

I, WOODROW

The Confidential Diary

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Come the millennium, month twelve,
In the home of greatest power, the village idiot
Will come forth to be acclaimed the leader.

NOSTRADAMUS

‘It’s been a fascination, as I’m sure you can imagine.
I’m not a very good novelist. But it’d make a pretty
interesting novel.’

GEORGE W. BUSH

My wife has already got herself a book deal. But when W. said to the literary agent, ‘Hello? How about me?’, the agent replied, ‘Mr President, I think you might want to wait a couple years on that.’

‘Shoot,’ said the author *manqué* [heh], ‘that makes no sense. In a few years no one’ll know who I am. This is a big opportunity. For eight years, and more on the campaign trail, nobody has known what I’m thinking. And now they’ve a chance to find out what I think, and did think then, before I started thinking for a salary.

The agent gave W. a funny look here, but he pressed the point. ‘I mean, there’s Hinton making millions in speeches, and both he and his wife got multi-millions for their books, and now she’s got a new job she didn’t even apply for. There’s a buck to be made here, for both you and me.’ (Full well I know that speaking engagements after a President’s term or terms in office, normally a guaranteed generator of humongous income, in my case cannot be taken for granted.)

‘You keep it, darlin’,’ she said, without a hint of generosity in her voice; ‘you may need it. Have a nice day.’

As the most recent Governor of Illinois said, ‘One day a peacock, the next a feather duster.’

W.

WHY should I not publish my diary? I have often seen reminiscences of people I have never even heard of, and I fail to see—because I do not happen to be a “Somebody”—why my diary should not be interesting.”

CHARLES POOTER.

George & Weedon Grossmith
THE DIARY OF A NOBODY (1892)

Fact: *In 1999, Governor Jeb Bush of Florida(George W. Bush's younger brother and at the time presumptive heir to their father's Presidential fortunes)'s wife, Columba, was mortified to be detained at Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport by US Customs agents for failing to declare \$19,000 worth of jewelry and clothes, which she was bringing home from Paris in her luggage. A fine was paid of \$4,100. 'I can assure you it was a difficult weekend at our house,' the Governor said.*

Praeludium ('Before the game')

Here begins the diary of one Woodrow Scrubb, a man perched precariously on the water-wagon. In return for giving up the drink, I have become the nominee of my Party for the Presidency of the United States. Since this is not something I wanted for myself, the situation in which I find myself is not conducive to sobriety. I am the Presidential Fearful, a bit player in the drama starring W.'s psychotic harpy of a mother, Hermione, ruler of the Scrubb family roost that comprises my father, Woodrow senior; myself; and my younger brother Cosmo. Cosmo being the serial philanderer and type-A moron, and Woodrow the retiring pseudo-literary poseur.

I was not supposed to be in this position. I never wanted to be thrust into the limelight. The Woodrovian *lumen siccum* ['the objective light of rational knowledge or thought'; *Oxford English Dictionary*] was flickering but alive under its bushel or shrub; it is a place I know and love. I minded my own business, and people left me alone. But as the Bard wrote in *Twelfth Night*, 'Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.' I am one of those thrustees.

The plot so far: my mother Hermione expected my younger brother, Cosmo, who is a twit of the first water, to be in the position wherein I currently languish alone and palely loitering, like the ailing knight-at-arms in Keats' ballad *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Hermione had put Cosmo's name down for the job at birth. So far as the matriarch of our family is concerned, and very concerned she is, he da man, and the history had already been written in her book that he was destined to be the second member of the family to be President, after Dad—who as Scrubb 41 was reckoned a bad dress rehearsal for a Cosmoan eight-year run. As for Woodrow, she cannot stand the sight of me. When I was a child she used to offer me money to run away from home. Dad she has reviled for as long as I can remember; why she married him I cannot imagine, and of course I would never ask either of them. To my mother, Dad is the one described in the Old Testament *Book of the Prophet Isaiah*: 'He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.'

"Right on, Isaac," said Hermione in church one day when I was ten—we used to go to church in those days, so that her prayers might be answered; "you bet your bibby. The man's a loser and the son sucks too, as he did on his wet nurse's nipple."

“It was Isaiah, Mother,” I said; “not Isaac.”

“I don’t care what his damn name was,” she replied; “he was a prophet.”

As to Dad and I, Mother is right: we are as alike as two peas in a pod.

Although some flash upstart from the Democratic Party managed to inveigle his way in for a two-term interregnum following Dad as President, an individual of suspect probity who became notorious for being surrounded by 24/7 floozies and unimpeachable flimflam, Hermione’s plan stood. The intervening period, in her mind, she wrote off as a bad case of *imperator interruptus*. Meanwhile my brother Cosmo remained her sweet snookums golden boy, the apple of her eye, the alpha student of her ways...and her Washington-Jefferson-Lincoln-in-waiting.

But alas! for Hermione—no sooner had Cosmo’s name been prematurely engraved on the golf trophy, as the Republican Party’s nominee at its National Convention, than he double-bogeyed the eighteenth hole. The unthinkable came to pass, the heavens fell, the earth gaped and swallowed him, and in default of my brother here am I, as we await the decision of the Great Unwashed, *hoi polloi*, whose votes will be translated into the fuzzy math of the Electoral College in order to determine who will become the next President of the United States of America.

Having cast their fates into the ocean of democracy and trawled it, will citizens net leviathan or a sardine?

The best laid plan

My brother is the Governor of his State, Gulfida, as I am of mine, Texicana. Both titles are sinecures rather than jobs (Latin *sine cura*: without care), courtesy of Dad's influence in the Party. [It does not amount to much. Both States have ambitious Lieutenant-Governors who like doing things the Frank Sinatran way.]

All was well with the Mother's Presidential aspirations for Cosmo until his wife, name of Cassandra, walked out of Tiffany & Co. in New York with several million dollars' worth of unset diamonds, which she had omitted to pay for. Scooped the ice from a tray under their noses and walked out the door as cool as you please.

Then she jaywalked across Fifth Avenue—the one-way southbound traffic screeching to a halt—and strolled into Bergdorf's. There she was browsing through lingerie when, unaccountably, she decided to go back to Tiffany's for a watch. By this time the staff had noticed that a number of their most valuable rocks had gone walkabout, AWOL, and reviewed the security tapes. Upon her re-arrival New York's Finest were onsite to meet and greet her, and she was arrested, Miranda-ized, handcuffed and escorted to the back of a squad car.

With such a wife as prospective First Lady, this would have made tough sledding for any Presidential candidate. In Cosmo's own State, Cassandra's popularity soared above that of her husband, which was in the low 20s. Having pulled a stunt like this in New York of all places was regarded as a large feather in the home cap. But in the final analysis, the pollsters and focus groups deemed that Cosmo's aspiration to lead the nation had been rendered impractical. In this they were at odds with Hermione, who wanted to make an example of Cassandra by having Governor Cosmo sign an executive order to have her burned at the stake.

The Tiffany job was not Cass's first venture into the interior of jewel-infested buildings, for the purpose of purloining the most valuable items. Oh no: her rap sheet lists only a small fraction of her appropriations. Abstracting Tiffany's diamonds was merely the most notorious of Cassandra's burglarious coups. She does not do it for personal gain. True, it is her practice to either fence the stones or sell them herself, or barter them for other goods or services that are more practical than hot goods. But having plenty of legitimate wealth on which to live in the style to which she is accustomed to being accustomed, she redistributes her ill-gotten gains and those she receives in kind, laundered of guilt, to the poor and deserving. In consequence

she is regarded as a female Robin Hood by more than one Sheriff of Nottingham who longs to interrogate her in private.

The real reason why she does what she does one can only speculate. Perhaps it is for the kicks she gets from the danger involved, physically and mentally via the release of adrenaline and the thrill of evading capture; or because of her innate charitable instincts; or because she hates those who equate riches with the right to social and professional preferment. Even I, who have reason to know her better than any am mystified; and because there are certain things she does not care to tell me, I do not ask. Nonetheless the question continues to intrigue me, as one who on occasion is permitted to view the floe beneath the waterline and enjoy certain privileges.

That Cassandra and I are lovers is known within the family circle—it is more pear-shaped than round—and tolerated, even by Cosmo. And that Cosmo is an incorrigible adulterer has always been well known to his spouse, from before they were married, but this has never been of concern to her. She is not the sort, one night while asleep, like Titania to fall victim to ‘a little western flower, |Before milk-white, now purple with love’s wound.’ Cassandra swears that she cannot remember agreeing to marry Cosmo, or why she would ever have considered doing so, given the prize jerk that he is. She even maintains that she was not present for the nuptials, for which she hired a surrogate. Thereafter, the formalities and informalities of the alliance have not been of interest to either partner; except in that Cassandra’s disdain of her husband pisses him off by offending his *amour propre*.

Of more particular interest to me is the knowledge that my mother is, privately, in awe of Cassandra’s skills and admiring of her imperious disregard for public opinion. Hermione is careful to conceal this under her mask of hatred, and refrain from any direct aggressive conduct towards her. With good reason, for Cassandra can defend herself in ways that a Navy Seal or Green Beret would gasp to witness; as I did once when we were set upon in a parking lot by a gang of thieves with knives. She made them perform surgery on themselves in ways that would make a mortician feel squeamish, and Mother’s ever-present Sicilian sidekick Ignacio Pesci writhe with envy.

Anyway, when it came to exerting her influence in determining who should be the next President of the United States of America, the Mother had no choice but to turn her lonely eyes to me. Throughout the campaign she called the shots, and all I had to do was show up or phone it in and do as I was told without asking any questions. Not having any idea what was going on, I had none to ask.

And now the nation has voted; or at least the half or so of registered voters have who decided it was incumbent on them to express, not a preference, but a vote against one of the pair on offer. The tally appears to be evenly divided between the Republican and Democratic Parties, and the woman is incensed. The vital few who voted for some other hopeless cause she wants rounded up and shot. Meantime the Election hangs in the balance and will be decided by recounts and legal rulings in, most ironically, Gulfida, the State of which my brother Cosmo is Governor. The rules are that the winner takes all the Electoral College votes; and then sits around for ten or so weeks playing Patience and wondering what to pack for the White House.

Naturally my opponent Senator Snorr, the Democratic Party nominee and his team have delighted and taken great comfort in our family's predicament; and for a while the susurrus of Snorrian sighs of exasperation, which he manifested so strongly at our so-called debates, has ceased. Snorr is one of those overgrown spoiled children who is accustomed to getting everything he wants, and sulking and complaining when he does not, until for the sake of a little peace it is easier to let him have it. In this case, the Presidency; which, not knowing Hermione, he is delusional enough to think he is entitled to.

Cosmo as kingmaker is not a role he would otherwise have relished, given his druthers, and his perfect teeth were in danger of being ground to stumps as he stumped around the country on my behalf. This served to greatly wither the druther of the Mother, who spent a fortune on his dentist when Cosmo was growing up, while I remained neglected and snaggle-toothed.

To summarize where we stand at the moment: Hermione is very unhappy, and Cosmo is unhappy because she is not happy; this has made for great unhappiness for me, and, unhappily in consequence, the happiness of my father has also been affected. This unavoidable sharing of ground in the interest of political expediency prompts Hermione to make frequent recourse to the sal volatile bottle, and other strong spirits; and for me conjures the grail-like image of a fifth of Jack Daniels as she rampages through my life, firing nails from her twin optical blunderbusses into the hides of her family and assorted flunkies. She would have preferred anyone but me as Cosmo's proxy: her hairdresser, masseur, or chiropodist, perhaps; her gardener, or the veterinarian responsible for keeping her pooch, Grendel, in tip-top condition (and incidentally allowing the veterinarian to stay healthy). Anyone, so long as the individual standing before the Chief Justice on Inauguration Day and swearing to preserve, protect and defend the

interests of Hermione Scrubb, might not be her elder son Woodrow.

But if the Scrubb dynasty is to stand a chance of being preserved, she had no choice but to endorse me. Unfortunately I did not have the guts to stand up to her and insist that, really, thanks awfully but this is not my bag, so, as much as I appreciate the offer I must decline the honor.

As much as I admire General William Tecumseh Sherman, who, when he was being considered as a potential Republican candidate for President, said, 'I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected.', I am in no doubt that if Uncle Billy had Mrs Hermione Scrubb for a mother he would have kept his trap shut.

Nulla dies sine linea

This journal, diary, or log (whatever it may be, or amount to—I do not yet know) is an effort to make sense of my life from this moment on, by setting it down installment by installment, however inconsequential the details. It is not intended as an *Apologia Pro Vita Mea*, like that of Cardinal Newman—for a defense of my life is impossible before there is anything to accuse myself of—but an exploration, a journey through rather than a voyage around myself as I stagger under a load of undealt-with issues, which herein are set forth unplugged, unpremeditated and uncensored.

A jeremiad, a rant, a railing against fate, it must not become. An attempt at self-administered therapy, perhaps, is what I should be striving for if I am to reap any benefit from the seeds of effort sown.

What I do know is that, if this is a diary, it is a confidential one. Nothing that I may set down is intended for publication; and not just for reason that much of what I have to say might be considered by the *Burrito Times*, which our premier national newspaper has been renamed under its new majority ownership, as unfit to preent.

It occurs to me that it is being frightened of my own handwriting that has always held me back from setting down anything personal. Hence the exhumation of this typewriter, a 1950 Olivetti Lettera 22, from the basement at the ranch. I am embarrassed to admit to anything, even or perhaps especially to myself (is that why Catholics enter the confessional and talk to a grille?), and the impersonality of typing affords one a sense of objectivity, as if one were writing about someone else. And now that after a certain amount of dodging and weaving I have begun, I must sit down regularly at my desk and tap away. Continuity is essential, if I am to discover certain things about myself along the way, and, when later I review what I have written, attempt to draw some conclusions about myself.

Otherwise, there will be no rules.

Already it strikes me that what I am writing or compiling here is less journal, etc., than letter. ‘A true letter’, said Virginia Woolf, ‘should be as a film of wax pressed close to the graving in the mind.’ I am writing letters to myself, without any expectation of receiving a reply from the void. Or, perhaps, even wanting one.

I called my father, and asked him if he had ever kept a diary. I wanted to see if the habit ran in the family, but in cowardly fashion without admitting that I was about to engage in similar solipsism for the first time.

“Always kept a diary,” he said. “Still seems odd to me, rather like talking to oneself. You know, first sign of madness. What was it that Lewis Carroll’s Father William said, in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, to his son who inquired why he incessantly stood on his head?”

I enlightened him:

“‘In my youth,’ Father William replied to his son,
‘I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I’m perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again.’”

Like father, like son.

The son also rises

The curtain goes up on a man of character, me, bearing a light breakfast from the buffet in the dining-room at the Texicana ranch where I live.

Longing as I continue to do for my former anonymity, owing to the constitutional crisis in the counting of votes in Cosmo's State of Gulfida, the campaign staff are here in full force. Every room is full—I had to evict half a dozen volunteers who were spreading their sleeping bags in my bedroom while I was walking the dog—and outside is an encampment of trailers.

Also, my folks are down for the week: my mother insists upon babysitting me, which makes me afraid, very afraid.

Far from being a simple mechanical exercise, the ballot count has proved susceptible to the virus of numerical misinterpretation. The polling station officials are easily swayed by my Mother's henchmen, who do not mince their words as they lean over their shoulders threatening to mince those who have qualms about fraudulent counts. The fickle voters' choice may with justice, they insist, be altered in the reckoning, in order to compensate for their having been misled by Democratic advertisements or erroneous statistics quoted by the candidate in the debates. Many voters are not of sound mind at the time of entering the polling booth, or they are drunk or stoned. Some are illegal aliens, or ballot-spoilers. Others are dead, or do not exist. Sometimes, because of the psychological imbalance of the person who cast it, a vote needs to be interpreted as a vote for the other candidate. And as always, when computers break down or prove unreliable there is the fallback excuse of human error, of which like influenza there is a lot going round recently.

As for mail-in votes, those have been taken care of. The US Postal Service has agreed not to deliver those that, when scanned by the sorting machines, are shown to have been sent by Democrats. They were sent to the dead-letter department and destroyed.

Most importantly, there is the now infamous 'hanging chad' problem, which my Mother is especially proud of having engineered with the firm that prints the ballot cards, using the wrong quality paper. The wise men and women of *Wikipedia* define chad or chads as paper fragments that are created when holes are made in a paper or card. In Cosmo's State, the problem is incompletely punched holes. These are referred to as hanging chad, dimpled chad, or pregnant chad, and result in the votes not being counted by the tabulating machines. As to how

‘Chad’ got pregnant, I dare not speculate; but I picture the authorities hanging ?him while the nation, transfixed, watches the reprobate dancing at a rope’s end on television.

Breakfast. Lox and bagel for me; cereal for Dad; liver, onion, bratwurst and haggis for Hermione. My mother is not a woman to nibble a croissant or sip herbal tea. “Armageddon hungry,” she yells from the top of the stairs, when she wants someone to take her order. They brought in enough steaming entrails to make Coriolanus blanch. Brain food, she calls it. She eats standing up, lapping the table like a prowling tigress and pronging those whom she addresses with her fork. Hermione is Boadicea on steroids, combined with Margaret Thatcher, the Amazon Queen Hippolyte, and a bottle of Tabasco. She is as dangerous as a bodkin in a condom factory. Monsignor Ronald Knox, quoted in the biography by his niece, Penelope Fitzgerald, said, ‘The three appetites of our nature are our love of pleasure, our taste for power, and our craving for human affection.’ If Ronnie had met my mother, a woman who eats razor-blades for lunch with gall and wormwood mayonnaise, he might have had cause to re-examine his hypothesis.

My goody-two-shoes brother, Cosmo, was due to come on the hotline speaker at any moment, phoning in from wherever he is drumming up the all-essential Electoral College votes. Which means bribing people, or blackmailing them with information or photographs obtained by Hermione’s gumshoes. Cosmo reports in every morning at this time through gritted molars on the scrambled line over the ditto eggs. He would much rather be doing his own dirty work than mine.

Dad and I, neither of whom are morning people, were huddled over our bowl and plate, staying out of the way as successfully as the Colossus of Rhodes. There was a surrounding enfoistment of *apparatchiks* in expensive suits, including Dad’s former Secretary of State, Fred Butcher, whom he wants around like a fart in a face mask. The look they gave each other over the orange juice was enough to gag a hyena, but Fred is here at the Mother’s command. All of these people are here at her behest, and they ignore me, for which I am grateful. The only one looking relaxed is Grendel, Hermione’s miniature poodle, who travels everywhere with her.

Grendel, of course, is named after the monster in *Beowulf*, the one with an equally fearsome mother. The poodle compound at home is a pamper-zone, a Pharaonic pleasure palace. It has a heated swimming pool, and an exercise room for when the weather is bad. The kennel has air-conditioning and heat, a snack bar, intercom, surround-sound music

and an adjustable bed. That is one privileged puppy. When the mutt dies, should he make it to doggy heaven he is going to be sorely disappointed by the downgrade. In the canine residence, pictures of his girlfriends hang on the walls, and if he paws them he can watch footage of their most recent encounters, as filmed by the walkers. There is a scratch-and-sniff panel of favorite aromas, odors and scents that comprise what his therapist calls his whiffle vocabulary. Nobody dares offend Grendel or be nasty to him. A former attendant whom Hermione spotted kicking him is now responsible for cleaning the single toilet in a Turkish prison.

Dad, whom my mother calls Norman for some reason when she is annoyed with him, which is all the time, is being his usual great self and as supportive as possible. He has a touching faith in family values, even as they disintegrate more than ever.

"We gotta stick together and help each other," he announced over his granola. "Function as a unit, as tightly wrapped as a Cohiba cigar. Chin up, Junior. The gore of the Scrubbs is thicker than the purified water in Snorr's veins. Win or lose this thing, we must hang together."

I refrained from observing that if 'we' did not win he and I should likely be hung together from a tree.

Then Dad, who is normally the most sensitive of men to other people's moods, especially mine, spoiled the sentiment by mumbling a little ditty that he had composed in his head while shaving. He is as rattled as any of us by what is going on, so I cannot blame him for the attempt at gallows humor.

"An urchin with dimples, called Chad,
Was sternly advised by his Dad,
'Your life's on a thread:
If you flunk this, you're dead!
Which—read my lips—clearly is bad.
Know that if you should flub,
You'll be vulture grub
For vengeance is hers, Dub my cub!'"

Even my mother cracked a smile at this one, as she slathered English mustard on her Scottish haggis without regard for mutual national offence.

The great Senator Snorr, my adversary in this undesired contest, is also a preacher of morality. Snorr is Mr Perfect, Mr All-Round Hallelujah for the planet. And very round he is, all around. So far as I

am aware, like Macbeth's adversary Macduff he does not have a mother. Unlike Macbeth, Snorr's ambition is not vaulting; he prefers to tunnel like a mole or crawl through the undergrowth whacking imaginary objects with the blunt instrument of his personality. He would make a fine politician if it were not for his prating. His primary offensive weapon is the sound and fury of his voice signifying nothing.

So here I am, caught between a she-devil and a man who bores for America.

Oh! Brother

My younger sibling Cosmo came on the telephone's squawk box in the room. I detected a wobble in his voice, and it was a tone or two higher than usual. Normally he sounds like Charlton Heston playing God. Or God playing Charlton Heston. Heston, who served several consecutive year terms as president of the National Rifle Association, is one of Hermione's few heros, so Cosmo does his best to imitate him.

I heard an un-Cassandra-like giggle in the background, which was suppressed, and a bubble and splash of water. Seems there was a houri with him in the hot tub, and the man was hard at work polling his libido.

"Good morning, Mamma. Father. Wood-row." He always says it *comme ça*: Wood-row. "How are you all this fine morning? Or is it afternoon already? One rises so early, and has so much work to get through that the meridian often passes unnoticed."

My mother, of course, was delighted to hear her...I was going to write favorite, but I do not rate a comparison...beloved son. It seemed that she was unconscious of underwater sucking noises in the background. "Cosmoski! Canoodlums! How is my diddums lovey-dove today?" I fought the urge to retch. "Oh Cosmo, darling, you should already be in the White House, and I should be First Mutha. Vetting—veterinary vetting—any in Congress who dare to question our agenda. Neuter and spay, callooh callay! Writing pet books in my spare time. Honest old dog poop on the Oval Office carpet again. A hound under the President's desk instead of an intern."

"Thank you, Ma, I'm..."

"Cosmo, we'll make Woodrow eat all the Ws from the computer keyboards. 'Wah!' he will wail. 'Woe are we! *Wae wictis*! Woe to the vanquished! May williwaws whisk me to Warsaw!'"

When the crooning ceased there was a marked change of tone. "Where's that bitch wife of yours? The woman who has done her best to nuke my pukka son's Presidential prospects. Is she in jail yet? Safer for her if she were, you dig? before I get my hands on her." Hermione pulled herself together. "So where is the light-fingered larcenist, darling? Off on a smuggling spree? Attending a meeting of Kleptos Anonymous? Anonymous, ha! that's a good one." She laughed mirthlessly. "There isn't a playground in the country where the kids aren't practicing sleight of hand, thanks to her."

Then the reason for my frater's discomfort became evident. Over the wire I heard a trickle of flatulence percolating through the tub, and

he coughed to disguise it. “There’s been a little problem, Ma. They’ve held her overnight in choky. A shoplifting infraction, nothing serious this time. A whole Genoa salami off a hook in a delicatessen, and a foot and a half of French bread from a basket. She left the premises without paying, and was arrested by an off-duty cop who had taken a ticket at the counter to get a sandwich made for his lunch.”

Came there a gasp of blue-rinsed incredulity. “I thought she only went for Old Masters and jewelry! The headline-grabbing Pink Panther stuff. Not perishable goods.”

“She told the cop she was famished, and there was an octogenarian manning the till who was fumbling around trying to count a customer’s food stamps. You know how impatient she is. But dinna fash yersel’,”—Cosmo’s favorite movie was *Braveheart*—“I’ll have it taken care of before you can say lickety-spit.”

“I don’t believe I ever say lickety-spit, sweetie. But I’ll make a point of it from now on. Judas H. Look, dear, you must ditch the broad before she does any more damage.” My heart sank and then rose at the implications of this. “Hoots, mon, or else she’ll drag us down.” [The Pictish mood was infectious, notwithstanding the discourtesy that she had just shown the Scots by marrying haggis and English mustard; she and Cosmo had watched the film together many times, and admired the no-nonsense manner in which justice was dispensed in those times, through hanging, drawing and quartering—though Hermione shed tears at the thought of William Wallace’s visibly brave heart.] “The woman’s a walking string of consecutive sentences. The jail kind, not the linguistic variety shunned by your idiot brother.” She glared at me. “OK darling, don’t trouble your pretty head over that, I’ll have the lawyers on it right away.” She jerked her head, and a half dozen suits left the room. “More importantly, how are the votes coming? I’m depending on you, bunchkin—we all are. Tell me we’re sure to win.”

“Er, yes Mother, it’s a dead cert. ABC thinks so and so does CNN. Also, there’s a fascinating little psychic prostit...ouch! prognosticator...excuse me, bit of a tram...cramp. Sort of an Ides of March soothsayer type who, er, demanded to see me yesterday. Her credentials were impeccable—I viewed them from every angle. She’s done all the most important people and is so talented she blew me away. Kind of a Deep Throat insider. Anyway, she assured me that we were on top. But that’s only the half of it. We intercepted the absentee ballots last night, and prestidigitated them favorably, shall we say. Here a spoiling, there a shredding. Now all I have to do is keep knobbing... nobbling judges and oiling the politicians, and Bob’s your uncle and

Fanny's your aunt. My fingers are into everything. It's a done deal. So get out the horseshoes and dog-biscuits, Ma. Let the limos roll and break out the champagne. Start spreading the news."

"'S Wonderful! 'S Marvelous! I knew you wouldn't let me down, Cosmo. You never do. Talk to you later, honey!"

Now that she was what in her passed for a good mood, my mother tucked into her breakfast with renewed appetite. As she champed, with open mouth she regaled us with an anecdote about her recent hunting trip in New Hampshire, where her guide from the Fish and Game Department had taught her how to field-dress the sixteen hundred pound bull moose that she sent the overly emphatic message of a 270-grain spitzer bullet delivered express mail by her 4,300 foot-pound muzzle energy .375 Holland and Holland Magnum rifle. (For Alaskan grizzly, she favored a 300-grain bullet from a .376 calibre Steyr. Had she followed her childhood inclination to become a hit-woman—there was still time—she would favor the super-powerful .50 caliber M82 anti-materiel rifle.)

"When you're sure it's dead [did she mean the moose?], cut the throat and let the blood flow away from the body from the jugular veins. Make an incision with your knife at the base of the breastbone. Continue the line down the length of the belly to the anus, kinking the cut around the genitals. Break the breastbone with a couple of axes, using one to cut and one to hammer.

"Sever the windpipe and gullet. Expose the contents of the chest cavity. Tie string tightly around the esophagus to prevent the stomach contents from pilling out. Pull the internal organs out of the abdominal cavity. Cut around the penis and testicles and round the vent. Circle the anus with your knife, cuttin' deep to free the lower bowel. Tie this off to prevent droppings from coming into content with the meat. Split the pelvic bone with your ax or saw, but don't slice the urinary tract or you'll get piss all over the meat and taint it. Free the bladder and rectum. The internal organs can now be removed, so just r-roll out the viscera with the anus attached.

"Cool the blighter off, quarter it with a chain saw and haul away your eight hundred pound dressed beastie. Pass the blood pudding."

Heads up

An ominous matter was revealed after the telephone call with Cosmo ended, and he had returned to performing his ablutions. Hermione ordered the staff from the room, and over the intercom summoned her hatchet-faced hatchet man, Pesci, to attend her. Pesci is a swarthy, monosyllabic cove. He sidled in looking shiftier than a sidewinder, and my mother ordered him to check the windows, draw the drapes, then go outside and guard the door.

When all was determined to be secure, and Hermione addressed Dad and me, her voice was unusually low and quiet. “Now listen up, dummies. I can’t believe what I’m about to tell you. I haven’t even mentioned it to Cosmo yet. Here goes. When we’ve won this thing, which I’m hoping to do sometime this young century, I’ve decided to have Cosmo’s precious features altered so that he can take over the job. I’m talking plastic surgery. Ugly prospect though it is, Waldo, his beautiful face will be recast in your image. A puppet must stand in for the poppet. A search is under way to find the best plastic surgeon in the world, a veritable Michelangelo in his field.

“Once the work—oh God, such work!—has been performed, here’s the plan. Presuming that you make it as far as slaughtering the Oath of Office, Waldo, my true son Cosmo will take over from the existentially challenged brother as President. I’m having nightmares about going through with this, and as you know it’s unlike me to have second thoughts about anything—she said in a rare, dare she say, yes she does, unique moment of weakness—but there’s no alternative. Unless someone screws up and we lose the Election, in which case any old sawbones will do to carve those responsible. In the meantime, regarding what I’ve just told you, Mum’s the word. You know what I mean.” Her glance made Medusa look like the Revlon girl. “Careful, boys. Watch your mouths. Keep them zipped, if you know what’s bad for you. Tell Cosmo, tell anyone, and you’re sausage meat.” Mother spiked bratwurst with her fork and chomped on it, so hard that when she withdrew the utensil from her mouth the tines were missing. She swallowed without noticing anything amiss.

“Indubentably, Herm,” said Dad, who had gone pale.

Aghast, I chimed, “Certitudinously, Mother.” I recalled the novel by Alexandre Dumas *père*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, in which the cruel and arrogant King Louis XIV of France has an identical twin brother, Phillippe, a good and noble man, whom the King keeps secretly imprisoned in the Bastille with his face locked in an iron mask

to hide his resemblance to the monarch.

‘Indubentably’? ‘Certitudinously’? As the world is already tragically aware, and I am a chip off the old block in this respect, my brain loses control over my powers of speech whenever I, who am no Beowulf in the courage stakes, feel the fell gaze of Grendel’s Mother, alias Hermione, boring into my skull—whether it be live in person, or from an audience; whether I am on camera and I know that she is watching or will be when the footage is replayed; or I am talking into a microphone and she is listening. The spouting of Scrubbish in moments of stress is a trait I inherited from my father.

“Waldo! I’m considering letting the surgeon go to town on you, too. To turn you into a frog, or something slightly more repellent than you already are in the reptilian line, and letting you fend for yourself in the marshes or desert. Now avaunt and quit my sight, the pair of you. Husband, son...I am a woman more sinned against than sinning.”

I am reminded of Mrs Gradgrind’s response in Dickens’ *Hard Times*, when poor Louisa asks, ‘Are you in pain, dear Mother?’ ‘I think there’s a pain somewhere in the room,’ said Mrs Gradgrind. For pain, substitute agony; a lifetime of agony. Over the years I have come to accept that, as in Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, the flower that is Woodrow was born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air. But now, for the first time in the farce of this Election, I fear for my life. If what Dad and I have just been told comes to pass—for my mother, whatever else I think or write about her, is a woman of her word—I will become expendable, and she shall have Pesci hang me on a barn door for knife-throwing practice. While Dad will be sent, not to the luxurious doghouse *chez* Scrubb senior, but to Siberia with the complicity of Hermione’s friend President Rasputin, with whom she used to share her dissatisfaction with her husband while she drank not only her vodka but the vodka that the President would have been drinking had he not been a teetotaler (possibly the first in his line).

Frank Sinatra said that he felt sorry for people who don’t drink, because when they wake up in the morning, that’s as good as they’re going to feel all day; though the same might be said of the drinkers. Now that it seems my whole existence is blighted, how I long for a six-pack of Colt 45 Double Malt beer.

Chug chug. Chugalug.

Cassandra

In Vietnamese, *duyên*, or ‘fated love’, equates to the Western ideal of true love. But it goes further than love. *Duyên* is a bond so strong that lovers may go through a series of incarnations before they are joined. So it is written in the stars.

‘Every Lover’, says Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, ‘admires his mistris, though she bee very deformed of her selfe, ill favored, wrinkled, pimpled, pale, red, yellow, tan’d, tallow-faced...crooked, dry, bald, gogle-eyed, bleare-eyed, or with staring eyes...a nose lik a promontory, gubber-tushed, rotten teeth, black, uneven, browne teeth, beetle browed, a Witches beard...’ A tad too much information, which prompts me to observe that old Burton may have been writing from personal experience.

Maybe that is why the man who would be I, Woodrow, has not seen Cassandra—my soul mate, the love of my life—recently: perhaps her tush has gubbered, and she is sensitive about it. Woodrow doubts it, but even if it were true it would not matter to him one jot or tittle. Maybe a tittle.

When W. confesses that he has much more than a ‘thing’, or *folie d’amour*, for Cass, he does not mean that his wife Phoebe and he do not get along. They are pals. But Phoebe is a distracted woman: the lights are on in her head, but nobody is home. The elevator does not stop at every floor. The cause of this, W. is certain, is her hair. The chemical from Phoebe’s shellacked hairdo, her *cheveux bouffant*, has leached into her brain. The pores of her scalp are sealed with polymers. Fats Waller sang a song about a lady with big feet; in the Feeb’s case W. could wax eloquent about her hair. Her coiffure, rather than the ‘pedal extremities’ that Fats drew attention to, is colossal. It looks like a giant lacquered popover. It never needs washing, being impervious to dust, dirt, microbes, romping dogs and children. Phoebe could be photographed in a Category Five hurricane, and the readers of the *DC Laundromat* would think she was on her way to a celebrity auction, or a tea party. In addition to being a cosmetic and aesthetic disaster, it is a physical hazard. On our wedding night W. bloodied his nose on it.

Woodrow used to think that having a fairy godmother was an appealing notion. But fairy godmothers have their own lives to lead, and it is unreasonable to expect them always to be at one’s beck and call. So W. called Cassandra, dialing her up in his thoughts—she has no telephone, neither landline nor cell-, and left a message to the effect that he loves her dearly and thinks of her, his Dantean Beatrice, all the

time. That he looks forward eagerly to seeing her again as soon as possible, and again and again until the end of time and a day. Meantime every night from imaginary moonbeams, that celestial crop, in his mind he weaves a bag and fills it, not with memories, but with the part of his being that is and will continue to be after he has passed—Cassandra. And then he hurls the bag back into the sky, to be cradled for eternity by the music of the spheres and the light of George Meredith's armies of unalterable law, the stars.

*

De profundis

Can a thought meet a thought, purely in air?
Unwritten, unspoken; just understood
Between people who always used to care
About many things, sharing when they could?

In downtime of the world, when we are blind,
When systems and formalities are dead:
Our waves don't flow in channels we designed,
Are borne in other currents of the head.

What stimulates a song to prompt the voice?
What quickens the pulse and fractures the dark
With light?

How can we ever make a choice,
When, as often is the case, there's no spark
Of inspiration, no shivering dawn
Alighting barefoot on a jeweled lawn?

Supercalifragilistic

Meaning what? I wonder. Badly hung-over Californians?

I am painfully aware that the public's image of me is that of a stumblebum who puts the English language's tit in a wringer every time I open my mouth. But to what end articulacy? Only a small percentage of words are absorbed by one's audience. Body language is much more expressive. One has only to listen to the drivel that windy politicians and talking heads spout when they crank open their buccal cavities, which they do at the drop of a hat. Berets, Borsalinos, bowlers, fedoras, Panamas, Stetsons, stove-pipes, ten-gallons and trilbies fly about like Frisbees.

They say a woman speaks seven thousand words a day, a man three thousand. I prefer not to beat my gums together with the rest of humanity, and concentrate on doing my bit to redress the average. My yoke is not easy, and I wish John Q. Public understood that. Even gifted speakers and rhetoricians, aficionados of Dr Johnson, and Webster, are capable of using less than felicitous expressions. Here, for example, is David Lloyd George, who was British Prime Minister for the second half of the First World War: 'We have grasped our niblick and struck out for the open course.' Novelist Katherine Mansfield's gloss on this is amusing: 'Years hence...when in the fullness of time, full of ripeness and wisdom, the Almighty sees fit to gather (Lloyd George) into his bosom, some gentle stone-cutter (will) take a piece of fair white marble and engrave on it two niblicks crossed, and underneath: "In the hour of England's greatest peril he grasped his Niblick and struck out for the Open course."' "

In the age of sound-bites, are not my gaffes and the nonsense and gibberish that I utter preferable to the Jamesian sentences of Snorr? I have heard Snorr begin one of his open-ended sentences on the subject of greenhouse gases, and global warming, and find that after a dozen or so semi-colons he has segued via education and health and foreign policy into the economy. When on tour, instead of flying from Washington to New York, Snorr sets sail for the Panama Canal and makes his final approach by train from Seattle. Children in Cambodian villages imitate his mannerisms, so familiar are they with him dropping by their classrooms on his way thousands of miles distant in the opposite direction.

At least my speeches are short. I am not standing as a grammarian. Humanity comprises those who think, those who speak, and those who do. I think, and do not do, but I know them as do do. My opponent

speaks and does too, producing an unappetizing blend of voodoo doodoo that is much worse than Dad's voodoo economics. Snorr tries to rub his tummy and pat his head at the same time; which, as Gerald Ford might have told him, is more difficult than it looks.

Pinning the tale on the donkey

On the same subject [to continue the matter of yesterday]: Last night I dreamed that I was back in one of those televised debates with Senator Snorr. Not the first or second one, which took place in a Town Hall format with members of the public standing up and asking the questions; but the third and last, before a moderator.

As I came on stage, Snorr emerged from the wings snorting like an enraged bull, and refused to shake hands even though I offered him my carry bottle of Purell. Instead he got in my face and bumped chests, winding me, and toured the footlights flexing his muscles like a prizefighter. He was wearing enough make-up to play the Mikado. In the seats I saw and smelled a large number of greasy-haired Joans, and Johnnies with fungous faces containing particles of organic food. The females were indistinguishable from the men wearing faded shorts and socks, unshaven and with hairy arms and legs. It was the angry Birkenstock brigade, an audience unlikely to be sympathetic to GOP Woodrow. Where are the rednecks when they are needed?

Senator Snorr and I were on separate podiums behind lecterns on which we might place our papers—I had none—and make notes. Although Snorr and I are about the same height, his platform was higher than mine; an advantage that was enhanced by the stack shoes he was wearing. He had an immense ring-binder in front of him, divided into sections by neon tabs, and a notebook computer was glowing to his side. A satellite dish was suspended over his head, and he was wearing an earpiece, and punching the keypad on some handheld device. Already a relay of pages were running in and out to update his bank of intelligence.

Instead of a glass of water on the ledge beside the lectern, my opponent had some filtration system going that dehumidified the air and piped moisture through a series of tubes into a cup. He was sniffing something from a vial. With a frisson of algor ('cold, chilliness.' *OED*) I noted on a small table next to me a half-gallon jug of Jack Daniels and a shot glass.

Removing from my pants pocket the one crumpled slip of paper that I had about my person, on which I had scribbled a couple of things to include in my opening statement, I dropped it. Being nervous I left it on the floor, not wanting to look like a fool by groveling. I needed to go to the bathroom. I felt as though I had been pushed onstage to play the lead in *Othello* with five minutes notice and recollection of not one line. I patted my inside jacket pockets, hoping to feel a reassuring wad

of script, or the thin crackle of an *aide-mémoire* that may have been thrust at me at the last moment by an intern. Nothing. I had no interns. All I felt was the rattle of my ribs over my palpitating heart. Or maybe it was the stuttering of my pulse. As in Wilfrid Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth* ['Only the stuttering rifle's rapid rattle'], it seemed that Woodrow was already a goner.

At our first encounter the Senator felt that he had been too easy on me, in consequence of his suffering at the time from a virus that he had picked up from former President Billy Trucker while putting in a day's work framing houses in Georgia for Habitat for Humanity. Today, to redress any balance that this may have contributed in my favor (none; in fact it had gained him sympathy, especially after he mentioned the reason for his indisposition), he squirted something at me from a bottle and within seconds I had a sore throat.

Today he was determined to do better. He was wearing a green tie, earth-toned suit, open-toed sandals and no socks, to please the audience, and enough rouge to play a hooker in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. His hair was slicked back. His wife came in and stood behind him, smoothing her bust provocatively and pouting at the audience with lips coated in Guerlain KissKiss Cherry Shine lipstick. I guessed that was what it was from having observed something similar up close and personal on Cassandra.

I was in a pinstriped jacket, bow-tie, no shirt, running shorts, and high heels. I was also wearing a blond wig, which I tugged at but could not remove, and my complexion was chalky. Hunching as much as I could behind my desk, I tried to look as though I were somewhere else. Difficult, under the circumstances, not least because unlike my opponent's my desk was an open one on a stand.

After the moderator had summarized the rules of the debate, he reminded Snorr and me that each side had already agreed to abide by them. He also cautioned the audience to remain quiet and reserve its applause, if any, to the end.

I suspect that I had been set up to make my opening statement first, because although this had been decided by the toss of a coin called by my opponent, from the wink that Snorr gave the moderator as I began speaking, I believe there was a complicity in the coin being double-headed.

In an effort to calm myself and get into the swing of things, I tried breaking the ice by beginning on a conciliatory note.

"Good evening. I..."

Snorr pounced, which saved me the trouble of ad-libbing further.

“Mr Moderator—Willie—when you were round for dinner last night, you did not mention that there would be someone sharing the platform with me. Who is he? To save taking up valuable time while I am talking, you may answer me on my Palm Pal, which will vocalize into my earpiece. ‘Good evening’, indeed! Willie, that man is implying that his day has been better than mine. He impugns my skills as a debater, by expressing optimism about the outcome of this debate before I have had a chance to address the country on the issues of which he is ignorant.”

I tried again. “Evening. I don’t know whether I’m going to win or not. I think I am. I believe I am ready for the job that we are here to discuss. Or not discuss because I am not ready. If not then it is unlikely that I will win. Win some, lose some. Lose this one maybe.” I looked at my watch. Dad had done the same thing to great effect in one of his debates in an effort to secure a second term. He failed, of course, which I consider unfair because it turned out that he had forgotten to wear his watch.

Snorr jumped in again, his facial coloring assuming a dangerous intensity of red. “Willie, when I saw you in church last Sunday you assured me that tricks of this kind would not be tolerated. This man, whom I assume to be my opponent, is adopting an inappropriate tone of false modesty when he has nothing to be falsely modest about. I, on the other hand, would like to take this opportunity to inform viewers that I am on the verge of finding a cure for cancer. More on that later. Also, that man is already indicating a refusal to stick to the issues. But I have news for him, Willie: he who laughs last laughs longest; and believe me, despite my senatorial seriousness, I am a great believer in the healing power of humor. As I speak, a collection of my wittiest sayings are being posted on my Web site. Also online are details of how people may obtain my best-selling books, audio visual tapes, CDs and DVDs, or order them in bulk at a discount. All proceeds are donated to my charitable Trust.”

Over Snorr’s head a sign began flashing giving details and there was prolonged applause led by himself and Mrs Snorr, whom he turned to acknowledge by blowing her a kiss.

“Now then,” he continued; “welcome to you all. Two score and ten years ago when I was born, it became apparent to me from the way that I was able to control the timing of my birth, and master the elements of English grammar before I left the womb, that I was destined to be a multi-tasker *par excellence*. Over time I have developed the ability to use twenty-five regions of my brain at once. In order to achieve certain

of the superhuman feats of which I am capable, portions of my anatomy can be enlarged by prostheses—there is one that has no need of artificial boosting—and robotic aids. Logistically speaking, I can avert another Great Depression, put out fires in the West, subdue floods in the southeast, defeat terrorism, solve global warming, invent the Internet, counsel the Pope on priestly problems of pedophilia and bestiality, teleconference meetings in the Middle East, virtual-tour the Balkans, sing both tenor and bass parts in *The Messiah*, run up a mountain on one leg, operate a laptop with the prehensile toes of my other foot, blog, e-mail, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and text—all nearly at the same time. I am the modern equivalent of a Renaissance man. Perhaps you now begin to understand why the Presidency of the United States need only be, for me, a part-time job. I have expressed a willingness, through diplomatic channels, to serve concurrently as Chief Executive of other countries.

“Central to my policy as President will be to require that every citizen attend classes twice a week in how to do a minimum of three things at once, so that all may make their own tiny contribution to my commitment to saving the world. Medical exemptions may be granted to those such as that man to my right, who are certified for some reason as being incapacitated mentally or physically or both.

“Back to my opening statement. Education is a powerful tool. Every healthy person should have a first-rate education. Health, since I just mentioned it, is another vast topic on which I have focused the Hubble telescope of my intellect, and will shortly be expounding upon. All the difficult words I use can be looked up in the Snorr Pocket Dictionary. Any questions that members of the audience may think of after this interview is over, can be e-mailed to me at the address above. I answer all my e-mails personally within fifteen minutes, usually.

“Now I know that the standards I set are sometimes impossibly high, being modeled on my own capabilities; but people must understand that I am not a hard taskmaster. On the contrary, I am a tender-hearted man. My wife was reminding me just how compassionate I am, earlier as we were warming up for the debate. We have broken many warming-up records, which is how I stay so fit. My mind, I confess, was elsewhere at the time, because I was addressing a special session of the Russian Duma on the speaker phone. Physically I was on top, of course—for I serve under no one—keeping my right hand free to work on my next book, while playing Ravel’s Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D major on a digital keyboard by the bedside.

“Espousing as I do family values, regarding my wife I should tell you if you have not already gathered that she and I enjoy a vibrant physical relationship.” Stepping to one side of his podium for a moment, he cupped his genitals, and Mrs Snorr opened her ocelot coat and revealed that she was naked underneath. There was more applause as she panned her breasts for the cameras. Snorr looked smug.

When the applause eventually died down, he proceeded. “An hour and a half ago I was in Iowa, talking to Ms Bo Nidal, who has fallen on hard times. Ms Nidal is a retired ballerina. Recently she lost her left leg, the result of an infection that set in after a skating accident. She gets about on crutches. Now when she needs new shoes, she has to buy a pair and throw one away, which is a waste. I recommended to Bo that she become connected to my Internet, so that she can advertise her unneeded left-foot shoes, boots, slippers and sandals to those in similar quandaries arising from the lack of a right leg. Others who are in similar plight will also be able to benefit from my network in order to procure right-singular or left-singular items of footwear, as their condition dictates.

“Ah. I see that the hot air in the room has now filled the cup of drinking water before me. I will therefore pause to refuel.”

Now, I, Woodrow Scrubb, have never been one for sermons. I endorse Wilfrid Knox’s belief that every minute after the first ten bores the listener, and undoes the work of two minutes. Thus after a quarter of an hour the speaker is, in effect, preaching in reverse. On the strength of which Snorr would, by the time he was done, be back in diapers and unlearning the English language preparatory to not being born.

Fortunately at this point the moderator intervened. “Thank you, Senator Snorr. We are now out of time. And that concludes the Presidential debates.”

As discreetly as I could in front of twenty million people, I pulled the cork from the jug of sour mash with my teeth, hooked it across the back of my arm, tilted it and glugged. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mrs Snorr bearing down on me with a whip, a pair of handcuffs, and an evil dominatrix look on her face. Though I had not seen her change, instead of a coat and nothing else she was now clad in a see-through bra, leather mini-skirt and fishnet tights.

There is a medieval slogan, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*: ‘Evil be to him who evil thinks’. It is the motto of the Order of the Garter, which originated under Edward III in 1348-9. In *1066 and All That*, the latter-day Edwardians W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman commented upon the

phrase as follows: 'Edward III had very good manners...and made the memorable epitaph: "Honi soie qui mal y pense" ("Honey, your silk stocking's hanging down").' [My own pedantic note on this: Such a paronomasia, or pun, requires the substitution of *soie*, French for 'silk', for *soit*, 'be'.]

As much as I like fishnet tights when Mrs Cosmo Scrubb is wearing them and not much else, and has a different sort of glint in her eye, at that moment another transliteration of the motto Honi soit qui mal y pense occurred: 'I honestly think I'm going to be sick.'

Next day

This morning Dad and I talked, which is only possible when we are alone.

“This race is getting to me, Father. When I awoke, which I usually regard as a good sign, I found this thumping great boil on the side of my face. I applied Phoebe’s cover-up stick but it disintegrated in defeat. The world is going to laugh at me. Worse, last night I found myself staring at a bottle of Old Grandad 100-proof bonded whiskey. Therein lies trouble.”

“Hang in there, son. Soon be over like a bad dream. ’Centuate the positive.”

“How I miss the old days at the ranch when I was content to be alone, knowing that I was not even a bit player in the drama of life. Now people are falling over themselves to rewrite the script with me as leading man. How I long for the way things were! A little Goethe or Schopenhauer in the library after breakfast. Dip into the Old Testament in Hebrew or Ancient Greek. Tinkle the ivories on the piano. Feed the birds. Cut some brush. Now I feel compelled to run and jog everywhere, or jump on my bicycle. I seem to want to be any place but where I am.”

“Yes, why is that? Do you really need so much exercise?”

“I get this overwhelming urge to escape my life. Which is impossible, of course. Mother’s people always catch me and bring me back.”

“I feel your pain, son. With your Dad it’s any excuse to jump out of a plane.”

“I did my best to lose those debates, you know. I even copied your thing of looking at my watch.”

“Don’t ever let on to your mother that you tried to throw the Series. Shush. Here she comes.”

At this moment Mother entered followed by several of her retainers, and the temperature in the room dropped forty degrees. People have different ways of walking into a room. Dad wanders the fifty-odd miles to the table. Cosmo slides under the door. Phoebe’s voice flutes in through the window, or from the mouth of a vase, even though she has never stirred from her bed. But Hermione—she arrives like Madame Zézelle the Human Cannonball.

My mother’s expression was thrawn, her gruntle dissed. “Oho! Norman and Waldo, skulking and scheming as usual. Talk to me, you lanky pair of gormless eejits. Useful as tits on a boar you are. Can’t

find your asses with both hands. Sitrep!”

Dad spoke up, after a fashion, which was only fair, he being the spouse and the senior. We were both coated in frost, and his voice quavered. “Hey, Hermie. Yep, it’s jes’ us two. A-whittlin’ and a-spittin’. Gotta go, right thing to do. Man about a dog. Splitsville.” This from the late Leader of the Free World. I whinged in sympathy—a sort of simultaneous whine, wince and cringe. My father made a feeble attempt to rise and quit the premises.

“Siddown!” Pole-axed, he dropped. His already Cyclopien eyes moved closer together and he began mumbling. As Lear caved, the Fool cowered and my motley pantaloons ballooned with noisome fear. But I had to say something by way of offering a sop to Cerberus, which was how Virgil’s Sibyl appeased the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the infernal regions. Or in this case Cerbera.

“Good morning, Mother. Doing well, thank you. Not staying up too late. Ask not what the Mother can do for you, ask what you can do for the Mother. Let’s see, today’s schedule. My elocution lesson. Some tutoring in math. One brief appearance. A little eckinomicks this afternoon after my nap. Tomorrow will be gigraphy, which I’m excited about. States, their history, and governation. Soon we’ll be moving on to advanced stuff: the names of world leaders, and matching them to their pictures. What speak they language.”

“OK, Einstein, can it. Tell me where the polls are at. Wait—what are you thinking, Hermione? Get me Cosmo on the horn! I need answers and I need them now.”

Curiosity got the better of me. “Mother, I don’t understand all this talk of popular votes and electical colleges. And Oregon—why are the Canadians voting? As for the Gulfida retirees and geriatrics, half of them will be dead before I start my second term.”

My mother’s eyes burned me like sun though a magnifying glass. “Second term! You can’t be serious. You *qua* you won’t be serving a first term let alone a second.”

Like the Fool I forged ahead. “Not to mention the burrito- and cheese-heads, as Mr Dickey [Hart Dickey, my pre-assigned running mate in the non-physical exercise sense: he is huge] calls them, in New Mexico and Wisconsin. The ones who can’t see their way to giving me a majority. Thereby failing to recognize that it is in the best interests of the country’s best interests that I be their best ever, most interesting President. I mean, duh. Then there are New Hampshire and Iowa [I was showing off my lesson-learning here]—all of fifteen voters there, individuously speaking.”

“Ohmigod.” The bags under Hermione’s eyes packed and unpacked themselves like a bullfrog’s throat. “You know, Waldo, I just did a recount in this room and you’re not here. I discard you thus, like chad.” With the back of her hand she flicked air in my direction from under her chins. Then she barked at one of her ferrets at the door, “I said get me Cosmo. My true son. Now, afterbirth! And then tell Billy Graham—nicely does it, asshole—to grease HQ. We’re going to need help from the Higher Power. In spades.”

I detect the imminence of a migraine and am ending redaction for the day.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow

This morning, through the shutters at the ranch—my sanctum, my sanctuary—came a gruel of birdsong. Upon throwing them open, I saw the bright and morning star. But hope faded with the coarsening day. I still have no idea where Cassandra is, and whether our relationship is on or off. Whether I matter to her at all. Do I love her for herself? Or as an adjunct to or extension of myself, a projection of what matters only to Woodrow? As if she were a part of me, as lovers say.

I recall, vividly, that my being underwent a chemical alteration at the moment of meeting the then future Mrs Cosmo Scrubb. A great pity to have her attractive maiden name erased or scrubbed in favor of Scrubb. I tried to persuade her to keep it but she just shrugged. Once a scrubber always a scrubber, she said: there are some odors that even the strongest perfume cannot overcome—and she rarely wears perfume except involuntarily when she emerges from extended visits to haute couture salons. Her scent is divine *au naturel*.

Love at first sight it most certainly was, for me. And what is love? More than ‘symbiosis’, I trust, the definition of which is ‘an interaction between two dissimilar organisms living in close physical association; especially one in which each benefits the other.’; or ‘helotism’: ‘a form of symbiosis in which one organism is held to make use of another as if it were a slave’. As aphids milk ants.

Poor Cassandra. No wonder she feels compelled to draw attention to herself by heisting jewels. Very professionally, I might add, she is a real artiste. I only wish that I could join her. We would make a great team. I fancy myself as Waldo the Cat, the bane of Fifth Avenue residents, stalking my unsuspecting carbon and carbuncular prey as it dreams of its next outing hung round an alabaster neck or reposing in the cleavage of an ample bosom. Safes, cameras, photo-electric beams, motion detectors, pressure pads, window sensors, metal shutters, central station alarms—we would laugh at them. Their owners might as well keep their valuables under the sofa, for all the trouble and time it takes us to find and liberate them and high-tail it. I contemplate shadowy flits over roofs with my silent partner, silhouetted against the night skyline. Cassandra, masked and encased in a black latex jumpsuit that seems to have been spray-painted on her body. Ballerina-toed she fires her grapnel gun, ascends the wall, abseils from the skylight by the wire that spools from her belt, and pouches the virgin crystals. Stealing it hardly is: from where they sparkle, breathless, under her green eyes on their velvet cushions, the jewels heed the call of their mistress and

long to be united with her. Adamant melts and is subsumed into her.

If we were destined to be with each other from the beginning, why are we not? What went wrong? Does she ever ask that question of herself?

*

‘You were young, *caro* Woodrow,’ the siren replied,
‘And naive in affairs of the heart.
And yet, to remind you, you took your vows first—
Look to them for what keeps us apart.’

‘A politic match, that’s all that it was,
Which begat neither loving nor pleasure;
And then it sank in, that to marry in haste
Meant repenting the deed at my leisure.

‘My love for you has never faltered, my dear,
I was young, as you say, and I hid
The feelings I dared not express. It was fear
That caused me to do as I did.

‘Then the nightmare continued, when you too were wed,
After I had been forced by my Mother;
And the grail of your body was taken to bed
And deflowered in the heat of my brother.

‘Believe now, my own self, wherever you are,
What cleanses my heart of regret
Is this truth I send winging to you from afar:
We were married the moment we met.

‘At the furthest remove, without writing or speech,
There are ties that no one can sever
In a place, or a vacuum, that’s far out of reach,
Where we are committed for ever.’

Mirabile dictu

By the waters of Babylon we sit down and weep, when we think of thee, O America!: [Horace Walpole, from the *Psalms*]. I was moping in a chair nursing a bottle of Evian.

And then Cassandra walked into the room. I was so surprised that, per the marine metaphor and had I been wearing any, I could have been buggered through my oilskins.

In a trice I was transformed. I went from rags to riches. My senses reeled. I tore the hangman's noose from my head and karate-chopped the executioner's neck, shattering the vertebrae. Carols of birdsong burst upon my astonished ear, cactus flowers bloomed in my head, and God gave me a free pass to Heaven.

"How in the name of Horatio did you get in here?", I said.

Cassandra had a distant look in her eye, as if she had not yet fully arrived, or had not been quite ready to leave wherever it was she had departed from. Possibly a jewelry store.

"I walked, fellow biped. It's a habit I got into around the age of two."

"And the guard? The family? Visitors are discouraged here."

"The guard didn't even look up. Here's the fellow's wallet." She tossed the thing onto a side-table. "I haven't had much of a welcome so far. Aren't you pleased to see me? I had to travel a fair old distance to get here, and you don't even offer me a drink."

"Pleased? Is the Pope Catholic?"

Well, what else could I say? Words fail me at the worst and best of times. Cassandra is my Alph, my Coleridgean sacred river running, as in his poem *Kubla Khan*, through caverns measureless to man. Like the Heineken ad, Cassandra refreshes the parts that other beers cannot reach. The sight of her face makes it seem preposterous that the allure of Helen of Troy or Cleopatra has not been superseded by the most beautiful woman in the world. Cassandra's gaze is that of a sphinx with viridian eyes. Her lips and mouth are velvet and full. She has a quicksilver tongue and mother of pearl teeth. Her body curves like Saharan dunes on a windless night, and her legs stretch to eternity. The silks she wears for skin—silk to draw the envy of a Saracen—are tauter than a ship's topgallant sail as it rounds the Horn. She has tigress loins and a Venusian vulva. The cool symmetry and thought-delaying gravidity of her breasts are to be marveled at. And her mind...well, her mind is unfathomable; it is a Daedalian labyrinth in which any man would be glad to be lost forever.

And...well, in other respects she is like any common or garden broad.

Words being inadequate to convey my joyance, without further ado I approached her and began at the top, working my gradual and unhurried way down to the bottom, paying particular attention to the twiddly bits in the middle. When I got to floor level I started again at the southern tips and worked my way up again. When I got to a fork in the road I took it. It is amazing how different, but equally pleasurable, the view and experience are when one is returning in the opposite direction. I lavished impartial attention on each eurythmic peninsula and followed every highway, byway, detour and dead-end. I drove down one-way streets and, oblivious of correctness, drove up them too. I broke the speed limit. I curb-crawled. I ignored shortcuts. I took the overpass, the underpass and the tunnel. I climbed every mountain and forded every stream. I jogged, biked, roller-bladed, scootered, skateboarded, trampolined, bunged, flew, parasailed, surfed, and swam. I four-wheeled off-road through the undergrowth. I beat my chest, yodeled and swung Tarzan-like from the ceiling fan. I had not taken so much aerobic exercise since I went fishing in Alaska and a boar Kodiak decided I should make a pleasant *digestif* after salmon and loganberries.

I sang a Song of Solomon unto myself. I expressed the intention of spending the next four years between her breasts. I told my beloved that she was unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi, and that my spikenard sent forth the smell thereof.

She murmured, ‘Get along with you,’ and purred. For this was not a one-sided exercise. Far from it, for it takes two to tango. Cassandra was like the filly among Pharaoh’s chariots, and I like so many postilions struck by lightning (as the old phrase books considered it helpful to include in translation for the benefit of the upper-class English traveler in Europe).

I leaped upon the mountains and skipped upon the hills. I was like a roe-deer or a young hart. For Cassandra had come out of the wilderness like a pillar of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, and all the powders of the merchant—Boucheron, Bulgari, Cartier, Chanel, Dior, Hermès. Her lips dropped honeycomb, and honey and milk were under her tongue. Her navel was like a round goblet, her belly a heap of wheat set about with lilies. Her neck was a tower of ivory and her eyes were like the fishpools in Heshbon. Her breasts were as magma rising from a volcano of irrepressible vigor.

And my spikenard...*da capo*: as in sheet music, ‘repeat from the

beginning’.

But just as there will be no telling it in Gath, no publishing it in the streets of Askelon, all I can further express on the subject is that, ‘There’s none so classy As this fair lassie—Oh! Oh! Holy Moses, what a chassis...!’ [*If You Knew Susie*, ‘Buddy’ DeSylva/Joseph Meyer]

Afterwards, or rather in between, we shared a Kent Menthol cigarette.

‘Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.’ The woman has ravished my heart. Bewitched me. But still the awful question lingers: Never mind Romeo, wherefore art thou Mrs Cosmo?

*

The Day I Met You

In that room the air will always be still;
The sun will always slither down its beams
On particles of dust, and the colors
Will always be gold and green, with splashes
Of red and white.

There were a few movements
And some polite conversation, nothing
More, before you left and I went home.

The circumstances of that room, that day,
That scene, the garden and the things around,
Though altered, moved, dug up and modernized;
Through freezes, storms, eclipses, power cuts;
Through fallings out of sight and of like minds...

In that same room today, or any day,
Nothing has changed, for me.

Same old same old

Several diurnal rounds later, it is still—still!—Election Day. It is a nightmare Groundhog Day of Spring that never arrives, but plays over and over, as in the film with Bill Murray. The stylus of time is stuck in a groove. ‘The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ...’ [Edward Fitzgerald, the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám*]...writes the same damn thing over again. My fate continues to hang in the balance, as evanescent as a butterfly ballot. Oh, for a transition team to transport me to another planet where there are no elections, only a benevolent and enlightened dictatorship.

They have brought me to Washington to put in a few appearances. Today Snorr proposed a power-sharing arrangement: we will agree to split the week. I should take Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and he Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Sundays we should alternate, so that neither side loses the support of the pious vote.

Although Senator Snorr is a giant waste of space, he should get a Nobel Prize for blocking harmful rays from the sun with his corpulence. I do not doubt that he invented the Internet, because he never misses an opportunity not to use one word when a million will do. The entire content of Google, I understand, is equivalent to a one hundred and ten mile-high pile of paper: www—a worldwide waste of words. If it toppled it would be worse than a bombardment of meteorites. Words, as T.S. Eliot cautioned us, are inclined to slip, slide and perish. Now if only Snorr had discovered a way to *uninvent* the Internet, that would be something worth writing home about. Quality not quantity is what we need. But no, instead he is the arch-exponent of dot-common sense, which means he is dotty and uncommonly stupid.

Last night they let me stay up late and go to a party—a wine-tasting at my running mate (I had been allowed to meet this stooge of Hermione’s only recently) Hart Dickey’s place. There the forked tongues were all a-flicker. Confined as I was to root beer, and being unable to steal into the night and my tent, I marveled at the woolly fictions that were being drawn for spinning to the public. Boccaccio of *The Decameron*, and Chaucer of *The Canterbury Tales*, even Scheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights*, would have marveled at the invention of these people. I understand now how the Republican elephant came by its lengthy proboscis. My press secretary, who is an oenophile—meaning tosspot—is a veritable Pinocchio when he is full of Pinot Chio. Amongst the assembled company, which included more mistresses and boyfriends than wives and partners, I noted the absence

of *Lacrima Christi*, the tears of Christ, and an abundance of *Liebfraumilch*, or whores' milk.

After discovering that my driver had decided he could not be bothered to wait for me, I walked back to the hotel on my own, arriving, like the poet T.S. Eliot's camels, sore-footed and refractory around midnight.

The remorseless day

After a whirlwind of recounts in the Gulfida State counties of Dude, Forward and Hotbeach counties; of political intrigue on an unprecedented scale; of injunctions, deadlines, contradictory judicial rulings and reverses; of a blank period as we awaiting anticipated Republican overseas absentee votes from Israel and the Military; followed by the Secretary of State for Gulfida arbitrarily purging thousands of Democratic votes as if she were spraying mosquitoes with DEET; followed by our trundling off to see the wizards of the Supreme Court of the United States for a ruling...a snippy and resentful Senator Snorr conceded.

Initial in-house euphoria was muted, pending the retraction that might follow, or the revelation of further skulduggery. People like Snorr never really concede. True to form, he came back and said he had had his fingers crossed when he made the call (to Hart Dickey, not me), and referred to some arcane rule disqualifying all voters who get up later than 5.30 a.m., do not exercise, drink coffee with fat milk, and eat bacon. Basically, Republicans. Apparently the ballots of those who chew the fat of his speeches are exempt. The prig has been playing for the sympathy vote all along by portraying me as the school bully. He never missed an opportunity to cry, 'Teacher, look what Woodrow did!' The man is shameless. In Gulfida, Snorr's Syllogism went as follows: All octogenarians are Democrats; all hanging chads are caused by octogenarians; ergo, all ballots with hanging chads are Democratic votes.

How desperate he must be, to argue that old folk are incapable of summoning the strength to dislodge a bit of card. It is evident he has not come across the frail-looking lady I helped across the street the other day. When I asked if I might be so bold as to inquire who had been fortunate enough to gain her vote, she told me to mind my own business and be gone, swung her purse round her head and struck me with it, whereupon I staggered and fell. It must have contained a lead ingot. She did it twice more. The first blow, she said, was for assuming that she could not cross on her own; the second was for asking a personal question; and the third was because I was still standing.

This is not a man of whom, as Malcolm said of Cawdor in *Macbeth*, nothing in his (political) life became him like the leaving it.

How I long for the humdrum, predictable life I used to lead, when I could count my life in books and bottles and cans.

The Siege Perilous

Incoming Dad. “You’ve done it, my boy. You are the President-Elect, Mr President. Your father should now get down on a gouty knee, like old Sir Ector before his foster-son when he became King Arthur. Anyway, it’s all wrapped up, thanks to the Supreme Court. That doofus Snorr has capitulated again, and this time there’s been no retraction, or at least nothing in the last—let me see—four hours. A lifetime for Snorr. Sorry to be late getting the news to you, I was under orders. They didn’t think it was important that you be told.”

Oh shit oh dear. Breathe, Woodrow, breathe.

An hour or so later, while Dad was taking his pre-nap nap, I had somewhat pulled myself together. Would that Snorr and I could trade places. For I doubt that he will go quietly, content to rest in Greenpeace and snore for eternity. For the moment, however, his geyser is stalled; the balloon of his rhetoric has been punctured; his Goliath act has closed after the previews. May he and his spinach-eating memory shrink smaller than one of Mary Norton’s Borrowers under the floorboards, leaving me with nothing worse than a dislike of spinach (my father hates broccoli because, being an Ian Fleming fan, he does not like the crap the screenwriters come up with for the James Bond films (the franchise of which is owned by the eponymous Italian Broccoli family)).

Dad mentioned Sir Ector, and I try and picture myself as the King Arthur figure in all this, and Dad as Arthur’s father King Uther Pendragon. Sprung from his loins, I am *rex quondam, rexque futurus*: the once and future king who pulled the sword from the stone to prove that he was the rightful king. [T.H. White: ‘Whoso Pulleth Out This Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Rightwise King Born of All England’]. There are other similarities both real and possible that I do not dare to contemplate. Arthur had a rocky relationship with his wife, Guinevere, and an adulterous relationship of his own. Arthur had to fight for his kingship and his life. What I long for is a Merlin to protect me as he did Arthur with his magic, and enable him to confound his doubters and defeat his enemies. In consequence, through the ages Arthur’s memory has endured as a symbol of order and goodness. He had the vision thing.

Dad, though, is more Sir Ector, Arthur’s foster-father, than Uther Pendragon. Cosmo is Mordred, Arthur’s bastard son: an insinuating character, at will smooth or scalpel-sharp. Arthur kills him in the last battle. Mother is an awful combination of the treacherous Morgan le

Fay and Margawse.

I am much more Arthur than any other associate of the Round Table. First among equals of course, was Lancelot: he was well endowed physically, spiritually and sexually. He owned the castle of Joyous Gard and was wealthy. Could he really have been ugly, as T.H. White drew him? Women threw themselves at his feet nonetheless. Lancelot created chemistry. He was competitive, mysterious, troubled; and flawed. A giant of the joust. In their final encounter he fought Arthur, from whose eyes ‘the tears brast out...thinking on the great courtesy that was in Sir Launcelot more than in any other man.’ [Sir Thomas Malory] But even with his faults, the charismatic Lance is as much out of my league as is his saintly son Galahad.

Tristram had good fortune in his love life. He was big-boned and strong, a skilful hunter and a harpist. Tristram I find an overstuffed shirt—or ‘a brown condom full of walnuts’, as Clive James described the present Governor of California—who did not deserve the love of the two Isouds, La Beale Isoud of Ireland and Isoud la Blanche Mains of Brittany.

Of the Orkney clan I am certainly not the bombastic Gawaine; but perhaps there is some of his youngest brother Gareth in me. When Gareth arrives at Court without declaring who he is, Sir Kay, Arthur’s foster-brother and Seneschal, sends him to serve as a scullion in the castle kitchens, where he is known as Beaumains. Gareth later proves himself to be gifted but immature, and he plays the arrant fool with his girl.

But all that is fantasy. In reality I am Woodrow the schlemiel, the bit player, the inconvenience, the nobody. A perversion of the Keatsian concept of negative capability. Within me is no hero struggling to emerge, to assume legendary status and be enshrined in literature, lays, plays, epic poems, rhymes, occasional verse, romantic ballads, stories, novels, operas. I am not the sort to make Malory, Tennyson or T.H. White stop and think, ‘Hm....there’s myth in this man. He could be a contender. He embodies a recurring theme. He deserves not just a chapter but a whole book to himself.’

As Mother likes to remind me, ‘You couldn’t organize a piss-up in a brewery.’ Now is not the time to point out that I have done exactly that, on both memorable and unmemorable occasions. Instead of pulling a sword out of a stone, I have a history of drawing corks from bottles.

All I can hope is that, though Merlin after he is imprisoned by Nimue (or Niviane or Niniane or Viviane or Elaine in some versions of

the legend) cannot save me, I have learned enough of his lessons to survive, and at the end be borne to Avalon for the healing of my wounds with my head in the lap of the one Queen I can occasionally call my own: Cassandra.

Sic transit

...Meaning to barf, I suppose. Which is what I feel like doing right now. The thought of Cosmo undergoing plastic surgery to make him look like me, if they go through with it, is appalling. I shall have been cloned. Though in nature we resemble Cain and Abel rather than Castor and Pollux, there will be *dos Scrubbos identicos*. I am most apprehensive about seeing the surgeon's handiwork, and do not know whether or how I will be able to take it. Shall they at least leave some token feature, which, though it be small, I can still call mine own?

Again confined to barracks at the ranch, I mooch about the house. Apparently now that I am President, Washington no longer has any use for me. So here I sit, or stand like Luther, *Ich kann nicht anders*—I can do no other.

Phoebe dropped in yesterday. She seemed surprised to be here. It was as if she had taken a wrong turn off the freeway en route to a destination that she had forgotten. I suspect that they may have brainwashed her. Poor Feebs: she talks dreamily of her passion to 'do something good for Americans'; her interpretation of which, so far as I can gather, is accepting a fulltime position with one of the international relief agencies, distributing essential supplies to those in need in the Indian subcontinent. While I applaud her charitable instincts, I cannot help but think that a First Lady in-waiting ought to plan on spending at least a token amount of time at home and in the White House.

There is no sign of Cassandra. I have round-the-clock guards, and they are under strict instruction to keep her away. Of course, she may be ignorant of my situation, off on a routine plundering spree on the Côte d'Azur, leaping from roof to nocturnal roof in her cat suit.

What is to become of me? Hermione has already disclosed her plan for my newly molded brother to take my place as President of the United States. Until he does, I am nothing but a pinch-hitter, soon to be surplus to requirement...and expendable, a threat to be eliminated as soon as my usefulness has come to an end.

If I am to be spared, shall they let me stay at the ranch? Shall they permit Dad to see me? I know he would have been here by now, had he been able. In a reversal of romantic tradition, shall Cassandra be able to use her skills to get past the guards, in order that the maiden may comfort the imprisoned knight in his distress?

There are so many questions. For the time being, however, I have nothing but books to furnish me with answers. I can find nothing in my collection on cosmetic surgery. Nothing on how to escape from prison,

travel through time, hypnotize people, conjure absent loved ones or make moonshine out of tap-water. Heck, I cannot even get a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

The thought occurred that I should write a novel as a means of occupying and diverting myself. But I gave up after an hour, as did another of the Knox brothers, Eddie, who spent even less time on his: 'Edward Smith stood on the top step of his house in Berkeley Square,' he wrote, 'on a late November evening of 189-. He was immaculately dressed. A fine drizzling rain was falling.' After this auspicious beginning, Eddie ground to a halt. 'I never went further than that,' he said. 'There were so many reasons why. What does 'immaculately dressed' mean? Wasn't I merely sending a hint to the reader that the fine drizzling rain would spoil Edward Smith's clothes? And if so, Edward Smith ought to have called a cab. I was sick of him. I hated him.'

But my predicament is different; my own life is too unreal, and it out-fictions fiction. I find Edward Smith an easy person with whom to identify, drawing a creative premise from his circumstances:

Smith is a privileged son, scion of a distinguished family. He is having difficulty in living up to the reputation of his overachieving forebears. He cannot stand his trammled, directionless existence any longer. It has all become too much for him, and a spring snaps in his head. His family has driven him nuts.

In the middle of yet another cocktail party attended by the rich, famous, intelligent and influential, he sneaks out and goes up to his room. Nobody notices; they never do. Once upstairs, Smith snorts a few lines of coke, drains the brandy in his hip flask and sneaks back down the staircase, averting his eyes from the marble busts and haughty, disapproving stares of his ancestors.

He passes the closed door to the drawing room. From within can be heard the neighing and baying of society in full cry. The butler, Bannerman, shuffles up from below with two full decanters on a tray, with which to replenish the glasses of the thirsty throng. Edward grabs one of them, raises it to his lips and gulps, spilling a quantity on the polished floor. He replaces it with a clatter.

Stuttering to Bannerman not to wait up for him, and

pausing only to glance fondly one last time at the elderly retainer—who together with his wife, the cook and his nanny, raised him in place of the mother who regretted that he had been born and neglected him—Edward Smith slams the front door behind him forever. In his anguish and haste, he has omitted to put on his coat, hat and gloves, or to pick up his umbrella.

Outside it is raining hard, but he either fails to register it or could not care. Lurching down the steps onto the street, and clapping his hand over the chest pocket to register that it contained his silver cigarette case, he hurls himself into the void of the rest of his life. His only solace in misery is the memory of his High School sweetheart, whose picture he carries inside the cover of his half hunter watch.

Blindly Smith strides on, his grief mingling with the tearful downpour.

I think that I am beginning to get the hang of the short story-writing business.

Funny girl

A miracle has happened. Cassandra has returned and transported me to a Secret Place. As she had arrived, so we departed, walking past the security guards with her holding me firmly by the hand and without a by-your-leave. One of the men yawned and scratched his balls; while the other looked furtively around, took a bottle from his pocket and swigged. I was ready to have kittens (and grab the bottle), but Cass just marched us through as bold as you please.

My rescuer and I are now sole occupants of some stranger's house, and I am in paradise. Cass, the cool queen of my heart, informs me that the owners (she does not know them) have gone away for several months to Italy, and that she has had her eye on the place for some time. There is a maid who comes in every morning to clean, while I sit in the gazebo at the bottom of the garden—as a precaution, though few recognize me. The maid has been told, and seems to believe, that Cassandra is a friend of the family. She does our laundry and shopping.

Still, I am skeptical. "Seeing as you're so polished in executing these scams of yours, Cassie, how come they nabbed you so easily at Tiffany's? I mean, there was fifteen million at stake. What went wrong?"

She tossed her gorgeous head. "It was deliberate. I wanted to draw attention to myself. I'd had it with Cosmo and his disgusting political career. Endless formality and State dinners are not my style. Think what it would be like now, with the entire country at his mercy. What did I have to look forward to? To acting the devoted wife, gazing fondly and mutely at him as he preens and shows off and tries to impress people? To listening to his crass speeches and conversation, and watching him semaphore his women and know that he is playing footsie with them under the dinner table? To seeing his eyes bug out as he lusts for the Braille of their nubile bodies?"

"I see your point. You have my every sympathy."

"I've succeeded in making things very difficult and inconvenient for them, which was my goal. Mission accomplished. Cosmo will have his plastic surgery and then the old ur-Cosmo, to all intents and purposes—though subcutaneously nothing has changed—will be no more. We will never look on his like again. Happy day.

"Anyway, who says I didn't come out ahead at Tiffany's? The unset stones they returned to the safe are paste."

Churning the butter

Whereas a President's life is plotty, plot-thick, plotcentric—the opposite of serendipitous—as a President-in-hiding, I have nothing to do but nothing. I have the leisure in which to wax philosophical and indulge in the luxury of the unsupervised moment. To think out loud instead of making speeches about how I intend to deliver on my campaign promises. Nobody either needs or wishes to hear what I have to say on any subject.

But I kid myself. The truth is that, as soon as a President is in Office, the public loses interest in how their First Representative is going to deliver on what he promised, and focuses instead on what he fails to do. They are tired of the emotional rollercoaster of the Election, and want the President to come off the phony speech circuit and get real. They end the honeymoon prematurely and are quick to forget why they elected him, which was likely to be for no reason other than they did not like whoever was running against him, or voted against him. If he attempts too much too soon, they criticize him for being unrealistic and impractical. Instead they want him to be pragmatic, and not to adhere to an agenda but to address the circumstances of each day in a manner that meets with their approval. Ideology becomes meaningless and everyone registers after the fact as a Centrist. The people are not fools: they know that Congress does what it wants irrespective of the President's agenda. The House and the Senate are where the battles are fought, every day and not quadrennially. The spirit of bi-partisanship is invoked one minute and derided the next, and the opposition, instead of being the Party of No becomes the Party of Hell, No.

For such a life any newly elected President is unqualified: his career has been built upon floating untested concepts, and managing environments that are parochial by comparison, and talking a good game without having to captain a team to a win or lose. The lesson soon learned is that the present, active tense is a dangerous proving-ground.

Consider the lies, how they are manufactured to feed the newspapers. I love how the reports of anything that has taken place in the political arena are so unreliable and inaccurate. This of course is deliberate, in the age of spin and ghost-written speeches, and everyone expects them to be so to the point of mistrusting anything that smacks of truth and honesty and sincerity. Everything that takes place is staged, an act. Misinterpretation equals interpretation and vice-versa. The facts are an irrelevant contrivance, intended to be malleable ('capable of

being pressed out of shape without a tendency to return to the original shape') or malleated ('beaten flat with a hammer') according to political expediency. They must lend themselves to as many interpretations as there are partial parties to pander to and satisfy with a different version, supported by photo ops in the papers, and bulletins on the Net and news, and food for support, debate and denunciation by the partisan opinionators to Left and Right in the editorials and Op-Eds.

I was amusing myself with musing on how Brother Cosmo—the Mycroft to my Sherlock Holmes—were he to be President, or when he is, might remember something that he had been involved in on the national or world stage; and how his recollection would differ from the official version of the same event that his handlers put out. Ironically, Cosmo's naive account is likely to be the more truthful of the two.

The following night, for example, be President Cosmo Scrubb dictating his diary entry on, say, a peace mission that he undertook to the Middle East:

'Frankly, I was bored and didn't pay it much attention. There were some good Sports on TV that weekend, which I wanted to watch live—fortunately one can do that on Air Force One (they told me I got no frequent flyer miles, which pissed me off), which is great (cheered me right up) when one has no interest in listening to one's advisers (my ruse to leave them behind succeeded: I demanded the captain get clearance from the control tower for an earlier than scheduled take-off, before they got to the airport and in case Mother decided she wanted to come after all...Grendel had to have an ingrown toenail dealt with), or reading one's briefing papers. Although I saw the name of the place we were headed to on a screen marking our in-air progress, it meant nothing to me. All I can say is that we flew in a direction full of eastern promise, though that may be with the benefit of hindsight.

'On arrival it was hot and I said I wanted to take a swim. They said there were no swimming pools in the desert because public nakedness of both men and women is a no-no. There is an oasis but the water could not be polluted by the human body—only camel feces, apparently. So, no need for my budgie-smuggler.

'Of course it's more of a parrot than a budgie.

'After I was treated to a tour round the souk, where I checked out the local talent, my request for belly-dancers in the tent that had been set up as my quarters was rejected, as was that for booze. All things considered it is a very negative place.

'On the first day we (my advisers arrived commercial during the

night) talked separately with delegates from opposing factions of angry tribal leaders—are they ever not angry?—through female interpreters wearing scarves. But first we had breakfast with both parties, who had agreed to a temporary truce, over breakfast in a tent pavilion. Sheeps' eyeballs on toast over easy, eaten while we sat cross-legged on a rug covering the dirt floor before a long low table. I was at one end with a heavily veiled female interpreter from each tribe at either ear, and with one leader seated to my left and the other to my right. The members of the two factions were ranged opposite each other down the table, scowling and fingering the knives at their belts. My aides were at the other end where I could not communicate with them except by gestures and looks. We ate with our left hands: the right hand is considered unclean in a land where there is no toilet paper; I didn't mention to the interpreter that I'm a lefty. In fact there was no conversation, everyone was too busy eating and watching out for treachery.

'The eyeballs were delicious; I must introduce them at the White House.

'After breakfast one faction went outside to tend to their camels and practice throwing their knives, while we met with the other. The first leader was a grim-looking (it must be in the genes) individual with a red-and-white checkered dishtowel on his head. He was unshaven and unbathed, and stank worse than a kangaroo's jockstrap, and I believe he had cleaned up for the occasion. Philips Sonicare and electric toothbrush technology is unknown in this part of the world. What we should do as a gesture of goodwill is send them all our used toothbrushes, and the new ones that the hygienist still insists on giving one. They can also have our used dental floss as garrote material for their executions—cheaper than a silken bowstring. If they don't want to clean their teeth with the brushes, they can use them to clean their latrines, if they have any latrines and want them cleaned; I had to use a hole in the ground.

'The head stinker babbled away through the interpreter demanding money, political support and weaponry—we had just given the guy plenty of all three, but he wanted more and said we mustn't deny him or he'll apply to the Russians, which of course he already has—in return for the oil reserves that ScrubbOil, surely he meant America?, is so anxious to tap into before BP gets to it...one of the latrine-diggers had a gusher the other day and top-killed it with shit...and the undertaking we are seeking that his faction might go easy for a few months on admitting and sponsoring some of the terrorists seeking to set up training camps in their territories.

‘When this leader was finished threatening us, he left with his party, and the other equally grim-faced leader and his lot re-entered and gabbled through his interpreter to similar purpose and intent. He was also irascible-looking, and made the same demands in reverse order for weaponry, political support and money—they speak a slightly different dialect. Why am I not allowed, as President of the most powerful country in the world, to behave as they do when telling other countries what I want them to do (when I find out what that is)? Why do Americans believe foreign policy to be a mysterious art that can only be practiced by cardiganed wimps like praise-the-lord ex-President Billy Trucker? Speaking of whom, my aides and I had agreed on the plane that no effort was to be made on our part to encourage the rival factions to make peace, only continue to play them off each other to our advantage. We don’t want any of that wussy Camp David crap. In the event of mutually assured self-destruction on their parts we would go in and take anything and everything we want.

‘I asked this second female interpreter, who though she was wearing a veil had a sultry voice that I took to mean she was good-looking, to pop a piece of Turkish Delight from a plate on the table in my mouth. She refused. How about b) peeling me a grape, then. Nothing doing. Not a whit deterred, I then said that I, who was fluent in female body language, had noticed her fondling her boss’s genitals while he was talking, and was wondering c) if local laws of hospitality were such that I might receive similar treatment. This item she referred to the leader, whose dark look darkened with dudgeon. He bared the gold in which what remained of his stained teeth were set, and fondled his knife. The interpreter informed me that she is one of his twelve wives, and that I should have brought wives or concubines of my own to render me such services. I returned that, as much as I should like to have done so, there were certain reactionary social protocols and religious prohibitions in America that prevented me, who am not a Mormon, from doing as I might wish. And I referred her to part c) of my original suggestion in the hope that, given I was on foreign soil, something might be done about it, if not by her then some other or others of her sex—in parallel rather than series given the shortage of time—on the understanding that I should return the favor if they ever came to Washington; and, now I felt that she and I were no longer strangers, my offer to her would still stand were she to accompany her husband, because, face it, all the Viagra in the world wasn’t enough to keep an old buzzard like him in service.

‘When this was passed on the chief had a hissy-fit—what a

sensitive peoples these are: he has twelve wives and can't spare any of them?—and the members of the second delegation rose to their feet in supportive umbrage. It was as much as I could do to pacify them by promising a larger than agreed-to consignment of FIM-92 Stinger missiles if they would not renege on our existing agreement of a certain number of barrels of oil at a certain price.

‘As we left both factions were already happily playing in the sand and sticking their knives into each other, as they always have and always will, and they ignored us.

‘That evening we flew across the desert to an oasis resort near the capital of an oil-rich country, where the following day we met separately in an enormous air-conditioned tent with another couple of opposing political factions, much larger than the warm-up tribes of the day before. This time the representatives were well-groomed and dressed in clean robes. Both parties owned massive reserves of oil in various regions. Again we sat cross-legged on the floor, as is traditional in even the most high-level encounters, first with the leaders of one side and then the other.

‘After we had been welcomed by the first leader and plied with sherbet, and we had dispensed the iPod touches, iPhones, and 64GB iPad 3G tablets and other freebies, I, POTUS, now a veteran of these negotiations, signed all the agreements that were passed to me on the spot, notwithstanding my Secretary of State's expectation that he would be consulted before I guaranteed American monetary loans and the supply of military hardware in return for a dog-eared Xeroxed trade agreement on which a former American President's name—he had rejected it—had been erased and in which I failed to verify that oil featured somewhere. Pleased with myself, as an afterthought I also gave a political endorsement to this leader; which my steamed Secretary of State, when I called him on the way home, told me will be bloody tricky to verify, because all these bearded people in their burnouses and flowing robes look the same. Which, as I tartly replied, to my mind was a pointless observation because it only put them in the same category as the Chinese and Japanese and Africans, Indians and South Americans—in short, the rest of the world except the Europeans with whom we had no truck and the Russians with whom we were back in a Cold War.

‘Really, is there any point in having a Secretary of State?

‘Business concluded, there was much cheerful conversation and a flurry of brown envelopes around the table. Taking advantage of the relaxed atmosphere I, potent POTUS, went off unnoticed and

communed energetically in a dark corner of the tent with the thoroughly complaisant and accommodating young female interpreter who was not related to anyone present, while the other side's leader read a lengthy untranslated and therefore incomprehensible statement summarizing what we had just agreed, punching the air for emphasis on the key points and chuckling.

When he was done I returned to the gathering from the corner where no translation was necessary and told a filthy joke in English. The foreign delegates laughed uproariously, having understood what I was saying perfectly, and I was informed that all of them had attended one or other of Yale, Harvard, Columbia and Stanford Universities and MIT. The meeting adjourned amidst a lot of backslapping and shaking of hands, and the delegation left the tent.

'The other leader and his entourage were delayed in entering, having been detained by the outgoing party—their sworn enemies—while they retailed POTUS' humorous anecdote. The newcomers fell about with mirth, and they all shook hands and exchanged snapshots of their children and recipes for curried goat and seethed kid.

'We went through the exact same procedure with the opposing side, including the trade agreement and political endorsement and brown envelopes. I also told them another of my favorite jokes, of which I have an unlimited store, one that was even filthier than the previous one. Again there was a bottleneck on the way out as this was retailed to the enjoyment of the previous group, who were still trying to sort out which black stretch Mercedes and chauffeur belonged to whom.

'I must remember to tell Wood-row what a doddle this diplomacy stuff is, and what a natural at it I am. It'll really annoy him.

The official version of these encounters concluded as follows:

At a press conference held immediately afterwards, the President said that the encounter, while tiring, was a great success; that he was pleased to have mounted an obstacle on his virgin mission, and that he had experienced great optimism at the coming together of two parties dedicated to mutual understanding. Both parties left confident that, having grappled with the issues, important moves have been made to resolve the cultural differences between our peoples, which would enable us in future to reach out confidently with both hands, dovetail the details, and assist our nations in

working together towards a broad unilateral and satisfactory accomplishment of our respective desires.

I, Woodrow, meanwhile was attending a summit of my own, the official account of which is top secret, my eyes only:

I flew to Cassandra's assistance at an undisclosed location. Well, it was the bathroom off the master bedroom, actually, where she had been taking a shower. She asserted that she was receiving unwelcome attention from a spider the size of Skylab, and demanded what the hell was I going to do about it. My merriment at her discomposure, which I expressed from the other side of the door from the bedroom, was not appreciated. I compounded this error by observing that an independent woman such as herself, one who thought nothing of abseiling from great heights down spider-like ropes of her own as she conducted her jewelry heists, would not sense a kindred spirit in a visitor who may after all only have come to pay his respects and learn a thing or two.

Cassandra explained to me briefly how she would in future use my intestines for ropes if I failed to enter and action a plan. In response to which I was forced to confess that, serious as I was about coming to her aid, spiders terrified me as much as they did her.

After some disputation, in a bilateral spirit of cooperation I went in as unobtrusively as possible, closed the door behind me, and with trembling hands opened the bathroom windows wide to facilitate egress of the largest of the invertebrate species in question that I have ever seen. Exiting the bathroom together after we had closed the heat vents and the plug holes, we slammed and locked the door.

In the yard we caught a dozen fat flies in a butterfly net, put them in a jar and shook it around until they were dead. Then we crept upstairs, opened the bathroom door as quietly as we could, went in and, averting our eyes from the monster as it watched us, laid the bait on the

windowsill by the open windows. As we exited and locked the door we loudly told each other what a good idea it would be if we were go for a drive, a drive so long that it might be worthwhile to pack an overnight bag.

Then we went to the cellar and spent the next three hours there talking in hushed tones.

When with great trepidation we returned to the bathroom, we were delighted to find that our stratagem had been one hundred percent successful: the spider was gone, the flies as well, and the intruder had moved on to pastures new.

Amid great rejoicing, after resolving not to use the yard for a couple of weeks because of the risk of sudden thunder showers, and to keep all windows in the house closed against the stifling heat and humidity, we settled down to an evening of playing Gin Rummy and Old Maid. Mostly I lost because I was not paying attention to the cards.

Run, rabbit, run

Still on the lam, the Mother-pack is hunting us. Last night there were soundless choppers in the air with the malevolence of Tolkienian Nazgûls, Hughes 500P stealth helicopters equipped with infra-red thermal and image enhancement vision.

So Cassandra, a girl to put the marvelous boy of Wordsworth's Thomas Chatterton in the shade, took a daytime stroll up to headquarters to find out what is going on. She did not announce herself, being under suspicion of aiding and abetting my escape. Although Dad would never breathe a word, the orcs at HQ are aware of our relationship.

She returned with a beatific expression on her face, despite a lapse in concentration which had compelled her to make an old-fashioned exit down a drainpipe. In endeavoring to avoid some wraps of barbed wire at a junction in the middle section, she had torn her stockings but thankfully sustained no physical injury. Lloyd's of London would not quote for what her anatomy is worth to me.

Cassandra had picked up some staggering news. I mean really mind-boggling stuff, to the effect that, not only has Cosmo had the plastic surgery that Mother had mooted as an *in extremis* measure to remove me from office and replace me, but that his new face has...melted.

Melted! Melted like Jim Carrey's physiognomy in the film *The Mask*. Like Camembert left on the radiator to ripen, or plastic on a hot stove. Apparently the plastic surgeon botched the job by using a new silicone that proved unresistant to the rays of the tanning machine in the last stage of the procedure as the final coats of patina were applied.

We speculated that the doctor was trying too hard to not just satisfy but impress Hermione—after all, the pressures on him were so heavy as to make Atlas's burden seem like a beach-ball. Surely, I said, the doctor has signed his own death certificate. The quack is as much of a dead duck as I am already a lame one. The Mother will show him the tender mercy of Jack the Ripper with a migraine. He will shortly be pushing up the daisies, and be worm fodder, six feet under, planted, toes up or curled. He will have croaked, kicked the bucket, gone west, handed in his dinner pail, gone to meet his Maker, pegged out, bought the farm, and snuffed it.

Or rather, since The Mother's man Ignacio Pesci would assuredly be the appointed agent of rubbing out the rubber-man, he will be sleeping with the fishes. But whatever the destination, soil or salt water

or the incinerator, the journey was bound to be extremely painful.

But there was no time to absorb this shocking piece of information. Cassandra had also picked up that they have picked up our trail and are on to us with the meanness and dedication of a pack of wolverines. Using what tracking methods and with what size of force, we have no idea. In consequence we are homeless again, and jumping from place to place, never sleeping in the same bed twice—like bin Laden and Yassir Arafat—and spending some nights *à la belle étoile* when we cannot get a roof over our heads. On such occasions it is always raining and cold, and no sooner have we crawled under a bush around midnight, than it is six a.m. and twenty birds are screaming in my ear. My clothes are wet and every mole for miles has spent the night partying under my aching body. Squirrels have hidden nuts in my pockets, and woodpeckers drill my skull for insects. Termites and mosquitoes feast upon my flesh and blood.

Cass's own antennae usually start quivering before we have eaten our meager and soggy breakfast, and off we go again. How she is able to pick up the far-off sounds of pursuit when I can detect nothing, I do not know, but she has a sixth sense. Careful not to betray our movements, we travel disguised and off the beaten track. My inherent anonymity is of some assistance here: stray dogs do not bark at me. Recognizing a kindred spirit, hobos and wave me over for food, drink and cigarettes, and look the other way when we leave, as is the etiquette of the road. If it were not for the Mother's gang of thugs on my trail, I should feel safe hitting the city streets, where people would stare through me, or walk into me and recoil with puzzled expressions. Bums would not solicit my spare change.

Otherwise things are peachy. Cass and I are *à deux* and happy. But still the woman has that far-away look in her eyes. Eternal secrets dwell within her to which I may never be privy—I, the future ex- most powerful man in the world. Perhaps I have lost her already, even as we are together for the longest time I have ever been in her company. I envisage descending to Tartarus, like Orpheus after losing his Eurydice, to regain her—and risk losing her again, this time forever.

Hubris quickly followed mythic high romance: that night I dreamed I used up all three lifelines on *Celebrity Millionaire* while trying to answer the hundred-dollar question. When I awoke I was lying in fog under a bush off the road to nowhere. A gopher was gnawing my ear.

The unbearable absence of being

The intimation of the immediate loss of the job that I never wanted in the first place has left me aimless and depressed. As a fugitive fleeing from nothing, I feel as if my license to exist even as a nonentity has been revoked.

To add insult to injury, I heard on our portable radio that I have been replaced as Governor of Texicana by my Lieutenant-Governor, so I am now officially as well as unofficially a nobody. The inscription on my tombstone will read, 'He is not sorely missed'.

Briefly promoted to the fiddle section of the orchestra, now I am the triangle player in the percussion section who, counting off his hundreds of continuous bars of rest, is left to imagine the single solo note that Schubert might have called upon him to play to conclude his Symphony No. 8, the Unfinished.

I have picked up no public comment on my/Cosmo's disappearance from public view, other than that the President-Elect is taking a rest-cure to recover from exhaustion brought on by the campaign. So it would appear that somehow Hermione has got everything under control, as with a Ross Perotian giant sucking sound the hose on the vacuum-cleaner of life has inhaled me into a bag of darkness.

Admittedly, my face is not memorable, which begs the question as to whether all this attention to tinkering with Cosmo's physiognomy was necessary. After all the thousands of hands I have had to shake while stumping, and after all the speeches and convention coverage, my Secret Service detail were still asking me every morning for photo ID, before going back to comparing notes about where to get their suits made and go for the trendiest mirrored shades. I dare say that as bodyguards they likely had agreed between them that, if the bullets start flying, to dive away from rather than towards me...most likely they would then complain about getting their hair mussed.

As long as I can remember, mine was the Marlovian face that launched a thousand quips. When I was in school, 'Where's Waldo?' my teacher used to ask of the class as I was sitting in the front row; 'I can't see Waldo.' She picked up the name from my mother.

The only place I ever had an identity to call my own was when I was on the bottle. No doubt the artist's impressions of Cosmo's new visage, the one he was supposed to be getting and may still, were done with oils and bright acrylics. The paint box that supplied mine contained watercolors.

Recently my life hung like a chad: now the sword of Damocles

hangs over me by a single frayed thread.

The pale cast of thought

The wind howled down the chimney like a chained and lonesome dog. Actually, I am not sure that it did, or that we have a chimney where we are, and I have not seen a dog. The wind may not even have been blowing. But if it was, and we do, and there is, then it would be logical that it did. I know I heard something, and so far as I know I was awake.

Am I going mad? Lear: 'O!, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven; |Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!' 'O! that way madness lies; let me shun that.'

Writing events down more or less as they happen so soon after the fact, and describing them honestly (there is no-one to lie to except myself) so soon after the fact, undistorted by hindsight, and describing how one reacted to them and what their immediate impact is reckoned to have been upon one's self, prevents a human tendency to revisionism. That is the matter of memoir and autobiography, which will never be written, and history and the rewriting of history, which the privacy of this personal account ensures will always be filled with gaps and presumptions and inaccuracies.

As for my setting down of the facts and recording of my experiences, I am aware of no latent or innate desire to varnish the truth with layers of supposition and interpretation. I am no artist. My fantasies and subconscious narratives are current not retrospective.

All this involves a trade-off: the keeping of a diary, making entries in a journal, or whatever best describes this laborious process means that the greenness of the events and my ink-wet (my metaphor for fresh typewriter ribbon) entries are too frequent to represent a seasoned retrospective vision. One cannot drive and look in the rear-view mirror at the same time.

Speculation as to what the immediate future holds can of course be worse than the reality when it happens. I have everything to fear, including fear itself.

La Cage aux Folles

The latest product of my subconscious was a doozy of a nightmare in which Cassandra chose to inform me that she thought she was in love—with someone else.

“I thought you loved *me!*”, I stammered, after a fortnight’s pause while I struggled with my emotions and lost.

“I do. But I’m talking ‘in love’ here. There’s a difference between in-love and love; though I won’t pretend that the latter isn’t more enduring.”

“I find double negatives confusing. I agree that the former, in-love, is the more unreliable of the two as a prognosticator of devotional longevity. But in-love is the more intense and memorable. In-love is irresistible. It doesn’t tap one on the shoulder, clear its throat and whisper, ‘Got a moment? We need to talk.’ In-love is Jove’s thunderbolt. Love beckons, in-love commands: It is a Copernican theory, a conversion on the road to Damascus. It is above the law: if thwarted it can turn a saint into a murderer. In me, in-love and love co-exist; and if it is true that absence makes the heart grow fonder, you and I are legendary in our attachment owing to our frequent extended separations. Our several marriages and domestic arrangement serve only to compound the emotional effect. At least neither of us have children, that would make it worse still.”

Cassandra shuddered, I supposed at the thought of children, and gave me a look of concern. “You’re a dreamer, Woodrow, by night and by day. I don’t set as much store by my dreams as you do, and there’s no reason why I should be influenced by yours. You’re not psychic.”

All true. Woodrow is a reactor not an actor. He is Actaeon the hunted, not Orion the hunter, and Cassandra—whose name means ‘she who entangles men’—is Artemis the huntress.

In Ovid’s version of the Actaeon–Artemis myth, destiny rather than guilt was responsible for Actaeon’s tragedy. His misfortune was that he observed Artemis naked, when after hunting in the forest he came across the goddess as she bathed in a pool of spring-fed water and observed her naked. Whereupon she turned him into a stag, and he was pursued as quarry and torn to pieces by his own staghounds.

Although I have frequently seen Cassandra naked in the shower, I have not suffered such painful consequences. In fact when she takes a bath she often asks me to wash her hair for her.

In Robert Graves’s endorsed version of the Orion myth, Orion, who was beloved of Eos the Dawn, shared Artemis’ love of the chase.

Apollo, Artemis's sister, tricked her into shooting Orion with one of her arrows; in remorse for which she set his image among the stars.

The one man idealized and immortalized, the other in shreds and dogfood.

For all my temporary serendipitous elevation to the highest political office, I am naturally a lowly person well suited for lowliness. As Winston Churchill said of Clement Attlee, I am a sheep in sheep's clothing. A modest man with much to be modest about. The man who gets out of an empty taxi. All my life I have been surrounded, at a distance, by male intellectual trust-fund silver spoon in the mouth WASPs; by the cream(puffs) of the literati and the college lecture circuit, mutual-admiration society intelligentsia who win prizes, and write learned and clever books, and are showered with academic scholarships and sinecures and titles and preferments. By men whom maître d's wave to the best tables, and hoteliers automatically check into suites with ocean views without asking for their credit cards. Men to whom bankers, brokers and blue-bloods offer the arm of confidentiality, and before whom tailors fawn. Whom bedizened European royalty with jewel-encrusted cuffs and coroneted hair, worn up, acknowledge with affable nods before sharing, *sotto voce*, the latest about the marquis' closet appetites and who is bonking whom.

I gulped in a futile attempt to swallow my disappointment. My brain was seared with grief and shafts of misery pierced my heart.

Then I was overcome with a hot tide of anger. I should kill this man. I should wire his testicles to a car battery. Then I should disconnect his balls and make sashimi of them with a rusty scalpel.

"Holy shit, Cassandra, who is this schmuck-faced crudmeister? Tell me, is he a billionaire hedge-fund manager? Or is he a thrice-married white-haired sugar daddy, sixty if he's a day, who wants to dandle you on his knee? Or is he terribly, terribly sensitive, and a good listener with a wonderful sense of humor? The ones with small dicks and toys in the bedroom cupboard always are. Or is he a pretentious summa cum laude Harvard etcetera Rhodes scholar future Nobel professor bullshitting type who pontificates and makes snide offensive personal remarks down his nose, some ivory tower creep who spends his life on the lecture circuit and at conventions and publishes papers on ancient Roman law that nobody reads? Or is he..."

"For your information he is thirty-five and a bachelor, and looks like Apollo. He's a workaholic multi-talented genius lawyer and legal theorist who has never had time to settle down and enjoy a proper relationship. He does indeed travel, round the world in a Gulfstream jet,

dropping in on countries emerging from dictatorship into democracy to advise them on constitutional law and legal and economic theory. He does lecture, at Harvard, Yale and Columbia and has held professorships at all three. He speaks seven languages. Oh, and he is a former Olympic track star who won three consecutive gold medals in the Triathlon. He has apartments in New York, and London, where he owns an art gallery, and Paris. There are houses in the Hamptons, and Martha's Vineyard. And Tuscany. His family has a vacation property in Bordeaux, where they own a famous vineyard."

"Ah yes, of course. An un-outed homosexual. You didn't mention the place on Fire Island. Does he have a chin? What color are his drapes?"

"Until now he has dated only supermodels and film stars, but he's given all that up. He's been contributing to sperm banks instead. He has broken off a long-standing engagement to a countess, and wants to marry me when the divorce from Cosmo is finalized."

"Does this Onanist like to dress up in women's clothing?"

"He's strictly Savile Row."

"I suppose it's too much to hope that he lost all his money in the stock market."

"He went to cash before the crash and bought everything back for pennies. There are some widget patents of his grandfather's that still bring in a lot of money. He has made another fortune writing best-seller detective stories under a pen name..."

"Pseudonym. A name for a pseud."

"He sponsors many charitable causes, and you may have seen photographs of him in the Society pages attending philanthropic functions."

"I have one subscription only, to *Mad Magazine*, and purchase only pornography at newsstands."

"One of the lines of medical research that is near and dear to his heart stems from the history in his family of an obscure disease that afflicts only the supremely intelligent. He's determined that a cure should be found for it in his lifetime. Especially because we plan on having a lot of children."

"I don't see children in his future, only rent boys, animals even. This fairy, this limp-wristed pencil-neck ponce of yours has a queen or three in every city, mark my words, and none of them are royal. He's afraid to come out and wants you to give him credibility as a heterosexual. What's his name, Fabrizio?"

"It's Rock. Rocky. As in reliable and dependable."

“Ha! Rock as in Hudson, darling, and you’re his Doris Day. There is no such thing as a person such as you describe called Rock. I rest my case. But do not fear, Cassandra, I will come to your rescue. Like Perseus to Andromeda I will swoop down in winged sandals—borrowed for the occasion, I hasten to add, lest you should think that I’m as light on my loafers as he is—and flash a snap of my Gorgon mother at him.”

“You’ve got it all wrong. He’s dying to meet you and I’m sure you’ll like him. The three of us will be the best of friends. I’ve told him everything about you.”

“Can’t have taken long. And that’s precisely what I’m afraid of, that he’ll like me a bit too much. I’d have to take care to keep my back to the wall.”

“Woodrow, you’re jealous! You’ve never been a petty or vindictive person. I’ve always loved you for your devotion, don’t think I’m not appreciative.”

“I, jealous? No more than Othello. Petty? No more than Don Michael Corleone. Vindictive? No more so than Titus Andronicus. Devoted? Yes, a little more than her husband and Paris and her other paramours were to Helen of Troy.”

At this point Rock burst in, square-jawed and muscular. He was clutching an enormous bouquet of lilies, which he presented on one knee to Cassandra. All of a twitter, she exclaimed with delight, blushed, and without introducing me ran to the kitchen for a vase.

As soon as she was gone the Rockster saw me and jumped up. His eyes blazed with lust and he made a sickly grin. Then he hastened over to me, paddling his hands and taking tiny steps on his tiny patent leather feet, like Albert Goldman played by Nathan Lane in *The Bird Cage*. Up close and personal, his hot breath smelled of violets. With a quick conspiratorial wink at the kitchen, he planted a kiss full on my lips, pinched my bottom and fiddled with my belt buckle.

I awoke lathered in sweat. There were ants in my pants. O, for a gallon of hooch.

Mamma mia!

We were at the DC Four Seasons in Georgetown, Cassandra having decided, in a *volte-face* change of strategy, that the Mother would never look for us in such an obvious place, and my accomplice is not one for sleazy hotel rooms. Plus, Cass was in the mood for a little pampering, spa treatment, massages, etc. I wanted some decent food. We were sick of roughing it. Cassandra had a driver on stand-by outside, and we had registered under our own names because she felt that, for one as well known as herself, to masquerade as a Mrs John Smith, even in the company of such a nondescript man as myself, would prompt suspicion.

I was seated in a luxurious thick white terry-towel robe compliments of the management unless I decided to stuff it in backpack before checking out, which one used to be able to get away with till they got fed up and started checking and nailing one on the credit card, scratching my mosquito bites and finishing my tenth cup of heavenly java when Hermione entered our suite. My jaw dropped to the floor, my eyebrows arched across the ceiling, and my heart did one of those cartoon boom-boom out of the chest things that cartoon characters register when they fall in love at first sight. This was fear at first sight.

“Nice try, kids!” boomed the Gorgon. “Is this the best you can do to fox an old pro like me? Though first I did go to the Ritz Carlton, I will confess. But it was either there or here, I was sure of that.”

The Mother’s orbs swiveled in opposite directions and the snakes of her coiffure hissed. The whites of her eyes were bloodshot. I decided against offering her breakfast and invoking assistance from room service. When Cassandra emerged from the bedroom, rubbing her eyes and wearing a fetchingly exiguous black negligée, she looked startled too. My heart sank, for she is the only person who is not afraid of Hermione, and if anybody on earth can unnerve my mother just a little, I think it is Cass.

“The Ritz was full,” murmured my minder. “I had the driver go in and check. You might at least have rung from downstairs—we weren’t expecting visitors and I don’t have my face on.”

“Oh, right. So you could do one of your Indian rope tricks out the window? I don’t think so. Give me some credit. I bribed the housekeeper to let me in.”

“I haven’t even brushed my teeth,” Cass continued. “But now that you’re here, Hermione, take a load off.” She waved at the couch. “So, mother-in-law, to what do we owe the pleasure? A troublesome

crossword clue that's driving you crazy. Investment counseling, perhaps. Fashion advice about matching a new dress and some shoes. Your dog has to be put down and you need a shoulder to cry on. You're stuck on where to go for a vacation. Or you have a female problem you don't want to discuss with the doctor."

I had to admire the gal's *froideur*. The Mother ignored her. Turning the full force of her curdling vision on me, she smart-missiled my quailing id. "Well, Waldo! Would you care to gibber an explanation for having left home without permission? Where we waited on you hand and foot. So ungrateful."

"Lawks-a-mussy. Poor Tom's a-cold." [Lear again, not the happiest of plays.] Cold indeed, a hoar-frost was forming on the furniture.

The bottom had fallen out of my world, and judging from the liquid rumblings from my lower intestine, the world was about to fall out of my bottom. After a week of abstinence in the rough, the ten cups of coffee I had just drunk were making themselves felt. Shaken and stirred like no martini I ever tasted, I ran to the bathroom, stomach churning.

The harriidan yelled after me, "Forget the window, Woodson—we're on the twenty-second floor. Concierge level, natch, what else? On second thoughts, go for it! That way out's painless compared to what I have in mind for you."

The words of poor despairing suicide Revd. John Skinner, nineteenth century author of *The Journal of a Somerset Rector*, came to mind: 'Let us close the door. There is nobody at home.' Poor Skinner. Poor Woodrow.

A lack of balm in Gilead

The Mother, I realized upon returning the room, had arrived on a floodtide of gin, which she was replenishing from the mini-bar before renewing her tirade of *ad hominem* abuse. The air was redolent of the juniper berry. When I tottered back into the room, for auld lang syne I sucked in the liquorous air straight. Of tonic water, containing the antipyretic quinine, or any other mixer, I had no need—just straight booze and never mind the glass. As Hermione's verbal combers crashed upon the beach of my brain, I took in about every twentieth word.

Medusa, there was no doubt about it, was squiffy. In liquor and less than sober. Not just well oiled; not merely tiddled, tight or tipsy; but blasted, blitzed, blotto, bombed, canned, corned and cut. Destroyed. Hammered, high. In her cups, in the bag, crocked, jagged, jugged, juiced, legless, lit, loaded, looped and out of her skull. She was pickled, pie-eyed, pissed, pixilated, plastered, ploughed and polluted. Rat-arsed or ratted, ripped, schnockered, shitfaced and skunked. Sloshed, smashed, soused, sozzled, stewed, stinko, stoned and swacked. Tanked, three sheets in the wind, toasted, trashed, wasted, whiffled, wrecked. Zonked.

Though there was no imminent sign that she was about to throw up, barf, chunder, up-chuck, heave, honk, hurl, toss her cookies, laugh liquidly, pandiculate (yawn) in Technicolor, ralph, retch, be sick, spew, or express an urgent desire to talk to God...*'Oh God'*...on the great white telephone: it was clear that she was as drunk as an ape, a beggar, a fiddler, a fish, a lord, a mouse, a wheelbarrow. As David's sow. I knew, because I had been all of them. Full well I could tell when a fellow had been on the sauce or hitting the bottle; had had a snort too many or a snootful, hoisted more than a few, or over-tipped his elbow; spliced the mainbrace, or done to excess what men do when the sun is over the yard-arm; when it was time for a libation and they fancy a dram, a drop, a finger, a noggin, a shot, a slug, a stiffener, a stoup, a tipple, a tot, or a belt or bracer.

Usually the Mother's diet of nails and other assorted hardware was sufficient to give her the highs she craved. She prided herself on being able to spit a thumbtack unerringly across a ballroom at a balloon, having called the one she was aiming at. At formal gatherings she got a kick from puncturing the prominent hindquarters of foreign ambassadors at close range.

Unless her murderous hirelings were lurking outside the door to do

her dirty work for her, today Hermione was in no condition to garrote, torture, electrocute, shoot or knife us. In her present condition she was more likely to injure herself. But her muscle-men were always on call, and might be awaiting the word to haul us out of the hotel in a laundry basket like the victims in the film *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, whom Mrs Meers sells into slavery. Or we might be submerged in freshly poured concrete, or a vat of acid; or Pesci might treat us to a swim wearing lead socks—whatever my mother had in mind as the *coup de grâce du jour*.

As it turned out we had nothing to fear, for the moment at least. With a great sigh, Hermione's bosom deflated and she sank onto the sofa. Then she turned maudlin and informative, spilling her guts like a lush, and we listened intently as she rambled on with unaccustomed honesty.

First, my mother advised that the pesky Pesci was busy choreographing the demise of the plastic surgeon who had wreaked mayhem instead of magic on my brother's face. It was this, of course, that had prompted Hermione's recourse to the bottle. As I shuddered, she confirmed that the private intelligence I had received from Cass was true: Cosmo's face had melted. A patch-up job had only made things worse, because the surgeon's hand was shaking so much that the scalpel he picked up instead of a spackle spatula described several Marks of Zorro in the underlying tissue.

It was not easy to piece together what she was saying, but the gist of it was that I was being invited to stay on the job as President, until some other utterly reliable person could be found to reconstruct the Cosmoan visage. An intensive search process was already under way for a topflight new plastic surgeon who could be guaranteed, given sufficient minatory encouragement, not to screw up. Such an individual would have to be a Michelangelean miniaturist, a veritable Raphael, a Leonardo da Vinci who was confident of being able to restore *The Last Supper* blindfold.

Initially it would be necessary to scrape off the useless hardened plastic. Then a lengthy healing process was necessary before it would be safe to break out a fresh pack of scalpels and the Silly Putty. During the recovery process my sibling's precious bonce will be encased in gauze and bandages, leaving only holes for his eyes. The wrappings would only be removed for the purpose of applying ointments, unguents, salves and herbal concoctions prepared by a team of gypsies, medicine men and witch-doctors.

The new physician, when one of sufficiently high caliber could be

found, would be shown a film starring one of the Mother's ex-veterinarians, a specialist from the Heidelberg zoo who had once attended her beloved poodle, Grendel. This hapless doctor had made the mistake of administering to the pampered pooch a powdered laxative such as is given to a constipated bull elephant. The results were considerably direr than I had just experienced. Hermione had been piqued by Pesci's notion of hurling the veterinarian off the Tarpeian Rock, a cliff on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. In ancient times this had been the approved Latin manner of dispatching traitors. Giving the idea her wholehearted approval and support, she spared no expense in making sure that the job was done properly. The celebrated documentarian Mr Ken Burns was to be retained as a consultant to the project, which he was being told was a historical re-enactment for inclusion in a remake of *Spartacus*. He also directed the cast of Pesci's vet-tossing staffers dressed in period costumes, and the crew's setting up of optimal angles for camera and microphone placement, so as to preserve the doctor's celluloid screams for posterity and replaying to anyone whom in the future Hermione felt might benefit from a screening.

A resonant voice-over was added afterwards, recounting Pesci's Italian forebears' history as holders of the Tarpeian Rock concession. A trailer included highlights of the veterinarian's disfigurement and within-an-inch-of-his-life physical rearrangement on his final night, courtesy of a semi-tame lion—a descendant of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer beast that roars in the title sequence—who Pesci used for illegal gladiatorial spectacles at a rural replica of the Roman forum. Thus the luckless leech was still alive and kicking in the morning when he was flown in for the reality flick plunge. As the doctor made his dive *sans* parachute *sans* sail *sans* wings *sans* everything, two teams filmed the event from above and below as the 'dummy' was given the heave-ho.

As she drained her drink, Hermione added that the successful applicant-draftee-press-ganged new plastic surgeon would be generously compensated with an incentive package that would include, in the event of complete satisfaction with his work and his agreement to certain stringent terms and conditions, his staying alive.

The New Deal

The Mother had therefore come to offer not a *rapprochement* but a truce, distasteful as it was to her. Alas, there had to be a President, and he needed to be a fellow wearing my face. For the time being there was only one person known to meet such a description.

The standards expected of me are high, for it is essential that I not torpedo Cosmo's chances of succeeding as the non-ur me. Although it is approximately two years before a President becomes a lame duck in Office in his second term, my mother is convinced that, unless my behavior is not monitored with the efficiency of a criminal's GPS ankle bracelet, I am likely to be quacking the morning after my first Inauguration.

Consequently, my Presidential duties are to be performed by my Vice-President, Hart Dickey, while I remain sequestered at the ranch, where I can run but not hide from my Secret Service Agents: men who are loyal to my mother owing to several of their nearest and dearest relatives being in her custody at an undisclosed location. My appearances at the White House will be kept to a minimum and orchestrated to the maximum—on a scale of Mahler or Bruckner rather than Mozart or Scarlatti.

Having got that off her chest, my mother smugly reminded me that I had Cassandra's light fingers to thank for all of this, and hoped that she was worth it to me. After all, if it was not for her I could still be paddling in the backwater of my choice. To which I replied that whatever punishment I had to take from my mother was worth it, if it meant being able to be with Cass. At which she gave a ghastly laugh and retorted in a voice laden with irony that she very much doubted it.

Pending Cosmo's restoration, it is shortly to be announced that Governor Cosmo Scrubb has taken a leave of absence, after sustaining multiple lacerations while battling a man-eating shark off a beach in Gulfida, as it attacked a group of children and he raced from his beach hut to their defense. That he succeeded in killing the monster, a brute of record size, with his teeth and bare hands. But the hero was in critical condition and, owing to severe loss of blood from injuries sustained during his two hour Herculean fight, was in no condition to discharge the gubernatorial responsibilities that he was accustomed to taking so seriously. Indeed there was a concern that he might not survive. Consequently the Lieutenant-Governor of Gulfida, a timorous and pliant plant of Hermione's named Nautilus Weed, would take over the Governorship, reporting to Hermione, who would be monitoring his

activities to ensure that Cosmo's legacy to the state remained intact.

Cassandra will be eligible for the same consideration as I. Hermione begrudgingly admitted that, far from having become the laughing-stock and social pariah of Gulfidian society, Cass's popularity is off the charts, and her feisty opinions, ready smile and ribbon-cutting glamour at opening ceremonies are in great demand. The public's imagination has been fired by her dare-devil exploits and zeal for ripping off the rich. By donating the proceeds of her most recent booty to charities and the needy, she has earned herself a niche as the patron saint of the underprivileged masses, and is idolized as a most compassionate philanthropist.

Nonetheless, in return for Hermione pulling some judicial strings with various Justices snapped in compromising situations by her private detectives, to get her off the hook for grand larceny, Cassandra must hold her tongue about what she knows. Which is not difficult for her because she is not a social person and does not talk much to anyone but me.

In due course, when it becomes necessary for Cosmo to die of his wounds so that he might be resurrected as President, Cassandra is to be cast as the chief mourner at his funeral, weeping buckets over her husband's casketed understudy: namely the post-mortem veterinarian, whose mangled and unrecognizable body, preserved for just such an eventuality in Pesci's deep-freeze, will have the honor of lying- rather than standing-in for Cosmo.

The sum of this explained why the Mother, slouched and slurring on the couch, was filling the metaphorical peace-pipe with a few shreds of tobacco as she murdered the last gin miniature.

As I began to digest her comments, my stomach was still rumbling from the after-effects of the coffee. There are still many darks clouds overhead. But on the bright side I am off the hit list. Though not released on parole at least sentence has been suspended, and my days of skulking in the bushes for the time being are over. Temporarily I am in a clone-free environment and Cass and I, the spouse and brother of a first-class louse and daughter-in-law and son of a champion mouse-catcher, are at liberty to enjoy each other's company. Hallelujah!

An apple a day...

Fantasy broke in, or reality, depending on how one looks at it. Days later I am back at the ranch, aboard the Frigate that takes us Lands away [Emily Dickinson], i.e. reading a Book, on the verandah. Cassandra has done another vanishing act, whither I have no idea, leaving me lonely and depressed.

So when the Old Man raced up in a pick-up and a cloud of exhaust, I was mighty glad to see him.

Dad came straight to the point. It was apparent that he had only just been apprised of my reprieve from being pursued by the Furies, or Erinyes. How typical of the Mother not to tell him.

“Where the feck have you been? I’ve been looking for you all over Hell’s half-acre. Getting away was impossible. Your mother’s watchdogs—now that I no longer qualify for a security detail—were following me every time I set off. Hermie was hoping I’d lead them to you. I kept trying to give them the slip, using tricks I learned at the CIA. Even rode the bus. Meantime the freakin’ poodle gets a driver.”

He was in such a terrible state that I was concerned for him. My tongue loosened in its rusty socket. “I’m really sorry, Dad, there was nothing I could do to contact you, even with Cassandra’s know-how and expertise, without getting us all into deep water. Deeper water. We were constantly on the move. It was a dangerous situation.”

He started breathing more normally. “Well, you’re both safe, and that’s the main thing. Now. It is your father’s solemn duty to report that the world has one less plastic surgeon in it.”

No surprise there. “I knew he had got himself into hot water. What an amazing turn of events. Of course it serves them right, tampering with Nature like that. You know, I was being interviewed in the home state once by some ageing hotshot TV female news anchor once: she’d seen so much sun over the years and had so much work done, she had to put on a special topical silicone cream to prevent her face from dissolving under the studio lights. Though they said she was seventy-five years old, she looked less than half that. When she crossed her legs, her ears waggled, which made it difficult to concentrate on one’s answers. Politicians hated talking to her because they forgot what they were supposed to be saying, they were so distracted, and she trapped them into saying things they didn’t want to or shouldn’t have mentioned, or they got things messed up so that they didn’t spin right. Needless to say she put me right off my stride and made me look even more foolish than usual.

“You know, when they cremate people like that woman, their non-biodegradable gunk clogs up the incineration furnaces. That’s documented. And the churchyards are full of Barbie dolls, Kens too. Not that many people get planted any more, though I understand it’s coming back into fashion. The funeral parlors are going to have to come up with a new strategy to get rid of them, some really powerful solvent. Maybe they can be recycled into something useful, like plastic bottles get made into fleece jackets. I’m surprised Snorr hasn’t jumped on that one, it’s got a lot more potential than that e-store of his for lonely shoes. Instead of a jar of ashes on the mantelpiece, in the future one will be able to say ‘Ah yes, my new computer station, or table...that’s Aunt Julia, I had her implasticated. Mind where you put that hot coffee. Last time I spilled some she crashed the system, and put rude messages and lewd pictures on the screen in the night. She also sends viruses to people she doesn’t like. But when she’s behaving, she’s great at picking stocks and I’ve made a bundle on the horses.’”

There was silence as Dad gave me an odd look. “You haven’t spoken to anyone for a while, have you?”

“Not a one. What were you saying?”

“I don’t know. I’ve not been feeling well for weeks. Things got so bad that every time I turned around I either saw or imagined sinister-looking men in trench coats and shades talking into their watches and patting the bulges under their jackets. One of them I recognized as a guy I went to Yale with who dropped out to become a mercenary. Before that he was in the CIA, and when I was put in charge of it he came up behind me in a corridor and tapped me on the shoulder. Then he laughed. Apparently he could have killed me like that, just by tapping me on a nerve in a certain place, or twisting my pinkie. Leaves no marks or evidence.

“Ah, yes, I remember what I was going to say. Don’t speak for a minute. Anent the quack, the surgeon. He got carried away with his own importance, fancying himself as he did as a surgical wizard. Tried to bluff his way out of trouble. You can imagine how that went over. Couldn’t say he hadn’t been warned: the fine print in his contract was not for the faint of heart. Pesci really went to town on him. Hermie told him to show us what he was made of, and he presumed she meant the doctor. He has some frightening-looking tools, Pesci does, heirlooms he has inherited from family members in Sicily. He butchered the man something frightful, it made the *Sopranos* stuff on HBO look like they were playing Old Maid. I saw innards I didn’t know we had.”

“The awful thing was, your mother made me watch. Insisted upon it

so I could pass the details on to you to show how serious she is about the Cosmo program, and to deter you and Cass from stepping out of line again. My God, the screaming! Those eldritch sounds haunt me still, I've been waking up in the night hearing them. And the blood! It was like something out of *Dexter*, the Showtime Miami Metro Police Department blood spatter analyst serial killer guy with the scalpels and plastic sheets. I've seen some bad things in my time, son, and became inured to in-theatre violence and human destruction when I was in the Forces. But the single operation on that surgeon fellow in the basement screening and entertainment room, as they call that Chamber of Horrors, that really shook me and I've never been a squeamish person."

"I'm so sorry Dad. What happened, exactly?"

"I couldn't possibly begin to describe it. First, see, Pesci mounted the doctor on a board like a butterfly without killing it first with formaldehyde. He used a nail gun. Said he'd always heard that acupuncture was painless, and wanted to prove it. He failed. Then he and his cousin from a circus knife-throwing act threw the surgeon's own scalpels at him. They kept score as in a game of darts: I'll leave it to you to guess where the highest points were and the doubles and triples. They were very accurate. Tight grouping. But that was just the warm-up. After the cousin won, Pesci shot a crossbow at the doc and the bolt went through.... Then they hung him upside down and wired his...to a battery and juiced some serious volts through him.

"After a while—the smell, by the way, was horrible—they stopped, waited until he'd finished jerking about, and then started over. They went through this routine several times. Pesci—I couldn't believe I was seeing this—cut off the guy's...and stuck it between the poor toad's teeth...the few of them that were left after they'd.... Do you remember Laurence Olivier as the Nazi dentist operating on Dustin Hoffman without anesthetic in *Marathon Man*? They did it for real and a lot more besides. Throughout all this, you understand, I was being restrained by a couple of those Fascist thugs, so I had no choice but to watch. My eyelids were taped open. Cosmo, the rat, was videoing the whole thing on a camcorder. Your brother, Woodrow!"

"How awful!"

"I'm not done. It wasn't over till it was over. Next, that filthy Eyetie got out some embalming instruments, the ones Egyptians used for drawing organs out through the nostrils, and..."

"Dad! Stop, please! Take a deep breath. Several deep breaths. Hang on, I've got some brown paper bags somewhere. You can put one over your head and do deep breaths to fill and deflate the bag, that's

supposed to do the trick for people when they're hyperventilating. It reduces the air oxygen content, I guess."

A while later my father's gray pallor had faded somewhat. Gradually his wild stallion look reverted to its normal codfish glaze and his lanky frame relaxed. I had not heard him so nervous since Hermione conference-called Saddam Hussein and Muammar Ghaddafi on the Oval Office phone, asking for advice on torturing people the non-Italian way. She wanted some new recipes, she said. When Dad walked in, she threatened to sear his balls on an iron skillet...whereupon Saddam sounded surprised because that was what he was about to suggest.

"Anyway, you get the picture, son. It didn't take long after that. The man was fish-food, glue, landfill, rebar, a scarecrow—whatever she fancies."

I was feeling light-headed myself. I fetched Dad a snifter, found an old half-empty bottle of Armagnac, and watched as he sucked it down. It seemed to do him good; and me too, vicariously, as I inhaled the fumes.

She

I came downstairs for breakfast and was surprised and delighted to find that Dad had stayed over, and was already *à table*, coating himself in the soft-boiled contents of several eggs. That aside, he looked a lot better than he did yesterday.

“What ho, P.” I have been reading P.G. Wodehouse in an attempt to cheer myself up...only to recognize myself in the vacuous Bertie Wooster. Which sicked the black dog of depression on me worse than before.

“Morn’, Dub.” Only Dad and Cass call me Dub.

Heavily yolked as it was, he unleashed his tongue further, no mean achievement at this hour of the morning. “Son, your father is worried about Arthur Cassam.”

“Who he?” Sometimes Dad is enigmatic, and it takes a while to get to the bottom of what he is trying to say.

“Haven’t the faintest idea—that’s the problem. It is the matter of identifying him that is troublesome. Your mother mentioned him at dinnertime over the grilled un-de-boned swordfish and wing-nut salad tossed in Castrol and vinegar, and I’ve been endeavoring to place him ever since.”

“He’s probably just another species of sword-swallower or fire-breather whom she’s interviewing for the staff. A hit-man. Or maybe he’s a plastic surgeon? That’s a specialty much in the family news at the moment. One could check with the American Medical Association. Or, he’s a veterinarian, canine nutritionist, hair colorist, or guru—take your pick. Ignore him, I should. Hang about: Arthur Cassam? Isn’t he that publishing wallah?”

“What? Who?” Dad’s mental Rolodex is exiguous.

“Chairman of Hazzard House. Publisher who gives big advances to celebrities. Do you remember crazy Uncle Wayne who was offered a million bucks for saying he’d slept with the Pope when he was young? Maybe Mother’s lining this Cassam up for Cosmo. Though it would be a lot of money for either a very slim volume or a lot of blank pages. More likely it’s for a book about the poodle as First Pet. There are precedents: First Families make bundles flogging books about their animals, more than some of them get for their memoirs. Phoebe is obsessed with various dog and cat dander-factories—I sneeze and get red eyes the moment I walk into the room. Could be worse: former French President Jacques Chirac was hospitalized after being mauled by his clinically depressed dog.”

“Really. Well, I think you’re right, Dub, your mother did indeed mention one of those...advances.” He made it sound sexual. “She speaks of this Cassam in hushed tones. She reveres him.”

“Nixon’s dog Checkers saved his career in 1952, but it died ten years before Watergate. He got the sympathy idea from FDR’s dog Fala. John Quincy Adams had an alligator. Andrew Jackson’s parrot Poll was brought in to view his owner’s corpse and had to be evicted for swearing, guess where it learned to do that. Buchanan was given elephants by the King of Siam. Theodore Roosevelt had a menagerie including a lion, a hyena, a zebra, rats and snakes. Taft was the last President to own a cow. My namesake Woodrow Wilson grazed sheep on the White House lawn. Coolidge had a zoo and a pet raccoon. I could go on.”

“No! Son, that’s enough. You’re not yourself.”

“True. Sorry. Anyway, congratulations. Buy yourself another cigarette boat.” [In addition to the frequent parachute drops that Paw continues to make, after (as it were) learning the ropes during his WWII days as a bomber pilot, he has a taste for dangerous sports in general. One might count his marriage as one of them. It is as though he has a death-wish, as I have a continual compulsion to escape from the (even by my standard) trammled circumstances of my present life. Ever since his honeymoon he has had a passion for sleek, powerful watercraft and traveling at speed in temperamental machinery that could dice him like a Cuisinart if anything went wrong. He has also recently enrolled on a bomb-disposal course.]

“Don’t think I’ll see a penny of it. Anyway, Hermie and this Cassam blighter have become close. They bill and coo over each other. Speaking of which...” Dad dissolved into giggles, and I looked at him in concern. In his old age, the cracks of a lifetime of matrimonial tension were widening.

Following his gaze over my shoulder, I perceived that Cassandra had entered the room. We had not seen each other since the dramatic occasion of Hermione’s drunken invasion of our suite at the Georgetown Four Seasons. When I write that she entered the room, I presume that is how she chose to arrive, though one never knows for sure. Sometimes I think her particles dissolve in one location and rematerialize elsewhere. Her spatial fluidity is astounding. Of the many possible means of manifesting one’s presence, she always favors the least orthodox. She makes Houdini seem as mobile as a beached whale. Like T.S. Eliot’s Macavity, ‘When a crime’s discovered, then Macavity’s not there!’. When I quoted this to her once, she said (I took

it seriously until she saw that I was taking her seriously and told me she wasn't being serious) that her grandmother was known as 'Old Ma Cavity'. Ma Cavity was a Cajun lady who lived in a bayou, and performed routine and emergency unlicensed dentistry on the locals. The ability, Cass said, to remove pearly objects from her patients, both painlessly and not, is therefore genetically implanted in her.

Cassandra is smooth, shapely and luminous. Under the coping of her auburn tresses lurk crannies and crevices of intrigue. She is also armed with a tree-leveling stare, and, as I have previously mentioned, is well able to defend herself against those who are foolish enough to come the raw prawn with her. The girl is Greek to me: Aphrodite springs to mind, with tricks as manifold as there are positions in the *Kama Sutra*—some of which she has taught me. I am partial to every piece of her, within and without, and flatter myself that my passion is on occasion reciprocated. Though it is hard to be definitive about this, as with everything else about her. Like W.S. Churchill's Russia, she is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

Cass and I exchanged fairly chaste kisses and somewhat of a hug with a grip or two thrown in. Then she went over and kissed the top of Dad's head. "Hullo, old man," she breathed into his ear.

"Ooh again!" pleaded the parent. Dad is a Cass fan too.

"Park it, Methuselah." The goddess spoke with the tolerance of affection.

"Say, Cassandra," he continued blithely, "you wouldn't happen to have any of the Crown Jewels on you, would you? The insurers called, apparently someone has stolen and is trying to fence the Koh-i-noor diamond, would we happen to know anything about it. Or was it the Star of India? In my opinion it's time you moved into a more dependable commodity—cattle futures, say, or pork bellies."

Dad was alluding to Cassandra's recent apprehension by the Law when she got impatient at having to wait to be served in a delicatessen, and helped herself to a German salami off a hook and a foot and a half of French bread (a dangerous combination) from a basket.

Cass bridled. "I was starving. And like the Queen of England I never carry money of my own or wait on line."

"Hoity-toity." Dad affected a high nasal whine not dissimilar to his own. "We were overcome with a primal urge to forage for sustenance, what one understand one's subjects refer to as a *snek*, something that does not require being subjected to a secret process we are informed is known as cooking, which takes place in a room called a kitchen. This sausage, though garlic and spices are foreign to our taste if not that of

our Prussian forebears, and loaf happened to be proximate to our person.”

“I’m warning you, Noah. One tap of my foot and you won’t be able to pee for a week.” She smiled winningly. “Later, guys.”

And she was gone.

The Coronation

Today was my Inauguration, and it passed in a blur.

Last night I had a nightmare that I was dancing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to the music of a hip-hop band—which goes to show how much turmoil my mind is in as it struggles to repair the ravages of reality. I find myself requiring copious draughts of music to soothe my savage breast, and naps in the afternoons to knit the raveled sleeve of care. It fear it is a losing battle, and that by the time this is over I will be as mad as a hatter. The madness of hatters, like the one in Lewis Carroll, was caused by poisonous fumes from the mercury that was used to cure the felt for hats. One of those facts I will not be sharing with my mother.

A man in public office needs charisma, so I just looked the word up in the dictionary. ‘Charism: a favor specially vouchsafed by God, a talent.’

To be a charismatic President it helps no end to have good initials, like FDR or JFK. Mine are WHGS: Woodrow Habakkuk (a minor prophet in the Old Testament) Garfield Scrubb. What were my parents smoking? Woodrow is bad enough, but switching to either of the others earlier in life did not bear contemplating. Twentieth President Garfield served in office for only two hundred days before falling victim to an assassin’s rifle. A surgeon tried to establish the exact location of the bullet, which was lodged near his spine or lung, with a metal detector designed by Alexander Graham Bell...while Garfield was lying on an iron bed. Predictably, the bed caused the metal detector to deviate from its purpose. Infection set in, which weakened his heart, and Garfield lingered in life for a further eighty days during which his only act was to sign an extradition paper before the Man Upstairs did the same for him.

In a hundred years’ time, I cannot imagine anyone saying ‘Oh yes, that was in the golden era of the charismatic WHGS.’

Today, I suppose things could have been worse. It began badly, because Cassandra called from London to advise that she would be unable to attend the Inauguration Ceremony and Ball and other festivities that I foolishly assumed were to follow. How she can not be in town today of all days, I am at a loss to imagine. And Phoebe, after having insisted on directing and overseeing all the catering—hundreds of chicken popovers and soufflés that nobly refused to sink—announced that she is shortly splitting for Mumbai to cater to the starving hordes. Of course all First Ladies are expected to adopt some

cause or other...but none that I know of have chosen to perform their good works eight thousand miles plus offsite. But good for her. I hope she keeps safe and healthy, and that Indians like popovers as well as they do poppadams.

Cassandra said something important had come up, and that I was not to worry. ‘Tis better to have loved and lost [Than never to have loved at all.], she said, quoting the poet Tennyson. I did and do not know how to take this, and I said nothing and refuse to contemplate it now. Damn: ‘Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have lost at all,’ echoed Samuel Butler. Ass. Cass did not sound as though she was in trouble. By way of calming me down, she read me some paragraphs (she had a few moments, she said) from an article in the UK’s *Daily Telegraph* about the inauguration of William Henry Harrison, in 1841. His speech was nearly 10,000 words long, and took two hours to deliver in cold wet weather, during which Harrison wore neither coat nor (?felt) hat. Though it is now doubted that there was a connection between his demise and the inclement conditions (what about the hat?), some few weeks later he was dead, after being unsuccessfully treated for pneumonia and pleurisy with castor oil, Virginia snakeweed, and snakes. It was the shortest American Presidency in history, Cassandra noted. To which I replied that if I was destined to break either of Harrison’s records—for if any subsequent President spoke longer than he did, I am not aware of it—it would not be because I caught a deadly cold, nor because my speech was lengthier than his. In fact, mine might be the briefest on record. [I had lengthened the single sentence that my speechwriters had given me to three, with a valedictory flourish of, ‘Well, there it is. That’s all, folks.’ Fact is, it is unlikely that anyone knew I had spoken at all: Vice-President ‘Ticker’ Dickey informed me that the cameras would be trained elsewhere in order to keep my face unmemorable until Brother Cosmo could face up to take over.]

I was afforded no transportation. Like former President Billy Trucker, but not by choice, I walked (in my case alone while my wife and parents got rides) down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol building. Allegedly a limo driver had been assigned to me, but he got a cash fare to Dulles airport at the last moment.

As I took my big step onto the platform of the world at the ceremony, I looked at Phoebe—the Popover, my Pops—mentally absent under the excrescence of her hairdo, wearing a mail-order smile, and muttering phrases in Marathi and Hindi, the languages of Mumbai. One of two strange women in my life, not much to tell between them

for strangeness. I felt sad that we were not even able to share our differences any more. I imagined how, in a billion years or so, some antennae Stanley Kubrick would discover her topknot and make a film about it. But at least the Pops was here for the Big Day itself, and I felt a brief moment of tenderness for her.

Then, as I raised my right hand to be sworn in, after a false start with my left—the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court smacked me on the wrist for this, snippily advising that he was in a hurry to depart for a vacation in the Samoan Islands. All I could think of was Cass and I, together on a moonlit terrace in the Mediterranean where the food was delicious, the wine resinous, and the sea warm and phosphorescent.

One pleasurable moment amid the tension was afforded by seeing Senator Snorr in the audience accompanied by, on this occasion, an obviously not-so-adoring wife. I attempted to resist the temptation to gloat, failed, and nearly wet myself from trying not to laugh. Snorr looked so sorry for himself, at being forced to watch while I bungled the task that he had rehearsed so often in front of the mirror. I dare say he might have left President William Henry Harrison in the dust, when it came to the length of his speech. What I have spared the nation.

Then I shook the reluctant hand of the outgoing First Lady, newly a senator herself and the recipient of eight million dollars for her unwritten memoirs. The sight of the woman sobered me up, and I was already sober, worse luck. I was reminded of Germaine Greer's comment that the late President's wife has an un-meetable gaze and was as elusive as 'a lizard sliding off a roof'. When she fired a glance at me, like the twin barrels of a shotgun at a rabbit ('That's all, folks.')...like T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, I confess that, 'In short, I was afraid.'

Ain't I a stinker.

Pop goes The Lizard

I am grateful to the Popover for sticking by my side through this, up to a point. She is remaining in Washington for a few days, while arranging a cargo of food and water and medical supplies to be shipped to India.

For our public appearances, Mrs Phoebe Scrubb donned her favorite outfit, a Nylon garment made out of off-cuts from Allied Carpets.

We were honored to receive a tour of the White House from the former First Lady, the Lizard, who primped, simpered and preened before the cameras, and then attempted to hustle Mrs Scrubb out of microphone range. That woman (the Liz) frightens the hell out of me, almost as much as the Mother does. She has an eye that can open an oyster at ten paces, and stare down a basilisk.

The Pops was not having any of it. Having spent the campaign maintaining that she is allergic to interviews and greatly averse to being in the public eye, she stole the show by telling everyone in fascinating detail how familiar she already is with 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, dating from the time of Scrubb senior's incumbency as President. She said that it was her immediate intention to arrange for the place to be redecorated from top to bottom, and to have every trace removed of the previous residents' occupation down to the image of their faces in the mirrors.

Frozen-faced with horror, the Liz joined the reporters in lapping up the tidbits that Phoebe tossed out, with a cavalier disregard for confidentiality, regarding peepholes into the bedrooms, the many bugs that were installed *passim* throughout the place, and the hiding places in which—inside sources had revealed to her—the previous First Family were known to have placed presents from foreign countries that they deemed inappropriate for gifting to the nation. And she drew attention to the team of professionals who were going inside as she spoke, to make an inventory of the furniture, rugs, fixtures and fittings, artwork and *objets d'art*, lest any of these items, she stated, should be tempted to loyally accompany the emeritus couple as they departed.

Phoebe also recounted information about the outgoing pair's domestic dramas and squabbles and quirky personal habits: things that White House code requires the staff never to reveal. Such rules did not apply to her, she said, who was free to tell how much in-house entertainment these had provided over the last eight years. Red Netflix envelopes are scarce at 1600.

Amazed that the sun had at least temporarily popped out from behind the clouds in Phoebe's head, I was reminded of the occasion those years ago at the White House when Dad was President and, after I had had a few drinks, as a prank I got a very young technical whiz called Mike Dell (whose fellow Texican father is our family's orthodontist and a friend) to install the listening devices.

Ah, those were the days.

On taking all this in, the Lizard's gizzard emitted a strangled sound, the balloon of her chest deflated, and the bottoms of her pantsuit rolled and unrolled. Clapping both hands to her mouth, she turned beet red and tried to scuttle inside, as if she had forgotten something; upon which the Pops' grapnel grasp shot out and restrained her. After a brief tussle, my wife punched La Liz in the midriff and winded her sufficiently to bring her to her knees. But she must be one tough lady, because in a trice she was up again, bruising her fists on Phoebe's head, and tearing her manicured nails on the industrial fabric of her suit.

Then the Pops, glancing at her watch and sensing that she could make the evening headlines if she acted quickly, treated her adversary to a Scottish handshake, as the head-butt is called in Caledonia. The onlookers groaned in sympathy, and this time the Lizard was flat on the ground and unconscious. As she slowly came to, she dry-washed her hands like Lady Macbeth. Phoebe's Nylon suit crackled with static electricity in victory...prematurely, for the bint bit her on the arm and slithered indoors.

As we waited for her to return, and first-aid was administered to Feebs, speculation grew amongst the assembled media that the Lizard had indeed remembered some precious item or embarrassing document that had been left behind in the moving process. I guessed that a vision of her jumbo-sized book advance going down the Swanee was also dancing in her head; which would be to the satisfaction of the Pope, who was only ahead by a parson's nose in the size of his own advance against royalties.

Feeling a vibration in my pocket, I pulled out my pager, and saw Bob Woodward's name.

Ten minutes later Liz returned, out of breath, bug-eyed and flushed. She was walking awkwardly, her jacket was bulging in a more than usually unflattering manner, and she was chewing something large enough to choke a pelican. Judging from her look, she was vowing to clog the Pops (Hermione's Ignacio Pesci administers a harsher treatment entailing the popping of clogs). Poor dear Phoebe: the Lizard's arm is long, and amongst the huddled masses in India is

probably the best place for her right now.

Of course we do not yet know what mines and booby-traps La Liz and her husband may have laid as they beat a reluctant and hasty retreat from the White House. No doubt they are already planning a triumphal comeback in the future with roles reversed, she as the President and he as First Laddie. For now, however, they are perforce leading a cadre of very unpleasant individuals of shady aides and phony cronies into political purdah. Inevitably a swath of pardons will have been granted to those who bribed a White House servant to slip an ultimatum under the Presidential bedroom door, accompanied by photographs and recorder tapes and copies of e-mails, citing what they would regret leaking to the public should they for one moment have to fear doing time in choky, spending their days staring at striped sunlight, and worrying about the consequences of dropping the soap in the prison showers.

I wonder: what if I—he, I should say, behalf of my younger and better half, Cosmo—indeed find himself running against the Lizard at the next Election? For Hermione is not one to be satisfied with only a single term for her Snookums, and the next campaign in effect has already started. The gage or gauntlet was thrown down this day on the White House steps; and now that Snorr is *hors de combat* his Party has no viable candidate going forward. Surely a comeback by Snorr is unlikely, unless the worm should turn and be foolish to squirm back to the surface and take on the Lizard as his Party's future nominee; in which case she would surely chew him up and spit him out.

For when one thinks about it, as I am now, Liz is really the only opponent worthy of Hermione. Meanwhile my predecessor, her hubby, is off to make the millions in consultancies, book advances and speaking fees that he needs to pay off the exhausted lawyers who have had to defend his errors, indiscretions, contrivances and connivances, and to cushion his existence and rouge his legacy.

I also wonder what a lizard's natural enemies are, other than handbag and boot manufacturers? Snakes, I suppose. No doubt in future Liz shall be guarded by a herd of mongooses. Hermione should consider taking a herpetologist on staff, preferably one descended from whoever was assigned to the Garden of Eden.

As pants the Hart

After I had washed up the breakfast things in the Residence kitchen in my new temporary lodgings at the White House—they have withdrawn all the staff from the Chief Usher down—in an attempt to pretend that everything was normal I was trying to recapture the first fine careless rapture of the wise thrush in Robert Browning's poem *Home-Thoughts, from Abroad*, and settle into Pepysian flow...when my ears picked up the creak of timber.

A shadow fell across the page before me, and I covered the typewriter script with my arm and body. Thus proprietorially crouched I looked up and saw, not a star, but an asteroid: the Matterhornian outline of my former running mate, in the non-aerobic sense, and now Vice-President Hart Dickey, was attempting to effect ingress ('entered' does not convey the sense of a task so much easier described than done) into the sitting-room.

Hart 'Ticker' (his coronary arteries are in a perpetual state of distress) Dickey lives in a perpetual Cimmerian gloom cast by his own shadow, and I wonder whether the old building is capable of supporting him on its upper floors for the duration of his occupancy. The framers of the Constitution had more important things on their minds than overseeing the framing of the White House and the load-bearing capacity of its beams.

I glared at the man to no effect. Hart ignores me with impunity, knowing that not only am I dependent upon him to perform the job for which I am so unsuited; but that if I did not, Hermione would have Pesci water-board me to the point where either I metamorphosed into a fish or became piranha food.

Ticker Dickey is a blubber factory of baleenic proportions. He is a wide load, a colossus of fat, a tallow-catch; a 'weighty Friend' in Quaker parlance. He is not one to trip the light fantastic. Hasty phrases like 'Must run to a meeting' and 'Between slim and none' are not in his vocabulary. When he dies his carcass will be shipped to the arctic circle, where a team of Eskimos will flense him like a whale, cut him into chunks, and use the fat for oil to burn in their lamps for the next century.

As Dickey eased his ponderous preponderance into the room, the door posts protested and begrudgingly adjusted to his girth. Finally the lipid humanoid was safely within, and his bodyguards entered and assumed positions on either side of the door. The Veep fired up a defiant stogie, knowing how much this would annoy me, and my lungs

gagged on the acrid smoke. There was no point in asking the guards to switch on the lights because no brightness could shine through the chthonic gloom and inspissated air.

Such was my surprise at the sudden incursion that I had no time to be afraid. “Hello, man mountain. Mahomet hath no need to approach thee, thou gargantuan gastric gridlock. The nation is grateful that you are giving up a career as a long-distance runner in order to work with me. Mobilize the Catering Corps! Go to MealCon 1! Tithe the voters their kine, their swine, their red port wine. Prairies awake! ‘Beef: It’s what’s for dinner’—and breakfast, and lunch. Ship it by the Sherman-weight. Alert the Commies that we will no longer be sending them our surplus, for there is no surplus. Hart Dickey shall not flag or fail. He shall go on to the end. He must never go hungry. He shall eat at home, he shall eat abroad. He shall eat with growing confidence and growing strength. He shall defend the island of his body whatever the cost may be. He shall eat on the beaches, he shall eat on the landing grounds, he shall eat in the fields and in the streets, he shall eat in the hills; he shall never cease eating. He shall eat in his dreams. He shall eat until we have nothing left to offer him but stale bread, pork rinds and beef dripping.”

“Fuck off,” admonished Dickey in a peevish whine: like many fat men he has a high squeaky voice; and the men in his bodyguard, Bitoff, Mawthen, Heakin and Tew—there has to a quartet to maintain simultaneous line of sight on all quadrants of Ticker’s anatomy—looked threateningly at me.

“Dessert! Let us not forget dessert. Creamy puddings full of calorific goodness to replenish the tissues of our wimps, our nerds, our energy-deprived exercise-crazy population. To fortify and restore our still ailing economy. Oh, Double Dip! Oh, Betty Crocker! Where are the cheesecakes, the *crèmes caramels*, the waffles and pancakes, the pecan pies, the fritters, the maple syrups, the *îles flottantes* and the Baked Alaskas of yesteryear? Yawn, deep-freezes across the land! Let there be chocolate on every face, and ice-cream in every hand until the last syllabub of recorded time.”

“Shove it, asshole.”

“Surely you must be salivating rivers by now, Hart, and ready for a snack. A team of oxen perhaps. But before you go, O penumbral pinguid one—before you test further the structural integrity of the floor; before you give the Deity reason to fear the waning of His powers following His edict ‘Let there be Light!’—a word in the giant clam of your ear, if you please. Since it appears, Hart, that I have been

elected to quadrennial jug in the White House, sentenced to four to eight without the option, I have some advice for you. Mean you already are, but your image needs to be leaner. Our message should not be one of greed run amok. Shed a hundredweight or two, why don't you? Walk around yourself a few times a day, and surprise yourself with how quickly you are demoted to a member of the mammoth family."

My Vice-President brushed the back of his hand over the cordillera of his chins, in a Sicilian gesture of defiance that he must have picked up from Pesci. Then he pumped a ham-like fist in the air, in that objectionable manner of Tiger Woods before hubris socked it to him, and clapped his other hand in the Bristol Bay of his arm. His fingers, I noticed, were like bunches of bananas and his forearm was saurian. The man had substance, to be sure, but no style.

Or so I thought until, with surprising fluidity and grace, he oozed his suddenly curiously soft amoeba-like shape through the exit and disappeared, leaving me none the wiser as to the reason for his flying visit (Hart has never flown anywhere except as sole passenger in a C-130 Hercules). As an elephant can move soundlessly, and as heavy men are capable of dancing daintily, the man without form voided the room and darkness was no longer upon the nap of the carpet.

The partial eclipse was over, and the breathless light came gasping back into the room.

La Donna è mobile

No sooner had I reverted to contemplation of my blighted fortunes, than Hart Dickey's executive assistant Donna Trist entered, as if by way of requesting a separate entry in my log. Permission granted. Actually, I like Donna.

Donna Trist is everything that Hart Dickey is not: she is rail-thin and fit. In a race she could show a clean pair of heels to a springbok. So slender is she that she can enter a room through a crack in the door. In apparently desiring to make a token reduction in the mean combined avoirdupois of him and his helpmeet, Hart did not share Julius Caesar's preference for men about him that were fat; presumably on the with-the-benefit-of-hindsight grounds that a fat lot of good the policy had done Gaius Jules.

"*Donner und blitzen!*", I exclaimed. The cells of the air were still bulging with cellulite from the bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken that was my Number Two.

"Once more with enthusiasm," retorted Donna Trist.

"Sorry. *Bonjour Tristesse*." [Heh. = 'Hello Sadness': poem, Paul Éluard; novel, Françoise Sagan; film starring Deborah Kerr.]

"They asked me to clue you in on a few things." She embarked on a lengthy litany of minutiae. I did not cut her off (it would have been unfair, there is so little of her to start with), neither did I care enough to listen. So the clueing left me without a clue as to what she was talking about.

Donna's calm polite efficient voice, though full of imperatives, I found as soothing as the wash of surf and the lipping of waves on a shingled strand. So I lay my snake-shod feet on the desktop, put my fingertips together and allowed my mind to wander. I departed on a Caribbean cruise with Cassandra. We were the only two on the yacht. We spent the days swimming and scuba diving, and the evenings drinking icy rum-based foo-foo cocktails through straws from tall fruited glasses served with little pink umbrellas in them. At night we lay on deck, buck naked, gazing at the tropical stars. I twiddled absent-mindedly with Cass's nipples, which were the size of capstans, steering us on endless passage through straits and around islands, guided by the constellation of ourselves.

When I came to, Donna had left and it was time to fix a baloney sandwich, hold the mustard, double the sour pickle, and add water to a glass of powdered lemonade for lunch.

Cabinet Nominations, or, 'Er, What's a 1099?'

It is so hard to get good help these days.

The illegal immigrant problem is bad enough without a very high percentage of candidates for public office, many of them wealthy and well-connected, being exposed as guilty of underpaying their personal taxes, employing illegal aliens, and failing to pay Social Security on behalf of their nannies, butlers, cooks and gardeners. There is a dearth of Green Cards amongst the hired help of these people. Embarrassing revelations have occurred so often that it is reasonable to assume that, behind every screen projecting the Wizard of Oz-like backlit giant images of these movers and shakers, crouches a crooked dwarf who has at least one Juan or Dolores driving his or her car, picking up the dry-cleaning and doing the shopping.

But the deeper mystery is how the truth was ever supposed to remain hidden. So ambitious are these persons to be pictured at their nominations grinning inanely in front of the White House seal with the President looking at them adoringly, that they develop amnesia regarding the Cinderella back home mending socks and scrubbing floors and the table under which she is paid.

Many Cabinet positions—there are a thousand or so Presidentially-Appointed positions requiring Senate approval—in consequence remain open for the longest time (and may indeed never be filled) before they may or may not be populated by honest law-abiding second, third, fourth and so on choices, and second-, third- and fourth-rate individuals whose best qualification for office is that they have shown a woeful lack of concern for their contribution to the bankrupting of the Social Security Fund.

These supposed adult and responsible nominees, through some quirk of personality or mental aberration, never reveal their secret until the moment of greatest embarrassment. They are like children who have only to close their eyes to become invisible. Wide-eyed, they smile and simper and act as might be expected of one confident of sailing easily through the rocks of vetting and confirmation procedures, saying all the right things at interview and giving all the right assurances—until it is time to go on oath and camera. Where they are surprised to find themselves facing a highly partial and inquisitorial Senate panel determined to discover everything about them down to the color of their underwear, what they ate for breakfast a year ago, and whether they ever winked at a sheep.

It is not that these people do not have the money or means to do

things on the up-and-up, or that most of them are not intrinsically honest. They do not make a habit of threatening the members of their households with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, should they complain about living conditions and pay, or fail to do what is expected of them. They do not treat them badly or make them work excessively long hours. They do not force them to haul water from the well a mile away and carry it home in pots on their heads; pound laundry on rocks; or clean the toilets with a toothbrush. Most of them would have voted to end slavery.

Few would doubt that, if confirmed in office, these nannied nabobs of non-disclosure would perform adequately. But so many are tripped up when it comes to recalling the immigrant in the basement and seeing the logic of why said immigrant should be remunerated in a manner consistent with the laws enforceable by the Inland Revenue, that one has to wonder about their capacity to serve at all, and what if any Truths they Regard as being Self-Evident. Is it that they consider the rules apply to everyone but them? That they are impervious to scrutiny, proof against audit? That they deserve a free pass or are owed some equivalent of diplomatic immunity? What is it that lies inside their co-ops, and their guarded and alarmed mansions, and their bank vaults, that they consider to be so secret, private, off-limits and nobody else's business? On what grounds, except that of taking a cut in pay to do a boring thankless job (in which case no one would blame them for saying so), do they believe that they are entitled to the common trust?

One will never know. All that can be said is that there is a pool of foolhardy people eager to rush to impale themselves on the palisade of public opinion. Administration after administration is plagued by the mini-scandals that they cause, and still the lesson goes unlearned.

It therefore seems to me reasonable and advisable and necessary that every person who has survived exhaustive deposition and examination regarding the number of wetbacks in his/her household, and is still being considered as a Presidential nominee for any government office requiring Senate approval, should be required to personally fill out, without assistance by his or her accountant or lawyer or PR person, the following questionnaire, before being asked in for coffee by the selection committee and cuffed to a polygraph machine:

To all Candidates for Consideration for Public Office

Without excuse, cavil or ambiguity, answer each of the

following questions. No, all of them. Yes, every single one. You are encouraged to take as long as you need to answer all questions as fully as possible, and to avoid creativity. A single 'I don't recall'; 'Don't know'; 'I'll take the Fifth on this one'; 'I've forgotten'; 'None that I can remember'; 'Not that I know of'; 'It was such a long time ago...'; 'Wasn't there'; 'With the benefit of hindsight...'; 'What planet are you from?'; 'You can't be serious!'; 'It depends on how you define sex'; 'Talk to my lawyer/accountant'; or variations thereupon will result in disqualification without the right of appeal.

Attach your tax returns for the last ten years. Include receipts for all deductions, including gambling losses, and amounts/goods donated to registered charities. Provide a complete list of all your monetary deposits, both onshore and offshore, and in all currencies, segregated by amount in each named financial institution. Supply the Swiss bank account numbers. Itemize all outstanding debt. Share your Equifax credit rating details.

Ready?

Ready yet? Tick-tock.

Proceed anyway. Now.

1. Wealth What is your net worth as independently verified by three AICPA-accredited accountants? OK, two AICPAs. OK, you can split the difference between their estimates.

2. Personal tax ,) a) Do you cheat on your taxes? Supply details of methods used, how often, over how many years, and on average for how much per year rounded up to the nearest million. Include all instances of tax-evasion and failures to declare, and false expense and deduction claims. b) Why did you omit/forget/fail to declare what \$€£¥ etc. amounts and interests in your financial holdings disclosures? c) Do you use Turbo

Tax to file your tax returns? d) Do you ever not file for extensions? e) How up to date are you in your tax payments? f) :(If not very, state why not? g) When did you last receive a letter from the IRS, and what was the gist of it however in your opinion unfair, illogical, ungrammatical or incomprehensible? h) :-(How much was the penalty? i) Have you ever been audited, and what was the result of your audit? j) Have you yet settled the outstanding amount in full? k) Why not, and when are you planning on doing so? l) Is your passport current? m) Do you have an accountant? n) Have any of your accountants/lawyers ever been investigated by the FBI, or done time? o) Have you recently hired an accountant to scrub your taxes? p) Have you ever received a rebate based on an estimate? q) For how much? r) When was the rebate canceled? s) Regarding your gambling habit, and without citing winning or losing as extenuation, itemize amounts wagered on any single event exceeding one thousand dollars.

3. Investments a) Would you be prepared to sell/redeem all your hedge fund, stock, mutual fund, bond, etc. investment accounts, including moneys held in offshore tax havens, tomorrow, irrespective of the parlous state of the securities markets, the shakiness of bonds, the unknown whereabouts of your investment advisers, the detention of certain of your financial managers, the insolvency of PIGS and other countries (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Italy, Iceland, Yada Yada), the weakness of the Euro, and the regrettable relative strength of the dollar? b) Could you do it without wincing and clenching your teeth, or jumping out of an (upper-story) window? c) Would you be able to put the proceeds into a blind trust and still be able to say 'It is an honor to have been called to public office, and to serve in this fine administration'?

4. Employment a) List all corporate boards that you are on in either an executive or non-executive or consultative capacity, and state how long you have served on or been affiliated with each of them. b) How

many attendances are required per annum at board meetings that take place at resorts and are followed by golf? c) That do not take place at a resort and do not involve golf? d) What has been the total compensation/emolument for your services to date on behalf of these companies? Give details. e) What is the total equivalent value of non-financial benefits, including golf and country club memberships, received? List them. f) How many of the companies that you either have been employed by or affiliated with are bankrupt or have filed for bankruptcy or Chapter 11? Any other Chapters? g) Provide details of your professional qualifications to fill such positions or furnish such advice/counseling, and the roles you perform(ed). h) Provide the corporate name, address and contact details within the contiguous states of the USA of the companies/parties for whom you have done or are doing work; the number of hours spent, and the rate per hour, or the flat fee or salary or other compensation received. i) Were you a State or Federal Government employee when the relationship/association/connection with the aforementioned part(y)ies was formed? j) Between what dates, and what was your job description? k) Give the names of all those in the private concern with whom you did business (all of them, not just those you met with in person).

5. Influence peddling a) Are you or have you ever been a professional lobbyist? b) If not, how soon after you may have left office shall you plan on becoming one? c) Do you play or have you ever played any independent consultative role in securing business for companies you either have done business or at which you have connections? d) Which companies? e) Have you ever either steered or influenced the direction of any State or Federal Government funded project that was officially subject to a bidding process? f) What were those projects, and what was their value? g) Reconfirm the amounts by currency contained in your previous answer. h) How much personal compensation did you receive in

each case? i) Do you factor such revenue into your annual budget as regular income?

6. Perquisites and payments in kind a) Do you use or have you ever been a passenger on someone else's private or corporate or chartered aircraft for official business trips? ['Business'=Productive of remunerative compensation (money) that goes into one of your bank accounts.] b) Whose aircraft and whose business? c) What are the other parties' e-mail addresses and telephone numbers (both cell phone and land line). d) Provide all documents relating to number and purpose of trips and details of work supposedly performed; number of miles traveled in the past ten years; destinations; and actual versus as-if cost of using commercial aircraft. Supply fuel receipts in each case. e) Do you have a chauffeur, and who pays his/her wages or salary. In respect of the value of all value of free trips, vacations, transportation, gifts, clothing, free services of any kind or in-kind including construction/domestic work at your house, and any other miscellaneous items and expenses excluding tips, provide full supporting documentation, invoices and receipts, dockets, chits, IOUs. [Yes, all of them. Did you try the other drawer, the safety deposit box, the cupboard and fridge, under the loose floorboard?] i) What fire/flood/burglary at your house? Provide insurance company claims adjuster's report.

Phew. Moving right along.

7. Medical. a) Have you ever been certified as mentally unstable or committed to a lunatic asylum; or undergone compulsory, prescribed or elective psychiatric treatment, or been in therapy, or received psychological counseling? [You may use as many separate sheets of paper as you require to answer this, for attachment to this form.] b) Have you ever indulged in any activity or activities for which a twelve-step program exists? c) How much do you drink, smoke, inject and snort daily? d) Which prescription or illegal drugs are you on, and in what dosage/daily quantity? [The polygraph technicians,

examiners and appointed medical consultants will be the final arbiters/judges of whether or not you are prone to misunderestimation in responding to the last two questions. FYI, completion of this form signifies your agreement to submit to blood, urine and stool tests.] e) Have you been implanted with a pacemaker, or other heart-function assisting device? f) Do you contain any artificial or replacement organs? Which ones? [Breast implants and internal/external prosthetic penile enhancement/enlargement need not be declared unless you wish to boast, or if you think that they shall assist you in the job you wish to be considered eligible for.]

8. Criminal a) Are you at present or have you ever been in prison? Are/were your terms consecutive or concurrent? Absent parole or early release for good behavior, shall you be away for more than 4-8 years or the length of this administration, whichever the greater? b) List all juvenile offences, felonies and misdemeanors that you have been arrested for and/or been bailed out from and/or been convicted of and/or done time for and/or been on probation for and/or been subjected to house arrest (with or without requirement for Global Positioning System criminal offender supervision [court-mandated electronic monitoring device or ankle bracelet wearing requirement] for. c) Cite any other offences that, when revealed, are likely to make the front page of a national newspaper, tabloid or magazine. In your answers refrain from using such phrases as, 'I was a different person then', or 'My hormones were imbalanced when I was a woman, that's why I had the operation.'; 'Times have changed since I...'; 'A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since...'; 'The Law was different when...'; 'In the court of public opinion...'. Give no explanation, do not attempt any justification, and no, you may not ask your lawyer to draft these answers for you. d) Identify all aliases and pseudonyms you may have used over the years.

12. Personal relationships, character and moral character

a) How often have you been married? List your

marriages and/or legal partnerships with members of either sex chronologically, giving dates and durations of each relationship, and noting in each case whether legally separated, or if marriage has been annulled or terminated, and if so for what reason and in consequence of action brought by which party or if by mutual consent, citing terms of settlement [again, use separate sheets if necessary—space is not at a premium here] or by reason of death of partner, stating if the cause of death is being investigated or treated as suspicious by the authorities. b) Do you beat or otherwise mistreat your wife, husband, partner or pets? If so, how often and what is the instrument/implement or method of choice? c) List all instances of publicly evidenced marital physical dispute or spousal abuse, and describe whether involving bodily violence either manual or utilizing weapons or projectiles of any kind, referencing whether or not either party was subsequently accused of being at fault. d) How often and with how many others, both in series and in parallel, do you cheat on your partner(s) of the moment? e) Give names, addresses and current telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of all mistresses/lovers. [As you should know by now, use as much paper as you need]. f) Who, or what, have you slept with over the last ten years? Categorize and distinguish between human (by sex), other mammal, and inanimate object. g) Rate the aforementioned experience according to the degree of satisfaction derived on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most pleasurable. h) When did you last pay for it? What is your average monthly outlay? i) Have you committed date-rape? j) Identify all occasions and circumstances of your acquaintance with bimbos, floozies, pimps, interns, prostitutes, catamites, and anything else that goes bump in the night, either professionally for services rendered or voluntarily or under duress. k) Quantify your daily consumption of Internet, published and video-recorded hard pornography, and indulgence in phone sex.

15. Diaries and memoirs a) Are you a compulsive diary keeper? b) If so, how soon would you envisage

publishing it or writing a tell-all or memoir about your day(s) in government, after you are fired or indicted or leave office? c) Which agent or publisher would you favor, and would you anticipate an auction for the publishing rights? d) Is it too early to predict a film/musical/play/screenplay/documentary? e) Who do you think should star in it? f) Is it likely that books/biographies would be written about you? g) Are you being, or have you ever been, blackmailed, bribed or offered a bribe? [For what amount/how much? Didja take it?] h) To your knowledge, are there any photos or recordings in existence of you in a compromising situation? [Some ignorance or vagueness is permissible here, except if caught *in flagrante delicto*.] i) Do you visit chat rooms? j) How much time do you spend blogging? Tweeting? MySpacing? Facebooking? j) Estimate how open you tend to be in revealing personal information about yourself or others, on cell phones, and in e-mails [1=My middle name is Discretion; 10=Blabbermouth]. k) Are you in the habit of leaving laptops or cell phones in taxis or other public places, or disclosing passwords or PIN numbers to third parties?

14. Public service career advancement a) How often do you lie? Grade incidents of mendacity on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being your definition of a white lie, and 10 the biggest whopper in the world. b) Have you ever been required or asked to take a lie-detector test? [If so, don't think that will make the next one easier to 'pass', and don't believe the scientists who say it's not accurate.] c) Are you allergic to thiopentone sodium? d) Would you make a good leaker, in you own assessment? e) What is your credibility quotient, i.e. how proficient are you at spinning/convincing/misleading people or changing their minds? [If desired, you may attach examples and testimonials. [Method classes are offered to appointees in honing such skills, and refining those of candidates who have demonstrated natural ability or raw aptitude.] [If your answer to the foregoing is Yes, and your documentation is convincing, either crosscut shred or

burn these papers and report for duty at 8.00 a.m. Monday.]

17. Useful contacts Ignoring legislation against soft money, do you know, or have connections who are acquainted with, any potential patrons/donors/deep pockets/Maecenas's/angels/philanthropists who are sympathetic to the Republican Party and may be willing to make financial contributions to it? [You may discount for the purposes of answering this question any crimes such persons may have committed, outstanding warrants for their arrest, extradition or repatriation or rendition orders, or any information about them that may have found its way onto FBI files. Why so? Because FBI Directors are appointed by the President of the United States. They serve ten-year terms unless they resign or are fired by the President before their term is up.] [Irrespective of your possible nomination and/or confirmation for office in this administration, by virtue of completing this form you are obligated to divulge where these individuals may be located, either at home or abroad, whether in hiding or not, and to furnish any and all information about them that may be required of you. On the bright side, such persons may be eligible for such incentives as free nights in the Lincoln Bedroom, the promise of pardons or exoneration for their alleged misdeeds, the expunging of records and incriminating evidence against them, and the guarantee of their return to public life and liberty. Should you mention this to anyone, you will be killed.]

Note to Candidates upon completion of the above

Now that you're finished, be advised that a) Just because you filled in this questionnaire does not mean that you are a prospective nominee for anything, however strong you may believe your credentials or qualifications to be. b) If having vetted you we do offer you a job, subject to Senate committee approval, we intend to use everything you, Tonto, have just told us to keep you from straying off the reservation. We reserve the right to hold nothing

about you in confidence. c) If you believe what Richard Milhaus Nixon said, that ‘There can be no whitewash at the White House’, tick the box below. If you do, it is unlikely that you will be hearing further from us; but you may expect i) a glitch to be revealed in your tax returns that your accountant could not possibly have spotted; and/or ii) the immigration/employment status of the Mexican domestic who was not living in your basement yesterday will be found not to be in order.

God knows that I, Woodrow—Dad’s reluctant dauphin—never longed to curvet like a dolphin in the Yeatsian gong-tormented seas of politics. But, were I an ordinary citizen, I think that I should pass the test...by flunking it.

Just call me Cicero

They are laughing about my first press conference, with good reason. Drooling, actually. It is the knowledge of Big Mother supervision for the next four to eight years—of her watching my every broadcast, listening to my weekly radio address even though she has it scripted for me, and monitoring my every (mis)step—that discombobulates me, scrambles my thoughts, stiffens my larynx and ties my tongue in knots. Syntactical howlers and labyrinthine circumlocution are inevitable. The drivel I spout is the verbal equivalent of committing suicide, and enough to cause the pages of grammar books and dictionaries to yellow and curl.

One part was coherent enough, unfortunately, because the sensical content was worse than my usual gargled garble...or garbled gargle.

“Your opinion on *Roe versus Wade*, Mr President?”

“Well, when Washington was preparing to cross the Delaware, he had to make a tough decision, whether to row or wade. The boats leaked, as did his boots. But the river, like the Jordan, was deep and wide, chilly and cold, he couldn’t swim, and the current was strong. Also his mother was on the other side and she’d be mad at him if he arrived in wet clothes. So he refused Lieutenant Michael’s offer to give him a piggyback and ordered the boats across.”

Where the hell did that come from? What did it have to do with the 1973 Supreme Court case that resulted in a landmark decision regarding abortion, and violation of the Constitutional right to privacy under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment?

Then they asked me my opinion on the unprecedented events of the Election.

“Hey, you couldn’t make that stuff up. Maybe I could. Truth and fiction are strangers, you know. It’s been a fascination, as I’m sure you can imagine. I’m not a very good novelist. But it’d make a pretty interesting novel.”

There was a lot more of the same, which I shall spare myself the indignity of revisiting. Moodily I contemplate the not-very-good novels that I might be capable of writing, should I survive my ordeal and resolve to adhere to a discipline of perspiration-rather-than-inspiration composition and revision.

The Infinite Monkey Theorem posits that generations of chimpanzees might come up with lines of Shakespeare if they were to hit enough typewriter keys at random.

It was Shakespeare, of course, who mused that life was nothing

more than a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing.

I win the New York Marathon!

Manhattan has always held a fascination for me, and continues to be a draw. Having overheard that a certain magnifico's private jet would be headed to New York from Philadelphia early last Sunday, which was forecast to be sunny and unseasonably warm, I caught the 5.25 a.m. Metroliner from DC to Philly and took a taxi to Northeast airport—journeys which prompted not a glimmer of recognition from my few bleary fellow passengers or driver—where I bribed the pilot to stow me in the toilet before the other passengers boarded. My hope was that, since it is a short flight, no one would need to use the can.

The journey went without a hitch in anyone's pants or dress. When the others had disembarked at Teterboro, I hitched an equally anonymous ride from New Jersey over the George Washington Bridge and got dropped at the General Grant National Memorial. Grant's Tomb, as some people know and some may not (Groucho Marx used to ask a riddle on his game show: 'Who is buried in Grant's Tomb?') is where Ulysses S. Grant, American Civil War General and eighteenth President of the United States, is enshrined in muted splendor alongside his wife, Julia Dent. I like Uly, because although he had a tough time as President, he was a man of decency and courage. As well as no stranger to the bottle.

The memorial is also a splendid place for hanging out and watching sail boats and sunsets on the Hudson river.

After Grant and I had finished swapping stories about how we had both now given up drink, I cruised over to the immense and still unfinished Cathedral Church of St John the Divine to check in with an old friend of mine: the great ammonite which is on permanent display there. The ammo is a secretive fella, and you have to know his wavelength, as it were, if one wants to share the secrets of the ocean with him in the Gothic Revival silence. Not that I'm a religious chap, but then it was on to the Riverside Church, where I almost got blown out of the door by the organ-playing as I emerged from the underground rest room. From there I took a bus down the West Side with a view to using my transfer to take the Eighty-sixth Street cross-town through the Park to Fifth Avenue, stopping by the Metropolitan Museum and having a stroll in Central Park.

The Popover Café on Amsterdam Avenue, next to Barney Greengrass, reminded me of the good old days, when Phoebe and I lived in New York and used to come here after shopping at Zabar's on Broadway. The Popover Café was the place where my wife got the

concept for her hair, and, like the uptown joint patronized by the Seinfeld characters, it has increased its thriving business still further as a result of a quirky Parisian left-bank sort of association with Mrs Phoebe Scrubb's coiffure. Though the composition of the Popover Café's signature puff pastry bears no relation to the Feeb's shellacked dome, which by comparison makes cracknel seem like melted butter.

Today, the neighborhood atmosphere, food and service were as good and congenial as I remember it, and I could not help but tune in to the some absorbing tales of matchmaking and marital discord between the middle-aged Jewish women at the surrounding tables.

Outside, chilled by the icy blasts that had arrived to confound the meteorologists' predictions of an Indian summer, while I was huddled with a number of others waiting for the M86 cross-town bus—which I understood had been forever not coming—I introduced myself to a chap who, after recovering from some surprise at being addressed, admitted that his name might be Greengrass; but then again it might not. I asked if he was related to the family who ran the nearby emporium of that name, home of lox and sable and gefilte fish.

"You want to know why?" he answered. "You are Jewish?" In order to buff my non-existent public image, I assured the putative Greengrass that my ancestors had been very Jewish—at least those of them who may have come from the Holy Land. Like young George Washington, I could not tell a lie.

'Twas then that I noticed a number of brown faces around us, looking vexed by the lack of bus. Fearing that my Semitic observation had been overheard, I remarked loudly that, as a matter of fact, one third of my forebears was Jewish, one third African and the remainder Hispanic. It was an ethnic blend of which I was proud, I said, double-checking the math. The ancestral perfection had only been spoilt, I confided, by a WASP who had infiltrated the ancestral line and, in proving to be the um...renegade sheep of the family, blotted the escutcheon. And for good measure I mentioned that one of my uncles was gay. This information was received in stony silence, and so, having despaired of transportation, I set off walking the two long blocks to Central Park to continue my eastward journey on foot. Trying to get into the spirit of things and appear like a native, I followed the example of the insouciant local pedestrians, as they stepped around someone lying on the sidewalk who had been unfortunate enough either to get stabbed or have a heart attack in an area where there is a dearth of accident and emergency departments (on the East Side he would have been patched up or angioplasted and discharged already).

At Central Park West, it became apparent why the cross-town bus had been a no-show: it was the day of the New York Marathon, and the Eighty-sixth Street two-way sunken transverse route across the Park had been closed to traffic by New York's Finest mounted policemen, who were clopping about on horses dispensing steaming piles of dung.

Abandoning my former plan, dodging and weaving between the fast-assembling crowds I headed across the Park up to Ninetieth Street, which is where the runners were due to enter on the Fifth Avenue side coming down from Harlem, before proceeding south on the East Drive down to Central Park South and round to the finish line at Tavern on the Green. It being too early for the first runners to appear for the final leg of the race, the Drive was empty except for an assembly of aid cars and paramedics, SaniCan portable toilets, officials with clipboards, and volunteers manning comfort stations for the runners.

Not having brought an overcoat with me, being on the move seemed the best way to deal with the cold; so I slipped under a barrier and started jogging south. In addition to needing the exercise, though perhaps it was too soon after lunch for aerobic exertion, I was impelled by memories of days gone by when I lived in Manhattan and it was my wont, every morning at dawn, to take my hangover for three laps of the reservoir—considerably earlier than Mrs Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy Onassis put in an appearance—or round the bridle track that rings it to cater for riders from the Claremont Riding Academy on Eighty-ninth Street between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues. Though sober now, that I still run regularly is, I suppose, a throwback to the days when I desperately wanted but lacked the courage to run away from home, and for the feeling of relief I now get from knowing that, for a blessed hour or so, I am off the Mother's radar screen.

It was a joyous experience, despite the lack of proper garb and shoes, and an excellent opportunity to practice for the hollow bids for freedom that I expect also to be making at dawn from the White House. For unlike me my mother is not a morning person, and my Secret Service guards start the day by breakfasting on burgers and fries at nine.

Having set the pedometer on my runner's watch and got my ass in gear, thinking to loop the loop of Central Park, I was delighted when the people gathering behind the barriers started applauding me and shouting their approbation of my performance in an almost manic way. There is nothing like a New York welcome to boost the spirits...especially when one is not aware that there is such a thing as a New York welcome, only a Bronx cheer. As I scooted on, light on my

toes, I kept an eye out for the stick figure of Hart Dickey's assistant, Donna, who is the only one of my domestic menagerie capable of catching me up and radioing for an interception to bring me in. Suspecting as I have for a while that a tracking device has been sewn into my clothes or shoes, or even implanted under my skin while I was asleep, I had little doubt that my minders were on to me. Being exceptionally thin, Donna is not an easy woman to spot, especially in a crowd through which her two-dimensional frame can flit with the greatest of ease. But of her, or any of the gruesome crew of Woodrow-busters, there was no sign.

When I had settled into a rhythm, I was overtaken by a young fellow of color, very lithe and loping along quite easily, who it seemed had also decided on running to stay warm. Less sensibly, the man, who for reason known only to himself was Barefoot in the Park [though not Washington Square Park as in the play by Neil Simon], was wearing a baggy dark suit. But hey, I thought, this is New York, where anything goes fashion-wise so long as it is black. Nonetheless, the jacket and pants, which he was holding up with both hands, were so large and loose that it struck me they could have accommodated his entire family. On the back of the jacket was pinned a card with a number on it, 55. I fancied situations in which the man, who it was clear was off his rocker, had come from Barneys, where a salesperson suggested he take a hike before security was all over him like a cheap suit—whereupon the individual, inspired to do a runner in as much one-hundred-percent worsted as he could lay his hands on for future cutting and alteration to keep him in threads, helped himself to a fifty-five-inch chest jacket and ditto-waist pants, and legged it; or he had ripped the clothes off from the XXXL rail at a cheap designer surplus clothing store on Orchard Street; or he had nipped into an open stage door in the theatre district and pinched them off a costume rack for a play about Jackie Gleason, or from the baritone's wardrobe for a performance of Verdi's *Falstaff* at the Met at Lincoln Center.

I was about to allow this chap to leave me in his wake when it occurred to me to repair some of the race-relations damage I had caused at the bus stop, and score a few humanitarian points by striking up a conversation with one who, perhaps down on his luck and somewhat touched in the head, might appreciate some company. So I shimmied up level with him, excused myself, and politely inquired where he might hail from.

This being New York, the young man was surprised at being addressed, and gave me an appraising look up and down; but then he

replied in decent enough English by mentioning the name of some place he said was in Kenya. Africa being a place that I have not yet got around to boning up on geo-politically, this I felt was the perfect opportunity to gain some firsthand tuition; so since the chap seemed disposed to be friendly, I resolved to keep up with him and engage him further in conversation. If his homeland was jungly and sparsely populated, I thought, it might be a good place to keep in mind for an early retirement, if the natives were welcoming and should I ever manage to extricate myself from the deep mess I am in—which from this point is likely only to get ever more boggy and swampy and quagmire and morass-like. So I began by mentioning how excellent our timing was, since, did he know?, in a short time Central Park would be seething with marathoning lemmings of every age, shape and description, including a number wearing silly costumes, not somber and sad outfits like ours, and mostly nearing the end of their tether. At this the fellow looked at me askance, before saying that this was his first visit to New York, but he hoped to return many times, as well as to Boston where he had had a fabulous time in April.

As merrily we rolled along, my jogging partner shared, of all things, a remarkable item of gossip regarding my late opponent, Senator Snorr. The day before yesterday, at the airport, the carrier that Snorr had deigned to patronize for his flight to New York—inevitably he was due to give a speech, on some environment-related subject at the Waldorf-Astoria—had lost the Senator's luggage. This my companion knew because, upon arriving himself in New York on a charter flight from Nairobi, after the bus arrived at the boarding house in the East Village where he and his fellow tourists were to stay, Snorr's leather Vuittons instead of his similarly delayed carpet grip were delivered to his room. Thus confirming the essential truth of the saying 'Lunch in Paris, dinner in New York, luggage in Bermuda.'

The fellow had had neither the time nor the money to buy new clothes, he said, and no choice but to make do with Snorr's duds. It was not a convenient exchange, because although the briefs were jock-strap tight at the front (a curious observation, I thought) and the suits too...he gestured with a handful of waistband. Because Snorr's tasseled loafers were disproportionately five sizes too small, after attempting to slit the sides with a razorblade to make them wearable he had given up, tossed them in a dumpster and gone barefoot as was his custom at home. He presumed that the Senator was now in possession of his own bag—similarly, he said, there were no items therein that would be of use to Snorr, unless he did not mind using a stranger's toothbrush and wearing

a loincloth.

The game was up as we hove in sight of the finish-line at the Tavern on the Green restaurant, and I was apprehended by a grim-faced posse from Washington, DC. This was a pity, because I was about to confess to my new friend that it was quite possible I should shortly be tiring of the domestic scene, and seeking to move to a congenial spot on the other side of the planet. In the event that his country fit the bill, and the people were the sort to respect the desire for hermit-like privacy of a man suffering from a bad case of Weltschmerz, in return I was going to offer my assistance in dealing with the Immigration and Naturalization Service as sponsor on his behalf, should in the course of his visit he become interested in pursuing the American Dream and becoming a United States citizen.

It afterwards transpired that I had been pacing a new and phenomenal young marathon champion—which more logically explains why there was a number pinned on the back of Senator Snorr's custom-made suit jacket—from the Uasin Gishu District of Kenya; who, despite the restriction of arm movement necessitated by the need to keep his pants up as if he were running a sack race, had gained a half-mile lead over the rest of the field. Running shoes were not a necessity on his calloused feet, accustomed as he was to training without them at altitude over rocky terrain. This admirable Kenyan was this year's record-breaking winner of the Boston Marathon, a man who had gained an instant reputation for speeding up 'Heartbreak Hill' near Boston College between the twentieth and twenty-first mile of that race as easily as Snorr, dressed in a loosely belted hotel bathrobe, was at that moment consoling himself for the loss of his luggage by indulging in a gastronomic marathon by polishing off his third Reuben on rye at the Carnegie Deli while snorting a pickle up each nostril and banging on the table (he may also have hit the wall like any mediocre runner) for an unaccustomedly respectful waiter to bring him a fourth edition of what he was having.

Today, however, just as my companion was with justification believing himself within easy reach of his first New York win, breasting the tape at Tavern on the Green...along came Woodrow, as fresh as a daisy and cocky enough to shoot the breeze with his last rival competitor. Astonished to find that there was anyone ahead of him, and desperate to outstrip me, my road buddy had been trying to display a nonchalance of his own by reciprocating my attempt at conversation. Which explains his increasing breathlessness and moisturization approaching the finish line, as he was unable to find the legs for a final

burst of speed and tripped and fell just as I, having spotted Donna Trist about to cut me off at the head of a panting bunch of Secret Service agents, sprinted through the tape at hundred-meter speed with the intention of completing a Pheidippidean twenty-six miles and three hundred and eight-five yards of my own, or whatsoever distance might lie between me and Freedom, USA.

After a couple of event staff had insisted on wrapping me in a space blanket of silver foil, as if they were going to roast me for the turkey I am in an oven for Hermione's Thanksgiving dinner, the Agents took over and bundled me into the back of an unmarked van. Now my goose was cooked too. Inside the vehicle they cuffed, straitjacketed and blindfolded me, and chained me to the bench in leg-irons as if they were going to haul me off like Hannibal Lecter and put me in a maximum-security institution under twenty-four-hour surveillance by men in white coats for four to eight without the option.

Which is what eventuated, at the White House.

*

Runners, Central Park Reservoir

When body lights are long blown out
We will all be like these dry hemispheres in drought,
Waiting for rain to roil the dust
By night, and seethe the pools,
Assimilating us into one lake;
Doused and drowned.

Sunrise is the bell to quell our fears
And subdue the flailing nightmares—
That which we fled we now pursue
Round ruffled waters
As dawn paints blossom on the Avenue.

Troubled dreams slink into caves
As trumpeting towers and parapets emerge,
And spirit birds appear upon the lake—
Courtiers attending a levee on the moat
Around a royal swan.

*

Ammonite on Display at the Cathedral of St John the Divine

What is in this fossil form,
Forever fixed, eternally surrounded by eternity?
I wrestle with it in my mind, perplexed
By stillness and design.

This horn of Jupiter,
Winding and unwound,
Now rests within the house of God:
The perfect image
Coiled and poised,
A stony model of the flesh,
A pearl accreted for all time.

The ammonite
In its symmetry
Symbolizes Death,
A deferential death whose breath
Is held in effigy.

What quest was in the argonaut?
What humid fantasies and dreams
Consume the chambered nautilus,
Benighted in this cloistered day?

*

Grant's Tomb

At evening on the West Side
The sunset pyre
Burns before the dome
Of Ulysses and Julia.

Round the Riverside Church,
The wrap of darkness is lit with
Stained glass candles of kinetic
Light, illuminating
Memoirs of the General's deeds,
while

With proud disregard
For such marbled virtue,

New Jersey hangs its hero in the sky
Flaming from Colchis
To the Islands of the Blessed,
Where Helius sails
On Ocean Stream.

But tonight it seems
That Phaeton is driving:
Low enough to draw
A thunderbolt from Zeus.

Dullsville, USA

It did not last long. Now that they have minimal need of me again, things have got simple in a hurry. The thrill of the chase, wherein I play the part of the fox as the hunt draws the covert he is lurking in, is over. In return for giving my parole, my dark-suited monitors in Washington have granted me the luxury of an open prison at the ranch with only my loyal dog—I feed it, that is why the mutt is loyal—for company. Such is to be my life henceforth. The only authority I can expect to wield is over a dumb animal, and a poorly trained one at that.

Home on the range, things are primitive, which is how I like it. Dire Straits (as in the band) I am not in, despite the lack of microwave oven, color television or MTV that feature in Mark Knopfler's song *Money for Nothing*. But I brought down from the attic the small old black-and-white television set and hooked it up, using a bent coat hanger in place of the rabbit ears aerial, which I could not find. Switching on the news, I was just in time to hear the anchor announcing that a comment on something or other important was being anxiously awaited from the President. I wondered what the President was going to say.

I realized that from habit I had unplugged the telephone when I arrived. The dog had chewed the pager they gave me, and insisted that I carry on me at all times, to pieces. The cell phone battery was dead. So I reconnected the land line, and made them sweat by calling Dad and jawing for a while. Fiddling while Rome burned for all I knew. If they were trying to reach me, I told the old man, it was too bad: I do not have Call Waiting and there is only one line to the house. The only connection to the Leader of the Western World was down. I said I hoped that no one was launching any missiles on my behalf. Regarding which, I wondered where the suitcase was containing the nuclear bomb codes, the so-called 'Football' that was supposed to follow the President around everywhere, chained to the arm of a military aide. Even if it were in my possession, I have been given no code or password, and must therefore suppose it to be in the hands of a madwoman and Pesci's thugs.

This Serious and Sad thought, like the Laughing Gas episode in *Mary Poppins*, brought Dad and my forced joviality to an end and we said goodbye.

Maybe if Cass were here I should feel more positively about things, as if my life still had purpose and was leading somewhere. As it is I am bewitched, bothered and bewildered, unable to concentrate on anything meaningful. What could any one under such circumstances as I am do?

Shall I ever accomplish anything meaningful?

Question: When is the Prez not the Prez?

Answer: When my Vice-President, Hart Dickey is in charge of running the country, reporting to Hermione. For Ticker is, of course, her pick. That man is one powerful dood with a massive (literally and metaphorically) sphere of influence.

The one thing in the world that sends Ticker's blood pressure soaring more than junk food is...me. He cannot stand to have me around, which is not a criterion for chemistry and a good working relationship between a President and his Veep. Ticker and I have a mutual antipathy that we acknowledge freely to each other. He is as allergic to me as some people are to cats, and after five minutes in my presence he starts fumbling with vials and pillboxes and inhalers. Sometimes when we meet he wears a mask or, on one occasion, horse blinkers. Without them, fifteen minutes of me would be enough to send him to hospital on a stretcher.

Given that Dickey as Veep holds a tie-breaking vote as President of the Senate, one can understand why there is a standing rule that he cannot see me for days before an important vote.

I perversely read him a line from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* the other day, when he telephoned me at the ranch while I was reading. As usual he plunged *in medias res* about something he wanted me to do that I did not follow or understand or want to do or know how to do. Roused to action, I interrupted him and began timing on my watch how long it would take for him to lose his temper.

"Hart, I've just got to this bit in *Don Quixote* where Sancho Panza says, 'As for myself, I must complain of the least pain I feel, unless this business of not complaining extend also to the squires of knight-errants.' Since I, Don Quixote, know that you are incapable of feeling any pain I might be experiencing, I beg to refrain from inquiring, O my Sancho, as to your state of health, though it be the customary polite preliminary to conversations such as this between acquaintances and professionals—because I know that the long version of the answer, and even the short version in your case is long, would take you all day, by which time you might be dead and I should be none the wiser.'

Down the line I heard the sounds of gargling and the phone hitting the desk, followed by shouts and rushing feet. There was a siren in the background. Then all went ominously quiet. Perhaps I had over-egged it, I thought; but then I have a lot of pent-up frustration and annoyance of my own to cope with.

Fifty-five seconds had elapsed from the moment I picked up the

phone—a record. I hung up and reverted to my brown-study contemplation of Cassandra...my Dulcinea. And I quoted to myself from *Don Quixote*, that for although ‘it is essential that every knight-errant be a lover’, as Marcela says: ‘I cannot conceive that the object beloved for its beauty is obliged to return love for love.’

Pharaoh's dream

I had a dream, in my role not as POTUS, President of the United States, but IMPOTENS, INVALIDUS, INFIRMUS, IMBECILLUS. However I lack a Joseph to interpret the vision for me.

I saw four fat cows, which emerged from a river and began feeding in a meadow. They were followed by four other cattle, lean bags of skin and bone, which stood on the riverbank and devoured the four fat and healthy animals. At this point I awoke and went to the bathroom to take half a sleeping-pill. Something, or somebody, was messing with my psyche.

When I fell asleep again, I dreamed that I saw four ears of corn spring up on one stalk, golden-ripe and full. Then four thin, withered and blighted ears appeared and consumed the four good ones. Again I woke up, and went out to take the other half of the pill.

What consumed me, pondering this in the morning over a pot of strong tea, is whether the lean and withered specimens were nourished by what they devoured, and restored to health, or if their condition was an incurable disease. Also, I cannot decide whether the sleek cattle are the fat, dumb and happy ones of business and society, or the *mens sana in corpore sano* folk who are so envied and hated by the emaciated creatures that they are driven to destroy them.

There is more in this, I believe, than a matter of feast and famine. Forces are at work, as Mankind plunges out of orbit faster than the Mir space station. In a million years or so, who is to say that the supreme species of the era might not be...fish, or some fast-developing microbe, or hummingbirds, or trees? [If baobabs should assume supreme genetic office, would they discriminate against poplars? Would the baobabs make the poplars sit in the back of the bus, and insist that they stay out of baobab restaurants?] In due course, likely sooner rather than later as pollution increases and global warming worsens, it is likely that humans are the ones who will become extinct, to be marveled at in glass cases in museums by whatever life form succeeds us, as examples of an intermediate form of life that did not just run its course in an increasingly hostile environment, like the dinosaurs and Neanderthals, but sowed the seeds of its own destruction. Ma Leakey paleontologists of the new ruling class will sift the ruins of our civilization, scratch their heads or whatever part of their bodies they use for thinking, and fail to conclude what made us do as we did.

Fish, fowl, beast, plant and cell: these are the forms of life most likely to perpetuate themselves, by obeying the laws of nature and

following the course determined by their genetic makeup, instincts and composition; while we do not even remain static but regress. They are the ones on the fast track, not us. They adapt, given half a chance, often surprisingly quickly both biologically and in behavior. They do not waste their potential and fritter away their lives by getting drunk, smoking, getting high, eating fatty foods, commuting, being kept on hold on the telephone, devoting their lives to making money, killing each other for reasons other than survival, and generally doing everything possible to diminish their capacity to think rationally and survive to one hundred and twenty years of age, which is the genetically programmed human lifespan. They concentrate on the essentials, just as we did when we were living in caves and nipping into the larder to carve off a slice of dried mammoth to give us the physical strength and mental acuity to invent the wheel, make fire, construct the Pyramids and deconstruct the universe.

Such are the Eliotian cogitations that amaze my troubled midnights and the noon's repose.

*

Intimations of mortality

I am not one for the evenings:
I prefer the simple early morning time
When the mist curls, and the light blinks
And winks on the cherry-blossom, and fog thoughts
Reach into a bland sky.

In the booming silence,
Hidden in the mist,
Gradually the drumming fades;
The pace and variety of sound increases,
The looming stasis dies from the brief
Diurnal prayer, and the ritual seance
Begins again.

Awake I am a grain
Of sand, or floating feather;
Later I will be hidden deep in the house,
Brooding in dark cellars of
Thought calcified in flagstones
Of the pooling hours; while the imperious

Sun beats loudly on the peeling shutters,
And hot lichen spider-creviced stones.

In the evening I will brew my kettle
As the night draws in, mend the fire
And turn to my bed at dusk
Where there be dragons, dreams and tremors.

Home, Sweet Home

Since every prince may hope to be a king,
And I had royal feelings in my blood,
Myself when young expected life to flood
My blue veins with praise, and asked it bring
Me gifts in token of loyalty.

A castle to live in was the next task,
Suitably impressive for me to bask
In a grand style, as befits royalty.
I took a lot of trouble to design
The structure, with thick walls on mountain steep;
A drawbridge, dungeon, towers, moat and keep:
A thrilling project.

However, now it is done the days are slow;
I sit and watch my people come and go.

*

All I know is that, wherever else I am other than the ranch, I want to run away from the present and myself as much as I want to get away from others, and deny whatever the future may hold. My periods of liberty are always too brief, the horizon too close. But here at the ranch, I feel myself absolved of moral responsibility for my lack of desire for engagement with the world, like a monk in a monastery.

The Roman Tiberius Claudius, latterly Emperor Claudius the First and a god, stayed alive because he managed to convince his murderous family that he was a blithering idiot. Fast forward from the year dot—he lived between 10 BC and AD 54—to me, and the lesson here to be learned; for as George Santayana said, ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’

But despite my Mother’s paltry assessment of my intelligence and abilities, and the unlikelihood that my existence is an impediment to her Empire-building strategy, I cannot get rid of this feeling that my life is in her hands, as soon as I have played my role in understudying Cosmo until the makeup department has made him cosmetically ready to take center stage.

I have always lacked self-confidence. As a child, upon entering an occupied room I felt the eyes upon me like searchlights in the dark, and threw up a shield against the arrows of enquiry and inquisition. For

people cannot be comfortable in the presence of another until they have weighed one up, analyzed and categorized one's threat level and capacity to arouse jealousy, reached their conclusions about one and either catalogued one for filing in the cabinet of personal opinion or published a fictional (prejudiced or wrong) version of one's character and personality that enables them to maintain a belief in their exclusivity and superiority. Much of this one can intuit from their voice and body language. The knowledge that people want to satisfy themselves as to what I am dismays me—for the opposing reasons that they may be right or they may be wrong. So I expend a lot of effort, even wear myself out, in sending mixed or misleading signals; in leading people up the garden path and across the fields and getting them lost. In so doing I am aware of my perversity in not wishing the real me to be discovered, so that neither my finer points can be appreciated nor my faults exaggerated.

I have always been unpopular and remained friendless because I do everything I can to resist and remain proof against interpretation and evaluation, and to give away as little as possible of my true self—whatever that might be: I am still searching myself, and Myself throws up as many barriers as I do. Therein may lie my essential problem: that I do not so much have a problem with what others think of me, but with a fear of what I may discover about myself. A further complication is that there are likely to be a number of versions of Me, none of them worthy or nice, and I fear that I am not smart enough to find and understand them.

In order to keep others out and protect myself, I have built a wall around me that no one except Cassandra, who scales walls of any height with the greatest of ease, can surmount. Though had she need of it I would provide rope or ladder for her to climb and descend into my garden of privacy. The conundrum that is Cassandra is that her presence is not intrusive. We get along without fiction or friction. Cassandra, and the images I have of her—both photographic and mental—are the best things in my life. They are my life, and I flatter myself that I reflect well in her mirror.

The ranch, then, is my snail shell, the high fortified place to which I withdraw my tender mollusc flesh, and preserve myself in the rarified atmosphere from the acidic air of scrutiny. Perhaps this is why Hermione is content not to waste her resources in having me under closer supervision, because she understands that I am my own keeper, not my brother's. Maybe she is hoping that some crackpot will happen along and do me in. A letter-bomb is unlikely, since I do not receive

mail. The postman does not consider the ranch part of his appointed round, and only comes up to the house if he needs to use the bathroom.

This parched landscape, with its Texican ticks outdoors and mice and lice within, where the air is filled with the chafing sound of crickets and the lowing of cattle, is to me a peaceful valley where Robbie Burns' sweet Afton Water flows gently among its green braes.

Heeere's Hart

I was pushing papers around my desk in the study when, unannounced—there was no one to announce him—and without knocking Vice-President Hart Dickey entered. I had not been apprised of his visit. Brave of him to come and see me so soon after he nearly had a coronary during our telcon the other day.

I say 'entered' as if it were that simple. But the time of his coming into the room was protracted, owing to the gross of Ticker's bulk exceeding the net of the doorway. During the peristalsis of the man's arrival through the sphincter of the frame, as he squeezed and squozed, I scanned the foothills of chins, base camp and finally Midriff Mountain itself. Then, like the poet Keats, 'felt I like some watcher of the skies |When a new planet swims into his ken.'

"A proxy and his doxy to see the Moron," Dickey announced, breathless and wheezing, when the whole was within and the uncharted Mordorean territories of his posterior had sucked in the sylphlike form of his assistant Donna Trist.

I scooped some paperclips into a drawer. "My jailers, you mean. One of whom has his own zip code, while the other travels airmail. You must be sucking in your gut something rotten, Hart, to get in here. Be careful you don't digest yourself, you'll make yourself fat. Your wife, I gather, lives in the next county and you communicate only by telephone. You have not seen your feet since childhood. Turn on the light, please, Donna, he's blocking the light."

Hart clutched his chest. He was flushed and sweating, and the veins were standing out on his forehead. "You are pleased to have your little joke."

"I was not aware that adjectives such as little, small, tiny or diminutive were in your vocabulary, Hart. Gargantuan, yes. Leviathan, sure. Humongous and elephantine—naturally. But little—surely not. At least your visits are diminutive, as in short. In a minute the continent of your belly will begin to shrink from hunger. It must be, what? half an hour since you have eaten. Perhaps you have a baron of beef in your pocket for emergencies. Others such as I chew gum, or pork rinds as our Presidential nibbles. Reagan was a jelly bean man. But you, instead of shuffling off to Buffalo, you shuffle down buffalo wings by the dozen."

"Put a sock in it, kid, or I'll call Hermione."

I shut up. Already I felt the Exocet missile of the Mother's will targeting my coordinates and my privates.

This was no courtesy visit. Hart was here to acquaint me with a matter of great importance: the new plastic surgeon who is to go back to work on Cosmo has been hired.

My bravado evaporated, and like Falstaff I babbled of green fields. I felt as I had as a child in a recurring nightmare, when I would walk into a dark room so full of ghosts that I was almost smothered as if by giant moths. And there had been another dream, equally bad: I was being chased by wolves, and just as they were nearly upon me, when I opened my mouth to cry for help nothing came out.

I stared at my persecutor, and said nothing. Hart was checking his pulse and looking pleased.

I take my hat off to this doctor fellow; he must be a supremely confident man, very ambitious and with a cast-iron stomach for viewing the Blockbuster-sized inventory of films that Hermione would have shown him of his predecessor bidding the world farewell, and others who, having failed to live up to expectations had exceeded them by dying. Of course, if he really is the best in his profession, it is possible or even likely that he was given no choice in the matter of answering the hypothetical question posed by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr (and stolen by President Kennedy) as to what he could do for his country.

The world, then, is about to be treated to Cosmo *redivivus* as Woodrow. A portrait artist, a phrenologist, and a beautician have been engaged to work in conjunction with the surgeon as he recasts my face, not like the death-mask I will sooner or later wear, but subtly smoothed and glossed to remove or downplay the genetic weaknesses, blemishes and bone-structural imperfections that, according to Mother, I inherited from Dad. And that is not all. With a big view to posterity, a Michelangelo of an architect and a Capability Brown of a landscape engineer have been commissioned to computer-design and oversee a future project executed by an army of sculptors charged with carving Cosmo's Photoshopped likeness on Mount Rushmore adjacent to the Presidential immortals created by Gutzon Borglum—in such a manner as to convey the impression of a distant regard for Washington and Jefferson, a slight acknowledgement of Lincoln, and the giving of a token nod to Teddy Roosevelt. Whereas adherence to the original sadly restricts how much can be done by way of improvement and enhancement, Cosmo's stony features shall be seen to have inhaled a whiff of the first President, absorbed a splash of the third, and to include a dash of Andrew Jackson, a splash of Honest Abe, a non-alcoholic drop of Ulysses S. Grant, and a *soupçon* or spritz of John

Kennedy. After all, who has ever looked that closely at me?, was the Mother's rationale as she worked herself into a frenzy of enthusiasm for Project Skulduggery. She has a point: the willing suspension of disbelief is never in short supply in Kansas, DC.

It shall be impressed upon the Rushmorean workforce, upon pain of their making hard impressions of their own reminiscent of the outline of a Disney cartoon character going splat against or through a hard surface, that Cosmo is their model model. As for the architects and sculptors, a wen or a wart or a zit, or a chisel in the wrong place, and they shall be treated to a top-down vertical fly-by appreciation of their shoddy workmanship. Rock-face plunges are of course now very much on Ignacio Pesci's film-staging résumé, and I can imagine him secretly hoping that the man shall fail; though a hint of that to Hermione, and Pesci would himself be conducting an in-flight interview of his last victim without a parachute.

To the extent that topography does not lend itself to physiognomical verisimilitude, i.e. if the geology and haphazard disposition of outcrops do not lend themselves to what is required—truth in art not being paramount on this mount any more than it is in advertising—a company named Mahommit Polymers, Inc. shall be called in to daub huge quantities of Almay Nearly Naked Cover Up Stick, and quick-setting acrylic, a cousin of Corian, on the mountain so that the sculpting and engineering artists can effect the ideal likeness.

Ronald Reagan left hair-dye on the headrest cover in Air Force One, they say. Who could therefore object to the latest President being memorialized with more luxuriant hair than I have, with unrodentlike ears, and a wider spacing and less pigginess to the eyes? To a greater fullness of the upper lip, extension of the skull to accommodate larger lobes and a cerebellum, and a more prognathous jawline that does not bring to mind the epithet 'chinless wonder'? It is unfair on him, and ungrateful of me, to mention it but Mother has a point when she attributes this genetic baggage to Dad. Under the circumstances it is therefore fair to observe that her own face makes the average volcano look like a grassy knoll, and very likely was what inspired Mount St Helens to explode.

Cosmo's voice-box, too, is going to receive attention, to improve the tone and make it sound less like a bad imitation of Charlton Heston. Some Ear, Nose and Throat specialist will be restringing his vocal cords with the aid of a synthesizer. One trace of President Billy Trucker, and there is no EMT in the world will be able to save the ENT guy.

As Hart and Donna arrived so they departed. Alone once more, there is nothing and nobody I can summon to shoo away my black dog. I am reminded of Thomas More and William Penn, incarcerated in the Tower of London, penning their valedictory works—but alas! I have no Morean *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* bubbling within me; only these pages, which so far recount only my trials and tribulations rather than a representing a Wordsworthian ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’.

Dr Johnson observed that a man’s mind becomes wonderfully concentrated, when he knows that he is to be hanged in a fortnight. I am now more than before convinced that the assurance of liberty that I have received, in return for my full cooperation, is nothing but a piecrust promise: one that is made to be broken. The gibbet awaits me.

‘Prisoner at the bar,’ said the ancient judge at the Old Bailey, holding his ear trumpet the wrong way round; ‘do you have anything to say before I pronounce sentence upon you?’

Prisoner: ‘Bugger all, my lord.’

Judge, frowning, to the Clerk of the Court: ‘What did he say?’

Clerk: ‘He said “Bugger all”, m’lud.’

Judge: ‘Strange. I could have sworn I saw his lips move.’

Bugger all indeed there is to say. There seems to be nothing that I can do to save my skin—only, by an epidermal irony, donate it to my kin.

Father, dear Father

The weather has turned, and we—the dog and I—are witness to torrential rain and flooding. High winds are scaring the tiles off the roof. Last night, there were birds singing through the storm at midnight. And two owls were perched on the tree outside staring in at me; when I waved my arms at them, they just blinked and turned their heads. I felt like a gladiator getting the thumbs-down from Caesar.

Thank God, Dad came to see me. He looks hollow-eyed and angular-featured. Not a good sign. Upon entering he held his hand over his mouth, pointed to the walls, the telephone, the lighting fixtures and the rubber plant, and wagged his ears like Dumbo. I deduced that we were in the presence of listening devices. A bit pointless given that the only sounds are me talking to the animal, and crackly strains of classical music from the old 78s on the gramophone, which I doubt are to the eavesdroppers' taste.

Then he threw away all his caution, we were so glad to see each other. At first he beat about the bush, making no sense. Then he stopped and cleared his throat, reached for the wall to steady himself, and blurted it out.

“Aw, heck, Dub—I’m here to tell you that Cosmo has had his second operation, and it’s, ah, truly amazing. He’s the spitting image of you. He’s far from happy about it, but needs must when you-know-who drives. They’re still blaming Cass for everything, of course. However, this time there were problems with your brother’s voice. For two days he was more Pee-wee Herman than Charlton Heston, like he’d been sniffing nitrogen. More me than you. Pesci went to work on the throat man and made him scream so loud his own voice snapped. The sound of that will give me nightmares. To cover things up until Cosmo’s vocal cords heal, which could be a while, they’re gonna say you’ve been having speech therapy. Jeez Louise, seems Mother Nature’s all agin this wheeze of your mother’s.”

All this was too much for me and I blacked out.

Dear Woodrow

Poor Dad has escaped for a break on his own to Spain, of all places, to relax by watching bullfights. He fancies himself in the role of a matador who, when the taurine pride of the Camargue, all stuck with banderillas, comes hurtling across the ring for the last time, ends the corrida by plunging a sword between its shoulder blades and into its heart. My father too has his dreams.

A letter arrived from him, and I hoped that the missive would contain some words to lighten the mood of a man in his darkest hour. After all Dad is, as a wartime pilot and quondam Director of the CIA, a veteran of unpleasant situations and how to deal with them. Like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, he has lived to tell the tale. He and I have always stuck together and shared our griefs, and derived comfort from each other's proximity even when they remain unspoken between us.

Some red-lining indicated that the letter had been tampered with by the staff censor, but nothing was blacked out. There really was nothing that could be objected to in the contents. Dad and I have mastered the art of writing in invisible ink between the lines.

DEAR DUB—

Howdy, son. Hope you're well. Nothing much to report here.

Love,
Dad

PS. There's an interesting chappie I met in Barsaloner—Ted. Hails from Dubuque, Iowa. Ted arrived a week before I did. He had sensibly decided to take his meals at the hotel, to avoid having to grapple with the dago lingo when ordering his chow. Recommended I did the same.

The joint isn't bad. Jorje the waiter, who turned out to be the same guy as drove me from the airport, is a man of cadaverous mien. He carries a knife in his sock—he showed it to me with a leer before picking his teeth with the point—and has a smattering of Yankee Doodle.

Ted didn't recognize me, but fell on my neck as soon as he heard American voices. He walked by as we were

checking in. I say we...my security detail, the pair of them, at first weren't sure they wanted to come on this trip. They weren't concerned for my safety, they said. The Bask terrorists lived quite a few miles away from Barsaloner, and like to stay close to their wives and families, where they can speak and understand their god-awful ancestral language and six different dialects. They only infrequently make incursions east to blow things and people up. But when I showed my guys the brochure of the Costa Brava, with pictures of scantily clad women on the beaches, they decided that some Iberian R and R would do them good.

Auguring well on this front, there was some female talent on duty at hotel reception, which convinced them that they'd made the right decision.

I'm not sure this is the same hotel I booked into over the Internet, but the cab driver—Jorje—made out like he knew it after I mangled the name a few times. So he should: his mother became sole owner after her husband was killed in a knife fight. Jorje drove like a maniac, and I lost my plane lunch out of the car window in route. We forced a donkey-cart, driver included, over the edge of a cliff on the way. Jorje refused to stop. Then he turned round with a grin on his face—still driving hell for leather round the bend—and said the late donkey owner had once made a pass at his sister, when they were kids, so now they were even. When we arrived, partially in my case, I gave him a hefty tip to stay on his good side, and he spat on my shoe. I presume that's his way of saying, *Mi casa, su casa*.

Last night at dinner, Ted asked if he could share my table. He looked a bit peaked. 'Of course,' I said, 'glad to see someone from back home. Everyone else here is German, French or English, and I don't speak the languages.' My agents were off chatting up the sultry check-in bird at the bar—she's a flamenco dancer, Ted whispered—and they're hoping she might agree to give them a lap dance so they can get their hands on her castanets. The woman, he told me, is Jorje's sister. As well as being beautiful she looks as though she can look after herself; which is probably the only reason her

brother hasn't already carved them with his knife.

So there was nobody at the table but Ted and me. When Jorje brought the soup, he poured half of it in my lap, he was keeping such a close eye on the trio at the bar. Fortunately it was gaz patcho and not hot. I said nothing. He glanced down, tossed Ted's napkin onto the mess and wandered off. Jorje is not a *simpatico* señor.

After Ted had downed quite a lot of the local wine punch—he drank it straight out of the jug on the table, so I decided to abstain and drink the remainder of my soup—he launched into a weird anecdote about his stay before I arrived.

The oddness had started at dinner on his first night, he said....

Ted was speaking in a whisper, so I interrupted him. 'Look here, old man, can't hear you. One knows a bit about foreigners. Unless you talk very loudly and slowly they can't understand a word you say. Turn up the volume a bit, would you?' Ted gave a nervous glance at Jorje, but Jorje's attention was still focused across the room. He proceeded with not much improvement in audibility, and I leaned forward to hear.

On his first day, said Ted, he was served a brace of hefty meatballs. Big juicy things bursting with flavor. Hello, thought Ted, who is a solid trencherman with a waistline to prove it, I'm onto a winner at this place, even if it is damn pricy for a *pensión* and the toilet is a hole in the floor a mile and a half from my room. Pretty darn fingerlickin' good. He used his bread to mop up the sauce, and would have risked Jorje's wrath to ask for more...except that he did not want to risk Jorje's wrath; and frankly it had been a most generous helping.

On the second night, Ted was surprised to be served the same dish again. He thought of saying something, but decided not to annoy Jorje, who was leaning on the bar cleaning his teeth with his knife, by asking him why the re-peat. Jorje's mother, he knew, was also the cook and this was probably her signature dish—a local delicacy, no doubt. Offending the family would be a bad move. Anyway, he thought, can't have too much of a good thing, and, "When in Rome..." He meant

Barsaloner, of course, because we aren't in Greece. Variety, thought Ted, in furrin' parts is the spice of dyspepsia; like Delhi belly and Montezuma's revenge it comes with the territory. And he raised his empty bucket of Sangria at the bar to indicate a desire for a refill.

Come the third evening Ted was actually hoping to get the same staple again—and he was damned if he wasn't in luck. Except that the jumbo portion had shrunk to a fraction of its former plate-obliterating size. Ted was dismayed. As I mentioned he is a big man, size of William "The Refrigerator" Perry the football player, and his trousers didn't stay up if he failed to maintain his girth. New Vell Kwiseen just did not ring his bell, no sir.

Something came over him and Ted rose to the occasion. The honor of Dubuque was at stake, and he topped up his Dutch courage, or would have done if the *mas* Sangria Jorje had delivered hadn't been Spanish. 'Well, slap me for a five-star gringo,' he said out loud, unaware of the *foe par*. Belching, he crooked a finger at Jorje to summon him back to the table. Whether the man liked it or not, and of course he would not, they were going to have words in an international language.

Though ever watchful, the driver-waiter-son of the owner was folding dirty napkins at the sideboard while chewing ice-cubes with a sound like broken glass. With a scowl he put the napkins down, spat ice onto the sawdust floor, and sloped over to Ted's table. Jorje's moustache, which had the wingspan of a pterodactyl, loomed over Ted's head and he was twirling the ice-pick round the fingers of one hand.

'P-Pardon me sir,' said Ted in a voice that was an octave higher than normal, as he found that he had still not consumed sufficient iced Sang-ria to address Jorje with the *sang froid* [good one, Dad] that he would have preferred to keep him from knuckling him a noogy as he chattered; 'is this the Chattanooga...I mean, is this, er, all there is? The portion is so much smaller than usual.' He pointed at the little meatballs on his plate.

Jorje's pterosauric moustache launched itself from the crag of his upper lip, freeing his mouth for speech.

‘Spik?’ he spat, with a glare that turned his eyes to phosphorus and Ted’s to coddled eggs.

‘Yis. Er...um.’ Dubuque realized that he’d gone over the top of the trench without fixing his bayonet. ‘*Viejo amigo. Compadre. Maestro.*’ Ted felt, along with the inadequately perused phrase book in his pocket (the natives responded more favorably to being addressed in their own language), the Geiger counter of his heart registering alarming levels of radioactivity. But there was no going back.

Ted said, ‘Kinda small helping tonight, wooden-cha-say buddy?. *Un poco porción pequeña. ¿Afirmativo? ¿No?* Same entray three days in a row, howzat?’

Like the Rock of Gibraltar Jorje loomed over him, with an expression that would have made Genghis Khan burst into tears...had the Khan-ster ever visited Gib. There was a pause as he twisted the latitudinally opposed ends of his subnasal plumage [where on earth did Dad get that from?], which had returned to roost, with long fingers that—had they not been occupied—Ted imagined around his neck. It was as if he were cranking a propeller. Then the lantern jaw began to open, enveloping Ted in enough garlic to subdue a caveful of vampires.

‘Sometimes, *señor*,’ said Jorje, displaying his gold-filled teeth; ‘sometimes the bull—he win!’

And with that he sashayed back to the bar, laughing hideously. Ted swore that as he did so the trophy head of the toro, the bull, on the wall winked at him.

Now most unfortunately, as a result of my paying close heed to Ted’s subdued narrative so as not to miss anything, I was unaware that the soup bowl before me had been removed. When I looked down, I saw that it had been replaced by a plate on which reposed the halves of two large ovoid objects, as featured in the earlier part of the story. I had already forked down several heavily sauced mouthfuls.

‘Lucky old you,’ observed Ted, cheering up as he noticed and speaking more loudly. ‘They’re sticklers for freshness here, and today the matador obviously got the best of the *corrida*. Enjoy your *cojones*, big guy.’ In

front of Ted was a radish salad, which he must have taken the precaution of ordering before he came in.

I rose, leaned across the table and barfed into his lap, just as I had into that of the Japanese Prime Minister at the State Dinner when I was President.

That was last night. I leave, sleepless, for Gulfida this afternoon to talk to some Brit oilman fella—he calls me “old chum”—about a drilling project he has it in mind for ScrubbOil to partner his company on.

Later,*

DAD

PPS. My security detail is not happy about our sooner than scheduled departure. One of them scored a date tonight with the dark-eyed daughter/sister at the bar. He fixed it with Jorje by impressing him with how he could take out a rat’s eye at ten paces with a cocktail stick. There are a lot of rats in this hotel.

*Earlier? Not clear on the time difference. No one ever tells me hour by hour on planes when I am supposed to change my watch backwards or forwards.

New York City

Desperate for a dose of sanity, I decided to hit New York again, a quick trip just to prove I could make it there and back without being apprehended or anyone knowing that I had absconded.

As before getting away from the ranch was a breeze—which does not say much for the Woodrow-busters' IQ and learning capacity. The most difficult part was summoning the courage to make a break for it. But when I had, it was a simple matter of hitching a seven a.m. ride with the driver/operator of the fortnightly recycle truck, Beppo of Linguini Brothers, getting dropped at the taxi dispatch near the transfer station—the ranch is Beppo's last call—and taking a taxi to the airport; en route thinking how Ignacio Pesci would freak out were he to learn that his family's hated rivals the Linguinis had narrowly missed the opportunity to compact me into a paperweight. Or, had I chosen next week when the garbage man Beppo's brother Zeppo comes, to make landfill of me.

Once in New York I had it in mind to take in some special exhibitions, cruise the art previews at the auction houses, and revisit some old favorites of mine amongst the permanent collection at the Metropolitan Museum—stuff that it had been my intention to do last time during my Great Escape before the circumstances of the marathon intervened.

At the airport, as I was standing in line for a ticket, the woman in front of me turned and gave me a funny look. 'Goofing off again, Bozo? No wonder the country's in the mess it is.' Recognition at last!

Though modern art has always been a blind spot of mine, I have to concede that there is some extraordinary stuff in the New York showrooms. Across the street from MoMA I saw cigarette butts by young Florian Thirst, or one of his assistants, for six hundred thousand dollars. There were an electric-colorful skull painting by a street artist called Baz Quiat; a distinguished and affecting picture of a woman with a long face by Mo Digliani; and a bronze sculpture by Jack O'Metty of a boot with extruding bones—which a man, seeing my look of puzzlement, assured me was a figure on a pedestal. Either way hardly a snip at fifteen million.

The cross-head screwdriver company is trying to flog or will be auctioning off a Picasso painting from a private collection: a large Blue Period rarely seen in public. I was intrigued by the sticker—POA. It sounded rude and so it proved. Having unsuccessfully tried to wake up the guard, I queried a kid who was swaggering around behind a name-

card. 'If you need to ask you can't afford it,' he said in a Hyannis Port voice; "which you obviously can't, not on a salary like yours with no bonus. We don't encourage Lookie Loos, so to you it means *Piss off, Asshole.*" Quick as a flash and witty too, I responded, "You should wash your mouth out with soap and wipe your nose, sonny, before your mother arrives to take you home." He swung on his heel and flounced off.

The Picasso was of a color with my own mood, indigo, like the jazz composition and song, music by Duke Ellington and Barney Bigard, lyrics by Irving Mills...or maybe they were written by Mitchell Parish. Indigo, an expressive shade. Not hyacinth-, or Wedgwood blue; not periwinkle- or cobalt- or azure; not cerulean, navy-, aquamarine, sky-, prussian- or robin's egg-. Indigo.

Mentally I bought it to hang over my bed. Later they sold it for fifty-five million, but it was a copy: I had taken the original with me in my heart.

*

Metropolitan Museum

At Eighty-second and Fifth,
Today the fairest spot
On earth, I go to spin
Thoughts that I can set
Aside to limn.

Atop

Cold sunlit steps
The Metropolitan Museum
Is flowing with the wine
Of humanity.

The expressions
Of the Roman heads seem
Livelier than those,
interim and coy,
That look upon them.
These stone figures are
Mobile—inspired by *Floor*
With the head of Spring,
Transported from a Roman
Villa (Antonine) at Daphne
Near Antioch, thanks to

Pulitzer's bequest...
Though your colors
Are somewhat faded,
Don't think your
Power to animate is jaded:
You are host to a marble
Party, garrulous and loud...
These heads are infinite
From the second century AD,
Traveling
On their gaze to eternity.

Benjamin Altman, dead
At seventy-three, never
Dignified himself more
Than in the acquisition
Of four hundred pieces of
Exquisite Chinese porcelain.
Such ghostly still perfection
Was never matched by Ben
In life more completely than
In this defining moment of
His apotheosis.

I am less tempted
By exotic things across
The balcony, preferring
These tapered simple shapes
With soft underglaze: hues
Of the imperial court: mirror-
Black; yellow; light and dark
Blue; bluish-green, apple-green;
Coral-red, *sang-de-boeuf*,
Peach-bloom and pale celadon;
Creamy white and *clair-de-lune*.

Departed and departing,
Ben
And I: we're both collectors,
Each with our courtyard
Thoughts of moss and topiary

Tidily squared with massive
Terracotta pots. Soul and body
Quietly seated, we listen to
The slight music of the fountain.

Dystopia

Safely back at the ranch, the benefit of my short break has already worn off. I feel as if I were guilty of some crime against humanity, and am rapidly coming to the point where I might be inclined to commit one, for both wanting to be alone and allowing myself to be forced into being alone without asserting myself and demanding the right to live—alone, perhaps, but on my own terms. My insides are full of loathing for the invisible people who are in control of my life.

Even saints have been known to have their moments of vitriolic self-expression. Here are the words of Sir Thomas More to his buddy Erasmus on the subject of heretics: ‘I find that breed of men absolutely loathsome, so much so that, unless they regain their senses, I want to be as hateful to them as anyone can possibly be.’ Since he was Lord Chancellor of England at the time, More was in a position to have these so-called heretics burned at the stake. Now, if he notwithstanding is a saint, what category does that place Hermione in? Shall History commend her for her euthanizing those who do not subscribe to her enlightened and far-sighted beliefs and actions? For offing her elder son because he was not fit to rule? Impossible to say. While sainthood is a posthumous honor conferred after official ecclesiastical deliberation, for similar secular opinionating as to Hermione’s pro bono/malo publico work and deeds to be informed and valid they require airing of all the facts (*vox populi* versus *ipse dixit*); and unlike sainthood they are subject to revision. What is understood only by a few is that her present absolute authority is surreptitious, in harassing and persecuting and pursuing those who offend her, and torturing confessions from those she suspects of disloyalty or wanting to cross her. She is a Tom More for all seasons—except that while More was the second most powerful man in the land under King Henry the Eighth, she is the first omnipotent woman under, meaning beneath rather than above, the law.

I, Woodrow—the word-challenged, the witless, am merely one of a long list of those who have been debelled—vanquished—by Dame Hermione. Only Cosmo the charismatic, her favorite, is immune from her displeasure.

The phone rang and I made the mistake of answering. It was the miscreant frater yet again, still in salacious mood. “‘My dear Mrs Walmisley Hoare,” he announced, “I’m beginning to find this a bore. I’m covered in sweat, you haven’t come yet, And it’s nearly a quarter to four.’ Post meridiem, that is. Hey, Woody, how’s it hangin’?”

“Fuck off, Cosmo.”

“Roger that. ‘It was the good ship Venus, By God, you should have seen us! The figure-head was a nude in bed, Sucking a dead man’s penis.’ You should be so lucky, Wood-row, when the time comes to make your exit. Hubba hubba, bubba.”

This time it was Cosmo who hung up first.

I recalled the Duchess’s lullaby to her child in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*:

‘Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes
He only does it to annoy,
Because he knows it teases.’

It being a Sunday, I cast about for a spiritual thought to expunge such distasteful matter from my mind. Shroffing the shelves I fell upon Dr Johnson, and declaimed to the ceiling rose: “‘Grant, I beseech thee, that another year may not be lost in Idleness, or squandered in unprofitable employment.’” In my case, a year that may otherwise be spent on the run from my persecutors, trying to persuade myself that an enemy ignored is an enemy defeated. Which I will admit is a flawed strategy that cannot work over the long term. I must work therefore to convince myself that, even as a stand-in [*mutatis mutandis*: ‘things being changed that have to be changed’] President of the United States of America, I am not only like Eliot’s Prufrock ‘not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be’...nay, I am the King, and kings are supposed to command loyalty, respect and obedience.

La comédie humaine

It is a sin to seek one's martyrdom (as a preliminary step towards beatification and canonization). It is frowned upon for the lamb to strip off its fleece, roll in garlic and rosemary and leap into a 400 degrees Fahrenheit oven. And yet, at my predecessor's impeachment proceedings, Senator Jekyll cited Tudor King Henry the Eighth's aforementioned Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, as a paragon of virtue. Little does Senator Jekyll know, it seems, about the real Sir Thomas, the author of *Utopia*—a pun on a Greek word meaning 'no place'—which is the story of the idealized society of an imaginary island nation. More was an enigmatic genius who struggled to reconcile the conflicting political and jurisdictional demands of his office, but lost his head for refusing to sign the Act of Supremacy acknowledging that the King, not the Pope, was Supreme Head of the Church of England.

As different as More and I are, I feel a curious sympathy with his contradictory nature. For a long time he kept his fate at bay, possessing as he did a lawyer's ability to argue both sides of a case. Despite possessing religious convictions that I do not share, he was a man who regarded life as a comedy in the modern, non-Dantean, sense that it has a happy ending. Although he wore a hair shirt, was a scholar, and relentlessly persecuted those he regarded as heretics, he also loved elaborate practical jokes.

But he had the misfortune to be serving at the pleasure of a megalomaniac, a Hermione-figure. Thomas More lived in the days when it was high treason (Treasons Act 1534, 26 Hen. VIII. c. 13) to let conscience be one's guide, and when no one would think of offering a Twinkie defense in extenuation for one's action, that it had been committed while suffering from depression, a symptom (not a cause) of which was (not a result of a change in diet from healthy food to sugary Twinkies) that one was trying to be a vegetarian in an age when any beast, fish or fowl that could not elude blade, arrow, spear, hook or net was all that appeared on every menu. More had accepted the chancellorship on the understanding that he owed his duty to God first and King second...and not only until Henry's interests and More's beliefs conflicted. It was an undertaking that Sir Thomas threw in the King's face in his address from the scaffold, though there was a tradition of curbing one's tongue on such occasions. His nemesis Martin Luther, when hauled before the Diet of Worms on charges of heresy, said, '...my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go

against conscience.’ [he may or may not have included the words, ‘Here I stand; I can do no other.’].

As to the charge that he offered himself as a candidate for sainthood, in my opinion More can be exonerated of seeking his death (he believed he could not be convicted as long as he did not explicitly deny that the King was Head of the Church). As it was he received word ‘That he should be carried back to the Tower of London and from thence drawn on a hurdle through the City of London to Tyburn there to be hanged till he should be half dead; that then he should be cut down alive, his privy parts cut off, his belly ripped, his bowels burnt, his four quarters set up over four gates of the City, and his head upon London Bridge.’ Henry, who was an old softy compared to Hermione, commuted this sentence to a simple beheading.

But enough of the good old days.

Twinkle, twinkle

Re: Predestination, Free Will, etc. (what a world lives in that ‘etcetera’)—can we look to the stars to justify our behavior? Are we capable of effecting change in our lives, and improving ourselves if we have a mind so to do; or do we struggle in vain?

Perplexed, I got Cardinal Popesqueak’s number from the White House switchboard, as well as that of some Einstein at NASA, intending to give equal consideration to a representative at each end of the spectrum, and then seek the middle ground. I would have conferenced them, but the phone at the ranch is a rotary dial.

The first said how dare I call him, and the second accused me of being a prank caller. Each hung up on me. I had the switchboard call them back individually to confirm that it was their President calling, and tried to humor each by illustrating my inquiry with a ditty by Ronald Knox.

“There was a young man who said: ‘Damn!
I have suddenly found that I am
A creature that moves
On predestinate grooves,
Not a bus, as one hoped, but a tram.’ Please discuss.”

I sat back, hoping for stimulating input, and in each case there was a long silence.

Finally the Cardinal, after sucking his loose teeth several times, said, “‘The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind.’” “Eh?”, I said. “‘The answer is blowin’ in the wind.’” And he hung up again, presumably having more pressing matters of child molesting or molestation, or Holocaust denial, to attend to or deal with. So Bob Dylan was all he had to contribute on the matter, and for all I know Dylan’s answer is the best one available to Mankind.

The pointy-head expelled a few cubic feet of air on the subject. That is the trouble with the nerd class, they are only too grateful to have an audience. Give them an inch and they take 5.2833 meters recurring. What he had to say was of dubious relevance, and demonstrated that he, and therefore presumably the rest of NASA too, had no interest in the stars except to take their temperature and analyze their gases and measure their energy and radiation and weigh their mass density and identify their mineral and elemental composition and generally deconstruct them to pieces. To what end I have no idea and do not care,

being interested only in data for which, I realized too late, I had come to the wrong place. Which the scientist confirmed, saying that stars were not his bag; his field, that of planets, had narrowed with the demotion of Pluto to dwarf status, a ruling that had prompted an international protest for which he said he was proud to be responsible. His brainwave was to stir up fervor for Pluto by appealing to people's fondness for the Disney dog of that name.

I tried calling the guy to heel, but he continued in the doggy vein by informing me that right now the Dog Star Sirius is the brightest star in the sky, being only nine light-years away. I know about Sirius, so I took the opportunity to inform him back that the ancient Romans noted Sirius appeared when they were at their most bad-tempered, during the hot and humid summers. [Being only nine light years away, it occurs that the thrill of consigning me via rocket into the custody of an ill-tempered dog, while her own equally ill-tempered animal continues to be pampered in its luxurious quarters at home, might be too much for the canophile Hermione to resist. ('Mother, please, you can't be...Sirius?')]]

It was clear to me that, like A.A. Milne's Pooh, both the scientist and the Cardinal are Bears of Very Little Brain when it comes to frontal lobe higher cognitive function matters, and it had been a waste of time calling them. Fortunately at this point the scientist told me that he was being summoned to a meeting about a situation involving a Russian satellite that had knocked one of ours—which for some mysterious reason contains not only Department of Defense data but the Social Security records of every working stiff and retiree in America—out of orbit. Of course I had not been told. Why such information should be circling the earth in a tin can I could not begin to speculate; so I suggested to the scientist that this was CIA disinformation: in reality our bird had been swallowed by some Ian Fleming SPECTRE-(SPecial Executive for Counter-intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion)-like terrorist hijacking craft. The man replied in unscientific earthy Anglo-Saxon language that this was not a credible theory. End of phone call.

When I later on got to read last week's newspapers—mail deliveries to the ranch are irregular—I discovered that the satellite business was neither breaking news nor confidential but a week old.

Visions and revisions

Of the Three Fates, Clotho, who draws the thread of life, and Lachesis, who spins it, have put their feet up on the fender before the log fire at the ranch, while Atropos, having mislaid her shears, goes to the kitchen to hunt in the drawer for the scissors.

Vita brevis. It is as much as I can do not to go back on the bottle.

In is an attempt to divert myself from brooding, this afternoon I visited an old friend of Dad's who is dying by inches in hospital. As I had been warned I found the poor fellow languishing *in extremis*, but he did not appear downhearted. He has lived a good and happy life on his own terms, and he was accepting without complaint that the end was nigh. He has always been devoutly unreligious (rather than irreligious) and was not about to do a Lord Marchmain in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* on his deathbed by reverting to any faith to which he might once have paid lip service. He had enjoyed perfect health until a few weeks ago, and I think that, consciously or unconsciously, he just decided it was time to call it quits. He cannot eat or drink and is being sustained by an intravenous drip. But his eyes are still bright and miss nothing of what is going on around him. Even now his sense of humor has not faded. Normally he is clean-shaven, so I complimented him on his bushy beard, which I said would make Sean Connery jealous. He gave a wry smile and pressed my palm. We both knew that this was farewell, but there was no cause to be maudlin, and it was clear that he was pleased I had come.

Dad's buddy is a little cricket of a guy, a British Air Force Spitfire pilot Squadron Leader during the Second World War, decorated with DSO and DFC medals. Amongst other things, Dad and he have it in common that they were twice shot down. His pal's best friend was killed in a dogfight, and after the war he married the widow, who had been an American nurse at the airfield hospital; moved to her home town in Texicana and got work as an engineer in an aeronautical company; and in due course become an American citizen.

Perhaps a little overcome as I sat with him, he needed to apply his oxygen mask. Once his breathing was even again he appeared to have fallen asleep and I rose to leave. Touching his bony hand I whispered goodbye—only to be arrested by a brief vice-like grip on my wrist. His eyes were still tight shut.

As I walked back down the bleach-swabbed linoleum corridors of the hospital in search of the exit, I felt almost palpably surrounded by a host of spirits as they migrated towards the next phase of their

existences. It struck me that they were like so many salmon returning to their place of birth; except that they were no longer urged by instinct but propelled by destiny. Perhaps it is impossible to distinguish the one from the other. In my inner ear I heard a disembodied voice, as of that of our friend from the ward, booming from the tiny cavity of his chest on which the little door was about to open to release his spirit, reverberating as loudly and clearly as it must have done when he was in his prime.

What class. I departed on light feet.

When I got home I pulled a sheet of paper out of my desk drawer on which, long ago, during a student backpacking trip round Britain and Europe that I made after leaving Harvard and finishing the two-year term of a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford, I had copied some words from a memorial tablet in an old church in England. It is the epitaph of an eighteenth-century child who died at the age of twelve years and six months, and it seems to me fitting to remind myself that, whether one is young or old at the time of one's death by whatever cause, and inexperienced or experienced, everyone's life has equal value and meaning.

The Good Talents he had received from Nature
Were improved by Reflections even at that Tender Age.
He was not only Innocent in his Manners,
But Virtuous upon Principle:
His truly Amiable Temper,
His sacred Regard to Truth & Sincerity,
His Affection & Duty to his Parents
Procured him the Love of all that knew him,
That can only be equalled by their Sorrow for his Loss.

We should all be so blessed. Having long ago committed the words to memory, I consigned the paper to the fire in the boy's memory by way of offering up a prayer for him; and watched the smoke streaming up the chimney to join the little lad where he had departed with so much more than the average person's share of goodness—leaving love in the hearts of those who remained behind, and giving people like me who visit the church cause to read the inscription and wonder at it.

And on behalf of Dad's friend I recited, having had him on my mind, the words spoken by Sir Thomas More at his arraignment before the Commissioners: 'So I verily trust and shall therefore right heartily pray, that...we may yet hereafter in Heaven merrily all meet together, to

our everlasting salvation.’

El Taco Grande

O! Dr Verdigris, Chairman of the Federal Horn of Plenty Bank, let me sing your praises! (I have been reading a fairly recent newspaper.) Let me thank you, Verdigris, for reducing interest rates again and again. Makes me look good without my trying. (Is it good to reduce interest rates?) I thank you; and Cosmo would thank you if he knew who you are and what you do. While you, Verdy, should thank your lucky stars that Hermione has no reason to hang you out to dry atop the neo-Florentine fortress of the Horn of Plenty Bank of New York building—I know it because it is opposite one of my favorite bar’s, Jim Brady’s, and the weird sculptures in Louise Nevelson Plaza, which look even weirder when one exists plastered—after having you keel-hauled by a Manhattan Circle Line cruise boat, in the brochure’s words advertising the trip to tourists, ‘for the full three-hour tour of three rivers, seven major bridges, five boroughs, over twenty-five world renowned landmarks, and, of course, a magnificent close-up of the Statue of Liberty.’

For, Dr Verdigris (you still there, Verdy?), my mother will not tolerate your mismanaging the economy on Cosmo’s watch, causing the Nation to turn its impecunious eyes and her murderous ones on you. I hope for your sake that you never have to be called in front of Congress and admit to being responsible for flushing the economy down the toilet. For if you did, my mother would take hobnail steps to place you under the less than tender care of an unqualified jobbing proctologist: her minestrone-sipping minion, Ignacio Pesci.

Mr Dickey checked in on me by telephone today, to make sure I am behaving myself, and I took the opportunity to point out a racial blunder in the honky Press: ‘Black Democrats are attempting to tar President Scrubb and his Cabinet as anti-minority.’ While Dickey took this on board, I read him the dictionary definition of *Cabinet*: ‘1. A little cabin, hut, soldier’s tent; a rustic cottage; a lodging or tabernacle; the den of a beast. 2. A summer-house or bower. 3. A small chamber; a private room, a boudoir.’ The den of the beast, I said to Ticker, presumably being the meaning closest to describing the overstuffed cabinet that he occupies.

Thanks to the new blood pressure medication that he is on, Hart kept his equanimity and stated that the Administration he was regent of was not anti-minority at all, but calorically high in its appetite for diversity, with a Cabinet that includes four women, two Blacks, two Hispanics, an Asian-American and only five Whites. To which I replied

that that was as may be, but if he would permit me to weigh in further on the subject, one of the Whites—himself—was equal to one hundred men; which meant that he was responsible for heavily tipping the balance of political correctness on the wrong side.

After pausing to pop the next three days'-worth of his pill dosage, Hart informed me that they had decided to broadcast me addressing the nation live on prime-time TV, from the ranch. Live! A camera crew was on its way to the ranch. It will be weeks, apparently, before Cosmo's voice doctor pronounces (heh) him fit to commence work with a suitably ugly lady speech therapist called Velma Croker. Time was of the essence, because the Super Bowl pre-game show would be immediately following, and they were in a hurry to get maximum free coverage before premium advertising rates soared to a million and a half dollars per half minute. All I would have to do is read a prepared statement—the words had been edited down to monosyllabic simplicity and syntactical brevity. The cameraman would cut away from me to a pot plant whenever I got my infamous deer in the headlights look.

I say 'all I would have to do...'. The opening of my mouth and simultaneous inserting of foot is as everyone knows a conjunctive given, even when I have had no hand in the composition of what I am supposed to be saying. Alarmed, I questioned the advisability of the idea, and suggested instead a pre-recorded Presidential radio address, which no one listens to. But Dickey said there was no alternative: the public expects to see and listen to its President occasionally in real time, and they could not wait until Cosmo was ready. His face passed muster, but they could not risk a Milli Vanilli lip-synching disaster.

The I-told-you-so occasion turned out even worse than I feared. Although the words were on the teleprompter, my tongue performed acrobatic feats that made stuntmen around the world cover their eyes as it performed such aerial maneuvers as a trainee pilot might execute in attempting to loop the loop at La Guardia airport in the fog. Haplessly I wound up giving a speech so embarrassing that I will not be able to shave for a week for blushing in the mirror. I cannot bear to set the fragments down. Suffice it to say that drum majorettes, baton and ribbon twirlers everywhere were so disgusted at the inadequacy of their talent as I showed them up as cack-handed amateurs, that they threw their accessories away. Boy Scouts, Navy Seals and round-the-world yachtsmen and -women gasped in awe as I gave lingual demonstrations of reef knots, figures of eight, double sheet and carrick bends, and bowlines-on-the-bight. Impressed as they already were, I went on to tie vocal manharness hitches, honda knots, cloves, killicks, sheepshanks,

prusiks, square lashings, jams, turls and half bloods. Captain Ahab—another man at the end of his rope—jumped into Davy Jones’s locker. That landlubbering blubber-ass lexicologist Dr Samuel Johnson groaned and rolled in his grave. Bill Bombay, the word maven of the *Burrito Times*, missed the deadline on his weekly column on language.

There were wider ramifications. Numerologists and mathematicians were inspired to co-author a paper agreeing with Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, that $2+2=5$. The Dow tumbled and the NASDAQ SQuAANDered a five-year advance. In New York Dr Verdigris threw up in his limousine as he listened on the radio, and called in an extra fifty basis point reduction in interest rates. Producers sighed and added another zero to Jay Leno’s paycheck. In Russia, or whatever satellite country he happened to be in monitoring the annexation of, Anatoly Rasputin chuckled; and Poodle Airey, Prime Minister of Britain, advanced his plan to abandon politics and jump on the SMARM, or Show Me an Avalanche of Real Money, bandwagon as a paid speechifier, political rainmaker for investment banks, and free-lance world savior. Schoolchildren were shushed by their teachers, issued copies of Dan Quayle’s speeches and told to memorize them as examples of rhetorical and oratorical excellence.

And Hermione no doubt tightened her grip on her parang, and instructed Pesci to prepare a lead-lined coffin for the dumping of the worst foot-and-mouth case in history in the oily waters of the Gulf.

After I slunk off for my nap, I dreamed that I was touring Iowa during the election campaign. I was being photographed next to a pigpen on a farm, when a swan off the pond nipped my *gluteus maximus* hard enough to make me squeal. It hurt nearly as much as the snake bite I got from the lady in the Brooklyn nursing home, to whom I returned tweak for tweak as best I was able given that she was in a wheelchair. On CNN, as it broadcast as its the top of the hour story the latest phony Delphic conundrum of old man Verdigris, it cut to a clip of me, in a New York minute of supposedly Bourbon-induced irrational exuberance, getting him to crack a smile by goosing him in front of the cameras. The financial markets went nuts with joy, taking this to mean further good news for the economy.

And last night I dreamed that as I hit the hay I struck my head against the Popover’s, where she lay tarpaulined and unconscious in her hairnet by my side, thereby incurring a nosebleed that would not quit. Cauterized and transported to an ocean dock, as Hermione dressed as Brünnhilde watched in triumph from the quayside I was thrown in the hold of a merchant ship, the SS *Valhalla*, and borne on an ocean of

gore to Byzantium, where I was sold as a slave to the Emperor Constantine.

Go figure, Woodrow. I do not suppose that there is a psychotherapist in the world who would agree to take me on as a patient.

Manhattan on the rocks

Yesterday's mention of Diamond Jim Brady's restaurant and bar in lower, old, New York City prompts further sentimental dwelling upon former Manhattan escapades. Most of them in and between downtown bars—I was never much of a mid- or uptown boy—or with bar-aforethought. Amongst them I have especially fond memories of Harry's at Hanover Square, and Fraunces Tavern, where a former President called George Washington bade farewell to his officers at the end of the Revolutionary War before returning to home to Virginia. Delmonico's, Michaels of John Street, and the Camlet; St Maggie's Café, the Yankee Clipper and the North Star pub at the South Street Seaport. And all the other welcoming joints and nameless dives on and under and above and in between Nassau and William and Fulton and Broad and Cedar and Pine and Wall and Pearl Streets, and Maiden Lane, where the eighteenth women washed the laundry in a stream.

Those thoroughfares are, or were when I knew them, a world unto themselves. The atmosphere changed dramatically once one crossed Church Street to the west and entered the dead concrete—four hundred twenty-five thousand cubic yards of it—and glass zone of Yamasaki and Roth's World Trade Center, which hosts a million seven hundred thousand visitors a year; with its forty-three thousand six hundred windows cleaned by automatic (window-washing) machines, and its semicircle of seven buildings surrounding the wasteland of an outdoor five-acre plaza. I hated the echoing roar of humanity in the concourse containing the boasted largest (the only?) shopping mall on the island, where one 'can buy everything from crystal to cameras to camisoles'. And I, who am an aficionado of subway stations (the night-time goutts of Consolidated Edison steam that issued from the gratings at the top of the steps; the rumble and shake of the trains; the hot greasy fetid stench of the rat-run tunnels) never liked the warren of the Chambers Street and WTC interchanges for the E, A, C and 1, 2, 3, 9 rabbits.

How I detested those Twin Towers, 1 WTC (North Tower) and 2 WTC (South Tower), each with ninety-nine passenger elevators and two great swaying express elevators that are inhaled express heavenwards (next stop Paradise?) for fifty-eight stomach-abandoning ear-popping seconds, through one hundred and seven floors each occupying nearly an acre up to the enclosed Observation Deck and rooftop promenade of Building Two, a quarter of a mile in the air (and a quarter of a mile down), where I found the Olympian view—of seven bridges, six rivers, five boroughs, four stadiums, three airports, two

states and one (count it, one) ocean—curiously unaffected and inferior to that from, say, the observation deck (long closed, but I was allowed a peek) in the crown of the Woolworth Building above the fifty-seventh floor; and the (similarly restricted) seventy-first floor former viewing gallery of the Chrysler Building, or the eighty-sixth and one hundred and second floor Observatories at the Empire State Building.

The top of the World Trade Center is for me not the sort of place where one might believe there could be nothing so romantic as to take one's beloved by the hand and together step out of this world into eternity.

I did not like the antiseptic atmosphere (nor the 'three separate dining experiences' of American and International cuisine) of the Windows on the World restaurant atop Building One, where the Pops liked to be taken for dinner when we could afford it—the telephone number for reservations, from memory, was 938-1111. To my mind the only worthwhile destination on the premises is the TKTS booth on the mezzanine level of the South Tower where one goes for discount seats for Broadway theatres, before exiting gratefully to pay a visit to Manhattan's oldest building across the street: St Paul's Chapel, built in 1776, and linger in the graveyard where many once-prominent citizens are buried.

As for the World Financial Center and the ninety-two acre landfill horror of Battery Park City, which seems like a town on another planet...fuhgeddaboudit.

The Tall Ships Bar at the Vista International Hotel, filled with out-of-town business people, was tolerable only for a quick sharpener on the occasions when I fancied a breath of saltwater air and change of scenery, and detoured from my daily Heritage Trail drinking route, cutting across Church above Liberty and heading for Moran's bar at the marina. Alternatively I might walk down Rector Street past where my grandfather's head office used to be, during the time when he was posted to the Far East for the Shanghai Power and Light Company (in WW2 he made it as far as Singapore before being apprehended by the Japanese and notified that he had won a complimentary three-year vacation in Changi prisoner-of-war camp. After his release he never again could look at a grain of rice). Or visit the Greenwich Street warehouse where my friend Adrian lived, and water and electricity supply was dependent upon him being up to date with rental payments to his Italian landlords.

When late at night I went home to the 10024 ZIP Upper West Side, I took the Number 1 IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Local from Wall,

Fulton Street or Park Place; or the 3 Express, change at 72nd Street; or the Independent A Express or AA Local—one did not wish to find oneself Express after Columbus Circle, or one was beating a nervous track back from 125th Street.

The English Victorian songwriters Edgar Bateman and George Le Brunn wrote: ‘Wiv a ladder and some glasses, |You could see to ’Ackney Marshes, |If it wasn’t for the ’ouses in between.’ Well, if it were not for the Twin Towers one could see to Staten Island...and there are some great bars on Staten Island.

Woof, woof

The dog (Cockney rhyming slang: dog and bone = telephone) rang this afternoon in the study and the dog barked and I answered (the phone) cautiously—a sort of ‘Nyello?’. Several things were surprising about the call. Firstly that the phone should have rung at all, though it is a listed rather than ex-directory number, given the secluded life that I continue to lead at the ranch. For other than my weekly monosyllabic radio—no more TV, thank goodness—midnight address, I have nothing in my calendar. I have no calendar.

Secondly, hearing as I do so rarely from him, I was surprised that the caller should be Hart Dickey. Something was afoot. Usually some teenage intern calls with my humdrum assignments on the unscrambled landline, and so far (or as near) as I know nothing we discuss has been leaked to the Press—which must mean nobody has been listening in who deems my upcoming ribbon-cutting role at the new municipal swimming pool worth dropping word of to the *Gay Ranchman’s News* (circulation: sluggish). Nothing is scrambled in this house except eggs. No one has been round to wave bug-detectors at the light fixtures, and peer under furniture and plant leaves. Not a single reporter has been to the door. I have roused no snaggle-toothed newshounds from the Scrubb shrubbery outside the living-room window. I never get market research, phone company call plan advertising (Ma Bell has written me off as a lost cause) or soliciting calls, or even wrong numbers.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells the Cyclops, Polyphemus, that his name is No Man. No Man and I are well acquainted. Nice as it would be to talk to someone—anyone—here from time to time, sometimes I feel lonelier than Tom Hanks on his desert island in the film *Castaway*, where all he had for company was Wilson the volleyball.

My reactions to head teacher Hart Dickey’s call were to stand up and to check for dirt under my fingernails.

My Vice-President for once was in good humor, and he seemed unconcerned about the danger of speaking freely over an unsecured line. Apparently one of our Lockheed U-2 ‘eye-in-the-sky’ spy aircraft had been detected by a couple of Russian fifth generation prototype Sukhoi T-50s on a test flight. This has caused a dispute between our two nations over whose airspace our plane was in while cruising seventy-five thousand feet above Moscow. My hawkish administration is shocked, shocked that our ‘Dragon Lady’ craft should be thought to have been conducting other than a routine overflight meteorological

survey (the images of President Rasputin on the throne in his private Kremlin toilet were very good but the air quality was bad, Dickey chuckled.)

I said, "This is good news?"

"Certainly," he said. "Because should tensions escalate further—we are doing everything we can to exacerbate the situation—Russia shall be toast. As I speak..."

I gathered that my Secretary of Defense, Pepper Basmati—ever since Ariel Sharon of Israel confessed that he had been too busy ogling her bosom to concentrate on what she was saying, there has been no holding her back or restraining her front—a frighteningly accomplished Indian lady who nearly became a concert pianist, was arranging a keyboard transcription of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* March No. 1, otherwise known as 'Land of Hope and Glory', while a Special Forces team prepared to sneak through the Moscow suburbs towards mad Ivan, a.k.a. Ostrich-Legs Rasputin, where he was skulking in his Kremlin khazi suffering from an upset stomach caused by consuming goods from a goodwill Christmas hamper we sent him, with malice aforethought and hostile intent.

I pictured President Bartlett from the *West Wing* TV show being briefed on Rasputin's gastroenterological sufferance by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

At a parade to celebrate the Russian President's non-recovery, Pepper Basmati, who is also a champion ice-dancer, will skate up the Moskva Canal in a short skirt and conclude her routine with a triple toe loop.

But that would only be, said Dickey, as it were the opening ceremony for an Olympian contest in which the US of A won all the gold medals. Before the Games can begin for real there are a few technical details to sort out. Owing to an executive oversight I still have control over deployment of the United States' national nuclear missile defense arsenal. Although the 'Atomic Football'—the Presidential Emergency Satchel containing the bomb launch codes, which is supposed to follow the President around chained (the black Zero Halliburton briefcase, that is) to the arm of a military aide—is in Dickey's possession, the President's personal identification code can only be accessed from my laptop computer. Normally access can be confirmed from a plastic card contained in the satchel called 'the biscuit'; but Hermione's dog had eaten the biscuit while she was leafing through the Black Book instruction manual that lists in red the retaliatory options: 'Rare, Medium, or Well Done.'

“Dickey, I do not have my laptop computer.”

“It’s in the under-stairs cupboard, and the password is ‘nitwit’, same as your Secret Service nickname, all lower case. Go get the computer now. A Pentagon technician will come on the line to guide you through the procedure necessary to relieve you of the onerous responsibility of being the only one able, in conjunction with the Secretary of Defense, authorized to detonate the United States of America’s nuclear weapons. Eee-ha. National security is a Need to Know thing, and you don’t need to know.”

“Time out, Ticker,” I said. And I gave him a homily to the effect that in my opinion we should decommission and scrap all military hardware, and in the event of conflict go back to good old-fashioned warfare with muskets, sabers and bayonets. It was a lot more fun than flipping the safety cap over a red button. “So you can ixnay the Football game.”

The Veep made a strangled sound and steam issued from the earpiece of my handset. “You will do as you’re told.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes you damn well will or your mother will hear of it. Hold the line.”

On came the youthful voice of the Pentagon technician, who asked me how I was doing today. He sounded about fourteen years old. I could hear zits popping, the inhaling of phlegm, and the sound of wet skin on Polyester as nose was wiped on sleeve. The Kid asked me to turn on my computer, man, so that we could play a really cool preloaded game.

“I don’t have the computer.”

“Mr Scrubb...”

“Mr President to you, junior.”

“...you need to fetch the computer as Mr Dickey told you and...”

“Even if I had it, kiddo, shouldn’t Pepper Basmati be the one talking to me? I thought only Indians were qualified to talk about computers.”

“...then you will clear the existing code activation sequence by entering your password and removing the existing onscreen facial and EyeDentify retina and infra-red iris recognition scan settings, and deleting the mouse pad DigitalPersona Pro biometric fingerprint reader authentication login data. Once all the personal stuff has been taken out we’re done, Mr Scrubb, and I can enter a new code with authentications peculiar to Mr Dickey.”

“Peculiar indeed. You need to remember, kiddo, what they taught

you in school, or what they would be teaching you if you weren't playing hooky, that I am de facto military Commander-in-Chief of the United States of America."

"Only for as long as it takes us to get this done, Mr Scrubb; but like I said, man, it's a really cool game we're gonna play today."

"I once tried to play a competitive amusement arcade video game called Space Invaders."

"Huh. Must have been before my time, Mr Scrubb. Xboxes are history too. Now, I'll hold the line while you go and get the computer."

I laid the handset on the table, went to the kitchen and put on some coffee. While I was waiting for it to filter I talked to the plants on the windowsill as I watered them.

When I got back to the study with my coffee cup and picked up the phone again the kid—who was under the impression that I had returned some minutes before and was already booted up and logged on—was in full flood.

I interrupted him. "Sonny, I'm afraid that I am unable to comply with any of what you are telling me to do."

"What? Why?"

"Because I can't."

"Mr Scrubb, haven't you been listening to what I was saying?"

"No."

"Well, we need to start again."

"No point."

"Why not?"

"Because I donated the computer to the local library—just this morning, actually."

"*Aargh!* You did what?"

"I offered it to Mr Moseiwitch the librarian for use by low-income members of the public who cannot afford or have no access to a computer. I myself have no interest in or use for a computer. Technology is wasted on me. I don't do Internet or e-mail. I write my diary in longhand with a fountain pen. [A lie.] The last mouse I had, not counting the ones in the attic, was a pet."

"*Aargh!* A public donation? To a Mr Moseiwitch? What about the hard drive, Mr Scrubb?"

"The library is only a few miles away. Now Mr Moseiwitch, he's from Leningrad originally and he..."

"St Petersburg. *Aargh!*"

"What?"

"Leningrad is now called St Petersburg."

“Whichever. Mr Moseivitch assured me that I should be most welcome to stay there with members of his family should I choose to visit...for as long as I want, he said, which I thought most hospitable if a little strange. Actually, a friend of Mr Moseiwitch who was over from Russia was with him when I showed up at the library today. Mr Moseiwitch’s friend said that Russians are much more underprivileged than the low income local library patrons, and if Mr Moseiwitch didn’t mind and I was OK with it they probably had more urgent use for the computer back home. All they have in Russia, I understand, are too few very slow clunky desktops. So I was happy to give Mr Moseiwitch’s friend the machine instead, and both he and Mr Moseiwitch were so overwhelmed by my gesture that it brought a tear to all our eyes. Mr M offered me a swig of vodka from his flask, which I declined, naturally. He said that Russian intelligents—he meant intelligent Russians, of course...his English is not that good—will be most grateful for my generosity.”

“Russian Intelligence! *Aargh!*”

“He was so excited about the gift that he could not wait to pass on the news to his boss, on a neat sickle-shaped red telephone that Mr Moseiwitch has on the desk in his office. He must have got it at Sharper Image.”

“*Aargh!* We must get the computer back! Where is Mr Moseiwitch’s friend now?”

“On a plane back to Russia. He said he was already running late to get to the airport when I showed up at the library. So my timing was perfect.”

“*Aargh!* What about the p-password? Of course you didn’t tell him the password.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Thank God for that at least!”

“I didn’t have to. It was written on a yellow sticky on the monitor, and...”

“*Aargh!* What about activation of the personal identification procedure?”

“When Mr Moseiwitch turned the computer on for me, he was pleased to find that I had checked the box for the computer to remember not only my password but my onscreen facial and EyeDentify retina and infra-red iris recognition scan settings, and my mouse pad DigitalPersona Pro biometric fingerprint reader authentication login data. That’s a lot of complicated stuff to enter every time, and Mr Moseiwitch said I’d saved his friend no end of

trouble.”

“No shit, nitwit! *Aargh!* Mr Dickey!” The kid hung up.

‘And so,’ as Samuel Pepys concluded his diary entry, ‘to bed.’

To resume

There has been an unscheduled episode. For—and who can foretell the hour of her coming?, no prophet that I know—Cassandra dropped in at the ranch.

Here she was, less large in life by far than in my mind and thrice as beautiful. This unorthodox in the extreme woman prefers not to use standard method of ingress, and on this occasion she rappelled from the roof and swung through the French windows. Fortunately they were open, both to admit a slight heat-dispelling breeze and enable me to feed the birds on the patio. High office notwithstanding, one has to take care of one's feathered friends just as one needs to water the plants. The result was that instead of chickadees on my fingers I had my girlfriend in my arms. She was a good fit.

Unaffected by the heat, Cassandra was wearing a slinky catsuit, the uniform of all top larcenists, and looked very Diana Rigg as she was dressed for the punch-up scenes on the TV serial *The Avengers*. To the annoyance of my regular avian customers, she was nibbling a peanut intended for the Green Jay, *Cyanocorax yncas*. Then she crouched and sprang like the adorable edible dormouse, *Glis glis*, which can jump more than twenty feet from tree to tree, to the ceiling. Clinging to the chandelier while hairline fractures radiated through the plaster, she removed a listening device and tossed it out of the window, where it was intercepted and picked to pieces by the nut-deprived Jay. I hope its squawking gave whoever was eavesdropping a headache before it disintegrated.

Then Cass dropped onto a reproduction of an antique escritoire designed and made by Thomas Jefferson, did a somersault and landed on both feet with the agility and balance of a Chinese gymnast. Even if French Regency style were not to Cassandra's taste, I thought that furniture-smashing was going a bit far, and I was foolish enough to remonstrate. This invited a flying kick that stopped an inch from my chin and a reproachful, "Aren't you pleased to see me?". To which I replied, well, yes I was but I should prefer to divert her energy to other ends.

Feverishly I set to work to unwrap my lady love, to expose her pampered flesh to my urgent ministrations. It was not easy, being rather like trying to remove Clingfilm from a grocery item or pry a newly purchased article from a sealed plastic box. She bore the process with amused resignation, offering no help. But I persevered and was ultimately successful, and paused briefly to inhale the fragrance of her

body.

She then joined enthusiastically in a series of holds, clinches, locks and contortions that would have impressed any wrestler or yogi. The aerobic benefits derived by both of us were considerable. This was no brief encounter.

Admittedly Cassandra is in great shape, but even so a demonstration of her rubber-limbed fluidity is enough to send a sea lion to a personal trainer. Like James Bond in the film song performed by Carly Simon (Hamlisch/Bayer Sager), Nobody, I can safely assert, Does It Better. Proteus himself could not match the speed and imagination of her transformations. Her double-lutzes and triple-salchows would have made Pepper Basmati, my Secretary of Defense, chutney green with jealousy. It was as much as I could do to keep up.

Once the practice session was over, we undress-rehearsed to a different choreography. After several performances we settled into a long run. I lost count of the precipices of emotion on which I teetered before joyfully swallow-diving into the abyss, only to swoop up again into the heights. The way Cassandra inhaled my passion and compounded it with hers lofted me as high as a kite for several hours, as I spread my wings and wheeled the thermals of ecstasy in the sky. Jazzed by endorphins ('endogenous opioid peptides that function as neurotransmitters, which are produced by the pituitary gland and the hypothalamus in vertebrates during exercise, pain, consumption of spicy food and orgasm, they resemble the opiates in their abilities to produce analgesia and a feeling of well-being'), I impressed myself. Medals have been given for less. "Let's give it up for the Scrubber," I announced to the incredulous walls, when all was done and done again and again, to an echo of furious applause. By the time I was exhausted and as destroyed as the unfortunate desk and my trembling fingers were toying with an unlit celebratory cigar, the sympathetic drapes hung limp and listless in sympathy.

Then, turning dreamily to my partner to express my appreciation and receive perhaps a small compliment in return, I rocketed off the bed. Cassandra had disappeared. And now a shard of *escritoire* was stuck in my toe.

I marveled: the woman is planetary in her stealth.

Now it is late evening, the ball is over and the candles are lit. 'Slowly, silently, now the moon |Walks the night in her silver shoon', begins the poem *Silver* by Walter de la Mare. Sitting quietly I mull and lucubrate. There is still a glow within me from my bonzer bonk and Cass's absence fills the room. A record is on the turntable and the

Swedish tenor Jussi Björling is singing with gladsome melancholy the song *Tonerna*—music by Carl Sjöberg, lyrics by Erik Gustav Geijer translated by Fred S. Tysh: ‘Loved one, I bless ev’ry hour we share’. Which is true even when Cassandra is not with me. What time I have left on this earth I will spend dreaming of her, ‘of the soft look |Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.’

Daytime, night-time, they are the same to her. For a moment I doubted the reality of our encounter; but was reassured by the languor of repletion and the ache of seismic activity in my loins and stomach. Although we have little need of words to express how we feel to each other, in the fullness of time our appendix to the great unwritten personal histories of mankind will be included on the bookshelf of life.

It occurs to me that I may be more of a poet’s poet than a budding novelist.

On a scribbled postcard received this morning, dated last week, Cassandra made no mention of Showtime but advised in laconic language that she was leaving Los Angeles for Paris, where she shall be attending the fashion shows; following which she is planning a lazy week on the Cap d’Antibes. I am not sure about the lazy part, only the planning. The French Riviera is a minefield of jewels.

What to do?

There is a house, the house in my head, which will never be built. It is a place where every room is a different part of me, where the sun never glances the same way twice, and the moon wanders in and out of the windows at night. Sometimes the front door is closed, and sometimes it is open, and for neighborhood there is but wilderness.

It is a home like Mr Badger's in *The Wind in the Willows*: ancestral, down-at-heel and cozy. Outside, storms rage in the Wild Wood and snow piles up at the hidden entrance, snow on snow as in the poem by Christina Rossetti, in the bleak midwinter long ago. One has to be lost first in order to find the way in the depths of the Wild Wood, where civilization is excluded by celestial law. Here is where the true, the old world, is; where the only sounds are the nighttime pad and snuffle, scurry, bark and drum of animals, and the daytime thrust of spring growth and shuffle of autumn leaves.

Summer is full of the long hot sound of silence. Trees tower and lean, and speak and are understood, and every glade holds a different secret, and the birds and the beasts of the field go about their business, ignoring the greater questions that trouble Men and obeying their seasonal instincts to subsist and thrive.

Indoors I smoke my grandfather's meerschaum pipe, mythically carved and mottled with use, like the wizard Gandalf on a oaken Hobbit settle on a hearth of worn red brick before the fire. Here I piece together the shapes that glow and reform in the heat of seasoned logs, and reflect off the chimney-breast. In the kitchen, onion nets and hams and bunches of dried herbs hang from beams over the range and dresser. In the cellar the bottles are stone-stoppered and cobwebbed, and the evening mug is pewter.

The leathered library is dim with candlelight and has its own fire. After nodding a while in my armchair, I get up and walk loose-slipped along cold flagstone corridors in my flannel nightshirt and cap and tattered dressing-gown. The shadows flee before the yellow light of the candlestick. The bedroom sheets of coarse stiff linen have been warmed by the bedpan coals into soft and deep lavender-perfumed sleep. Amid the exhalations of the night in the world outside, owls hoot, a dog fox barks and the badger prowls his route.

Ashes. There are a lot of them at this time of year, from the embers of the cooling year. Memories rise like the folded and layered contents of storage chests, exuding camphor, where they have lain for years undisturbed between sheets of tissue paper.

In loneliness is independence found.

A diversion

Anno Domini: the church funeral of another of Dad's wartime cronies: an 'uncle' of mine. I listened as the eulogists—so-called friends and acquaintances, and those of his flesh and blood—detailed a litany of his irrelevancies and celebrated his bogus virtues and accomplishments. They waved his shorn plume and described the cognizance that he wore emblazoned on his shield: the shield with which he protected himself from them. They honored his wartime rank, conduct and chest of medals for bravery, the only things of which he was modest and never spoke; which were earned before he decided to advantage himself of more tangible glory in business, when his personality changed very much for the worse.

Prefiguring their own demises, those in the congregation congratulated themselves upon being granted the right of survivorship, and wallowed in the feeling of entitlement that it bestowed.

Of course he had not wanted a funeral and/or memorial service in a building dedicated to religious observance, and interment, only a simple cremation. And of course no one was going to allow him that luxury, and deny themselves the opportunity of telling tales and gossiping behind his back. There was to be no right of rebuttal during his day in court. That like Dad's other friend, the one I visited in hospital, he never went to church; that a consecrated place where births, marriages and deaths, beginnings, middles and ends, were entered in the register and parish records had afforded no rock or structural basis for his life...mattered to them not at all.

It was his own fault: that none of the mourners properly understood him was not intentional but inevitable, because he had never understood himself, nor the world sufficiently to invite them into a room of his own. To him reality was chaos, chaos reality...it was a perversion of—Keats again, in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all |Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’ But his wife knew that he was a shit, and had taken comfort in it, to the extent that she now regretted the loss of the presence that for so long had allowed her to fancy herself his moral superior. As to the others, whether the version of him that they created was fiction or non-fiction did not concern them.

As those present read aloud from their unauthorized biographies, and painted his wartless portrait, and roasted him in absentia, and celebrated the quirks and quiddities of his life, it struck me that they were not addressing the man and his qualities but, unlike his wife,

redefining themselves in the new context of his absence. They were deconstructing him for their benefit, cobbling together a fond and slightly irreverent version for publication, creating an image of him that he was unable to take issue with.

Then row upon row of them stood to bawl *Jerusalem*, beseeching that their bows of burning gold and arrows of desire might be re-forged before they too were boxed up and buried or incinerated, and subjected to similar posthumous treatment.

I felt bad about entertaining such thoughts, which seemed a conspiracy of my own. After the obsequies were concluded—the priest, who had not known the deceased, had limited general discomfort and his own by keeping his remarks short, and the burial was not to take place until tomorrow attended by relatives—I wandered into a side-chapel, feeling the ache of my own hypocrisy. I wanted to avoid the family at the door, inviting me to join them afterwards at the reception as a reward for attendance.

There upon the lectern in the chancel, dusty and ignored, the Book of Life sat open and unread. On a candle on a brass candlestick the snuffed wick was eloquent of everything that had not been expressed earlier, as the flame had guttered like a weak heartbeat in the hallowed air. An order of service was laid next it with a photograph of the deceased on the front. Wax had flowed down the body of the candle, which was no longer pristinely smooth but gnarled like life with hardened streams of wax.

It was only then that I remembered the man as the child that had once been me once knew him. Solicitous and cheerful, he had watched me playing on a sunny lawn around a fountain at his country house, and taken pleasure in my innocent enjoyment. And I became peaceful, thinking of him as he was then and would remain to me.

Then I made my way out through the porch, ready to join but not participate in the drinking and eating of little sandwiches and sausages on sticks and making of valedictory conversation. Ready to mingle, orange juice in hand, with the others smiling and saying, ‘It was a lovely service, wasn’t it?’ When I arrived the party was in full swing. The priest stayed one glass of wine behind the rest, but only one, while the rest quaffed and caballed over the obituary that would appear in the local paper.

The mystery play ended, the curtain came down, the actors removed their makeup and they and the audience hastened to quit the *arrière-garde* theatre of their own mortality.

Telling the bees

There is a custom, which is mentioned by Flora Thompson (authoress of *Lark Rise to Candleford*, published in the early 1940s), in the country of ‘telling the bees’. Mrs Thompson explains that, because the bees share in the joys and sorrows of the household to which they belong, they must be formally told of each joyous or tragic happening, or they shall pine away at the lack of confidence and die. Thompson surmises that the reason the honey bee no longer hums as it used to may be that, in the wild, it is no longer accorded the respect due to it as the confidential friend of a family.

A death, of course, would be an event of which bees would expect to be informed. Apropos of which, upon the demise of my mother Hermione, I avow that the ranch shall be at the center of one very large Yeatsian bee-loud glade, or a giant apiary. Honey then shall drip from walls, sinuses shall clog with yellow pollen dust, and the sound of sternutation (sneezing) shall be heard in the land. Sales of anti-histamines shall soar. Hives shall proliferate and the ground shall be a moving carpet of furry insects. The air shall swarm, the ground shall be a sea of waggle dances, and there shall be a proboscis in every flower. Nectar shall be served on draft.

Pending the above I continue to feed the birds at the ranch. They do not need me to supplement their diet, nor do I wish to upset the balance of nature by messing with the genetic principle of survival of the fittest for the benefit of the species. It is a selfish thing on my part: I like birds because they are pure scraps of nature, wild and untameable. It is a privilege to have them around. If one feeds them they shall come, though they remain wary and aloof. A measure of faith in my innocence can develop but only if it is earned and for so long as it is maintained. ‘Trust but verify’, as Reagan said to Gorbachev: *Doveryai, no proveryai*. The bubble of confidence can be broken at any time.

One cannot doubt the integrity of birds, for as with humans the relationship that grows slowest is the most enduring and dependable. The benefits are mutual: like finings, birds draw the cloudy spirit from a psyche and distil it to clarity. All it takes is some mixed seed; some fat or dried suet; sunflower seeds to hang in a dispenser, and a tubular mesh for peanuts so that the birds do not swallow them whole and choke. Fresh water for drinking and bathing—so many people forget that. A little table on a post with a roof to deter raptors, a nesting-box or two, and sugar water for the hummingbirds.

There is great satisfaction in coming to the birds’ aid when food is

scarce. But once one has begun, one must not discontinue the routine until Mother Nature is fruitful again, for an interruption of supply can be fatal. Equally, one must stop when instinct tells the seasonal visitors that it is time to migrate, as swallows know to go south in winter when the supply of insects runs out. Otherwise one runs the risk of persuading them to stay until the weather turns inclement enough to kill them, by subjecting them to cold that the hummingbirds especially, they being the smallest, are not physically equipped to endure, though some of these marvels of nature travel up to four thousand miles a year.

Nonetheless at heart I feel lowered in my own esteem by my compulsion to feed the birds. It is as if I am guilty of luring or entrapping them, buying their attendance if not their affection in order to keep me company, afford me pleasure, assure me that I am a person who is sensitive to the needs of others; or to flatter me that I have dominion over the creatures of the air when I have failed to maintain a single human relationship. It is an insult to a bird and demeaning to oneself to believe that one can tame it. Taming implies subordination.

Birds come to the table because nourishment is given them on a plate, as it were, which saves them having to forage for it. It is the same principle as hunters and fishermen put out decoys for duck or lay groundbait for coarse fish. One who wooingly coos at a pigeon with a handful of seed may also pick up a gun and shoot it, pluck it and serve it for dinner. Why feed the birds when instead one could write a check to save a starving child in the Third World? Perhaps because the child is not present either to receive a hand-out or thank the benefactor. Most charitable donations are elicited by solicitation rather than voluntary contribution. Without giving thought to whom the beneficiary might be, or caring, people want tax deductions.

Turning to the domestic side, and pets: dogs are the opposite of birds. The loyalty of man's best friend is bought. In return for bed and board and a modicum of exercise, a dog understands and accepts that it is required to suppress its individuality to suit its owner's personality, habits and routines. Enslaved, the beast is bred (rarely for hunting even as a sport) and exists only to affirm humanity's belief in the righteousness of its ways and conduct; and in the majority of instances a dog is content, even happy, to do so because of the ersatz mutual affection that is its reward. Even cruel and insensitive people can love a dog, and from this has evolved the 'love me, love my dog' philosophy: if a person is rude to or God forbid should kick the animal, it is as if one has kneed the owner in the groin or slapped her face.

Dogs require minimal upkeep, which appeals to the lazy. It is not

compulsory to train them or bathe and groom them. They do not complain at the long, short or irregular hours one keeps, or object when the house is not clean, or hold a grudge when they are abused—even to the point of not blaming the owner when they are dying through neglect. Treats are received with disproportionate gratitude, like absolution for a sin that has not been committed. If the owner does not feel like going for a walk, perhaps because the weather is bad, the dog may look mournfully at the leash, or it may howl when one forgets to feed it, but all is forgiven when order is restored and it is given a pat or its ears are rubbed.

Dogs will tolerate all manner of foibles in their owners, and do not answer back or insult them. They do not bite the hand that feeds them. They do not object when their owners consume an excess of liquor, or smoke, or blaspheme, or read pornography. They require a minimum amount of care to keep them alive: all a man has to do after getting up late, skipping the toothbrush and the razor and the shower, scanning the newspaper and calling his bookie, is empty a can of horsemeat into a bowl, walk the mangy critter round the block, and smoke a cigarette while it does its business. The unpaid alimony and child support, and the grand one lost yesterday at the track, are immaterial to the animal. One might commit premeditated murder without hearing a whimper of dismay or reproof from Fido, and may even get some assistance and a tail-wag of approval when the job is done.

In return for fawning over its owner, enough to make him or her feel beneficent and benevolent, and the animal is embraced as a member of the family, and upon dying mourned more than a close relative. A maltreated dog receives more prominent coverage in the newspaper than a person who has been murdered or raped or mugged and left in a ditch or dumpster, while the perpetrator is more vilified. The meanest individual is prepared to expend large sums on veterinary care. Ignoring his wife and family, a man will spend hours adoring and talking baby language to the uncomprehending beast. While children are repeatedly told that they are inconsiderate, untidy, rude, stupid, good for nothing, out of control, and expensive, in return for its unconditional affection the animal is free to shed hair and slough dander and live like a pig (a canard: pigs are by nature clean animals) and expect someone else to sweep and vacuum (which Someone is happy to do). It may throw up and shit on the carpet, bring fleas into its owners' bed, chew furniture, break ornaments, stink, fart, scratch, drool, and lick its genitals; it may drink from the toilet, copulate in public, growl at and bite visitors, nudge women in the crotch, and bark

all night and sleep all day. All this while men and women misunderstand and fall out with each other over the smallest and imagined things and difference of opinions.

Walking the dog, if it is done at all and at more than a snail's pace or only as far as the nearest bar, is a self-serving operation that can exalt a male (writing as a man) leash-holder in his own mind to a level approaching sainthood. Better still, when he is being tugged around by his animal, even the dullest and homeliest owner becomes attractive to others of all races, colors, creeds and ages who are eager to detain him in conversation even if he has no conversation. He is being brought to the attention of the world not in the image of himself but of his dog. The petless in the park bachelor or divorcee walker, who is given as wide a berth as if he were a sex offender, having acquired a cute or handsome well-behaved friendly canine is transformed into a Romeo for every Juliet, and a magnet for kids with good-looking single rich mothers. Being in company with a dog effortlessly endows the owner with all the qualities, however disparate they may be, that the approaching person values and longs for most. The animal mutely conveys that, Stranger, I would die for this person; you can only guess at his boundless good qualities: the unselfishness, the bravery, the tenderness, the love of humanity, the taste he shares with you in politics, philosophy, films, music, travel and ethnic food.

But in my opinion the best thing to be said about a dog is that it is not a cat. The house cat is selfish selfish selfish. It cannot be trained. A cat is not loyal or grateful to any person. It is disdainful and scornful, and a demanding and finicky lodger. [Bastard, Bitch,] Felix, Max, Chloe, Tiger, Fluffy, Socks, Patches, Smoky stinks of self-entitlement and privilege, and people—usually women—who like cats or take comfort in their company are in thrall to them and pander to their every whim, receiving no thanks or acknowledgement (none are desired or expected) in return for what the cat requires to keep it in the style in which it requires to be kept. The creed of the cat is that the honor of its patronage is all, and the owner does indeed feel that an honor has been conferred, so thanks but no thanks are necessary. It is as if the Queen came to stay the weekend and did not write a thank-you letter; instead one sends her one thanking her for coming and saying sorry the electricity went out and the fish for dinner was a bit off.

As I scribble this stuff I get a kick out of imagining how the public thinks the President of the United States is spending his days. The truth is that having elected me Americans are paying to keep me out of Office, and for a lot of birdseed and dog food.

Silent night? Unholy Night!

Why is it that, just when the hot-water bottle has thawed the icy sheet, the bed socks are on, the tasseled nightcap has been adjusted about the ears, and the tallow candle is blown out—all hell breaks loose in the bedroom? Monsters and incubi that day-roosted under the floorboards awake and cavort about the room, so that instead of dreaming sweet dreams of Cassandra I am plagued by visions of leering gargoyles, Komodo dragons, chimaeras, and the *éminence maternelle* of Hermione *gules rampante*. Swarthy men in robes with gold in their gleaming white teeth steal up on me clutching jewel-handled kukris, khanjars and jambiyas with curved blades, and cursing in guttural accents under their unminted breath.

Or I imagine myself lying on a Procrustean bed (Procrustes the Attican bandit who stretched his guests or chopped off their legs to make them fit the spare-room bed, until Theseus treated him to some of his own hospitality) some frightful slaver creature gnawing my legs, and another holding my head between the claws on its warty forelegs and stretching my neck with its teeth like chewing-gum.

Or I am emerging late from Sparks Steak House in Manhattan (I was actually there on the date that the real incident occurred, eating lump crabmeat with bay scallops, a Caesar salad, and sliced steak with sautéed onions and peppers, and creamed spinach, washed down with a couple of gin martinis followed by a superb and superbly expensive bottle of Barolo wine, while Phoebe dismembered a three and a half pound lobster...I hate lobster...and drank 7UP), just as a Plymouth gangster sedan with running boards and rear front-hinged 'suicide doors' glides to the curb, and men in high-collared trench coats leap out tossing aside violin-cases. Mistaking me for Paul Castellano, 'The Howard Hughes of the Mob', 'Big Paulie', they stitch me with lead from the round magazines of old-style machine-guns, jump onto the boards and drive off in a screech of tires and a cloud of burning rubber, leaving me robustly bleeding fermented nebbiolo grape juice on the sidewalk.

Only as Homer's rosy-fingered dawn traces the sky with her pastel strokes do things calm down. The monsters squint at the light and yawn, their jolly romp over. Downing cups of sugared cocoa, they bid each other goodnight and disappear to sink into an untroubled rest of their own. Or maybe they have nightmares of me.

Topside at last I slumbered, and to my great surprise upon waking up eight hours later without once having to go to the bathroom, had an

extraordinary dream. It was set in Merrie England. I suppose that this was because I have been reading a book on English History and Tradition, in which there is a chapter on the Tower of London that describes the ends that many of those unfortunate enough to be incarcerated there on counts of High Treason (gloss: Incurring the Monarch's Displeasure) came to at the executioner's block on Tower Green, or on the scaffold at Tower Hill or Tyburn.

Rule, Britannia!
My dream

Hermione Scrubb was speechless, and for once she was diverted from her Saturnian plan to devour her son, Woodrow, and install her other son, Cosmo, in the Oval Office.

She had that morning received a telegram informing her that King James the Third of England wished to interview her for a permanent senior executive position at the Royal Court of His Britannic Majesty.

It was an extraordinary offer and unprecedented. Of course everyone knew that James—who was dubbed Jug Ears by his subjects because his aural appendages were as yacht spinnakers compared to Woodrow's ratlike crops—was batty. But still, Hermione wondered, what could the Brits possibly think she had to offer that someone else, some homegrown aristocrat, diplomat or politician, could not? There was already an American Ambassador to the Court of St James's. There were numerous areas in which the two nations cooperated with each other through a cadre of officials. But this was different: for some reason known or unknown to himself, King James wanted as his most trusted adviser a Yankee lady who, as the wife and mother of a President, was as near blue-blooded as it was possible to be after several hundred years in the thinned-out stock of a revolutionist republic.

Why had he picked her of all people? Perhaps it was because she liked animals, she thought—well, one dog—that would endear her to citizens of the UK. But were their Intelligence Services so depleted, that they were incapable of discovering her, shall we say, more salient characteristics? For her autocratic disposition was hardly a secret, and presumably her personality had been subjected to some scrutiny. A King and a Dictatress wannabe are unlikely to agree much on how the country should be run; it would be like Charles the First suggesting a power-sharing coalition government arrangement to Oliver Cromwell.

Perhaps this was a trick, she thought, a resurgence of the national spirit against the Colonialists. In the present day absence of Might, the country may have decided on cunning and duplicity instead of Right as a cloak for its objectives. Did the reacquisition of the renegade North American states still hold some allure for the disgruntled British? Maybe the government, having heard a rumor that the President of the United States was as mad as King George the Third, saw a chance to turn the clock back to 1776 and assume its former territory into the Commonwealth.

Hermione decided to bottle her suspicion and agree to visit London, without giving any undertaking or agreement in advance, in order to meet the King and talk over exactly what he had in mind and how practical the arrangement might be were she inclined to accept. Already the seedling of a plan to expand her sphere of influence in the world was sprouting in her head, fed by the potent fertilizer of her imagination, to annex Great Britain or the United Kingdom, whatever it called itself these days, as an accession gift to her beloved son and President-in-Waiting Cosmo Scrubb. This decadent society was ripe for the plucking. The opportunity was being handed to her on a silver salver, to wreak revenge upon the English for their sins of the past, in attempting to deny the United States its destiny two hundred plus years ago. She would thereby ensure her son's place in history, and gain a valuable base from which to achieve further dominance over Europe, the fragmented former Soviet Union, and the East.

Then one could forget the Mount Rushmore project: Cosmo would get a whole mountain all to himself.

Concorde whisked her to Heathrow, and she was taken to a suite at the Connaught Hotel. A very luxurious suite. The bed, which was the size of the Great Bed of Ware at the Victoria and Albert Museum, according to a card propped on it boasted a Vogue Flex Deluxe mattress, thousand-count Egyptian cotton sheets, four St Geneve eiderdown pillows, and Charlotte Thomas 'Bespoke' handmade bed linen with twenty-two carat gold thread woven into the finest Merino wool fabric backed with silk jacquard. Laid on the bed was a silk chemise gown from the Satin collection by Argentovivo.

Upon being received in audience by King James the following day, Hermione found the monarch ingenuous and pleasant enough, and she decided to string him along and discover how much autonomy and authority would be granted and delegated to her, and how generous a package of compensation and benefits were being proposed.

During her interview, while Hermione sipped camomile tea, James sucked pastilles of slippery elm. She was his first choice for the position, he said, and it was hers for the taking if she could make a quick decision. Some pushy individual called Snorr, also as it happened a native of the portion of North America that lay to the south of King James's most loyal Dominion of Canada, had just got in touch and was lobbying hard for the position. First to come, first to serve, however: Jug Ears was a man of his word. Snorr's availability had to do, apparently, with his decision to delay acceptance of an eight-year commission to lead his country and save the planet by adopting

extremely Green emergency measures that, to be frank, were near and dear to His Majesty's heart. For though Snorr had aroused some suspicion by asserting that he was a Senator—the King thought that the only senators were Ancient Romans—he had terrific credentials as a conservationist. Also of particular note in Snorr's résumé was description of a patented system for growing crops elsewhere in the solar system, and shipping them to earth by ethanol-fuelled rocket.

Mentioning this brought a low-salt tear to the King's eye and caused his voice to quaver. As the cartilage of his auricles rippled with emotion, the breeze they set up blew out a number of candelabra that the servants were holding—it was a dark day, and he would not permit the methane gas lights to be lit.

Hermione bridled when she heard that she had competition, and from whom, and although she did not care because since childhood she had never followed anyone else's orders and was not going to do so now even when they were issued by a king, she acidulously asked what the responsibilities would be. Jug Ears, heedless of her annoyance, said that within her purview would be anything and everything that had to do with the King's environmental programs. As Mistress of the Plants—it was a generic title and a lot more demanding than it sounded, he said, looking at her sternly: plants had extremely delicate constitutions and required a lot of coddling. Hermione—or, ah, the successful candidate—would oversee a large staff dedicated to the tending of Jugs' massive horticultural collection. This meant ensuring that each tree, plant, shrub, flower and seed was properly housed and embedded, fed and watered, and organically fertilized; and in addition talked, sung madrigals and played Bach to for five minutes every hour.

There would also be a lot of formal dinners to attend, James said, and speaking engagements on the subjects of Green power, the reduction of greenhouse gases, the downsizing of carbon footprints, conservation, recycling, ecological economy, animal husbandry, the growth of organic foods, and the elimination of chemicals in food.

To which should probably now be added, he said, overseeing development of a plan similar to the *soi-disant* Senator Snorr's outer-space farming project. Mumbling somewhat, the King said something to the effect that, now he came to think of it, the job description comprised everything that the man Snorr seemed eminently qualified to perform.

Hermione mentioned sarcastically that she had a cast-iron digestion for rubber-chicken dinners, and a recently developed passion for broccoli. She had an endless supply of Green conversation, she said,

getting into her stride, and as for weeds and vermin and creepy-crawlies...er, flora and fauna and insects...they were amongst her closest friends. Darwinian concepts of survival of the fittest, evolution and extinction were matters that were very dear to her heart, in that she was dead-set determined to extirpate every endangered species from the face of...that she was committed to doing everything she could to discredit such specious theses.

The King, not quite knowing what to make of this, then raised the subject of accommodation. Hermione, who had been thinking in terms of a Knightsbridge flat close to Harrods and Harvey Nichols, or a Grace-and-Favor apartment at Hampton Court so long as it was not haunted, was taken aback when the monarch mentioned a triplex at the Tower of London—properly known as His Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress—and offered to give her a tour.

'There is no time like the present,' said Jug Ears. 'Come to think of it there is no time *but* the present, what? How very jolly clever of us to think of it. We must dictate a memorandum to that effect, both as to Time and our cleverness.'

The Gold State Coach—which had built for King George the Third, said James—and which required eight horses to pull it, and which was decorated with gold leaf and painted panels, cherubs, crowns, palm trees, lions' heads, tritons and dolphins—was waiting downstairs, so off they went.

As soon as Hermione saw the Tower of London she knew it was for her. She loved heavily fortified places and had always fancied herself as the chatelaine of a castle. The building was ninety feet high and of massive construction, with walls varying from fifteen feet thick at the base to eleven in the upper parts. Above the battlements rose four turrets, three of them square and one circular where the first royal observatory had been housed. The White Tower in the innermost ward of the Tower of London itself, being itself a donjon or keep was impregnable and—being already stocked and equipped with every kind of medieval *matériel* of armaments and weapons—if supplied with sufficient provisions could withstand a siege with ease. And since Hermione would be bringing her bodyguard and factotum Ignacio Pesci with her, the prospect of having unlimited instruments of torture to play with, so she fancied, from amongst the dungeon displays would guarantee his enthusiasm. There was even room for Pesci's mother, whom he had never before been able to persuade to leave Palermo, to come and stay.

The apartment itself comprised the upper floors of the White

Tower, the outer Caen stonework of which had been sandblasted to its original brightness. Inside everything had been remodeled and modernized and tastefully decorated. There was solar-powered central heating, and of course the walls were so thick that the interior remained cool in the hottest weather.

There were Flemish tapestries on the walls, oriental rugs on the polished floors, and any amount of antique furniture. No expense had been spared in restoring the Tower to its original designation as a Royal Palace, and to erase its functional image as a top-security prison. The atmosphere was bright and the rooms were filled with sunlight from dawn to dusk. Everything was a delight to behold. The fixtures and fittings were magnificent: the walls were covered in Old Masters on loan from the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Tate Britain Museum. [When one of the interior designers had suggested to James, during a pre-renovation inspection, that he might want to consider exhibiting some pictures from the Tate Modern, His Highness had a tantrum. Aristocratic cusswords which had not been heard in Tower Hamlets for centuries, such as ‘Faugh!’ and ‘Zounds!’ and ‘Slid!’, flew though the air; and the Court interior designer, who had never been on a farm, was redeployed shoveling manure on one of King James’s organic establishments in the Shetland Islands north-east of the Scottish Orkney archipelago.]

Making a courtesy, Hermione to her great surprise heard herself saying that she would be honored to accept the position effective immediately. She had one small request: that His Majesty might consider not taking any more of Senator Snorr’s telephone calls. The man was a pretentious stumblebum, and the King would find his presumption and lese-majesty mightily offensive. His house plants all died of malnutrition and dehydration, and either silence or from being forced to listen to atonal music and bad language. He was a big-game hunter, a great meat-eater and a winner of wiener-eating contests, and it was rumored that he had once bitten the head off a chicken.

James—when he had recovered from his horror at learning in answer to his question that a wienerwurst or hot dog was a frankfurter—was piqued and danced a jig. Then he turned to an aide and ordered a peal of bells to be rung at Westminster Abbey in celebration. He assured Hermione that he had no use for telephones, in fact had banned them from Buckingham Palace, and that any further written communication from Snorr would be either returned unopened or recycled without being read. And as a magnificent earnest of his good faith he awarded her, instead of a chauffeured limousine, for her

exclusive use a coach and four with the royal coat of arms on the side, a coachman and footmen, in addition to the full complement of domestic staff including butler, cook, maids, servants and a secretary that came with the job. To which Hermione quickly obtained the King's agreement for her to add Pesci and his (Mafia soldier) assistants, even though they had all had the misfortune to lose their passports.

As he was leaving her to settle in—her luggage would be delivered as soon as it arrived, as well as her dog, which was to be flown over in a first-class seat and would not be required to go into quarantine—King James paused. There was a single condition, he said. It concerned one room in the Tower's Waterloo Barracks that Hermione must give her solemn pledge, as an honorary Englishwoman, never to enter. This room, which had no windows, was locked and guarded at all times by Royal Yeoman Warders, or Beefeaters. In the interest of national security, Hermione must swear never to transgress this most solemn promise. If she did, Jugs said, word would quickly come to his ears—and Hermione had no doubt of it: the satellite dishes that effloresced from the sides of his head looked as if they could pick up a mouse-fart on Pluto.

Hermione curtsied again, crossed her fingers and swore the oath.

Then King James called for his pipe, his drum and his fiddlers three, and the Master of the Rolls so that he could obtain Hermione's signature with a quill pen on the parchment scroll contract for the red wax impression of the Great Seal of the Realm to be affixed to. Then, commanding her to lie face down on the floor, Jugs inducted her by waving a sword made of *lignum vitae* over her head. Her appointment was official.

Anthropophagi (Cannibals) making nice

Hermione was duly installed in the White Tower. It had views of the river on one side and the moat on the other, as well as assorted portcullises and turrets, and it overlooked the roof of the Waterloo Barracks. Her own staff arrived from America. For his latest part, Pesci had himself outfitted himself in doublet and hose and shoes that curled up at the toes. He swaggered about dragging a rapier that was too long for him, and toyed with his dagger as he issued orders to his men (that bit was nothing new).

Hermione threw herself with gusto into everything, not giving a hang for political correctness or any offence she might cause the monarch now that she was secure in her position—after all she had a contract. She became a nationally popular figure overnight, a party gal who thrived on the social circuit. She did nothing to conceal her contrarian streak, and publicly and ostentatiously ignored the edicts and proclamations that King James had taken to issuing with great frequency inveighing against and proscribing the making of mirth and merry.

Taking heart from her disrespect for authority, and delighted that they now had someone to adopt as a figurehead and leader in the expression of general disgruntlement, Jugs's subjects were quick to adopt Hermione as their role model in disregarding the King's instructions regarding sobriety of manner and dress, morality, and respect for tradition.

Ignoring the prohibition of open revelry, the spores of excess and immorality permeated the air. Fancy-dress balls and charity galas masqueraded as fund-raising events for environmental protection, at which no money was raised. Get-down parties flourished in the guise of state functions, receptions, dinners, concerts and cultural events—which were permitted, so long as they had a Green theme. Because they were billed as being in aid of the King's favorite causes, there was no shortage of fine wines and gourmet food, and bands played far into the night, disturbing the sleep patterns of trees.

Hermione greatly relished these events, attended them all, encouraged their proliferation, and happily rubbed shoulders with the miscellaneous royals, peers of the realm, toffs and landed gentry who represented everything she hated most about humanity, and who insisted upon entertainment on a grand and lavish scale even when the King was against it. As she conversed with them in a fluting instead of her usual deeper gravelly voice, uncharacteristically girlish and demure

under her pancake makeup, and fluttering her fan and false eyelashes, Hermione envisaged how they would look with their necks stretched on a block under her window, as the drums rolled and the executioner awaited the drop of her lace handkerchief to swing a blunt ax. She already had plans to stage her own version of the French Revolution, over which she would star as the Lady of Misrule.

Despite his image as a spoilsport, however, King James was genuinely devoted to his people and concerned for their well-being and welfare, and he valued their affection as much as he did their respect. The people knew that had their best interests at heart; which is why despite everything they tolerated him, reserving their utmost loathing, contempt and ridicule for the free-loading upper classes.

Hermione was greatly chuffed to learn that her advent on the scene was contributing to a covert populist revolt. Symptomatic of this was that the Web site for Wenches Willing was topping the Google list for receiving the most hits. Newly inspired architects were toying with designs and plans for commercial buildings resembling heaps of blancmange and piles of Meccano or tortured metal. Communist and Socialist Party memberships were starting to go up, and university enrolments were declining as the youth of the day decided to apply for apprentice positions and jobs as manual and skilled laborers and craftsmen instead.

Unfortunately it was compulsory to invite Jug Ears to the supposed fund-raising parties, and ask him to make a speech. Besotted with his own image, however, and deaf to everybody but himself, at those he graciously consented to attend he never noticed the orgiastic anarchy that surrounded him and the lack of attention that was being paid to him. He believed that the citizens were eating up his every word, instead of swallowing caviar and swigging from wine bottles, having fun and fooling around with each other. He was always the last to leave, only reaching his peroration as the waiters cleared up the broken glass and the last unconscious bodies were being carried out.

Meantime plants of all kinds were wilting and pining for lack of nourishment, irrigation and conversation, as the soothing strains of Mozart in greenhouses and conservatories were overwhelmed by the louder sounds and defiant boom-boom thump of Jazz, Blues, Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, and Rap music. The only species that thrived was a variety of Triffid.

Struck by the royal tradition of the monarch touring the city in an open landau while a footman tossed Maundy money to *hoi polloi*, Hermione began doing the same from her own coach around the streets

and squares of Mayfair and Belgravia, where the rich residents—one could never be too wealthy—rushed out to supplement their unearned income. Except that in this instance their supposed benefactress had her servants throw Christmas coins of chocolate encased in gold foil, and Monopoly money, and worthless foreign banknotes and scrip. Observing the wealthy burghers from behind the coach's curtains as the dupes dived and swatted each other in her wake, as in the schoolboy trick of Superglueing a coin to the ground and then watching from the corner to see who bent to pick it up, Hermione rolled on her monogrammed silk cushions in paroxysms of laughter, and toasted the King with draughts of Black Velvet—Guinness and Champagne—from a gold drinking vessel.

Le Roi S'Amuse

The bloodlines of royalty and horses had mingled over time—given the centuries that they had spent in each other's company, it could not be otherwise. Long ago the similarities of the two species, fostered by interbreeding amongst close relatives, had rendered them almost indistinguishable.

But though no one would dare to state such a thing, James as the top aristocrat in the kingdom was in reality the least thoroughbred of such animals. Softening of the brain had resulted in his believing himself to be an inverted centaur, having the top half of a horse and the legs of a human being. To complete the image he used a bale of straw as a throne, and for his orb and scepter a mangel-wurzel and an elm sapling. In the monarchical tradition he never shook hands—to do so would imply superiority over the equids. If he felt like a snack between meals, he would drop to all fours and eat alfalfa sprouts off the floor, or have a servant put on a nosebag of hay as if it were his necktie.

The royal family were able to converse with horses as equals—to “walk with the animals, talk with the animals” as in Leslie Bricusse's song sung by Doctor John Dolittle in the musical version of Hugh Lofting's children's books—and had many features and interests in common with them. They had big nostrils and pronounced overbites. They did not laugh or guffaw but neigh and whinny. The problem of genetically ill-advised arranged marriages was compounded by frequent separations, divorces and remarriages. Princes' mistresses gave birth with fecund regularity to illegitimate children who, by patronymic tradition, were surnamed with the prefix of “Fitz”, as in Fitzwilliam and Fitzherbert. The only area of the population to be eschewed by the royals in their amorous activities were the commoners, with whom legal crossbreeding was unthinkable because—although it was genomically essential to preserve the sanity of the line—it was reckoned to winnow the strain and incarnadine the essential blueness of one's blood.

The only species that Jug Ears was truly comfortable in the company of other than horses were plants, especially those in his own very extensive botanical collection in the royal hothouses, conservatories and greenhouses. He had a particular affinity with orchids and a facility with the complicated Orchidian language and dialects, which like Horse—and they are as different as different can be—make Chinese seem as easy as Pig Latin or pidgin English.

King James, as the incumbent squatter of the Windsor Castle,

Buckingham Palace, Sandringham House, Palace of Holyroodhouse and Balmoral Castle estates, was a decent sort of middle-aged old horse. He had grown up amongst the beasts and forged bonds playing polo with them, while other less privileged children kicked soccer balls. He was of middling intelligence, being neither a fetlocked working type like the Clydesdale nor a fleet Arab stallion. In addition to castles and palaces he was also of course very at home in and around hay barns, box stalls or loose boxes, tack rooms, dressage rings, pastures and paddocks. He was a prolific stud and took his on-the-job business seriously amongst women he knew and met in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot Racecourse, at the Badminton Horse Trials, and at show-jumping grounds around the country.

James's was not an easy job. For the first time since the Civil War the King was again the ruler-in-fact of Merrie England, wielding undisputed and unlimited power over a cowed and submissive Barebone's Parliament. The monarchy (not a Protectorate of the Cromwellian kind) was trying to reassert itself as chaos and anarchy, such as Hermione had it in mind to foster and support, had overrun the country.

The circumstances in which this had come to pass were complicated but sudden.

The Prime Minister and Leader of the Whig Party had begun the toppling of the nation's political house of cards, by deciding that he was gay. He announced his intention to divorce his wife and marry the Lord Mayor of London. By remarkable coincidence, the Prime Minister's wife chose that moment to announce that she was not a woman after all; just as the Lord Mayor was revealed from leaked doctor's records to be a Lady Mayoress. The Deputy Leader, a male transvestite, felt unable to handle the pressure and entered a nunnery, while his late boss was committed to an asylum for psychiatric evaluation after he wrote a letter to the *Times* saying that he was the victim of a botched transgender operation. The Leader of the Tory Party, who was now regarded as the potential savior of the country, was then hauled up on and convicted of an impressive array of felony charges, including tax fraud, tax evasion, money-laundering, embezzlement, drug-running, attempting to form a Coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats, and charging as an taxpayer expense having the Virginia creeper, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*, removed from the chimneys at his country residence. After adding perjury to the list at the Old Bailey, he retired to a cell in jail made comfortable also out of His Majesty's Revenue coffers to write a book,

while his wife absconded to Biarritz with his substantial advance against royalties and her toy boy, the Leader of the Lib-Dems.

A referendum on the crisis confirmed a popular consensus that there was no one left in the political arena capable of leading the country. It was time to reaffirm the Divine Right of Kings. Things would be as they had been when a horse was considered capable of running a kingdom—as heralded in Richard the Third’s prophetic Shakespearean cry, “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!”. A now very barebones indeed Parliament bowed to the national wish and restored the monarchy. It reinvested the King with all his pre-Commonwealth powers—one is reminded that the Roman Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Caligula) had it in mind to appoint his horse a Consul—and a jubilant James went to work.

The first thing to be done, Jimbo decided, was to extirpate lax morality. In order to send an immediate message to the nation as to the seriousness of his intentions, after testing the waters of public opinion—Jugs was a pragmatic fellow—by hanging a number of pimps, prostitutes, sex offenders, and those who had solicited sex in public places or exposed themselves, the audience response was so positive that the leaders of the two main political parties were also executed and their heads displayed on pikestaffs in Whitehall.

It was then also His Britannic Majesty’s pleasure to shut down the Media, leaving only the broadsheet *Cavalier Times* in operation, which although a Murdoch-owned News International print-only publication was allowed to survive on condition that it never featured tits and bums on page three or any other of its pages, and reported only events that presented the monarchy in a good light, and included articles and expressed editorial opinions that were agreed in advance to be supportive of and in line with Palace policy.

By royal fiat all British Commonwealth World Wide Web IP addresses were shut down; Broadband and dial-up Internet networks were declared illegal; e-mailing and mobile phone texting became illegal; and coaxial cable and DSL-boosted telephone line and satellite and transmitter TV broadcasting were outlawed. The BBC became an analog radio service only. The moribund Royal Mail was revived with a capital injection of £1,000,000,000,000, and the cost of stamps was reduced from £4 and £3 respectively for first class and second class to 0.40p and 0.30p.

The country was taken aback at the severity of the measures; but the King had the bit between his teeth and there was nothing to be done about it. The Army, Navy and Air Force were solidly royalist in

sympathy, and bored. Buggering about in Northern Ireland and other foreign countries was a chronic pain, and they decided to seize the first opportunity to have some fun since the Glorious Revolution.

James sent vaunt couriers to the European Union, with the message that Blighty would no longer be toeing the line on everything from tariffs and subsidies and weight measurements to the crisp-air displacement ratio in a metric bag of Smith's Crisps. Foreign embassies in London were closed and well-fed British diplomats, Members of the European Parliament and civil servants in Brussels, apprised of His Majesty's declaration that the last one home would be hung, drawn and quartered and fed to his prize Saddleback pig, wiped their lips with their napkins, pushed back their chairs, bid hasty farewells to their mistresses and lovers, and came home lamenting the bon-vivant days when dear Roy Jenkins had been President of the European Commission.

Declaring the Auld Alliance between France and Scotland irreconcilable with his vision for a New Britain, the chauvinistic—or rather one should say, now that Frenchisms were banned, “bellicosely patriotic”—King James declared it null and void. Under heavily armed supervision by the English, clans of Picts, Gaels and Celts in kilts brandished their claymores and ancestral weapons, and curdled the air with their war cries. The Edinburgh fountains ran with single malt whisky, and hogsheads of ale made with organic hops were broached for the Scots to toast the Sassenach king with, pledge fealty to him and swear to come to his aid when summoned.

The equally xenophobic French were delighted, and agreed that they too yearned for the good old days. On the site of the Field of Cloth of Gold—or le Camp de Drap d'Or, depending on which side of the water one lived on, between Guînes and Ardres where Kings Henry the Eighth and Francis the First had set up their encampments—a bilateral Entente Cordiale—Cheerful Understanding was signed by the President of France and King James...the latter arriving by Virgin balloon dyed in the variegated vegetable-green colors of the new Union Jack flag, the Union Jim...to the effect that the Hundred Years' War was a record that had stood for too long. The British people, who had had it up to here with the garlic- and sausage-eaters on the continent anyway, and the intransigence of the Wogs that Begin at Calais, were thrilled. Regiments of yeomen and mounted cavalry sharpened their swords and sabers, checked the priming on their rifles and flintlock pistols, curried their horses, massed on the White Cliffs of Dover and raised their voices in unison with the words of Michael Drayton's poem *Agincourt*:

“Fair stood the wind for France |When we our sails advance, |Nor now
to prove our chance |Longer will tarry.”

To mark the occasion, and to great fanfare on both sides of the English Channel, or La Manche, depending on one’s point of view, the Chunnel was blown up.

A Royal Proclamation

There was no end to King James detestation of everything newfangled. One day he summoned his Lord Chamberlain and informed him of his decision that, henceforth, clothes made of synthetic fabrics were forbidden.

‘Forbidden, Your Highness? You mean...’

‘We mean that all clothes, you know, the ones that people wear, whether underwear—smalls, unmentionables, that sort of thing—innerwear or outerwear—jackets and coats and stuff, scarves and so forth, are to be made of natural fiber only. Nothing artificial. Do you follow us, Lord Chamberlain?’

‘I think so, Your Majesty.’

‘Have a scribe draw up an edict, will you, Lord Chamberlain? Cause copies to be posted throughout the land on recycled paper.’

‘Very good, sire.’

The Lord Chamberlain backed away from the Presence, the footmen on either side of the double doors of the audience chamber opened them for him to depart and carry out his sovereign’s instruction. But before the Lord Chamberlain turned to exit, he was struck by a thought.

‘By natural fiber, my liege, I presume you mean cotton and wool. The combination of which, I happen to know, is commonly known as Viyella.’

‘LC, we will use no more proprietary names. A mixture of cotton and wool is exactly that: a mixture of cotton and wool. The wives of shepherds in ancient times did not sit at home carding and spinning Viyella. There is a caveat regarding cotton, LC. We will no longer allow people to wear denim. There are to be no more jeans. And as for fur: we have a zero-tolerance policy regarding the wearing of fur or furs. There will be absolutely no fur. Even furry animals will be under suspicion, guilty until proven innocent of being bodily detached from it. To summarize: Anyone caught in jeans will be put in the stocks and pelted with Genetically Modified foods. Pilloried. If they’re wearing fur, their heads will be cut off. Got that, LC?’

‘Very good, Your Majesty. Making a note here on my pad...Cotton and wool: cool. Denim jeans: rotten tomatoes. Wear fur, lose head.’ And the Lord Chamberlain turned again to leave.

‘Lord Chamberlain!’

‘Sire?’

The King said pettishly, ‘You know, LC, cotton and wool are not

the only natural fibers. Far from it. What we are saying is that the people may only clothe themselves in fabrics that are of natural material. They are not to wear anything made from artificial, man-made stuff. You know, nasty things that melt like Nylon and Polyester. Dacron. Ugh.'

'Other materials, sir? Other than cotton and wool?'

The King paused. 'Come here, Lord Chamberlain.'

The Lord Chamberlain retraced his steps. He sensed that an error had been made on his part and that he was about to pay for it.

'It seems to us, LC, that you are weak on the subject. Cotton and wool are not the only fabrics from which clothes are made. Tell us that you know this and that we do not have to enlighten ye.'

The Lord Chamberlain was inspired. 'Oh no, sir! I mean yes, I do. There's linen, too. My grandfather bespoke a summer jacket made of linen. And in winter he favored corduroy trousers to keep his legs warm. There's nothing like a good wide-wale corduroy, he said, for...'

The King gestured impatiently. 'Linen, corduroy. There are others.'

'More? Yes, I suppose there are. Very good, I'll go and get on with...'

'Footman on the left!' barked James. Both footmen stood forward at attention.

'Tut! *Our* left. Go and get our patented portable writing block and a folio sheet of recycled paper and a woodless HB pencil for the Lord Chamberlain. Make that several folio sheets and two pencils, and mind ye that they are well-sharpened ones.'

The articles were brought, the platform was hung round the Lord Chamberlain's neck and he was furnished with paper and pencil.

'Ready, LC?'

'Ready, sir.'

'Then prepare to write down these words, Lord Chamberlain.'

'Very good, sire. I am prepared.'

'There's cotton, and there's wool. Got those?'

'Actually a previous notation was made to that effect, sir. Now may I...'

'Can you write fast, LC?'

'Fairly, sir. But I have a secretary, in fact two secretaries, who...'

'Here goes then. In addition to cotton and wool there's buckram and grogam and fustian...'

'Of course there are, sir. I had forgotten those. Silly me. Buckram and grogam and fustian: I've added those to the list. Now I...'

'...and canvas and felt and hessian and stammel and drill and twill

and nankeen and mull and nainsook and jaconet and dowlas and moleskin and sharkskin and dimity and duck and mohair and camlet and baratheia and cashmere and alpaca and vicuna and angora and worsted and kersey and tweed and serge and shalloon and baize and lace and percale and rep and seersucker and chintz and cretonne and holland and foulard and grosgrain and damask and brocade and silk and samite and satin and sateen and tulle and ninon and taffeta and tiffany and tussah and tussore and gaberdine and sarsenet and shantung and velvet and velveteen and velours and muslin and organdie and organza and gazar and calico and madras and bullion and chenille and crinoline and toilinet and bombazine and drugget and gauze and crape and crêpe and crêpe de Chine and crêpeline and georgette and gingham and voile and cambric and batiste and lawn and poplin and chiffon and lisle.

‘Got all those, Lord Chamberlain? We are sure there are more but right now we...Lord Chamberlain?’

On your bike, mate

The next day the Lord Chamberlain, his right arm in a sling, was again summoned before King James.

‘Ah there you are, Lord Chamberlain.’

‘Good morning, Your Majesty.’

‘LC, we recall you once telling us, when we and you were playing Real Tennis at Hampton Court and you nearly beat us by mistake, that you are ambidextrous.’

‘Ambidextrous, sir?’

‘Meaning you can write with equal facility with both hands. Using one at a time, of course. We presume you are familiar with the term, LC, because it was you who mentioned it.’

‘It is true, sire,’ said the Lord Chamberlain dully. ‘I cannot deny it.’

‘Nor should you, LC. It is an enviable accomplishment. ‘Footman on the right!’

The footman on the King’s right was prepared for what was coming, and brought forward the writing platform and three folio-size sheets of recycled paper and three sharpened HB pencils. The King motioned for the footman to equip the Lord Chamberlain with them.

‘Now then, LC. Yesterday you were an inspiration to us.’

‘How...I am most gratified to learn so, Your Majesty.’

‘There is another proclamation we want you to make to the people.’

‘Really. What’s on the menu today, sir?’

‘No more cars, LC.’

The Lord Chamberlain thought of the Rolls-Royce Silver Phantom that came with his job. ‘I see, sir.’

‘What do you see, LC?’

‘That there are to be no more cars.’

‘By which we mean not only no more engine-powered cars, LC, but no more motorized transportation of any kind.’

‘I see. Do you think that *wise*, sir?’ The Lord Chamberlain heard himself sounding like Sergeant Wilson responding to Captain Mainwaring in an episode of *Dad’s Army*.

‘We do, LC. We do because it is we who are the King, and you who are the LC. And let us be clear what we mean here, LC. There is to be no more of *anything* that requires an internal combustion engine or solid or liquid fossil or other fuel and a battery to power it, hybrids not excepted, whether the propulsion be afforded by petrol or diesel or biodiesel or ethanol, or propane or hydrogen gases, and whatever else there may be...chip fat, for example...that is capable of facilitating

translocation of a party or parties from A to B or anywhere else within the alphabet. In addition to cars, LC, we are talking aeroplanes, trains, ferries, trams, buses...and anything solar-powered.'

'We are? Bloody hell.'

'They poison the air with noxious fumes that block the light needed for the photosynthesis of plants and the growing of crops. They steal their oxygen, and ours too.'

'I get your...drift, sir.'

'It's not a drift, LC, it's a carefully plotted course. Put pencil to paper, if you please.'

The Lord Chamberlain wrote in a wobbly left hand: 'NO MORE CARS, ETC.' He underlined the letters with a flourish, and tucked the pencil behind his ear under the long curled powdered wig. 'With respect, Your Majesty, how will your people get around?'

'On foot, of course. Or by swimming, now that we have cleaned up the rivers and dredged the canals. By hot air balloon. By using their imagination. They may use bicycles, provided they are pedal-powered. But primarily they will employ workhorses of all denominations. Horses, ponies, palfreys, mules, donkeys and asses—our lesser cousins once, twice, thrice more or less removed. And behind the horses, the usual equipage of carriages, coaches and other turn-out will be employed. You know what I mean, LC. It almost goes without saying.'

'Of course it does, sire. I will see to it without delay. Shall that be all, Your Highness?'

'Better just jot them down, LC.'

'That won't be necessary, sire. My old man was a ve-hicular engineer, and I am familiar from the cradle with all the transports in question.'

'Since you ask, LC...'

'In addition to the aforementioned cars, aeroplanes, trains, ferries, trams, buses, and all things solar-powered, I am cognizant of variants thereupon, namely lorries, trucks, coaches, vans, motorcycles, mopeds, scooters and motorized bicycles. Tractors. I omitted tractors. And may I venture to add sit-upon lawnmowers to the list?'

'LC, you are most worthily entering into the spirit and we commend you for it.'

'Thank you, sire, for your condescension. Then with your permission I will proceed immediately to...'

'You may use cursive script, LC.'

The Lord Chamberlain gritted his teeth and held his pencil at the ready in his left hand. 'Go ahead.'

‘Coaches, yes: coach and four, or four-in-hands, and coach and six. Hackneys or jarveys. Chariots, even, but omitting the blades that Boudica, or Boadicea depending on one’s preference, the warrior queen of the Iceni tribe, caused to be affixed in the wheel-hubs to go into battle against the Romans. This is a peaceful nation, LC, and by Jove we do not want anyone getting their legs cut off like a frog by a string trimmer.’

‘By Jove I should bloody well say not.’

‘LC?’

‘It would be a shame, sir.’

‘Then there are the other permissible sorts of rig.’

‘Damn straight.’

‘Eh?’

‘Naturally, sir. Now if you would permit me to...’

‘...write them down, of course: Landaus and landauettes. Berlins, chaises or shays and post-chaises. Victorias, broughams, barouches, phaetons, clarences, sociables, coupés, surreys, buggies, wagons and wagonettes. Calashes, droshkies, quadrigas, brakes, drags, char-à-bancs, cabriolets, tilburies, whiskeys, traps, gigs, jitneys, sulkies.... Omnibuses! Or is it omnibi? Check that, should you?, LC. Dogcarts, hansom, fiacres, growlers, rickshaws, sedan chairs, shandrydans, curricles, caroches, *barèges*, diligences, flies.... Hm. If I think of more, LC, I will let you know.’

‘Let me hold my breath.’

‘What?’

‘Sire.’

‘Oh, and if you like you could add punts and skiffs and row-boats and gondolas, and all the marine and freshwater pole- and rope- and oar- and sail- and hand- propelled and pulled and tugged stuff.’

‘I’d like that only too much, sir...were it not for the fact that, why, how could you know?, I happen to own a sodding great encyclopedia in ten hernial volumes of all sodden craft in general specificity and specific generality, which was recently reissued with updates and revisions and appendices. Volume ten is by my bedside. I will fetch all of them and, ignoring my blisters and to the great relief of my under-worked and overpaid secretaries, I will copy it out myself word for sodding word holding the sodding pencil between each of my toes until the skin is rubbed raw, when I will hold it in my mouth, and when my lips are numb I will stick it in my.... And then I will have my beloved petrol-guzzling carbon-dioxide-belching Rolls-Royce towed to the scrap yard, and borrow my son’s Lance Armstrong-designed Tour de

France racing bicycle with the drop handle bars and the hard seat designed for a squirrel's arse in order to come to work wearing a yellow jersey made out of cobwebs dyed with cats' pee.'

'Splendid, LC! Well there it is. What a fine couple we do make, eh?'

'Eh?'

'We say, LC, can you really write holding the pencil between your toes? We have tried it and, like, no way! Perhaps you saw the film *My Left Foot*. You see, for tomorrow we have another idea....'

What's a girl to do?

The image that Hermione had always entertained of England, not that she had ever derived any entertainment from it, only experienced annoyance, bore no resemblance to the one that now confronted her up close and personal.

Dammit, not only had Jugs emasculated the defense—and offence—system by deactivating the nation's stockpile of nuclear missiles, he had ordered all firearms in the land, anything and everything dating from the first harquebus that employed gunpowder and bullets, to be turned in and decommissioned. All ammunition had been barged out to sea and dumped in corrosion-proof containers, and the iron and steel from the guns melted down and turned into pots and pans.

Further: Now that no food stuffs were being imported from abroad, it had become imperative that crop yields be dramatically increased if the country were to become self-sufficient for its goods and supplies. Following the success of a pilot project in the Duchy of Cornwall, thousand percent increases in yields were required from a cooperative of State-run farms and allotments, and from freshly ploughed cricket and football pitches. Laws mandated the tearing up of lawns, and the planting of vegetables and fruit in place of flowers and shrubs. It had been the worst week of James's life when the former floral occupants of every front and back garden were euthanized, in order for the composted remains to be distributed, and committed to an afterlife as soil nutrients in thousands of services of remembrance around the country presided over by Druids conducting fertility rites to promote a good harvest. Now that the landfills had been closed and the dumping of garbage was illegal, the only household materials that could be discarded at the waste disposal sites were those that could be recycled. The green-waste wheelie bins of every household were used for the weekly collection of food scraps from every middle and lower class household, for composting, and the already-processed manure from the upper-class residences. Chemical-free hydroponics enabled the planting of cereal crops on coastline land reclaimed from the seas and estuaries and slathered with the humane product.

The phrase "You are what you eat" acquired new meaning.

Hermione decided that, foreigner or not, she could not sit on her fanny and watch all this taking place without mounting an opposition to the King, with a view to replacing him with an enlightened government (under her direction, natch) that would reverse the retrograde slide. Jimbo was not just misguided, he made King George the Third look as

sane as she was. The situation called for another Boston Tea Party to be convened, a Mass U-Slurpation, a riotous assembly or High Noon come-uppance, and this time the event would be held in London EC3. A phalanx [(in ancient Greece) a body of Macedonian infantry with shields touching and spears overlapping. *Concise OED*] of second Industrial Revolution soldiers was what the country needed to run it, not a bunch of namby-pamby nut-eating nitwits, and she was the woman to start the recruiting process.

One day when Hermione received notification, by pigeon post at the Tower from an anonymous well-wisher, that the vast cache of arms in the Tower of London was to be removed and distributed throughout the land for use as farming implements (so that swords could be beaten into ploughshares and spears used as pruning-hooks), by George! (not) she knew that the time for insurrection was nigh, and she wasted no time in instructing Pesci to make an inventory of the mass of weaponry in the many saloons of arms and armor, and take as much of it as his seasoned eye adjudged might be serviceable and of potential use.

It took the Eyetie and the loyal men who had accompanied him from home three days working round the clock to accomplish the task. Included in the store were dozens of longbows, and enough arrows to win another battle of Agincourt. There were arbalests and crossbows with windlasses for ratcheting them up to fire quarrels and bolts. There were bombards, broadswords and falchions, lances and spears. There were halberds and the related weapons of pikes, partisans, *langues de boeuf*, or ox-tongues, glaives, and poleaxes. And there were flails, the spiky iron balls on chains that looked like the cases of the drilled and strung horse chestnuts that schoolchildren compete at the game of conkers with. In the event of a pitched battle, the pitchforks, shovels and rusty blades of Jugs' peasant army would be useless against them.

Then, acting as its sergeant, Pesci began drilling his squad—which he had supplemented with Hermione's much surprised English household staff and skivvies who had been press-ganged into service as loaders, runners and armorers—in the weapons' use, with the object of making a lethal fighting unit out of them.

Spurred further by her irritation, Hermione summoned Pesci after drill and practice and together they marched to the Waterloo Barracks. There they approached the doorway that the King had forbidden them to enter under any circumstances. Sweetly Hermione wished the pair of Beefeater guards a good night and pleasant dreams—which took them aback because they had just had tea and come on duty; then the Eyetie came between them and took them aback still further by hitting each on

the side of the head, a left and a right, with the mace he had been carrying behind his back. Seizing the heavy ring of keys from one of the felled and unconscious victims, Hermione unlocked the iron-studded oaken door and they strode into the dimly lit room within.

There on immaculate display in their cases were the Crown Jewels! Although they were the property of the State, James, who was not a vain or materialistic man, had considered bartering them to some other country to feed his subjects. But he bowed to the opinion of his Lord Chamberlain that because they were the property of the State not the monarch, and part of the national heritage, it would be bad for public morale. The King had also considered moving them to Buckingham Palace—there was a precedent in that they had formerly been housed at Westminster Abbey—but security was notoriously lax and inefficient there. One morning his mother had woken up to find a tradesman sitting on her bed waving an unpaid milk bill under her nose. When the Crown Jewels were stolen in 1303, said the Lord Chamberlain, they were only recovered after being spotted on display in the window of a jewelry shop. So James had agreed to leave them in the Jewel House at the Waterloo Barracks within the Palace and fortress of the Tower of London, from which even Professor Moriarty, Sherlock Holmes's nemesis, could not steal them.

There was a lot of history in this room, and all of it sparkled. Pesci, that fascist proponent of public ownership of all property except when it was his own, saw nothing before him but dollar signs, and again he put the mace to work to liberate the jewels from the glass cases. The sturdy weapon proved equal to the task of demolishing the thick glass when he put his back into it, and Hermione gasped as she picked up item after item of the precious hoard. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds, pearls, and of such size: it was the trove of all time.

Mesmerized by the sapphire glint of a tiara, Hermione put it on and pulled a mirror from her handbag to admire the effect. The piece would have turned the Emperor Bokassa, whose coronation crown contained two thousand diamonds, green with envy.

But she still had her wits about her, as Pesci found out to his cost. As the Sicilian scumbag slipped the Koh-i-noor diamond into his pocket, in a flash his shoulder was immobilized, pinned to the doorpost by an ivory-handled dagger. It had been the gift of some eastern potentate, and Pesci noticed that it was inlaid with gold and chased with rubies. It was a privilege, he thought, to be punctured by such an artefact. Although Hermione was fifteen paces across the room, all it had taken was a flick of her wrist. He had never been in any doubt

about his mistress's abilities, which were on a scale of those of his own mother. The two women were the only people in the world of whom he was afraid.

Philosophically Pesci stood and waited to be released and relieved of the famous gem. Hermione walked over to remove the blade from gristle and wood. She had made her point, in the only language he understood, and that was enough for both of them.

Alarums and excursions

The tripping of the silent alarms in the Jewel House resulted in the break-in registering at the monitoring station at Buckingham Palace, and King James was already viewing the royal rapine with dismay on the security cameras. So much steam was issuing from Jugs' ears and pouring out the windows that London SW1 was fogged in. Traffic ground to a halt, pigeons collided in the air, and two sentries shot each other.

In the Jewel House resided in a majolica or glazed earthenware pot a large and aged and dusty rubber plant, *Ficus elastica*. It was vehemently loyalist, and although it had not taken liquid nourishment for fifty years it enjoyed conversing with the monarch when he visited. As soon as *Ficus fidelis* had seen what was going on, it emitted a series of sonic shrieks that were picked up by the Chief of the Ravens outside. The bird, as a guardian of the Tower, understood the emergency signal and wasted no time in flapping off west as fast as he could in the direction of Buckingham Palace to confirm the treacherous breach.

The Chief Raven's plumage was snowy with age. His joints creaked and his pinions, which had never been clipped like those of the other avian sentinels of the Tower, were rusty with disuse. Progress was slow. When he arrived at Buck House and was admitted to the Presence, the distracted Sovereign was in the Operations Room, pacing up and down and issuing orders and counter-orders. The Palace was abuzz with confused parties hurrying in different directions, ignoring the signs saying that there should be no running, and bumping into each other.

The King was unsure how to respond to the crisis, but he knew that immediate action was required in order to send a signal to the country that he was in control of the situation. Grasping his leafy scepter, he swore a mighty oath that he would defend his heirlooms to the death. Then he ran downstairs to where his green phaeton was plugged into the compost-fed charger, ready for departure, and his driver was waiting for him. Jugs shouted that today he would be assuming the controls himself, and that the man should disconnect the power line.

Switching the fuel selector to the highest octane tank marked Bat Manure, James fastened his safety harness and pressed the self-starter. The machine powered up with a roar, and the triple exhausts coughed into action and asphyxiated the driver as he stood at attention to the rear. Wrinkling his own nostrils against the stench of the volatile rocket mixture, Jugs slid his oxygen mask over his head to cover his nose and

mouth.

The carriage rose high into the air. Unfurling his ears to the maximum extension, the multi-tasking King deployed them a) as ailerons to control the phaeton's roll, b) to act as parabolic radar dishes—there was a lot of bird traffic to avoid in the area, c) to receive radio messages and meteorological information, and d) to remain in contact with his war room.

In a twinkling they passed over St James's Park, and the odious South Bank complex, where Jugs had the presence of mind to jettison a quantity of depleted bat shit. For a moment he forgot his distress and chuckled with pleasure.

Westminster, Waterloo, Blackfriars, Southwark and London Bridges came and went below. Scanning the panorama from aloft the King shuddered at the excrescences of various modern buildings: the “monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much loved and elegant friend” Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, and the eyesores of Ken's Testicle atop the GLC building, the Eye, the Royal National Theatre, the Razor, the Gherkin, the Helter Skelter, the Shard of Glass, the Walkie Talkie, the Doodle, Lloyd's of London, the Tate Modern and the “Wobbly” Millennium Bridge and Dome/O2 Arena. Their prospects nearly caused him to lose his breakfast of muesli and warm goat cheese, and he vowed to destroy all of them and hang their architects at The King's Gallows at Tyburn, as Marble Arch had formerly been and now was again called.

Soon Jugs' conveyance was in descent and making a perfect landing in the dry moat surrounding the Tower of London. The piebald Chief Raven, who had cadged a ride in the phaeton's luggage compartment, holding his breath most of the way, staggered onto terra firma and threw up. Aloft the rubber plant, which was watching anxiously from the window of the Jewel House, fluttered its fronds—which were no longer dusty—and made deep obeisance to the King, wishing it were under happier circumstances and that it were not under duress and so untidy. Then it returned to fencing with Pesci and Hermione, who were attacking its aerial and buttress roots and branches with the Jewelled Sword of Offering and the Great Sword of State. To their surprise the ancient vegetable was still flexible enough to dodge their thrusts and hacks from both sides, and adept in getting in some nasty jabs and whiplash slices of its own with its sinewy limbs.

When they heard the strangled speech of James R, Hermione gave up for the moment trying to top the plant. Snatching up as much as they could of the Coronation Regalia in the folds of their garments to

bear away with them, she and Pesci hurried back to their quarters in the innermost ward's White Tower.

When they emerged onto the roof terrace to assess the situation, they observed all thirty-five Beefeaters—properly known as Yeomen Warders of His Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress the Tower of London, and Members of the Sovereign's Body Guard of the Yeoman Guard Extraordinary—milling around the inner ward that lay beyond the White Tower's precinct. They were in disarray, pulling on their uniforms and buttoning them as if they had been caught napping; which was true. They had been carousing until early that morning to celebrate the King's Unofficial Birthday (the King himself had forgotten about it, and no one had sent him a card) and were in no condition for action of any kind, least of a fight. As soon as they were assembled they ran, clutching their heads as if they were about to lose them, which was possibly the case, out of the Middle tower gate to greet their monarch in the outer ward and moat.

Strategist that she was, Hermione took in the situation at a glance. There was not a moment to lose and she ordered Battle Stations. Having conferred with her, Pesci blew a blast on his bugle to have his cohort of soldier-servants fall in, and barked a string of orders. They snapped to in a very un-Beefeater-like manner, and before King James had a chance to send the ridiculous Yeomen Warders back inside, the portcullises had been dropped, the gates secured, and the enemy was barricaded within the curtain walls of the oldest and stoutest fortress in the kingdom.

There was nothing that all the King's men could do but brandish their pikes, or partisans, from the moat at the battlements and hurl abuse.

Pesci turned some of his well-trained squad to setting up cauldrons for the boiling of surplus fuel oil drawn from the Tower's heating tanks (the installation of solar heating panels on the Tower roofs had rendered the redundant former fuel nothing more than a sobering reminder of how Mankind had plundered the resources of the earth and turned it into a pollutant...but there was no time to dwell on that now, except to reflect that the oil was about to be put to the only use it was still good for) to pour on the heads of anyone foolish enough to approach the battlements, and catapult buckets of it at those withdrawn across the moat. Already an Eyetie team was winding the rope and manning the levers of the ballistic machine, readying it to launch its first consignment of hot distillate petroleum product at the royalists.

'Men!' barked Hermione to the members of her own force through

a rolled-up original of the Magna Carta, ‘Should a single bloody mouse get into this place from amongst that rabble across the way, I will personally cut off the head of the man responsible and use it as a cannonball.’ Pesci smiled: this was just like being at home with his own mama. He paused to consider the dear lady as she probably was at that moment: elbow-deep in pasta, garlic and tomato sauce in her kitchen. Half a dozen of her fettucine-fed family (those who were not in jail or, in Ignacio’s case, had fled the country under indictment), ranging in age from thirty to their late fifties and all still living at home, would be sitting at the table and regarding her adoringly. The vision made him homesick as he stood and rubbed his sore shoulder, and a tear formed in the corner of his eye and ran down his nose.

Ignacio Pesci’s sentimental thoughts were interrupted as the rubber plant, which somehow was exercising some vestigial ability of its genus to climb up walls with independent locomotive power, and followed them, appeared on the scene and launched itself at Hermione. Looping itself several times around her neck and making an eldritch sound, it began to strangle her like a boa constrictor or python while hitting her with considerable force over the head with its earthenware pot.

It was its first and last mistake. Before *Ficus elastica* could wreak its murderous intent, demonstrating great strength of tooth and claw Hermione tore it off her and ripped and bit it into a congeries of fractured branches and roots and a confetti of leaves. In its death throes as it was dismembered, the plant screeched an agonized prayer to its liege lord King James, begging him to avenge it.

Striding to an embrasure, Hermione yelled defiance at the royalist gaggle in the outer ward and moat. Then she loaded the plant pot into the catapult bucket, took a sighting and made a few adjustments to the machine’s aim, and released the firing mechanism. Accompanied by a mixed barrage of shouted encouragement and invective from the Tower, the missile curved up and up...then down and down...and struck a Yeoman Warder on the temple as he looked up in amazement.

The Beefeater’s hangover cured, that was the end of him and the score was one-nil—which is a sporting count, since it does not include the two friendly-fire deaths of the sentries at Buck House; the expiry of Jugs’ phaeton driver from toxic fume inhalation; and the severe concussions and memory loss sustained by the pair of guards at the Waterloo Barracks.

Aux armes, citoyens!

Hermione disappeared from view.

Ten minutes later when she emerged again into full view she had bedizened herself with excerpts from the Crown Jewels in order to taunt King James. She looked like a Pearly Queen of the early twentieth century London organization associated with Henry Croft, an orphan street sweeper who collected money for charity—except that charity was not what she had on her mind.

So dramatic was the sight that the sun was drawn from behind an English cloud to marvel at his competition, dazzling the crowd on the ground. The woman's dumpy frame was transformed into a giant candelabra of earrings, pendants, brooches and rings supplemented by the flashing rubies of her eyes. On her head she was wearing the Imperial State Crown, featuring the Cullinan II diamond.

King James bustled forward as far as he dared, and whipped out his special sunglasses for looking at solar eclipses. The antagonists glared at each other. Then he rolled a surplus quantity of ear into a megaphone of his own, and addressed his former acolyte and her force.

‘Lay down your arms and yield, varlet miscreants! Ye have incurred the wrath of the Sovereign and affronted us beyond tolerance, and ye are guilty of High Treason under the Treason Act of 1351 of levying war against the King in his Realm and of otherwise attempting by force of arms or other violent means to conspire against and incite overthrow of the organs of government established by the Constitution. Therefore be it known that we will assail ye mercilessly, as God be our witness. Your lives are hereby declared forfeit.’

It occurred to James that such language might not be direct and simple enough for Hermione et al to understand. ‘Hrrm. This is the boss speaking. Throw down your weapons, you knock-kneed yellow bastards, and come out with your hands over your heads.’

As he waited for a response he stomped up and down, sucking his teeth and casting covert glances at the Tower walls. But answer came there none and nothing happened. It was clear that commands and threats were a waste of breath.

At that moment the aged Chief Raven lumbered back into the Tower's airspace, determined to defend the honor of his liege-lord. He was not sure what he was going to do, except perhaps to peck Hermione to death with the dull edge of his beak. Scornfully Hermione surveyed the tired bird as it approached the moat, and she nodded to Pesci.

There was the twang of a bowstring, and the would-be avenger turned a somersault in the air and fell slain to the ground at James's feet in a pied heap of rumpled feathers. A white feather drifted downwards and came to rest on his head. Hermione jeered at the cowardly symbol and Pesci, much pleased with his impressive display of marksmanship, cried 'Yankee Doodle-doo!'. The defenders cheered madly over the dispatching of the Chief Raven—Hermione had spread word of the legend that if the ravens left the Tower the monarchy would fall (so would the White Tower, it was said, but she had no worries on that score because by then she would have traded up to Windsor Castle)—and James, aghast, viewed the corpse in disbelief.

The Tower had lost its oldest retainer, and the score was two-zip.

After gnawing in anguish at his woven-nettle sleeve, next Jugs commanded the Beefeaters to bring desks and doors from a nearby office building, for use as shields to protect them against the slings and arrows and whatever else they had at their disposal that the insurgents might bring to bear against them.

Meanwhile Pesci's household militia continued their preparations apace. The copper cauldrons of oil over the fires along the battlements were now bubbling hot. Quantities of antique furniture had been broken up for use as fuel, supplemented by the highly flammable Old Master oil paintings from the White Tower apartment and their frames that had been used as kindling. Thomas Sheraton's George the Third armchairs and cabinets, of satinwood, rosewood and tulipwood, proved dry and fast-burning but were practically smokeless. In a practical demonstration of Art for Art's Sake, Joseph William Mallord Turner's canvases burned especially well: despite the heavy fumes that the thickly applied paint gave off, they generated exactly the sort of intense heat that was required. The more restrained John Constable was less fiery but lasted longer.

Soon the containers' contents were hot enough to be poured from the battlements, or tossed in chamber pots onto the heads of the enemy with the aid of the catapult. If James had any ideas about scaling the walls with ladders, this would put paid to them. Meanwhile, some of the Tower force's younger crew were demonstrating increasing accuracy with the longbows and arbalests, and a few were hurling spears with enough velocity to threaten any Beefeater who was incautious enough as to come within range.

The desks and doors were hurried in from an ugly grey concrete insurance office complex at Tower Place behind All Hallows Church—Jugs recalled his ancient privilege that the monarch had the right to rase

to the ground any building within a longbow shot of the Tower's walls, and he vowed to exercise it and have the architect and the executives who had authorized the construction put to work on a sewage farm. The royal party turned the metal desks on their sides and took shelter behind them; but the hollow-core doors had to be discarded as useless. And neither was any proof against a churn of oil launched by Pesci from the catapult, which scored a direct hit on a pair of distracted Yeoman Warders. Looking like a pair of moribund lobsters in their despoiled uniforms, they were borne from the field to furious applause and renewed cheers and jeers from above.

The invaders' advantage was now four to nothing, and the penthouse partners were without question on top and at the top of their game. Nonplussed, the would-be besiegers scratched their heads and looked nervously at their King, as the termagant rebel mistress of the Tower high-fived her accomplice and crowed her Schadenfreude over their heads. While he winced with pleasure, Hermione pinned a medal from the royal collection on Pesci's doublet above his dagger wound. It was in earnest, she said, of her intention—as soon as she was voted Queen by popular acclamation and installed at Windsor—to bestow upon him the Order of the Garter, which was the world's most ancient order of chivalry, founded by King Edward the Third, and which could only be awarded by the Sovereign.

King James watched things go pear-shaped in dismay. This was *lèse-majesté* (damn those Frenchies and their expressions) on a grand scale. His mother, who had waited until he was middle-aged before relinquishing the throne, never had to contend with contumely such as this. It had been a most humungous mistake, Jugs now realized, to turn to the Colonies for a new broom in his administration and at Court. He was the first to admit his lack of understanding of foreign peoples and their ways; but naively believing that Americans spoke a kind of English, the recruiting of some forward-thinking person into his administration from the States had seemed a good idea at the time. For here at home all he had to choose from out of the non-equine classes (most of whom he had to admit were a bit foggy, i.e. thick and wet) were soccer-obsessed yahoos and meat-eaters who spent their days fiddling with computers and mobile phones and other technological gadgetry, the electronic currents and cycles and radio waves of which interfered with the mental processes of the plant kingdom with which Great Britain under his rule was so proud to be allied.

Today was already much worse a situation than the King's upset, shortly after the monarchy's full pre-Civil War privileges had been

restored, in an exchange with a loud- and foul-mouthed hard-line Old Labourite ex-Trade Union boss and ex-Member of Parliament and Government Cabinet Minister, at a ceremony where Jugs was cutting the ribbon to open a new National Health Service clinic devoted to the diagnosis and treatment of rare plant diseases.

When James had spotted this person holding a large placard protesting the waste of public funds, which was not only worded in language that was unparliamentary and equally rude in its personal reference to the King, but that both split an infinitive and ended in a preposition, he threw a wobbly and ordered the man brought before him. With such an individual he would dispense with the Froggy *noblesse oblige* sufferance that might otherwise have compelled him to pretend he had seen nothing to offend him.

‘W-w-whatever happened to l-loyalty, and r-r-respect, and grammar—what-what?’, James had inquired. To which the boor responded, ‘Carn ’elp yer there, mate. I don’t kiss no Kaiser on the keister. Your arse ain’t the Blarney stone, Jimbo me lad.’

In a supreme instance of political oxy-moronic irony, the following day the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that this individual, who upon retirement as a Labour Member of Parliament had accepted a peerage, for many years had claimed as an expense and received taxpayer reimbursement for the interest on a mortgage on a second home in Westminster that was owned by his partner—when the man’s Constituency where he lived was only ten miles away.

Jugs had stripped the man of his peerage and sentenced him to five years hard labor digging for plant fossils for the royal leaf-architecture collection, as punishment for defrauding the Realm; plus another five consecutive years for grammatical abuse in the wording of his placard (which was an affront up with which he would not put), to be spent splitting rocks instead of infinitives in the Cairngorms; plus another five years in jug that he was to spend writing a book on the Divine Right of Kings.

To the manner born

Out of the blue King James had a ripsnorting idea. ‘Cry God for Jimmy, England and St George!’ His Highness hollered, slapping his anointed shanks. ‘I do believe I’ve got it! By George I’ve got it!’ And he gave thanks for the seaweed in his diet, which had done such wonders in rejuvenating his brain-cells. Though his inbred sense of decorum then returned, along with his customary equine expression, he remained bubbling underneath. Why, should this wheeze of his work....

Alerted to the crisis by a leak from the Palace, news crews and TV cameras had arrived, choppers were circling overhead, and the event was about to be broadcast live to the four corners of the world and possibly even beyond Dover. As the royal entourage poured in from SW1, breathless members of Jugs’ household milled about erecting tents and arranging the impedimenta of the traveling court. They were arriving in waves on Circle and District Line tubes to Tower Hill station on special non-stop trains that did not make any of the incidental stops after Westminster. All the gear was in the process of being unpacked. There was the filtration unit for the monarch’s beverage, and the mobile system that processed toilet paper to produce the fibrous vellum on which was transcribed HRH’s memoranda. For he was a great dictator, with a dozen secretaries and scribes who worked around the clock, setting down and illuminating his transparent thoughts. There was the portable conservatory for the most highly strung plants who could not bear to be separated from their lord for even brief periods; nor he of them. They had to be spoken to soothingly on the hour or they would pine and wilt and refuse all nourishment. And the lavatorium was rigged where James communed with nature and produced the royal manure, which was spread on all the Palace gardens—the roses would tolerate none other—and sent to the royal sheds where it grew the most extraordinary mushrooms. There was the vegetarian, supervised by a crack team of organic gardeners, whose duty it was to tend to a temperamental collection of tubers, legumes and grains, in addition to numerous flowers to gladden the royal eye, grown from seeds sent by Kew Royal Botanic Gardens’ Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place in West Sussex, where seeds of every plant in the world were sent for deterioration-proof storage in an underground vault (the King had made arrangements for him to be buried there alongside a rare orchid with whom he once had a relationship). And there was the porta-kitchen: James was of course finicky in the extreme about what he ate, and he had a weak stomach. Instead of using salt, he

wept (the tears he shed were not the crocodile ones of the oyster-guzzling Walrus in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*) over his meals in the cafeteria of black Perspex (it would not do for the vegetables to observe him in the act of consumption) as he thought of the anesthetization and cropping and Cuisinart-ing to which his food had been subjected. Sometimes Jugs would fancy that he recognized an asparagus spear, or the shape of a favorite turnip, and his gustatory senses would revolt and he would not be able to eat another bite.

Jugs realized that this was the crisis for which he had been bred and trained; this was to be his defining moment. And not before time: he had been kept in short trousers by his parents until he was twenty-one, and made to wear his schoolboy cap, and he continue to use his Primary School satchel and swivel-top pencil-box while he was at Oxford—all so as not to bring him on too quickly. Well, now the time had come for the top pedigreed stud from the royal stables to open his legs and show his class. This must be his finest hour.

He would begin, he decided, by playing mind-games with the enemy, following the example of Sir Francis Drake announcing his intention to finish his game of bowls before toddling off to defeat the Spanish Armada. At his command the Yeoman Warders, rather too literally, fell in and saluted—none too smartly, but it would have to do. Jugs announced, ‘No longer Yeoman Warders, ye. Henceforth ye will be called...dash it, what was the name, Lord Chamberlain?...LC?...there you are. What? Ah, yes. M-Marrow Splungers. Yes indeedy, Marrow S-Splungers it is. Have the new uniforms arrived? Oh, for crying out loud. Well where are they? Bring on the uniforms at the double!’

As Jugs waited impatiently all was quiet atop the Tower—which made him suspicious, and annoyed because he wanted his affectation of nonchalance to be observed. His doctor took his blood pressure, and made him swallow some herbal pills with a glass of generic beetroot juice. Then the panels of a pavilion of green and white striped silk were drawn aside and the Master of the Horse stepped forth. He was leading a couple of milk-white unicorns, one on each side of him, and he brought them before the King. Each beast had a long straight horn projecting from its forehead, like a narwhal’s. The keeper dropped onto one knee and, as he dug his elbows into their fabulous flanks, they followed suit by sinking onto one foreleg and bowing their heads. James was a distant cousin of theirs, and they had been well trained.

James flushed and tutted. ‘The uniforms, you dolts, not the unicorns—we said the uniforms! The uniforms for the M-M-Marrow Splungers! Honestly, we don’t know. C-come along now you lot, buck up! Sorry,

you two, there's been a regrettable mistake. We'll see you at dinner.'

It took him a while to calm down, under the influence of more pills and juice. Contributing to his nervousness was the emergence from a different tent—late as always, but there was never anything that could be done about that—of the unicorns' attendant virgin. The sight of the damsel made James blush and stutter worse than usual. As soon as it was clear that her services were not required, the virgin, who had come out looking cool and bored and uninterested in what was going on, turned on her yoga sandals heel and flounced back to her tent. She had been in the middle of getting a manny and a peddy, and the varnish was still wet, and now there were smudges because there had been no time to have the toe separators put in.

Finally the Master of the Wardrobe advanced from a third tent at the head of a group of servants in formation like pall-bearers. They were carrying poles on which rested oaken chests. Staggering under the weight they brought them forward, lowered them onto the turf and raised the lids. The Yeoman Warders stamped and saluted. The monarch, his composure restored, called for a parchment to be unrolled and held before him and the investiture began.

"Item the first: Be it known, Yeoman Warders, that ye are no longer to be yclept Beefeaters, because there ain't no beeves left to be ate." What? Who wrote this crap, LC? No, seriously. Are you sure? Well, it was late, and the virgin was...never mind. To proceed. "Item the second: The term Beefeater is hereby outlawed. Those who offend by continuing to use it shall be mulched. Item the third: Owing to our gloriously renewed *entrecôte* with our worthy and ancient adversary the French..."

'*Entrecôte*? Poor choice of word, that. It's French, for starters, and it's meaty. We think we meant *contretemps*, but that's just as bad. Memo to file: eliminate both from the dictionaries and use Disagreement, Spat, or Barney instead. Dammit, LC, this is from another speech altogether. No wonder this country is in the mess it is. Find the right scroll and sack the scribe. Ti-tum ti-tum. Got it? Oh never mind, I'll take it from here. I'm sure you are. No, thank *you*.

'We will now proceed to administer the oath. Advance, proud Marrow Splungers, and disrobe. Yes, those too. Pile the old uniforms for burning. Swear that ye will not blot your escutcheons. Excuse me? No, that's not what I meant. Look it up, you silly rabbit, and don't interrupt. Promise ye never to dishonor *Cucurbita pepo*, the noble marrow. Some of our best friends are marrows, you know. Good, job done. Signed this day by my hand...where's the fucking quill? Not that

goose, the other one, Rodney. Eh? Green ink of course. There. Use the sand-shaker. Blotting paper then. Now, cause this proclamation to be copied and illuminated and distributed immediately. Rush order. One hundred copies.'

After the ex-Beefeaters stripped to their long underwear and were presented with the new green and yellow uniforms, the old red and gold ones were put in a heap, sprinkled with methane hydrate and set alight. A hip-flask in one of the pockets exploded, and the material blazed.

The interlude concluded to his satisfaction, Jugs was ready to refocus his attention on the situation within the Tower.

Cry Havoc!

Hermione and Pesci welcomed them back with a lead bucketful of boiling oil. The bucket up-ended en route dumping the liquid on the grass (this in itself was cause for the King to wince), but the receptacle conked a newly inducted Splunger on the head and reduced the complement by a further one. Things were looking grim for the Royalists. The score was now five-zero, and it was high time for Jimbo to show the fiber of his being—of which potentially, owing to his diet, there was plenty.

In ringing tones HRH called for his Fiddlers Three: not the medieval trio as in the time of Old King Cole, but the massed marching bands of the Royal Household and all the impedimenta related to each of their specialties. And he communicated to the Lord Chamberlain a similar order for a group of professional singers to be imported pronto.

Understandably this took quite a while. During the enforced intermission, James repaired to the unicorn's tent hoping for green tea and sympathy from the virgin. In this he was disappointed: now that her nails were dry she wanted to go to Motcomb Street and have her hair done. James said that he could not in all conscience permit this, dear, because if everyone else had to be here, dear, he could not exactly give her leave, did she see?, because it smacked of favoritism. He could and should have stopped there, but he went on to say that the last time she had a cut and color at Errol Douglas he thought he might have to sell one of the Crown Jewels; and that, dear, was something that he was not allowed to do even if he wanted to, which he did not, and anyway right now he did not have access to them so there it was.

After the virgin smacked Jugs and kicked him out of the tent, he gave word to the Lord Chamberlain that he was to be notified when the bands were all present and correct; and he retired to his private quarters to sulk amongst his cacti collection because, he said, his reception was sure to be less prickly.

When the bands were all arrived, it was an impressive sight. The sun, which had gone behind a cloud after venturing forth to admire the Pearly Queen, came out for another dekkko. Even he had to admit that the brass gleamed—which coming from a Sun was a compliment indeed.

There was rank upon rank of strings and wind instruments, including accordions, clarinets, bassoons, English horns, flutes, oboes, piccolos and saxophones. There were a dozen bagpipe players. Even an organ had been set up. There was all manner of brass: bugles, cornets,

trumpets, mellophones and trombones, and every generation of tuba, including serpents, cimbassos, sousaphones and euphoniums. There were vuvuzelas, or stadium horns. Only the French horns were missing: by royal decree they had been declared politically incorrect, and destroyed (Mutatis mutandis the English horn, of course, was called an oboe and not a cor anglais.). There were numerous percussion instruments, including side-, snare- and bass and bongo drums and a fearsome array of kettledrums. There were triangles, gongs, whips, bells, klaxons, whistles and a kazoo; a carillon (the heaviest of musical instruments), a celesta, chimes, cymbals, castanets, a glockenspiel, a xylophone, güiros, maracas, marimbas and tambourines—everything that made a distinctive sound when blown, cracked, clashed, bashed, clacked, rubbed, scraped, shaken or swung, or when struck with a mallet or stick or the fists.

At length, after much crashing and cursing, the battery was ready and armed. Meanwhile the Marrow Splungers looked straight ahead and tried to pretend that their Commander-in-Chief did not have bats in his belfry.

Little did they suspect that bats—a myriad of Chiroptera, in fact—were exactly what he had in mind; for the King was on terms with many lesser species and wished to call in a favor. Jas. pursed his lips like a trumpet-player about to blow a fanfare and then, huffing and puffing until his face bulged like Dizzy Gillespie's, he emitted a sound so high-pitched and shrill that the courtiers and Splungers clapped their hands to their ears. Bliss it was when the bullfrog's cheeks deflated; but the noise persisted inside everyone's head for a while, and blood trickled from more than a few eardrums.

After the Director-Conductor of the Fiddlers Three had been received on the royal daïs by his Patron, he withdrew and mounted his own podium. Raising his baton, which was three feet long and fluorescent green, he launched the band into a deliberately exaggerated and 'awfulissimo' rendition of John Philip Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever*, to taunt and insult those on the battlements. The onlookers at first did not notice that the band members had donned acoustic noise-canceling headphones, which they removed from white leather pouches at their sides. Page-boys were running about distributing pairs of Bose QuietComfort 15's to all those in the party of would-be besiegers. These headphones (the superior QuietComfort 3 model) were also sold under royal warrant from the better class of retail establishment to the public. For James acknowledged that sometimes the ambrosial sound of the King's Musick, especially the pieces he wrote himself for open-air

concerts in aid of the royal horticultural charities, was more emotionally intense than many of his subjects could bear, especially in the fortissimo passages above 80 dbSPL.

Aloft the American defenders, who had paused to stand respectfully to attention with hands on hearts when the band struck up, lost their senses of patriotism and humor after the third erratic repeat. A tuba-player succumbed to a small cannonball—the heavier cannon were inaccessible (and anyway there was no gunpowder with which to charge them) on the Traitors' Gate river side of the Tower, again aimed and loosed from the catapult by Hermione, who was determined to act as a good leader should and lead by example.

Jugs, who had begun to recover his composure, was aghast: he was now six and a tuba down. But it would not do to show dismay.

'Bring on the singers!' he yelled.

Onto the field of battle trooped a famous array of sizeable operatic stars of various non-Britannic nationalities, who were not concealing their disgruntlement at having been summoned to attend His Majesty. Their performance that day at the Royal Opera House had been canceled, along with their fees, and it had been made clear to them by the Lord Chamberlain, through the chief executive of Covent Garden, that there was no question of their being compensated or reimbursed for coming to the aid of the nation. Further, upon arrival they were told that they were to sing as prompted on pain of having their vocal cords removed. It was possible that this might not prove to have been a good decision: the tenor, whose girth was even greater than that of the soprano, looked as though he were ready to explode, which would be most counter-productive in the causing of additional casualties and collateral damage.

Bite me

Still in ironic mode, the singers warmed up with *The Star-Spangled Banner*, which ill humor assisted them in tossing off exquisitely badly. Only when delivered at football and baseball games could the quality of singing have been surpassed. As an insult to the defenders' national pride, it achieved its objective in rousing their ire as much as if the American flag was being burned before their eyes.

The King was amused.

Next on the program was Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries*, played inside-out with a wailing vocal accompaniment prompted by the buttocks of the singers being pronged with pitchforks. Unable to beat time to the music because there was none, James hummed and alternately waved and gnawed a carrot stick, consulted his watch, and tuned the radio inside his own headphones—which were customized with earpieces made from gourd skins—to a BBC Radio 4 interview with the celebrated gardener Percy Thrower.

During the fourth improvised repeat a furry creature flew overhead, and dipped its jointed wings to the Sovereign, before flying at Signor Pesci and biting him on the neck. It hung there on his dewlap, chattering through clenched teeth. It was a giant vampire bat, *D. draculae Morgan*, the leader of many that were to arrive over the ensuing minutes in response to the King's call to action. The sinner from Syracuse turned pale. It was the first of several Keith Reid/Procol Harum whiter shades of pale through which he would pass over the next few moments as the blood was drained from him. As he clutched at the beast in an attempt to dislodge it, it dug its claws and teeth deeper into him.

Squadron after squadron of bats arrived. There were so many of them that the caves they lived in were batless and devoid of squeak. They had been promised a good feast, had traveled a long way, and were very hungry. They were accustomed to getting first bite of the King's executed felons, before the flesh was tossed to his pet piranhas, family *Characidae*, subfamily *Serrasalminae*, in the Buck House swimming-pool: James was conscientious about playing his part in maintaining the links of the food chain. Soon the Mediterranean murderer was coated with fur, as many little teeth glommed onto him. The vampires did not wait until everyone had been served, say grace, wipe their mouths with napkins, and make polite conversation during the meal. They had no use for cutlery or palate-cleansing sorbet between courses. The apophthegm 'Enough is as good as a feast' was

unknown amongst their ilk.

One frantic ‘Mamma mia!’ later, Pesci was dead. The score was now six to one, and a very big One it was. Hermione was stricken. It was so hard to get good help these days, and she had relied on Pesci since he was a promising juvenile delinquent to do and increasingly coordinate her dirty work and black ops. For the first time in years she was at a loss to know what to do. Boiling oil and arrows were useless as a defense against so many of these winged bloodsuckers.

There was a silver lining to the cloud over her head. Pesci had been an unfortunate choice of appetizer for the bats, owing to the strong taste of garlic in his blood. James had forgotten that vampires are allergic to and repelled by *Allium sativum*, which had literally been as mother’s milk to baby Ignacio; and like a good Italian the adult Pesci ingested many a clove of garlic in his meals throughout his life. He was in the habit of eating raw bulbs as a snack, and began torture sessions by breathing in his own victims’ faces: the sulfur-rich compounds of garlic are excreted from the lungs. Hermione and other non-Italians who spent time in his company used as part of their daily routine to take a garlic pill with their breakfasts so that they would not notice the smell.

When the bat leader, who had been too ravenous to detect the flavor of what he was imbibing until too late, spotted the throat-wattle exposed of the White Tower’s Amazon Queen, it sped and attached itself to it, perilously close to the jugular vein, in the hope of diluting the awful taste. But far from tasting like honey much sweeter than wine (as in the song by Bobby Scott and Ric Marlow recorded by Paul McCartney), a taste of Hermie proved to be as gall and wormwood. Although bats were familiar with A, B, AB and O, and Rhesus positive and negative blood groups, Hermione was in a hematological category shared only by Lady Macbeth. Her blood mixed with Pesci’s affected the leader like a dose of cyanide, and it spat her out, fell to the ground, spun in agony and expired.

Disgusted and furious, the bat army departed en masse.

So delighted was Jugs by the symbolic victory over Hermione’s chief henchman, and his beau strategem that was responsible for it—in his euphoria he failed to register the disastrous effect of serving the bats Cucina Italiana—the score was now seven-one. The conductor redoubled his arm-waving, increased the tempo of the music and, leaving Sousa and Wagner in the dust, moved on to an arrangement by none other than King James (who fancied himself a modern Frederick the Great of Prussia in his composing) of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* with choral accompaniment. This put the singers into an even fouler

mood than before, with the result that in their amplified anger the volume of sound that they produced increased, and then increased further, as each refused to allow his or her voice to be drowned either by the other singers or the bands' playing.

Which was exactly what James intended, and already the decibel level was uncomfortably—for those not wearing headphones—in excess of 115 dbSPL, which is louder than the average rock concert.

On and on the music played. When the Stravinsky crashed to a halt, the conductor brought down the house with another of James's untuneful compositions, *Variations on a Theme of Karlheinz Stockhausen*. Despite the gravity of the crisis, the King was thrilled that his work should be getting such public exposure. For by now crowds of excited onlookers were pouring out of the Monument and Tower Hill tube stations (the stopping-train service had resumed now that the courtiers were all in situ) and off the buses to join the cameras, booms and microphones of the Breaking News crews. There was even a couple of music critics, one of whom wet himself in his excitement as he scribbled and thought of the bonus that King James would pay him for a good review. The hi-fi shops in the area were doing a brisk trade in noise-excluding headphones, and their managers were desperately calling their other branches outside the City begging for more to be sent over in taxis. It may or may not have been observed that even the sphere of the sun, though he continued to shine for fear of missing something, was wearing matching fluffy cumulus clouds on either side.

As musicians and singers began weaving and fainting from exhaustion and heat, they were replaced by musicians and singers registered at the Royal College of Music and English National Opera, and amateurs from around London who had been telephoned and told to report with their instruments for placement on stand-by. One by one the original performers were compelled to retire, their *embouchures* cracked and flaccid, their hands blistered, their voices gone, and their arms aching. Some had to be put on stretchers and borne to an aid station in one of the tents to be revived and tended to.

In vain the Tower's occupants tried to harpoon those of their tormentors who ventured too close to the walls, with spears to which rope had been attached, so that they might be hauled in and stripped of their headphones.

In a change of strategy, instead of weaponry they hurled down pleas for cessation and silence in return for promises to wire-transfer money from their bank accounts—and met with no response. As pre-payment for sets of headphones, they catapulted bank- and promissory notes

wrapped around soft articles at the besiegers—only to see the money pocketed and the notes shredded by the Marrow Splungers with their teeth. They hailed the instrumentalists offering to send them their wives and sisters in return for their downing their instruments and coming out on strike—but they were deaf to their begging.

Having failed in their attempts to bribe and barter, the defenders—they were coming to think of themselves as such—switched to trying anything they could to obtain prophylactic relief from the unrelenting barrage of sound from below. British Airways earplugs from the flights from America proved useless, as did candle wax, and the ploy of wrapping towels round one's head. Radios tuned to the same easy-listening programs on BBC Radio 2 or Classic FM ('Smooth Classics at Seven') failed to distract or detract from the cacophony. They tried singing to themselves. They huddled round baths and ran the taps. They drummed on furniture. They buried their heads in soil from the plant pots, and submerged their heads in buckets of water, and breathed through straws. They whistled and hooted through their fists and shouted, on the theory that creating a barrier of friendly noise might bring relief. When that did not work they tried imagining that the music was beautiful and that they could not hear enough of it. They tried to meditate. They pretended that they were marooned on a desert island, and in soundproof rooms.

As for Hermione herself, she got medieval. Ransacking the Tower's collections of the ancient accoutrements of war, she donned in succession helmets of every kind: casques, heaulms, *cervellaires*, bascinets, barbutes, sallets, armutes, sugarloafs, and *chapels de fer*.

None availed her and some even amplified the sounds.

Meals were forgotten and nobody slept. This so-called music, far from being the food of love, was the genetically modified nourishment of monsters. It seemed no longer to be generated from without but within their own heads. It was pure, torturous, hell.

Ding, dong, the witch is dead!

The interminable war of sonic attrition wore on for three days and three nights around the clock, and during all of this time the King slept not, neither did he eat. From time to time the corners of his mouth twitched like divining rods, but with what prescience it was impossible for anyone, even the Lord Chamberlain, to tell.

The conductor collapsed with exhaustion off the stand, and was carried away while another took his place. But the band did not miss a beat: Oom-pah oom-pah. Ta da, ta da dah, da da dah-ah-a, ta da dah, ta da dah, ta da dah-ah-ah. Poom poom. Bam pam. And again. And again. End. Repeat. End. Repeat. And then, squeak fiddle-dy squeak fiddle-dy squeak; while the singers went Aah-ah-aah-aah-ahh, ooo-eee, eee-ooo, eee.

A distraught Hermione surrendered, after two of her servants jumped to their deaths from the walls and she felt drawn to imitate their example. She threw in not just one towel but every one in the Tower in order to attract attention to herself.

‘I give up—I can’t stand it any longer!’ she cried, Tosca-like on a crenellation. ‘What can’t I do?’

‘She can’t stand it any longer!’ came the audience’s shout from below. On a signal from the King the conductor brought the music to a screeching halt; then at another nod he resumed his waving. James was a cautious man and the woman was as duplicitous as they come.

‘Stop it, please—stop it, I’ll do anything to stop it,’ reprised Hermione through her Magna Carta megaphone, [“...and like summer tempests came her tears”]. ‘I’ll do anything if only you’ll stop. I promise. No tricks, no nothing—I surrender!’

After a white sheet was run up a flagpole by the delirious butler, the King signaled again to the conductor by drawing a finger across his throat. The music and singing ceased, and wave upon reverberating wave of silence rolled and crashed through the air like combers on a beach. But because the music had been playing at maximum volume for so long, though instruments were lowered and mouths were stilled, every head in the Tower was still filled with tooting, tootling, booming, whistling, banging, sawing, bellowing and shrieking. For several minutes nobody could be sure whether it had stopped or not, and the anguished cries for mercy continued to peal out.

When five minutes later Hermione emerged tear-streaked and haggard in the outer ward, leading her wild-eyed train of staff and servants, she looked crestfallen, bedraggled and...soundly...beaten. The

last spark of her insolence and defiance was extinguished. The defeated occupants of the Tower staggered on the grass as if they were blind drunk, clutching their heads and moaning at the migraines they were suffering from.

The King's household, the musicians and singers, and the general public and Media tossed their headphones in the air and cheered, singing "'Rule Britannia! Britannia rule the waves,'" (the music critic mouthed 'airwaves' instead, sniggered and made a note to include the analogy in his review). Strangers hugged and kissed, and the elderly danced like young fauns.

King James ordered the criminals rounded up and marched up and down in ignominy as if they were so many dead Hectors being dragged by Achilles about the walls of Troy—though he was generous enough as to order it done three times only and not for the next nine days that the vindictive Achilles had hauled round Hector's corpse—to the accompaniment of his own National Anthem, conducted by the composer. It was a surprisingly tuneful piece and the bands played as if they were fresh and rested, much to the enjoyment of all. Unfortunately for Hermione it was written in four-four, common or marching time, and although she tried to break step in order to clear the rhythm from her head, she reeled like a yachtsman who steps on land for the first time after circumnavigating the globe, and relapsed into hysteria.

Then she was loaded with chains and taken straight back into the Tower; but this time she was brought where there was no decorative distinction, where there were no creature comforts: only a dark, dank, rank, bare cell infested with rats. And even there behind the thickest of walls the memory of that terrible everlasting concert was inescapable—Oom-pah oom-pah, Ta-da-da, Ayee, ayee. Her nail-broken fingers scrabbled at the greasy stones, and she fell and began banging her head against the floor.

She had gone mad, stark staring mad.

Above, King James—nobody was ever to think of or call him Jug Ears again behind his back—preened, surrounded by his courtiers and the admiring masses at a respectful distance. They were awestruck by his noble mien in victory, as were those throughout the country who were glued to their television sets. The Sovereign had single-handedly foiled a most heinous plot against the nation and saved their heritage, and they forgot all their grudges against him and adored him for it.

Though James was sorely tempted to express his jubilation by cavorting in a manner unkinglike, he took a restrained bow and posed for the cameras with one arm akimbo as if he were posing for a full-

length portrait by Kneller. When the sound of noise-makers had abated, he agreed to make a statement. A hundred microphones were thrust at him, and a forest of sound-booms were lowered over his head.

‘We are, well, you know...quite p-p-leased. Though of course, we are most grieved for the bird and the plant. Obsequies will be performed and their ashes interred at the Abbey. I will design a suitable plaque, and the Royal Mint—it used to be at the Tower, you know—will strike a commemorative Raven and Rubber Plant twenty-two-carat gold proof sovereign Brilliant Uncirculated with a portrait of us on the obverse. The Marrowers, too, we will not forget them.’

From somewhere in the crowd came a Cockney voice, ‘Waggle your ears for us, Your Majesty! Waggle your ears!’

And all around the cry was taken up by the people: ‘Yes, go on, Sir, please! Just this once, do it!’

There was hush as King James paused, frowning. Then he laughed loudly, a great belly-laugh into the air, before lowering his head in concentration as he complied: not once, or twice, but four times, to the north, east, south and west. The crowd applauded and roared its appreciation, and James cupped a gracious hand in airy acknowledgment.

The next day Hermione, in a broadcast televised to the world, was paraded to the block on Tower Green, where King James was again Master of Ceremonies and viewing the proceeding from a canopied stand....

The End [Version A, subconsciously rejected]

Lawks! Suddenly Hermione grabbed the massive leather-hooded headsman by the goolies, and, twisting them as hard as she could, jumped up and felled him with a sharp blow to the neck. Then she caught up the heavy ax and, displaying astonishing strength, scythed her way through the inept clutches and lunges of the Yeoman Ward...Marrow Splungers, who were again a little, very, hung over from the previous night’s celebrations.

The prisoner used both ends of the weapon and the middle too as cutting edge, club and stave. The ax had been well sharpened, and loose fingers, hands and arms flew in all directions. Much blood was spilled; but at least it was not her own, thought Hermione. She knew how to keep her head in a crisis!

The onlookers, despite themselves, were much impressed. There was no stopping the woman. As the King watched helplessly, Hermione made it down to Traitors’ Gate—thus depriving the opera-

loving world of a live enactment of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, which was sung so memorably by Maria Callas in the 1957 Milan production directed by Luchino Visconti—where a frigate was waiting to bear her across the Channel to France: She was never heard of again in Blighty, and one can only assume that she retired from politics and lived the rest of her life in peace and contentment, eating snails and drinking champagne and speaking French like a native.

Yeah, right.

The End [Version B, rejection of Freudian ambivalence, adopted by personal acclamation]

The drums rolled, drowning her piteous cries, and the ax fell, once, twice, a third time because it was so blunt, and then the ragged-necked head and body were removed to be stuck on a pike and gibbet in Whitehall, as a warning to any Republicans of the inadvisability of plotting high treason against the King.

Exeunt omnes...and Good Morning, as I, President Woodrow Scrubb, awoke sweetly refreshed, and ate the largest and most enjoyable breakfast of my life: fried eggs over easy, sausages, streaky bacon, grilled tomatoes, a whole portobello mushroom (*Agaricus bisporus*), fried bread, black pudding, kidneys, heavily sugared English Breakfast Tea, toast, butter, and Frank Cooper's Original 'Oxford' Coarse-Cut Seville Orange Marmalade.

Foot and Mouth

They have brought me back to Washington! whither I have been whisked, not by Air Force One, but an aged Cessna that took off down the ranch driveway. With Cosmo waiting in the wings, they say, it is time to start ramping up my appearances in public. Caveat orator/auditor.

In the Oval Office, Hart is installed at the Presidential desk, while I have been downgraded to a schoolboy contraption made of metal in the ante-chamber. We are quite the Odd Couple. My desk has a small hard seat connected to the aluminum top, which swivels like that on a child's high chair and sticks in my gut when locked into place. There is a playpen, colored paper and crayons; and no escape until the bell tolls at the end of lessons. I have to ask permission to go to a mini-toilet in the bathroom.

My tutor and coach, Mr Smorgasbord, uses a whiteboard and magic markers to draw countries, and write the names of the people whom I will meet. For public appearances, the precaution will be taken of outfitting me with extra-large shirt-cuffs on which notes have been written in different colors according to priority of importance. There is also fine writing in the stripes of my tie, which I can fiddle with if things get desperate. One hopes for a hot day if one is to find oneself at a loss for words, because it provides an excuse for rolling up the sleeves, and mopping the brow for reason other than being in a flop-sweat. When abroad, I can use these prompts to ascertain what country we are in, and what city, and the name and title of my host; and in some cases, particularly in eastern European countries, the sex. Mr Smorgasbord instructs me as to whether I am supposed to pretend to adore my opposite number on sight and hug him or her, or shake hands and smile, or grimace and withhold the Presidential paw. There are, I gather, fifteen different types and gradations of smile and contouring of the lip, to express varying degrees of approbation, complicity, friendliness, caution, or cordial dislike—which is exactly that, a mixture of cordiality and dislike. A lot has to do also with the relative warmth or coldness of the eyes. A finger-wag accompanied by a scowl or smirk can mean both 'You dirty rat' and 'You dog, you!'.

Body language is a subject unto itself on which I rate a not-discreditable B+.

Sadly, I flunked my first real test before the microphones and cameras. Some comedian, masquerading as a reporter, informed me that the Canadian Prime Minister, Monsieur Poutine, was looking

forward to spending time with me. Since we were not in Canada, the Premier's moniker—which is not Poutine—was not written on either cuff or tie. I am under instruction to ignore unscripted or off-message remarks, and attempts at banter, which may be tricks to lure me into unfamiliar or hostile territory. But in this case I saw an opportunity to curry favor...which I accomplished in a lengthy reply to the effect that I thoroughly reciprocated the estimable Mon-sewer Poo-teen's enthusiasm for rapprochement. It is possible that a shadow did cross my mind at this point cast by the similarity between the Canadian geezer's name and that of the Roosky President Ostrich-legs Rasputin. Worse, it turned out that the bogus appellation of the gentleman in question, 'Poutine', is a word that Canadians means a fried-up mess of a national dish constituted of french fries topped with curd cheese covered with brown gravy. Yum.

I got a thousand lines from Mr Smorgasbord [the hypocrite: in the Sweden, *Smör*, meaning butter, combines with *gås*, meaning goose, to produce the small pieces of butter that form and float to the surface of cream, like geese in a lake, while it is churned. Yuk. I am lactose-intolerant.] for committing this solecism. In vain did I plead that President Kennedy had committed a similar boo-boo. By informing German citizens that 'Ich bin ein Berliner', instead of 'Ich bin Berliner', he had admitted to being a jelly doughnut.

My handlers are of course exceedingly annoyed about the incorrigibly moronic stuff that continues to issue from my lips, like oil from an uncapped well, every time I am confronted by recording devices. It is impossible for me to explain to them that it is an inevitable consequence of the Mother Sickness, the onshore strain of *mal de mère*, that afflicts me. Even when I try to inject a bit of Woodrovian humor by poking fun at myself, and succeed in getting people to laugh with rather than at me, they fuss. But the way I see it, we need some laughter in our lives right now, what with the financial markets being in such turmoil, and the unemployment figures so high, and people not being able to afford their houses. The message I am sending to people is that, Hey, if a idiot like me can get elected to this office, there's hope for everyone, which means that the American dream must be alive.

One of these instances went down so well at a roast recently in Washington—'roast' in this case equating to something a little cooler than a Scrubb family barbecue—that it resulted in a fleeting and slight boost to my popularity rating, which has never before broken twenty percent (it is only that high because my appearances are so rare).

I wrote ‘at a roast’. Actually I was trying to climb out of a hole I had dug for myself when ambushed at the reporter-lined entrance to the oven-building, with a question about a bad situation in a part of the world that I had not heard of—nor, I suspect, had Mr Smorgasbord—with the words, “If the East Timorians decide to revolt, I’m sure I’ll have a statement.” I was wearing a ill-fitting rented tuxedo, and a shirt on which the sleeves were so short that it was impossible to shoot the cuffs; no problem was anticipated: the occasion being a roast, I was expected not to have to do anything except look like a turkey (a cinch); and of course it is difficult to write notes on a black bow-tie except in white high-visibility ink or refer to them unless one is choking on a chicken-bone and being treated to a Heimlich maneuver, in which case one is excused from having to comment.

My excuse is a lengthy one. I was attempting to refer to my activities prior to assuming the Presidency as a moderately successful in-absentia oilman. Big Oil being an area that Hermione neither knows nor cares anything about [except as a commodity to boil her victims and enemies in, *vide supra*], the family ScrubbOil business has always been a safe haven for Dad and me. We know next to nothing about it ourselves, and rely on the managers; but the Gulf being a Hermione—John Mortimer-esque She Who Must Be Obeyed pollution- and volatility-free zone makes it our Disney resort of choice. An additional incentive to me is that Cosmo, though Governor of the State of Gulfida, has no interest in hydrocarbons, only the suntan-oiled skin of beach babes.

What I do know is that one has to be a bit of an entrepreneur, i.e. cowboy, to make it in the oil game. Dad and I, by whom I mean someone on our behalves, are always on the lookout for new drilling fields, and this East Timor place, according to the scouts, seemed promising. And when we sent a Company man out to explore, Lo! the report was good. After greasing a number of palms, he said, and agreeing to cut the government in for an exorbitant share of the profits, we could secure permission to start drilling. Dad and I, as Directors of ScrubbOil, flew to Timor to sign the contract, and I was obliged to consume monkey brains with the Head of State, who was an East Timorian. As opposed to a West Timorian, which, when one thinks of a West Side—East Side thing is pretty meaningless except geographically...my bad, I shoulda remembered Manhattan). Dad weaseled (I wonder whether Timorians eat weasel) his way out of the dinner, pleading indigestion and a bad record when dining with Heads of State, especially upon ethnic food, and made do in his hut with a

peanut butter and jelly sandwich that he had pocketed from the flight.

It was a wasted exercise. The next day there was a coup by the West Timorians, and some brutal military feller was now in charge. He denounced the monkey-hunters in the East, and foreigners like myself who had done business with them. Fortunately for Dad and I our plane was able to get out in the wet knickers of time; but our man remained holed up in East Timor. Our company assets were frozen, the fledgling oil venture was shut down, and our equipment was impounded by the West Timorians—whose first act after assuming power was to devalue the currency.

I, as Chairman of ScrubbOil—Dad had turned that role over to me—needed to come up with something to put in the Annual Report by way of 'splainin' what we had done to the shareholders. But what to say? Also, since we had no idea what our speculative investment was now worth, if anything, short of writing it off altogether how were we to account financially for it?

Hoping to defer having to make a fuller accounting to a time when, with any luck, the monkey-brained East Timorian feller would have kicked the military blighter's ass back to West Timor, so that we might have an opportunity to resume the project, in drafting the Chairman's introduction to the ScrubbOil Annual Report I had come up with the aforementioned and much circulated statement that, "If the East Timorians decide to revolt, I'm sure I'll have a statement [by which I meant financial statement] to satisfy everyone, shareholders and auditors alike." Of course the last bit got omitted from the news; bad always becomes worse when it is quoted out of context. My object was to appease shareholders until ScrubbOil's Chief Financial Officer had something more concrete and positive to say; which was impossible, he confided to me, because he was not a financial magician, and if he was, he would need to be in order to prestidigitate himself out of jail because the regulators were already all over us like my cheap suit.

Next. The reporters kept trying to pin me down on foreign policy, they by now being well aware that it is the weakest of my weak spots. They were rewarded with the observation that: "Nigeria is an important continent..." Of course they rushed to the phones before I had completed my sentence. In full, what I said was that, "Nigeria is an important, [comma] continent, [comma] ('continent' in the sense of 'restrained', 'temperate') political climate where peoples representing a range of ethnic backgrounds may find asylum from persecution elsewhere in Africa." Had they remained to hear me out, I might rightly have been faulted on factual grounds, but nobody cared: as a sound bite

it was perfect.

Next: "Welcome to Mrs Scrubb, and my fellow astronauts."

Phoebe was home briefly from doing her good works in India, on a fundraising trip, and I was guest speaker at a thousand dollar a plate luncheon that she was hosting for the National Society of Hairdressers. It was to be televised on C-SPAN. The Feebs has made those hairdressers rich by proving herself to be a major trendsetter in the hair department. Her signature Popover Puff is much in demand; though the large amount of styling and setting product and gel required make it expensive even before taking the amount of labor into account. God knows, and I do not want to, how much it costs to be made to look as though one is wearing a giant tortoise on one's head. At least with a Carmen Miranda fruit hat one can take it off.

The style itself was hit upon serendipitously. The former First Lady's hair specialist is, understandably, a nervous wreck after eight years of trimming the snake locks of the Lizard (thought: lizards being bald, does that mean she had her design human-hair wigs?). Upon being told, also quite understandably, by Phoebe that if she were to keep her on she wanted a different image from what she had been accustomed to creating, the woman was in a tizzy and all fingers and thumbs with the scissors. Then she mixed the setting chemicals in the wrong proportions. Then she turned up the heat on the dryer too high. In consequence the result was all poufed up and cemented in place so that it looked like a space helmet. In the summer news doldrums, the first time thereafter that Phoebe appeared in public provided a terrific lead story, and her picture was accorded headline coverage on the air and Internet homepages and the front pages of newspapers.

Today, in recognition of the level of Phoebe's public and private support for the hair industry, I had been invited to join the First Lady and her clone-coiffed staff for a cut and blow-dry before the dinner. By which I mean that I was the only one to be treated to a much-needed haircut, because before the others have anything done they need the services of a Pittsburgh steelworker. The first time the Feebs went back for a remodel the stylist blunted two pairs of scissors, sprained her wrist and injured her arm, as the shears she resorted to skidded off her head and short-circuited a dryer, which caused the lights to fuse and started an electrical fire.

But enough about them. My own hair ended up standing out in all directions as if with static. I looked like Don King. I felt it advisable, given the proficiency with sharp instruments of the many Edwina Scissorhands on hand, not to comment on the starburst treatment that I

had received. Still in everyone's memory was my predecessor in office's expensive pre-take-off trim from Beverly Hills stylist Cristophe on Air Force One, which was said to have snarled up air traffic at LAX.

Hence, as I attempted to make light of the fiasco, my weak comment, the first words of which were inaudible owing to the scraping of chairs, "[Thank you all for the] welcome to Mrs Scrubb, and my fellow astronauts." Somehow 'astronaut', I thought, sounded better than 'giant tortoise'. Think again. Too late.

Next. "It's time for the human race to enter the solar system."

I was misquoted. My comment had been intended only as a light-hearted pun on a name, but it caused many a groan. I was doing a favor for an old college chum of mine, J.J. 'Sunny Jim' Solarz. JJ, with enthusiastic sponsorship from Phoebe, has invented a system whereby Third World nations can cheaply convert methane gas produced from silage into energy. The resultant creation of domestic jobs, for the construction and operation of processing factories and distribution networks for the product, shall ease these countries' dependence on the West for loans and aid.

The Pops is Honorary Chair of the organization, and I contributed a preface to JJ's recent book promoting the project. My introductory paragraph began with the words "It is time for the human race to join the Solarz system." I went on to extol the benefits of preserving farmland, because this is, last time I checked, where silage comes from. But the corn-fed environmentalists, with their short attention spans, did not bother to read further and quoted what I said as evidence that I am a friend of industry and a foe of conservation.

Next. "It isn't pollution that's harming the environment. It's the impurities in our air and water that are doing it."

This statement occurred during a theological debate I had on faith-based initiatives with an order of Catholic nuns, to whose convent I had been sent in order to get me as far out of the way as possible for a day, to a place that no news organization would deem worthy of dispatching a reporter let alone a crew.

My handlers were proved wrong, after I made a comment to the nuns to the effect that, these days, people were more concerned with worldly matters like global warming than religion—except, of course, when it came to paying attention to the much-publicized activities of those of the nuns' celibate male cousins who, incardinated as public ministers, feel compelled to relieve their sexual frustrations by preying upon innocent boys, instead of confining expression of their urges to

consensual acts with their Brothers within the walls of seminaries and monasteries.

Compounding my crassness in an attempt to draw worldly and otherworldly issues together, I was inspired to add, as it were on the sperm of the moment, that the original meaning of the word ‘pollution’ was ‘seminal emission apart from coition.’

Now at this occasion it also came to pass that—upon sensing an atmospheric in addition to sartorial starchiness in my hostesses—I asked if I might excuse myself to use the rest room. Not a chapel of eternal rest, I said, but one where I might, according to need, either relieve or unburden myself physically rather than spiritually.

Upon finding the convent toilet seat in an upright position, the john yellowly unflushed with a cigarette butt in it, and the air full of smoke, I was reminded of Jake Thackray’s hilarious song *Sister Josephine*, which is about an escaped convict who disguises himself as a nun so that he might, by loitering in a cloistered environment, otherwise remain at liberty. Hence my being inspired, upon returning to the meeting room, to continue where I left off by remarking that, “It isn’t pollution that’s harming the environment. It’s the impurities in our air and water that are doing it.”

An explanation for the above was shortly forthcoming. Notwithstanding the supposed news embargo, it transpired that a male reporter from *The National Enquirer* had dressed up as a Sister that day, in order to sneak in and record anything I might have to say for dissemination (oh dear) to the public. Owing to his being full of coffee, and the voice-activated GPS navigation system in his vehicle failing to understand his urgent request for directions to the nearest nunnery with a men’s room—it was not Toyota’s fault, he told me on the way out: he had a bad cold and was hung-over—and being anxious not to miss a word I said, he only just made it to the toilet for an express piss and a drag before joining us. [He stood at the back; there being no vanity mirror in the john—do nuns call it the jill?—he was concerned that the hand towel he was using as a wimple might not conceal the stubble that he had not had time to shave after over-sleeping.]

Lastly. “The vast majority of our imports come from outside the country.”

Fancying myself in private to be something of a literary-minded fellow, I was flattered to be asked to address the American Etymological Society on *The Meaning of Words*; with license to confine myself, the Secretary who wrote me said, ‘TO THE COUPLA DOZEN (12) YOU ARE HABITUATED (ACCUSTOMED) TO

USING YOURSELF.' Silly me for not picking up on the block-capital irony of the invitation, and thereby setting myself up for a verbal pratfall into a poorly concealed trap.

I started by trying to impress my audience by displaying some knowledge of the European roots of our language in Greek and Latin, and the derivative words that English has imported from other languages. This was going down quite well, I thought; and I imagined my comments gaining me some minor but favorable media coverage, to offset against my reputation as a syntactical stumblebum and murderer of the lexicon.

Unfortunately, in mid-speech I was distracted by a most attractive Jamaican journalist who was winking at me from the front row, pouting her full lips and running her hands over her not-many-of those-to-the-kilo breasts, which were bulging over the top of her bodice as if pleading to be liberated by a hands-on President who believed in the freedom of other nations. As a joke I said that, from the point of view of the one person lucky enough to be facing this lass, "...although it is indisputable that the vast majority of our imports, whether it be of words or traded commodities, come from outside the country, from my perspective right now the Jamaican docks are being unloaded in this room."

How I should like to sue the Press.

It shall not come as a surprise if I am again ostracized from Washington and confined to barracks at the ranch.

Raising Abel

This morning the telephone awoke in its cradle, announcing my baby brother. And yes I was right, I'm back at home, sweet, home.

Though Cosmo sounded hoarse, from the eerily familiar sound of his voice it was plain from his ebullient humor that he had called to show off how well his vocal cords had mended...as well as could be expected, given that they had been retuned to sound like mine.

"Hey, Wood-row, get a load of this. Come on, Charlotte, blow! Put some oomph into it. 'Blow, winds and crack your cheeks!' That's King Lear, Wood-row, right? I remember it from school, when we were reading Shakespeare in class and little Susie Q. was on her knees for ham and cheese under my desk. Don't talk with your mouth full, Charlotte. It ain't over till it's over. Ouch! Do be more bloody careful, won't you? I'm not a rhinoceros."

There are some things, even or particularly amongst family, to which one does not wish to be privy. "I'm hanging up, Cosmo."

"No, wait! Charlotte! Come back—Daddy says come...back."

The person I assumed to be Charlotte blew her nose in a tone conveying petulance.

"E flat!" I growled, unable to help myself; and I stomped across the room with the phone to strike the note on the piano by way of proving it to myself. Gifted though I am with perfect pitch, I cannot play any instrument more complicated than a penny whistle.

Charlotte blew her own penny whistle again, more ambitiously this time up and down a pentatonic scale. I was impressed.

So it seems was Cosmo. "Oh!"

"That's quite a nose-blow, Cosmo. How does she do it?"

"Wood-row, she wasn't blowing her nose. Oh!"

Enough was enough. "Look, I have a country to run, or hadn't you heard? It is of particular concern to me that I do it well, for sundry reasons, against the day that you take over and send us all to hell in a hand-basket. So, until then, you can hold your peace."

"Ah! No need old boy, someone's doing it for me. Doing it very well, in fact. She's quite the juggler, is our Charlotte. Steady as she goes, girl, steady. We don't want to arrive all at once, do we? Anyway, Wood-row, who are you kidding? In your dreams, bro. They haven't even given you In and Out trays. I heard about what happened. Now you're just sitting there as usual on your lonesome at the ranch, talking to the dog and playing checkers."

"Actually, Cosmo, I'm reading the Old Testament. Cain and I are

the elder brothers, remember? And I am not my brother's keeper."

"Watch what you say to me, Woody, or I'll tell Mom and you'll get creamed. No, Charlotte, wait. Say, Wood-row, you seem a bit up tight. Why don't you go out and get yourself some tail? But while we're being biblical, remember the other bit about coveting your brother's wife? Nice piece of ass would do you good, s'long as you keep your schlong out of the family.

"It's a big playing field out there, Wood-row. Run through the women's alphabet. You know: Arabella, Brenda, Christine, Debbie, Ermintrude, Fenella, Griselda, Harriet, Irma, Juliet, Katrina, Lana, Mandy, Nicola, Odette, Patricia, Queenie, Rona, Sadie, Teresa, Ursula, Vera, Winnie, Xantippe, Yvonne, and Zoë. Or perhaps Zarathustra's more your type. Ah, Zarathustra! And then start again at the beginning—Anna, Betty....

"Take Charlotte here, for example...ouch! I didn't mean it literally. There are things in Charlotte's portfolio of accomplishments that even I, Ben of the House of Hur, have not yet sampled. Her dividends, let me tell you, are outsize and magnificent. Charlotte is guaranteed to wax your...my weasel on demand in ingenious ways, if you grease her palm sufficiently. Get this, Woody: she can smoke a cigarette at the front, whistle Dixie at the back, roll two more in each hand, twirl her titty tassels in opposite directions, and do an impression of Marilyn Monroe—all at once. Gal deserves an Oscar. She's very limber, used to be with *Cirque du Soleil*. The way she comes off the trapeze in my bedroom and lands right on my..."

"Enough!"

"There are more where Charlotte came from, Wood-row. So Muffward Ho! Geronimo! Screw your courage to the sticking place, Woody! I remember that one too. *Macbeth*."

"You block, you stone, you worse than senseless thing. *Julius Caesar*, Cosmo."

"Touché, old boy. That'll do it for now, Charlotte. Gotta hit the can. Need to take a leak. A slash, a Jimmy Riddle piddle, a tinkle, a pee, a piss, a widdle, a wiz. Gotta drain the main vein. Shake hands with the wife's best friend, or the unemployed—not! Rinse the prince. Point Percy at the porcelain. Do Number One. Micturate. Farewell, Wood-row. Hope you're having a good time rusticating amongst the dung and manure. Which reminds me of the ancient lay—no, not you, dear..."

"In days of old when knights were bold,
And paper wasn't invented,

They'd wipe their arse with a piece of grass
And walk away contented....”

I could not let him have the last word. “Heal up, Handsome. This is your President saying Goodbye.”

I wonder which of us is the more pathetic.

Uh-Oh

This morning, just as I was beginning to feel a little better, Cosmo walked into my bedroom—as me. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I was not flattered. I threw up on the carpet.

My brother wrinkled his new nose. “Eeeuw. Good morning to you too, Wood-row. Throw open the vomitorium! Messala, come! The prize is one hundred thousand sestericii, and a crown of laurels. Bring me my chariot and four bay horses. Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds. On to the arena!” The timbre of ‘my’ voice did not match Heston’s authoritative tone, but Cosmo spoke defiantly to compensate for the deficiency.

My brother was accompanied by two giggling floozies (Charlotte must have been resting from her labors), one on each arm; airheads, evidently, and no surprise there, for they showed no sign of being taken aback at seeing the Dromio twin before them. But then the pair of them looked identical to each other, too.

Having made his grand entrance, Cosmo relaxed. “Hello, Numbnuts, how’s it hangin’?” And he adjusted his crotch.

I pulled myself together as best I could, and wiped my mouth on a Kleenex. “What happened to a person’s right to privacy, asshole? Next thing you’ll tell me they’ve sneaked a hidden camera in here.”

Appalled, I observed Cosmo’s eyes wandering around the room. “He seeks it here, he seeks it there...and why not?, I have a camera in my bedroom, and mirrors on the ceiling. And tut tut, Wood-row: I’ll thank you for not using such language around your unelected leader. We are in female company. But since this chamber’s made for sleeping, rigor is not *de rigueur*. Not for nothing are you not known as Woody.”

He tweaked the cheeks to east and west of him, eliciting hilarity. “Ladies, say g’day to my brother. Please pardon his lack of politeness, he’s not usually so stiff.”

I took a moment to case the face. Though he would never master (nor could anyone else) the Woodrovian *je ne sais quoi* (nor does anyone else), I had to admit to myself that the likeness was staggering. I staggered.

“The voice still needs work,” I opined weakly when I had stabilized. “Also, though I say so myself, I have some rather effective...”

Cosmo sneered. “Spare me. I had to beg for some poetic license here and there, and Mother agreed as an act of humanity. Gravitass, Wood-row...”—draping his arms around the bimbos’ shoulders, he

cupped and squeezed the mammarian melons to either side of him, as if testing them for ripeness, and nodded approvingly—“...meaning that which heavily hangs, like fruit in the Gardens of Babylon. Either you’ve got gravitas or you don’t, Wood-row. These do, and I do. Many times have these ladies, and others like them, solicited my endowments. Often have they expertly guided my firm policy to its anointed goals.” The floozies encored the giggles. “Now then, girls, how about a drink? I’m sure old Woodson’s got some booze stashed somewhere downstairs.”

I scowled. “You had a...a wife last time I checked. Have you no consideration for her feelings?” A little hypocritical moralizing seemed excusable in my situation.

Again the sneer. “So do you, old chum, and where’s she? Aid-working in India. She can’t get far enough away from you. Meantime, girls, this little pig sticks his parson’s nose, his membrum virile, in another man’s trough. Have you no shame, Wood-row? Have the Ten Commandments been amended without my knowledge?” He withdrew his arms from the supports to either side, and jutted his jaw in a Heston-as-Moses look.

My relationship with Cassandra being no secret between Cosmo and me, I could only deflect the blow. “You’ve never paid the slightest attention to Cassandra, Cosmo. The F...Phoebe and I have always enjoyed cordial relations.”

“Good old Phoebe. But tell me, Bro, where did she get that hair?”

“Damned if I know. One day she just...”

The floor shook. Because this is not an earthquake zone, I assumed that we were about to be visited by my running-, as opposed to jogging running without the hyphen, mate, Hart Dickey. Who is now, I suppose, Cosmo’s Vice-President.

No such luck. The air thickened, the lights dimmed, there was a peal of thunder and the walls ran with blood. It was Hermione.

The Mother-load

Enter Queen Lear. Dad, her Fool, was cringing behind her.

““Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,”” raved Hermione,
““Singe my white head! Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the child.””

I made a feeble attempt to stand up for myself. After all, I was in my own bedroom. “Good morning, Mother. Mother, Cosmo is masquerading as me. It is upsetting. The years of therapy I will need...”

“Ingrateful man! Rumble thy bellyful. But enough already of the blank verse. A limerick is more appropriate. Let’s see...yes, I have it:

“The clown of the family Scrubb

Exclaimed, ‘Well, rub-a-dub-dub!

If Mensa says ‘No’, I’ve nowhere to go—

We morons must form our own club.”

“Mother, I have yet again been deprived of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Yes, and Happiness. If it is not too much trouble, I should like to be granted my freedom. Sure, I like it here. But I have read all the books at least twice.”

“Attend, worm. Lend me your cropped ears. Note how nice Cosmo’s look. Cosmo dear, I see that your appetite for interviewing new secretaries is undiminished.”

Dad, bless him, tried to be supportive. “That’s a bit strong, Hermie, don’t you think? Go easy on the boy, you’ve put him through a lot already. He is your son, after all. One of the progeny. Kinder and gentler does it.”

The Mother swung to face him. “Progeny! [Switching to Lady Macbeth] Women like me—and there are no women like me—bring forth men children only, and this is a man-child. I should have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash’d his brains out. Though there were none to dash, only my hopes. However, things being as they are: there is one condition on which I’m prepared to release Waldo.”

Timeo Danaos et dona ferentis. [Virgil: ‘I fear the Greeks even when they bring gifts.’]

“There is?” said Dad.

“There is?” said Cosmo.

“There is?” I said.

“Cool!” said the floozies.

I dragged a lugubrious voice from the depths of my being. It is not a great distance and it did not take long. “What do you have in mind, Mother?”

“You are to depart, poor Hermie’s hermaphrodite,” Herself

continued, “to join feeble-headed Phoebe in India, where she has decided, with some encouragement and a small donation from me, that her future lies. You shall live on the banks of the Ganges and subsist on green curry and poppadams. Your passport shall be revoked and you shall be denied reentry to the United States. We’ve implanted a tracking chip under the red dot on Phoebe’s forehead, and will be monitoring the weak signal from your brain by satellite. There is nowhere under the sun for you to run and hide.”

“Yippee!” Dad interjected. “The son has got his hat on—hip-hip-hip hooray! The son has got his hat on, and is coming out today.” We all turned to stare at the late President, Saddam Hussein’s nightmare.

Breaking the silence, I said, “Er, I would rather not go, Mother, if you don’t mind. Of course you do. But I have not had all my shots. The Ganges is notoriously polluted.”

“May you drown in it.”

A whirlwind arose in the room and everything went black. Methought I heard an owl scream, and crickets cry [a worrisome surfeit of *Macbeth* here]. When the darkness cleared, the status quo ante had been restored and I was alone again.

The invisible man

I have not mentioned him before, but there was a mysterious fellow at my Inauguration, who came up and shook hands with me. We talked for a few minutes, and then he was arrested. I have thought of him since, but somehow the subject of him defied imprintation. When I tried to set down the details, it was as if the pen had seized up. The paper seemed coated in wax and repelled the ink. And my mind went blank for the rest of the day.

This stranger succeeded, without authority or pass, let or hindrance, in getting past the security barriers and evading all the earpiece-and-microphone guys. They are investigating the breach, it was announced through my Press Secretary, and an inquiry is under way. My Secret Service agents blamed it on the airwaves being jammed and a bad lens coating on their shades.

At the time, before he was hauled off I had the presence of mind to get the guy's phone number, and resolved to call him at the earliest opportunity. Though I did not know the first thing about him, I was not afraid. He did not appear dangerous. But what with one thing and another—I had mislaid the piece of paper—I only just got around to getting in touch, and invited him to stay for a few days at the ranch. Here, I assured him, if he was inclined to accept my offer, we could talk without fear of interruption or discovery. My bodyguards had left a note saying they would be AWOL for at least a week.

On the phone he asked To what did he owe the honor, and laughed when I told him that he was quite the nicest person I saw or spoke to on Inauguration day; as well as being the only pair of Birkenstocks in a crowd of steer-, ostrich-, lizard-, stingray-, eelskin-, anteater-, python- and mandarin-tree-frog- booted Republicans.

Randy—the name he announced himself by on the horn—said he would be round in fifteen minutes; which threw me somewhat, but then I did not yet know Randy. It would take him that long because he had yet to shower and shave, and search for and feed his tortoise. After we hung up I rushed outside to comb the shrubbery, searching for a hideaway in the undergrowth. I found nothing but a dozen of Dad's golf balls—he practices on the lawn when he is here.

When Randy arrived, he was as pleasant as I remembered him. Sometimes one gets a feeling from the briefest of encounters. He arrived in a battered Land-Rover that expired in the driveway under a cloud of steam or smoke from under the hood. We sat down to tea and some Entenmann's cookies on the terrace, which I hope is an

eavesdropping bug-free zone. After he had admired the koi in the pond, we picked up where we left off on Inauguration Day, when we had been rudely interrupted by a bunch of Executive Branch bouncers, and the Chief Justice.

Then he told me some alarming stuff. Randy, this mild-mannered gent, according to him had pulled off the same stunt as he did with me, not once but *twice* before: both times with my predecessor at his own Inaugurations. Subsequently, they used to chat on the phone late at night, and were now both fast friends and comrade fast-food aficionados.

His prior stunts had shocked and chagrined the lantern-jawed enforcers of security when they were unable to apprehend him. This despite the presence of a force of Special Agents equipped with scanning and surveillance equipment, and snipers confident of being able to pick out and pick off an infidel amongst the faithful pilgrims from outside the walls of Mecca during the Hajj. Modestly, Randy said that he can come and go anywhere as he pleased, whether it be into the Queen of England's bedroom, which was probably his most notorious exploit [Whoa! c.f. the Palace intruder of my Tower of London dream], or a Turkish sultan's harem. He is as unobtrusive as they come, and go. He can run shouting and waving his arms through the tightest security cordons with impunity. Guards and professionally trained personnel may as well be deaf and blind for all the attention they pay to him.

If this did not stretch my credulity, imagine how my mind was boggled to learn that the second time Randy met the former President, at his repeat Inauguration, it was at the personal request of that gentleman's wife, the Lizard. Apparently the former First Lady had been impressed with her husband's description of the nonchalant way that Randy had strolled up and introduced himself four years earlier. So, having abstracted Randy's phone number from Hubby's little black book—Randy's androgynous name apart, she said, he was the only male entry—she commissioned him to kill her husband at his second swearing-in ceremony. She had had it up to here with his promiscuity, she told Randy, and wanted him terminated with extreme prejudice. OK, he said.

The Lizard also had a plan for a short-term Senatorial career for herself, having decided that a direct lunge at Presidential candidacy for herself after his death was inadvisable; following which she would chuck in the boring old Senate and run for the Big Job itself in four or eight years time, unencumbered by a First Gentleman, or First Laddie as he once quipped that he would style himself in such an ultimate

eventuality, given the political smarts he acknowledged she had. During this period she would keep her head down, get a decent political résumé together, and do her best to make people forget or pardon some missteps she had made during her earlier career, and the less savory aspects of her known character. Then she would ride the electoral wave of approval for her latter made-to-measure good works, and the respect she had earned for putting up with her husband's fooling around, and the sympathy she generated after his violent demise (courtesy of Randy), back to the White House.

The assassin-elect had been instructed to plug Liz's two-timing two-termers in the chest with an efficient little pistol that she gave him, which was made out of disassembled synthetic parts that the metal detectors and X-ray scanners at security checkpoints would fail to identify. Then, instead of embarking on a second term, her husband's cheatin' heart would be chilling in the morgue like left-over pizza in the fridge.

But Randall is fond of humanity, warts and all. He had developed a good relationship with his proposed victim, on the occasion of his first encounter with him, was not swayed by the animus of the former First Lady, and despite his indication to her to the contrary he had no intention of offing her spouse. All he wanted was to see the man again, make nice, and invite him to partake of the large order of french fries that he had picked up en route at the McDonald's on E Street.

Of Randy's sizeable reward, however, he had insisted on receiving half in advance, which he immediately donated to charity. Then he wrote an account of what was supposed to take place and deposited it in his safety deposit box at the bank, giving his executor instructions to send it to the *Burrito Times* and the *DC Laundromat* in the event of his disappearance or death under suspicious circumstances.

Then he informed the Lizard on the phone that she had been hornswoggled in a good cause.

To my utmost consternation but perhaps not total surprise, I then learned from Randy that my own encounter with him had arisen from a similar situation. Hermione, who had been advised of the Lizard's failed plot by a mole whom she had planted amongst her closest confidantes, was eager not to let such a clever scheme go to waste. La Liz's wheeze must have struck my mother as a bonzer means of installing Cosmo in the Oval Office sooner rather than later. It was obvious that Randy's subtle and elusive talent—unless the target was to be blown up, this was not a job for Ignacio Pesci—was *sans pareil*, and she took it for granted that he would not be afflicted by the same

compunction as before, when it came to dispatching someone so worthless and expendable as I.

Hermione's plan, s'welp me God, was to have me assassinated at my swearing-in ceremony, thereby rendering me ineligible for inclusion in the list of Presidential martyrs except as an asterisk, like a Major League baseball player who had broken the home run record on steroids. Then, at the next Election—my heart metaphorically bled for the woman that she would have to wait that long while Hart Dickey, as Vice-President, assumed my role and acted in effect as my mother/brother's regent—Governor Cosmo would himself ride the Scrubb family sympathy wagon to the White House. My brother, after all, has committed no public transgression other than that of being a prize asshole, which has never been a disqualification for Office; and by that time Cassandra's career as a cat-burglar of Mediterranean real estate would be old news. A PR blitz and judicious re-branding of her image would render her even more popular with the public than before. And once Cosmo had been voted in his own right to the Presidency by Hermione's suborned stooges in the Electoral College—to hell next time with the Will of the People—he would surely remain in the job for two more joyous terms. Only two? There was already a precedent for more, with FDR, and in Britain and Russia; one never knew till one tried.

[That was Plan A, which became Plan B. The new Plan A, that of subjecting herself and her darling son to the ordeal, trauma and indignity of having his face surgically altered, so that he might demean himself for the greater good by impersonating me—only occurred to Hermione as she wrestled with the awful drag of having to wait for four more years. Plus, the risk that President Hart Dickey might at any moment succumb to the impenetrable clogging of his coronary arteries was too great.]

So, despite his prior willful failure to execute orders and the President-in-Waiting, *moi*, Randy had been offered the job again, this time by my mother. Pesci called the listed phone number at his house, a landline that he answers himself, owing to the lack of a recording machine or service, wherever he happens to be, and passed the handset to Hermione. My mother explained to Randy that, regrettably, I was unsuited for office, a clear and present danger to the country, and something drastic had to be done about it. This was his chance to demonstrate his patriotism. Take it from a woman who knew, she said: killing her elder son was the right thing for him to do.

Randy told me that, rather than being asked to thread my guts with

lead in the time-honored fashion, Pesci would FedEx First Overnight him a socket-chargeable serrated stiletto, a sort of combination of a soldering iron and a knife, which burned white-hot and vibrated like an electric toothbrush—which is what it looked like in its case.

My informant was blasé about describing his proposed assignation. As he spoke, he reached into his pocket, and I looked at the man with a wild surmise. Although it was clear that Randy's genius would enable him to get at me any time that he chose, I now had occasion to demand of myself whether instigating this personal encounter while I am on my lonesome at the ranch, was not the greatest folly. I feared that I might not even have the opportunity to answer my own question in the affirmative; only disadvantaged by hindsight.

I felt like the proscribed Cicero must have done at his Formiae villa, fearing the arrival of his executioners.

But instead of a stiletto, Randy pulled an enormous pipe from his pocket and began filling it from a leather pouch; the pipe was made from a briar root carved in the shape of a leaping chamois, and it had a hinged lid of filigreed silver. It looked Austrian: one notices these things even in the depths of despair. He lit it with a Swan vesta, tamped down the burning shreds of tobacco with his thumb, closed the lid with a snap, and puffed with satisfaction until he was wreathed in so much smoke that I could barely make him out. When the inspissation cleared, I saw that he had strolled off down the terrace, and was admiring the perennials in the terracotta pots.

Reassured, I hurried after him begging for more details. They wanted me stabbed twenty-four times, he said—for symbolism, once more than Julius Caesar—and he was to receive a certain dollar amount for each plunge of the weapon.

Although Hermione, unlike the Lizard, had not fallen for Randy's half-in-advance requirement upon acceptance, it was clear that the financial incentive and other rewards in store for him were substantial if he was prepared to do the job. In the event that he then elected to retire, an index-linked pension would be wired in monthly installments to a numbered Swiss bank account in his name. Men would be standing by to whisk him to Andrews Air Force Base, whence he would be spirited out of the country and supplied with a new identity. (The latter offer was redundant: he could be anyone he wanted, or nobody.) The keys to a gated estate on a tropical island awaited him: a paradise with fountains playing in the courtyard, a private beach, and nubile maidens to peel his grapes. The owner of the property had been persuaded by Pesci to donate it to the Republican Party.

But Hermione had misread the man; for although Randy is a vegetarian, lotus-eating is not his style. He is a social animal, he told me, who likes to be out and about, meeting and talking to people in all walks of life, and getting to know them. Whether he is chatting to a bum on the street or hobnobbing with bigwigs, it makes no difference to him. And as to the money, he had got enough to live on.

Randy was sane, I decided with the greatest relief, and a good egg.

He must have read my thoughts, for he laughed and said that it is the other side that is dangerous, not him. He was not taken in by the promises of money and a mansion. No, they would have used him as trolling bait for sharks off the Gulfida Keys as soon as put him in a Motel 6 for the night. Not that the sharks would have been able to detect him in the water.

So he turned them down, he ended, speaking as nonchalantly as if he were declining a ride into town.

What he said of course was true. Pesci and his minions are always dying to have people to practice deadifying on. Everyone is grist to the Italian mill. And they're always on the lookout for new recruits. They advertise for the services of bored felons who have paid their debt to society and are at a loose end: 'Wanted: Bomb-makers and inventors of cool annihilative gadgetry. Competitive fees and wages. Ex-cons welcome.' The day I took office, the signboard at the entrance to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was changed to read, 'Two minute White House guided tours to the left, tickets \$100 cash only, \$1,000 fine for reentry. To the right—follow the red carpet—qualified applicants for employment in the following categories: murderers, mercenaries, gun-toting radicals, freaks, kooks, maniacs, unmedicated psychopaths, NRA members, and disturbed children. Also WTO, Summit of the Americas and G8 and G20 demonstration alumni (riot video footage required as proof of radicalism). Report to the desk on the second floor for registration and interview.' And on a smaller notice, 'Applicants for the Untraceable Poisonous Compound Competition, proceed to the Crippen Laboratory in the basement.'

You could not make this stuff up.

I am fortunate, Randall said, that he was the one offered the contract. How many professional or would-be assassins would turn down wads of cash, an index-linked pension, and an Epicurean existence on a tropical island, in return for plugging an already unpopular President whose Secret Service plug-uglies have elected to take sick days without telling him?

I hazarded a round number. Hell, I would do it myself.

At least I know what has happened to my minders. They are taking the cure on a Bahamian beach.

Now you see him...

Now that I trust him, I want Randy to teach me how to dematerialize my body at will; how to become a chameleon. I long to be able to neutralize my presence in the hurly-burly, so that I might observe the world around me without being myself subjected to critical analysis.

Then I should be like Cassandra, and able to emulate her ability to flit hither and yon undetected. If only I could hone my senses to imitate Randy, then I could hie me to wherever my beloved came to roost, and serenade her. I could never ask her to teach me how she does what she does. Her secrets are not for the telling, and anyway, I prefer things the way they are between us. The bubble of magical mystery is not to be broken. And she is wise enough not to attempt to decode herself.

Your President commands it, I said to Randy, only half in jest. You forget, he said, I could disappear before your eyes right now, so don't push it, big guy (we have already established an easy relationship). Besides, one can't force these things. And to prove it he relit his pipe, puffed for a moment, and then...his chair was empty. I was still staring at it when the French windows opened, and he walked in and sat down again. The man is an artist, a tableau of transience, a human hole, a derider of human assumptions of context and definition.

I told Randy that invisibility would also solve my life's biggest problem, if I could become a blank on the Mother's radar screen and be immune from persecution by her. Having met the woman, he conceded that while 'where there's a will there's a way', fear is neither justification nor qualification for embarking on a course of study. The generalities must precede the specifics, and one must not have an agenda. The most one can say at the moment is that I may be an apt pupil to learn what he calls the Elements of Evanescence. I would need to dedicate myself to the art and practice long hours. (Perhaps that is the reason for Cass's spotty record: she is impatient.) It is only in the course of hard work that any pre-existing natural talent can reveal itself.

Randy agreed to stay over, and we talked more over dinner. He is a most congenial guest and was prepared to tell me a little more about what I so long to know. He admitted without any hint of immodesty that his capacious and inquisitive mind is allied with a psychic ability to read thought, deconstruct emotion, and predict action. Nonetheless he takes nothing for granted and spends hours every day meditating to maintain the essential balance between body and mind. I cannot and

should not aspire to anything so complex, because it is evident to him that I am not psychic, but there are lesser levels of competence and skill.

In the morning we started at square one. The basics sound ridiculous to describe, but they are difficult to do well when one is under the scrutiny of a master. A self-conscious person, like a guilty one, feels that the eyes of the world are upon him. So—he (though the principles are the same, the rules are somewhat different for women, like the complementary skills of dancing partners) should never walk in a straight line, or full-frontal through a door. He lowers his gaze to avoid eye contact and focuses instead on maintaining a self-effacing demeanor. Then he angles and slopes into the room, varying the speed of gait so as not to attract attention. He eschews robotic gestures and heavy foot placement, by coasting as if he were on wheels. He hugs borders and takes advantage of cover along the way, subordinating himself to the heavier visual placement of stationary objects. The aspidistra is his friend.

The man who would be invisible does not just aspire to immateriality, he thinks and breathes it. He floats in the trough between waves of sight and sound. When he talks, he does so out of the side of the mouth, his speech half way between drawling and articulation. The effect is incoherent enough to imply that whatever he is saying is unimportant. He could murmur the secret to eternal life, and be ignored.

One has to work hard to still the natural vibration of a body, in order to negate the emphasis of presence; to avoid the hypodermic needle of sense that seeks to penetrate and draw out one's life's blood. In the main, drab clothing and garments of irregular pattern are advised that will camouflage the body. There should be nothing crisp and definitive about the appearance. In the speeded-up replay of a room, the blur of coming and going is easy to ignore; the trick is to achieve the same effect in slow motion.

The essence of inconspicuousness, however, that which is the condition preceding invisibility, has to do with attitude, or 'mental placement' as Randy calls it. One has to tap into a genius for the diminishment of ego and its relegation to beyond or outside the aura of the present tense. Self must become as a ghost, and exist between the dimensions. The objective is to behave in such a common or garden a manner as to make a snail look flamboyant. Breathing comes into it, and posture, and the suppression of thought. Neutrality of mind is the most important thing, because brain activity sends out signals that

attract attention by creating detectable fields of kinetic energy. One concentrates on not concentrating. Only when the mental process is disengaged and the mind cleared, can the molecular structure of the body's natural magnetism and the physiological frontiers of self be dissolved. By asserting himself outwards from the core of being, the individual loses its definition, its hard perimeter, and ceases to be discernible by the naked eye, which is the grossest of our senses.

In order to become proficient at disappearing, one must exalt the invisible over the visible, and cultivate in oneself the belief that nothing is unachievable. One must remember the principle whereby an iceberg can only break the surface of the water because of the far greater mass beneath; and that, if he is to attain it, a mountaineer must have a fix on the summit and the hazards in between before leaving the foothills.

Since transparency is the goal, one must avoid using colorful images in speech, and definitive language. Except when asking questions, that is, when directness is necessary to avoid creating suspicion as to the existence of a presence. There is nothing wrong with talking: in fact it can help to diffuse the atmosphere; but the vocabulary should include vague unallusive terms such as 'nowhere', 'I doubt it', 'possibly', and 'not at all'. Badly put or misdirected inquiries are good, because they deflect or disable one's interlocutor's perception as he struggles to formulate an answer to a question that he imperfectly understands. Instead of asking the concierge at the front desk of a private club of which one is not a member, where one is not permitted to enter, the way to the rest room, one says, 'The doorman said the elevator wasn't working. Can I use the service elevator at the rear of the lobby to get to the bathroom on the second floor?'. Both sentences are technically wrong: the second elevator at the other end of the hall is known to be functioning, and the bathroom facilities are on the third not the second floor.

The concierge is perturbed enough by the inaccuracies to want to correct them. His urge to do so is stronger than his intuition that one is a non-member in desperate need of the toilet. As an institutional Cerberus guardian of the gate, he feels not just annoyed but threatened by mistaken assumptions and presumptions regarding his domain. Taking advantage of this one moves quickly past him, so that the critical seconds, wherein he should have asserted himself to ask for one's membership card or visitor's pass or invitation, are lost. His Little Hitler moment of authority gone, the concierge is embarrassed and refrains from demeaning himself by running after one; whereupon his ego kicks in to delete his memory of the incident, and of one's person.

Why is all this so important to me? Because at its very highest level, I believe that two people who possess such a proficiency are also capable of raising their consciousness to a plane at which they may freely communicate with each other, inner being to inner being, irrespective of the physical distance that separates them, or the passage of time. At such a level of contact their relationship could even survive a breakdown of 'sublunary' or terrestrial contact between them, and be repaired in the event of such a breach. And since every moment I spend with Cassandra, in person or in thought, is a microcosm of eternity, I yearn to perpetuate ourselves as one in a place where we may dwell in bliss together forever.

*

Orpheus to Eurydice

Che farò senza Eurydice?

Dove andrò senza il mio ben?....

There is no Muse can teach me

The skill to win my happiness again.

O dio! Rispondi!

Io son pure il tuo fedele....

I mistook the sun for you

(The sudden light had blinded me)

And I sent you back to Tartarus

This time unredeemably.

Ah! non m'avanza piu soccorso....

You were still in darkness,

Guided by my lyre. Both of us

Were aware there was no recourse,

No second chance, should I look back

To admire

The beauty for which

I had pacified the Dog; charmed

The Ferryman; soothed the Judges

Of the Dead

And even had stern

Hades so disarmed that he desisted

Torturing the damned,

Saying

All I had to do was
Demonstrate I was proof
Against such enchantment
Turning my head:

I, who could entrance
The wild beasts with music,
Must show I could remain aloof
Though I could cause the rocks
And trees to dance—

Gifts I owe
To Apollo and Calliope the Muse.

But I did turn before you
Reached the upper world,
And—eager as I was—
My devotion cannot excuse
My losing your life
As its banner was unfurled again.

I compare us to those ancient
Mountain oaks in Thrace,
Still standing as I left them
In the pattern of a dance;
Just as you left me

With love
In your shadowed face
Eternally
Wrapped in your infinite glance.

...now you don't

Two weeks later, and the amazing Randall is still here. The work is very hard, exhausting even, and the horizon seems more distant every day. The first week had to do with nothing but how to read the prevailing conditions and terrain, and conform and adjust to them as one crawls, runs, walks, or inches forward on one's belly; pausing, crouching or lying down as necessary. I feel like an Indian tracking scout. I have been instructed in how to get 'the lay of the land', and select optimal paths and positions.

One has to be very clear about one's destination and objective, and not allow oneself to be distracted from arriving at and attaining them. Unbroken concentration is key at all times. To falter is to fail, and I am determined not to fail.

Different environments call for different strategies. The little brown weasel who hugs the wainscot in his brothel-creepers, or tries too hard to mingle with the crowd, often stands out like an archbishop at an orgy. Whereas in a flock of brightly colored birds no individual is distinguishable, one cannot fail to notice a singleton of the species when it is sitting on a leafless branch in a brown and empty landscape. But every rule has its exception, and an ability to adapt is everything. Some assumptions I should make, as a neophyte, are to my surprise, disproven: for example, whereas it is natural to shun and ignore those who appear ostentatious and objectionable, otherwise vigilant and perceptive people often turn a blind eye to those whose loud clothing and voice, lack of respect for personal space and an antipathy to toothpaste, soap and hot water, would otherwise draw their attention.

Part of my training involves continuing to feed the birds, with greater than usual quantities of seed, and at considerably higher cost than the tuppence a bag that was charged by the little old bird woman in *Mary Poppins*. Randy says that I have to become 'one with nature'. Although I have always looked after my feathered friends, keeping the feeders filled now takes a lot of time, for reason that the birds have advertised this all-you-can-eat-for-free bonanza far and wide; more of their relatives are flocking in every day. Chickadees have taken to pecking my ear if there is no food to hand. I never thought the sound of a crow cawing in one's ear could be so loud, and up close they seem as big as an eagle, with wicked beaks and sharp claws and great flapping wings that are most intimidating if there is nothing to eat more substantial than seed. It has been demonstrated that whatever chemical is in the avian droppings on my jacket is proof against dry-cleaning.

Though this activity hardly puts me in the St Francis category, I do believe that a sort of channel of communication has opened between me and the birds, and a slight but crescent mutual understanding. As I have become attuned to their moods, I begin to see the value of this regime. With birds there is no artifice, no standing on ceremony; no Chaucerian ‘smylere with the knyfe under the cloke’. By associating with those who live by their wits in order to stay alive, that is instinctively, one becomes better equipped to deal with humans, who only do what they think they have to in order to achieve an objective of dubious or meaningless value, thereby wasting their time, and who only see what they want to see. Any bird behaving like that would be killed and eaten by a hawk in no time.

Speaking of food, I have not yet got used to the diet that the big R. has put me on. No red meat is allowed, only fish and other brain-fodder, and enough Fiber One to keep a guy close to home. I had to ask Randy not to light his pipe this morning, for fear of combustion. He does not appear to be aware of the mephitic smell. Gradually my hunger has abated.

Although I am only a beginner, in the evenings I cannot help but ask Randy about some of more advanced techniques that a master such as he practices. He has indulged me to an extent, by regaling me with stories about some of his experiences. He has seen and heard some extraordinary things. He has even transcended the need for invisibility, and can assume a presence so unthreatening that he can walk in on strangers, fully visible, and listen as they confide things to him that they would not confess to their closest relatives or friends. Trappist monks, who are not known for being talkative, put on a performance of *The King and I*, just for him; and a lean and clean Elvis sang *Happy Birthday* to him, badly. Colombian drug kingpins fulminated to him about the poor quality of their children’s education. A Death Row prisoner, whom he visited an hour before his hanging, got on a riff about why having good table manners was so important. The Pope wondered aloud what would have happened if he had followed his youthful inclination to become a train driver.

He has met other interesting people: the Queen of England, obviously, since he once occupied her bedroom; and on another occasion a close relative of hers performing the Dance of the Seven Veils for him. Yassir Arafat showed him his stamp collection. Nelson Mandela agreed to spend a week with him in a small room for a week, if he promised not to walk out on him; after two days of listening to the worst jokes in the world, Randy said that he had had enough.

Like the painter Vermeer, my instructor absorbs a scene into his mind and reduces it from four to two dimensions (the fourth dimension being that of emotion, or the intuitive sense); and then to a nothing that is none the less present for being invisible.

All that glisters

I have become a factory of glitter. As I trail about the house in between lessons, while Randy tinkles the ivories on the Bechstein upright in the drawing-room or reads a book in the library, I am leaving in my wake a trail of gold dust. Friction is literally rubbing off me. I am exuding an invisible substance that coalesces and flakes like dry skin.

Except that the dust is bright gold in color. Real gold or not, the woman domestic who comes in once a week is unhappy because the auric stuff is clogging up her vacuum cleaner. But when I suggested to her that maybe it is worth something, her eyes also lit up, and I can tell that we will be buying new vacuum bags so that she can have the detritus assayed by the nearest jeweler.

Equally odd is that Randy, who is an accomplished musician, is able to play the piano while lying on a wicker lounge chair in the conservatory with his eyes closed—as if it were a thought-controlled pianola or player piano, which operates off a pneumatically controlled mechanism of perforated paper or metallic roll. When so engaged his technical and interpretative skills are as good as when he is playing first hand, as it were. How does his brain enable him to perform the function that lesser mortals need fingers and a piano stool for?

Confronted by such an abundance of conundrums, and in the belief that if he told me how he did it I should not understand, I instead applied to my guru for an explanation of the gold dust phenomenon. And I added that he had better hurry up, because the place is beginning to look as though King Midas has come to stay. He laughed, and said that it is a consequence of my high level of concentration, and the abrasive effect of multi-dimensional brainwaves upon the atmosphere. I see, I said. The principle is similar to that of an increase in barometric pressure. Got it, I said. The shedding would diminish as my proficiency increased, Randy said, and I was not to be concerned about it; rather I should be pleased.

Which I am. For the time being I am the golden boy; though I hope that the situation will normalize before (like Midas) I sprout ass's ears and prove my mother right about my lack of mental acumen.

So for now I move around the house slowly so as to stir up as little dust as possible; and leave windows open to the sultry weather, on the theory that it might release the indoor air pressure; and keep to the same path as I move from room to room.

At night I glitter before an open window, and admire the more enviable sparkle of the stars, and the phosphorescence of the moon. For

the moon is my planet: she is my idol of the late watch, the one who unites me with Cassandra as I imagine her gazing at it also (time zones permitting). She lays cool fingers on my brow, and assures me, in the words of the anchoress Julian of Norwich in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, that ‘all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.’

On turning on the light I find that I am sitting in a pile of gold dust. Tomorrow is a work day.

*

Penelope

When your ship returns
When the bird of your arrival,
Straddling the cross-currents,
Lands after arduous adventures
I will be here to greet you.

Assisted by much reading
In palmistry and horoscope
I have been drawing out
The fabric of time upon
The loom of circumstance,
Daily unmaking and reweaving
A shroud of memories.

One day I will sense an imminence
In my universe, and hear a cold
Floating harmonic scale
A bubbling curdling curlew’s cry
Come skirling down in dark
Hollow notes, which drop like
Parachuting capsules of silent
Loneliness

Through bellowing wind
And billowing clouds, which clutch
And dance across a light-
Besotted sky.

We will be ungainly
In our unaccustomed company

At home after adventures,
Storms and squalls, the scudding
Gray and long long rain.

But understand: these years gone by
And those that stretch ahead
Have not nor will put us asunder.
We are never apart never have been
Never will be;
For every minute of distance and distance
In time that we in body are separated
We are joined as upon a Monument
—We are the Monument
On a misty island in a northern sea
Obscured from sight by fog and angling rain
A reaching needle aiming at the sky.

I flit, I float

I recall what they say about the blind and the deaf: how their other senses sharpen to compensate for those that are impaired; about how acute an eagle's vision is compared to ours; and how human senses of smell and hearing are so manifoldly weak compared with those of a dog.

Already I am living proof of how with practice our dull faculties can be improved. My latest humiliation has been to be blindfolded for a week, during which time I had to continue to do all the things I normally do. I was amazed at how quickly my sensitivity of smell and hearing and touch became enhanced. In a dark or sightless world, these endowments acquire a variety and intensity that I never believed possible. In the morning, I could not wait to go out and sniff and taste the air. I was able to get a surprisingly accurate fix on the direction and distance that noises were coming from and traveling. By touching things, I got a mental image of their shape and what they looked like. Though I have feared blindness (and drowning, and being burnt alive) more than anything since childhood, I soon lost the feeling of deprivation, of being less than a whole person.

Randy read me some amazing articles about the achievements of blind golfers, and the nuanced performances of blind pianists.

For better or worse, such progress was made that my taskmaster saw fit to extend the project by another seven days, which is an indication that I had advanced beyond the beginner stage.

No sooner had we completed the cycle, than Randy informed me that my sight was to be restored but I was now to be deaf. He stopped my ears with wax. Again, one week was extended to ten days. I am convinced that the carrot and stick incentive is part of the program. With Randy, how could it be otherwise?

Then, lo! I was able to hear, but the power of speech was denied me for a fortnight, compelling me to communicate only with gestures—no notes were allowed.

And as if any of these disabilities were not enough for me to contend with, Randy spent the time while I was perforce mute in laughing and joking on long-distance telephone calls. He took an obscene or sadistic pleasure in doing so too, to rub in what a good time he was having. Whom he was talking to I have no idea: my gestures of cupping a hand to my ear, or raising interrogative palms and eyebrows asking him to enlighten me were met were met with ill-feigned incomprehension.

Although for a while I could cheerfully have garroted him with piano-string wire, again to my amazement and pride further heightened powers kicked in, which are the more powerful for combining all the senses, attuned to a degree of balance and sensitivity that I have never before experienced. I am reminded of J.S. Bach's composition *The Well-Tempered Clavier*: an *OED* definition of musical 'temperament' is: 'A particular system of the adjustment of the intervals of the scale, in the tuning of instruments of fixed intonation, so as to adapt them to purposes of practical harmony.'

Now I have such a feeling of Olympian detachment and superiority, that I fancy myself belonging to a different species: that of a Tolkienian Gandalf-Mithrandir type of wizard...having relinquished my role as the forty-third and heir-and-spare edition of Presidents of the United States of America.

Exit the King

Just as I was daydreaming of strolling out of the Louvre with the *Mona Lisa* under my arm, whistling the Marseillaise and tipping the attendants, my education came to an end. It happened so suddenly that even Randy was taken by surprise. Leaping out of the armchair where he was snoozing, he exclaimed, ‘Stap my vitals!’ (an expression rarely heard since the end of the seventeenth century).

As for me, I was preoccupied by a difficult crossword clue when a couple of Hermione’s heavies arrived at the door and, instead of ringing, knocked it off its hinges. They had reason to be angry, I suppose: I have not answered the telephone for weeks, and my last three radio addresses have been repeats. But as usual Hart Dickey has been running, if not himself, the country, so I could not see what the fuss was about.

My tutor had no time to collect his thoughts and fade into the background. Instead, he jumped out of the window into the shrubbery. Disconcerted that he was disconcerted, and wishing to avoid being interrogated as to whom it was that I had been entertaining, I threw his china Starbucks coffee mug after him, and there was a yelp as it beaned him and doused him with hot liquid.

The precaution proved unnecessary. Rather than interrogating me on the spot, or ransacking the place for evidence of what I might have been up to, the thugs were in a rush to remove me from the premises. I was handcuffed and my legs were chained together, and dumped in the back of a pickup. A tarpaulin was thrown over me and secured, and we drove off at a suicidal clip.

At the airport, I was frog-marched onto Air Force One and buckled into a seat at the back next to the toilets. At last I get to travel in luxury.

Now I am back in Washington, DC, occupying the President’s Residence at *La Maison Blanche*. The windows are locked and guards posted outside whichever room I am in, against the possibility or even likelihood that I may make a further bid for freedom—one of the late perks of democracy—and jog off into Never Never Land.

This evening, however, they let me out to attend a formal dinner, and I was called upon to make a brief speech after the sticky-toffee dessert plates had been cleared to the dignitaries present, thanking them for their attendance. I could tell that they were looking forward to being amused, so high is my entertainment value these days. But as usual it was a disaster, owing to the Mother’s eyes gimleting me. I could have murdered a vodka gimlet.

After opening by remarking that former President Billy Trucker never missed a free meal, “Mother,” I said...and the gimlet became a red-hot glower from across the table...“I’m glad you came.” I kid me not. What prompted a comment like that? Flustered, I compounded the stupidity by mentioning that my father had started calling me Quincy, after the son of John Adams, the second President, who also served a term in office. I said, “There’s another man who had one tough old bird, Abigail, for a mother.”

A stony silence hit me like...a salt cellar, and I left before the coffee and after-dinner drinks were served in order to put sticking-plaster on the cut over my eye.

I hope that the benefit of Randy’s training, in whatever form he has it in mind for it to take, kicks in before it is too late and I get posted to a new address in Kingdom Come.

Exit the King, part *deux*

Shots were fired outside the White House and a bullet broke the window and hit a wall in the Oval Office. Someone had taken a potshot at POTUS. “Yo!”, yelled a staff intern, who was sitting in my chair at the desk (a gift of Queen Victoria, made from the timbers of HMS *Resolute*) doing impressions of me doing nothing, so Donna later informed me, “Oswald! If you’re after the President he’s in the Rose Garden!”.

Actually at the time I was wandering the streets during a lull in my schedule, having exercised my newfound powers, thanks to what I had learned at Randall’s Academy of Invisibility, to walk invisibly out of the door and past Security.

Invisibly! I am so incredibly proud of this achievement. No one even blinked in my direction. One of the guards scratched his ass as I sauntered past, raised a haunch and released a quantity of gas.

I have entered this break-through feat in the logbook that I am required, by Randy, to keep so that he can monitor my progress. I am to get as much practice as possible, he says, and keep up all the exercises. By my performance today he cannot fail to be impressed.

On this occasion the timing of my escapade was mighty fortunate, and I thanked my lucky stars for my recent training. But I am greatly concerned as to the significance of what happened. What is the Mother up to now? I fear that the advent of Cosmo redux is at hand, in which case I am now officially surplus to requirement.

Walking into a sports bar, I saw a bored reporter briefly announcing the incident on one of the TV screens mounted on the wall and tuned to CNN. My Press Secretary was making a statement in the White House Press Room, assuring everyone that I had never been in any danger. “Danger of what?” a Reuters reporter asked, to general laughter, in which my Press Secretary joined. CNN then resumed its top of the hour report on a rest-home for sick and aged cats, from which deceased moggies have been sold at the back doors of ethnic restaurants. I thought of my last night’s Chinese take-out.

I focused on maintaining myself in invisible mode, and turned to the very necessary errand for which I had come out, namely—I embarrass myself by committing the confession to parchment—the purchase of toilet paper; the cheap recycled kind, not the double-ply *Soft ’n Downy* extravagance, for installation on the musical roller in my toilet in the Residence. It plays *Loch Lomond* [*Chorus*: ‘O ye’ll tak’ the high road and I’ll tak’ the low road...’], and if one is reckless enough to

consume the Jalapeno and Cream Cheese Taquitos and Big Gulp soda from 7-Eleven, one can hear it ad nauseam.

Now it came to pass that I had identified, from the coupon section that came with last Sunday's *DC Laundromat*, that toilet paper was on sale at one of the Cash-and-Carries. 'While Stocks Last', and this was the final day, hence a certain anxiety as to whether any would be left on the shelves. Supplies are close to bottom, so to speak, at the White House, and—this is so ridiculous—the housekeeper refuses to replenish my bathroom with anything but the most inferior quality of hard paper, the sort that is normally used for wrapping artillery shells. There is a national shortage of toilet paper, apparently. In these recessionary times, I understand that the airlines now intend to charge passengers to use the toilets. What used to be called spending a penny will now cost a dollar at thirty thousand feet. Now that is what I call extortion. When one adds in the price of shipping a bag, an in-flight sandwich and a cocktail, one has exceeded the value of the travel ticket.

At the White House the senior staff members have formed a toilet cooperative, from which I am excluded, and the heavily chained and padlocked stockroom cupboard is full of custom aloe-impregnated rag toilet paper made from Sea Island cotton, imported from Dubai. Nobody will give or sell me a roll, owing to the high volume of bumf usage in a Hermione-run household, and paranoia that stocks are about to, er, run out. My desire to access someone else's private latrine is thwarted by each having a combination lock on the door, for which I am not privy (oh dear) to any of the seven-series numbers.

The charlady in charge of the stockroom, Mrs Boggis, who is deaf to everything including the call or bellow of nature, has informed me that I am too low on the totem pole to share in the others' nether-land supply. This has not stopped the woman from accusing me of perloining a package of the pampersome papyrus. However I know that she is doing a brisk black-market trade in slipping quantities of a generic version of the stuff to visiting foreign Heads of State who are billeted at Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue. It is a strictly cash-only business. Prime Minister 'Poodle' (he bears some resemblance to Hermione's dog) Airey of Britain, who is here on break from anguishing over whether or not to call his fourth General Election (my mother is *so* envious), was a pleading beneficiary this morning; and I listened to Mrs Boggis—I was already in invisible mode—telling him that she would be happy to furnish him with six double rolls of multiply Luxosquit...at a price. They bargained for some time in the corridor and, when he produced pounds sterling from his wallet, she insisted on

euros, fifty of them. He did not have any on him, and she threw up her hands and trundled off behind her trolley.

When Poodle arrived to see me in the Oval Office—it being a State visit, for appearance' sake Hart Dickey decamped to my cabinet next door...a very tight fit—he refused coffee and a seat on the sofa, and stood awkwardly and grimacing as if he were in pain. When the Press joined us, Poodle was unusually brief in his comments (if not yet full in his briefs), mentioning only how urgently he was looking forward to communing with nature (and host Hart Dickey, he would be informed) at Camp David.

I decided that it was probably now safe to return home; so, after a stop at the J.W. Marriott for an extended use of the facilities, and provided with four twelve-packs of Angel Soft in plastic bags from the Cash-and-Carry, plus a couple of half-plies wrested from the almost burglar-proof double dispensers in the hotel restroom, I walked back to the White House.

Everyone was scurrying around looking for me. Still unsightly, I went to the Residence and, after sticking my hoard where the sun don't shine under a loose floorboard, rematerialized. It was fun watching the Secret Service jaws drop when they came in and saw me sitting in the middle of the drawing-room playing checkers.

Later on, watching the news on ABC, I recognized the individual who had been 'arrested' for putting a bullet through the Oval Office window and narrowly missing a portrait of George Washington on the wall. His real crime was failing to first verify that it was indeed I who was seated at the desk. Which of course it was not, after the Poodle Airey meeting had been cut short owing to his fear of being caught short. The sniper, who is a member of Hermione's staff, had blood-soaked bandages wrapped around both knees, two black eyes and a broken nose. Pesci's work.

Things here have really come to a head, and it is no longer possible to paper over the cracks.

Human kind

Thank God, I have sent back in disgrace to my books at the ranch, where ibis-headed Thoth, the god of writing and patron of scribes, awaits me.

Depression has set in. O, to be like a hibernating dormouse: to lie 'so stiff and cold to the touch that [I might be] supposed to be dead', as Flora Thompson describes it; not asleep, but in a 'halfway house between sleep and death [where] Nature has turned down its...spark of life to the faintest glimmer.' I am reminded of poor Mr Tamas, who last year arrived in Budapest after having spent fifty-five years as a prisoner of war in Russia. 'As a Hungarian soldier,' reports the Associated Press, 'he was captured during World War II, held in a prison camp and later placed in a psychiatric hospital, where he was forgotten. Hospital workers had thought his use of Hungarian was gibberish.' Time, for Mr Tamas stopped in 1947. When he was not sitting on a bench carving wood in the hospital workshop, he lived in a state of suspended animation, like the wintering dormouse.

The French have an expression, *J'ai the cafard*, literally 'I have the cockroach'. Though in my case it is a depression that goes deeper than that of merely being down in the dumps, or feeling blue (as the *Collins-Robert* dictionary translates the phrase). My malady I should describe more as a megrim: a severe headache, low spirits, or the 'vapors'. It is also a local name for the smooth sole, or similar flat fish; another low spirit.

I think of what was said about Robert Burton, author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*: that after he arrived at an astronomical prediction of his death, having calculated from the date of his nativity that his critical or 'grand climacteric' year, which was held to be sixty-three, would prove fatal to him, he committed suicide (1640) at that age in order to ensure that the prophecy would be fulfilled.

What profits it a man to dwell on the impredicables of life? Rather should not one not practice contenting oneself with the inevitable? Which calls to mind three related statements: 1) Daniel Defoe, 1726: 'Things as certain as death and taxes, can be more firmly believed.'; 2) Benjamin Franklin, 1789: 'In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.'; 3) Dad, August 1988: 'Read my lips: no new taxes.' Ahem.

As I sink ever lower in my own esteem, I am qualified for nothing, nor even hubris, because I never scaled any height from which to be cast down.

Returning to the subject of bees, and Flora Thompson's mention of the country custom of telling the bees about the joys and sorrows of the household to which they belong, so that they do not die from neglect: I should very much like to give them some good news for a change.

A Cornishman called Trelawny was celebrated in the lines of the Revd. R. S. Hawker's *The Song of the Western Men*:

And have they fixed the where and when?

And shall Trelawny die?

Here's twenty thousand Cornish men

Will know the reason why!

And shall poor Woodrow die? If so, sooner rather than later, there are fifty million citizens will not know the reason why.

Heads he shall, tails he shall not. Damn. OK, best of three.

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
I will abroad.
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free; free as the roe,
Loose as the winde, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?
The Collar, George Herbert

No, he shall not die! *Nay, he shall not!* The hour of reckoning has come! For as another poet, John Dyer, has written,

And he that will this health deny,
Down among the dead men let him lie.

I dreamed that President Woodrow Scrubb awoke before dawn back at the White House, and did walk in the Rose Garden. Or tried to. For some reason it had been torn up and planted with marrows and beets, and the President got compost (or was it manure?) in the cuffs of his pants.

This is the only time when the spirit is truly awake, thought the President [dreaming away] and the life force within one; the only time when the mind is truly fresh, before the soul is drugged and made heavy by the routine and events of the day.

Even here, at the heart of Washington, birdsong was in spate. Some of the birds that Scrubb thought he recognized, as if they had come all the way from his ranch, from the shrubbery outside the house, just to be with him. Such was their matchless loyalty to a friend in need. Scrubb fancied that he understood the birds' language. He listened intently as they told him their hopes and plans for the day, as he was in the habit of doing with the bees.

But the birds never talked of disappointment, or death, nor did they wish to hear of them. They never mourned. By singing only of Life they drew Death's sting.

The President liked it fine when he was in the company of the birds. In a perfect world, he thought, everyone would speak the Esperanto of Nature. Wildness would have no reason to shy from people, for Man would no longer exude the evil and sin with which he had been permeated since the Fall. There were, Scrubb understood, a few places in the world where this was still the case: the Galapagos Isles, for example, where the birds and animals are unafraid of humans, in a Garden of Eden where Man is still innocent until he proves himself

guilty. How little one did to earn and maintain the trust of the lesser orders of sentient beings; a trust that, unlike Milton's paradise, it is impossible to regain it once it has been lost, for there is no forgiveness in the wild.

Back indoors the President picked up the phone and ordered breakfast to satisfy a healthy appetite. In response he was told to go downstairs to the White House staff canteen and get in line like everyone else. Nuts, he said: juice, cereal, granary toast and coffee, hot, in ten minutes or you will be pink-slipped. The waiter told him to get stuffed. Scrubb told him that he was fired. The waiter told Scrubb that he could not fire him, because he reported to a Higher [female] Authority. The President invited the waiter to place a bet on that amongst the other member of staff who were in similar danger of losing their jobs.

Thus did fiber meet fiber. Back upstairs, Scrubb ordered out of the conference room, where they were lounging in shirtsleeves eating doughnuts, muffins, bagels and Danishes, and slurping coffee, various Cabinet members and Secretaries of This and That, Joint Chiefs, Senior Advisers, and Miscellaneous Hirelings. These told the President to go and sit at his school desk in the ante-room until—if he was patient—someone might bring him some crayons and a coloring book.

The President chased them all out with a baseball bat, autographed by Hank Aaron, that was mounted on the wall.

In the Oval Office, the trash of empty pizza boxes and burger wrappers and beer and non-diet pop cans from Hart Dickey's last evening meal overflowed the waste-paper baskets. There was an empty bourbon bottle with cigarette butts in it on the sideboard, and cigar ash in a plant pot. The furniture was smeared with grease and even the air felt heavy with fat and stale smoke, which made breathing difficult and unpleasant.

Scrubb tried to throw open the sash window, but it was locked. Invoking Aaron's aid again, he used the baseball bat to smash the pane and knock out the jagged edges. Then he went to the door and called for the cleaners to be summoned. When they arrived, he told them have the place spic and span lickety-split.

Next the President called in Donna, and dictated a memo to all Staff from Hart Dickey down, telling them never to enter the Oval Office without knocking, never to be late for a meeting, always to wear a jacket and tie in his presence, and not to even think of speaking to him without an appointment, which would likely be denied. But they were not to be vexed, he said, for it would not be for long. Every one of them

would be gone within a week, and replaced with others more to his taste, whether a Senate majority approved of them or not.

And he told Donna to have the window unlocked and the glass replaced.

The President's first new appointment he announced in a separate memo. Ticker Dickey's forced resignation had been accepted with pleasure, and President Scrubb's former tutor in Metaphysics, the amazing Randall (he has no last name) was hereby nominated and confirmed as the new Vice-President.

Randy was also to be Chief of Staff.

After Donna left, Scrubb called Randy on the phone, and asked him if he would be so kind as to grace the Oval Office with his presence. He would be given a pass at the gate upon production of whichever ID he cared to produce.

"Here I am, Master, yours to command.", Randy said; and there he was, ID- and pass-less, sitting on the couch. Of course, Scrubb thought, have I learned nothing about this man?

Scrubb ran through the aforementioned. "What do you say, Randy? I'm sorry, of course I should have discussed it with you first, and given you time to think about it. But somehow I just knew that..."

"...Knew that what?"

"That you would accept."

"Well, there you are then."

Ex-Vice President Hart 'Ticker' Dickey took the news of the President's newfound confidence hard. He was literally heartbroken. The paramedics broke three stretchers and a gurney getting him out of the building. One of them joked that it might be easier if they cut him into pieces in the spa bath or hot tub, Soprano-style. After they had called for backup they squeezed him through the door, and dragged, pushed and rolled him outside and up a ramp onto a Bekins furniture removal truck, which bore him to the Washington National Zoo mortuary, which is the only place with a cold room big enough to hold an elephant.

And that was the end of my nocturnal hallucination. Dare I hope that I am after all to live the American dream?

The return of Ulysses

‘Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts! Unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top full
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature’s mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry “Hold, hold!”’

Macbeth Act I, Sc. v.

Very much awake now, in real time like the TV series 24, I walked into the Oval Office, to find my mother there confabulating with my sibling Cosmo. Hermione was on the sofa, with Pesci standing behind, and Cosmo was in the armchair facing it. My brother was still the spitting image of me, despite the so-called genetic improvements.

I, Woodrow, was invisible and sight unseen.

Most significantly, my stomach did not churn upon encountering my mother; nor did I feel queasy at my first inspection of Cosmo since he and the floozies du jour had paid me a visit at the ranch.

Several days ago I spoke to the second, still extant, plastic surgeon. Randy was kind enough to get me the man’s name and telephone number. I rang his office and asked the receptionist for an appointment to see him to discuss a project that I had in mind.

“Uh-uhh,” she said. “Whatever it is, you will need a referral from your Primary Care physician, and to provide us with a copy of your medical records to prove that you are healthy and have no pre-existing conditions. Then and only then may the doctor agree to a thirty minute consultation, the non-refundable fee for which is ten thousand dollars payable in advance, check only cleared into our account before the visit. The fee does not count towards the cost of any work that may be performed, payment for which is one hundred percent in advance, check only, cleared into our account.”

I said, "I..."

"There's no insurance for elective work."

"I..."

"We'll also need a signature on a waiver of liability form."

"I..."

"Think about it and call me back. Doctor's fully booked out to...there are no openings for three months, and there are fifty on a wait-list for cancellations that we never have. Four and half months including his vacation."

I said, "You've been wasting your breath. I need to speak to the doctor right away. Tell him this is his President calling, President Woodrow Scrubb."

"And I'm Marlene Dietrich."

"No you're not, Marlene Dietrich's dead."

"Look, you can't speak with the doctor, he's in theatre."

"He'll be in the graveyard if you don't get him on the line in under a minute, and there's no insurance for that either, except for funeral expenses. You need to call or page or beep or text or whatever you do your boss and tell him that this is the other son of Hermione Scrubb calling, and that if he really is in theatre he may as well rather swallow a scalpel as a taste of what's to come, than not see me today and hear what I have to say to him. And you, and anyone else in your office, you can all order scalpels on rye for lunch, notwithstanding the sufficiency unto the day of the evil thereof."

When the nurse admitted me to the plastic surgeon's office, after trying in vain to take my blood pressure, I did not eat about the bush. I informed the doctor—his name was Rubinek—that I was fully informed as to the work that he had recently done on my brother Cosmo. That he had been charged by my mother with performing the operation of his life in order to save his own. And lest he should continue to doubt me, I described in detail a day in the history of the last doctor who had operated on my brother. His last day.

Having got the man's attention [*Q*: What do you have if you are holding one red ball in one hand and another red ball in your right hand? *A*: Chairman Mao's undivided attention.], I instructed him to clear his appointment book. He would be performing one final operation: that of working on Cosmo's puss one more time, to restore him to his pristine condition. This time he would be working for me, and there would be no payment. It was an offer that he should not refuse, because in case he was wondering the contract that he had with my mother would never be honored, except in the form of a last

vacation, Italian-style, all expenses paid.

Then, if he knew what was good for him, and good was in pretty short supply right now, he should consider taking some of his own medicine in the shape of a new face for himself created by his most trusted and expert peer in the facial reconstruction business, and getting out of Dodge with a new identity while the paint was still wet. Or he could do the job himself, in the mirror, it was up to him. He should therefore proceed without delay to sketch out how he would like to look for the rest of his born days.

Dr Rubberneck was...well, rather than break out the thesaurus, I will just say that he was afraid, very afraid. He spilled his guts—not in the Japanese *seppuku*—hara-kiri fashion, though that was an option, and told me the whole story. He had traveled the world in Hermione's jet, in order to source and collect a number of potent fresh herbs, which—when pounded, dried and ground, and absorbed, ingested and applied in various forms as balms, salves, beverages, inhalations, ointments, unguents, potions, lotions and poultices—would be efficacious in effecting Cosmo's second healing. Then, after a crash course in tai-chi, and some intensive psychiatric therapy to bring his nervous system under control so that his hands would not shake in the operating theatre, he had gone about his creative business and transformed my brother into a likeness of me, with the subtle improvements and upgrades as previously advertised.

Back to the tense present. Hermione and Cosmo did not look up, for reason that they did not see me, and kept talking. Thanks to Randy's schooling, and hundreds of hours of study and practical application, I was invisible to them and they did not suspect a thing.

Pesci's eyes were fixed upon my mother with his customary look of devotion. He was taking notes on a pad, and licking his lips with anticipation at the prospect of receiving a work assignment.

I sat down at the President's polished empty desk, and attended to what they were saying.

The pith of the discussion was that, so pleased were they with Rubberneck's work, they were proceeding to choose a date for the swapping out of Woodrow I with Woodrow II, following Cosmo's return from a long weekend in Hawaii, and after Hermione's pooch Grendel had had an ingrown toenail dealt with.

The plan was to announce that Cosmo Scrubb, Governor of the State of Gulfida, had died of the grievous wounds that he had sustained in his selfless act of saving the children at the beach by killing the man-eating shark that had attacked them. In his will, he had donated

(whatever the shark had spared of) his heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, skin, hair, blood and sperm to science; with any other parts that people had a hankering or reverence for to be preserved and exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution. The Cosmo Scrubb Memorial Trust would hold the copyright to all material to be used for the documentaries and movies that would be made about him; and the rights to reproduction, storage in a retrieval system, and transmission in any printed, electronic, mechanical, photographic or recorded form of his ur-stwhile face, voice and smile.

The inevitable comparisons, said Cosmo grandly, as he rolled an unlit green cigar between his fingers, would be made between him and little Jack Kennedy (not least in the matter of bedroom prowess, I could see him thinking to himself. Though it was likely that he would do his best to keep this under wraps, no doubt he was of the opinion that a leak here and there would not hurt his reputation.)

“Kennedy, Schmennedy,” said the Mother. “Darlin’, we got ourselves a new royal family of the USA now. The memory of my husband and Waldo’s missteps must be expunged from public memory. My spouse, unfortunately, I can do nothing about except keep him under my thumb. Waldo has to go, however. He’s done his worst to screw things up for you, and he’s going to pay for it with his life. Vengeance is mine, saith the broad. I’m the new Machiavelli. You gettin’ all this, Ignacio?”

“Si, Signora,” croaked Pesci, scribbling furiously. He liked the invocation of his countryman Machiavelli.

Cosmo ran his voice up and down a few scales, major and minor, to exercise his larynx. He was still getting adjusted to the sound. “Next Tuesday works for me, Ma, if it does for you.”

Hermione checked her veterinary schedule. “Perfect. Grendel will be red in tooth and all his claws by then. Tuesday it is, then, Snookums. Can you be ready in time, Pescalino?”

“Si, Signora,” husked the helpmeet.

“Good. I want Waldo dumped from a great height over the Nullarbor Plain without a parachute. Is there such a place as the Nullarbor Plain, Ignacio? I can’t think why it came to mind.”

“Si, Signora. Use often for body.”

“Where is it?”

“Nullarbora eez in Australia, Signora.”

“Not Africa?”

“No, Signora. *Wikipedia* say Nullarbora Plain is part of area of flat, almost treeless, arid or semi-arid country north of ze Great Australian

Bight. Word *Nullarbor* derived from Latin *nullus* for ‘nothing’ or ‘no one’ and *arbor* for ‘tree’, and is pronounced ‘NULL-uh-bore’.”

“Annul a bore. I knew there was a reason I liked it. It was either there or the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. Now then, about the drop. Strawberry jam is the effect we’re striving for, as was the hoped-for result when husband Norman was a bomber pilot and bailed out of his plane over France during WWII. Never mind that he was the youngest ever at the time to get his wings, flew fifty-eight combat missions, and was awarded several medals for bravery in action. I call it cowardice and desertion of duty. And Ignacio, save some fuel by taking the plastic surgeon along for the ride in the Gulfstream. [Of course I was right about Hermione’s plan for the man.] Kick their butts out at ten thousand feet. The doctor first, so that Waldo can watch.”

“Si, Signora.”

“What I can’t figure is why Norman has started doing parachute jumps again at his age. Perhaps he’s trying to commit suicide. If that’s the case, one mustn’t mock, and maybe this’ll encourage him to keep trying. Now then, Cosmo darling, I must tell you a very important secret.”

“Oh good. I love secrets.”

“Then you’ll particularly love this one. Cosmo, it was I who caused Norman’s plane to crash in France during the war.”

“You...you did what? Really? No! How?”

“I asked a lover of mine, a German Messerschmitt pilot who told me he was a bastard son of Manfred von Richthofen, the ‘Red Baron’ First World War flying ace, to take him out.”

“For a joyride?”

“No, silly, to shoot Norman down. Sadly, though the Stormbird’s machine guns hit Norman’s plane, it didn’t explode, and Norman bailed out and was rescued by a bunch of Resistance fighters; while the German pilot’s Me 262 limped home, crippled by flak from an anti-aircraft battery.” Hermione’s grimace grimaced. “I contacted the Resistance people and tried to persuade them that Norman was a German spy, so that they would kill him. But they said he was far too stupid to be a spy, as well as being very annoying to have around, and they paid me quite a lot of money to take him back.

“That German pilot, Cosmo, that brave man, was *your father*. I met him before the war when I was at Berchtesgarden visiting Herr Hitler with my friend Leni Riefenstahl. I didn’t fancy the Führer physically, you understand, but if I had...well, you never know. You, Cosmo, were the baby I bore Richthofen junior after the war. And you are still my

baby, baby.”

Cosmo’s newly contoured mouth was hanging open. “You mean, Ma, that...”

“...Norman is Wood- Waldo’s father, Cosmo dear, and not yours. You are the son of a handsome brave German fighter pilot. By becoming President you will be honoring the memory of the love of my life. Alas! he died, poor lamb. After becoming a successful industrialist by profiteering from rebuilding Dresden, a block of concrete fell on him during a site inspection. Excuse me, dear, while I have a moment.” Hermione took out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes; though I swear there was nothing to wipe. My mother weeps only when she is angry, and then her tears are of vitriol, which Pesci decants into dropper bottles to sear his victims with.

Enough was enough was enough. It was at this point that my body involuntarily ceased to be invisible to my mother and my half-brother, and the Eyetie. My deep-seated powers of concentration had deserted me.

Making a massive effort to control my emotions and remain calm, I spoke.

Ithaca

“Good morning.” I picked up the *Moloch Alley Journal* from a little table next to the President’s desk, glanced at the headlines, and tossed it aside. At least my voice was strong and firm.

As I looked at the relative pair as impassively as possible, I was treated to various comical inarticulations, facial contortions and demonstrations of strangulation and apoplexy. The expressions ran the gamut from shock to incredulity to horror and back again. It seemed that Cosmo’s face might be about to erupt, in which case all bets were off and it was back to the drawing-board.

Struck as I was too, by the *coup de foudre* that my mother had tried to have my father killed, so that she could marry the Nazi whose son Cosmo was, the ability to maintain my own outward composure was sorely tested. If any of what I had just learned made sense, and I already knew that it did, given the woman that Hermione is and what she was capable of, I had to put off contemplation of the full implications until I had the leisure to do so in private.

Even Pesci was showing signs of distress, as if he had let my mother down. The unearthed wire in his brain crackled and he sprang at me with a snarl.

A heavy candlestick rose off the chimney-piece and felled him with a blow to the back of the head, and Randy appeared. My *deus ex machina*.

Even the invisible me had had no idea that my mentor was in the room. Randall is, as I have said before, the undisputed Master. I should never have called upon him for help: in order to prove myself worthy of a new life and character, I had to take care of business myself. This was the moment that my mental conditioning had prepared me for. Nonetheless, I was grateful for the assist with Pesci, martial arts not being my forte. This was the second time that Randy had proven himself to be my guardian angel as well as teacher. He was my rod and staff, not just—I hoped—my Chief of Staff.

Now that everybody and everything were out in the open, the mystery was solved of how it was that the personalities, character and temperament of the brothers could be so different. Also explained was how the younger sibling could be so beloved and coddled by his mother; and the firstborn be so detested that she had ordered an arid treeless plain in Australia to be bespattered with his body parts.

Every piece of that puzzle now fit into place. But the fact remained that Hermione was mother to both of us and wife to my father. That is

her problem, not mine, nor even Cosmo's. She is a psychotic woman deranged by forces I hope never to assailed by. Fortunately Dad, to whose boundless decency my mother owes everything she has, has been strong enough to retain his humanity and sanity throughout; and I have survived, though to what extent it is still too early to tell, a lifetime of emotional abuse.

I will never tell my father the truth. I know in my heart that he does not know about or even suspect the existence of Hermione's German lover, or the truth about Cosmo's conception. I will remain racked with guilt at not being able to undeceive him as to the lie that Cosmo is my full brother. My heart bleeds for Dad when I think of all that he has borne in his wife's treatment of him, as well as the disappointment he must have felt over the years at the way the younger son turned out. I hope that in some measure I have compensated for that by loving and supporting him.

It was time to bring the curtain down on the play that has been my life so far. At the end of Act V I was holding center stage, and all lights and eyes were on me. *Bouleversé* as I was—gobsmacked would be the distasteful English word—by the revelations of the last few minutes, I was rational enough to know that at a stroke all my demons were destroyed. It was time to begin my life afresh, as President of the United States. A man who should not always wearing brown trousers and looking over his shoulder with fear, stammering and misspeaking. The people deserved better.

I glanced at Randy, and was delighted to see a glimmer of what I took to be approbation as to how I was handling things. As Cosmo continued to quail, and Hermione moaned, I launched into my peroration on the subject of retributive justice.

"Thank you, Randy. Mother, Cosmo, meet Randall, my new Vice-President and Chief of Staff. Oh—sorry, Randy, that was in a dream I had, in which..."

"I know. I accepted then and I accept now."

"Thank you, kind sir. Now listen up, folks." I got up and walked around the room as I spoke. "Mild-mannered person though Randall is, I warn you that he is also an expert in all that karate and kung fu and ju-jitsu stuff. [Is he?] So, Mother, in case like that evil Ian Fleming character Rosa Klebb you are armed with poisoned needles and blades in your toecaps, I should advise you not to expend unnecessary energy deploying them. We all know that under his veneer of machismo, Cosmo is afraid of his own shadow. As to your man here,"—I kicked Pesci's recumbent frame; "when he comes to it shall be in a cell.

“Turning to you, Cosmo. Fingerprint and DNA tests of your hair and skin cells will prove that you are only my half-brother. Medical records and affidavits to that effect shall be placed on file, along with Mother’s and your sworn statements and confessions. My lawyers shall inform you of your rights, which are that you have no rights. Impersonating the President is a serious offence, punishable by...well, under the terms of the Patriot Act I can make up my mind about that later.

“Further. Should you still be considering faking your death, Cosmo, forget it. You are going back to being Governor of Gulfida, for as long as the voters will tolerate you, after recovering from your fight with the man-eating shark. The plastic grin that was until a moment ago on your face is going to be wiped off it. Substitute ‘scraped’ for ‘wiped’. Before he heads for the hills, your plastic surgeon, Rubinek, will be doing his best to restore your chops to their pristine condition. The operation will be conducted at the Guantanamo Bay hospital. But don’t worry: if Rubinek is as good as you think he is, the USA shall still be able to assure the world that it does not condone the use of torture...by inflicting Cosmo upon the nation. We will not cry for thee, Gulfida.

“I sincerely hope, Cosmo, that your facial tissues are capable of withstanding the further injury that is about to be done to them, as the status quo ante is restored. As to what degree you will resemble the Cosmo of old, I am not qualified to form an opinion. Rubinek’s hands were shaking when I spoke to him. Fortunately for you, a doting mother is said to be blind to irregularities in the visage of a loved one. All I can offer you by way of advice is to wear a hat and stay out of the sun. Perhaps the pair of you could go into business together, selling a brand called Cosmo’s Cosmetics.

“To both of you: As my family, I will demonstrate my love for you by assigning you a large security detail, unbribably loyal to me, of heavily armed and humorless men with bulging muscles, who will keep you within their sight and hearing all the time. Have I covered everything, Randy?”

“I have nothing to add, Mr President.”

“Very well, that is all I have to say to you two. I am a busy man and there’s no time for questions. Dad and I are lunching to discuss whom I should appoint and hire in my new Administration. So without further ado, Mother, Cosmo—this is the Leader of the Western World and your President bidding you farewell.”

Postscript

Many are those in my former Hermione-appointed government who, already sitting comfortably on the monstrous private incomes that they ‘earned’ as lobbyists and consultants for politicians and law firms and investment banks, have been proven mistaken in believing that were gilding their résumés in preparation for further chrematistic [‘Of, pertaining to, or engaged in the accumulation of wealth’; *OED*] activity.

The last of Hermione’s stoolies to be flushed out and removed from office were the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Bob Johnson, and the Speaker of the House, Phil Partisan.

As everyone knows, the Chief Justice flubbed the administering of the Oath of Office at my first swearing-in ceremony: ‘*I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute...*’ became ‘*...that I will execute the office of President to the United States faithfully...*’

The bungling was deliberate. Hermione had a reserve plan to use the flub to prove that I was not really President, owing to the oath having been administered incorrectly. In this she could count on the support of stalwart Nixonian speechwriter, language maven, and originator of a fatuous metaphor about ‘nattering nabobs of negativism’, Bill Bombay—that the words were in the wrong order and grammatically incorrect.

The memorandum that I wrote Johnson, before sending him to Seattle to take up his new job as a magistrate hearing appeals against traffic and parking violations, was couched in ersatz legalese designed to make him grind his teeth:

WHEREAS Bob Johnson decided that now, while a billion people were watching, was the perfect time to give everyone an English lesson; or even a lesson in English;

And WHEREAS the President, when he was still Junior Senator of the State of Texicana, and on the Senate Judiciary Committee, voted against then Federal Judge Bob Johnson when Johnsonian Bob was nominated for Chief Justice of the Supreme Court;

And WHEREAS this Johnson has been bearing the worst grudge against Woodrow Scrubb ever since;

And WHEREAS Johnson had it in mind to get his revenge by administering the Oath of Office incorrectly;

And WHEREAS many Constitutional scholars, who are now First-Grade teachers, came out and said most impartially: ‘You know, You the People, if the two-timing Prez don’t say it right, it ain’t legit and he ain’t no longer Prez. Therefore a do-over will be necessary.’;

And WHEREAS certain parties now awaiting rendition to Iran accordingly did the aforementioned do-over the day following the first attempted swearing-in, in a private ceremony in the Map Room at the White House, after all the necessary people, the presumed still-President-Elect being one of them, and the Chief Justice another, along with a number of witnesses specially chosen by the Bobster, including a guy who is deaf, another who is not an American citizen, and another who would afterwards maintain that he was asleep, on account of his having been listening on his iPod at the time to a CNN podcast of droning anchorman Coyote Spitzer;

And WHEREAS it might be posited that at this juncture President-Elect Woodrow Scrubb was still not officially sworn in, and that Vice-President Hart Dickey, who was propped up in a wheelchair[*], might Constitutionally be presumed to be President, because he had already been sworn in as President of Vice by a plot-complicit Associate Justice of the Supreme Court;

[*Hart Dickey had been deprived him of his ambulatory function by a routine heart attack, in this instance brought on by the sight of me being bogusly sworn in. The story had been put out that he had hurt his back lifting boxes; other than that he was fighting fit and raring to get to grips with the economy. Hart has never lifted anything in his life weightier than a jumbo-size Pizza Hut box.]

NOW, be it known that Mr Chief Justice Bob Johnson had this nefarious plan to ensure that in consequence

Hart Dickey would be *de facto* President, his gravitas enhanced by his FDR-wheelchair mode of locomotion. And in the event that Dickey's boom-box gave out in all the excitement—which Johnson, having consulted his doctors, believed that it might—then Speaker of the House Phil Partisan, as the Constitution provides, would become Acting-President.

WHEREUPON the Johnsonian Supreme Court would announce that the Chief Justice's good buddy the Speaker of the House, Phil Partisan, was now President.

I need only to further record—yes, sirree, Bob Johnson—that the ubiquitous, multi-faceted and -talented Randall, in addition to discharging his other duties as Vice-President and Chief of Staff, now also serves as both Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Speaker of the House.

Coda

I called my half-brother from the ranch.

“Yeah, hi, Cosmo.”

“Woodrow?” [Note the lack of hyphenation.] Er, Mr President?”

“How ya doin’. Look, I’ve changed my mind.”

“Changed your mind...sir?”

“Yes.”

“How so, sir? I mean, in what regard?”

“As to your future.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank you, Woodrow! So no Guantanamo?”

“Correctamundo. Pack a bag, you’re going to the White House. As President. I’m handing the job over to you. Decided I don’t want it after all, now that I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul, as the poet W.E. Henley has it. Mother’ll move in with you, of course.”

“What! Haha. You can’t be serious, Woodrow! You are the President, not I.”

“I’m as deadly serious as Hermione with a migraine.”

“Woodrow, it’s awfully k-kind of you, but I don’t want to be P-President. I never did.”

“Tough noogies, and congrats. You have everything you always wanted, until now, and everything Mother has always wanted for you and still does. Which means you want it now.”

“I did not want! She want! It was all M-Mother and her blind ambition, and I had to go along with her wishes. P-Please, Woodrow, I’m not qualified. T-Totally unsuited. Woodrow, say it ain’t so!”

“’Tis.”

“I know I’ve done some things, said some things...but the p-past is over.”

“‘The past is over’?—in addition to having developed a stammer, Cosmo, you are talking Scrubbish. That is a good sign. It shows you’re making a good transition. What was it I once said about reading? Ah yes: ‘One of the great things about books is sometimes there are some fantastic pictures.’ So Cosmo, now that Hermione is to be at your side or looking on at all times, you’d better *resignate* yourself to being a stumblebum for at least the next four, minus a few months, years.”

“Oh *Dog*! But I th-thought...I say, Woodrow, why don’t we go ahead with Gitmo after all, and the...face-scraping? I can grin and bear it.”

“No. You will remain as you are, as President Woodrow. Actually, you have no choice. Rubinek has got out of Dodge and headed for the

hills. My informed guess is that he feared himself unequal to the task of restoring your face. After all the mucking about with it, there was too much risk of turning you into the Elephant Man. I should advise against getting someone else to have a stab at it: Rubinek's was the only copy of the blueprints."

"Aaargh!"

"So you are Presidential material after all, Woodrow Scrubb, you handsome devil, and good to go. I've messengered a letter to Mother. She's in a limo right now headed for the White House. If you don't do everything Hermione says, you won't be her diddums any more. And take it from one who never was her diddums, you don't want not to be her diddums. *Capisce*? Couple more things."

"There's more?"

"First the bad news."

"There's good news?"

"Your Vice-President. Not Randy, he's quit politics for good. Hart Dickey."

"But he's dead. Died last night choking on a plate of prawns."

"He sat bolt upright in the mortuary and asked for a bacon sandwich."

"Oh Jeez."

"When I visited Dickey in hospital this morning, and gave him the news about my change of heart, it was as if his own had been swapped out—and not for mine. We had a bit of a laugh about that. He even thanked me. His blood pressure dropped to 120 over 80 and he's been discharged. He said he's now a vegetarian, and going to join a health club. Remember when Hart stopped Google Earth from showing the satellite image of the One Observatory Circle Vice-Presidential residence, because he didn't want people watching him taking a bath in his swimming pool? He's going to lift the restriction, so that the nation can see him sweating off the pounds on an elliptical fitness trainer."

"Jackass."

"I come now to the most important matter of all."

"You do? Is this the good news?"

"Yes. Cassandra and I are together. As a couple."

"A couple of what?"

"Lovers. We're not sure where we'll go. South of France to start with, perhaps; plenty of jewels to steal there. Your step-dad is coming with us. Randy, too. We're going to find ourselves a big villa in the hills, somewhere nice and private. Though I've always been drawn to the Cap d'Antibes myself, somewhere like Willy Maugham's Villa

Mauresque. We'll see. Cass and I don't plan on putting down roots for a while. But don't worry, Cosmo, I haven't left you in the lurch. As a squid pro quo, now that you're me you've already got a wife."

"What say?"

"Phoebe is coming home from India, permanently. She got fed up leading an uncomfortable a life and eating bad food and having nowhere to bathe and do laundry. She has become a staunch Republican, and wants to be very involved in the cause from now on. Like Cass, she's not afraid of Hermione. How good it'll be to have two such strong women to guide you. The Pops is going to have her own Chief of Staff and team of assistants, sit in on your meetings and take an active role in them, and run the White House. She intends to be the very model of a modern First Lady; and if I know the Feebs, now that she has made up her mind, she shall watch over you with the solicitude of Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. So there'll be no more fooling around with other women."

"Eeergh!"

"Word of advice, Cosmo: Don't call Phoebe Pops, or refer to her in her presence as the Popover. You're liable to get nuttled. She's a tough lady is our, or rather now your, wife when roused."

"No! Woodrow, mow me shum sercy. You misoverestimate me. Infamy, infamy, the world's got it in for me!"

"Try not to fuck it up, Cosmo. It's a beautiful world."

"Brother, I beg of you..."

"Half-brother. The wrong half."

"Woodrow, the most important job is not to be Governor, or First Lady in my case. What am I saying? Did I say that?"

"You did, Woodrow-Cosmo; and what's more you're going to say it again in public, and it will be included in collections of our greatest pronouncements. Hi to Mom." *Click*.

As to the rest: Let History judge.

Epilogue

I dreamed that I was at Camp David for the first and last time, on my early run.

Above the still slumbering flanks of the Catoctin mountainside, which I imagined heaving in the regular breaths of sleep, mist hung above the trees layered like Salome's veils. It was an exhilarating morning, cold and fresh and quiet. The landscape at this hour of neutrality was black and white like an Ansel Adams print, with many pilgrim shades of gray.

I relaxed in my stride and took in my surroundings as I paced along the trail. I pictured myself as a net passing through the air, or water flowing through the gills of trout in the stream.

There is a time of entrancement around daybreak when everything is in limbo, and held in equipoise. When the eye of the world is as vacant as that of a sleepwalker. When the heads of flowers in softer climes are still shut, nodding in their other-world. A time before the daytime commerce of birds and beasts and bees and butterflies begins, and the seeking of food, and the marking of territories and searching for a mate and the raising of families, and of cross-pollination and propagation.

I saw a deep gully before me and started down. It took a while to get to the base, but the going was smooth and the decline gradual. As I ran along the level bottom, however, I became aware that the ascent at the other end, by contrast, was abrupt and uneven. It presented a fearsome aspect, and I eyed it with misgiving. As I proceeded, the going was lined with boulders and strewn with and rocks.

When I reached the end of the ravine, I began the rugged and tortuous haul back to the rim. My head was lowered in concentration, and my steps were short and sinews tight. I saw each pebble, each sprig of hardy vegetation.

Gradually I rose up the side like a cork in a bowl filling with water, until at the last, alerted by a growing breeze, I crested at the top and spilled onto a wind-smoothed plain. The release of concentration and tension, mental and physical, was like a blessing. Once on the level my body was soon loose again, and I felt capable of running on for ever. I had no sense of bodily exertion, or traction of my feet on the ground. With every step I felt myself losing the terrestrial needs of eating, drinking, sleeping.

While I coasted along the flat, I entered a high bank of fog. When suddenly the cloud parted it was like hearing a like a drum roll. Blades

of sunlight rent the fabric of the sky, and colors seeped like blood into the landscape. At my feet the head of a thistle tinted purple against a chlorophyll crown of leaves. Now there were cumulus clouds overhead, tooth-white pillows instead of the tired laundry hue of before. Everything near and far looked as carpentered and freshly painted as a stage-set.

It was impressed upon me how, in a landscape, present and past are indistinguishable. How every day respects the integrity of the one before, and cedes to the next. How each morning is a supplement or appendix to the one before as well as the parent of its successor.

The heart of any quest, I realized, lies in the search not for the grail of certainty but for knowledge of what is hidden. Now that I had shed my innocence along with my unhappiness, I was filled with confidence that today and every day the sun shall rise and sink; that the stars shall come out at night, and the moon ride like a galleon in the ocean of the sky; and that, last thing and upon awakening, Cassandra shall be by my side and I by hers.

