

HOUSE of LARGE SIZES

A NOVEL

IAN GRAHAM LEASK



**CALUMET
EDITIONS**

Minneapolis



FIRST EDITION

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Trigger warning: accurate, truthful writing about sexuality, exploitive religion and family secrets.

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Terrance Langley told his clients that dwelling in the past was like keeping inflammation in the body—it would eventually flare up and kill you. Luckily, his clients could not see inside him; if they could they would gasp at the untidy bundle of regrets he hauled up the mountain of his life. Of late, he wished he had endured a little further through the English educational system and become a psychiatrist instead of a psychologist. To be this age and forced to listen, for an inadequate salary, to the whining and victimhood of immature egos was withering his soul. He'd had it up to his balls with the inner child.

It was only Monday and he ached to get home to Vera and spend every second with her, to eat and drink and laugh. Even with the office window closed, he could hear Big Ben, the old bell in Whitehall, chiming lugubriously through the backed-up day. Yet when he was at home, time whooshed him forward as if some malevolent god selected him for torture, hastening bedtime with its insomnia and impotence; its time-bomb of nightmare, either his, or more usually Vera's. Bedtime came before he could spend the promised hour at his desk, writing, or walking to the river with Vera to sit and watch the brown water drift by. After the ten o'clock news, he would yawn and she would cry and they would retire to the beautiful bedroom of their former passions to wait out the night like small mammals in a primordial forest.

Compassion for his clients, now dried up by the recent threat of Vera's relapse, had to be at least faked, and faking he could always do. An old faker with love handles who couldn't seem to keep his fingernails clean—fraudulent on all levels; hence the nightmares, the whiskey, the habitual loss of identity in outlandish fantasies about literary glory, the seduction of Holly-

wood actresses, and flashbacks to a time long ago when he had found the love of his life, only to be ripped in half when he had to abandon her. He was a Don Quixote look-a-like with shriveled pudendum and swelling prostate, barely coping in a constant mode of damage control.

In an effort to escape the doom of Vera's scheduled visit to her oncologist, Terry pushed his spectacles into his hair, clasped hands behind his head, and imagined a future wherein his novel, successfully published and lauded as the first great work of the twenty-first century, allowed him to stop counseling fruitcakes and go on the lecture circuit. He vaguely heard the receptionist, Minnie, answer the telephone in the adjacent office, but his mind remained in his novel, a novel about the pure realism of what gathers in our navels and gets streaked on our underwear, that realism illuminating how we produce romance, spirituality, and philosophy in our evolutionary quest for survival. The critic in the *Times Literary Supplement* would describe him as a prose poet possessing a benign eye for existential truth and a gift for subtly unlocking the fruits of his encyclopedic intellect. He would write the perfect review of his own book as an introduction, the reviewer as well as the reviewed, rather like Jehovah in his ability to beget himself and then sacrifice himself to himself.

There would be memorable characters, shaped by his long experience with human nature; yet his dramatus personae would codify fully realized classical archetypes. The best novel ever, loosely based on the earliest written story, yet truly a book of life—the inner life, the dream of how we see ourselves. It must be a novel of inner voice because that's where we articulate the great bulk of our existence; but it wouldn't be pedantic and obscure like the masterwork of that windbag, Joyce. Terry Langley would settle for a one-hit wonder like Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, or that poor O'Toole bloke's *Confederacy of Dunces*. But please, almighty Thou-Who-Doesn't-Exist, may I reap some benefit from my life's work before I'm too dead to appreciate it?

Minnie called through the office, "Terry! 'Oy! Wakey-wakey! International call for you."

Terry sighed loudly.

"Don't be grumpy, Terry," said Minnie. "And by the way, you have Monica in five minutes."

"That bloody malingerer! Wasting taxpayers' money!"

"Shush. You'll be in trouble again."

“Some of these people don’t want to get well, Minnie.”

Laughing, Minnie said, “Don’t keep international calls waiting.”

“Come in and find me Monica’s file, then. They don’t pay me enough to multi-task.”

Minnie laughed again. Terry rubbed his face, picked up the receiver, and punched line three. “Good afternoon. Terrence Langley speaking.”

“Terry?”

One word with two syllables told him the caller was a North American male, trying to disguise the depth of his voice.

“Yes. To whom am I speaking?” The formality in his own voice made him want to slap his own wobbly chops.

“This is George. George Pym. I was nine years old when you stayed with us in Minneapolis.”

Terry’s synapse leapt into party mode. “Blimey. That was thirty-odd years ago.” His scalp numbed. Yesteryear rushed into the present.

George continued, “A bit over thirty-two to be accurate... 1972.”

“Where are we now, 2004? Time’s wingéd chariot, eh?”

“This must be a shock, Terry, but we need to talk.”

“I’m pleased to hear from you, George. I remember trying to teach you football but it wasn’t your forté. You kept sitting on the ball and resting.”

“You were nice to me. I’m still not very athletic.”

“And your family was very kind to me.”

“Especially my mother.”

“Ah, yes. I imagine this call has something to do with that.”

“It sure does.”

“Of course.”

“She called the child Gilbert because she thought it sounded English.”

Terry received an electric zing through his body. Outwardly unruffled, he said, “My child, presumably?” It would be a question of explaining: Vera darling, remember I told you I went through a rather wild period...

“I gotta tell you, there’s no question about the paternity. However, other than teasing him a bit about not looking like the rest of us, and my mom throwing it in his face that he’s a bastard, he doesn’t know for sure, and doesn’t know much about you.”

“Well bugger me. Gilbert Pym. And he’s thirty-two, you say? How interesting.”

“Gilbert Langley Pym.”

“Clever of her—a magnificent name. But I don’t have any money.”

“Nobody’s after money. Gillie’s not doing too good at the moment. He was doing real good for a while and suddenly he turned into a jerk.”

“Of course, he has my genes.”

George laughed, and the full, male richness of the voice made Terry smile. You cannot hide in a laugh, only in laughter.

“You’re a funny man, Terry.”

Minnie came into the room shaking her head, immediately picked up Monica’s file, and placed it in front of Terry. Her black lipstick had all rubbed off and now she looked quite pretty, aside from the silver studs between her chin and bottom lip and the safety pin in her eyebrow. Terry winked at her. Minnie scowled and left.

“Sorry, George, I was just repelling a Visigoth.”

“Huh?”

“No matter. I have an appointment shortly, but do go on.”

“You’ve gotten left out of Gillie’s life for three decades, Terry, but now we need your help.”

“How on earth did you find me?”

“Internet, and a lot of guesswork. Mom remembered that you studied psychology. So I searched your name under English psychologists and, boom, there you were at the Holborn Clinic in Covent Garden.”

George pronounced Holborn phonetically, but instead of correcting him, Terry said, “I didn’t know we had a web presence.”

“The world’s shrunk, Terry. No hiding place.”

“I assure you, I was not hiding.”

“That’s nice to know. But you probably should be hiding from my mother. I do.”

“How is our Nina?”

Nina, Nina, Nina. Terry’s genitals swelled at the flashing recollection of her bouncing breasts. There was a yellow couch; he’d sit on its arm with her straddling him.

“I haven’t seen her since Christmas,” said George. “She’s out of her mind. Breaking the hearts of geriatric Hells Angels in Coon Rapids.”

“Hasn’t changed much, then?”

George cackled.

Oh please God, preserve those colossal American breasts sticking hotly in my face like the pillars of paradise. It’s what Muslims are promised after all—an eternity of potency and beautiful women. “And your dad? Michael?”

“Dad didn’t make it.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. What happened?”

“He died about twenty years ago.”

Vanished now was the attempted disguise in George’s voice. Sensing deep discomfort, Terry didn’t pursue details, but said, “I didn’t know. Your mum and I didn’t stay in touch.”

“She implied you did—for a while at least.”

“No. I always wondered, but after a while... you know.”

“It’s all, as I remember you saying, water under the bridge.”

“You always were a clever lad. I’m alarmed that you recall my axioms.”

“Dad wasn’t much of a talker. He used to work all the time at the bakery or tinker in the garage, as I’m sure you remember.”

“I do. I remember the maple icing he’d put on his doughnuts. Marvelous. But he couldn’t understand why I hated cinnamon.”

“Dad said you taught him that all Brits hate cinnamon.”

“Genuine Brits, anyway. We suspect cinnamon lovers of psychotic deviancy.”

“I remember a lot of what you said.”

“I hope I didn’t muddle you.”

“You assured me that the darkness of my school years would ease up in adulthood, and that’s what got me through high school.”

“I don’t recall being so wise.”

“And you explained that every pretty girl needs a plain friend and that the trick was to go after the plain friend if you wanted to get laid.”

“I’m cringing.”

“It was good advice, but a bit wasted on a nine-year-old.”

“Those were ridiculously permissive times, I’m afraid. Sorry about that.”

“I remembered it later and passed it on to Gillie and he married a very plain girl who’s now divorcing him. And I married the beautiful one for appearance’s sake, then taking your advice a step further, shelved the pursuit of girls and went after their boyfriends.”

“I see you’ve turned into a fine bull-shitter, George Pym.”

“I’ve had great teachers.”

“George, what does Gilbert look like?”

George remained quiet for some uncomfortable seconds before saying, “His hair is thick and stands up like summer wheat. He has hazel eyes and

the form of Adonis. A lot like you, Terry, except, as I recall you have a big nose and his is more normal.”

“Cheeky sod.”

“His looks get him into trouble. He got into fights as a kid, so he has scars on his face. He put himself through college with the help of insurance money we got when Dad died. He earned a degree in Architecture, but he’s just like the rest of us in this family in so far as he’s a classic underachiever. He runs a lot these days, stays in shape, and dresses like an off-duty mountaineer. He smokes weed sometimes and drinks too much beer.”

“How’s his eyesight?”

“Good, I think.”

“I’m thankful not to have passed on my myopia.”

“He has a different kind of vision problem—more of that later. He wears his hair too long—to stop it sticking up, you know—and sometimes ties it back in a ponytail.”

“What an excellent description, George. Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*.”

In George’s ‘thank you,’ Terry detected an immature joy at being praised. Terry remembered the withdrawn, obese nine-year-old George with his mother’s dark hair and blue eyes, and what a dismal nightmare of a childhood the kid was undergoing when Terry dropped on the Pym family like a horse-hidden Greek. Terry repressed a cruel impulse to ask George if he still wet the bed. He remembered teasing the boy with the nursery rhyme: *Georgie Porgy pudd’n and pie, kissed the girls and made them cry. When the boys came out to play, Georgie Porgy ran away.* He would never tease a child now.

George was saying, “Anyway, you have a son called Gilbert and he’s in need of a dad right now ‘cos I can’t do any more for him. I got my own problems.”

“Why doesn’t Gilbert know about me?”

“It’s a long story, perhaps for later, but basically Mom wanted your baby. She thought it would bring you back. Dad was devastated but wanted to keep the family together. It worked out though. He and Gillie became close, and Gillie, even twenty years later, still isn’t over his death. After it was clear you wouldn’t return, or she couldn’t find you, or whatever, Mom stopped talking about you. But she did go out and try and replace you—which at the end of it all Dad couldn’t take. Gillie’s had some tough breaks

recently, which I'll explain, and I'm not sure how he'll react to knowing about you. He's in a mess and we have to tread carefully."

"You seem to know a lot about counseling."

"Only 'cos I been in it all my fucking life."

"Does Nina know you're contacting me?"

"Yes. Be very afraid."

Terry laughed, and George said, "I'm serious. She's something else. Went on a diet and stopped smoking, because she thinks she might see you. We can't let that happen."

"You'd better tell her I'm happily married, George."

"That won't matter to her. She's stuck back in the seventies."

"Sounds like you've all lost the plot."

"There is no plot."

Minnie stood in the doorway, hand on rotund hip, her expression saying *get off that bloody telephone and attend to mad Monica*. Terry covered the receiver with his hand and said, "Minnie, be a love and remind Monica of the virtues of patience."

Minnie's face stretched in a miraculous show of incredulity. The dropping bottom jaw, dragged down no doubt as much by metal as by surprise, pulled the cheeks and lower eyelids with it. "Terrence Langley, you're terrible."

"I'm fielding a life and death situation here, Minnie. Now please be my Cerberus and reschedule her."

Minnie backed out of the room, shaking her head. "Gawd Almighty, the things I do for you."

Terry exhaled a long stream of air. There would be time enough now for a full revelation of facts. "All right, George, tell the story." He brought the cordless phone over to the black leather couch, attached the sucker cord to his tape recorder, and after finding the tiny plug hole in the phone with his terrible eyesight, he lay down and listened.

* * *

Terry pulled on his overcoat in the reception area where Minnie applied fresh black lipstick and adjusted her piercings. He asked, "Where are you off to tonight?"

"Meet me mates."

“Tell me, Minnie, do I look fatherly to you?”

“You’re *old* enough to be my father.” She laughed. “Dirty old lech.”

“You’re projecting again.”

“Too right,” she said, coming around the desk to stand in front of him. Smiling, she tapped him in the sternum with a long black fingernail. “We all know your reputation, so keep your maulers off.”

“A reputation exhausted decades ago, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, don’t give me that. You can still charm their knickers off.”

“Oh, Minnie, when are you going to save me from myself? Be my *Dulcinea*?”

“Who’s she when she’s at home?”

“An archetypal object of desire, attached to the romantic psyche of a well-intentioned old Dago.”

“Well, we all know where objects of desire lead geezers like you, don’t we?”

“Indeed we do, my delightful little dove...”

“Blow jobs and buggery on Hampstead Heath,” Minnie laughed. “Now get home to your missus.”

Terry put his free hand over his heart and said, “Ah, the refreshing reserve of the younger generation.”

Minnie, looking up at him like a Gothic Puck, gave him a little push toward the door.

“And mad Monica? Was she discomfited by her postponement?”

“She knows you don’t like her. You better watch it—she calls you *Mister Numb Nuts*.”

“She does not.”

“Oh, yes. I smoothed her over, of course—tomorrow at noon.”

“Shit. Can’t you transfer her to *Sajita*? She can identify better with the pre-menopausal. Give me someone more challenging?”

“That’s what you all want. You all only want to treat the interesting ones. It drives me bonkers. Don’t forget your mantra—mental illness isn’t spectacular, it’s dull. You’ve got a full day tomorrow, so no more mucking around.”

“Yes, Minnie dear, I shall obey.”

“Go on now, shove off, *Mister Numb Nuts*.”

* * *

Terry failed to notice London until he began crossing Waterloo Bridge. A man tired of London is a man tired of life. He swung his briefcase, measuring the exchange of weight as the tape recorder and book therein slipped from end to end. The book, bought during a late lunch break in Charing Cross Road, infuriated him. A first published work, nominated for a Booker Prize and winning other prizes for best first novel and most promising this, that, and the other, was authored by his friend and rival, Marty Kelso. Kelso, a sneaky little swine of a bus driver with whom he swapped manuscripts until a couple of years ago, had beaten him to the punch.

Terry's intention, to throw the book unopened into the river and watch it sink, quarreled with his curiosity—plus the fact that he'd had to pay full price for it. The little bastard hadn't even told him; he'd be gloating, driving around in his ridiculous bus. Oh well, just ignore it—leave it unread. Marty would finally ring, disguising his triumph, unable to wait, asking about the progress of Terry's literary masterpiece in his piping little voice. "Oh, forgive me Marty, for not getting to the book yet. Is it the one we work-shopped in Crouch End?"

It was nearly five o'clock, darkening, and Terry's bus, packed with commuters, idled in traffic two hundred meters behind him. He wore no hat so his Samuel Beckett hair blew sideways in the wind. May as well walk home for all the good the bloody bus does. This town's an anthill. The unreal city, Elliot called it. That other poem—Prufrock—especially now... yes, I understand now. Dear oh dear. Septic tank who wanted to be one of us. James too. Auden went the other way. Ha! He did indeed—boat race like a Sharpei.

For a man of such complex thought, London had become a cattle prod of excess stimulation, and to have so much going on all at once, just when he planned on winding down his career, wasn't fair. To be confronted with parenthood and the return of Vera's disease at the same time seemed like ample proof that the cosmos meant him harm.

And the humiliation of Kelso's popular success! Bloody fluke! But this is life, Terry thought, steadying himself. Adversity keeps it interesting, and then you age, falter, fail, and enter eternal negation. But surely not, surely there's the promise of salvation as reward for the painful struggle of existence. Receive me unto thy kingdom, oh Lord, that I may not perish and be no longer Terry.

Terry saw an alarming vision of himself twenty years hence, a tall stooped creature in a dressing gown, even thicker spectacles, behind which

drooped bloodhound eyes, shuffling around mindlessly in a nursing home, smelling of piss. Don't be afraid of this vision, he pleaded to himself—embrace it. Cobblers! If only I was one of those who can rest in the faith of a life hereafter. But no, there's a different hell in that; it's they, the believers, who'll destroy the human race to further their faith. I am a sad wretch wracked between intellect and fear.

Rain in the wind. Sod it. Walk to the Elephant & Castle and catch pneumonia. That would just about do it. Can always wedge onto a bus in the event of a deluge.

He stopped and looked down into the river. You have a son called Gilbert and he's in need of a dad right now. Terry looked at Savoy Pier to his right. The Queen Mary of Glasgow moored there. A train rattled south over Hungerford Bridge and beyond. At the bend in the river, the illuminated monstrosity of the London Eye brought false festivity to the sky over Westminster. A launch decorated with fairy lights cruised up-river with a few huddled tourists in the bow, clasping white cups. Big Ben hammered out the hour.

Terry remembered when he had need of a father and there wasn't one. I have a son, albeit on the other side of the world, but I have a son and that son needs me. As if Vera doesn't have enough trouble. Oh, by the way, darling, I know symptoms of your cancer just returned, but I'm off to America shortly to meet my bastard son.

Terry gazed down into the river and saw that it had stopped moving.

There's a moment, just before the tide turns, when the rubbish floating in the Thames drifts nowhere, floats still. And is it a metaphor, a moment of blinding clarity? You're joking—step into the vacuum of the turning tide and it's the same old trash, boring and meaningless. But you should be chuffed to have seen it after all these years. Fill in that blank of experience—you saw the river stop.

Retire and finish your novel. Just do it. If that cunt Kelso can do it so can you. You've had enough dysfunction. Notebooks and folders litter the house, awaiting your attention. Langley's brilliant unpublished manuscript was not keenly sought after by University English departments in America—because there was no bloody manuscript. If he died, squatters would wad scraps of masterpiece to burn in the fireplace. Ah... the whole idea seems tame now anyway compared to the story George Pym just told—a story that, if rendered fictionally, would be considered implausi-

ble by the intellectually anemic, the politically correct reviewers who laud only novels of popular simplicity and meaningless innovation. Lazy bastards—another indication of the final stage of the Viconian cycle. No critic would believe the Pym story. Too Dickensian, they'd bleat, too complex... Baaaaaaaaaaaaah! Useless wazzocks sitting on pompous arses, passing judgement on their betters. Any writer—even a bus-monkey—is superior to a critic. Baaaaaah! Better not put that in your novel. Cantankerous old plonker. Baaah! You are yourself a microcosm of the Viconian Cycle—decadent cynicism, the ripe carbuncle on the bum of civilization. Are we entering the period prior to cultural collapse? We're in the last days, brothers and sisters... come to Jesus! Submit to Allah! Look at this, everyone hurrying home to a boring dinner and a quick wank. I live among lackeys and opportunists. And I myself am one of them, too afraid to retire and write a novel that no one understands.

Terry placed his hands on the sides of his head and shouted into the river, "Stop!"

Embarrassed, he looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and someone had—two pockmarked skinheads, smoking thin cigars, laughed at him. One said, "That's it, boss. Have a word with the old river."

Laughing, the other said, "It's needed a good bollocking for centuries."

After they'd passed in swirls of cheap cigar smoke, Terry wished he'd laughed louder instead of producing nothing but a crazed grin; he wished he'd walked along with them, explaining himself so that they wouldn't think he was just another Waterloo nutter. But, like Vera always said, "No one cares, Terry." They were obviously Millwall fans. He imagined them punching and kicking him, and dumping him over the railings.

He walked to the middle of the bridge where he often took a minute to sing under his breath what he remembered of an old Kinks song, "Waterloo Sunset." This led him to another of their songs, "Lola." He thought to himself, ah, the surprising creative process. Observe the psyche at work, so simple. Lola. Boys will be girls and girls will be boys, it's a mixed up something; bugged up, bolloxed up world or something. How can I be a writer when I don't remember anything? Need to sharpen up. Echinacea. When Vera dies, there'll be enough insurance money on which to retire, and I will spend the rest of my days writing. Oh, what have I just thought? God forgive me! May dear Vera outlive the cad Langley. Please, for all my sins, let her outlive me.

He looked into the water and the rubbish had started moving downstream.

* * *

Wet through and steaming, Terry closed the heavy door behind him, hung up his coat, and placed his briefcase on the umbrella-less umbrella stand. He smelled chicken roasting, vegetables steaming, and his stomach roiled with hunger. Vera called out from the kitchen, "You're late."

"I walked," he called.

She came fast out of the kitchen and along the little hallway to kiss him. "Bloody fool," she said, after pecking his lips. "You'll catch pneumonia and then we'll both be in shtuck street. You better change."

"You're a silly child."

"Sorry, darling. By the way, I broke down and bought Marty's novel. It's in my bag."

"Jolly good. I want to read that. It got a lovely review in the TLS."

Terry rolled his eyes and Vera patted him on the chest, laughing, and said, "Hurry up and get changed and I'll bring a pot of tea into the lounge."

Vera sped back to the kitchen. Terry went up the two flights of stairs and put on an old pair of jeans and a faded Arsenal shirt from the double year. He sat on the bed for a while and listened to the rain lash against the windows.

From the bottom of the stairs, Vera called, "Tea's on the table. What on earth are you doing?"

"Coming, coming, untwist those knickers."

He heard Vera laugh and go into the living room where she proceeded to clatter cutlery and condiments. Before putting his slippers on, he noticed his crooked toes with their dry, ruined nails, the victims of fungus, and thought back to when Nina Pym first seduced him. He'd been wandering around America and his arches hurt. She rescued him and he slept on the yellow hide-a-bed couch. Michael Pym was always at his bakery. On waking, Terry would find Nina Pym sitting on the coffee table, smiling at him, wearing a bosom-popping denim vest or some sort of Indian wrap-around thing. She gave him a foot massage, and then sucked his toes until his brain nearly burst. He had nicer toes back then.

* * *

He led in with: “Darling, remember I told you I went through a rather wild period...”

The fake coal fire warmed the living room with its pale gas flames, and his tea, grown cold now so that a milky film formed on it, had not been so much as sipped. Vera drank three cups whilst she listened.

In the narrow road outside their big bay window, rain bounced off the parked cars and dripped from the leafless sycamores lined up along the pavements. His explaining over, Terry looked outside to avoid Vera’s eyes. The road seemed grayish under the streetlights, and it took him a moment or two to pick out colours: the red pillar-box on the corner with an old lady in a pink coat studying the collection times; people beyond the pillar-box, sauntering up the steps of the Catholic church in yellow and red raincoats; the bright blue MG, owned by a South African neighbour who had not moved it in three years. Closer, a pair of young Mormons, tipping a green and orange umbrella into the wind-driven rain, seemed to be advancing against the satanic forces of logic. Terry turned away, picked up his cold tea, swilled a mouthful, and then said, “Anyway, I have a son called Gilbert and he’s in need of a dad right now.”

The flesh of Vera’s face looked young. She looked younger than him although she was six years older. Her pensive countenance made Terry smile. Her piled-up white hair, secured with a chopstick, and her light brown eyes left him speechless with love, but nevertheless anticipating a verbal assault.

“Say something,” he said.

Vera reached across the table and tapped his wrist several times with her index finger. He felt like Zeus about to be humbled by Hera’s respectable wrath. Then Vera said, “Are you willing to share him?”

Terry raised an eyebrow at her and asked, “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. I should’ve had more faith. I was expecting a bollocking.”

“I’ve loved you twenty years, Terry. You’ve always played fair with me, despite your naughtiness before we married. I always wondered if something wouldn’t come back to haunt you. But I must say I don’t see this as anything negative. I see it as an opportunity for you—perhaps for both of us.”

“Always so wonderfully rational. Thank you, darling—so much.”

“We need a purpose. I do at least—I know you have your never-ending novel...”

“Watch it.”

“We’re stagnating, and I don’t know how long I’ve got...”

“Darling, no.”

“We have to face reality, Terry. I’m pretty sure I’ll get bad news on Wednesday and I can’t think of anything better than having something to focus on other than myself.”

“You’re marvelous.”

“Stop twinkling at me. I’ll cry. Where does he live?”

“Well, Minnesota, but George tells me he’ll be in New Orleans soon.”

“Good, I’ll be warm there.”

“Unto us a child is born.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Terry.” She jumped up and made for the kitchen. “You’re so bloody histrionic!”

11

The freezing river flowed stiffly under Gilbert Pym as he looked down from the Hennepin Avenue Bridge into its dark eddies, imagining the brief drop and the shock of cold as he sank and tumbled underwater in the muscular current. With a clenching scrotum, he imagined scraping over the long series of saw-edged drops that terminated just beyond the Stone Arch Bridge.

The authorities would find a torso down by Hiawatha Dam and accompanying pieces of its main corpus would collect in the backwash with the flotsam and jetsam of the Mississippi. They'd re-assemble the essential parts of a man once known as Gilbert Langley Pym and his brother George would have to come out of hiding to identify him. Laura would have to look too. She'd be furious; she'd call him a stupid baby and slap his face, knocking his head to the floor. They'd eject her from the morgue.

The recurring vision of Laura in the missionary position with Ray, straining for orgasm, kept shocking Pym's consciousness. He couldn't keep it out, and with it came the attendant reasons—all his fault—that led to this situation. He preferred oblivion to this ceaseless viewing of his failures and their consequences.

The Friday night city hummed and steamed. Once, Friday night was magical, a time to kick back after a hard week, laugh with one of the girls, or George, eat a big dinner, guzzle beer. Now, a yellow leviathan of a post office building and three neon signs were the last things Pym would see if he chose to go the way of his father: Riverplace, Pillsbury Best Flour, Gold Medal Flour. Might he discover his father somewhere down the dark river amongst the shades of the dead? They could have a chat about jelly doughnuts and cheese kolaches. His father always smelled sweet, like cookies.

A wide safety lip beyond the railing on which he'd have to stand, and the act of climbing over it, separated him from the last great adventure. While he rested his forehead on the railing and felt the cold metal through the double knit of his hat, he wondered if his father's last thoughts were similar to this. What made his father, Michael Pym, choose this way? Pym easily conjured up less painful suicides; he was nothing if not inventive. Jumping into a freezing river was a hard act to follow, like watching Michael Pym walking around one day with a hammer on the steep roof of their home, pounding down shingles after a summer storm. The kind of nerve his father possessed would never be Gilbert Pym's to boast. It would be a clean symmetry—twenty years between the deaths of father and son. He pictured Michael waiting for him, saw for a second all our fathers waiting for us down there in the dark, and this image released another thunderbolt of grief.

To resist crying out and be noticed by the swarming eyes of nearby skyscrapers, he straightened himself and looked up to see the falls just ahead, all choked with crazy shaped icebergs, spooky in the diverse light; and his heart, for months nothing but a dried up fossil, stirred itself at the reality of suicide. A bus went by. He heard the city—the faint whoosh of the falls—and his bowels, too gutless for the death plunge, gurgling with gas.

A car full of youths crawled to a halt and a boy shouted, “Hey, fag! Waiting for your boyfriend?” Pym turned to stare at the boys. Their rusting Ford Taurus idled, and their young, bright-toothed faces grinned from the windows like mindless goblins. The impulse to go berserk, to pound the roof in, to pull teenagers from their safe arrogance, presented itself. But an ironic voice, one that often spoke inside him, asked: And will you run amok tonight? Break their bones and make them bleed? One way to worsen his despair would be to wake up in a cell tomorrow, charged with assault. It had been a long time since he had hurtled into enemies with fists and knees flying. The prospect of doing this presented itself as a way to wriggle free of the anguish, but he failed to summon up the necessary battle-wrath before his languid inner voice spoke again: Relax. What does it matter? Compared to all that's happened, who the hell cares? Let them think they're tough guys.

Pym turned back to the river and spat meaningfully like a man with a history. The voices continued a little longer, but then the boys moved on, hiding the truth of their soft youthfulness amidst derisive laughter and the stink of exhaust. Fifteen years before, Pym was much the same and he asked

himself if he'd matured at all since then; indeed, had anyone of his acquaintance actually grown up? Laura perhaps, but now she behaved badly too, gorging herself on another man's semen.

People are stupid. Here's a lone man standing at the guardrail of a bridge late at night, and no one in the car has the smarts to say, "Leave that poor bastard alone, he doesn't look happy." And you, you stupid son of a bitch, remember how you spoke to George and the way you betrayed Laura. Asshole. Alone now—deservedly so.

Whipped, Pym abandoned death, turned, and plodded north across the bridge. Beyond De LaSalle High School, which he attended years ago on Peter Pan Island, stood his brother's recently remodeled house. It was near the dimly lit corner of West Island Avenue and Maple Place where the view of downtown resembled the cover of a science fiction novel. Pym looked over there and addressed George as he walked. "One minute you're the do-it-yourself George I've always known, coming over to fix my plumbing and drink beer. The next you leap out of the closet at me like Jabba the Hut with a lisp. Christ, how the hell was I supposed to react?"

Pym looked in at Nye's to see if Estelle waited there, but the chairs were turned onto the tables and an old man in an apron swept the floor. Earlier, around ten-thirty, Pym had started a quarrel with Estelle and then stormed away to drink alone over the river, first at the Monte Carlo and then at Runyan's, where the unattached women posed in mating plumage. The way they flicked their hair and wiggled their rears like preening parrots... it infuriated him. And the affected way they smoked their stupid cigarettes made him want to slap their phony, expectant faces. To think he used to dodge among them like a cunning piranha, probing for entry. Now he wouldn't want to fuck them with George's dick let alone his own. They had brought him to his knees; it was their fault; women with their beckoning facades, drawing fat dumb bozos like himself onto the deadly rocks of marriage, deception, and adultery.

And Mother.

Don't go there, the voice said... you're fucked up enough. Remember whose fault it is. It's your fault. All of it.

Yes.

Not even The Times remained open for a final attempt at inebriation, so Pym headed back along Second Street into his neighborhood. His face stiffened and the moisture inside his nose froze. The small, closely arranged

houses looked cozy, bedded-in for the night, and a few, defying the gloom of late winter, still sported Christmas lights.

He tried to comfort himself by thinking of Estelle. He thought of how it felt to suck her taut nipples, to straddle her rib cage and slip his cock between her breasts while she held them just so and smiled, slightly cross-eyed; but nothing stirred; there came no distraction, only remorse and the copulating vision of Laura and Ray. An age ago, at Thanksgiving, he'd driven this same route, his heart filled with contentment. The stocks he owned at work were shooting through the roof, he had a great little wife who loved him, a mistress who couldn't get enough of him, a nice little house in which he'd been raised, and it was Thanksgiving, his favorite holiday. Everyone was coming to Laura and Gilbert Pym for a big turkey pig-out. Laura and George would cook, swigging sherry and laughing as they used the juices from the turkey to make gravy. His mother would be alone on the porch, wrapped in blankets, smoking. Estelle, with whom he'd been weight-training, would arrive via a different route. Laura's mother and sisters would be there; there'd be nieces and nephews—mostly from Estelle and Laura's families. Wonderful—it had been arranged for months.

Pym had let himself in the door and there was a hush, like the inside of a huge seashell. No people. No smell of roasting meat and pumpkin pie. No laughter, only the first stab of intuition, then damp, cold emptiness, and Laura's note: 'The banquet is canceled. You cooked your own goose, Gil. Whoever invented love deserves to be hanged. Don't even try to put this right.' A brick dropping through guts, numb legs—sorrow and embarrassment—not only are you busted but everyone in Christendom has the scoop. Not even Estelle arrived because George reached her on her cell phone and told her not to bother coming home either, so she headed to Wisconsin where her mom owned a trailer court. Thanksgiving was canceled and so was Christmas, New Year's, his birthday, everything. Now, just when there should be a hint of spring in the air, an Arctic front sat on the city like the Devil on a dead man's face.

As he approached the house he smacked his forehead. Why did you do it? What were you thinking? Unbelievable idiot. You sent it all to Hell! To add to Pym's woes, as if vengeful gods threw turds at him, the stock of the architectural dot-com into which he'd invested all his assets had gone belly up. And those gods had plenty more in store for him, bless their white marble asses.

Tonight, Pym opened the front door to the same emptiness and smelled gas. He switched on lights, checked the stove, and then went into the basement where he found someone had pushed in the window, knocking off the latch. A frozen wind blowing in had snuffed out the pilot light on the old furnace.

An odd smell, faint, like burned rubber or old boots mixing with body odor, baffled him. Pym shut the window, found duct tape to seal it and then re-ignited the furnace. Someone watched him. He spun, ready to fight, but confronted only the bare one-hundred-watt bulb, glaring off the white cinderblock walls.

Armed with a hammer, heart pounding, Pym searched the basement, then went up the steps to the kitchen and noticed the porch door ajar. A sharp knife from the utility drawer stuck up from the fissure of a cutting board on the countertop. The porch outside was dark. He closed the door, locked it, and slipped the chain into place.

Ready to lash out with the hammer, skin buzzing, he searched each room with no thought save a primitive longing to crush someone's forehead—whack one of those teenagers from the bridge—or that fuck, Ray! Ray, the right man for Laura. Mr. Maturity. Crack! Maxwell's Silver Hammer, yes. Coming in her mouth. Ahhh! Crack! God! Bury the hammer in the frontal lobe. Crack! Crack! Crack! Aaaagh!

Down on hands and knees, his fingers digging into the stair carpet, he watched tears sprinkle over the back of his hands. "Oh, no," he said. "Not you. Oh, no no no, not you."

A thud sounded in the basement.

Pym's skin leapt.

Only the furnace going on. Shit. He wasn't alone though, he felt sure of it. His inner voice said: Oh, this is nothing strange, just the family madness. He searched the rest of the house—even small places where no human could hide. Was George here, messing with his head? George was quite capable of such tomfoolery. Yes, only George knew the basement window could be easily forced.

"George!" Pym called. "Come talk to me. I'm sorry."

He wanted George in the house with him now. Like when he was a kid and George baby-sat because their mom was god-knows-where and the rotten fucker would hide because he knew how terrified Little Pym was of being left alone. What relief when he showed himself! Or George would

read horror stories in the dark like Mother had done to him with a flashlight under the chin. Then, to make up for it, he would sleep on the rug next to Little Pym so Dracula wouldn't come out from under the bed in the night. That's when he held Pym's head on the yellow couch and farted in his ear.

He willed George to stand up behind the yellow couch and say, "All right, Gillie, sorry to scare you. Your brother's home to look after you." He wanted to take it all back—starting with the affair with Estelle, and all the arrogant things he had said to his brother to make him go away. It would be like George to teach him a lesson and then just turn up and everything would be all right again.

But George was too big to squeeze through a basement window.

And he had a key.

Pym found nothing missing. Not that he owned anything worth stealing. Laura had already hauled anything of value to her mother's place when she left—the iMac, the cell phone, the music center, the good television. The thought of Laura officiating over the movers, her Lutheran parents ferreting around like gray typifications of I-told-you-so, made Pym take another swing at the air with the hammer. Grinding them into dog meat was way too good for them.

Pym went to the antiquated answering machine on the table beside the yellow couch and pressed the flashing red light. One message only. Not Laura, not George, but Estelle:

"It's a cold night, Gil, and you left me alone. That was so embarrassing. But I forgive you. I figured you'd come back to Nye's but I guess you had to be stubborn. Please call me when you get in. It don't matter what time. I'm worried about you."

Pym sat on the couch, pulled off his boots, and put his feet on the coffee table. Arranged neatly at the table's center sat a pile of unopened mail. He went through it, setting the junk aside. Ultimately the only item he didn't set aside was a thick, rectangular envelope with his name and address scratched on the front in black ink as if the author were on his deathbed. The postmark over the stamp proved too obscure to read. He ripped open the envelope and pulled forth a stack of postcards—it looked like several dozen—bound by an elastic band. They smelled faintly of sweet perfume.

A yellow Post-it note on the top of the stack said, in red ballpoint ink, "Read this in order." It was his brother's printing, beautifully artistic, almost a new font design. Pym peeled the note off the top of the first postcard and

was taken aback by the top image, a gloomy picture of a cave entrance. He turned the card over.

There is much to tell and you must listen deeply. Come closer, lift your eyebrows and think of nothing else but where the words take you. If you choose to listen and see, to interpret the story as you know you can, we will go to Hell together and bring back the ones we love. As an epic tale should, let this one begin late at night on bridges over dark rivers; and let us meet ourselves as we often are, alone, afraid, and looking into darkness.

The message on the postcard was typical of George's poetic tastes, written in the rational neat cursive which won him praise and prizes in junior high; the scrawled, written-out address on the envelope belonged to someone else. He flicked through all the cards; they were all written in the same red ink.

The next postcard, a color photograph of some sort of megalithic monument, said only:

One foot in the womb tomb!

In tiny Celtic lettering at the base of the card was printed: *New Grange, Co. Meath, Ireland.*

It would be a chore to plow through the entire stack of George's crap. The lazy bastard couldn't write a novel; no, he'd claim that a story told with postcards was an avant-garde response to American consumers with pitifully short attention spans.

George, who majored in Humanities and French, was a prolific reader, whereas Pym had taken a few classes in literature as general requirements then promptly forgotten everything in favor of books on architecture and business. The cave was an obvious reference to the entrance to the underworld. Or was it that thing from Kafka? The womb tomb reference was something George had lectured him about long ago, but he couldn't recall its significance, something about the recycling of life. This was the great flaw in George's plan for educating his kid brother: he assumed Pym had a memory—a deeply erroneous assumption; anything intellectual flew from Pym's brain like a flock of swallows.

Who was it went to the underworld? Orpheus, Theseus? Who else? He knew there were others. What was George driving at and who are we going

to bring back from the dead? Dad? Our friendship? Is he forgiving me? Confusing—always trying to educate the jackass. Who the hell is it with one foot in the womb tomb?

He left the cards he'd read neatly turned on their faces with the remaining stack awaiting his eyes later. He felt too exhausted to deal with George's games tonight, but he couldn't help seeing the next one—a black and white picture of a grunge-dressed youth with cropped hair, dyed almost white, sitting on one of those suppository shaped pedestrian bollards. The boy's jeans were pulled down and his face displayed a theatrical expression of ecstasy. Pym groaned and turned the card over to read:

Gillie, my darling sibling, here begins our life in sound bites. One reason I have come to New Orleans is to escape all the information in Minneapolis. It's overwhelming; everyone's so well informed. I was being grilled like a fish on the fire of my own inadequacies. Here in Fat City nobody knows anything. As you would so eloquently render this situation: They're a dumb bunch of fucks. Love, Georgie.

Pym rubbed his face in a frenzy and shouted, “What the hell? You're in New Orleans? You're kidding me! Crazy fat turkey!”

When George found out from Laura that his wife and brother were having an affair he deflated into depression. When George was upset he let everyone know it, but he got himself under control, moved in with his friend Mishawn, and told Estelle she would have to find her own way in life. Estelle liked to control George; controlling someone had a calming influence on her, and she was used to him. Surprised and hurt that George would dump her, pouting and expecting forgiveness, Estelle floundered for a while until it became clear that George wouldn't relent—he seldom did—and then she got over it. George continued to successfully team up with her at their prosperous little hair salon, but they were not to stay married. Estelle threw herself into her bodybuilding and aerobics. She maintained the self-improvement kick that George had started her on—foreign films and instant vocabulary books. Once she felt free of all obligation to George, she came after the moping Gilbert Pym like an Amazon in heat.

One Saturday morning George turned up at the house and put his arms around Pym. “Now listen, Gillie,” George had said. “I have something im-

portant to tell you, and I think maybe you're the only one who doesn't know yet, because you're just such an ostrich."

Pym, rolling his eyes, said, "Let me have it before the media get involved."

"I'm gay, Gillie."

Pym could still hear the words. *I'm gay, Gillie*. And true to form, Pym screwed the whole thing up like the loser he'd always been. All his frustrations—his strangled ambition, the loss of Laura, his company's stock plummeting and the job dissolving—it all exploded in George's face and Pym ripped him a new asshole, called him a disgrace, a fuck-wad, a fat fucking faggot.

About the stupidest thing you can do in life is to be hosing your brother's old lady and then call him a fat fucking faggot on the same day he comes to forgive you and come out of the closet. Christ! *Fat fucking faggot*. What an asinine thing to say to the best brother a man could have. He looked after you from the start, he carried you on his back, he saved you from Ma. He raised you. Asshole! Motherfucker! You absolute worthless bag of rat shit.

Estelle, anticipating final victory, had rushed to spill all George's secrets, and Pym, to his shame, had listened.

The memory of Estelle, sitting in bed cross-legged with her vagina exposed like a lily, her big, rounded breasts perking up like something out of a Hindu temple and telling marital tales, set off a blood surge in Pym's loins. Even in the face of his agony over the loss of Laura, the thought of Estelle could send his emotions in a completely different direction. He knew this wasn't normal; something had gone wrong with him. Her breasts were like the opiate of the people! He couldn't remember who had said that. Groucho Marx? Love was one thing, but the allure of Estelle was quite another. No doubt it had much to do with her lovely face, shaped oddly like his mother's, with naturally elegant black eyebrows and irises as blue as morning glories—and those big lips made for kissing. Her powerful but sleek arms and slender wrists earned her the nickname *Wonder Woman* at the gym where they worked out. *Please call me when you get in. It don't matter what time. I'm worried about you*. The timbre of her voice sent a charge from the base of his skull to his prostate.

He should hate Estelle's guts—she ruined his life; hell, she helped ruin George's life. Her unfaithfulness to his brother, her contempt for anything to do with Laura—nothing put him off. He had zero resistance—he was a

hopeless addict. He loved to just get her and hold her down and fuck her. It was never enough and he was always sore—he had to use a special cream. Then he'd suddenly dump her in the hope that Laura would hear of it and think he'd finally come to his senses and decide to return to him. But he couldn't sustain the separation and would let the image of Estelle take control of his mind and he'd soon be at her again like a frenzied chimp.

Then this guy Ray arrives on the scene and hell gushes into your basement. Pym shook his head. You should go back to the bridge... jump in the goddamn river why don't you?

The furnace thumped off.

Quiet.

He slipped out of his coat.

After a while Pym turned around and gazed at the door into the kitchen. He wiped tears out of his eyes and, frowning, looked around his dingy living room. It remained the way Laura had left it when she went to her mother's, yet tonight it looked different, a strange tinge he didn't like—a sort of menace. Something nasty that wasn't there before now inhabited the atmosphere of the house. He dialed Estelle's number. She answered immediately and said, "Oh, Gil. Jesus."

"You're a pain in the ass," he said.

"Yes, Master," she said.

"Cut that out, it won't work."

"Please, Master, I need you."

Pym laughed, said, "Man, what is it with you?"

With relief in her voice, Estelle said, "I'll be right over. Get the bed warmed up. I don't gotta go nowhere in the morning for once. I'll fix you breakfast."

Emotion rose in him. He closed his eyes.

"Are you there, Gil?"

"I'm here."

"You okay?"

"I don't get what you see in me. I'm a jerk."

"You been acting like a bit of a jerk. Don't mean you are one inside."

"Don't you agree that our actions define us?"

"Bit heavy for me, baby. All I know is you got great insides, you're the greatest guy, you just..."

"I feel like my brain's on fire."

“You know all this’ll pass, and when it does I’ll be there for you. Gotta gimme a chance, hon.”

“It’s not about you, Stella. I know I blame you when I get mad at myself and I’m sorry for that. Make sure you quote me next time. Shut me up. I feel like I’m becoming my mother. I’m just like her.”

“Well, Nina don’t look at herself like you’re doing, that’s for sure. She goes off and finds a new bar to cause trouble in... that’s her answer.”

“Maybe that’s right though, just drift through life and make sure you don’t get too wound up by it.”

“Come on, you don’t believe that.”

“I dunno. Nothing seems to phase her.”

“But she’s horrible.”

“Ah, Christ, she’s just my excuse.”

“Snap out of it now. You’ve had a good old tantrum.”

“Tantrum?”

“You really let me have it in Nye’s.”

“I guess I should make it up to you.”

“What are you going to do to me when I get there?”

“I’m going to fuck you and then kick you out in the snow.”

“Yeah, right. Like you could, with your little pussy arms.”

“Get here, you bimbo.”

“Do you got bread and eggs and stuff?”

“Sure.”

“There in ten.”

“Hey?”

“Yes, hon.”

“Has George contacted you?”

“No, hon.”

“Shit.”

“Be right there.”

Pym went into the bathroom and lifted the toilet seat. He watched his clear urine foaming in the water. How many times had he pissed like this? How many times had he rammed his dick into Estelle? In just a few months it was now more than his entire marriage to Laura. He examined himself in the mirror of the medicine cabinet and hated the stupid face reflected there. What did Estelle see in him? He was a thinner model of his brother—the uncircumcised, blonde version. He flushed the toilet, and

the swirling water represented all the tears he would shed if he could let himself.

A blue plastic safety razor rested in the sink; the casing had been stripped from the blade and the blade must have fallen down the plughole. A few tiny, red-brown hairs littered the porcelain. He usually put his razors back in the medicine cabinet but he must have been careless. He couldn't understand it. He opened the cabinet to get toothpaste and brush and, as the image of his own face moved, revealing other parts of the bathroom, he gave himself a fright by imagining his brother's face suddenly appearing beside his in the reflection. He wanted Estelle to arrive as soon as possible. He cleaned his teeth, then went and lay naked in the cold bed. His stomach pulsed and his armpits ached, but the anticipation of Estelle's arrival made his stomach flutter.

Pym was dreaming about George when a woman slipped into bed beside him. She felt refrigerated against his bed-heated skin, her nipples as hard as princess-peas. Until she gasped, "God, it's cold. Gotta get that heater fixed," he thought it was Laura coming home late from the hospital.

"How can you stand me?" she giggled, shivering against him.

"It feels good," he muttered, slipping back into the dream. George was in the basement with the tool bag, trying to replace the furnace. The furnace was ripped apart and the tools scattered, and he didn't know what the hell he was doing. Where the hell's Dad, Gillie? George kept asking him. Has someone been fucking with my tools? Pym's nose was being sucked, bringing him awake. He sniffed Estelle's breath—tonight she hadn't spoiled it by smoking. He kissed her, slid his tongue into her lovely mouth, felt her smooth teeth, felt her sucking back at him. She broke away, breathing heavily and bit his bottom lip while stroking his buttocks. He woke up a bit and tried to feign indifference. "You're deathly cold," he said, "like a corpse."

"Ish," she said.

"A very buxom corpse," he said, shifting position.

Estelle gently pulled Pym's foreskin forward with her cold fingers and nuzzled her knee between the pillow and the side of his face. She whispered, "How about a little necrophilia then—warm up the dead girl?"

His body, tumescent and lost in Estelle's beauty, suddenly teemed with vitality. He rolled onto her and she went with his movement, shifting weight so that he slid between her opening legs, her ankles quickly clasping behind his hamstrings, drawing him with a gasp into her tight warmth. She felt long and slim and cool.

She gazed big-eyed into his face, gritting her teeth, one hand lost in the hair on the back of his head, the other, like a child's, holding his bicep, and whispered, "You don't get it, do you? How much I love you." She shook his head like he was clueless, and then deep in his ear whispered, "I'm all yours, Gilbert Pym."

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Estelle had waited at Nye's Polonaise room but Gil didn't come back. People had watched him go nuts on her; it didn't matter that they were just Northeast barflies, she still felt like crawling under a rock. His arms flying everywhere—yelling and swearing. They sat near the door and all the singers standing around the piano went quiet and stared. And then to have to wait, scared to miss his return, and sitting alone like a loser. She left after an hour, drove home to the island, and changed out of her work clothes. They stank of bar and she threw them in the hamper. Then she called Gil's answering machine and left the best message she could muster. Boy, he was a hard man to love; he was in a big muddle. But he was better than anyone else. Gil's crazy shit was nothing compared to George's.

That mother of theirs. Jeez.

She felt a constant tingling inside her, which was pleasant but needed satisfying. It mightn't just mean she was horny for Gil; it could spell the onset of a bladder infection, which would be no fun at all. She felt a buzzing in the hips, only faint, and wanted to be wedged together with him, kissing. She wanted him to say, "Stella, I love you so much, baby. I know I'm mean sometimes, but I'm just in a muddle at the moment and I'll get over it and we'll settle down and everything will be okay. I love you, baby. I'm never gonna let you go."

She knew how funny this was but she wasn't going to give up hope. She went into the white bedroom and lay on the bed naked. The house felt warm. She loved looking at herself in the mirror above the bed. If she were Gil she wouldn't be able to resist herself. She wanted to make him say, "God, I'm so proud of you, baby. You work so hard at looking good. It ain't just good genes. I have to have you right now."

God, if he'd only call. And what the hell was he still so hung up with Laura for? She's a stick figure. Snap her like a dry twig! Laura liked clean sex, Gil had admitted—she couldn't sleep in the wet spot. And the way she'd gone off with that Ray as soon as she did. Bitch. There was revenge in that move—mean—not a thing Estelle would ever do. Laura knew how territorial Gil was; she knew what it did to him. Laura should have given them both a little time to settle things. It was nasty—how can Gil get over it now?

It was a horrible empty feeling with Gil out there all pissed off and damaged. Please God, let him calm down. Please let him call. She lowered the ringer a bit on the phone beside the bed in case he called and startled the hell out of her. Not that she'd be able to sleep. How could she sleep with him out there like that, wandering around like a bum?

She used the remote to turn on the television. It opened to Public TV—some depressing English soap with ugly actors and a dialect she couldn't understand. Why don't they have subtitles? CNN was all massacres and the burning of Hindu widows. The Weather Channel said it was just gonna get colder. So she put on the NASA Channel and watched through the eye of a satellite as it looked down on Madagascar. She practiced kegels as she alternately watched the television and herself in the mirror above the bed.

Resist, don't be bad, Gil may call when he's had enough of being grumpy.

She was good for ten seconds, then, with her middle finger, gave her clitoris a light tap, sending a shudder through her. The room's warmth and the big comforter made her feel luxurious. She didn't do it often, but sometimes she liked to just get into it on her own to let her mind run free. It was so much more fun with the mirror George had installed above the bed. Her nipples swelled; she wasn't going to be good; it would get her mind off old mister grumpy guts.

She imagined Gilbert nice like he was before the shit hit the fan. He'd lie between her legs kissing her, adoring her face, and she could come with hardly any movement at all if she thought about having his baby. What a baby it would be! She tried to feel it in her belly, the weight of it, its kicking. She imagined the moment when conception took place and a shudder went through her. She threaded her hands under her buttocks and pulled apart her thighs from behind. Her toes pirouetted, buttocks off the mattress, as her vagina opened in the mirror above the bed. With her fingers spread on either side of her petals she tugged them further open and imagined the

dark cave that appeared there full of pushing scalp, the wet head of a new and holy child.

The phone rang and Estelle jumped half out of her skin—saw her own startled face in the mirror. George’s voice said, “Don’t be there in the morning, I’m coming over to get the last of my shit and I want to be alone.”

“George. Hey, I had another fight with Gil.”

“So what? It’s not my problem.”

“He needs you. Lighten up.”

“You promised me you wouldn’t tell him I was here. If you do...”

“I keep my promises.”

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“Just the marriage vow. But it weren’t no marriage, was it, hon? Stop being a prick.”

“Don’t tell him.”

“I won’t. But you should. Go see him, he’s going crazy—I’m serious.”

“You know I can’t face him. He’ll sit me down and he’ll reason with me—after he’s bludgeoned me with insults. I don’t want anyone talking reason. Anyway, I was over there tonight. I needed some stuff.”

“What stuff? I coulda gotten it for you. He might’ve walked in on you.”

“You couldn’t have gotten the stuff I needed. And he always goes out Fridays.”

“Did you leave him a note or anything?”

“I left him something to ponder.”

“Then he’s gonna know you was there! So what’s the point in all this secrecy? God, George, you are so goddamn stupid.”

“Don’t call me stupid. I had something sent by mail.”

“But did you leave any trace of being in the house?”

“I may have.”

“There, you see—stupid. He’ll know you were there and he’ll be even more depressed.”

“I didn’t think of that. I’m on all this medication. You can’t always think straight.”

“What have they done to you?”

“I’m a hell of a lot thinner for one thing, so don’t be knocking it.”

“How did that happen so fast?”

“Roux-en-y.”

“Speak English.”

“This is a full service outfit I’m hooked up with down there,” George laughed. “Everything you need to become a sexy, middle-aged woman—toy boys, sex toys, counseling, and gastric by-passes. I have liposuction scheduled to get rid of my love handles.”

“Life doesn’t have to be about being thin, George. I’ve told you before...”

“Easy for you to say.”

“I work out, George. It’s a lot cheaper.”

“Don’t start. You know I’m allergic to my own sweat.”

“Another of your excuses, babe.”

“I gotta do what I gotta do.”

“I know. There’s no stopping you when you...”

“So don’t tell him anything.”

“Okay already.”

“Leave the key under the geranium pot. I left my goddamn keys in New Orleans.”

“How’d you get into Gil’s place, then?”

“That loose basement window.”

“My, you *have* lost weight.”

“Don’t be there in the morning.”

“So I can’t even see you?”

“No. I’ll be in touch.”

“Wait.”

“What now?”

“Where can I get hold of you?”

“I’ll get hold of you when I’m ready. I’m somewhere safe. I’m outta here tomorrow anyway.”

“I mean down there.”

“No way. If I tell you, he’ll get it out of you. He has to find me himself. He has to use his brains, get his mind back, quit being a shallow little shit. He has to... hell... I gotta go, Estelle.”

“Wait.”

“Estelle, sweetheart, I have to go.”

“What’s it like down there?”

“It’s the land of the dead, Stella.”

“Don’t sound too healthy to me.”

“The grateful dead. You wouldn’t understand.”

“You have to help Gilbert. Somehow. You don’t get it. He’s really losing it—I ain’t pissing you. Laura brought her new guy Ray over to fix the washer and Gil had to sit there while they were all lovey-dovey. She’s such a bitch. He can’t let go of her in his head.”

“Then how come he’s fucking you till your kidneys bleed?”

“I dunno. I’m not a psychiatrist. I know I’m his future, but I don’t know how to make him let go of his past. You’re supposed to be the clever one. You help him. I need you to do this, for him and me.”

“You want him very badly, don’t you?”

“I do, George. God, I really do.”

“Your poor little heart. I hope it won’t get broken. Gillie can be a tornado when he gets going.”

“I know it, but he’s so great underneath.”

“It’s true, he’s always been like that. That’s why I love him despite all the crap he’s pulled on me. He’s two-thirds god and one-third asshole. But the asshole part is going to receive its comeuppance.”

Estelle began to cry. She pulled the comforter over herself. “I can’t get enough of him. Please don’t let anything bad happen.”

“Is it love or sexual addiction?”

“It’s love, you cynical—”

“All right, all right.”

“Help him.”

“I already have. I did something that will help.”

“What?”

“I made a few calls. He’s going to have to come down to New Orleans soon, and he’s not going to like that. Make sure you encourage him. I have this big plan that’ll end up in a party to end all parties. Laura’s even in on it.”

“Laura, but not me?”

“She’s more trustworthy than you.”

“You asshole.”

“Anyway, you’re in on it now.”

“And you guarantee that this will help him settle down so’s he’ll be with me?”

“You know there are no guarantees in life, but by the time I’m done with Gillie he’ll be in a different place.”

“I love him so much.”

“You’re lucky, Estelle.”

“How? His head’s full of that stupid, zippy Olive Oyl bitch. And he’s fretting over you disappearing. He’s been talking a lot about your dad’s suicide. And he hates drawing unemployment.”

“I’ll get it all back in balance, but right now I gotta stay low and keep moving. If he saw me right now he’d freak.”

“Do you look different, hon?”

“A lot.”

“Are you happy?”

“Not yet. But I’m planning on being happy.”

“When’s the big operation?”

“Real soon.”

“Isn’t it a lot all at once?”

“Yes, but I can take it. I want some time to enjoy it.”

“I love you, George. Remember, you’re not indestructible.”

“Georgie.”

“Okay—Georgie. I hope this works for you.”

“I love you too, Stella. Good night now.”

The satellite camera switched to the Outer Hebrides. Estelle went back to doing her kegels and then did some slow stretches, all the time watching the workings of her muscles in the mirror above her. She pulled out the Xandria catalogue and leafed through it, looking at all the fascinating sex toys she could no longer play with because Gil didn’t approve of anything artificial. He made her promise to throw away all the sex toys she’d collected with George, but she’d hidden them in the attic.

When Gil finally called she was all hot in the face from stretching, and her heart started to pound at the sound of his voice. And when she replaced the receiver she didn’t even know what she’d said, she was so happy—something about breakfast.

IV

Despite his body being in alarm at the roaring in his blood, Pym didn't want to wake up. The bed shook. What is this, a poltergeist, an earthquake, the house being crushed by an ice floe flushing down the Mississippi? Mother, in a mighty rage, slammed the walls of the basement with a sledgehammer. She came out of the dark at him with a big knife. Laura shook him out of his nightmare and her sweet friendly voice asked, "What's going on in that complicated head of yours, Mr. Pimstone? I'm not involved with Ray, George hasn't left you, your dad's still alive."

When Pym dragged himself fully awake, he understood that a jet liner had passed low over the house. Laura's voice remained in his ears and her face in the dark dissolved before his eyes. He pulled the curtain aside in time to see the plane skim over downtown, the lights of its undercarriage flashing. The plane was unusually low. You shouldn't fly so near skyscrapers these days. The noise had not woken Estelle.

"Stella, how could you sleep through that?"

Dead still.

"Hello?"

"A corpse," Pym whispered, expecting her to laugh. "The undead. Doesn't show up in mirrors." Estelle's face indeed looked livid in the sparse light. She looked like a woman in a coffin. He made sure of her breathing, and then he played with her nipples like they were the controls of a video game. He rolled them in the palms of his hands like the Karate Kid—wax on, wax off. He knew she wasn't faking because her nipples were soft. "God, you are one tired chick, what the hell have you been doing?"

He considered sexing her as she slept. Never once had he had such a thought about Laura; in fact, his body hardly reacted to Laura, but now that

she belonged to Ray, he could barely function. He wondered if George had felt that way, or still did, about Estelle.

The flow of insight was like water torture.

He got up to pee and returned to bed with frozen feet. He wanted Estelle to wake up and fuck him long and hard so he wouldn't have to think. He'd willed himself to not be afraid of the dark. But the fear was always there, hovering beneath his rationality. He understood it was just insecurity—a caveman response to fear; attach imagery to the unknown—ghosts and vampires and zombies—like when he was a kid and George and his mother used to frighten the shit out of him. His childhood terror of the dark, of an implied spirit world, threatened to burst from the place he'd imprisoned it all these years. His mother's awful stories. He'd long ago given up the struggle with religion because if there was a supreme being controlling everything then there sure as hell could be malevolent spirits and god-knows-what-else accompanying such a deity. No, thanks.

As he warmed up he tried to fall asleep and not think, but the thoughts came anyway, delivering adrenaline and increased heart rate, then gut wrenching, like electric snakes inside him trying to push out through his navel. Sometimes the acid saliva of the snakes pushed up into his throat, but at last he fell into a fitful sleep where the snakes emerged and entangled both him and Estelle, slithering in and out of their orifices and securing them together like a package headed to Hell. Finally, he woke himself and chose the agony of self-seeing over the horrors lurking in dreamland.

Pym's worst betrayal was laughing with Estelle about George. Ignoring the increasing silence of his dad all those years ago was bad enough; being unfaithful to Laura had become such a habit that he could still only view it in terms of how it affected him; he probably could've kept his job too if he hadn't been running around telling everybody to fuck off. When he saw it all together in his mind it made him gag. But that wasn't the worst.

Before the shit hit the fan, Pym and Estelle were in George's bed at the house on Peter Pan Island in the middle of the river. It was a round white bed with a mirror affixed to the ceiling above it. Pym rested with his head sunk in the pillow, Estelle propped next to him. She'd pulled a big vanity mirror around because she liked to observe herself from all angles during sex. She touched the end of his nose and said, "I bet I know more about your anatomy than you do."

Pym grunted. Estelle tried to gently stick her red-nailed pinkie up his ass, and he laughed and squirmed away. She frowned, head to one side, and said, “Don’t you like that?”

“Not particularly,” he said. “But if it turns you on we can negotiate.”

“Seriously. That ain’t a turn on?”

“It’s weird.”

Estelle shrugged and said, “Your brother don’t think so.”

“Oh?”

“And others I know about—in my limited experience.”

“Yeah, right.”

She got in close to him and said, “I’m gonna stimulate your prostate and jump you again. It improves the turn-around time for a girl.”

“Not with this puppy, you’re not,” laughed Pym.

“Your brother couldn’t do without it.”

“Explain.”

She licked inside Pym’s ear, moved her tongue around, and whispered, “I’m the one who does the penetrating in this family.”

“No clue what you’re talking about.”

“Come on, Gil, don’t make me give details.”

Sitting up and laughing, Pym said, “That’s exactly what I’m gonna make you give.”

Estelle told Pym how over the years the sex between she and George went from unsatisfactory to nonexistent and then, after a month of couple’s therapy, to the slightly abnormal and then to the wild and kinky, with her sometimes playing a sort of Bridget Nielsen role, strapping on an expensive, foreign-made dildo, purchased off the Internet. After a while George took to wearing her underwear to have sex in, and, as a result of this, could no longer accomplish the male role normally unless Estelle made him play a domineering dyke—her favorite game, of course.

Pym slid off the bed in a fit of laughter; there was nothing more grotesquely ridiculous than the picture in his mind’s eye of his huge brother cavorting in stretched-to-the-limit lingerie.

Estelle swore she’d remained faithful to George throughout all these changes and she believed he’d been faithful to her too. It was safe—a slightly fucked-up heterosexual playing out fantasies—no harm in it. But after a while she wearied of the game and needed a rollicking good screw with a narrow-minded, testosterone-filled stud. Pym laughed and said, “So you chose me!”

“Zactly,” she said. “You’re his brother—it seems less like adultery.”

“I’m flattered.”

Estelle glanced into the mirror and shrugged as though there was a television camera in there observing everything. “There,” she said to the audience behind the mirror, turning her wrist over at the grinning Pym. “See?”

Pym grilled her on whether or not her obsessive bodybuilding had anything to do with wanting to be more like a man to counter George’s nascent effeminacy, and she vigorously said no, of course not, it wasn’t that serious. She just liked herself muscular, that’s all, and she told him to get out of her face. Pym ignored her and laughed. “I wonder how you look with a big dick strapped on you.”

She thought for a second, then said, “Good.”

“Come on then, show me.”

“No way. I’d never hear the end of it.”

“You won’t anyway.”

“You are a bastard, you know.”

“And you’re a naive fool to let George talk you into all this sick shit.”

“Naive maybe, but I could teach you a thing or two.”

Pym got all mad at that because it implied she’d had more lovers than he, and that made him sick with a sort of loss of honor and it took them an hour to be friends again. When they finally made up, Estelle said, “I was just having fun. You’re too sensitive, like George. You’ll end up taking it in the rear.”

“Is that right?” Pym mused, and then suddenly grabbed her and held her face down in the pillow and proceeded to get her in the rear. She squawked and squealed, laughing and bucking, calling him a pervert. When they were done, Estelle got up and fetched a warm, soapy towel and cleaned him up. As she did this, her hair hung over his belly and he thought of Mary Magdalene and her friend Jesus. Estelle nestled under his legs and licked his balls with closed eyes, and in a dreamy, distant voice said, “God, Gil, I love this with you. Never go away.”

But go away he did, as always, back home to Laura who bounded up to him at the door, thinking he’d been off working out hard at Gold’s Gym. He hated himself for betraying her at these moments—her innocent, rather plain face with no guile in it. How could he be doing this with a woman who was Laura’s opposite? He coped with his guilt by simply not thinking about it; this was something he’d learned from his mother. When he asked her how

she had handled all the fucked-up crap that had passed through her life, she growled in her smoky voice, “I put it aside, boy. The past is the past and I refuse to think on it. I think about what’s up next and what’s in the present moment. Your dad, Michael, he was a big dreamer—everything was a symbol. He drove us all crazy.”

Pym had loved his dad; his mother knew this and sought opportunities to alter Pym’s mind. This only made him more loyal to his father and finally he told his mother to stop doing it and they quarreled badly and she still wasn’t over it. Nina would reincarnate as a skunk. She wasn’t a nice person although she tried to look like one. She made a good living as a psychic and her clients thought she was wonderful and authentic, especially with the quarter Ojibwe blood she claimed. Pym was close to her when he was young; she opened him up very wide—same with George a decade earlier when she was much younger. She had that certain something and Estelle was very like her... big, athletic, raven hair, blue eyes—a sexiness so alluring it felt artificial, a gollum fashioned by infernal forces, a design so cunning that men would never suspect they were being drawn to destruction.

Pym knew this was nonsense, so it was easy for him to believe Estelle was only outwardly like his mother. Estelle wasn’t truly promiscuous and he understood why a woman like her would need a man like him. And he understood why he needed a wife exactly the opposite: Laura—dependable, logical and steeped in integrity, which, once turned against him, was pretty final.

On the day George forgave him for having an affair with Estelle—which resulted in the big row, which was all Pym’s fault, for which he would never forgive himself—George kept calling Pym a bastard. Everyone had been calling him that lately but for George to keep saying this was weird. “My righteous brother, the bastard,” George would say, or, “My bastard little brother.” Finally, Pym said, “Quit with this bastard shit already, you great fairy.”

“You *are* a bastard, you know. Nobody’s told you. Now you deserve to know.”

“What are you babbling about?”

“She had you in wedlock, but you’re not Dad’s.”

Pym took a swing at George but missed. George jumped away and screamed, “So now you’re going to beat me up too!”

“I’m going to gut you, you damn pie wagon!”

Staying on the other side of the sofa, George asked, “What have you become?”

“Me? Christ, what in the fuck’ve you become? Jabba the Hut with a lisp?”

George’s eyes became slits; Pym had never seen spite in his face. “I’ve always been like this, you bastard—it was only you and people like you with your hilarious put downs that stopped me admitting it. I thought, with the shit you’ve just pulled, that you’d cut me some slack when I admitted to you that I was gay. And always have been. Jesus fucking H Christ! You pig!”

Pym calmed down at the sight of his brother’s flushed cheeks. He sat in the armchair. “Okay, then. I’ll stay reasonable if you do. First tell me about this bastard stuff, but don’t think I’m giving you a break on the faggot thing.”

“I was here,” George snarled, “when that Limey roadie fella lived with us for a summer. I was nine.” George pounded the yellow sofa he was standing behind. “And he slept on this piece of yellow shit. Early every morning after Dad left for the bakery, Mom would come down and fuck him. I’d hear her having orgasms from my bedroom—she didn’t care who heard. Dad knew, but he was cooler than all of us. Then you were on the way and she walked around as if she had some goddamn prince in her belly. But of course he never came back. He stayed over there in Limeyland with his own people. And after a while she shut up about it and realized what a mess she’d caused. I was sworn to secrecy forever. Fuck that now! And look how you’re turning out—just like her and that dirty rat who slept on our couch for a summer at Dad’s invitation. I never let it bother me and neither did Dad. You were one of us, but the truth is you’re all her. You selfish little shit. Who needs you? Fuck you, Gillie, I’m outta here.”

The easiest thing to get over in all of this was that he wasn’t really his kind old father’s son, but the offspring of some skinny rocker who got dumped in Minneapolis by his band while awaiting a court date on a drug charge. Pym knew the story, just not the affair part. But it didn’t surprise him. He looked a bit different—blonde hair and a thin straight nose. He’d always been his own man, paddled his own canoe, as his dad would say. It didn’t change anything. He wondered briefly about this new father and saw in his mind’s eye a longhaired man with rotted teeth and sunken cheeks, begging on the London Underground like the homeless men he had seen

during his London honeymoon with Laura. That nameless guy had nothing to do with Gilbert Langley Pym.

The losses were such now that the river seemed the best option—a few minutes of acute discomfort and then, after a struggle against his decision, oblivion; but, he reasoned, in the absence of any belief in divine judgment, he might as well stay alive in the warm bedclothes, if only to see what happens next. The only comfort was that he could lose himself between Estelle's muscular thighs; perhaps one day he would end by suffocating between them, drawn back to a womb like a grateful babe. The river would gradually freeze and the life in it would move slower and slower until it was forced to dig itself into the mud.