

FELL'S POINT

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FELL'S POINT

a Novel

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“One might be painted while one is asleep,” suggested Mr. Brand as a contribution to the discussion.”

(Henry James,
The Europeans, (1878) p.66.)

Chapter One

This happened in Baltimore and at the end of September. David West, a lonely, troubled, white boy of twenty-five, shared an apartment with Elsa at a central spot in town, at Upper Fell’s Point. He lived in a predominantly black city, was currently on social security and did not know what to do with his life.

Young West had smooth North European or British features, and his pale face was broad with marked eyebrows and his eyes deeply set and dark blue. There ran a furrow between the small eyebrows. Most of the time, he, therefore, unfortunately, had an angry or dissatisfied look. Furthermore, the little, red mouth was open all the time. Maybe there was something wrong with the ventilator function of his small nose. Davis’s blond hair was thin and had a beige tone. He wore what once had been a postmodern, neat, worn jeans dress, but now looked like rags. Mahogany colored boots with high heels made him look a little bit taller, being of middle height. His movements were quite irregular, insecure, and had no musicality in them or any timing at all. As a whole, his walk was just some sort of combined jerking and swaying. David was an outsider, a loner, and a real sissy. He was – not surprisingly – thus full of despair. As a small remedy, he often carried a small bottle of reddish Baltimore beet extract with him - and a Glock pistol.

David was alone on a Sunday afternoon. It looked as if it was going to rain. Despite this, he decided to take a short walk in the yards close to where he lived, at St. Vincent’s Cemetery, which was almost as snug and flowery as the famous gardens at Cylburn Mansion. A small white-breasted nuthatch sat picking on a branch in an

elm tree that stood by a grave a few yards from him. It sat upside down, which David never saw before. "Perhaps that bird is crazy," he thought.

He knew that his thoughts used to be "all over the place." It was long since he had been able to concentrate upon anything at all. Some people seemed to think that David was soulless. However, David was no junkie.

Last summer, he had been using cocaine for a short period. That was it. David promised himself not to use any stimulants, ever. He had begun experiencing abnormal things and having visual hallucinations. These were unpleasant experiences, and David had interpreted it as a result of drug use. Because of this, he had decided that – at least – he intended not to perish because of drugs. In August last year, he made that decision on the 23rd, and he was determined never to go back to cocaine, or any other medication, come what may! This decision was so damned steadfast for an apparent and distinct reason. The hallucinations hadn't ceased to come.

The tiny nuthatch in the tree looked at him. Its small black eye fixated him in a way that was not crazy at all. The bird looked friendly and a little begging. David often thought about the psyche of animals. It was almost magic to try to understand their urge and their simple doings. Sometimes David used to feed the ravens, crows, and the magpies in town. He knew that the crows in the harbor remembered him. They sometimes followed him around at the piers.

He knew of those few people, who had learned to live a full and a social life, hallucinating. Within the cultural realm, there were many examples. David always had had an enormous appetite for books. Writers like Baudelaire, de Quincey, and Coleridge had learned to live a life, including daily visions. But he, he simply didn't want to. He wanted to be safe and sound, unaffected by substances from bright-colored mushrooms, striped snakes, and blossoms, so red that no cameras could grasp their redness. He just didn't want to live a life like that!

Because of these experiences, thoughts, and feelings, David was downhearted almost continuously. Nobody suspected the real reason for his murky features. He had not told anybody.

It never occurred to David that most of these people could – in theory – have hallucinations. However, David simply did not be-

lieve that was the case. He would have heard them complain, and they did not.

David also didn't know if other people, both in Baltimore and elsewhere, shared his experience. It didn't seem like that. Many kids in Baltimore were on drugs, though. It was a common habit. Widely known was that many kids even earned their living in selling drugs. Maybe a few of those kids had hallucinations and did not tell anybody but just continued to take their dope because they were ashamed. They doped themselves into eternity. David, though, wanted to return to square one.

David was not only experiencing hallucinations in the evenings and the mornings. He was also having delusions during the day. David wondered if the experiences of the unreal ever would vanish. Either, he thought, they would stay, and he would never be able to be as clear and bright in his head as he had been before, or they would – right out of the blue - simply stop. It was also possible that the future would present a middle way: He would perhaps suffer mild aberrations from the saneness he so dearly worshiped. No doctor, psychologist, not even magician or spiritualist could tell anybody the long-term result of abstinence. He could just hope that he one day would get rid of all this tumultuous suffering. He thought about it repeatedly and continuously. It was all a mixture of deep sorrow and faint hope.

He barely had any money, but still decided to go down to the drug-store to buy some milk.

Politically he regarded himself as an anarchist.

Chapter Two

Eric Cedric Goldkettel, an elderly Connecticut medical doctor born in Tidwell, Maine, was tormented by the most unhappy love. Once a day, in the morning hours, in half slumber, Eric's memories of the beautiful, voluptuous Martha appeared from the forgotten. It only glimpsed by in the after dreams visual realm, among dream figures that never existed and would never exist, among the memories of a half-forgotten unhappy love. This inconceivable loneliness followed him unconsciously like a shadow in the Connecticut countryside. The pine forests almost constantly refused to solace his mourning. The silence of the landscape brought "a month of Mondays...." to his soul.

The doctor had early on taken a fancy in western Connecticut's rural landscape. Reader's mansion was situated, embedded in the most enchanting greenery, on a slope by a lake. The house itself was a wooden castle, and it had a small guesthouse built of yellow brick nearby. The village, which was the closest village, Bloomside Grove, situated by the lake's outflow, by the old brick mill ruin, was but sparsely populated. The church of the parish, which was a Quaker one, was but a tiny reddish shed.

Reader's mansion was surrounded by pinewood. The landscape tried to market itself as a recreation ground for youngsters, fishing and riding as main attractions. Retired people populated several houses; many had moved back from Florida or Georgia not long ago. In Bloomside Grove itself, some IT-entrepreneurs had tried to build a small *Silicon Valley*. Still, the houses now – in this massive global depression – were deserted and torn. Even a theatre had been built, but it was used as an inline skating rink. The local Quakers were fervent though in their religious tremor. The parson of the small congregation, Jansen, summoned it to service every Sunday. Jansen held, especially for children, adorable predictions, which all contradicted science, of which he was incredibly proud.

Burg Lake was always black – and was said to have a monster in it and had an air of romance and autism. The lake had its name after a local tyrant. Long ago, Mr. Burg had built his house near the lake, on an aboriginal graveyard. He had been shot dead by an apache arrow. His name had been Burg the Porcelain Potter.

The hills around the lake, tiny as they were, stretched their heads. The mountains seemed as uninterested in the small pond as in the pastures and the waterways. Mountains are always stuck-up.

A couple of swans swam in the middle of the lake, chasing brown ducks along the surface of the shallow water. Signs around the lake were informing people of climate change and the necessity to keep nature clean and free from drugs.

The pine forest had a sad look, and some people had heard the trees whisper ominously in the night." Everything is long gone. Long gone. Long gone. The ravens are gone. The ravens are gone. It is way too late."

Jansen Quakers were the dominant tribe in the small valley. Most people here did not even own a car but drove around on motorcycles. Goldkettel had a car, an old white Buick. No electric vehicle had ever been spotted in Bloomside Grove.

A Cessna airplane suddenly flew by, and the swans on the lake hurried ashore. One might frequently see the doctor walking the small paths around the lake, stick in hand. Goldkettel was old, and he was antique, bucktoothed, and outdated.

Today, an ordinary September Sunday, it looked like it was going to rain. Goldkettel's open eyes narrowed, and he took out a small foldable cap from his waist pocket and put on his grey hair. Soon the rain splattered down on the remote landscape by the Burg Lake. Close to Reading's, there was another property owned by the Delmonte's. The houses of Goldkettel and Delmonte lay in a suite by the lakeshore. Goldkettel's was the one westward, more toward the deep forest and the stuck-up mountains. Behind Delmonte's, there was more mixed vegetation and finally, to the east on bushy meadows lonely, utterly small cows of foreign breed were straying around looking for fresh grass and snails.

Paul Delmonte was a well-to-do author of colorful bird books. He lived alone together with a young, dark-haired philosophy student from NY. She served as a temporary housekeeper. Aged 23, this eager student, who looked upon this job as a pleasant variation, went by the name of Armamente Dulcinea.

When Eric Goldkettel arrived at his house again, he glanced in the direction of his closest neighbor's house, at the Palace, Delmonte's mansion. So he caught a glimpse of young Armamente, how she, dressed in a simple black gown, stretched for a small glass. A red

rosette in her raven hair threw out some small decorative mats from a balcony. The girl had dark hair, greyish eyes, and pale skin. She waved at Goldkettel and whistled. She did not now notice the rain, and she fed the cat, which, striped and small, gently stroked her leg. Armamente seemed just a kid, a schoolgirl. But she had an air of intelligence and awareness about her.

"What a beautiful day!" she shouted.

The slender, athletic girl suddenly rushed down the stairs and came out on the porch while the rain took a pause. She swiftly ran down the small lane, past a dead crow, towards the old doctor, who stood by the gate of Delmonte's wooden fence. She finally reached the gate and said, pulling aside some locks of her raven hair, which had fallen in her one eye:

"Hello, Doctor! I heard you are going to have a visit today?"

"Oh, yeah, Armamente, I sure will."

"But who is she?"

The girl with the small stick panted and breathed heavily. She had an exciting pair of shades below her green eyes, greyish and purple.

The doctor's heart leaped, and then he said:

"It is a friend of Martha's, my former love, Inga. My friend's name is Inga North."

All of a sudden, Paul Delmonte appeared like from behind. He had come from the forest and was walking his dog, a bloodhound named Oscar. Delmonte – a man in his sixties - had lived on his farm for eternity. The prominent author was tall and energetic and had an all-consuming interest in animals, especially birds. He was freckled and red-haired. From his shoulder dangled a small old-fashioned rifle. Eric thought Delmonte was pretentious. To make things worse, Delmonte was in the process of building a guesthouse close to Eric's property.

Goldkettel seemed an old, kind goat, while Delmonte flourished and was with excellent health, a happy pig with a big red nose. Some natural scientists are thriving with their work. Probably he also in every way wanted to impress Armamente, who was new as his servant because he smacked his upper leg and said:

"Oscar! JUMP!"

Delmonte was busy writing a book on trained birds but also had an interest in sheep and dogs. Goldkettel was not impressed by the

actual books fabricated by Delmonte, but Delmonte's book sold. Goldkettel himself planned to take up painting or something.

Paul Delmonte's latest wife had died just half a year ago. Her name was Swanee. She had drowned herself in the Burg lake.

The beautiful and active Armamente, who, in her paleness, seemed to suffer from a lack of vitamins but still seemed full of youthful energy, had been hired just a month ago. The agency who had brought her had told Delmonte that she was a real treat. She was a philosophy student but had taken courses in cooking, they had said.

"Oh," said Armamente, and she reached for her foot. "My poor foot, I think I have wrenched it."

"Here." her master with the rifle said, and he handed to her a red scarf. She took it and put it around her neck, instead of around her ankle, and laughed and smiled at the same time. She then hit him playfully with the back of her hand.

The doctor looked on, enjoying the sight of the odd couple. They then all started to laugh.

"You look a little pale," Delmonte rightfully said and took Armamente's hand and tried to kiss it. Still, the girl suddenly ran away, and as if her foot was okay, she soon disappeared to the backside of the mansion, where they kept the hens.

The doctor and the author of books on birds stood left alone at the gravel by the gate.

"It looks like it is drying up." Eric finally said.

Oscar Bloodhound sniffed for something in the doctor's pocket. The doctor always brought medicines of all kinds in his pockets, in case of emergency. He glanced at Delmonte. Although Eric did not like Delmonte nor his books, he was fascinated by the man and his knowledge of nature. Eric, who was well educated, and a double-doctor, had great respect for facts and knowledge.

"Certainly, I will send her for a health examination. After all, you have to have a sound housekeeper," Delmonte said.

"She is a real beauty." the doctor said laconically.

"I think she is a police undercover. They do not send out girls like that for keeps," Delmonte said. Delmonte was referring to the housemaid agencies. The bloodhound seemed to agree because it let out a moderate growl and wagged its tail. Armamente, all the same, happily shouted from a window:

"Mister Delmonte! Breakfast is ready!"

The pair of swans, lying quietly on the lakeshore, suddenly came flowing up to the grass plane in front of Delmonte's mansion.

"Does she feed the swans?" Goldkettel asked, all red in his face. He often went all red. Goldkettel was greatly respected for his kindness and generous attitude, and for his respect for other people and their sufferings.

"No way." said the author of bird books, who did not have much to say on matters he did not think were profitable for his career.

The doctor also felt a little smell of whisky from the big man. That might explain the absentmindedness and oddly casual behavior of his neighbor.

Suddenly there was a commotion out in the middle of the sea. One of the swans seemed to have trouble when it tried to lift off the lake's surface. One of its feet dragged a green plastic rope with it. The other swan looked extremely troubled and kept a few yards away, blasting out its anguish.

Delmonte took steps nearer to the coastline, but at the same time, there was shouting from the balcony.

"I am coming!"

It was Armamente, who swiftly swung from the balcony, jumped onto the grass, and as soon as she started running, she took off her jacket and then, when she reached the shore, her leather boots. She took a small fabric bag that she saw lying on a bench by the little bridge, glided into the water, and swam out to the poor swan, which had a frantic look in its dark eyes.

Some people glide in the water like torpedoes, the sensitive doctor thought.

When Armamente had come close, she grabbed the swan by the head and forced it into the woolen bag. Then, holding the swan between her legs, she freed the swan's foot from the awful plastic rope. Within minutes she was back ashore with the two men, who, perplexed, were both standing by the bridge on the seaside, panting from exaggeration and anguish.

"Pooh!", Armamente sighed while she slid out of her sweater and then, keeping her bra on, rubbed herself dry with a striped cloth, handed to her by the doctor, who happened to carry one.

The two men were profoundly admiring her.

"I never saw anything like that!" said the doctor in a very high voice. "I thought you were a philosopher!"

"Haha," Armamente replied. "Practical Ethics..." She held out a piece of the rope, which glittered bright green in its polystyrene shape. She then long-legged ran inside the Palace, and Eric congratulated Delmonte on his excellent housekeeper.

"See you," he then said in a light tone and turned to go to his place, since Reading was situated just a hundred yards away from the Palace, which lay closer to the lake.

I want to become a painter, the doctor thought, and I will paint Delmonte while he is asleep in a portrait.

Delmonte looked after the doctor, and he muttered:

"Yeah, yeah," just like psychopaths sometimes do.

Through the years, we have found more and more reasons to classify people as psychopaths.

Delmonte's face lit up since he saw how Oscar, with a leap, nearly caught the swan that had not been subjected to the rope, instead. However, the swan, that probably was the male one, which had looked for a spectator's spot on the shore, took a jump and ran right into the Delmonte mansion kitchen.

After a few seconds, the winged beast came out again, carrying a piece of butter bread in its beak. It then disappeared far out over the woods, diligently and with a great thunder moving its dark wings. The female swan lay still by the side of the small bridge.

Burg Lake now was deserted, and the rain from up above was gone too. The old bloodhound had a sore look in its reddish eyes. Armamente's laughter, however, bounced bright out over the surface of the dark lake.

The doctor soon slowly sat down in his office. After having refreshed himself with a glass of carbonated water, called Vichy, he took out his opium pipe. Nothing beats opium in its very softness, he sometimes thought.

Delmonte, in turn, went inside his house to have another whisky on the rocks. *Bell's* it was. Armamente called him a second time to bacon and eggs breakfast. She was now very fancifully dressed up in a red shirt and a matching semi-old black uniform jacket, which she had found in a cupboard. The smitten jacket had the name "Swanee" embroidered on its back. In the early morning, Armamente Dulcinea had earlier this day been out in the woods and collected some chanterelles too. She was serving them, lightly fried, with

Bacon, eggs, tea, marmalade, bread, and butter. She was a good cook.

Broad-shouldered and slim-hipped as she was, she looked more like a boy.

Chapter Three

David West was well on his way to buy milk at the drug-store. It was Sunday.

In Baltimore, the global competition had since long closed down its steel plants and shipyards. The Covid 19 epidemic had done away with a hell of a lot of other jobs. People were, of course, yet still thriving with their lives, inventing new jobs and careers. Despite climate change, summer had come, birds had been singing, and coyotes kept hunting rats and weasels. And then autumn came and surprised at the fact the trees started dropping their leaves. Now it was late September. A slight, lukewarm rain had been falling ceaselessly all day. More often than not, on evenings like these after the earliest autumn storm ever, small, friendly ponds appeared on the lonely streets of the flat-footed picturesque city. Everyone hoped that there would not be another storm.

Suddenly lights from the random street lamps glittered brightly. They were soon reflected by myriads or more wet surfaces outside the semi-suburb's low, nondescript concrete buildings. Cars drove in all directions in the center of the city. Lukewarm water silently flooded in the gutters outside the six-story houses near Pratt Street. Three rugged young magpies fought over a filthy pizza slice thrown under the bus stop's worn wooden bench. By Patterson Park, the bus resided in the middle of the street; the engine turned off, tail-lights still blinking. It required to repair, some black men seemed to think, gathering around it, some of them busy with their phones.

Dusk was compact. It was almost a classic vampire night. The houses were void of any significant decorations and painted in dark sepia, and their eyes were closed. Some of them entirely lacked inhabitants. Baltimore did not grow anymore. The old rowhouses were beautiful. They were not like the new ones. Architecture, by the way, is an extraordinary form of art. Because it is, of course, not art at all, it is at least not entirely art. It has a practical side, as far as houses are for living in. Hence, we might conclude that the architect ought to have some rudimentary knowledge about both beauty and practicality; it is thus a two-sided business. In Baltimore, though, the art aspect is very much pronounced.

People marveled at the strange nights because it was as if there was an extra shadow this year or an additional light when shadows came. One cannot imagine shades without light, which is both a strange thing and not strange at all.

Some people think that life is a tale, and many people think politics is telling tales. "You have to have the defining story.;" "You have to own the story.;" "Who has the story wins the election!" and the like. Now: a tale is never really just the course of events. No. The story that I am telling - I'll let you know... - is not about the facts themselves. Literature, in general, is not about the events that comprise the story. No course of events ever makes a story. The report or the source of a specified kind of report is not equal to what is happening. There is always something else that makes a story. Content is something infinitely small.

What makes the story is the underlying myth. Myth is the law and the conscience of a society, and of the times we live in. In precisely the same way, it is not bricks and layers that make houses, not in Baltimore's charming town anyway. It is something else. Remember that "eliteness" is not comparative. You might say that New York is more different from Tampa, FL, than Baltimore. But you cannot say that New York is much more than Baltimore, from Tampa's perspective. Because you have to understand the mystery of the "else" and of "something."

Hence: if you have a defining story, it is a story that is not about events but about something else and of the mystery of the Else.

Today David had been trying, in vain, to configure a web server onto his laptop at home. Why he did this, he was not sure. He knew it was not very useful. But someday it might be, he thought.

On his short evening errand walk to the drug store, he suddenly spotted a slender man, accompanied by a black and white terrier. The dog seemed to be sick or something and it looked wretched. David approached the man, who seemed to be in his seventies, had grey hair, and seemed more than slender at close range. He was thin, on the verge of being anorectic, but very energetic. The senior with the terrier had a dark blue striped costume on, 1949 Humphrey Bogart style, outdated but still stunning. The outfit was hanging around his tall body. He also had brought a light grey raincoat, pending on his arm.

David - who wore a black leather jacket - was an aesthete. He was susceptible to the striped suit's beauty. Nothing in the world was so beautiful as a striped suit, according to him.

"What's the combo?" he asked, referring to both to the man, the dog, and the entire situation and because it was his common greeting phrase at the time of this story. The dog seemed to be really out of its mind, and it rolled its eyes, dragging its cord. However, there was no reaction from the rather impressively dressed thin man on anything.

"Is anything wrong?" David reiterated with a wave of slight anger.

Then he suddenly remembered having seen the man before. Yes, at the jeweler's store. Oh, yes! He was the one who bought the \$4000 necklace. David, in turn on this sad day, had sold his mother's wedding ring. His mother was since long deceased. The golden thing was a dear memory.

"No, of course, I know what is wrong with him." the man responded and in a low tone. "The dog is epileptic. He'll be fine." The man seemed on guard. David looked at the poor animal.

"Epileptic? Ah, I see." David said in a brighter tone, much to ease his confusion. The younger man, who ordinarily had a way with words, was easily disturbed by health and sickness matters, like the dog's predicament, and could not this time grasp the situation. He hastily took a step back and looked with curiosity at the dog and the man as if he did not believe what he just told him.

The dog suddenly fell on the ground in massive seizures. The older man stood by him, just slowly waiting for the dog to get a hold of himself. It had a broad leather collar with some white stripes on it with text that said: "I am epileptic. Pills inside." If you zipped up the collar by the side, there would thus be some kind of medication there to help the dog out.

Young West had come halfway on his walk to the small drugstore that resided on the corner between East Pratt Street and East Harvey Street. He had brought with him a small bag, made of thin, checkered cloth. Now, facing the dog in distress, he bent down on the sidewalk and placed the cloth bag under his little head. The dog had his eyes eerily rolling, and the white saliva now and then was pumping out of his mouth. It could not keep its jerking head still. Eventually, it fell about after about three minutes and lay quite still, apart from violent panting.

David bent down over the creature. He grasped the dog's tiny neck firmly and almost professionally. The man in the Bogart suit still did not say a thing, though. His mouth was tight, and he breathed through his nostrils, which seemed all free from obstacles. His eyes were strangely widened as if he was perpetually astonished.

"Do you live around here?" the man suddenly asked.

The dog now had got hold of himself, seemed to be okay again, and lay still. The man did not seem worried.

There was also something odd with his way of expressing himself. Behind the word and the apparent meaning of those words, there was like a hidden meaning or a peculiar light shining. In a way, the words were said as if the transmitter hoped for some memory or a ghost would come forth and fill in the omitted part of the question. There was something Gothic about his speech. But this was not true either. He looked earnest and a skeptic, David thought, but his talk was at the same time rather pretentious.

"But..." David, who despite being a sissy, in various situations also had absolute compassion for the sick and the disabled, said in an aggregated tone:

"You cannot possibly have a dog with epilepsy!!"

With this, David apparently meant that the dog ought to be put to death.

"It's not mine," the man answered rapidly as if someone had pressed a button. "I am just walking him. Why shouldn't I take care of him, if I can?" The man said, whom we hitherto regarded as the dog-owner.

The man's energy again transformed his utterance. He did not seem to be talking but kind of tryingly reciting something. The dog walker was not PRESENT. Maybe he was dead.

"I see," David said.

The man in the striped suit, who was very earnest in his whole appearance, despite his ambiguousness, definitely seemed eager to defend neither his actions nor his standpoints but proposed his case was with calm and indifference. But, on the other hand, dead people seldom did protect themselves. Anyway, the Bogart man sure looked secure and reliable, David thought.

When David had a closer look at the man's wrinkled but anonymous face, marked by a small, stubborn nose in the middle of it, he noticed that the senior most certainly had had his face surgically modified around his eyes. David soon realized that since this face

had so many wrinkles, it was probable that the wrinkles over his eyes had bothered the eye-sight. Thus the older man most likely had let a surgeon remove the skin above his eyes. The outcome, however, was this eerie, clown-like, astonished look.

He was undoubtedly much more muscular built than David was. Maybe he was a former military or agent or something. He had large hands and still a strong neck under the grey hair, despite his age.

David had all of a sudden come to reflect on multiple matters. The man who had incited all this seemed unaware of it, though. He blinked, changed the overcoat from one arm to another and took out an old-fashioned cigarette of some strange brand, and lit it.

Sometimes, when David met a person, who looked in a certain way, he thought that this person seemed to have dealt adequately with terrible looks, or the opposite. David could distinguish between bad and good looks and bad and good energy. The man with the dog, for instance, had exciting natural features, and his face shone with complete irregularity and was disfigured by surgery. His mouth was rather wry, but he had a friendly look all the same aside from the clown eyes. Although they met outside on the street and on such a rainy night, he smelled grossly from tobacco.

“You see ...,” the dead, or ironic, the man finally said, “the woman who owns him is sick.”

That was at least something, David thought. The man wanted to clarify himself and was not just reciting.

He sure would like to hear him talk at length, David thought. He did not know that he would have lots of opportunities for that.

West’s gaze focused on the old man, but his mind all of a sudden took a turn. He had spotted an ostensive, golden tooth in the older man’s mouth. David realized that this man had a story. Everybody with a golden tooth had a story, according to David. Not only the man in the suit seemed awkwardly ambiguous and but definitely interesting. Thirdly, he must be rich too! Anyone with a golden tooth was rich.

The man with the dog was generous with not being present. But he apparently wanted to share his absence with David because he gave no indication of leaving the street-corner.

The dog eventually had recovered fully and rose to indicate he wanted to leave. West decided that he did not need the milk he had set out to buy from the drugstore but instead chose to accompany the man and the dog. They performed a circular walk around the

children's playground and the nearby hideous old church. Concerning this latter phenomenon, the two newfound friends soon came together in a united deep despise.

"Strange things, churches." The man in the suit said. "I have never been able to understand religious people. Do they really believe in that nonsense?"

"I don't get who they are neither, those folks who go to church!" West agreed.

"I was married once to a woman whose closest friend frequently attended church," the niggard man said while he, at last, tended a little to the dog and tapped it on the head. It dawned upon David that the man in the striped suit appeared incredibly selfish. David noticed that this guy had not uttered a single positive thing for twenty minutes. He also had not asked David anything essential. Neither of these conclusions hurt, though, because he was such a formidable mystery.

"I see! Ah, you've were married? By the way, I mightn't perchance get to know your name, sir?"

"My name is Longman. Reuben Longman."

This was positive, kind of, David reconned. At the same time, he did not bother that Longman did not answer the first question. Thus this whole conversation seemed not very earnest.

"Mm. You look like one who has traveled a lot." David continued.

"Mm, yeah," Reuben Longman said.

Reuben looked, and his look was a kind of heavy, perpetrating one from light blue eyes, at the dog, which seemed keen on leaving for home. The little terrier sat down and lifted his paw.

"Perhaps he wants to be carried," David said in a neutral tone. "He just had a severe seizure."

Reuben looked like an old sailor. Again, he showed no gratitude towards David's friendly approaches – but lifted the dog and took out his ancient, long-armed army gloves from a pocket inside the raincoat and put them around the poor dog.

"I have to go home," Reuben suddenly said. "Nice meeting you, pal."

"Nice, Mister!" David nodded with a smile, "Hope to see you again! I guess you don't live far away, eh?"

David felt the Glock's presence in his pocket. The gun made him talk in a way he would not without it.

"Well, not exactly close to where we are; I live on Thames Street, No 340."

"I see."

The young boy nodded again, stored that information, and put his hand out to cuddle with the dog, but then in a whizzy Reuben, carrying the terrier, already was far away towards the harbor. David realized that Longman had not invited him to his place.

David – who continuously was in financial trouble – realized that Longman was wealthy. Anybody with a golden tooth and that could buy a necklace worth \$4000 was wealthy. It would not hurt him to give David some, David thought. Sure, enough, David realized that Longman might be a dangerous person. It seemed that he had been through a lot. But Reuben was more likely an old sailor, David sensed, than a retired military or an agent or something like that.

When David – who did not exactly plan to rob Longman - strolled further on his walk, he thought that life and culture in the U.S.A., in a unique way, wholly revolved around the 2nd amendment. To David anarchism also presented many problems. But he put them aside for now. His personality was only very slowly evolving.

David was all mesmerized by the blue, striped suit.

Chapter Four

The small shop on the corner, owned by Captain Georgie Butterfield, a local property broker, had two main entrances, one from East Pratt and another from Harvey Street. The one from Harvey Street was since long bolted up and sealed. In the doorway to East Pratt Street, there hovered a large bookstand, almost blocking the way. David slid into the small shop to finally get his milk bottle from Ethan, a tall, slender, black boy with soft, glowing, greyish skin and an enormous. The colored guy seemed to be always at the store, reading on his tablet or in a pocketbook, and now and then obsessed with making small sketches on his *iPad*. David – being the customer and polite as was his habit – showed his interest:

“Hi! What’s the combo?”

“Just fine. And you, bro?”

“Fine. What cha’ reading?” David asked.

The shop was scarcely lit, and it had a sweet smell as from some forgotten rotten bananas.

“I am reading a book on writing.” The young clerk laughed friendly and looked at the same time powerful and very modest. He looked intelligent.

“Hah!” David retorted in a hollow tone. “Are you an aspiring author?”

“Who isn’t?” Ethan’s answers, as well as all his ways, were all the time very swift. His laugh was extrovert, but David did not think that Ethan’s extrovertedness was of any ordinary kind. He had probably learned to be that way.

David smacked with his lips and looked around for the paper stand. After the pandemic, not many papers were traded off, and there were just a few left. *The Baltimore Chronicle* announced that there was going to be a small concert tonight in the town hall. Sunderland “Sleepy” Polly-Ann. David looked at yet some more papers and magazines. He did not know Ethan very well, but he had – just from a couple of short conversations with him – come to a rash conclusion that he – although he had modest ways – was a bit aloof. Ethan was too sure of himself, even if he was humble. It wasn’t delightful how humble this competent young black man was. On the other hand, David thought that Ethan seemed very friendly and probably was a very warm-hearted young man. David had a history of being tricked and robbed by countless people, so he was finally set to be on guard against tricksters, psychopaths, and junkies.

A commotion was heard on top of the convenience store. David looked up at the ceiling:

“What’s all the noise about?”

“They are having a funeral. The old mama has died.”

“Oh, I see.”

They dropped the subject.

David these days felt extraordinarily insecure. He was at a turning point in his life. It may turn out either way. He might have great success, or he might – on the other hand – end up in the gutter. The 25-year-old was preposterously broke and haply had the money for the small rent. He had no one to borrow money from and no one who would help him with anything. The only thing he had was his student loan for his studies in programming and his Glock pistol.

“You don’t happen to know anything about Mr. Longman, the old man with the dog, who was outside just a while ago?” David asked.

Ethan looked suspicious. David boldly went on with his ranting. This is the boldness that poverty and despair gives.

“I wonder if he is ... rich?”

Ethan looked down in his book again, reading.

“I don’t know.”, he mumbled monotonously but under strain.

A bottle of Worcester Sauce, or something, suddenly fell off a shelf in a back room. Maybe the cat had caused it to fall about.

“Hush!” David panted. “I cannot stand sudden noises. But hear me! Do you feel me?”

He actually could not stand anything sudden. It is a frequent remark in the literature on magic and the occult that Satan himself is as fond of the unexpected as of the sinister.

The two of them went silent again.

In the shop’s corner, a man in his sixties in a beige coat and a blue hat was sitting, sipping on a cup of coffee. Perhaps he also was listening to the two youngsters.

“A book wouldn’t be too hard to write.” Ethan suddenly said in a casual voice.

“A book, what about? About what?”

“About small things, or nothing at all.”

"Why small?" David asked, mischievously, in a try to make friends.

"It is a good way to start with small things."

"Greater things come when the stage is set, eh?" David laughed, satisfied with his poetry. Nonsense made him relax. Absurdity seemed to him the perfect hallucination.

"Now, I don't know if the books I am going to write would be like porn for women or if they are going to be completely incomprehensible."

Ethan, at the same time, laughed tryingly at himself. His massive Rastafari-hair trembled or waved around his big head. David did not comment on what Ethan just said. Ethan subsequently added:

"I don't know if I will develop into a writer at all."

Ethan, like David, was a very young man. In posing that question that way, he showed himself mature, David thought.

"I see," David said, but he hadn't many clues to the actual subject. Therefore, he changed to his old topic:

"You don't happen to know Mister Longman? Reuben Longman? Do you?"

"Yes. I know him. He's having *The New York Times*."

"Yeah, I think he's a democrat."

"So what?" Ethan finally put down his book, *The Walled Kingdom*, a book on the history of China, and looked at David, who was a couple of years his senior, but seemed younger than Ethan, who only was nineteen:

"What do you want with him?"

"Rob him," David suddenly said and put his fingers in a moving stand with umbrellas with funny logos on them that stood nearby, and swung the whole set of umbrellas full circle to the left. At the same time, he felt the weight of the Glock against his chest, almost in a hurtful way.

"Now, that's not a sweet thing to say," Ethan said. Ethan Bailey did not know if David was serious. It was impossible to tell, but if David's words had been ironic, it certainly was covert irony.

"I can't help it. I do not respect other people's property. I think property itself is robbery. Just like Kropotkin thought. Besides, that Longman is old. He does not NEED the money. I do."

As a matter of fact, it was not Kropotkin, but Proudhon, who thought that property was theft.

Perhaps David's dissatisfaction with his own life was so immense that he simply wanted to ruin his chances. But of course, deep inside, he actually did not want to destroy them, but his talk of these criminal actions was a cry for help. David also thought that, since he was such an outsider and such a loser, common law did not apply.

Ethan did not know if David meant what he said.

"Have you been to his place?" Ethan asked in a new tone while he rose and folded his book into a roll, and began piling chewing gums in a box under the counter nearer to the back exit.

"No," David said and looked up, curiously: "have you?"

"Yes, I have. The man has got porcelain, artwork, books, and oriental rugs, and dead animals at home. Horns from buffalos and skins from alligators, tigers, and snakes."

"Wait a minute! You don't say! I asked you about him, and you said he bought *The New York Times*! I told you he was also...."

"Let us go there tomorrow! Reuben likes to be with young folks." Ethan tried to smile, although this conversation had nothing comical in it." You might pick me up at six o'clock because Joshua has his shift from around then until midnight on Mondays. I know where Reuben lives."

"Thames Street," David said, knowingly, looking at Ethan's slender fingers piling chewing gum packages at an enormous pace. The Afro-American then picked up his rolled-up book about writing again to continue his studies.

Ethan's phone rang. He picked out the *Samsung S5* from his waist pocket and answered.

"Yes, hello. Of course. ----- Yes. ----- Yes.----- Sure. Just come in.----- We always do.---- Bye-bye."

Those fingers looked fiercely arrogant, the Euro-American thought. Did Ethan know that David was out of a job since last year and that he had nothing to do but trying to learn to be a hacker and some History at the University at a course he most likely never would complete? Did he know that he, David, was wearing a Glock pistol? The meeting between Ethan and David almost could serve as a prototype between a guy who has a job and hasn't.

Suddenly a tall, bald man, in his seventies, dressed in a smug blue striped suit, entered the shop. The man in the back of the shop immediately called upon him with a hoarse Hello.

The newcomer, David soon realized, turned out to be the shop-owner himself, Captain Butterfield.

He probably was no Captain at all but was a sheer businessman. He looked like a small gangster of the salons. He was dominant in his gestures but was a rather skinny man. His voice was thunderous, though. His narrow, meticulously clean-shaven face was red or purple, and his minuscule hair was white. It was put tight to his skull by use of a fluid like Keratin or something.

"Howdy, Ethan!" he said casually, lifting his hat that had a sharp turn by his right eyebrow.

"Everything is fine, Mr. Butterfield," Ethan said.

"It's fine, Captain, 'is it," the Captain retorted, with no irony. He early had found out that being dominant served his business.

"Yes, Captain," Ethan obeyed and made sounds with his fingers hitting the book cover.

Butterfield looked casually up at the cigar shelf and the shelf with liquors on it and then left for the man in the back of the shop, after giving David a quick look and touched the brim of his hat with a little smile.

Butterfield greeted the man with:

"Oh, Sammie!" and then they sat together and talked, and both of them lowered their voices to a minimum.

David yawned and decided to leave. But before he left, he got an idea.

"See you tomorrow then at six o'clock. Will we go and see Longman then? But do you work the day after tomorrow, Ethan?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I am free. Why?"

"Want to go fishing early? I have a small boat by the bridge."

"Sure, but I don't know how to fish."

"You'll learn," David said.

"I'll pick you up at 4.30 AM."

"4.30???"

"Yes. Do you have a car?"

"Yes. I can borrow one."

"Well. What do you say?"

"It was a little sudden. But okay! It will be an experience."

Ethan smiled, and they made a high five.

When he got home, he was so sore at Ethan that he threw out the pet raccoon, Niels, on the street yelling: "Shitty, shitty cat!" although it was no cat at all. But he was happy that they should go fishing together. It would be a real feast. He thought he would call upon somebody to tell about his new friend, though. While he made some tea, David took out his phone, laying on his bed, and swiped his contacts. David had got some friends, most of them through his apartment mate Elsa, others through the University. Elsa's closest friend Haylee had a brother, Raymond, who had lots of friends. Sometimes, David used to hang with them, especially at concerts and dances.

But soon, his thoughts were around Ethan again.

He guessed that as soon as Ethan understood, which he soon would, that they shared the same interest in literature, they would quickly be the best of pals. David West liked what he had heard Ethan say, that he did not know what novel it was going to be. The trouble was to define the concept of "incomprehensible," he thought. David did not believe that the novel was just entertainment. The word "incomprehensible" could refer to utterly modern prose, or it might be something still more subtle.

He was happy that they would visit Reuben's place, and he wondered much about it. But the prospect of robbing him had almost vanished. Longman appeared much too capable, in his relative wealth, for David to be able to take any advantage of him. David also had a feeling that Reuben, as well as Ethan, knew absolutely everything about him without him having to say anything. This, in turn, was incredibly depressing. David sometimes bordered on persecution mania.

David's friend Elsa, a tall black girl, who rented the other half of the apartment where David lived, now, after having knocked twice, entered his room, looked at him in his misery. With a tiny, amiable grin on her narrow face, she flung out, after having seen the look on David's face, her close to enormous chin protracted:

"Are you preparing to die or something, sweetie?"

Elsa herself, a girl of twenty-two, was, as indicated, no immediate beauty. She was flat-chested, slightly bent, and had that chin, under which one almost could hide a bus. She was a brave girl. She worked as a help nurse at a nearby care home for older people. Elsa

was an honest girl, though, a real diamond, and everybody liked her. David did not answer, but he was happy that she was around.

Chapter Five

David's buddy dream.

In the night, David dreamt. His dream, however, had the character of absolute reality.

He dreamt that he was thirteen years old. It was October, and the weather was cold and wet. Together with a friend of his, Cole "coolie," Humphrey, they were on their way to a small uninhabited wood outside town. The two camerades had arrived there by bicycle, and with them, they brought a substantial golf bag. They had prepared the golf bag at Cole's house in the evening before. Now, that was on a Saturday. They had rehearsed what they should tell curious people who might wonder why they were heading to a dense forest, carrying a golf-bag.

Back home, at David's place, his parents probably were dealing with their respective miseries, mourning their lives, and trying to figure out why and how they should spend the coming years in the same loveless manner at the least financial cost. However, in Cole's house, his parents spent their time watching the telly together, cuddling on the sofa, making up plans for their spare postal order business and their home. They often talked about how proud they were of their son, who spent a lot of time battling his dyslexia. His parents were convinced that this handicap would not hamper young Cole in his desire for a productive and prosperous life. David's parents, on the other hand, did expect nothing of their son and didn't do anything to socialize him.

Cole, who was a boy, both longer and sturdier built than David, had a face with a reddish complexion. The always pale-faced, thin-haired David almost looked feminine by his side.

Coolie - who was not a "cool" person, but more of a very hearty, friendly, and boisterous youngster - owned a Ruger Blackhawk Combo air rifle and a small air gun, marked Stiga, as well. Those were the objects that he kept hidden away in the golf bag. David did not own any such playthings.

Their project for the day was to go hunting squirrels.

They had embarked on the subway train by 10.00 am, and nobody asked them about their luggage. They got old clothes on them as if

they were going on a real dirty job or were going to jump in muddy waters. However, they were heading towards the woods.

The simplistic and thoroughly kind Cole was a real talker. He had emphasized to David that this was not only going to be fun but that it was an entirely profitable business too. They would not only shoot the squirrels. No, they were going to sell the furs also. About \$10 apiece they would get, all in all, per coat.

“This is fun, isn’t it?”

Cole took care of everything. He was not at all afraid that they should meet someone. David was.

When they had proceeded a couple of miles from the railway’s immediate nearness, they also had a less habituated area around. The boys thought they had made it with their golf bag, and they felt safe to unpack the rifles and get them on their backs. The wood was closing down upon them, and it was now a dense wood of firs and lots of bushes and weed around them.

They finally put the rifles in their hands. Cole gave David the ammo to the pistol, and the young hunters started to look out for the small tree-rats.

“Imagine when you are old, thinking back on this moment, how we were hunting here today! That’s a memory in creation! Eh?” and Cole jolted his gun and lightly smashed David on the upper arm, trying to exert more enthusiasm.

David got perplexed. He hadn’t thought in those lines before. Was it a sound idea, the setting up a memory? Imagine, David felt for himself if you had that kind of thinking all the time! Still, it was a cozy thought. But David decided he did not like it. Notwithstanding that, he intended to enjoy himself and took a shot on something high up a tree that looked like a squirrel.

The small leaden bullet smashed against the trunk of a tree, and then it blasted to other trees before it came back down and landed in front of David.

“You must do like this,” Cole said, and he smelled from a cigarette that he just lit. And Cole was adjusting the barrel on David’s pistol, with a small black screw.

“Now,” he said.

David nodded.

They proceeded through the dense and varied forest that contained many an unusual tree and brush. The many squirrels were not exactly afraid of the hunters, which bothered David.

“Stupid creatures!” he thought to himself, but to his friend, he just said:

“They ought to be easy to get.”

They flashed smiles towards each other.

Later in the afternoon, when they walked back to the metro, carrying the golf bag between them, and Cole had a t-shirt, which he had knot to a small bag, in his free hand, they were both tired and happy. They had eight squirrels with them, shot dead, seven of them by Cole, and one by David. The one squirrel shot by David was regarded as “useless,” though since it had been hit five or six times.

Suddenly, when they just had two miles left to the main road and the metro station, a man with a dog exerted from the dark of the forest - it was about 08.00 pm.

The dog immediately sniffed around Cole’s t-shirt-bag, and the man heaved up his voice and cried out:

“What’ d’ u’ have there?”

Cole looked at David and David at Cole. Then they just ran.

Luckily the man withheld his dog, and so they escaped and got on the metro in one piece, each.

“Now,” Cole panted, as they both sunk on a seat in the wagon. “You bet, this will be a beautiful memory!” He patted the t-shirt bag, from which a couple of drops of blood silently lukewarm were dripping onto his shoe.

Chapter Six

Ethan's buddy dream.

Ethan dreamed: He and Thomas, one of Ethan's colored friends, who was an author of several horror stories in the Edgar Allen Poe style, was at Ethan's place watching the news and to have a chat at an evening in Dreamland.

The stormy weather had returned to Dreamland Baltimore and ravaged the roofs. Ethan and his friend sat in chairs opposite to each other, watching clouds assemble in the sky above through the window. Thomas smoked a cigar. He had also brought some fine cigarettes. Ethan enjoyed the evening fully and slowly combed his cat. The furniture was rather luxury.

Some ravens were sitting on the windowsill. Now and then, the rain broke loose, only to rapidly vanish again. The ravens also lifted off with much noise and were gone.

"Here!" Thomas said, put out his cigar in an old ashtray, marked "De Dion Bouton", and pulled out the cigarettes from a pocket. "These are particular joints. Take one, and you will see for yourself."

Ethan was usually very cautious and certainly not into smoking strange substances. Still, since Thomas was offering, and they both were in Dreamland, Ethan accepted, and they both lit a cigarette and took a deep inhalation.

Thomas, whose face was extremely black, intelligent looking, and with a marked nose, acted like he would make a speech. He had a blue cup full of coffee standing beside him.

"I got a thought," Thomas said, "I just got it, actually, out of nowhere, and it has nothing to do with anything."

"Sounds interesting," Ethan said, half sarcastic. He wished that he and Thomas became friends but was not sure how this ever would happen. Thomas was advanced and had a contract with a New York publisher. The writer of horror fiction looked at Ethan with his sharp black eyes.

Outside, the ravens were back on the sill of the large window and pressed themselves towards the pane as if they wanted to hear what Thomas would say.

“Now, suppose,” Thomas began, “it was, that some things existed, at least in part, in the enormous mischievousness, that they in an invisible DNA has engraved the ability entirely being able to avoid to be detected by the scientific method?”

“How?” Ethan said, just because he wanted to know.

“Well,” Thomas said, excusing himself (he always was very polite), “I mean, to be more exact, it is not entirely impossible, that it has been, in an evolutionary way in the infinite universe, since long favorable to some type of existence, in the meeting of countless civilizations that have come and gone, to evolve through the eons of time, the property of being unable to be detected by the scientific method. Maybe most civilizations that, this type of existence met with, were all concentrated upon what could be detected by the scientific method.”

“Well, that sounds tricky.”

The wind outside the windows kept soaring. The poor ravens that seemed to try to take shelter against the wind in the window corner and listen to Thomas drew closer to the window glass. In the wind gusts, their feathers rose above their heads.

Thomas glanced at Ethan.

“But, you know what that means, of course?”

“Oh yes, I think so,” Ethan said, and he looked at the window and the darkening clouds, who had a purple tone. “But certainly, it would be a giant extra manoeuvre. An unlikely one, for someone to choose to create a shield against human knowledge, and the scientific method, to gain an evolutionary advantage, when there are so many”

“Well, I agree. Highly unlikely. But certainly very smart. And highly unexpected. Don’t you think? Nobody would assume that?” Outside Ethan’s window, which faced a street intersection, and therefore was more open to the wind, which arrived straight from the harbor, a bulky thug of wind came. The clouds in the sky now miraculously vanished.

“What you are saying is, that out there, something exists, that keeps dodging and laughing at the scientific method, something that thrives and might enjoy all sort of vain human commotion, just because we, in our civilization, are so prone to think that everything can be observed by the scientific method and controlled experiments?”

Thomas grasped his blue coffee cup and emptied it in one big sweep.

“Yes, indeed. It is incredible, isn’t it?”

His eyes shone.

“I just came up with it.” He smiled, “I am surprised that I haven’t thought of it before.”

“Nothing strange with that,” Ethan tried to order his thoughts. The two ravens now knocked at the window pane with their hard beaks and wing pens.

“Nobody else has been thinking like that either,” Thomas said, and continued:

“It is creepy, though. Because what does it MEAN? Well, it means that right now, Invisible Existence is at your shoulder, in evolutionary superiority, sits there laughing at us, at how both of us are trying to come to grips with what governs our lives. And while we are doing that, brooding about OUR understanding of evolution, they have the keys in their invisible hands, walking around in their secret dimension. We are not able to hear the least ring from their keys and their other belongings.”

Now Ethan shuddered because a giant orange light shone across the sky, and it somehow wobbled out there. The two ravens had started to cry tears, and they hugged each other, and it almost looked as if they bade Ethan, through the pane, to save them.

“The wind is surging,” Ethan said, now letting the cat, which he had been holding in his lap, slip down on the floor. It stayed by his feet, though, and pressed his shaking body against his leg.

The wind was shaking the walls of the building.

“It is not supposed to be a wind like this in our area, is it?” Ethan shouted at Thomas. His Rasta hair waved around his head. Loose furniture started to jump up and down. Even electricity suddenly vanished.

“Look, what you have done!!” Ethan suddenly shouted at Thomas since Ethan could no longer discern cosmological theory and a Baltimore storm.

In turn, Thomas had been hit by a flying object, a small tin box in his head, and bleeding from a scar.

“Yes,” he shouted, “Invisible Existence is VERY SMART,” and he had grown furious. “Look! IT IS TRYING TO KILL US!”

“Yes, certainly it will. Quite understandably, it will!” Ethan shouted back, rushed to the bed, and from under the pillow drew a Colt 1911s.

“Why the hell,” he simultaneously shouted at Thomas, “did you have to dig into the secrets of existence, you vain absolute complete IDIOT?”

Thomas was rushing about in the room. Ethan shouted:

“Let’s go down in the cellar!”

Well out in the stairs, they saw broken windows and other ravens in the staircase. The raven’s eyes were quite mad too. The walls squeaked, but the doors to the other rowhouses, seen in the dark from Ethan’s front door, did not open.

“Terrible fuzz someone has ordained, just because one puts forth a theory!” Ethan shouted in a loud voice.

“Take the theory back then!” Ethan shouted to Thomas, in vain to open the door to the cellar. The door seemed stuck.

“You cannot take back a theory,” Thomas said, adjusting his collar.

“Of course you can. You can try.” Ethan claimed incoherently, hoping and praying that something would bring things back to normal.

Perhaps, Ethan suddenly thought, if he could get Thomas out of ... existence, then these invisible powers of nature would calm down. It was Thomas’ fault. But then it struck him that it might not play such a significant role if Thomas actually should be dead and gone. Because he was himself consecrated. There was no hope, Ethan thought, now managing to get the cellar door open.

“What are you thinking?” Thomas asked, just as the wind took a small pause.

“You never know anything about the end, do you?” Ethan asked. He thought that if he took out the Colt and shot Thomas, maybe Existence would spare him just because he was not guilty at all.

“Ah, pfui, bring yourself together! You aren’t superstitious, are you?” Thomas said, raising his voice in almost anger.

When Ethan looked out through the window down versus the harbor, he saw that wind has calmed down. Suddenly it was all silent, and everything fell in its usual place, just like magic.

“Oh, my head,” Thomas said, and he held his hand to the bandage around his forehead.

“That was really bad,” he added, looking almost dizzy.

“I guess it’s climate change,” Ethan said with devastating irony. He went out on the front stairs, put the Volt back in his pocket, sat down on the wet white marble, massaging his Colt’s hand.

The two ravens ruffled their wings and were soon walking down the lane, picking fallen chestnuts, and they seemed to chatter in a good mood.

Suddenly Ethan Bailey woke up in the middle of the night.

“Strangest dream!” he whispered to himself.

Chapter Seven

On the following day, which was a Monday, Inga, Nord, Eric Goldkettel's friend, arrived at Goldkettel's house by an antique deep blue Mercedes SL. Eric was thrilled.

Inga was an impressive woman, muscularly built, a former athlete and Boston marathon runner. She had a small head with red, shortcut, curly hair. She was a bit juvenile in her thought and adventurous, and now in her early sixties. Inga was also extraordinarily verbal and a clever woman, much into reading. They said she read two books a day, readers of every sort imaginable. Eric and Inga had a long story together. Not the least, she had been the best friend of Martha, Eric's former wife. Now, for a couple of months, Martha was dead, and this was the first time that Eric met Inga, or, for that matter, anybody who knew who Martha was since she died. Martha had been married many times, and the last one of her many husbands was a Baltimore sea-Captain, one Reuben Longman. Eric also knew that Reuben and Martha had been planning a divorce and that Martha's death had been a mystery. She had been found dead in a deserted park, and no exact cause of death had ever been established. Partly to discuss the end of Martha and the mystery around it, Eric had invited Inga.

"Oh, Inga, Inga!" Eric cried out as they met on the small grassy knoll that severed Eric's mansion from the small parking lot (built for up to six cars) between his and Delmonte's estate, *the Palace*.

"Oh, Cedric!" it elapsed her, and she, also, cried out, "WOW!" as they hugged. "Cedric" was, curiously enough, Eric's second name.

Inga had been to Eric's house earlier, but it was ten years from now, and then she had had Martha as a company.

To make the relationship between Eric and Inga and the relationship between Inga and Marta more comprehensible, I will, myself, tell you in such an objective way, as is ever possible, a little of Martha.

Martha, born Stilton, of the Jewish Stiltons in Tampa, was an adventurous girl, youngest of four. Already as a First-grader, she had her own business in Tampa, where she sold candy.

Papa Stilton had died in a fire, being a firefighter, and Martha was raised - or not raised at all - by her maternal grandmother. Martha's

mother, Beatrice, you see, had disappeared to Africa with a Nigerian priest just after Martha was born.

Martha was not only an unusually bright and social creature. She was also awfully good-looking. Since the grandmother was poor, Martha did not for long attend any school, but she started to earn her living as a local waitress from the day she turned sixteen.

Early every morning at 06.00, she stood up, made her bed, and went swimming outside Tampa, 3 miles away. She went by bicycle. She loved swimming and dreamt of being an athlete, a gold-medalist at the Olympic Games. Soon the grandmother died. Her brother and two sisters left for different jobs (they were substantially older than Martha and had other fathers). She never was to meet them ever.

Martha tried to reach out to her mother in Africa. Still, it turned out baboons in Uganda had eaten the neglecting adventurer. Thus poor Martha found herself all alone in the world. She then decided to go to Europe.

She sold her now-deceased grandmother's house and bought a flight ticket for the money. She was sure she would succeed one way or the other in Paris. This was in 1978.

Martha Stilton swiftly got acquainted with a couple of other girls in Paris. They joined in a small flat at Montmartre, and she, almost a Marilyn Monroe copy, started to work as an art model for the painters. She not only looked good, but she also was amusing and friendly.

Soon a painter, living at *Rue Bréa*, took her home, and they married after a month. His name was Peterson, Robert Peterson.

Peterson originated from Cape Town in South Africa, and the two of them soon emigrated from Paris. Martha had barely caught a couple of French phrases when she found herself living in a Cape Town suburb in a family where Africaans was spoken. Martha took a fancy in learning Africaans and soon became a teacher for the small colored children. These immediately grew fond of their American mistress, and she was like a mother to them.

After a while, Peterson was unfaithful to Martha. It was decided that Martha should move out from the Peterson's residence. She then got a flat on Regent Street in Johannesburg.

She started to work in an orphanage and took children to the zoo; she then met Abraham Girma. And after that, she went to Ethiopia, as Mrs. Girma. Girma was a banker, and Martha now learned fine fashion. She got pregnant, but the child, a small boy, died right after

birth. She lived in Addis for three years, and a gang of servants escorted her wherever she went, for example, to the river to swim. Her favorite servant-boy, named Bennah, followed her into the water. He gave her such a good massage that she almost fainted from pleasure. Some natives of Ethiopia know how to provide a tender massage. Years later, she would describe the beauty of the limbs of Bennah, especially his muscular arms, to her female friends. The girls eventually grew so tired of hearing about them that they asked her to talk about her Jewish background instead. Martha was a Zionist and loved to indulge in the subject of the Jewish race's alleged superiority, which, of course, is neither a race nor superior in any way. But the beautiful Martha Girma always claimed it was both.

She divorced Girma since he got disappointed at her not wanting to have more children. The doctor, a Medical Professor at a nearby college, had advised her not to try. Together with young Bennah, Martha now returned to Florida. After ten years of earning her living as an Antiquarian, while Bennah disappeared to Los Angeles to become a bar pianist, she finally met with the mysterious Captain Reuben Longman. She moved with him to Baltimore. There, they should have many years of a happy marriage, during which they respected each other's need for freedom and living space.

Captain Longman dearly loved his blonde bombshell wife. They had assured each other that this was to be a free relation. And to Martha, who at last happily felt both free and secure, it was.

In Baltimore, she, at a fur shop, found her female mate, her best friend, Inga, who in every way seemed like a twin sister. Inga was her soul mate and an admirer as well. The first time they met, they immediately realized their kinship, embraced, and were going to be the best of friends until their last breath.

Inga, who today lived in Asheville, but earlier in Philadelphia, often earlier visited Reuben Longman's home. She also escorted Martha on the many adventures Martha had with several men in and outside of Baltimore. They even took a trip to Europe together. Hence, Inga also had, together with Martha, visited Eric in Connecticut a couple of times. And now, although this time without dear Martha, she stood in the hallway of Eric's *Reading* mansion.

"Lunch is ready," Eric said in his courteous manner.

He fumbled with his soft hands around plates and pots. The remarkable thing was that Eric had been an outstanding surgeon,

even though his general manners were those of a man who will mess up any dinner and drive a car onto the wrong side of the road.

After having the meal that Eric meticulously had prepared for lunch and clumsily served to his dear friend, the two of them, Inga and Eric, sat down in the library. Eric's library was an old brown study. It was elegant and dark and had books up onto the ceiling. The windows were large and stretched widely across one wall and were slightly open so as for the smoke to be free to escape and fresh air to get in, to clear the brains and foment the discussion. Inga wanted to have a cigar, and she took out one from a box in her purse.

"Now, a cigar is always a cigar." Inga smiled, her still very muscular and fit body lustfully submerged into a large mahogany armchair. She was fully aware that she was paraphrasing Freud, who once claimed that "a cigar SOME-TIMES is just a cigar," in relation to his theory of dream symbols.

Eric laughed at this elegant joke.

"Let's not waste time, Inga," Eric then said, "I just want to know what happened to Martha, please!"

Inga stroked her red hair, wrinkled her forehead, and said:

"It is so sad! Poor Martha! But I guess she knew that being an adventurer has its risks."

"How do you mean?" The doctor now seemed controlled.

"She was found in a park in Baltimore. She had no obvious signs of how she had been brought to death. The coroner claimed she was not strangled or suffocated but might have had been stressed or scared to death. She had some scars from her nails in the weak of her palms and face as well as bruises on her arms and knees from falling on the lawn."

"I see. But when was this? And is her husband a suspect?"

"Yes, it was in July, during the heat, July the 23rd. Reuben, her husband, was brought in by detective Ludwig, the officer in charge of this case at the Baltimore Police Department. But Reuben claimed he knew nothing about her being in the park and that he had been home all night. He was alone, though, so nobody could corroborate his testimony. But they had nothing on him. There was no mud or grass on any shoe in Reuben's house. Ludwig, whom I have spoken to, said that they simply had no clue what happened to

Martha. As far as I know, nobody is a suspect at the moment. Reuben seemed not very bothered if you ask me. I talked to him as well, by the phone."

"But when did you last meet with Martha? Please give me the whole story, please. You know I loved Martha, and I have to know who took her away, no matter who it was!"

Then Inga told about the last meeting:

"It was in June," Inga said, "We had not met for a year. We went bathing together one day, out into the bay by a boat that we hired. I always like boating. Martha had a bright red swimsuit."

"Anyway, I had talked to her a couple of days before. She was a little tired of Reuben, who seemed lost in memories. He had started to talk about an old love, she said, way down in Mississippi, long ago. She told him that it was okay if he connected to any old flame, just claiming she did not want to listen to it. If he had grown tired of her, he should say so, she had said. He responded by telling her that he just felt low. He had a small lung condition, and he said that nothing is as terrible as a lung condition. Martha said to me that Reuben very seldom complained about anything at all and very seldom of his health."

"She had joined a course in writing last spring, and she met with some of the writers now and then. The aspiring writers met even during summer to be inspired and to exchange books and manuscripts."

Inga was a bright and conscientious woman, Eric thought:

"How would you best describe Captain Reuben?"

"He is economical," Inga said.

Eric looked up.

"How do you mean?"

"He's a niggard," Inga clarified. "You know, Martha had brought a lot of money to their household, and she was collecting art, and my God, is there an art collection at Reuben's place today! It is worth millions!"

Her face suddenly had gotten red with excitement.

"Why so? How had she been able to buy that much art? Is it precious art?"

"She used to beg her lovers for it or simply take it away from them."

Eric looked depressed.

"I know..." he stated, clumsily.

"We know. Both of us know. She was not always nice. She was not just adventurous, but sometimes a criminal. To be blunt about it."

Inga however wrenched her hands a little and looked down.

Both now seemed desolate, and they knew that whoever had brought death upon Martha, she probably had angered that person before.

"I am determined to find out who it was," Eric said in an anonymous tone.

"I cannot go on living if I don't."

Then, from behind the window, that had been slightly open, a voice suddenly was heard. Yes, if there ever was anything sudden in this world, this was it.

"I might be of certain help."

It was a woman's voice, and it belonged to no less than young Armamente Dulcinea, the housekeeper at the *Palace*. She now showed her head, and within a minute, she had unhooked the window, crawled in, and was soon seated in a chair next to the doctor.

"How?" Eric panted, almost fainting from consternation.

"We will ALL of us go to Baltimore to investigate Reuben's place."

But how do you know....?"

"I always investigate people I live close to and come into contact with. In the night at the *Palace*, I have lots of time. I looked you up on the *Internet*. It was easy to see that you and Martha Stilton were a couple and that she is—inexplicably—dead."

"Good Lord," Inga said, and her mouth was about to smile out of pure consternation.

"And I can assure you," Armamente said, rubbing off some plaster she had got on her hand when climbing through the window, "that this here Reuben is, just as you said, Inga, a real niggard."

Inga was confused, and rightly so, because she, of course, had no idea who Armamente was. This she asked about now.

"Who are you then, darling?"

Armamente told Inga her story. As it turned out, Eric could also find out about the girl who so bravely and unexpectedly had lined up to offer to be a catcher in the rye.

Armamente was born in New York City, she told them, in a hotel, since both her parents, the Dulcineas, had been too lazy to move out of their favorite social spot and leave their friends, all of them being hotel people. So she was raised by some highly intellectual beatniks in a hotel. Her parents did not talk about anything else than Psychoanalysis, Quantum Physics, Marcel Proust, and Philip Grass' music. When she had graduated from high school and decided to become a policeman, they told her that this was alright, of course. They insisted, however, that she studied something else than Policing before that. So she took up philosophy before forensics and Dactylographic (finger-print) studies.

"But," Inga said, a bit consternated," what are you interested in regarding police work. I mean, this seems a bit strange to me, for a spoiled child to start with wanting to be a policewoman?"

"I guess I am a bit like Martha," Armamente answered. "Only that I might choose my men or women a bit more cautiously and don't want to collect art. I am all for the experience."

Eric looked baffled.

"Maybe, when you grow..."

"I assure you that I would not mess up anything," Armamente said.

Inga looked at Eric, who nodded like there was nothing else to do other than letting the girl in on the case.

"I am sincere," Armamente said. "I would never mess up things for you. I just..."

"Then, off we go to Baltimore!" Eric said, and finally, all of them started to laugh.

("We're off, we're off, we're off, we're off, to see the wizard of Oz," Armamente thought, Martha maybe being the wizard.)

Soon after, Eric brought forth a photograph of Martha from his hidings and placed it on the mantelpiece.

"This is the woman whose reputation we will set out to save," he said and added:

"Let us all drink a cup for Martha!"

He took out a bottle of whisky, and soon all of them were hailing Martha and greeting each other.

"I think that with a superpower like you on the boat, we cannot fail," Eric said to Armamente, who looked very pleased. She looked around in the brown study and then raised and took a couple of steps to the room's freest space. She then buttoned up her short borrowed cheerleader coat, on the back of which it said "Swaanee" in red engraved letters, and she ... made a ... backflip.

Eric and Inga applauded this somersault and laughed in loud voices. Armamente bowed. She then looked a little more earnest and said:

"You have to remember that I was raised in a hotel! I really cannot help if I am not like others."

The two adults did not comment upon that. Suddenly she looked at her wristwatch and screamed:

"My God, I have to make dinner for Mr. Paul!!"

Then she stopped, adding:

"Please, I have to arrange for a replacement woman for myself if I am going to Baltimore. Could you fix some money for that?"

"Of course," Goldkettel answered. "Money is no problem. I'll see to that!"

As fast as she had entered the room, she disappeared. But this time through the door.

When Armamente had left, Eric and Inga started to plan for the trip on the following day. They arranged rooms in a hotel and then decided to call Reuben Longman up to ask for a chat and for permission to look at Martha's belongings.

"It was long since I was in Baltimore," the doctor said, "by the way, where do you live now? I have forgotten..."

"Asheville. I have lived in Philadelphia for a long time; and then a while in Baltimore. I am a fur specialist as you might remember. But even if I have lived in Baltimore I don't know a soul there.."

"What do you think, Inga, of the girl - of Armamente?"

"She has a cute name." Inga blinked. Inga always was full of humor, even if there was no humor around. At worst she was at least happy.

Inga whistled, scrolling on her phone, murmuring:

"It is 19\$ for a Greyhound ticket from Hartford to Baltimore, one way...", and then she asked:

"Maybe it is better if I am the one calling upon Reuben and not you doing that?"

Eric nodded and then put his hand on her shoulder, saying:

“It is good to have you here, Inga. On this mission.”

Inga smiled.

The doctor was generous as a person, and he was forthright. Through his long practice as a doctor, he had learned that time seldom is on our side. You have to be generous while you can. And what is the meaning of life other than being generous?

Chapter Eight

To the South of Baltimore's center in the Fell's Census, Reuben's house on Thames Street was a well-attended rowhouse, and in every aspect gorgeous. It contained three rooms and a small kitchen on the bottom and three rooms on the top. All the rooms were worn and darkish but stuffed with wondrous furniture, expensive antiques, and parts of dead animals, and beautiful art. Almost a hundred relatively small oil paintings hung on the walls, mostly landscapes, sea motifs, and harbor views, in an unorderly and abundant fashion.

Reuben had a high appreciation of his home, which had also been Martha's. He showed every room of it with extreme pride.

"Bourbon?" he asked, looking a bit like a byzantine warrior. For the first time, David saw a smile on his disfigured face. He was perhaps the kind of man who only smiled at his own words. David had thought he was above that.

From various photographs on the walls, especially in the hall, one could infer that Reuben had been a sailor who had sailed on many a foreign sea. Reuben had been far away from Baltimore Bay. The whole apartment had a curious smell of musk and vanilla. In the saloon, there was in the corner by the window a mahogany table set for a coffee-party. Three porcelain cups and ditto flowery plates in rose and purple, with small tarts and cookies, a few lumps of sugar, wrapped up in paper, and with logos from cafés on them and a tiny jug with a little milk in it adorned the table.

David and Ethan looked confused and uneasy, but the old sailor seemed in good spirits and bade them sit on the sofa. It was a vast, bolstered, greenish, majestic piece of furniture with curved legs. The couch shrieked and almost fell about when the boys sat down, and David startled because he – as we know – could not stand even modest surprise.

The scene stood under three ancient lamps, who resided by tripod feet on the wooden floor.

From the number of curtains and cushions, it was apparent that not long ago had there been a woman living in this house. In the corner by the sofa, the small epileptic terrier lay asleep. Surprisingly it did not wake by the entrance of perfect strangers. Maybe it was not conscious. It was breathing, though, and the sound of the dog's snoring was to accompany the slightly tense conversation between the three males.

A newly shaven Reuben had on a brand new red shirt. His surgery-afflicted eyes shone from poorly disguised satisfaction when he glared at them and served the two youngsters strong coffee. He was discretely enjoying himself.

David directed his attention towards the walls again. There all the paintings and all the souvenirs from travels and possibly hunts in Africa were carefully displayed. David did not think, though, that Reuben himself had had any contact with live buffaloes or tigers, but he wasn't exactly sure, so he asked about it:

"Did you shoot those animals yourself?"

Reuben smiled and said that he had traveled a lot, but he had never been hunting live animals. No.

Ethan said:

"But you have been a sailor, you told me before. Tell us more about that! Was it a long time ago?"

"Those odd things on the walls my wife bought. We liked auctions. She passed away three years ago. I miss all those travels around all along the coast. I miss that."

"That is bad," David said. "I am sorry."

"But you were a sailor?"

David had risen from the sofa and walked up to one of the larger paintings on the wall. It showed a waterfall and a barn, and a couple of horses. It was a typical North American 19th-century oil painting.

"This is nice," he exclaimed.

"As for my time as a sailor," Reuben recaptured, "I was the 1st officer many years. I seldom, during my first twenty years, was hired as a Captain. And I mostly sailed on Australia and Indonesia."

"Ooh," said the boys.

"But when you are on those trades, you seldom get the opportunity to return home. You have to enlist in books pertaining to foreign companies. Not many U.S. vessels are trafficking in those waters. But I liked Indonesia. But of course, it did not take many years before I got homesick. When I arrived here in the United States again, I got a job, badly paid, but a job, on a steamship on the Mississippi River. And the years on that rotten ship, they were the best."

"How come? Not much happens on the Mississippi?" David said, but once he had left that remark, he wanted to take back his words. What did he (himself) know about Mississippi? He had never even seen it even from the landside.

“Well, it is a great difference. Of course, Mississippi is no ocean. However, I just liked it. And I fell in love.”

“With the boat?” David cried out.

“No, with a woman.”

“Ah, your wife?”

“Wrong again. With a lady. Just a lady. I married later but to another woman, the one who liked to collect these things. Well, that is it. That was about me. Let’s talk about you, or something else, eh?” he said, blinking with his clown eyes.

Reuben rose, collected the empty coffee cups, and took them out to the kitchen sink. Ethan and David also got up to inspect all the marvelous things along the walls. Ethan cried out with joy when he, behind some large bird beaks and a stuffed chimpanzee, found an old saxophone made of some bronze-like material. It was a “Dolnet,” Ethan observed. Not the most exclusive of brands, but it looked all right, and it was an old brass beauty. Ethan was a true connoisseur in many areas. David could not understand where Ethan had gotten all his expertise. Maybe he was superhuman or was half robot.

“Heye, do you play the saxophone?” David shouted to Reuben, who was still in the kitchen or somewhere.

“No.” was the prompt answer.

“In fact,” Reuben added, “I don’t have a single talent. If I had had, I would probably just develop that talent.”

“You do have talents to kill tigers,” David said.

“It is not nice to mark words,” Reuben answered. Probably Reuben had not heard what David just said.

”Martha brought those.”

The dog now was awake, and it snuffed on David and Ethan. It was very polite and friendly and had an intelligent look in his sleepy eyes, half-hidden under sticky eyebrows. He didn’t look taken aback by epilepsy or anything. Reuben lifted him in his lap as he has sunk in his armchair.

“You are my boy.” The senior said, in a voice, slightly trembling.

“What are you two planning then?”

David began to feel bad about himself. He wondered how he could ever have thought of robbing this man. Reuben was very different from all the people that the boy had met. He was strange and represented some peculiar, seldom seen Otherness, he thought.

"Might I take a look upstairs?" Ethan asked, ignoring the question. "This is such an exciting place."

"Of course."

Perhaps Reuben was on the look for heirs, David thought. Reuben Longman was old, and very soon, he would be gone. Possibly David and Ethan could inherit his house, all the paintings, and all the stuffed animals? They would get rich! David was sure that Ethan did not have any thought like that at all. Ethan – the bastard – wanted to succeed in life by his powers. That's for sure, David thought.

Now the three of them walked up the quirking staircase to the second floor. It was, Ethan thought as if Reuben let them go on with their search, scrutinizing every move they made. But why?

A phone suddenly rang, and it was Reuben's. He took the phone out of his pants pocket and answered. At the same time, he halted. While he continued his call, he waved at the two boys to continue with their sightseeing while returning to the first floor to concentrate on what was said.

"Of course," Reuben said. "You are welcome, Mrs. Nord!" Reuben wrinkled his brow and listened to Inga's voice. Some seconds elapsed.

"Yes, Inga, but I don't remember...."

Simultaneously, on the second floor, Ethan and David entered into what seemed to be a woman's beauty parlor. Ethan and David were not aware of much about Martha. This was her room. On one of the walls, there was a giant mirror. That must be weighing a ton, David thought. On the small table in front of the mirror, there were several photos of the woman. She looked happy and proud. A little vain too. But beautiful. She had platinum hair.

David first blushed when he saw the photograph, and then he whitened.

"Sure, she was worth losing one's mind for," Ethan said, but ashamed for having said so, he pointlessly added:

David felt dizzy and had to sit down.

"What is the matter?" Ethan asked.

"It is nothing," David said, holding on to the chair to which he had taken refuge.

This room was incredibly messy. There were packages on the bed and on the floor that looked as if they were going off somewhere.

They only had temporary stickers on, though. "To the antiques.", "Antiquarian.", "Stored." And so on. The wrapping was. Reuben was in the process of selling goods that had belonged to his wife.

When they were back down in the living room again, Ethan pointed at a painting and, blinking with his right eye, he said:

"This must have cost a fortune."

"No, not really." Reuben said, "But I don't quite remember. Be with it as it may. Now let us talk about you! I want to know what your plans are for the future? Both of you."

Reuben then pointed at a large painting of a naked cocotte:

"This is the famous Matisse. It has attracted attention from the galleries."

The Matisse painting was impressive. It was clear that this was a work of genius. The colors were sublime.

Ethan sat down on the quirking sofa next to David, who pondered over his future as a non-robber.

"He's going to be a writer," David said, referring to Ethan while patting the dog's head. The handicapped terrier sat beside his knee.

"A writer?" Reuben got surprised.

David and Reuben looked at Ethan, who stared down at the worn carpet in a greenish color, with white-greyish flowers.

"It's a dream," he said.

"What kind of books do you want to write?"

"Just good books." Ethan smiled.

"But you, then, David? What are your plans?"

"I am studying programming. Java. And taking a course in History right now. Maybe I would like to become a teacher." David responded, displaying an innocent look. He was afraid of Reuben. David thought that he wanted to leave. Why were they at this place? He thought.

"What was the name of your wife, sir?" David asked.

"Martha."

Ethan nodded. Reuben now suddenly got a stern look on his face.

"Now, what kind of folks are you?"

David was worried.

"I once was a Captain, you know. I have to know something about my crew."

David and Ethan looked at each other, not knowing what to think.

"Crew?" David said.

"Yes. I am planning to have a social club."

“A SOCIAL CLUB?” David echoed.

“Yes. A club. Why do you think I asked you to come if I had no errand?” Longman asked but blinked at the same time with his clown eyes. “I think it would be nice for a bunch of youngsters on the loose to gather here and for me too. We might talk about life and Baltimore, thus overcoming the generation gap. What do you think? Some eight or ten youngsters and me. I would tell you about life on the Seven Seas. And I would serve coffee and biscuits. Every Wednesday night.”

David and Ethan looked at each other.

“That is a great idea!” Ethan said. I know some people, and David does. We’ll take care of that. When will be the first meeting?”

“We will sort that out. But on the coming Wednesday, probably. We are friends then?”

“Sure. Of course,” the youngsters agreed, and they looked pleased about having got such an interesting person, an old Baltimore sailor, as a buddy.

“What is your phone number, then?” Reuben rapidly asked. Ethan gave Reuben his number, which the old man immediately put into his phone. To ease the tension, the old Captain now distributed a couple of old small red Chinese books, with plastic covers on them, from the time of Mao Tse Dong, among them, and then shoved them to the door. They all laughed, and David was truly baffled.

They left, and on the street, David called Elsa on his iPhone to ask her if she was going to the concert, which soon was about to begin at Marsden Palace. She did not answer.

Ethan and David strolled on Thames Avenue. Ethan showed David his favorite video-blog on *YouTube*. It was a bunch of videos with Young Pharaoh, a boxer and black intellectual, who had “a higher perspective” on race. They both laughed, watching videos as they uniformly strolled on. Avoiding a clash with a small ultra-juvenile street gang, they, by running, managed to get to Ethan’s place at nine o’clock. David had no Glock on him on this evening.

“Strange guy,” Ethan said, referring to Reuben.

“Yeah!” David agreed.

“Let’s meet in a couple of hours then, to go catch some flounder!”

“Yes, four o’clock!” Ethan smiled. “Not much sleep tonight.”

“You don’t have to if you want to sleep...”

“I am too curious,” Ethan said.

Chapter Nine

David had called Ethan late in the evening to confirm their agreement and had asked him if he had a car. Ethan said it was not so, but a friend of his, Dupree, had a vehicle that Ethan used to drive. Ethan promised to pick David up at 04.00 am, and David said he would provide them with everything they needed, fishing gear, clothing, and food. The only thing Ethan was required to bother about was gas for the car.

When arriving outside David's place in the dark at 04.00 AM, Ethan had on him an oversized, green, checkered lumber jacket, old blue jeans, and massive winter shoes with thick soles. He wore a sizeable woolen cap on his head that made his head look like a large hay bundle with the Rasta hair all tucked inside. David kept the city-style, and he had a white shirt with a collar and a small vest.

Ethan very wisely still took a small backpack, a black and white, where he had another set of clothes.

"I have been on the Bay, of course," Ethan said, "but I actually never have been out fishing here."

They now had arrived at Annapolis, the capital of Maryland, the city where James Mc. Cain was born. They had arrived on Route 50 to the Pearl Harbor Bridge, as Severn River Bridge recently is called.

After having parked the car by the river's side, there was a short walk to David's small boat shed. It was now awfully early in the morning, 04.35 AM, and it was a beautiful day, although it was a bit misty and slightly chilly. Some other boats were already out on the water. Fishing people are early ducks.

Marsh birds - like black duck and coot - had left the immediate neighborhood in the river and were now sitting on the water up-stream. It was still very early in the morning, and next to the coastal banks, there was a mist. The greenery over the meadow was dense, slightly covered by milky-white haze. The insects had not yet been awakened by the sun. The sky not round but an oval, and it was of immense proportions and far away in the east. Thin clouds of greyish complexion tried to mask the big star.

The boat lay in still juicy cordgrass by the river, and the bright blue, small outboard motor was well hidden, not in the boatshed but a tree trunk nearby. David got out the engine from its hiding-place and heaved it upon the boat's stern plank, where he secured it with handy clamps while holding the whole apparatus by the tiller. Then

both of them showed the entire Santa Maria afloat in the river. The boat, which was relatively small and freshly painted, slid out through the grass onto the river. The air was fresh in the brisk of the morning.

Some birds that David did not recognize told the boys that they were a nuisance to birdlife and, in doing so, shrieked loudly.

It was going to be a continued splendid day, David could tell from the formations of the cloud down over Washington, as he started the engine. He had learned a lot about the language of the clouds. Because clouds can tell a lot, now they told David no more than there was a great day to be unraveled. Ecliptic latitude: -3 degrees, Ecliptic longitude: 46 degrees

The Chesapeake bay had been a place of wars over oysters. The Chesapeake Bay means "great shellfish bay." One may see turtles and dolphins surfacing nearby.

"I am often watching the seagulls here," David said, raising the speed carefully.

One might catch fish around the bridge and off the bridge pilings this time of year, but autumn was the best time for flounders.

"We should use bloodworms, trout magents, and shrimps to get them," David said. "I used to fish a lot when I was a little boy."

David looked at the fishing gear on the floor of the boat.

"Is this boat safe?" Ethan asked. He looked a little uncomfortable.

"Of course. By the way, we are not going out at sea. We will stay just under the bridge."

"Where are the rods then?"

"I personally don't use rods. I use my finger," David said.

It turned out that Ethan was not very used to any boats at all. His movements onboard were clumsy, and David wondered if Ethan was one of those people who were utterly unpractical. Maybe Ethan was pure theory, David thought.

It was still dark on the river. The moon was up, and thin clouds now and then covered its whiteness. Towards the bridge, there was a mist. The small outboard 5hp Suzuki motor now was coughing. The ship was initially a rowing boat, and it contained a couple of oars and necessary oarlocks. David sat at the tiller, both feet on deck-hooks. The motor worked fine. Little puffs of smoke came out of the water bubbles just above the exhaust. Slowly the boat, by its

own motor power, got closer to its destination, the bridge bars to the River Bridge. It rippled in the water under the lining of the boat. A few small whitish-greyish seagulls flew up from an islet not far away and soon circled over the small vessel. They probably were used to small boats and had felt the smell of the bait David had picked up and put on the bottom boards in front of him, mussels and shrimp. On the gunwale, he had fastened a couple of empty hooks.

Ethan, sitting on the center thwart, looked curiously and cautiously around. He had drawn his woolen cap down to his eyes. Having had a questioning mine, he now seemed more content, and he laughed, showing his big white teeth. His slender black hands rested on the knees of his jeans.

They had arrived at one of the mighty concrete pillars that bore straight down in the mud. A couple of other boats, slightly bigger, were assembled in the early hour, and with people that had expensive fishing rods were assembled close to other pillars by the New Severn Bay Bridge. The others were not after flounder, like David, but trout and Spanish mackerel.

There was a relatively strong undercurrent sweeping below. The eelgrass mysteriously seemed to feel with his tiny hands after everything that was not theirs for the taking.

“So, this is where you spend early mornings?” Ethan smiled, now better at ease, when he saw that they had company.

“Mm,” David murmured, his foot on the side plank. He had let the small anchor go and secured the iron chain attached to it by the thwart, and now he distributed the fishing lines.

Soon they had two lines on each side of the boat. David had charge over the two in the front of the water car, Ethan over the two ones in the aft.

The wrinkle over the nose of David had flattened out a little, and he looked more half-satisfied now and not worried or half-discontented anymore. David was happy as he had made an effort, and it seemed as if it were going to work out well. At least they were actually fishing now.

Ethan’s expression, his left hand on the gunwale, was that of concentration. They were simple lines, knot to one oarlock each. With this fishing method, the very idea was that you would hold the rope with just your hand and so with your index finger feel the fluttering

itself. When you felt the jerk, you would then leave the line that was not relevant tied to an oarlock and turn exclusively to the side, starboard or portside, of the boat where the pacifier came.

"The idea with my method is one when you might fasten the hook more secure by pulling it up in the upper cheek on the flounder. And then it is another thing too. You might perceive the weight and the power of the fish right in your finger. It is like having a battle between your hand and the in known fish down below. Often, very often, the fish has a lot of mass and weight. It will eventually feel like you are having a finger battle with Nature, or with God himself," David said.

His eyes had an unusual glow. Not a big one, but still a very rare glow. Thus were his feelings and his thoughts about fishing this way.

Ethan just nodded and tried by way of experiment to put himself into David's half-trance.

On the other boats, the rods did the job. After a while, they suddenly bent. The fishermen took the rod and carefully and, under stern concentration, winched the catch onboard.

"I like fishing. Fishing is a good idea."

"It is simple. I like it when it is not complex."

"Yes." Ethan took a deep breath, "so what do you want to do when you are through the university then?"

David was grossly disappointed that Ethan did not take time to enjoy the hunt for flounders but still answered the question:

"Well, travel, maybe."

David arranged his line carefully in his hand. He tested several times to catch the flounder by surprise, by a violent pull. Ethan – who revealed he never had in his life caught any fish of any kind – on the other hand, was silently waiting for the fish to act themselves.

"You said you had taken History? Can you tell me more about that?" Ethan said when in a boat thirty yards up the river, a man yelled out:

"There's not a single fish here at all!"

David smiled at Ethan and then explained to his friend:

"This is the usual talk here. Everyone is giving misleading information about everything. About fish. And about the weather, and sand and gravel. And bait." David said he had to explain a little about this exceptional art of fishing.

"One cannot," he said, lecturing, "when flounder fishing, overestimate the importance of boat positioning. Flounder don't lie around just anywhere on the bottom, but they dwell near drop-offs. Only by the bridge here – a classic spot – there is a real steep drop, and the most likely catch is between at a depth of 10 to 30 feet. One never can set the hook on the initial nibble, though. Flatfish will almost always grab and check up on their prey before eating it. When fishing using bait, you'll practically always initially feel a small jiggle-jiggle in your finger. It is the flounder chomping down on the bait-fish or shrimp, shaking it. If you try to set the hook on the first jiggle, you'll miss the catch. A thump-thump-thump feeling, yes, it is quite like heartbeats. It is bizarre. When the flounder has taken the bait, then you shall make a move. You just pull for all you are worth. Usually, you will then hook the fish somewhere near the mouth. Then haul it up to the boat."

Ethan smiled. It was a cozy day.

David decided not to answer. Too much talk might scare the fish off and also distract themselves.

Slowly the day became brighter. David took off his coat. A dragonfly landed on the tiller with a small ticking sound. The morning mist now was gone, and all the fishermen enjoyed bright sunlight.

Nobody got any fish. There were four boats near the bridge and two upstream, fishing for trout. The boats had been out there, all of them for more than an hour.

"What did I say?" the upstream man shouted. He was alone, and he suddenly decided to haul aboard his anchor to move to another location on the river.

David and Ethan waved at him in a friendly manner.

"I like studying," David said. "Maybe I will study all my life." He did not know if this was true.

Ethan did not respond but more and more enjoyed the tranquility of being out on the river.

"Maybe I will take up some language after History. I think Italian would be nice to know."

Ethan nodded. The boy with the Rasta hair did not believe that his white friend was clear about anything at all.

"What do your parents do?"

"They are dead."

"Oh. I am sorry."

"I grew up with an aunt. In Texas. But now I live here, alone."

“I see.”

“There is no fish today,” David said.

“No, I have not seen any of the others getting any either,” Ethan replied, nodding towards the boats to the south of their own, which lay closest to the shore, away from the town side.

Ethan shouted out:

“Fish!”

He bent to the left and grabbed his fishing line with both hands, leaving the other loose by the other bulwark.

It did not take long before Ethan had secured the first greyish-brownish spotted, slimy flounder aboard with no help from David.

There came applause from other boats around since this indeed was the first fish of the day.

After a couple of hours, they took a break, and David started the engine, and they took to the shore.

They had caught twenty-three fish, and it was almost 2.00 PM when they dragged the boat on land and took off the motor. David smiled, and Ethan nodded profusely.

They took the car and brought the fish back to Ethan’s apartment, wrapped up in a large plastic bag. It looked like they could have a fish party.

David called up Elsa and Odile.

Chapter Ten

Ethan and David had decided to meet up at Ethan's place at Pratt Street in the following evening. Like Reuben, Ethan lived in a characteristic Baltimore row-house of older origin.

But Ethan hired a single room. It was a two-and-one-half-story, side-gabled, red brick building, where Ethan resided. He had access to a small kitchen on the second floor, but the building itself was two rooms deep, with a dormered attic, it had white marble steps and pressed-metal cornices. However – as I said – this very house was rather ancient and looked almost ready for some real thorough renovation. Half of Ethan's apartment was secluded and reserved as a supply of some sort. It was closed and locked up. What was left was this single room that had no lights. Ethan showed David how to light a candle and instructed him to sit on a kitchen stool by the window.

David was shocked at the extremely miserable conditions of Ethan's earthly housing and home living. At least there was a fireplace. No wood or fire in it, though. No wood basket.

"You like it here?" David asked the Afro-American.

Ethan lit another candle and sat down on another chair.

"It was nice go fishing, David!"

It ought to be remembered that these two persons, both are very young and vulnerable people. Every action must be taken to safeguard them and forgive them for their peculiar manners and strange ways of expressing themselves and their ways of thinking and feeling. Young folks are strange folks, and they often develop potent strategies to cope with the fact that they are mostly left alone with the problem of the future. It is not the case, as some people are saying, that the business of the future is to look after itself. It is neither the case that the business of the future is to wait for us. Actually future has no business at all! Young folks are those who have a business.

Ethan's greyish face under the Rasta hair was a face of a 1500-meter runner. It was healthy and fresh. The dark brown eyes were extremely observant but still shy, and eyelids slightly sunk. Shyness often comes with high intelligence.

"You have no electricity?" David asked. He was stunned because Ethan certainly had a steady job and income, so why this darkness in his home?

"I like it without light bulbs." Ethan responded. "It is way calmer this way. I have electricity."

Fractions of light entered through the transom from the stairs outside the slab to the hallway. The hallway was very narrow, void of door-jams. The glazed panel of the door had been painted heavily with black tar.

When David's eyes had gotten used to the dusk, he saw the immense heaps of books that lay all over the apartment, along the walls, which in turn were covered with all kinds of photographs and posters and sketches. A door to a cupboard had not been able to close, and there were books in it piled up unto the ceiling.

"My God!" David exclaimed, awestruck.

"I have lots more in the garage," Ethan added, with modest modesty. His skin seemed to have an even stranger greyish-greenish color in the dark.

"Good griseous." David said, who perhaps thought that was an accurate expression.

Ethan pulled out a coffee can from under a small mahogany table.

"I want to write a book about Paris," he said as he strolled out to the small kitchen to make some new, fresh caffeine drink for the coffee party. He exerted the remains of his former session into the sink.

"Why is that? Why? Have you been to Paris?"

"Never," Ethan said, almost cutting David's question.

David now began to look around more, and he saw that the muntins in the windows were broken. Why would Ethan have such a skunky home? It was a two-story, elementary building of the all too frequent sort in Baltimore, slightly older than the neighboring houses. Maybe this house was a remnant from an earlier period. Not Middle Ages, but almost. Ethan's Fell's Point house did not have striped mortar joints but was looking like a backyard house on the very front façade. It was a pity. It is always a pity when things are worse than they have to be.

"You cannot write a book on Paris if you've never been there. It is just silly." David finally said.

"Not at all! Would you like to read a book about New York by some New Yorker? Isn't that the dullest book you would come to think of?"

"Yes, but"

"Surprisingly, the best book about America is written by Kafka. You bet Kafka never visited New York!"

“You are not Franz Kafka,” David clumsily riposted. As he rose from his chair and walked up to one of the three windows, he broke loose a piece of rotten wood.

“I never thought people lived in rotten houses these days,” he said. “Now I get why you don’t have on the light. I am rather stupid when it comes to wisdom.”

“Not at all. I just like it the way it is. I don’t know why.”

But David secretly thought that Ethan was very close to perfection. Like all boys that never had a father, David looked everywhere for father figures and autonomous and fabulous people. David felt that he would rather be with Ethan right now than anything else. He was happy, and he didn’t care about Reuben. Ethan Bailey was, in several ways, a surprise to David. He had never thought that people like Ethan that chose not to have light bulbs, existed in real life.

“Now,” Ethan said when black coffee was served in the dark parlor, “what do we want with ol’ Reuben? You hope he will make you his heir?”

David did not respond. This was not going to be an easy thing to explain. Not easy at all.

David felt that Ethan was ahead of him. As soon as David arrived at a certain point in the discussion, it seemed that Ethan already had been at that very spot for a long time. When David, on arrival, looked for where he was heading next, Ethan was gone, waiting somewhere else. And this would, it seemed to David, go on and continue to repeat itself indefinitely. And if David had dared to ask Ethan about this, and asked him how it came about, then Ethan would have answered that this depended upon the simple case, that he, Ethan, had will-power, had a vision about what was right for him.

In contrast, David had no such power nor any such idea at all. And if David had agreed but asked Ethan about how will-power and visions could be got, Ethan would have told David that it merely was a matter of exercise. If you had no dreams, you would have to imagine visions and train yourself to do things that seemed right to do. You would have to – all the time, 24-7 – indulge in putting goals ahead of you and then immediately try to reach them. To become a decent person, a person yourself could stand, was a matter of exercise, repetition, and practice. If you were able to construct goals and achieve those, you would be a decent human being. You

would then eventually find that other people never were ahead of you in any conversation because you simply already knew what you wanted. If you knew what you wanted, you had almost every possible answer to everything.

“I guess I think he has more money than he can use,” David admitted reluctantly and felt like trash.

David nowadays – ever since his dear Aunt Mary died, and Albert, his black friend – had fallen into nausea. Yes, nausea it was. There were many things that David simply couldn't stand nowadays. Among those things, real objects, that were all of them very concrete and everyday things, we might – while only looking into David's head - refer to striptease, newborn babies, and raw meat. David got into intense shivering when he thought about it. He was very sensitive to every smell too. He often thought it smelled of fire. When he woke up in the morning, he could wonder if he had gone mad, if he was psychotic, or just had depression. He did not know, and he did not dare to try to find out. Some days he didn't even care if he was alive or dead. He also had lost the ability to smile. What he had told Ethan about his feelings about Reuben was, in fact, all true. He thought that it was no need for Reuben to own all those things, Matisse and all and probably being a millionaire too. David himself was broke.

“Crazy,” Ethan said in a firmly decisive manner.

Then all of a sudden, Ethan's phone rang.

It was Joshua, Ethan's colleague at the drugstore. He was distraught, and he was talking in a loud voice. There had been robbers in the store, and he, in trying to escape the robbers, had tripped on a stone in the small alley and hurt himself. He was waiting for an ambulance.

Ethan and David immediately took a cab to the hospital and then spent sat all night in a corridor at the Johns Hopkins Emergency Hospital, waiting to get information about Joshua, who had hurt his foot.

Ethan in the cab told David about Joshua. David learned that he was a black youngster, with his parents coming from Trinidad and Tobago. Joshua was just 17 years old and worked spare time. He was a good guitar player, and Ethan often bade him sing in the

drugstore's backroom when they were both working and had not much to do with supplies or customers.

David thought that what had occurred was awful and wondered if there had been a fight.

The police came to the hospital, and Ethan and David talked to them, and they said that Joshua had tried to escape as soon as the robbers entered, armed with handguns, the two of them. But in the struggle to open the back door, he had caught himself in a mess of old bicycles that were stored in the backyard. When the robbers came after him, he had also fallen into the gutter and hurt his foot, which still was entangled in the remains of a wheel of a bicycle.

The robbers had gotten nothing but cigarettes and a handful of dollars. They were caught on the surveillance camera, and they would soon be apprehended, the officers assured Ethan and his comrade.

By 03.00 am, Joshua came out in the corridor at the hospital, supported by a nurse. He had gotten his foot in a bandage and had a couple of crutches. The doctor had offered him to stay the night, but he had declined, telling them that he had a dog waiting for him at home.

He was overwhelmed in meeting Ethan and David and surprised at how tender and sweet they were towards him, especially David, whom he had never met before. They almost carried him out to a taxicab and then took him home.

Joshua lived in Halethorpe on Ridge Avenue. They got into his house by 03.45 PM and helped Joshua find a small sofa. His parents were on vacation in Georgia, and he had but one brother, who was in the army. The only living thing in the small apartment was a golden retriever, called Bobby, who licked Ethan's hands as he took him out for a short walk in the still of the September night. There was no rain now, the weather was pleasant, and you could almost see the stars.

David stayed with Joshua. The boy was rather shocked, continually repeating the eerie fact that he had been pointed at with a gun.

"I could have been shot," he said. "I just ran, you know."

"I am so sorry," David said, sitting on the edge of a wooden sofa, which stood by the fireplace in the parlor in Joshua's home. Nearby there was an old piano, and on the wall hang several musi-

cal instruments, like Spanish guitars, trumpets, and clarinets. A large painting was dominating on the wall, showing a raccoon and a cat sitting on a rooftop.

"How is your foot?" David asked, rubbing his head.

"It is not broken. It is just bruised. I got penicillin."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just got penicillin."

"Yes. Well, they know what they are doing." David agreed.

"I could have been dead by now, easily," Joshua said.

David nodded silently, gasping for air. It was stuffy at Joshua's place. His father must be a heavy smoker, David thought. They had terrible pictures on their walls too. Badly painted raccoons and racehorses.

Ethan finally came back. Bobby, the dog, wagged his tail, and all the time, was very observant at Ethan, especially his face and hands. David thought that Joshua had trained his dog Bobby into a state of sheer and absolute stupidity. However, he did not comment aloud on this.

Later Joshua told his comrades that he would like to sleep, but of course, he was delighted if they would stay because he was afraid. They did not know if the robbers had been caught. Ethan called the police department, but they said they had five patrol cars looking for the culprits. They had an excellent identification of both of them. The police would call Ethan back as soon as the bandits were apprehended.

"They will call back as soon as they have got hold of them," Ethan said as he put back his phone into his breast pocket.

"Or when they are dead," David said, without really want to say anything at all.

Ethan and David decided to stay with Joshua. He went to sleep in his bedroom while the comrades from the Reuben meeting resided in the parlor, each in his separate uncomfortable sofa, glancing through old newspapers that lay about on cupboards. Joshua's father seemed to have a passion for newspapers. He read the *Baltimore Sun*, *Washington Post*, and *The New Yorker*.

"Now, about me wanting to rob Reuben," David slowly said, letting his newspaper drop onto his chest. At least this house was

adequately equipped with lightbulbs. Still, Ethan immediately interrupted him, telling him that this was not the right time to talk about that.

“But do you think Joshua is afraid they might come here to get him ...?” David changed the subject.

“Maybe, but I don’t think there is a real danger,” Ethan answered after a moment’s deliberation.

“Look at that old cornet on the wall!” David said and pointed at an instrument right above his head.

“My uncle had one of these,” Ethan answered.

“He, the mad one?” David smiled.

Ethan startled.

“Why are you so rude? You must sharpen up! I don’t like when you are so rude.”

“I just try to be fun.”

“Well, that you are not. Cut that out!”

“Tell me about your uncle anyways! Please!”

“Mm Yes. My uncle....”

There was a spectacular noise from the bedroom.

“Listen!” Ethan said and got up on his elbows, dropping the Baltimore Sun on the floor near the sofa on which he was residing, with a brown blanket on top of him.

“I think he is crying,” David said.

Ethan got up, left David, and went into Joshua’s room. David meanwhile looked at Bobby. The dog was asleep in a remote corner of the living room on a green blanket.

Joshua and Ethan spoke silently, and David refrained from excessively bothering them. Ethan would undoubtedly be comforting Joshua better than any priest, psychologist, or shrink, David thought

“It certainly takes guts to cry aloud,” David thought and suddenly felt how tired he was. It was 03.15 AM. He turned to the wall, and after a short minute, he was fast asleep on Joshua’s sofa.

After an hour, he was awake again, though.

Joshua sat by his kitchen table, and he looked like a mummy or at least semi-dead. David and Ethan looked at each other and shook their heads. Ethan told Joshua that it was terrible luck for Joshua since it might as well have been him that the robbers could have

attacked. Ethan told Joshua that he must think that his swift actions had saved his own life.

Ethan and David then decided to leave. So they did, after giving Joshua leave to call them any time on the phone. They would be back as soon as he wished for it, they said.

On their way back to Ethan's house, David was silent. He tried to digest what he was experiencing.

They were now on at Ethan's place on Pratt Street at 05.00 am when Ethan turned to David:

"I have to get one hour's sleep. Then I go on my shift."

"Good. See ya!"

David immediately took off towards his own house, and Ethan did not follow his departure.

Soon Ethan was at home again and swung the door open to his narrow hallway. There was a letter on the floor. He seldom got letters. In the last couple of years, postal handling of ordinary mail had decreased. The young Afro-American bent down and picked up the letter. It was from his uncle, his oldest uncle, William. Ethan decided to read it later in the day because he needed an hour's rest before going to work.

The moment he laid his head on the pillow, he slept.

David hurried home to Beck Street, and on the way, he thought that his and Ethan's relationship was a real uncomfortable relationship, if there ever was one. Even though they had gone fishing together, they had not come any closer. He also felt that it would be a terrible thing if he would spend the rest of his life in Baltimore. But, on the other hand, he knew Baltimore and loved the harbor.

Chapter Eleven

Captain George Butterfield, the owner of the drugstore where Ethan worked, was a man in his sixties. He lived with his wife Griselda, who was slightly younger, at Fannershead, in a large white mansion with four round marble pillars and two broad front stairs. The house had three stories and a large roof compartment that hovered and swelled with a somber maternal grace over the rest of the house. It lay on a flowery slope, embedded in the most profuse greenery, huge lilacs covering some areas of the front so that you could not be sure if the windows were open or not. Close to the house was a small lake called Lily's Pond, to the south of Baltimore.

Butterfield, a republican, had a Lincoln convertible and a dog, a German Schaefer, called Hubert, and was a relatively wealthy man, having in his financial sphere some thirty of the one hundred small houses in the center of the town as well as contacts within the local Maryland administration. He was the closest friend to the brother of the governor. For some reason, however, this brother was a man who always wanted to act in the background. His preferred Nom de Guerre was *Leclerc*.

However, recently, Butterfield had been diagnosed with pancreas cancer, which had brought on him a giant depression. He was determined not to let this crush him, but he would now ramp up his efforts of securing his small fortune. He would do this at any cost.

Butterfield and his wife had had a daughter, aged 25, but she was away at a Glasgow university in Great Britain. Butterfield had planned for his daughter to inherit and overtake his business, including all the rental housings. But the daughter, whose name was Eliza, was not the slightest interested in the property business. She studied art and literature, played the bassoon and the alto saxophone, and was a prolific painter. She had her own art site on *Facebook* and had sold some works through *Etsy* and even on a large internet auction at *Sotheby's*. To Eliza, literature was necessary. She also despised the fact that her father had supported such an illiterate president as the last one.

To try to console themselves for the absence of their only child, the Butterfields used to invite friends to stay for a week now and then. Right now, there was Mr. and Mrs. Buck Allen, who were distant friends of Mrs. Butterfield, who were visiting. The Allens were

sitting in the garden together with Griselda, amusing themselves by playing with two dogs, poodles, Buster and Curt. They had a radio on, and on the table, there was coffee, tea, and sandwiches, which were brought to the small party by Evelyn, the maid, an Irish girl by the handy age of eighteen.

Griselda was a bitter woman. Her husband had since long been bored with her. He had several erotic ladies, which he both visited and supported, several times a week. Those ladies often were very young, not seldom quite the age of his own daughter or the maid. Since Griselda also was aware of this fact, her resentment, bitterness, and anger were second to no human feeling.

On this evening, Butterfield, completely ignoring his guests, sat in his back garden, talking to his simpleminded gardener, Mr. Joseph, a stunningly beautiful black man with bright eyes, in his early 40ies.

“You see, Joseph, I just spoke to a friend of mine, and I will have him on a visit in an hour. Please try to see to that my wife stays occupied with her guests. I don’t want to be disturbed. You might entertain them in any way you like. I know you have many talents, Joseph!”

“I could show those folks when I catch fish in the lake, sir. With my teeth. Then they are practically out of sight for almost an hour, sir.”

He grinned. He thought much of Mr. Butterfield. To him, his master was equal to the president.

“You have such a great understanding,” Butterfield said and clapped Joseph on the shoulder. He took out his phone and asked Joseph if \$100 would be of any use to him. Joseph nodded and tried to clean his hands with his shirt. Butterfield asked for his number and then instantly wired the money.

Half an hour later, Joseph had brought Griselda and her guest down to Lily’s pond, where the Afro-American man sang and dived and brought the delighted guests fresh trout by the teeth.

Leclerc’s car, a small black Mercedes DL70, glided up on the front porch at Butterfield’s residence. The brother of the governor escaped from the dark of the van, whose windows all were black. He drove himself and was all alone.

Richard Leclerc was a small, fat man with a bald head and thick glasses. He was profoundly nearsighted, almost blind in the left eye. On the sides of his round pale head, there hang a pair of bushy

black whiskers. He was known for his immense memory and was also a wealthy man. A strange nervous condition caused him to always have some sort of tremble, or tremor, all over his body. Some thought it was just due to an overflow of energy; others meant that it was some odd disease. He had always been like that, and he was used to his condition and did not like to be notified about it.

Leclerc owned a couple of industries that dealt in cocoa. He also owned some ghost towns in Utah and a tourist boat on the Amazon River. He was not married and had never been.

Butterfield welcomed him and led him from the parking lot to the front of the house since he noticed that the talented Joseph had already started his show by the lake. Screams and laughter were heard as he caught fish with his teeth. Greenery and huge slurs prevented the party by the sea from seeing the mansion from there.

Butterfield led his guest to the backyard. He had lunch waiting on sideboards beside a small group of tables and resting chairs.

Leclerc was in a good mood, and the elegant host served him cigars and whiskey. During all the preparations for the small lunch meal, consisting of roasted deer steak, Captain Butterfield was talking:

“I have nothing to complain about, Richard,” the Captain said to Leclerc, “but I want my sweet little daughter to be impressed enough by some thrilling news for me to be able to lure her back. She is right now dwelling in pure fantasies, and she can’t yet put into her head that her very bright future lies here, with a business right here and not in London Soho.”

Leclerc was a kind, apt and eager listener. He had been a friend of the Captain for a considerable time, and so far, it seemed to be a perfect companionship. The Captain had his Real Estate Company, called *GEBB Properties*, where Leclerc owned about 22% of the active stock. In return for the revenues from the housing business, Leclerc, through the years, had, through different connections, led state officials to make economic and political decisions that favored the Captain’s Company. Leclerc was, as we already know, also related to the governor.

Leclerc swept a glass of wine. From a distance, there was a peal of rising laughter. It seemed as if not only was Joseph catching fish, but both the Allens and the Captain’s wife, the relatively massive Griselda, had taken a bath together with the athletic black gardener

on this beautiful hot day in August. Maybe they even got out of their clothes altogether.

"Now, let us turn to my actual errand, which has nothing to do with Eliza." Butterfield said, glancing at the trembling man, "I have to tell you some about Martha. Because you never knew her, did you?" Captain Butterfield said as he pushed away his plate and dried his fingers on the tablecloth.

Leclerc said he did not think he knew who that woman was.

"You are familiar with the museums here," Butterfield continued, "... and all the famous art collectors that this town has produced. Yes, We all know. Anyway, this Martha had no education, no money, and nothing but her matchless beauty and conversation skill. She happened to know all the families with cultural interests in our town during a couple of decades, and she also was kind enough to offer her amorous services to some wealthy collectors of art too."

"I still don't know who that woman was." said the man who was known for his immense memory.

"I am telling you right now. Some coffee?"

"Certainly," Leclerc said in a neutral voice.

Captain Butterfield lifted a small golden bell placed on the table and rang for the young Irish girl, who immediately appeared carrying a tray with the desired fluid in a small, blue pot.

"Excellent! Thank you so much!" Leclerc said and smiled at the young girl, who appeared very modest and shy in the presence of the shaking Leclerc. She was not an American girl, and it is, of course, a certain flair to have a European maid. Captain Butterfield just seemed to have realized that he wanted so much more excitement in his life since he was about to lose his only daughter to London and jazz music. The future looked anything but bright to him. And he had grown deeply irritated with his wife. He barely could stand to have her company at all.

"You know the type, I am sure," Butterfield said, "She came from a simple background, but energetic and beautiful. She had a significant handicap, though, because she was excessively dominant. She simply could not be handled by any man at all. Not during her heydays, anyway. It was not until she was about sixty years old that she could be tamed, and then it was by a strange, reliable Sea Captain."

Leclerc nodded and glanced around him the loggias and the garden flowers, the plume trees, and the small lamp cherubs made of porcelain that enlightened the railing to the back garden.

Screams were still heard from the small pond on the other side of the house.

“Well, what business was she into?” Leclerc asked.

“She had small gift shops and such. She was no businesswoman.”

“She just was attractive?”

“Well, she was educated, well self-educated, and she could carry a conversation. She traveled around the world, accompanying people. Marrying. And then she was mistress to many men.”

Leclerc nodded, and he seemed a little puzzled. What would eventually be revealed about this woman that possibly could be of any interest to him? He had known many women like Martha. They were nothing to him since Leclerc was exclusively into men, or, more exact, boys. And of this, he knew that Captain Butterfield was well aware.

“She had a hobby.”

“So?”

“She was an art collector, and she managed to swindle off art from the men that she seduced.”

“Is that possible?” Leclerc said, raising his eyebrows to his skull, where some thin straws of hair crossed each other.

“Well, you just have to visit the home of Mr. Reuben Longman, her very last husband, to get a clear opinion about that. But I would say that Martha when she died of a stroke or something in the middle of Riverside Park on a summer’s day some months ago, she left to her husband many million dollars worth of art on his walls. And in fact, and this is the exciting thing, I don’t think he is, to this day, aware of it at all. He is not aware of how she got these paintings, and – pro secundo – he is not aware of their immense worth. There are Modigliani’s, Mattisses, and Rubenses in long rows on his walls. And he does not know it. She did not steal these paintings. SHE GOT THEM FOR FAVOURS.”

Leclerc sat still, puffing at a small cigar that he just had managed to get out of his summer coat.

“You bet,” he said.

“Yes honestly,” Butterfield tried to smile and added:

“But, Richard, now comes the horrendous part.”

Leclerc looked at Butterfield. "Soo?" he asked and raised his massive eyebrows.

"Yes." Butterfield said, "She blackmailed me."

"She blackmailed you?" Leclerc asked, now a bit more concerned.

"Yes. She found out certain things about my business that could be held against me. Nothing serious. You know, even some figures, calculations, and prognoses might be of danger to oneself if they fall into the wrong hands...."

"Sure, it is understandable," Leclerc said, and he nodded.

"And since Martha now is dead but died in such a sudden and unexpected manner, I fear that the papers which she stole from me – because they are missing – might be in Longman's house. And I have to get hold of them."

"And you haven't informed the police?"

"No, actually not."

"So what are you going to do?"

"That was what I would like to ask you. It is hard to figure out which steps are the best ones to take...."

"I see."

"I have to emphasize that I don't want to cause harm to Mr. Longman. He certainly has nothing to do with this. He is just an innocent bystander whose wife just was a bit extravagant, or more exactly a criminal. You know, the poor man had a wife, who not only betrayed him but also was a thief."

"Anyway," Butterfield continued, "what I have thought of is to lure Longman away for a couple of days, somehow, so that I could send my men in to take a thorough look at the entire building because SOMEWHERE inside those papers must be kept. I don't think Martha kept them in the safe at the bank. That was not how she was. She kept the paintings in Longman's home, where she lived on the upper floor, in some sort of marriage. And I think she kept my documents there too. But I don't think Longman knows of any documents."

"Well, it can be tough."

"It is only one more thing." Butterfield added and continued:

"A murder inquiry is ongoing. I mean an investigation. Some think that Martha was murdered in the park and that she did not die from heart failure or something."

"I have to ask you," Leclerc, who suddenly had stopped shaking, began, but Butterfield interrupted him.

"No, no, nothing of the kind! I had ABSOLUTELY NOTHING to do with her death. I swear."

He held up two fingers.

Leclerc nodded.

"So, you will be absolutely sure that whoever lures Mr. Longman away, while you are searching the house, that this could not be linked to you. Am I right?"

"Spot on."

"Aaah. Let me think. Give me a day or two?"

"Oh, yes. I have a man on watch outside Longman's house, and today Longman was carrying lots of boxes out to the backyard. Of course, I will try to get hold of these, but I certainly do not think that the documents are there. Longman is a conscientious fellow, a former Kofferdist Captain."

"You will hear from me," Leclerc said, now rather tired. He probably had wanted to discuss the art collection more than some Butterfield documents.

Butterfield escorted him past the hedge, behind which Griselda was heard to sing together with her friends.

"I am so thankful to share my problems with you, Mr. Leclerc. That Martha was a real ... I hope there is something I can do for you in the future."

"It's all right," Leclerc said and drove away in his Mercedes, which ran perfectly noiseless. It seemed as if it instead absorbed noise than emitted any. Butterfield shrugged. He did not like to have to ask for help.

Now he heard Griselda shouting in a shrill voice:

"Geordie boy! Come over here!"

Chapter Twelve

To reach another place, geographically, taking the bus is often a good solution. The storm was waiting out on the Atlantic Ocean. All the east coast birds of the U.S.A. took shelter between houses, in alleys, forests, or holes in the ground. So they did in Connecticut and at Fell's Point. On CNN, the male meteorologist in charge was dressed in black and stammered. At the same time, his arm repeatedly wavered up and down in front of his map, showing the area outside of New York. Life was full of storms.

Eric, Inga, and Armamente had on this Tuesday embarked on the six o'clock *Greyhound* bus from Bloomside bus station to Baltimore. It was an eight-hour ride. They showed their luggage in the outside box compartment and entered the streamlined bus, half full of people.

It was decided that Inga, who wanted to sleep, should sit alone, while Eric and Armamente, who wanted to chat and watch the road, sat together on the left side of the bus. As soon as they had gotten on the highway, where the traffic was at least somewhat less heavy, Armamente took out a book and placed it in her lap.

Inga told the two of them that she had dialed up Reuben, who had told her they were welcome tomorrow Tuesday at 01.00 PM. Eric nodded, and Armamente smiled. Her face shone young and bright. Her nose was curved and her eyes clever. She took out a small notebook where she scribbled down the information received with a little pencil that she had kept hanging in a string around her slender neck. Tiny straws of hair caressed the tanned skin on that neck.

Eric tried to make the journey comfortable by removing his small Mocka shoes and putting them in his coat pockets.

"Now, let us start fresh. Have you ever been to Baltimore?" the doctor asked.

"I told you," Armamente said.

"Let me ask you." Eric continued, unobservant to her remark, "What do you think of today's America?"

Armamente sat silent for a while.

"I cannot answer a question like that."

She tried to modify her bra, which seemed to be itching.

Suddenly, a hand came through the small raft between their chairs, and it was Inga's. In it were a couple of almost crumbled envelopes.

“Here! Take a look at these. They are the three letters I got from Martha before what happened. I think they might tell a lot of her situation....”

Eric and Armamente took hold of the letters. They decided not to read them separately but out loud and right away so that they both could be judges of their content.

“Who’s going to read them?” Eric Goldkettel asked.

“I’ll read,” Armamente said.

Martha’s handwriting in these letters was clear, round, and easy to read. She misspelled some words but was, on the whole, a decent writer of letters.

“Dear Inga!

Baltimore on the 6th of January of 2xxx.

I am so tired of the life I have right now. Ah, Inga, if we could do something funny! Reuben is genuinely dull, which he certainly was not before. He has lost hope in some way.

I am trying to cultivate myself and find new things to do. I have taken up writing. At the moment, I am on a course with wonderfully artistic people in a writing circle. I am writing a novel too. Do you hear it? I AM WRITING A NOVEL.

Please write soon and tell me what you are doing yourself, my little sweetie tartie!

Martha (P.S. Loooooove!)”

“And then we have letter No.2.”Armamente continued. It goes like this:

“

Dear Inga!

Thank you for your letter. You seem to do alright. I know you have a talent for that. I wish I were more like you. I have always hoped for that.

Reuben seems depressed. I don’t know what is wrong.

I have met a beautiful gang with writers, though. Yesterday we were at a restaurant. Some are from Africa. You know how I love Africa!

Please write soon

to

Martha."

"She is not happy," Eric remarked. He looked at the hands of Armamente, which so swiftly and graciously dealt with the letters and envelopes that seemed terribly torn and shabby. He was almost fascinated by her hands.

"You've got very boyish hands." He said.

"Well, I am not exactly a girl," Armamente said in a light tone as she flattened the last letter against her Levi Strauss knee.

"What do you mean??" the doctor mumbled, and his mouth went dry.

"I am a transsexual. A transgender person. I am not a girl." Armamente insisted.

"What?" The doctor had to grip hold of his bus seat because the bus now swung in the heavy breeze on the highway.

"But...." he said. "Oh, I did not know....."

"No, of course, how could you? I should have told you."

Eric was shocked. He had to loosen his seat belt and turn for a glass of water. Eric kept a bottle on the holder in front of him, water provided by the bus company.

"Confusing, isn't it?" Armamente added in the same light tone. "If it is to you, imagine what it is for me!"

"Ha, yes, you're right," Eric said, and he wondered what it would be like to take Armamente's hand. Immediately he decided that that was what he would do. So he grabbed her left hand, thus made her drop the letter, and he said:

"It perfectly fine with me. I like you, no matter what."

"I think so. And thank you!" Armamente said, smiling, and picked up the letter.

She started reading it while the doctor loosened his grip on her hand and took out a handkerchief to wipe his face.

"Dear Inga!"

Thank you for your letter. It must be great to be in control of your future.

I am having trouble with everything. Reuben merely is sarcastic.

I don't know what to do.

Kisses

Martha.”

“What a strange letter!” Armamente added.

Eric nodded and looked out the bus window. Now it was night, and all the electrical lights were just flaring by in the wind, just like in some unreal, cosmic dream.

Chapter Thirteen

When David woke up in the morning from his deep sleep, he did so very slowly. Still, when he finally regained full consciousness, he checked on his mobile phone, especially the news. There had been more shootings during the night, CBS reported. The record from 2019 of 57 dead by gun violence per 100000 inhabitants would probably be broken this year. It was ten o'clock. He rang little Elsa. She immediately answered while attending an old lady in the care home somewhere.

"Hello!"

"It's me, David. I just want to tell you what Ethan and I did yesterday."

"I haven't got time now, gringo."

"OK, I'll call you up later. When can I call you?"

"When I am home. I'll give you a knock. At seven."

"OK. Bye!"

David hung up. He then dialed Raymond up, Elsa's friend, Haylee's older brother.

"Raymond," the sullen voice said.

"This is David, Elsa's co-liver at Beck Street. Would you like to join in? We're gonna visit an ol' sea-Captain who has opened up a social club by the harbor, at Thames Street. It is gonna be open every Wednesday night. I think it will be great fun. And I would like to know what you think of him, if he is dead or not or something. You know. He has sailed all over the planet...."

All David heard was Raymond's heavy breath.

"You talk too much," the voice said.

"No, I talk like that."

"Sure. I like new stuff. I am bored too, you know."

"Fine. I'll let you know the details. The old man wants to know. He wants at least seven or eight persons, for a start. He's got a whole house. And boy, it is stuffed with chimpanzees and zebras. And a lion too. Stuffed."

"Ah. Lion and zebras?"

"Yes, awesome guy. A real sailor."

"I'll be there. Call me!"

"See ya!"

They both hang up.

David rose and walked up to the window. He placed his knuckles on the windowsill and pensively banged with his head against the

windowpane. He still didn't know what his plans were. One thing was clear, though. He wanted to give Ethan a good impression of him, because meeting Ethan was the best thing that had happened for a year or so.

David stopped banging his head and left for the kitchen where he took out some bread from a paper bag and jam from the fridge and then sat down with a pile of books on Italian renaissance at his desk beside the window.

Outside David saw the trees losing their leaves in the light September breeze. The lane was deserted. Just three or four of these small, dense cars by the side of the road served as a contrast. Not a single sound was heard. You could neither see nor hear any birds.

His books on the Italian Renaissance always waited for him. He was not interested anymore. It was a new thing, though, that had come about lately, him losing interest in what had been important just days before. It was never like that a couple of years ago. Now he felt like this frequently. Like for instance, in July, when he had had a mania about science fiction. Just a few weeks later, in August, he was not the least interested any longer. Now it was only Ethan that was on his mind, and he didn't care at all about de Medici, Julius II, Castiglione or Cesare Borgia. He would never take up Italian. He had just last spring planned to learn Italian. David could not stand these manias any longer. He was sick of himself.

David did not have any idea about what might help him. He was fascinated by Ethan. Ethan wanted to write books in French. That was gorgeous.

David had some sort of intuitive wisdom and logic. He thought that maybe he was on the verge of going crazy and end up in an asylum, like Ethan's uncle. But being crazy does not in itself exclude wisdom.

David decided he needed a walk. These times were strange. In the recent pandemic, many people had acquired the habit of taking pointless walks. Many continued to do so. Life would never rearrange. Lots of businesses were all gone, and most people too. At least here in this town, just like in Texas. He sighed.

It was almost noon. David strolled down to the harbor. While watching the small yachts in the Inner Harbor, enjoying the weather, he sat down on a bench in the sun. Some days were like sum-

mer, he thought, and called up Ethan to check if everything was okay.

David returned to his house, putting his shoe on the white rectangular marble doorstep, when he suddenly heard voices from Elsa's window on the other side of the front porch. Elsa had visitors. David sat down on the stairs to pretend to fix one of his shoes.

It had to be Elsa and her friend, Haylee, David thought. He knew Haylee from the library. She worked at a small pharmacy, and she used to spend her evenings at the library. David overheard their conversation. The girls discussed joining the basketball team – *The Northern Gulls* - due to being excluded from the football team. Haylee also complained about her friend Jenelle, whose brother Joseph who had no job but was just cleaning car front windows at street intersections together with a pal of his. And she was for some reason worried about him. Then the girls suddenly got silent, and in a minute, both their heads were visible in the window. Elsa tore it open and shouted:

“So, you're just sitting there?”

David didn't answer but rose and went inside. He banged at Elsa's door, and the girls giggled, but they did not open the door. Maybe they were trying on new clothes, painting their fingernails or something, he fancied. It was Saturday, and they were both going out tonight.

Inside his own room, there was a real mess. It was long since there had been any cleaning of any sort. David now the girls leaving for a walk. They probably thought that they didn't have privacy enough in the apartment, David being in his room close by. But they hadn't been long gone when they returned. They knocked at David's door and told him they were going to near Woodstock, up the Patapsco, because they had had a call from a friend of Elsa's, who had his brand new wooden shack just by the river being burnt down. Elsa and Haylee had decided to go there by bus to see if they could help him sort things out. The girls bade David look after the cat. They might be gone till the next day, they told him.

David was just going to slip out on the street to check if the cat was in. He noticed a crowd on the other side of the road, at a house where another friend of his lived, Buster O'Malley. Buster was a jazz piano player, bebop style, an excellent one. It was not rare to see people standing or seated outside his window.

The cat lay on the bed.

David did not like at all to go into girl's rooms when girls were not there. It was something unsettling with all their clothes, lotions, medicaments, garments, and the small faux jewelry. To David was downright sickening - that is when they were not there themselves. David had several times been up at Woodstock, by Woodstock Road, which had a manifold of dense woodlands at small, brisk, idyllic waterways. It was kind of heaven on earth. That a concert had been held there, twice, was nothing that came to his mind.

David often had ideas about himself, picturing him as an enormously gifted and essential person. Usually, these ideas were linked to the fact that he partly was of Jewish origin. Young West did not look upon himself as a Jew or being of any race at all. He sometimes did not even think that he was a human being at all. The thought of being important worked very well when he was alone but did not work well with Ethan.

David now heard Elsa rumbling about in her room again behind the door to her quarters. Much of David's time in his home was wasted by trying to listen to what Elsa did. It was not long before he heard a slight knock on the door. She had heard him, as he had heard her. Now she whispered:

"Hey, David, are you there??"

When David saw Elsa, he got still more tired. She was never any inspiration to him. That was not anything he could help. He patiently waited for what she had to say. At the same time, he thought that he would be kind to her the next time he spoke to her, but not yet, not now. He said to himself that he in his heart was much nicer than what was immediately apparent to others. Thus David - of course - was a liar.

"Oh, David, it was terrible."

"What?"

"With Joshua, of course... and the police shootings."

"Yes, quite a shock. Don't worry! Joshua is all right, I think. Ethan and I were with him at his house until just an hour ago."

"He is alright then? Is he really?" Her lip trembled.

"Yes. I told you."

Elsa hesitated. She looked tired, and her hair was a mess.

"I was just wondering," she said and returned to her room. She turned the lock twice.

When she was gone, David undressed and went to bed. He slept until 01.00 pm.

Chapter Fourteen

Washington Post had the news early on the next morning, on Tuesday. The perpetrators from the robbery in Upper Fell's Point had both been shot dead by the police.

It was 10.00 AM. In Joshua's house on this very morning nobody checked that Washington Post web site, or Baltimore Sun, but the three youngsters in the apartment on Ridge Avenue all lay fast asleep. David's phone rang, and Elsa told him of the deaths. She wondered if Joshua, he and Ethan were okay. David told Ethan and Joshua the bad news, and then he assured Elsa that he would call back later.

"Thank you, Elsa. Just take it easy." David finished the call. Joshua soon walked around in the small apartment on his crutches, looking awful, all grey in his face.

"I saw them you know. They were just my age," Joshua said, taking out, trembling hands, some cups from a shelf above the stove. The cups were green.

"I will make some coffee," David said.

Ethan took the cups from Joshua, and soon, he had laid the table in the kitchen, which was much cozier than the parlor and the other rooms.

Joshua maneuvered himself wearily to the window, where there was a small radio, and he turned on a news channel.

After listening to some ads about new Kia models, the news announcer reported on the latest violent crime cases. He told the Baltimoreans that two young kids, aged 15 and 16, had been shot by the police amid incredibly tragic circumstances. They had not succumbed to the police patrols' commands in Patterson Park.

"They got shot in Patterson Park," David said, whiter in his face than ever before. Joshua, who just had his jeans on, no shirt, also seemed to be close to fainting.

"We don't know, they might ..." Ethan said. But David cut him short and in a sudden rage flung out at him:

"They are dead, for sure. We do know."

The radio reporter continued, almost in a hysterical tone:

"The youngsters had refused to give back their guns. At first, the police shot the older boy, who declined to lay down his gun, which he waved over his head. Later, when the younger boy, in attempted revenge, aimed at the shooter with his revolver, he was himself shot in the head. The two deceased boys, who just had been

robbing a small grocery store in Fell's Point, were both well known to the police. Their parents are contacted by the authorities. And now the weather forecast ..."

Joshua now had to sit down. He was sobbing again, and Ethan's trying to solace and to comfort him were all in vain.

"You must give your parents a call!" Ethan said while patting Joshua on the back, serving him coffee.

"Why?" Joshua sobbed. "Why did they shoot them?"

"They were a danger to the police," David said.

"I am so sad" Joshua sobbed.

After a while he calmed down.

"I only wish it would stop someday," He added. "Sooner or later. The shooting. I can't stand it. What is the use of growing up here, just to get shot?"

David looked out the window. He felt helpless too, and sad, not only for the people that had lost their lives, but also - in the usual way - for himself. David could see nothing to live for. Just hours ago, he had enjoyed Ethan's company. However, right now, Ethan felt mentally absent to David, far away, and it was as if Ethan had frozen or turned into stone since he came to know about the robbery of the drug store. David realized that Ethan had not at all been able to cope with the recent events. Maybe he was a softer man than one might initially think, and he needed help ..., David suddenly thought. Maybe he himself was stronger than he thought. The white boy glanced at Ethan, but Ethan's eyes were covered with tears. Ethan was the superior mind here, David knew that, but why didn't Ethan speak up then? People with brains do have responsibility. Haven't they?

"Let's call the police," David whimpered, "to tell them that we are in severe need of a psychologist or something! We cannot handle this situation by ourselves anymore."

Ethan looked at David, and suddenly there was a new understanding in his eyes.

"Do that!" he said, and he nodded his head fiercely, actually gulping.

David, happy to be able to grasp the situation and to be able to try to do something about it, called the police headquarters and told them that they were in a crisis. The operator was very understanding and forthcoming. She told David that they would immediately send two social workers educated to handle psychological strain and traumas. They also wondered if they should send a vicar or daikon

too. However, David declined the latter part of the offer. A psychologist would do, he said. He thanked them and said that they waited for the help to arrive.

Joshua felt better while overhearing David's call. Now, the three were more bound together, and David was happy with his action. He did not understand from where he had gotten his strength and such a brilliant idea of calling for that sort of help.

When the social workers arrived David and Ethan soon left for their own homes.

It was late that day, at 11.22 PM at David's place. David slept while having the radio turned on. The cat sat on the window sill. The small fan on the bookshelf worked at a slow speed, and it sounded like a medical ventilator.

Now, the phone rang. It was Haylee.

"Hello, it's Haylee. I am with Elsa, but she is hurt. We're at Woodstock. By the road. She's been hit."

David got on his feet in a hurry.

"Where? How?"

"We got off the bus, and she slipped, and by accident, she got in front of a bicycle. An old man, a bum with a bicycle, hit her. Maybe she has broken her hand or something. It's just the wrist though. But we don't know how to get to the hospital. I cannot reach Raymond"

"Oh, is she bleeding or ...?"

"No, but she's got pain."

"I'll go look for Raymond. I'll call you. But Wait!"

"Yes."

"Can she talk?"

"Yes."

"Ah. It's nothing. Just tell her that we'll come for you. Where are you, then?"

"At Woodstock Inn. It is quite near the shack that burnt down."

"Where is the guy with the shack then?"

"He's not here either. I don't know where he is. We're all lost. Jus' the two of us."

Haylee was sobbing. David could feel the desperation.

"I'll call you in a minute," David reassured her, and he at the same time got his short woolen coat on and rushed out on the street to go over to Raymond's place.

Raymond was at home with his girlfriend, Beth, and they fixed with a new music video. They had set up an intricate net of cameras in the basement, arranged with several colored spotlights. They were both dressed in rather fantastic, elaborate gothic outfits. They had a friend of Beth's serving as a cameraman; a clever black girl named Odile, and were performing and shooting a crazy Goth song called "Death in the green attic." which was a work of their own.

Raymond's car, a small Kia, was in the garage, and they all stopped the shooting of the film and he all rushed for it, stilled dressed and in an outfit as Dracula, and Odile and David jointly called poor Haylee to tell her they were on the run. Odile could not ride in our car because they had to have enough room in the vehicle for Elsa and Haylee. Odile had a big motorbike with her, though, standing in the backyard of Raymond's place, and she said she would follow us tight.

"The bike is faster than anything. I jus' have to know what has happened to Elsa." Odile said. She was a small, bowlegged, fit girl who wore a black leather jacket, neatly decorated with a massive red fist and the letters "NESSIE B." (Nessie B. was a sea monster in the bay of Baltimore.)

Raymond and Beth both had their Goth masquerade suits on. David felt surreal.

"How far is it?" Raymond asked, when they had all gotten in the small car, while hitting the gas... His face, all chalky white, with red horns on top of it, looked scary, which of course added more tension to the whole expedition.

"Maybe 30 miles," David answered, though he was not very confident in this matter. No life where at stake here, though, David thought. It was about a hand concussion.

David was beginning to feel tired, and as always, when he was awake too long, voices came into his head, and pictures. Now there came up a striped monkey in his imagination or live dream, a primate with big white teeth. It laughed and told him to say, 'That's shit, bro., That's shit, bro!'" 'You just tell `em that's shit!' David sternly pressed his lips together and suffered.

He glanced through the rear window to look for Odile. She waved her hand when she saw him turning around to look for her. She had on a blue helmet and was on the bike behind the Kia. Odile was small with a blunt nose. Her eyes always sparkled with mockery. She probably was not afraid of anything at all. But she was no psychopath at that.

Raymond, as they ran faster and faster, thought it was wise to take Elsa to *Mercy Medical Center* on Calvert Street downtown. He knew the doctors and nurses there, he said. Raymond had been shot in his leg not long ago. He had gotten his trauma treatment there for months after.

The night was dark, and it was a long ride for our small caravan of horrors out of the city towards more rural areas. The car ran smoothly, and so did the motorcycle behind. Beth, who also was a friend of Elsa, rang her up, and as Haylee answered her phone, she just told her that they were on their way to take Elsa to *Mercy's*. Haylee was happy to hear that, and she told Beth that Elsa had had her arm wiped up in a towel and that it was terribly bruised. The lower right arm was susceptible to touch, and now and then, Haylee told, Elsa just screamed when she tried to move it.

David – who had planned to spend the evening alone - noticed that he had a pleasant feeling. It was relieving when something was going on, and it felt good as well to have a company.

David glanced at Beth, who sat beside him in the backseat. Flickers from streetlights rhythmically bounced right into the car through the newly washed windows. Beth had removed half of her facemask by using *Kleenex*, and David thought she was stunning.

Raymond was an excellent driver. The car ran smoothly along the Patapsco River and up towards Elliot county and the Woodstock area. The woods surrounding the meandering road were densely grown. There were pine trees, white oak, and maple trees. Often a small current broke loose by the wayside. On a small meadow, there could be seen a glimpse of a deer or a large bird.

"There's a deer!" David actually cried out when he thought he saw one. He never tried to appear more mature than he was. He wanted no credit for that.

"You ever were fishing `round here?" Raymond asked.

"Nope," David said, "but I have been fishing a lot in the Chesapeake Bay, though. By Severn Bridge."

David glanced at Raymond. The contrast between his Dracula face and the relatively commonplace question was so gross that he started to laugh.

Chapter Fifteen

Raymond by the car wheel took the last turn before Woodstock, and David and Beth stretched their necks on the look for Elsa. It was now in the deepest night, at 02.00 am, and the small Inn, which indeed was nothing more prominent than a hamburger stand, was several hours closed. Nevertheless, by the creek, there was a trucker's stop. There Elsa and Haylee sat together with two young males drinking coffee from plastic cups. Haylee waved her hand to the newcomers.

An owl howled.

The rescuers parked their car and got out, and Raymond went up to Elsa, who was wrapped up in a blanket, sitting by the table. The poor girl had bruises practically everywhere. She shrieked a little when she saw the Dracula face of his. But she soon calmed down. She pointed at her own face with her healthy hand and said:

"This is how you look when you have been hit by a bicycle." She could not talk straight because she had been hit on the mouth too.

Haylee had her arm around her.

"Why didn't you call an ambulance?" David asked, standing in front of Elsa, indicating that he wanted to see her hand.

"I can walk, you know," Elsa mumbled. Her lips were swollen, and she had scratches on the side of her face. Her right hand was swollen and had a range of colors.

"Move it!" David told her.

She moved her hand up and down, and it did hurt, you could tell.

Odile, that had parked her motorcycle but left it blinking, came up to Elsa and hugged her and took out from her coat some small paper napkins to wipe her face with.' Elsa looked thankful.

In a couple of minutes, they were on their way to town again. When they arrived at Grace Hospital, Elsa was sleeping in the car's backseat, leaning on Beth, who had put a spare blanket around her.

"What happened, really?" Raymond asked Haylee.

"It was just an old man on a bicycle. He was drunk. He ran into her, just when she had left the bus. He got petrified. He cried and peed his pants. He was from Marriottsville."

Nobody commented on Haylee's recount of what had taken place. All of them realized why nobody had called the police.

At the hospital, a doctor and a nurse took care of Elsa. She had not broken any bones. She did not have to stay there neither, the doctor said, and ordered some painkillers.

Raymond and his sister Haylee took her home and put her to bed, and David kissed Elsa on her cheek and went to his room. Elsa was dead tired and almost slept when they tucked her cushions and toy elephants around her.

It was 05.30 AM and a new day dawned. The giant owl grumbled and slurred and then made it ways through the woods of Patapsco Valley in search for squirrels.

Chapter Sixteen

Around 08.00 AM, Ethan sat on his usual barstool behind the counter. He had few customers. On a September Saturday morning, there is not exactly any rush at convenience stores. Butterfield had called, asking if any journalist was there for comments about the robbery. Ethan said there had been one, but he had told her he did not know anything of substance related to the case. Butterfield then asked the usual questions about supplies. Ethan checked upon it, and then Butterfield was temporarily content. The owner of the shop was a straightforward person to communicate with. Ethan was happy about that, although he did not like Georgie Butterfield. Ethan was equally tired of David, who, although it was clear that David wanted to make friends, did not seem willing to come forward as any sort of reliable person at all. However, Ethan, all the time, encouraged him to try to head in that direction.

The phone rang. Ethan rubbed his nose.

“Hi, it is Thomas,” a voice said. Thomas, who was the most intellectual friend of Ethan, wondered if Ethan had read a specific book, which he named the title of. It turned out that he had not. Then Thomas asked Ethan for a loan. Ethan turned that request down, however. Thomas then said that he would come over for a chat. Then he hung up. Ethan looked out the window.

Thomas was immensely talented, but Ethan did not share his interest in politics. Thomas always had new ideas for political protests on his mind. Ethan thought that David would most certainly very soon make his own life a living hell if Ethan himself did not pay attention. To seek relief, he took out his sketchbook and prepared himself to draw something on one of the leaflets. He started out on a dragon.

By noon, the Police returned to Ethan’s store to return the video surveillance material to the owner, which of course was Mr. Butterfield. Some people from the press were entering the shop to talk to Ethan, but he subsequently had nothing to say.

Ethan answered questions put by the Police about the robbery. They all compared this incident to other incidents, better known to the general public.

By lunchtime, he took a hotdog, a soda and then talked to Mr. Butterfield by the phone. The latter was very friendly and promised him an extra \$100 to help Ethan ease from the current stress caused by the robbery and all the surrounding tragedy. Ethan also was told that his boss had arranged for another replacement man.

Butterfield had owned stores, cafés, houses, and apartments in Baltimore for at least thirty years. Although he could have dozens of employees taking care of his stores, he liked to keep a close eye on the business himself. At present, he had one of those periods when he was overactive and was sneaking around to look for irregularities and fraud everywhere.

In the afternoon, Reuben rang.

He wondered if the guys would turn up on the following evening.

Ethan told Reuben about the robbery, which Reuben was unaware of, since he did not regularly check up on the news. However, they agreed that David and Ethan should visit Reuben at 07.00 PM on the following day. Ethan said that he did not know if he could be able to assemble any of his other friends that fast but that he would try. Times were troubled too, Ethan said, but then realized that times always were troubled. They agreed that anyway, it was a great idea, and Ethan thanked Reuben again for the initiative.

They hang up, and the rest of the afternoon slipped by in the way it used to do.

That is, Thomas came by. Thomas was silent. He walked around in the small shop, fingering on packages and bottles, and finally bought a smaller Coca-Cola can.

“I heard you had been robbed.” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. How much?” Thomas held up the Coca-Cola can between them.

“1.20.”

Thomas paid and left the shop but, standing in the doorway, he said:

“So, Reuben Longman intends to open up a social club?”

“How did you know that?”

“I met him on the street. He invited me.”

“Oh,” Ethan said.

Chapter Seventeen

Reuben realized that he had all day to himself. He had left the dog at Mrs. Campbell's house. It was too early to summon to a *Social Club* meeting, and for that matter, he had not yet got the house ready. Consequently it was no hurry. But he longed to meet the boy's friends and to find out about the youth of today.

Reuben was delighted at his new project and had set out not only to clean the house but also to rearrange the furniture on both floors. Since the death of Martha he just had let everything stand the way it used to. After lunch that day, he also managed to fabricate a sign to put outside his home. A piece of sheet-metal comes in handy. After having first painted it in a dark blue color, he had set out to meticulously put a text on it, in white, saying: "SOCIAL CLUB." He left the sign on the kitchen table to dry, leaning against a package of corn flakes. Tomorrow he would pin it to the wall outside beside his front door.

The doctor who took care of the elderly Mrs. Campbell, rang. The lady was very ill, and the doctor did not think she would make it through the night. She wanted her dog to stay with her for a while. Reuben should check upon the dog and Mrs. Campbell on the following day, through the nurse that cared for her. He got her telephone number.

He had taken the boxes out of Martha's room and firmly put them in his house's backyard. It seemed too much of an effort to try to sell off those old artifacts. Instead, he planned to burn everything on the following day. After all, he did not need the money. He was financially independent for the rest of his life, much due to Martha. He did not need any small earnings.

Reuben also took out a can of kerosene and placed it outside the back door. He then returned to the living room. All the animals needed some sort of cleaning. The lion and the chimpanzee glared at him with their eyes of glass. He glared back and started to look for a brush.

But as he did not find a suitable brush he soon grew tired of tending to the artificial creatures and of cleaning up the house and finally gave the whole thing up and decided to go for a walk a walk. Then he remembered that he had to bunker up with some beer and biscuits. He rang a store and bade them deliver some good around 05.00 PM. He then changed clothes, looked himself over in the mirror, and checked that he had keys, wallet, and phone with him. He took an umbrella too, although it did not look to be any rain. The sky was plain grey, and it was windy like it had been all last week.

Before he left the house, he returned towards the living room and stopped at the wall close to the hall entrance. Reuben had pinned a photograph, an old worn one of A4 size, depicting a Mississippi steamboat. It was a glossy one in black and white, but it did not seem from very long ago. The Captain touched the photograph with his finger tips, said something indiscernible, maybe the name of a woman, and then returned to the hall to leave the house.

He decided to have his usual walk to Upper Fell's Point. Reuben liked those quarters.

He left his house, thinking of how long it was since he was Captain of a ship. It must be more than fifteen years now, he thought, making a small roundabout during his walk not to disturb two pigeons, which were having a meal on the sidewalk.

Chapter Eighteen

One cannot measure the vast, almost bottomless, depths of a human soul by deploying the simple tools of a land surveyor, or, in the telling of a story of one's life, use the multicolored signal flags that one has onboard warships.

Eric, Inga, and Armamente arrived at Baltimore Station on Wednesday at 04.00 AM. They were all of them sleeping when the bus arrived at the destination, and Eric had a sore back when he woke up. Armamente and Inga almost had to carry him to a cab.

They installed on Morton Hotel, which was in Grant Street close to Porter's Furniture, by the Kern's Saloons. Since the doctor was not feeling well at all, they had to rearrange their planning. The appointment with Reuben had to be postponed. Inga called the Captain up at noon and told him that they would arrive on another day. Reuben agreed and said that one should not be careless with a sore back caused by bus travel. One should never go by bus, Inga said. But since none of them had any driver's license, a bus ride was what "had happened."

After lunch, Inga and Armamente went for a walk in Baltimore, a town familiar to Inga. She took Armamente to the most picturesque of streets. Since the wind had slowed down a bit, they had a pleasant afternoon in sunshine, strolling about and buying unnecessary things in the very smallest shops that the illustrious town could muster.

Eric lay on his back, looking straight up in the ceiling in his room. He was in pain. They finally had to send for the doctor. Doctor Elijah Elias declared that the doctor for a long time seemed to have neglected his exercise. This was such a thing that inevitable would happen if the backbone muscles were not sufficiently used, the specialist earnestly told Eric.

Eric then got painkillers for one month.

Early in the evening, Eric declared that he was fit for fight again. But Inga and Armamente were cautious, and they told him he had to stay at the hotel for another twenty-four hours. Armamente at once started with letting the doctor make sit-ups, though.

Inga suggested that they should have a reconnaissance meeting on the same night at 09 PM. She wanted first to discuss the letters that she had brought, and which Armamente had read aloud on the bus.

Secondly, she wanted to have a reconnaissance patrol that should investigate the writer circle, Martha had attended on the spring season in the year before.

Eric agreed that this was the right thing, and while they all started to search for the author's circle via Google, they soon noticed that the hour was late, and they turned to their sleeping quarters. Each had wanted to have their separate room in their new villa, and they agreed on meeting at 09.30 AM on the following day. Armamente went to bed, without further ado, while Inga read a book on gardening. Eric listened to a string concerto by Vivaldi in his headphones before taking his sleeping pill. Vivaldi was his favorite composer.

At Morton Traveller's Hotel in Baltimore, it slowly dawned upon Connecticut's small crime team that they perhaps had to re-group.

The young detective herself was an early bird. She woke up at 05.24 AM, out of heavy dreams about dragons, and took on her shirt while looking out the window. There was not much commotion in the street. She only spotted the paperboy, and Armamente wondered about this old, historical city, on which she had just embarked. Since she did not know much about Baltimore, she googled on "Baltimore, a portrait of" and she read this, which was written by a schoolboy, who called himself Riddar Cato, on his blog Phat That Swat:

"Baltimore, (pronounced.: 'Balwmore') The City that Reads, Clipper City, The Greatest City in America, Frank Zappa town, Charm City or whatever you may prefer to call it, is situated where it is because of the Patapsco River, an almost forty miles long river in the state of Maryland, which is perhaps the per capita wealthiest state in the USA. This meandering river emanates into the famous Chesapeake Bay. Dams heavily support the river, so one cannot sail on it nor use the water. But after much renovation and cleaning of the water, one might nowadays again fish trout in it.

Baltimore is a flat city. No point reaches above 160 feet above the sea. This town was initially mainly a seaside port. Baltimore was created close to the Patapsco to ship tobacco and grain vessels up and down the East Coast. It has also always been famous for the

building of those ships. Baltimore clippers for a long time – and long before Joseph Conrad’s times, too - plied the oceans. Baltimore region has a subtropical climate, with hot, humid summers and a short winter, which often is very mild. For Europeans, the weather in Maryland may most be like Spain’s climate than any other country. Baltimore thus is an old city, in a former slave state, today mainly populated by black people.

Baltimore was established mostly by former Europeans in 1729 and was a local household for the mighty lord George Calvert family. Calvert’s name is frequently found in the center of the town, referring to streets and buildings.

Despite Maryland not seceding from the Union during the Civil War, many of its citizens were conservatives and had Southern sympathies. Union troops, therefore, occupied Baltimore throughout the war. When the war was over, the city only slowly recovered from disruption and poverty.

A fire in early February of 1904 razed most of the center of the town. During World War I, Baltimore began to develop industrially with a multitude of war industries. A period of urban decay in the city’s central parts after World War II was followed by a grand renovation of the downtown buildings, streets, and waterfront.

There have been devastating epidemics of Cholera and other diseases that have taken their toll on the population.

In 1821 the Basilica of the Blessed Virgin Mary became the nation’s first Roman Catholic cathedral. The Washington Monument, a Doric column, rises since 1829 high in the old city. State parks, such as Gunpowder Falls, Hart-Miller Island, and North Point can be reached near the center.

The current metro area population of Baltimore in 2020 is 2,325,000.

Birds you might see in Baltimore and the surroundings are Brown Pelican, Snow Goose, Ring-necked Duck, Ruddy Duck, King Rail, Marbled Godwit, Great Skua, Pomarine Jaeger, and Parasitic Jaeger, Laughing Gull, Franklin’s Gull, Black Tern, Chuck-will’s-widow, Least Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Bank Swallow, Nashville Warbler, Northern Parula, Yellow Warbler, Field Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Common Sparrow, Baltimore Oriole, and Purple Finch. The Orioles is also the baseball team, and the Ravens are well-known for American football. A few blocks from the stadium, baseball legend Babe Ruth was born. The grave of Baltimore native writer Edgar Allen Poe is situated in Westminster Burying Ground,

close to West Lafayette Street. Other birds are House Finch, Eskimo Curlew, Long-billed Curlew, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Long-tailed Jaeger, Mew Gull, Bachman's Sparrow, Lazuli Bunting, and White-winged Crossbill.

Finally: here is a small zoo too, in David Hill Park, with lion and tigers in it."

Armamente was quite content and amused by what she read, She already knew some of it, but it put things in perspective anyway.

Morton Hotel offered free pancakes 24-7. She went down to the dining room and looked for to eat some. Only one more guest was awake and in the dining room at this time. It was an older man with long white hair. Armamente greeted him at a distance, and he waved back and smiled. He gestured at her where she could get the pancakes.

She asked if she might sit down at his table. He was a retired teacher from Oklahoma, on vacation and sight-seeing alone in Baltimore. He asked Armamente what her errand was in town.

"I am here to try and find out whether there has been a murder or not. A friend of mine has an old love that has died here, during mysterious circumstances."

"Oh, that is good of you," the man said.

"I am studying criminology at the University really," she answered, and she blushed because the old man seemed to her so kind and sincere.

"Oh, I see. But you still seem to be a very kind girl."

"Thank you. I am also looking for writer's circles or writer's courses in town. You don't happen to know who is in the business of organizing such activities?"

"Not really. But you will easily find it, as you might well know. But I cannot give you any insider tips. Has it anything to do with the investigation you brought up before?"

"Yes. The victim seemed to have participated in a writer's circle. Perhaps she wanted to learn to write like Poe?"

Armamente smiled. She so much loved the older man's eyes that she was willing to say anything, to make him smile a little bit more.

"Indeed. Like Poe. But of course, you don't know the favorite author of the victim, do you?"

"No. You are right. I don't."

"Most people have one."

"You are right again. I don't know what I am saying." Armamente lay her hand on his hand. "I might be better off if I just ate my pancake and kept silent."

"Anytime," the oldie said, "by the way, my favorite author is Stephen King. I think he should have the Nobel Prize."

Armamente nodded.

"My name is Armamente, by the way," she said.

"Oh, I am honored. I am trying to be as incognito as I can, if you don't mind. It is just a way of life," the old man smiled. Armamente was a bit baffled by this, but she was content anyway.

They sat silent while Armamente ate her breakfast. Outside, the wind surged. She hoped that she at least some time would be able to meet with the mysterious Mr. Longman.

She would, but first, she would, as we shall see, meet with a man by the name of Askelon. A Haitian writer and participant on the circle Martha attended.

She later googled and found out that there had been three writer's circles held on a free basis by Johns Hopkins. She found out before lunch which of them Martha had attended.

Eric and Inga applauded her. They soon decided that Armamente and Inga should try to contact all the pupils of the course. Eric's back was even worse, and at times he gnarled from pain.

At three o'clock, the young private detective had a Mr. Josiah Askelon on the phone. He remembered Martha well. But he also knew that she was dead, and he did not want to talk about her over the phone.

"I am not insensitive," he said.

They decided to meet on the following day at a café in the harbor, close to where Josiah lived.

She now went to see Eric and Inga, who was seated in a study at the hotel. Eric was wrapped up in a big frock-like fur, which had been provided by one of the attendants at the hotel. He was on painkillers and looked pale.

"Now, I have come into contact with the circle," Armamente said.

Inga was impressed by this achievement, but she also had news of her own.

"Listen," Inga said and flexed her very muscular legs, "I don't know about you - I have to ask you something, both of you."

Eric grunted and took a sip of his tea. Armamente looked at the old lady with curiosity.

“Eric, you are retired and in deep trouble with your back. But we are on a mission, and I suppose that we all want to complete it. I don’t know about you, Arma (she had created a nickname), but it seems as if you for this season does not have much of a plan.

But I have a plan, and since we are having such a good time but are living in an expensive hotel, I have done some research in the housing market.”

“Housing?” Armamente cried out.

“Yes. You know, here in Baltimore, many houses are all empty and for rent. Why don’t the three of us just rent a house here and settle for a month or two, to let Eric recover in perfect peace and calm? And we might do a thorough investigation in the Martha case. We might also further learn about each other and have a more pleasant time without bothering about the regulations and the hotel costs. What do you think? Let’s rent a row house in Arbutus!”

Eric and Armamente looked at each other. Large smiles appeared on their faces, and it did not take them long to agree.

“As a matter of fact,” Armamente said, laughing, “I do enjoy myself so very much in your company. I could not think of anything more exciting than living with you fellows for a month or two in Baltimore!”

“So be it,” Eric concluded, and it was agreed upon that Inga should fix a house for them until the next day.

They now laughed, and they told each other that now they were all Baltimoreans.

Eric then said he wanted to return to his room. He had found an interesting book on a bookshelf in the hotel’s small study, where they had been sitting. He showed them the book. *The feathered serpent* by Edgar Wallace.

“What is good about that one?” Armamente, in glancing at the cover of the book, asked, without knowing why she put such a rude question to the sick old doctor.

“Ha!” the doctor burst out, “Yes, you know, I am familiar with Wallace since long. I will tell you that he once was quite a remarkable and very successful mystery writer.”

“Why?” Armamente insisted, who had disliked the book, on the cover of which green figures performed some dance.

“Among other things,” the doctor grunted, “Wallace claimed that his books had no literary value of any sort. They were written with the sole purpose to entertain. He claimed that he had left absolutely no mark whatsoever of his thoughts or personal reflections or

anything in those books. They were all dictated to a secretary and went checked by no one to the publisher.”

“No literary value. I told you!!” Armamente cried out triumphantly. “That’s what I said!”

“But, don’t you see, dear Armamente, that that is a real achievement. Isn’t it a real proof of genius to be able to write tons of books – because he wrote dozens – and not leaving one single personal trace in them?”

“I see,” Inga said, “I bet you have set out to find the real Edgar Wallace!”

They now all laughed, and Inga took out a big cigar from her purse. While the doctor retired to his quarters, Inga and Armamente Dulcinea decided to have a refreshing walk in the escalating wind, which was not very cold though, outside of the small hotel.

On the following day, grey and windy, Armamente hired a bicycle in a small shop and set out for the New Harbor. She found out that she was already in love with Baltimore.

She was troubled thinking of Eric and how he almost had changed to the worse after he had got his back ailment. It seemed, she thought, as if his table of existence suddenly had become very small. Inga, she thought, was a marvelous woman, energetic and competent.

The café where she should meet Josiah was a small one, facing the water.

A lovely schooner from Australia lay on the fly.

She went onboard the café, that itself was on a small boat, fastened by the quay.

Soon she spotted Josiah, who had informed Armamente, that he would have a black cap on with the name of E.A. Poe on it.

“Hello! Come and sit!” Josiah shouted, in a modestly high fashion. He had of course spotted her first.

After they had exchanged some phrases of politeness, Josiah started to tell about Martha:

“She immediately became a central person in the circle, although she did not show any special talent in anything at all. It was her charm and presence that made the rest of us seem negligible.”

Armamente tried to understand who the young man with the Poe-cap was. He had a yellowish complexion and African treats, alt-

though his skin was not black. He had curly brownish hair, and his speech was fast, and he was well versed. Josiah's eyes were sad, his clothes clean and old fashioned and a bit too large. He had a brown khaki shirt on and blue jeans.

"She was immensely sexy, despite that she was not at all young anymore. Her mouth was like a strawberry, eyes like cornflowers. She often wore all white; a white top and a white skirt, and a white taffeta shawl. She also had a white or red gardenia or something in her hair. It was all overdone, but it suited her."

"Ha. But what about her writing then?" Armamente interrupted.

"Oh, yes. Our teacher, *Ogy*, Mr. Ogilvy, told us to write a short story about meeting our new neighbor in the elevator. Martha wrote a long story, but hers was the only one where the elevator fell and crashed. Her story was about the split second when it fell."

Josiah paused.

"It was a very effective plot. But it was badly written."

"Hm?" Armamente said.

"Well, she also flirted with all the male pupils at the course, and I had an evening with her in a park."

Josiah changed the subject and blushed.

"IN A PARK?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry. Not in the park where she died. We were in a big park, to the west. I have forgotten the name of it. I borrowed a car. And we went up there."

"Was it kind of romantic?" Armamente asked.

"Yes. Oh, yes. But she kept talking about Africa all the time. I got nervous by all her stories about Johannesburg and Addis and the parties there and so on...."

"She seems to have been a completely terrible person!"

"Absolutely. Yeah. Yes. Martha was terrible, indeed. But she had lots of charms. Tons of it."

"Did she have any self-distance at all? Had she any irony?" Armamente asked.

"No. Oh no." Josiah looked down.

Armamente looked at Josiah. He had given a remarkable portrait of Martha. She was delighted to have met him. Now she knew better what kind of person the whole expedition was about. And no wonder Eric was in such a miserable shape. After all, the woman he had loved was both gorgeous and thoroughly despicable. And that sort is the most dangerous, and the hardest ones to come to terms with

when dealing with them in our recollection, Armamente thought. Armamente, consternated, emptied her coffee and thanked Josiah.

“You have been of great help! I’ll see myself out.”

She mounted her bike and drove back to the hotel.

When she arrived, Inga and Eric were already outside, packing themselves to leave for the house, complete with simple furniture supplied by the housing agency, Butterfield Housing Ltd, from which Inga had rented it for a month at a time.

“Ooooooh,” Armamente cried out, “this will be absolute heaven!” She left the bike with a boy in the street and told him to leave it at the bike-store. She then rushed up the stairs to her room to get her things.

After fifteen minutes, they were on their way to their new address. Oyster Pancake Street.

The Connecticut doctor with friends embarked on their new home during chat and laughter. Pain in Eric’s back seemed to down normal. It was such a lovely house, with red brick and white brims. The kitchen was small, and the house had modest proportion all over. But there were seven rooms in it, and the furniture was a simple one. Striking was that the Housing Agency had hired some consultant who had chosen an all-blue interior for this house. Thus not only all the chairs and tables in the kitchen were blue, but all the beds in their bedrooms, as well as sofas and armchairs in the living room. Even the willow furniture was blue. Everything in the house had this sky color.

Eric did not like it, but to Inga and Armamente, this was a change, and they did not object to it.

A man from Butterfield Housing, Mr. Condon, helped them to gain entrance and showed them around.

“Here in the cellar,” he said and pointed at a bolted door in the hall. There are some other furniture down there if you grow tired of the blue style...”

He laughed, and Inga smiled and praised the management.

In the kitchen, there were complete sets of pots and plates and cups of all sorts. Armamente had bags with food and wine sent for from the *Food Markt*. They sought out a bedroom each in the upper story, and Armamente got one with windows facing the backyard. In contrast, Eric’s and Inga’s rooms faced Oyster Pancake Street. Trees outside still had left on them, and magpies strolled around at the parking lot.

At 05.00 PM, they were all seated in their living room, watching the telly.

"This is fabulous!" Eric said. "I have not enjoyed myself this much since I was a young medical student."

"I can't wait to get to work," Armamente said and blinked. The others laughed.

"Yes, please, tell us about the writer's circle," Eric cried out while he turned off the TV-set. Armamente, in great detail, recapitulated what the Poe-loving Haitian writer had told her.

"Now, that is not exactly true," Inga said, referring to the young man's picture of Martha, "she was in no way vulgar! I must protest!"

"Indeed, everyone has a right to have his view," Eric said, blushing a little. "But I, of course, never saw Martha like that. Was he sincere in his purpose, that man? It seems to me that he almost had a ... plan."

Armamente corked up a bottle of red wine, and she said that she would try to contact more people from the writer's circle. Armamente jostled around in the living room, wine glass in her hand, where there even was a small bookshelf with some old novels in it. While she dusted them off with one finger, she said:

"Tomorrow, we must visit Reuben Longman. I can't wait to see that person."

"We sure will," Inga said in an authoritative tone. "Still, I would like to meet with inspector Ludwig to hear where the investigation stands."

"Calm down, girls!" Eric said, and then he suddenly remembered that Armamente was no girl, and he blushed again and corrected himself: "Everybody, one at a time!"

All three of them laughed, and Inga and Armamente smiled at each other.

Chapter Nineteen

Butterfield was sitting at noon in his small office at Pratt Street in Baltimore's center, looking through last month's debit and credit of Butterfield Housing LTD and Butterfield Service Shops together with his primary accountant, Sanders, when the phone rang. Butterfield's Schaefer dog, Hubert, made a small leap under his Butterfield's chair. He had once been scared by New Year's bombs and rockets.

It was Leclerc's voice.

"Hello! I hope I am not interrupting anything I wonder..."

"No, no, Hello, please, go on!"

"Yes, I am sitting here with one of my men plus a fellow from BAM."

"BAM?..."

"Yes, Baltimore Art Museum. Well, you asked me if I could help you out with that Reuben Longman thing? And I, along with my partner, Westwood, Sidney Westwood, have some ideas. You know, Longman has since long this famous Matisse, and it is even now and then shown at BAM. Still, Westwood and his friend from BAM might call upon Longman to ask for permission to look at the other paintings that Martha had ... collected. They might ... well, you see what I am suggesting. They might simultaneously try to look for any place where Martha could have hidden the papers. Longman could be stressed and diverted, yes, even shortly removed so that Westwood might have a good search. Do you follow?"

"Oh, that's just excellent! I am highly supportive of this. But what would my expenses be for all this, you know, my business..."

"Don't worry! We are all interested in art, you know. Maybe one deal or another could be made with Longman at some stage regarding some painting. We already know he won't sell the Matisse; this said, he has a lot more."

"I am so thankful. So very indebted, Leclerc. You are so kind. I could never have thought of that."

"It is Westwood you should be thanking. He is a real gem. I'll send him over so that he can get a notion of what kind of stuff you are looking for."

“Good. When will he come?”

“This afternoon. If it’s fine with you?”

“Four o’clock.”

“Four o’clock.”

When Leclerc had hung up, Butterfield had got a big smile on his round face,

“Worth a try,” he summoned.

He looked at the photo of Eliza, his daughter, and only child, which was placed on his desk, and caressed it with his index finger, brown from tobacco. Butterfield hadn’t given up smoking. He ran a dangerous game.

The phone rang again, and Butterfield now sent his accountant away, who had overheard the Leclerc conversation because the name “Tommie” was shown on the display.

“Hello, Tommie! How is it going?”

“I took the stuff off his backyard,” a metallic voice declared. “Nothing of any interest, though. Just old clothes and stuff. I might get some dough for it, though.”

“It serves you well. Thank you anyway! No documents whatsoever?”

“None. Not even an envelope. No stripes, neither.”

They hang up.

Butterfield wasn’t content. Reuben was no crook, the way Martha had been, he thought. He had no hard feelings against Reuben and therefore intended to be reasonably fair. Butterfield lit a cigarette and bent down to scratch his dog Hubert behind his ear.

Police cars drove by outside. The familiar sound of the sirens did not bother Butterfield. He glanced at the Pratt Street sky through the window. September in Baltimore is still summertime, he thought. But suddenly, he missed happier September days and fell into a melancholy mood. For a split second Butterfield thought of having bourbon and benzodiazepines, but he then took a deep breath and called for Sanders, his employee who had waited in the office lounge together with the secretary.

Chapter Twenty

The actual importance of moral values depend on the level of sentimentality in a society. Sentimentality is not a value in itself, but it is how we look upon values. North American culture is highly sentimental. Sentimentality is a kind of remembrance, a pious memory, and it is a highly conservative view of life. Sentimentality does not only affect the way we honor the past, but the past will, in a sentimental society, put a ominous mark on the present. Sentimentality in such a community will be a shadow, put on every present action. Today's actions are thus seen IN THE MOMENT through sentimentality already when these are in the making. Consequently, no action is performed in its own right but from the view of sentimentality. Thus sentimentality tends to invade values so that every value becomes soaked with a sentimental Self. Sentimentality is a kind of blindness concerning the present. It is, more or less, the moral and ethics of a dream.

The three from Connecticut decided that they would visit Inspector Ludwig in the morning while they would take on Reuben's place later on the following day.

After breakfast, the trio took a stroll to the BPD, Central District Police Building, which lay on 500 E Baltimore Street. On their way, in lovely sunshine and noticing that there was not much wind, Inga also looked at Eric, satisfied with the rapid recovery of the doctor. Pigeons gathered around fountains, and people were happy and chattered in the cafés or on their way to the marketplace.

"You do look healthy again, Eric! It must have been a terrible time...."

"Oh, yes, it was! You know, Doctors generally marvel at how very often people are healthy. We, therefore, often are hypochondriacs. When struck with sickness ourselves, we often become almost psychotic. We cannot imagine that we are patients. It is almost against Nature. At least against the nature of being a doctor," Eric laughed.

"You have a way with words sometimes," Armamente said and blinked.

Inga stretched out at a pace with which the others were not comfortable.

"You know," Eric panted, "Martha also liked to walk very fast. I always walked three steps behind. That is the way psychopaths behave. Rushing way ahead of the rest, dismissing the social..."

"Leave it!" Inga cried out, but she lowered her pace.

They passed by a small shop called *Anette's Dog Trim*. Inga looked at longingly.

"I would much rather live in a small shop than in an apartment."

"Why so?" Eric asked.

"You are always talking about psychopaths," Armamente remarked on Eric's previous claim.

"Yes, as far as I understand, that is the only real problem in the world. Almost every problem, aside from psychopathy, can be dealt with."

"I would like to live in the middle of a rush," Inga insisted, and she also had stopped and turned around. She was looking back towards the Dog Shop. The shop owner, a young woman in hijab, was sitting in a bamboo chair outside with a light blue blanket loosely swept around her. She waved to Inga, noticing her blank appreciation.

"Inga!" Armamente cried out. "Bring yourself together."

Soon the three of them assembled and then continued their walk.

Police lieutenant Hans Ludwig greeted them with a big smile. On his shoulder, the emblem with the Battle Monument shone sunlit. Because sun shone in through the large window. He was sitting on the corner of his desk, looking tired. It was 10.30 AM.

Inga was leading the troop.

She put her hand towards Ludwig and introduced her Nordic beauty:

"Inga Nord."

"Hans Ludwig." Ludwig smiled warmly.

"These are my friends, and the doctor here, Eric Goldkettel, actually was a close friend of Martha. Armamente Dulcinea is our expert on criminal investigations."

"Delighted to meet all of you! Only if it were under different circumstances. Sit down please!"

The room was a simple office and had two chairs for visitors. On the wall there was a big poster with an oriole on and the text "BALTIMORE". On Ludwig's desk papers were spread out in an unordered fashion.

Ludwig mustered the strangers from Connecticut while adjusting the watch on his left arm. The trio searched out places to sit in the inspector's room while Ludwig took out an envelope from a cupboard.

"These photographs are showing Martha in the park."

Eric and Inga took the photos in their hands. Armamente glanced over their shoulder, standing behind their stools.

"It just looks as if she had laid down to sleep," Eric said.

The others nodded.

"And she was completely lifeless?" Armamente asked.

"Yes, she was," the BPD officer said.

"There were signs that she had run across this field." Ludwig took out a bird's view photo of the park and pointed at a red line on a field, "... and it seems she fell to the ground at least three times before falling about and die." He said.

"So she was chased?" Eric asked with a sad look on his face.

"Definitely. But of course we do not know by whom."

"Were there no other people there that day? I mean, it is a park. Workers..."

"The park was closed that day because they were going to have a concert in the afternoon. The entire park had been marked with red ribbons, and a scene was built on the day before, and they were going to have an audience at 04.00 PM on the next day. This park is rather significant, and it was as good as empty, apart from some people who were arranging chairs and such things. But they did not see Martha."

"Was there going to be a rock concert?"

"Yes. Some sort of. The band's name I have forgotten."

"But Martha was walking there anyway?"

"She was a bit rebellious," Inga filled in.

"Strange," Eric said. "And you have no clue? As to who might have followed her..."

"No clue at all. It might have been a dog or a rapist!" Ludwig said. "We don't know."

The photos of Martha showed her with some blood on her face, but not much. Her beautiful face with the red lips had no expression at all. Her eyes were shut.

When the trio, the newcomers to Baltimore, left the BP house, they were in for a surprise. Outside of the building, riding a small red bicycle, the woman in the hijab from Anette's Dog Trim was waiting with a little smile on her face.

"Sorry," she said and climbed off her vehicle. "I just thought you guys seemed such lovely people."

Inga rushed to her and immediately hugged her.

"I knew it!" she shouted, "I knew you were something special the moment I saw you!"

The woman, who was in her thirties, and presented herself as Çansu, then followed them back to their small brick house on Oyster Pancake Street.

Chapter Twenty-One

On Wednesday evening, Ethan and David strolled off to visit Reuben. They were excited. David wondered if Reuben would show some old books or memorabilia or stuff like that from his years as a Captain on the Seven Seas. Since David's friends still had not recovered from Woodstock's events, the two friends had decided to come by themselves. But Ethan had given his learned acquaintance Thomas a ring and told him that they were going to Reuben's at seven o'clock.

They had both agreed that if there was no fun at Reuben's place, they would go somewhere else. Youth is short. It would not put down their spirits, they agreed, but they would then go to have a glass of beer and then go for a visit at the Town Hall to enjoy the singing of the amazing Polly-Ann. This young singer was the daughter of the late famous rhythm-and-blues man Yonder-Creek Blue Bufford. David also had told his friend Elsa that he might go there. If they then decided to go to the Hall, they would immediately give her a ring. She had agreed to that.

Although it only was late September, the storm season had begun. It was a violent one too. On the week before, winds in the harbor had managed to destroy seventeen boats. Six people had been killed by flying debris.

Now when Ethan and David were out on the street heading for Reuben's place, they saw several trucks on their way to the harbor, with military personnel sent out to assist the fire brigade. The weather had stabilized, but the weather service warned of another storm surge in a day or two.

"Brace for the storm!" was the word of the day.

David and Ethan had met outside of the *Free Library*, a place dear to every youngster in Baltimore. Ethan had greeted David with what the white boy later should understand was Ethan's usual greeting ritual. This ritual, or position, consisted of Ethan placing his left hand near his left ear and, at the same time gripping with his right hand under the elbow of his left arm. In this way, a 90-degree angle protruded, probably denoting some sort of frame for the upper body. This greeting, Ethan told David, was invented and frequently used by the Dutch modernist painter Piet Mondrian,

which was a renowned painter. You might see some of his works at BAM, Baltimore Art Museum. Baltimore Art Museum was very famous, among other things, for the collection of the Cone sisters, containing more than 1000 works by Matisse.

Ethan told David that Matisse was among his favorite figurative artists. His favorite author was Balzac, he said.

This Mondrian greeting, though, did not entirely show the typical in Ethan. On the contrary. Sure enough, Ethan was a guy that existed in two allotropes. The least common was the colorful, inventive, unconventional one, with the odd greeting. The most common was a stale, earnest one and a more insecure young man, with a considerable reflection capacity.

David laughed at the “90-degree greeting”. He said that he was very familiar with the works of Matisse and his eloquent handling of color. This was an exaggeration on David’s part.

It was six o’clock in the Monday evening, and David said that it was just not sure at all that Longman was at home. Ethan thought he would be. Maybe they should give him another ring? However, older people tend to stay at home, he claimed. David then commented on how expensive Longman’s costume seemed to be. “He might be at the sick lady’s house or maybe out with the dog or something,” he then said.

Ethan was silent. He greeted some people they met on their way to Thames Street. Ethan greeted with a simple wave of his left hand. Ethan seemed to know everybody. Anyway, he used to serve them all at the drug store, of course.

“I bet he is a Jew,” David said. He wanted to provoke Ethan.

“I don’t care what race people are.”

“I was just kidding,” David said. “I am a Jew.”

“I know.”

David thought that Ethan was both very handsome and very intelligent. Also, he was quite envious of him for both. But it was a mean thing to say to David that he, Ethan, knew that David was a Jew. It was not apparent that he was a Jew. He looked like an Englishman.

David was a little more lighthearted than the day before, perhaps because he had left the Glock at home. He had put it under his mattress.

“But if you are going to write a book,” he said, “there has to be something more to it than the small things. There must be some form and a tone in it? You know.”

“Yes, and a formative idea,” Ethan said and was happy to talk about something else than Reuben. He already knew Reuben, and David didn’t, but he was soon to be acquainted with him.

“Yes, exactly.”, David panted. He was tired from trying to learn a new computer language, and he had been sitting still and he had not eaten much either. He had no peace in his soul. Or maybe he was becoming sick or something ... “So what is the performative idea?”

“Formative.” Ethan corrected. “I think it will be a meeting of two different delusions. Two misconceptions. I want to dream forth a book about two friends, who both of them are delusional about the other. The curious thing with misconceptions is that they are still conceptions.”

“Nae, Nae,” David smiled, ignoring the final twist, “that is a much too common thing. It happens all the time. Nobody knows anything about other people...”

“It is not about knowing. They simply are supposing the wrong thing about each other.”

“I don’t quite get it.”

“It is fun because two delusions do not exactly make one truth.”

Ethan smiled broadly, and David smiled too, without any earnest ground. David then lightly smacked his friend on the upper arm. It was good to have a new friend.

He had been much too lonely all summer, and he knew he would never become a hacker, however much he tried. He was not good at it, as it were with everything. He was not good at anything at all. He was not bright like Ethan was. Ethan looked as if he might become a professor or something, a chemistry professor perhaps if he got the opportunity if he got a scholarship!

Then, like a flash of lightning, it struck David that Ethan might not be his friend at all. No, of course, Ethan was just accompanying him to Reuben to ensure that he, David, and Reuben were to be safe and look after him so that nothing dangerous should happen. Ethan probably had noticed the Glock pistol on the day before, and now, when he saw that David did not bring the gun, he was just relaxed and had begun to talk about writing and stuff. He was supervised. That was the whole thing. David West was an idiot. And Ethan felt sorry for him!

David went silent. They got quite near to Thames Street when David said:

“I don’t want to rob Reuben. I just said so. To get attention.”

“I know,” Ethan answered, glanced down on the shorter boy with the booties, and lit a tiny cigarette.

Although David frequently used the phrase “I know,” he still hated when others used it.

They now were just two blocks from Reuben’s house when Ethan suggested that they should call the old seafarer up, instead of just old stylish surprising him with a knock on the front door of his row house. David agreed that this was perhaps the most sensible and polite thing to do and would strengthen their case. Ethan then exerted his *Android* from his breast pocket on his light brown khaki shirt and dialed Reuben up. It took a while, but Ethan then got him on the phone. After a couple of minute’s conversation, it was decided upon that the two youngsters should arrive in an hour since Reuben had to manage some errands for a neighbor right now.

Ethan finished the call and told David, who had been listening slyly while admiring a small car in the street, painted in deep green and had a yellow roof on it, that they had to spend an hour for themselves before the visit.

The car also had stripes that said:” Jambalaya.”

Since the two of them now had a whole hour to spend before the visit, they decided to go to the nearby Green Mount cemetery for a chat on a bench there, a bench that Ethan said he always choose for both meditation and the writing of short stories. Short stories could be written while standing on one leg, he said. The cemetery was called St. Otter. Soon they had comforted themselves on this very sofa, and they buttoned up their light jackets against the evening cold and the brisk wind. David had one blue and one black sock. Ethan then said:

“My uncle William tells me the only thing that works against madness is coffee.”

David was startled at Ethan’s way of taking the discussion in all kinds of directions. Thus, he took the challenge:

“I haven’t got any uncle.”

Ethan smiled. Even if David looked very stupid, he wasn’t, he thought.

"If you had an uncle, he would tell you that this is the case," he returned. "Coffe is the miracle drug."

"About the books you are going to write: who would read them? I mean: whom are you addressing?"

"Oh! Every Frenchman." Ethan answered.

"Frenchman?"

"Yes, you didn't think I was going to write a book in English, did you?" Ethan said, looking upon the top of an old elm, who was looking for oxygen way up among the clouds.

"I certainly was," David muttered. He added:

"You win. Stop this bullshit!"

"It is not bullshit. Like the French language, and I am going to publish my book in France, on *Gallimard*."

"Say something in French!"

"Nous sommes en retard." He looked at his watch. Ethan wore such a gadget, a *Ravel*.

"Who is your favorite French author?"

"Rabelais."

"Never heard of."

"He is good, though."

"I just love the word 'though.' It is so diligent."

A small black baby crow was approaching the little wooden bench under the elm tree. The boys discretely looked at it, and the bird carefully kept the distance as crows always do.

"Have you ever been to France?" David asked, now very sullen. Of course, Ethan was kind of brave, realizing that David was not wearing any Glock pistol.

"No. Never."

Ethan exercised his eyebrows up and down.

"But you cannot be serious. Maybe we should call Elsa and tell her that we are not going to the concert but that we are keeping to the plan with Reuben?" David said, and he was about to change his mind about the visit to Reuben because he didn't want to be made a buffoon.

"I am not kidding you. I am writing in French." Ethan said. "Many famous authors have written their major works in a language they do not consider their native language. Thus, Kierkegaard wrote *Either-Or* in Latin, and Conrad, although he was Polish, wrote *Lord Jim* in English. And they are both masters of unraveled literary subtlety. And Raymond Chandler was an Englishman, not an American, you know! All great things are achieved

by keeping a certain distance. 'Am besten sieht man ferne Dinge.', as Kafka put it so well. Kafka was Czech. But he had his books translated into the Czech language by his girlfriend. Strindberg, who was a Swede, wrote his short novel *Inferno* in French. Lots of Russian people wrote in French."

The Afro-American was well-read. His face shone with youthful energy.

"I don't think you are serious at all." David claimed, "By the way, is your uncle alive?"

Ethan laughed out aloud. He turned to David and suddenly kicked him off the sofa, shaking with unrestrained laughter.

"I haven't got any uncles. I am all phantasy."

"Now I am distanced," David said, but Ethan's remark had suddenly made him happy. Ethan was unhappy too. That was fine. Ethan and David, both of them, were just kids. Ethan was 22 years old and David 25.

They passed by the small *Iglesia de Dios en Cristo*, and soon they heard happy songs from inside the building. Many churches in this town are – architectonically - façade churches. The backs of the churches look like any other houses. This makes the impression that religion is integrated into society.

"But who were going to be characters in your novel then?" the Euro-American asked.

"Just ordinary people." The Afro-American answered. "The important thing is not content. Content is something minimal."

When Ethan and David finally arrived at Reuben's porch, Thomas, dressed in a simple black leather jacket with pins and needles on it, was waiting, sitting on the porch stone.

Reuben opened the door and showed them inside.

He had his favorite stripe costume on, and he had his armchair in the living room, the spotted terrier lay, void of interest of the outer world.

Reuben served wine and beer and asked them if they, as the first members of the *Social Club*, would like to listen to a story. Thomas, who had been admiring the famous Matisse painting on the wall above the sofa, thought that would be great. David and Ethan were both equally delighted and the three of them sat quite like school-boys in Reuben's living room as Reuben started telling a story.

“This whole event happened more than twenty years ago.” Reuben began his account, “It was Captain Burrow from Perth, first officer Don Yoseley and a new 3rd officer names Bert Hansen. And me as 2nd. We were on a long trip between England and Australia on a standard carrier, a ship, 13.000 tons dwt. *Bonaventura II* was her name, and we got to know each other pretty well between the officers. All the four of us.”

Ethan and David looked at each other. They were completely baffled. It turned out that Reuben was a eager and apt storyteller, something they would never have guessed about him. They were thrilled. Thomas’ eyes also shone, and he took off his jacket and placed it on the floor beside his armchair. The chair was green with red flowers on it.

“Now the thing with Hansen was something strange,” Reuben went on. “... and this the others soon found out. They got too annoyed with it, no doubt: the man was much too perfect and could do absolutely nothing wrong.

He was very tidy, he was exemplary in his work, an excellent sailor, as well as a navigator, and he seemed to at most – in the capacity of handling the sextant – to come to a couple of fractions of degrees wrong.”

“Especially to Captain Burrow, George Burrow, a short, stubborn man, who smelled of fish, this Hansen was a nuisance. One night when I had the night watch and mate Yoselyn had dropped by, he told me that he was so irritated at Hansen, who was – by the way - of Norwegian descent, that he, Burrow, could no longer sleep at night. The Captain bluntly said he would give a whole bottle of whiskey each if we could set Hansen up, make some fuzz with the sextant or something like that, to make Hansen make some faults, so that Burrow could reprimand him. Burrow said, licking his mouth before sticking his chime pipe back, that he would love if Hansen were made to apologize for it.

Now, Yoselyn and I started to make plans. We recognized on Hansen and calculated what might be the easiest way to set him up. We looked at his way of making calculations, noticed which were the stars he was observing the most when calculating position, and all his other routines.

Yoselyn and I called our future victim “The man who could do no wrong.”

Well, eventually Yoselyn and I got hold of the sextants and simply hid two of them in our own quarters, and then tampered with the remaining one so that no sensible data could be obtained, using that one.”

“Of course, Hansen soon discovered that something was wrong, but since Hansen probably suspected the truth, that he was disliked by us and even by the Captain, he could win absolutely nothing by complaining about us to him.

Hansen then locked himself up in his courters for an hour, came up unto deck in the evening, when we just were passing in the reach of Windfall with an apparatus that he had made himself. Within an hour, he annotated in the observation book just the correct position of our vessel.

We gritted our teeth but did not give up. Burrow was furious and could not stand to be on deck at all but resided in his saloon listening to Puccini at a high volume.”

The eyes of Ethan glowed with fascination. He thought of Reuben as a future writer of novels.

“Yoselyn and I then thought of reversing the cables of the wire-operated telegraph, that is used to send stop, forward and back-signals to the machine-room, but since we were not permitted to put the ship in danger while we tried to oust Hansen, and the Chief of the Machine department did not want to be dragged into the affair, we left that idea.

In the meantime, we noticed that Bert kept himself unusually happy and tidy too. We noticed that we both, Yoselyn, and I were tired, ragged and filthy from the navigation tampering. We raged at this.

The next thing was to get rid of the updated tables from Greenwich. We took the books with the tables and locked them all up in a box that we stuffed under my bed in my cabin.

Without tables, it would be impossible to establish longitude. This was all clear to us and to Hansen, and we were now on *Bonaventura II* in a pre-Harrison predicament. George Harrison (... another George Harrison) was the man who invented modern navigation. Longitude is hard to find out without tables.

The next night, it seemed as if Hansen much earlier had foreseen this eventuality, and we found that he had made some annotations on a piece of paper that let him make his observation faultlessly.

We then tried simply to poison him.

This was of course a bit radical. But our Captain insisted.

On the next day, we saw him on deck, resting comfortably – clad in trunks, sunbathing, because it was tropical weather and in July in the middle of the Atlantic, outside of Kongo - and we decided to serve the man ice-tea. We ordered the chef to do that. Without the chef knowing anything, we put tons of laxatives into his cup.”

“I don’t believe a word,” Ethan said with a broad smile, energetically rubbing his knee and nose.

“Don’t you?” Reuben asked with something like ironic earnestness. He continued his story:

“Noe, I will tell you, Bertie-Hansen- man sipped at the tea but then let it trickle out on the deck.

We had to tell the Captain that we simply could not find out anyway to provoke a mistake from *The Man Who Could Do Nothing Wrong*.

As soon as we arrived at our next stop, which was Durban, the Captain left the ship – pretending he had an ulcer – and transferred the command to Yoselyn. When we got home, we heard that he had taken a flight home to Florida, where he and his wife lived.

Now, *Bonaventure II* continued on its trip, but Yoselyn and I refrained from harassing Hansen anymore. We even tried to laugh the whole thing off, together with him. However, Hansen only got on with his perfection and acted as if nothing happened! Imagine that!! The ship eventually months later returned safely to London, where we were stationed. We each of us took leave, and I saw neither Yoselyn nor Hansen anymore. However, I stayed in Red Cargo Orient Line for a long time.”

David and Ethan raised their eyebrows.

“But,” Reuben said, and he took a large sip of Kenyan coffee, “the story does not end here. When I as a 1st officer met one of the Red Cargo Orient Line owners a couple of years later, I told him the story about strange man Hansen aboard my ship, from the time I was 2nd officer. He laughed, – his name was de Koen – and he almost bade me tell the story twice. Still, it was all the time something strange with the old ship proprietor because he kept nodding while I told the story the second time. And he had a troubled and confused look in his eyes.

However, he soon began to speak, and now he was more stern and formal:

'Dear Mr. Longman, I know the man. Or – more correctly - I knew him, sir'

'What?' I cried out. 'Tell me!' 'Please tell me,' I fiercely begged him.

'Well, ' de Koen continued, 'Hansen sailed on one of my big fruit vessels, one of those container ships, for many years. He certainly got that reputation which you just, in such an elegant way, have described. When he turned sixty-five years old, he came to me in my office to take leave. Hansen was, like you, sailing as 1st Officer at this time. I turned down his resignation and said that he, from this very moment, was promoted to Captain and that he next month should be taking my largest ship to Shanghai.

However, he persisted and told me that he intended to follow the rules of the Company. The rules in this shipping company were such that retirement was due to the 65th birthday. I finally, when I saw the determined look at his face, let go of my resistance. The retiree got a substantial bonus, a Havana cigars box, three bottles of Bell's whisky, and I said thank you and goodbye to him and good luck.

Later an employee of mine from the HR apartment told me the perplexing ending of it all.

Hansen had his wife back in Trondheim, which he had visited now and then, with whom he had no children, but who was through all these years a very faithful and good wife to him. He came into his apartment on Hardangergata, as was the name of the street, that had an excellent view over the harbor, I have been told. The home comer hung his cap on its place, kissed his wife, and got into the bedroom. There he lay down, and after having a cigar, which he maybe had brought with him and kept for a long time, or one of the Havanas he got from me, he took a blanket, turned to the wall, and didn't move.

His wife cried, she tried to make him at least eat something, and she asked him what was wrong. Then Hansen answered, turned away from her, facing the wall:

'I am old now. My opinion is that older people shall not be a burden to others. It is also quite clear that the planet is overcrowded as it is. So, I, therefore, have decided to die. The natural way to die is by stop eating and drinking. Farewell, and thank you so much for everything, my dear!"

His wife got mad, hammered at him with both hands, and even bit him in his ear in her rage, but Bert Hansen allegedly did not move.

His wife was beyond her senses, cried and went berserk, and she tried to summon folks from Hardangergata and a competent doctor too. However, Hansen, from his position facing the wall, just told them to leave.

After two weeks without food and water, Hansen did die.

The man who could do nothing wrong was gone, forever.”

This story shook the soul out of its audience.

Reuben emptied his coffee. The dog at Reuben’s side, gnarled, sensing that something terrible once had occurred. The room in Fell’s Point was quiet, and the sky over Baltimore outside Reuben’s place was as grey as ever, and the birds hid under the cars. Then the old sea-Captain lent forward to scratch his foot. Maybe he did this as some kind of apology for having taken so much time and being so pretentious.

“My God!” Thomas said.

David sensed that Reuben, when he told his story, wasn’t ambiguous at all. At least not in a bad way, which he had thought Reuben sometimes was.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Some Maryland stories are classics. It happened – they say - in Maryland just shortly after the American Revolution.

A soldier named Charles Sims had come to get some wealth, and he and his dog, a blue tick hound, a black and white English foxhound, went to one of the local beer houses for a drink. However: *In vino veritas!* Charlie could not refrain from talking in a loud voice of his riches and the deed that had led to his wealth. He patted his pockets, where he kept the gold when sitting in the bar. The other guests, three youngsters, Henry and Chuck, and Billy, were listening. Several of the men came from Port Tobacco, as was Henry. Port Tobacco is a Maryland town, just to the east of Washington, which today has approximately thirteen inhabitants.

When Sims left the bar, Henry and the others followed him. They apprehended Sims and his dog along Rose Hill Road, hitting him with an iron bar, killing Sims and his pet. Chuck and Billy got scared and left. Charlie fell on a rock near the road. Henry took the fortune from Charlie's pockets, buried it beneath a nearby holly tree, and fled. When H. returned a day later to get his treasure, the dog would not let him have it. The ghost of a big hound appeared, howled, and charged at Henry. This poor man tried to shoot the dog using his rifle, but the dog evaded the shots, jumping high. These dogs are both intelligent and agile. The dog attacked. Again, Henry decided to leave. Henry never did get hold of the treasure he buried. He reportedly fell ill and died suddenly shortly after. If you're courageous enough to travel Rose Hill Road, look out for the place where they killed Sims and his dog. The treasure is – if nothing has happened to it - still there, in the woods by the state route.

Ethan thought that this story told so much of his beloved Maryland.

Ethan spent Saturday evening at home, trying to tidy up. There was not much anybody could do to window-sills that very badly rotten, though. His apartment was almost beyond repair. But of course, it was not. Ethan ought to call the property owner, but

keeping the rent cost at a low level was also a question of importance. As it was, the price for his apartment was minimal.

After having carried some trash out in the backyard, Ethan turned off the lights and indulged in reading.

He simply could not get enough of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville. This presented a considerable problem since he had consumed everything both Conrad and Melville ever had written.

He liked Jane Austen too but not Poe, the Baltimore son. He thought that Poe's prose was a little meager. But Poe, of course, had many good ideas, and Ethan thought Poe had a brilliant nerve in his stories. Ethan sometimes wished that Poe had taken himself more time with his stories. Why hadn't Poe been a little more elaborate?

The Atlanta school was also gorgeous. He liked McCullers, Capote, and the author of *To kill a mockingbird*, whose name he never could remember. He was fond of Virginia Woolf, and he liked Franz Kafka as well as Robert Walser. He read Raymond Chandler but also Cornell Woolrich. The latter almost had surpassed Poe in the masterful novel by the name of *Fright*. And Ethan also admired *Paycheck* by Philip K. Dick.

But, for no reason at all, other than it was a natural thing to do, he spent lots of time on the internet that day too. He did not usually comment on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Still, he was a member of all three of them, and YouTube also. Often he took time to follow specific and oddly specific accounts, often Baltimoreans. He had a more active account in one author's forum, where he sometimes posted short stories of his own.

He received very few comments.

He gave concise comments himself.

This and that conspiracy theory on the web caught his eye just because it was there. He was a curious person, but more so, he had much reflection and a skeptic mindset of his own. He concluded that people who believed in theories like that suffered from laziness and naïvité because they tried to jump on a train wagon in motion without asking themselves which train it was, where it came from and where it was heading.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Reuben willingly welcomed some visits to his house, but he grew suspicious when a phone rang and a man presented him as Carl Larsen, from the BAM, the Baltimore Art Museum. Larsen declared that he was interested in buying rare art. He said he was sorry for Reuben's loss, for the death of Martha, and had heard that Reuben had more interesting paintings than the famous Matisse one. Might someone possibly be able to take a look at the entire collection? Longman agreed, and Larsen was welcomed on the same day, at 03.00 pm.

Later that day, Larsen walked through Reuben's house with a small camera in his hand, looking at art objects; Reuben however took a neutral attitude. The BAM man did not think any other painting, mostly North American artists - pictures showing the Rocky Mountains in sharp sunlight - were of any value. There were no Modiglianis. Larsen rushed from room to room, and Reuben had a hard time following. Finally, he sat down on his salon sofa and let Larsen stroll around as he pleased in his house. Suddenly Reuben thought he heard a familiar sound, a small squeak, and he performed a stealth operation to find out what had caused the sound. It was Larsen looking behind a drawer.

Reuben rushed to Larsen, grabbed his camera, threw it to the floor, and stomped on it until it lay asunder in infinite parts.

Then he turned to Larsen himself, who had grabbed for a gun in his back pocket. Larsen could not get hold of the small weapon, but it fell to the floor as well. Reuben then raised his hand and gave Larsen a giant blow in the face.

"Why are you doing this?" Reuben shouted. "Why?"

Larsen, whose nose was bleeding, did not answer.

Reuben took up the gun from the floor, put it in Larsen's outer coat pocket, and led the man, who was bleeding heavily, to the front door and threw him out on the marble stairs.

Larsen fell about, raised, and without a word, he disappeared down the street, where a Mercedes stood waiting for him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Human beings are right from the very start, intuitively interested in animals. It is not an odd thing since we all live amongst them and together with them, sometimes from them. We just don't feed off them, but sometimes we make clothes of their skin, and we might often ride on them or have them draw wagons or wheels for us. Sometimes they are admirable companions, at the hunt or just on our walks in the neighborhood.

However, often our interest in animals grows more intense than that and even becomes a little bit weird. It is, in fact, no uncommon thing that people are trying to understand the inner realms of animals, trying to get in deeper contact with them, almost in a perverse way. Some of us just do not limit ourselves to become cat owners or dog breeders, but at some – often very critical – point in life, many of us try to find comfort in a situation of crisis, in attempting to establish emotional and loving contact with an animal. We will yet try to delve a little deeper into this matter.

It might be about an effort to come close to an ape, an elephant, a dolphin, a tiger, or some other creature, perceived by us to have some sort of mental complexity. For example, we are trying to find out if the animal in question can understand certain matters that we believe we have a great understanding of, in our way. Like music, literature and philosophy.

By examining this, some of us think that we might achieve both bits of knowledge of these animals and contact with them.

On countless occasions, humans have put mirrors in front of animals to watch what happens. Humans are watching how the tiger or the elephant watch themselves – or each other - in the mirror, how the analyzed creature walks to the mirror's reverse side to try to solve the mystery. We amuse ourselves, almost like Kaiser Nero himself with his slaves, on behalf of animals, which seem completely ignorant vis-à-vis the function of mirrors.

It is all very sad and deplorable.

It is an excellent comic in seeing how people, time and time again, laugh their asses off when they realize that the animals – the lions,

the giraffes, the bears, the lynxes - have no idea about mirrors. People of all ages, shapes and sizes are shouting:

“Look, it does not understand that it is he himself in the mirror!!” And some wise guy leans toward his son and points at the giraffe, explaining:” You see, it has no self-conscience!”

Whenever people display themselves in this manner, comparing themselves with animals, it is as if stupidity explains itself.

Many humans spend their entire precious lives in trying to teach apes using sticks and other tools to a greater extent than apes do in their natural environment. Many humans spend their lives constructing experiments designed to show that apes can predict future events. The human interest in animals is not funny per se. But it is, more so, bothersome. It is, namely, both as if humans have an inner urge BOTH to prove that animals are stupid AND that they are not stupid at all compared to humans themselves.

It is only that this wise stupidity, or stupid wisdom is understood by every five-year-old child WITHOUT having to design experiments. It is in the human DNA, this knowledge of other animals. Children know how smart and how stupid the cat and dog is. It is an inborn quality with humans that we, from the outset, are aware of this.

Now, this isn't all. There are people to whom it is not sufficient to design an experiment to determine the obvious about animals. No. High strung people meet with individual animals . as I already mentioned - as if they were offering a special kind of relief and resurrection. It seems to certain people as if they need to be rescued from something by an animal. Some people are looking for wisdom, or whatever, in the eyes of dolphins or orangutans, or jellyfish.

Human anxiety and despair are so strong, that many of us wants to be rescued at any cost.

There are countless theories about experiencing extended spiritual dimensions by exchanging vibrations with jellyfish in aquariums.

As everybody knows, some folks gather outside of an aquarium shouting to it:

“Oh, jellyfish, jellyfish, octopus, octopus! What enigma is torturing your soul?”

The octopus in question is lying at the bottom of its manufactured home, its water cellar, (WATER CELLAR) and is all silent. It does not say a word nor does it respond. This appears to make

things more evident to the public. Folks outside of the water bunker (WATER BUNKER) feel mesmerized by the serene, eloquent, mystical fish, whose ancestors were comrades with the dinosaurs and probably also have relatives on Mars.

It is NOT, however, the jellyfish that mesmerizes. It is our stupidity. WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THAT WE ARE LOOKING AT OURSELVES IN THE MIRROR! (And we dare not look behind it.) It is like our idiocy poisons us, and we are kneeling in front of the amorphous fish, crying:” Please, please, give us a sign from your precious, secret world! Say something! Anything! Whatever you say, we will obey! Give me a message because I KNOW that your BRAIN is just as COMPLEX as mine is! Or complexer!”

It is our stupidity that is talking. Perhaps the octopus raises one of its many legs, and we are screaming with joy, sinking to the ground with bliss painted in our faces. Our exhaustion is enormous. Our spiritual anguish has momentarily been released in the meeting with this fish. The thought that each of us is all alone in this completely unknown world, in this incomprehensible cosmos, just feels less immediate. The subtly coded message that the jellyfish left with us is like Christ returning on resurrection day. When we are leaving the area, the CELLAR ZOO with the foreign animals, we are anew talking to each other, one disputed person *in Spe* to another, planning to write a paper on the wisdom and the elusive truth contained in the eyes and the hints of animals of the watery kingdom. Every one of us wants to exhibit a degree in the metaphysics of the Octopusian civilization.

Truth is like hints, Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed. Maybe the gesture of an octopus can be relied upon. It lifted its paw anyway.

When David made himself ready to jump into bed, there was a small knock on his window. It was Odile. David opened the window.

“Tomorrow, there will be nice weather,” she said. “Let’s all go to the zoo tomorrow. Elsa too! She’ll be fine. “

“Perhaps,” David said. “I’ll call you. But I don’t have a slug.”

“Don’t bother. I’m rich,” Odile, who smelled a little from vanilla, grinned. Then she jumped on her bike and drove away with thunder.

Ten hours later, the big sun shone through the window, and though it was late September, it was almost hot. It was like a summer's day. Soon Odile came by again on her thundering Honda. They called upon Elsa, but she immediately told them that she just wanted to sleep. Odile had on a short black skirt and a white blouse. Her brown skin was gleaming in the sun.

"Are you a member of ANTIFA?" she asked.

"No, why?" David answered.

David jumped up on Odile's bike, and she drove the short way to the small animal park.

Odile and David went to the zoo alone.

When they got in and stood by the penguins ...

All of a sudden, David realized that he was in love with Odile.

"Lo ... lo ...k at him!" he said, pointing with his finger at a small penguin who just suddenly had fallen over and into a small ditch. "He ... is cute," but his whole body was in a whim, and it was uproar inside him. Odile looked at him and saw that he was sweating profusely.

"Mmm. What's the matter?" she said and added:

"Are you sick?"

The park was vast.

It had three main compartments.

Arctic, Africa, and America.

When David and Odile stood by the fence, looking at the zebras, David, who had regained some strength, glanced at Odile.

They then approached the bird section, where the zoo kept some Aras, owls, and orioles. One of the roofs was asunder after a storm, and the guard said that a couple of owls had escaped last spring - great horned owls.

David omitted a giant sigh. People who are deeply in love do often sigh deeply.

David, the anarchist, snuggled his hand into Odile's. She allowed him to.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eric, Inga, Armamente, and Çansu sat in their living room at Oyster Pancake Street drinking tea. Armamente had convinced her friends that tea was not only good for digestion but also that tea promoted sound thinking. Çansu told a little of her Turkish background, her life as an actor and now as a shop owner. It turned out that she had lived in Asheville too, like Inga, but up in the beautiful hills, together with her husband. They were now divorced, and she felt happier than ever.

According to the agreement, Inga called Reuben up, and it turned out that they were welcome at 01.00 PM to Thames Street. Inga asked if she might bring some friends with her, some of which also had known poor Martha. Reuben told her that she might do as she liked.

Since the rain after the storm had arrived to their street, Eric rang for a cab.

It was not long before the four of them knocked on Reuben's front door. Çansu had been asked to join. Reuben would be informed in the case by Armamente, who had a talent for explaining matters with few words.

Inga pointed at the big, amateurish sign, saying, "*Social Club.*"

"Heye, look at that!"

Çansu, who had a white complexion, and was slightly fattish, took out a notebook.

"What is that?" Inga asked, referring to the notebook.

"My notebook. I always take notes."

"Let me see!" Inga said, and she firmly removed the small black book from Çansu's hands.

"Ah, hear!" she said, and while Reuben opened the door to his house, Inga read aloud from Çansu's book: "Imagine if all trees were ugly. Imagine if there were no books or stories at all in the world! Imagine...."

"Very welcome!" Reuben said, and his thin face, with its clown-like look, twisted into a giant grin.

Reuben had made some coffee. He now served the small gang of intruders, who all of them were delighted, as every visitor would be, at the chimpanzee and the zebra.

“It is a real zoo!” Inga said.

“Zoos have live animals,” the doctor corrected.

“I remember,” Çansu said and took out her notebook again, “once in a zoo...”

Eric and Armamente looked at each other, smiled and shook their heads. Armamente then looked at Inga, as if it was her fault that this meeting now seemed to be all messed up by Çansu. And in a way, ofcourse it was.

Reuben immediately understood what was going on. Therefore, he stretched behind the sofa, took out a small baby ape made of cloth, and gave it to Çansu.

“Here’s for you!”

But he did not smile.

Çansu first got immensely offended and would not take the ape, but then she changed her mind and asked if she might keep it, take it home, and Reuben said yes to that, she accepted. Now Reuben smiled. His clown eyes were wide open.

“What can I do for you?” Reuben then asked, and he had turned to the doctor, whom he had fancied was the small private investigation group leader.

“We are just interested in trying to find out what happened to Martha,” Eric said earnestly and in an otherwise neutral voice.

“I don’t know more than the police do.”

“We spoke to inspector Ludwig yesterday,” Inga said.

“We are interested in her laptop.” Armamente then boldly asserted.

“Oh. But my wife’s laptop is a rather private ...”

“We would not insist on that.” Eric raised his voice, tapping the table, “but could you tell us what you guess happened in the park. What do YOU think occurred on that day?”

Reuben looked down at the carpet with an inaudible sigh.

Çansu put the ape in the blouse, Armamente held her chin in her hand, and Inga flexed her muscles in her feet. Eric frowned.

“Martha had many enemies. She was very adventurous. We had a troublesome journey behind us. Maybe we soon would have split up. I don’t know what happened to her. I miss her, I do...”

Reuben’s face was sorrowful, and he looked much older now. He looked as if he was ninety years old, though he probably was no

more than seventy. Armamente still wanted to ask for Martha's laptop, but Eric now acted as if he wanted them all to leave soon. He apparently felt very uncomfortable.

Eric had not touched on the Mexican coffee.

"Might I take a look upstairs?" Armamente asked Reuben. "Perhaps I could come back? You do have some sort of social club here, haven't you?" the young transgender said.

"Sure, I give you a ring, and you may join another day. On next Wednesday. I am sorry. I don't like to talk about Martha." Reuben turned his head to all sides, like he was exercising the muscles of the neck, and then coughed with a shrill sound. He was looking at Çansu, who scribbled notes in her book, now standing in front of the Mississippi photograph beside the door to the hallway.

Inga had opened the front door.

"What is that?" she asked, referring to the photograph, while the head of the monkey was bumping on her hip.

"It is a riverboat, on which I once served as a Captain," Reuben answered.

"What was her name?" Çansu asked, pen in her hand.

"Conchita."

"Aah," Çansu said admiringly but got a push by Armamente. Then they all left in a hurry, ushered forward to the street by Eric. He felt that they somehow had been trespassing at Reuben's and wanted to undo this offense by vanishing as quickly as possible.

"Absolutely meaningless," Armamente murmured, but nobody heard what she said.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Inga and Armamente spent the rest of the afternoon discussing Martha, specifically Martha's connection with the writers of the circle, where she had met with the elusive Mr. Askelon. Now they had set out to use the Internet and their smartphones to find the other members of this illustrious gang of aspiring bestseller authors. Armamente also contacted Askelon for the addresses of the other participants in the writer's circle. She thought he most likely had those addresses because the circle had had the habit of outdoor meetings and thus used to form contact chains to assemble at different spots at certain times.

Inga and Armamente, who both were determined to solve the mystery, did not dare to discuss Eric's obvious lack of interest out of fear that he would call the whole thing off.

Askelon finally mailed Inga a small list with six names on it. W. Thunder, O. Cantrell, Bill Porter, Anne Porter, Sam Ellis, and Jackie Nelson.

Inga and Armamente divided the names between them and started to call the persons up.

By the information they got through the calls, which was a very diverse one, they soon reached an even better understanding of how Martha had appeared to the circle folks.

The most interesting among the writers seemed to be the Porter couple. Armamente and Inga had found out that they lived outside of Baltimore in the countryside on a small farm that they had rented, where they - according to *Google* - raised Labrador dogs. The two investigators, who seemed to enjoy each other's company more and more as the days went by, set out to visit them.

They went there by bus and were thrilled by the desert landscape. The mansion lay on a small table-like hill in a flat landscape. When they got closer, they experienced a lovely summery heat. When Armamente looked around, she noticed clouds in all directions, but the sky was clear above their heads. But they were on the countryside now.

They at arrival were stunned at all the small blockhouses that were built around the main building. These houses were for dogs. But it showed that some of them contained birds as well. And on the slopes of the small knolls, sheep wandered around, now and then lifting their cute heads and looking at Inga and Armamente with rectangular, scared, greenish-brownish eyes. Some of them bleated in a low murmuring way.

One of them sounded like an oboe.

At a small distance from the house, Inga saw a sign telling them that they now entered the *Porter Free Town*, and on a pole, there was a flag, white and blue, with a large red “P” (as in “Porter”) on it.

Nobody seemed to be at home, though Inga had talked to Bill just an hour ago on the phone.

Suddenly, a woman appeared from a guesthouse. She wore what seemed as a tarnished white dress, Armamente thought. She was rather old and seemed of Vietnamese or Cantonese origin. The woman soon approached them and waved her thumb towards another small house that appeared to be built over a small well and half shouted:

“Bill.”

Armamente and Inga then entered the small brick house.

Then they met a middle-aged man, who wiped off his hands towards his shirt and presented himself as Bill.

After a couple of minutes, they sat in Ann’s and Bill’s enormous kitchen, which contained an old iron oven, and Anne, a small, endlessly pale woman, soon served them tea. They never had coffee, they said, because of tender stomachs.

“Yes,” Bill began, while changing shirt, to a clean one, which was handed to him by his wife.

“I was wondering when someone finally would come to ask about Martha. We have been wondering that for a long time, haven’t we?”

Anne nodded and put on a faint smile on her thin lips.

“It is good to tell, but not pleasant, though,” she said.

“Who was that old woman in the garden?”, Armamente asked Bill. She saw that Inga had been shocked by something. Inga was busy pulling herself together, with an intense stare down on the surface of the tea in the tea-cup.

“Who was that woman in the garden,” Armamente retook, “ ... that unlucky woman?”

“Oh, she is alright. We met her a year ago. It was outside a restaurant downtown, you see. They were changing their furniture in that Chop restaurant. They had flung out some giant Chinese carpets in their backyard, where Ann and I happened to sit and watch a game of table tennis with friends. We approached the Chinese and asked if we might have one of those carpets, a yellowish one, with dragons on it. It was mighty thick too.”

Bill measured at least ten centimeters between his index finger and thumb.

“Of course, they said, but then one woman lingered a little longer behind, and it appeared that she wanted to get away from the restaurant. She helped us out to the street with the large and heavy carpet, and then she asked us if we might take her with them for protection. Other Chinese, young men, came out on the street with sticks in their hands, but I always carry a Glock, and when I took it out and pointed at them and shouted for help up the alley, they vanished. Since then, Lin has been with us. She is taking care of the dogs and has a small massage saloon in the basement as well.”

“I see,” Armamente said. But she was worried all the same.

“Is this the carpet?” Inga said and pointed to the salon, where a tip of thick yellowish carpet, with dragons upon it, gleamed forth.

“Exactly,” Bill said, “a lovely carpet. Maybe valuable too,” Armamente noticed that his eyes were almost infinitely small as if the owner of those eyes had spent his whole life smoking pot.

“Now, you said you are happy we’d come?” Inga said, almost in a hostile tone. She was as bothered as Armamente by the sight of the poor Asian woman.

“Yes, we had Martha here as a guest the week before she died,” Bill said, blowing up his left cheek to enormous proportions.

“She was vain,” Ann said absentmindedly.

“You don’t say!? Tell us, please!” Armamente said and leaned forward to try to catch a glance of the living room, through a doorway, that was just half covered by a Turkish purple curtain, with oriental figures on it, which was hanging on some copper nails. The entire house smelled of Turkish cigarettes and dead snakes, Armamente thought and involuntarily brought her hand to her nose.

“Martha rang me up after the class one evening in May,” Bill told the visitors, “and asked if she could come and visit us. I agreed. She came, silver blond hair and black city dress, and she stayed for three weeks.”

“She said she had a small apartment on Fell’s Point, but Martha was not used to living alone and told us that she needed a day or two, and then maybe she would buy a small pet dog for company. She hated to be alone, she said.”

“On the second evening, though, she began to brag about her seductive powers. She said that she could still, although at the age of fifty-six, have any man she wanted.”

“Much rather she talked about men and herself than about literature. In our writer’s circle, she was not prominent at all. Not as a writer. She sure dominated as a person. But she rarely showed us anything she had written. I don’t think she wrote anything at all. She was there just for the company.”

“Yes, she was incredibly vain.”, Ann said another time, picking her nose.

“I told her that I thought she looked like Marilyn Monroe. That made her happy. Every day she talked to Lin, who has a massage salon in the basement here, about to give her massage. Martha said she did not know who was the mayor of Baltimore, for instance, but she could swear that she could make him jump in bed with her. And give her some antique artifact at that, as a gift.”

“I told her that it would be impolite to doubt it....”

“Now, we searched for who was the mayor of Baltimore. But that turned out to be a woman. Then Martha said that that woman must have a brother. The mayor had. It was a guy who generally went by the name of Leclerc. To make a long story somewhat shorter, she set up a meeting with Leclerc, and then she was gone about six o’clock on one evening.”

“She returned at 01.00 AM on the following day - in the middle of the night, that is - and was all messed up and crying. She had been ridiculed by this man Leclerc and utterly insulted. He had even laughed at her. Martha went to bed and was not seen until the evening on the next day. She was utterly silent.”

“Now, on the next day, when we were trying to console her, it turned out that Lin, our Chinese factotum, had her nephew here, a boy around twenty years old. It was not long before Martha had dragged the boy with her up to her attic room and seduced him.”

“Lin herself afterward was raving mad, but she gave Martha her massage as usual on the next day. Only she gave her the evil dragon massage, she said. An expert masseuse, she knew that if you press the right spots, the body will not relax, but the body will react with severe nightmares, jerking, and appetite loss. After the massage,

Martha was a wreck. She looked for Lin, but Lin had hidden in a doghouse. Martha then left for her apartment. This was on the day before she died.”

Armamente and Inga sat with their chins dropped.

“But that is MURDER!” Inga shouted. “Lin is the murderer.” Suddenly Lin herself entered from behind the Turkish curtain.

“Why so? It is not possible to die from a massage!” she asserted, “nobody can prove that she died from a little nightmare.”

Armamente looked at the elderly Chinese woman, who still had her tarnished dress, a massage suit, on.

“She is probably right,” Armamente shouted, to silence the utterances of all the others. Because, as it was, the persons in the kitchen seemed divided into two camps. Ann and Inga seemed to immediately want to convict Lin of murder, while Bill and Armamente played a waiting game.

Lin’s face was stern. Armamente was curious about why she had told Bill and Ann that she had executed this kind of massage.

“Because I am an honest being,” Lin answered.

Armamente was so upset that she gave a shout that echoed in the entire building.

“I HATE this!”

“Who knows what happened in the park?” Bill said while he cleaned the table from cups and saucers.

Inga just stared out through the window, towards the clouds at the horizon.

“Poor Martha! Little Martha...” she said.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Some folks look for comfort, and some want thrills; some are looking for someone who can take care of them. Some look for money and power, and some are looking for adventure.

Some want hot love. Some are just happy with themselves and the way other people are.

Odile was at the library studying. She was an industrious student. Odile seemed to be a well-organized, perfectly content, and audacious young woman, but you only had to be with her for an hour or so to realize that she had a soul as complex as it was worried. Her eyes were as watchful as they were dreamy and brave. She was an audacious woman, and you also saw that she was on the look for something else, something distant and rarely seen, which she yet did not know what it was. Now and then she kind of shook off the present situation off her mind and put up a new face, as if she said: "Now what? Let us shove all we know aside and get to learn something new."

She thus could put her worry aside.

Late in the day, she would become calmer. Soon she would wander off home. You could see her by in the Inner Harbor or by the waterfront, she looked afar, and she was silent.

Some said she did not know where her father was. He had left when she was five years old. She did know who her mother was, but not where she was. She also had left without notice.

She sometimes thought that since there always seemed to be so many problems caused to humans during childhood, the best childhood would be one of a coma. Then, when the person was revived at the age of fifteen, she at least could not be hampered by ugly memories from the early years. Some said of Odile that she always thought of how to find her father.

She wanted to be a psychologist — and many who wants to be psychologists like motorbikes. The motorcycle thing was much like looking for the mysterious "Self." She wondered how a reflexive pronoun ever had managed to take the place of the soul. A reflexive pronoun was nothing but a mirror. Why call the innermost of a human being a ... mirror?

Odile wanted to get cute David on a motorcycle.

Having a bike is almost like writing a novel. Having a friend also is very much like writing a book. Having a friend, however, is not like having a motorcycle.

She put aside her book of duty, which was an introduction to psychology.

How should she ever manage to become a psychologist when she had no father and her mother just had left?

She thought about David. They had had a good time at the zoo. They had stopped in front of an empty cage. There was a hole in the roof. The owl, a barred owl, had run from the zoo. David thought that most animals at the zoo did not belong there. Odile had said that the animals probably had not a worse life at zoo than anywhere else. It was a romantic notion, that they were better off in the wild, she had said.

David had seemed all taken aback by her person. He was clearly in love with her. When she thought about David, she smiled. He was not her type. He was definitely too weak. He was just a baby yet. Maybe he would mature.

She took out her phone, smacked the book together. On her way out from the library, she called David up.

It was 07.30 pm, and David answered.

“Hello!”

“Hello, it’s Odile.”

“Wow! Hi!” the boy’s voice raised to falsetto.

Odile smiled.

“I have got an extra helmet,” she said. ”Want to go for a ride?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Inga and Armamente were on their way on the bus back to the house on Oyster Pancake Street to tell Eric what they had discovered. But they were both shaken, and they were not very keen to tell Eric about Martha and Leclerc, or whatever his name was.

Eric had been in love with the seductress, and now she was dead. Inga had all the time known who Martha was, but she did not think Eric had. The doctor was broadminded and tolerant, but when it comes to love, everything is a whole new story.

The two newfound friends, Armamente and Inga, were sitting on the bus and wished again they knew what had happened in that secluded, closed park that afternoon. Had Martha Longman gone insane because of Lin's awkward massage? Or was there more to it?

"Do you think," Armamente said, "...that we might gain something by letting the police know about the Porters and Lin?"

"I don't see how we might," Inga answered, glancing out in the autumn sun on the streets and cars of Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A..

"Maybe they might retake the autopsy"

"And find out that she was crazy??" Inga snapped. "I don't think psychiatry has come that far. It almost certainly never will neither. I hate psychiatrists."

The bus stopped in front of the red light.

"Do you think Martha hated psychiatrists?"

"She died on the following day. You were listening, weren't you?"

Armamente smiled. She loved that they had come so close to each other in just a couple of days that they could quarrel with each other without further ado.

"Yes, of course. I just thought that Martha would be exactly that kind of person who would like to visit psychiatrists. Male psychiatrists, that is," Armamente said in a light tone. "You know, every bit of information is of most significant interest to us, as private eyes."

"She just died," Inga said, "and as a matter of fact I am beginning to lose a bit of interest now."

Two blue and white police cars drove by, exerting hideous signals with their horns.

“What do you mean by that, that ‘she just died’...”

“I simply mean that she probably just had a heart attack and died.”

“She did not have a heart attack. Such things an autopsy perfectly well can reveal.”

When the bus stopped, they immediately walked the few yards to the house to search for Eric.

They locked up the door and went in. They could not at once notice Eric. After a while, Armamente spotted some smoke entering the sleeping room on the back, from the balcony. She rushed to the balcony, and there she spotted Eric lying in a folding chair, smoking a cigar.

“Do you SMOOOOKE?” she yelled, entering the small balcony, where a whole row of small pots contained blue flowers.

“I do not inhale,” the doctor said, looking at Armamente, his eyes looking pale.

“This is a lovely balcony, at least?” he added.

“Oh yeah. But you did buy that cigar?” Inga cried out.

“Yes. By the way, I have been to a psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist?”

“Yeah.”

“I did not know that you needed a psychiatrist. I actually tho...” Eric coughed. Now Armamente appeared with a cup of tea in her hand.

“Hello Eric,” she said, “what have you been up to?”

“I visited Martha’s shrink,” Eric told them.

The women were truly stunned.

Soon the three of them comfortable gathered at the balcony to have tea and reflect upon what the psychiatrist had revealed.

Eric put out the cigar, which had a sharp odor and a black smoke too:

“I checked around a little to the most prominent psychiatrists in town with private practice. I told receptionists I just needed information about a dead person. Suddenly I got to know that a doctor by the name of Silbermann had a patient named Martha with platinum hair.”

“I got an appointment right away, and Silbermann sacrificed the hour before lunch to tell about her, for a reasonable sum of money.”

“She had visited him numerous times during recent years. Martha had been a very serious patient, and she had not clung to Silbermann in any ordinary or unordinary way or for that matter tried to seduce him. But she had complained about her misery, claiming that her childhood had turned her into an insecure girl, prone to senseless adventures, instead of looking for true love. She had in early years been subjected to abuse, but the real problem was that she had not any self-worth at all, according to herself.”

“I never thought that she would look for comfort by a psychiatrist,” Inga said. “She was not excessively proud, but she certainly was afraid of appearing vulnerable.”

“Silbermann told me that he had asked her if she was afraid of people. She claimed that she was not afraid of anybody or anything. Except for birds.”

“Birds?” Armamente cried out.

“Yes. Her husband at the time, Carlos, had owned a giant red parrot named “Sammy.” This was in her first marriage. Martha had tried to take out her real anger at Carlos on Walter and had walked around with the large cage, teasing the bird. Suddenly the door of the cage had opened up, and Sammy had escaped, then hitting her with his wings, chasing her around, so she fell about and hit her head. Carlos had come and rescued her from the beak of the bird. When Sammy was back in his cage, Martha was crying. She soon left Carlos, but she told Silbermann that until that very day, she had nightmares about Sammy.”

“Strange,” Inga said.

“Did they still meet at the time of her death?” Armamente asked.

“Oh, yes. Martha had an appointment on the day after she died.”

“How do you feel about Martha when you hear all this?”

“Of course I feel bad,” Eric said, and twisted his mouth to illustrate his feelings, “but you two, did you meet with the Porters?”

Armamente then told Eric about Martha’s days in the *Porter Free Town*. But, out of shame and pity, she omitted the story about Martha’s seduction of the Chinese boy.

Eric listened carefully.

“Yes, I remember her passion for massage. And she thought that it was a very classy thing too,” he said.

“She was rather vain, wasn’t she?” Armamente said, feeling both tired and disappointed.

Inga was resting before the telly when Eric and Armamente returned to the living room.

“Maybe we’ll concentrate on Reuben.” Armamente said, “The important thing in life is of course, to concentrate on people alive. Let’s concentrate on Eric and Reuben. They are still alive.” Armamente said, in a desperate try to both be funny and to create some sort of engagement.

“Death is a matter for the living,” she said, but added:” but life is the most significant matter.”

“Who is looking at a television-series like this?” Inga said, holding the moist remote control to her cheek.

“You are,” Eric said while slumping in another armchair.

Eric never talked about his deepest feelings. Maybe very few people do. He thought life was like a dream. The image of Martha slowly was disappearing. He sensed that he had never known her. This insight created nausea within him. He didn’t want to have a life where he did not even know his loved ones.

Suppose there was an afterlife, and you met your friends in Paradise, and it turned out that you had never known who they were. At least for Paradise’s sake, you have to be sure of who your loved ones were.

He clenched his fists in painful sorrow. This was not the way life was supposed to be. In despair, he cried out to the women in the room:

“I love you!!”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ethan and David, on the following Wednesday, called upon their friends, and Odile, Elsa, Haylee, Raymond, and Beth all agreed to come along to *Reuben's Social Club*. Thomas would also attend. By seven o'clock in the evening, the eight of them were let in at Reuben's place.

Those among them, who were newcomers, marveled at the stuffed chimpanzee and the zebra, as well as the numerous beautiful oil paintings and the curious atmosphere in Reuben's house, as well as at Reuben himself.

They sat down on the sofa, on chairs, and on the floor on the old dusty carpets, by the old piano that had some stuffed orioles on it.

"It was during the Cold War," Reuben started, when everybody had been familiarized, and he shuddered.

"As you all know, it was a strange war. I served as a 1st officer on a ship, a small rusty American vessel that transported cars and diesel engines to foreign places. It took back animals, corn, antiquities, and some rare wood and a few passengers. It was a spooky shipping company. I never understood who the owner was. The name of the ship was *Lily Mae*. Under the name, it said "Athens," but I never knew about any Greek connections, other than the word "Athens" painted with huge black letters on her bow side. But on the other hand, there are many "Athens."

We were lying on the swing offshore Palembang, a rather famous seaport upstream a river in Sumatra. Two miles away in these waters, also by an anchor, a Russian ship was harbored, a ship about twice our size. Its name was *Omsk* from Archangelsk. It was a sizeable black vessel. It was challenging to understand what her cargo was.

It was July, and we celebrated one of our passengers' birthdays because we had eight tourists aboard.

During the party on deck, a wind gust came and brought a small parasol, owned by the woman we were celebrating. It flew overboard. It landed on the river and swiftly was taken by the strange current and eventually ended up by the side of the Russian ship.

It was getting dark, and as you perhaps know night falls swiftly comes in tropical regions. Still, we saw a sailor getting down to the

waterline, by a rope, alongside the *Omsk*. He snatched the small red umbrella from the surface of the sea and then took it aboard, and vanished through a door. And so did the umbrella.

Our Captain, Derek Hogan, a sturdy fellow from Ireland, got confused. He told one of his mates, the 2nd officer, whose name was Ferguson, to take some men by the small sloop and go over to *Omsk* to ask for the parasol.

Miss Wilson, who just had turned thirty-two, and who had lost her parasol, giggled and squeezed my hand. Unfortunately, I had some day before contracted blood poisoning in my left index finger and was on penicillin, and it hurt a bit.

Ferguson however took with him two young Irish seamen and, in the morning, by 11.00 AM, they rowed over in the small boat.

The Russians would not at all take him aboard, though. They simply said that they knew of no parasol or nothing at all.

Officer Ferguson came back and told the Captain.

We conferred for a minute, and then we tried, through the telegraph, to come into contact with the *Omsk*. Then we got the strangest reply.

‘Our Captain is having a bath.’

Miss Evelyn Wilson told us to leave the whole thing. Her parasol was not her dearest belonging, she said. But our Captain, who was very fond of the young passenger from New York, said he would sort it out, if it was the last thing he ever did. Miss Wilson had earlier been cuddling with the Captain on deck, stroking her hand across his bald head, as he had been sitting in a deckchair, holding his Captain’s cap in his lap. He would go over to the *Omsk* himself, he said.”

Ethan looked at David. David looked consumed with the story, and his mouth was more open than usual. It almost hang down om his chest.

“Now, I was curious om the Omsk and I got hold of a pair of good binoculars and got up to the steering hut and tried to focus on the deck of the black USSR ship, that was rather ugly a ship too, to find out what was going on.

It was a good pair of binoculars, and I could see that the Russians had made a small swimming pool out of cloth, of tarpaulin, as sometimes is the habit in tropical waters, and there the Captain swam. By the side of the pool, I could see some uniformed personnel. This was something new and unexpected. As a matter of fact,

two high Russian officers from the Russian navy were onboard the *Omsk*.

Miss Wilson, who was a redhead, - they are the worst ..." Reuben smiled at Elsa, Beth and Haylee, neither of whom were any red-heads.

"...again bade the Captain, let it all be. Evelyn pressed his hand. But the Captain soon decided to take his best uniform on and get in the boat and go over to the foreign ship himself.

He bade me accompany him. I showed him my left hand, which was all wrapped up in a bundle of white cloth. But he said that he just wanted my mental support, not my muscular powers. I had displayed my philosophical qualifications during dinner conversations during the entire journey. The two sailors that had brought Ferguson over, should row the boat. He told me to get my white uniform coat on, where ribbons showed that I was the 1st officer onboard *Lily Mae*.

At 1.00 PM, we got over. The sun shone and it was hot. When we came up to the Russian, Captain Hogan rose to his full length standing in the small sloop, and he waved his hand majestically and shouted through a large dark green megaphone that he had brought with him:

"Let me aboard! Let me aboard! I am Captain Hogan from New Haven!"

Nothing was heard from the Russian ship, and I could see no movement on her deck from my position in the small boat, where I was seated in the stern, my bandaged hand wrapped up for this occasion in a small plastic bag.

After a couple of minutes, though, a ladder was thrown down, and a sailor shouted:

"You might come along aboard! Both of you!"

The voice of the sailor sounded in perfect English.

Hogan and I climbed onto the *Omsk*.

We were greeted in the heartiest of ways. The Captain of the Russian ship was equally dressed up, but in a light blue dinner suit, and the officers, one of whom was a colonel, stood in a parade. Another man, in a subtle grey double kept suite, presented himself as the Russian ambassador to Palembang and Greater Indonesia. Mr. Titov.

The Russian Captain, whose name was Koslov, or something like that, a big, fat guy, took us on sightseeing aboard; he showed us the whole deck, the navigation equipment, the pool, and the machine-

room and bade us look at his crew. Then the steward, who looked like Djingis Khan, told us to enter the dining room where a giant meal was served.

Hogan protested and told Koslow that he just wanted to pick up the umbrella.

Eventually, we sat down at the table, which was set for a real feast, with Koslow, the Chief plus four officers and five men from the Russian Embassy of Palembang, and started with the soup.

The steward, a man called Dschuganov, filled our glasses. I whispered to him that I was on penicillin. He looked at my hand and secretly nodded, and he then continuously served me orange lemonade.

Hogan looked at his glass, and suddenly the boisterous Koslow bade us mighty welcome onboard the revolutionary ship.

“Let’s have a toast to the great Russian revolution!” Koslow cried out, hailed, and lifted his glass, which in all was identical with Hogan’s glass.

Hogan emptied his whiskey, and so did Koslow.

I looked on and sipped at my lemonade.

Soon after that, Mr. Titov, who had not participated in the earlier toast, lifted his glass. Dschuganov had filled up our Captain’s drink to the brim, and he had to empty another glass of Tullamore Dew, which was the brand. I remember it very clearly. Three times distilled bourbon. Not my favorite, but anyway.

Well, you are perhaps beginning to understand where this story goes.”

Ethan and David nodded. Reuben sipped a little coffee.

“Well, Hogan looked at me, perfectly unhappy, and mumbled, covering his mouth with his hand: ‘What shall I do? They are trying to kill me!’ I looked down into the soup. ‘You’ll have to take them out, one after another, all of them. No matter the cost!’ I said, with a look of terror mirrored at my face, I think.

The first officer of Omsk, a big fellow with giant whiskers, now was in turn:

“To Mr. Brezhnev!”

Hogan drank.

Then a high ranked military man from the Embassy heaved up his voice and claimed:

“To our lovely guests, both of you!”

Dschuganov kept filling up Hogan’s glass.

After an hour, and nine glasses, Hogan slurred, and he said aloud:

“Where is the men’s room?”

Both Hogan and I were escorted to the toilet.

Watching himself in the cheap mirror, Hogan was almost crying.

“What ... a..m I ... g,g,g, ...oing Too..... doooo?”

“Hang in!” I told him, watching my face in one of the other mirrors, noticing that my face was – as expected – looking perfectly normal. Hogan’s face was deep scarlet. They simply were to take him down in increments, I thought.

When we came back to the dining table, we ate beef and later were served ice cream. Hogan almost fell off his chair.

Our Captain of the *Lily Mae* lifted his Tullamore Dew to greet another Russian officer who had lifted his glass and chose to praise the weather:

“To the Russian sun!” the Russian shouted.

Hogan, who barely could speak, screamed:

“I want the red ... parasol!”

Now, Koslow laughed and said:

“Oh! Of course. I forgot. We have just found it. Here it is.”

Dschuganov carried the small parasol to my Captain, and then Hogan tried to get up from the table. His legs did not bear him, though. Two Tatarian sailors had to carry Hogan, five hours after he had gotten aboard the *Omsk*, to the ladder and then sink him down to the slope by several ropes. With the parasol, which shone bright red, tied to his suit with a piece of cloth, he was then carried back to our vessel. Miss Wilson cried her eyes out almost by the sight of her dear Captain, and Captain Hogan was taken to the ship’s care room and looked over by the 2nd officer, which always is the one aboard any seafaring vehicle, as you may know, that takes care of the sick.

Hogan finally had passed out. He woke up on the next day. However, I myself, as 1st officer, had to take charge of *Lily Mae* and bring her and all of us all the way back to New York. Our Captain stayed in bed for the rest of the journey and would not talk to anybody. Miss Wilson was shocked and started to read the Bible and the book of Job.

Captain Hogan actually never recovered but spent ten years of his life in a care home for older people. He passed away, never being able to find out, even in a remote way, what had occurred to him.

I, of course, have always blamed myself for his death.”

David and Ethan applauded.

“You are, of course, not telling the truth,” David said.

Reuben laughed. But his clown eyes did not. Since they were operated around, there never was an actual smile on Reuben's face. Not much was said after the awful account about Derek Hogan. David and Odile walked around in Reuben's apartment and looked at the paintings. Some books consumed Ethan in one of the bookshelves in the small study. Elsa, Beth, and Reuben were talking about the poor dog, who had been laying by the sofa all the time, and which seemed ill again.

Chapter Thirty

To Ethan, the following week was one of work at the drug-store and reading. He also went to have a haircut. But he kept his Rasta hair, and it wagged on his head when he moved.

David tried to concentrate on his course in Italian Renaissance. Butterfield had a phone call from Eliza in London, telling him that she might not come home even for Christmas because she thought her jazz band would have a Santa gig then. Eric, Inga, and Armamente were enjoying their time in Baltimore. Eric and Armamente had chess battles, and Inga bought some new furniture for the house.

Reuben was walking his dog, feeling a bit uneasy. He was waiting to get a letter from his old Mississippi love, whom he had presented with a necklace of great value..

Chapter Thirty-One

David and Ethan were together with Odile, Beth, Elsa, Thomas, and Dulcinea's Armamente, who also had had a call for the upcoming Wednesday *Social Club* meeting from Reuben, asking her if she would like to attend the gathering.

When everybody was on their places in his living room, the Captain with the clown face, without further ado, told them a story of a certain Captain Burbank. This was Reuben's third longer story, and it would be his last as well.

"It happened some years ago in the Persian Gulf outside of the Iranian coast when a man named Burbank and I were managing a small convoy of Patrol Ships. As joint chiefs, we had orders to evacuate a general and nine men from a camp to our ships. The convoy was thus a military one and consisted of three ships. Medium size vessels it was, and we were three Captains, and the two other Captains were relatively young. On the third ship, we had a guy, who ordinarily was a Chemistry professor, a Mr. Knight. In these years we had all sorts of personnel.

We had set out to rescue a gang of paratroopers led by a commanding general that had been stuck in a small castle just close to the coast. We supposed that we had been lured there but could not do anything about that. We had to try to get the folks out of there, alive.

Burbank was a young, competent Captain who had excelled in two executive maneuvers before. He was, according to his reputation, fearless, bordering on lunacy.

'We will pose your respective vessels on anchor one mile to the south and one to the north, covering my ship,' I said. 'And then when I got straight up to the pier, and I let them run aboard, you will shoot at anything that moves, and as soon as I am back, in line with your ships, we will leave. But we are going to move quickly.'

We did so.

Knight, Burbank, and I had hugged each other and swore we should make this.

My own ship suddenly had to fix a propeller blade, and Burbank got the order to take the final step in evacuating the gang ashore.

Burbank went right to the shore, flung out a ladder at the small port pier of the castle, where our lads were waiting, swept in ladies' coats, disguised.

When the ten refugees had got aboard, Burbank's ship turned around. Then, however, the shooting from the Iranian artillery started, and what a shooting! Knight's vessel, *Patrol Ship 211*, which waited alongside my own almost at once, sank. Knight himself, with three men, managed to come over to my ship, *Patrol Ship 113*, which was busy shooting at the Iranians as well as looking for Burbank. When Burbank had come halfway, he too got harpooned, and when his ten guests sat out a lifeboat, he also sprung on it. His vessel, *Patrol Ship 101*, did not sink. It lay floating while he arrived at our boat with the happy general and his men.

Suddenly, Burbank remembered that he had a rare painting, a tiny but precious painting by Renoir left on *Patrol Ship 101*. He turned around with the motorized lifeboat, with two sailors to help him. He managed to collect the Renoir, wrapped up in brown paper, and he got aboard the lifeboat just as *Patrol Ship 101* gave up and sank, in a roar, with over twenty of its skilled crew.

The enemy was still shooting, but Burbank managed to reach my boat, which, as you understand, was the only ship we had left. I was raving mad about the delay, mostly since the reason for it was such a silly thing as collecting a painting, which in itself still probably was not genuine at all, but fake. I always thought everything with Burbank was fake.

We even were subjected quite unnecessarily to enemy fire.

Anyway: as soon as Burbank got aboard, he got into a big quarrel with the general, a fellow by the name of Resonansstedt. Then our boat, *Patrol Ship 113*, was hit. We rushed to two lifeboats.

To make a long story a bit shorter, the general did not make it to our boats, and in the commotion, just Knight, Burbank, and I managed to survive to the shore. The Persians immediately caught us, and they interned us in the castle.

Burbank, though, had managed to, under his skirt, save the painting, which was very small, so far as into the Iranian camp.

Knight and Burbank got into a gorgeous fight, and Burbank finally walloped him that he, being an academic and not at all used to fighting, died a day later.

I at least had in my Captain's cap my small spy camera, which I later hid in the toilet. As a memory, I kept photos of Burbank's ghastly action when he escaped from Patrol Ship 101, with the Renoir in his hand.

Burbank finally lost his painting, which was destroyed by fanatics since it was a nude. Burbank and I spent one year together in prison before *the Mossad* rescued us."

"Is that really true?" Thomas cried out, almost laughing.

The others laughed too. All except Armamente.

Reuben held an earnest face and said:

"Unfortunately, it is all true."

David and Odile both thought it was a great story. Nobody knew if it was true. Armamente looked at Reuben with admiration and curiosity. Old Reuben was no ordinary man. She was convinced the whole story was true.

"Tell us another one!" Beth said.

"When did you first time go to sea?" Elsa asked.

The youngsters now, since Reuben wanted the story to sink in, looked around in the apartment. There was a lot to see. There were paintings and stuffed animals, but there were also musical instruments, vases, old books, maps, tin and copper boxes, playthings for children, masquerade attires, and a lot more.

"You need to have somebody cleansed all this stuff," Elsa said.

"What is a story, when you think of it?" David asked, philosophically. "I wonder if the whole world isn't comprised of stories."

Armamente joined them in their conversation.

"I think the captain is fantastic. Are all the sailors in Baltimore this fantastic?" she said.

"You are not from here?" Ethan asked.

"No, I come from New York and Boston. I study in Boston."

"Ah," Ethan said.

"I can hear that from how you say 'Boston.'" David laughed, "It sounds like this: 'Basten'."

They all laughed.

"Bawlmr," Armamente said.

They laughed again.

Now Elsa, Beth, Odile, and Reuben were gathered in the kitchen while David, Ethan, and Armamente were alone in the living room.

"Look here! Joseph Conrad's collected works!" Ethan pointed at an impressive row of books with gilded letters on them. It was the beautiful *Gresham Edition*.

"So good!" Armamente said, who had her finger on a book by Carson McCullers. She smiled knowingly. She also took out a thin volume by Cornell Woolrich, "*The bride wore black.*"

"He is widely read." She finally said, referring to Reuben. They chatted about books, Edgar Allen Poe, Frank Zappa and about some movies.

"Now, listen," Armamente said, "I am new here in Baltimore. Couldn't we meet up and you show me around in town someday? Or I could visit you. You are pals, eh?"

"Yes. But my house is in such bad shape. I am sharing an apartment with Elsa," David said. "Do you live in a hotel or something?" he then asked.

"Nae, we have rented a whole house."

"Who are "we"?" Ethan asked, and Armamente explained.

They soon decided that Ethan and David should visit Armamente and her friends Inga and Eric Goldkettel on the following evening at 0800 PM. The whole party soon broke up after every guest had thanked Reuben, who seemed delighted to have been their host.

When the young folks were leaving, Reuben glanced at his photograph of the old steamboat on the wall - the "*Conchita.*"

Longman closed the door, and out of his pocket, he drew a letter that earlier had been left to his postbox and that he had managed to save for to read when the guests had left. It was a letter from his Mississippi woman. He had sent her the bracelet, and with the bracelet, a letter and here came the answer.

He sat down in his favorite armchair, beneath the stuffed chimpanzee, which looked terribly ragged. Slowly Reuben now opened the small light blue envelope that smelled of elegant perfume.

It read:

"Dear Reuben!

Thank you soooooowow much for the lovely gift! You should not have!

I remember those years on Conchita so well. I loved it. I will never forget them.

Nowadays, I am just concentrated upon my small antique shop, and I have my dear bird. The bird and I travel a lot, and when we do, I just close my shop. I bought Sammy a year ago. He is a large red Ara, a parrot. We enjoy all the bird exhibitions.

*I am sending you a photo of him and me.
Actually, we were in Baltimore last spring and almost won
the first prize. We had some trouble with the police.
Now I have not more to tell. I have always been a lousy
writer when it comes to things like these.*

*Kisses from
Your most loving
Cindy*

Hug hug hug hug hug ”

The old Captain stared at the letter. Then he smelled at it again and finally lifted the photograph. It showed an old lady with a red parrot in her lap.

Reuben wiped his eyes, walked into his study and took out a magnifying glass, and scrutinized the photograph.

Well, it seemed to be Cindy, after all. But how she had aged! All wrinkled. It was not more than thirty years since they had met. But she looked so very old.

She toured with a parrot!

“She is touring with a bird!” Reuben said aloud, in a broken voice, and put the letter on top of some books on the bookshelf. He went to a cupboard to take out a bottle of brandy.

Reuben did not think that he had aged. He was only focused on the woman’s age and looks, whom he had presented with a million-dollar bracelet.

Chapter Thirty-Two

When Armamente returned home on this Wednesday night, she met with Eric and Inga, who were playing chess in the living room on the first floor. From the speakers, a Concerto by Vivaldi streamed out in the room, and Armamente discovered that it had a marvelous, soothing effect on her.

“Who wins?” Armamente grinned, and she put her cheek on Eric’s shoulder to get a picture of the game standing from his point of view.

It seemed as if Inga had the stronger position, she thought.

“Let us pause to hear what the evening at Reuben’s was like,” Inga suggested. Eric nodded, and the three of them all moved to the chairs and sofa by the mantelpiece.

“Shoot!” Inga said, smiling at Armamente. Inga, at the same time, wondered how life would develop for this young boy-girl. Inga had in the last few days begun to look at herself as a person dealing with the final chapters of life. The heat and youth of Armamente had overwhelmed her, and she looked with envy at her fresh limbs and broad smile. Inga stared at the pretty, intelligent and agile transgender person whose cheek was glowing, despite the late hour. Often in the years that have passed, Inga had regarded herself as a modern and free spirit and as a progressive and activist one, perhaps just because she had allowed Martha to live that wildest of life that her friend had lived. But now, when she had started to reevaluate Martha, her view of herself had changed remarkably. When she realized that Armamente was the one that took responsibility in their small collective, she slowly found herself to be most sentimental and conservative. She almost thought that she had become such a person that she hitherto had loathed the most, one who protested against every novelty and every change.

“Oh, it was absolutely fantastic!”, Armamente said, “You should have heard Reuben tell the most horrific story about military actions in Iran...”

And she made an extensive recapitulation of the entire early evening.

When she had finished, Inga raised her voice in disbelief:

"Is he telling tales, or are these stories true?"

"They are presented as true," Armamente said.

"You did not talk at all about Martha, did you?" Inga asked, irritated as she presently was at the whole world.

"Nope, but another thing happened. I bade Ethan and David, two of the nicest boys in the world, to come to us tomorrow. We might ask them further about Baltimore and about Reuben too."

"Do they know him well?" Eric asked.

"Not so well. But regarding what we have found out about Martha, I mean, we do not seem to be able to find out so much more. Why don't we go over to Reuben's place and tell him about Martha and the Porters, the massage and all?"

"Yes, maybe she just died, overwhelmed by ... massage?" Inga said with an ironic ring in her voice.

"You mean that that would satisfy Reuben and close the case?" Eric wondered in disbelief.

"We may never know more about Martha than what the Porters told us," Armamente concluded.

"Sometimes one has to let go," Inga agreed.

Eric rose from his chair, with some difficulty, and then stretched his back, yawning. "I think I'll go to bed. Maybe I can think straight tomorrow. Today my head is like fog."

And Eric left the others, who turned on the telly and zapped between the programs until they found an old movie with Jack Nicholson.

"But if Reuben really is interested in knowing what happened to Martha, I don't know," Armamente said when Jack played the piano for the little dog Verdell in the movie.

"What is his real interest then?" Inga said, with a cheese snack between her teeth.

"Maybe he is interested in young girls...."

"You know, I wonder if Martha might have left some belongings with the Porters. She seemed to trust them in a special way. Don't you think she was exceptional with them? Suppose ..." Inga said.

"You are right. I'll call them tomorrow."

Armamente's smartphone rang. She took it up and spotted the name on the display. "Reuben."

"Hello, it's Armamente!"

“Heh,” a voice was heard.

“Hey, It is I am shot...”

Then there was a scramble, and the phone went dead.

“IT’S REUBEN. HE IS SHOT!” Armamente shouted out. She took Eric’s arm and they now called the police and then for a cab.

In a minute, the trio were on their way to Thames Street.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Reuben lay on his back in the hallway, blood all around him when the police arrived. There was no way in saving his life. Reuben had been shot in the stomach, and the blood loss was immense. The patrol officers rang homicide right away, and after fifteen minutes, Lieutenants Ludwig and Sommers arrived. Bill Sommers closed off the entire street and ordered a large gang of forensic engineers to the place of the hideous crime. Ludwig, who knew the victim and had been at the apartment before to discuss the Martha case, carefully strove through all the rooms of the house. When entering Reuben's living room, he froze.

The killer apparently first had called attention by ringing on the door, then shot Reuben and then stepped over his victim to go into the house to steal the famous Matisse painting. Then, as far as one could see from the bloody footprints, he (or she) had retreated the same way, to disappear from the area, presumably by car. As soon as Ludwig had oriented his superior officer about the mysteries of the proceedings to the case, Bill Sommers took out a notepad from his pocket. While licking his lower lip, he said:

"Let us see! Here comes a killer, manages to lure a war veteran to the door and even shoot him in the stomach, without further ado. Suppose Captain Longman knew his killer? And this killer must have had nerves of steel. How come to risk discovery in order to steal a painting? That is odd, very, very odd!"

"Exactly! It does not add up," Hans Ludwig concluded in a vague and contradictory manner.

At this moment, a policeman on guard out on the street announced that two visitors, who claimed they knew the victim, wanted to have access to the investigating officers.

Armamente and Inga were let into the house, through the back of the house, escorted by another policeman.

“So? Who are you?” Sommers shouted. Sommers, who was a big fellow with a red face, always got very nervous when relatives of victims were around on crime scenes. Sommers thought the two newcomers were relatives.

“Relatives? No, no,” Armamente said, “I don’t think he had any. We were just distant friends. And I personally...”

“When did you last meet Mr. Longman?” Sommers interrupted.

“A couple of o hours ago,” Armamente said. Inga nodded.

“You too?” Sommers growlingly asked Inga.

She nodded.

“What did you do here today at Mr. Longman’s place?”

“We were invited to his social club.” Inga answered.

Armamente then had lots of trouble explaining all the oddities that had taken place. The two women were admonished to go to the Police Station uptown to be questioned in full there. Sommers and Ludwig would show up later. But Armamente and Inga had to leave their phone numbers.

“Do we have any witnesses on the street? Do we have cameras?” Sommers shouted.

Ludwig ran around to find answers to the questions posed. As a whole, they had very few leads. But there still were a couple of youngsters outside who could describe the suspected killer.

A young black man named Tiko said that it was a big, white guy, with a robber’s hood and a military jacket. A mobile movie soon appeared from another boy, Zach, who had caught the man on film, as he embarked on his getaway car, a black Volvo. Sommers now sent out the number of the car to every patrol car in the whole of Maryland.

The coroner, Dr. Pullman, a small energetic man with curly red hair and giant glasses, soon delivered the expected information:

“The man was shot with one bullet. He died in ten minutes.”

Armamente and Inga soon were sitting alone in a small questioning room at the BPD on Baltimore Street waiting to be heard.

“Absolutely horrible,” Armamente said, looking intensely at the opposite wall. Her gaze was such as if it tried to perforate the concrete.

“Does this change what we think of the Martha case?” Inga said.

She apparently wondered if Armamente thought that the guy who killed Reuben also had anything to do with Martha's death two months earlier.

Both of them now went silent. The cooling system of the building kept working, omitting a deep murmuring sound. Armamente in an eerie mood got up and soon started walking around in the small deserted room, embarrassing Inga, who did not have any reasonable ideas to reflect on.

Armamente soon cried out:

“HEY! I know!”

She rushed to the room door, locked from the outside, and began pounding with her bare fists.

“Tell this to Mr. Sommers! Please! Tell Mr. Sommers!”

A young, slender police officer with a mustache opened the door and stared at Armamente.

“Tell Mr. Sommers to jump in a car, take some men, and go to the harbor. You will see a military ship. Go on board and ask for Mr. Burbank! There you'll have your killer!”

The young policeman, a guy from Barbados by the name of Powell, took out his phone and got Bill Sommers on the line in a minute. Sommers and Armamente then took a heated discussion, during which Armamente recapitulated the story of *Patrol Ship 113*. When the transgender person hung up and finished the call, Inga almost cried salty tears from excitement.

“You mean, you know what happened?”

The two friends then in a trance danced around in the interrogation room and soon were served coffee and biscuits by a consternated Constable Powell. Now the wait was on for them while Sommers and the SWAT-team in the darkest night embarked on the vessel, which was about to leave Baltimore's Inner Harbor, where it had stayed for a couple of days in the October sun before it should set out on a journey to the Taiwan waters.

“*Call Eric! And call the boys! Call Ethan and David!*” Inga cried out. Then she fumbled in her pocket and took out a phone herself. The police hadn't robbed her of her belongings.

Armamente's face was uncommonly pale and almost as pale as a sea shell in Sahara or something.

Eric had set out sobbing, and he claimed he had got his pain back. Inga and Armamente had to walk him to his bed, where they gave him sedatives, at his ordination (!) and sat by his bed until he fell asleep.

“I have to make a call to Bill Porter!” Armamente whispered when the two of them silently left old doctor Eric’s bedroom, where sun rays lit the old man’s white hair, him laying sleeping on white bed-clothing.

“You will visit the Porters. I will go get the dog,” Inga said and put out her boots that seemed extraordinarily steady and practical.

“Without the microfilm, which made Burbank kill Reuben, we might not get justice for those men who died in the Persian Gulf.” Armamente said.

“Strange thing, that Reuben kept the film and did not go to the police with it.” Inga frowned.

“It is strange. But we will probably never know the reason for THAT, now that Reuben is dead.”

“But Reuben would never give the microfilm to Martha!! He was a man of morals! I don’t see how we will find that film? If it is in the house, the police will, of course, find it. But it is not likely that Reuben kept the film stuffed in his house.” Inga speculated, and it was like she had got new energy out of nowhere.

Read the rest.... In the paperback. Buy it on Amazon!

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