

A man of uncertain identity hungers for the gifts of life which he imagines must be seized through conflict or seduction. Perhaps he is sleepwalking when his soul awakens and demands excitement. But without love all is wistful. At first he entices himself with a strange looking woman. Soon there will be three other women, and adventurous phenomena that forewarn of illusory rewards or ruin.

SEDUCING THE BEAST

by Henry Gonzales

© 2000 - 2011 Channel49

From the thoughts of a man who would be a hero if not for himself *and circumstances...*

UMBERTO'S MANIFESTO

Time is always running out. Opportunities evaporate before they become opportunities. We wither on the vine. Umberto withers on the vine. He is desperate and wants to kiss all sorts of ladies in all sorts of places. They would only laugh at him. Humiliation doesn't seem to matter anymore. He's afraid of dying and being scorned for the wrong reasons. He wants to commit a crime and run while there is still an hour left. He thinks of himself as a reptile, an obsolete creature of chance. Umberto is me. And I am ashamed but go to sleep with my shame and wake up into a new, troubled day hoping to try the same things again. The same things only with added recklessness. Umberto is almost out of control. I am almost out of control.

I do nothing. Another long journey in empty circles. I toughen the body. The arms. Pushups, two dozen repetitions. Perhaps, Umberto wonders, he should carry a gun. Since my recent discovery that all days end, I know that nothing can hold me back. No embarrassment, no defeat, is so small that it cannot finally be avenged. No scheme too stupid or bizarre that it should not be put into operation. No potential flirtation too impossible, or crazy, that a liaison should not be attempted. No, my friends (and enemies --screw you); only God can hold me back. And it was God who made me and will destroy me whether I do or don't.

I am scared by this. But inadequacy breeds rage, I look deep inside for some. I am like a refrigerator preserving all things. Yes, a little rage is ordered by the cook. And Umberto will use some to spread like butter upon his toast...

Umberto...

Discovering one has fallen in love can occur anytime. While laughing together, or glancing into the other's eyes. But to Umberto, discovering that love had gone came in shopping center parking lots. When the mundane had overwhelmed his expectations. Too much eyebrow knitted across the forehead. 'Who is this person and what have I done?'

Possibly whimsical, he was still compassionate. Falling out of love was hard on him. He tried not to choose love again. He tried distracting himself with novelty, hoping to save

his heart. Nothing worked. Eventually he wanted to fill the emptiness of his hopes again.

But the women were not agreeable. They either were not interested or gave themselves too quickly. He knew. Yes, Umberto thought he understood. That to love a woman would change her perspective. An evening of warmth would spread like the milk of passion and soon she, or he, would be convinced of destiny. How does one know destiny? Can one stalk destiny, or does destiny fall upon one with either the subtlety of a fifty dollar bill floating in the wind or the suddenness of a train collision?

From when he was a child he imagined fate rewarding him in two ways: Giving his play meaning which he could call work, and opening his eyes with that sudden, heart-stopping shock as he saw the only woman who would see him. The only thing fate had rewarded him with was the passage of time.

So fate had not been what he imagined. Perhaps work was what one did for a paycheck and love something else entirely, and not a gift to all creatures. He cursed himself for foolishness and vowed to be a hungry entrepreneur of the human spirit, but some flaw in his makeup made him demur, and made his pursuits something to be abandoned as he awaited perfection. Yet serendipity did not come to him, frenzy did, to make up for all the time he had wasted waiting for it.

Sometimes Umberto was lazy. Sometimes the weight of the sun over moisture in the air was enough to send him to a grassy bank. Maintaining a smile was all the burden he could bear to carry. Sometimes he needed the warning of winter to motivate him. The premonitions of lost daylight, when squirrels and seagulls put in for early retirement by standing in the roadway and letting cars plow into them, either that or face another bleak and barren season. But this was spring, the planting season, and the air had an exciting impermanence to it. And, yet, still he glimpsed timelessness at the edge of the sky.

Maybe the laziness was a speck of depression. A droplet of self-doubt melted by the warmth of life. In a dream he met his imaginary lover. He kept wondering why she was smiling so pervasively. He felt foolish. A man who had struggled unsuccessfully to become a clown and now was failing at being taken seriously. He thought too little of himself to be happy, and too much of himself to be satisfied.

If he couldn't be an artist at least he should be an opportunist, he thought. But Umberto was a bad opportunist. If he was at a restaurant it would be his very last thought to capture the check in order to retain the receipt as a potential tax deduction. If a woman should say hello it was never his first thought to get between her legs as the instinct of a predator seeking combat with its prey or an adversary. He spent too much time in the moment ruminating the past or fantasizing about the future. In terms of work he disliked taking orders as much as giving them. That was why his life seemed like a blur of memories rather than a register of accomplishments. He took pride in having matured (finally) from a teenager who stormed ahead without looking either way to someone who held doors open for other people. He wondered if that was to be his epitaph.

He castigated himself for such inappropriate behavior, trying to be nice in a world of

absolute focus and achievement. He pondered way after way to make up for so much lost time. Meanwhile Umberto spent hours in a particular library. Learning, relaxing, wasting away more moments. It seemed to him that the librarian was someone more unhappy than himself. She was very tall, with an awkward gait, a poor selection of suits and dresses. Flaxen hair that could not have been dyed its color, shaped by static and inattention, possibly combed (with spit?) Her eyes seemed opaque, focused inward, her fingernails like Umberto's, simply there at the end of her fingers, sometimes gray from print. Lips that held her teeth inside and spoke when spoken too. She was helpful when she must, as Umberto asked her a question or two. Her last name was the same as the library's. He actually remarked about it once. Waiting for an old periodical to be rescued from its tomb while standing before her name plate at the reference desk. 'My Grandfather donated the foundation grant,' she had sighed, so heavy with the knowledge she had grown up under a regime of disciplined affluence with no desire for anything but escape. Kind of like Umberto, he supposed, knowing oneself, yet with such limited ability to change. Even the pearls around her neck were thrown there to distract from the pulls on her sweater blouse which had seen too many washings.

If, idly, while daydreaming, he had seen her place books onto a shelf, and assumed that she had haunches under her dress and that possibly here (a ridiculous thought) desire might be kindled, that's the most he ever thought about it. No, Umberto kept telling himself to investigate more entrepreneurial paths, seek out glamorous companions and reinvent Umberto in a more serpentine mode. Then one night he had an absurd dream in which he married this woman. A reader taking his own librarian? Even in this dream she could not smile, and her eyes often avoided his. But once she did look at him, and a torrent of astounding thoughts raced through his head. He struggled to awaken and keep those things with him, but they quickly receded, washing away like a lost tide, leaving only a vapor of their remains. It was hard for Umberto to look at her the same after that, and for some weeks he avoided this library.

On his return he tried to ignore her, realizing that an obsession fueled by nothing could spring forth. Ironically they had a conversion. She was holding too many books in an aisle they were both passing through. The thought occurred to go around, but this would have been silly. She dropped a volume at his feet and Umberto picked it up for her. As she was busy juggling the remaining books, he had a moment to pass. The book was about Anglo Saxon literature. He flipped it open. *Beowulf*. Umberto remembered something but found the verse impenetrable. "Ah, the poor monster... what was her name, Gwendolyn?" He said, finding *Robyn Hode* and being able to comprehend that.

She laughed. Yes, she could laugh. "The beast was Grendel not Gwendolyn, a dragon I think."

Umberto laid the book upon the pile she had gained more control of. "Now, why did I think of the beast as female?" He queried.

"Maybe because life is a beast and life is female," she said edging passed him.

It was the rudiment of a possible discussion but she was already gone, leaving him alone in the aisle. He considered pursuing her to the reference desk to continue, but didn't. She

seemed so intent upon her duties.

He read for an hour and on the way out stopped before her desk. She seemed aware of him but would not look up. There were no engagement or wedding rings on her hands (he didn't think so). Umberto waited a moment for the excitement to clear from his throat. "Hi."

Finally she looked up. Who knew where her thoughts were? They were not in front of her as Umberto was. He suggested going for coffee sometime. It seemed as if he were recommending exploratory surgery. Agitation showed on her face. She didn't know what to say. Not being smooth himself, Umberto smiled, shrugged and slowly backed away. He felt sad ascending the steps that this might be the end of his library visits.

He lay sleeping, this Umberto character, in dreams of turmoil. Colorful renditions of remembrances that may not have happened. Ah, the perversity of a dream-past that mutates with the moment; scenes, nuances, backgrounds merging, ameliorating, deteriorating. Such restlessness. So much adversity. At every turn deadlines missed, exchanged glances with potential lovers who are never seen again. Challenges, undefended and indefensible. Demands placed upon him by powerful others. Toil in the uncertainty of reward. Everywhere rejection. Small solace taken in provinces of alienation, passing time in unknown jobs with tasks undone, awaiting a certain dismissal, passing through an endless night on journeys of empty excitement and vague despair. At last he saw a face that he believed could be recognized in a work-day's reality. An expression that betrayed an inertia of thought. The countenance of a woman who does not care for her own looks. Tall with flaxen, nearly shapeless hair. Her body was also shapeless, hidden under a long dress.

He went into the day already drained of resolve the way one feels after napping following a luncheon of wine. Umberto took the train into a larger reality. He was like the other journeymen and knights outfitted with pagers, cell phones or PDAs fastened to their belts like swords. Umberto attempted to hide from the waste of time behind a newspaper. The words formed meaningless dots in his mind as the joined cars clattered quickly over the rails entering a tunnel and howling like a wounded entity to the ears of anyone who would listen. Looking up, Umberto noticed that the men held blank faces and the women looked inward or far away. He folded his paper into his lap as there seemed no harm in watching. No one would see him.

The Company He Keeps...

Out of the dismal wailing of the tunnel all travelers were greeted by a vision of the city. The train emerged into daylight two stories above the street and there, spread before them was an immense apparition of buildings and looping roadways both below and above them. The layers of architecture spanned almost a century and with an impeccable gradualism constantly changed. After anticipated delays that often seemed longer than they were, *the day seeming so close yet still beyond the grasp of the coach doors*, a great exodus erupted as all fled to their myriad destinations.

*

Lunch-time and Umberto ate the goods of a street vendor on the way to a bookstore. The store held more humans than usual. Perhaps some activity was about to take place. He meandered, giving up on the notion of finding a seat, or even a book. He didn't seem to have that much appetite for commitment. Suddenly someone was talking to him. He felt sheepishly defensive as if a sales clerk had descended upon him.

"I know who you are," she said. She looked no more than 19 maybe even younger. So much smile. She did not seem to have the personality of a sales clerk. Not very tall with long dark hair. Very thick hair. Hair that lay in a loose braid as if it would do nothing else. He wondered why he should even notice this.

Umberto was slightly flushed. "Yes?" he asked, having no idea what she had said.

"I know who you are."

Excitement. Either he was going to be embarrassed by not knowing who this person was, or vicariously embarrassed for the person who shared so much smile with him for no good reason. Or perhaps, he would find out who he was; a concept that had been eluding him for quite awhile.

"I hope someone does," Umberto quipped.

She nodded happily and pointed to him, child-like, "I forget your name... I mean I knew it but seeing you here. It just left my mind."

"I am Umberto."

"Yes," Her smile deepened with accomplishment. "I knew it was something like that."

She seemed to be in awe of him which he found bizarre, yet was enthralled by her candid shower of happiness. He couldn't help himself.

"Listen, I know this is a big imposition," she began, "because you don't, you know, know me at all. And I'm just coming up to you like this, but there's this project I'm working on that I'd like you take a look at..."

"Oh I would love to," Umberto said, "No imposition at all. But I'm very certain you have confused me with another Umberto or someone like that..."

"No, it's you..." she said, wavering slightly though pointing at him again.

"Well, if you say so. But I have no notoriety. I am the Director of the Foundation for Lost Souls, a part-time position which I invented myself. I am outside," Umberto motioned with his hands as if to show a box which he was not in, "almost everything, though I do work during the day..."

She shrieked, not hearing his last phrase at all. "It IS you!" She said, covering her mouth to contain her glee.

She began speaking in general terms concerning what his philosophy had meant to her. Umberto could barely hear her as his own head was screaming out suggestions on how to part company. But he tried returning her smile and continued to nod as she spoke.

Then she retrieved a small pad and pen from inside the voluminous satchel she lugged and began scribbling things for him. "It's only a coffee house in the 'burbs. But, oh please! Come see and tell me what you think. Okay. I'm there Thursday nights. Please, please, please! Say you'll come. Please! I agree with practically everything you believe in."

"I believe in very little. Maybe God, and that you should try to be polite, that is if you can't run away," Umberto remarked off-handedly as he accepted the note paper. She laughed.

"My name is Lori. Please come see me. Please?" She almost whined.

"Of course, provided I won't have to go to Timbuktu." He read the address. The town was actually near him.

"Bye," she said waving with one hand, the other side of the scales of justice holding her satchel. It was a handbag one could live out of. Maybe she did.

Remembering his pledge to live as if possessed with desperation, a man on the edge of his soul with a thirst for life before time absorbed it, Umberto raised his voice an octave, "I shall see you!" After all such a thing had the makings of an incongruent adventure.

The Father Of Umberto

The man who had lent some of his chromosomes and much of his heart to the creation of Umberto lay shriveled and white-haired in his hospital bed. With careful and unconscious precision he folded and refolded the corner of his sheet into and out of a meaningless pattern. He had been in this hospital many times already, and all with life-threatening catastrophes plaguing him. Still, he clung to life with the small allotment of strength left. His crankiness of confinement had been displaced by the inclusion of Xanax into the regimen of medicines the nurses brought him at unpredictable intervals. He had an odd complacency and crooked smile for the creakiness of fate which had returned him here. Not due to a raging humor at the bizarre irony of life but from a mixture of druggy soma and the iron will that had brought him from the nothing of his youth to the orderliness of his constructed and devolving existence. He asked his few visitors how they were feeling and shrugged when they asked the same. It was through him that Umberto learned that true heroes were both dutiful and boring.

It pained Umberto to visit. He saw in the old man's symptoms of doddering and palsy his own pitiful mortality. Visions of erotic sirens melted into the dull hospital smell of banished urine heated under florescent lighting. Still, he attempted to make eye-contact and flirt with the nurses. They must have thought him an odd nuisance if they thought anything at all, he believed. Most likely they paid him no mind, or considered him a nice

and polite clone of the relic on the bed.

The father of Umberto sometimes fought for his next breath. Umberto had to avert his own eyes knowing that he himself had only so much time and had accomplished little. The father of Umberto had at least created Umberto, and in this Umberto had to fold his face into his arms and choke back the surge of laughter that threatened to break out. The old man thought Umberto was withholding grief and sought to comfort his boy with a withered and cool hand. "It's all right Sonny..."

One of the nurses making the next bed seemed momentarily moved by the emotional interlude and Umberto wondered if he should try to capitalize on it. Even in such places life tries to struggle on.

*

The hospital visit had left Umberto momentarily stripped of illusions. Thus he felt depressed. That his father might die (*had in fact begun to die; barely resembling the handsome aviator of many decades ago*) was a burden too heavy to face. That his own world was still unmade became a taunting challenge.

It was Thursday evening and he forced himself to follow the directions on the scrap of paper from the girl who mistook him for someone else. What was left of his imagination attempted to construct an intriguing instruction in who he was not.

*

The coffee house was almost empty of people and light. Lori sat upon a stool in a tepid spotlight that shone on a very small stage, a mere platform of particle board. She held a guitar which she strummed as she sang-talked, sometimes causing a melody to come forth, though fairly unrelated to her guitar playing. Some young heads bobbed at a table near the stage. Her message seemed suicidal which did not go with her happy face. Again Umberto felt like burrowing his head into something soundproof and wailing with laughter.

She and the lone waitress spied him simultaneously. The waitress, a voluptuous (to chubby) girl wearing (naturally) black tights and a black and white-striped top. This time it was Umberto's grin which loomed contagiously forcing the waitress to smile uncontrollably. He was being made into a new person.

"Coffee or Espresso, or...?"

"How about a Coke?"

"Pepsi?"

"Fine."

Lori grinned horrendously from the stage. Her imagined mentor had arrived. An infection of enthusiasm leapt from her throat as she belted out a lyric that had some musical qualities. Umberto hid his humor and his expression behind the soda which he tried not to

gag on while slurping away the dryness of the hospital. He felt so full of bizarre, happy cheer his mood would not allow him to dampen the girl's spirits. At a pause that could have been the end of the particular piece, Umberto applauded approvingly. Oh, he felt so foolishly gleeful. He would have applauded a dog's yelp or a child's charade. It must have been the effect of show business.

After an repetitious duration of more talk-singing that lasted an eternal five minutes, Lori finished with her final line, "...drink my own blood..." followed by vigorous guitar strumming. All applauded wildly. None wilder than Umberto.

She joined him at the table, as a timid student sitting with the Professor. "What did you think?" She asked, sitting stiffly with the kind of posture her parents had been begging her for all these years (to no avail). She slipped the guitar pick into a little holder. He could see perspiration on her face.

"Marvelous!" Umberto said.

"Really?"

"Very funny," Umberto added.

"Funny?" She asked, uncertainty at the corner of her eyes but joy in her face.

"Yes!" Umberto exclaimed.

"Oh... Well, I try to be.... You know entertaining." She laughed loosening up with some expressive body language as if she were throwing the whole suicidal *shtick* out the window in favor of vaudeville. They both laughed, and Umberto tried not to think about the fact that this little girl might want to sleep with him. It was really not what he had in mind.

The Girl Who Mistook Him For Someone Else

She was just finishing up high school: A senior. Though precocious she was not exactly a prodigy, being eighteen already. Umberto was of the age that Jesus' career was reputed to have had its impact.

"Fifty?"

"No, thirty three. Do I look Fifty?"

She shrugged, sucked her soda through a straw, wondered if she really knew the difference. "No, you look like twenty-nine."

Her school (and her parents) were permissive. She had classes a few half-days a week. The rest of the time was spent in 'Real World Apprenticeship' which meant doing whatever she liked. She had to check in with her Counselor but had some sort of unusually close, though unspecified, relationship with him. She was adamant in her abhorrence of going to college the following year, but Umberto surmised unless she was discovered and catapulted to fame she would go anyway.

She was not terribly subtle, and insisted on showing Umberto some of her reams of lyrics or free verse or whatever they were. Lots of computer paper. She also had dog-eared and doodled notebooks. Lilac and orange, with pages ripped out. Alienation, sex and frustration. Lots of explicit descriptions. Umberto felt nervous reading them in front of her. Alone he would have laughed.

"How did you get your start?" She asked.

"I never did. Or actually, I've had many starts, and have always found excuses for leaving the race." Their eyes were locked, she was busy drinking him in.

"I am not who you think I am..." Umberto warned with a knowing grin.

It no longer mattered. It was as if she were a lost duckling imprinting him for a mother. She was fixated. He seemed to be taking her seriously and given his supposed maturity, that was enough.

"You're better," she giggled, her face screwing up into a smile so large it distorted her features, giving her nose and eyes much more prominence than they usually had. She squeezed his hand briefly with hers. At least one ring per finger. Then she let go and slumped forward in her chair. "When will I... You know... see you again?"

Umberto flushed. Half of him shouted a silent *never*. The other half was passively silent. She was so young. "Let's go into the city this weekend. Saturday night. We'll take in some performance art. I'll get tickets. Okay?"

He almost hoped she would say something, like *I can't*, or *I have to be home by...* Instead she touched him again, holding his wrist. "I'd love to... Let me give you my home number."

The performances they saw, in Umberto's estimation, sucked. There were only two reasonable shows in town and those tickets were unavailable. Lori, however, loved it all. She talked non-stop as they walked, comparing everything to everything. Asking Umberto for all his opinions as to whether this, that or the other thing would enhance her own efforts. Umberto grunted. She gave him little opportunity to speak. Then she began reality checking. "Do you think I'm crazy? Other people at school do. But I think they are emotionally castrated, you know? They are afraid to live! But sometimes I think, maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the one who's crazy. Did you ever think that way?"

"All the time," Umberto said, steering her into a place where they might be served without her getting carded."

They sat at a little table in the dark and she continued to talk. At last a server arrived.

"Rum and Coke..." She said, looking up to evaluate whether she could get away with it.

"I.D. please?"

"Oh... sure..." She began rummaging through her wallet. There seemed to be a plethora of cards there, many of her own design created by desktop publishing.

"Cappuccino?" Umberto asked.

Lori gave up trying to fake it. Her hands collapsed on top of her swollen wallet. "Can I get one too, please?"

The server vanished. "Rum and Coke!" Umberto joked.

"That's all I could think of!" She admitted, smiling with embarrassment.

Umberto had to marvel at her. She seemed to be a painting, perhaps unfinished, that in some light appeared to be of a woman of little pretension who wore her faults proudly as if they were fashionable. But then the light would shift and he saw a child, a few years past menarche who could not understand that play was still only play. While he fiercely admired such attitudes, he had enormous inhibitions of developing a relationship with someone else so afflicted. Besides, she had parents somewhere who still thought of her as their little girl and who was Umberto to intrude into such a development?

"I'm so glad you brought me, tonight. I've really learned a lot," she said.

"Such as?"

"About performing. About life." She chuckled.

Umberto raised an eyebrow in defense of the unspoken.

"When you see something, go for it!" She said, nodding.

Umberto nodded too, not knowing what about.

They were served. She took a big gulp and almost spit it out. After swallowing she coughed. Umberto comforted her. He showed genuine concern that she not choke. Her coughing paroxysms turned into laughter. She tried speaking but had to wait till she had breath over a dry throat. Then she touched his arm and spoke.

"Is there someplace we can go, you know, to be alone together?" Her eyes were soft and full of expectation.

Umberto exhaled. He struggled for the best excuse.

"You don't want to?" She asked, looking more serious.

Running from a lion I meet a bear; looking for a woman I find a girl... His expression was not encouraging to her.

"You don't think my work is very good, do you?" She asked.

"You possess one remarkable ingredient that is worth more than money," he said.

"What?"

"Enthusiasm."

Her face dropped and for a moment it seemed she might cry. "Is that all?"

Umberto put his arm around her shoulders. "What do you mean is that all? A half billion people would die for it, if they knew what it was worth. It *IS* a gift. What you do with it is something you... *we* all have to work on. I love your enthusiasm..."

She tried not looking at him. She was repairing some hurt inside. "I've been told that, you know..." Then she looked at him again and he saw the part of her which was almost a woman and not as crazy as she could work up to.

"I could learn so much from you, Umberto. I know I could if you give me the chance. Don't you like me?" What a way to clinch a deal.

*

He followed her outside, leading her to his lair from behind. Two voices argued in his head. One voice sought to offer congratulations, this was a voice he had overheard from the conversations of others. The second voice was sorrowful at the approach of a mistake, this was Umberto's voice. He didn't know how to say no to her; couldn't bear the thought of hurting her feelings. Yet, it seemed like an act he already regretted. Walking with her he felt like a friend and not a lover. Maybe, he would simply fail to act and let such an improbable union dissolve from lack of interest. The other voice had plenty of rebuke for this thinking. *'Umberto you are being a coward about the fruits of life. Take what ever you can get and throw the consequences to the winds. You can not make up for lost time by hiding from danger!'*

Umberto thought he saw a woman across the street resembling the enigmatic librarian. Tall and commanding. She bent her frame to get into a car. Umberto sighed. Why did he want such a thing? To discuss Beowulf? To discuss the monsters of life? To reawaken a passion that might have fallen dormant? To tease himself about what he did not know? Yes, yes, yes and a thousand yeses. He wanted to throw himself at a greater, more improbable danger! This realization made him feel better.

Lori stopped to use a pay-phone. She was going to give herself the night off from her parents by inventing a flimsy excuse with a girlfriend. But first she had to find a girl friend who could provide the correct alibi.

No one was home yet, and she was running out of quarters. She had trouble reading the directions on her phone card. Then it seemed that one particular girl friend was home but leaving. She had bad news for Lori. A member of their group had been involved in an accident and the group was gathering to provide mutual comfort. Lori seemed shaken.

"I have to go..." She implored him.

Yes of course. Umberto seemed shocked to be getting out of something so easily. Maybe, even, the non-Umberto voice had been winning the case, and he would be disappointed!

"Please, can you give me your phone number?" She asked. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Maybe she would come to her senses or rediscover a bond with a member of her own group. Who knew about such things? Their relationship was based on the most tenuous of connections. After all, she had mistaken him for somebody else.

It was late but he felt no inclination to go home. He stopped at another night spot and ordered something he intended to nurse. There was a man at a table behind him who seemed happily drunk. He was with two women and they were tipsy also. The man's face was red, his eyes were red, his long, straight hair falling in greasy locks over his forehead. He half leaned on the table and said things that made the women laugh. Umberto knew him and turned away.

"Hey don't I know you?" He called, titled crookedly on one elbow while pointing to Umberto.

It seemed inappropriate to shout something back so Umberto picked up his drink and reluctantly walked over to the table. The two women, one with her arm around the man, smiled.

"Yes, we got out of the Army at the same time and were new students together. Freshmen orientation for overgrown post-adolescents." Umberto related.

"Oh..." He seemed disappointed he hadn't met Umberto under more socially relevant circumstances.

"Yeah, you had the weird first name, Dumbert or something..." All laughed.

"Or something." Umberto knew the man's name was Frank but never liked him. He had been a liar, cheat and show off. He had a lot of girlfriends, none of them very bright and he was usually in trouble.

Frank kicked the fourth chair out from under the table.

"Si'down take a load off..."

Reluctantly Umberto sat.

"So what-a-ya up to these days?" Frank asked.

"Smuggling contraband," Umberto said taking a nonchalant sip from his beverage.

"Oh..." This time Frank seemed impressed. "Like what?"

"From digital processing parts to the more exotic," Umberto was usually a poor liar. But he was also a poor Dumbert.

"You know I could use... I got myself into a bit of a jam, you know..." Frank laughed.

"Oh?" Umberto raised an eyebrow at the ordinary quality of such a statement.

Both of the women at the table were attractive and Umberto fought the compulsion to posture. He thought he'd mine Frank's woes for any amusement and then leave.

The Maltese Fiction

The woman with her arm around Frank nuzzled his ear making him laugh. The other woman addressed Umberto, "I'm Wendy."

"UM-Bert-o," he said, smiling.

"Not Dumbert?"

"No."

She seemed the more sober of the three. Frank broke his lack of concentration with the woman masticating his erogenous zones, "Hey, how'd you like to make some money? Say five hundred bucks?" He asked Umberto.

"Probably not..." Umberto replied.

"Just have to deliver a package, that's all. It's easy money," Frank insisted.

"I don't courier drugs," Umberto said emphatically.

"No, no, no... Nothing like that. I haven't played with that shit since college. Really. It ain't even stolen. I promised to deliver this thing to a guy. I'm bein' sentenced Monday. Tomorrow's my last day off. 'Cause I'm probably gonna have to do like 3 months in club Fed, you know. Strictly white collar bullshit. A misunderstanding..." While he spoke his girl friend rubbed his back and grinned at Umberto. Why the grin, Umberto wondered.

"Deliver what?" Umberto asked.

"A manuscript," Wendy answered. "It's at my house."

Umberto made a puzzled face.

"Wimen!" Frank exclaimed throwing up his hands. "The guy who gets the thing, well he's kind of unreachable, if you know what I mean... Wendy's nervous about going alone. I don't know why!"

Wendy shot Frank a quizzical look but let it go.

"Who is he?" Umberto asked.

"You never heard of him. He's got money. His family was in publishing a long time ago. No, no. He's not a heavy, nothing like that. I was gonna go tonight. Throws some good parties, if he's around." Frank leaned across the table, "This guy knows how to party...but I'm beat." He rubbed his girlfriend's back and she arched forward jutting her breasts into the center of the table, "You know how it is. I just want to go home and get some," he winked, "--peace and quiet... Right baby?"

"If it's so easy why pay five hundred bucks for it? Send it Federal Express." Umberto asked.

"I maybe shoulda done that," Frank said pulling at his lower lip. "But this guy can be tough to get a hold of. Wendy knows. And as for the money, it ain't enough to pay my fine, so what the fuck difference does it make?" He laughed and finished up with a smoker's cough.

All very interesting, but Umberto wanted to leave. He looked at Wendy and he looked at Frank and the woman with her arms around his neck. Frank looked at Wendy and then Umberto. Frank shrugged, reached into his wallet and began pulling out hundred dollar bills. He counted out five and left them on the table. Umberto was not tempted. Five hundred dollars was five hundred dollars but what was it buying at what risk?

"Easiest money you ever made, guaran-fucking-teed," Frank said with a wave.

Wendy touched Umberto's arm, "Take it, it'll be fun..." Her eyes were flushed with the late hour and promise of excitement. Now he was tempted.

"A manuscript that isn't even stolen..." Umberto prodded.

"For sure!" Frank said.

Umberto scooped up the bills in his right hand. His left hand pulled out the wallet from his left pocket. Wendy smiled, stood and turned. She waved with four fingers at the other two and sashayed on staccato heels under black jeans toward the door. Umberto shoved his wallet back into his pocket and folded all the bills into his other pocket, as if they were not permanent assets.

*

She invited him upstairs into her apartment but kept most of the lights off. She insisted they have a quick drink. She produced the manuscript which occupied a manila envelope next to her bag, with her apartment keys on top.

He sat next to her on the couch. Her legs touched his from the upper thigh to the knee. None of that was his doing. Perfume.

"So you and Frank were old buddies," she said.

"I knew him..."

She took a sip of her drink, (Umberto had declined one) and touched his arm, "That thing," she indicated the manuscript, "is worth more than a half grand..." She smiled and began nodding, "Know what I mean?"

"If you say so. Actually, I have no clue what it is, or what it's worth... Where are we supposed to go with it?" Umberto asked.

She nodded to herself, giggled and looked at her watch. "Oops, we'd better start going..." She picked up her bag, the manuscript and her keys in kind of a clutch as if she were a

student heading to class. But she stopped; "I have to pee," she laughed and went into her bathroom holding everything.

Umberto supposed he should look around her apartment to discern what type of a person he had inherited for a partner. There seemed to be decorative rugs or prints on the wall. But it was dark. He was tired. He didn't know what to think.

She emerged from the bathroom with fresh lipstick on. "Have to pee?" she asked.

"Might as well," he agreed.

"Sure, do it now!" She announced happily.

Umberto was not surprised that her bathroom was small, and crowded with things, water hoses, clothing, many jars and lotions. Her medicine cabinet door was not shut and he looked inside. There were many varieties of pharmaceuticals. Some over-the-counter drugs, other prescribed. Some were prescribed to Wendy Horndower, others to a Richard Tomisini. There was both a diaphragm and birth control pills on separate shelves.

"You musta had to really go; you were in there for awhile," she commented when he rejoined her in the darkness.

"I'm nosey. I was looking in your medicine cabinet, but didn't touch anything," Umberto declared matter-of-factly.

"Oh?" They exited and she locked the door three times with two different keys.

"I'm always impressed meeting a bigger hypochondriac than myself." Umberto said.

"That's okay. Help yourself. My life's an open book," she said as they walked down the stairs. She held onto the rail.

"Who's Richard Tomisini?" Umberto asked.

A moment of silence. The book seemed closed. "My boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend, really." Her tone did not invite further comment. Then she changed the subject. "This guy that we're going to see... --If he's there. He's very different. But the parties go on all night. I mean all night. They are so cool!"

*

"What a place." A statement uttered by Wendy as she sped-walked along the foyer, blowing hair out of her face to see better. There was a cornucopia of refreshments. Tables stocked with bottles of everything that came with alcohol. More varieties than Umberto thought imaginable. There was food too, or the remnants of it, the hour being quite late. They prowled room after room, he following her. There were other people there of course. But they were paid no mind.

"I wonder if he's here... if he is I gotta show him this..." Wendy clutched the manila envelope with a determination bordering on frenzy. She paused long enough to help herself to what looked like a martini being created by a bartender making many of them.

Umberto spied punch pissing out of a fountain and helped himself to a cup hoping it would ease the dryness gathering in his throat.

"Oh yeah, I'll have some of that too..." Wendy said filling her already empty martini glass with punch. "Wouldn't you kill for a place like this?" She asked him with a leer.

"No. The booze bill alone would break me," Umberto replied.

"Not if you had mon-ey!" She sang out.

"And so? How do I earn my five hundred?" He asked her.

"Maybe you don't!" She smirked. Excuse me a minute..." She touched his arm as she backed away. Umberto felt like sitting, no laying, down. He set his glass down and wandered off.

*

He seemed more like a retired quarterback than the scion of publishers. Tall with a square cut jaw, a checkered sport shirt under a beige jacket. There were many years on golf courses upon his skin.

"So you're the man!" He clasped Umberto's hand with two of his own and did not let go right away as he beamed into Umberto's eyes with the illogic in his own.

Umberto grinned. "I am? Perhaps not," already feeling bad for the imagined future embarrassment of his host.

"Oh no, no I've read that manuscript, or actually parts of it... I know beauty when I see it." Still holding Umberto's now life-less paw, which Umberto wished were his own again.

"I can even quote one inspiring passage: 'I have lived as a flame devouring and dying, falling to a spark and rekindling always for one last time. I walk through the unknowable streets as if lost in a reverie, path after path after path; quiet, passive buildings peopling the night. Who knows me, how do I know myself? From what fantasy is love born? What secret knowledge teases me from the corner of this dream? Across yellow-lit silhouettes I traverse, talking with the many selves I meet. All of them me. Awake it leaves a vapor that vanishes in the light...' That's writing!"

Umberto had his hand back, for a moment the passage seemed like some amateurish project he had completed in college. But then it was the lateness of the hour. He was practically asleep on his feet. In fact it seemed like his host was still holding his hand. Umberto looked down to make sure this wasn't so. It wasn't, but when he looked up his host's nose seemed purplish and the dimensions of his face were both alien and familiar. *Shit!* There had been something, maybe THC, in the punch. He could feel paranoia and bizarre humor competing for his internal attention. His host was elsewhere, mentally, in a business meeting or on a putting green.

"My contacts in the business are not what they once were. But I think I can make it

happen for you; for *us* actually!" The man laughed and clasped Umberto on the back. Umberto felt his knees begin to give way. They didn't but they seemed like they might.

*

Umberto thought that food might help and he prowled the rooms for something. Anything, a piece of bread. From room to room he traversed the yellow-lit indoor panorama. There seemed to be only acres of alcohol. Finally he settled for some fruit, but as he slid a pineapple slice into his mouth Wendy approached.

"UM-BerT-OH!" She sang gaily waving her arms and then rotating her middle as if in a dance.

"Yes?"

With dramatics reminiscent of play-acting, she seized him on the shoulders and kissed him on the mouth. "Pineapple. Yummy!"

Umberto finished chewing and swallowed it.

"Are you a good lover?" She asked him.

"I've had my moments. At least in my own mind," he said.

"Frank and Richie thought they were STUDS..." She rolled her face into the parody of a macho grimace and thrust her hips out as if fornicating. He realized that she had a lot more of what he was suffering from.

"Studs! Banga-a-da-banga-da-banga..." her voice trailed off as she began eating pineapple. "We should find a spare room somewhere, or a closet, or..." She stopped eating for a moment, "Maybe we should just leave."

"Shouldn't we say goodbye or get a receipt?" Umberto started laughing, thinking a receipt perhaps on a stained napkin to be sublimely funny."

"You are weird, man!" Wendy said with too much arch in her eyebrows. She hugged his shoulders and ground against him for a moment. He clasped her back with only medium enthusiasm.

"You're not into me are ya?" Wendy asked suddenly, as if straight and sober.

"You're okay," Umberto said.

"Nah, I can tell. You're a very honest person. Too honest. No bullshit. You want nothing that ain't yours. I respect that."

She lit a cigarette and after one monster inhalation held the cigarette between two protruding fingers with her elbow cocked on a tilted hip.

"Yeah that depresses me, I'm constantly fucking up opportunities before they can become real by this perverse sense of truth." Umberto said.

"The opposite of most men I know or have known."

"Sorry to disappoint you..."

"Not by that. I want an honest man to give me everything I need, because then, sugar," her eyes opened very wide, "I know it's real."

Umberto shrugged, she puffed again and blew a languid smoke ring. They both became aware of the buzz of the ongoing party filtering around them. Finally Wendy crushed out her mostly un-smoked cigarette. "C'mon, let's blow."

*

She seemed to be carrying the manuscript with her, but insisted it was something else, another manuscript or nothing. He felt no will to argue or even be too curious. She seemed to hold onto his shoulder, not in a romantic way but as if to steady him. They walked, path after path. Umberto got a mild shudder which made him shiver. They stopped to cross a street. Wendy seemed to be leading him though slightly behind with one hand on the seam along the back of his arm. Leading from behind. This reminded Umberto of something similar that happened in a recent universe he had inhabited and he started to say something. Traffic seemed to have passed, but the light was not green and they did not cross because a police car was paused on the opposite side of the street.

From the left Umberto could see a bus approach the intersection though it appeared to be slowing down. The light changed, the moment was held in stillness. Umberto stepped to the curb.

A Cliché Comes True

He was hit from the right side and flung into a sign. He thought, 'I am going to feel embarrassed,' then a moment of great fear which subsided into resignation as if falling asleep. The bus braked unsteadily, finally stopping in the middle of the intersection blocking the view of the patrol car which erupted in silent lights flashing from its bubble.

John Doe hovered about consciousness for hours or days. There was no measure to tell one from the other. When he blinked at the opaque film that seemed to coat his eyes the attendant making the next bed noticed and buzzed for the nurse. It was many minutes later, or even hours, when the nurse arrived carrying a clipboard. She asked how he was feeling, checked his pulse and pressure and informed him that a resident from neurology was going to examine him that evening or the next day. Then she asked him his name.

"Name?" It hurt to talk.

"Who you are," The nurse said.

His hand moved toward where a wallet had been. The hand didn't seem to be completely in his command. And there was no wallet. No pants. Only a hospital gown.

"We have your money. It's at the nurses' station. Didn't you have a wallet?" The nurse asked.

"Yes." Sounded like 'yeth' to his own ears, and he wondered if his teeth were still there.

"Name?" She asked again.

"Don't you know?" He asked.

She sighed, "We have you down as John Doe..." She shook her head. "It sounds like you have a good case. Getting hit by a bus in front of a police car. Do you remember anything?"

"No."

In a nearly conspiratorial tone the nurse asked, "Do you have a good lawyer?"

"No."

"Well my sister-in-law might be a good one to talk to. She has a law degree but doesn't practice, therefore you could get an *honest* opinion from her."

"What's wrong with me?" He asked trying to move parts of his stiff body.

She saw his toes wriggle under the blanket. "No spinal damage, thank God! Not so sure about the extent of your head injuries. The neurologist will want to do some tests."

"Oh."

"What's the last thing you remember?" The nurse asked.

There was a pause as the nurse prepared for John Doe's last distinctive memory. She was prepared to write it down if it had any relevance to his condition.

"...You asking me my name."

"Oh."

*

John Doe spent his time languishing under the protection of morphine and its cousins. It was a drug that was boredom personified, but it allowed the time to pass in unrecognizable segments. It did not end the pain or in his case, significant discomfort, but separated it along with anxiety and any other intrusion of reality into another dimension. Maybe he knew it was there. But 'there' was someplace next-door.

The resident, a physician of Indian extraction made him touch his nose and the back of his arm and other foolish things. Mr. Doe was stiff and sluggish, and felt on the verge of nausea.

"I see there is an old scar near the location of your wound. Did you have an accident some time ago, hitting the same place?" The doctor asked.

"I don't know."

"That's right, you say you have no memory. No knowledge, even of who you are."

"Uh huh..."

"Can you get out of bed and walk for me please?"

"I might throw up." Mr. Doe replied.

"Why is that; are you feeling nauseous?"

John Doe closed his eyes. It was the only thing he had confessed and the doctor could not remember. Perhaps not having anything to say was better than talking to one who would not listen. A thought came to him of hospital rooms. An old man who was losing his strength. Perhaps it was him. Perhaps it was a dream.

"How old am I? Is there a mirror here?"

"Maybe thirty. A mirror?" The doctor thought this would be interesting so he broke his protocol and searched for a shaving mirror. This he held up for Mr. Doe.

At first John Doe recoiled. Maybe it was the bandage along one side of his head. But the face! Both alien and familiar. Was that him? He had his teeth.

"Your eyes are swollen," The doctor said.

"How come I can speak? I haven't forgotten language."

"No, you haven't become a vegetable. Good thing too. This is positive. Very positive. Perhaps in a few days you will begin to remember everything right up until your accident. You probably will never recall the accident."

He took several steps with the doctor steadying him. He seemed to recall someone else steadying him, recently, or was it him helping someone else, or another dream?"

"Can you walk better than this?" The doctor asked letting go and facing him. Mr. Doe was shuffling. He felt weak and dizzy.

"I don't know. I want to lay down now, before I fall."

"You should try harder," The doctor encouraged.

John Doe tried to nod in agreement. It hurt. "You are very correct. At some point in the near future I shall try harder. I promise." He turned and shuffled back to the bed he had emerged from. The white-ness of sheets and an often washed cotton blanket encapsulated him, and he drifted away from the noises and smells in the ward. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

"Maybe I will be seeing you again in a day or so..." The physician said.

"Hmmm," Mr. Doe replied.

*

After another day Mr. Doe's nausea passed. The heavy doses of painkillers were rescinded and his appetite returned. Now the time seemed to weigh imponderably upon him. While eating a turkey sandwich, and not a very good one, a hospital administrator visited him.

She drew up a chair and presented him with a document. She said something about assigning his claim against the bus company to the hospital in lieu of paying for his already enormous medical bills.

"Contact the bus company," he replied.

"Well... You see..." The administrator persisted, holding the document in front of him.

"I am not signing anything. I don't even have a name to sign," he said.

"The cost of maintaining a medical facility is very high," she replied.

Tiring of the rubbery sandwich lacking any flavor beyond mayonnaise, he laid it down upon the plastic plate. "How much are meals here?" He asked.

"Meals?"

"Meals."

"The cost break-down is about fifty dollars per meal," The administrator replied.

"Fifty dollars?"

"Approximately."

"Fifty dollars for this excuse for a sandwich?"

"Mr. --... uh... sir, there is an entire infrastructure here. An entire kitchen and dietary staff and..."

"I'm sure there is. And there are usually kitchens at restaurants too. Only they can make a better sandwich at a much lower price. You should look into it, really."

"I will. So you are not signing anything?"

"Not with out benefit of counsel."

"Oh... Do you have a lawyer?"

"No," he smiled.

"Well okay. I'm really sorry to have bothered you... But I had to. - I mean come up here and..." she stammered.

"It's okay," Mr. Doe replied magnanimously.

After lunch he asked the nurses for his personal belongings, to see if they offered any clues to his being someone.

The jacket smelled slightly of cigarette smoke, though this did not entice him and he assumed that he did not have the tobacco habit. Keys on a plain key ring. Keys to what? Shirt, pants, shoes, nothing unusual. The clothes were okay, neither cheap nor expensive. The nurse who had first questioned him brought him something else wrapped in tin foil. She had it locked in the cabinet with the opiates. Mr. Doe unwrapped the tin foil and found five hundred dollar bills. How nice.

"I thought we should protect it. But there was no wallet. Maybe someone swiped it in the two minutes before the police got to you. People are something."

"I suppose,"

"Maybe we should put everything back until you are transferred," The nurse said.

"Transferred where?"

"To a rehab facility," The nurse said.

"I think," declared Mr. Doe, "I should get dressed and leave."

"To where?" The nurse replied, aghast. "Where will you go? Wait, maybe in a day or so some television people will come and do a little story on you. Maybe somebody will recognize you."

"I've got clothes and five hundred dollars, which is more than I had when I was born. And keys," he said hefting them, "all I have to do is find the magic lock that accepts one of these keys."

"You'll have to sign a form. The hospital won't discharge you until..."

"Not a problem."

"Do you remember what I said about my sister-in-law?"

"Sure."

"I'm Harriet, if you need to get in touch with me," the nurse said.

He shook her hand.

When she was gone he dressed and left taking the elevator down to a never-before-seen first floor and walked into a foreign world having signed nothing and with a left side that was still weak.

Where does one pause in one's wanderings when there is no place to go? Bars or libraries. Something sounded appealing about a library. Knowledge to be discovered,

images arising from text or pictures that could be the springboard to fantasy; an adventure for the mind in a body going nowhere. John Doe considered this but elected to visit a bar in a train station. This was a springboard to an adventure in which the body went first and brought the mind along for company.

He had no taste for alcohol, his equilibrium already fairly numb and fuzzy around the edges. But he ordered tomato juice and snacked on pretzels. Trains came and went as did patrons. Some stayed. They drank and drank those potions and elixirs that put out the fires or started them. The bartender favored Mr. Doe, after all he had broken a hundred and was not drinking. And like the bartender he represented a frustrated sobriety.

"What happened there?" The bartender pointed at his bandage.

"I got shot in the head, or run over by a bus. One or the other."

"Wow. You're not sure, huh?"

"Would you be?"

The bartender laughed, "I guess not. Waiting for a train?"

John Doe considered the question. "A train of thought... I could use some direction, actually..."

"Yeah, where are you going?"

"Don't know. Any suggestions?" Mr. Doe asked.

"Me... --If I was you I'd take a drink," the bartender confessed. The man didn't work around booze for the hell of it. He was following a passion, even if it didn't love him anymore.

Mr. Doe exhaled. "I spent the last several days, or week maybe, with an immense headache. I don't know that I want another one. Besides, I have only a handful of hours relating to direct experience on this planet and I don't know if I want to confuse them."

The bartender laughed. "You an alien? No, I get what you mean. In the hospital with a bullet or a bus getting removed from your head. I get it. But, maybe what you need is to *get* confused! When the details don't make any fuckin' sense, screw 'em up and see if you stumble onto the bigger picture."

"Does it work?" John Doe asked.

"Look at me." The bartender implored, "I had a nagging wife who didn't love me, three kids who had no use for me, even a dog and mother-in-law who showed me not one moment of respect all in a house that sucked money right out of my pocket... Now, I got nothing. And I did it all myself."

"Lucky you..." Doe commented.

"I'm on the road back, really I am. But in order to get on the road back, sometimes, my

friend, you got to get on the road outa here!" The bartender said.

"And so?"

"Have you ever liked the taste of booze. I mean just the *taste*?"

"I don't recollect..." Mr. Doe said.

"Well then, okay. I'll make up something special that even virgins could drink. But, it'll do the trick, I warn ya!"

After much work behind the counter the bartender put a tall glass of something that looked like ice tea before him. "Take a sip."

Mr. Doe did. It tasted friendly.

"There you go my friend," the bartender said taking a five from Mr. Doe's pile and giving it a snap on the way to the register only to be summoned by a man sitting before his ninth empty vodka. A man with a small voice and large red capillaries on his cheeks and nose.

*

By the end of the tall glass Mr. Doe was intoxicated. It seemed like more fun than morphine, at least at the present. The man with the small voice had moved himself and his twelfth vodka next to John Doe, and began regaling him about misbegotten adventures in finance and infidelity. In a meandering tone, with one thin wrist waving in small motions, he painted a picture of being a half-assed investment broker turning every winning trade into a losing one all the while losing a good woman while chasing floozies. It sounded made up. The man looked like an alcoholic clerk with a life of bad stories. But Mr. Doe had less to tell. He had never made any money, save the five hundred (now \$ 490) dollars he knew nothing about, never been in love and never had an affair. At least that he could remember!

"And what about you?" The man asked him.

Mr. Doe warily stepped off of his stool. "I, sir, was born yesterday. Whatever good or bad there is to my life lies ahead," he nodded looking for the men's room and scooping up eighty five of the ninety dollars on the bar. "And I aim to have a go at that beast directly."

*

It was the 'rush hour' when most of the offices released their employees into the world and John Doe fell into a pattern with the flood of commuters. He stood in a line, bought a zone ticket, waited in a queue. Boarded one train, then changed for another, then walked through a turnstile, and then was on the street. By now the rush of men and women in business clothes had thinned but had not disappeared. Street lights lit the maze of unknown, unyielding byways. He had to urinate again and looked for an establishment or an alley. He was traversing a dimension of *deja` vu*. There was something vaguely funny about his predicament, as it was soulfully perplexing as well.

He reached a building and tried the handle. It was locked. A woman approached, her heels clattering on the pavement. He reached into his pocket and retrieved the keys. The first key didn't fit. The second did. He turned the key, the door opened. Maybe the world wouldn't be so tough after all, he mused.

He walked up one floor in the dark. The cooking smells in the hall were familiar. He wondered if there would be someone who knew him, missed him... Up another flight. This time his hand went out and the light switch was right there on the wall and he could then see the walls by the dim, undersized bulb high overhead. He stopped at a landing and tried the first key. This door opened. It was dark, even cold inside.

"Hello?"

No answer.

He went to the bathroom which was where he supposed it would be, and when finished returned to the main room. He put on a lamp and looked around. He hoped to find pictures. Pictures of people. Maybe, even, a picture of himself, though he hoped not. No, the denizen of this lair had no celebrated keepsakes, no cherished moments frozen on film. No memories...

The phone rang. He sucked in his surprise and answered it. It sounded like a girl past puberty. Maybe selling magazines or conducting surveys, or...

"Umberto?"

"Who?"

"Umberto. Is that you... Have I dialed..."

"Who's this?" Mr. Doe asked.

"Lori."

Lori? He wondered. "Lori?" He repeated.

"Oh, Umberto I have been trying to get hold of you for *days!*"

"Hmmm..."

"Is this Umberto?" The voice named Lori asked.

"Maybe. I really don't know..." John Doe said.

"Umberto!" She laughed, "I've been worried."

"And for good reason."

"Why? Are you OK?"

"I was in an accident. I just got out of the hospital. In fact I'm not quite sure I *am* Umberto."

She laughed but abruptly became serious. "You're not making fun of me, are you?"

"No. I was hit by a bus, so they tell me. I don't remember."

"A bus!" The humor strained through her voice enjoying the full range of her enthusiasm. But then concern got the better of her and she changed tone, "Were you, like, laying on the road for days or what? What happened?"

"Some cops saw it, I'm told. I was in the hospital."

"A bus hit you and cops witnessed it?"

"Uh huh."

"Cool! Are you OK, like can you walk and stuff?"

"Basically."

"Wow. You got stitches?... How long were you in the hospital?"

"Maybe a week?"

"Wow. My Dad is, like, a lawyer who specializes in this stuff. Once one of my brother's friends had this freaky accident and like they were all drunk and it was their fault but he made them a ton of money. Can I come over? I'll bring a camera. We'll need pictures. And the police reports, and the hospital records. Cool!"

"Jeeze, everybody is a fucking attorney. .." Mr. Doe said.

"Can I come over? Just tell me where..."

Not only didn't he know *who* she was, but he didn't know *where* he was, not in relation to the rest of the world. Finding the door that matched the key in his pocket had been an act of serendipity proving that sometimes God watches out for drunkards before hitting them with out-of-control trains (or busses).

"If you can find me..." Looking out of the window he noticed a bistro across the street. It had an unusual name so he repeated it to her. "I'll be there in about an hour..."

"I'll find ya," she said.

He set the phone down. He could have rummaged through the drawers looking for tax returns or check stubs to find out about this Umberto, but he wasn't sure it would be the right thing to do, looking through a stranger's things. True, he had little knowledge of himself, and this caused considerable apprehension. Yet such unease was offset by excitement concerning the possibilities of who he might turn out to be. In fact, it was better to be an interloper into *this* Umberto's life, than find this was *him*, with a life he would only want to cast away.

He felt an approach of despondency, as one would upon awaking from a pleasant dream and realizing that an ongoing trauma loomed in one's day. Perhaps this Umberto was an

engaging fellow with an exhilarating future full of significance and achievement. Perhaps he was loved by beautiful women and able to be with them without commitment.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps... But from what Mr. Doe saw, he assumed Umberto to be fairly ordinary. No, it was better to assume that they were not one and the same, at least not metaphysically.

*

He sat stiffly in a chair expecting the real Umberto to arrive. What sort of a person was he? By his Spartan existence Mr. Doe could only assume Umberto had utilitarian habits. Feeling sleepy he forced himself to rise, shower and borrow some of Umberto's clothes. They fit well. Then he searched through Umberto's medicine cabinet and linen closet for some gauze and surgical tape to re-make the bandage on his head. Looking at the wound made him feel faint. There was a roll of bandage gauze but he had to use masking tape to fasten it together.

*

John Doe was very hungry and without waiting for Lori, whom he did not know, he ordered a hamburger and french fries. A young woman in her late teens spotted him. Walked over to his table, letting her bag drop.

"Umberto, my God... I almost didn't recognize you..." She touched his face in such a way that Mr. Doe assumed that if she and Umberto hadn't been lovers they were at least brother and sister. And the latter could *not* be true!

He grasped her hand warmly. *Someone knew him and liked him!* Yet he also felt that this could be a case of mistaken identity. He kissed her cheek gently. There was a hint of tobacco there from experimental smoking or an other.

"Wow..." She said happily rolling her eyes at the romance of being kissed by a heroic bus victim. She sat and lifted her satchel. "My camera's in here. We'll need some pictures you know."

"Hmmm. I'll get the waitress, so you can order."

"I'm not hungry," she said.

"Does it hurt?" She asked of his wound.

"Only if I look at it," he replied.

His food arrived and he took a big bite. "Hmmm it's good. Sure you don't want anything? A soda?"

"No..." She watched him eat. "I thought you were, you know, avoiding me..." she said sadly.

He shook his head, and attempted to pick up a glass with his left hand which he almost knocked over. The thought occurred to him that perhaps he was not all right. He

wondered if he would be able to have sexual relations with Lori. He knew about such things in a vague way but couldn't for the life of him conjure up what it would be like. Did he really want her? Could he be in love with her? What was her relationship with this Umberto? Was Umberto a man who robbed the cradle?

When he had finished eating she asked if they could go to his place. He blanched. "I don't really feel it's *mine*..."

"Where is it?"

He pointed out of the window behind them and up one floor. "That's the window I was looking out of when I was talking to you on the phone."

"So you really don't remember *anything*?" She queried.

"No."

"How'd you get home?" She asked.

"It's a mystery. I had a buzz. I had a stiff drink in the train station and must have reverted to some subconscious rush hour pattern... The keys opened the door. The clothes fit. That's all I know!" He declared.

"I met you in the city during the lunch hour thing. So I guess you must have worked there. What's the last thing you *do* remember?" She asked.

"The hospital. A nurse asked me who I was."

"So you don't remember our *-date*?" She asked coyly.

"When was it?" He asked.

"Last Saturday," she said.

"Today is..."

"Friday," she finished for him.

"You might be the one who stole my wallet," he replied.

She looked at him slyly.

"What did we do on our date?" He asked.

She blushed slightly, "You don't remember!"

"No. I don't. I'm sorry..."

"Jesus, I might be the last one who saw you Saturday night... What time was the accident?"

Mr. Doe shrugged.

"It'll be in the police reports," Lori said.

"You sound like a lawyer," he remarked.

"I could be. I've worked in my dad's office since I was ten."

"Precocious."

"-Set up files, make phone calls... Not when I was ten. But, like, during school breaks and stuff."

He paid the bill. She sat across from him her arms laying limply along the sides of the table, beyond relaxed, offering no resistance. "So, you think going to your place is sorta uncool?"

He nodded.

"Well that's okay, because no one's home at my house this weekend except *me!*" She sang out and hefted her bag, "So let's go!"

Why not? A man has to learn sometime. He followed her outside and waited beside the passenger side of an older, black Mercedes. "Wanna drive?" She asked hopefully.

Driving seemed more complicated than picking up a soda with his left hand. "No."

She seemed nervous behind the wheel and after fidgeting to get comfortable fastened her seat belt. "You'd better do the same," she advised.

Mr. Doe complied, and it wasn't a bad idea. She pulled out too quickly causing oncoming traffic to honk angrily. "Whoops!" She laughed.

"So where is everybody?" He asked.

"Greg didn't come home this weekend. He's a senior at Penn. My parents are away till Sunday night." Though she maintained a funny, twisted smile she became quiet as she concentrated on driving. Perhaps her vision was not perfect either. Mr. Doe watched her.

She was not bad looking for a youngster. He already liked her. She had spunk... -- enthusiasm for life he believed. But she was a kid. Not what he had in mind, *if he had anything in mind*. He assumed there was some level of intimacy between her and this Umberto he seemed to be mistaken for. He recognized nothing of the streets and towns they went through. He might have come from another state; another world.

They pulled into the sunken driveway of a three car garage. Above loomed a many-roomed monstrosity of a house about ten years old. A neo-modern bi-level something; a tribute to the improvement of particle board and siding over the last decade.

"I can still remember living in a three bedroom condo," she said as way of an excuse.

"You poor thing," he teased. "I can still remember sleeping in a hospital ward."

She laughed and opened the door with the remote, garage door opener. She seemed self-conscious doing it as if this was the definitive thing about being middle class. Obviously she had friends without such conveniences. She made a mimicking sound as the garage door shuddered open. They both laughed.

Inside she got right to work, putting on several lights in the finished recreation room and taking her camera out. "Here sit down in this chair and look like you feel like shit..."

He did and she took several pictures. Then she had a brainstorm. "C'mon... No, this won't do..." She brought him to her bedroom tossed all the pillows and junk off her bed, and ran to the linen closet to fetch a white sheet. Lie down. Maybe I can crop it so it looks like you're still in the hospital.

Though he made a few faces it all seemed like fun. "I have shoes on..."

"You could take them off," she remarked suggestively.

He removed his shoes and lay back on her bed. She drew the sheet over him and began framing her photographs. Her scent was upon the pillow. There was a familiarity to it.

"What have you got on that bandage, packing tape?" She teased.

"Could be..."

"We have to take it off anyway..." she advised.

"The wound looks gross," he warned.

"Good! The uglier the better!"

He sat up so she could unwind his bandage. She made cartoon noises which made him laugh. "Ugh!"

"I told you it's disgusting."

"Cool... See if I can count the stitches. Scars are good, too bad it's under your hair line, even if you should get bald. A scar on top of your head could be worth more!"

She took several close-ups. "Got any bruises on your body?"

He thought before answering. "My left shoulder."

"Take your shirt off..."

While he undressed she retrieved new surgical supplies from the bathroom. This house had everything! But she decided to wrap a turban of gauze on her own head as well. Half undressed he rose, took the camera and tried to get her picture. She squealed with joy but ran with him following. They were having so much fun.

He caught up with her in another bedroom and she quickly pulled off her turban but opened her blouse and thrust both her brassier and tongue out for this pose. So

precocious. He didn't know what to do. She did. She took the camera from his hands and kissed him. He barely responded.

"What's the matter..." she cooed, sounding more like a grownup, "never done it before?"

"No. Not that I remember..."

"Well it's like riding a bicycle. It'll come back to you..." She ran her hands along his arms and shoulders.

He had a thought of mounting a bicycle and falling off, making him chuckle. "Ooo, what's that matter, did that hurt?" She asked thinking she had touched his bruised side too harshly.

"No..."

She urged him down to the carpet. "What's the matter; do you think I'm too young?" She asked.

He said nothing, though it was the case. "I am eighteen and am quite experienced here. I'm losing nothing I haven't given away. I will not get a baby from this. So don't worry. And I haven't got any diseases, *I don't think*," she laughed.

Mr. Doe exhaled, he felt like a wounded beast in the arms of his only friend. He kissed her softly on the cheek. She began to kiss him in earnest, closing her eyes and allowing a passion to devour her with hunger. Her taut body grasped him with more strength than appeared evident in her thin limbs. She began pulling off her garments with frenzy. The thing Mr. Doe wanted to do most was laugh. He was not into this thing for whatever reason. He was observing from the middle, a bad place to be.

"What's the matter?" she croaked in a throaty voice.

He sat up. "I'm just not with you in this moment," he replied trying to strip the humor and incongruity out of his voice.

"You've been through a lot, I know... but... I just want to feel your skin against me... please..." she asked.

Now, he felt badly, and took off his grin and pants and lay beside her. They kissed again and her passion flamed back. Soon she was astride him moving vigorously against his chest and midsection. She reached for his hand and guided it to a particular spot. Upon applying pressure she arched, "Ooo... yes!" She undulated and sank upon his right shoulder with her mouth open.

"Hold me now," she asked in nearly a whisper and he held her, thinking of everything and nothing. But his soul was a million miles away.

Later, she was briefly more sedate, but that didn't last. She raided the fridge for beer and offered one to John Doe. "Beer, Umberto. It's domestic."

"Sure you won't get in trouble; have to hide the empties?"

"They'll never count them. The recycling can has a month-full in it," she waved the worry away.

He took a sip. It tasted interesting but not something to quench a real thirst. He swallowed a gulp. Belched and then uncontrollably yawned. " 'Scuze me."

"Oh, you must be exhausted," she said of him. "What did the doctors tell you about, you know, your recovery and rehabilitation?"

"I don't know..."

"Well, before they discharged you..."

"They didn't. I got dressed and left."

"You did?" She sounded concerned. "Were they done with all their tests and everything?"

"I don't know."

"You just walked out? What if your... your brain stem is, like, hanging by a thread?" She demanded.

He laughed, "Maybe it is."

"Oh no," she said feeling guilty about having forced a casualty to provoke her desires.

The man she called Umberto set the beer down minus it's gulp and teetered off toward a couch.

She turned him around worrying about his comfort and insisted that he sleep in her bed. It was a single. She would sleep elsewhere. He demurred, but she insisted. This time she helped undress him in a nurturing way, still making silly noises as she yanked his socks off two at a time. She covered him with her blanket and while tucking him in sat on the edge of her bed.

"No matter what, we're still okay with one another, right?" She asked.

"Sure." He squeezed her wrist.

"You won't be weirded out by..."

"No, no... Don't worry..." He kissed her hand and lay on her pillow, this time not posing for photographs.

"Good. Because I don't want you pulling away from me..."

He was almost asleep when a red flash invaded his eyelids. She had taken a picture for posterity. Her prize sleeping in her bed. Poor girl. The man she called Umberto slept.

In the morning (he supposed it was morning because Lori insisted it was) he didn't want to wake up.

"C'mon I made breakfast. Bagels and French toast."

"Yum... a carbohydrate feast..."

"You gonna sleep all day?" She asked.

He searched for her clock. "Nine thirty? Don't you teenagers sleep all day Saturday?"

"Not when we go to bed early on Friday night."

*

He didn't mind breakfast even if his mind was still dozing.

"See what I don't know is if we can file a 'John Doe' complaint or whether we have to truly discover your identity. Like first and last name," she said. "And if it's a municipal bus company we have to act much quicker than a regular civil action..." she remarked crunching on a spoonful of marshmallow cereal in addition to bagels and syrupy French toast. "I'm really hungry!" She declared in defense. She sat cross legged on the chair in an oversize tee shirt.

"But the bus company part is because of it's the tort claim act. Sovereign immunity and all," she continued.

"What are you talking about?" he asked with half a mouthful of everything.

"I know... My friends get really weirded out when I talk like this. They HATE me when I get this way. But it's true, I mean, maybe, we have to declare you incompetent and appoint a guardian before suing."

"You're being my lawyer again," he observed.

"Hey that's me," she said sounding real serious.

Mr. Doe spied a family portrait in the dining room. "Well look at that, I guess that's your brother and your folks..." he said pointing a fork at it.

"Yeah... I'm surprised my father's actually in it," she said.

"Why?"

"He was never around." Her back was straight and her eyes on her plate. Something was bothering her, he surmised.

Mr. Doe's hands held a question he did not ask.

"That's why I know so much about this plaintiff business. I grew up in that fucking office. Either that or no Dad."

Mr. Doe nodded. Lori continued, "See Dad is way more than a mere workaholic; he leaves the house by six in the morning, home between nine-thirty and midnight. Saturdays, eight to five in the office, Sundays he works in his home office. Saturday

nights were baby-sitters and he did whatever my mother wanted or she would have probably left him..." her voice trailed off. "So Greg and me hung out Saturdays and vacations with Dad. By the time I was ten I was little miss photocopier. Hey it bought all this." She gestured around her, "but sometimes..." her head sunk, "I wished we lived in that little condo and I had a Daddy..." She sniffled a little and chewed on one side of her mouth keeping her eyes away from his.

"I'm not complaining about you being my lawyer. I like the service," he offered.

"I know," she faced him, "see with you I can be myself like I can't be even with my long-time friends. I didn't get too bummed when you told me my performance art was shit."

"I said that?" He asked.

"Yeah. But I had great *enthusiasm*," she mocked.

"You do!"

"But I want to be an artist!" She whined.

"Be an artistic lawyer," he joked.

"Fuck no!" she tossed her bagel remnants to the side of her plate. "Anyway, I think it's important that we find out who you are. And I'm going to get my hands on that police report ASAP!" She nodded with conviction.

John Doe was tired. He had claimed this and gotten Lori to drop him off at Umberto's apartment. She would retrieve the police report by herself. She had a business card claiming she was a paralegal assistant at her father's firm. She was anyway. Actually he was feeling a little dizzy. Or imagined a lively buzz on the edge of his consciousness. He sat in a chair, his eyes fixated on a drawer in a nearby table. Finally he opened it and found bank statements and a check book inside among other things. His heart produced a palpitation. The name on the papers was *Umberto Cain*. He felt so disappointed. But, yet, this might *not* be him!

He made a studious, exploratory journey into the bedroom and found an answering machine overwhelmed with red blinks. There were many messages from Lori of varying lengths and tones, some sing-songy "Hi Umberto!" others more stressed and unhappy, "-Umberto?" There was a formal message for "Mr. Cain... This is Gloria in Human Resources... we haven't heard from you..." There was a voice of an old man barely able to speak to a recording, "Sonny?..." Mr. Doe's heart fell. Last there were several calls with no voice. *Lori*? And at the tail end of the tape a new voice, a woman's that just began to say a word as the message was aborted.

So he had fallen into a Mr. Umberto Cain's life. He remembered nothing past his rebirth in the hospital. And like a newborn he was still weak. He lay on the bed and drifted into unidentifiable images. The door buzzer sounded. His first thought was that it was Lori exploring some new angle. He liked her. Yes indeed, but needed a small vacation, a brief

respite. Maybe it was his recent lack of stamina.

He found the downstairs door release and pressed the button. Someone with platform heels climbed the steps slowly. He looked down and saw a brunette with reddish tones. She was very sexy, from above anyway. A saleswoman?

"Hi..." she said.

"Hi," he replied.

"I heard about your accident," the woman said.

Mr. Doe made no response, "I have lost my memory," he announced.

"How convenient," the woman did not enter his apartment but stood on the landing outside his door which Mr. Doe leaned upon for support.

"I'll get to the point," she began, "Wendy is missing. I talked to her last Sunday and then... Well she's gone. Peter Lynch does *not* have the *mani*... the writing he optioned, and Frank is pissed. I guess you kept the five hundred dollars for a job *not* done!" There was a coldness in her eyes and demeanor.

Wendy, Peter Lynch, the manuscript, Frank meant nothing to Mr. Doe. But the five hundred dollars did. "What about the five hundred dollars?"

"Oh, so now you *do* remember," she smiled, but it was not a friendly smile.

"I have it, or had it. But nothing else. No wallet... no recollections..."

She put her hand out, "I'll take the five hundred dollars. Every little bit helps,"

"What was it for?" He asked.

"Oh Come on!" She said angrily throwing her hand away and stamping one foot.

"Who's Wendy? Who's Frank? What's this talk about a manuscript? How come I got hit by a bus? Who took my wallet?" Mr. Doe asked trying to restrain his own ire.

She fumed. "Look, I don't believe you," she said harshly.

"Who are you?" He asked.

She must have believed he didn't recognize her, "I'm Angie, Frank's girl. We met last Saturday night. You went to college with Frank... Wendy took you back to her place to get the document..."

Dizziness real or imagined wafted through him. His stomach began to rebel. "Give me a phone number, so I can get in touch with you..." he offered.

"Fuck you!" She turned and stormed down the steps almost losing her balance on the narrow stair rise."

He held onto the door knob until she left the building. Then he bolted inside, beads of perspiration forming on his forehead. He took a gamble that would cost less than a dollar, picked up the phone and dialed *69. He expected it to ring at Lori's house. He was surprised to hear another voice on somebody else's answering machine recite: "You have reached 776 - 9599, no one's available now..." It was Angie's voice and Mr. Doe wrote down the number. Then he set down the phone and made for the bathroom with great deliberation dropping to his knees before the commode and vomiting Lori's French toast and bagels into it.

*

He slept fitfully and dreamt of a Norse woman who sang opera. Was this Wagner? The phone rang and he answered it from the bed. It was Lori on her car phone. The connection was not perfect.

"I got the police report..."

"Uh huh..."

"The accident happened at four o'clock in the morning..." There was a pause. "What did you do in the four hours after I left that night?"

"I don't know..." He had more questions to ask than she did, but kept them to himself.

Another pause this time longer. "Maybe hypnosis would work..."

"Hmm?"

"I know somebody who's good at it," she said.

"Who?"

Another pause, "My... uh, guidance counselor, Steve..."

"Steve?"

"Mr. Goodman..." she said slowly with charged sarcasm.

By the change in her voice Mr. Doe came to the conclusion that 'Steve' had been closer with her than the typical teacher student relationship should be in high school.

"I have Umberto's last name. It's Cain," and he spelled it.

"That's cool," I guess. "How are you feeling?" She asked.

"Not well... I have to go, I'm feeling nauseous...Bye..." He let the phone slip into its cradle and lay back on the bed holding his eyes closed.

*

By the afternoon he was feeling somewhat better and decided to re-trace his route to the hospital. Perhaps he had some notion of checking back in.

It was a nice day and the dizziness retreated into a nearly comfortable malaise that lingered in the nether regions of his psyche. He stepped off the bus onto hospital grounds and decided to stroll through the small park that several employees and visitors were using to eat their lunch or just sit. He put his hands into his pockets and drank in some of the fresh air.

"You, hello!" It was Harriet the nurse and a companion. A tall woman with flaxen hair who kept her glance on her sandwich.

Harriet was excited to see him. "And my sister-in-law is *here!*" She exclaimed gaily. "Look Virginia, it's the man I was telling you about, with the amnesia..."

"Who was hit by the bus," Virginia said looking at Mr. Doe. Both of them froze their expression. To Mr. Doe, whose knees became weak, this was the Norse woman of his dream!

The distance in Virginia's eyes melted for a moment, but looking to her sister-in-law, she let it pass. "This is Umberto Cain..." She announced to Harriet.

"How do you know that?" Harriet asked with astonishment.

"I looked up his library card once," she said allowing the significance of this to pass into silence.

Umberto was dumfounded. "My library card? I haven't even a wallet..."

"You did once... Don't you remember me?" Virginia asked.

He said nothing. *Yes, from a dream...*

"Beowulf, Grendel..." Virginia prompted.

"Virginia runs the library at..." Harriet began.

"The amnesia..." Virginia reminded herself taking a bite of her sandwich.

"And why did you leave the hospital?" Harriet asked sharply, the good nurse perturbed by the recalcitrant patient.

"Do you want the other half? It's tuna. I can't eat it?" Virginia asked him.

"No thanks. I've lost my appetite..." Umberto Cain, AKA John Doe answered.

"So what do you think of his legal case?" Harriet asked Virginia.

"Did you jump in front of the bus to kill yourself?" Virginia asked Umberto.

Umberto shrugged.

"No, I saw the statement of the officer who came to ER... Crossing on the *green light!*" Harriet said and then to Umberto, "Virginia graduated nearly tops in her class from law school, passed the bar the first time and..."

"Never really practiced. Law as a business was not for me..." Virginia said. "But the case sounds like a winner. Have a lawyer?" She asked Umberto.

"Sort of," he said.

"A good one?" Virginia queried.

"Seems so, though she's only eighteen."

Harriet laughed. "Kind of young, huh?"

"It's her father I suppose who's the... I'm not all that interested in this legal business at the moment."

"Normally you have two years to file in a negligence claim, but not against a municipally owned entity..." Virginia said.

"Tort Claim something or other..." Umberto said lamely.

"That's right," she said brightly rewarding him with the intelligence in her eyes.

"I seem to have other more pressing interests," Umberto related.

"Like that amnesia..." Virginia said, "maybe it hasn't all that much to do with the accident, though I wouldn't say so *aloud*... Maybe you just got tired being you..." she said smiling and perhaps speaking with some authority.

"Maybe."

"Do you want to remember everything?" Virginia asked him.

"Probably not everything..."

Harriet noticed he appeared woozy and stood to take his arm. "Here sit with us for a few minutes."

Umberto sat on the concrete bench next to Harriet. He leaned forward to maintain his line of sight with Virginia though.

"I must go Harriet..." Virginia stood, holding her half of tuna. "Sure you don't want this?" She asked Umberto again, who shook his head.

"You were one of our favorite *customers* at the library. Do come back... We miss you..." Virginia said to Umberto. It appeared difficult for her to do so and maintain eye contact as she did. He smiled and watched her walk away. "What library?" He asked Harriet.

A Dull Headache Ensues

Umberto 'John Doe' Cain found himself at the crossroads of ambivalence. Unlike his former visits he had no recollection of spending so much time there, only a vague

uneasiness. Reluctantly he made two small efforts at stabilizing Umberto's future. He called the Human Resources person at the company Umberto worked for and made a disjointed appeal on behalf of his hospitalization and head injury. Mentioning his lawyer's assistant as having more information worked gratuitous miracles with his employer. He needn't worry about a thing (for the moment). Second on the agenda he responded to a rent notice by writing a check out of Umberto's account, leaving a balance of \$ 1,600. Other than that he hadn't the slightest curiosity about the man, his position or past. The only thing he had was a headache. A nearly constant discomfort unrelated to stress that would neither cripple him nor go away.

Lori called often. He allowed her to chat. It was his window to the world. Her father wanted to meet him. Umberto demurred.

On a Wednesday he received mail. It appeared to have been addressed in black crayon with no return. Inside was an attempt at intimidation: 'You owe us the maniscip (sic) and the money! You better watch out!!!' The penmanship was neither male nor female, large letters but neat. It made him laugh and burst his lack of enthusiasm. He rummaged for the phone number of Angie and dialed it directly.

"Hello?" She answered with a throaty, sensual pleasantness.

"It's Umberto..."

She grunted in surprise, her mood growing cold and angry.

"-Got your letter," Umberto continued, "How bad do you want the five hundred?"

She said nothing for a long moment, "How'd you get this number?" She asked with an icy demand.

Umberto said nothing for a moment than in a friendly, sly tone added, "It's not man-I-sciP; it's man-U-ScripT."

"Look you fuckin' bastard..." Running out of thoughts she slammed the phone down.

He pressed re-dial and got her answering machine. He waited until the beep and began speaking again, "What manuscript? I might *pay* for some information..."

She picked up the phone and threw her voice into it like a weapon, "You keep calling me like this and it's harassment! It's a felony!..."

"What about your love-letters?" He asked. Another silence punctuated by the feedback from the answering machine. "Wait-a-minute." She turned the answering machine off.

"We need the mani... what ever it is..." She said.

"Then you and I will have to talk," Umberto suggested.

"When?"

"I have plenty of free time. You tell me..."

Even discomfited by a headache this Umberto craved action as an antidote to his feeling of languishing. He used a mirror to examine the wound on the side of his head and determined that the stitches should be removed. He asked Lori for the name of a doctor or clinic and she arranged to pick him up.

There was a constant drizzle that seeped into one's being. He waited under the overhang and was surprised to see her in the daylight. Lipstick, a tie-dyed tee shirt, sloppy jeans, but her hair was carefully done in an interesting swirl held by a ribbon and then cascading along her neck haphazardly. She was sipping coffee as she pulled up, but kissed him on the mouth. Cappuccino!

"Isn't that your car?" She asked pointing to one.

"I don't know, is it?" He shut her car door as he got in.

"Do you remember how to drive?" She asked.

He considered the question. "I don't know."

"Like if I stopped and let you get behind the wheel, would you know what to do?" A truck passed them and Umberto had a thought. Once he may have driven a truck; or *dreamt* that he had."

"Yes, of course, but don't..." he advised.

"You're still not feeling well, huh?" She queried.

"Maybe not."

"Aww that's too bad, because I was, you know, thinking that maybe later we could, you know, try and have some... --fun..." she said.

"Do you know anything about a *manuscript*?" He asked suddenly

She was interested, "Like one you wrote?" She asked.

He turned away, "No..."

"Because I met you at that bookstore... There was supposed to be a signing that day, this guy... Oh, he's not really a playwright.. . kinda a... Well he's an *artist*. I thought for sure he was you! But you claimed you weren't him, or he wasn't you... This guy is *very* private," she waved her fingers from the steering wheel for emphasis, "and he didn't show up..."

"Uh huh..." Umberto coaxed, not getting the full drift of her remarks. "Did I ever mention *anything* about a manuscript?"

"Well, no. But you could have," she said.

"But I didn't," he pressed.

"No."

He looked out of the window and pulled at his lip. "Did I wear glasses?" He asked.

"No," she said.

Maybe it was the precipitation, or condensation. He used his sleeve to try and clear the side window a bit.

She parked at an office building and he was prepared to follow her inside. But he could find no doctor's marquees. Not even a dentist. Only lawyers and accountants. Then he looked at the names.

"Oh no, you're not dragging me in to see your father?" He asked with alarm. The concept of suing the bus company made his knees sag. There was a time for such business, but Umberto felt the time was not *now*.

"Oh c'mon... You just have to sign some papers. It'll only take a minute," she pleaded pulling his sleeve.

Umberto was certain she would insist on keeping her hands on him. And her father, if he was not an idiot would know Umberto was more than a victim in an insurance-go-round. And if he *was* an idiot why do business with him?

"Please, not today?" He urged.

"Oh OK. But it's for your own good. It could mean decent bucks."

She had no idea of doctors or clinics. And without her father's guidance in such matters she reverted to foolishness. She took him to her house and removed the stitches herself.

Umberto sat at the kitchen table as if getting a haircut and let her clip and pull each thread from the skin in his scalp. "How can you do this without feeling sick to your stomach?" He asked.

"I'm female," she reminded him. "We are a stronger species than you are.... Blood is something we get used to..."

"Species?"

"Whatever..."

Umberto heard from Angie shortly after the stitches were removed from his scalp. Her instructions were curt, explanations brief and surprisingly, she maintained a modicum of civility through her conversation. She would pick him up outside his apartment. The most bizarre component of her directions was the advice to bring a bathing suit.

She arrived in a small pick-up truck that held a large, padlocked tool bin bolted onto its bed. It had a manual transmission which she operated with ease. She barely looked at him as he got in and drove for almost a mile before saying anything at all. "It's gonna be a bitch, but it's gotta be done..."

"What?" He asked.

"You'll see."

"Tell me about this manuscript, and the five hundred dollars," he asked.

She tapped her nails on the steering wheel. They were polished in red though the ends were worn and uneven. "If today works out, it probably won't matter as much," she said.

"Well, what about it? The whole thing is a mystery to me," Umberto remarked.

"Everything's a mystery to you; you're so fuckin' stupid. But that's why you're gonna help me because it's all your fault," she said.

"What is?" He pressed.

She shrugged, "Lemme' just drive for now, okay?"

In a half hour they were removed from the urban sprawl. The few houses they passed on the local roads were dilapidated and abandoned. She stopped the truck alongside the brown water of a river. She got out and he followed. She paced along the bank still wearing platform shoes. Finally she stopped and lined up her hand between a tall tree on a small island in the middle of the river and a tree with a broken limb on a hill behind her. "That's where he dropped it in. C'mon get your wet suit on."

She unlocked the tool bin and pulled off her shoes. Then she unsnapped her jeans and stepped out of them wearing a black speedo. In minutes she had a wet suit on, with a survival knife strapped to her ankle. "You can use Frank's," she said motioning to the tool bin.

"What for? I don't feel like going for a swim..."

"We got to get that box up," she said rinsing the inside surface of her face mask with spit.

"Why?" Umberto asked.

"I can't do it by myself. It's heavy."

"Well why don't you go find it and attach a rope to it and we'll haul it out with the truck," Umberto offered.

She considered this as if a revelation was being explained, "I don't have no rope."

"We could get some," Umberto offered.

She threw her hand down and stamped one foot into the dirt. "Let's just get this thing,

okay?" She said sharply.

"The current could be deceiving," Umberto remarked of the river.

"Can't you swim?" She asked.

"I didn't wear a bathing suit," he admitted.

"So? Just get the wet suit on, I won't look at your weenie," she said sounding exasperated.

He stripped on the far side of the pickup and piled his clothes on the ground. While she was pacing up and down the river bank he reached inside the cab and removed the truck keys from the ignition which he secured in a pocket on the inside of the wet suit. Then he joined her on the river bank. She was short, coming up to his shoulder but in such good shape that he felt she must be an athlete.

"Put your mask on," she said pulling hers over her face.

Reluctantly Umberto did. It made the pressure in his head expand against it. A notion came to him that this was not the thing for him to be doing. They sat in the cold water and pulled their flippers on. She at least was smiling. "You do this before?" She asked before putting the snorkel in her mouth.

"No." Umberto was not certain this was a thing his previous self had ever done either. Then she was gone under the surface heading for the middle of the channel. Reluctantly he followed.

Visibility was limited in the water. He marveled at Angie. She beat the currents as a predatory fish, one moment in his shallow vicinity, the next invisible in the murky depths. Umberto's swimming skills had atrophied to the rudimentary and he managed to become dizzy and anxious just looking for her. Nonetheless he followed after her. The drift was fairly strong as it pulled them out and south. The bottom was a murky morass of green and brown. Either it was full of junk or things were growing down there. He was tiring already and completely uncertain that anything could be spotted. He tried to raise his head to gain his bearings with the pickup truck but was turned around and saw nothing he could recognize. And he got a mouthful of bad tasting water for his trouble.

He told himself that if he didn't panic he wouldn't drown, at least immediately, and thought it best to try and head back toward the shore he splashed in from; which was? He tried treading water and looked around himself 360 degrees. Angie was already topside. She had removed her snorkel.

"The current is pushing us down river," she shouted making sure he could hear.

Umberto kept the snorkel in his mouth and nodded. He tried pointing to the shore they came in from which was slowly retreating.

"I don't think so... We'd better make that island, before we pass it," she shouted, pushed her snorkel in and disappeared.

Umberto did another 360 degree turn. Perhaps it would be his last look at the world. He had been too easily challenged by adventure. Summoning what little there was to his reserves he followed Angie toward the island. Like her he attempted to swim into the current hoping that it would compensate the tide's movement past the island and out into the full course of the river. He was faltering, however. When he looked up there was only the river. When he turned toward the island, which was only somewhat closer, he seemed to go nowhere. He could not draw enough air through the snorkel tube to stop his lungs from aching. His arms and legs were becoming numb from the exertion.

'*Sonny, you need to fight harder...*' A memory of a voice melted in his mind as if a seed was germinating. '*No, Pa, I need to not fight so hard; I need to rest a moment,*' Umberto ceased his struggle. He could hear the water. The sound of his breathing enforced his sense of isolation and loneliness. It was all he could hear.

The irony, the tragedy, the misplaced sense of foolish proportion. A mere life gone to its conclusion without significance or glory. Somewhere in there was a joke, and Umberto wished he could remember it for later, as if there would be a later. A force touched him harshly. He could feel fingernails in his face.

"This way, stupid..." and more gently, "Just kick, I'll steer..." This voice was tired and winded too, and speaking between breaths. He obeyed. There was a little more strength. A sense of calm. He was on the surface now. Then there was gravel beneath his knees. They were beaching themselves on the last cut of the island before the river widened to an eternity. '*What I needed was some luck...*' Umberto thought.

He rolled onto his back pulling the mask off of his face and beheld the sky. The water tugged at the flippers on his feet.

"You're not much of a swimmer, are ya!" Angie complained.

"I suppose not... How long have I been out of the hospital? I may not be a great swimmer, but I am a great fool."

She looked at him strangely.

"Today I cannot say 'no' to a challenge," he complained of himself. "And what do we do now?"

"Wait for somebody to come by on the bank, I guess," she said.

Umberto propped himself onto his elbows. This part of the river was not visible to the road. Save for an abandoned truck tire he saw nothing of human habitation along either bank. A deer ran into the woods a quarter mile across the water. "Did you see the deer?" He asked Angie.

"We got no rifles or bows or anything," she said derisively.

"I wasn't thinking of hunting," Umberto said, "deer usually avoid people... Not a good sign for rescue..."

"I'll build a fire she said," and pulled her survival knife from its sheath. Under the cap in the handle was a small compartment with a bit of line and a small fishing hook. There were also several wooden matches with wax over the ends. Umberto pulled himself out of the water and watched as she gathered bits of debris such as cardboard and small sticks for tinder. They were safety matches, however, and she couldn't find anything to light them on, finding tree bark a poor substitute for the sandpaper-like substance on match boxes. Umberto removed the flippers from his feet and ambled about the end of the small island. He found a rusty can which he gave to Angie. This worked in producing a flame on the match, but it wilted in a breeze and went out. Cupping the remaining matches preciously she married them to the tinder, but like unruly sperm they fertilized no egg. Every flame went to oblivion.

"I guess there will be no bonfire," Umberto commented.

"Shut up," she said screwing the cap back onto the handle of her knife.

"Why don't you catch us a fish. A grilled tuna steak..."

"I said shut up!" She sat cross legged on the dirt, her back arched and her shoulders straight.

"What was in the box we were looking for?" He asked.

"More trouble," she said with a touch of fervent reflection.

Feeling a chill he sat next to her letting her block the wind. "What do *you* want?" She asked with wide eyes but an absence of her purest malice.

"I am not entirely well," he said shivering a bit.

"You gonna die here?" She asked.

Umberto laughed, "I don't know, it's preferable to drowning, don't you think?"

"Well piss on that. I don't want you dying here!" She grasped his head firmly near the ear and maneuvered his face down so she could look into his eyes. "Follow my finger," she commanded as she moved her other hand along all visible quadrants. This time she seemed to know what she was doing.

"You a neurologist?" Umberto asked.

"I used to be a paramedic. I wanted to be a cop, but had a small... some trouble when I was a kid," she said letting go of his head. "I don't think you're about to croak," she said as way of prognosis.

"Cop, huh? One part criminal, one part bureaucrat. I don't see any bureaucrat in you," Umberto said.

She laughed, "How come you were so stuck up the other night? Like you was so much better than me?" She asked.

"When?"

"When we ran into you at the bar a couple weeks ago..."

"I don't remember anything since I woke up in the hospital,"

"Still sticking to that story, huh?" She prodded.

"Unfortunately, it's true... Somebody told me I might not want to remember *everything*... But it seems to be a handicap to remember nothing..." he admitted.

"I don't know; it was like you were this college *graduate*, that was too good for us..." she said.

"Me? A graduate? Cool. At least I finished something." He glanced about the island, it did not remind him of any movie or literary themes. It was a desolate spit of land with a few trees and thick brush that invited a few adventurous boaters, probably kids looking to get high or have sex, during the summer. There was junk about, floating waste that had been beached there as they were.

"So, we going to spend the night, or the rest of our days here? Eat dirt? Grow old together?" He asked.

"Some guys would think it would be a great idea. They wouldn't be shivering in their boots about it."

"I apologize, but I think we need to get off of this island before I become delirious," Umberto said, standing.

"We'll never buck this current to get back; maybe when the tide changes," she said.

Umberto stepped through some of the rubbish underfoot. "Why go back? Why not go to the other side, with the pull of the current?" He asked.

"You'd never make it, and I don't think I could carry you that far," she replied.

"Look at all this stuff. Plywood... There's got to be some floatation value here. It'll save us from swimming..." Umberto said.

"But the truck is over there!" She said, angrily, pointing to it.

"We passed a bridge a few miles back, there's probably another one south of here too... We can walk."

"For five fucking miles!" She shouted growing incensed. "I left the keys in the damn truck. Somebody might steal it while we're gone!"

"Who?" Umberto asked, keeping the secret of the keys to himself. "And what's to stop them from stealing it now?"

"Damn you!" She said making a fist.

Umberto shook his head. "Look Angie, I think I have to get off this island, that's all. If you have a better idea..."

"No! I don't have a *better* idea! I'm just a stupid, fucking cunt!" She shouted, tears of rage building in her eyes.

Umberto softened. He was fearful that she might unravel. "No you're not... You're a superb athlete. My savior..." He touched her shoulder gently and was surprised she didn't recoil.

"Okay, we'll do it *your way!*" She announced.

They gathered a few longer pieces of lumber and some plywood planks. As there was no wire or rope they held just enough to grasp with their thighs and arms as they glided back into the water kicking with their flippers. Angie was silent, her eyes, small and reddened, kept carefully away from him. Once in the water she applied vigorous urgency in distancing herself from him. She attempted to fight the current and make directly for the other shore. Umberto swam with the current taking him at an angle toward the middle of the channel. There, alone, and feeling cold again, he steadily worked his way across the remainder of the river getting pulled many yards downstream for every yard toward his goal.

When he reached the other bank he at first found no handhold to pull himself out of the water. He bobbed about and had to let go of his makeshift raft in order to haul himself out of the river. He was exhausted. Holding the mask and flippers took a decided effort. He ambled along the shore in the direction where he last saw Angie. She was far ahead walking, her back to him with no intention of waiting.

"*You are a crazy one,*" he muttered to the trees and breezes.

Umberto lost himself to the melancholia of life. He was once this way even if he did not remember so. Fantasies of memories, recollections of dreams filled his weary head. He was lost in a tiresome reverie as he marched into his future, lumbered actually. Time passed slowly and became inconsequential. He became aware of a feeling of freedom and hope for possibilities that lightened his spirits. He noticed movement on the opposite bank. It was Angie having made the bridge and turned back toward the truck. She did not look at him and her pace was purposeful.

Umberto considered letting himself into the river again to wash away downstream. The idea seemed funny. Eventually he reached the bridge and wearily crossed a narrow area of the river. He could see its force in this deep channel. Then the laborious and lonely hike along the other side. Fragments of images came to him: A woman like Angie, but taller, kissing him in some burst of the unexpected; a daydream of indolent sensuality in which normal rules have been suspended.

Umberto walked on the hill along the road. From the distance he could see Angie get into the pickup truck. Then get out, look around, search the bed of the truck and look about the ground. She had intended to leave him there. Umberto tried walking faster, but decided it did not matter. Eventually he reached her. She had kicked his pile of clothes

into a messy sprawl and was beside her self with anger.

Easily, Umberto retrieved his clothes. He pushed them into the truck cabin and got in after them wearing the uncomfortable wet suit. Then he locked the doors and took the key out. Angie banged on the window with her fists and pulled her survival knife from its sheath. It had a nasty blade and would offer little survival to its enemy. He doubted she would have killed him, but by that time he had the engine started. He hesitated a moment, then stepped on the clutch and eased the little truck into first. It responded nicely and Umberto moved away toward the road. He put the vehicle into second and covered some more distance. Angie ran after him. He waited till she was within four feet of the truck and accelerated to another hundred yard distance. Then he opened his window.

"I'll turn you in for grand theft, auto, you cocksucker!" She shouted.

"I'll say that you threatened my life, after kidnapping me," Umberto replied.

She looked at her knife and lowered her hand. Trying to be coy she ambled toward him then made a burst of speed to get onto the bed. Umberto kept away from her. Then he roared onto the road, drove quickly for a half mile. He stopped and watched her in the rearview mirror. She seemed to have less fight in her now.

He backed the truck up to within twenty yards of her. "I want some answers or *you* walk out of here," he told her.

"Sure," she said.

"Throw that knife away," Umberto ordered.

"It cost thirty five dollars," she protested.

"Throw it away," Umberto said with no mercy.

Making a distasteful face she dropped the knife into the weeds.

"Now talk," Umberto commanded.

"Let me into the truck..."

"Talk!" He shouted.

"*Talk, talk, talk*, you sound like a detective," she mocked, "What do you want to know?"

"What was in that box; or was there a box?"

"Yeah, about eight hundred dollars in old coins; not that much. Frank had *borrowed* it then ditched it before he went down."

"You going tell me about the manuscript, and Wendy and the five hundred?" He asked.

"Yeah... Look I'm tired and hungry, lemme in okay. I'll be good, I promise..." she said.

Umberto unlocked the passenger side for her. She got in casting him an embarrassed,

almost furtive glance.

"Wendy is my sister and I'm afraid something bad may have happened to her. The maniscrip-thing was something Frank showed this guy Peter. Peter's got a lot of money, and he..." the words poured out of her with abandon. It made little sense to Umberto but he listened to most of it and then tried to refine the point of it with some questions.

"Frank is your boyfriend, right?"

"Sorta. I mean yes, but he's in jail now..."

"How did he get this manuscript?"

"Didn't you write it?" She asked. "Smart guy," she added.

"Did I?" He asked.

"It was in parts. Some handwritten on yellow paper..."

"Traversing under the dim yellow light.." Umberto said whimsically.

"What?"

"Nothing. Continue."

"Some typed. Different, you know, type styles... I didn't read it. But Peter wanted it. It was gonna be his comeback into publishing. I don't know, he was something of a fruitcake. Sometimes he was friendly, other times it was like he had ice in his veins... Frank would give us a cut to go the parties. Peter wanted us to go and bring some girl friends," she paused, "Just to go and have a good time," she added defensively. "But Frank said he'd get a ten thousand dollar finder's fee. So if he said ten thousand it coulda been thirty."

"On the level guy," Umberto commented.

"Everybody can't be a prince."

"And me?" Umberto asked.

"You're a prince," she said.

"Right. How did I fit in?"

"You show up while Frank is trying to get out of delivering this thing. He didn't trust Wendy because... Well Wendy is not always reliable... He told me later that he thought you wrote it, which he thought was very funny, like you were the sucker making five hundred dollars and he was the genius conning the mark for the big pile."

"How did he get this manuscript?" Umberto asked.

"Wendy knew. Frank was going with her then," she said.

Umberto looked at her.

"Hey, they had a thing and it was over. Wendy got involved with some other loser and I got Frank," she said proudly but her expression sank.

"And how long is he in jail for?" Umberto asked.

"A while. I don't want to wait for him, but he might get pissed when he gets out..."

Umberto was approaching the suburbs. "You'll have to give me directions, I'm not quite sure how to get to where I live," he said.

"Okay..."

"What time did you meet me that night?" He asked.

"With your superior attitude?" She mocked. "Around midnight..."

"So I was with Wendy... Where does Peter live?"

"All over. He has a penthouse in the city. Homes all over the friggin' place."

"I'll need his address, and what he looks like," Umberto pressed.

"Sure."

"Wendy took my wallet," Umberto declared.

Angie's eyes widened. "How would you know that?" She asked.

He didn't, it was only a hunch. "How else would you have known where to find me, or even what my name was... Right?"

"Could be," she said.

They pulled up outside Umberto's building.

"I see you found it all right. By yourself," she said.

"How about that," Umberto said smiling. "So she was in touch with you after my accident."

"She called me yeah... Then she was gone."

Umberto nodded. His head hurt and he rubbed it gingerly. Somewhere there were pieces falling into place.

"So you gonna, like... uh... call me sometime?" She asked.

Umberto looked at her with a dumbfounded expression. "You don't even like me," he said.

"Who told you that?" She said sliding over behind the wheel as he got out taking his

clothes with him.

"I'll borrow this," he said of the wet suit.

"Fine," she almost smiled.

"You know, I don't think I was acting *superior*. I think I'm shy around attractive women, that's all," he said.

This time she did smile and even giggled.

She was gone and he was ready to collapse. He fished his own keys out of his pants pocket and opened the downstairs door.

"Umberto!" It was Lori approaching along the sidewalk. She had a pained look about her. She must have been waiting in her car.

He sat on the steps, clutching his belongings.

"So that's your girlfriend. I guess your memories are coming back." Her eyes were heavy with the sorrows of life.

"Lori, Lori Lori..." He put his head against her middle. "No, she's not my girlfriend... her sister and boyfriend set me up the night the bus hit me. I was just getting some answers. The five hundred dollars brought her here. I found something out about the manuscript. I have a few explanations. And I almost drowned getting them."

She brushed his hair with her fingers. "You didn't screw her?" She asked.

"No, I followed her into a river looking for stolen coins and she pulled me out and then tried to leave me there... It's very confusing."

She looked into the great fatigue settling into him. "Umberto! You mustn't do these things," she said with tenderness, hugging him as if he were a small child.

*

She took him upstairs, making more inquiries and listened to his answers until he drifted into sleep upon the couch. Then she sat in the dark watching over him for almost an hour and quietly left.

He had dreams in which he remembered everything from the night he was murdered. And yes he seemed to think of it as a crime against himself. He saw himself talking to a tall man with the face of a golf pro under the light of a yellow bulb. A party swayed around him. The man shook his hand and made him promises. Umberto felt himself mistaken for somebody else. But that somebody else was a different Umberto, yet also *him*. He awoke in the middle of the night and took several moments to remember where he was and what had happened to him that day. The dream taunted him until it finally let go and disappeared. Alone in the dark he absorbed questions of the metaphysical. If only he had the energy to act, he thought. Maybe, just maybe, he should cancel his credit cards.

Umberto Follows His Nose

He knew he would end up there, without even thinking about it. One day he would simply find himself in the quiet among the books. He was tired from sleeping, having slept on the couch from evening through morning. His brain had trouble wanting to wake up. Indeed, had it fully woken up in weeks; or in his lifetime?

He saw the tall, flaxen headed, Norse woman busy at her desk. His first impulse was to slide past her and lose himself in something or other for awhile. But this Umberto was lost enough, he approached her directly, gliding to the side of her desk which was strewn with papers.

She was bent over, busily sorting through photocopies of something very librarian-*esque*. She wore a gray cashmere sweater which at this stage of its existence looked more gray than cashmere and a gray wool-like skirt. He did not sense perfume in her aura but a mild, book induced perspiration. Yet, she had something he thought he wanted.

There was a moment when she was aware of another body standing close to her which she shut out in order to concentrate on what she was doing. Then, social convention got the better of her and she turned her head to offer a restrained, 'Yes?' She saw Umberto and froze. Then she tried smiling.

"Hello Virginia the Juris Doctor, Head Librarian..." Umberto said in a melodious purr.

"Mr. Cain... I see the bandages are off of your head..."

"Yes, I seem to look a little better this way. Less like a lobotomy victim anyway."

"I think a lobotomy is..." she began.

"Done on the front of one's skull, hence it being called a frontal lobotomy. But where the *lobo* is and whether it has anything to do with wolfish-ness I do not know," Umberto finished.

She released the photocopies and stood upright. She was quite tall, even in her pumps. She slouched, however, to remain at Umberto's eye level. "When you asked me to lunch that one day I ... I just was taken by surprise and didn't know what to say..."

Umberto's eyes clouded over.

"Oh, you still have not regained your memories," she said.

"Circumstantial evidence leads me to believe that I have been known as Umberto Cain. I see no reason to dispute that, and have little curiosity about the man. But I am puzzled by recent events caused by this fellow's actions..." he smiled.

He had spoken in an amusing way and she enjoyed his language. Now she was smiling, and even though she had limited practice it was a good smile.

"As far as lunch, or dinner or tea I'd love to," he offered.

"Drinks?" She asked.

"You may drink. The only drink I've experienced had mystical qualities but was the beginning of a ten day hangover; or at least it seems that way," he said.

"Wow. So what's it like to be born yesterday?" She asked.

"It's different. But different than what, I don't know," he shrugged.

"Have you filed suit against the bus company?" She asked.

"Not yet."

"I hope you're not waiting for your eighteen year old lawyer to pass the bar," she said, perhaps fishing about this person.

"No. There seem to be other developments that hold my interest," he said.

"Oh? You must tell me..."

He became aware that his conversation with her could go to places that his conversation with Lori and especially Angie might not. This excited him.

"When would you like to drink this drink with me?" He asked.

"Soon as I get back. My mom's having some surgery and I'm taking off a week to be with her. It's not that serious..." she flipped through her work calendar which Umberto saw had cryptic messages written across entire days with a black, felt-tip pen. "A week from Saturday?" She asked trying to maintain optimism in her voice. "I'll be here during the day should you call..."

The word Saturday pained him, as if he would be cheating on Lori by avoiding her, as if every Saturday was a potentially life-threatening experience.

"Or is Saturday your busy night already?" She said, reading his face and giving him an out. He smiled.

"So you're busy on a *social* note," she said, "I should be back by next Thursday if that's better?"

Umberto considered his social calendar. He was convinced that if it were something he would have pursued, none of it would have happened. "I would like to see you Thursday, if I may..."

She smiled. "Thursday!" and flipped her calendar to Thursday and wrote above her notation: 'Fiction D - H;' 'Umberto' both entries were scrawled across the entire page.

"Can you tell me what developments of your possibly former life have you so engrossed?" She asked.

Umberto considered the question. "How many crimes were committed by misrepresentation, guile, robbery, carelessness and execution... for greed, lust, art, ego, meaning or boredom?"

Uncontrollably she rose to her full height as she pondered his sentence. "Can one commit a crime to obtain meaning?" She asked.

"Of course," Umberto answered, "consider its value."

She considered its value. "Then even I have the disposition of a criminal," she declared.

"Welcome to the club," Umberto jibed. "Well, I look forward to seeing you on Thursday," he said graciously taking her hand. She smiled and blathered an equally banal compliment and quickly hunted for a distraction on her desk as he departed. Umberto floated up the library steps feeling giddy and confused upon the occurrence of making his first real date.

*

Umberto returned to his apartment just in time to take a phone call. And it was not from Lori. The caller, with a tinny connection identified himself as 'Frank.'

"Frank who?"

"Oh, you still doing that shit! Well, look pal, I am not entirely happy with what's going on here," he said in an angry tone. Then as an aside added, "I haven't got too long so I'm gonna get it all out, if you don't mind," before becoming angry again. "What was going on with Angie yesterday? What are you doing with her? I'm not going to be in here forever, guy. I just want to make sure you understand that..."

As Frank rattled on, Umberto went to the drawer in the coffee table. There behind the checkbook and bank statements was a heavier object wrapped in velveteen fabric. Cradling the phone alongside his head, Umberto abandoned caution and laid the object onto the coffee table where he unwrapped the fabric. He was somewhat surprised to see it, yet something in a dream may have hinted it had been there.

"And when you get out of prison you're going to look me up and explain why you were trying to peddle a manuscript you claimed I wrote... and why your ex-girlfriend stole my wallet and possibly did worse..."

"Who said that?" Frank asked.

"Frank, I want you to tell me where I can find Wendy..." Umberto said, feeling an urgency that surprised him.

"Hey..." Frank began.

"Hay is for horses. As far as when you get out; I'll bet money that Angie is not waiting for you. I'll bet more money that she's not going with me, or the second or third, or fourth me who stumbles across her path..." Umberto said.

"Hey!" Frank shouted with venom.

"Frank, I'm sitting here in my living room looking at what appears to be a .45 caliber automatic pistol... Do you think it's loaded?" Umberto asked.

"Oh... you still have that, huh..." Frank said with no trace of anger in his voice.

"What is this manuscript-shit about?" Umberto asked.

"It goes back a long, time buddy. It was almost like... like, I don't know what, when you walked into that bar, the other night..." Frank laughed. "Theeere's Dumbert!"

"I'm not happy right now, *buddy*." Umberto added with derision, "My head has been *fucked up*, if you get my drift."

"Okay, okay, I catch your drift..." Frank admitted.

"I want to find Wendy. I want my credit cards back."

"Okay, okay. But I want you to carry out the trade with that Peter guy... I need that," Frank said.

"Your five hundred bucks is barely a retainer against my current expenses," Umberto said.

"There'll be a lot *more* for *you* if this thing happens for *us*," Frank promised.

Umberto shrugged his promise off; water on a fish's fin. "I'm going to look him up," Umberto said with conviction. "Now about Wendy..."

Frank exhaled. Even the tinny connection couldn't distort that. Frank might be forthcoming. Umberto massaged his head and grinned.

Dreams Don't Count; Do They?

Umberto went to bed early and was summoned from his slumbers by a most convincing apparition. A woman, a muse, half-dazed with a druggy sleepiness sat naked at the foot of his bed and roused him by pulling his feet. She had no allure or romantic interest in him. She was lonely and tired of the night. She offered him a drink from a bottle still in its paper bag.

Umberto was thirsty and drank deeply. More and more. It tasted sweet and made his throat burn with pleasure. He rose and dressed. The woman lay back onto his bed and partially covered her nakedness with his sheet. She was a brunette and he felt he must have known her. He was in the bathroom when he realized who she was. Yes, many recollections returned to him. Many mysteries showed the root of their puzzle. He went to search for her. She lay sleeping. He tried to rouse her. She could not be roused. Perhaps she was dead. Her form seemed lifeless in the dark. Umberto struggled to find a light. He could find no such light. Perhaps he couldn't see her at all. Perhaps she wasn't there, he

told himself.

He went out to a club, the drink catching up to him. A band played. Tight blue jeans, flannel shirts, boots and straw cowboy hats. Some men and a woman singer. "Cowboys," Umberto marveled. He crowded the stage to absorb their music. Strains of fiddles reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands. Umberto was convinced he had inhabited cowboy lands some years ago. The woman singer was alluring. She had a melodious voice, a melodious body...

"Hey partner, want to step back a bit?" Umberto was admonished by the fiddle player. It sounded funny to him and he laughed. Here was a man talking like country-folk who had taken violin lessons as a boy. Umberto looked for someone to share this joke with. The woman singer smiled to him and Umberto blushed. He stepped back into a group of Japanese business men.

Another man who did not appear Japanese began talking to him. "Do you like her?" He asked pointing to the singer who was now much farther away from Umberto.

"Yes, but I don't think I'm *in love* with her," Umberto told the man.

"Why not? I am. We all are," the man proclaimed waving his beer. He had a thick mustache and Umberto felt his own lip to see if he had one too. He didn't.

"I don't know her. Besides, I think I fall in love too quickly only to be disappointed too fast, and then I don't know what to do," Umberto admitted.

"Uh, you're a baby!" The man said without seeming mean. "You want your mommy."

"I don't think so," Umberto replied laughing.

"Women are to be enjoyed, not kept. They are like milk, they go bad if you keep them too long. There should be a last sale date on them, I'm serious," the man said.

"I think I've heard this before," Umberto admitted. "Men are like dogs, just want to eat, sleep and shit unless they haven't been neutered then they want to eat, sleep, shit and fuck. Women are like cats, they don't know what they want but rarely want what you *think* they want. Maybe it's true but I choose not to believe it."

The man shrugged. "Some people can never learn." He drank from his beer and then began a new conversation, "What is it that you *want*, my friend?"

What did he want? "Whatever I don't have, that I think I need," Umberto said.

"A good answer and what do you *need*?" The man asked.

"That's a good question... I need a sense of myself, and I need to complement myself with another, which is probably part of the same thing," Umberto fumbled, and then re-phrased his answer. "I need to have done something, or do something, by which to know myself, and for one last time have the delusion of falling in love again."

"You don't want to be alone anymore?" The man asked.

Umberto nodded.

"Perhaps this is an illusion, and a sign of weakness," the man said.

"Then we are all weak and deceived," Umberto replied tiring of this conversation.

"You can be married, have a wife and children, mistress, a girlfriend and be alone. You can be married to one woman and faithful and not know exactly what is in her heart, and still be alone. There is some mystery in this, I admit. Do you think you should *earn* the things you need or *fight* for the things you need, or simply *take* the things you need?"

A series of dilemmas that have plagued Umberto forever. "One can't earn these things, because life is not fair, one cannot fight for them and expect to hold on to them without continuing to fight and fight... How does one simply *take*?" Umberto asked.

"You take what's there, what's ripe, what's available to you," the man said plucking an imaginary fruit. "It isn't always what you've dreamt about, but it's better than nothing."

Umberto was interested again, he knew the man was going to tell him what to do. "Continue."

"You are struggling with some beast. It seems to have the better of you, or you wouldn't be here, listening to me. Find that beast and get it to like you..." The man said.

"How?" Umberto asked, feeling a knot in his stomach.

"Like yourself. Then practice. Think of some woman who might want you. Maybe a *not-so-nice looking* one who has yielded to the competition. Dropped out of the race. Make her smile, make her laugh and then make love to her. You will feel much better about yourself then. Practice makes *almost* perfect. But relax, don't fight so hard. It will only make you tired, and in the end everyone loses." The man was grinning with so much intensity that Umberto felt fearful. He stepped back to see the man more clearly and lost sight of him in the crowd. He thought he saw another, older man. Very frail. Someone he thought he should know well. Ah, he had some inkling of memories about this other man as a younger and stronger person. A handsome man. A diligent man. This man would have much more straight-forward advice. Could a man be too honest, Umberto wondered.

The singer on stage now wore a chic black gown that followed the contours of her body. There was no band yet she sang to a strong current of music. An orchestra existed somewhere. People in formal clothes pushed in to get closer. Umberto felt himself moving to the rear of the patrons. Farther and farther from the stage.

*

He would find that librarian and seduce her, he thought. It made perfect sense and Umberto walked the streets in rhythm with this revelation. He felt enticed by her and she seemed to be accommodating at this point, so why wait? The sooner he could woo her, the sooner he could begin accomplishing the things he must do. Perhaps life was this simple. A thought falls into one's mind, it is therefore a fruit to be plucked, then deliciously savored. Some meaning might come from such a thing later, but no use

worrying about that now!

*

There were many obstacles blocking his access to Virginia's apartment. He had to climb a tree and shimmy along a vine to another tree. His shirt got caught and tore in the branches. Then his pant leg became entangled with something. Umberto began taking his clothes off to free himself of these things. There were voices at the window and he began singing as part of his courtship.

A man looked out of the window at the terrace. She was not alone! A pang shot through Umberto; he was ashamed to feel this way, insecure and troubled by competition. Believing in some relative form of virtual virginity, in which other lovers were shadowy figments of failed fiancés, and people are not the flawed creatures of company they indeed are. He thought the man to be Frank, and his hands gripped the tree in displaced anger. "You! Get out of there!" Umberto declared. "What kind of a *Dumb-boat* is in that tree?" The man joked.

But Umberto cast away his anger. After all the librarian was not to be venerated like a holy object, or savored like silver or semi-precious stones, she was to be *gotten!* Umberto wailed his love song again and climbed hand over hand up the vine to the terrace where he lifted himself over the railings and pushed in the curtains. He entered her lair wearing an athletic supporter and basketball sneakers.

The rooms were large and dim and seemed to be the interior palace in which a princess slept. *Hey, I thought this was supposed to be easy?* He was now barefoot to walk more softly. A heavy door to be opened. It creaked back into the darkness. He heard snoring. The snoring of a beast. A sleeping beast. Umberto's heart beat wildly. He threw back his head and sang again, perhaps it was a Latin song.

Candles were lit upon the night tables on either side of the bed and upon the dressing table behind him reflecting in the mirrors there. She was enormous. A huge, blonde demon-goddess with hair braided and loose to her mid-thighs. Breasts the size of honeydews. And an extensive forest of light brown bush growing wild where her legs joined and body parted. Umberto approached her naked, his desire apparent. He sang again, clowning slightly to make her laugh. It was an Italian love song, then it was something else. Was she ever going to smile? Was she awake or dead?

"What do you want with me?"

"Well..." Umberto considered the proposition. *I have come to know you, penetrate you, join with you, to fertilize you. I have come to give myself life.* "Well..." His understandings became excuses, his memories rushed together as if the universe was collapsing into itself. He began to forget things, lose things. First the conversation with the man who told him what to do, and then images of the man himself began to fade. Then the nuances of where he was paled and melded with a hundred other nuances. Truths and fancies blended into one indistinguishable glob of substance with no flavor. He fell slowly into a fetal position becoming born again into life in his own bed. His mouth was dry, there was no song to sing.

*

He returned to sleep and had a repetitious dream concerning the past or the future. He couldn't tell one from the other. He was awakened by the downstairs door bell. Umberto's headache was still with him, he had trouble deciding what was ringing, a phone, a clock, a timer, or a smoke detector. He held the phone to his ear and acknowledged a dial tone. The buzzer sounded again. He pulled on a pair of slacks and went downstairs.

It was Angie. She stood in the shadows next to the front door. It seemed like she was smiling. "Did I wake you?"

"Yes."

"You're asleep at ten?" She seemed incredulous.

"Uh huh. I lead an exciting life."

"Look, I need some money," she said. "Five hundred, eight hundred, whatever..."

He looked into the depths of her eyes. She seemed amused, at ease.

"My rent's due," she said.

Umberto rubbed his head. He yawned. "I think I might be a soft touch. But..." he marshaled his thoughts, "I'm brain-damaged and have less than two grand to my name. Who's going to pay *my* rent?"

"That's months away... I have a landlord bothering me now," she held onto an entertained expression, "I don't want to have to fuck him... again." She took a hit on a home-rolled cigarette and held the smoke in her lungs, "After all he's a lousy lay." Marijuana smoke rolled out of her nose. She held the joint up to him, "Wanna hit?"

"No. I already have a headache."

"I like you," she said.

"I sort of like you too," he replied.

"So you don't give a rat's ass if I get tossed into the street, huh? Hey, I wouldn't sleep with this douche again, no matter what. That was over a year ago. Only once."

"You could crash on my couch, for a week if you had to," Umberto offered.

"Big of you. So you got two grand? You're rich!" She smiled.

"Frank called me..." Umberto said.

Her mood darkened. "What did he want?"

"It started out about you actually," Umberto said.

"That bastard. I told him I was broke, if he knew anything, you know... I was counting on getting some money from that deal I told you about," she said.

"No paramedic jobs?" He asked.

"That shit. Old people... unless you work in the city. Then it's gunshots and stabbings. I can do without that..."

Old people made Umberto think. Of the voice...

Lori pulled up in the older black Mercedes. Angie watched Umberto's eyes. "You know her?" She asked.

"She's my lawyer," he said.

"She looks like a lawyer... Well, I'll let you go. It seems that other people like you..." She smiled and he caught a scent of alcohol under the marijuana. She sauntered from his doorway and waved with one hand.

"Umberto, what are you doing up?" Lori asked. She held a package in her hands.

He motioned at Angie getting in to her pickup truck. "She just woke me up looking for money,"

"You were asleep at ten?" Lori asked.

"I lead an exciting life."

"I brought some Chinese food. Hungry?" She asked, edging into the doorway.

They went upstairs and Lori managed to poke her head into his bedroom, "No she was *not* up here," Umberto insisted, putting a T-shirt on.

She laughed self-consciously, her eyes brimming with vulnerability. "Why did she want money from you?"

Over egg rolls and lo-mien, he told her the story.

Lori ate with chop sticks. She was rather good at it too. "Umberto, you *do* lead an exciting life. I think you did write that manuscript. I don't think you really know who you were. Maybe you didn't know who you were, before you forgot who you are," she said maneuvering a shrimp into her mouth.

"I disagree, I think I am a case of the cliché coming true," he said.

"Which one,"

"Be careful, because if you wish for something hard enough, it might come true. I must have wished a life of tempestuous confusion upon myself."

"Meaning?"

"I'm sure I lived one of those lives of quiet desperation. The only thing unique being my singular lack of uniqueness," he said.

"I disagree. You are unique. I've never met anyone like you. Maybe you were getting bored, needed something interesting to spice things up, humored me, fell in with bad company," she made a face, "and got hit by a bus."

Umberto laughed.

"I have to be home early tonight... by eleven," she said looking at the clock. "My father is bugging the shit out of me. He wants to get going on your case." Slipping into silence she began tidying up his coffee table, and picked a stray noodle off of his couch.

She threw away an empty container and put the other one in Umberto's refrigerator. "You should go shopping. There's nothing in here."

Umberto massaged his head, she came over to sit next to him for a moment. "And you should be examined by someone. Not just for the suit, but for your own good."

"Logically you're right," he announced. "I just don't seem to want to know very much..." On a brighter note he accompanied her toward his door smiling.

"What would you do without me?" She asked.

"I'd be truly lost," he admitted.

"Do you love me just a little?" She teased.

"Oh absolutely," he said and gave her shoulders a squeeze.

She couldn't restrain a smile from blazing upon her face and she shuddered with some delight.

"That girl who was here... I mean she will probably come back. She wants something..." Lori fumbled.

"She is a talented but foolish skin-diver, who has shared a bed with a man who apparently threw a box of stolen coins into a river before a search warrant was served," Umberto shook his head softly, "Not exactly my cup of tea..."

She looked into his eyes searching for his heart and soul but at least saw his smile, which was enough for her at the moment, "I hope you get well soon," she said in a small voice.

*

It was difficult for Umberto to fall asleep again. He lay in bed an interminable while until consciousness slipped away. He imagined himself walking alone through an unknowable, dark city and settling into various temporary habitations. A heavy pounding was going on. Something disconcerting to disturb his sleep. He awoke with a pain in his head that was worse than before. He rose, feeling a panic erupting from inside of him. Feeling a wave of perspiration wetting him he opened the medicine cabinet of the former Umberto

and looked inside. There seemed to be a container of prescribed painkillers: Percocet. He opened the vial and examined the pills. He took one with a few sips of water and sat on the couch for a while. No relief. He waited a few more minutes and took a second one, then he returned to bed.

Perhaps he slept fitfully, or perhaps he imagined it. A vast dizziness unfolded upon him and he stumbled from bed again. This time he gave in to impulses and vomited into the commode. The door to his apartment seemed to open. *Lori?* He rinsed his mouth but sank to the bathroom floor to lie there. He hadn't locked his door before. Feet walked through his apartment. Women's voices. Two women. Lori and ? No, Virginia and Harriet? No. Angie and Wendy? Perhaps.

'He's not in his bed, maybe he's gone...' Was this Wendy's voice? He couldn't remember her so it was only a guess. He lay helpless on the bathroom floor. Very weak, very far away. Slipping, quietly slipping out of consciousness and back into a dream. Another dream. Then from dream to dream on to more dreams. Some were farfetched, some versions of his recent reality.

He awoke on the bathroom floor. His limbs were weak, and his disposition inanimate. He crawled into the living room and examined his front door. It was locked. He looked around as he sat against it. Perhaps it was a dream from the bathroom floor. He drifted to sleep again leaning on the front door.

Mystical Gifts That Come From Seeing The Edge Of The Universe

Umberto completed sleeping in the center of his bed, his consciousness undone by such deliberate and dark dreams that he awoke in terror. A nervous pulse propelled him out of bed with such clarity that he felt he could never sleep again. He seemed to touch a premonition that he was dying. Sitting on the edge of his bed beholding his arms and legs as if they were wondrous attachments he had noticed for the first time, he felt need to digest this perception. He noticed his answering machine blinking; had he slept through a phone call?

A woman caller's voice informed him that his (?) father had been admitted into such and such Nursing home and the old man missed his son who used to visit frequently. Contemplation time was over. Holding this new, ubiquitous and perhaps dangerous energy in check, Umberto showered, dressed and exited to meet a man's antiquity.

The car that Lori thought was his, unlocked with his key. Reluctantly, after such a hibernation, it started. It would carry him to the nursing home.

*

He asked at the desk for directions, explaining that his name was Umberto Cain and he understood his father had been transferred in, and he himself was not well and might not recognize the man. The woman at the desk was somewhat suspicious, but Umberto showed the red scar along his head and explained briefly. Perhaps she sensed his taut energy, or maybe it was something else entirely, but she personally escorted Umberto to the bedside of a little, old man.

"Sonny," The father of Umberto said thickly waving him closer. Such a frail being, bruised by procedures, hair growing wildly.

Umberto leaned over and kissed the grizzled stubble on his cheek. "Why have you been away so long?" The man asked with anguish.

"I have not been well," Umberto declared.

"No?" The man asked with great concern, forgetting his own difficult circumstances, "But you're better now?" The man hopefully concluded.

Umberto debated the question. This man was closing in on the end of his life, there seemed to be no point in politeness. "I was in an accident and seemed to suffer some memory loss."

"An accident? What kind of accident?" The old man asked summoning all the strength in his trembling fingers which rested upon Umberto's arm.

"Apparently, I was hit by a bus, and hospitalized for a week."

"Hospitalized, why didn't you tell me?" The old man said with great pain, his eyes beginning to water.

"I was sleeping. In a way I just finished sleeping this morning..."

"A bus? You hurt your head?" He asked.

Umberto turned to show his scalp.

"Oh boy," The old man said disapprovingly, "You get a CAT scan? What did they say?"

Umberto shrugged.

"How about an MRI?" The old man suggested. "My God, they put me in one of those things and the noise! It was like I was back in the war, in the middle of a gun battle --all those fifty calibers going off..."

Umberto smiled at the comparison. The man had lived a life. He could have asked so many questions, but he didn't, he just sat and made small talk with his aged father. The man must have been at least forty when Umberto was born, perhaps older.

When it was time to leave he knelt over to kiss the man again. "You'll come see me soon, sonny?" The man asked with a tenderness that came with the frailty of age.

"Yes..." Umberto said, "we shall see each other soon..."

Leaving, he had a tear to wipe from his cheek. One of the aides paused her efforts at stuffing a pillow into its case to show she was touched by his emotion. Umberto smiled, there was no reason for anything else.

Wendy was not so hard to find. She had moved in with her some-time boyfriend Richard Tomisini as Frank had surmised. Only Frank knew his whereabouts as Angie did not. Theirs was a luke-warm liaison based on occasional *laughs*. Frank did not think they could survive more than two weeks together and had urged Umberto to hurry.

Though it was mid-day Umberto was surprised to find them both at home. The apartment stank of tobacco and beer. Swaddled in bathrobes the couple looked like a shower and shave would be appropriate for both of them. Wendy ran her hands over her stubbly right leg in realization of its condition.

"Who the fuck are you?" Tomisini asked. He seemed like an associate of Frank's; another asshole. Balding, macho, developing a paunch.

"A mystery candidate," Umberto said entering the living room. Pizza boxes and overflowing ashtrays were everywhere.

"Selling something?" Tomisini asked.

"No. I'm the reason Wendy has taken flight, even though I don't remember her..." Umberto said affecting a neutral tone.

Wendy looked appalled and downcast. She remained seated. Tomisini become more indignant, he took several steps closer, "Why, did you fuck her?" Then to Wendy, "Did you fuck this guy?" Umberto grimaced.

"Nooo!!" She whined twisting her head away into her forearm, as if she had much to hide.

"Why are you coming in here?" Tomisini threatened Umberto, "I could break your balls and throw you and this whore out of here!"

"You've been fucking around... There's been other women here!" Wendy shouted back, nearly in tears. Her throat contorted into a series of coughs.

Tomisini grabbed Wendy bathrobe by the collar. Umberto felt multiple emotions. The bands of tendons on the back of his skull tightened and his face flushed. His knees were tremulous. Somewhere in his head a voice whispered panicky advice and ironic jokes. He had been prepared for this and even mentally rehearsed such activities. He pulled his jacket open and stepped backwards.

"Please," Umberto pleaded, "time is *so* precious..." The handle of a large automatic pistol was visible in the waistband of Umberto's trousers. "I just want to get some things and clarify a point or so..."

Tomisini's attitude changed. He released Wendy and grew pale. Wendy stopped coughing.

"I want that manuscript. I also want my wallet back. And I want to know two things..." Umberto said.

"Frank..." Wendy began.

"Frank!" Tomisini exclaimed raising his hands into the air.

"Frank suggested I do this, as far as getting the manuscript and delivering it to Peter," Umberto said, "He gave me this address."

"I don't have it here," Wendy said in a small voice.

"I want it," Umberto declared.

"Give him the thing!" Tomisini added.

"I will! But it's not here!" Wendy shouted her hair becoming wild covering her face as she spun her head. She combed it back with her fingers. "And?" Wendy prompted Umberto.

"My wallet."

"Who says I have it?" She asked in a voice both small and empty. The voice of a tease.

"Why did you take it; for the five hundred bucks?" Umberto asked.

"What five hundred bucks? You said you were flat broke!" Tomisini said to her.

"There wasn't any. There was, like, forty dollars in his wallet," Wendy said to Tomisini or recording history. Then to Umberto, "Where did you hide the bills?"

"They were found in my pants pocket," Umberto said.

"I thought I saw you take your wallet out in the restaurant..." She said to Umberto.

Tomisini showed a restrained rage concerning Wendy but decided to sit down across the room.

"I didn't..." Wendy began, "I didn't want to take *your* wallet..." She faced Umberto squarely trying to regain her composure and pretend she was in an attractive and capable mood. "It came out of your pocket when the bus hit you... I just thought that I should remove the... You know, the evidence of who you were and get out of there myself... and I needed the... See the trade was not done and you really didn't deserve the five hundred dollars.... We didn't need you there anyway, that was just Frank's idea because he didn't trust me... I didn't want to get cut out of the thing, Frank had made promises to Angie and me and I wanted; --we both needed more than a promise to pay our rent..."

Umberto laughed at the convoluted path of truth. "Did you push me in front of the bus?" He asked.

"No," she said recoiling at the thought. "Hey, I wanted to take you home... I liked you."

Tomisini shook his head and placed it into his hands.

"And you were kind of wasted, I was holding on to you so you wouldn't stumble into the

street. The light was green for us. The bus just couldn't stop," Wendy added.

"You'll give me my wallet?" Umberto asked.

"Yes," She rose feeling shame and tried to walk with dignity into the bedroom. She was there a few moments looking perhaps for her own cash to return, but she couldn't find any, so she reentered sorrowfully and handed him a wallet with one dollar inside.

Her eyes were large and hurt. She extended the wallet as if asking for forgiveness. He took his wallet.

"And one more thing," Umberto said.

"Yes?" Wendy asked.

"Where did the manuscript come from? Who wrote it?" Umberto asked her.

"Frank had it, that's all I know," She said.

"And you'll get it to me? And call your sister, she's worried, and in the same boat you are," Umberto said, "Angie has my number."

"What about the money from the manuscript?" She asked.

"If there is any money you might get *something*. But I wouldn't count on there being any money," Umberto counseled.

Umberto was prepared to leave. "You folks going to behave toward one another?" He asked.

Tomisini was in a better mood, "Oh yeah... She's leaving right after you are. As soon as she gets dressed."

*

Later, on the phone, he recounted the story to Lori leaving out the part concerning the threat of violence tucked into his pants. She was amazed at the *ape-like behavior of men*. "Why are they like that?" She wanted to know.

It seemed like a subject he hadn't given much thought to recently. "I suppose we are talking about a billion years of instinct on top of a few thousand years of culture," Umberto said.

"Are you defending him?" She asked.

"Why would I do that? I dislike people who behave that way. Though maybe I was an asshole too at some point, who knows?" He said.

"I bet you were never an asshole!" Lori insisted.

Umberto tried to weigh his various attributes, something indefinable voted that he was not always a gentleman. "I don't know," he mused and stretched, feeling both

comfortable and slightly bored with the conversation.

"And this guy got rough with his girlfriend?" Lori coaxed.

"Hmmm." Umberto thought the event too disquieting to repeat.

"Why would a guy get *so* bent out shape because he thought his girl had been with you?" Strategic pause, "Were you!? --With her?" A strained note of desperation leaking through.

Umberto laughed softly, "No..."

"But you don't remember anything!" Lori exclaimed.

"But she did, and the answer is no; and besides you just answered your own question," Umberto said.

"Yeah, well I wasn't about to beat you up," she said defensively.

"Only because I'm ten miles away. Otherwise you would probably be thrashing me about, wiping the floors with me on the ungrounded suspicion that I fornicated with a strange woman..." *and we're only friends...*

She laughed, "Yeah, that's me tough-girl!"

"Let's say..." Umberto began, "That sex represents the greatest power in most of our lives. Most of us never become generals or politicians. The most significant and poignant thing we ever do is form relationships and procreate new people."

"And you've never done it?" She queried, mining his didacticism for mirth.

"Maybe not..." Umberto said.

"What's that have to do with violent jealousy and screwing around and not wanting women to?" She asked.

"Genetic inheritance."

"Who would want to sustain that type of gene anyway?" She asked.

"Lori," he chastised, "maybe you're right. Maybe if women would smarten up and use equality and birth control to good advantage they could eliminate macho men from re-creating one another in a generation; though I don't think so."

"You're not that way are you?" She asked, "The jealous type?"

Of whom, he wondered. "I don't know. I probably am," he said.

"No, you're not... I bet I could tell you about the guys I've been with. But then that's about *me*," she said, her voice trailing off.

The nervous pulse was throbbing in him, and he felt he was wasting time debating with

her. He needed to move on, to explore this restlessness. He had a night-time ahead of him with so much to look for.

"You going to come see me again Thursday night, I've changed my act a little," she coaxed.

Thursday night had other representations. "No," he said.

"Why not, you don't remember it from the last time," she said.

"I'll catch it next time," he replied.

"You going out on a date?" She asked.

Uncanny, he thought. "A date with destiny. I cannot sleep so I will seek my fate,"

"You're not going to tell me," she complained. "How's your headache?"

"I think it's gone." *Replaced by something else.*

Seducing The Beast

A night of wandering under the city's stars, the little lights that populate the darkness alongside human habitations that lay asleep. He no longer wore the weapon, he was afraid of losing his nerve and acting ahead of time, using the human fear of death to provoke it. Just his sense of doom enlightened by seeing life for almost the first time.

The city had a lonely Eros stretched across its bareness. Danger too. Along chance intersections personal dramas were enacted. There was illicit business going on. Buying and selling of things that nature did not always give away freely. Powerful intoxicants and promiscuous sexual transactions could be contracted. If one had no interest in such business then one was in less danger. There were possibilities of mayhem from a robber or mad person, but these incidents were as likely as being hit by a bus.

Umberto whiled away his hours on the prowl imbedding the surreal present into his senses as he imagining altered versions of the past. An occasional prostitute waved him over. Bare meat from the thighs to the calves. Too much risk for no passion.

He returned home several times, his way station on this temporary sojourn. A shower, shave, small meal. Daylight formed in primitive colors along the eastern horizon then matured into light that led people out of their nests and into common byways. The day matured. Everything does.

When he next saw Virginia, closing the reference desk, he had two distinct impressions. That she was ungainly, too big, unlikely and often unlike-able. But there was a tension behind her intelligence that represented a puzzle, perhaps even to herself. And here he thought was a magic key that could help unlock his own existence. The promise of communication across the isolated barriers that life invents represented something of a small salvation. Shattering the unknowable, sharing her mind, was as alluring as taking

her clothes off; seeing what form actually existed under the costumes she wore. He was excited about the prospects.

They made small talk until the sushi bar. There, alone in the early evening they ate California roll with liberal wasabi. She drank a beer as chaser to a Vodka double on ice. Umberto had a Coke.

"You were telling me you're not a drinker," she remarked, "I rarely date men who don't drink."

"Why, you don't like to drink alone?" He asked.

"Very perceptive," she nodded, "Being sober with a person enjoying themselves is like being on two different planets..." She had a healthy appetite.

His eyebrows went up, as much from the hot stuff as from her remarks.

"Yeah, I stopped drinking for a few months, some time back... I was pregnant and not quite sure what to do about it." She saw that she had his attention. "I lost it. No, I wasn't married. Did you think I was a virgin?"

"I am," Umberto said.

She laughed. "Are you really?"

"Probably not... But as good, or as bad, as one..."

"Oh that's right! No recollections... Kind of like re-growing your hymen and starting over, for a woman anyway," she said. "I wonder if I should do that," she remarked wistfully, "Sometimes I think it would be a blessing to be able to start over." She finished her beer and ordered another.

"And not just start over sexually," Virginia continued, "just start over."

Umberto finished his Coke and drank water.

"So why don't you drink; to me it's the next best thing to losing the worst of yourself, but then you've already done that!" She laughed.

"It doesn't seem to benefit head injuries... I can't say I have been one hundred percent... --I did have a very powerful drink in the train station after I left the hospital, I found my way home even though I didn't know where I was going... Very phenomenological..."

"You speak like a professor sometimes. What's with *Umberto*? Were you born in another country? What did you do for a living?" She asked.

"Apparently I was in the Army and I at least attended college, that's all I know... and I have a pistol at home," he smiled.

"Very eclectic. Do you shoot it?" She asked.

"Not that I remember. I think it would be very loud. I'm fairly sure I can drive a truck too, but now I'm guessing."

"Simplify! I wish I could do that... saves on so much explanation. I was born into a wealthy, but tight-fisted, discipline-bound pack of Eastern Republicans. Anglo-gentry. Not bad people really..." she relented, "My grandfather was a philanthropist... Ivy League... Harvard Law School, but I didn't have what it takes. *Virginia is too tall for a woman. Virginia is too idealistic for a professional. Virginia is too much a dopey dreamer to succeed.* I had a breakdown. Oh, I don't want to bore you with the mundane trivia of my little life..."

"Why not? I'm fascinated. Other people's failures eclipse the sense of my own," he said.

She laughed, "I started as an associate in a law firm my father had contacts with... I'm not going into any *real* history here!" She said abruptly, "There was a man and I was tragically infatuated with him. He was a... I said I wasn't going to do it!" She put her hand up to stop the monologue as if she were about to take an oath. Then she relented and slouched backwards into comfort. "Anyway, I might occasionally go out with *somebody*... If it seems okay I might have sex, but I do *not*," she said emphatically, "become emotionally involved anymore." She waited for his reaction.

He was very disappointed. First to discover that he was not pragmatic but a romantic, and secondly to learn that she was not waiting for *him*, but for anyone or no one. He tried to hide his disappointment but had difficulty doing so.

"I'm not ordinarily as scatter-brained as I was when you first asked me to lunch, though you don't remember that. I'm not so sure I want to date a brain-damaged, virgin, teetotaler either, but I seem to find you interesting."

As he watched her speak he realized that her pronouncements were only mission statements. She was human and therefore susceptible, she might fall for him, regardless of her intentions. It might take a little longer, it might be a campaign waged with faulty intelligence, but if he wanted her he could get to her! The terrible question arising in his mind and beating down his sense of purpose was, *did he want her?* If time was the essence of all reality, did he want to tie it up and throw it away to wrestle something damaged that he could not fathom holding onto anyway? How much time was there for him? Would it be a selfish act that would wreck havoc on her or him, or both of them? Romance was such a powerful entity. He couldn't have invented such truths from unworn cloths. He must have known this first hand from his own hidden past.

Half way through her second beer she refreshed her vodka. By now she was carrying the conversation, going into literary sources. All he had to do was look into her eyes and nod. It gave him room to think. He was partially invisible, a man who chucked his archives, living on the edge in a world becoming peopled by measures of desperation. After sleeping for weeks, perhaps for decades he had not dreamt with his eyes closed in over a day. It would be a week or a lifetime till he would sleep again. His reality was becoming his dreams and vice versa in an existence that eschewed the infinite in favor of the temporal and transient.

As she spoke, his philosophies were becoming stripped away. He debated whether every word he spoke should be the unutterable truth or a persuasion to see her naked. He hated seeing a sense of ambivalence return to him, it made a mockery of all the newly founded illusions he had sought to live by. Finally the pressure of thinking of it on an un-rested head made him laugh. She laughed too, thinking he was sharing her story.

"Wait, it gets better!" She claimed, continuing the story he was not listening to in greater detail.

Umberto decided to relax from too much thinking. He decided that he need not drive *all* the time. He could take the passenger's seat and see what she wanted to do with him; after all in judo, the harder one clings to one's opponent, the harder one falls.

He mellowed into a sensual disguise maintaining a cynical other-worldly view of everything. A cynic and a romantic, what delicious incongruity. Maybe he was abandoning ambivalence in favor of finding the joke inside all the little riddles he never paid attention to. He inhaled her presence through all of his senses, including the olfactory. Whatever perfume she may have had, even hair shampoo, had evaporated. He sensed a nervous perspiration. She was a hard worker and a hard talker. She was also a sloppy drinker.

Their conversation no longer meant much to him. She was blabbing about trivia in her life, that or going to the ladies room. He was thinking about sex, but the only home movie playing in his head was Lori. He felt an attack of guilt.

She saw his eyes slip away at the same time she was about to signal the bartender for more to drink. She tried counting what she had already consumed and felt a cloud of self doubt raining anxiety upon herself. She fumbled in her handbag for a mirror. She felt a need to examine and recompose her face, perhaps something clownish had been constructed there. She decided lipstick was important and tried to paint her lips while Umberto watched. Suddenly she realized she was being both transparent and rude and her confidence shattered. She was making a fool of herself! The lipstick was too thick on one side and her tissue wasn't helping. She had an overpowering urge to cry which she bridled.

"Shall we go?" She asked icily.

"What's the matter?" Umberto asked, seeing a sudden change.

"You want to sit there and watch me get sloshed?" She said standing unsteadily.

Whether he realized it or not, the old (younger) Umberto would have taken this as an omen, and castigated himself for her sudden change in behavior. But vast maturity had been bestowed upon him since his recent epiphany-of-existence. Life was a series of mostly small and some large dramas. Acting lessons were not required.

He reached up and took her hand and lowered her back into her seat with a gentle but firm downward pressure. "I want to watch you do anything," he said.

She sat, stiffly, but attentively. "Why is that?" She asked wishing the alcohol cloud in her brain would go away.

"I don't know!" He exclaimed. "Maybe I think you're my *type*. I haven't a clue. I don't imagine I spent time pursuing female basketball players... The vast majority of women on this planet are lower in altitude than I am; why look into the stratosphere?"

She was slightly dumfounded, uncomfortable and hoping to be home soon. "I was very bad at sports," she admitted.

"And I was a pretty good soccer player, right wing..." He stopped; he tried to think. Was this true?

"You can remember that?" She asked forgetting about her own immediate dilemmas for a moment.

"No. But it sounds *plausible*!" He said, and they both tittered.

"Anyway you were saying," she reminded him.

"About you," he nodded, "I sense or imagine an attraction that goes beyond the physical."

"I should hope so," she said, not liking her physical being.

He grasped her hand hoping to find at least a friend there. She allowed his grasp but held onto her emotions. She was not *sharing*.

"Are you telling me you want to yield your virginity to me?" She asked feeling a hot blur rushing to her face.

"Perhaps," he admitted.

"I'm honored," she said, "and might have taken you up on it if I hadn't drunk so much on a nearly empty stomach!" She tried laughing but it came out flat, like a forced, self-conscious chortle. She was beginning to loath herself, something alcohol usually put an end to.

"Let's just say," he admitted, "that currently I am feeling an intensity toward life in general and you in particular." He smiled.

"Virgin, my ass! My God, you *are* a charmer," she said and leaned forward to say something very personal. "Unfortunately I am on the verge of having a full blown anxiety attack."

"You too? Cool..." Umberto countered.

"You have them?" She asked incredulously.

"I've been vomiting out demons every week or so," he said.

She gave his hand a simple squeeze before letting go. She was feeling somewhat better,

"Maybe we should have a real dinner someplace. I'll pay for it, or we'll go Dutch, if that offends your sensitivities. I won't have anything more to drink now, I promise."

"I have some cash on me... And if I live long enough might collect from the bus company..."

He signaled the waiter for the bill.

"You know, I did a little research about your memory loss... --In the library of course," She said.

"Of course."

"It seems that your amnesia is more likely due to a neurotic or personality disorder than to purely physical trauma. Because you seem to have little motor deficit, no seizure disorder, right?"

He nodded, "I had weakness on one side, but I've compensated for it, or gotten used to it, or forgotten about it," he said.

"But there's barely anything noticeable. And that could be from contusions or the accident itself rather than being neurological," she said.

"Could be," he admitted.

"I'm sure there are injuries a paid expert, known in the legal, personal injury field as a *whore*, would testify to: A scar for one thing, headaches?"

"Yes," he said.

"But beyond the retrograde amnesia caused at the time of the accident itself, your overall memory loss seems related to other factors," she declared.

"You are very impressive when you are intoxicated," he complimented.

"Thank you. The only time I actually tried a case in court was after three martinis. They tell me I was very good, but I quit the next day. Did you know that I wore spike heels tonight?" She asked.

"Did you need to spike anything?"

"Probably to intimidate. I'm such a push-over that I refuse to look people in the eye, preferring to tower above almost everybody. If I weren't a woman I would feel badly about it. We are allowed to be cowardly at times."

"If I could do it I would, but I like looking into people's eyes, unless they are crazy," Umberto said.

"But do you think I'm right about your memory loss?" She asked.

"Could be, but it doesn't matter. I've given up sleeping because I am expecting to be at

the mercy of the Universe," he said.

"What does that mean?" She asked.

"Every moment counts," he replied.

"And what does that mean?" She asked.

"I might die soon. Let's get some dinner."

*

The restaurant she suggested maintained intimate lighting and private booths. Halfway through a king size cut of steak she seemed to make progress toward sobriety. Umberto had less appetite though he was still attentive to her conversation. He had illustrated a story for her on the ride over concerning the adventure with the manuscript though he downplayed the strong female personalities in the experience and made it sound even more cartoonish than it was.

"A manuscript?" Virginia marveled, "I knew you were a reader. Maybe you're a writer too,"

"Or just an unlikely messenger," Umberto said, though her speculation pleased him.

"Did you ever have the feeling that you were miscast in life? That whatever it was you should be doing is this elusive thing you can't seem to touch?" She asked.

Umberto laughed, "I think this might be my essence,"

"But you don't even know what it was you *were* doing!" She exclaimed with excitement, "how could you know it was wrong?"

"Because I allowed myself to be led astray," he said. "Would I have had time for foolishness if I was doing what I was supposed to be doing? Unless foolishness is my destiny." He hadn't mentioned very much about Lori, but that seemed to apply to the same equation.

She considered his argument, then allowed herself to lower her guard. "I don't think I've told anyone this in years but I always thought of myself doing something *creative*..." she said.

"Such as painting, sculpture?" He asked.

"I don't know," she shook her head.

"Sewing, cabinet-making, mosaics..." Umberto prompted.

"Maybe," she said hopefully.

"What are your hobbies?" He asked.

She seemed to look blankly into her own life. "I don't know."

"What do you do on ordinary evenings?" He asked.

"Read a book, watch a video or TV, have a few drinks and go to sleep. Not very creative, huh?"

"Well... Maybe your dreams are creative," he offered.

"I don't remember them, do you?"

"Sometimes," Umberto said. "Some of them are very rich complexities in which pasts and futures are grafted together sometimes forming bizarre genres of college, libraries, travel, cities, military, jobs, exotic resorts falling into decay..."

"Did you travel a lot?" Virginia asked.

"I don't know, if I was in the Army I might have," he said.

"Do you have love-dreams?" She asked.

"I think so..." he answered.

"Sex dreams?" She asked.

He smiled. "Perhaps. And you?" He was suddenly aware of her knee touching his, though this closeness might have existed for half an hour or more.

She smiled and looked to her plate. "Sometimes."

"But you don't remember them," he chided.

"Sometimes," she laughed and pinched him playfully on the arm. "So I'm the one being foolish about longing to be creative and doing nothing about it?"

"Maybe you're afraid. Maybe if you try something and it doesn't come out very good, you will become discouraged and depressed," he said.

"So I don't try, but think I should eventually get to something," she said shaking her head. "And you, taking the *phenomenological* approach, of knowing yourself through some mysterious fashion not based on direct evidence; are you the kind of person who would dare *try* something?"

"I think I could be the kind of person who would spend years attempting, on the outside, to be like everybody else, only do so badly and then filled with frustration become impetuous and do something rash and absurd."

"Maybe we are birds of a feather," she sighed.

Her knee had become a planet whose discovery he would not announce, or whose colonization he would avoid. He was still disappointed. The illusions of her had not lived up to his expectations. Worse, if they were indeed soul mates, what did this say about him?

"Would you like to have coffee at my place? I make a delicious cappuccino!" She offered.

"I'd be delighted," he said.

They both worked hard at keeping their smiles from expanding child-like into giggling grimaces as they understood what games they were intending to play at her house.

*

Virginia lived in a three level condominium that had ample window space and a touch of the aesthetic in her decorations and furnishings. But nothing beyond his grasp. In fact her bookcases still had some of her childhood books, perhaps for a niece or in anticipation of progeny, or maybe she hated to throw things away.

She removed her heels, and glided about her kitchen gaily as she produced all the utensils for making cappuccino. She was chatty even giggly but grew quiet for a moment as she poured herself a cordial. Something brownish and rich looking. "Want something a little stronger than coffee?" She asked.

"No..." Again he felt disappointment that she needed to lubricate herself with materials other than romance before attempting any union with him. But he chided himself for being too sensitive. Umberto found himself walking into the kitchen and was positive he had done this before, even if was only in a dream.

He touched her on the arm and she turned to him expecting to be kissed. He did so. She opened her mouth and the kiss became intimate. "Ooo, you want to skip the coffee?" She asked.

"Sure," he replied.

"Okay," She downed the nightcap in two swallows and kissed him again, her mouth had a sharp liqueur flavor. "The bedroom's this way," she said taking his hand.

The hall light did not work and she flicked the switch several times. "I just changed that bulb!" She insisted.

Idly Umberto wondered what she was trying to turn on or off with her sudden concern about the light. She forgot about it and they entered her boudoir. She left his embrace in order to round up her morning's bedclothes and toss them from the floor and bedspread to a chair. They sat on the edge of the bed and kissed. She began to become passionate and Umberto thought of Lori. *Were all women, large and small that alike?* He wondered, trying not to leave the moment and begin laughing.

They lay back upon the bed and continued petting. "Okay, I know where this is going!" Virginia announced. She stood and began undressing. She folded her blouse and skirt and lay them upon an array of paraphernalia on her dresser. Umberto laughed softly.

"What's so funny?" She asked taking her brassier off. Her breasts were larger than he had thought *one larger and lumpier than the other*, though this seemed to make no general

impression on him. Perhaps he wasn't as American as he believed.

"I don't know, I just had a flashback to seeing you at the reference desk," he said.

"You just going to watch?" She said. "Consider the reference desk open for business," she said pulling off her panty hose and underpants.

He was aroused and shed his clothes quickly. "Oh," she said, "I've seen them bigger *and smaller* than that, but that one will definitely do!" She sang.

Umberto thought her statement odd, but decided to expend no resources comprehending all of its nuances. He embraced her. They kissed and undulated. He moved and she put her fingers between her thighs defensively. "Aren't you going to put something on there?" She asked.

Umberto had expected to gain entry with no more than a cavalier attitude. "I don't have anything," he said truthfully.

She sat up, her expression changing, "This is not an overdue library book, this is life and death. Literally."

Umberto's ardor wilted. "Sorry."

She looked at him below the waist. "Have you been screwing around with a lot of women? Prostitutes? Or you just can't remember?"

"I don't think I've been screwing around... no." He was ready to get dressed again, though additionally disappointed.

"Well, I don't want a baby." She looked at him coldly, then jumped up patting him on the thigh, "Let me get something," she cooed, nuzzling him on the cheek. He felt better with the return of her warmth and sought to amuse himself with his own thoughts as she disappeared into the bathroom.

Much time passed. Umberto felt like an insomniac confined to bed. He waited and waited and tried not to think too much, a problem for a man who has often lived in his head.

She returned with an odor of some sort of cream emanating from her person. "Where were we?" She asked squirming next to him.

"I thought you went out for coffee," Umberto tried joking.

She didn't like his joke but decided not to comment. He kissed her but this time she had no passion to return, she kissed him back perfunctorily. Now, Umberto knew that all women were not alike, and he conjured up guilt on behalf of the first female he recently kissed.

She seemed uncomfortable and moved away from him. Suddenly and studiously she reached into her vagina and fished something out. At first Umberto thought she was doing tricks to make him laugh and had retrieved a prophylactic from such a place. But it was larger and didn't look like it could unroll.

"I can not get this diaphragm seated properly," she confided. "I'm loaded with goo. Spermicidal jelly and foam, but I'm not comfortable with doing it," she said. "Are you going to hate me?" She asked.

"No," he actually felt as if the moment had passed and would be tiresome to resurrect.

He left her bed and pulled on his underwear.

"Am I going to ever see you again?" She asked.

"Sure," he said, wondering if it was the truth. He knew he would be doing a lot of thinking about this rendezvous; something he had been looking forward to for more time than he knew.

"Look, Umberto," She said sitting naked on the edge of bed. "I think I've given you the wrong impression..."

He was perplexed with this assertion.

"I'm not all that..." she began, "I don't go out a lot..."

His expression was blank. He was becoming less able and willing to imagine the whole of her.

"You see, I went out with a guy about four months ago, but it was like, a year and a half before that... And... It might have been three years before that... What I'm trying to say, is that if I... led you to believe that I had a full life, it wasn't true. Yes, I have had intercourse and other things, but I don't feel all that keen about it... Maybe it's been the men I've been with. And what I said about doing it and not feeling any... --emotion. That's not really true, either... Again it could be I didn't have a man worth, you know, feeling for..."

He considered making a passionate vow and pushing her back upon the bed and giving himself to her, but he weighed the expenditure against the result and decided; *if I am to have my first (known) love, I want it to be better than this. I want to believe!*

Yet diplomacy ruled, "I really like you. Overall, I've enjoyed tonight." He pulled up his trousers sat next to her, took her hand and kissed it lightly. "We'll have other opportunities," he said, smiling.

"Oh I hope so, because I really like you too! I do! I want to see you again, okay?"

"Okay," he replied, after which she kissed him chastely on the lips.

*

Umberto left Virginia's home with an urge to cry melting in the back of his throat. He thought that once out of earshot he would moan violently as if teaching himself how dangerous his general illusions about life were. Instead he began laughing with cathartic abandon. Maybe all life's lessons were meant to be taken as amusement to those able to see them. He walked to his car trailing the sounds of enjoyment behind him.

His mood changed when he returned to his apartment in the dead of night. An underlying dread punctuated by a buzzing nervousness returned. His evening with Virginia began to haunt him as a rumination of self-caricature. It was as if he had rescinded his lead in a play to resume a position as janitor. He had on overpowering sensation of wakefulness and decided to return to the street below and wander about.

A woman was sauntering in front of him in a very unhurried pace. Umberto tried slowing down and staying behind her, but he decided that this type of behavior might be misconstrued and disconcerting to the woman, so he made a wide berth and passed her at a brisk pace.

"Umberto... Is that you?"

He turned around and saw a woman who looked like Angie. Only she seemed somewhat disfigured. He considered feeling a flash of panic for dreaming bad dreams while awake, but felt a dead calm instead.

"Yes?" He waited for her to reach him.

She sauntered up to him. She seemed slightly drunk. There were bumps on her face. "This is me. Ugly," she said.

"Am I imagining this?" He asked.

"No, oh no. It's real," she said. "I can't afford my medicine. Now I'm too ugly to get a job. Life has a funny way of piling on like that."

"What's wrong?" Umberto asked.

"Adult acne. When I get my period it can get really bad. Who'd want to kiss this face now?"

Gently, Umberto kissed her on her out-broken cheek. "Is it catchy?" He asked afterward.

"Yes," she said and they both laughed.

"You know something, *Dumbert*; you are an incredibly sweet man." She slipped her arm around his and they began to stroll together.

"You hear from Wendy?" Umberto asked.

"Yeah, shacked up with that loser Tomisini. I thought she dumped him a month ago. She had to split though. She's staying with a cousin. Why move in with me? I'll be evicted soon enough."

They continued together as if they were heading toward a known destination. "You walk all night too?" He asked.

"Uh huh," she nodded affirmatively, looking up at him with a smile.

"How'd you end up *here*?" He asked.

She laughed softly, "I live two blocks from you. Of course you have, like, no curiousness. Is that the right word?"

"Curiosity. But you're right. I have my *head up my ass* and seem to prefer keeping it there."

"So you *were* in the military! Me too, but only for about 8 months. I didn't take well to the regulations," she told him. "So where were you tonight, on a date?"

"Yeah," he said.

"With the kid-lawyer?" Angie asked.

"No. This librarian who I suppose I had a crush on,"

"And she shoot you down?" Angie asked.

"No."

"So what happened?" Angie asked.

"Nothing," Umberto answered.

"Couldn't get it up?" She asked.

Umberto constructed his reply out of the most concise version of the truth he could muster, "I think we both realized that the risk was not worth the reward."

"Couple of loser cowards, huh?" She commented.

"Maybe... I seem to be such a hopeless romantic. I think that love will change me for the better," he said.

"Huh!" She snorted.

"And I should fall in love before I die. I'm not sure why, maybe it's pure instinct, like a fly evacuating its larva before succumbing to insecticide," Umberto said.

"That's an appetizing picture," she commented. "You figuring on dying soon?"

"One can never tell. I almost drowned last week," he said glancing at her.

"I fucked up. Half a brain is worse than none. Going into that river without a life-line was stupid. *Sorry*," she said. "So you going to see this woman again?"

"Who knows. I thought she was interesting, but damaged like the rest of us," Umberto said.

"Who's the kid-lawyer?" Angie asked.

"Her father is the lawyer. She... she's taken a liking to me. I don't know why. Maybe she thinks I'm someone else."

Angie entwined her fingers with Umberto's. "You don't know why? You're very likable. A gentleman. Even though I never met one before I know one when I see one! And you're not the dumb push-over I thought you was. And when you got the upper hand with me you didn't hurt me. You're a special guy, and if I didn't have zits all over my face I'd blow ya right here on the street."

He squeezed her hand as he laughed.

"Hey, big guy, buy me a cheap glass of wine, okay?" She asked.

"Where?" Umberto asked.

"I know a place that's open after hours. It's not far," she said.

"Sure."

"So that's the way to get something from you," she teased pinching his midriff, "just be nice to ya!"

"It works miracles," Umberto confessed.

"Cool! C'mon hon, you can tell me all about love, because I could use some instructions there myself." Leading him by the hand she accelerated the pace and clattered across an empty street in her platform shoes. Halfway across she looked both ways, "No busses!" She shouted happily.

*

The club was shuttered and used an alley entrance for its after hours activities. A large, older automobile was parked at the curb and Umberto thought he saw a woman looking out from the back seat. A thin, tall man lounged by the door and gave Angie a thorough looking over before glancing at Umberto.

Angie knew the bartender and ordered a glass of red wine from him. "The house stuff." Then she excused herself to visit the lavatory. Umberto pulled up a stool and ordered a ginger ale.

"You a program guy?" The bartender asked. He was a heavyset, young man.

"No, just not much of a drinker," Umberto said.

There were few other patrons. The thin man who had been loitering near the doorway slipped up to Umberto.

"I've seen that woman before," he said of Angie. "Is she like a relative or girlfriend of yours?" He asked.

"Just a friend," Umberto said.

"Oh," the man said smiling, "Cause I got a better looking woman in the car outside there. And she'll do anything for the money," The man winked.

"Good for you," Umberto shrugged.

"So you not interested?" The man pressed.

"No," Umberto answered.

"Are you some sort of a connoisseur of skanky women?" The man asked.

"Could be," Umberto said.

"Well I can get you *real* skanky women if that's what you like..." The man persisted.

"Alfonso, leave him alone!" The bartender barked. The thin man put up his hands and retreated to the door.

Angie returned from the lavatory. She saw Alfonso looking at her and made an unpleasant face. "So, Umberto, tell me how love makes you better."

"Just a notion. You would think it makes sense, no?"

"Hmmm," she mulled over the concept then bummed a cigarette and a light from the bartender. "In my experience," she said shaking out the match and exhaling smoke, "love makes you crazy and then sorry. I don't think love is real, you know what I mean?"

"Yes, and no," Umberto responded. "I don't know that it's real, but don't you *want* to believe in it?"

"In my experience, if I like some guy and go with him, sooner or later he leaves me, or I kick him out. So how could love be real?" She replied.

"Did you ever have a dream that love existed, and made a person beautiful, and gave life hope? Made existence seem cherished, huh?" He asked.

She repeated his words slowly, "You do have a way of talking. Have a dream... about..."

"The beauty personified in a person's face. The light and serenity and mystical happiness you felt looking at them..." Umberto said.

"In a dream?" She queried.

"I don't really know much else," he admitted.

She thought about it for a moment, puffed on her cigarette, swallowed some wine.

"Sometimes sex is good," she giggled. "I don't mean that it just feels good. I mean that it makes you feel special toward a person..."

"Yeah?" He asked, feeling hopeful again.

"Yeah, but it don't last. He wants to eat, leave, or wants me to leave... or anything."

"It's always that way?" Umberto asked.

"Sooner or later," she said.

"So you've never been in love?" He asked.

"Have you?" She replied.

"I'm only a few weeks old," Umberto said.

"Once, when I was a teenager..." She blushed.

Umberto smiled.

"No, I know what you're thinking. It's not like that. We never did nothing. I just liked him and he was... I guess he was real shy, or maybe he didn't like me as much as I liked him. I knew him from school, not from the neighborhood. I used to daydream about him, you know, kid stuff, growing up, getting married together. Having kids..." She blew a smoke ring and drank another gulp, "And then what, get old, divorced, die?"

Umberto shrugged.

"But real life ain't peaches and cream like that, sugar. I guess it was that same year, I was raped by a friend of my brothers. Yeah. That's right. Don't look surprised, it happens. I went to live with my Aunt in another town, because everybody knew about it in school... I couldn't look anybody in the eye."

Umberto imagined young Angie, crying and screaming. Much movement. Her clothes ripped off. Violent, physical carnal knowledge. He slumped onto his arm on the bar.

"You don't have to feel pain for me, hon. It's a long time ago," she told him. She finished her wine and ordered another. "So how come you don't sleep at night? You see, I'm a night person. I used to work at night. And I don't sleep all that much anyway."

"Were you and somebody else in my apartment the other night?" Umberto asked.

She smiled, "Why you thought I was there? You get psycho at night? It's happened to me," she said.

"I guess I haven't been well. Not fully recovered," Umberto conceded.

"I'm not waiting for Frank, you know," she said. "He could be fun. And he could also be gone. Now, he's gone for awhile, and I will not be there when he gets back."

"I think he knows that," Umberto said.

"You gonna try and do the deal with the document-thing; the writing?" She asked.

"Yeah,"

"For the money?" She asked.

"No. I want to find who I was, and what is real. I want to find out if my dreams could be real. I don't expect this to make any sense to you, but that manuscript episode has

become the nebula from which my present existence was created," Umberto said.

"You're right I don't understand. You must be real smart or real crazy," she said.

"Or both," he said.

She nodded, "Okay, look it's almost three in the morning. I'm going home now. You can come too, if you want to, if not it's okay, maybe next time," she smiled.

"Maybe next time," he said and kissed her.

He paid for their drinks and gave her three twenties. "For your pimple medicine,"

She laughed and hid her mouth in her hands. "So next time, I'll be looking fine..."

They left the club, but ran into Alfonso on the way out. He examined Angie's face again with disgust he tried sharing with Umberto, "Skank-eee" he intoned softly.

Angie stopped, she stamped her foot and threw her hand into a point, "Look you asshole, you got something to say to me?!" She exclaimed fiercely.

Alfonso shifted back and forth from one foot to the other as if he were cold or had to pee. The corners of his mouth turned up in a grin, yet his eyes looked hallowed and opaque. "No, lady I don't have nothing to say to you... Nothing at all."

Umberto gently redirected her into the alley toward the street. Angie saw the car at the curb. A woman passed them from behind wearing an imitation leopard skin jacket and a black leather thong over her crotch. She coughed phlegm onto the sidewalk and climbed into the rear seat of the car parked curbside.

"Whore!" Angie hissed under her breath. "I hope I'll never be out on the street."

Umberto said nothing. They passed the car and paused to part. "You take care of yourself," she said to him tugging on his sleeve.

"You too," Umberto called after her.

He turned the corner and had a brief vision of a tall man in a sports coat with a golfer's face promising him something. Something intangible as he walked through empty city streets lit by tungsten street lamps.

*

He lay back in the dark against the wall at the head of his bed and tried to let the time pass. Sounds just below whispers rustled in the netherworld between imagination and hallucination.

*

He met Lori for an early lunch across the street from his apartment. She recognized a weariness that she hadn't measured before.

"Umberto you do not look rested. That slight limp you had seems to be almost gone, but you look so tired!" She said, putting a napkin onto her lap.

"I can't sleep. I have premonitions of losing my mind, or death or both," he smirked and sipped orange juice.

"That's not good." She lay her face in her hands supported upon the table by both elbows and watched him. Stared at him really.

"Why are you looking at me that way?" He asked.

"Thinking," she replied.

"About what?" He asked.

"What it is that's causing me to make a fool of myself over you," she said, very lightly, then looked away and straightened her posture before smiling. He noticed the delicacy of her neck, something he had not seen before.

"You are my center," he declared without being too patronizing.

"Maybe it's because I can't seem to get to you. First maybe it was for fun, now you've become a cause. My mystery, Umberto," she said toasting him with a trendy fruit beverage. "You missed my performance, last night. Non-performance. No one was there so they closed early..." She played with the edge of her spoon for a moment. "How was your date?"

He shook his head.

"I'm being very silly aren't I? Imagining something that can't happen?" She asked.

"No..." He tried to gather up his thoughts concerning her and put them into some order.

"Forgive my mood. It's pre-menstrual, I'm sure. Some girls get bitchy, some get pimples..."

Umberto's eyes opened in recognition.

"I become melancholy and insecure."

"Melancholy, that's a word one doesn't hear much anymore." Umberto mused.

"From kids, you mean," she pressed. "A lot of guys would kill for an eighteen year old. Are you like the opposite?"

"Lori, I..."

"What? Other than bandaging your head, what have you let me do? You don't even care about your case. Do I mean anything at all to you?" She almost pleaded for an admonition.

He chuckled. "Of course you mean something to me," he took her hand and it felt slender

and fragile in his hand. He felt an arousal stirring and smothered it with guilt, then let go.

"What?!" She demanded in a low but emphatic voice that attracted no attention beyond their table.

"Because I'm your only friend?"

"I love you," he said, simply.

"Are you going to piss me off now?" She asked, looking emotionally charged.

"I do," he said.

"You love me like we're close, or you're *in* love with me, like, like..." she pressed for clarification.

"I love like you have become part of my life. Not what I was expecting, and not what I think I should be doing. But..." Umberto said.

"I don't know if that's good enough for me," she said sorrowfully, and put down her napkin and left the table.

Umberto followed and intercepted her outside the ladies' room. The hall way there was empty, and he grasped her gently by her arms, noticing that they were thin and not well muscled. He felt out of character, like he was doing something foolish but carried out the part anyway.

"A few weeks ago, I just liked you... Now you mean much more, give me a break, okay?"

"Will you ever love me, really?" She asked becoming pliant in his grasp, "or will I just be an enthusiastic kid to you?"

"I can't answer that. I don't know where I have been, or what I'm going toward,"

"What if you could remember?" She asked, regaining her composure and cleverness.

He shrugged.

"I told you about my friend Steve...you know my counselor. He's going for his Ph.D. and is a good therapist and does hypnotism and..."

Umberto smiled a smile she could read.

"Don't tell me you're jealous?" She asked, covering her grin with one hand.

Umberto relaxed with the idea of jealousy; it put her on the defensive. "Maybe."

"All right, we had a thing that shouldn't have happened. For him it was a no-no, for me it was just for fun. I wouldn't do that anymore. There haven't been that *many* guys, Umberto. Really. I'm not a slut."

He stopped embracing jealousy not wanting to hear a maudlin confessional in the hallway outside the lavatories. "I don't know that I could be hypnotized, or what it what it would reveal,"

"I'm sure he would do it for nothing. It's worth a try. And he doesn't mean anything to me now," she declared.

"You are so precocious," he said, trying to propel her back to their table.

"Let me use the ladies room first, okay?" She asked, grinning widely.

"Okay."

**

The session was arranged by Lori to be held at 4:30 in the afternoon in Steve Goodman's office at the high School. Umberto had to sign in at the office designating himself as a visiting educational psychologist on the sign-in roster. He wanted to write *forensic psychotic* but Lori insisted he not. Walking the corridors of adolescent angst made him feel giddy. Lori buried many emotions and seemed to perfect the attitude of someone at their fifth graduating reunion.

If anyone was ill-at-ease it was Steve Goodman, who seemed apologetic about his post juvenile environment. He seemed like a nice enough fellow, blond but already thinning -- though he was a year or two younger than Umberto. Umberto wondered what had turned him into a pedophile but relented to appease the confusion in his own mind.

"Have you ever been hypnotized before?" Steve asked in a reasonably good clinician's voice.

"I don't remember!" Umberto exclaimed laughing as he sat next to the desk.

He nodded seriously, sticking to his assumed role. "Lori, has told me about your condition, - on the phone," he added.

"Uh huh..." Umberto nodded.

"Lori could you come back in forty-five minutes or so?" Steve asked her.

She had been standing alongside his bookshelves in the cramped office, and was disappointed to leave. She flushed but agreed, tapping Umberto affectionately on the head as she left.

"She's an interesting gal," Steve said of her as she left, "Likes us thirty-year old guys..."

"Uh huh," Umberto said, wondering where Goodman's clinical formality fled to, and whether he would have to endure a confessional on this end."

"I think it has something to do with her father's absence in her life," Steve continued. "I clearly made a mistake, which could have cost me dearly. Quite dearly, but the gonads don't always think, do they?" He asked.

"I'm not fucking her," Umberto said, simply.

"Are you able to?" Steve replied quickly.

Umberto studied his hypnotist closely. "I believe so," he said.

"The reason I ask, is I've done some research and the case for neurological damage that selectively voids a person's history leaving almost everything else in tact is not very likely. I say selective because you seem high functioning. You can tie your shoes, etc.," he said sounding slightly patronizing.

"I have heard this before," Umberto admitted.

"It's more likely that you are hiding something from yourself and used the trauma of the accident which would have blocked the formation of long term memories from forming; memories from just prior to the accident, for instance..."

"I will never remember the accident. That's called retrograde amnesia, which is common," Umberto said.

"Very good!" Steve said, as if he were talking to a bright child. "And by the way, you are very lucky to have a gal like Lori dedicated to you. I am engaged to a woman I care deeply about, yet still I am jealous of you," Steve said.

"Is this *shtick* to make me feel comfortable?" Umberto asked beginning to feel uncomfortable. "I'm dubious about this. Hypnosis was big *before* Freud. If I've blocked something why would I tell you, or myself?"

Steve grinned, "You might not. In fact, highly intelligent people with thoroughly integrated personalities are generally resistant to hypnotism."

"I might be thoroughly disintegrating as a personality," Umberto quipped.

"Maybe so," Steve chuckled, "I understand you have not slept. Or, more likely, cannot remember sleeping? Have you found yourself someplace you cannot remember going to, besides the hospital?"

"No evidence of any fugue-state," Umberto remarked.

"I'm impressed. Dissociative Fugue *had* been labeled a form of conversion hysteria, or a personality disorder. And related to that is Dissociative Amnesia and Dissociative Identity Disorder," Steve related with an almost smug expression. "But I'm not going to try and *open the mystery box labeled Umberto Cain's past*," Steve said with a display of his affectations. Umberto felt this was something Lori saw more of, but wondered if it was a reason he should pull away from her or not. *Why like a person who likes a person you don't like?*

"I'm going to talk to you for awhile, in this almost monotonous drone of mine. You will begin to feel bored and sleepy which is quite natural and then when you go under, which you will, because you *want* to, I will ask you to reconstruct some of your recent dreams

for us. I think we might learn something useful from them, don't you?"

"Uh huh, Umberto nodded, feeling more relaxed than he had in days. Monotony had its allure after all, he thought. Soon he found himself accepting the suggestion that the number five did not exist anymore, and he could count forewords and backwards without it.

The first dream recounted a tale of the city. An unknowable city poised on the periphery of an uninhabitable countryside. There was much movement. Umberto was living with a woman he did not know. She seemed to like him or was used to him. Umberto shared part of his past with her but suddenly went to live with another woman who he knew from before. They shared a small cottage that was barely furnished and poorly lit. Night was everywhere. He left this cottage in search of children who had not been born yet and took a series of jobs in the city. None of these jobs had any sense of purpose. He did not excel at them and was on the verge of being fired from all of them.

One job had him at a desk on a campus, and he would journey across the campus after hours wherein he became a student. A student who had not passed any tests, or taken any classes. A student whose tuition had not been paid. But a student who frequented the library just the same. And it was a great library. Then he went to a job in the city where he sat in a grade school desk in an office above Main Street and did nothing but plan to leave. When he left he drove for hundreds of miles in directions North and then South reaching almost the North Pole, which while cold-looking seemed familiar and suburban and then re-enlisting in the military he was sent to a deteriorating base in a southern area. He found this area close to a seashore with its debilitated resorts. Then back to the city where he took a series of buses to a series of trains and drove by car across dangerous, heavily traveled highways and bridges too abrupt to be real. Then deep into an arcane, home, electronic laboratory where he tried to remember what he had invented with no success. And back to the cottage though this time with the woman he did not know. And then back to the city to go to a party he had not been invited to. A crime had been committed and the evidence hidden.

Fragments of dreams or memories assaulted him. Was that him looking up a whore's black skirt? Touching the soft flesh under her dark pantyhose, seeing the mercurial, yet wanton smile emerge from her lipstick... Did he see a tall woman in a kitchen flitting about as if she were a long bug? Was he losing his mind entirely? Visions of alabaster and flesh-pink trimmed, or nearly hidden, in lace; a crime, a chase, a great piece missing was hidden in his thoughts. Umberto carrying suitcases around a barren room. Was there a dismembered body among his things? No. This Umberto set the suitcases down upon the bed and opened each. One held piles of clothes. Nothing folded neatly. The other suitcase was full of books and papers. Presumably the intelligence of the universe and not merely cooking recipes.

The body to be disposed of must have been downstairs. Yes, in the tub of the basement bathroom. Or under the tub. He was already downstairs, but wanted to return for his suitcase of books and papers, lest they disappear. Dreams can be this way, things vanish without trace. In the next room was a conversation between a police detective and another. Umberto was already under suspicion for murdering himself. There was no

body, and the evidence was circumstantial, but the crime was so audacious and he so culpable that there was no way out except to promptly flee. Which he did, abandoning everything of value that remained in the bedroom.

A woman called to him from an open window above the street. He turned assuming it was a whore looking for money. Instead it was a woman he loved. "Why are you going?" She asked. In her eyes was much more poignancy and meaning than her words could convey. There was a great deal of regret in his heart already. All that could be, and was, would soon disappear.

"To ride a donkey," he answered, beginning to laugh.

"Why?"

"Because I am already an ass, and this is so circular!" he chortled, feeling brazen for laughing instead of crying over such bizarre misfortune.

A flood of hinting nuances toyed with him. Representations of dreams that might have recurred or he might have imagined they had: Spending an entire semester in college without attending a required math class, and the final exam loomed. Visiting a unisex bathroom in the center of a public place. At last more concrete representations occurred: Lori cavorting on the floor with him, her head wrapped in gauze. But he was not he, but a grunting Steve Goodman and Umberto was peering into this vision as its conjurer and therapist. *'But she's so young...'* he berated his hypnotist. *'Old enough to pee, old enough for me! Have you got a problem with this?!'* The chagrined and invented Goodman asked. *'I don't know; I'm not sure what this means to me...'* Umberto thought of answering as things again dissolved into sleepy chaos.

A voice visited him from outside his declining concentration, "Tell me Umberto, are you holding onto anger?"

"I suppose,"

"About what?"

"My ambivalence, but maybe not," Umberto joked.

"Are you angry with me?"

"I could get angry, but I'm not. Anger is one of those things that brings so little return. I would feel sadness instead..."

"Tell me about it," the voice coaxed.

"My father taught me to be honest and to fight for respect; for my share in this life; but I don't think it served *him* well. He was a guiding light to me when I was little. Now, I tell myself to be serpentine in pursuit of my needs. Only if I am serpentine I have no needs, I am not me. My philosophies and meanderings do not coincide," Umberto said.

"Are you jealous?" He was asked.

"Of you? I have become a hypocrite about such matters. Today I believe in love. Yesterday I don't know what I believed in."

"Are you in love with Lori?"

"Ask me another question, or I'll simply stop cooperating; and I have *been* cooperating," Umberto said.

"So tell me Umberto, who exactly are you?" The voice from outside the supposed trance asked. Internally, he smiled as the answer was constructed, "I am not Umberto. But I am the criminal who has assumed his lack of identity," he heard himself say jovially.

Lori was there when he finished the session. She was smiling as though engaged in something interesting.

"Very enlightening," Steve Goodman said.

"How so?" Umberto asked, feeling both refreshment and a temporary sense of vigor return to his extremities.

"You do not seem to be well connected to life, so much is temporary, unstable, unsuitable." Goodman pushed the glasses up on the bridge of his nose, "As if you are a relentless explorer searching haphazardly for something to happen and point the way toward a real commitment..." He looked at Lori as he spoke to Umberto.

"Or perhaps, you are hiding something, I detected a feeling of *guilt* or perhaps regret," Steve added, "Maybe you *murdered* Umberto Cain and have assumed his identity to temporarily mask your wandering."

Umberto nodded.

"So, are you searching frantically for something, or fleeing from something you have repressed?" Goodman re-phrased.

"Or maybe I have nothing to flee from, and no sense of what to look for; and this is my shame," Umberto suggested. "No grandiose sense of accomplishment or illusion to guide me."

"But he's such a nice guy," Lori mused, grinning.

"Maybe, he doesn't want to be nice, and this is a conflict. You know what they say, *nice guys finish last*," Goodman joked.

"All nicely illuminating," Umberto commented sarcastically. "I feel refreshed," he declared, rising, "And I thank you for your efforts," he said shaking Steve Goodman's hand, which was almost lifeless. The hypnotist's eyes were nearly downcast.

*

As they left the high school Lori almost stumbling while looking at him as they walked. Casually, he put an arm around her back. She walked close to him and seemed happy.

"Did that help at all?" She queried optimistically.

"I don't think so," Umberto said.

"Maybe something else will come to you, soon," Lori offered.

"Maybe."

"Do you want to go out tonight?" She asked.

"I'm getting that manuscript at some point tonight. And going to try and meet that fellow Peter who promised to establish me as an artist," Umberto said. "I believe that I remember him from fragments of another dream." It was easy to say this, but Umberto left a sea of doubts unspoken. He was no more certain of finding Peter than he was of concocting his own television shows. After all dreams were dreams. It was the manuscript that beckoned him magically. It held a promise of arcane wisdom that for him could unlock a secret past and foretell a clouded future. This was the monster and the grail of a quest.

"Wow," Lori said, feeling jealous. "This is so cool!" A happy face in transformation. Just as one could see in a woman, beginning to age, her youth metamorphosing away, with Lori one could still guess at the nucleus of her childhood blooming into something else.

Seducing The Beast Part II

Wendy was supposed to meet Umberto outside Peter's high rise in the city. The night winds vamped him with echoes of loneliness; a siren's song. He thought of the librarian whose wisdom he wanted to delve into only to find no diagram to find his way in. Conversation without passion made little promise to cure the soul of all its longings.

He thought of Angie whose resentment had turned to attraction. But he surmised a rough practicality behind her motives. And this was not a match he could sustain. Wendy was still a cipher he could not reconstruct; nor did he feel a need to. Lori made him smile if only from the embarrassment he felt attempting to assign her a position within the turmoil of his shadowy life.

Thoughts of the old father upon this foreign street made Umberto's determination falter. The man had fought so hard for so little; why couldn't Umberto be satisfied with the same? Then there was Frank, an opportunist who eventually outsmarted himself, something about the man made him angry.

Umberto had secured a parking spot across the street and took turns sitting in his car or on the fender. He watched the front door for signs of Peter, who he was not certain he could identify, or Wendy, whom he began to doubt would show up. The pistol was in the glove compartment for no known reason other than he was carrying near his person everything he thought he might own. He was prepared for contingencies beyond his imagination.

Like a furtive ghost he saw a tall man in a sports jacket slowly emerge from a hallway within the lobby and approach the front door. Umberto stepped onto the pavement but a car, cruising slowly made him stand still. It was a large, older automobile. A chill descended his spine and a pain twitched in his head.

The car stopped beside him trapping him alongside his own car. A head peered out of the window.

"I know you; you the connoisseur of skanky women," followed by laughter.

A woman was driving and another woman laughed at him from the back seat. Neither were beautiful. Alfonso had more to say to him, but Umberto saw Peter Lynch about to exit his building as the doorman opened the way.

Umberto smiled but moved sideways away from the car and crossed the street. It was his intention to intercept Peter on the sidewalk.

"Umberto!" It was Wendy, fast approaching him at curbside.

"She ain't so bad," Alfonso sang out about Wendy.

The choreography amazed Umberto. It was all so ill-timed.

"Who's that?" Wendy asked of the car and its passengers. She handed Umberto a large manila envelope.

"Pimp and prostitutes who want colleagues and clients..." Umberto commented.

"Hey, sister you want to make some money?" Alfonso called to Wendy.

Peter Lynch was on the sidewalk and aware of the interchange. He stood, tentatively watching, but it seemed that he might return to the doorman or move away. He reminded Umberto of a deer for some reason. Peter seemed to recognize Wendy and turned his head away from her and began to walk.

Wendy turned in the opposite direction and disappeared. Umberto hurried after Peter. After a moment's hesitation the car began to trail the two of them.

"You gentlemen want some high class company?" Alfonso called from the passenger's seat across the bosom of his driver.

Peter stopped and considered turning around. Umberto stopped also. "Maybe some other time," Umberto called back and the car moved away.

Peter looked at Umberto. There was an unpleasantness in his face and no sign of recognition. He began walking again.

"Mr. Lynch," Umberto said, coming abreast of him.

He spied the envelope in Umberto's hand and tried to ignore him entirely as he continued walking.

"Excuse me," Umberto said with more urgency.

"Look bud, I am *not* interested in what ever you got," Lynch called over his shoulder without facing Umberto.

Umberto stopped, "Hey Peter, you blew a lot of smoke up my ass a handful of weeks ago about this manuscript Frank wanted to sell you."

Peter half turned as he continued walking, "That's life," he sang in a tone that put music to meanness.

"That night almost cost me my life, most of which was in my head," Umberto added.

"See my lawyer, every one else does," Peter sang out.

Umberto caught up with him and continued walking, matching his pace step for step. Peter stopped, "You going to stalk me? There used to be a time when you could walk in this city without vermin sniffing all over you for a handout."

"I don't want any money from you. I just want to know what this dream is I have concerning a promise and an evaluation you made to me," Umberto waved the manuscript.

"Is that yours?" Peter asked of the manila envelope.

"I don't know. You and Frank seemed to think so. And I'd finally like to know who I am," Umberto said, realizing that one inch from the humor of incongruity was just plain *stupid*. He was beginning to feel the relevance of the latter.

Peter looked at Umberto with less than complete annoyance. "Haven't you read it? Wouldn't you know if you wrote it? Don't use me as a crutch; if it's good go do something with it."

"I just received this from one of your party girls, Wendy Horndower. I lost my mind when a bus hit me returning from a party in your suite."

"Take *five*, pal," Peter admonished.

Umberto was jolted by something he couldn't recognize. A flood of dream memories returned. Anger? Jealousy? Love? A great crime...

"And you're suing me?" Peter asked.

"No. The party, I suppose, is incidental to this," Umberto said.

"Hey, I'm just a shmuck. Sorry if I caused you any undue whatever," Peter professed still maintaining an attitude of distance. "Look, I have a manic depressive disorder. I get a fucking allowance from the conservator of my own estate. Every so often I try and re-invent myself as a scion of publishing and literature. My lawyers usually run around disavowing whatever I say the next morning. For all I know I was high as a monkey and that could be an envelope stuffed with wallpaper that has graffiti crayoned on it by a

three-year-old and I would have told you it's *magnificent!*" He said rapidly, kissing his fingers on the last word in a biting embrace of self-parody.

Umberto laughed.

"So don't use me as a measure of your own worth. If my Daddy hadn't been a rich man I would be riding in that pimp's car or doing whatever you do, waving unread manuscripts at people who live in high rises," Peter said.

Umberto laughed again.

"I have no connections anymore. All the Lynch holdings are gone. Merged into media conglomerates years ago. If I were to pick up a phone I wouldn't know who to call," Peter continued. "So I play golf and give parties when I'm up. And suck my thumb when I'm not. Look, pal, I'm on medication. Give me a break okay?"

Umberto laughed.

"Is it that funny?" Peter asked before turning and walking briskly.

Yes it was, Umberto thought. So much misadventure and bad luck crystallizing from false serendipity. He returned to his car and slammed the door after him. The glove compartment fell open revealing the handle of a nemesis. "*Fool*," Umberto said of himself, "*thinking you'll discover something of importance in yourself the easy way.*"

He reached over and slapped the glove compartment shut, snapped the dome light on and tore the envelope open.

The papers were aging. The manila folder that held them was at least ten years old. Bundled within were collections of papers, mostly typed, some hand written, but not by the same machine or pen. In the front was a list of names. Frank's name was at the bottom, Umberto's in the middle. The rest of the names were women.

In the center of the pile were about eight pages handwritten on legal sized, blue lined, yellow, paper. The bottoms were folded up to enable this manuscript to match the others in size. Umberto skimmed through it, he recognized a line or two as having some familiarity and positive flavor. The rest was embarrassing.

This had been the semester project of a creative writing class Frank and Umberto had taken, probably because it sounded easy and was cast with female students. The best writing, representing the most pages, was done by a talented student who had very little to speak to anyone about. She had either gone on to commit suicide or excelled at medicine, law or business. Another name made Umberto's jaw twitch. She seemed to like Umberto, but by the time Umberto had made up his mind whether to do anything, or what to do, she had gone drinking with Frank and had sex with him.

Frank had contributed nothing. His task had been to have everything typed, photocopied and bound. He had failed at even this and taken an incomplete for the class. Umberto did not believe that Frank ever graduated. He certainly did not graduate when Umberto did. Umberto had found another woman whom Frank, at least, hadn't used and almost

married her. More uncertain memories, *should-have-beens*.

So here was his life in his hands. The gag. Frank tried to peddle a creative writing project that he probably hadn't read, and couldn't remember who wrote, to a manic, rich guy in the midst of a psychotic episode. Two women whose workaday lives did not fit within the conceptions they held of how much fun life should be, had gone broke and possibly homeless counting on the rewards from their participation. Frank was in jail on other matters. Umberto had let boredom, bravado and curiosity cause him to become the clownish, fall guy expecting some great revelation from so much inanity.

Umberto held the sheaf of papers up as his namesake *Bogart* would have and tried to imitate the movie detective. "*This is the stuff that jokes are made of.*" He had wanted to discover he had something special in himself based on dubious clues expounded by unreliable witnesses and found he had simply decided to forget himself as this was the most exciting way to deal with a life bogged down in equilibrium. His head hurt, his left side was weaker than his right. He was afraid to fall asleep and he hadn't had a woman in almost a year. He wanted to fall in love but kept finding no candidates. The best thing about his job was that he had a good excuse for not being there.

Perhaps another might have been laid low by so much self-realization. A lifetime of forgotten meanderings suddenly realized as stunning evidence. But the sense of the prank he had played on himself was so great he was forced to laugh. This was what champions sometimes did, especially if they were gentlemen.

He felt excited by his discoveries and wished there was someone *simpatico* whom he could share it with. Yes, there were lessons here: *Keep your eye on destiny, but always try to be lucky! Think only one and half times before doing anything, and keep a smile on your face when it doesn't seem to work.* He started the car and turned off the dome light. The pile of papers he tossed into the back seat. He would tell the story to Lori; who else was there?

A Seduction Ends

"So who *are* you?" Lori had asked.

"Umberto Cain, a nice guy," he announced with a leer, spinning her half way around as he presented her with a surprise package that was produced when she was about eight years old. "Still just unrealized potential," he mocked of himself.

She was excited to see the manuscript and read a sentence of Umberto's collegiate drivel before proclaiming it was almost brilliant. Umberto had to admit maybe it wasn't as bad as *he* thought it was.

"No, no, it's *really* good!" She insisted, but changed the subject to show him a little-man figurine she had woven out of straw in homeroom that morning. "To bring good luck," she smirked poking him with it.

"Oh, I feel lucky already!" Umberto said.

She made the little figurine kiss the scar on his head. "To make it better," she mimed in something approaching *baby* or *mommy* talk.

"That'll probably cause a lesion," he joked and chased after her trying to seize it. She squealed with delight and ran into his bedroom where she pounced on his bed upon both knees and taunted him with the little toy. "He's commin'-ta-get-ya!"

Umberto followed her onto the bed, grasped her arms and at the appropriate moment kissed her on the mouth. He thought of absolutely nothing other than how good it felt. She kissed him back and manufactured considerable passion. His right hand dwelt for a moment on the nape of her neck, how smooth and delicate the arch there! He cupped her face and drank in the desire in her eyes. Umberto only saw the woman in her now and could conjure up no other.

She smiled that smile of Lori, so eager for his attention. Yes, this was her too, this was the child in the root of her soul. But it was okay now. He kissed the tips of her fingers. These were the fingers that had tried to heal him. These fingers caressed him.

They took their clothes off. "Wow!" she exclaimed seeing his stimulation, "I guess you do *love* me!"

"Silly girl," Umberto said moving against her.

*

They made love several times. At one point she joked, "Nice guys *do* finish last, especially if they have good control!"

Later, she lay in his arms and quietly looked off into space. He asked her what was the matter.

"Have you reconciled everything about me? You know, me being a *kid*, and you being a *grownup*?" She asked.

"No," he answered. "There are no guarantees. If I get hurt I get hurt," he said rubbing her back.

"Why would *you* get hurt? I'd never dump you," she said.

"I don't take these things lightly," Umberto said, "Regardless, *I* would hurt if it didn't work out..."

"I'm sad about one thing," she admitted drawing a small circle on his chest with her forefinger. "I'm not you're first woman," she giggled.

"Maybe you'll be my last," he said stroking her.

"That would be nice," she sighed.

Their trysts were varied, romantic and playful, serious and passionate. He held back nothing and she accepted gladly and gave to him, and gave still more. After all what is love if not finding someone who will take what is given and give what can be taken? And what more did he really want but to love?

While in Pursuit Of The Beast

Umberto slept. When he floated into a form of consciousness all things were still possible. His father was home from the hospital and they had an animated conversation though this did not last long. Soon after, he saw Virginia and they spoke as Umberto luxuriated in the morning sunshine that filled the library windows. Everywhere were exciting books full of the information Umberto desired. Virginia was radiant in the morning sun and apologized for being so brusque the other night. She wanted to see him again, and Umberto so full of good cheer certainly agreed but set no date or place.

He was welcomed back at work with a short, noon-time celebration of soda and pizza. He didn't mind the work because the light of the day was so long and the hours of employment fled quickly. Wendy and Angela had been hired as receptionists. Angela's face had cleared and she, too, looked lovely. They thanked him for the references he had supplied, and graciously he acknowledged their thankfulness though he could not remember any assistance; *was this a problem?*

Frank was wheeled in briefly, he had his legs broken, or worse, in prison, and wanted to talk to Umberto about the manuscript. It had become Frank's last hope. Umberto's mood darkened, he had nothing to discuss. There was no manuscript, *was there?* Frank looked disappointed unto the death of him.

...

There was a funeral to go to. Umberto made a speech before a gathering of faces coming to share his mourning. He alluded to the deceased as having been strong and brave in his day. But it was over; the struggle, the joys, the evil and the mundane. It was the final milestone. One day in the future, Umberto would have to sit alone and come to terms with such vast sorrow. Not now. With Umberto everything must begin as a seed and remain buried for time to bring to the surface. Wasn't this the cause of his recent masquerade?

...

Lori's father insisted on discussing the case with Umberto, there was much to do. Umberto left it entirely in the man's hands as he was in a hurry to return home.

...

The train glided along splendid pastures of many greens and yellows, along glens of spring forests past so many wonderful sites. The air was fresh and the pace joyous. Then the car ride toward the lake and the cottage he owned with his wife. He did not believe so

much joy was possible; to embrace loved ones in the beauty of the day. His little children wanted to play in the meadow near the flowers and his wife, Lori, took his hand to walk after them toward where the sun would later set. And these were the most recent *dreams* of Umberto.

Revised 4/8/99, 5/4/99, 02/18/00

© 2000 - 2011 Channel49