translation, but rather to produce his own translation.

“E, that’s very generous. But the book is in Russian and I’m not entirely sure that you’d do any better or faster than me reading it with a dictionary.”

“But I will not read with dictionary,” E replied forcefully, “I will read with cousin Mu.”

“Coozinmu?” Alan asked, mistakenly thinking E was referring to an object about which Alan himself had no knowledge.

“Yes, Cousin Mu: he is son of second wife of brother of my mother. Once upon time, when family still live in Vietnam, he work in Russian embassy. He learn Russian very well. Very, very well.”

“And he speaks English or French?” Alan asked, wondering if perhaps E were indeed so resourceful as to produce for him a translator. E made an ambiguous sound that seemed to indicate no.

“But he speak Chinese very well. Very, very well.”

“But I don’t speak Chinese at all!” Alan exclaimed, wondering what bizarre thought had passed through E’s head.

“Yes, you not speak Chinese at all. But I speak Chinese, and I write English.” Alan closed his lips and looked at incredulously. He thought that he saw what E was about to propose.

“Cousin Mu will read book, line by line. He will tell me what book say exactly in Chinese. Then, I will write down for you exactly what Cousin Mu say, in English.”

Alan looked at E skeptically. Any time one translates between two languages there is a certain loss of information, while at the same time the addition of information not present in the original. This is why translations of translations are, normally, to be avoided. Alan himself knew that the famous slander that Jews have horns was the result of a sloppy second hand translation of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, if the intermediary language was distant from the target and source languages, it had a tendency to compound the problem. Chinese was, in this sense, about as bad an intermediary language as possible. Finally, even if E’s cousin spoke perfect Russian, there was the dismal state of E’s English to contend with as well. Considering his options, something occurred to Alan.

“You know,” Alan said in French, *“This would be an excellent time to admit that you do actually speak French.”*

E shook his head slowly, seeming not to understand. Anger flared up in Alan, but it was soon tempered. What E was proposing would at least give a decent fall back in the event that Alan couldn’t track down good information about the text. He decided to give his assistant the go-ahead.

E called his cousin from the kitchen telephone and returned to the main room. Alan was now seated on the orange burlap couch, where E presently joined him. Alan sensed that E was quite pleased with himself. Not only had he redeemed himself for his failure to find the book, he was being entrusted with an assignment both pivotal and difficult. He twiddled his thumbs happily, while his head floating left and right. He smiled enthusiastically at the table in front of him.

Alan found E’s merriment vaguely annoying, although he intuited that he was perhaps more annoyed with his own situation vis-a-vis Marie. In fact, realizing that this was indeed the case, Alan decided to start a conversation with his assistant in order to avoid thinking about his own personal problems.

“Your family lived in Vietnam?”

“Yes.” E said, nodding his head, for the first time enjoying proper attention from his superior. “Most Asians living in Paris have live some time in Vietnam,” he continued.

“I thought you were Chinese?” Alan asked.

“Yes, and still am Chinese. And still is whole family. And still is most people in Paris who live some time in Vietnam. We live in Vietnam, but we are Chinese. Now we live in France, but we are Chinese.”

Alan looked at E questioningly.

“It not so strange. You are American, but you live in France.”

“But I am French,” Alan clarified.

“No, you are not French. You are American.”

“But my mother is French.”

“And father?” E asked, a strangely prosecutorial edge entering his voice.

“Not French,” Alan replied quickly, somewhat uncomfortable.

“See, you go inside,” E explained pedantically, “Your mama become same as your daddy: American. We stay outside, in Vietnam. We stay outside, in France. We will stay outside, where we go next. If we go to America, we stay outside there too.”

Alan snorted, and replied, “No E. Your diaspora ends in America because every diaspora ends in America. In America, identity melts.”

Truer words Alan never said. America is often compared to a melting pot, but it would be more correct to say it is a foundry. As its raw material, it takes in all manner of adamantine identities. It breaks these down into component parts and reassembles them into a composite unlike any hitherto seen (even in Canada). The great question of course is whether the casting process produces something which is stronger, like iron transformed into steel, or an admixture which is flimsy and weak: an identity identical with junk. I can't say I have any desire to resolve this question, and I doubt I am alone. We Americans like to keep our identities molten, solid on the outside, liquid on the inside: ready to become a different shape if need be. There is a risk in thinking of identity in that way, but also a great opportunity. The risk is that if identity is fluid it becomes easy to ignore how important it is to actually be something or somebody. If we fail to appreciate that risk, we will wind up being glib, callous, and naive. Our opportunity lies in the

realization that if identity is molten, it is for us to mold. We Americans, better than other peoples, understand that it is really up to us to determine what we will be. If we act on our opportunity, we will be well on our way to a freedom more empowering than liberty, a fulfillment more gratifying than satisfaction. I speak now of autonomy: the rule of the self by the self. Of course it should be pointed out that the American dilemma is the human dilemma, on a grand scale. We all need to answer the question, “How should we invent ourselves?” The only difference with Americans is that we feel the question more acutely, whether we realize it or not.

The room grew quiet in the wake of Alan’s remark. Alan and E did not sit together in silence very long, for soon there was a knock at the door. E sprang to his feet, telling Alan excitedly that “Cousin Mu is here.” E bounded excitedly over to the door, tottering back and forth on each foot as he went. For his part, Alan stood, wearily, and approached the apartment entrance. Already E had opened the door and was boisterously shaking his relative’s hand. Cousin Mu was an unusually thin and tall man, with a long nose and spindly fingers. “He can’t be E’s relative,” Alan thought to himself. “He looks like he has Marfan’s syndrome.” Alan was particularly stricken by the man’s bulbous eyes, which protruded repulsively from their sockets. Alan felt as if a part of his body were lurching backwards, away from the door, and in particular away from the bloated eyes of cousin Mu. And yet he found that his body was, in point of fact, moving forward: he was reaching his hand out to greet the man. The fact that Alan was in mind moving away from Cousin Mu, combined with the fact that he was in body moving toward him, caused Alan to experience a curiously vertiginous sensation, similar to something a claustrophobic person might experience while entering a space capsule. The vertigo disappeared, however, just as soon as Cousin Mu grabbed Alan’s hand, stealing Alan’s attention away from his face. Alan watched as the man bowed so deeply that his torso formed a right angle with his legs. His head touched Alan’s outstretched hand.

“He must be E’s relative,” Alan thought to himself. The man, whose head was still at Alan’s hand, began to say a few words.

“Cousin Mu say he is very pleased to meet you,” E translated. “He is pleased to introduce himself by name,” — here E seemed to pronounce his own name.

“E?” Alan asked curiously.

“Yes?” E replied, thinking he had been asked a question.

“No E, what is his name?”

“Cousin Mu’s name is,” here E made the same E-like sound. Cousin Mu remained bowed at Alan’s hand, although none of the people in the room seemed perturbed by this fact.

“His name is E?” Alan asked.

“Well, naturally.” E replied, “We are related.”

“You have the same first name because you’re related?” Alan asked incredulously.

“Of course!” E insisted, “One always has same name as relatives.”

“But my father’s name isn’t Alan,” Alan countered.

“But is father’s name Stuart?” E asked in a leading tone.

“His last name is Stuart,” Alan replied.

“Yes, exactly. But for Chinese people last name is first name and first name is last name.”

Alan shook his head, wondering how Chinese people could keep anything straight when so much about their world was literally backward. He was also wondering what it was he was supposed to do with the bowing cousin Mu, or cousin E, or whatever he was, who did not seem to have any inclination to stand upright. Alan looked from E to Mu and back again, hoping for some hint as to what he should do to extricate himself from the bowing man’s grasp. Finally, Alan directed himself toward Mu and said, humbly, “It is an honor to meet you, E, my name is Alan Stuart.”

E rapidly translated Alan’s words for Mu. The latter immediately stood upright. E ushered Alan and his cousin into the dining room, pulling out chairs in which the two could sit. Mu asked Alan to see the book he was being asked to translate. Alan gingerly placed the thin, old book in the hands of E’s cousin. The man, apparently lacking good reading vision, brought the book within an inch of his face. His eyes darted wildly across the page; he flipped through the book ten to fifteen pages at a time. A series of squawks came from the man’s mouth, which was followed by a knowing and toothy grin in E’s direction. E laughed and explained to Alan, “He says the book smells moldy.”

Mu finished scanning the book and looked seriously at Alan. Alan tried not to meet the man’s horrifying eyes, which the latter hardly seemed to mind. Mu began explaining something to E.

“Mu want me to warn you that this book is very poetic and will not translate well.”

“Tell him that’s fine,” Alan replied, “I just need a literal translation so I can write my paper.”

E translated Alan’s response. The man, accepting Alan’s answer, continued on to a second point.

“He will not be able to say how long translation take before he start,” E relayed, “He has never translated book this way before.”

Alan nodded again, saying he understood the risks. Mu had one final thought.

“He say you buy this book in Russian bookstore in Montparnasse. In future, you must not buy book from Russian bookstore in Montparnasse. Cousin Mu own bookstore in Chinatown. He give you lower price for same book. Plus, he give you better service.”

Alan smiled and agreed that he absolutely would not go back to the store in Montparnasse if he could help it. The translator smiled heartily when he heard E’s translation of these words. With that, E informed Alan that they would begin working on the translation. Alan agreed, deciding to remain at the table while E found some blank sheets of paper and his calligraphic pen.

The translation was finally set to begin in earnest. Cousin Mu opened the book to the first page and read the first paragraph. He read it a second time more closely, before beginning to talk excitedly with E. For his part, E seemed to be asking a number of questions about the paragraph, which gave the translator serious pause. The latter kept consulting the text, again and again. There wasn’t even a sentence down on the page after five or ten minutes had elapsed. Alan was getting bored and decided to try and catch up on his back reading.

At first Alan read on the couch. This effort didn’t work, however, for the two Chinese men’s voices were so abrasive and loud that Alan could hardly read a full sentence without getting distracted. Moreover, he was bothered by the fact that the Cousins E still hadn’t produced any tangible product. He could see why: the two were reclining back in their chairs, not even looking at the book, but rather joking and socializing with one another. Mu had removed from his bag a glass jar full of a boiling, brackish liquid, as well as two tiny stone glasses. Mu was constantly refilling their glasses, not an easy task given the unwieldiness of the enormous jar.

At a certain point, Alan could no longer stand to watch the spectacle. He asked E exasperatedly, “E, what’s going on? What are you two talking about?”

E did not notice the reproof evident in Alan’s tone. He replied jocularly, “We are discussing family matters. Cousin Mu is telling me about Cousin U’s new job at Bus Company. Bus company go from Chinatown to Chinatown across Europe. All seats they not sell to passenger, they use to move merchandise. Cousin U able to get many rare and interesting product at great discount. We are drinking tea called Tea Kwan Yin, or Iron Goddess Mercy. Very good, very hard to find. Cousin U gave to Cousin Mu for free.”

Alan shook his head, indignantly, and castigated E, “E, there is a deadline for this paper.”

The color swiftly drained from E’s face. Alan’s assistant directed his eyes downward. He said, diffidently, “I am very sorry Aaron. We are drinking tea now so we have energy to work all night.”

Now it was Alan’s turn to be embarrassed. Alan hung his head sorrowfully as his indignation swiftly transformed into guilt. The man with spindly fingers was looking on amusedly at the exchange. He said something to E, but E shook his head glumly.

“That’s fine E,” Alan said, “I just wanted to know what was going on. I’m under a lot of pressure. I want to have this thing done as soon as possible so I can begin to write.”

E nodded, and looked up. His lips were pressed together in an indifferent smirk. Alan realized that if he wanted his assistant to produce good work, he would have to help him stay motivated. Alan, feeling he had spoiled the productive and happy mood in the room, presently tried to introduce some collegiality to the exchange.

“Actually E, I trusted you completely to do the work quickly,” Alan lied confidently, “The real thing I wanted to know is whether or not I can try your tea.”

E smiled at this request and in turn asked his cousin for another glass. The gaunt man reached his long, thin fingers into his bag and produced a cup, which he used to pour a drink for Alan. Alan, raising the cup up to his face, thought the liquid looked horrible, like something one would find in a befouled toilet. And yet, he could hardly help but notice the overpoweringly pleasant floral smell of the drink. Gingerly, he took a sip. Cousin Mu was looking at Alan with an expectant smile.

“How ah?” Cousin Mu said cautiously, a rising tone on the last word.

Alan didn’t answer, but rather drained the whole contents in a single gulp.

“HOW AH!” Cousin Mu shouted ecstatically, slapping E on the shoulder.

Alan put his glass down and his drink was quickly refilled. The three sat together for some time, drinking shots of tea. Although conversation at the table was weak, the tea was strong. Alan could feel his heart palpitating and wondered what the other two, who had been drinking much longer than he had, were feeling. Certainly they seemed ebullient, especially Cousin Mu. Alan could see why E was so enthusiastic about his cousin, who, despite his freakish physical appearance, seemed to carry around him an aura of positivity and good cheer. There was always a creeping smile on his face, which would discharge itself fully upon even the slightest

provocation. At one point, Alan scratched the side of his nose, which caused the man to laugh uproariously. Despite all his expectations, Alan was enjoying himself and decided to ask a question which had been bothering him ever since E had told him about Chinese names.

“E,” Alan started, “if your first name is your family name, what’s your personal name?”

Cousin Mu looked questioningly at E, a surreptitious smile pulling at the corner of his lips. E said something to Mu. Immediately, the man burst into a fit of abrasive-sounding laughter which sounded something like a wood pecker boring into a tree. Cousin Mu motioned for Alan to listen closely. The haggard man puckered his lips and slowly, carefully, said a strange monosyllabic sound, which seemed to Alan to be a subtle hybrid of “J” and “CH.” Alan decided to go with the best approximation he could.

“G?” Alan asked.

Cousin Mu laughed uproariously, while E nodded vigorously and smiled.

“Why didn’t you tell me your name was G?” Alan asked.

E shrugged, “I figure we should start on first name basis.”

Alan nodded, although part of him wondered what exactly “being on a first name” basis could mean when first names meant such radically different things to each of them. For Alan, a first name was something familiar, something congenial. But for E, the first name was something formal. Alan had always assumed that there was an immediate familiarity in their relationship, a spontaneous association of almost filial rules between himself and his assistant. And yet, Alan realized, E had kept him at a certain distance: in the family one always talked of “Cousin X” where X was a personal name. There was nothing spontaneous about Alan and E’s relationship. Indeed, it was quite the opposite. Alan’s assistant had concealed his true name from Alan, and this was only one of many facts Alan suspected he concealed. Alan suddenly came to the conclusion that his assistant’s deliberate obfuscations were tantamount to a lie. Alan felt that he had been cheated. He felt that the massive asymmetry of information possessed between himself and his assistant was unfair, and indeed outrageous. After all, Alan found himself living and working in a world that E was quite at home in: a world about which E understood both how things worked and how to make things work for him. The only thing that Alan had was power to command E to do things, which was hardly sufficient. Sitting at the table with E and his cousin, Alan perceived that he was under siege. He suddenly had an impulse to retreat to his quarters.

“Right, right, that was good of you,” Alan nodded. He said quickly, “Well, see that you get something to me by morning.” Then, he stood. Alan didn’t wait to see how his assistant had

reacted to his prodding, instead he picked up his book, turned around, and retreated to his room. He turned on a light next to his bed and read briskly, without thinking much about what he was reading or the fact that he wasn't thinking much at all. He wanted simply to do something, to leave the table and the false merriment of tea-drinking. At the same time, he couldn't help but hear the two at the table. In the few minutes after his departure they sat quietly drinking the tea, but then steadily grew louder. Twenty minutes later they were shouting again, talking over each other, wildly oscillating up and down the tonal register. Alan went over to the door to his room and opened it just enough to peep through. He saw that E was writing diligently now. His cousin was reading ahead in the book, preparing his thoughts. Alan breathed a sigh of relief that at last they had begun to work in earnest.

Satisfied that work was beginning, Alan tried to sleep. He did not succeed, however. The two men in the room next door had an uncanny ability to abort Alan's departure from consciousness the very the moment it became imminent. Just as he began to feel himself drift, to disconnect from his time and place, the din would start once more. He would try to forge ahead, to ignore the noise. But there were too many "oww"s, too many "arr"s, too many "aayy"s: he found it was impossible to put them out of mind. At some point, Alan realized he was laying on his back, staring straight up at the ceiling, and counting the number of times E's cousin had paced across the room. The count was one hundred and thirty four. Alan turned on his light once more and read. Yet even as he read, he found himself thinking about the memory of Marie standing outside his gate. The sound of his heart beating in his head seemed to set the tempo for his memory. He relived his vision of the past again and again, up until the moment of their embrace. Without having turned off the lights, Alan finally fell asleep.

Alan woke with a headache. He had been sleeping with his stomach on top of a hard cover book, his head directed towards the light on his nightstand. Alan was surprised to find that the light had been turned off. Moreover, someone had placed a stack of pages and a red pen next to the lamp. Without getting up from the bed, Alan moved himself so he could see the cover page. Alan discovered that it was a note, written in an impeccable cursive handwriting, which read as follows:

"Alan, here are the first two chapters of the book. Please use the red pen to mark all corrections."

Alan immediately sat up and took the stack of pages in his hands. He was relieved by its

weight. Lackluster progress the night before had lead Alan to question the practicability of E's plan. With a sizable amount of text now in hand, however, Alan was more confident. Although, Alan cautioned himself, perhaps E had written the page with enormous margins or in a childish large font. Alan began to leaf through the text.

Flipping through the pages, Alan found something remarkable. The translation looked like something produced by a printer. Its lines were so straight; the letters were so evenly sized. Even the amount of ink pressed on the page was consistent from letter to letter, from page to page. Alan was dumbfounded. He stood up and walked to the door, intending to ask E how he had produced such a magnificently legible manuscript.

Alan opened the door, eyes still attached to the page. Glancing upward for a moment, Alan shrieked. Spread out against the floor, like a cadaver in a morgue, was E's cousin Mu. His neck was craned backwards and his spindly hands were folded upwards against his shoulders. His mouth was open and his large, piercing fangs pointed threateningly in Alan's direction. For his part, E had fallen asleep on the couch and was snoring loudly into its burlap upholstery. His right arm was cast over his flank and hung limply, like the flipper of a beached whale. Alan decided not to disturb the sleeping duo, but rather went out to a café in order to begin working on his essay.

Sitting at the café with a continental breakfast of croissant nature, orange jus, and café espresso, Alan began to scan the text more thoroughly. All told, he was extremely impressed by the work. Although it had no literary pretensions, it was eminently readable. Most of its sentences were declarative. It contained few idioms. Indeed, it was a clever translation on E's part. He had only chosen to operate in clear grammatical contexts. When sentences or ideas were complicated, he would break them down into simpler ones. Alan hardly needed to use the red pen. Nevertheless, Alan did not think the translation was perfect. It seemed unmusical. All of its sentences were too much alike. It developed its points too slowly. It began too many sentences with the word "it." It was, in sum, repetitious. That said, Alan thought the translation was more readable than most business English.

Having read what there was of the translation thus far, Alan returned to the apartment. He found that the translators had returned to work. E made a show of getting Alan breakfast, but Alan informed E that he had already eaten and was only returning to get a few books. Alan soon left the apartment again with his substantial reading list in tow. He walked a half-mile in the opposite direction from Place Denfert, and sat himself down on a terrace much the same as the one in which he had breakfasted that morning. An assortment of cheap wooden chairs with red-

thatching were splayed haphazardly underneath a sagging tarmac, not necessarily positioned next to their corresponding metal tables. It was yet another example of those quintessentially depressing cafés germane to Paris, whose crudity is made romantic through a beguiling deception I will momentarily try to explain. In such cafés, even the people seem identical from establishment to establishment. Here, for example, is a thin girl in her 20s wearing sunglasses and smoking profusely. There is a cockeyed maitre d' past his prime, providing surprisingly bad service at all hours of the day. By the counter is an overly fat or overly thin alcoholic drinking vaguely his 10:30 AM verre - or was it his 1 PM, or his 3:30? Despicable clients and despicable maintenance would it seems make a despicable place. Nevertheless, there is something about these cafés that is inherently charming, in much the same way as the American diners of old. To judge such establishments by all the normal criteria for judging a place of business is to miss the point. It is the routine of going that is excellent, not the actual place one goes. When one is at the café one spreads out as much as one likes, can sit as long as one cares to sit. All there is to do is to do nothing and look at Paris, quietly reflecting about what one is doing there, or not doing there, and also upon all the other people who have wondered the same. One sticks out one's tongue and puts in a dry, day-old croissant, taking one's communion with the greater spirit of resigned acceptance. One washes down this pasty with an acidic, already cold espresso, which is going to cost far too much. One has consumed the blood and the body of Paris; one has been taken into the bosom of indolence itself.

Alan sat and read. He continued doing so until the evening, taking his dinner at the same café. He even stayed on into the night, now reading with a glass of wine. He returned home around midnight, only to find E and Cousin Mu still working. When he woke he found yet more of the book waiting by his bedside. He passed the next day much the same as he had past the previous one. By morning of the third day there was already a good half of the book yet translated and Alan began to think about possible topics for his essay. On the one hand there was the obvious challenge of thinking about what the book had to say on its own terms. Alan recognized, however, that this challenge was fundamentally a red herring. Professors rarely cared much about what a text was really saying. Of greater interest to them was how the text might be made to fit into their larger critical agenda. Of course, that was not to say the text was irrelevant to them, but rather because a literary work contained so much raw information it could usually be pushed into saying almost anything at all. All that content had to be arranged in some way; the easiest way usually was to first establish ones agenda and thereafter set about seeing what evidence there was to support it.

For this reason, Alan set about determining Nokitoff's own agenda in criticism before he started writing his essay. He had brought to Europe a book of Nokitoff's interviews on literature,

Correct Beliefs, which he now read closely. It was clear to Alan that Nokitoff, like himself, had an agenda in thinking about literature. And yet Nokitoff's agenda seemed confused, in a way that Alan's own agenda was not. In Nokitoff, it was clear that there was a certain taxonomical mind at work: a scientifically-minded writer who thought literature should satisfy certain criteria and conditions in order to be considered excellent. Also in Nokitoff was a radical aesthete, who thought that literature was its own universe which could hardly be understood on any other terms. It seemed to Alan that there was an irreconcilability there, which Nokitoff covered up with a self-aggrandizing superiority complex.

Still, Alan found that there was something thoroughly agreeable about Nokitoff approach. The great author really seemed to care about remaining grounded in texts. For example, in teaching literature he would often construct diagrams of the places he depicted. He loved the world of fiction, and wanted to be as faithful as possible to the world creating potential of books. Alan decided he would do well by picking something concrete in the text and tracking its progress exhaustively, as opposed to exploring something hard to characterize like "femininity" or "Oedipal instincts."

Alan returned to his apartment, excited to take up all the available parts of the text and begin his essay. He saw that E and Mu were busy with some task having to do with translation. Alan went over to the table and looked at the most recently finished materials. The translators ignored him. He saw that there were three piles of face down papers; two of which were thick and one of which was quite a bit thinner. Alan picked up one of the thick piles and discovered a mass of Chinese characters.

"Odd," Alan thought, "Weren't they translating by discussing in Chinese, not by writing in it?"

He flipped over the thinner pile, discovering that it was the most recent part of the English translation.

At that moment, Alan almost turned away satisfied. And yet curiosity got the better of him. He decided to have a peak at the large third pile. Alan almost questioned his vision, such was his disbelief. As certainty grew inside him, he felt his heart rise into his throat. The third pile was a French translation of the very text he had been reading.

"Who wrote these?" Alan demanded.

"I write, Mu read," E said absentmindedly. He was too focused on his work to notice Alan's anger.

“You wrote this one,” Alan said, holding up a French translation of the text. For a second Alan thought E was going to nod, but the assistant suddenly looked up. He seemed to gulp when he saw Alan and what he was holding. He said, inconspicuously, “No, cousin Mu write this one.” Cousin Mu, realizing he was being talked to, directed his attention toward Alan and then to E. For his part, Alan looked directly at Cousin Mu.

“*You speak French?*” Alan asked, sharply.

“*I speak French,*” Cousin Mu replied factually.

“*So why have we been speaking with E as translator?*” Alan demanded.

“*I am not so proficient in French,*” Cousin E lamented, the slightest tinge of accent coloring his words, “*Cousin G speaks English much better than I speak French.*”

“*I strongly, strongly disagree with that assessment,*” Alan replied.

“*No, it’s a plain fact,*” Cousin Mu replied, “*His English is manifestly superior to my French.*”

Alan was tired of playing games with the two. He was absolutely sure that it would be easier to communicate with Cousin Mu in French than with E in English. And, for that matter, he was sure it would be easier to communicate with E in French than in English. Finally, he had his chance to prove it.

“*I can tell you wrote this!*” Alan slammed the table with his fist, “*The handwriting in French and English are the same! The same!*” E looked blankly at Alan. After a second, he gulped. Alan sensed that E’s seemingly impregnable facade was at last beginning to buckle. Yes, Alan would prove it now: his assistant had perpetuated a massive deception against him for the entire duration of his time in Paris. And yet Alan was fated not to prove anything about the state of E’s French, for at that moment Cousin Mu interceded in his relative’s defense.

“*No, Cousin G did not write this. I wrote this. Moreover, Cousin G could not have written this because Cousin G does not speak French. You must understand Mr. Stuart that all literate Chinese people have the same handwriting: we are experts in calligraphy.*”

Alan shot an angry look at Cousin Mu, “*You’ll forgive me Mr. Mu, but I don’t believe that for a second.*”

“*Firstly, Mr. Stuart, I am not Mr. Mu: I am Mr. E. Second, you have the wrong Mr. E, Mr. Stuart, you are mistaking E Mu for E G. E Mu is writing the French translation of this book, E G is writing the English translation, and E Mu and E G are writing the Chinese Translation together.*” Here Cousin Mu flipped back to the title page of each of the translation, and pointed

to a line underneath the authors name which indicated the translator. The signatories were indeed correct, or at least the French and English ones seemed to be.”

“*Well then Mr. E or Cousin Mu or whatever your name is,*” Alan retorted indignantly, “*Explain the handwriting! It’s impossible for two people to write so identically!*”

With that Cousin Mu took the pen which the now dejected E had been holding and began to write a few words in French. Alan watched, at first smugly satisfied, then quietly apprehensive. Finally, he felt his face flush with embarrassment. Mu had written, in a magnificent facsimile of printed Latin characters, “*We are your friends Alan! Trust us!*”

What had Alan just done? The two men at the table had worked around the clock to produce an original creative work, which Alan desperately needed in order to succeed in his own attempt to woo Nokitoff. They had no expectation of reward besides his gratitude, whatever that was worth. In that moment, he had give just the opposite of gratitude; he had produced accusations and theories of conspiracy. What a schmuck! And yet, there was a part of Alan that could not move past the sneaking suspicion that the two were indeed toying with him. E had said that he was the one who wrote, Mu was the one who read. There was only one pen at the table: E’s own. Was it even logically possible that Mu was writing in French while E was writing in English and Chinese? Moreover, wasn’t it laying it a bit thick to say that they were friends? What other purpose could their be for that line besides laying on guilt?

Alan looked at the cold, bloodless face of Mu, avoiding his powerful eyes and instead focusing on his jagged incisors. How the exhortation that they were friends now gnawed at Alan! It was that one line which had pierced Alan’s skin, sucked out all his vital anger, and put in its place the frosty emptiness of guilt. How Alan wished to taste anger once more! He wondered if Mu or E could be enraged somehow. Then it would be Alan’s turn to pierce someone with a wholesome and sincere phrase, in order to drink the sweet sap of righteous indignation from their livid form. Alan intuited, however, that Mu would be immune to such a turn, that there was no trace of indignation left in the man, and that E himself had been victimized by Mu in a similar way, rendering him useless. Alan, seething at the fact he could not be furious, picked up the French and English translations and retreated to his room.

Alan began reading the French translation which corresponded to the unread part of the book. He found that the style was the complete opposite of that of the English translation. Possibly the reason was that he had become used to the brisk style of writing which characterized the English text, or that French was more amenable to long-winded sentences. There was no care in this translation to avoid — how to precisely explain? — strange and unusual grammatical contexts, where even a French speaker him, her, or themsel(f/ves) might not know what to do. It suffered

so greatly from literary and academic flamboyancy that it was difficult to understand exactly what the text was saying. It was an unusual combination of ineffability and poor writing mechanics, whose profoundness was mainly confined to the respect in which it was irritating. Alan became so frustrated that he, despite every inclination to the contrary, switched back to the English translation of the book.

And once he did so he once again read with ease. He wanted desperately to finish the book so he could begin to write. In the evening of the following day he would go to François' party, and what followed might make it impossible for him to finish the essay. An improbable sequence of events might occur: he might find Marie once more in his arms, kissing passionately, drifting again toward some bed. Which bed? Any bed. Maybe François'? It didn't matter, so long as the girl was Marie. In this case, Alan had to budget time for the possibility that Marie and he might spend the weekend molesting each other's bodies. Or, a more probable sequence of events, he would see Marie doting upon François and would have to suppress his resentment for the entire evening. It would go for hours and hours on end. When Alan left the party, he would hardly be able to imagine anything besides the two screwing, let alone focus on an obscure Russian novel from the 18th century. In either eventuality, he would be better off finishing his essay now.

When Alan woke on Friday, the fourth day of working on his essay and reading the ancient work of Russian literature, he found that the final chapters of the translation were besides his desk. He wrote about the role that eyes played in the text, creating a table with a list of eyes mentioned in the text and their properties, as well as the place in which they occurred. Alan presented no interpretation of the text, his essay was entirely factual. In fact, he used the table to make an argument against investing symbolic importance in the eye, establishing as completely spurious several plausible stories of what eyes were doing in the text. There is simply something aesthetic about a good description, Alan argued, nothing less and nothing more. He finished at five o'clock and gave the manuscript of his essay to E, who he told to rewrite it in his own handwriting. E accepted the task with pleasure, promising Alan that it would be ready when he returned.

Chapter 7

Of all the cants which are canted in this canting world, though the cant of hypocrites may be the worst, the cant of criticism is the most tormenting!

-From Tristram Shandy, Laurence Sterne

François' party would begin at eight o'clock that evening. His apartment was located a few miles north of Alan's own address, just opposite the Bourse, Paris's stock exchange. Even though Alan had no desire to come early, he had already begun the painstaking process of sculpting his hair and composing his outfit well before six. This purely academic exercise in improving his own appearance had, however, taken only a measly hour and a half to complete. Alan was, therefore, left with an excessive quantity of disposable time. Like anyone, Alan would have normally enjoyed having a little extra spending-time in his pocket. At this moment, however, he was too occupied with concerns about Marie to do anything genuinely useful. He decided to walk to François' apartment, hoping to give both his thoughts and his appearance a chance to settle themselves.

Alan walked briskly past the compounds and parks immediately north of 88 Rue Denfert. He noticed a coolness about the evening which spurred him forward as he moved, an ever so minute annoyance that made him quiver excitedly. He passed through the neighborhood of the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, perceiving that he was not the only one made restless by the evening's crispness. Young people from adolescence into their late twenties stood milling about in groups around the Park Luxembourg, around the Pantheon and the School of Law, around the Sorbonne. Joking and shouting, they discussed what had brought them there that evening and where they were going later. Except, they were going nowhere and, moreover, they knew it. Why even talk about it then? Because they knew that talk of going was a perfect excuse to stand in place and talk excitedly, which in spite of the shivering cold is exactly what they wanted to do.

The streets were full of reveling young people, up until the place St. Michel. Here the feverish crowd ballooned into an immense and prickly volume, unable to expand north because of the Seine. Surprising that a thin and placid river, well covered by bridges, should prove an insurmountable barrier for the crowd. Nevertheless, that night it did, as it often does. For you see, the Seine defines a separation just as much metaphysical as concrete. On one side there is a place self-consciously creative and independent, and on the other one just as self-consciously conservative and well-to-do. Like the space between zero and one, the distance between the two river banks is a matter of perspective: negligible, or potentially infinite. The Seine is like the

slash between Left\Right, between Yin\Yang. The Seine is a symbolic and concrete manifestation of the irreconcilable distance separating opposite sides of a binary. The Seine is difference incarnate, which conditions the very possibility of understanding, yes, but imperialism, misogyny, and racism as well. The Seine is that construction whose construction deconstructs itself, but which it is nevertheless impossible to deconstruct.

The Seine is also a river.

Crossing the Place St. Michel, Alan turned left at the nearest street, a quay which abutted the river. Very suddenly, he found himself very alone. And yet there was not much serenity in Alan's newfound solitude. To his right stood the Cathedral Notre Dame, whose aura pierced the consuming blue-black night with the illuminating force of a hundred thousand bulbs. On Alan's other side was the Bridge of the Arts, a raucous congregating point, upon which police seldom enforced public drinking laws. Here, immigrants who spoke barely a word of French sold immense quantities of alcohol to minors, vagrants, and those without the good sense to set aside advance provisions for their evening. It was, in short, a public nightclub, with no guards, cheap drinks, and flexible hours of operation.

Before Alan reached that bridge, however, he came across another, older crossing called *Pont Neuf* (lit. New Bridge), which he used to cross to the other side of the river. The area just over the right bank abounds with museums and government buildings. Every day here, throngs of well-dressed business people and government officials mingle with a horde of appallingly dressed tourists. Now, at night, it was as if it the neighborhood were under curfew. The streets were empty, although every now and then a person might pop out of a building, look left and right, only to quickly disappear down some side street.

The Bourse was an imposing building, whose façade was adorned by well-lit doric columns and marble statues, recalling the classical era. It gave an eerie impression. It paradoxically seemed lived-in, and yet off-limits. Many Parisian buildings have a similar oddness about them at night, which explains why so many have imagined them haunted. The Opera had its phantom, The Cathedral had its hunchback. For all one knows, inside the Paris Bourse there lurked a hideous creature, with a troll-like face, of goblin-like build, and clothed in an Italian suit studded with rhinestones. *The Abominable Stockman*, as he shall hence forth be known. En guard Victor Hugo, I'll make my name as a storyteller yet.

Alan found the address for which he had been looking. Next to the door was a dial pad. Alan, like most Americans I would imagine, found the French system for building-entry rather baffling. There are few doormen to be found in Paris. In order to enter an apartment complex,

one needs a code to the building one wants to visit. There are no directories listed on the outside and there is not necessarily any obvious way to call someone on the inside. The best and maybe only thing to do is simply to have arranged for one's arrival in advance. Alan had the required code, which was easy enough to remember: *1776*. An auspicious number, which François had chosen as an allusion to the birth year of something he held dear to his heart. What he alluded to was not the United States, however, but rather *Modern Economics*. The *Wealth of Nations*, like the *Declaration of Independence*, was also published in 1776.

Alan entered the building and found a spiral staircase to his right. The space was unlit and cramped. Alan headed upward, to the highest of three floors, taking slowly the uneven and creaky steps. As Alan climbed, he couldn't help but sneeze from the dust and mold. Even wealthy homes and apartment buildings in Europe are usually dilapidated; basically the entire continent is a fixer-upper. When Alan reached the second level, he caught a glimpse of the portico he was trying to reach. In contrast with the staircase, the doorway was well-lit and inviting. Alan could hear young voices emanating from the top floor. They were laughing, speaking briskly.

Alan rushed up the stairs, ready to steal away Marie from François, should he find the opportunity. He reached the doorway, suddenly finding himself overcome by fear and hesitation. How would he act upon entering the room? He had no idea. He would have to trust that in the moment he would know. He noticed that the door was slightly ajar. He wanted to throw it open wide, in a sudden powerful motion. He stuck out his hand, and, pretending it was a tennis racket, prepared himself to hit a forehand smash. He swung his hand, but at the last second flinched. When he put his hand to the door he pushed meekly.

The door opened and Alan saw that she was standing just on the other side. Her back was turned to him, her hair held up in a black beret. She was wearing a dress shirt made from a thin white fabric, cut boyishly. The chemise hung on her frame loosely. Was it François' shirt? Alan nearly gasped as he realized that she wasn't wearing a bra. How close Alan came in that moment to reaching his hand underneath the shirt, around her waist, spinning her around and pressing his lips to hers. All the while he would move his hands up her chest, groping her nipples in front of God, François, and whatever random assortment of dinner guests had come unfashionably early.

Yet the moment passed, and luckily so, for standing in front of Alan was not Marie, but rather a short, pig-faced young man with a frail and sickly physique. The young man, still turned away from Alan, removed his beret. Underneath were not the long and curly locks Alan had long imagined tousling, but rather an austere and unsentimental blonde crew cut. The young man turned around, facing Alan in the doorway. Alan shuddered at the man's pugged nose, gapped

front teeth, and narrowly set eyes.

“*Good Evening,*” the young man said, taking no notice of Alan’s disgusted reaction. He put his beret on a hook inside the closet he was standing in front of, and then proceeded into the main room. Alan glanced into the apartment, saw that the room before him was a living room occupied by three or four girls who might have been Marie, as well as two or three men who probably were not. He walked into the closet, which was quite large. For some reason, he closed the door. In the dark, he undressed his outer garments and prepared himself to be seen.

Soon he left the closet and entered the living room decisively. A petite girl with light brown hair was sitting in the center of the couch, her legs were curled up, and she was quietly nuzzling the neck of a lanky blondish fellow sitting next to her. “At least she isn’t kissing him,” Alan thought.

Alan approached the two, thinking that a few harsh words were in order. Before he could pick the appropriate barbs, however, he realized that the lanky man wasn’t François, and that the girl’s hair was too straight to be Marie’s. He nodded at the blonde lanky fellow, who nodded back enthusiastically. In fact, on closer inspection, Alan realized that none of the people in the room was actually Marie. Rather than introduce himself to anyone, however, Alan continued onward in his search of the apartment.

To Alan’s left was the dining area. He noticed a girl standing on its cusp. The girl smiled warmly at Alan, which confused Alan. “She’s smiling at me,” Alan thought, “Is it Marie?” But in fact, she was not Marie, and Alan confirmed that she and Marie had not the faintest resemblance. This girl’s eyes and hair were too dark, too big. Her skin was ever so slightly bronzed, which, though appealing, was certainly unlike Marie’s pure whiteness. For a moment, looking at this girl Alan had a curious lapse in consciousness. His pulse slowed; his thoughts uncharacteristically stopped racing. He forgot entirely where he was going or what he was doing. He was, in short, at peace.

The game of life, like many games, is complicated by the existence of private information. Those complications are often beneficial. For example, it would hardly be interesting to play poker if everyone knew everyone else’s cards. Without private information, every hand of poker more or less reduces to the insufferably dull card game “War,” wherein each player reveals a card and the player with the highest takes the lot. Card games need private information, most of what’s fun about playing comes from the interaction of private information at hand with public information on the table, as well as the inferences about other people’s private information disclosed through behavior. At the same time, there is much reason to wish that Life were more like War, without truly private information, because undisclosed private information is

responsible for some of life's more catastrophically tragic ironies.

I mention this now because unlike Marie, the girl who smiled at Alan was actually an excellent match for Alan. Her name was Elaine Vinstine. Her father was, as is obvious from the name, a French Jew. Meanwhile her mother was an English Canadian from Toronto. Elaine loved Canada, and very much wanted to emigrate. She did not hate France, however, or at least no more than the typical French person. Nor did she begrudge her Jewish ancestry, although she could have understood why someone in her situation might. It was simply her dream to living in Montreal, a city in which she could feel at ease in either one of her identities, and where her prestigious French degree in anthropology would make it easy for her to find a suitable academic job. What happiness might have followed if either Alan or Elaine had known each other's private information! And yet the real tragedy is that the private information was always there, quite ready to be disclosed. If Alan had greeted Elaine properly, he would have soon recognized the highest and best parts of himself in the beautiful young woman, thereafter falling into a more profound and effortless love than he could have ever thought to know. In time, he would have learned her perspective on the fraught half-Jewish identity, come to terms with it himself, and relaxed enough to actually laugh at himself, or for that matter the films of Woody Allen. Would have been, could have been, should have been, had Alan followed the simple rule that if someone smiles at you, you should go talk to them.

Alan was not going to greet her, however, but rather would proceed on to the kitchen. I know that it must hurt to see our protagonist unwittingly miss his best chance at true happiness. At some level, we all want everyone to succeed in their projects, to be happy, even the misanthrope with whom we have been so long been concerned. But there is nothing for me to do here. As much as I might like to suddenly make things work for Alan, my hands are tied. Alan is the epitome of a Romantic, and it's an essential characteristic of all genuine Romantics that they follow to the letter whatever cockamamie plan they've developed for themselves. "But surely narrator, you're a post-modernist," I seem to hear, "You can break any rule you damn well please!" Afraid not, I'm not that kind of post-modernist. My writing is, like life, about invention within the backdrop given, and in the present context that means Alan is a Romantic, this novel's plot is borrowed from Eugene Onegin, and our love-sick protagonist, for whatever reason, has eyes only for Marie. I've got my plan, I've got my principles, and as much as I'd like to bend them I can't, I shan't, and I won't. Take your complaint to the Romantics, you haven't got a right to quarrel with me.

Alan nodded at the girl who might have been his perfect match, and moved onwards to the kitchen. Even at a distance of maybe ten feet he could sense that someone was cooking; tarragon, garlic, and other aromatic French spices filled the apartment's air. Before he could

enter the kitchen, however, he saw François leaning against its wall. He was even thinner than Alan remembered. He also looked quite awkward, although Alan was not exactly sure why. The reason, as it turned out, was that there is something altogether uncomfortable about a thin person's appearance as they recline, lean, sit, or do anything really besides stand straight and tall. A thin body has too many right angles; whenever a lean individual positions him or herself any way besides perpendicular to the surfaces they touch, something looks off. By contrast, the ample, formless curvature of a typical a couch potato looks quite at home when leaned, sat, or pressed against a soft surface.

François saw Alan and smiled broadly.

“Alan!” he exclaimed in English. “It’s been almost a year hasn’t it?”

François stood straight and reached his long arm out to greet Alan. Alan had half a mind to punch François in the face and then, while the latter was still reeling from the pain and surprise of physical assault, find Marie, pick her up by the waist, and run out of the building never to be seen or heard from again. Before Alan could properly examine the advisability, or even the plausibility, of this course of action, he was already caught in François' grasp. Alan felt his head being pushed down against François' chest. More than the suddenness of this gesture, Alan was surprised by the smell of François. It was not exactly an unpleasant aroma that his rival had. Indeed, it was somehow like the redolence of a roasted pecan. The unpleasant part was not the smell per se, but rather how overbearing it was. It seemed to crowd out all the other aromatics in the room.

Alan withdrew from François. Before he could disengage himself completely, however, François was already grabbing his face and pressing it against his own. François kissed Alan's left cheek and then his right. Such homoerotic gestures are common between French men who wish to show how secure they are in their sexuality. Alan didn't kiss François back, but rather quietly accepted the unsolicited show of affection.

Finally, Alan was released. “There!” Alan exclaimed to himself. He saw her, it was definitely her, standing just on the other side of François. How was it possible that he had gotten so confused before? Her hair, her form, the breathtaking poise of her movement: everything about her fit his conception of her so exactly. She was standing by the stove, cooking an immense dinner. She wasn't looking at him. Why wasn't she looking at him? Probably she was too concentrated on cooking. Alan wanted to sneak up on her, to cup her breasts. Alan could tell her face was flush. She was sweating profusely. She seemed to have a tired yet satisfied look on her face. Alan noticed her left finger was scratching her face — something she often did when she wanted a cigarette. For whatever reason, her demeanor incited Alan's jealous side; Alan was

more determined than ever to let François know the reason he had come that night.

Alan took a second small step forward, and felt that something was obstructing his path. He looked down and saw that François had put his hands out, blocking Alan's passage.

"Marie can only be occupied with one thing at a time Alan," François said factually, "Don't interfere."

Marie turned away from the food. She saw Alan and smiled. Her smile seemed so distant. Alan looked back at her abstractly. When Alan didn't smile, Marie herself began to frown. Suddenly, she seemed to Alan both weak and fearful. He saw her look at François, blink, and then turn back to the food. For his part, François put his hand on Alan's shoulder and said enthusiastically, "Go back to the main room Alan and introduce yourself to my friends. There is one in particular that I think you might really hit it off with. But I won't tell you which."

There was a goading look on his face. François loved to know things others didn't. Moreover, he was exceptionally good at molding social situations so that others would have to ask him for explanations.

"Why not?" Alan asked tightly, humoring François even though he had not the slightest wish to do so. As François talked, Alan realized that he was losing his chance at playing the short game, becoming enmeshed in a drawn out conflict with his French rival from which he would not be able to extricate himself easily.

"Because Alan, if I tell you which one it is then you'll just go to the one I suggest and not socialize with anyone else. Meanwhile, if I don't tell you, then you'll have to try a few out! There are eight guests here besides you so you'll have a one in eight chance of meeting the one I have in mind. *Ceteris Paribus*, I expect you to meet four and half of my friends searching for the one I think you would be very happy to meet! I'll trust I won't need to show you the math to back up my model."

Alan snorted rudely and turned around. He walked past the girl standing on the cusp of the dining room and into the sitting room. He stood awkwardly in the corner, feeling no compulsion to introduce himself to anyone at the party. For their part, the crowd reciprocated Alan's sentiment; no one at the party was particularly inclined to introduce themselves to the stranger who looked either angry or annoyed. Perhaps as much as twenty minutes later, the guests were directed over to the dining room, where they were to be served their dinner.

François quickly sat Marie next to his own seat at the head of the table. The only seat Alan was able to find was on the same side as Marie's, but on the table's opposite end.

Unfortunately, this position at once deprived Alan of a clear line of sight to Marie but gave him an excellent vantage for viewing François. Over the next few minutes, Alan tried mightily to catch a glimpse of Marie. Whenever he did, it seemed that her expression was reserved, possibly crestfallen. Her eyes were fixed on her plate. Indeed, she hardly noticed when someone passed her a tray. François wound up plating her dish himself.

At some point after the meal had begun in earnest, the guest sitting immediately next to François asked a question.

“So François, who is your mystery guest?”

Alan considered answering the question himself. If he was to woo Marie, it was important that he appear both dynamic and full of charisma. Unfortunately, François was quicker to enter. He explained that Alan was a friend he and Marie had met during their study in America. François pointed at Alan several times during the explanation, which forced Alan to smile weakly at the length of the table. When François had finished the introduction, Alan waved an abrupt hello to the table.

“He is American then?” the friend continued questioning François, *“Does he speak French?”*

François replied, *“A bit.”* Alan immediately felt a pressure in his chest began to rise. He was about to say something hostile to François, but Marie interjected. She shook her head and said, not taking her eyes off her plate, *“François, don’t be an ass.”*

“So she isn’t totally removed from the conversation,” Alan thought, *“The joust is on!”*

François looked sheepishly at Marie. He gulped and then cleared his throat. *“Actually,”* François said, *“Alan speaks excellent French. His mother is French, and he has studied French literature extensively.”*

The inquiring guest hummed his surprise, smiled at Alan, and resumed eating. For her part, Marie nodded at François and shot Alan a quick glance. She smiled weakly, confirming that the first point had gone to him. The tan girl with curly black hair, who had decided to sit across from Alan, asked how long he had been in the country. Alan replied politely, but most of his attention was occupied with thinking about how to fire off his next volley at François. Alan’s neighbor looked as if she were going to ask him another question, but François suddenly interjected himself.

“Actually, speaking of coming to France, Alan had an interesting experience on the plane ride over. Tell them, Alan, about what happened when you arrived at Charles DeGaulle.”

Alan shot a cold glance in François' direction. What was François doing, prompting him to tell an embarrassing story about being detained by the police? Marie already knew the story, and indeed the fact that she had told François indicated that she had found it interesting. "He must be trying to reframe the story," Alan thought, "The more we talk about me the more opportunity there is for him to make me look bad. Moreover, if he can rally his and Marie's group of friends against me it will be a serious blow to my chances." Alan shook his head at François, warning him not to continue. François paid no attention to Alan, however. Instead, he himself launched into the story of Alan's flight to Paris, relating Alan's foolish gambling with the con artist, his fainting episode, as well as his alliance with the boorish, unusually red-faced American to escape the clutches of the law. Alan hemmed and hawed the whole time the story was told, watching as Marie's reaction. The story was obviously being told in such a way as to embarrass him. And yet the incredulous laughs from the group of dinner guests were rather encouraging. Marie even laughed, casting an admiring glance at Alan when François explained how Alan had resisted the proposition of the con artist to send the American to jail. Far from disadvantaging him, Alan felt that François' telling of the story had actually curried the assembled group in his favor. All of the dinner guests were now looking at Alan with genuine curiosity, even admiration. Before they had only displayed a polite indifference. Alan, still acutely annoyed with François, felt a smug satisfaction that the latter's gambit had backfired.

"From my perspective, the interesting thing," François said, face as red as that of a magician struggling to pull a rabbit out of his hat, *"The interesting thing is how foolishly the policeman conducted the interrogation."*

Everyone at the table tilted their heads curiously in François' direction. An odd way to take the story, they must have thought. The young economist looked left and then right. He had a daring and mischievous smirk on his face. Alan glanced at Marie and saw that she was frowning at François, moving her arm as if she were tapping him under the table. François didn't look at Marie, but rather waited for someone to respond to his remark. Finally, when it was clear no one would take his bait, François continued, *"First, putting all the detainees in the same room was a very bad decision. The thing that really botched the investigation, however, was pretending not to speak English."*

A few incredulous laughs from the table. Where was François taking the conversation? Marie looked worriedly at Alan. Her cheeks seemed so frail and hollow. Alan nodded at Marie assuredly, hoping that she secretly understood he was fine even in spite of François' overbearing and obnoxious behavior. *"Magnanimity is attractive,"* Alan thought, *"Women all want to be with the bigger man."*

The crowd fell silent and looked at Alan expectantly. They were tired of hearing François talk; they wanted something from Alan. To reply, to say something... to not let himself be the piñata at François' party: this is what Alan perceived that the crowd wanted. Alan, quite deliberately, took his napkin to his face, cleaned his mouth, and finally held the napkin in a clenched right fist next to his head. It was like a threatening rock made of white tablecloth.

“He didn’t speak English, François, because he didn’t know English,” Alan replied matter-of-factly. *“He wasn’t pretending.”*

François snorted, *“Of course he was pretending.”*

“How would you know?” Alan replied pointedly.

Just as tightly, François replied, *“To get to such a rank in the police force, one needs to be a graduate of the École Militaire. Do we have any reason to think otherwise?”*

Alan squinted at François. Was he trying to demonstrate Alan was more of a foreigner than he was? Alan resented the implication that he didn’t know how the education system worked. Nevertheless, something was flagging his attention. Feeling pressured to speak and comfortable in his current, personally unreserved position, Alan decided to play his hand open.

“Now that you mention it, I remember seeing that he had a diploma from the École Militaire hanging on his wall.”

“Shit!” François exclaimed, *“Shit! That’s unbelievable!”*

François started laughing, the only one at the table to find the statement remotely amusing. Alan looked at Marie and saw her shaking her head and looking at François strangely. It was almost as if she were losing her attraction for him with every word. Finally, François stopped laughing and explained the joke, *“Such a buffoon! He sets up a ruse at speaking no English, but then he puts the proof that its a ruse right on the wall so everyone can see.”*

Alan was silent. Was it so obvious that a graduate of this particular school would speak English? Maybe it was. In fact, now that he thought of it, there had been a few moments where the officer had actually seemed to understand when his fellow American had spoken English. *“But he made such a show of not speaking English,”* Alan thought, *“Why had he done that in the first place?”* Alan reflected privately on the problem for a few moments, but could not think of any explanation. Alan refocused himself on the conversation at hand, finding that François was explaining his reasoning more completely.

“You see, what happened with Alan is really a variation on a classic example from game

theory. Three criminals are arrested and the police officer wants to get the most number of convictions. The criminals don't like conviction, they'd rather go free. To get a conviction, the police officer needs two of the criminal to make a statement accusing the third of wrongdoing. You'll agree that this is the same game that Alan played when he landed, right?"

A few people around the table nodded slowly, although Marie was rolling her eyes. Alan noticed that François was obliquely calling him a criminal.

"Now, from the criminals' perspective, it's clear that they have to form a coalition. If two criminals can agree to blame the third, in exchange for not blaming each other, the two who form a coalition will go away scott free. Moreover, once an agreement is reached, it will never be broken. If one of the agreers accused the other, then he would expect the other to accuse him in revenge. In that case, the one who broke the agreement would have two accusations against him and would go to jail."

A girl sitting across from Alan asked François, *"So you're explaining why Alan did not blame the other American for starting the crime? Because if he blamed the other American, the other American would blame Alan back."*

"Exactly. Then what would happen is that the con artist, who is already going to jail, would make his allegations against the other two in order to avenge himself for being excluded from the agreement in the first place. This is a happy circumstance from the policeman's perspective, since each criminal has two witnesses testifying against him and can be sent to jail. However, the policeman's best outcome won't happen, ever, because two of the three criminals will inevitably strike a deal so long as they can communicate with each other."

The crowd's focus was returning once more to François. He was speaking so factually, and with such confidence, that it was hard not to hang onto his words.

The boisterous friend disagreed, *"François! How can you say that? With a policeman sitting there, how will they make a deal?"*

"Well, someone has to talk first, and he basically defines the deal. He accuses one and not the other, and the one who is not accused has to get on board. However, if the criminals are sitting in the room before the officer comes in, as happened in Alan's case, then that's probably when they'll make a deal."

"Right in front of each other?" the boisterous friend said, incredulously. *"Like that, what, me and you send the third to prison?"*

"Well, naturally," François said, *"Although, again, if one of the criminals is unconscious, it*

makes striking a deal easier.”

François’ words were like a bath of ice-water thrown on top of Alan’s head. He had no idea how long the gamesman and the red-faced American had sat together alone in the officer’s room. Moreover, the second Alan had woken up, the gamesman had propositioned Alan with an offer to accuse the American. Was it really possible that the gamesman preferred Alan so greatly as to propose a deal with him? Or rather, was it not far more likely that the gamesman had tried to make a deal with the American but the other had simply not understood. “How close did I actually come to going to prison?” Alan wondered.

“*Why am I not in jail right now?*” Alan asked himself. He didn’t realize that he had posed the question aloud.

“*Incompetence, pure and simple,*” François replied. “*Firstly, on the part of the American, who didn’t seize the opportunity to assure his chance at leaving freely, and, secondly, on the part of the police officer, who didn’t structure the game properly.*”

“*But I don’t believe he was incompetent!*” Alan said, indignantly turning to François, “*You didn’t meet him! He was thoughtful. He was a man of letters.*”

François waved his hand dismissively, “*Men of letters have no concept of decision theory. They decide things for vague and inconsistent reasons they can hardly define: ‘truth’ or ‘justice’ or ‘morality.’*”

Alan was astounded, “*You think justice and morality are bad reasons to choose something?*”

“*Well, if they were good reasons,*” François replied, “*Then they’d be easy to define. As for justice, you have a definition, Alan?*”

Now Alan sensed that the battle was begun in earnest. What had previously been a game of pot-shots and catcalls, intimidating feints and counter-gestures, had now become a serious clash of values and attitudes. François was suggesting that his value system was superior to Alan’s. He was putting Alan on the defensive by asking him to define something that was obviously ineffable. But Alan also understood that this was exactly the kind of dispute that the two needed to have if Alan was going to steal away Marie: her heart and mind was with his system of beliefs, not with the value system of François. Counting on a position of strength, Alan decided to ignore François’ question, and instead mock his alternative.

“*And what would be your replacement for justice, François? Money? Profit?*”

“*For one thing, yes,*” François replied, now leaning over the table eagerly. He kept glancing

at Marie as he talked, as if he were arguing with her as well as Alan. *“But money is too simple. Advantage would be a better term, more flexible, but still concrete. You see Alan, what we are coming to understand is that everything — physics, biology, mathematics — everything has the structure of a game. In every scenario, there are always actors with possible actions, which they choose among by considering the relative advantages of each. What that means is that our cells, our selves, our society, indeed our universe, all have the structure of a game. Life itself is a game embedded within a game embedded within a game. You get the picture.”*

“I utterly, and completely disagree,” Alan said.

“Of course you do Alan, because you are a man of letters... an idealist... a Romantic. You perceive reason, science, prudence, pragmatism, as the enemy of the good and free life. And so you rebel. You fight with reason and with obvious advantage. Instead, you go with intuition. Little do you realize that you cannot escape, that the game itself determines your intuition, so that you end up playing the game no matter what. You, like all Romantics, are an opportunist in the end, Alan, even though you think you’re not. You really only care about your own advantage.”

Alan hated how joyful and satisfied François looked at that moment. And indeed, his words stung. Alan did feel for a moment that he was an opportunist, that he hardly cared about principles *per se*, but rather was only interested in advancing ahead on his projects, both personal and professional. And yet, he did not reflect long on the personal indictment, because his thoughts were quickly drawn to the more pressing social pressures. It seemed to Alan that at this moment, if he did not respond to the accusation he was an opportunist, he would lose whatever credibility he had built up thus far among the dinner guests. Moreover, if he did not respond effectively, he would never be able to position himself as a romantic alternative for Marie. But how to reply to the accusation? There was obviously the possibility of a physical response, though brutality was not nearly as French a response as a witty retort would be. As for a retort, Alan had to consider how to maximize cleverness of response with respect to immediacy. Unfortunately, François was already continuing onward, blocking Alan from making a parrying response. He rose up higher and higher in his seat as he talked, face growing livid.

“Now... what should the officer have done if he wasn’t totally derelict in his duty? As I was saying, the universe is a giant game in which is embedded a multitude of games, which have their own sub-games, and so forth. In the policing game, we have two types of police officers. One does an inconsistent job of policing, doing what he feels like when investigating whatever criminals, and another does his job as aggressively as possible. If police officers are inconsistent in enforcing the law, then lawmakers cannot count on police officers to do any one

thing. Inconsistent policing deprives laws of force, which makes lawmaking ineffective. In turn, this makes it impossible to hold lawmakers accountable, since they cannot play the lawmaking game properly. As a result, voters have no way of conducting the election game properly and society falls apart. The only way that we can make any reasonable model of society work is if we count on people to pursuing their advantage with the utmost vigor. Anything less is a dereliction of duty and sabotages the system.”

François was now practically standing by his chair. His cheeks and forehead were red, his tone of voice was scandalized. But as he continued onward, he seemed to calm down, slowly moving back into his chair.

“Fortunately, individuals do almost always follow their advantage, unless they’re irrational or incompetent or men of letters. Here’s where Alan and the police officer come in. If the officer were really aggressive, then he would have put all the defendants in separate rooms to prevent them from talking to one another. He says to each of them, we’re not letting anyone go until someone goes to jail. Then, it’s clear to each criminal that it’s a race against the clock to send the other guys to jail. So, they blame both the other criminals and hope to god that one of the other two criminals didn’t understand the game itself and didn’t write an affidavit against them. The end result? All three criminals go to jail, as it should be. This is the only appropriate resolution to the three person prisoner’s dilemma.”

If Alan had understood François correctly, then it was not a vague joke he was making, but rather a grave and outright insult. Alan felt his face grow flush, a pressure fill his chest. He could hear his pulse beating in the side of his head. He had to be sure that François had meant what he said, *“François, just to be clear, you are not only saying that I would be in jail if the officer weren’t incompetent, but that I actually should be in prison.”*

“Precisely, Alan. You are, but for the grace of a fool, a prisoner, and in any event, a criminal.”

“François!” Marie scolded.

“A criminal!” Alan shouted, coming to his feet.

“Well, a criminal is what you call someone who, but for a botched investigation, should be in jail.”

This statement elicited appalled laughter from the room. Alan could see that Marie was furious with François. She looked almost on the brink of tears. Alan was overjoyed: he was on the verge of making a major coup. All he needed to do was make the offense irremediable and it

would ensure the introduction of an enormous friction into François and Marie's relationship.

"Thank you for the invitation François, but I don't think I'll stay for desert," Alan said.

With that Alan excused himself from the table and went toward the door. Around the table he heard the guests begging with him to staying, saying that it had only been a joke, but he ignored them. Instead, he tried to act as if he were mortally offended, rushing to the coat room. He could here Marie yelling at François to apologize. There was no way Alan was going to give him that way out; he had to end the conflict now while he was far ahead. He saw the coatroom and wondered if he would be able to get his coat without giving François a chance to detain him for an apology. Unless! Alan nearly giggled for joy. What if he were so upset that he forgot to take his coat? Not only would it make it seem as if he were far more offended than he actually was, but it would also ensure that he would have to make another visit to François' apartment. There he might run into Marie or François and get more information about whether and how their relationship was unraveling. Without a second glance at the coat room, Alan was out the door. He slammed it behind him and flew down the stairs as quickly as he could. A few moments later, and he was out in the streets, melding gleefully with the cold and energetic night.

Chapter 8

Pitiful is he who foresees all, whose head is never in a whirl, who hates all movements and all words in their interpretation, whose heart is by experience chilled and forbidden to get lost in dreams!

- From Eugene Onegin, A.S. Pushkin.

By this point in his journey, Alan had become accustomed to restless nights. It was not unusual for him to spend half his sleeping hours flipping himself back and forth, from side to side; his racing anxieties eventually made every position uncomfortable. After the evening at François', however, Alan's anxiety was replaced with hope. Flushed with the evening's success, Alan had stayed up half the night, rolling back and forth, cradling his head in his hands and occasionally pumping his fists into the air. Rolling and reveling, I would call it, instead of tossing and turning. From a certain vantage, it would be difficult to distinguish the two.

When Alan awoke the next morning, he found himself in a superlative mood. "Utterly unbelievable!" he privately enthused, "Who knew starting an absolutely catastrophic riff between the two of them would be so incredibly easy? In the briefest time, their relationship will be completely shattered."

After a few more minutes of enjoying what was, in essence, another man and woman's misfortune, Alan began to think about where he was and what he was doing. He did so in a general, but not too general, sense. It was the day of Nokitoff's second lecture. He had a paper due. He would have to go to the lecture in order to turn it in. He did not actually have his paper, however, because he had given the final draft to his assistant E to rewrite in his own eminently legible script. Whether or not E had actually rewritten the final draft, Alan had no idea. Not having a physical copy of his essay could have potentially posed Alan some problems. Nevertheless, Alan was not concerned by the possibility. Rather, he was far more concerned with the problem of when to get his coat. The walk back home last night had been very brisk. Cold, even. If Alan recklessly exposed himself to the elements for more than a few additional hours, he was, he felt, quite likely to become sick. For this reason, Alan decided that it was not just advisable, but actually imperative for him to stop by François's apartment after the lecture. Then, since he would already be there, it would be perfectly natural for him to ask François about Marie, how badly they had fought the night before, whether they were still together, etc.

Alan bounded out of bed and entered the main room. He found that E was sitting upright in the wooden chair by the dinner table and snoring gently. His arms were folded across his chest, securely clutching a manilla folder. Alan assumed that the folder must have contained E's

rewrite of Alan's original manuscript. Alan tiptoed over to the young man's seat and gently grabbed the folder.

"Aaron?" E asked, interrupting himself mid-snore, "What are you doing?"

Alan was quite startled. He had not expected his assistant to wake, let alone sound so alert. "He must have already been awake," Alan thought. As Alan looked more closely at E, however, he realized that the latter's eyes were closed. What if his assistant were simply dreaming, and had spoken aloud something that, by coincidence, happened to make sense in the present context?

"Is this my paper?" Alan asked in a whisper, trying not to wake his assistant in case he was, in actuality, asleep.

"Yes, this is your paper." E replied, holding the folder more tightly. "It would be very strange, if he were asleep and managed to say that," Alan said to himself.

"I'd like to see it, E," Alan said firmly, deciding to treat E as if he were indeed awake.

E frowned and said, stiffly, "I cannot let you do that Aaron."

"What do you mean you can't let me do that?" Alan asked incredulously.

"This — too important Aaron."

"What do you mean it's too important?" Alan demanded.

E came to his feet. He did so in a way that was both remarkable and eerie. Instead of pushing off his toes, as one normally does when standing, E tensed his thighs, forcing them to swing upward over his knees. This action propelled his body upward, without moving it forward, so that his face ended up in a space not six inches from Alan's own. "You have finished blueprint," E said while rising, "Plan is perfect, and complete. There is nothing more for you to do."

Alan felt uncomfortable with how close E's face was to his own. E, still gripping the folder with both his hands, stated calmly, "Plan — is in my hands now."

Alan was flabbergasted. Eventually, he shook his head. Rather than acknowledge E's usurpation of control over his academic essay, Alan decided to ignore it. Indeed, this was the better decision for our protagonist, at least in terms of conserving his unusually good mood. Instead of badgering his assistant further, Alan suggested to E that the two of them celebrate their recent successes by going out to breakfast. This suggestion was not met with the enthusiasm for which Alan would have hoped. E expressed concern about the amount of time such an excursion

would take. He also doubted the quality of food available at most cafés. Finally, he was wary over the possibility that food would spill on Alan's document. Despite these reservations, Alan managed to convince E to take a trip to a bakery near the Collège de France, under the conditions that Alan's paper would be placed in a manilla folder, itself placed inside a leather case with firm backing, which would be kept at all times in E's burlap sack.

Almost every street corner in Paris has a bakery, any of whose products excel far beyond almost anything one can find in the States. Some are tiny, typically run by a middle-aged woman with the stout build of a ravioli. All day she patiently waits behind the display case, watching as a hundred people walk by for every one that chooses to enter. And yet, the one in a hundred is enough to perpetuate the existence of her and her establishment. She rests at ease. Other bakeries are larger, have several workers, the most senior of which is usually a thin woman with angry-looking eyebrows. In these, the display case is pressed so close to the wall that one can hardly move through the establishment. On one side of the display case there is a door where the line enters; on the other side, a door by the register through which one exits. Mid-sized bakeries are usually busier than smaller ones, but their goods are not necessarily of a higher quality. Nowadays, there are also much larger bakeries, whose style mimics that of an American lunch establishment. They are hateful places, mostly because they offer such a predictably decent product in such a diabolically commodious space. I, like all French people, despise the *boulangerie à l'américaine*. I want to resist it, but cannot.

The bakery which Alan and E tried out that morning was a mid-size. Alan ordered for himself a croissant and an espresso. For his part, E looked at the display-case uneasily.

"What would you like E?" Alan asked.

"Is there anything with bread on outside and...." Here E seemed to be at a loss for words. He cupped his right hand and seemed to make an inserting motion with his left.

"Oh, you mean you want something like a *bao*?" Alan asked, congratulating himself for knowing a technical term in Chinese.

E laughed and nodded. Alan pointed at the *chausson aux pommes*, which is a thin-crust, spherical apple turnover. The two took their breakfast out to a street bench, where they ate together in silence. E finished his pastry and commented, "Good to eat, but it is too much like desert for breakfast." Alan acknowledged E's remark with a thoughtful "huh" and resumed eating his croissant. What they were eating was indeed quite like a desert food, Alan realized. In fact, he had a hard time identifying more than two breakfast items that could not be repurposed for desert.

From this basic insight, Alan might have inferred any number of general points: that Westerners are addicted to bitter foods like coffee, so must go to inordinate lengths to balance the tastes; that Westerners will not feel something is complete if it does not start and finish with something saccharine. Or maybe Alan could have apprehended a more metaphysical point: Westerners feel the beginning of something should be like its end, when there is no necessary reason for it to be so.

Yet Alan was not to have any epiphany such as these, but rather stared thoughtlessly at the ground ahead of him while finishing his croissant. He motioned E toward the Collège and the two were soon crossing the street.

Alan and E found the corridor in which their lecture auditorium was located. The corridor was long and poorly lit. It had a high roof, marble floors, and open windows which faced onto a courtyard. At its end, the corridor made a sharp right, as the building wrapped itself around the green space at its center. Nokitoff's two assistants were standing in front of a pair of doors, which were situated just before the place where the hall turned. The larger of the two was standing in front of the door with his arms folded, while the smaller was slouching against the doorframe, looking bored. Both guards had dressed exactly the same for this lecture as they had for the previous one.

As Alan drew closer, he realized that a long line was forming just past the bend of the hall. The queue was full of quiet, anxious-looking people. Apparently, they were waiting to be admitted to Nokitoff's lecture. Alan wondered if the classroom was not yet open. How that could be, he had no idea. If the door were locked, he would have expected that the two assistants would be looking for the key so that the lecture could start on time. But the two assistants were not searching for the key. As far as Alan could tell, they were either actively blocking the door or passively idling. Unsure of what to do, and not wanting to talk to the guards, Alan decided to head for the back of the line. After taking only a few steps forward, however, someone whistled for his attention.

Alan turned in the direction of the whistle, and saw that its source was the smaller guard. His horribly scarred face motioned for Alan to look further left. Doing so, Alan soon found himself confronting the beefy, folded arms of the Nokitoff's goon. Alan craned his neck upward. As he looked into the small, pale eyes of the bald-headed behemoth, he felt the pulse in his neck reach a crescendo. The man curled his lip upward, derisively baring his incisors. He reached his arm out and Alan flinched.

"Ehsseh!" the man hissed as his hands made the same insistent motion one would expect from a mugger demanding a wallet.

“Essay?” Alan asked.

“Ok, like you say, essay. You write essay?” His heinous pronunciation of the word ‘essay’ remained unreformed.

Alan nodded at the bodyguard and gulped.

“Ok, you write, give me,” he said. The goon continued to make the same insistent motion with his hands. Alan was about to reply that E had his paper, but was interrupted by the soft cough of someone toward the back of the line.

“Hey!” the behemoth bellowed, ”Who speak?” For a half a minute the man squinted hostilely at the length of the line, sticking his tongue into the side of his mouth and rotating it around his teeth. After his tongue had cleared his last molar, the man announced, “One word I will throw you from building!”

He looked down once more at Alan. “Nu?” he asked. Alan motioned for E to produce his paper. E shook his head, unwilling to let another usurper take control of his prize.

“What with you! You think I have whole day? Give me essay!”

Alan gulped severely. In fact, he sympathized with E’s unwillingness to turn over his paper. If it were up to Alan, however, he would have just acquiesced to the man’s request. Now, with E putting up resistance, Alan found that he either had to stick up for his assistant, potentially drawing the wrath of the large Russian, or go against his own personal interest and leave E to face the bully’s malice alone. Forestalling a decision, Alan stated, in a trembling voice, “My assistant wants to know why we would give the essay to you.”

The large man narrowed his eyes at Alan. For several seconds, Alan wilted under the ogre’s terrible, threatening gaze. Alan’s knees bent and he began to feel faint. Soon, however, the man’s anger subsided. He explained, grumpily, “Boss not want people in lecture who not write essay for course. So we collect essay at door. You give me essay, I let you pass. You not give me essay, you go to end of line. If you not want go to end of line, you fuck off. If you not want fuck off, I will fuck you off. In this case, you will not go to end of line.” The man smiled toothily.

Alan motioned once more for E to hand over his paper. This time, Alan’s assistant was more agreeable. E took off his backpack and removed the leather binder. From this, he removed the manilla folder and delivered it neatly into the enormous hands of the individual before him. In turn, the large guard handed the folder to the smaller assistant, who swiftly put it somewhere inside his jacket.

The large man moved away from the door, allowing Alan and E to pass. As the two moved toward the door, however, the large man put one of his heavy hands on E. E looked up at the bodyguard fearfully. A discerning witness would have been surprised to see that, despite E's timorous facial expression, none of his hairs were standing on end, no goosebumps were to be found on his body, and he was actually quite physically poised, his balance suspended lightly on the balls of his feet.

"Where your essay?" The hulking guard asked.

E shook his head and said, defensively, "I not write essay."

"Ah kay," the guard replied easily, "Then you not go to lecture."

E glanced over at Alan, who was holding the door and watching anxiously. Part of him was cursing himself for not entering the lecture auditorium more quickly. Then, he could have settled himself comfortably, and later claimed not to have seen E get stopped at the door. Now, however, E had seen Alan watching him, which meant that Alan was himself, by proxy of guilty obligation, also caught by the bodyguard.

"I am assistant, I must go to lecture with my boss," E insisted.

"No assistant in lecture! So say *my* boss!" The man trumpeted while pointing at himself emphatically. Subsequently, he pointed to the line. Alan now discerned a new pattern amongst the people queueing outside the lecture hall. True, there were a good number of *Praelectus Incompetentis*, and even a smattering of *Praelecti Vacui*. Nevertheless, the most abundant type was "member of an immigrant minority group, in his or her late teens." At the very front of the line, there was a young girl in a Hijab leaning against the wall reading a book. Next to her, stood a lanky young man with wide, sensitive eyes and very dark black skin, who seemed to be reciting something to himself from memory. Alan continued looking down the row, finding multiple, differently featured representatives from South East Asia, Polynesia, the Arab States, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa. Alan felt as if he were looking at the admission line to the Congress of Young French Colonials. In Alan's mind, the nature of E's program began to come into relief. These young, enthusiastic, talented assistants were all themselves immigrants to France. Because of the inequities in the French education system, and in particular the difficulties of entering the universities without a good understanding of French language or academic writing, it would normally be impossible for them to excel in French institutions of learning. Therefore, despite their brilliance, they would never be able to live up to their potential in greater French society. In order to make up for France's bloody history of oppression, and to prevent the cycle of discrimination from repeating itself, each student had been attached to someone like Alan: a

slightly older, academically excellent French national who had grown up abroad. An apprenticeship was evidently what the young were supposed to get out of the arrangement, and in return they would give their time and effort. A mutually beneficial exchange, perhaps, though one cannot help but note that the same trade was always proposed to the colonial situation. The Westerners give sophistication and in return receive free labor.

Alan saw that E was also examining the line. He looked from one fresh-faced young person to the next, his frown deepening with each passing second. His posture slackened; his shoulders slouched. He descended from the balls of his feet. His heels seemed to fall heavily on the ground. He cast a mournful look in Alan's direction, and then began to slough off toward the end of the line.

"Wait," Alan found himself saying. E looked back in Alan's direction and perked his head up thoughtfully. The large Russian, for his part, also looked curiously at Alan.

"You should admit him," Alan said authoritatively.

The Russian smirked, "Why?"

Alan felt the reverberation of the man's booming voice in his chest. Alan feared that courage might fail him.

"He didn't write an essay," Alan explained slowly, hanging onto each of his words carefully, "But he did do a huge amount of work on the one I wrote. He wrote an entire translation of the book, and I couldn't have written my essay without it."

The bodyguard, who at first only seemed disposed toward a merciless skepticism, softened his expression. He looked at E admiringly.

"He write translation?"

"Absolutely," Alan said, "And a good one."

"Give to me translation; I will let that he enter."

Alan looked at E, who shook his head back at Alan. He must not have brought it, Alan thought.

"We didn't bring it."

The large man shrugged his shoulders. "You not bring, I cannot let to enter," he said.

Alan was not sure what other cards he had on the table. He had certainly tried to help; E could hardly blame him for not trying. Looking at his assistant, however, Alan could not help

but feel that he really did want E to come to the lecture. E would enjoy being there, it would give him pride in himself and his achievement. Just the opposite would occur if he were left outside with the wretched of the earth: the homeless, the immigrants, the elderly. The large guard was preparing to push E out of the way, when Alan saw the smaller guard check his diamond encrusted watch. The impish man looked surprised. He began trying to catch the attention of his companion by tapping the face of his wristwatch. Alan realized that it must almost be time for the lecture. Moreover, there was a chance that being punctual might matter more to the guards than meticulously keeping out all those who did not belong.

“Look, come on!” Alan insisted, “My assistant already passed Nokitoff’s test last lecture! Doesn’t that count for something?”

“I not remember he pass test,” the guard said factually.

“He did, he absolutely did,” Alan replied.

Alan watched the larger guard, who returned Alan’s gaze skeptically. Finally, he turned his head toward his colleague and said something in Russian. The latter guard closed his eyes thoughtfully for a moment, before saying, tiredly, “Romeo Romeo ... Shakespeare.” Suddenly the larger guard seemed to recollect E, nodding at the young man with a certain glint of laughter in his eye. The smaller guard motioned for the larger one to wrap up the proceedings. The behemoth nodded and said to E, “Well, today is lucky day Romeo.” With that, the guard smiled and put his hand lower on E’s back, pushing the young man into the lecture hall. Then, looking at Alan, he said good-naturedly, “You may to be good advocate. I know, I advocate.” Here the man pronounced the word ‘advocate’ as if it rhymed with cot instead of kit.

Alan, to put it bluntly, had no idea what the man meant. Had he intended to say that Alan had advocated well? Perhaps. The only problem was that, if he had intended to say Alan was convincing, why had he said “I advocate”? Maybe he meant to say that he was advocating that Alan advocated well. But why would he advocate that? A personal compliment is not usually the kind of thing one has to advocate. But in Russia, maybe it was? Or maybe the man simply did not speak English properly. It occurred to Alan that *avocat* was the French word for lawyer. But that didn’t help anything, Alan thought dismissively. He entered the classroom.

So it was that our protagonist and his intrepid assistant managed to avoid getting bounced from the doors of a prestigious institution of higher learning. The lecture auditorium they entered was almost entirely empty. In a huge space that could have easily seated several hundred, there could not have been more than twenty five people strewn across the room. As it turned out, Nokitoff himself was already present, reviewing his notes atop the lectern at the front

of the room. He was wearing a blue workman's shirt and a black jacket made of polyester leather. Both the jacket and the workman shirt had stitched name tags which read "Vova."

Alan and E found their seats. They prepared themselves for the lecture by removing their notebooks and pens, tucking their bags underneath their seats, and placing their desks in an upright and locked position. These tasks complete, the two sat awkwardly together for a few moments. Alan expected that E would want to give Alan a show of gratitude, one which would no doubt make Alan extremely uncomfortable. Perhaps he would fall to his knees and kiss the bottom of Alan's shoe. Maybe he would insist on giving Alan a piggyback ride. Alan was determined to avoid giving E the opportunity to perform such a minstrel show. For this reason, he tried now to avoid eye-contact with his assistant by looking out the windows to his left. E was about to force Alan's hand, however, by gingerly tapping Alan on the shoulder. Alan felt that he had no option except to turn. E, looking Alan directly in the face, said, "Thank you Aaron. I appreciate very much how you defend me before. I did not want stand in line like other assistants."

Alan blinked at E, before finding himself looking away. He nodded his acknowledgement. "You're welcome," he said.

Abruptly, Nokitoff cleared his throat. He grabbed the sides of the lectern with both his hands and seemed as if he were about to speak. Alan turned back toward the room's entrance, seeing that the two guards had entered the room and were locking its door behind them. As Nokitoff began to speak, the two bounded down the stairs, settling themselves in two chairs at the end of a long wooden table next to the lectern.

"Literature," Nokitoff said, allowing the word's percussive effect to settle with the audience. "Rite of the wrist, stirrer of the soul. Literature: to pronounce the word, the tip of the tongue takes a hike up the palate and then, on the third syllable, holds itself as still as possible, while a bunch of hot air slams against the back teeth. The lips make a kiss, while the throat oohs and aahs in wonderment. Lit. Ri. Chuh. As you can see from the syllabus, today's lecture is about what this word means."

He paused significantly, presenting the audience with a sardonic, almost goading expression.

"Let me, foyst, say that this is obviously a matter which we have no chance of expurgating in a single sitting." Here Nokitoff pronounced the word expurgating as if the g were a j, expurge-ating. "In fact, I can say from experience that even if you are fastidious and regular, even if you sit at the proscribed times and push hard to squeeze out as much as you can every time you sit, *even then* there is a chance you will fail to produce anything resembling what you thought

you wanted to produce when you started. If, indeed, you produce anything at all.”

Nokitoff looked ominously at the room.

He continued, “Nevertheless, I would like today to elucidate two or three major points, about this subject of inquiry.”

Alan was doing his best to keep up with the lecture, writing in a shorthand system he had long ago devised for transcribing lectures. Unfortunately, Nokitoff had a habit of pronouncing some compound words by saying their parts, instead of saying the words in their entirety. To compare the difference to something one encounters in normal speech, sometimes people pronounce the word “Jack-o-lantern” as if it were a single word, “jackalantern,” while other times they enunciate each of the word’s parts. Nokitoff was enunciating the parts of a far larger number of compound words than was normal. And yet, it was not as if he were pronouncing the parts as though they were truly distinct. He would not have pronounced the word “jack-o-lantern” as if it were three words in succession: “jack” “o” “lantern.” His style of pronunciation drew attention to the compositeness of compound words, without disintegrating the composition entirely. It was a way of showing that the word could only be a whole because it was made of parts, while still validating the essence of the whole. Whatever the manner of speaking was, it bothered Alan, slowing down his note taking and making it hard for him to follow the lecture.

“Literature is not one of those things that is easy to define. It is, like beauty, one of those things whose definition is almost always either too broad or too narrow. Or, most often, too broad and too narrow at the same time, so that even a narrow-waisted broad with a cleft-lip may be considered beautiful, while a poem by Rul-keh may not.” Alan thought about how to write the name of this unknown Turkish or Arabian poet. Unable to decide, he put a question mark next to his best guess.

“Given our lack of a good general definition, and until someone has a eureka moment where they discover it, I would propose that perhaps we should not try to answer the question “What is literature?” with a definition. Rather, we must be as the artisan who carves an elephant by removing from the stone everything that does not look like an elephant.

Here Nokitoff paused thoughtfully. He put his finger to his mouth for a second, and then said, in French, *“Just to reiterate for clarity: I am proposing that today’s semantic investigation into the term “literature” will establish a positive definition by developing a taxonomy of disqualifying markers. Subsequently, we shall find that taking the mathematical complement of disqualified objects will, a fortiori, provide a rigorous definition for that which should properly be deemed literary.”*

Although Alan was initially taken aback by the sudden burst of French from Nokitoff, he was relieved to hear it. Admittedly, the idea of removing from the stone everything that doesn't look like an elephant had been a good deal clearer to Alan than taking the mathematical complement of what was, in no real sense, mathematical. Still, Alan appreciated the feel of the words when Nokitoff spoke in French, even if the point they reached for was rather confusing. When Nokitoff had been speaking in English, Alan had the vague sense that he was listening to a car mechanic tell him that everything you needed to know about fine art you could learn from doing one good auto tune-up. Much to Alan's disappointment, Nokitoff abruptly switched back into English.

"Ok, so what do we have here. Foystly, if it ain't written in text, it ain't a work of literature. Bam." Here Nokitoff made a gesture with his hands and thumb indicating "get out of here." He continued without pause, alternating the same gesture with different hands, "If it has no characters: bada-bing. No setting: bada-boom. No events: *arrividerci*. If it don't got any of those things, then it ain't literature. That, I believe, is obvious. But is that all the features? No, it is not. These aforementioned features cannot possibly be enough. Why? Because there is still an elephantine quantity of rock to remove before that statue can be an elephant. Why do I say so? Namely, because all kinds of popular writings, travel logs, pornographies, artifacts from the Zhou dynasty and the country of Lesotho, all these things happen to be texts with characters, settings, and plots. But since we know that all these things are not literature, there is a natural question. What it is it about literature that really separates it from those other things which are much like it, but not?"

Alan felt that Nokitoff was at last getting into the heart of his lecture. Nevertheless, Alan found that it was suddenly very difficult to focus. For after momentarily looking at E, he realized that the latter had fixed his eyes on the table by which the two bodyguards were sitting. Alan saw that the two were reading the papers. In fact, they were writing comments in the ledgers. Was it possible that these two ignoramuses who spoke barely a word of grammatical English between them would be entrusted by so eminent a literary figure as Nokitoff to appraise literary criticism? Alan looked at his lecturer with a certain wondrous horror, wondering if he saw anything. It soon became clear that he was too focused on delivering his own lecture to notice what was going on right by his side. Alan spent the next few minutes desperately trying to keep up with his notes and somehow, through a private mental effort, will Nokitoff to notice the travesty occurring to his left.

"Or, to put the question another way, 'How do we pick a true work of literature out of a textual line up?' The answer is to be found by the introduction of a coytain notion. That notion is the 'literary motif,'" Nokitoff said. He pronounced the eff in the word motif as if it were a vee.

“Literary motifs are often discussed, but usually in a disorganized and slap-dash fashion. Motifs are talked about as if they were refrains in a song, specific to the song in which they occur, and then repeated again and again as the song plays on. Really, literary motifs are like flavors, which exist in much the same way as the Play-tonic ideals “Sweet” or “Spicy.” Flavors occur in every dish in some proportion, and are made conspicuous even by their absence. An experienced eater knows what the possible flavors are, and could produce a complete list of the flavors, eventually, if someone so entreated them. Motifs in literature are infinitely more complex and varied than flavors in food, but, like flavors, they occur again and again, and are not specific to the thing in which they occur. Moreover, just as it is flavors, and only flavors, that transform food from nourishment into cuisine, so too are literary motifs what transform mere stories into art. Hence, we may now see what it is that separates “popular fiction” from true art; the popular fiction has no motifs at all, or, if it does, has motifs that are so artificial, insipid, and rotten that they hardly deserve to be called motifs in the first place. Moreover, this is what separates supposed “Chinese literature” or “Afri-can literature” or “Indi-an Literature” from true literature: these texts have such strange motifs that the palate cannot even understand, let alone appreciate, what it is sampling. What I’m saying is that Chinese literature is a contradiction in terms: an oxymoron, like sweet and sour soup. Some may say that’s race-ist, or colonial-ist, or some-other-hoo-hoo-ist. But it isn’t, it ain’t, and it is not, because I am not disparaging those texts or those cultures. I am not disparaging them at all. Those texts from those other cultures are perfectly fine for whatever it is that they are. It’s just that they are not literature. And anyone who has actually invested themselves in literature would recognize that, just as any-one who has eaten a good deal in French or Italian restaurants would understand that what you get at a dim sum place is not cuisine.”

Alan looked warily at the two bodyguards, who were now reading one of the papers together. They were laughing quite a lot as they read, poking each other in the rib cage as they exchanged quick, enthusiastic remarks. They seemed to be laughing at the comments each of them had written in the margins.

“Now, once we have at our disposal the concept of a literary motif, we can use it to break apart the problem of what exactly literature is. A work of literature, it turns out, is a text with characters, settings, and a plot, but most importantly it is a text that invokes the time-less literary motifs. More-over, there are rules and principles which govern the use of said motifs, which determine the quality of their usage. It is from these laws that we derive the universal criteria for a work of literature to be good. It is not merely arbitrary, not just at the leisure of the writer, to decide what will found the construction of his work of literature. Nor is it at the discretion of a group of writers, subject to fad or fancy. Excellent literature is excellent now, then, and

forever.”

Nokitoff looked out the audience to see how they took the remark. Alan snapped back to attention and tried to appear as if he had been following very closely. He nodded his head enthusiastically. For an instant, he felt that Nokitoff has caught his gaze. Nokitoff took a glass of water from the lectern and took a hearty drink.

“Ok, with that said, it’s clear what we need to do to understand what literature is, and what makes it good or bad. We need to examine the motifs. Only problem is that there are a whole fuckin’ lot of ‘em, and, sometimes, they are so mixed up with with each other that they may be there but you would never know it. Nevertheless, with my help, we will be able to gather a full list of them by the end of the course. For the rest of today’s lecture we will only have time to examine one motif. But it is also one of the most important ones.”

What had begun in Alan as wariness and incredulity toward the two bodyguards now turned into genuine fear and excitement. Alan felt a certain tingling in his spine as he saw the smaller guard with the minced eyebrow remove a jackknife from his inner jacket pocket. He flipped out the blade with his right hand and with his left held the paper he had been reading up to his eye level. He proceeded to shred the essay systematically into even sized ribbons, which fell in three directions on the desk. Nokitoff remained oblivious.

“What is the motif to which I refer? You will notice that throughout many great works of literature we find two characters put together. The foyst is a king, an emperor, a scientist, or, in short, some kind of rule-maker. The second character is a home-less man, a clown, a ghost, an imp, a fool. In short, he is someone beyond the normal order of things. Usually, he seems as if he was not just touched by the holy ghost, but down right molested by it. For this reason, I will call him “the sacred man.” Lear and the Fool, Faust and Mephistopheles, Potso and Lucky, Klamm and K, Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past: these are some of the more famous examples of Rule-Maker and Sacred Man. There are many, many more.”

The larger guard, evidently impressed by the smaller’s antic, but not wanting to be outdone, gathered the long even sheets of paper into a small pile in front of him. Then, he appeared to asked the other guard for his knife. With knife in hand, he took yet another essay from the pile and rolled it into a thin cylinder. These, he proceeded to cut with a bias of no more than 5 degrees. Curly, onion-like ribbons fell into a pile directly in front of the man.

“The foyst mention of such an encounter in literary history does not come from any book we have surviving, but it is also the clearest voysion of the motif. In this story, Alexander the Great decides to visit a homeless man whose real name is “Son of Zeus,” but who most people just call

“The Dog.” He finds that the Dog is trying to tan in the sun. Alexander walks up to The Dog and starts talking. “Hey you, yeah you, Dog,” Alexander says, “I like you Dog. Whatever you want, I’ll get it for you.” The Dog looks up, and says to Alexander, King of the Greeks, most powerful man in the woyle, “All I want right now is to sit in the fuckin’ sun. So, why don’t you get me a whole big box of scam?” Alexander doesn’t know what to do. He can punish The Dog for insolence, but what’s the use? He knows The Dog is going to be as insolent as ever after he punishes him, and he’s already just some harmless old man. Alexander can tell The Dog what to do, and punish the Dog for not doing it. But what he cannot do is make the Dog obey. So Alexander decides to take a hike.”

At this point Alan was about ready to raise his hand and demand that Nokitoff do something to control his assistants. He was not able to do so, however, because the two had just now resumed reading the pile normally. In fact, they were now scrutinizing together one particular text. The two marveled at it; they kept pointing at various parts of the page and stroking it lovingly. Alan’s heart stopped as he saw the smaller guard point in his own direction. They were reading his essay! What would they do to it?

“Now, I want to dwell a bit more on the meaning of this moment, by considering what the characters themselves embody. Alexander the Great is famous for being the first person to ever dream of ruling the entire world. And yet even in Athens, he finds The Dog, who says Alexander is not his king. The Dog says he is not Greek, but rather a “citizen of the woyle.” Which is to say, The Dog claims to represent the kingdom Alexander wants to be his. And yet, there is an irony, because The Dog really is Greek. Therefore, in point of fact, he is a member of the community Alexander already rules. So The Dog not only represents the kingdom Alexander doesn’t yet have, but he represents Alexander’s lack of power over the kingdom he already does. In short, by his existence alone The Dog proves that Alexander’s dream is never going to be a reality. The Dog therefore incarnates unobtainability itself. Because Alexander wishes to obtain everything, he is drawn to The Dog, the unobtainable. And yet because The Dog is by definition unobtainable, there is nothing for Alexander to do: he is mocked, laughed at, insulted. The Dog is the hair in Alexander’s throat.”

The smaller guard took the essay Alan assumed was his and put it in his coat pocket. The two guards traded thumbs up signs and resumed reading the pile. Alan exhaled in relief and looked at E. The latter was holding his hand to his heart and hyperventilating.

“So, same story with the Fool, who always mocks Lear for trying to control fate. Same story with Mephistopheles, who claims to give Faust omnipotence but always holds something back. And so on, and so forth. The sacred man represent the thing which is beyond the power of the

rule-maker to obtain. The interesting thing is that it's entirely the rule-makers fault that the sacred man is important in the first place. No one cares about the sacred man besides the rule-maker: he's always there, sometimes making mischief, but generally harmless. It is the rule-maker's ambition to control everything that makes unobtainability, and the sacred man, a problem."

Alan realized that he was not really sure what Nokitoff was talking about, although it sounded as if what he was saying could not be terribly complicated. Even when paying attention to the guards, Alan had been taking notes, which he knew in normal experience would come close to an exact representation of what had been said. He decided to try to read from a few minutes back, hoping to catch up.

"One reason for the persistence and the importance of the Rule-Maker/Sacred Man motif is its connection to the act of writing. For the novelist is a finite being trying to make rules for something so vast as a woorld. He creates the setting, the characters, the sequence of events: in short, he tries to be God over the text. Unfortunately, he is not capable of being a God, for a literary text is too large and rich. Moreover, whatever it lacks in concrete existence it makes up for in potential. Hence, the text itself is a thing beyond the writer's control. He never knows exactly what words he's used; he is not Homer, able to reproduce from memory that which he has written. Worse, the meaning of the words themselves change over time; the meaning of the text is always slipping further and further beyond his control. The text itself is The Dog, The Fool, The Mephistopheles. It dances there in front of him, a fop with a ridiculous poof of hair on his head. Or maybe it's a mime juggling a full deck of playing cards. There's a lot of different ways one could put it in a novel; one could even do it as a mischievous, prepubescent girl. All the while the text presents the writer opportunities, some good, some bad, some who knows, amongst which the writer is expected to chose. The joker laughs. How the writer wishes he could have power over everything! And yet he cannot."

Alan had by now totally lost the thread of the lecture, he had a strange assortment of random words written on the page which it would take substantial effort to reconstruct. The only thing which stuck to Alan was Nokitoff's description of the "sacred man," which had bothered Alan enormously for some reason he could not decide. He had the vague feeling that some kind of strap was choking him. For this reason, Alan began to vigorously scratch his neck. Suddenly, a terrible image confronted him, which he could hardly decide to be true or false on the basis of memory alone. He thought for a moment that he had seen the gamesman's face in the window-sill, laughing exuberantly. When Alan blinked, it seemed that the con-artist had disappeared.

"It is for this reason, that the novelist of ideas and causes so drastically misses. He invokes

tropes, motifs, strings together a bunch of haphazard gambits in order to construct a text that is indeed recognizably literature. But he is too focused on his issue, his cause. He is making a point and his motifs become all demented in the process. He favors the bad daughters and ignores Cordelia.”

Alan hardly even heard the lecture. It was as if he were experiencing the same tunneling of consciousness that he had on his first day in Paris. It seemed to him that he was looking at Nokitoff and the lecture auditorium in the Collège de France through a piece of piping, and that the gamesman was somehow on all sides of the pipe at once. Now he was jumping up and down on the pipe, now he was thumping his foot hard and fast like a bunny rabbit. Alan managed to avoid recalling the gamesman’s face from memory, but it was like a pulsating weight that at once threatened to crash down on him and rise up from above. Meanwhile, Nokitoff was leaning back, holding his hands in his pockets and striking a concluding tone.

“The alternative?” Nokitoff asked rhetorically, “That the novelist has a vision and stays as true to this as he can. His subconscious churns and churns, trying to fit the puzzle piece of literary motifs together in his head. Until, one day, he sees the outline and then, looking closer, realizes that he’s got the whole picture. It is not a conscious writing, a forcing, but rather a more authentic relation to the text. All my books are a product of such a process. Hopefully, at the end of the course, you’ll be able to see why they’re so much better than something written by Johnny Steinbeck or Teddy Dreiser.”

With that, Nokitoff abruptly stopped speaking and moved toward the exit at the front of the auditorium. As he passed the table his bodyguards had been sitting at during the lecture, he rapped his hands twice on the wooden surface. In response to this signal, the two quickly gathered the papers and were soon following Nokitoff as he walked out the front exit. Alan told E that he would meet the latter at home. The two soon went their separate ways.

Alan left Nokitoff’s lecture in an odd mood. Before the lecture, he had been mirthful, even giddy. And indeed, after the lecture, much about his demeanor was the same. As Alan traversed from the Collège de France to the Bourse, he felt the same effortless appreciation that he had the night before: the sounds of cars honking and the policeman’s whistles, the soothing smell of salt in the air. It all seemed to be part and parcel of a thing made for him. The world was the present he had always wanted.

Yet Alan was also unsettled. In the massive and unavoidable tourist trap just east of the Place St. Michel, he had noticed a restaurant whose facade was adorned by a banner composed of

differently colored triangular handkerchiefs. The banner caused Alan to fly into a terrible rage. When the owner of the establishment asked Alan if he would to try the lunch menu, Alan responded by explaining in no uncertain terms that the man should go and have sexual intercourse with his mother. The restaurant owner, like most restaurateurs in this part of town, was well accustomed to surprisingly hostile reactions from random passersby. He smiled at Alan and began looking out for the next customer to harangue. Alan, on the other hand, spent the next few minutes wondering what had come over him. This period of introspection ended when he came to the Fontaine St. Michel and saw a juggler performing. He found himself unable to take his eyes off the spectacle, even though some part of himself was insisting that he should look away and possibly run. So mesmerized was Alan that at some point he was actually fully turned around, walking backwards toward Paris's right bank. He continued walking backwards over the nearest bridge, standing on his tiptoes to be able to look at the juggler. Alan backpedaled for another twenty or thirty meters, until he happened to see something out of the corner of his right eye. Two old men were playing cards on a bench. One of the men, the one with a pigeon on his shoulder, was just about to shuffle the deck. The very instant the cards began to break against each other, a strange terror seized Alan. Abruptly, he made an about face and ran to the far edge of the bridge. Then, at a safe distance, Alan had a moment to collect himself. At last he intuited the cause for his behavior. Something from the lecture had dredged the con artist to the fore of Alan's mind. Now, he was having problems submerging the memory back beneath the surface. Everywhere he turned, he was seeing things that reminded him of the gamesman. It was as if the latter were a lost love.

Alan had a few minutes more of walking, which he used to steady himself. He recalled to mind his goals in the present moment and how those goals related to his life in general. A glowing, warm feeling grew in his chest, as he released himself into the sense that he was living out a destiny all but manifest. The path before him and behind him seemed to become meaningful and clear. Even the obstacles were a comfort to him now, just like the briny river smell in the air. At the top floor of the building he was now approaching, there was information waiting for him. This information would, after deliberation, be transformed into a directive and a task, which would in turn be used to unite Alan with Marie. In turn, Marie would fire his imagination, help him commune with his true, inner-essence, and thereafter enable him to become his time's Chateaubriand. And so it was now up to Alan to seize the information, to figure out what was happening between Marie and François.

And so Alan's last few steps toward François's building were full of vigor. He punched the entry code 1776 with a certain zealously, not even looking at the dial pad as he did so. Alan suspected that he had made a mistake inputting the code, though when he tried the door he

found that it opened as expected. Buoyed by this confirmation of his sense of the moment, Alan turned without hesitation to the right. Soon he was bounding up the stairs, three at a time. The floorboards gasped under the duress of his heavy landing. Upon taking his third step, Alan felt the floorboard give more than he would have expected. Alan had the vertiginous fear that the stairs might crack. In an act of excessive poise, Alan grabbed for the banister. Though the floorboard did not crack, Alan did miss the banister and was thereby thrown off balance. Alan belatedly decided to ascend the stairs in a measured fashion. Though he was self-consciously confident in his ability to navigate François' apartment, his movement was unduly inflected by the paranoid feeling that something might somehow go wrong. Which was perfectly natural: what distinguishes over-confidence from simple certainty is the paranoia that it might not be merited.

Alan knocked firmly on the door. He heard footsteps and straightened his posture, in order to approximate François's height as best he could. The door opened a crack; a flood of fear and excitement went down from Alan's eyes through his esophagus before settling in the base of his stomach. The one who opened the door was not François, but rather Marie.

"*Alain!*" she shouted. Alan was too shocked by her presence to reply, although he did appreciate the shimmering sensation that the sound of her voice aroused. Marie opened the door wide and bounced over to Alan with the nimble grace of a ballerina.

"*I love you so much I could kiss you!*" she enthused, standing on her toes as she did so. She kissed Alan, first on his left cheek, and then on his right, before finally settling with an agreeable smooching sound on his lips. Alan was too busy processing her appearance to respond properly to her sudden gesture. She was wearing a man's dress shirt, fit to someone a few inches taller than Alan. The gleam of the light off her legs seemed all the more luminous for the fact that she was not, as far as Alan could tell, wearing underwear. Before Alan could seize her buttocks in his hands, however, Marie disentangled herself from his body. She spoke hurriedly, "*The cloud has past Alan! A new day is dawned! I feel as if I were a condemned person set free!*"

With that, Marie twirled around and curtsied toward Alan by pulling at the sides of her shirt. When she did so, she revealed that she was wearing a tight-fitting pair of powder blue boxer-briefs. Alan was overwhelmed by the radiance of Marie. How marvelous she was when happy!

"*Then you've broken up with François?*" Alan asked, not containing in the slightest his enthusiasm for the idea.

"*Yes!*" Marie said in rapture. She began laughing and bent about her waist, pulling her elbows into her stomach.

“That’s incredible Marie!” Alan whooped, pumping his fists.

“I know, but let me tell you the whole story,” Marie began, *“So, first, before dinner last night, I told François that I wanted to see what other men were like before we got engaged properly.”*

Alan’s eyes went wide.

“You know, I wanted to try being with someone more artistic, or literary, or humanistic. I don’t know, just someone not so boorishly practical, or stuffily French. In short, someone not François.”

Alan’s smile was so wide that it connected the apexes of his respective cheek bones.

“As you can imagine, he took the news badly and was in a funk the entire evening. Then, he started to provoke that fight with you. And you, Alan, you took the bait so drastically! So wonderfully! You exposed him for the over-bearing monster that he was!”

Alan pointed at himself and mouthed, wondrously, “Me?”

“Yes!” Marie shouted. *“I was so furious with him, and he was so over-vexed also, that we cleared the guests out of the apartment immediately and began to have a catastrophic fight. We shouted so much, I felt as if my cheeks would burn up from heat, or that my forehead would explode!”*

The imagery of an incensed Marie was too much for Alan. He began to sweat profusely. He felt that his face was becoming red.

“And he looked so terrible Alain! He must have been just as furious as me. The fight got so bad that at one point I picked up my shoe and threw it at him, falling into a bundle of tears on the couch. He sat, watching me cry for some minutes, before joining me. And then, the most incredible thing happened!”

“He suggested that you break up?” Alan squealed.

“Eventually, but not yet. No, first he came over and said he was listening. Then we talked honestly. A brutal, terrible honesty that cut us both too the core. I told him that he was treating me as if I were a potted cactus: a plant that can be kept in its house, away from the sun, with no water, and maintain itself just the same as it always was.” Here Marie suddenly began to shout angrily, as if losing her sense of place and time, *“But I’m not a cactus François!”*

Alan, taken aback by the fact that she had seemed to call him François, only nodded. But Marie was hardly noticing Alan, instead she shouted the line again, and again.

“I’m not a cactus François! I cannot keep every promise I made as a foolish little girl!”

Marie looked lividly at Alan, as if demanding some kind of response. But then, just as Alan was mustering himself to mumble something or other, Marie smiled once more, gasping slightly.

“Oh Alain! But then, it was his turn. And he started telling me how afraid he was of the same, how he was changed now too and not sure if we would have anything in common any more. And when he returned to Paris, he found that I was another person. I was cold, dry, limpid. I was passionless and asexual. In his words, I was two parentheses with nothing in between. But then, sometimes, when I got engrossed by something or another, I would forget that he was there. And he saw me Alain, and he saw that I was the same as before. And he told me that I was acting with him. And you know what Alan?”

Alan’s trepidation was growing. He did not like where the conversation was going. He, with genuine uncertainty, asked, *“What Marie?”*

“He was right Alain! I was acting with him. And he helped me realize Alain, that I was protecting myself. I was afraid that he would find something in me that he didn’t like any more, so I emptied myself. I was nothing, so there was nothing to object to. I sabotaged it, Alain, so that it would be someone else whose love failed — not Marie! And then something even more remarkable happened, which I never expected. He said that he understood! It was the weight of the past on us, our debts on each other that caused us to fight. And so you know what he suggested we do?”

“No,” Alan replied gravely.

“That we end our relationship for good! That we declare ourselves bankrupt with respect to each other. No debts to settle, none of the old promises to live up to. And when he said that, I saw in his eyes such a pain and forgiveness as I had only ever intuited in myself as an emotion for him. I could not help it Alain, I dove into his arms straightaway!”

At this point it will be useful to introduce an analogy. Life may be compared to the sailing of a massive armada across an unbounded watery plane. The watery depth corresponds to the heavy, formless, vaguely threatening misery which surrounds us all our life, while the sailing of the ships corresponds to the actual process of living. And we, what are we? We are the boats, the vessels, the ships that make up the armada. And yet we are not all of like natures; ours is not a fleet of cookie-cutters. Rather, we are all of different shapes, colors, and most important, we are all of different sizes. Some of us are small in personality, like canoes or paddle boats, while others are enormous, as big or bigger than the Titanic.

Now every ship is perennially at risk of taking on water, which will cause it to depress lower, making movement more difficult, and making it easier in the end for the ship to take on more water and sink even more. And if enough water is taken on? The water will cross over the lip of the hull, the entire ship will be flooded. The armada will have to arrange some kind of intervention if it wants to recover the ship from the ocean floor.

Fortunately, we as ships are usually well-equipped to handle the sea of troubles, cruising along at a fair clip even in adverse weather. And yet, we do not all handle the problem of cruising along in the same way. Smaller vessels, made with a single simple hull, quietly move around the big obstacles in life. If the ship springs a hole, the water must be shoveled out quickly, but even a small crew is almost always more than up to the task. On the other hand, a personality that has to carry around a lot of stuff will not be able to maneuver easily around adversity. In response, these ships are typically designed to be far larger than their needs would seem to dictate. Their hulls are composed of an intricate patchwork of interlocking, independently sealable sub-compartments. In this way, large personalities can encounter all manners of minor adversity, spring all kinds of holes, take on tons and tons of unnecessary ballast, and yet cruise on much the same as before, simply by shutting off those sections of their personality until repairs can be made. This is to explain why megalomaniacs seem to have such unsinkable personalities.

And yet, as it turns out, the large personality has a critical weakness. If a serious enough breach occurs, one that happens so quickly and so broadly that the containment systems are overwhelmed, then there is no hope of shoveling out all the misery taken on. The ship is simply going to go down. So it was with Alan in this exact moment. For he had sighted the iceberg too late and was only just now realizing that the news was going to be catastrophically bad, not unfathomably good. Sounds of alarm began to blare in Alan's head. A rush of different voices all tried to speak at once, each in point of fact saying nothing at all. Marie continued reveling, *"And just like that, the moment after we filed for bankruptcy, we started something new. We ripped off each others clothes."*

A giant screech in Alan's mind, similar to the sound of metal tearing against rock, to which was joined the panicked shrieks of the thousand moods which occupied his soul.

"And we had the most impassioned, mind-blowing sex I could have ever thought possible!"

There was a great quiet in Alan's mind. The thousand personalities competing for attention collapsed to one, which sat stoically silent amidst the klaxon sounds: the blair of alarms, the rushing sound of swiftly descending despair, the dull thud of metal compartments clamping down in a vain effort to stave off the inevitable.

“I’ve never felt so close to him Alan, and I feel free too!”

He was shutting down, closing off. He was quarantining the disaster and losing basic functions in order to do so. He couldn’t feel his lips. Breathing was arduous. He focused on taking a breath while looking at the top button of Marie’s shirt. He didn’t even realize it but he had switched to English.

“That’s great. I’m so happy for you.”

Marie’s smile began to descend. Alan continued to speak, his voice as dispassionate as that of an automated warning system.

“I was worried I’d done something terrible. Anyway, I’m very busy, do you think I could have my coat?”

Marie’s face fell now as she realized that something was drastically wrong with Alan. She was at a loss for words. After a few seconds passed, she decided to follow Alan’s request and get his coat. When she returned, it was clear from her face that she was quite distraught. She gave Alan his jacket and put her hand to his shoulder.

“Do you not feel well, Alain?” she asked concernedly.

“Not particularly, no,” he replied factually, “Goodbye.”

With that, he turned around and descended the staircase. Whether Marie was calling his name, Alan had no idea. He had long ago shut down both his hearing functions and his internal clock. Marie could have run after him at that point and prevented him from leaving. If she had, the embarrassment of the moment would have forced Alan to crumple in a ball and roll head over feet down the stairs.

Marie did not run after Alan, however, and Alan realized that she was not going to upon reaching the landing on the second floor. He was now relying on changes in space to mark the passage of time. Unfortunately, even his spatial awareness was beginning to crumble. Alan lost control of basic posture. His back slunk lower and lower on the right side. He began to walk like someone with middle-stage Parkinson’s. He held his left hand to the banister, gripped it tightly, and then stepped down two steps. He landed unevenly, forcing his body to swing around into the banister until he hit his chest. A sharp pain struck his hand, while a dull one occurred just below his nipple. Momentarily, the pain restored some of his functions and he made a mad, uneven dash for the exit.

Alan burst outside the doors of François’s apartment, running immediately into a duo of

tourists carrying coffee-type beverages from some imported American coffee chain. The liquid, which smelled of Pumpkin and Strawberry, as well as Coffee and Spiced Indian Tea, flew high into the air. A moment later and it crashed upon Alan, staining more than half Alan's shirt and scalding his flesh.

"Your Mouth Prostitute!" Alan screamed, using English words to invoke French curses. He did not bother to apologize to the couple.

"French prick," the American tourist replied. Alan cackled ludicrously in the man's direction. He officiously slung his coat across half his body like a poncho, and then traipsed backward into the street. A motorbike's tiny horn tooted its objection as the driver sped around Alan. The car following the motorcycle broke suddenly and stopped just in front of Alan. Alan flipped himself around and landed with his back on the car.

Alan stared upward wide-eyed, looking directly into the noonday sun as his body slid down the front of the car. After maybe ten seconds of looking he slid off the hood and crumpled gently onto the street. But for the fact that the car had recently been waxed, Alan might have contracted incurable blindness. As was, his vision had become splotchy, discolored, and generally ineffective. The absence of sight allowed Alan to regain some of his hearing.

"Get off my car you son of a whore! You're too young to be a bum!"

Alan remained kneeling while the driver backed his car up and sped around Alan. Our embattled protagonist stayed on the ground for as long as a minute. Drivers rerouted their cars around Alan and screamed gratuitous curses at him, saying that it was people like him that explained why France was going to shit. Finally, Alan stood and gradually began to slough across town. He was wet, smelly, and totally bereft of spirit. Ironically, this was the first time that all the locals treated him as if he were a real Parisian.

Several hours later, Alan arrived at his apartment. As soon as he opened the door, E took charge of him. He insisted that Alan take off his clothes and sit in a chair in the center of the room. Alan, delirious, stripped down to his briefs and sat, leaning far back in the chair. Suddenly, he felt a splash of cold water on his face as E hurled at him a glass's worth of water. Alan moaned and was hit by a second glassful.

"Aaron, you are love sick?" E asked worriedly.

Alan nodded and motioned for more water. E shook his head and said, "Need more time. Once every fifteen minutes: no more."

Alan would have liked to scream at E to splash him with water immediately, but he found

that he could hardly move his mouth. Alan soon lost interest and E began to put Alan's clothes in order. When he got to Alan's jacket, he discovered an envelope was contained in the pocket.

"What's this Aaron?" E asked.

Alan had trouble focusing his eyes on the object E was holding. E opened the envelope, scanned the contents, and then handed it to Alan with trembling hands. Alan, in fits and starts, began to read.

"Alan

Because I would have welcomed you as a brother, it pains me all the more to propose what I must. It has become clear to me that mine and Marie's love is burdened by an enormous debt of the past, and that our relationship must grow rapidly if there is to be any hope of escaping a death spiral of emotional debt. Though I have long suspected you of having feelings for Marie, I always projected them as something that would pass, a minor bubble which would come and leave, never having had any measurable effects. But last night, I realized that you were pursuing her with the utmost vigor, and that there was actually a chance you would succeed in winning her away from me.

Alan, you must desist from your pursuit! There is no future for you in it! And what is more, I am willing to risk everything to make sure that there is no future in it. Alan, I beg you to tell Marie in the clearest terms that you have no interest in a relationship with her, and that she would be a fool to throw away what she and I have. If you are unwilling to surrender your baseless claim to Marie's heart, and endorse my own, then my hand is forced. I will challenge you to a duel.

Consider Alan, if you would not dare to risk your life for Marie, then either you are a coward or do not love her as much as I do. In either case, it is not you who deserve her, but I. Don't be a fool Alan and throw yourself away for some girl you barely know! Think Alan, would you really risk your life for her? But also know that there is no time to think. If you must think about it, you also must know that the risk cannot be worth it. Which is why I insist that you reply as soon as possible, and that if you accept my challenge that the duel commence on the morning thereafter. Send confirmation of your intent and I will take care of the arrangements.

Confidently awaiting your reply,

Eugène-François

At first Alan read the note lamely, with the reluctant curiosity of a child being schooled about something he is quite sure will prove boring. And yet soon he found that François's words were

divulging a huge amount of information about how he saw Alan and Marie. When Alan realized what François was actually proposing, however, a shuddering chill rose up through his esophagus. The letter brought to mind Alan's memory of the dead bodies he had seen on the French news report on the airplane. In every scene it was a different crying family, a different background environment. The body, however, laid supine and being carted away slowly, without any of the urgency of the world, was always the same: covered in a horrible black shroud. In particular, he was struck by the image of one of the dueling victims, one whose corpse had not been appropriately covered, so that one of the individual's wrinkle-less, blemish-less hands fell limply off the side of the gurney. The person's fingers was ever so slightly blue.

Just then, there was a knock at Alan's door. E glanced at the entrance and then back at Alan. Alan shook his head vigorously, fearing that death itself might be on the other side of his doorstep. E did not see Alan, but instead stood up. Alan insisted that the door not be answered, but his assistant ignored him. A few seconds later and the door was swung wide. Alan felt a cool splash of light hit his face. The original source of the ray was the meager bulb hanging in the hallway, which was subsequently refracted and magnified by the lapels of the man standing below it. The unexpected visitor was none other than the second of Nokitoff's assistants, the diminutive one who dressed extravagantly.

The brutally scarred man did not wait to be ushered into the apartment, but rather immediately stepped around E and entered the main room. There, he discovered Alan sitting totally naked, except for his underwear, with water dripping from his head to his toes. Somehow, the assistant did not seem surprised by Alan's present state. Rather, he squinted up and to the left, then up and to the right, before finally settling his eyes on Alan once more.

"You are Alan Stuart," he said. Alan was surprised to discover that the diminutive guard had significantly better English than his large counterpart did.

"Yes." Alan replied.

"Excellent. I have been sent to tell you that my superior, Vladimir Nokitoff, has taken an interest in your work and in you personally. He requests your company Saturday afternoon at the Geneva Palace Hotel, which is located in Geneva, Switzerland."

E tittered excitedly and seemed to jump up and down on his feet. The more profound reaction was to be found in Alan, however. It was as if someone had detonated a container of very highly pressured air in his head, forcing a good deal of Alan's mental ballast to rush out so quickly that it was almost as if it had never been there. The containment mechanisms in his mind began to function as they should. Alan was sitting higher in his seat.

“I’ll be there.” Alan said in a rising tone, marveling that his powers of speech would return for such a triumphant sentence.

The short Russian nodded, and then, relaxing his posture a bit, added, “On a personal note, I liked your essay very much. It is unusual for a foreigner to write so well about Russian literature.”

“Thanks!” Alan yelled, then coughed. The bodyguard nodded and let himself out the door.

“AARON!” E screamed ecstatically, “ESSAY WAS SUCCESS!”

Alan chuckled. Just when he had thought all hope was lost, expecting death to be knocking at his door, ready to carry him away, something like this happened. He realized that he had the mental energy necessary to undertake a full analysis of the letter and what it meant for him vis-à-vis Marie. Clearly, François’s counter-play to Alan’s gambit had been a successful one. Marie and he had definitely had sexual intercourse. This was to the game of love what sacking the queen was in chess. And yet François seemed uncertain about his position. Indeed, he had admitted as much in the letter. If François had the upper-hand, why would he do something so drastic as challenge Alan to a duel? Alan did not suspect that François had any real grievance against him. If Alan was to understand how to respond to the drastic maneuver, he had to consider why someone would make it.

Alan began to pace. He instructed E to make him a pot of the Iron Goddess tea. Meanwhile, Alan went to put on a fresh pair of clothes and fix his appearance. When he returned, E had the tea waiting for him. Alan sat with E and privately ruminated. For his part, E sat in his chair and sleepily drank the tea. Perhaps the important thing to focus on, Alan thought, was not the possibility that the two would actually duel, but rather the fact that he had been challenged to a duel. The threat of infinite damage is often enough to influence behavior. In poker, a player with significantly more money than another player, but not necessarily a better hand, can make a bet big enough to bankrupt the latter. Should the poorer player lose this hand, he will lose the game. This threat is often enough to make the poorer player forfeit in order to see another hand. And yet, the poorer player’s situation is already that much more difficult, for he has to forfeit the money that he put into seeing his hand so far. Every time the poorer player folds under threat of bankruptcy, the easier it becomes for the other players to make the same threat. It is for this reason that having more money can be even more dangerous than having better cards. Of course, a player does risk a lot in putting his opponent all-in. If the opponent really does have a winning hand, the player has given the opponent a chance to double his strength in a single round.

The more Alan thought about it, the more he became convinced that François was trying to

win points by intimidation. “He must know how demoralizing his success would be for me,” Alan thought. “He wants me to quit while he’s ahead.” Indeed, Alan observed, often times when men learn that it will not be easy to go anywhere with a girl, they will actually lose interest. By making the process of getting Marie even more arduous, he greatly incentivized Alan to forfeit. But because Alan was flush with the recent success in his professional life, and because he was also eager to avenge himself for the hurt he was still enduring, Alan actually viewed François as giving him an opportunity. “I can accept the challenge,” Alan told himself, “And sooner or later *he* will have to back down. Then I can tell Marie about this whole duplicitous and awful conspiracy François has devised, while still affirming the boundlessness of my love for her.” Moreover, Alan was sure that he would not be the one to back down. For Alan knew something that François did not: that Alan was a man of destiny, a man *with* a destiny, that the deck was stacked and he had drawn four aces. As such, Alan was not one who could be shot down by a bullet or prevented from obtaining his love. Seeing a piece of paper and E’s calligraphic pen on the table, he quickly jotted something down. He looked up from the paper into E’s meditatively calm face. “I want you to deliver a message to this address,” Alan said while tapping the paper.

“What message?” E asked curiously.

“Two words: I accept.”

Chapter 9

Purgatory is more poetic than either heaven or hell: It offers a future that the others do not.

-From The Genius of Christianity, François-René de Chateaubriand

To the South of Denfert Roucherau, one finds the park *Montsouris*, or “Mouse Mountain.” An apt name, as both the park and the rodent share a similar topography. They are both low and flat toward the front, sloping gradually upward through the middle. The final third features a sizable rump, which swiftly flattens toward the very end.

One can also translate the name *Montsouris* more whimsically, since the word *souris* could also mean “you smile.” “You Smile Mountain” sounds like it could be the name of either a corny amusement park or a completely generic restaurant in Chinatown. Still, the park would deserve the name, for *Montsouris* is as charming and carefree a place as one can find in Paris. It bridges the gap between the larger parks *Boulogne* and *Vincennes*, which simulate natural woods, and the more artificial gardens of *Luxemburg* or *Tuileries*. Towards the northeast end of *Montsouris*, there lies an artificial lake, which used to be a large and productive quarry. Swing sets and gravel paths line the lake now; the agonized shouts of workmen breaking stones have been replaced by the joyful shrieks of children playing. The hill toward the south of the park is overgrown with greenery. A perfect place, I would presume, for a child to get lost in imagination or adventure. On the west face of this hill, the brush has been cleared away, so that adults may pick up books and read in comfort, losing themselves in fantasy the only way society deems age-appropriate. At the park *Montsouris*, the sternest *grand-mère* soon becomes a dotting *mamie* or *mémé*. Even the ducks seem to have nothing better to do than to blow dandelion seeds to the wind.

Early that morning, the air was cold, humid, and still. In particular, the air grew thick around the hill at the park’s south, becoming a dense and icy fog. The fog hugged the ground closely, like a child afraid to leave his mother’s skirt. It only came up to about the knees, though it was as white and opaque as snow. Above the knees visibility remained relatively good. One could easily make out the birds flying overhead.

On the west side of the park there was a flat strip of land, situated between the cleared side of the hill and the fence blocking off the street. At present, this space housed a sculptural exhibition, which made the field look as if it were the unkempt play-pin of a massive child. Life-sized playing cards were propped up at random against huge chess and checker pieces. As is often the case with whimsical French art, the statues had a carnivalesque and disturbing affect.

The playing cards featured differently festooned jokers, with goblin-like faces and bifurcated tails. Each joker had a different expression on his face and a different style of hair on his head. In his right hand, he carried an ace of an unidentified suit, which he held close to his heart. In his left hand, he held a jack of hearts, which he was ripping in two. Meanwhile the chessmen were made of cheap, green plaster and molded to look as if they were wearing Asian-style body armor. They were either pawns or bishops, one could not tell which. The sleepy expression on the statues' faces, as evidenced by their closed eyes and relaxed cheeks, was rather unusual.

“These are cheap Western knock-off,” E said, tapping one of the statues and finding them to be inferior manufacture. “Warriors at Xian much better.” He was standing a few feet away from Alan, who was looking in the opposite direction, toward the sloping, fog-hugged hill. Alan ignored E. The two had quarreled that morning and Alan was still upset. The fight had started with E insisting that Alan should not attend the duel to which he had been challenged. The fight had ended with Alan telling E that if he wasn't going to be his second for the duel then he might as well not be his assistant in the first place. Ultimately, E decided to accompany Alan to the duel and to act as his second, especially after Alan had assured him that no one would actually be shot that morning. It was nothing more than a peacock-show, Alan had insisted.

The two had managed to arrive at the statue exhibition in the park before the scheduled time of 5 AM. This punctual arrival was made even in spite of E dragging his feet as best he could. The wily assistant had changed his clothes four times and spilled hot tea on Alan's shirt, forcing the latter to redress himself as well. The entire discussion on the way from the apartment to the park consisted of E presenting differently worded proposals for the two of them to stop by a café and order some croissants. Now that the two were at last at the park, Alan was trying as best he could to put his assistant out of mind. Instead, he was reviewing privately all the mental preparations he had made before.

Alan heard a loud whistle to his left. It was tooting with impressive volume, fidelity, and speed France's national anthem *La Marseillaise*. Eventually, Alan saw that the whistler was François, emerging from the fog in the company of a tall young man who Alan vaguely remembered having met at the dinner party two nights prior. François was alert and excitable, in the high spirits of someone about to attend a long awaited show. His companion, on the other hand, looked groggy and slightly anxious. Alan's attention was drawn to the hard-shelled case that François' friend was carrying. In other circumstances, Alan would have assumed it contained a typewriter. At a distance of thirty feet, François cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted jocularly at Alan, in English.

“Alan my dear, how did you sleep?”

The skin on Alan's face felt uncomfortable and loose. He was holding his head as if there were a weight around the back of his neck. And yet, like someone on the cruel end of a joke, his demeanor was a study in false cheeriness.

"*Well,*" Alan shouted back, in French. In fact, he had not slept at all, opting instead to use the entire night to prepare for the duel. He had prepped himself in much the same way as someone preparing for a presentation. First, he had determined the type of affect he wanted to convey: *cocky*. He felt it was important to seem extremely self-assured, because it would prevent François from thinking that Alan was likely to back down. A certain flippancy would be helpful in this regard as well: if Alan didn't realize the seriousness of the consequences that might follow from a duel, then he was unlikely to protect his life properly. If he could really convince François that he was not going to back down then François would have to back down himself or else risk life and limb. Since neither wanted to hurt the other or get hurt themselves, Alan was quite sure that one or the other of them would eventually call off the duel.

Because feeling at ease was so important for his success in the duel, Alan had moved from determining the image he wanted to present to exhaustively examining the possible contours along which the duel scenario might progress. The basic template was as follows: he would get a pistol from François, the two would start to walk in opposite directions with backs turned toward the other. At some point before the two shot at each other, François would fire into the air. Alan went through the entire gamut of possible variations on this template: from François not showing up in the first place, to François waiting until Alan and he were facing each other with guns already raised. Alan had also tried to examine variations on the same scenarios account for different extraneous details: different weather conditions, different kinds of dueling equipment, etc. Every step of the way, he had asked himself, "Are you going to fire into the air now?" invariably replying with a vehement "No!" Also, and at the same time as he mentally shouted the word "no," Alan had hit the top of his right hand with his left. In this way, whenever the fear of getting shot would incline him to raise his hand up, there would also be a countervailing impulse for his hand to go down in order to avoid getting hit. His goal was to suppress completely his instinct to resign. By 4 AM, Alan had in imagination already survived and won several hundred duels with François, never having fired a shot. Satisfied with his preparation, he had woken E and the two had left together for the park.

"*And how did you sleep François?*" Alan asked, having waited until the former was actually within speaking range to do so.

"Not a wink!" François replied delightedly in English. "I find that the night before the duel is extremely stimulating."

François' words struck an unexpected and frightening note with Alan. It seemed to Alan that in order to have formed an impression of what the night before a duel was like, François must have already had some personal experience with dueling. But had François actually dueled, or was he just trying to intimidate Alan?

“You know some of the greatest mathematics ever written was done by a twenty something on the night before a duel. Of course, it’s far more edifying if you actually think you’re going to be shot dead,” François said, beaming. “Which is to say that I don’t think I got the most out of the night that I might have!”

Alan put his lips together tightly and nodded. It was as Alan figured, the whole duel idea was just a ruse whose goal was to embarrass and intimidate him. “Well,” Alan told himself, “François is going to be the one humiliated, not me.” François and Alan looked each other in the eyes for a few moments, testing for weaknesses, each giving the other a chance to cave in and resign the duel.

“Well, are you ready to go?” François asked finally.

“Go?” Alan asked, so surprised by François' words that he spoke in English.

“What, did you think that we would do it here, where anyone can see us?” François asked in an outraged tone, “There are already people out jogging!”

François turned around and squinted into the fog, finally pointing in the distance. Alan’s eyes were not as good, which was probably something that he should have taken into consideration given what he and François were about to do. After a few seconds of squinting, Alan was able to discern a figure. It was a middle-aged man in a spandex suit, flailing his arms out to their maximum height and throwing them to the ground as fast as he could. At the same time, the man was high stepping like a chorus dancer. It must have been a form of calisthenics.

Turning back to François, Alan asked, “*Well, where are we going then?*”

François smiled, “On an adventure: you’ll see.” With that, he motioned over for the other three to follow.

Alan had anticipated that François might try and change the location at the last minute. By doing so, François would disorient and frighten Alan, making it more likely for him to resign. Moreover, delaying the actual duel would allow that much more time for the one who was going to forfeit to do so. Alan had no intention of forfeiting, however. He assured himself that he was not going to be fazed by a change of location. Even though most of his preparation had been done on the assumption that the duel would happen in the park, he had also taken the precaution

of envisioning the duel happening in a variety of different milieus: in deep wood, in a *banlieu* back alley, on a bridge over the Seine, on the roof of a tall building, etc.

Alan let himself be led back toward the street which bordered the park's north. The party walked briskly, heading to the west and south. To the right, Alan found a large hill covered in grass, which had five feet of brick separating it from the street. The hill was obviously artificial since its dimension were so high and rectangular. After walking half a block, Alan noticed that ahead of them was a structure which resembled a pagoda. Just before the pagoda, there was also a smaller brick building with a metal door. This building looked very much like an outhouse. François motioned for the three to wait. Then, he pulled himself over the five foot wall and ran across the grass. François ran toward the metal door and, testing it, found it to be open.

"We're lucky!" he called to the group. "We won't have to go the long way!" The three other young men soon joined him.

On the other side of the door was a staircase, illuminated by weak emergency lights. The stairs wrapped themselves in a spiral around a thick piece of metal pipping, so tightly that one had no idea whether the stairs descended ten feet or an entire mile. As he descended the stairs, Alan became slightly panicked because he had not anticipated that the duel might take place underground. And yet Alan reminded himself that walking underground was merely another ruse, another feint, yet another way to scare Alan into submission without a fight.

The group arrived at the bottom of the stairs after about five minutes of brisk descent. The repeated turning around and around had left Alan feeling dizzy. He was not the only one. E was holding his head to the wall and putting his hands to his ears. François looked as if he was trying to stand straight, but kept losing his balance. After a few minutes pause, François removed from his jacket two small but powerful flashlights, one of which he gave to Alan. He turned the flashlight up towards his face, as if he were telling a ghost story.

"Bienvenue, Alan, to the catacombs of Paris!"

Alan's jaw began to shiver and a tightness began to build in his upper chest. He felt that he wanted nothing more than to scream at the top of his lungs and run back out to the surface and into his bed. He envisioned those skeletons, those anonymous corpses, piled one on top of the other six million high. And to think that they were now only a few feet away from his present location! All those people, who at one point had had their own faces, their own manners of speech, their own predilections and humors. Each had a pair of eyes, pregnant with aspirations, which they must have at times tried to examine, wondering what secrets they held. And those ambitions, what they were, whether they were fulfilled or not, one cannot know. One can only

imagine. Napoleon could be down there and no one would be any the wiser. The Paris catacombs: they are the first and best museum constructed around the concepts of unobtainability and finitude. To think that a lazy and uninspired municipal government invented them! If necessity is the mother of invention, then surely convenience is its father.

“There are over 200 kilometers of tunneling here to walk over,” François explained, “Actually, these are properly called the Quarries of Paris. The Catacombs are just where they put all the corpses.”

The only one who seemed interested in what François was saying was E, who listened thoughtfully as he walked, acting no different than he would if on a tour. Unable to stop the duel from beginning, E had decided to glean whatever he could out of the unfolding events. He seemed quite thrilled to be going to such unusual and different places at such an early hour. He kept looking appreciatively at the environment around him and clucking approvingly.

François started leading the others in one direction down the corridor. The hall in which they presently walked had arched roofs. The walls had been covered with masonry, which was still in excellent repair. The space might have easily belonged in an old cathedral, were it not for the street signs which the quartet of catacomb walkers kept passing. The names sounded familiar to Alan, but he could not explain why. There were also plaster icons on the wall which had numbers written on them, similar to the address signs one saw on the surface. Alan realized that these markings corresponded to actual locations above ground, so that people in the catacombs could figure out where they actually were. It turned out that the entourage was not far from Alan’s own apartment.

After a few minutes walking in the unfinished corridor, the group turned right. Ten meters away there was a chain blocking the way, and beyond that a wall lined with skulls. Alan cringed. François really was taking him to the gravesite part of the Paris quarries, the catacombs proper. It was clear why François had chosen the location. By having the duel in a gravesite, he was making death concrete, and the consequences of losing more intuitive. Alan felt his confidence buckle. He really was about to forfeit then and there, thinking that Marie could not possibly worth death or even its risk. And yet, as if by conditioned reflex, a great “NO!” resounded in his head. Was he the type of man to bargain with the prize he really wanted? Was he the type to breach the castle by subterfuge or by battering the front door? Was he to be intimidated by a taller, thinner man with more money and purer blood? In short, was he a romantic, or was he not?

François led the group into a large, circular cavern, whose radius could not have been more than thirty feet long. The roof was maybe fifteen feet high and was supported by columns made

of stacked rock. All the walls had an inlay perhaps four feet high and two feet deep, stacked with piles of skulls. There were a number of light fixtures in the room. François found the switch that turned them on.

Additional lighting did little to change the dreariness of the room. The black stone walls absorbed almost all of the brightness. Still, all four people in the room could now see each other comfortably. Alan and François put away their flashlights. François motioned for the group to gather in the center of the room.

Now François' friend laid the case he had been carrying on the ground. He opened the metal latches and flipped the top open, revealing two pistols held in place thanks to a pair of tired looking leather straps. François took the two out of their holders and showed one to Alan. It looked very old, like something a Confederate general would have carried.

“Voilà Alan, one six shooter for me and one six shooter for you. Pretty isn't it?” François said, caressing the gun at about waist level. Alan smiled widely, but with lips still tight. François suddenly stopped smiling and, feigning concern, asked, “You have fired a gun before?”

In fact, Alan had not. “Of course,” Alan said dismissively, “What kind of American do you take me for?”

François laughed genuinely and patted Alan on the shoulder. “That's very nice,” François said, “You should use that one more often! Just to repeat the instructions for everyone's benefit, you point — ” here François raised his gun toward a skull forty feet away, “— and shoot!”

The bang was so enormous that Alan had to put his hand to his ear. Even as he did so, he placed his index finger and thumb into a trigger shape and then pumped it several times up in the air.

“Nice,” François said, “Hit my mark!”

Alan, squinting in the distance, saw that François had indeed shattered the skull apart.

“Alright, let's get down to it. The principles of the duel are as follows. We will walk until a distance of fifty paces is between us, which is twenty five steps for each. We will turn, hold our guns up, and then fire. At any point before or during the shooting, one of us may fire into the air and that will count as a resignation. The other shall not shoot thereafter. Now, basic etiquette. One does not duel in the style of a cowboy. The goal is not to score a quick point, but rather to give each man his fair shot. *Le duel français* is a refined thing, like ballet. Understood?”

Alan almost gulped, but caught himself. Instead of gulping, he raised his hand and made a

dismissive motion with his hand. “Yeah yeah,” he muttered.

François looked at Alan coyly, but then smiled. “Now, bring your assistant,” he said. Alan motioned for E to join François and Alan, while François motioned for his own second to pay attention. Holding the gun out for everyone to see, he unhinged the revolver.

“Look closely everyone. This chamber has six places to load a bullet. Only one live bullet is loaded in the pistol, however. The rest are filled with blanks. If someone fires the gun filled with a blank, there will be a bang and smoke, but no bullet. Like this.”

Here François fired again, this time at the ground. Alan jumped on his feet, startled, and felt his eyes covered in a haze that smelt of burnt chalk. As the smoke cleared, Alan realized that there was no bullet where François had fired. François reloaded his gun as he continued to explain the mechanism of firing,

“Unless something gets hit by the bullet, it’s very hard to tell whether what was shot was a blank bullet or a real one. The person firing the gun knows what he’s fired, however, because it feels very different leaving the barrel.”

Alan wondered why François was giving him all this information on blank bullets versus live ones. Of course, the blanks were a strange wrinkle, but ultimately one which Alan welcomed. Alan figured that if there was one bullet in the pistol instead of six, then he had already dodged five bullets from the get go.

“Now my assistant will spin the chamber of this pistol, randomizing the positions. This pistol will be yours. The second pistol is configured exactly the same as the first, and I will trust your assistant to spin the chamber so that the positions are truly random.”

François' second handed E the pistol. The young man opened the chamber and unloaded it. He checked to make sure that there was indeed only one real bullet and that the rest were blanks. He reloaded the chamber and then gave it a spin. He handed it to François.

“Shall we begin?” François asked pleasantly. Alan tiredly nodded. Alan had expected that François would carry him at least to the brink of the duel. Actually, he expected that François would resign the moment the two faced each other. Privately, he had hoped it would not come to that. It was with a certain weariness then that Alan sauntered over to the exact center of the room, confronted François face to face, and then turned.

And so Alan began his paces. There was not actually that much room in the cavern. Alan was not even sure that there were twenty five paces to step. E and François' friend began to count in unison, both speaking in English. Alan did not need their count, for the tally in his own

head was far louder and more certain. It sounded like the quiet, high-pitched voice of a female child, which cuts through even the most vociferous din of adult voices. Indeed, there were now many competing voices in Alan's head, different calculations and observations, analyses and propositions, all competing in a vain effort to be the insight necessary in the moment. By the count of ten, the thoughts were no longer well formulated into sentences, but rather consisted of words, half-words, and images. In particular, there was a sequence of mental pictures in which Alan found solace, all of them fleeting impressions of principled sturdiness in the face of adversity. The first was a painting by Caspar Fredrich, the one of a robbed nobleman standing on top of a massive rock being battered by an energetic, wave-like fog. The second was lifted from Chateaubriand's *René*; it was of Alan standing on the lip of Mount Etna, as it bubbled with lava and billowed smoke up in his face. The next images, corresponding to the later teens of the count to twenty-five, were wholly a product of Alan's own disorganized consciousness. First, he envisioned himself piloting a jumbo jet at low altitude into an oncoming tornado. Next, he imagined himself wearing a top hat and riding a bicycle into a fifteen foot squall. Finally, he pictured himself trying to do a forehand smash while diving into a pool of water from three stories high. The pool was, like the center of Alan's own eye, darker than the North Atlantic at nighttime.

Alan's attention was jarred away from his visions by the rapid firing of five shots from François' gun. Alan whirled, raising his own pistol in François' direction. Although it was difficult to see what was happening from all the gun-smoke, Alan knew that he had not been hit. Making a natural inference, Alan was overjoyed to assume that the shots had been François resigning. When the smoke cleared, however, François' back was still turned. From the direction of the smoke, it was also clear that he had fired into the ground. This action had no meaning, as far as Alan was concerned. Since neither E nor François' friend had any idea what to make of the action either, the two stopped their count.

“Well, twenty-one, no?” François said, slight irritated.

The assistant duelists looked at each other, and then at Alan. Eventually, Alan turned back around. The count resumed, though from Alan's perspective it was said more slowly. Perhaps that was only his own perception of time. Alan was trying to understand as quickly as possible what ramifications François' action should have on his own behavior. Why had François shot off so prematurely? It seemed to Alan to be completely foolish to deprive oneself, in five of six cases, of one's only bullet. In fact, one would have to be completely mad to stand up in a duel with only a blank in his chamber.

“Twenty-five,” E and François' friend said in unison. Alan stopped still and then slowly

turned. “Unless,” Alan thought, “He knows that there is a bullet in the barrel.” Alan now stood facing François, with gun still lowered. He saw François beginning to raise his pistol and Alan started to raise his own. “And actually, he does know!” Alan marveled. “He told me that when you fire a blank you know it! Clever bastard! He cleared his chamber so that he would know to resign if his last bullet were a blank, and would know that he had a five in six chance to score a clear win if the bullet were real! He only wants to compete if he’s stacked the odds!”

Alan wanted desperately to copy François' maneuver. He almost pulled his trigger then and there. And yet he did not, because he realized that it was too late to do so. Alan's gun was already raised and there was no way to clear the chamber without either resigning or giving François a plausible reason to shoot. François put his left hand behind his back and Alan started to do the same. “Unless it's a ruse!” Alan thought. “He'd have to be crazy to try a ruse like that though! No, he's either totally insane or knows that there's definitely a live bullet in the chamber!”

Alan did not believe François was crazy. In fact, he realized that he was crazy to stand up to his opponent when his first shot was certainly live. Alan shouted at himself, “RESIGN! RESIGN! FIRE INTO THE AIR!” And yet, again by force of reflex, his hand fell down and the word “NO” blared in his consciousness. Though he wanted desperately to move the gun upward from the center of François' body, Alan could not do so.

“Ready!” the assistants shouted loudly as if for attention. “AIM!” they cried louder, their voices now evincing genuine fear. François' smile fell slowly, like a child whose prized toy was being unexpectedly taken away. For a second it seemed that he might have raised his arm to an angle above Alan's head.

“Fire!” E and François' friend whelped. The two rivals, by reflex, shot.

Alan shot only once, but there was a one in six chance that this would be enough. Alan felt smoke hit his face and for the longest time assumed it was the advance guard of a bullet headed right for his nose. And yet, through a mist of chaos, smoke, and blackness, there came the dull thud of a body crumpling to the floor.

Heart racing, Alan ran towards the sound, dropping his gun as he did so. He could hear the footfalls of E and François' second doing the same. Alan found that François was lying on his side, next to a growing stain of liquid, while his head was already being cradled by E. François was muttering an exclamation, Alan could not decide if it was “*Fou!*” (Fool!) or “*Feu!*” (Fire!). E said calmly, though authoritatively, “Help me carry him.”

Alan and François' second carried their injured friend in the direction that E had pointed.

Meanwhile E was a flurry of motion, running ahead and checking on various paths, quickly determining which way in the tunnel was forward. It turned out that there were many well-marked signs directing them toward the exits; during reasonable day hours the catacombs were something of a tourist trap. In a matter of three or four minutes the trio had found the way to the surface. They began the arduous process of climbing with the injured François in tow. François seemed to be entering a trance, muttering over and over “what a fool” or “what a fire,” one could hardly know which. Alan was not paying attention anymore, instead he kept his eyes trained ahead on E’s feet, which were the swiftly ascending the stairs. Alan was finding it hard to balance himself, the constant turning of his ascent up the spiral staircase made him dizzy. Moreover, he could feel that he was the weaker of the two carrying François' body. François was leaning more heavily on Alan than on the friend. Alan could feel François' blood running down his hand.

The three reached the top of the stairs after another minute more. They burst out of the stairwell into an unoccupied room. It was small, and to one side there was a berth where someone collecting entrance fees would sit. Alan and François' friend were now holding François' unconscious body, his legs bending limply. E ran over to the door and without a second’s hesitation kicked in the glass. He wrapped up the spare length in his shirt and cleared out the residual shards. E ducked under the open space and motioned for the two to follow. The two young men dragged François over to the entrance way, putting the upper part of his body in such a way that E could grab it. E pulled François clear enough so that the other two could go through the door.

“Search ambulance!” E commanded François' second. Alan was too flustered to notice that E pronounced the first s and the concluding ch the same way, both like the ch in chef. His sentence sounded more like “*cherche ambulance*” than “search ambulance.” Alan himself began to follow E’s instructions, but E took hold of Alan’s hand, jerking him backward. “There!” E shouted to François' second, pointing to a police car at the end of the plaza. The friend nodded, leaving François on the ground with Alan and E. But Alan and E were soon gone.

E instructed Alan to walk briskly, throwing his hands high in the air while he did so. In this way, the two looked like a duo of power-walkers out on their morning routine. Alan could not help but feel conspicuous. For one thing, his arm was caked with blood. For another, his body was quivering uncontrollably. His gait was unsteady, as if he were trying to walk on waves. Prolonged exposure to adrenaline had left Alan very weak, hardly in control of his muscles. In fact, the stress of the past minutes had induced in Alan a waking black out; his short term

working memory lasted no longer than fifteen seconds. For this reason, he kept looking down at the terrible red stain on his shirt and rubbing it obsessively with his right hand. He also kept looking backward, trying to confirm that there was neither a police officer nor a mime chasing after him.

“Stop Aaron! Focus on exercise!” E insisted under his breath. To prove the point, E reached higher and stepped further in his walk. Alan did his best to do the same.

Soon the duo arrived at the apartment. E went straight into Alan’s room and removed Alan’s two suitcases from under the bed. He brought these over to the dresser, which he immediately began to ransack. He whipped pile after pile of clothes into Alan’s bag. Surprisingly, the force with which E threw Alan’s clothes actually managed to preserve their folding. The piles of laundry were left completely in order. Alan stood frozen by the door, unsure of what to do besides watch. After E had finished packing away the clothes in the dresser, he ran to the closet and started packing away the rest of Alan’s wardrobe. He found the laundry bin in Alan’s clothes, which was empty except for the coffee-drenched clothes Alan had worn the day before.

“Put these on!” E shouted, throwing the dirty laundry to Alan. Alan began to put the clothes on, but E interrupted him.

“No, first take off blood covered clothes!” E shouted. As Alan began to undress, E zipped up the bags and took them to the front door. As he past Alan, he said, “After you finish wash hands.”

Alan went into the bathroom in the bedroom to wash his hands. The water had a calming effect on Alan, probably because he did not yet have the presence of mind to realize that he was literally washing his hands of blood. He kept repeating to himself, “François will be fine. François will be fine.” As he toweled his hands, Alan thought, “The wound can’t be that bad. Plus, he’s rich, he’ll have great medical care.”

E popped into the room carrying a small plastic bag. He put all of Alan’s toiletries in these and then went into the bedroom. Alan followed him and watched as his assistant collected all the knickknacks still lying around. E found Alan’s tennis racket in the closet and looked as if he was going to take it, but then decided to hand it to Alan to carry. He did so with a mischievous smile on his face. “It will be good if you take this,” he said.

Alan and E went into the living-room and Alan saw that E had already packed his own burlap sack. There was only Alan’s own backpack left to fill now. E stuffed most of the items on the kitchen table into the plastic bag for knickknacks. He was, however, quite careful with the thick envelope which contained his own translation of the old Russian book. E placed these

items gingerly in Alan's backpack and then went over to the door. He moved all the bags placed in a pile into the apartment's awning. Then, he wound a piece of twine tightly around the pack and then, swinging the combined weight around his body, was soon marching with all the bags down the stairs. Alan followed, locking the door behind him.

It was still quite early in the morning when Alan and E entered the courtyard outside their building. The grass there was very slightly muddy from the morning dew, which had yet to burn off. E, recognizing an opportunity to use the mud to his advantage, stopped.

"Lay down," E told Alan. Alan, weak, unfocused, and generally unable to resist the flow of events, nevertheless shook his head no.

"I say lay down!" E shouted, genuine anger in his voice. Alan had never heard his assistant yell. He was understandably taken off guard. In the face of E's vehemence, and considering that he was totally at a loss for what to do, Alan complied with E's request. Alan put his backpack down. He kept holding the racket, however, because removing it would have proved too complicated. He bent down on his knees and laid in the mud, letting the dirt sink into his clothing, which was already suffused with coffee and tinged with blood.

"Now roll over!" E commanded. Alan was powerless to resist, he turned and turned, so that his face and body was intermittently covered by a thin paste of grime.

"Good job Aaron! You can stand up."

Alan got to his feet and picked up the backpack. He stood dumbly in front of E. E, looking Alan up and down, still holding the bag with one hand, reached over to Alan's collar and tussled it, finally shoving his thumb straight through. Alan was fearful, surprised by the dextrous strength of his assistant. He flinched and pulled backward. "There will be fewer questions if you look homeless," E explained.

E instructed Alan to always walk on the opposite side of the street from him at a distance of ten or fifteen yards. He suggested Alan walk unevenly. Doing so would not be difficult for Alan in his given state. The two left Alan's compound.

E started by heading north, away from the Place Denfert. Even from this distance E and Alan could hear the faint sounds of police and ambulance sirens. After passing two blocks, the duo encountered a six way intersection. In the distant, Alan could see the inviting white marble

domes of the Sacred Heart Basilica. E turned right onto a street heading southeast. He crossed to the opposite side of the street. Alan stayed on the nearer side, but nevertheless continued to walk.

The two were now almost parallel to Rue Denfert. After three blocks, Alan could actually see the plaza. The whole area was blocked off by different police cars, some of a traditional make and others of the darker detective-model. Only a few sirens were blaring now, but their shriek penetrated Alan's ear and seized his heart. Alan wanted nothing more than to turn left and run from the police as far as possible and as fast as possible. Yet E was still walking southeast. Alan followed him unsteadily.

The neighborhood in which Alan found himself was unlike any he had previously encountered in Paris. The buildings here were taller, newer, and there were relatively few businesses or establishments. It was highly residential. The businesses that were there were packed with offerings, and looked as if they were already open by 7 o'clock. There were no cafés, no parks, no wide boulevards. There was nothing about this side of town that actually felt like Paris, at least to Alan.

After another five or ten minutes walking, Alan began to notice strange signs. Some were written in Chinese, others were full of strange syllables written in Latin characters with many diacritic marks. Alan thought that they must be Vietnamese.

Very suddenly, Alan found himself entering a main street. The street was lined with trees, unlike the more urban Chinatowns he had been to in America. And yet there were the same telltale, omnipresent, overstimulating signage. Every square inch of the street was packed with shops, with huge façades explaining what wears they housed. And yet, because of the sheer number of signs, nothing was explained. Everything melded with the next thing and dropped out of view. Each store had a placard in its front, glowing with lame light bulbs, and also blocking off the shop's interior. Fortunately, the streets were wide, which made the area seem less claustrophobic than an American Chinatown. And yet, even though the streets were wide, they were nevertheless crowded. Alan turned to the left and nearly ran into an old Asian man in a walker. The man had a fat face and no teeth. A patch of gauze covered his left eye. The middle aged woman walking with him yelled a stream of words at Alan and pushed the man ahead. He had walked no further than a foot ahead, when a small, happy looking four year old banged into his leg. Alan stopped in his tracks, while the infant continued walking ahead like a merry drunkard. The mother, dressed in a studded jacket, seemed to pay no attention.

Such a variety of smells Alan had never encountered. They ranged from the excruciating to the exquisite. Searing hot oil amplified the aromas of otherwise inert vegetables, imparting to

them the pungency of herbs. Black plastic bags containing garbage were left to bake on the street. What wonderful chemist was it that discovered how to make eggplant smell as sweet as basil, or bok choy as fresh as mint? Was he the same person that decided to lump all the garbage together in a pile on the street, so that the rats would have an easier time replacing rotting food with feces?

The most disturbing and invigorating part of the Paris Chinatown, however, was not the sights or the smells, but rather the sounds. On the street, fat middle aged men stood outside their shops, singing their melodious, joking songs to each other. Meanwhile their wives stayed in the apartments upstairs, shouting for their children to do this or to do that. They yelled in a harsh, fast and cacophonous sound, one which either breaks a child young or makes him a hardened stoic. Still higher in the apartment buildings, old folks were listening to their radios, whose warbling was more extreme than what can be produced by most birds. But it was not just the sounds of people that were disturbing. Also, there were the sounds of business: men fixing cars on the street, using power tools to open hermetically sealed rivets; the screech of bandsaw cracking glass and mirrors; the hammering of nails; smashing of wood. The main drag of Chinatown was like an open air factory, which could make anything in the world, if one could just figure out how to ask.

Alan struggled to keep up with E, who even with his heavy encumbrance was moving deftly through the crowd. After two more blocks of walking against the flow of traffic, Alan saw E put his bags down in front of a building with a particularly wide façade. Ten feet in front of him was an old and dirty tour bus that seemed in poor repair. Alan crossed and was soon watching the bags while E went inside. A few minutes later, he returned and began moving the bags over to the parked bus. Alan and E put the heavy bags inside the luggage compartment on bottom. Task completed, E handed Alan an orange ticket. On top of the ticket were four Chinese characters. On the bottom, there were four Latin syllables: “Bù-lǚ-sài-ěr”

“Bus leave in half an hour,” E said, motioning Alan on board.

Alan and E boarded the bus, finding that the fourth row from the front was already occupied by a sleeping homeless man. Though asleep, the man had a wind-swept look about him, which even a trek across the Sahara could not have heightened. Compared with him, Alan looked as if he were dressing up for halloween. How long the man had been there was unclear; long enough to fall asleep and fill up the front half of the bus with his redolence. Alan found that there was

something soothing about how one dimensional the odor was. It was a welcome reprieve from the onerous grab-bag of scents one found outside. It was as if the man had distilled all the smells of Chinatown and its surroundings into a single essence, an aromatic mean. As a result, the nose could actually understand the odor it was smelling: weird, rather unpleasant, but nevertheless the kind of thing to which one could grow accustomed.

Given the pervasive odor in the front half of the bus, Alan and E decided to hop over the homeless man and head for the seats in the back. Because there was no bathroom on the bus, the places they found did not smell terribly. Moreover, there was actually a good amount of fresh air entering the vehicle: the emergency exit hatch on the roof had long ago been jettisoned, without anyone having bothered to replace it. Alan and E sat underneath the hatch, morning sunlight streaming down upon their faces.

Now that he was on the bus, Alan was no longer worried about being spotted by the police. The tinted windows made it impossible for anyone on the street to see him. It seemed unlikely that the police would raid a Chinese passenger bus unless they had strong reason to suspect a criminal was there. Even if they did, why would they think that the criminal was Alan? No one had his prints on file, no one had any reason to suspect him of anything. Anyone in their right mind would assume that he was just a smelly, dirty young man headed out on vacation. After all, he was carrying his tennis racket.

Even though Alan was not worried about getting arrested, he nevertheless felt unsafe. He kept stroking his face softly, finding that it was very brittle. It seemed to Alan that if he touched it too hard, or if he did not touch it at all, then it would shatter into a thousand pieces. He looked warily at his nails, sensing that they might precipitate a terrible conflagration. After an uncertain amount of time, it occurred to Alan that there was probably something deeply wrong with whatever highly alienated process of self-discovery he was presently experiencing. Alan dug into his pocket and found the bus ticket, hoping it would provide some means of diversion

“Where is Booloo-Zaire?” Alan asked E.

E had his face pressed against the window, which he was looking through warily. He turned to Alan and said, “In Belgium. Bù-lǚ-sài-ěr is Chinese for Brussels.”

“Really?” Alan asked curiously, “How is that?” The name did not sound anything like Brussels. Alan supposed that it must have been a translation of the meaning of the word Brussels. To Alan’s knowledge the word Brussels had no meaning, however. He was therefore quite curious to learn what it actually was.

“Bù-lǚ is Chinese word for ‘Bruce’, while sài-ěr is Chinese word for ‘sale.’ Bruce-sale sound

like Brussel, right?”

Alan held E's gaze for a second, and then two. He continued looking until E lost interest and turned back to the window. The Chinese sense of the world confounded Alan. Everything was mixed-up, backward, arbitrary, and confused. Even a city name was like a fortune cookie, which one felt obligated to crack open, only to find some maddening riddle therein. How did the culture cope when so few things could just be one thing?

Alan turned to the window and continued to meditate, absent-mindedly, on the aforementioned subject. The impulse for precision manifested itself so differently in E's culture than in Alan's. On the one hand, there was the perfect handwriting, the exactingness with which instructions were followed, the focus on memorization. And yet the egregiously fake clothes, the lack of directness in speech, the demented constellation of occupations which people and businesses took — it all evidenced an appalling disregard for making sure things were the way they were supposed to be. Of course, Alan had not spent a great deal of time with Chinese people besides E and his Cousin Mu. He might be mis-inferring things about Chinese culture, in much the same way that thinking Alan was a typical Westerner could lead to mis-impressions. Nevertheless, it seemed to Alan that what he was inferring were not just particular to E, but rather must have been a result of something deeply embedded in E's culture. The important thing for E was that on a formal level, on the surface, things be exact. Whether the thing had the proper essence hardly mattered. And yet to Alan, essence was all that mattered, and it had to be characterized in a way that was extremely precise. Why else was it that Alan could not have dreamt simply of becoming a writer? He could not even dream of being a neo-Romantic, as specific as that was. He literally had to pick a person and say, “I would like to be him, Chateaubriand.”

At about ten till eight, the bus began to fill with passengers. The crowd quickly swelled to about a third of the vehicle's capacity and then petered out. The passengers were for the most part middle-age to elderly Chinese, although a few non-Asians around Alan and E's age were there as well. None sat as far back in the bus as Alan or E.

A rugged-looking, working-class Chinese man in his late thirties boarded the bus. The man had spindly, large hands and bulbous eyes. He was rather short and rather plump. The man began to take people's tickets. When he arrived at the fourth row, he put his hand on the kneecap of the man sleeping there, shook it, and started shouting at the man in Chinese. The napper woke, groggily. Without arguing, he stood up and left the bus. The ticket-taker continued, nonplused.

Alan removed his ticket from his pocket once more. He glanced at his assistant. For his part,

E was suppressing a grin and looking intently ahead. He made a whistling sound, which caused the ticket-taker to look up and several passengers to turn around. The ticket taker put his hand up to his eyebrows, as if blocking out the sun. A rapid burst of speech from the man, who had the heavy, gravely voice of a life-long smoker. Alan's assistant laughed and then delivered a reply with quickness and force. Several people on board laughed in response to what E said, although the ticket-taker held up his hand and shook his finger at E. He repeatedly said something like, "Boo sure! Boo sure!" After he repeated the phrase five or seven times, he broke into a fierce grin.

The man quickly took the rest of the tickets and approached E. The two hit each others forearms jocularly, and the ticket taker mussed E's hair. After a bit more banter, the conversation suddenly turned quite serious. The man held his hand to his face, pulling down the skin underneath his eyes, revealing a complex of bright red veins. He kept darting his eyes back and forth to Alan, his expression looking harder and harder each time. Alan assumed that E was telling the man about what had led the two of them to buy a ticket to Brussels. When E finally finished, the man gave Alan a long, hard stare.

"Hi," Alan said.

The man must not have realized he had been staring, for he flinched at Alan's words. He nodded quickly at Alan and took out a cigarette.

"This is my Cousin U, Alan," E explained as the man lit his cigarette, "Though I advise you it is impolite to call him U. Better to call him E, or best to say E U."

Alan nodded. Cousin U took an enormous puff of the cigarette and blew it in the direction of the open safety hatch above. Suddenly, he started yelling at E very harshly. E patiently endured the onslaught. When it was over, E said something curtly. Cousin U repeatedly hit the seat in front of him hard, before leaving E with a stinging phrase. He returned to the front of the bus and descended the front stairs. E could only shake his head.

Alan watched E for several moments. The latter continued to stare the seat in front of him. Finally, the assistant began to say, almost to himself, "Cousin U is very over-protective. Cousin U is very unhappy I not help with business. Cousin U say I am impractical, spend too much time with Li Bai, not spend enough time with real problems. But Cousin U is really just angry at his brother Mu. So he puts anger on me all the time."

Alan nodded, unable to offer any advice. He went back to looking at the window.

The bus left the station moving slowly around the bock and then more quickly as it

moved south. Soon Alan and E were slingshotting their way around the west side of the Peripherique, a circular highway that went around the Paris city limits. Through the far windows of the bus, Alan watched as the tower Montparnasse and then the tower Eiffel came into view. A few dozen large tears fell down his face, though his expression was unperturbed. He neither frowned, nor grimaced. When they were no longer in view, he put a hand to his face and wiped away his tears. E, looking at Alan's feet, said, "Don't worry Alan. You will be back soon."

During the journey to Brussels, time passed unevenly for Alan. He spent much of it in a kind of waking, dreamless sleep. He found himself suddenly coming to his senses now and then, realizing that he was unable to remember anything about the twenty minutes just past. Whenever he came out of a reverie, he did so with a sentence on the tip of his tongue. It was always something about how it was still possible for him to get back to Paris: "François will survive," or, "François would never rat me out," or, "They have to give me and François the same punishment, it shouldn't be my fault that I won." Alan considered that maybe it would be possible to ask Nokitoff to intercede with the Chancellor of the Collège de France. "They must have some influence," Alan thought.

It was late afternoon when the bus arrived in Brussels. Alan and E were deposited in a large, anonymous parking lot, not far from an immense train-station. A hundred yards from the structure there were three sets of elevated railroad tracks, which came together just before entering the building. The sky above these tracks was thick with hanging wires, which provided electricity to the trains as they moved around the city. Every tram in the Brussels metro system, as well as every long-distance train entering or leaving the city, went through this immense concourse. Alan and E approached the building, hoping that inside there might be someone who could help them figure out where to spend the night.

In the station, Alan and E soon found an information booth. The two waited in line, E carrying the great majority of their luggage, while Alan held on to his backpack and tennis racket. When it was their turn, E took the lead in approaching the attendant.

"Excuse me," E began. The man shook his head and asked, "You with him?"

E nodded. The man motioned for Alan to come over. Alan approached.

"What can I do for you?" the man asked. The man had a British accent, although Alan was able to discern that he was not a native English speaker.

"We're looking for a place to stay," Alan said tiredly. The attendant looked Alan up and down. He seemed to find that there was something unwholesome about Alan's appearance.

“Better go to the hotels close to here,” he said, pointing east. Alan and E followed the man’s lead.

Leaving the concourse, Alan realized that there was something vaguely disturbing about Brussels. The tramways looked as if they were a more technologically advanced version of something that might have come out of Victorian England. The people walking on the street smiled too much, even at Alan, who at this point looked like a deranged vagabond. It was jarring to see so many smiles, especially coming from a place like Paris where one became used to utter indifference. Most upsetting to Alan, however, was the Flemish language. He kept seeing signs that made him wonder if his recollection of English had not been permanently demented by the psychological trauma of participating in a duel: “*Engeland Straat,*” “*Poort Tunnel,*” “*Welkom: dit is de centrale boulevard van Brussel.*”

The two found a dingy hostel between two bars, the first called *The 3000 Club* and the second called *Homo Erectus*. E insisted that Alan stay inside the hotel while he go further down the street. He was intending to go to the Brussels’ Chinatown, where he hoped to find some bus schedule, as well as some reasonable food. Alan did not mind if E went ahead, as what he wanted most of all was simply to rid his body of all the grime and dirt that E had made him wear as a disguise.

It did not take long for E to return to the apartment. He came bearing several steaming vegetable dishes and a handful of bus-pamphlets. He found Alan sleeping naked on the toilet, his hair still dripping water. E picked Alan up and laid him on the bed. Alan was running a fever, so E made sure to tuck him into bed tightly. E took turns feeding Alan and himself using a pair of chopsticks. The only musical accompaniment available for this impromptu dinner was the noise from an illegal public festival being held by gang members underneath the tramway tracks across from their hotel. Soon after he finished feeding the catatonic Alan, E himself went to sleep.

Alan woke at ten o’clock the next morning. When he did, he found that E was sitting at the table in their room, eating a Chinese bun and marking up a set of pamphlets with his calligraphic pen.

“E?” Alan asked.

“Bad news today Aaron,” E said. Without turning around, he handed Alan the morning paper.

On the front cover was a picture of François, the title above which read, “*Favorite Son of*

Paris Slain in Duel!

A retching feeling rose up from inside Alan, as if his abdomen were trying to force itself up his esophagus. Alan felt as if he could hardly breathe, there was a cracking feeling in the top of his chest and a tingling in his feet. E turned around and saw that Alan was hyperventilating.

“Aaron?” E asked.

Alan began to babble his mouth without uttering any sounds. He stood up from the bed and sat down again. He said a few more words, raised his right hand and started talking to it in a low voice. E continued to call Alan’s name, but it was no use. Alan started walking back and forth across the room. At some point, E got up to try and stop him. E’s attempt at calming Alan backfired, however. Just as soon as E had put a soothing hand on Alan’s shoulder, Alan flew into a rage, squawking loudly and running through the same mad pantomime as before, only now twice as fast. Finally, not knowing what else to do, E tackled Alan to one of the beds. With Alan pinned under the substantial weight of his body, E said, “Aaron, you must focus! You need to decide your plan! Soon, police will find out it is *you* who commit crime. They will talk to François’ friends, who will say you and François not get along. Then, they will go to your apartment and when you are not there, they will take your fingerprints. Finally, they will match your fingerprints to gun!”

Alan looked at E for a few seconds, thinking over his remarks. Suddenly his eyes filled with tears. He began to cry.

“Aaron. Hope is not lost! World is still your oyster! You have many options. First option: you can take plane to America. You can be in airport in few hours. Right now, I think there is almost no chance international police will have your name, or will block your flight.”

Alan shook his head. He exclaimed, “I want to go home E!”

“So go home Aaron! To America!” E smiled.

“To Paris!” Alan balled.

E shook his head, “Only way you go to Paris is if you give yourself to police and beg for mercy. But even then Aaron, there are no prisons in Paris; you will only be there for trial.”

Alan took a hold of himself. He gulped, breathed in and out, and then repeated the same two actions again.

“I can’t do that E.”

“Well Aaron, then you can do one of two things. You can stay on run forever in Europe,” E

offered, shaking his head while doing so. “OR, we can find way to sneak you into Vietnam or China,” E smiled vigorously and shook his head up and down at the idea.

“What?”

“I have family that can sneak you into Asia. They are distant, distant Cousins. Maybe Five Times or Six Times Cousin. Not really Cousins at all. I not know them. But Cousin U know them. Sometime they pay Cousin U to move people and things from Vietnam or China. Cousin U not ask questions because Cousin U say they very scary Cousins. Very tough. But if you ask me, I say Cousin U is very scary. I think this mean that these Cousins must be very very tough. Like bodyguards of Nokitoff, but Chinese. As violent maybe, but less sense of humor.”

“Why would I go with them?” Alan asked, obligated by curiosity as much as necessity to find out more about the human traffickers.

“They do for cheap and very reliable. Plus, maybe they give you job. You can make good life for yourself by helping expand business to America!”

This last suggestion in particular exasperated Alan, “E! I don’t want to live the rest of my life as a human trafficker in some backward part of the world! Nor do I want to be in debt to human traffickers from a backward part of the world! In fact, I don’t want to have anything to do with *either* human traffickers *or* backward parts of the world!”

E nodded humbly, while Alan continued to rail against his fate, “But the other options don’t work either E! I can’t live my life on the run! I can’t go to prison!”

“So go to America!” E said, “Or go to Canada, if you not like America! Catch next flight, at least twenty flights per day go there. You can be safe in less than 24 hour.”

Alan shook his head, “No E, that doesn’t work either. Even if I make it into the country, they’ll arrest me within a week and then extradite me to France within a year.”

“Extradite?” E asked, sounding out the word.

Alan sighed, “Yes, extradite. The United States and France have an agreement to exchange known criminals for prosecution.”

E harrumphed. He sat for a minute, scratching his chin. Finally, he said, “I think going to China look like better and better option.”

Alan shook his head. The two sat quietly for a few minutes. Alan paced around the room, holding his hands to his head. He had no idea what to do. Nor did he feel like any were forthcoming. He didn’t know anything about the criminal code, what penalties there were for

dueling, nor did he know anything about extradition and international criminal codes, the complicated web of treaty obligations. Of course he had heard there were many Nazis scattered around South America. Presumably they were managing to stave off prosecution for crimes far worse than Alan's. Alan sighed, thinking, "But you probably need to have a lot of money tucked away in a Swiss bank account if you want to do that."

Alan's present line of thinking was obviously not going to terminate in anything useful. Nevertheless, thinking at all often leads ones to genuine paths forward. The process of testing an idea, no matter how lunatic, usually uncovers something of actual worth. In this case, the word "Swiss" catalyzed the formation of a series of thoughts, the last of which Alan said aloud.

"E, we're going to keep my appointment with Nokitoff," Alan said.

"You want to go to Switzerland?" E asked uneasily.

"Yes, Geneva."

"But Aaron, Geneva is practically in France. It is very hard to go to Geneva without going where police can have easy time to arrest you."

"Well E, that's too bad," Alan replied, "But the point is that I have no clue about what to do in this situation and therefore I need a lawyer. I don't know any lawyers. Moreover, I don't how to find any I can trust. So unless you have a Cousin A or a Cousin Z that's a lawyer," Alan paused, waiting for E's answer.

E shook his head glumly, "This is major gap in family." E made a frown and looked at the floor, "Cousin U say it is my responsibility to fill this gap in family and go to law school."

Alan, ignoring this revelation about E's own family life, picked up where he'd left off, "Right, so there's no Chinese lawyer. But *Nokitoff*, Nokitoff *clearly* has dealt with some major immigration issues in the past. And he has a lot of different revenue streams coming in from all different parts of the globe. He must be connected to some type of international law firm or lawyer, which is probably located in Geneva since he almost never leaves the city! Maybe he can refer me!"

E reflected for a moment on Alan's plan. He seemed to decide that it was a good one, "We should go to Geneva right away then, before international police block you from flying."

Alan shook his head, "No. We can't go before my appointment."

"Why not?" E asked.

"Because we don't know where Nokitoff is right now! He could be in Paris, New York,

Moscow, who knows? All we know is that this Saturday he's going to be in Geneva.”

E shook his head in agreement, adding his own point, “Also, he will prefer to talk with you if you have appointment.”

The two looked at each other for a few seconds. Finally, E said, “Very well Aaron, I will take care of arrangements.”

E went to work planning the trip. In his notebook, he began to draw a picture of the routes across Continental Europe. The circular paths looked like the leaves of a four leaf clover. At the center of this flower, E formed a thick dot which he denoted with the name “Bǎlí.” Alan had no idea why E was writing the name of an island in South East Asia. He watched skeptically as E continued to add heavy dots with names and times written next to them. From Bǎlí, E wanted to take the two of them to Mǎsài, and then from Mǎsài to Mǐlán. “He's going to take me to Milan,” Alan thought, “Via some place called Ma-sai. But where's Ma-sai? There's no Ma-sai in Europe. Maybe it's some variation on a real place? But no, Europe has no Ma-sai-ah or Ma-sai-eh either.” Alan was confounded.

After a short while of watching, however, he suddenly had an idea. “Let me forget how it's written. Just imagine how a Chinese person would say the word Ma-sai. They'd say it like ‘Mar-sai-er’,” Alan tried to do a Chinese voice impersonation privately, “Or maybe Mar-sai-eh. Marseille?” Alan thought it might make sense for a bus to stop in Marseille on the way to Milan. But any bus connecting Brussels to Marseille was very likely to make a stop in Paris. With the disbelief of someone solving a riddle whose answer had been obvious all along, Alan startled laughing. If Peking was the same Beijing, then B's could be the same P's, J's could be the same as K's. And, as Alan was reminded constantly when talking to E, L's could easily transform into R's. Bǎlí could therefore be written Pǎ-rí; Bǎlí was not an island in Indonesia, but rather the city of lights: Paris! Alan started to nod as he watched E continue making the route: from Mǐlán to Luómǎ, (which could be Ruómǎ, or Roma: Rome!), from Luómǎ back to Mǐlán, and from Mǐlán all the way to Rìnèiwǎ. Really, R's could be the same as G's? E dotted his last colon and turned to face Alan.

“There is no way to go to Geneva directly from Paris. Only way to go there is to take bus from Milan to Paris, which makes unadvertised stops in Geneva and Lyon. But this journey is not long enough. I think it make sense to stay on bus as long as possible. I can make disguise for you, so that you will look like package of dry good. No one will ask question on bus. Even if bus get search, they will not suspect you are person.”

“You're planning on putting me in the baggage hold?” Alan asked.

“No, no. Sometime when too many shipments they put package in passenger section of bus. I will move more packages up to passenger section and put you in back. It will look like bus is just carrying a lot of stuff. This way, you will be sitting in chair and will be comfortable.”

Alan gulped. He had his doubts about how feasible it would be to make Alan look like a package of dry goods. It seemed to Alan that with this sort of thing there was usually a zero sum trade-off between quality of disguise and comfort. Nevertheless, he felt it was necessary that some sort of disguise be made, in the event that the police decided to search the bus when coming in to Paris. He decided to let E try to make a disguise. If it was unsatisfactory, he would insist that E make another one, or simply take a chance and do without.

Alan dressed quickly and soon the two were trundling off to Brussels' Chinatown. Alan was surprised to discover that the two had slept in a predominantly Arab part of the city. Almost no Flemish was to be found in these shops, only French and Arabic. Also surprising was the number of fast food restaurants here; it seemed as if a third of all businesses were selling fries, burgers, pizzas, and gyros. Most Americans, even those who have come to Europe on vacation, do not realize the extent to which Europe's Arabs have branded themselves with a product, or that this product would happen to be American-style fast food. And yet in France, if one ask where to get a quick bite to eat, one will be told to try “The Corner Arab,” by which the speaker means a grease shack only a few blocks away.

After several more minutes walking, our intrepid protagonist and his assistant reached their destination. The Brussels' Chinatown was smaller than Paris's, consisting of only two or three adjacent, semi-circular streets, all of them within spitting distance of Brussels' absolute center. A hundred meters away, Alan could see the Brussels' Bourse. It was a smaller, less palatial version of the one in Paris. It seemed that the building's steps were a popular place to eat lunch.

E led Alan up one of the cramped Chinatown streets, searching for the bus company's main office. Alan now understood why the bus had not actually unloaded its passenger's in Chinatown: the streets were too small to accommodate a passenger bus. Moreover, the streets of Brussels were quite petite in general, especially around downtown. Even in regular rush hour traffic, it could take a bus equally long to get from the outskirts of Brussels to Paris as from the outskirts of Brussels to the city's downtown.

The shop that Alan and E entered was quite dusty. Uncomfortable-looking metal chairs had been riveted to the walls. Opposite the door, there was a counter behind which the employees sold passenger tickets. Two or three people were sitting in the chairs by the wall, while three or four more were waiting in line to buy tickets. At present, there were only two employees working: a thin old man and an energetic boy of about fifteen. The old man hardly moved; his

entire job was talking with customers. Occasionally he would send the boy to fetch this or that knickknack.

E did not have to wait long to talk with the bus attendant. The man listened carefully to E, looking Alan up and down strangely, as if he belonged in an exotic petting zoo. Finally, the man called his lackey over and in a hushed tone explained what he wanted done. The boy took the instructions seriously. There was a certain ceremoniousness visible in the boy's posture and step as he led Alan and E behind the counter, toward the shop's back room.

The storage area of the bus company's office was far larger than one would have expected, given how small its welcome area was. Heavy looking sacks were propped up against huge crate boxes lining the walls. Alan could not overlook the fact that there was a toilet fixture sitting in the far corner, which one could not use without being totally exposed to everyone else in the room. The boy instructed Alan and E to wait in the center of the room. While E and Alan waited, the boy found two empty sacks, which had been lying next to the other filled ones. One of the sacks made of tissue-paper thick cloth. It was only big enough to hold a bowling ball, although a bowling ball would have easily ripped apart the fine fabric. Meanwhile, the other bag must have been seven or eight feet high and made of a coarse burlap. This one was also easy to see through, although that mainly had to do with the fact that the fabric was very loosely knit. E seemed quite satisfied with what the boy had provided. He instructed the boy to hold the larger sack open, as if he were about to empty into a large bag of garbage.

"Aaron," E said, "this will be easier if I can pick you up."

Alan was wary about what E was planning, but he grudgingly decided that if he had trusted E this far he had to let his assistant have his way now. If he didn't like it, he could always change his mind.

E bent down and picked Alan up, so that Alan's pelvis was pressed against E's shoulder, while E's hands held firmly to Alan's upper thighs. After a second of being lifted up, Alan was put down, with feet touching the bottom of the burlap sack. E instructed Alan to hold the lip of the sack up, while E and the young Chinese boy brought over one of the full sacks. A minute later and the two had begun shoveling an immense number of tea leaves into the sack. The bag was filling it up rapidly. Alan felt as if his present situation was roughly analogous to lying in the bottom of a grave as a pair of gravediggers filled it in. When the sack had been filled up to his bellybutton, Alan recalled the tea's aroma.

"Iron Goddess of Mercy?" Alan asked. E smiled in response, but did not stop shoveling.

It was not long until E had to bring over a stool to continue filling in the bag. When the tea

was at last up to Alan's neck, E stopped and put the tissue-paper thin sack over Alan's head.

"This will prevent face from getting scratch," E said.

The cloth which Alan now wore was fairly pleasant to wear. It had a cool texture and was soft on Alan's skin. Alan doubted that breathing would be very comfortable with the tea surrounding his body. Truth be told, however, Alan hardly noticed as E poured on the last seven or eight inches. It turned out that being enveloped in the package of leaves was actually quite soothing. It reminded Alan of his childhood, when he and all the other kids on his block had gathered together all the block's tree leaves into one enormous pile. They would derive endless amusement from the pile, diving into it, laying in it, trying to walk through. The smell of the dried tea leaves was actually much more pleasing than that of old wet maple. "This could be some sort of spa treatment," Alan thought to himself.

E explained to Alan that he was now prepared to tie the top of the sack. He told Alan that he should try to press his face as close as possible to the burlap. That way, he would have better access to air and also to be able to see. Alan did so and found that the white tissue hardly impaired his vision, and that seeing through the burlap was no harder than looking through metal bars.

"How does it feel Aaron?" E asked.

"Like a mattress made of hay," Alan replied.

"Oh, that is pretty good!" E enthused, "Many people sleep whole lives on mattress made of hay!"

E took a thick piece of twine and wrapped it around the middle of the sack. Holding both sides of the rope, Alan's assistant heaved. Alan felt that he had been lifted off the ground and was now moving toward the exit. In a matter of minutes the two were on the street, and then out of Chinatown, and finally boarding a bus. E plopped Alan in the back, and then, surreptitiously, promised Alan that he would return with the rest of the bags.

And so it was that Alan was effectively rendered just another piece of luggage on a transcontinental bus ride. I cannot say that this was his most fervent wish, especially since he was at the moment still conscious. Nevertheless, all things considered, Alan could have had it much worse. The Goddess of Mercy favored him, ironically.

There is a popular theory of grieving, which says that there are discrete stages through which

one comes to terms with guilt and loss. In this view, first comes denial, then blame, then despair, and then mourning. Only after passing through these stages, does one find acceptance.

Personally, I don't feel as though I experience either denial or blame. After loss, I find that despair and mourning occur almost immediately, taking turns and, at least it seems, never moving forward. One day, however, a thoughtful epiphany lifts me out of the gloom. Acceptance is never for me a slogging, grinding coming to terms, but rather a cloudburst after much contrition. But I suppose everyone is different.

For Alan, the stage of denial was probably rather shortly lived. While it lasted, I suppose Alan had good reason to assume that everyone with regards to François would be just fine. That was simply optimistic thinking, not necessarily unrealistic. When the news of François' death had reached Alan, suddenly the veil of denial was lifted, revealing only a hideous panic hidden underneath. How terrible it was for Alan to realize all at once that everything about his life was upended, uprooted. At the same time, he had felt like he needed to escape, and yet also to touch the walls and feel that there were barriers to which he could hold on. Planning his escape to Geneva had kept the panic at bay, as had moving around the city. And yet now that Alan had made it to the bus, and because there was almost no form of distraction available to him in his present position, there was a great opportunity for panic to return.

It is for this reason that the drastic discomfort of Alan's present comportment was a godsend. For physical discomfort and annoyance had thrust Alan from grief's panicked intermezzo to its composed second act: blame. Nearly the entire four hour duration of the trip to Paris, Alan had spent by railing against François, blaming him for both his own demise and Alan's present misfortune. It was François' idea to have a duel. It was François' idea to take Alan into the catacombs, where he had been disoriented and deprived of judgement. Then there was the whole business of throwing away his bullets. What kind of a fool expects to survive when he's only shooting blanks? Alan punctuated nearly all of these observations with the following rhetorical question, "And for what? Now no one gets Marie and no one gets to live the life they want!"

It was early evening when Alan and E's bus arrived in Paris. Alan was rather nervous about being in the city, but was encouraged by the fact that they would not be there long. Moreover, unless the police had reason to suspect he would be at the Chinatown bus station, it was virtually impossible that he would be stopped. And indeed, Alan and E were soon on the road again, heading south for Marseille, and thereafter Italy.

With nightfall there came fewer distractions for Alan, which is to say boredom, but also a sense of calm. Resentment cannot last forever. Our nature's forbid us from holding a grudge too long, especially against the victims or the dead. Alan grew reflective on the long ride

southward. In particular, he found his thoughts drawn toward the previous morning. Of course, we are always changing, always are different at different moments in time. Somehow yesterday morning seemed to Alan like it was incredibly distant, more removed from Alan now even than America was. And yet the details of it were so fresh. He could still live the moment, in however much detail as he liked. Other distant memories weren't like that. Death has a strange power to make recent memories distant and distant memories fresh. Alan remembered vividly the feel of his first hand-shake with François, now over a year and a half before.

A strange mood overtook Alan as he thought about what it was that separated François from him. How odd that the latter had died while he himself still lived. To think that François, who had once been so vital, bursting with life, competitive and hungry for success, was now an object wrapped in a piece of cloth, sitting in a stuffed container beneath the ground. How different was it really from Alan's own position? He was stuffed into some padded package, no life to lead, at least not one he would recognize as his own. He was dead too. The only difference was that his was a waking death. He might yet recover from it. He might yet find a way to slip through, on either a technicality or bust of good luck. Alan thought that he might still live something like the life he had always wanted to lead. But for the moment, however, he was dead. He wasn't living; he was being trafficked across time and space, hoping no one stopped him in the process.

Alan fell asleep. He awoke many hours later. He could not be sure how many. At some point in the night it had rained. A small amount of water had fallen through the emergency escape hatch onto the package of tea that Alan himself was sleeping in. The water, though not hot, had nevertheless released some of the aromas contained within the tea. Both proximity to the smell, and the sheer quantity of tea around him, made Alan feel as if someone had sprayed perfume up his nostril. "I wonder if this is what it's like to be a bumblebee, to feel as if one's face has been shoved into a giant flower's genitalia." Uncomfortable by the thought, Alan tried to move. His difficulty moving led him to consider what he must look like to an outside viewer. In turn, thinking about his objective appearance led him to a more refined thought, "I'm not a bumblebee in a flower; I'm a caterpillar wrapped in a cocoon."

Alan was beginning to ask himself unusual questions, the question here being, "Which insect does my current existence most approximate?" The posing of such a Kafkaesque question was a clear sign that Alan was moving from a phase mostly characterized by Blame to one dominated by Despair. The more he thought about it, the more utterly hopeless he felt. The only reason he didn't start balling tears then and there was his fear that the hot water from his eyes would start steeping the tea. Alan's mind kept going in circles around how pitiable he was, how good he was really, and how no one would ever know, not even him. The weather improved as the bus head down the Italian countryside, but Alan's spirits were not lifted.

Approximately three hours after Alan awoke, the bus reached the outskirts of Rome. The bus unloaded its passengers close to a train station, which was even bigger than the one in Brussels. The neighborhood next to the train station was actually a Chinatown, although one that was rather strange. Rome's Chinatown was smothered together with Little India. Which is to say that the bouquet of smells and signage was even more confusing than that of a more typical Chinatown.

E took Alan off the bus and to the Chinese bus company's office, which was less than half a block away. Without objection, he was allowed to enter the office's back room. There, he removed both the tea and Alan from the sack. E had little fear that Alan would be spotted by the police in Italy, explaining, "Police here have more interest in playing police than in being police." The two returned to the bus and took their bags to a nearby hostel.

After unloading their things, Alan informed E that he was going to take a walk. Even though he was confident nothing would happen to Alan, E thought it made sense not to take chances. He offered to help Alan buy a disguise. Next to their hostel was a tiny junk shop which sold touristy knickknacks. E was able to negotiate an absurdly low price on a bundle of clothes: a red Hawaiian t-shirt, a pair of large orange sunglasses, and a baseball cap with the word "Rome" misspelled on its front. Costume bought, Alan suggested to E that he would go out on his own. For his part, E explained that he would go to the river in the west part of town, taking with him his notebook and his pamphlet of poetry.

And so Alan was left alone in Rome with his thoughts. Heading toward the center of town, a great sadness seized Alan and he started blubbing tears. He held his hand up to his face, covering his cheeks. His sunglasses were already shielding his eyes. Alan kept thinking about how pointless everything was. How absurd to have ruined his life on an impulse.

Misery seized Alan in earnest then as he pantomimed a tourist's route through Rome. Aqueducts he could only appreciate through a river of tears. The music of the street were drowned by his own, sometimes audible, wails.

From a certain perspective, it was a terrible waste for Alan to suffer so greatly while touring a beautiful foreign city. But from another perspective, Alan was doing exactly what one was supposed to be doing at that moment. For if Paris is the best city in which to love, then surely Rome is the best in which to despair. For what does one want when one feels utterly miserable? Firstly, distraction, of many and varied kinds: foods, sights, sounds, outrageous personalities. Rome has many of these. The local cheese delivery system, "Pizza" as they call it, is efficient and excellent, although by reputation inferior to that found in nearby Napoli. Meanwhile a sugar fix is available on every street corner, *gelato*, a form of ice cream so light that one can eat it

continuously without ever tiring. Street performers, monuments, shines, parks and shouting shopkeepers are to be found on every block. But Paris is nearly equal to Rome on almost all of these counts, the sole exception being food: the crêpe is unfortunately overburdened by having to be a medium for both cheese and sugar. The real way in which Rome excels in distraction is the fact that one's life constantly feels threatened. There are no lights when crossing the street, one simply has to run into the road as cars blare their horns angrily at pedestrians. Pick-pockets and criminals seem to be walking around everywhere; even Western tourists move in herds. Rome has both carrots and sticks for catching one's attention.

And yet for misery there is something even more important than distraction. For when one despairs it is important that one be allowed to despair. When one is sad it is because, at some level, one wants to be sad; no amount of cajoling will convince one otherwise. What one needs then is things that prompt one to be sad, a helping hand in starting up the waterworks. In Rome, more than in other cities, there is much to be sad about. For the city is essentially the mausoleum of the Roman Empire, our civilization's progenitor, the first and only uniter of all Europe. Rome is like the deceased father's room, which one has never bothered to clean out. Instead, a usurper has been allowed the chance to move in. Nowadays the usurper is like our father as well, although it too constantly mourns father's death. Everywhere one turns in Rome one finds either an ancient statue of a statesman falling apart or a more recent statue of a Martyr's death. But of course, the greatest Martyr is Jesus himself, and it is his image that one finds more than any other. I find that there is something particularly fitting about the ubiquity of images of Jesus suffering in Rome. For Jesus is at once the father and the son, which is to say he is both Rome and us Westerners, together dying an eternally agonizing death. His image is the example *non-pareil* of greatness lost. Catholic guilt is famous, but deserving of the same renown is Catholic self-pity.

But enough of Catholicism, I was describing despair. And yes, Rome is excellent for despairing, firstly, because it can help one avoid thinking sad thoughts and, secondly, because it can help get one started feeling sad. Most important of all, however, is the fact that in Rome one can cry as much as one likes in public without fear of embarrassment. The paintings, the statues, the religious iconography, any of these could bring a person to tears. And indeed, many are brought to tears; entire herds of Polish, Japanese, and even American tourists spend their entire vacations wandering through these storied streets, bubbling tears. Even the proudest men among them cannot avoid spilling a few drops. Even if, by some miracle, one does not happen to be in the proximity of a notoriously heart-wrenching objects, it is still socially acceptable to cry. Those who pass by will simply assume that the weeper is receiving a "vision," which has naturally induced sobbing. It is not uncommon in Rome to find people fainting in the middle of

the street, overwhelmed by the feeling that they had just perceived Jesus or some other martyr.

After a few hours, Alan gave up sight-seeing and slogged back to the hostel. As soon as he returned to his room, he fell asleep. E had to wake Alan for dinner. The two ate together quickly. Alan subsequently returned to sleep.

Around mid-morning the following day, Alan and E boarded the Chinatown bus for the fourth time, in order to make the sixth and second to last stop of their European tour. Alan was exhausted. Though over the past several days he had hardly done anything besides sit, it seemed to Alan that not moving required even more energy than actually doing things. He felt groggy. He could hardly open his eyes he was squinting so much. And this was even after two morning cappuccinos, which had together cost him less than a single cup of drip coffee back where he came from.

In fact, Alan was manifesting a variety of strange physical symptoms. His spine, all the way from his tailbone to the crown of his head, tingled in a dull and painful way. The space between his back molar and his gum itched fiercely, though when he scratched the spot it did not disappear. There was an emptiness in the upper part of his stomach, though he was not hungry. He was exhaling too much and not inhaling enough. He felt his heart palpitating, but his heartbeat was slower than normal. Also, his body still smelled like tea.

Alan thought about each of these symptoms in turn. He considered them, estimated their intensity, and tried to recollect if he had ever before experienced them. Finally, Alan realized that he was too detached to actually care whether they would hurt him or not. Alan's mind wandered randomly, never staying long on any subject. Even in spite of the fact that Alan could not focus, his thoughts were dancing around the outskirts of a certain question. Some part of his mind was working on the problem of what had been going through François' head shortly before each had fired their shots.

François' falling smile in particular stuck with Alan. It indicated to Alan that in François' mind something had gone wrong. It was *then*, and only then, that François had realized there was indeed some chance he would get shot. Before that he had been certain, absolutely certain, that his life was not remotely in danger. Why? Because he must have had a plan. But what was the plan? Perhaps it was to take Alan into the catacombs. And yet the new location could not have provided François any certainty. All it did was test Alan's mettle, throw him off balance, give him that much more opportunity to resign if that was his intent. It was not a plan one could count on. Moreover, François was hardly surprised to find Alan unfazed by the location. It even

seemed that he had expected it.

“His plan must have had something to do with the arrangement with the bullets,” Alan surmised. Most duels that Alan had read about did not involve blank bullets. Moreover, the distance at which duel participants fired was usually much greater than the distance which had separated Alan and François. Standing so close together had essentially guaranteed that if someone fired the other would get shot. Strange, François' modifications to the classic duel cut both ways. On the one hand, fewer bullets seemed to make a shooting less likely. On the other hand, close proximity made a shooting inevitable. François modifications made the contest between himself and Alan more like a game of Russian Roulette than a traditional duel.

Of course, the elephant in Alan's head was the question of why François had discharged his chamber prematurely. It was even more paradoxical than the idea of having both live bullets and blanks. On the one hand, it seemed to be crazy to eliminate five sixth of his chances to win the duel. Indeed, François' last shot was a blank: Alan would not be where he was if it were real. In the moment, however, Alan had been certain that the bullet was in the chamber and that he was facing a mortal threat. Why had he thought that? Because he knew that François knew what was in his chamber, and he knew that François would be crazy to fight in a duel with only blanks. It was getting rid of all but one of his bullets that made Alan believe the last one had to be real. And indeed, Alan had really believed it. At no point had it occurred to Alan that François could have been bluffing. Even if it had, would Alan have been willing to take the chance? Who would be willing to bet on the fact that François would ignore so radically his own self-interest? Not Alan. He had assumed François was completely in his right mind and was, in fact, holding a loaded gun.

The more Alan thought about it, the surer he became that in the moment he had been fully aware it was completely in his interest to resign from the duel. Alan had chosen to compete in the duel, fully aware of the fact that doing so risked the infinitely bad outcome of ignoble death. Moreover, it was not as if resigning was actually an outcome that was so bad. It was not impossible that he and Marie would share a future together. Indeed, by informing her of who had proposed the duel, he might have completely undone whatever gains François had made. Those had been the options in Alan's mind. He had been so certain that there was a bullet in François' chamber that he had been completely blind to see the possibility that he would survive the duel live in his present limbo life. He had literally thought the options were resign and live or fight and die.

Why then hadn't he chosen to resign? For a long time Alan puzzled over the question before coming to something that felt to him as if it had to be the answer. “Because I didn't like the

options,” Alan thought, “Because I sensed the manipulation, the stacking of the deck against me. I felt self-interest and common sense grabbing hold of my neck, lifting up my arm to the sky and pulling the trigger. And to that self-interest, to that interest I said ‘no’. I fired because it *wasn't* rational to fire. I thought it was better to die pointlessly, absurdly, than to be a slave of necessity. It was more important for me to be master of my own fate than to be alive.”

With this realization, Alan felt as if a weight came off his back. He understood why he had done what he had done. Moreover, he found that his decision accorded completely with his own personal values. He understood that he had had no choice in the matter. To have not fired would have been a hypocrisy, contriving everything he stood for as a Romantic. And François? Alan realized that his behavior also agreed completely with his personal beliefs. To François, everyone in the world was rational, pragmatic, and motivated by obvious self-interest. If Alan had acted according to his own self-interest, neither of the two of them would have ever faced any risk. The duel would have never taken place and François' bluff would have worked. Even to the last second, François was sure it was working. In short, the duel, like the argument at the dinner party, had really been a contest between competing world views and ideals. As it turned out, these world views were fundamentally incompatible. Some part of Alan was proud to say that he had been right. In the battle of ideas, his had won.

Alan thought that this understanding of what had happened could satisfy him. His present situation was uncomfortable, but it had a semblance of order. It made sense. Alan could learn to live with things if they fit with his idiosyncratic take on the world. Poor Alan! His satisfaction would not last long.

Alan and E were deposited on Milan's West side, in the most subdued Chinatown that two had yet visited. Signs in the Chinese language filled the shop windows, but there were no huge banners on the outsides, no fanciful architecture, no neon lights. Alan and E found yet another hostel run by a Chinese family. E found the family particularly amiable. A boy about his age who worked there was studying for some sort of English placement exam. He and E were happy to discuss at length the finer points of English grammar.

Alan left the hostel and went to examine his environs. As he did so, a feeling of intense nostalgia took hold of him. The streets and architecture of Milan are very similar to those of Paris, especially on the Right bank. The Milanese walking down the street were, like Parisians, both hauntingly beautiful and devastatingly indifferent. Truth be told, the people Alan walked past were probably more beautiful than those to be found in Paris. In Milan, there are more fashion models per capita than anywhere else in the world.

The park due south of his hostel reminded Alan of the Luxembourg Gardens which he had walked past on his way to Nokitoff's lectures. Many of the African immigrants selling stolen or bootleg merchandise spoke French. Alan heard them joking to one another about how badly they had ripped off their last customer. The indoor shopping malls near the city's center reminded Alan of Paris' arcades. Milan even had bakeries. Their pastries were quite bready and horrible, but the coffee was both cheap and good.

In short, Alan felt as if he were free again, walking in what he felt was a decent proxy for the Paris which he so loved. The feeling filled Alan with an immense sadness. What a waste it had been, to have a duel, to fire the gun, to fight some contest of beliefs that only really mattered in his head. For the consequence of the contest were real. To have deprived himself of Paris, of his future... and to have done the same for François? He could have stuck up for himself and his values at some different time, in some different way.

Alan's short time in Milan implanted a cool remorse inside him. It was a quiet sadness, one which he could live with, but one which he *would* live with for a very long time. It would never prevent him from doing this or that. It would never cause him any sort of panic. And yet he would not be able to put it away. He would wake up with it in the morning and lay down with it at night. It would be inscribed in his hand; he would think about it every time he looked at his fingers or his arm. It would be tied to his flesh, flagging his vision like a black box above the nose. Any yet, whenever anyone happened to ask why he was so glum, he would never be able to say a word.

“Goodbye my proxy for Paris! Goodbye wide-streets and cafés! Goodbye ancient parks and storied steps! Goodbye indolence and beauty! Goodbye lights and romance! How I wish it was *au revoir*, and not *adieu*!”

Chapter 10

"I am always glad to mark the difference between Onegin and myself, lest a sarcastic reader or else some publisher of complicated calumny, collating here my traits, repeat thereafter shamelessly that I have scrawled a portrait, like Byron, the poet of pride — as if we were no longer to write long poems on any other subjects than ourselves!"

- From Eugene Onegin, A.S. Pushkin.

Ten miles outside the city of Geneva, situated on the coast of the eponymous lake, was the place in which Vladimir Nokitoff made his home. The Geneva Palace, as it was called, was a fairly tall and very wide building with a canary-yellow façade. This color was eye-catching, but not abrasive, evoking the same whimsy as badly preserved technicolor film. More whimsical than the building's color, however, was its architecture: its six floors had been built in concentric rectangles, the bottom level being roughly twice the height of all the others. The structure's tiers, together with the wrought iron siding of the tall bay windows, made the building look as if it were a wedding cake suffering from jaundice. All that it needed to top it off was a colossal bride and groom standing on the roof.

The main entrance of the building opened onto the first of several lobbies. This first foyer took up as much space as a small factory would. Its stunning thirty foot roof was illuminated by the incandescent force of five chandeliers. There were six or seven couches to be found in this large space and about as many sitting tables. The couches had been upholstered in a very fine red fabric with a subtle gold trim. This same color scheme was invoked by the numerous rugs lying around the lobby floor, and then repeated by the cushions of the sitting table chairs. The extravagance of these furnishings paled in comparison to the lobby's most stunning feature: a bank of more than one hundred floor-to-ceiling windows opening onto the lake. The shore was not quite a hundred feet beyond. A pair of heavy drapes, the same color as the building's exterior, framed these windows, embellishing even further the view they offered. Canary yellow accentuates the blueness of things: in its company, blues seem brighter, cleaner, and purer.

There were many porters and bellhops scurrying across the floor of the main lobby. The coloring of their costumes were alarmingly similar to that of the the drapes and the couches. It was as if the hotel management were trying to make human individuals blend in with the décor. Indeed, one would have had to count to realize that, in the lobby, hotel employees outnumbered guests by a ratio of three to one.

Almost immediately upon entering the hotel, our protagonist and his escort raised eyebrows

among the hotel staff. Alan was still dressed in his appallingly cheap American tourist get-up: sweat-stained Hawaiian shirt, orange clog sandals made of soy by-product, and a bent baseball cap with a decal of the leaning tower of Pisa. Meanwhile, E looked as if he were a Nepalese pack animal, loaded up with half his weight in luggage.

Alan and E trundled over to the couch closest to the hotel's front door. They set their bags down upon the couch and Alan began rummaging for a pair of clothes to wear. He took out a pair of khakis, a pair of loafers, and a bright-colored polo shirt. He also removed a cream-colored cashmere sweater, which he planned to drape over his shoulders and tie in a knot over his chest. At the same time, E found a very long and very ornate frog button shirt, whose red and gold color pattern had the unfortunate effect of making it seem as if he were a bellboy on loan from the hotel's Shanghai branch. Because E was not bashful about his body, he decided to change clothes right where he was standing in the main lobby, exposing his naked chest to the world writ large. Alan did not notice this, however, for he had already started heading towards the bathroom to change.

Upon entering the bathroom, Alan immediately discovered that there was a tuxedoed attendant standing by the sink. The attendant looked warily at Alan and seemed as if he might say something. Deciding not to give him the opportunity, Alan went into one of the stalls, where he quickly changed. When he came out, Alan sensed that the attendant was quite relieved by his new mode. He graciously invited Alan over to the sink for a squirt of liquid soap. Alan, who had not been planning on washing his hands, decided to accept the offer.

And so Alan began to wash his hands, shortly thereafter becoming transfixed by his own image in the bathroom mirror. In particular, Alan's gaze was drawn to his eyes. He had often looked into his eyes, wondering if the consuming blackness at the center would give him some window into his destiny. He had imagined that, next to his own face which he saw reflected in his pupils, he had on occasion seen a glimmer of something bright, of something light, which to him had served as a kind of phantasmic promissory note. He had a destiny — he was sure of that. He had a spark — he had seen it before somewhere in the depths of the two black holes which he presently searched. Was the spark of fire, that glimmer of intensity, still there to view? Had it ever been? The windows to the soul are the most inscrutable, dark, and empty part of the human body. When appraised, they only return to the appraiser that image which he himself presents. Alan did not think about this fact. Nor did he think about whether it meant that the essence of a person is no more and no less than the image the person presents. What he *did* think about was how unsettling it was that his search for something remarkable in his eyes was turning out to be in vain. In turn, this led him to a host of anxious doubts. If there was no way for him to live in France or even in the first world, then there was no way for him to develop his voice. Without a

voice, no influence. Without influence, no proxy for chosenness. Without a proxy for chosenness, well, he was back to being a mongrel. If not a Jew, if not a Frenchman, then what? Was there any other nation that would have him?

Alan's thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of a commotion in the main lobby. Alan ran out of the bathroom, finding four bellhops hoisting his assistant E. Each bellhop held in his arms a different limb of the young man, who, for his part, was spiritedly resisting their collective efforts.

"We are here to see Nokitoff!" E kept shouting. Because of his heavy breathing, the guards, if they understood English, must have thought that he was intending a pause just before the sentence's last word. It was certainly quite reasonable to think that E was saying, "We are here to see! Knock it off!"

Alan hurried to help his waylaid companion, shouting insistently in both English and French, "Stop! Stop! *Ne touchez pas à mon assistant!* Don't touch him! *Non!* No!"

The porters, surprised by the intercession of someone who looked like he actually belonged in the hotel, were momentarily distracted from their attempt at controlling the young assistant. Seizing the opportunity, E flailed an odd assortment of muscles in unison, causing his body to swing a full one hundred and eighty degrees. In a single motion, he freed himself from his captors and was directed toward the ground. A moment later, E landed on all fours, with the effortless aplomb of a cat thrown upside-down.

The bellboys did not try to seize E again, but rather watched patiently as their superior approached. The man had a very aggressive widow's peak and a bright blue silk handkerchief, which he had tucked neatly into his collar. He spoke to Alan in a strange way. For the most part, he talked high and fast. Occasionally, however, he would stutter a word or two. Invariable, he would recover from the stutter by squawking an exclamation. To Alan, it seemed that the hotel official was warbling the mating song of an elusive tropical bird.

"Excuse me, monsieur. What is it that I can do... do... do... do do — to perhaps! — be of assistance?"

"Well, for one you can tell your employees to stop attacking my attaché!"

"Forgive me, monsieur. We have had many problems with loafers, in the puh... puh... puh — recent! — memory. Obviously you can see why they would be attracted to this establishment."

Here the supervisor threw his arms wide and spun a full circle, in reverent appreciation of the majesty of the room which he now demonstrated. When he finished turning, he stuck his head

close to Alan's face and squinted his left eye, as if he were appraising a diamond.

"Your father is a guest at the hotel?"

"No," Alan said bluntly, *"No, he's not. I am here because I have an appointment to meet one of your guests."*

"How... how... how — very! — unusual." The man said, blinking furiously and not retreating his head an inch.

"Is it?" Alan replied indignantly.

"Certainly! Our guests stay here for the privacy we... we.... we — have! — provided here. They are very exclusive clientele, who prefer not to mix their private and public lives."

Alan was not sure what to say.

"What is your name Mister..."

"Stuart."

"Mr. Stuart. Tell me Mr. Stuart, who is ... is ... is — do you think! — is expecting you."

"Vladimir Nokitoff," Alan enunciated the name forcefully, repeating the pronunciation that Nokitoff himself had previously used.

"Who?" the man furrowed his brow, looking skeptically at Alan.

"Don't be coy! The whole world knows that he lives here!"

The hotel official scoffed and drew his posture upward, so that he achieved his maximum height.

"Well, it is for this very reason that Mr. Nokitoff has left explicit instructions to not... not — Never! — be bothered by anyone who drops-in!"

"But how do you expect me to keep my appointment?" Alan demanded.

"To be... be... be... be — Frankly! — I don't believe that you do have an appointment."

Alan gave the man a cold stare. Alan wondered if the fact that he had committed a homicide made his gaze more threatening. Wouldn't the man crumble in the face of his demands, at some level intuiting what Alan was capable of doing?

"If there is nothing else that I can help with," the man said, stretching his hand out and turned his palm toward the door and inviting Alan to leave the hotel. This action did not cause Alan to

move, though it did cause him to wonder how many people that he had previously had dealings with also had previously committed violent crimes. Oh lamentable reality! How often will we sing that sad refrain: *being* counts for little, *appearance* counts for nearly everything. A single face tattoo will do more to make the world tremble than a thousand secret murders.

Though embroiled in a serious clash of wills, the attentions of both the hotel official and our protagonist were soon diverted. “Call large Russian,” E suggested. Alan immediately pounced on the idea.

“There are two guards Nokitoff takes with him everywhere. The large one is named Misha and the smaller one is named Grisha. They’re here now, aren’t they? They’re also guests of the hotel?”

The hotel official flared his nostrils as Alan spoke and frowned severely. When Alan finished, he sized Alan up once more and said quickly, *“Excuse me for one moment.”*

Alan nodded and watched as the man retreated behind the lobby’s front desk. With his back still turned to Alan, he dialed a number on his telephone. Soon he was nodding his head tersely. His posture indicated discomfort. When the call was finished, he slowly returned the phone receiver to its cradle. He went into a side office without a second glance to either our protagonist or his assistant. Alan figured that he had won.

And indeed he had. For after no more than five minutes, the largest member of Nokitoff’s entourage sauntered his way into the lobby. He was dressed in a simple black tunic made of a light cotton material. He had tucked his shirt into a pair of running pants, which were black with a white stripe running from waist to ankle. There was a certain jauntiness in the Russian’s step, which Alan had not previously noticed. The guard would extend his leg far out in front of his body. To compensate for the forward tilt in his body, he had to throw his shoulders backward, which made him look something like a skier about to fall on his rear. Within a few moments, it was apparent that the guard was quite popular at the hotel. A number of bellhops diverted their scurrying so as to intersect the Russian, trading high-fives and secret handshakes with him as they passed. Some, who evidently could not divert themselves from what they were doing, threw the Russian a thumbs up sign or some other greeting. Somehow the Russian caught all these accolades, snapping his fingers back in return. All the while he had a tightly pressed smirk on his face and a look of merriment in his eyes, bobbing his head left then right as if he were listening to music.

“Alan Stuart?” he asked when he was an arm’s length away from Alan.

“Yes,” Alan replied tersely. Though the man seemed to be in good humor, Alan feared that,

like many Russians, his mood might be able to turn on a dime.

“Glad to see you are here,” the Russian said in English, stretching his hand out for Alan to shake, “We didn’t think you would make it.”

Alan found that the man’s shake was actually quite delicate, weak even. With paws like those, the man must have learned from experience that it was better to err on the side of caution when shaking hands. Alan was just beginning to think that it was very odd how much the Russian had improved his pronunciation of English in only a week, when his attention was called away by an enthusiastic, almost outraged shout.

“Romeo! Romeo!” the Russian yelled, “What the fuck are you doing here, Romeo?”

E nodded politely. The large Russian spent a minute taking in the appearance of the two. Finally, he said, “Well, should we go up?”

Alan was momentarily stunned by the sudden burst of confident French from the Russian. There was no time for his surprise to be noticed, however, for Nokitoff’s bodyguard whistled loudly. The massive hall was filled with the ricocheted screech of rubber stopping against waxed marble. A second later five bellhops were standing at attention in a semi-circle around Alan, E, and the large Russian.

“Keep our guests’ bags safe during our meeting, please,” the Russian ordered politely.

In unison the bellhops nodded. The Russian nodded back and soon a train of men were taking Alan and E’s bags somewhere behind the main desk. Meanwhile, the Russian led our intrepid protagonist and his assistant to a space between the first and second lobbies, where a manually-operated elevator was waiting for them. The three boarded and were soon rising upward. No one had requested a floor.

The elevator was old, small, and slow. There was no kind of background music available to break the awkward silence, although presumably if one had asked the elevator attendant he would have taken whistling requests. Curiosity and awkwardness getting the better of him, Alan decided to ask Nokitoff’s bodyguard, *“So you speak French?”*

“And English too actually,” the Russian replied, *“Although my French is better.”*

“Really?” Alan asked, impressed and surprised by the easiness with which the man switched between the two languages.

“Why not?” the Russian asked, sounding offended, *“What, you think I look stupid?”*

The enormous man seemed as if his entire body were tensing. Veins all over his arms and

face sprang to life, throbbing violently. His chest swelled, practically filling the small elevator space. Alan's heart surged. There was no way to escape the man's grasp in his present confines. And yet, there was no need to do so, for after only a few seconds of tensing the man laughed uproariously.

"Just joking! In Paris I pretend not to understand any language, let alone French."

Alan exhaled with audible relief. The Russian continued jocularly, *"You see Alan, where I come from, everyone learns at a very young age that not knowing things can make life easier. In fact, there are times when knowing things makes life quite literally impossible."*

By the rise and fall of his voice, the guard had clearly intended some humorous irony. Alan remained taciturn, however, and nodded his head seriously. The Russian frowned. As the three disembarked from the elevator, the guard remarked, *"You know for a Jew you have a terrible sense of humor."*

The Russian led a quiet E and fuming Alan to a door at the end of the hall. Somehow, the man's remark had managed to mortally offend, on multiple levels, both the Jewish and French parts of Alan Stuart.

"How dare he call me a Jew!" the French part shouted, scandalized.

"He's not allowed to use the word Jew like that!" the Jewish part cried.

"What, are Jews supposed to be the only funny people on Earth?" the Frenchman asked, outraged.

"How can he say I don't have a great sense of humor? I have a great sense of humor!" the Jew demanded.

"Détestable Brute Russe!" Alan fumed at the back of the man's shaved bald head, *"Typical Anti-semitic Slav!"*

The bodyguard reached into his pocket and found a small key. He approached the room at the very end of the hall and put his key in the lock. He turned it, opening the door wide.

Sitting in a heavy chair by a window with canary drapes was none other than Vladimir Nokitoff himself. He was wearing a cheap pair of thick reading glasses, a baggy frog-green shirt which had been tucked into his khaki shorts, and a pair of grey socks pulled tight up to his knees. He was reading a scientific journal called, "Advances in Lepidoptery." Upon hearing the door open, Nokitoff turned toward the entryway and squinted.

"Well, well, well, look at what the cat has dragged in," he said, smiling. Alan was not quite

sure if Nokitoff was referring to either himself or the bodyguard. He did not have time to think about it, for Alan and E were quickly ushered into the long couch in the sitting room. Alan settled on the left side, closer to Nokitoff, while E sat in the center, which crowded Alan slightly. As was often the case with meeting professors, Alan was nervous. He was worried about saying the wrong thing or interjecting too quickly, sounding stupid, and not getting whatever it was that he wanted out of the teacher. He decided to smile at Nokitoff, while the latter appraised him critically. Nokitoff's bodyguard went to a back corridor and Alan watched for a second. When he returned his gaze to Nokitoff, he still had the same smile on his face.

"You really are an optimistic idealistic son of a bitch aren't you?" Alan heard a door close somewhere in the apartment.

Alan, completely blind-sided, considered his words carefully. "Pardon?" Alan asked.

Nokitoff laughed and put his journal on a table to his left. He said apologetically, "Excuse me, where's my manners? Please, sit back in the chair, take a load off, make your-self comfortable. Can I entreat you to something to drink? Scotch, soda, scotch and soda. My assistant makes a hell of a Bloody Mary."

Alan had not expected to be offered a drink, considering how early it was in the afternoon and his general sense that he had to keep his wits about him. He realized that he was jumpy, however, and that it was off-putting. He decided to accept the drink offer.

"I'll have whatever you're having," Alan said stiffly.

Nokitoff, leaning forward and turning to his right, motioned to E and asked Alan, "He want a drink?"

Alan glanced at E, who seemed apprehensive.

"No, I think he's fine," Alan said. Cursing himself for his politeness, Alan decided to take a stab at jocularly. Slurring his words slightly, and trying to adopt the working class dialect of the city which he came from, Alan explained, "When he drinks he lights up brighter than a reindeer's nose on Christmas."

Nokitoff nodded and smiled slightly. He said quickly, "There we go, no drink yet and already loosening up." Suddenly, Nokitoff burst into a stream of Russian. There was some kind of response from the space to Alan's left, though he didn't know what. As an after-thought, Nokitoff shouted, "And put a little blood in it this time, for our guest."

Alan stiffened as he tried to digest the meaning of Nokitoff's remark. Blood in a beverage?

From an animal or from a human? Not from a human, not even Russians drank that. But was it possible that they drank some kind of alcoholic beverage with animal blood? Was there such a thing as Vodka Tartar? Normally, drinking blood is a recipe for a serious bacterial infection or blood-borne illness. If the blood was from the right animal, or if there was enough alcohol in the drink, perhaps it was safe. Of course, it was possible that “blood” was meant metaphorically or ironically. But what was the irony? Was Nokitoff making some sort of elliptical reference to blood libel as a way of insinuating that Alan was a Jew? Alan decided that this was probably not the case, but that he was just keyed up because of the larger Russian’s remark on the elevator.

Nokitoff stood up and went over to a bookshelf behind the couch on which Alan was presently sitting. He filed away his journal and put his glasses into a case sitting on the bookshelf. He returned to the chair he had been sitting on previously and faced Alan.

“So tell me, Alan, how did you get here? I am quite interested to know.”

Alan felt a cutting sensation in his insides. This was not a pleasant question to answer for Alan. If he told Nokitoff the truth, it would lead Alan to ask Nokitoff for his lawyer’s contact information before he was properly ingratiated to the professor. Meanwhile, if he lied, it would drive the conversation into even more uncertain territory, and Alan could risk getting caught in saying something untrue or stupid sounding.

“To Geneva you mean?” Alan said, stalling.

“No, to Earth,” Nokitoff replied dismissively, “Yeah, to Geneva.”

“Oh,” Alan winced, feeling that he was already off to a bad start, “It’s a long story.”

Nokitoff laughed, “I bet it was. Fuzz was chasing you the whole way, huh?”

Alan was caught off guard by chuckling from his right. E was pinching his nose, trying to prevent himself from laughing. He was imagining the decrepit, stuttering and shuddering Chinatown bus, being driven by a desperate Chinese man, cursing wildly and looking out the back mirror, as an enormous ball of yarn threatened to crush him and his vehicle as it sped its way through the Swiss Alps. Actually, Alan was not entirely sure what Nokitoff meant by fuzz. He assumed that he meant foggy weather or rain or something like that.

Nokitoff’s second assistant entered the room carrying a tray with three drinks and a small bowl of pickles. One of the glasses looked like it was tomato juice, while the other two appeared to be water that was ever so slightly pink. Surprised by his entrance, Alan turned to look at him. He found that, like the first assistant, the second assistant’s clothing was more subdued than usual: presently, he was wearing a bedazzled black t-shirt and a pair of black dress pants. The

studs in the t-shirt were placed in such a way as to spell the word “Rich.” The assistant gave Nokitoff one of the glasses, put the tray down on his table, and took the last one for himself. He sat down in a heavy chair at the opposite end of the couch, relatively far from the other individuals in the room.

“So, out with it: plane, train, automobile?” Nokitoff asked.

“We took the bus.” Alan said factually.

“Took the bus?” Nokitoff seemed surprised, “From Paris?”

Alan decided not to speak. This did not pose a problem, for Nokitoff soon began spouting his own thoughts, “I’d have figured that the coppers would have the bus station pretty well plastered up.”

At the mention of the word “coppers” Alan realized that Nokitoff somehow knew that Alan was connected with the killing of François. Alan felt as if he were completely exposed, sitting on the couch while his professor glibly discussed whatever anatomy Alan had been hiding under his clothing.

“Of course, they’d know that you’d have to be an idiot to try flying out from an airport in Paris.”

Alan nodded and, unsure of what else to do, took a long and hard drink. Alan found that there was something very enticing about his beverage, which was at once spicy, peppery, and had just a slight touch of something light and fresh, like basil or mint. After as much as thirty seconds of what Alan considered to be an extremely awkward silence, “How did you hear that the police are after me?”

Nokitoff was surprised by the question, “I didn’t hear it, I read it. Right...” Nokitoff began rummaging for something behind one of the drapes, “Here!” Nokitoff produced a newspaper which he had evidentially stored after finishing. Nokitoff handed it to Alan, who scanned the front page, finding that at the bottom there was an article titled, “*Possible Suspect Sought For Questioning in Case of the ‘Catacombs Killer’.*” Underneath the title was the picture Alan had given to the *Collège de France* with his application. In the picture, Alan had a very bad attempt at thin, greasy, French mustache. “At least it makes the picture look less like me,” Alan thought. Alan handed the paper back to Nokitoff, realizing that he was quite happy that his mother had discontinued her subscription to *Le Monde*.

“We took the Chinatown bus the day of the duel; there was no chance for them to catch us.”

“How clever,” Nokitoff remarked.

“I’ve actually been in four countries since Tuesday.”

Nokitoff did not seem to be particularly impressed by this fact. He took a sip of his beverage and smacked his lips with satisfaction. He took a small pickle and ate it whole. When he was finished, he asked Alan,

“So how long do you think you’ll be able to last on the run?”

“I don’t know.” Alan replied, truthfully. The alcohol in his beverage was now causing him to loosen up. Even though he was totally exposed to Nokitoff, he found it easier not to pay attention to the fact. If he did notice that he was talking with his professor about the fact that he was running from the police as a leading suspect in a front-page murder investigation, he found that it was somewhat amusing, if not totally normal.

“You have a plan?” Nokitoff asked.

“Not really!” Alan hiccuped. He furrowed his brow, “Now that you mention it... Do you think I might trouble you to ask if I might use your lawyer?”

Nokitoff did not seem surprised or perturbed by the request, “By all means, he’s in the back hall. Third door on the left.”

“He’s here now?” Alan asked, finding it highly irregular.

“Why of course he is!” Nokitoff replied, an incredulous expression on his face. Alan shrugged his shoulders and stood up, drink in hand, heading back toward the room Nokitoff described.

“Ask him whatever questions you like,” Nokitoff said invitingly, “He’ll try his best to research the answers to them when he gets the chance. In the meantime, you can come back here and continue our visit.”

Alan acknowledged Nokitoff’s remark and headed to the back hall. As he did, he could not help but overhear Nokitoff begin to interrogate E, “*Alors parlez-vous français?* Speaky speaky English?”

“I’m sorry, what did you say,” E asked, though Alan was too far down the hall to hear distinctly Nokitoff’s reply.

Alan found the door that Nokitoff had described. He knocked on it. A burly voice replied, though what he said Alan could not be sure. Alan decided to enter.

Sitting at a heavy wooden bureau, in front of a floor to ceiling bookshelf lined with thick legal volumes in three languages, was the larger of Nokitoff's two assistants. He was reading a thick legal document through a pair of large horn-rimmed glasses, which had slid down the length of his substantial nose. As he read, the large man rocked back and forth in his chair, muttering strange guttural syllables to himself. Alan realized that if the man had a black hat on his head anyone would have taken him for a Hassidic Rabbi studying torah. It occurred to Alan that the reason the assistant might have felt entitled to say Alan was a very unfunny Jew was because he himself was Jewish.

The man sitting at the desk, who constituted in one body both Nokitoff's physical and legal protection, looked up at Alan. "Well, if it isn't No-Jokes! Nu, vos macht a yid?" Alan had no idea what the lawyer had said, though he knew it was common expression in Yiddish. Pushy, overbearing, trying to one-up Alan in terms of Yiddish credentials, Alan knew now that the guard was definitely a member of the tribe. Part of Alan wanted nothing to do with the conversation he was about to have. Curiously, however, Alan somehow felt as if he could trust the man's advice.

"You're Nokitoff's lawyer?" Alan asked.

"I prefer the term 'advocate', but yes. I am licensed to practice law in several countries: some of them are even in the first world. Usually you can't just buy those." Here the large man motioned to his right, showing an impressive array of legal degrees, which included, among others, legal master's degrees from La Sorbonne and Harvard.

"I am in need of some legal advice," Alan said factually.

"I can imagine!" The man chuckled and leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on his desk. He motioned for Alan to sit. Alan did so. As soon as he sat, however, Alan noticed that the lawyer was looking for something. He hit around his pants pocket and then, finding nothing, took his feet off his desk and checked in the front drawer. He pulled out a small audio recorder and flipped it on. "For my protection," he said. He motioned for Alan to continue.

"I don't want to talk with that thing on," Alan said, cursing himself for inadvertently putting his voice on audio.

"Relax, Alan, this is nothing," the lawyer replied, "Only in Russia would they be able to use something said between lawyer and his client in court. This is simply to protect me from charges of wrongdoing."

Alan nodded, sensing that the lawyer was probably correct. Relaxing, Alan asked, "So I take it you're familiar with my case?"

The lawyer nodded, “Spoiled French brat is shot in Paris catacombs, probably in a duel. Cops want to know where Alan Stuart is because his fingerprints are among those four found on two guns left in the catacombs. Both Alan and the person found at the crime scene have their prints on the murder weapon. The other gun fired six blanks and has the prints of François and Alan’s roommate, whose name is still unknown. Both Alan and his roommate are sought as persons of interest in the case. Alan is considered most likely suspect as he is the only one with motive, having gotten into an argument with victim several days before.”

Alan took the information in glumly. It seemed that the police basically knew everything there was to know.

“So what do you think about the evidence?” Alan asked.

“Assuming that at least one of the two non-suspects, the person found at the crime scene and Alan’s roommate, does not testify in court, this case is purely circumstantial. Without testimony to the contrary, it seems impossible to say beyond any reasonable doubt whether it was the person found at the crime scene or Alan Stuart who shot the rich kid.”

Alan exhaled visibly. He posture sagged in his chair and laughed a little, making a cheers sign toward the lawyer and taking a sip of his drink.

The lawyer was not as enthusiastic as Alan. He shook his head glumly, “That, of course, is assuming a fair trial with equal resources and consideration for both sides. All the publicity of this case, and the fact that the prosecution will have so much pressure from the victim’s family, and the nearly unlimited resources at their disposal, compared to your relatively paltry means, indicate to me that a fair trial is extremely unlikely. Unless you can somehow play a Dreyfus card, you’re going to be lynched.”

Alan huffed, the air slowly trickling out of his body. He took his drink and finished it off in a single gulp. The lawyer nodded. A prolonged period of silence followed, where Alan looked at the floor and the lawyer looked at Alan. Finally, Alan spoke up.

“So what do I do?” Alan asked, “Where do I go?”

The lawyer held his hand up to his ear and cupped it, indicating to Alan to listen. But then, as he began speaking, he wagged his index finger back and forth at his cupped ear. It seemed to Alan that the lawyer was telling him not to pay attention to his words. “Strictly speaking, you must go back to France to stand trial. I am fully aware that if I advise you to flee France permanently, then that would be encouraging you to commit a crime, an offense for which I can be disbarred in several jurisdictions. Nevertheless, I am happy to answer questions of a general

nature, even about matters such as extradition, asylum, and immigration.”

Alan understood that he was being invited to play a game. In this game, Alan, the client, would have to act as interrogator, while the attorney would only answer questions that he did not risk self-incrimination for asking. The vaguer the conversation, the more likely he was to get information.

“What is the maximum penalty the French legal system can assign for participating in a duel?” Alan asked. The lawyer nodded enthusiastically.

“A well-phrased question. In theory, self-defense should acquit the majority of dueling perpetrators from a first-degree murder charge, but cannot acquit them from reckless homicide. However, if the duelist happened to be committing a crime like criminal trespassing while dueling,” here the lawyer pointed at Alan, “A negligent homicide can be considered to be a first-degree murder. In short, the maximum penalty in France would be between 30 years and a life sentence.”

Alan gulped.

“I should say, prison in Europe is not like prison in America,” the lawyer added, “Almost a third of people in my home country spend at least some years in prison. It is a very normal life-experience, even positive. One is given a lot of leisure time, which one can use to learn skills one would never otherwise develop. Grisha, you know the short guy, is good example: he never would learn to trade stock if he did not go to prison. And if he never learned to trade stocks, then he would never have become Nokitoff’s portfolio manager.”

Alan was not surprised to hear that Nokitoff’s other assistant had gone to prison: he had the look. Nor was he surprised to hear that he was an accomplished investment banker: he had that look too.

“Well, assuming that prison isn’t for me,” Alan coughed, finding it quite unbelievable that he was even in a position to be saying that sentence, “I am at least considering a few other things.”

The lawyer held his hand up, motioning for Alan to stop. He pointed two fingers at his own eyes, and then pointed one finger at the tape recorder. He nodded significantly at Alan. Alan realized he needed to speak in terms that were more hypothetical.

“If a fugitive from a developed country were to arrange for himself to be, well, for lack of a better word, trafficked to East Asia, how likely would it be for him to be found and extradited back?”

The lawyer looked skeptically at Alan. “Unless the fugitive goes on vacation some where else in the first world, absolutely impossible. Of course the downside for the fugitive would be that being trafficked is potentially more dangerous than prison. And then, what’s waiting on the other side? Chinese food every day, crowds, pollution, no job opportunities, no family or friends.”

Alan nodded grimly. He exhaled long and hard, thinking about how to phrase his final question properly.

“So my final question is, ‘Is there a country to which it would be possible for a fugitive from French jurisdiction to legally emigrate, such that this same country has no extradition agreement with France?’”

The lawyer smiled, “I told you that you would make a good lawyer. You should probably add ‘And is not likely to have an agreement soon’ as well as make some mention of ethnic background/current citizenship status. Incidentally, your mother is French?”

“Yes.”

“No help there. Jewish?”

Alan shook his head, “Only my father’s side is Jewish.”

“Really?” The lawyer asked, “I’m surprised. I’d have thought you were Jewish on both sides.”

Alan quietly accepted the remark. The lawyer continued, “Your father’s family has been in America a long time?”

“Yes,” Alan replied, “Four generations or so.”

The lawyer shook his head, “Bad luck. Well, let me check some things Alan, and I will have an answer to your question. One idea actually jumps immediately to mind, but I’m not sure it’ll work...”

The lawyer stood in his chair and turned, looking through his bookshelf. He told Alan that he could go back to the main room, he would find Alan when he was ready.

Alan quietly shut the door to the lawyer’s office. He stepped gingerly back towards the apartment’s main sitting room. He overheard Nokitoff saying, Alan was not sure to whom, “Leave it with the people at the desk and I’ll take a look at it later.”

Alan entered the main room and was greeted by Nokitoff, “There’s the man of the hour. What’d Misha say?”

“He’s going to get back to me,” Alan replied, standing behind the couch. E was still seated forward, his hands resting lightly on his knees.

“So, going to China?” Nokitoff asked. Alan wondered what E had told him.

“No,” Alan said uncomfortably, “It seems that your lawyer thinks I’d be better off going to prison than to Asia.”

Nokitoff laughed and shook his head back and forth. He motioned for Alan to sit. He leaned forward in chair, and shot a glance toward his other assistant, who was still leaning back in the sitting chair opposite Nokitoff’s own.

“Well Grisha, what do you think? Will prison be good for our budding homme de lettres?”

The assistant took a sip of his drink, and squinted his damaged eyebrow at Alan. After he had finished appraising Alan, he remarked, “They will eat you alive in prison.” He took another sip of the drink while staring doggedly ahead. Alan shivered. Nokitoff laughed, “Never mind him, you’re going to be just fine. Somehow I don’t think prison is in your future, Misha will come up with something.”

Nokitoff smiled at Alan, who returned a similar expression, though his was much tighter. Nokitoff’s smile fell, and he sighed. “Alright,” Nokitoff said, “Let’s get down to more serious business. Now, you must have wondered why it was that I invited you down here?”

“I assumed it had something to do with my essay,” Alan suggested.

“Pre-cisely. I read your essay on the use of the eye motif and thought it was exceptional. Your intuition for how motifs and symbols operate is terrific, you pay an immense amount of respect to the details of the text, and your writing style is clear, but can be flashy when it needs to be. In short, I think that you potentially have the makings of a major literary talent.”

At the mention of the first word Alan’s heart began to flutter. He felt his chest rise up and the tips of fingers and toes begin to tingle. Alan felt an immense gratitude and relief. No more was there a need to look in the mirror and intuit the presence of greatness; he only had to hear the words of Nokitoff in his ear. Nokitoff did not give Alan long to relish his ringing endorsement.

“You’ve written fiction?” Nokitoff asked.

“Not much,” Alan admitted, “I’ve read much more than I’ve written, as I feel should be the case for every writer.”

Nokitoff nodded his agreement, waiting for Alan to continue.

“But yes, I’ve done writing that is not essayistic or analytical. In particular, I’ve worked in the genre of memoir. Not necessarily true memoir, but memoir.” Alan was about to add that he felt great literature had to come out of great life experiences, but was not entirely sure what Nokitoff would have to say about it. Would that imply that Nokitoff had to be a necrophiliac to create Norbert Norbert?

“An excellent vein in which to begin. We always write about ourselves, even if we don’t intend to,” Nokitoff said, *“At least you’ve started by intending to write about what you will actually be writing about.”*

Alan nodded. Nokitoff was quiet too. Alan, reflective, decided to ask Nokitoff something he had long been wondering about, a problem which had always held him in his attempt to write fiction. *“But I have a problem with that. How does one write about oneself? What does one write about oneself? It seems difficult to me to figure out what’s important.”*

Nokitoff nodded. He looked up in the air, squinted, and said, *“One only truly describes one’s own heart by attributing it to another.”*

Alan knew the quotation, *“That’s Chateaubriand.”*

“You know the quotation?” Nokitoff said, somewhat surprised.

“Chateaubriand is a favorite of mine,” Alan said.

Nokitoff nodded, *“He is a writer’s writer. His turn of phrase is impeccable, exquisite. He is comparable only to Shakespeare and Gogol. Even Twain pales in comparison to him. So, what is he saying there?”*

Alan tried to remember the quote. He was becoming nervous again, worried about embarrassing himself. He had to take a stab at it though, *“That one can only convey what one is if one gives another person the credit for being it.”*

Nokitoff shook his head, *“Close, but not quite. Actually, it relates to my last lecture. The question at the heart of Chateaubriand’s quote is, “What does it mean to attribute X to person Y? It means to give X to Y, yes, but also to give Y the credit for having X.” It is to say, in a deeper sense, that the thing is really Y’s and not one’s own. So on the one hand Chateaubriand is saying that “In describing oneself one is always describing a different person.” Which is self-evident, if I were to give you a complete account of myself, I would need to include at some point the process of me giving to you an account of myself, leading to an infinite regress of self-*

explanation that can never terminate. A self-description cannot be at once complete and true, because it can never take into account the process of self-description. It is a totalitarian ambition to fully and truly describe anything, let alone oneself. And like all totalitarian ambitions, it is doomed.”

Alan disagreed completely with Nokitoff’s claim. It was a basic tenant of his that the purpose of writing was to describe, once and for all, those few concepts which were at the base of life. This was what made the Romantics so great: they explicated love and life and death and many many other things as being exactly what they were. And yet the culture had lost its way, turned its back on those expositions, taken up by fad and fancy it sought now to redefine this as that and that as the other. Alan’s task was simply to remind people of those explanations, to capture the public’s imagination with the essence of life once more. And now Nokitoff was saying that there could not be any full exposition of anything, or any person’s life. Alan did not mention his disagreement, however, instead allowing Nokitoff to continue.

“But interestingly, and here is where the remark becomes original, we can put weight on the word “by.” What does Chateaubriand mean when he uses the word? Now obviously words only mean what they mean and nothing else. Nevertheless, in this context, “by” means “in this way” or “through the following process.” In other words, he seems to suggest that “Through the process of giving another the credit for having what is in one’s heart, one describes one’s self.” In other words, there is an enormous gift of self implied in the notion of authorship. One has to have an immense compassion to put the something that is in oneself in the body and mind of another. Think of it, one takes what is precious inside oneself, perhaps even secret, and gives it away. In the very process of giving, one is transformed, one becomes another, for one no longer has what one gave away. In this sense, true description is like love, fleeting. It must change the lover so long as he is in love. And yet, even more than love, it is like love’s fruit: parenting. It is a gift for which one can expect no reward for oneself, besides whatever one gleans from the act of giving. For some people, the rewards of giving itself are enough reason to give. This is roughly the precondition for someone to be a happy novelist or parent.”

Alan was actually quite bored by this discussion of Chateaubriand’s quote. It seemed to Alan that Nokitoff had possibly gone senile, proposing that writing was somehow like parenting or giving presents. No, description was about saying how the world was, how one was. It was not about just inventing things willy-nilly or giving gifts from the bottom of one’s heart to creatures from imagination. Nevertheless, Alan nodded his politely listening to Nokitoff’s exposition. When Nokitoff finished, Alan nodded vigorously, saying, “Uhuh uhuh. Wow.”

Nokitoff said, “Well, I hope that gives you some insight. To be more concrete, I’d say you

should try picking some parts of yourself that you think are particularly laudable or particularly despicable or are particularly different, make them even more extreme, and write an excerpt of that person's life. And then you'll see, the more memories you feed them, the more the memories become theirs and not your own. And yet, they'll be yours too, truer descriptions of some part of you than you could ever manage to write otherwise."

When it was clear Nokitoff was finished, his assistant cleared his throat. Alan turned to face him, found him leaning forward in his chair and pointing his finger at Alan.

"And don't write about fucking dead people," he said, "Writing about fucking dead people has already been done."

Alan tittered uneasily at the vague threat from the assistant, who leaned back in his chair. The pause in the conversation that might have followed did not occur, however, for the four sitting in the drawing room were presently interrupted by the entry of Nokitoff's lawyer.

"Misha, you have reached a verdict?" Nokitoff asked.

Misha, who still had the glasses on his nose, had a legal pad in his hand. He sat down in the free space on the couch between Alan and E.

"Well, Alan, you essentially have asked me for a country that has no extradition agreement with France, which has completely open immigration, and is not completely disconnected from the Western world."

The lawyer paused, as if to check that Alan agreed that this was the question. Alan nodded.

"Unfortunately, no such country exists. The only continental country without extradition to France is Switzerland, and the Swiss require an ethnic connection to immigrate. Now, extending the search, the lack of an ethnic connection excludes the few Latin American countries that do not have extradition to France, as well as Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and Belorussia."

Alan shook his head. Although, to be fair, Alan could hardly imagine a future for himself in Belorussia.

"In fact, there is only one country in the Western World that will offer Alan Stuart a path to citizen based on his national heritage."

A dull horror dawned inside Alan. He could hardly believe the word coming out of his mouth. He whelped a questioning word, "Israel?"

"Exactly," the lawyer replied. "Israel."

“I don’t want to live in Israel!” Alan insisted, “I’m a European! At the outside, an American! I don’t have any allegiance to a nation of Jews! I won’t be a citizen of Israel!”

“Not with that attitude you won’t,” the lawyer replied.

“I mean think of it; I have no connection to that place at all!” Alan shouted. The lawyer motioned for Alan to stop.

“No one is forcing you. There’s always the option of being trafficked with sex slaves and contraband to East Asia.” Alan did not appreciate the lawyer’s sarcasm. The lawyer continued, “So, if you want it, allow me to explain. The extradition law between France and Israel is quite complicated, and you are almost certainly on the right side of that complication.”

Though Alan’s gut reaction to the proposal had been an overwhelming “no,” he found that there was a very soft “yes” slowly building inside him. Israel - there would be Jews there. That was a down side, obviously. Was it not some version of Hell to be trapped for eternity in some extended reunion with family from his father side? And yet, there were modern conveniences there. Most people spoke English. Some people even spoke French. There were great writers in Israel; at least in the sense that the Nobel prize committee had given a few Israelis their stamp of approval. In Israel there were libraries with books on European literature; the entire literary canon from every language would be at his fingertips. Israel was certainly a place where he would be able to develop his understanding of literature, maybe even make his dream of being the next Chateaubriand a reality. Come to think of it, Chateaubriand had spent quite a bit of time in Israel. He had written a whole book about it. Best of all, if Alan went to Israel he would never have to tell anyone back home what he’d done to François! If his family didn’t know now about what had happened in Paris, which he doubted, then they might not ever know. He could spend the next few years saying that he had caught the Zionist bug and didn’t want to leave Israel. He would insist that there was nothing more to his refusal than totally preposterous extremist ideology! They would believe it; they would have to. What would be the alternative — to think that he was a murderer? Eventually he would get an Israeli passport with a new name and he could travel anywhere in the world! Except France, that would probably still be too risky. Alan was saddened by this, but he at least took consolation in the fact that he could salvage something of his life.

“You see, Alan, France has a policy of refusing to return its nationals to foreign lands to stand trial. And Israel has a policy of adopting the extradition policy of the country that requests someone on its soil. Therefore, if you were an Israeli national, they would not give you up to the French. Especially if there was reason to believe that you would not get a fair trial. And indeed there is reason to believe that, considering how rabidly the public is against you and given the

weakness of the case against you. They would have to bring you to trial in Israel.”

“Wouldn’t Israel try me for killing François in Israel?” Alan asked.

“Extremely unlikely,” the lawyer replied, “If the other witnesses are not in the country, Israel will not be able to bring them to court. France will be unlikely to cooperate in providing them, because it will not condone the foreign trial of one of its citizens for the killing of another of its citizens on its own soil. Even if they wanted to cooperate, however, it would be very complicated to track down the witnesses, especially if they didn’t want to be found... right, Romeo?” Here the lawyer put his hand on E’s back, “And without Romeo here, there is no way to know whether it was you or the victim’s friend who fired the gun! The fact that you disappeared the day of the murder is just coincidence; it also happened the day you converted to Zionism!”

Alan shook his head, unbelieving. It was so wonderful. Israel had everything he wanted, except for the people. Alan sensed that he was already won over, and needed now only to convince himself.

“And it wouldn’t need to be permanent, just long enough for the heat to die down.”

“Exactly!” Nokitoff said, “This, this is fabulous. You’ll go to Israel, you’ll keep up with your studies, we’ll keep in touch, badabing badaboom, you’re a famous artist and no one cares whatever crimes you committed in your youth.”

Alan sensing a new determination coming over him, slapped his knees and decided that he was ready. “Alright, how does it work? What do I do?”

“Well, the first thing to do is to go to Israel as soon as possible. Neither Switzerland nor Israel should care that you’re wanted for questioning in France; they might stop you if they know that you’re a fugitive, though. Once you’re in Israel, however, the critical thing is to become a member of one of the extreme right-wing groups, either the Hasidic Jews or the Settlers.”

“How do I do that?” Alan asked. The lawyer was about to speak, but Alan interrupted, “I’m almost certain that I’d rather be a Settler.”

The three Russians chuckled in unison, which caused E to become confused. Presumably he did not know what any of these terms meant.

“So, to become a settler,” the assistant began, “You should simply find the name of one of the many small settlements deep in the occupied territories and then go there. Tell them your story, but make sure to tell them that you are a very devout Zionist. Then, they will help you create a new fake identity. After a while, you will be able to mostly tell the truth about your past, you’ll

“speak decent Hebrew, and you can go to the army. They’ll assign you to some job not in the line of combat, and you’ll be a real Israeli citizen. Then you can do whatever you want. Israel will protect you.”

Alan breathed a sigh of relief. Nokitoff congratulated his lawyer on his achievement, “Outstanding. Bra-vo, Bra-vo.” Then, looking at his watch, he seemed surprised by the lateness of the hour. “Better not wait, Alan,” Nokitoff said, “You should try to make the next flight.”

Sensing it was his time to leave, he stood and stuck his hand out for Nokitoff. Nokitoff shook it, saying, “Take my address from the front office. They’ll let your mail through. And if I’m you’re ever in Switzerland, be sure to drop in!”

With that, Alan and E were ushered out the door

For whatever reason, Europeans are a people possessed by the need to take care of as many of their travel arrangements as possible in person. In contrast to Asian tourists, who tend to form herds and entrust all their important decisions to a pack leader, and in contrast to American vacationers, who like to plan things either by travel agents and catalogues or with phone calls and the internet, European travelers like to deal as directly as possible with the faceless multinational conglomerates whose services they intend to purchase. Boutiques for airline companies, national railroads, bus companies, and tour boats abound in European cities of any size. I doubt that there is a single American airline company with a sales office in Manhattan.

It would not have struck a native Genevan as particularly strange for Alan to arrive at the airport expecting to buy an international ticket. Nevertheless, it would have seemed rather irregular that he was doing so on the very day of his departure. A true European who wished to buy his ticket at the airport would first make a trip far, far in advance of his travel date, returning every now and again to check that things were still on track. How insufferable it is to wait in lines with such people! All one wants to do is to unload one’s cash, get one’s ticket, and go. And yet one cannot, but instead has to survive interminable conversations about whether the flight numbers are still correct, whether any of the flights have been cancelled, whether the seats will be crowded, whether they can be changed, what other options are forming up in case something goes wrong. Such fastidiousness is surely madness to the freewheeling, cocksure Americans, who prefer to travel by the straps of their boots and leave it to God to sort the rest. Alan would have to hope that the fact that he was an American would explain why he was breaching custom and buying such expensive tickets with so little planning in advance.

Alan and E were deposited by the Geneva Palace’s shuttle at the airport departure area. The

outside wall of the facility had been designed to look like a row of large, unmarked black metal window frames filled with black-tinted windows. Though the materials with which the structure had been built were in perfect repair, neither dirty nor weathered, the building had, for whatever reason, the unmistakable aura of a thing past its prime. Perhaps the reason was that it looked like a hearse. Evidently, those in charge of the airport had picked up on the edifice's deficiency, for they had decided to rehab the interior so as to appear ultra-modern. Garish red and orange metal had been pounded thin and formed into neat blocks, which were used to line the airport's interior walls and ceilings. This operation had drastically reduced the amount of space inside the airport, rendering it a sleek, modern, and visually over-stimulating can of sardines.

Alan and E made their way over from the section of the airport reserved for air carriers whose base of operations was in East Asia, toward the area reserved for carriers from the Middle East. On the left side of the hall, the one closest to the curb, the airline companies had established an area for sales. On the right side of the hall, the side closest to the planes, were the booths to which air travelers reported when trying to check-in their luggage. As Alan and E pushed a pair of airport carts carrying their luggage, they were handed mints and candies by the tightly-uniformed Asian stewardesses to their right. Even though, strictly speaking, the stewardesses were only there to welcome travelers on their own airlines, the stewardesses took the view that they were there to help brighten the day of all travelers. Certainly they brightened E's day. Alan watched curiously as the young man beamed at each stewardess, trading smiles and taking candies, while surreptitiously checking-out the young ladies' fetching physiques.

Alan and E soon left the clean, organized, and vaguely erotic area reserved for Asian airlines, entering the strangely Manichaean space reserved for air carriers from the Caribbean. On the one hand, the space near the ticket selling counters was totally empty and dark, although a few TV sets behind the desk were left on. Even though the counters represented different Caribbean countries, whose history, culture, and climate were quite varied, the video footage playing behind each counter was identical. Panoramic views of azure waters lapping at well-groomed beaches were interspersed with shots of native Caribbeans gyrating enthusiastically and banging drums near a massive fire on the beach. Westerners, dressed in cheap, floral print t-shirts, also bounced around drunkenly, smiling like fools. Placed on top of several counters were cardboard placards with cartoon clocks, whose watch hands were made of plastic could be set to any time. Above the clock, the placard read, "Will Return At:" Even the latest time on any of these placards had passed by half an hour. Meanwhile, on the right side of the hall, a horde of sweaty, angry-looking people jostled against each other, jockeying for first position in the line moving forward. Five or six counters were staffed only by two fat, slow-moving women. They both were oblivious to the anger of the crowd.

Finally, Alan and E arrived at the area reserved for Near Eastern carriers. In contrast with the just passed section of the airport, here the ticket counters were the source of excitement while the check-in counters were relatively dull. Each ticket counter had multiple staff, who took turns shouting city names and prices. Meanwhile, a mass of customers stood against the counters opposite side, shouting for attention from the sellers, like traders in a stock market. From what the flight representatives were shouting, it was clear that they were making last calls, threatening their customers that they would have to return late the next day if they wanted a chance at a purchase. “These counters must only be open for a few hours in a day,” Alan thought, “I guess I was lucky to come when I did.”

Tucked in the center of this section of the airport were two decidedly calm counters with few sellers and no buyers. Sitting in front of a sign for “Syria Air” was a man with angry eyebrows and enormous aviator sunglasses. His style of dress was similar to that of a British military officer circa World War II. His face was held still in an expression as emotionless as the one you would expect from either a poker player or a dead man. Next to him, in front of the counter for El-Al, was a pale-skinned man in his forties propping his feet up on the counter. He was reading a newspaper in Hebrew while reaching into the open front of his shirt and scratching. A golden Star of David mingled with his curly, light-colored chest hair. As Alan and E approached the ticket counter of the Israeli airline, the representative of Syria Air tracked their motion with his head. His neck moved with the evenness and rigidity of an automated AA-gun keeping an enemy aircraft in its sights.

Alan and E stood at the counter for a few moments, watching as the Israeli took the hand that he had been using to scratch his chest and began to pick his teeth. The obvious scrutiny of the Syrian Air representative was making Alan uncomfortable.

“Excuse me,” Alan said in English, hoping that the fact he was American would make the process of interacting with the man, who was obviously Israeli, easier.

“One minute, one minute,” the Israeli insisted, holding up his finger for Alan to wait. He had pronounced the word “minute” as if it were the word “me” compounded with the word “newt.” Alan stood watching as the man finished his article.

“Sir, I’m trying to get to Israel,” Alan said forcefully. Though he was confident that he would not be stopped by the police, he did recognize abstractly that every second he waited could conceivably be the difference between getting away to freedom or spending the next thirty years in a French jail.

“Get to Israel? For two thousand years people have been trying to get to Israel. And what,

you want to go now? Don't worry! Wait five minutes, Israel will still be there."

This was it then. This was the attitude in which Alan was preparing to ensconce himself. Alan had never been to Israel, he had known few Israelis. But what he suspected, and indeed what in the bottom of his heart he knew, was that every single trait he identified as abnormally Jewish had become normalized there, growing even more pronounced, obnoxious, and, indeed, monstrous. Was he really about to do this, to become one of them?

"Issra-eel will *not* be there," the representative of Air Syria said in a guttural, hostile, and definitive tone. The remark stirred the El Al employee out of his reverie. He sat up in his chair and put down his newspaper. He asked loudly, "Not there?"

"Issra-eel will *not* be there," the man dressed like an army officer replied, his tone exactly identical to the one he had taken before. The Israeli shook his head and smacked his lips. His face grew red for a moment, but then brightened. Switching from anger to sarcasm, he took the newspaper in his hand and said, "Listen. You know, actually, I was just reading here a memo in the paper. It says, 'in two minutes, we are going to leave Israel forever.' Ok, so good. But because you rush me, I'm going to call my brother and say it's off. So you can apologize now and we are gone for good, or you can not apologize and we stay forever."

The Syrian kept quiet, his expression exactly as stony as it was before.

"You see, they cannot say sorry even to get what they want," the Israeli ticket agent said, appealing to Alan and E with his hands as if to prove the point. Alan and E looked blankly back at him. The Israeli blinked and smiled awkwardly. Finally, coming to his senses, he said, "Yes, ok, what you want?"

"I would like to buy a ticket to Israel," Alan asked, "Would it be possible to leave today?" Alan tried not to look at the vendor as he spoke. He hoped that by not looking at the man, he would manage to avoid starting a real conversation.

"What does God say?" the man asked rhetorically, "Everything is possible for those who try. And, I think, even, in this case, I do not believe he exaggerate. Let me check something for you."

The man sat back down and began looking through a binder on his desk. Alan guessed that the binder must contain a passenger or something. As he read he said quietly to himself, "yehudi" "yehudi," "terrorist," "yehudi," and then looked up to see if Alan had understood him. Alan gulped, pretending that he had not.

"First time in Israel?" the El-Al representative asked, looking up from his document and smiling.

“Yes,” Alan said.

“Good, you will like it. I am sure of it,” the man ensured Alan. Alan felt as if he were easing into an American-style customer-seller interaction. Though he did not like such situations, he was at least comfortable with how they worked. A fraction of a second after Alan smiled back, however, the Israeli’s demeanor completely changed. He banged his desk and said brusquely, “Now ok come on, for what you are waiting? Give to me your passport, credit card, second ID. Yalla, yalla. It is not like here we are building Rome.”

Alan immediately handed the representative the passport and, finding his backpack, eventually produced the remaining items.

“Stuart, where they give you this name?” the man asked, scrutinizing Alan’s passport, “You should just be Konigsberg — it’s better.”

Alan shook his head. Was there even a single thing that the man knew about him? Why should he be Konigsberg? It had nothing to do with who he was, who his family was. There was literally no reason that Alan should be called Konigsberg. Alan fumed quietly, watching as the man wrote down his information. Finally, after two or three minutes, the man said.

“Alright, I like your picture. I think that we take you. You are going one-way or you need to go back somewhere?”

A fearful sensation ran suddenly through Alan’s spine. It was similar to the shock that moves the entire length of the leg when the knee is knocked with a doctor’s mallet. He was worried it was a test. He didn’t think that they allowed just anyone to get one-way tickets to Israel.

“Oh, I’m planning on going back to America after that. But my parents have already bought the ticket and I’m meeting them in Israel.”

The representative nodded. It did not seem that he cared. He merely shook his head understandingly. A few seconds later he named a very large figure in dollars and said, “I am going to charge it to you. It’s ok?”

Alan was about to nod his head in the affirmative, but was interrupted by the representative from Air Syria. With an aggressive and forceful tone, the man offered, “I can give you a ticket to Damascus for one-half of this price. Damascus is quite pleasing this time of year.”

Alan blinked at the man and then told the Israeli to just go ahead. The El-Al representative finished the transaction and came around to the other side of his desk. He informed Alan and E that he would go ahead and check Alan’s bags. He handed Alan a boarding pass as well as the

few documents Alan had just given him a few seconds before.

Very suddenly then, Alan found he was left without possessions, except for the clothes on his back, the tennis racket slung around his neck, and the boarding pass in his hand. As Alan walked with his assistant E over to the security checkpoint, he wondered about how quickly he had found himself in his present state. Was it really so easy to flee one's problems? Could just anyone buy a ticket for some far-off land where he or she could make or break their fortunes anew? Alan supposed it was a freedom that he had always possessed, just one he had never thought to use. Indeed, it was only one of many freedoms that he and every person always possessed: different capacities to radically redefine self-conception and the trajectory of life. Of course, there were limits to what was possible for everyone. A few months ago, for example, he would not have been able to afford the ticket for the international flight between far-flung world capitals. It was only the living allowance given to him by the French government that allowed him to buy his way to freedom.

"In two weeks I blew nearly a year's stipend," Alan found himself saying, surprised, "Did the state of France really just pay for a plane ticket for me to flee the country?"

Alan glanced at his assistant to see if there would be a reaction. Instead Alan found that his assistant looked rather distant. He was thumbing his burlap sack, with a tired or discontented look on his face. Was E sad? Alan wondered if perhaps the young man were sentimental about the fact that the time the two had spent together was drawing to a close.

Alan stopped. They were only a few yards from the place where the line for the metal detector began. Alan felt that he should say something to E. At huge personal risk to himself, and for unclear personal reward, the young man helped Alan escape the worst consequences of his own foolishness. Before Alan could draw up the words of gratitude, however, E began to speak. "Aaron?" E asked, "What will I do now?"

Alan cast an inquisitive expression at E. He assumed that what E meant was that he, Alan, was such a formative influence in E's own life that E could hardly fathom what life would be like without him. Alan considered how to respond to the question, what consoling words to offer.

"I mean, I joined this program in order to learn from you," E said, "Without you, how do I get ahead?"

Very abruptly, Alan realized that he was being asked by E for some advice. Up until this point, Alan had always thought of himself as a student, a novice, someone who could only be mentored, never someone who mentored himself. He was always searching for the one to get him to the next stage, take him to the next place; the man or woman with the keys to the doors.

He had never considered that he himself could be the key in someone else's door, or that his absence would be felt by another as a loss of opportunity.

"I suppose the Collège will assign you to someone else," Alan said. His tone suggested that he was grasping for straws.

"I do not think so, Aaron," E said, shaking his head sadly, "I think every student already has an assistant."

Alan held the gaze of his assistant long and hard. What could he give the assistant, who had already given so much? Alan had virtually no possessions, no useful connections, and was at the moment fleeing a murder rap. All that he had was his ideas, which had gotten him to his present unfortunate state, and his skills, which had prevented his situation from being much worse. Moreover, he could hardly impart his skills to E in a few moments. It was not as if he could teach E to speak French or write academic essays in a snap. No, he could not give E anything that E did not already have. And yet, perhaps, he could give some ideas about how E could to utilize better those things that he could use.

"Well, E," Alan said, "The important thing is for you to realize that you are your own teacher. Most teachers, parents, bosses, team captains, and mentors are consumed with their own interests and ideas. They are so concerned with the moves they're making that they will never even think to ask what it is you need."

Alan spoke from the heart, appraising the situation frankly, letting E know the harsh truth about how the world worked. When he finished speaking, however, he realized that his words largely implicated himself. He had never shown interest in what was special about E, what E was trying to get out of their arrangement. He had more or less treated E as a means to his own end, and less as an end in and of himself.

"I'm probably guilty of that as well," Alan said hesitantly, facing growing red, "I'm sorry I wasn't a very good mentor."

"No, Aaron," E shook his head vigorously left and right, "You were very good. Very, very, good. You give me interesting projects, good variety of task. You give me inside look at how it is to be very high-level graduate student. It was very good to be your assistant."

Alan hummed. Perhaps his assistant was humoring him. Whatever the case was, Alan appreciated the thought. He wanted to believe he was good to those around him, even if from his behavior it clearly wasn't his number one priority. "Well, nevertheless, I probably could have been better. Anyway, what I was going to say is that the first thing that you need to do is to

develop a project. A project helps you transform all the things that you might do into things that you should do. Then, instead of being confused and wondering what to do all the time, you'll do work on your project. At the end, you'll always walk away with concrete gains and will probably end up doing a lot more than people who spend their time thrashing around unsure of what to do, just reacting to their environment. So, you should start by asking yourself what your interests are and what your project is."

"But Aaron, I already have project."

"You do?" Alan was surprised. Actually, it made the fact that he had not asked earlier all the worse. And yet, he chided himself, there was no use worrying about what might have been. The only thing he could do was to make sure E's project made sense and wasn't ill-conceived or directed in the wrong direction.

"Yes, I do," E said. He paused. When he spoke again, he sounded as if he were reading a memorized abstract of a paper, "I am interested to explore poetry of China Golden Age, especially writing of great Chinese poet Li Bai. It not a secret. Today Chinese culture in state of decline. It collapse from weight of foreign values. These values do not belong to China. Maybe few Chinese people really believe these things, but they are very, very small minority. I believe that what China need is for someone to bring new strength to Chinese culture. Someone need to remind Chinese people what it is that they truly believe is important: balance, tradition, playfulness, and imagination. I think that maybe I can be this person."

Alan nodded politely while E spoke. Truth be told, he had no idea what the cultural situation in China was. Nor did he understand what made the values E was propping to return to the Chinese people quintessentially Chinese. Finally, E's ideas of what was possible for one man to accomplish struck Alan as rather grandiose. Nevertheless, Alan did not feel it was his place to discourage E.

"That's great, E. So, follow that interest as far as it will take you. Go to Nokitoff's lectures, go to any other lectures at the Collège that interest you. Talk to professors, read as much as you can, find people who will challenge your ideas. Seek out good examples, find out what people who have succeeded do. Do whatever it takes to get to the next step."

"I will, Aaron. And I think you should do the same."

E seemed satisfied with what Alan had offered. Alan was ready to part ways. E, seeming to understand the moment was nigh, removed from his burlap sack the pamphlet out of which he had been reading. He handed it to Alan. Alan, thumbing through the book, saw that on each page of Chinese characters, E had written a very literal translation of the words.

“It is a book of Li Bai’s poetry,” E said explaining. Alan nodded, thankfully. Such a personal gift E had given! What was there that Alan could give in return? Almost all of his stuff was checked. The only thing he had on him was his miserable racket.

“Here,” Alan said, on impulse grabbing his racket and handing it to E, “ Take this. I don’t think I’ll be using it.”

E smiled widely. Alan was not sure that E even knew what it was for, but he imagined that E thought it was a very dear and special present. E wrapped it around his neck, as Alan had done, although for whatever reason Alan had the sense that it fit better on E’s body than on his own.

Parting gifts exchanged, the two at last said goodbye.

“Goodbye, E,” Alan said, “I will try to send a post-card to our address when I arrive. Maybe we can keep in touch.”

E shook his head vigorously. He seemed quite relieved to hear Alan’s offer to continue their relationship. With that, E bowed his torso at Alan respectfully, not as deeply as when the two had first met. Alan felt himself bowing as well, mimicking E’s gesture. For whatever reason, he also held out his hand. E looked up, smiled at Alan, and grabbed his hand. The two shook.

“Bon voyage,” E said, “À la prochaine!”

Before Alan could register what E had just said, or the ease with which he had said it, the young man abruptly turned around and left. Alan watched as the assistant walked to the nearest exit and went out the door. He followed the young man with his eyes, for a moment making as if to follow him. But then he stopped. After a few moments of waiting, Alan felt an itch on his nose. Scratching, he turned around and looked rather confused. With no better options at hand, he headed for security check.

And so it was that Alan’s adventure in Europe drew to a close. Some concluding words are no doubt in order, no doubt there are a few last holes left in which to place my screw. Will Alan be taken off the airplane by the Swiss police? Will the con artist, who swore to chase our hero to the ends of the earth, finally catch up with our protagonist? Will Alan sell his story to his hated namesake Woody Allen for a fistful of dollars? Will Alan confront the ghosts of Chateaubriands past? Oh, it just seems to me that these wrinkles are merely added complications. I don’t think Alan’s adventures in Europe need to be drawn out. I think it is best that they now come to a close.

Of course, one thing about the story does still bother me. Indeed, it scratches my face like a burlap hood. It would be nice if I could lift the veil, remove my mask, and reveal how it is that I knew all the players in the story as it has been told. And yet, I do not feel that I can. For a narrator to say who he really is would just be a posture, since he would never be able to prove it anyway. Say, for example, I were to write that the entire time I only pretended to be an anonymous narrator, but in reality I was Alan. A bit older perhaps, with slightly different ideas about life and about my past: one could write-in whatever corroborating bits of narrative one would want. Certainly there is a good case for me to be Alan, as Alan does know all the players, what they did, and what his own mental life was like at the point in time described. And yet, he is not the only one with access to those things. Marie would know as well. Plus, she spent an awful lot of time with Alan; she studies literature, and there are a lot of feminist ideas she might subscribe to that were peppered up and down the book. Moreover, she does know a bit about game theory, actually, since she would have listened quite often to François. And yet, where would she know so much about Chinese custom? Or how Alan related to E? Or, for that matter, what the two did after Alan left Paris? Wait, actually, that's it! E could have written the story! That one was always shifty; he never laid all his cards on the table. Of course someone like Vladimir Nokitoff might be interested in describing the tribulations of a young literary talent. Moreover, Nokitoff is such a genius that whatever he didn't know of Alan's story, he could quite easily invent. But can we ignore the possibility that this tale was the moonlight project of a pretentious French policeman with literary ambitions or a secret scam of a con artist working behind prison walls. What if, by some miracle, it were the work of a slain economist!

No, even if I said I were Alan you'd be wrong to believe such a statement, as I'd never be able to provide a signal noisy enough to sustain the posture I proposed. I subscribe to what Nokitoff said before in his lectures: a storyteller has to avoid the impulse to try for too much control. For this reason, I think I will follow the lead of the politicians of our day. I will choose to explain nothing of who I am, but rather stick to my talking points.

In this world there are an endless number of red-faced men chasing fame or power or money, and a possibly greater number of sea-cucumbers vegetating on the social fauna. There are orthodox of every stripe, who live life in a way that is well-intentioned, purposeful, and yet often times overbearing and chauvinistic. And then there are the dreamers, who have the daring, creativity, and intelligence to try and invent their own games to play. What Alan's story brings to mind is that dreamers often become closed, cloistered, and stiff. They forget that, since life is a dance, one must always stay on the balls of one's feet. Admirable is he who is at all times ready to shuffle — ready to leap! Lucky will he be, whosoever without warning falls into a deep bow, uproots himself, or picks up the broken pieces of another's life. If a dreamer forgets that games

are not just about winning, but about playing the game well, he assuredly will fall into a trap. Unobtainability, the spirit of winningness itself, will haunt him to the ends of the earth, choking him by his misery like a flamboyant tennis racket case around the neck. The dreamer then has a choice. He can go backward, become a red-faced man or an orthodox worshipper at the temple of himself. Or, he can take the racket up for play. With daring, with kindness, with flexibility, with engagement, the bugbear of unobtainability will fade away.