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## Small Claims

Shawna V. Tropp

Had Laura Davidov not been a heavy woman in her late fifties, she would have thought that she had made a conquest. A golden young man appeared to have been following her through the Musée Rodin for over an hour; his eyes were turquoise, and he was quite old enough to be her son. There was also something disturbingly familiar about him. She therefore beamed her most maternal smile upon him and took a hesitant step in his direction.

He shrank into the adjacent gallery towards The Hand of God.

Her Indian guest caught her up. He, too, was quite old enough to be her son, though a good five years the senior of the golden boy. “Not hungry yet?” asked Vikram.

This meant he was starving — probably for bouillabaisse or other piquant seafood at a nearby restaurant to which he wished to take her. He rarely came to Paris or, for that matter, any center of civilization. He preferred fieldwork in arid African terrain, where they had first met some half-dozen years before. Then a United Nations volunteer in Somalia, Vikram briefed Laura on the political intricacies of famine there, knowing full well that her strictures as a UN correspondent would preclude her breaching neutrality in any prose she might produce. Now a dazzling candidate for mid-level bureaucracy at the World Bank despite his being under thirty, he was resisting a year's stay in Washington by dallying as long as possible in Paris with his sabatticaling colleague.

“I intend to found a new department, he told her exuberantly as they made their way out of the museum. I shall call it the Bureau of Social Elimination and Poverty Development. The premise is that once one eradicates social structures — and, by extension, social programs of all kinds — poverty will develop wholly without assistance from donor governments and agencies.”

“An interesting approach,” commented Laura, taking his arm. “I believe the US government is progressively adopting it, with some success. The number of working poor seems to be rising daily — to say nothing of the homeless and the destitute.”

“Exactly,” Vikram rejoined. “The next step. . .” He paused and returned the turquoise stare of the golden boy, who lingered at the entry desk. “The next step is a jump start on the eradication of poverty itself by shooting the poor *en masse* worldwide.”

“I thought the objective was the development of poverty,” said Laura, covering her smile. “Don't you perceive an inconsistency?”

“Possibly,” he mused.

The golden boy had started towards them.

“Stop harassing my bride,” Vikram told him.

He colored and again shrank back.

“Vikram,” Laura cautioned, “that is not nice. And people will think I’m a pedophile.”

“So you are, luv. Who is this guy anyway?”

“Who?”

“The character with the eyes.”

“I haven't the slightest idea,” said Laura. “I've known only two people in my life with turquoise eyes. One is dead and the other was a baby, her son, no more than six or seven when I last saw him.”

“Light eyes probably grew out of congenital Vitamin A deficiency,” remarked Vikram under a raven lock that had fallen across his brow as the two took a sidewalk table. He ordered Chablis for them both. “The question for the eyes guy,” he went on, “may be less whether you're a pedophile than whether I'm a necrophiliac.”

“Thank you. But since he seemed to be following me, whereas you are merely my dear friend, the question may be whether he is necrophiliac.”

“A necrophiliac with Vitamin A deficiency...” He raised his glass. “Fine companions you choose... What have you programmed for my last three nights here?”

However, because Laura had failed to program Vikram with contemporaries that night and because she found herself inspired to return to the novel she had returned to Paris to finish, she had little time to puzzle over the golden boy — until he turned up the following morning below the windows of her sublet. There he hung in the doorway of the concierge. The weather was unpropitious, even for loitering in a flowered Left Bank courtyard.

“Who are you, Monsieur?” she called down.

“Laura?” The accent was American.

“Do we know each other?” she asked in English.

“No... Yes... I 'm Nik. Nicholas Garson.”

It was, of course, possible. But so was anything else. She had not seen Nicholas since his childhood; a moustache and beard obscured this young man's features. Still, it was possible, far more so in Paris than in East Africa, she thought absently. Perhaps more in Paris than their native New York. The eyes were those of Nicholas' mother, as were those delicate features that the facial hair did not completely cover. Vikram, still asleep in the guest bedroom, could be aroused if trouble rose. Laura invited the golden boy up for coffee. “The stairs are steep,” she warned.

He arrived winded, more like someone of her age than his.

“I 've been sick,” he said, although she had not asked him for an explanation.

“The stairs are very steep,” she repeated. “They cannot put in an elevator; the building is landmarked. And I must ask you to speak softly; I have a guest who's still asleep.”

“The romantic rajah type?”

“He is Indian, in fact.”

“But you were ... cohabiting with an Indian here for years, weren't you?”

“Bessarabian—not quite the same physical type — Fair and European. Do come in.”

“How long is the rajah staying?” asked the golden boy, taking the armchair she indicated.

“You're quite inquisitive.”

“I need a bed.”

“Nicholas,” said Laura, “if you are indeed Nicholas...”

“Nik. N. I. K. And I am Nicholas Garson. Your godson. At least, that's what you used to say.”

“Then I suppose that you are Nicholas. He never hesitated to ask anything.”

He did not smile.

“When you were a very little boy,” she added lamely. “Let's have coffee.” She turned towards the kitchen.

“I need a home here in Paris — here.” he called after her.

As she poured coffee for them both and scabbled for milk, spoons and sugar, she reflected that he must be Nicholas. At last report — and for years prior to that — he had been ill. With a variety of psychological problems. Chemical, she corrected herself. Neurological. Genetic. All quite treatable with the proper combination and balance of drugs, his mother had insisted. It had been said, however, that the years of trying to find that combination and that balance had led to her death in a car accident some ten years before. Laura, on home leave from Nairobi when the tragedy took place, had not seen him at the funeral; the crash had nearly killed him, too, and he was lying in a coma in the hospital. No one was allowed to see him but his father — and on her later homecomings, whether from Africa or Paris, he had been with his father in Garson's ancestral Montreal.

“What brings you to Paris?” she asked as she served him.

“What brings you?” he countered.

“Sentiment, I'm supposedly escaping the mundane distractions of New York to concentrate on a book. How did you find me?”

“I met a UN guy the other day who talked about you. He told me you were here for a few months near St. Germaine. He gave me your address; he said he knew the woman who swapped you her apartment for yours in New York.”

“The world is a ghetto,” murmured Laura.

“You're angry.”

“No... Stunned. Now, what brings you to Paris?”

“My dad got some money and took a place on the coast near Trouville. It's a grungy village where he thinks the light is great. Except he is not painting. As usual. Not doing much of anything. Sketching sometimes, but that is all. What is your book about?”

“I 'm not sure I know any longer. When I started, it was about people clashing.”

“A war story?”

“Not exactly. Although there is a war in the background — several wars in fact. It is set in East Africa, you see.”

He did not seem to see at all.

“It’s more about people stumbling around in their misunderstandings of each other,” she explained. “People of vastly different cultures, but no less so than people of the very same culture.”

“Then why put it in Africa?”

“That’s rather the point,” she replied, “to point up the mutual blindness of the people who supposedly share the same values with those born into a quite unique set.”

But he was no longer listening. The creaking of the floorboards in the next room heralded Vikram’s entrance, replete with toothbrush.

“I’m in computers,” said Nik, rising to greet him. “Mission models—3-D interactive.”

“Rural redevelopment,” Vikram replied, extending his hand. “Semi-nomadic pastoralists. Sustainable livelihoods.”

They seemed to understand each other wholly. Therefore, when Vikram asked Laura if he could refill her coffee, she declined and left them to their exchange of professional identities, perhaps eventually their names. It was a peculiarly young male ritual, she thought; shipwrecked and desiccated on a coral reef, they would have done the same.

It was not, after all, strange that Nicholas should ask her immediately for lodging, even a home. Their relationship predated his birth, even hers. Her father and his maternal grandfather had attended the same yeshiva on New York’s Lower East Side, then became teenage Trotskyites together, medical students jointly distilling vodka for their tuition during Prohibition, brothers in Freud and at last in the fellowship of Wilhelm Reich — which had brought them to fratricide only a few years after Reich’s death in 1957. The boy’s claims on her therefore stretched back almost to the beginnings of the century.

“I’m glad you think the poor have wealth that’s realer than just income,” Nik was telling Vikram when she returned with a tray. “I’m an idealist, too. And a realist. Everything boils down to knowledge. And that primitive knowledge of your tribal guys sounds absolutely wild. Have you put it on the Net?”

“We’re just waiting to flesh out a few comparisons — you know, the proportions of goats and cows to camels in herds at different altitudes, precise vegetation mapping of the ecotones, the height at which each species browses — stuff like that. The herders have fine-tuned these balances for centuries in Africa. All over the world, actually. That is why they’re still alive — and the pastureland, too.”

Nik appeared only slightly bewildered.

“Of course, it wasn't my discovery,” Vikram added, having determined that his interlocutor was an apt pupil. “It took this genius from Guyana, this guy who did science at school just because he got good grades in it. But he is really interested in social revolution.”

“So am I,” said Nik happily. “And I can get it up there very graphically for you...”

That night, Vikram introduced him to other young people and within a few days left for Washington. The two seemed made for one another, the populist technocrat, so secure in his privileged bastions, and the rootless technological wizard, groping for a toehold in the world, dependent for his very life on drugs. As Nicholas did not resurface, Laura assumed that he had found at least a bed, if not a home. Nonetheless, she made several futile efforts to locate Garson on the coast of Normandy and called her brother in New York to tell him of the boy's fleeting appearance.

“Brave lady,” Sasha commented across the ocean.

“No. This is Paris and a quartier where people still walk around gleefully at all hours. And Vikram was here in case I needed physical protection.”

“No, Laura, I meant the whole past can of worms.”

“I hardly thought about it.”

“That's just as well.”

“I was just stunned. Nicholas looked so fragile, so vulnerable.”

“I'm sure. He's been in and out of institutions since before his mother's death. And being with Garson afterwards cannot have helped much. After all, to the extent that his problems are genetic, he got the bad genes from Garson. Mind you, I never liked the boy. Even when he was small. The kids did not either, come to think of it. Yes, they took compassion on him, played with him, read to him. They probably regarded him as one of their stray animals. But they never liked him. In fact, I remember one time when one or the other of them told me that he was cruel.”

His daughter and son were the pride of all their lives. But unlike the golden boy, they were blessed with sane parents and stability, as well as prodigious natural endowments.

“Sasha, Nicholas seems brilliant as well as beautiful.”

“He always was. And psychopaths often are — both brilliant and beautiful. A student had apparently come into his office; he closed their conversation tenderly.

A sad-eyed man despite his children, Sasha Davidov taught history at Columbia and had stayed on the Upper West Side where he and Laura had been raised but for a brief 1960s stay in Argentina during which he had quietly charted the coming resurgence of fascism, despaired over the growing violence of both left and right, and wept for friends caught in the middle. He could and did leave, a dissertation in his suitcase; many of the friends were later disappeared; from New York, he managed to smuggle only three to safety. Even when the junta fell at last, he had not exulted. “I suppose I am resolutely Manichean,” he answered those who rebuked him. “For every evil overcome, another emerges.”

He smiled only slightly when he added, “Of course, some bads are far more desirable than others.” Laura suspected that he feared for his children simply because their being rejoiced the world.

When the telephone rang at 2 A.M. Laura heard herself sleepily blurting, “Nicholas?”

“You haven't gotten involved with that boy in the last six hours?!” Sasha exclaimed.

“Sash, have you forgotten the time difference?”

“Forgive me; I thought you might be writing late. I had a premonition that you had taken that boy in.”

Although Sasha's premonitions were not to be dismissed, he needed chastening. “If anyone were to call at this hour, it would be Nicholas, not my big brother.”

“Lau, please stay away from that boy. We owe him nothing, even for Mimi 's sake. Just remember that he killed her. Even if he did not actually crash the car. He drove her to it.”

“Neither of us was there, Sasha.”

“How can you, of all people, be literal?”

“Easily. As a novelist, I keep my fictions in a separate life. Unlike some dispassionate historians I know.”

“Lau, you were far away during Mimi 's last months before she sent Nicholas to boarding school. He drained her utterly. She was skeletal. He was having violent screaming fits. I am not saying it was his fault; evidently, he couldn't stop himself.

But he threatened to kill her on a few occasions — and eventually, he did. He is dangerous, even if he is on the best medication. And sometimes, you are so like Mimi — so impulsive, so Russian.”

“Rash and self-destructive?”

“I did not say that. Please, Lau. Don't let the boy get to you. For all our sakes.”

She assured him that she would do nothing without consulting him and bade him good night.

“Tsar Nikolai  
Go fuck your mother,  
Look what you married...  
A rag, a whore, a German whore.  
Ai , yai , Tsar Nikolai.”

So, they had sung gleefully in Russian syllables they did not understand as children, riding their bicycles in Central Park, all three of them, in the early 1950s. The song was forbidden in their respective homes. They had picked it up from one or another elderly relative wandering through the gracious spaces of their parents' apartments.

Even on the Upper West Side, they suffered occasional snubs from their classmates because of those parents' eccentricities. Bon vivant and distinguished psychiatrist though he might be, Ben Davidov allowed his wife to actually work despite his lucrative practice; worse, she taught at an experimental school and did not play bridge. Moreover, the Davidovs seemed to have turned their living room into a boarding house. Admittedly, the guests had lost their jobs because of Joe McCarthy and the witch hunt to which the President had only recently put a stop. But the tone of the neighborhood had to be considered, the more so with all the Puerto Ricans moving pell-mell into the side streets.

Then, too, there were the peculiar medical ideas; it was said that Ben Davidov had gone beyond Freud to follow a fringe disciple of his named Reich; the man had not only written one book called *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, but another entitled *The Function of the Orgasm*.

Once, with his usual charisma in the lobby of his building, Ben Davidov had been heard to avow that all handicaps and diseases, from myopia to chicken pox and cancer, stemmed from emotional — even sexual — dysfunction. It was said, too, that his patients had to strip down to their underwear, if not the altogether, in their sessions and that he encouraged children to masturbate.

Not that Sasha and Laura did not seem perfectly normal kids — well mannered, too — as did Mimi Stern, despite the fact that her parents shared the bizarre notions of the Davidovs. This was odd because Dr. Stern was a surgeon and somewhat forbidding; one never spoke of him as “Simon Stern,” let alone “Sy.”

And Lily Stern definitely did not work, except for volunteer activities at the Museum. Of course, she did not need to, even without marriage to a thriving physician; a member of New York's German Jewish aristocracy, she had brought a goodly dowry to their nuptials.

From the vantage point of late middle age, Laura occasionally found the image of Wilhelm Reich coalescing with that of Simon Stern. She did not smile at memory's illusion. Her father had first presented her to Dr. Reich, who inspected the children of all his votaries, on the day when she had received her first kiss — a furtive peck bestowed by the amour of her nine-year-old life, who had abjured her not to confide their love to anyone until they could marry six years afterwards. She had betrayed him twice before sundown: first to their teacher, who had wondered why the customarily ebullient child had doodled away a quiz; second, to the family maid, who had gently taken her to task for neglecting her few household chores, only to see the youngster burst into tears, lamenting the length of six years. Consequently, that night, when Wilhelm Reich had asked Laura, after only perfunctory greeting, if she had a “boyfriend,” she had told him — politely — that her inmost life was her own.

Ben Davidov had been despondent. Two weeks before, Sasha had barely passed muster with the Master; having heard that Reich had opposed the Nazis, the boy had deflected his questions with persistent queries about Hitler. Now Laura had been declared secretive, evasive — neurotic. And Simon Stern had apparently shared the judgement, as well as that of his own daughter, the ravishing Mimi, Laura's contemporary and best friend, who had fared only slightly better in Reich's eyes.

Though neither Laura nor Sasha had ever learned why, they assumed that Mimi, too, had failed the test of submission. Her father, however, apparently did not. Simon Stern had eventually become Reich's closest confidante, shifting his practice from surgery to psychiatry, eventually inheriting the Master's mantle.

From this position, he had gradually pushed Ben Davidov towards the periphery of the Reichian fellowship. He had disowned Ben, too, when his old schoolmate had given a series of public lectures on the Master's thought. During their years of growing estrangement, Davidov had never seemed to protest. This, too, was odd; he was infamous for his Russian temper, often wreaked upon his family, then drowned in a rush of largesse, usually expensive, and always exquisitely attuned to the desires of those he had offended.

When Stern had expelled Davidov from the fellowship, the other members had regarded the punishment as disproportionate. Ben had not concealed from them his invitation to lecture on Reich's legacy and the burgeoning sexual revolution; he had shared his ideas with them and sought their counsel. But he had not formally asked permission to speak; apparently, he had not known he should have done so.

No one, however, opposed his ouster; Stern's pronouncements on matters both great and small forbade question. Consternation followed when Davidov died of a multiple coronary shortly thereafter, but it was soon remembered that he had twice before had heart attacks and had continued to indulge in rich food, good cigars and similar habits discouraged by his cardiologist. The ultimate diagnosis was that he had not wished to continue living.

Mourners overflowed the funeral chapel — patients, students, old Trotskyite associates, even Reichian comrades. But, as Laura rapidly observed, Simon Stern was not among them. He had suddenly come down with the flu, said Lily Stern, who had arranged the simple service and the reception afterwards and had managed the Davidov household in the days that followed with both compassion and efficiency as Dolly Davidov languished in the shock of widowhood and Sasha and Laura reeled back to their respective studies.

“I wouldn't let him come,” Mimi wrote Laura a month after the funeral. “He killed Ben. I told him so. My mother, too.” She did not elaborate, nor did Laura press her to do so. Grief as well as shock muted any response beyond a monosyllabic acknowledgement of the possibility. But she began characterizing her friend as “Antigone” to her brother.

In addition, the Davidovs were grappling with acute financial problems. At Stern's urging, Ben Davidov had ventured into the stock market for the one time in his resolutely Marxist life — disastrously. The Sterns, too, had suffered from Simon's own heavy investment in the doomed speculation, but Lily's inheritance cushioned their losses comfortably. Though neither of the Davidov children ever sought proof, they strongly suspected that Lily Stern, as well as scholarships, had subsidized the rest of their formal education and that Mimi's conviction of Stern's role in Ben's death had played no small part in this.

Not that Lily was not the soul of generosity — or that Dolly Davidov did not seize the earliest occasion to re-enter the public school system at a far higher salary than her private teaching could possibly yield, as well as strip her household of every superfluity, including the theatre and opera subscriptions that ranked high among her joys.

But for all their protest, she allowed neither of her children to try earning money beyond the summer employment and the token jobs at school that she and Ben had considered essential elements of their learning. Sasha had only recently embarked upon his graduate studies. Laura, like Mimi, still had two years of college to complete.

All three children had disappointed their fathers bitterly by entering the humanities rather than medicine or, indeed, any science. For some two years, biology tempted Sasha as much as history, but he soon found himself embroiled with his father in the defense of his classroom learnings; Reich had at one time performed an experiment which, he held, demonstrated that spontaneous generation — far from having ceased eons before — was still taking place. Having little taste for what he felt unnecessary conflict, Sasha took refuge in the workings of the body politic during the late Renaissance, moving into modern times only after Ben's death.

In her mid-teens, Laura, who had long shown a propensity for writing, found herself torn between literature and physics.

By the end of her first year in college, however, she became deeply absorbed not only in all high forms of fiction, but aesthetics itself. Although she relished intellectual disputation far more than her brother, she, too, wearied early of battling Ben on the development of science — and, indeed, the whole of human thought. Both youngsters found Marxism “simple-minded” and only slightly veiled a contempt for Freud, to say nothing of Reich's rooting all behavior in sexuality. When Ben told his daughter, shortly before his death, that he would await the expiration of his children's natural adolescent rebellions, she haughtily replied she could never be a true believer — moreover, that she had been born a polytheist, as had Sasha, and that if he, her father, were not glad of it, the world would be.

Mimi took a different course, especially after Ben's death. Though passionate about philosophy, especially ethics, she changed her course of study to musicology and took up the tuba, along with a variety of non-western instruments, many of which her college did not own, and which therefore had to be bought by the Sterns at considerable expense and brought into the country with some difficulty. Each such purchase enlarged the distance between herself and her parents, her father in particular. However, much as he berated her interest in matters he called “esoteric,” even “escapist” — though he did not specify from what — he did not dare refuse to finance any of these acquisitions. Did he fear that any such refusal would lead to a rupture with his daughter, Laura wondered, or did Mimi simply terrify him generally? Sasha believed that their relationship involved both elements equally.

Yet Stern seemed bent on provoking a rupture. Whatever Mimi's beliefs about her father's role in Ben Davidov's death, the two families continued celebrating major holidays together.

At Thanksgiving of the girls' last year in college, Mimi, eager to compare certain forms of Buddhist liturgical music with late medieval Masses, had been playing examples of both, ceaselessly on the family phonograph. As their strains rose throughout dinner, she began rhapsodizing on the glories of the twelfth century Church only to be interrupted by her father: "And the virgin birth — how do they justify that?!"

Lily Stern offered her husband another helping of candied yams and was waved away.

"How the hell do they justify that?" Stern persisted, looking fixedly at Mimi. "They can't justify it publicly for the denial of genitality that it really is, so what reason do they give?"

His daughter regarded him coldly, helped herself to the rejected dish and passed it on to Sasha before answering. "If you look at mythology worldwide, gods always mate with humans to produce heroes. Each religion has its own terms. But always there must be a union of the earthly and divine. Always. Just ask Laura; she is the literary expert."

Though Stern did not redirect his gaze, Laura ventured timidly, "Simon, the Church had to reach out to the Greeks and Romans. It could not say that the Messiah was just the Son of Man. That wouldn't have been understood outside the culture of the Jews."

"Who never denied genitality," replied Stern, not once averting his eyes from his daughter. "Whatever their other faults, they did not deny genitality. And whatever the Bible keeps from us, Christ was truly a genital character."

"Then what do you make of circumcision?" asked Sasha.

Dolly's attempt to frown her son into silence was unnecessary; Stern did not dignify the query even with a glance.

Mimi folded her napkin and left the room.

Almost forty years later in Paris, Laura recalled that Mimi as a child had wanted to play the cello but had been embarrassed at the idea of spreading her legs. Instead, she had played her mother's piano — at which she was never as talented as Lily. And only after her father's death did she find her true calling, only after the chance teaching of music to disadvantaged children — in child psychology.

Nik resurfaced two weeks later.

"Do you like music?" Laura asked.

“If I do, can I stay?”

“Nik, I 'm not sure that your staying is a good idea — not just from my point of view, but yours.”

“C'mon, Laura, I know that ploy. Anyhow, I do like music. I don't know it like my mother, but I like it — especially Victorian chant.”

Laura suppressed a smile.

“So can I stay?”

“No. Certainly not now. But tonight, if you like, I'll make you dinner. Have you a place to spend the night in Paris?”

“I can crash at a friend's.”

“If you like, I'll pay for a hotel.”

“I can pay for my own fucking hotel. I make plenty of money when I like — on top of my mother's. I could even pay for my own fucking father's house.” His fair skin flushed; his voice rose, the turquoise eyes took on a metallic glaze.

Fear rose, suffused Laura's body. “Nik,” she tried to recall him to himself, “with all that money, why don't you go downstairs and buy anything you want me to cook for you?”

The blood drained from his face. He walked out, slamming the door.

In the reverberation of the sound, she felt slightly dizzy and utterly sick at heart. A few minutes later, at the knock on her door, she feared and hoped he had returned, but could not find the strength to move.

“I 'm harmless,” Nik called from the other side. “I 'm sorry. What about if I take you out to dinner tonight — just like Vikram?”

She rose to let him in.

“You don't have to say anything right now,” he called from beyond the door. “If you like, just come to Vagenonde at nine. I know the maître d.’ If you don't come, I'll understand.” Instantly, he clattered down the stairs.

When Laura arrived at the restaurant that night, Nik embraced her ostentatiously and presented her to the maître d' as his godmother. A bottle of Dom Perignon sat in the cooler at their table; one waiter presented her with a chalice of caviar as another more discreetly served smoked salmon and the maître filled her flute.

“I'm sorry about this afternoon,” Nik told her as soon as the entourage disappeared. “I haven't been feeling well.”

“That's what I thought,” Laura replied. “But you're feeling better now, I hope?”

He nodded. “I took my medicine. I forgot to take it this morning. And I will be good. I promise. I will take it every day.”

“Actually, I was just thinking about something else — when you were two.”

“Good or bad?”

“Quite marvelous. It was your mother's birthday, and I came home from Paris with some special champagne to celebrate the occasion. When you asked for a sip, we poured a few drops into another glass so that you could, as usual, be totally independent. And you looked up at your father after you had tasted it and said, daddy, this is really good beer.”

He did not laugh. “Were you living with that Arabian then?”

“Bessarabian. Yes.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died, Nik. A couple of years after your mother's death.”

“How?”

“Of cancer. Very Horribly.”

“Did you kill him to put him out of his misery?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because your fucking brother thinks I killed my mother.”

Again, Laura felt fear rising in her throat. “And why do you say that?”

“Because it’s true. My father told me. So, I wanted to see if you thought so, too.”

“No. Why should I?”

“Because it’s true.”

“And what do you want me to do now?”

“Whatever you like. Scream, Leave. Call the police. Call your fucking brother to tell him he is right.”

“What if I say I don't believe you?”

“Then you're lying — or you're stupider than I thought. Everyone knows I killed my mother. Even my father. Says I did it for him. Says it saved him a huge custody fight. He practically thanks me every day.”

A waiter came to take their hors d'oeuvres and offer them menus in exchange.

“Is there any point, Nik, in going on with this meal?”

“That's up to you. Don't you want to know why I killed my mother?”

“Let's order,” said Laura against her better judgement.

“If you want to do take-out, you can do that, too — and leave. Just ask the maître d. He'll do anything I want.

Laura called the waiter over and ordered the plat de jour. Nik echoed her request wordlessly.

“Why did you kill your mother?” she asked finally.

“Because she was so fucking authoritative.”

“Authoritative?”

“Authoritative. Bossy. You know. For Chrissake, you knew her better than I did. She had to have everything her way.

Like, everything she thought, everyone else had to think. Like that I was bi-polar or schizophrenic or whatever just so it wouldn't be her fault.”

“What wouldn't be her fault, Nik?”

He summoned the waiter, asked for a rare steak in English and turned back to her, enraged. “Maybe I 'm not like your fucking brother's kids — but I 'm a genius. Yes, a genius. And she would not let me be. Like, she made me go to school — tried to force me to study all that crap like English and history. Just would not let me be myself with the computers. Myself. That is just what she would not let me be.”

Yet from the moment of his birth, he had been allowed to do anything he wished, except what might do him immediate physical harm. He had flouted even the small rituals of toothbrushing and baths, and Mimi had staunchly defended his right to do so [almost to the death]. He had run wild — seeking discipline, Laura and Sasha had clucked to one another after appeals to his parents had failed. Then, upon his entering school, problems had begun emerging, most ascribed at first to his curiosity and creativity.

He had been only six when the headmistress had suggested to the Garsons — well before their separation and divorce — that their son should perhaps undergo both neurological and psychiatric examinations.

Already, he could not be coaxed from the computer, even by a puppy — whom he repelled whenever it approached. Nor, with occasional exceptions, did he play with other children — largely when they manifested interest in his doings on the computer assigned him at school and then only on a strict master-disciple basis in which true access to his allegedly miraculous machine was denied.

Mimi had been enraged by the suggestion of the headmistress and, at the second such proposal, had transferred Nicholas to another school. She had begun practicing child psychology several years before his difficult birth, well before a series of miscarriages bereft her of the very fantasy of having a child. Roland Garson had not welcomed the pregnancy. He had, in fact, threatened to leave her when she refused to terminate it.

Sasha speculated that he had grown too accustomed to the luxury that Mimi's independent income permitted — especially when, on the eve of the birth, he had insisted on getting married at last. He had also demanded that Nicholas bear his surname alone. Nobody quite knew why — nor why Mimi acquiesced in this last wish. But Garson became a devoted baby-sitter, if not father; he went as far as to change his son's diapers compulsively. His work in artificial intelligence — as early as the halcyon '70s — permitted him to spend much of his time at home.

Nicholas toyed alongside him with small AI gadgets of the time, as well as the conventional playthings of a toddler. Happily, the child painted, too, as Garson dabbled in his favorite hobby, the creation of exquisite abstract miniatures in various media. For his son's sake, he even gave up smoking — as Mimi did not — and toxic visual materials. He often removed the sleeping boy from the crib to a cradle on his desk, interrupting his own work to marvel at the conversion of so much of Mimi's beauty into infant and male form.

Sasha, though, had seen in Nik traces of his grandfather — an impression everyone else had dismissed, most of all Garson, as was only natural.

Like Mimi, Garson reacted with rage at the thought that Nicholas might have an emotional problem — or, as he put it, “defect.” This was not surprising; at several points in his life, Garson had been characterized as manic-depressive — to which he had replied that he was simply a mathematician and artist, an unlikely and highly desirable combination that came at a price. Mimi also scoffed at this diagnosis, both before and after their union — in part, both Laura and Sasha suspected, because Simon Stern had almost immediately pronounced him so afflicted and, of course, sexually dysfunctional as well, possibly even a gay person, the gravest illness in Reichian pathology. This last possibility seemed remote; while not stridently masculine, Garson was hardly effeminate — only passive and abstracted much of the time.

Stern had found significant faults in all his daughter's suitors — as had Ben Davidov, more mildly, with each of his own children's adolescent partners — but the intensity of his dislike for Roland Garson, whom Mimi had encountered while still in college, resulted in the young man's ban from the Stern home.

The charge of same-sex attraction, according to Mimi, had arisen from Garson's defense of Leonardo da Vinci's merit as a scientific thinker. “If this be homosexuality,” she remarked to Laura — and possibly her father, “let's have more of it.” Shortly thereafter, she had moved out of her parents' apartment with all her musical instruments to a Soho loft. This seemed in no way unnatural; she had completed college and claimed that she needed her own space as well as time to decide what to do with her life.

Along with several other friends, Garson intermittently used the walkup — casually and apparently chastely — as his pad. Years passed before he and Mimi regarded one another as anything more than occasional roommates. Yet he left the bulk of his possessions with her — and, when there, expected to be served.

“Why do you want to stay with me?” Laura suddenly asked Nik across his steak.

“Dunno. It is a great old building — and a very classy address.”

“But surely you could rent a place of your own with a classy address and have your privacy as well.”

He shook his head. “Then my father would come stay. He is already threatening to call you.”

Shifting her eyes from his stare to the delicate golden hands clenched on the tablecloth, Laura wondered how so much horror could erupt from anyone so physically beautiful. “I hope, Nik, that you would not give anyone my number without my permission.”

“I don't have it,” he replied sharply. “You didn't even give it to me.”

She did not comment. She did not know what to say. Perhaps this might be their last encounter. Perhaps she could finally put paid to Mimi — and rejoice her brother into the bargain.

“This is a really crappy restaurant,” he muttered, pushing away his steak. “Dunno where most of these places get their reputations.”

It was late. Laura excused herself on the grounds of work the following day; it was not altogether false. She also wanted to call Sasha.

“So, you're not even going to give me your number?”

She hesitated. “Nik, I have a great deal of work to do — and friends coming up from Provence to stay.”

“That's a lie. They are staying with other friends of yours. I looked at your calendar. ‘Sebastians chez de Ruggy,’ it said — with a big arrow through the end of the month. You forget that I know French even if I do not speak it very much. In fact, I decided to become Canadian when I was twenty-one. Not that that matters to you. All I want, for Chrissake, is to know I can call you from time to time. That's the least a godmother could do.”

She wrote down her telephone number, shook hands with him and moved towards the door.

“Now I know why you never had kids,” he called out after her. My mother always said that if you really tried, you could've. But having books was easier. You could just leave them whenever you liked — whenever they got too tough to write. Just like my father's fucking paintings. And you do not even write about real people. Only fucking novels about fucking Africans and all those people no one ever heard of.”

As Laura thanked the maître d' and walked the few blocks back to her apartment, she wondered what Simon Stern would have made of his grandson — had he lived to see him. Then it occurred to her that Mimi had carried to term only after his death in her mid-thirties — and Lily's installation in a home for Alzheimer's patients. But it was all too wearying. She found herself too exhausted to return a friend's request for confirmation of their meeting the following night, let alone call Sasha.

“I was terrified and transfixed,” she told her brother the next day. “He sat there, spreading caviar on toast, and told me he had killed Mimi. And I wanted to flee but could not. I couldn't move.”

“I'm shocked, but not at all surprised,” came Sasha's reassuring voice. “Did you believe him?”

“No. Certainly not in any literal sense. I'm not at all sure that he believes it himself. But he seems convinced that you think so. Also, that Roland does — and approves.”

“That would not surprise me at all — especially after she refused to pay him an allowance for leaving her alone. But how did Nicholas get the idea that I consider him a murderer?”

“Who knows? Maybe he picked it up on your visits during his convalescence. God knows that all of us tried to put up at least a good show of caring. For me, it was easy enough by cards and letters that he never answered anyway. You and the kids, though — something might have slipped in face-to-face encounters. Nik may be illiterate, but he is hardly insensitive. But Sash, even if any — or all — of this were true, why would he want me to believe it?”

“He's your find, dear, not mine — and you are certainly his. Did he give you any reason for killing her, that is?”

“Yes. That she kept him from being himself — the mind constantly interlocked with the computer, undistracted by anything else. He was a genius, he said.” She quoted all she could remember of that part of their exchange.

Across the ocean, Sasha said nothing.

“Why?” she asked his silence. “Why try to convince me that he had killed his mother when he says he wants to move in here with me?”

“Because you're his next victim, whatever he did or didn't do,” Sasha replied at last.

“Since his mother did not recognize his genius — not enough, at least — it is up to you, his godmother. And if you do not do so, you are forewarned that he will exact revenge. Laura, I beg of you, get rid of him. Fast. Now. Even if it means leaving Paris awhile. I mean it. For all our sakes, Laura.”

In her own silence, she considered his counsel. She could not quit Paris now; friends were coming; too much was planned. And she was due to leave with them for Provence after their visit. If Nik appeared once more, he could be put off. There was no reason whatever to let him rule her life, disrupt a calendar crafted months before. “Yes,” she told her brother. “I won’t see him again. I will tell him my schedule has changed, that I am leaving in two days.”

“And that you have no time for him between now and then,” Sasha prompted.

“Yes. I promise.” But as soon as she replaced the receiver in its cradle, she remembered that she had no way of reaching Nik. Not that she needed to tell him explicitly that she was leaving for Provence — or for Antarctica if necessary. But he could reach her, catch her in a lie — or truth. He could track her down, at least in Paris, whereas she had no way of knowing his movements.

More than a full minute passed before she realized that her inability to contact the boy could represent a dimension of freedom from him. Not only did she have no obligation to inform Nik of her whereabouts or doings; she had a perfect excuse for not doing so.

Nonetheless, the fact that the mistaken thought had paralyzed her even momentarily showed her that his hold on her was greater than she cared to think. When the telephone rang a moment later, she was so fearful of encountering him at the other end that she refused to answer.

At the fourth ring, the recorder lurched into motion and Sasha’s voice commended her for having gone out into the world, ceasing her brooding on this misbegotten whelp of a departed and lost soul. “And please remember,” he cajoled, “that we really parted ways with Mimi — you especially, Lau — when she took up with the Black Panthers.”

Outside, a summer thunderstorm had unleashed fury. Laura rushed through the apartment, shutting windows, then sank into an armchair, cursing the weather that imprisoned her inside when action of any kind, even shopping, would have been consolatory. Wordless, she could not face her manuscript.

The general absurdity of things had become suddenly the general atrocity of things and the sole remedy lay in music. Distractedly, she scuttled through the discs of her hostess, finding nothing of the pure Baroque tonalities to which she normally turned for the restoration of order.

She found nothing but the high Romantics and cursed herself for having left a complementary selection in New York until amid the Wagner, she found Mozart's *Requiem*.

“I 'm the only person I know who plays requiem masses when deliriously happy.” So Laura had heard Mimi say when she had first met Roland Garson. “The conciliation of heaven and earth you know. The arcs of harmony subsuming hell.”

But Garson has not understood. Not to Laura's knowledge, at any rate. He had ignored such logical impossibilities as paradise and hell.

She put on the disc and resolved to surrender herself to the music. But the recording opened with a tolling of bells; it had commemorated in Vienna's cathedral the bicentenary of Mozart's death. Sobs overwhelmed her. She was not weeping for Mimi — or even Nik or Mozart. Simply for the waste of passion, love, and honor in fanatic creeds.

*Salva mei. fons pietatis.*

Yes, Mimi had joined the Black Panthers — to the extent that they had allowed her to do so. Fair and blond with her turquoise eyes, she had hovered on their margins, unwelcome but for her money. Perhaps that had been the point — to drown the self in a great cause and yet remain forever marginal.

It had all begun innocuously enough. In 1964, barely out of college and burning with outrage at the segregation of lunch counters even in Washington, both Mimi and Laura had joined the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, planning to take part in the Freedom Rides into the Deep South. By no means unafraid of the commitment they had made, both girls sought their parents' blessing.

Still blighted by her husband's death, Dolly Davidov reluctantly consented to Laura 's boarding the bus for Alabama; she had not constrained Sasha from study in Argentina and felt she could hardly forbid her daughter the dangers of enlisting in a cause she had been taught to champion. The Sterns followed suit — not, however, without a lecture from Simon to the effect that political struggle only masked the need to bring about the revolution in sexuality that would wither oppression and all its attendant evils.

Baffled but smarting, Laura called Sasha in Buenos Aires that night to ask if Stern were not in fact a white supremacist.

“Probably, came her brother's muffled voice, “but I suspect he doesn't know it. And for God's sake, do not tell him. Or Mimi either. Just go to Birmingham or wherever else you are headed and take care. For Mom's sake, if nothing else.”

She did, registered voters for a month, was swept into prison for a week, and returned to New York. There, in deference to her mother's obvious wishes, she remained, taking a junior job in educational broadcasting — from which she joined the information staff of the United Nations. From time to time over the years that took her from her native city to Paris and Nairobi, she regretted not having followed Sasha's academic path, but reflected that her own had combined prestige and financial comfort with the heady mix of adventure and a conviction of altruism.

Mimi followed a different course.

[ECHO ANTIGONE; MIMI 'S ADHERENCE TO A HIGHER LAW. SHE ADMITS PANTHERS HAVE COMMITTED MORAL CRIMES BUT UPHOLDS THEM FOR THE SAKE OF HIGHER CAUSE. “POWER TO THE PEOPLE.” COMMENTS ON THE BLACK FEMALE CONTROL OF THE BLUSTERING BOYS -- IS MIMI HERSELF, IN ALL HER FAIR FRAGILITY, MOLESTED???)

[CERTAINLY, KICKED AROUND PSYCHOLOGICALLY. MIMI IS ALSO THE FIRST TO SPEAK OUT AGAINST VIETNAM WITHOUT BEING PRO-COMMUNIST. SLIGHT FLING WITH LSD, THEN AVERSION TO ALL PSYCHOTROPIC DRUGS, BUT ADDICTION TO THERAPY -- NO EASY SELF RENOVATION PROGRAM. UNLIKE LAURA AND SASHA, SHE DOESN'T TRAVEL -- ONLY INITIALLY AND BRIEFLY TO THE COUNTRIES FROM WHICH HER INSTRUMENTS COME (LARGELY ASIAN). THEN PREFERS TO WATCH FILMS AND VIDEOS ABOUT EXOTIC PLACES; PREFERS INNER JOURNEYS.]

[THERAPY -- INCLUDING GROUP THERAPY -- SEEMS TO PROVIDE SANCTUARY & A MEASURE OF PERSONAL TRANSCENDENCE, AS DO POLITICAL MOVEMENTS, NOTABLY THE PANTHERS FOR A TIME.]

[TRACE MIMI 'S MOVEMENT FROM INNER CITIES (DRUGS AMONG KIDS?) INTO CHILD PSYCHOLOGY.]

[TIME INDICATION PLUS TRANSITION.]

Having spent half of June in Provence, Laura returned to Paris to find the apartment newly equipped with a computer so advanced that she hardly dared approach it — even with the laboriously handwritten instructions sitting on its keyboard, which promised the imminent delivery of a printer capable of magnificent functions for which she had no use.

“Luff, Nik,” the directions ended. That had been Mimi 's signoff in situations in which she felt diffident or uneasy.

The note gave no indication of where her son might be reached. When questioned, the concierge asserted defensively that Monsieur Nik had been impeccable in his comings and goings, returning the key to the apartment each time he had left over the course of three days; he had even been so good as to upgrade the primitive computer of her son — and for nothing, not even the material — when a plumber these days charged more than a surgeon just for replacing a screw.

But had Nik copied the key, Laura wondered aloud.

That, the concierge assured her, was impossible; a special secret code, known only to her good self and Laura's landlady, was necessary. Besides, even supposing that Monsieur Nik had managed to replicate the key, why had he stopped each time he came to obtain the one in the possession of the house, even to the point of waiting through an afternoon in which the conciergerie had been deserted? Laura marveled at the naivete of a woman otherwise paranoid about the movements even of the building's residents but asked if Nik had left a contact address or number.

“Surely, Madame, you know where to find him,” commented the concierge.

Laura retreated upstairs to recheck Nik's note, even her answering machine. When neither yielded a clue as to his whereabouts, she switched on the computer. This, of course, would be his true medium of communication; she berated herself for not having thought of it earlier. She soon found, however, that access demanded a password — of which no indication had been left. None of the obvious names worked, nor even any birthday she could summon, including Nik's, for which she combed her memory. The date of Mimi 's death, she morbidly concluded, must be the answer, and this eluded her. Perhaps, though, Nik had left some solution with the concierge's son.

With no hesitation, the boy typed “Welcome” in French. A full screen of options revealed itself, including one marked “Laura's Files.” None of the choices, however, yielded any possibility of finding Nik.

Nor could the concierge's son tell her anything useful. Monsieur Nik had simply said he would be traveling but would stop by sometime after his return at summer's end to check if all was well with the computers. It was perhaps a confidential mission, probably a top-secret mission for which he had had to go under cover. Did Mme. Davidov think that Monsieur Nik was involved in space communication, contacting extra-terrestrial beings?

Laura tried to dismiss Nik from her mind but was successful only intermittently. Beneath the stream of engagements and excursions over the next months, even beneath rapid progress on her book, he or Mimi surfaced in her dreams, occasionally melding or gliding in or out of one another, and she would awake wondering where she was.

He had gone under cover, she reflected, in her gut; so much for her illusion of freedom in being unable to reach him.

One night she even dreamed of Simon Stern. “I didn't kill her,” he said, “your father either.”

She lunged for his throat. It should have been easy to choke him. He was clearly dying, his face bluish gray, lurching in a wheelchair among the beds and pallets of starving Somalis in a makeshift hospital. Yet constantly, he moved beyond her grasp. The hands of the starving were outstretched as well; he was the doctor. But the spittle of the dying was dribbling from the corners of his mouth. Until he spat and the starving shrank from him as a brownish jet splattered the rags in which they lay.

But Simon did not spit, thought Laura as she jolted awake. One could never have imagined Simon spitting, even in a dentist's chair; at more than 20 years' removal from his death, she could not picture him performing any natural function. Worse, in the wake of the emaciated bodies rose the memory of a photo that had fallen out of Vikram's papers during their stay in Mogadishu: four blue-helmeted white soldiers, members of a UN peace-keeping contingent, roasting a Somali boy tied to a spit over an over an open fire. He had been, it was said, one of the thousands of youngsters who had raped, plundered, tortured, and killed villagers throughout the famine belt. Moreover, it was also said, he had dared his captors to torture him upon stripping him of his guns and, after a brief singeing, they had let him go. The photo had been rapidly suppressed; she herself had seen it for only a few seconds before Vikram had whipped it away.

It was 3 AM still — however, a respectable hour in America. She poured herself a liberal dose of cognac to ease the horror of her nightmare and its aftermath and dialed Vikram in Washington. He was deep in a report due the next morning and remembered the photograph with considerable annoyance.

“Whatever happened to those guys?” he echoed her question disdainfully. “Well, they were punished, I guess. Court-martialed.”

Locked in a stockade and shipped home to Europe or Canada or wherever. They got whatever their country's military brass does for that kind of behavior. The kid thug they had hung over the fire was no prize, either. Laura, you are about the last person I would have figured for a sentimental fool.”

“Then why did you keep the photo?”

“I didn't. I threw it out when I left Somalia. One has to keep things in proportion. That incident was merely sensational.

Just think of all the daily horrors poverty inflicts on people. There is where the attention should be focused. That and the fact that we can now really wipe out poverty. The worst of it, at least. If we can just empower people.”

“When you say that, Vikram, you imply that you can give power — and that it also can be taken away.”

“Not when it is knowledge, Laura, and people's consciousness of their own knowledge. That's the big thing, the revolutionary thing: people's sense of ownership of their own knowledge so that they can be active stakeholders in the management of their destinies.”

“Spare me the jargon. I was writing it in one form or another for the UN before you were born.”

“Then why the hell did you call me?”

“I really don't know.” She considered hanging up, but he sounded anxious as well as angry. “Forgive me,” she murmured. “I just had a nightmare and an impulse. Of course, you're right — and bless you and Godspeed — and there will always be sadists.”

“May I send you my paper when I 'm through? I 'd really appreciate your comments. And you will see how all these ideas translate into data positive data. I will call you.”

Only a moment after their conversation, Laura wondered if Nik's computer prowess would help Vikram propagate his gospel. The point was moot in any practical sense; she could not reach the golden boy. More, as neither young man had mentioned the other to her, they had probably found no lasting common ground, professional or social. The cognac was producing its desired effect, closing her mind as well as eyes. She fell asleep with the comfort that she was a meddling old fool who should withdraw from involvement in the foibles of the young. She took her headache the next day as just punishment and found escape from both her manuscript and the memory of the photograph in shopping with a friend, yielding to the sensuous delights of Paris. Happily, the two women lavished money on a score of useless purchases, from the first autumn flowers to the latest plastic jewelry. They bought a funny antique pornographic woodcut for a friend.

They surrendered to laughter also, to the chagrin of a coiffeur who wanted them to concentrate on his efforts, then to the temptation of a new movie melodrama and left each other giddily exhausted close to midnight

Recklessly, Laura checked the answering machine. A summons from the Pitié hospital demolished the day's bliss. Nik had been taken there after a mugging a few hours before.

There were apparently no severe injuries — only a black eye, a cut that required several stitches, a few superficial bruises and three broken ribs in addition to anal abrasions consistent with the young man's broken account of having been sodomized. The senior physician felt an MRI warranted, given the patient's indication of concussion and coma in adolescence, as well as his present regime of medications; his insurance papers were quite adequate.

Why had they called Laura? Because hers was the name in Garson's passport. No, no father had been mentioned — neither on the Norman coast nor in Montreal. And yes, they would appreciate Davidov's arrival as soon as possible; she might contribute to the clarification of several elements of Garson's presentation of his medical history; in addition to his shock, his French was limited. He was now sleeping only fitfully as could only be expected in this kind of trauma.

The attending physician was far warmer than her telephone demeanor had suggested, sensitive to the possible effects of sudden sexual violence on a young man so clearly unstable. She had insisted on Laura's coming largely because she felt that Garson desperately needed a familiar, reassuring presence — a feeling confirmed by his evident relief at the announcement that Davidov would momentarily be at his side.

Beyond Nik's battered, closed right eye, his face had become almost unrecognizable. Not only had his beard been shaved to permit a few stitches in his chin; swollen and discolored, he looked like a caricature of dissolution.

“It wasn't me who got you here,” he greeted Laura. The turquoise eyes were dull with sedation. “I told them not to bother you until at least tomorrow. “

Laura took his hand and kissed him. “I've been trying to find you since I returned from Provence.”

“It was this queer who came over to my table at the restaurant. He kept wanting to buy me a whisky and would not believe that I didn't drink the hard stuff. Then, when I left to go back to this friend's pad, he beat me up him and some other queers. He was living, it seemed, in Montparnasse with two other computer enthusiasts, a young couple to whom Vikram had introduced him. There, though, he felt like a fifth wheel. And his father was off in Morocco until late September.

The police had found him unconscious in an alley, said the young doctor. He had not been robbed. Such sexual assaults were increasingly common though not yet, thank heaven, as frequent as in Davidov's New York. Pending the results of the MRI, the hospital could keep Garson for three days for observation. But for some weeks afterwards, he would need care and follow-up; he seemed to have no doctor in France.

He had also refused any suggestion of talking to a psychiatrist about the rape. While this feeling might change, it was understandable in view of his medical record.

Laura could furnish little supplementary information but volunteered to shelter him upon his release. The image of the Somali boy kept rising behind her eyes. Someone, she remembered, had traced the origins of war to assuaging a primal fear of being hunted and devoured by stronger carnivores.

When she arrived at the hospital the following morning, Nik welcomed the prospect of coming to her apartment with a show of diffidence. He was anxious, too, about the MRI; it appeared that his neurologist in Montreal, whose name he had given the hospital staff, had urged that he undergo the test. “Y’ know,” he told Laura, “I could put you up at my father's place in Normandy. It' s really cool and you like being near the sea.”

She declined, explaining that she had to adhere to her routine; with or without him as a house guest; she had to meet a deadline for her book.

“I’ll pay for everything at your place,” he avowed, “our food, your rent, the telephone...”

“Nik, you have already given me and my landlady an enormous gift with the computer upgrade.”

He smiled, blushed, and consigned himself to the orderly who had come to take him to the test. He bore the evident pain of the movement into the wheelchair with brave silence.

Happily, the MRI revealed no anomalies other than those charted over the years by his Montreal specialist. Beyond the [Manuscript missing for two typed pages] than those syllables might well have sunk into the youngster's brain without his knowing what they meant, reverberating much later on.

Nik's fine fingers were raised almost in benediction as they conducted the chant. She took the disc case from his knee. On the cover, under the words *Requiem Aeternam*, a Virgin draped in celestial blues, haloed in heavy gold, cradled the head of her golden Son, his own halo marked by a scarlet cross; beneath scarlet flecks of blood, his face resembled Nik 's own. “Death is also the Resurrection” said the booklet of notes.

Nowhere, though, did it translate the text, even the titles of the mass. But her movement had broken the boy's trance. Evidently, her face showed distress as well because he asked if she disliked the music.

She heard her voice trembling as she told him it was a mass for the dead, that the choir was entreating God to grant eternal rest to those who had died, and to let perpetual light shine upon them. So that they might have the serenity of the face of Jesus on the cover of the disc and be spared the wrath of Judgement Day.

“What wrath? They're so peaceful.”

“The souls and singers have looked into hell, dear, into its face and come out the other side, come into peace.”

He shook his head as the boy sopranos soared over the basses into the Sanctus and benediction. “Awesome. These guys really have it together.”

“Your mother,” Laura ventured, “loved this type of mass — for that same reason.”

He considered this information with dispassion, then asked, “Did you love her very much?”

“Yes, It was difficult not to, despite...” She stopped. “I had profound respect for her as well, even when I deeply disagreed with her. She had a kind of integrity that is hard to find these days; it's out of fashion to stick to what you believe — publicly at least.”

“So, she was a pain in the ass?”

Laura knew she should try to smile but couldn't. She wanted to invoke Antigone but feared he would not understand the allusion. “I think of her sometimes as a legendary princess who stood firm, ready to sacrifice everything for what she thought was right — position, reputation, even love.”

Again, she stopped. Antigone had not had children, had not lived even to the consummation of her love, dooming her prince as well as herself in her fidelity to her higher law. And for many, perhaps Sophocles included, she had certainly been a pain in the ass... The gods had not praised her; nor had Tiresias. Perhaps they had not known what to say.

“I think she sacrificed me, too,” the boy said, low.

“No, Nik. Certainly not consciously. You were the center of her life.”

“I was myself and she would not let me be. That is why I had to kill her.” He rose aptly, turned the music up to a roar and bolted to his room.

But he did not close the door nor repel Laura when she followed him and took his trembling body in her arms. "I just had to get out of it," he sobbed against her, "all the pression and repression ... I wanted to get out and she would not stop. I just had to get out of the fucking car. She went outa control."

All the generations, Laura thought, of pression and repression, as she stroked his damp hair, all the rapes...

After he had fallen asleep, she thought of calling Sasha, but did not. His certitude of Nik's guilt confirmed, he would urge her to throw out her golden godson, to consign him either to the world in which rapists had found him or, at best, to the care of some clinician unable to understand that this child's history was the century's and his crime a cry for freedom. No, she would keep Nik until he himself wanted to leave; he would kill no more. If necessary, she would keep him from Roland, too.

The next morning, she asked the boy if he wanted to see the settings in which his music had been sung. She was thinking of Sainte Chapelle, of going and returning when the light had changed, so that he might have two impressions of its glories. And if he found in those windows even a modicum of the rapture of his chant, they could plan an expedition to Chartres, where he might even hear his music as he bathed in the cathedral's colors. If the friend whom she was scheduled to see that evening assented, they might even go to Chartres that very day. They could all go together, have lunch and stay until the angelus. After his confession of the night before, he might wish to be with someone in addition to herself.

But he wanted to go nowhere. He needed to immerse himself, he said, in his new books with his chant in the background. Nor did he wish her to change her plans in any way; they could go to Sainte Chapelle or Chartres another time when he was feeling stronger; he had perhaps overdone things the day before when the doctor had instructed him to rest.

When she returned that night, he told her that the telephone had had a busy day; he had almost thought of turning the ringer off. Among the many calls, there had been one from her brother and another from Vikram. He had answered the former only because Sasha had specifically asked him to pick up if he were there. "And even then, I almost did not. Hypocrite S.O.B. He said I could stay with him and his wife if I ever came to New York. Said his kids wanted to see me. Said your nephew whatshisname, the Harvard physicist — liked to talk computers. Ha."

"Actually, he's a nice guy."

"Who? Your brother or his son?"

“Both. You might actually like my nephew — my niece, too. And Vikram did you also speak to him?”

“Yup. Good ol' Vik. He's fulla crap, too. Says he is looking for a job for me — not a big one, but something that could lead to something else. But he won't do anything, I bet.”

“I would not be so sure. But these international contracts are difficult to obtain...”

“No, I scare him. He knows what I could do to him — to everyone.”

“Nik, forgive me, but if there is one thing Vikram does know, it's that using the talents of others properly — and giving them due credit — can make him look good.”

“Not with what I can do to him.

From time to time, he reminded her strangely of his grandfather. She resolved not to ask him to reveal his secret and turned into her manuscript.

“Not very many people really understand about computer viruses,” Nik doggedly continued. “They're like a kind of life we can create ourselves.”

Laura refused to respond.

“They can reproduce themselves. They can mutate, too, all by themselves. And also, mate. So, two can get together and produce a whole new species — which can also mutate by itself and mate.”

Ordering him to his room would be useless. She could escape by excusing herself, but she balked at the notion of being displaced in what was, temporarily at least, her household.

“Of course,” he went on, “it takes somebody pretty special to create a virus like that one that will evolve according to the criteria decided by the creator.”

He was doubtless paraphrasing a notion he had found in one of his new books. And he had no idea whatever of the ancient lineage of the Frankenstein fantasy.

“A virus could be programmed to destroy very selectively. Very selectively. So that no one could even suspect that the target was specific. Or that there were several specific targets — just to drive one very specific person to whatever the creator wanted, including suicide or murder. But only a real cyborg could do it. You do not even know what a cyborg is.”

“No, except that you are undoubtedly one of them,” she finally responded, rising without returning his gaze. “I’m tired and it’s late.” She gathered the last pages she had written into a folder and shut herself in her bedroom.

The doctor had said he could be moved into a convalescent home, she remembered. His father would doubtless be returning soon. She slept almost until noon. All was silent as she moved through the morning rituals. Nik, too, seemed to be sleeping late — or had left too quietly to wake her.

She tapped at his door gingerly; when no response emerged, she opened it. He was seated at his laptop, fully dressed with immense earphones on his head. His entire being seemed fixed on his screen, over which he slightly rocked. But the draught she had created ruffled his papers. He frowned, turned, and saw her.

“*Requiem aeternam*,” he said, slipping off his headgear.

“I was never an early riser,” she answered guiltily. “Forgive me for disturbing you.”

“No problem. There is no disturbance.” He smiled. “Just a pause. Maybe a necessary pause.” She asked if he had eaten.

“In cyberspace,” he said, “there is no race, no class, no gender. No defects, no disabilities. No fake distinctions. Just yourself. Pure selves communicating with each other. Maybe chanting if they like.”

In this recitation, she recognized shreds of some old advertisement for Internet software.

He pressed a switch. The plainsong blared. “We are all aspects of one great Self.”

Including his mother?, Laura wondered. She murmured that she had to get to work and that the small refrigerator was bursting with leftover delicacies.

He nodded without looking at her, rose abruptly and lowered the shutter of the room until the sole distinct object was his vivid screen. [INDICATION OF CHANGING COLORS, UNCLEAR IMAGES...ALL TO SUGGEST A CHAPEL OF HIS OWN.]

Donning his earphones once more, he took his music back to himself and concentrated [on his screen]. “I’ve decided not to destroy ol’ Vikram,” he announced to the images Laura could not see. Again, the music seized him, and he began slightly rocking, his eyes half-closing over the bright intensity beamed a second earlier on her — almost, it struck her, and she recoiled from herself as well as her thought and the boy, like some old Orthodox Jewish man.

“There is strength in submission,” he murmured to the screen.

He lacked only the skullcap, beard and sidelocks.

One great Self ... Submission ... Find strength in submission.