

one

OVER THE YEARS, IN MY IMAGINATION, I HAD TRAVELED TO MANY WONDROUS places – from the crest of Mount Fujiyama to the heart of the Amazon rainforest, the Transvaal to the Wailing Wall. But never had my mental wanderings placed me here: in the consulting room of Dr. Gérard Desjardins, noted plastic surgeon, at his clinic on the outskirts of Zurich.

“Monsieur Schönwasser has told me the whole story,” said the doctor, addressing me in French. “Quite frankly, it’s a miracle that you’re alive. I can only think that being such a big fellow, you had some extra resiliency. For most people, an accident of this nature –”

From across the room, Pierre Schönwasser said, “Please, Doctor, I don’t think there is any need to dwell on the circumstances.”

“No, of course not,” said Desjardins, “please excuse me. Well, Monsieur,” he continued, “let me first tell you – there are limits to what I can do. It wouldn’t be safe for me to alter your body... beyond, ah, what has already been done. However, as for your face, I can make you attractive in a rough sort of way. Like the American actor... the one who always kills people in his movies?”

“That could describe most American actors,” said Schönwasser disdainfully.

“I’m thinking of one in particular – he died some years ago. Blunt... Brontus...”

“Bronson?” I asked.

“Yes. Somewhat like him, and somewhat like the other fellow – the Mexican with an Irish name...”

“Quinn.”

The doctor nodded. “If that’s acceptable to you, we can schedule your operation for early next week. You would stay here until then.”

“Yes,” I said. “Quite acceptable.”

“Good. If you return to the front desk, they’ll help you get settled in.” We shook hands, and he looked at me rather gravely.

“Let me tell you something, Monsieur. I always regard this kind of procedure as a kind of... journey for the patient. It’s as if you’re going from one kind of life to a very different one. And so I want you to know that I’m proud to send you on that journey.”

After he left the room, Schönwasser and I looked at each other, and I smiled. We each understood what the other was thinking: *If only he knew.*

In truth, my journey had already begun – in my mind, years ago; in reality, several months earlier. It had taken time, you see, for my ill-defined fantasy to evolve into a disciplined, orderly plan, perhaps because the fantasy was more comforting. It is always easier to imagine the conquest of the world than to go about the messy business of raising an army.

And even after I had thought it through, it was necessary to enlist a partner; I knew that the venture would be quite impossible to conduct on my own. Thus, I summoned Schönwasser to my home, where I told him of my intentions – and waited, for nearly three minutes, while he said nothing.

Finally, I asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking,” he replied, “that you have completely lost your mind.”

I was truly shocked. The reaction was so unlike him – we Swiss are known for our sober mien, and Schönwasser could fairly be described as an *über*-Swiss.

“How can you say that?”

“How? Because it is the very definition of insanity!” He is a round little fellow, barely five and one-half feet tall, and in his agitation he seemed to bounce around the room like a balloon on a windy day, buffeted by the gusts. “You wish to change your appearance? And what will you tell the doctor whom you ask to perform the surgery? Perhaps that you’re a man from Mars, who wishes to start a new life as an Earthling?”

“I have considered that,” I said, and proceeded to tell him the story that we would relate to the doctor: I had been skiing in Kitzbühel when I slipped and fell almost two hundred feet, bashing my face and body on some jagged rocks. The rescuers and emergency medical technicians had managed to keep me alive while bringing me to the nearest hospital, where I had undergone a series of extensive surgeries over several weeks – thus my scars, skin patches and sutures. Schönwasser did not scoff at my fabrication, so he clearly thought it plausible. But he had other objections.

“The doctor is probably the least of it. What about afterwards? In order to travel, you’ll need a passport and other documents. For you, this is no simple matter. Arrangements will have to be made – people paid off and sworn to secrecy. Do you have any idea how complicated –”

“Of course,” I said with a smile, for he had given me the perfect opportunity to use my best weapon: an appeal to his vanity. “That is why I have come to you: not just because you are

my oldest friend and my attorney, but because you are uniquely qualified to make this happen. All of your excellent talents can be put to use – for persuasion, for subterfuge, for planning and organization. I honestly cannot think of anyone else who could make it work.”

For another few minutes, he did not respond, though I saw his lips move – his thin mustache stretched taut, then returning to a relaxed position – as he seemed to be conducting an internal dialogue with himself. At last he looked at me and said:

“I make you no promises. I’ll do this out of loyalty to your family; that is all. I will serve you to the best of my ability, as I always have. But you must appreciate that ultimately, the success or failure of this little adventure depends on you.”

“Quite so.”

“Now you’re sure you want to go to the United States?”

“Absolutely. There is no better place for exposing that abominable woman’s lies. If something happens there, it is broadcast around the world.”

He snorted. “Indeed. Then, as to the name...”

“I am ahead of you. I came up with it when I was composing the introductory letter.”

“And what exactly did you ‘come up with?’”

“Well, you see, I was in a rather whimsical mood...”

“What name?”

I smiled. “Frank Percy.”

two

I DOUBT THAT ANYONE COULD HAVE IMAGINED MY FEELINGS DURING THE Swissair flight to New York – the ecstasy that engulfed me with each new sight, sound, smell. For whose senses had ever been so deprived as mine? The prisoner could console himself with fond memories of his years of freedom. The blind woman could draw on a lifetime of voices and tastes and touches. I would not think for a moment to minimize their hardships; yet still I remain convinced that my experience is unique in human history. What could compare to living since birth in a hermitage, the majority of humankind no more accessible than the denizens of a far-off planet?

And so I reveled in it all: the contours of our first-class compartment, the cheerful and highly efficient attendants anxiously inquiring after my comfort (I was forced to slouch deeply in my seat, but my head was still barely an inch from the ceiling), my diverse fellow travelers, even the bland “meal” and inferior wine we were served. It had been suggested that we try to sleep during the flight, but now, as the airplane prepared to descend, I smiled to think that not once had I even come close to shutting my eyes – unlike Schönwasser, who snored loudly through much of the journey. Energized by my excitement, I felt like I might never sleep again...

“Excuse me?”

It was the man who sat across the aisle from me – an American, casually but neatly dressed, who looked to be not quite thirty. I had noticed him glancing curiously at me several times during the flight, but was too absorbed in my own reveries to engage him in conversation.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes?” I had a good idea of what the question would be, as it had already been put to me several times in my journey by Italians, who excitedly asked if I was a professional *giocatore di basket*. And since I had heard that Americans were equally passionate about the game, I was prepared once again to politely demur.

But the fellow surprised me. “I was just wondering... would you happen to be an actor?”

“Err, no. Although,” and I recalled the words of Dr. Desjardins, “I have been told that I bear a resemblance to Charles Bronson or –”

“Yes, I can see that. Definitely.”

“But no, that is not my profession.”

“Ever thought of trying it?”

I had to laugh. “No, I cannot say that I have.”

With an odd sort of smile, he said, “I think you should.”

“Really? Whatever would give you such an idea?”

“Wait – I’ll explain.” He pulled a wallet from his trousers pocket and extracted a card, which he presented to me:

FEIR PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Los Angeles – New York – Berlin

JEFFREY C. FEIR
President and CEO

“That’s me,” he said, extending his hand across the aisle. “Jeff Feir. Remember, it’s ‘fear,’ not ‘fire.’”

“How do you do. My name is Frank Percy.” He had what I have since learned is a typical American hand-shake: a bit more vigorous than is really necessary.

“I’m in film production,” he continued. “So you see – it’s my business to know what works on film and what doesn’t. What’s especially important is what people *see*, because film is, you know, a visual medium.”

“I have heard that.”

“Which covers a whole range of business. Sets, lighting, costumes, but especially – *especially* – the actors. If the faces aren’t right, the whole project goes down the tubes even if everything else is working. So I make it a point to see that the people in my movies have *exactly* the right look for the part. Makeup, padding, whatever, can only do so much. If it’s not in the face, it ain’t there, period.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“So let me cut to the chase. You have a face – a *presence* that could really work in the kind of movies we do.”

I laughed again – well, more of a polite chuckle, as I did not wish to offend him. “I – I do not know what to say. How exactly would you describe your films?”

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. “Uh... *suspense*. Suspense and action. People get into dangerous situations. And the question is, how are they going to get out? Or *will* they get out?”

“Oh,” I said, “rather like *La Salaire de la Peur*?”

“Huh?”

“Sorry – *The Wages of Fear*? Clouzot?”

A look of utter confusion crossed his face. “Uh... no offense, but when I think ‘Clouseau,’ I think comedy.”

I decided not to pursue the point, though it surprised me that a man would know so little about the glories of his chosen profession. “So, you could see me portraying a person who finds himself in a ‘dangerous situation?’”

“Well... not exactly. See, the most popular characters in my movies – the ones who really keep people glued to their seats –”

Suddenly I was aware that Schönwasser had roused himself. “Excuse me,” he said, “he is not interested in your proposition.”

“It’s not a ‘proposition,’ it’s –”

“I know exactly what it is. Please stop talking to him.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“His attorney,” he said in an ominous tone.

Mr. Feir shook his head disdainfully, but decided to take Schönwasser at his word. “Keep the card,” he said to me. “You’re a grownup, you’re allowed to make a phone call.”

I nodded politely and turned to Schönwasser. “Really,” I said, “I do not think –”

He addressed me in French. “I will explain when we get off the plane. Here,” and he drew up the shade on the window, “why don’t you look outside?”

I did, and saw Manhattan island in all its magnificence: the spires of its tallest buildings pointing upward, as if pulling the entire land mass toward a rendezvous with the clear autumn sky; the graceful rivers on either side, coming together in the grand harbor at the island’s southernmost tip; and further off – small in my view, but unmistakable – the legendary edifice in the harbor, her torch raised high, a constant beacon of welcome to untold numbers of travelers of every class and station. I made a silent vow to visit her, imagining myself in the footsteps of all the humble immigrants who had come to the shores of America, seeking to make their lives anew. For after all, was that not my ambition, even if I planned to return to my native land?

Soon the plane touched down at John F. Kennedy International Airport, and Schönwasser quickly steered me far ahead of Feir as we hastened through a series of corridors into the terminal.

“Please don’t forget,” he said as we walked, “that even some young children have more experience of the world than you. There are situations for which you’re totally unprepared. This was one. It’s not uncommon for swindlers and degenerates to pretend to be film producers.”

This amused me. “Are you suggesting that he had designs on my virtue?”

“It’s not impossible – there is no accounting for taste. But more likely, it was your money. In the future, please keep this in mind if you encounter any other people offering to ‘help’ you.”

“As you say.”

The rapidly-moving crowd around us began to congeal into a thick mass, slowing down to near-immobility. Not far ahead, I could see the cause: people were being grouped into a long line snaking its way to a row of small glass booths, each manned by a uniformed official.

“Remember what I said about the American passport inspectors,” said Schönwasser. He had told me that in the years since the tragic attacks on their soil, those gentlemen had understandably become rather wary of foreigners. “Be as polite as possible. Emphasize that you pose no threat. Do not give them any reason to be fearful, or God knows what they’ll do.”

About ten minutes later, we reached the row of booths. An official waved me toward one of the enclosures; Schönwasser tried to accompany me, but the official put up his hand and said sternly, “One at a time.”

“It is all right,” I assured him, and walked forward, where I found myself bending down to face an inspector across the glass partition. He was a man even younger than Feir, with a small nameplate on his blue shirt reading **A. GURSKY**. I handed him my passport, which he scrutinized with a quizzical expression.

“You’re from Switzerland?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“But you understand English?”

“Certainly.”

Apparently reassured, he went on: “How long do you plan to be here?”

Hmm. This was a question that, in truth, I had never seriously considered. “Oh,” I said, “I would say approximately one month.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Are you here for business or for pleasure?”

Now I was completely at a loss. I thought, for a moment, of asking him for clarification; but from his flat affect, completely devoid of nuance, I concluded that he must mean his words literally. “Well,” I replied, “I suppose you could say a bit of both.”

“Huh?”

“I am here to conduct a business transaction, but I also hope to have a good deal of pleasure... to enjoy myself in your wonderful country.”

Gursky’s eyes grew narrow, and I knew instantly that I had not given the proper answer. “You trying to be cute with me?”

“I... er... not at all.” I had never heard the word “cute” used in reference to myself.

“Then please answer the question.”

“But I have.”

From behind me, I could hear murmurs of impatience from several people. Anxiously, I glanced around for a glimpse of Schönwasser, but he was lost somewhere in the crowd.

“Look, Mister,” said Gursky, “I asked you a simple question. You speak very good English. This shouldn’t be a problem. Let’s try again – are you here for *business*, or for *pleasure*?”

At this point, I could not rid myself of the clear feeling of impending disaster, and the thought that nothing I said would improve matters and indeed, could only make them worse. But remembering Schönwasser’s warning, I decided to thrust to the heart of the matter.

“Sir,” I said, “upon my honor as a gentleman, I can assure you that my intentions are entirely above-board. I carry no weapons. And I am a great admirer of your country – your enemies are my enemies. I could no more cause destruction in the United States than I could in my own home. You have my word.”

His expression, at this point, was rather odd: his mouth was wide open as if in amazement, yet twisted into a half-smile as if desperately trying to keep himself from laughing. But before he could utter a sound, we heard a great clamor from another booth nearby.

We both looked in that direction, and saw one of his colleagues arguing heatedly with a mustachioed young man of swarthy complexion. The man was waving a sheath of documents, apparently of great import, and shouting in a language that I recognized as Farsi, while the officer shouted back in English and repeatedly jabbed his index finger at the man’s chest.

Suddenly an older officer came running up to us.

“Get over to Line 5,” he said. “Parisi needs backup. I’ll take over.”

Gursky appeared irritated. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Stand there. Look scary. I don’t care. Just don’t let him leave. The guy might be on the list, we’re checking. We put in a call for an inspector who speaks Eye- ranian. But it’s gonna take a few minutes.”

Gursky muttered under his breath and left the booth with barely a glance at me. The older gentleman stepped behind the desk, smiled politely, and asked, “How long do you plan to be here?”

Given new life, I did not hesitate. “One month.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“Business.”

He nodded and stamped my passport. "Enjoy your trip."

"Thank you very much."

On the other side of the row of booths, I found Schönwasser waiting for me.

"Was everything in order?"

"Apparently."

I walked toward the exit quickly, in case the officer had second thoughts, yet slowly enough to keep Schönwasser at my side. For a moment I glanced toward the booth area, where I again saw Gursky, now joined by two other officers. They were struggling to keep the swarthy young man pinned to the ground.

three

“YOU OKAY BACK THERE?”

It was the driver of our limousine, a man named Ysidro, though he insisted on being addressed as Sid. He was a round, incessantly cheerful fellow who spoke English with a rough Spanish accent, and he had enquired after our health repeatedly – about once every fifteen minutes – since we had left New York City.

“Quite well, thank you.”

At this point we were on route number 95, rapidly approaching the city of Boston. So far, our sojourn in America had been uneventful – though certainly never dull, since for me, each new sound and sight was a thrilling discovery. In the morning, we had ascended to the summit of the mighty Empire State building, with its godlike views of lands and waterways far in the distance; after returning to earth, we took a stroll around the neighborhood, and so taken was I with its colorfulness and cacophony that I barely noticed the stares of other pedestrians – owing to my size, I imagined. Then, following a fine restaurant luncheon, we met Sid at our hotel and commenced our northward voyage. It was the last day of October, with the crisply beautiful landscape of mid-autumn spread out all around us.

“I don’t mean to be a pest or nothin,” Sid now continued, “but I want you to be comfortable so you know, if you want to get out and uh, stretch your legs, I can stop...”

“It’s more important that we get to our destination,” said Schönwasser.

“Is that how you feel, Mister Percy?” Ever since the start of our travels, I had noticed that waiters, hotel clerks and other service-workers often did not know what to make of Schönwasser, as I looked from all outward appearances like a man who needed no special assistance. Some seemed truly offended by this officious little fellow issuing orders on my behalf, and took pains to “double check” with me before taking any action.

“Mr. Schönwasser speaks for me,” I said cheerfully. “Do not worry. It is his business to take care of all the little things, and he is very good at it.”

“Oh, so he’s your gofer?”

“Excuse me?” I realized that he did not mean “small burrowing animal,” but I was not well-versed in American colloquialisms.

“Gofer. You know, like part of your entourage. Errand boy.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Schönwasser, “but I am not any kind of ‘boy.’”

“*Calmez-vous*, Pierre,” I said, with some amusement. Despite my deep affection for Schönwasser, I have often found it entertaining to tweak him for his utter lack of humor. “I am sure he meant no such thing. Your maturity is evident to the world.” Schönwasser grumbled unintelligibly in response.

“Yeah, chill, *hermano*, don’t mean nothin,” said Sid, as he guided the limousine past a sign reading **Exit 26 –Waltham** and exited the highway. “Be thankful he treats you with respect, you know? I drove this lady last month – big time singer, black girl, not Beyoncé but this other

girl only uses one name – oh man, you should of seen the way she treated her people. Screamin, throwin things... You see that phone next to you? One time she gets so mad, she tears it outta the door and throws it at the guy. Unbelievable! Like her you-know-what don't stink, you know?"

"One should always honor the dignity of one's employees," I said.

We felt a sharp bump, as if the car had struck some object in the road, but Sid ignored this. "Tell me about it. I get some guys comin in here, big money guys, what you call it – masters of the universe, won't gimme the time of day. 'Shut up and drive,' you know. You're goddam right they got to show some respect. I come here from Nicaragua with *nada*. Nothin. And I work hard. I learned English, learned the roads... Not everybody can do this job. Lots of guys I know had accidents, bad ones, people had to go to the hospital – not me. Not once. I take pride in my work."

"As well you should."

"I'm tellin you –" But then he suddenly stopped as we heard a strange flapping sound, coming from under the limousine. Sid grunted "*Mierte*" and slowed down, maneuvering the vehicle to the side of the road.

"What is wrong?" I asked.

"Might be a flat tire. Lemme check."

He turned off the engine, stepped out of the limousine, and spent the next few minutes inspecting the offending tire, then opening and quickly closing the trunk. When he returned, his face bore an expression of absolute disgust.

"Well?" said Schönwasser.

"Hang on. Lemme call the office." Sid picked up his cellular telephone. "Don't worry."

In truth, I *was* starting to be concerned. We had gone about five kilometers – excuse me, three miles – from the highway, in a semi-rural area where the houses were few. The orange sun had disappeared over the horizon, and darkness was encroaching.

So we listened anxiously, or tried to, as Sid chattered on the telephone with his superiors – so rapidly that I could not tell whether he was speaking Spanish, English, or a combination of both. Finally, after a few minutes, the conversation ended and he turned round to face us.

“This is just great,” he said, shaking his head disdainfully.

“What is it?” said Schönwasser.

“We’re supposed to have a spare, you know? And I used my spare on my last trip, so they’re supposed to replace it. I bug them for two weeks and finally when I show up this morning, they say, ‘We got you a spare, it’s in the trunk.’ I say fine, and I go off to get you guys. I don’t bother to check it out. That was my stupid mistake. I should of known the cheap bastuds would gimme a piece a garbage. The treads are worn down, it’s patched in a couple of places. I put it on the car, and even if we get to your place, which we probably won’t, I’ll never make it back to New York.”

“Then what are we to do?” I asked.

“I’m gonna call Triple A.”

“Who?”

“Auto club. You call them if somethin like this happens and they bring a tow truck, take you to the nearest gas station. I can buy a decent tire there.” He picked up his telephone. “Get the best one they have, you know? Put it on my company card. Let them pay for it, the cheap *avaros*.”

After his brief exchange with the club – as we again listened, helpless to do anything – he said, “Okay. They’ll send somebody. But it’s gonna be a while. They said an hour, which means more like an hour and a half.”

“You expect us to wait,” said Schönwasser, “in this place where we don’t know a single person, where –”

“Take it easy. This is a safe neighborhood. Anyway, don’t have much of a choice, you know?”

And so we waited. Ten minutes passed, then twenty, then thirty. Sid continued to inveigh against the miserliness, unfairness and stupidity of his employers, except for brief intervals when he would instead rant about disrespectful clients. It was now completely dark, and we had yet to see another sign of humanity save for the quick glimpse into the occasional passing car.

“You guys hungry?”

“I am starting to feel that way,” I said.

“Yeah, me too. Lemme check GoogleMaps. Maybe there’s a diner or something around –”

He stopped, as we heard a light rapping on the car window.

I turned to see a truly bizarre sight: a group of children, carrying small grocery bags and clothed in colorful yet grotesque raiments. One was dressed like a European peasant in the Middle Ages, with a huge green mask on his head from which small, cylindrical ears protruded. The second was in a kind of donkey costume, complete with ears and tail. The third was wearing a red leotard, decorated with black crosshatching that suggested some sort of web, and a mask dominated by a pair of milk-white eyes *sans* pupils. Most bizarre of all was the fourth – he or she was encased inside a large, square, yellow box, the child’s legs protruding from holes in the

bottom. Painted on the box were huge, watery eyes, a needle-shaped nose and a mouth stretched into a hideous madman's grin.

I rolled down my window. The donkey, a girl, stepped forward and said solemnly, "Trick or treat."

"I beg your pardon?"

She repeated, with slightly more emphasis, "Trick or treat."

"We don't got anything," said Sid.

"What are they asking?" said Schönwasser.

"It's a big holiday in the U.S.," Sid began to explain. "The kids go out and –"

From several feet away came the voice of a boy: "We want candy."

I squinted, trying to discern his appearance in the darkness... no easy task, as he was almost entirely obscured by the other children, who stood in front of him. Yet the partial glimpse I was afforded piqued my curiosity – nay, my suspicion. A small, urgent voice rang in my head: *Is that what I think...*

And foolishly, I listened. I pushed open the door – "No, *no*," cried Schönwasser, though it was already too late – and stepped out.

The children stared at me, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, for several moments, then let out a collective, piercing scream, turned and fled into the darkness.

"Get back in the car," Schönwasser hissed. I complied.

"Well, now you've done it."

"What the hell is your problem?" said Sid.

"I am sorry," I said to Schönwasser. "That boy's costume – I needed to know –"

“And all *they* know is that a strange-looking giant approached them. What if they should tell their parents?”

“I will explain it to them...”

“You will explain *nothing*. Leave it to me, do you understand? You said it yourself: ‘Schönwasser speaks for me.’ Well, let me do my job, unless you want this mission of yours to be strangled in its crib!”

I sighed; though I resented his tone, I knew he was right. “As you wish.”

“Thank you.”

Through this whole exchange, Sid had been watching us warily. “You sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“Yes, quite so. I apologize for the disruption.”

“‘Cause you make any trouble, you can get out right here.”

“There will be no more trouble, I promise you.” He nodded and turned away from us, though he continued to look back periodically as if fearing an ambush.

We sat for almost twenty more minutes until a vehicle approached – red light flashing, siren keening.

“Remember what I told you,” said Schönwasser. I’ll talk to them –”

But before he could utter another word, a harsh voice boomed out: “THIS IS THE POLICE. GET OUT OF THE CAR SLOWLY, WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR.”

“My God,” I said, “what is going on?”

“Just do as they say – hopefully we can find out. Remember, they have guns.”

And so we slowly emerged from the limousine.

There were two police officers, and indeed, each had a very large firearm, pointed at us.

“Put your hands on the car,” said one of the pair. “Legs wide apart.”

“We are visitors,” said Schönwasser. “We have come here from —”

“Keep your mouth shut.”

They began patting us over the length of our bodies; the constable who had spoken now ordered me to stoop downward so that he could reach my shoulders and neck. Then he said,

“Turn around. Slowly.”

I obeyed. “What are you doing out here?” he asked brusquely.

“We got a flat,” Sid explained. “We were waiting for Triple A.”

“I mean why were you driving around here in the first place?”

Schönwasser spoke up. “We have an appointment in Cambridge with Professor Beecham of Harvard University.”

“What about?”

“We would prefer not to say. I should mention,” and he nodded toward me, “that I’m his attorney.”

The officer chuckled, in a rough, almost cruel manner. “How do you like that, Charlie,” he said to his colleague. “He’s already lawyered up.”

“Like he was expecting us,” said Charlie.

“Would you please tell us what this is about?” I asked.

“You’re going to have to come with us.”

“But —”

He waved his weapon in the direction of the police car. “Let’s go.”

“Hey, I don’t know these guys,” said Sid. “I’m just —”

“You can explain it when we get there.”

We started walking. “We have luggage in the trunk,” said Schönwasser.

“They’ll send somebody for it,” said Charlie.

I bent downward and tried to squeeze into the car, but the only way I could fit inside was to contort my body into a “C” shape, which left no room for Schönwasser, let alone Sid. So the officers, with much irritation, called for a larger vehicle, which arrived soon after. Charlie joined the driver in the front seat, while his partner, after manacling our wrists, sat facing us in the rear.

I said to Schönwasser, in French, “What will they do to us?”

He spoke calmly, though I could tell he was as worried as I. “This isn’t Russia. I know there are limits to what they’re allowed to do.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Hey. Green Giant,” said the officer, “shut up.”

And we rode the rest of the way in silence.

Reader, I can attest to being quite unnerved by this turn of events; yet I did not succumb to fear, as I recalled a long-ago lesson from my father.

Seeking to provide me with a new companion, he had purchased a dog for the household. When the animal first arrived, she put on quite an exhibition – barking loudly, flashing her teeth, straining at the leash. But my father remained calm.

“Observe her behavior,” he told me. “It may appear that we should fear her, for she represents a threat to our well-being. But in truth, it is *she* who fears us; we are bigger, we are

stronger, we are far more intelligent. What you see is an instinctive show of bravado, designed to make us forget these clear facts.”

The policemen’s conduct, then, was their own show of bravado. Although there were those guns to consider.

We arrived at the police station, a flat rectangular structure at the end of a long driveway, well back from the road. Over the next several hours, I would learn more than I ever wanted to know about the American system of law enforcement.

Once inside, I was separated from Schönwasser and Sid and brought down to the basement, where I was placed in a dank cell. I waited there for more than an hour, my only companion a foul-smelling fellow who snored loudly, no doubt inebriated, on a bench. Finally an officer took me upstairs to a tiny, windowless room, unfurnished save for a table, three chairs and a large mirror on one wall. I was greatly relieved to see Schönwasser sitting at the table.

“You got five minutes,” said the officer, who then departed, closing the door behind him.

“What have you been doing?” I asked.

“Establishing that I’m licensed to practice law,” Schönwasser said. “They had to contact Geneva. After that was cleared up, they told me why we are here.”

“Which is?”

He shook his head – whether in sadness or amazement, I could not be sure. “They suspect you of trying to seduce or assault those children.”

I was outraged. “Are they *insane*? I would *never* harm a child – not that way, not any way!”

“Of course,” he said. “Nevertheless, one of the children or a parent has made the claim, and they were obligated to investigate. You can give them your side of the story.”

“I certainly will!”

He leaned forward. “Please remember that this whole mess came about because of your rash actions —”

“In your view, this whole trip is a ‘rash action.’”

“That’s beside the point. I have swallowed my objections, or else I wouldn’t be here. What matters is that now, if you continue to behave as you did with those children, you ensure that something like this will happen again and again.” He lowered his voice as we heard the door opening. “You don’t have to answer every question. I will indicate, for each one, whether you should.”

Two rough-looking men entered the room. One appeared to be in his mid-forties, his clothes rumpled, his face bearing the weary expression of one accustomed to giving orders with no assurance that they would be followed. The other, who was somewhat younger, moved with confident energy. He had an ugly sort of smile, as if preparing to indulge in some manner of disreputable behavior.

“I’m Sergeant Vogeler,” said the older man. “This is Detective Marinetti. Your name is Frank Percy?”

“That is correct.”

“What kind of name is that, ‘Percy,’” said Marinetti. “Sounds like a queer name. You a queer, Percy?”

“I am not familiar with that term.”

“A fruit? A fairy? A ho-mo-sex-u-al?”

“Absolutely not.”

“What, you swing both ways?”

“Excuse me,” said Schönwasser. “What does this have to do with your investigation?”

“Please forgive my partner,” said Vogeler, giving us a transparently insincere smile.

“Cases like this get him... upset. He has small kids.”

“I think child molesters should have their balls cut off,” said Marinetti. “What do you think, this is Thailand? Think you can come here for the sex tour, huh? Find some kiddy whores, you freak?”

“If I ever traveled to Thailand,” I said, “it would be to visit the Buddhist temples, not –”

“The Germans are the biggest goddamn perverts. You’re German, aren’t you?”

“No,” I said indignantly. “I am Swiss.”

He snorted – I imagine that to his ignorant mind, this made no difference whatsoever. But the older policeman said, “No kidding! My grandparents came from Switzerland. Bern.

Sprechen-sie Deutsch?”

It was refreshing to hear a display of politesse, let alone friendliness, after so much abuse.

“Ja,” I replied. *Deutsch, Francais, Italiano* and quite a few others.”

“You sound like a pretty smart guy,” said Vogeler. “No wonder you were going to see the professor.”

I had heard of the police stratagem by which one interrogator spewed threats and insults while his partner tried to inspire a feeling of trust by speaking in soothing, comradely tones, the

better to work his wiles. Still, if I was in fact witnessing such a performance, it was very convincing indeed.

“I expect her to be much smarter than myself,” I said.

“Aah, you’re too modest.” He leaned closer to me and spoke in the timbre of a loving parent. “But tell me, Frank. I’m just curious. Why exactly did you want to see her?”

Schönwasser and I exchanged glances. We both knew the crucial importance of not deviating from our agreed-upon story.

I answered, “Professor Beecham is a distinguished literary scholar who has written extensively about the author of _____” (*I cannot bring myself to write the name of that despicable volume*) “and her circle. I am her descendant, and I inherited a cache of letters and other documents that will shed new light on the creation of the book. I have corresponded with Professor Beecham, and she has indicated that she would be very interested in seeing these documents. Given the age and rarity of the material, Mr. Schönwasser and I agreed that the most prudent course of action would be to bring them to her in person, rather than trusting the mails.”

The sergeant appeared to be impressed.

“That’s really fascinating,” he said. “I never read the book, but I did see the movie. Boy, was it scary. They did a great job.”

I was not about to argue with him.

“So where are these letters?” he continued. “In your luggage?”

Whether or not this was an innocent question, it gave me pause – either a “yes” or “no” answer would open the door to any number of unwelcome queries. But before I could formulate

a response, Schönwasser said, “They *should* be there. If they aren’t, it would mean that someone in your department is either extremely sloppy, or a thief who hopes to sell the letters for a profit.”

Marinetti snorted again. But the sergeant looked at us thoughtfully, as if calculating the likelihood that Schönwasser had spoken the truth. Then he said, “Okay. What we’ll do is check out your story with the professor. But I’ll tell you right now – if anything you told us is bogus, you’re both in a lot of trouble.” He motioned to his partner, and together, they headed for the door.

Trying to sound helpful, Schönwasser said, “I have her phone number at the uni –”

“We tried it. No one answers. We’re trying to find a home number.”

But apparently they never did, for I wound up spending the rest of the night in the dark, fetid cell with my intoxicated neighbor. Between his snoring and his odor, I was still awake when the morning light slipped between the bars of the window.

I was again brought to the windowless room, where Schönwasser and the interrogators were waiting.

“Well, Frank,” said Vogeler, “I’ve got good news, and not so good news. The good news is, we’re dropping the attempted molestation charge. The kid who made the complaint, it turns out he’d been picked up for vandalism – eggs, rocks, flaming dog turds, the usual. He thought he could get off if he led us to you know, a bigger fish.” He laughed. “Thirteen years old and he wants to cut a deal. Probably watches too much ‘Law and Order.’”

“And the other news?”

Marinetti said with a smirk, “The professor never heard of you.”

The older detective shot him a look, then turned back to me. “She confirmed that you exchanged letters. But she says you misunderstood if you thought she wanted a meeting. I mean, she didn’t want us to repeat this... but just between you and me, she says she was humoring you.”

I was stunned. “That is impossible!”

“Sorry, but that’s what she says.” He spoke in a sympathetic tone. “I mean, if you have any e-mails that can prove your story, you could forward them to —”

“I did not use e-mail, for *precisely* the reason that I wanted to convince her of my seriousness. I did not want her to think that I was some sort of international confidence-man.”

“Then you wrote letters? You keep copies?”

“Yes, but they are at my home in Switzerland.”

“Well,” he said, “then it’s between you and her. Although I should tell you that it’s probably better if you don’t try to see her. You don’t want to get in any more trouble.”

Schönwasser said, “Is there anything else?”

“No,” said the sergeant, “you can get your luggage at the property desk downstairs.” He lightly touched my shoulder. “Good luck, Frank.”

But I barely heard him. My mind was still trying to comprehend the incomprehensible, and all around me was blurred and indistinct. I imagine that at some point, we recovered our suitcases, after which Schönwasser contacted a taxi-cab company to provide us with transportation to our hotel in Boston. I imagine, yes, but I have no actual recollection.

I do remember one event, however; it would be impossible not to. Just as we had gotten into the taxi, I saw Marinetti emerge from the station entrance and walk swiftly toward us.

He leaned down to my window and said, “Listen to me, you latte-sipping Eurotrash freak. You got something in mind. You know it and I know it. So let me tell you right now – you forget about it and get the hell out of this country. The first plane you can find. If you stay here, I promise you, your ass is mine.” He paused. “Have a nice day.”

four

AS I LAY ON THE BED IN MY HOTEL ROOM – MY HAIR BRUSHING AGAINST THE headboard, my feet dangling over the other end – I struggled to convince myself that my plan had not yet failed, that all was not irrevocably lost, even as the universe itself, it seemed, was conspiring to make me think otherwise.

I heard Schönwasser, at the other end of the room, speaking into the telephone. Every few moments he would fall silent as the other party responded.

“Yes, I know,” he said, “but we didn’t entirely trust the police. We wanted to hear from the professor herself if... I see. Then could we know the precise reason? After all, my client has invested considerable time and money in this project, and to be told without any explanation... Really. But did they also tell you that my client has been cleared of all charges, that it was all a false accusation by a little hoodlum who was trying to avoid punishment? ...I’m not sure you quite understand. There was *absolutely no evidence* against him. Doesn’t that make any difference to —”

At this point, there was a much longer stretch of silence. Finally, Schönwasser spoke once more: “Very well. If she wants to deny herself the chance to share in one of the greatest literary discoveries of all time, that is her choice. But I must tell you that we will be considering several other offers, so if she changes her mind, it may be too late... Thank you. Good-bye.”

He came over to me, looking even grimmer than usual. “I think I know what you are going to tell me,” I said, sitting up.

“But I’ll tell you anyway. According to her assistant, Professor Beecham is deeply concerned about avoiding a scandal, which she believes is exactly what would arise should she associate herself with you. It doesn’t matter that you were cleared – the very fact that you were accused will taint you, she thinks, in many people’s eyes. Add to this that you are a foreigner, that she has never actually met you, knows nothing about your background, does not even know what you look like –”

“Is it not enough that she believes I am descended from –”

“Perhaps it was, but no longer. The assistant said the professor’s colleagues are a very jealous, competitive bunch, and would welcome any opportunity to discredit her. She fears that her connection with you would provide them with such an opportunity.”

I shook my head, greatly surprised. “I thought scholars were above that sort of thing.”

“Welcome to the modern world.”

I frowned, thinking of something, anything, to suggest as a strategy for extending our mission. But before I could speak, Schönwasser continued – again, saying exactly what I would have expected.

“Obviously we must return home. I can see no alternative.” Perhaps he anticipated that I would protest, because he then added, “You’ll have plenty of time to formulate a new plan, if that’s what you want. Maybe there really is some other scholar whom you can contact. You can review the mistakes you made on this trip, and avoid repeating them in the future.”

I said nothing.

“Did you hear me?”

I remained silent for a few moments, then nodded slowly and sank back onto the bed.

“I know how disappointed you are,” he said, “but we must face reality. Think of it as – the Americans have an expression – a ‘learning experience.’ If you’re really set on doing this, there will be time to try again.”

I knew what he was thinking: that I while was too disconsolate to speak, I had resigned myself to accept what he considered “reality.”

He was completely, utterly wrong.

After leaving my home for the first time, assuming a name, creating a false narrative, committing a substantial amount of money – after all this, I had no intention of returning to Switzerland having spent barely three days in America. I am a proud rationalist; superstition has no place in my thinking. Yet still I felt that somehow this was the most propitious time to make my journey – the stars were in alignment, if you will – and that postponing it to a later date would be tantamount to a master card-player withdrawing from a potentially lucrative game after one bad hand. Who knew what odds he would face if he later decided to return?

And so, even as I appeared to concur with Schönwasser’s opinion, I was silently formulating my own plan of action.

For the next several hours, I was the epitome of docile cooperation. I watched serial dramas and cooking demonstrations on television, listened to classical music on the radio, and perused several newspapers. At six o'clock, Schönwasser ordered dinner from the hotel's kitchen, and out of sympathy for my profound disappointment, he spent the necessary money for a truly sumptuous meal, along with two bottles of Chateau Donatien-Navarre, one of the most excellent rosés native to our country.

Quite naturally, the consumption of this rather heavy, alcohol-marinated repast caused my companion to tire early. It had no such effect on me – my unique structure enables me to imbibe and engorge virtually at will; it is only a vain concern for my weight that prevents me from indulging myself more often. So it was Schönwasser who donned his pyjamas and crawled into bed, and I who bid him good-night, saying that I was going for a short stroll around the hotel.

"Be careful," he murmured, already half asleep.

I had been partially truthful: I *was* going for a walk. But I had another destination in mind.

I took the elevator to the lobby, emerged and walked quickly forward – oblivious to the stares from other guests, to which I had, by now, become completely inured. Stepping out into the street, I quickly hailed a taxi-cab.

"Where to, buddy?" said the driver as I slowly, laboriously climbed inside.

"Harvard University, please."

"Front gate?"

"Whichever entrance is closest to" – I read from the piece of paper in my hand – "Barker Center, on Quincy Street."

"You got it."

Barker Center, you see, was the headquarters of the school's English department ...and, as I knew from our correspondence, the location of Professor Beecham's office.

My plan was simple. I would enter the campus, slip into the building, sequester myself in an unoccupied room – even a closet or a lavatory, whatever was available. In the morning, I would emerge and approach the professor. I say “approach,” rather than “confront” or “accost” – I sought no argument, no contentious scene, merely the opportunity to explain myself and assure the woman that she need fear no ill consequences from collaborating with me. And once I had earned her confidence, however long it took, I would reveal to her the full story of my mission.

Simple, indeed; yet as soon as I emerged from the taxi onto Quincy Street, I realized the truth of an old proverb, attributed to the Hebrew peoples of Eastern Europe: *Man plans, and God laughs*.

The campus side of the street was lined with a thick wall of hedges and small trees, which I would not have been able to breach without causing substantial damage, not to mention drawing attention to myself – it was late, a few minutes past midnight, but the occasional student could be glimpsed traipsing back to his lodgings.

I began searching for an alternative entrance, walking south to Harvard Street, then east to Prescott Street, then turning north. Everywhere, I found the same barrier of inhospitable flora. Then suddenly, a respite: The hedges gave way to a row of parking-spaces on the easternmost side of the Barker Center. At the end of the row, a wing of the building angled outward, to the edge of the sidewalk.

And at the very juncture where the wing began, there stood a tree – tall and sturdy, reaching upward to the mansard roof atop the fourth floor, its branches reaching out to brush against the windows.

Oh, serendipity! I strode quickly to the tree, quickly glanced around – there was no one in the immediate vicinity – secured a foothold, and began climbing.

When I was parallel to the third floor, I crawled gingerly onto a branch – the thickest one available, so that it would be able to hold my weight – and crept toward the building wall. The windows were of the sash style, long and wide; but they had all been tightly shut. I realized that I had only one option: to try to shatter the window-glass with some sharp object. Perhaps if I managed to break off a smaller branch from the tree...

“HEY!”

To this day, I do not know who shouted in my direction. It could have been a security-guard on patrol; it could have been a student or professor; it could have been some local drunkard, for all I know. But the suddenness of the cry distracted me. I jerked my head to one side, trying to determine from whence it came... which caused me to lose my balance and swiftly fall to the ground.

There I lay.

A smaller man would no doubt have been rendered unconscious by the fall; but I was left in a kind of woozy delirium, like one suddenly awakened from the deepest sleep. Thankfully, I could feel my arms and legs – I was not paralyzed. Yet I did not *want* to move. It was as if my limbs and head had acquired such an extreme heaviness that trying to lift them from the ground seemed utterly futile.

After a few moments, I heard footsteps. Soon two people, then three, had arrived, quickly joined by others – at that juncture, I lost count. From my vantage-point upon the ground,

I gathered that they were in their twenties, and dressed in a style that I can only describe as deliberately shabby.

Disoriented as I was, I lapsed into French. “*S’il vous plait, monsieur, s’il vous plait,*” I muttered, “*aidez-moi, je vous en prie...*”

“What’s he saying?” said one of the group.

“I dunno,” said another. “Sounds like French. Which I don’t speak.”

Other youths joined the conversation until it became a babble of random voices, jostling with each other in the air above my head.

“There’s a guy from Canada on my floor. Don’t they speak French?”

“Did somebody call Security?”

“Oh, those people are worthless.”

“Which guy – you mean Duncan?”

“I think his name is Clark.”

“Well, *somebody’s* gotta take care of this.”

“Clark what?”

“No, Clark is his last name. I *think*.”

“Don’t try to move him!”

“Clark Duncan?”

“Clark is his *last* name.”

“Uh, I think he went home for the weekend.”

“Out of the way, please, out of the way.” I heard an older, authoritative voice; then a man dressed in some sort of uniform – a guard? a policeman? – knelt next to me. I felt someone else’s hands going through my pockets.

“Please stop,” I mumbled, “I have very little money...”

“Can you tell me your name?” said the man.

“Frank...”

“Okay, Frank. Take it easy, we’re going to help you... Can you tell me what happened?”

“Had... a fall... from...”

“From where? A window?”

“The wall...”

“Humpty Dumpty!” said one of the youths.

“Shut up.” It was a woman’s voice.

My interrogator continued, “Can you move your arms and legs?”

“Do not want... feel so heavy...”

“Okay, I got it. Lie still, we’ll try to move you.”

Another uniformed personage came into view: the woman who had admonished the others to be silent. She was holding my cash-purse. “This is everything,” she said. “About forty bucks.”

“No plastic?” said her colleague. “No license?”

“Zip. Nothing.”

The man shook his head. “I love it when they make it easy.”

That was the last thing I heard before slipping into darkness.

five

THANKS TO MY BRIEF STAY IN DR. DESJARDINS' CLINIC, I HAD GAINED A familiarity with medical settings. And so, when I awoke in what appeared to be a hospital room, I was not totally bewildered by my surroundings.

But neither was I at ease. There was a slight but persistent throbbing in my left temple, where, upon reaching up, I felt a lump the size of a small pebble – which gave me the fleeting fear that some of Desjardins' work had been undone. My cot was too small; someone had placed a second cot at the foot of the first, lain out horizontally, so that my legs did not dangle... but every time I shifted my body, the additional bed was pushed farther away. Thus my limbs were now forming a "bridge" of several inches between the two beds.

Above all, there was the thick-bodied presence standing immobile in front of the door to my room. As my eyes adjusted, the personage became clear: it was Sergeant Vogeler. At that moment, physical discomfort seemed the least of my troubles.

"Hello, Frank," he said. "How're you feeling?"

"I have had better days," I mumbled.

"Better *weeks*, I'm guessing." He came toward me.

“Could you... Would you mind pushing the beds closer together?”

“No problem.” His tone of voice was much less stern, and much more solicitous, than I could have imagined. “You must get this a lot, huh? Short beds, small cars... What’s it like for you at home?”

“That has been designed to meet my needs.”

“Like what? Super-high ceilings? No offense, I’m just curious.”

By now I had regained enough of my wits to remind myself that he could again be playing the policeman’s game, professing friendliness in order to learn more information than I was willing to divulge.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“Cambridge Hospital. They brought you here from Harvard. You had a pretty nasty fall, you remember that?”

“Where is my attorney?”

“Mr. Schönwasser? He’s on his way.” Despite my wariness, I was impressed by the way he spoke the name, using the proper Germanic pronunciation: *SHUN-vasser*. For all the other Americans we had encountered, it was mangled into “Shohn-wassur.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Well, Frank,” he said, “that’s up to you.”

“I do not understand.”

He picked up a nearby chair, moved it next to the bed, and sat down.

“Let me tell you what happened,” he began. “About an hour after you left your hotel, Mr. Schönwasser woke up. When he saw you were gone, he went into a panic, called 911. We got the

word – it went out to all the precincts in metro Boston. Normally it takes 48 hours before they file a formal missing persons report... but when I heard your name, naturally my ears picked up. Then another report came in from Harvard. You see where I'm going?"

"Possibly..."

"It's like this. At the moment, you're not in trouble. The guards at Harvard will have to file a report, but that's where it ends. I talked to the head of security there – he used to be a cop, he knows me. They won't press charges. But Frank," and he lowered his voice, as if to impress me with the gravity of his words, "we can't let this go. You've gotten in trouble twice in three days and this time, you can't say it's not your fault. I told you not to try to see the professor –"

"You did not forbid me."

"You knew what I meant – come on, you're not stupid. Now look. Let me put my cards on the table..."

"Cards?"

"Excuse me – let me be honest. Since you haven't been charged with anything, there's nothing I can do except follow you around, which I promise I'm going to do. And then if you screw up again... well, maybe you don't get off so easy. But it doesn't have to be that way."

He leaned forward. "Look, can I tell you something? Most people think being a detective is really exciting, 24/7. That's b.s. A lot of it is incredibly boring – especially when you've been doing it for 18 years, like me, and you've heard the same stories over and over again.

"But you... I just know you've got a story that's goddamn fascinating. It's not only your size or the way you talk – just something about you. I know it's not just about a couple of letters.

Nobody puts himself through all this for a couple of letters. I feel like I have to find out – what else is there?” He paused. “And that’s the other reason why I can’t let it go.”

“What is it that you want from me?”

“Your story, Frank. Your *true* story. You tell me, and I promise I’ll help you any way I can. But please. I have to know.”

I hesitated, silent, for a few moments. Yes, I had hoped and planned for this occasion for what seemed like eons... but the setting could hardly be more different from what I had imagined. I dreamt of revealing myself to multitudes, in an appropriate public venue – a television broadcast, perhaps, or a podium in a huge arena. But a nondescript hospital room, to a single policeman?

Still, I understood: When fate presents an opportunity, it is only a fool who quibbles with the details. Besides, there could have been far worse audiences than the man sitting at my feet. With my limited experience of the world, I can hardly say that I am what is known as “a good judge of character.” Yet something in the sergeant’s manner – perhaps it was the clear sense he conveyed of being truly desirous, even desperate, to hear my tale – caused my defenses to weaken. I felt, finally, that I could trust him. (And after all, he *was* a countryman, in a manner of speaking.)

“All right, Sergeant,” I began, speaking slowly and deliberately. “First of all, I must warn you – what I am about to say, I am sure that you will find shocking, even astonishing. No doubt you will have a difficult time believing it. But on my honor, it is the absolute truth.”

“Okay.”

I raised myself to a sitting position. “When we were in the police station, you mentioned that you had seen the film adaptation of the book. The film, of course, was a work of fiction...”

A slight look of confusion crossed his face. “Well... yeah...”

“But did you ever hear an account of the origins of the book? The gathering at Lake Geneva?”

“Ah... something about a ghost story, right?”

“A *contest* of ghost stories. Four friends – two great poets, one accompanied by his young lover, and a physician – competed to see who could create, on short notice, the most frightening tale. And it was the young woman’s story, they all agreed, that was the most horrific.”

“Frank... where are you going with this?”

“Please bear with me.” I certainly did not want to bore him, but I was determined to include every salient detail. “The accounts are not entirely accurate. For you see, there was a fifth member of the party – an acquaintance of the doctor. This man lived nearby, in a manor-house that had belonged to his family for generations. The family was quite wealthy, so he did not have to work. But he was also a man of science. He had set up a laboratory in the cellar of the house, where he conducted experiments. And the story he told the others was, in fact, an account of his latest experiment... which had been quite successful.”

I saw a small but distinct reaction from Vogeler – a slight narrowing of the eyes, a tightness around the mouth. It was as if his mind was beginning to coalesce around an idea that had not previously occurred to him, because it was too unnerving to contemplate.

“It was that story that the young woman adapted into her book... and distorted beyond all recognition.”

“How do you know all this? The Lake Geneva thing took place, like, two hundred years–”

“The scientist was my father. Not in the biological sense, but in every other.”

“Wait a minute.” His mouth formed a small “o” of disbelief. “Frank... are you telling me that you...”

I nodded. “That is exactly what I am saying.”

For the next few minutes – though they seemed like centuries – I watched as he stared, wordless... struggling, no doubt, to somehow absorb the unthinkable. I assumed that given his profession, he was an absolute rationalist; there was no room in his mind for the fantastic, for anything that seemed contrary to his accepted reality.

Finally, he spoke – softly, slowly.

“So that explains your being from Switzerland. And your size.”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not... I mean, you don’t look anything like...”

“Like a monster? A ‘creature?’ A walking mutation with green skin and bolts protruding from my neck? Yes, because those are the products of a film-maker’s perfervid imagination. And that image has been endlessly reproduced, until it has become fixed in the public mind. It is what people throughout the world picture when they think of me. That boy whom I was accused of assaulting? I was simply trying to determine whether his costume was yet another representation of that vicious canard.”

“But if it was... what would you have done?”

“Confront him with the truth. That is all. Violence is not in my nature. The idea that I am a brute, a killer – that is yet another despicable lie.”

He gave a short nod. “And as far as the letters...”

“There are no letters. That was a ruse that I concocted, in order to attract the interest of the professor. I sent her what I claimed was a letter that the young woman had sent to my father.

Actually, I had created it out of whole cloth. But she believed that it was genuine – and one of many that I was eager to share with her.”

“And so she agreed that you could come to the States and meet with her.”

“Precisely.”

I noticed another small change in the sergeant’s manner. His tone of astonishment had receded; in its place was the calm professionalism of the trained investigator, with a singular focus on obtaining critical information. Was this sincere, or was he desperately trying to put aside the disbelief that surely, he still must have felt?

“And when she found out that your story was bogus – what then?”

“I would have revealed the truth to her, and to the world – putting an end, once and for all, to the distortions, the canards, the lies.”

“Okay.” Another lengthy pause. “Tell me... does Mr. Schönwasser know the, ah... the truth?”

“Down to the smallest detail.”

“You told him?”

I shook my head. “He is descended from one of my father’s closest friends, who was the magistrate – that is, the chief judge – of our community. In every generation since that time, the secret has been passed down to one or two members of his family. Those designated persons have been in charge of every aspect of my existence, from investing my inheritance to managing the upkeep of my home. They have hired my household staff, telling them that I am a recluse who does not wish to have contact with the outside world. They have also introduced me to all the new technologies that have arisen, up to the present day. That has been my window on the world, so to speak. For I have never ventured outside my home, until now.”

“Did that have something to do with the book?”

“Precisely. Once it had become a success on both sides of the Atlantic – and untold numbers of readers had come to believe the woman’s vile distortions – my father realized that he could not come forward and reveal the truth without putting both of us in jeopardy. And I continued to hold this opinion for years after his death.”

“What changed your mind?”

“After two hundred years, I simply decided that enough was enough.”

“You weren’t worried about how people would –”

“Because of all the advances in fertility science in recent years, I felt that the means of my creation would no longer seem particularly frightening.”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘fertility science?’”

“Despite what you have probably heard, my father was not driven by self-aggrandizement or a mad ambition to possess godlike power. On the contrary, his motives were entirely altruistic. He hoped that by sharing his process with others in the scientific fraternity, he could provide an alternate method of producing offspring – thereby bringing hope to those unfortunate couples who were unable to conceive.”

“But they wouldn’t actually wind up with a baby...”

“No, but with a child that they could call their own.”

Again, he nodded. Then: “Just one more question. Your father... how did he do it?”

I smiled. I had long assumed that I would be asked this question, above all others.

“On that one detail, the book and the film were correct: it involved body parts taken from cadavers. The sort of people who had no loved ones to claim them – a convict who had recently

been executed, a poor wretch who had succumbed to alcohol poisoning in an alley. The magistrate enabled my father to obtain the bodies, which otherwise would have gone to unmarked graves.”

“But after he got them, what was the... you know... the process?”

That was the one step that I was still unwilling to take.

“Sergeant,” I said, “as I am sure you might imagine, the process was extremely complicated. So much so that I would not feel comfortable describing it to you without first reviewing the copious notes that my father kept. Unfortunately, I did not bring them with me to America.”

I said this in all sincerity. It was the ultimate secret, and I was not going to reveal it casually. My plan, after revealing my existence, was to allow the world a decent interval to consider and ultimately (I hoped) accept that fact; it would then be easier to share the details of how I came into being.

But as Vogeler again stared at me, silent and impassive, for another long minute, I wondered if answering in this way – or indeed, answering any of his queries – had been a mistake. Were my responses not detailed enough for him to accept? Or were they *too* detailed, so that they sounded like the well-rehearsed narrative of a professional swindler? Was he trying to decide if I was a liar? Or a lunatic?

“Is there something else you wish to ask, Sergeant?”

He exhaled slowly. “Frank... I’ll say this. All the pieces of your story fit together. I mean, if you believe Point A, then you can believe Point B, C, and so on.” He turned his palms upward. “But the thing is... at the end of the day, it’s still a story. And I’m sorry, but... I have no way of knowing whether or not it’s true. For all I know, you could just be a very tall guy from Europe, pulling a scam.”

“You could ask Mr. Schönwasser...”

He snorted. “He’s not exactly what you’d call an objective source – you know?”

I could not disagree. And so, there remained only one course of action.

“Very well, Sergeant. I have another ‘source.’ And it is unquestionably objective, I assure you.”

“What would that be?”

With that, I slowly and carefully slipped my arms out of the gown. I then leaned forward, so that he would be able to observe my naked back as well as my chest – every graft, every suture, every scar.

“Wow,” he said, softly. “I really thought I’d seen every—”

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?”

Schönwasser appeared in the doorway – panting and sweating, his face a dark shade of crimson – and strode toward us, sputtering imprecations: “This is completely out of... What are you thinking ... How could you allow...?”

“Pierre –”

He ignored me, speaking directly to Vogeler. “This is absolutely unacceptable. Don’t you understand? This man has lived as a recluse for years! He’s completely ignorant of – he comprehends nothing...”

“Pierre, if you would just...”

“You’ve taken advantage of his naiveté, and it will not stand! *Nothing* he told you is admissible in court. I will get a court order suppressing his entire statement to you. Every word! Then I’ll go to your superiors. You won’t get away with this. If you think –”

“Be QUIET, Pierre!” I said with such ferocity that both men jerked backwards, as if struck by a powerful blow.

“Please listen to me,” I continued. “*I* made the decision, as a man who has long since reached the age of majority, to tell Sergeant Vogeler the truth about everything. I did this because he has treated me with respect and compassion, unlike many other people we have encountered; because he interceded with the authorities at Harvard on my behalf; and because he is a fellow Swiss... Do not roll your eyes, Pierre! We spring from common roots. I believe that means something.”

“It means that you’re even more foolish than I could have possibly imagined.”

“Remember the plan – that I would reveal the truth at a time and place of my own choosing? Well, I have chosen this time and this place. We have reached an impasse, and Sergeant Vogeler has agreed to help in any way he can. I want to take him up on his offer. Do you have a better idea?”

“*Yes*. We get out of here, go to the airport, and –”

“*That* is out of the question.” For the first time in my existence, I felt myself empowered by a feeling of rightness, of absolute certainty. “No, Pierre – I have made my decision. I respect you as a lawyer, I cherish you as a friend, I love you as a brother, but you cannot dictate the path of my life. That is the whole point of this journey, is it not? I must make my way in the world. And I want you with me – but marching side by side, not leading me by a leash. That is how it must be, from here on in.”

For a few moments, Schönwasser was silent and still. But as I watched his mouth, I saw that slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, then quite clearly, his mustache was moving. He was having another debate with himself. I smiled, for I was certain of which argument would prevail.

Then he gave a long sigh.

“I’ve never seen myself as your jailer,” he said. “I’ve only tried to protect you from your own worst impulses. But as you say, you are an adult in the eyes of the law. I have no intention of hiding my reservations...”

“Nor should you.”

“...but I’ll continue to accompany you and give you my counsel. Do with it what you will.”

Coming from him, this was a ringing endorsement. “Thank you, *mon cher ami*,” I said quietly.

Throughout most of our exchange, Vogeler had returned to his state of sphinxlike silence. But I had seen him grow tense – his face tight, his hands locked together – when I told Schönwasser of his pledge to assist us.

“Are you all right, Sergeant – I beg your pardon, what is your given name?”

“Albert – Al. I’m okay, Frank, it’s just...” He shook his head. “You got to realize, this is – until an hour ago, I would have said all of this is unbelievable. But now I *have* to believe it. That’s not an easy thing to process.”

“Of course.”

“At the same time, I know I made you a promise... and I always try to keep my word...”

He paused, and looked directly up at the ceiling. It seemed as if he were wordlessly seeking guidance from the Almighty, or with someone who was no longer of this world. Schönwasser and I waited, with trepidation, for him to return to us.

Finally, he said, “Okay. The doctor said they want to keep you here another night, just to be on the safe side. Let me give it some thought and I’ll come back tomorrow morning, then we can talk about it.”

“Thank you, Albert. I will look forward to it.”

“Sure thing.” He stood up, started walking to the door... then stopped and turned back to face us.

“One thing I know? You need to get out of Boston,” he said. “With your luck, you stay here much longer and somebody’s gonna take a shot at you... Sorry, bad joke.”