

# THE CABIRI

A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups

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It was laundry day, and Kasi could not shake the dream of dwarfs. The dream had come in the vague hour before waking, and in the aftermath of a small earthquake—a magnitude 3.8, with an epicenter near Long Beach—just enough to rattle the china figurines on her dresser. The dream had lingered through her coffee, disturbing but not unpleasant. The dream dwarfs had been licking her like little kittens gathered around a dish of warm milk.

Kasi was undergoing psychoanalysis for the first time in her thirty-three years, and had been told by Dr. Beck that the process would “stir things up.” Childhood memories, repressed desires, that sort of thing. So she supposed that a dream of horny midgets must somehow come from the basement of her mind, and looked forward to telling the doctor about it on Tuesday. In fact, she wanted to tell him right now. Would he take her on a Saturday?

She began to think about her choice of words. Kasi was no prude, but still, it was a little cringe-making. She shuddered at the lingering image and felt it way down deep. She decided that the least embarrassing way to relate the dream would be ‘in character,’ and chose one of the bit parts she’d played in a *Lifetime* movie some years back, a murderous schoolteacher named Alice Klebold. Kasi was an actress who got hired mostly for her body and bad girl looks. In her twenties, she’d been okay with that, but at thirty-three, it was causing her some anguish and three-hundred dollars a week to Dr. Vincent Beck, because she could already feel gravity’s pull on her flesh and

knew that the juicy parts would stop coming soon. She closed her eyes as she sipped her coffee, and instantly regretted doing so. The face of one of the dream dwarfs filled her mind's eye. He looked up from her lower half and waggled his long, red tongue at her.

Kasi shuddered again, and this time the shudder felt like the torturously sweet onset of an orgasm.

The dwarf was a monstrous infant with an old man's wrinkles and a little red hat. Hideous and adorable at the same time.

It wasn't his ugliness she found disturbing, so much as the uncertainty of his age and identity. Eight months or eighty years? Man or monster? "We are frightened," Dr. Beck had told her, "by things and people we can't readily identify." Neither/Nor things. The unfamiliar familiar. Dreams mixed them all up.

She picked up the phone and punched the speed dial for Dr. Beck. As it rang, she strode to the balcony door and opened it, letting a wave of wiltingly torrid air into her air-conditioned apartment. September in Los Angeles. Earthquake weather. She left a message with his service, requesting a four o'clock appointment, and then proceeded to the laundry room with a week's worth of dirty clothes.

Vincent Beck was on professional probation. The APA and the medical board had come down hard on him as a result of Susan Coyle's charges, but they could have come down harder. They might have recommended that his license to practice in the state of California be suspended, but fortunately, the sole woman on the disciplinary committee had voted against this sanction. Vincent had screwed up with Susan Coyle in two ways. He had prescribed

morphine for imaginary pain (specifically, the pain from a phantom limb that she'd never actually lost). And he had slept with her.

He had been seeing Susan for nine months in the Tuesday afternoon slot now held by Kasi Paar. She'd come in that day on crutches, as always, and complained that the pain had become unbearable. Susan believed that she had lost her left leg to a shark while swimming in the warm waters off Cabo San Lucas. The shark, she said, had removed the leg in one bite, at the upper thigh just below the inguinal ligament. Her limp and her use of the crutches was well-practiced. Susan was an actress, as well, as were many of Vincent's clients. But it was no act. No matter how many tests, x-rays, or physical therapy sessions he ordered, she refused to believe that her left leg was entirely intact. She could feel it only as a phantom.

The pain was real for her, too, and that was why he'd finally prescribed the morphine. It was the only thing that worked, and on the day that changed everything, she'd come in with a soft smile and more than a little languor of limb. With the frown lines and panic missing from her face, he'd seen how alluring she was.

"How's the pain?" he'd asked.

"Much better," she'd answered. "Thanks to you. And I think I've finally decided to get a prosthetic. I want to walk again."

"You will."

"Maybe...but I'll never work again. Nobody wants to look at--"

"Susan," Vincent said, holding up his right hand. "Tell me what you see."

"I see your hand, Doctor Beck."

"Good," he said, scooting close enough to put his hand on the arm of the overstuffed chair she sat in. "Where is my hand now?"

“On the arm of the chair. This is a silly game. Shall we play Simon Says?”

Over those nine months of treatment, Vincent had tried any number of approaches to dismantling Susan Coyle’s delusion. He knew that she would accept only a truth that was *evident to her*, or to that place in her psyche she now inhabited, not to him or any number of specialists, technicians, or colleagues. Nothing had worked. And so, finally out of tricks and exasperated, he breached both the code of ethics and the regulations governing his trade. Impulsively, he put one hand on Susan’s blue-jeaned knee and the other over her eyes.

She raised her chin and leaned into his hand a little.

“Where is my right hand now?” he asked.

“It’s where my knee used to be.”

“But you can’t see it, can you?”

“I can feel it, Doctor. You know about phantom limbs. You feel them. That’s why you gave me the morphine, right? Your hand is warm. There’s energy from it. It even helps with the pain.”

“No, Susan,” he said, in a firmer tone than he’d taken with her before. “You feel my hand because you have nerve endings in your skin. My job is to treat you, not to indulge you. There is a lot of good work we can do. Need to do. But not until we get past this.”

She pulled his left hand away from her eye, but tellingly, let the other one stay.

“I shouldn’t have to tell a psychiatrist that we feel in our brains, not in our skin. And I don’t need your indulgence.” She began to get up. Even in a huff, she was careful to put the weight on the right foot.

Vincent had never committed an act of malpractice. He was forty-three, divorced, and knew he was attractive to women for any number of reasons, but his record was clean. A case might be made that a doctor whose practice consisted in large part of film and TV actresses might have a hidden agenda. But until this moment, with this patient, he'd never pictured himself as a transgressor. It was therefore with some self-surprise that he found his hand had moved from her knee to that place just below the groin muscle where she claimed the shark's teeth had sunk in, and that he was exerting pressure to restrain her movement.

"Now where is my hand, Susan?"

Her voice dropped into her chest.

"You're getting warmer," she said. Her legs parted almost imperceptibly. "That's where he— Where it—Now, yes. You're very close to the bite. It hurts." She slipped forward, and her hand floated down to his. She lifted her hips and he felt the dampness and heat in his fingertips.

She'd laid a curse on him in so many ways. There were, of course, the legal and professional issues. But beyond those, he would no longer be able to regard a female patient in his big, overstuffed chair without seeing Susan Coyle's legs in the air.

It had happened only that once. The least he might have hoped for was a breakthrough in her treatment. But her pain continued, and foolishly, he kept prescribing the morphine. He now realized that he'd done it in part to keep her quiet. After three more sessions, he told her that he was referring her to a colleague and would no longer be her doctor. It was after this that she'd filed the report.

He noticed the voice mail light blinking on his telephone receiver and checked the message. Kasi Paar, asking to move up her appointment. Something urgent. A dream she couldn't shake. He checked his calendar. Other than his Saturday hike from the Griffith Observatory to Old Mulholland, which was something of a ritual, he was clear until dinner. He phoned her back and then tied the laces on his running shoes. Once around the Silver Lake reservoir before breakfast, that was his regimen.

It was hot. By the time he left for his run at 9:20, the sun had already bleached out the stuccoed façade of his bungalow on Tesla Street. Even in Los Angeles, it was hot at 9:20 only in earthquake weather. And hadn't there been a tiny one just before dawn? He took off at a canter and was sweating by 9:25. Coming around the bend onto Silver Lake Boulevard, he saw a flash of red in the tangled brush on the banks of the reservoir. A scarf. A cap. What went through his head was, "someone climbed the fence and left something behind."

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Jack Flynn was due at the Kodak Theater at 3 to receive his "Spirit of Hollywood" award. Of all the trophies he'd received, this one seemed the least legit. What the hell was the spirit of Hollywood? Narcissism? Avarice? All he could think of was Jacob Marley dragging his chains. It was the wrap-up of this year's Hollywood Film Festival. Talk about selling coal in Newcastle. Hollywood was for making movies, not honoring them. Anyone on the inside knew how little honor there was about it, and Jack was way inside.

But he would get through the ordeal, wear his white tux, smile broadly, maybe get a little drunk. And when it was over, he'd have

Kasi for a *digestif*. The limo would bring her at nine, and she would come bearing gifts. White powder and pussy. A strawberry tart frosted with confectioner's sugar. Now *that* was the spirit of Hollywood.

Jack peeled off his hoodie and dove into the pool. Six laps in the morning and he was good to go, even at nearly sixty and some hard wear on his machinery. The sunlight, already white hot, blinded him as it ricocheted off the surface of the water. September sun. This time of year, he ought to be in Tuscany. From his aerie in the hills high above Mulholland (nobody's house was higher than Jack's), Los Angeles did look a little like Italy. If you squinted. But it was a fake--*ersatz*, like everything else here. He opened his eyes mid-lap and was blinded again. In the midst of the white-out, there was a transient smear of color just outside the security fence.

*Goddamned papparazzi*, he thought. *I'm putting in land mines.*

He thought about his speech. *Old actors never die, they just collect trophies*, he'd say. And they would laugh. They always did.

Vincent's office was in Larchmont Village, an enclave within the greater enclave of Hancock Park, where the old money lived. The houses were big and stately, but not Beverly Hills ostentatious. And Vincent liked the fact that his patients had to travel east from their gilded palaces on the west side to see him here, in "old" L.A. It was as if they were traveling from present to past, from what they'd made themselves to what they'd been, and that served their therapy well.

Before the Susan Coyle incident and the ensuing damage to his reputation, Vincent had had some very famous clients, women whose fame was exceeded only by their terrible fear of falling. Now, most of them had left. It wasn't what he'd done, or even the taint of scandal,



that had driven them away. These things could be turned to professional advantage. It was that his stock had been devalued, and that they feared that in order to restore its worth, he might have to trade on their secrets. This was a line he would never, ever have crossed, but he understood their caution, and accepted their abandonment as his penance. His income had dropped fifty percent in less than a year.

Kasi Paar wasn't famous, except on the internet, where a raunchy photo spread she'd done at twenty-two had gone viral. At this point, it was likely she never would be famous. 28 or bust was one of Hollywood's brutal truths. If the big role hadn't come before your thirtieth birthday, it probably never would, and Kasi was thirty-three. She was also self-destructive, duplicitous, and presented signs of borderline personality disorder--though this was a diagnosis easier to make than to itemize. He liked her because she was willing to dig into herself despite the ugliness of much that was buried there. Her education had stopped with high school, but her curiosity hadn't. She was looking for a woman she could be comfortable being at forty.

"So," he said. "Tell me about the dream."

"It's a little embarrassing."

"Dreams often are. That's why they're disguised in sleep."

"I googled 'Jungian.' You're a Jungian shrink, right?"

"You know what Jung said? *'Thank God I'm not a Jungian.'* But yes, I'm a fan of his work. I practice depth psychology. Why?"

"Well, this whole idea that the things we dream come from some big, deep well that everybody drinks from. Does that mean that the same dream could be dreamed by more than one person?"

“Yes, but not like the same video playing in everyone’s head. It would be colored by your own experience And it might or might not *mean* the same thing. Why? Did someone else have your dream?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’m not sure.”

“Well, tell me your version of it,” Vincent said.

“I was on my back, on some kind of wooden table. Like a picnic table, but bigger and heavier. Much bigger. Much heavier. Oak, or something. And I was naked. My arms and legs were, like... Well, like I was tied down, only I wasn’t.”

He had noticed her voice drop and her posture change, as if she were affecting a different persona. She had also developed a little tic. A twitch of the nostrils. He’d seen this before, and made a note.

“Did you feel like a captive?” he asked her.

“Yes. No. *No*...but I couldn’t get up. I couldn’t leave.”

“Why not?”

Kasi giggled and averted her eyes.

“Because it felt too good. What they were doing.”

“*They?*”

“The midgets.”

Vincent scrawled ‘*midgets*’ on his pad. Then, as an afterthought, he wrote ‘*digits?*’

“Go on,” he said. “Tell me about them.”

“There were dwarfs. But smaller than real ones. Little tiny wrinkled men no bigger than babies, with little pointed red caps and long, pointed red tongues. Lots of them all around me, sort of feeding on me. Like kittens or puppies.”

Vincent cocked his head. “Red caps, you said?”

“Yeah. Pointed and kinda saggy, like-“ She laughed.

He smiled at her. "Like what?"

"Like the seven dwarves, almost, and me as Snow White!"

"When you say, 'like kittens,' do you mean you got the feeling they were hungry? That they wanted nourishment?"

"Yes. No. Not really. I got the feeling they were really horny."

"Okay. And how about you?"

"Weeeelll... It wasn't exactly the worst dream I've ever had. The weirdest, but not the worst. There were three of them... Three rough little tongues. I'm pretty sure I had an orgasm, but it might've been the earthquake. And then later, when I was awake, just thinking about it gave me another one. That, believe me, has *never* happened before."

"Well...congratulations. Things may be breaking up. Old habits. Complexes. Orgasm is a rare experience for you, right?"

"Right. Unless—"

"Unless it feels like you're a captive."

"Yeah." Her chin dropped. "That's bad, right? Was I 'abdicated my will' to the dwarves, like the way I do with men?"

"Pleasure isn't ever bad in and of itself, even when it comes from make-believe captivity. Pleasures become threats when they become obsessions, or when we do bad things to get them. Like stealing to get a fix. We talked about the abdication thing. Where it might come from. The business with your father. Our deepest pain can become a source of guilty pleasure. And being object rather than subject is a sexy thing for most people. I'm curious about something."

"What?"

“Well, first...can you remember what sort of space you were in? You’re on a table, right? Look up toward the ceiling and tell me what you see.”

Kasi rolled her eyes heavenward, then closed them.

“Wooden arches. Like in an old building.”

“Uh huh. And how about the lighting? Is it bright and sterile, like an operating room...or dark and mysterious?”

“Definitely dark. Not pitch dark. There are...candles.”

“Candles.”

“Yeah. Like in a church. I wonder-“

“Who is worshipped in this church?”

Kasi took a shallow breath, closed her eyes briefly, then fluttered them open again and said, “I think I am.”

Vincent nodded, made a note, and let a moment pass.

“Sooo,” Kasi said softly. “Does this mean I have a thing for little boys or something like that? Midgets....children. You know.”

“I don’t think so, Kasi. I know your dream life pretty well, and children don’t figure into it much. The *Snow White* idea is interesting. So’s the fact that you’re not *really* a prisoner. A captive only of your own desire. It might even be that you’re asserting your strength and sexuality after years of feeling held down by men.”

“Wow,” she said. “Ya think?”

“Let’s go back to the place. If it’s a church, and you’re the object of worship in this church, what does that make the dwarves?”

“I dunno. *Priests?*”

“And if they *are* your priests, and the table is an altar, that puts a new spin on what they’re doing to you, doesn’t it?”

Kasi made a smile, then crossed herself.

On the Bronson Canyon trail in late afternoon, with little more than a half-hour of daylight left, Vincent sat down on a boulder to rest. From here he could see the Pacific. Santa Monica Bay and Catalina Island beyond. He felt the rock and the ground beneath his feet tremble. An aftershock, he supposed. The shudder subsided quickly, and in its immediate aftermath, there was a disturbance in the brush on the far side of the path. Possibly a family of quail, or if something bigger, a deer or a coyote. Whatever it was, the little quake had stirred it into motion. The scrub oak trembled again, and this time Vincent saw something amid the tangled undergrowth.

Dark red. Like blood on a mule deer's brown flank.

## 2

Jack Flynn was reclining on the veranda when Kasi arrived. *On the veranda*. He liked the sound of that, even though he wasn't sure *veranda* described the sprawling, tiled deck that overlooked the wild canyon and the mosaic of swimming pools below. It sounded genteel, refined, powdery, everything he wasn't.

He was wearing a robe of red Chinese silk with a dragon motif and drinking a very expensive port, partly for the same reason he liked to say 'veranda,' and partly because he liked sweet things. He rose from the chaise longue at the sound of her tires on his driveway and felt his paunch drop below the sash with the force of gravity. Gravity was making him old, pulling him down there where the worms lived, but gravity had a fight on its hands. He tightened the sash and watched as she walked to his door and rang the bell.

Kasi had indeed brought gifts, but also a message, and as she waited at the door, she shuddered at the thought of delivering the message because she knew how badly Jack received unwelcome news. It hadn't occurred to her that wearing fuck-me pumps and a bustier might not be the best way to say goodbye. Or maybe it had, and she'd done it anyway. She was twisted that way.

"Hi, gorgeous," he said at the door. "You look delectable."

"Thanks," she said, stepping in. "Nice robe."

"Jackie Chan gave it to me. I wore it for you." He struck a martial arts pose and stepped back to let her in, admiring her backside as she made her habitual walk across the atrium toward the pool deck.

"New snow in Aspen?" he asked her.

Kasi nodded and set her Chanel bag on the coffee table. She reached in and handed him a small rectangular pouch of aluminum foil, not much thicker than a stick of chewing gum.

"This isn't gonna get me through the night," he said.

"Just wait. They call this Incan Silver. It'll blow the top of your head off. Be careful. You're not twenty anymore."

"I've got the heart of a racehorse," he said, and dropped down to the sofa facing the pool. From a glazed Chinese pepper pot on the coffee table he drew a narrow glass tube about two inches in length, and pinged it with his fingernail to shake the residual powder loose. It rang like crystal. He opened the pouch carefully, put the tube to his right nostril, and took a snort of the cocaine.

"Oh, baby," he said. "Macchu Picchu, here we come. Put your ass down here next to me. I'm going to eat your pussy all night long."

"That's a nice thought, Jack, but I don't think so."

"You don't think so? What does that mean?"

"I've got someplace to be."

Kasi braced herself against the wall. She was already trembling.

"This is the place to be, sweetheart. You and me. We make a world. Quit talking bullshit."

"I need to see my daughter," Kasi said in a half-whisper.

“Since when do you see your daughter at ten o’ clock on a Saturday night? It’s past her bedtime. Your mother’s probably already tucked her in.”

“That’s just the thing,” she said. “It should be me.”

He took another noseful of the coke and sat back. He felt the grin coming on. “Sit down, Kasi,” he said. “I’ll tell you all about parental guilt and why it’s unhealthy for people like you and me.”

Kasi pushed herself away from the wall. It took some effort because she felt glued there. She perched on the sofa and began.

“Listen, Jack,” she said. “You’re great. This...has all been great. But I’ve learned some things. About myself. And I-“

“Oh. Right,” said Jack. “Your therapy sessions with the discredited Dr. Beck.” He went to the granite-topped bar and poured her a glass of chilled Sancerre. Next to the bottle was a Tiffany crystal bowl filled with hard candies and Tootsie Pops. He unwrapped a lemon sour and popped it into his mouth. “And what have you learned? That I’m your father? That you can’t be ‘whole’ until you stab me in the heart and throw me over?” He handed her the wine.

“Something like that,” she said. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “Of course you want to hurt me. That’s what makes it so good.” He leaned over and took another snort. The grin came on full, pulling at the corners of his mouth like rigor mortis. His jaw ached, his head throbbed, and it was good.

“I told you to go easy with that stuff,” she said. “It’s uncut. Pure. Oh, Jesus. Your nose is bleeding.”

Kasi found a tissue in her bag and tried to wipe the blood from his upper lip. He batted her hand away and took the tissue. He held it to the bleeding nostril while drawing a tubefull of cocaine into the



other one. Kasi got up and strode to the plate glass patio door, wringing her hands. She stared out at the lights in the canyon and said:

“I need to get well.”

Suddenly, he was behind her, his hands under her skirt, his weight against her. “I’ll make you well,” he said.

“No, Jack,” she said flatly. “You make me sick.”

She tried to slip out, to break into the open, still hoping for a peaceful ending, but he had her pinned.

“What the fuck, Kasi?” he demanded. “What the fuck?”

She looked into his eyes and saw mayhem. His pupils were fully dilated and the whites bloodshot.

“Please, Jack. I just need some time.”

“Time?” he roared. “I *am* time. I’m the eternal spirit of Hollywood! I’m the ghost of Christmas past, present, and yet to *come*! No matter where you go, you don’t get away from me!”

“Then why don’t you kill me?” she said softly.

He took her head in his hands and began to beat it, slowly, rhythmically, insistently against the thick pane of reinforced glass. It might almost have seemed tender if not for the look in his eyes.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it? That’s why you come. You can’t stand yourself.” The hammering continued, more forceful, and she stopped struggling. She began to feel dizzy, and remembered she hadn’t had anything to eat. “I’ve tried to get it through your thick fucking skull that you don’t have to repent for your sins when you’re already damned. The only way out of Hell is to go all the way in.”

He paused for a few seconds, awaiting her response, his thumbs against her temples and his thick fingers gripping her skull.

Kasi's eyes had been closed, but now she opened them and said, "I'm done, Jack. I'm not coming back."

"The fuck you say." He pulled her to his chest and let her rest there for a moment. A shudder ran the length of his body. Then he took hold of her head again, cocked back, and threw it with full force against the glass. The glass, designed to withstand a baseball bat, did not break. But Kasi did, and she crumbled to the floor.

"Oh, fuck," he said under his breath. "Now I've done it."

He knelt and put his knuckles against her white throat. She was breathing, but shallowly. "Goddamnit, Kasi," he said. "You bring out the worst in me." He reached for a pillow from the sofa and slipped it under her head. For some reason, perhaps because he'd done it in the movies, he lifted her eyelid and inspected the state of her pupils, but he really didn't know what he was looking for. It was something you just did, like boiling water when a woman was in labor.

Jack sat back down on the sofa and contemplated doing another line. That didn't make a lot of sense. That would be the behavior of a crazy man. Briefly, he considered doing her while she was out. Then he contemplated calling 911, but concluded that would be stupid. He drained the rest of his port, got up, and paced for a minute. Finally, he decided that the prudent thing to do was to call Doctor Al.

After he'd made the call, he soaked a wash cloth in cool water and sat down beside her to dab her forehead. At one point, her eyelids fluttered open, and he was frightened by what he saw.

"They're coming out," he said to himself. "The little fuckers are crawling out from the sewers."

He decided that he had better call his lawyer, as well.

Vincent pulled up to the curb in front of the L.A. Free Clinic and let the motor idle. It was 9:56 and Mina was off at ten. They had booked a late dinner and maybe a sleepover, depending on how much in need of comfort Mina was feeling after a day of ministering to the city's tired, poor, and uninsured.

He could see her through the glass doors. She was at the admitting counter, still in her white lab coat, and in rapt conversation with a darkly handsome guy in scrubs who looked to be her junior by about ten years. Something about the way Mina was looking at the man gave Vincent a twinge, and impulsively, he gave two quick honks of the Saab's horn, then immediately felt foolish for having done so. Both of them turned to look toward the street, and Vincent saw the young doctor's lips move. He imagined him saying, "Better go, Mina. Your daddy's here."

Sexual jealousy makes apes of us all, Vincent thought, and resolved not to grill her about the young medic. Still, there'd been something about his stance. A presumption of ownership, a suggestion of shared secrets. Mina got into the car, redolent of hand sanitizer and *White Linen* perfume. She gave his chin a nip.

"How'd it go on the front lines today?" he asked her after they'd pulled onto Western Avenue.

"The usual damage," she said, checking her face in the visor mirror. "Ear infections, strep infections, yeast infections. And one bleeding ulcer. God, I'm exhausted. I've got circles under my eyes."

She took a make-up kit from her bag and went to work.

"You look fresh as the dew," he said, and it was only a small exaggeration. Mina was of Estonian descent and had a durable Baltic beauty that withstood even the ravages of a full-time residency in the

pediatric wing at Cedars Sinai and her volunteer work at the clinic. She shone with goodness. Her hair was naturally dark, but she'd recently gone blonde, the better to look the part of angel.

"No battered women today?" he asked. "No drive-bys?"

"Not today," she replied, deftly applying mascara. "There was one odd thing."

"What's that?"

"A woman came in with scratch marks all up and down her inner thighs. Not deep, but long, and she said the itching was driving her crazy. She said her cat had done it, but that had to be a very unusual cat. They were really inflamed. I gave her a shot of cortisone and some ointment and told her to stay away from tomcats."

"How did she respond to your advice?"

"She said, 'but the midgets won't leave me alone. They come in my dreams.' Mina laughed. "Maybe she's got a house full of bedbugs. Or maybe she needs to see you." She daubed at the delicate skin beneath her eyes, then gave him a look. "On the other hand, maybe not. You don't do so well with nymphomaniacs."

"I've taken the cure," said Vincent. "Nothing clarifies the mind like the prospect of professional disgrace. Where do you want to eat?"

"How about Cliff's Edge in Silverlake?"

"Sounds good to me," said Vincent. "So was that the new orderly you were talking to?" He couldn't help himself.

"Orderly?" she laughed. "He's an orthopedic surgeon! A good one, too."

"Nice guy?" he asked.

She hesitated just a beat too long before answering.

“Yeah. Nice guy. Greek, I think,” she added for no good reason.

The restaurant had trees growing inside. Big trees, garlanded with twinkling Italian lights. Mina said it reminded her of Prospero’s island. They came here a lot, Mina because she liked the trees and the fresh ingredients, Vincent because he liked the way it made her glow. He ordered a 2003 Brunello, a taste left over from the days when he’d had disposable income, and one he’d have to part with soon.

“One of my patients dreamed of midgets, too,” he said. “Horny midgets. Lapping at her naked body like hungry little animals. Ever have that dream?”

“Not that I remember,” she said. “And I think I would.”

“How does it strike you? I mean, as a woman, what do you make of it?”

“I dunno,” she said. “Maybe her maternal clock is ticking.”

“Hmm. I hadn’t considered that one.” He put the wine to his nose and smelled loamy soil and marmelade. “It’s funny... I’ve treated so many women that I sometimes feel like I’ve got a phantom vagina. But I can’t cross over to the physical. I can’t feel their body memories or their cycles. I try, but I can’t imagine what it must be like to bleed. Or to be-“

“Penetrated?” she asked.

Most women Mina’s age, especially those in a comfortable, postmodern relationship, would have said “fucked,” but she was careful with words.

“Right. I just can’t. I feel like if I could, I’d be a better doctor.”

“You’d be a better doctor if you knew what it was like, physically, to be a woman?”

“If I could access the body memories. If I could be Jung’s androgyne. If I could make that sort of alchemy in my own psyche.”

“This is why put up with you, Vincent. You make even your craziness seem like a search for psychological truth.” She took her own taste of the wine. “What does the dream mean to you?”

“I told her it might mean that she’s finally taking control of her sexuality.”

“By being ravished by dwarves?”

“I think she might be the one directing the show.”

“Ah. Like Catherine the Great with her horses?”

“Not quite,” he replied with a laugh. “But it’s a pretty rich dream...archetypically. I have to do some homework, but I think dwarves go a long way back. I remember reading about these little guys from Near Eastern mythology. *The Dactyls*. Tiny men who lived under the earth and served the Great Goddess. You remembered their names by counting your fingers, and eventually the fingers—the digits--*became* the Dactyls. My patient...has never been able to masturbate manually. I think maybe that changed last night.”

“And digit rhymes with midget,” she said.

“Right.”

“Why can’t she masturbate?”

“That I probably shouldn’t go into,” he said. “But she’s got some kinks.”

“It’s a wonder you don’t fuck them all,” she said, and this time she used the word as purposefully as she had avoided it the first time. It didn’t sound right on her angelic lips.

“Believe me, Mina. Most of the time, it isn’t any sexier than a gynecological exam. They’re just too damaged.”

“You sure that isn’t what turns you on?” she asked.

“I’m sure,” he said. “Let’s order.”

As it turned out, Mina did come home with him. She said she was spooked by the earthquakes, but on the evidence of her behavior in bed, it struck Vincent that she might also have been aroused by the Kasi story. If so, it wouldn’t have been the first time the relating of his patients’ tales had had an aphrodisiac effect. It wasn’t the stories themselves that seemed to turn Mina on, so much as the fact that these faceless women had confided them to him. The intimacy of this trust, the tingling envy it gave rise to, made her want to share her secrets, too. These were not--as they might have been with his actresses--narcissistic or fetishistic fantasies, but earthy expressions of lust as healthy and untroubled as Mina was. She was especially fond of the kitchen table and other food preparation surfaces.

If Mina did have a hang-up, it was that she never spent the night without some sort of pretext. She was “in a funk” or “the clinic had gotten to her,” or some event in the news—a terrorist attack or a murder--had made her shaky. In this mostly unconscious way, she denied Vincent the satisfaction of ever feeling that she was there for him. In the months following the Susan Coyle episode, she became especially inventive with her rationalizations. Her apartment was being fumigated or there were painters in there all weekend. Anything to avoid admitting that she loved him in spite of his sin.

But Mina had recently let slip a number of things that told him that she was ready to seal the deal. Get married, maybe even have children. If not to Vincent, then to someone else who could make her laugh, cry, and scream. If anyone’s clock was ticking, it was Mina’s.

"Tell me about Dr. Dreamboat," Vincent said, when she lay in his arms after sex.

"Why? Does it turn you on to be jealous?" she asked.

"If that were the case, I'd have asked you about it an hour ago."

"Ah, I see. But now that you've made your conquest, you feel confident enough to ask about the competition."

"Okay," he said. "Busted. Now tell me about him."

She shaped herself into the curve of his body, leaving a small gap as a hedge.

"Well, like I said, he's a surgeon. Kind of a rising star in his field. He volunteers twice a week. Wednesday night and Saturday."

"What a coincidence," said Vincent. "Your shifts."

"It *is* a coincidence," she insisted. "At least it is...for my part."

"The plot thickens. He's after you, I can tell."

"Oh, yeah? How can you tell?"

"Body language," said Vincent. "He's...protective."

"He *hears* me," she said. "Maybe it's all an act, I dunno...but he has this knack for seeming completely *present* when we talk, and days later he can still remember some tiny detail of our conversation."

"Impressive," he said. "Am I 'present'?"

"You are for your patients. Totally. I promise you that five minutes after this conversation ends, you'll be with them in your head. Studying their stories the way the old Jews studied the Torah to figure out what's beneath the words. But not for me, Vincent."

He pulled her closer, saying nothing. Once he felt her release herself to his embrace, he began to drift, and soon they were asleep.

At 2:44 AM, the phone rang.

"Shit," said Vincent, from somewhere in his dreams.



“Better get that,” Mina mumbled. “I’m on call.”

“Okay,” he answered, and fumbled for the bedside telephone. Mina watched him from the pillow, one eye open, hearing him say only, “Yes, this is Dr. Beck,” “I’m her psychiatrist,” and “Okay, tell her I’ll be there soon.” In between those utterances had been two minutes from the other side. Mina knew this was not a good sign.

“What is it, Vincent?” she asked. “Who?”

“That was Dr. Kanters from Neurology at Cedars,” he replied wearily. “The patient I told you about...the one with the dream.”

Mina nodded.

“They brought her in unconscious three hours ago. A concussion. He didn’t say how. Some intracranial bleeding.”

Mina sat up. “That’s pretty serious. Is she-”

“Stable, but under close observation. They’re concerned about epidural hemorrhage. She’s conscious now, which is good.”

“And she asked for you?”

Vincent nodded.

Mina dropped her chin unconsciously. “Well, then, you’d better go.” A pause. “Why do you suppose they’d call her psychiatrist?”

“Maybe I’m the only head doctor she has,” Vincent answered. He kissed her and added, “I’ll be back before you wake up.”

The night had sealed in the day’s heat. Los Angeles nights usually brought an easy ten degree drop into what is known in seasonal climates as “sleeping weather,” but not tonight. A Santa Ana condition, with bone-dry winds driven from inland desert, had taken hold. The winds, along with the grit they carried, set Vincent’s teeth

on edge. And with good reason. The murder rate in Los Angeles always rose when the Santa Anas blew.

He drove east on Beverly Boulevard with the windows down and the air-conditioning at full blast. The streets always looked broader at night, the sidewalks as empty as a deserted movie set. L.A. wasn't an after-hours town, and it felt illicit to be out at this time of night, as if he were violating an army-imposed curfew. Los Angeles, like some third world metropolis, seemed made for martial law. Despite the sway of the palm trees, there was a certain severity.

The Cedars Sinai Hospital complex loomed ahead, plate glass walkways spanning the street, a small city of white coats and torn flesh. There were other hospitals, but if you were white and could afford it, you booked at Cedars. All the best of the new-breed specialists practiced here. Even the food was state-of-the-art.

They had put Kasi in a private room, which surprised Vincent. Her Screen Actors Guild medical insurance wouldn't have covered that, and if she'd come by an ambulance following a 911 call, they'd have followed standard procedure and gone semi-private. Private rooms at Cedars were as hard to come by as one-bedroom suites at L'Hermitage. There were waiting lists for them. Somebody else had paid for the room, someone who could open doors.

There were already yellow roses at her bedside.

"Kasi," he said softly from the door. Her eyes fluttered open.

A weak smile. "Dr. Beck," she said. "Thank you."

"What happened," he asked, moving to her side.

"So stupid. I fell in the shower. You know what they say. Ninety percent of accidents occur in the home...so stupid."

Her reply had felt transparently rehearsed. So transparent that he was certain she'd wanted him to hear it for a lie.

"It happens to the best of us," he said. "How do you feel now?"

"All right I guess. A little nauseous."

He leaned in to check her pupils, then laid a finger against her throat. "Stick out your tongue," he asked her, and she did.

"How're my tonsils?" she asked, after she'd swallowed.

"Nothing to do with tonsils. Chinese medicine. The tongue's an indicator of overall organ health. And lots of other things."

"Oh, right," she said. "My acupuncturist says the same thing. "So what's the verdict?"

"You seem okay," he said. "Did you do any coke tonight?"

"I told you I stopped. It was making my nose bleed."

"Completely?"

She turned her head a few degrees to the left.

"Kasi," he said softly. "I looked at the x-rays. There's a hairline fracture. It's tiny but it's not a small thing in terms of healing and cost. I'm your doctor, so tell me. Did you go to see your 'customer' again? Did things get rough? Does that explain the yellow roses?"

Her eyes moistened, as they always seemed to when he'd hit a vein. Still, she shook her head no. A reflex.

"We've come a really long way, Kasi. You're not the same person who walked into my office a year ago. And the rule in therapy is the same as with any other transformative experience. Don't backslide."

Her eyes remained unfocused as she said, almost under her breath, "My father told me once that I had a head made for beating."

Here, and in other instances like it, the doctor in Vincent came to odds with the man. What he wanted to say was, "May your father burn in Hell." What he said instead was,

"And was there a part of you that believed him?"

Her answer, in a voice tiny and far, far away, was, "Yes."

"Can you imagine any little girl, anywhere in the world, so damned by the universe that she deserves to be told such a thing?"

"No."

"Then why you?"

Kasi didn't answer, but Vincent had an idea what the answer was. She deserved punishment because she had fed the beast. She'd traded physical intimacies with her father in exchange for reprieves from his cruelty. And so, pleasure for Kasi was knotted up with punishment, and this was why she couldn't orgasm normally. This was also why her dream was a potential breakthrough.

Out of the blue, her head still turned, she said, "There was something I heard him say. *'The little fuckers are coming out.'*"

"Heard who say, Kasi? Your father?"

"My customer. I think he dreamed about them, too."

"The dwarves? Ah...so he's the one—""

"Yeah."

"Like you said, we all draw from the same well," Vincent said. "What do you think it might mean if he had... had the same dream?"

"Maybe that I'm going to die."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because they're pulling me under. Under the ground."

"I don't think you're going to die, Kasi. But I do think you're going deep. And I think it's about time."

## 3

Mina found herself unable to sleep, and got up to make a cup of tea. *Valerian Root? Chamomile?* No! *Hot cocoa.* That would do better to drive away the dread; to make her feel small and protected again. It was Sunday night and she wished she'd gone to church that morning. She wasn't much of a churchgoer, but she felt the need to have the flesh and blood of Christ in her belly.

Archie, her silver-gray Scottish terrier, nosed through the doggie-door that led from her tiny backyard into the kitchen and began to lick her toes, the toes that Vincent had nibbled the night before. Archie liked Vincent, and there he was on her feet. Dogs had an amazing ability to conjure presence from scent. She'd decided not to sleep over at Vincent's a second night, and had come home to her little West Hollywood bungalow. Sunday nights were rare for them anyway, as both felt they needed the alone time to recalibrate for the work week ahead. But Mina had other reasons for the hiatus, as well.

She believed that she was about to sleep with another man, and did not want to feel horribly guilty about it. Two nights in a row with Vincent might have felt like a vow. Somehow, it seemed to her that her betrayal of him would be both less hurtful and less sinful if it didn't follow so closely on intimacy.

What silliness, she told herself, turning to mix the cocoa. It's not betrayal. I'm a free woman. He's not my keeper. He screwed around. And it won't cause him any less pain if I cheat on him after a recess.

But none of this logic could shake the magical thinking, the moral superstition that had made the "I love you" she'd wanted to say last night catch in her throat. If she'd said the words, she might not have been able to do what needed doing, which was to find out if Dr. Gregori Papus was really all he seemed to be. She knew what Vincent was. Vincent was great, but Vincent would never *really* take care of her in the way she wanted to be taken care of. Before she accepted that as her lot, she needed to do some comparison shopping. *Ugh*. She hated the sound of that, and remembered that she *was* a good person at heart. But, oh, how her belly throbbed when Dr. Papus was standing near her.

The bungalow's kitchen had an old-fashioned breakfast nook, the sort that had come as standard equipment in the forties. She slid onto the bench to drink her cocoa and read what remained of a *Vanity Fair* article about the riotous youth of actor Jack Flynn. The author was a woman, and clearly enamored of all the things about Flynn that made Mina wince. Halfway through the piece, however, it struck Mina that some of Flynn's aggressively alpha qualities were present in Dr. Papus, and this disturbed her greatly. Maybe she wasn't such a good person after all. Maybe she had a dark side. She reached for the Xanax bottle that sat on the table next to the saltshaker, and took two. Thirty minutes later, she curled up on the bench and fell asleep, promising herself that it would only be a nap.

On the tiled floor beside the bench, Archie the terrier circled his position twice and dropped to his belly, his black nose pointed in the

direction of the flap Vincent had cut into the back door, his nostrils dilating and contracting with each breath of scent carried through on the wild Santa Ana winds. Time passed without markers, as it does for dogs. A half-hour, perhaps an hour. Archie slept, then woke. The doggie flap squeaked on its hinges.

Archie began to growl. He managed two muffled barks before the silence came over him.

Mina woke on the kitchen floor with her legs apart and her right hand resting on her pelvis. Her pink and black plaid pajama bottoms had been cast aside. Even stranger was the position of her left hand. Her arm was thrust halfway through Archie's doggie flap, as if she'd been reaching for something.

Or as if something had been trying to pull her through.

She lifted her right hand and brought it to her nose. Her fingers were damp and smelled of her sex, and the limpness in her limbs told her she'd had an orgasm. This might have made a certain sense given that she'd fallen asleep thinking lewd thoughts about Gregori Papus, except that she was on the floor with one arm sticking through the doggie door. Something licked her left palm and she screamed. She pulled the arm in quickly, scraping her wrist on the rough wood. Archie followed, whimpering.

And then she remembered.

She had watched them come in from her place on the bench. Even if her eyelids had been closed, her mind's eye had most certainly been wide open. Through the flap, one by one, and Archie mesmerized, unable to move. Ugly little men, with faces as wrinkled and red as a newborn's. Not angry faces, but instinct-driven like any

animal on the prowl for food. Crawling through on all fours and then standing in turn to a height of not more than eighteen inches. Red caps, floppy like those of some Serbian shepherd. They'd come beneath the breakfast table to the bench where she lay. They'd slipped off her pajama bottoms and scrambled onto the bench.

The faintest smile crossed her lips before she clapped her hand over her mouth. "Jesus Christ!" she shouted, and frightened Archie. "Jesus Christ! Am I losing my mind?" She saw that the fur along Archie's spine was as stiff as if it had been moussed into place. This was a reaction her dog had, not so much to cats and squirrels, as to the perception of abnormality. Archie growled at the outcast and misbegotten. A blind man with a limp and a hairlip. A bag lady swaddled in layers of stinking rags. But usually, the reaction was temporary. She'd never seen his fur remain standing for so long.

*Oh, fuck, she thought. They're still in the house.*

The compressor behind her refrigerator switched on suddenly, and she started. Mina scrambled to her feet and hurriedly pulled her pajama bottoms back on. Then, moving from room to room in barely controlled panic, she turned on every light in the house, all the while whispering to herself, "Ridiculous, ridiculous." The thought that a posse of eighteen-inch lechers in red caps occupied her house was indeed ridiculous, but Mina was now in the grip of the irrational.

Vincent had told her once of a theory that when the ancient Greeks had experienced the sensation of panic, they'd *seen* an image of Pan. They had actualized the god. The theory held that the left and right hemispheres of the ancient brain had not been sufficiently integrated to conjoin emotion and reason. The ancients had abided with daemons, and had given them names and faces.



Rather than following at her heels as he usually did, Archie remained crouched in the kitchen, which gave no comfort to Mina. But once she had set the house ablaze with light, pulled open every closet and looked under both beds, her heartbeat slowed a little and her mind began the process of reconstructing the world she knew.

She made a pot of tea. No more chocolate, thank you. She brought her laptop to the table and checked her e-mail and resisted, for the moment, the urge to Google “dreams of dwarves.” It was, of course, very strange that she’d had the same dream experience as Vincent’s sexually dysfunctional patient, but maybe this was a case of dreaming by suggestion. *Dream-seeding*. Ha! She decided to Google *that* and found only some verse by an obscure Scottish poet, a song by a punk band in Tulsa, and a porn site in Russian-flavored English that featured awful, grainy videos of purportedly sleeping women being mounted by men and animals. She exited after one stealthy look and, with a shudder, promptly deleted the web cookie from her file as Vincent had taught her to do, but the exit was not fast enough to keep the memory of the dream from coming.

*It was a dream. It was a dream. It was a dream.* She said this in a kind of incantation as the images came flooding back into her brain.

They had been all over her, top to bottom, front and back, and neither the little creatures nor her had shown the slightest shame. It had been as if she were floating in ether, weightless, with the dwarves holding her limbs, bending them, stretching them, opening her up to the inspection of their eyes and tongues. She scratched suddenly and reflexively beneath her right arm, and this triggered a vivid memory of a rough tongue scooping out the shaven cavity of her underarm. Of all the lovers she’d had, only Vincent had ever

done this. Was the dream a reminder that he was the man for her? And why had it seemed so vivid, so real? She slipped the silk strap of her camisole off her right shoulder and lifted her arm to inspect the tender cleft. That was when she saw the scratch marks.

Mina began to scream, and didn't calm until the sun came up.

## 4

At 6:53 that morning, four minutes after sunrise, a tremor shivered across the Verdugo fault just east of downtown L.A., and for a few moments, a crack opened between two worlds. The resulting magnitude 5.6 quake was strong enough to have crippled a third world metropolis, but L.A.'s battle-ready defenses took it in relative stride. Chimneys collapsed, a few poorly constructed roofs fell in, and an overpass near Dodgers Stadium, built in the 1930's, suffered some damage. There was only one reported death: a Glendale woman whose husband's bowling trophy tumbled off the high shelf and cracked her skull. A few more might come as the day wore on.

Vincent had awakened early that morning and was out for his run when it hit. The earthquake experience is different outside. The world goes momentarily out of register, as if seen through a shaky camera. Balance is lost for a few seconds, and takes time to recover. But these things might be provoked by an internal seizure as easily as by an external one. A stroke, a lesion on the brain. Only when he returned home and saw his CD collection on the living room floor did he know it had been a sizable temblor.

His plans for the day would remain in place. His first patient was not until two, so after his shower, he drove west on Pico Boulevard to the little wood frame structure that housed the C.G. Jung Institute and its library.

The call he'd gotten from Mina in the aftermath of the earthquake had given him added reason to find out if the granddaddy of depth psychology had written anything about little men in red caps. In 1959, two years before his death and at the height of the Cold War, Jung had published a book called *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen In the Skies*, in which he argued that the saucer sightings of the 50's were the modern-day equivalent of religious visions (or of the ancient Greeks actualizing their gods). The luminous discs might be projections from the collective unconscious. In any case, Jung expressed no doubt that the objects had actually been seen. Vincent knew that the same dream dreamed by two different women did not amount to a mass phenomenon, particularly since both women were connected to him, but it was worth examining.

The Institute's librarian was an elderly woman named Rose who had served as a secretary at the Eranos conferences Jung had hosted in Switzerland up to the time of his death. She wore hair like pink cotton candy up in a Danish twist and her eyes twinkled behind rhinestone-studded glasses. She was a link to the original wellspring of his craft, and Vincent was going to miss her when she was gone.

"Do you know," Vincent asked her after greetings, "if C.G. had anything to say about dwarves? Specifically in terms of dream symbolism. Little men in red caps with big libidos?"

"The Cabiri," she answered, without missing a beat. "The sons of Hephaestus, god of volcanoes and other chthonic phenomena."

"Greek?"

"Samothean, actually, but exported to Greece by the Pelasgians. They were miners, working the underground veins identified

by their father, but they were also the tutors of Orpheus and attendants at the birth of new gods. The obstetricians of Olympus.”

“This just gets better and better,” Vincent said.

“Why?”

“One of my patients has been dreaming of them. Erotic dreams.”

“Man or woman?” Rose asked.

“Woman.”

“Ah, well,” she said. “The earth has been shaking, you know.”

“Explain,” said Vincent, taking a seat on the little library’s sole upholstered bench.

“The mind is both more figurative and more literal than we imagine, Vincent. Have you noticed that when people say they are ‘looking forward’ to something, they almost invariably lean forward, and when trying to recall a past event, they lean back? A woman’s mind does not impose an interpretive screen on sensation. If she is treated coldly, she feels a chill. If the earth shakes, things are shaken within her. Stirred into consciousness.”

“But lascivious munchkins?”

“It’s an ancient archetype. Jung wrote that the Cabiri were the stirrings of the subconscious in its desire to break the surface of consciousness. The lower urges. The subterranean self. Why do you suppose the Brothers Grimm made their dwarfs miners, too? And the Snow White story, by the way, where the little men offer sanctuary to a beautiful but psychically threatened young woman and use their powers to ‘awaken her,’ exists in almost every European culture. In a Swiss version, the wicked stepmother figure explicitly accuses the girl of being sexually intimate with the dwarfs. All of them.”

“Is there anything in Jung’s journals to suggest it’s a powerful enough archetype that it could be reified by someone under extreme stress? Someone on the cusp of a psychotic break?”

“I’ll be happy to take a look,” she replied. “Hallucinations are certainly stress-induced, and what are earthquakes if not a huge buildup of stress? Has your patient had any waking episodes?”

“No. It sounds hypnagogic. Right on the edge of sleep. On the other hand, I’m seeing some evidence that it might be transpersonal. My girlfriend had the same dream. And I—”

Vincent left the sentence unfinished. The red cap he’d spotted at the reservoir had to have been coincidence and not synchronicity.

“Does your girlfriend know your patient?” she asked.

“No, but I did relate the dream. You’re thinking some sort of *folie a`deux*? I considered that, but I...no, I don’t think so.”

He stood up and walked to the shelves containing Jung’s published journals and redacted case files.

“Can you get me started?” he asked Rose. “I’ve got a couple hours to devote.”

“Of course,” she said, rising to a height just shy of five feet. “We’ll start you with ‘Ingrid M.’ 1919. She was an actress, too.”

Kasi was released from Cedars Sinai on Tuesday morning, and told to avoid strenuous activity, alcohol, and recreational drugs. She was to report back on Friday for an MRI scan, and a speed dial key on her cell phone had been set for her neurologist’s pager in the event she experienced any unusual episodes. The doctors were concerned about seizures, but since the tiny fracture in the back of her skull had,

quite unexpectedly, vanished in the latest x-rays, and because Kasi loathed hospitals and was vocal about it, they'd let her walk out.

Her plan had been to drive directly to her mother's house in Sherman Oaks and wait there for her seven year-old daughter's return from school. This, at any rate, was the intention of the new, healthier Kasi. But at her mother's house, she'd be subject to her mother's judgment and her daughter's silent reproach, and the more she thought about this, the more the new Kasi retreated into the safety of the old one. She stopped off at home to make herself a sandwich, and playing for time, thought that a glass of white wine might go nicely with it. It went so nicely that she had a second, and a third, and after that found herself searching through the shoeboxes on the shelves above her dress rack in the walk-in closet, her mouth twisted with a rage that she could not trace to any single cause.

There were shoes received as gifts (from Jack Flynn and others) and shoes purchased on impulse but never worn, and even a pair of princess shoes she'd meant to give to her daughter Holly for her fifth birthday but had forgotten about when she'd instead accepted Yemeni sheikh's invitation to fly to New York on his personal jet and lost track of three days in her life.

In an oversized Manolo Blahnik box, she found the gun.

Vincent turned right onto Pico Boulevard, heading west toward the ocean rather than east toward his office. His two o'clock had phoned in a cancellation. She was his last 'A' patient, and he couldn't help but wonder if the cancellation was a prelude to being dumped. With each regular patient lost went as much as twelve-thousand dollars in income, and a less quantifiable measure of self-respect. He

knew he shouldn't be surprised by their desertion. Hollywood people practiced magical thinking in the cultivation of both personal and professional relationships. Damaged individuals like Vincent became toxic and taboo, and could spread contagion by mere association. Actresses could not risk that kind of exposure.

He was driving, instinctively, toward the ocean, because the ocean cleared his head. It was, like the desert, an open field over which his thoughts could skitter and then be coalesced into something that approached understanding. Vincent needed this pause for thought before making the leap to conjecture that the similarity of Mina and Kasi's dreams, right down to the smallest detail, meant that some sort of viral hysteria was at play. No real scientist would draw such a conclusion from such scanty evidence.

And yet...

He'd meant to aim for the beach north of Santa Monica Pier, but found himself instead at Venice, having lost himself in thought. When it was hot in L.A., the size of the crowds on the Venice boardwalk increased by fifty percent, even on weekdays, and it took some time to find a parking place. Once he did, he wandered onto the broad concrete midway at a place just north of Muscle Beach and opposite a tattoo parlor that also sold faux transgressive t-shirts emblazoned with phrases like "Irredeemable Slut."

Almost immediately, he became aware of a certain electricity in the air. Not unusual during a Santa Ana. The winds messed with the ions and created static from skin to skin. But there was more to this. The crowds were moving faster but going nowhere, fanning out to the edges of the midway as they walked, like breath-heated atoms expanding a balloon. The tourists and freak show ogglers were there



in force, as usual, but there was an anxiousness about them and a palpable feeling of enmity. The freaks themselves, the lost, rudderless denizens of Venice, the tattooed, nipple pierced, void-eyed, diseased creatures of the beach, were given a wider than usual berth by the crowds, as if today, of all days, they were especially radioactive. For an instant, Vincent imagined himself to be one of them.

From the south, there approached a homeless man, a beach bum so filthy and hairy that there appeared to be vegetation sprouting from his scalp and shoulders. The sick-sweet odor of rot preceded him. He was wearing at least four layers of found clothing on a day when it was one hundred and three in the shade. He was carrying a handmade placard, and the placard read:

HAV YU SEEN THEM?

Vincent stopped twenty feet short and watched the man's approach. The inscription alone would not have caused his breath to catch. Venice Beach was home to hundreds of fractured personalities, released too soon to the streets by a state stingy with its resources and a medical establishment that had no room at the inn for these poor travelers. Each one of them carried his demons, alien abductors, and persecutors like the soiled knapsack he wore or the overloaded shopping cart he pushed. What caused Vincent to pull up short was the cap the man wore on his unwashed head: a bright red, brimless shepherd's cap of felt that came to a gentle point.

It was the *pileus*. The cap described by Kasi and Mina's dreams.

Vincent remained where he stood in the man's path, and when they were within six feet of each other, he hailed the man, gestured toward the placard, and asked, "Have I seen *who*?"

The man, his race and girth indeterminable beneath strata of caked dirt and mummified rags, was not accustomed to being directly addressed, and at first kept walking until his bearded chin and his rank odor were in Vincent's nose. At this point, when he could go no farther, he stopped, visibly agitated. It seemed to Vincent that he was walking "his line," the line he probably walked all day every day and that no one but him could see, and was used to having oncoming traffic give way. It was the sole benefit of being a pariah: no one wished to obstruct your path.

His mouth began to twitch. Like a cartoon version of Vincent's less drastically obsessive-compulsive patients, he had no idea what to do when his program was interrupted. He looked as if he might cry. Vincent gestured again to the sign and asked, "Who are *they*?"

It was likely the man had not spoken in some time, and he seemed to be trying to recall how to do it. Finally, seeing that Vincent was not going to make way, he mumbled:

"A-bee-wah."

"Abbey Wa?" Vincent asked.

The man gave a scowl. "Kah-Bi-Wah," he repeated.

Vincent let the phonemes percolate through his brain. Something about the final syllable. It had come from the back of the man's throat, like a French 'r'.

"*Parlez Francais?*" Vincent inquired.

"*Oui,*" the homeless man replied. "*Guadalupe.*"

At that moment, the syllables hit home and Vincent realized that the final "*wah*" had been the French "*roi*," and that what the man had just uttered might be a Caribbean twist on the Latin *kabeiroi*.

The Cabiri.

“Kabeiroi,” Vincent repeated, and pointed toward the red cap.  
“*Comme sa? Comme ton chapeau?*”

The homeless man began to laugh and hack, and as he did, his lungs and his rotted mouth released a vapor so noxious that Vincent finally had to step back. As he did, the man saw his opening, sidestepped him, and lumbered past, still laughing and hacking.

“Unbelievable,” Vincent said under his breath, and shuddered.

Over to the right, spilling from sand to pavement, was a mass of humanity forming a tribal drum circle, a staple of Venice culture since the sixties. The congas and bongos sounded more fervent than usual and the crowd surrounding the core of drummers and dancers at the center had grown large. Vincent was about to wander over when he heard a sharp cry from his left, some distance away but unmistakably human.

There was a narrow easement between two wood frame buildings, one a bar and the other a candy store. The passage was not wide enough to be called an alley, but wide enough to serve as a shortcut from the residential area to the boardwalk. Vincent stepped into the crack and was immediately masked from the post-meridian sun. His pupils, still contracted from the boardwalk brightness, adjusted slowly to the darkness. The path was littered with broken glass and beach detritus. After twenty feet, it doglegged left and opened into a small clearing where the backside of four buildings came to corners. The clearing was sparsely vegetated with salt grass and scrub, and on a denuded patch of soil in the far corner, he saw two large mammalian creatures in the act of fornicating.

His first thought was to back out immediately, but he did not. In the poor light, he couldn't at first make out their species, although

the posture--the arch of the tandem spines--and the rhythmic panting suggested very large dogs. There was a growl, deep and guttural, followed by a yelp like the one he'd first heard, and the hair on Vincent's neck bristled. *Coyotes?* No, far too large. *What else?* Something wild. For an instant he felt silly: a grown man watching animals fuck. But as his eyes acclimated to the sunless gray, he began to see the shoulders and head of the creature in saddle position as distinctly human. A man and a woman—she mounted from the rear, he stabbing furiously away within thirty feet of the boardwalk. Now Vincent was caught between embarrassment at having intruded on an intimate act and real concern that it was a rape in progress.

“Are you OK?” he called out, feeling that to do any less was negligent, but that more might be both rude and presumptuous.

A grunt. The thrusting slowed. A head turned. The man—it seemed a man—had matted hair beneath a cowl of some sort. The woman—perhaps—cast a glance back from the hollow beneath her partner's chest. Her head was shaven, her eyes doe-like. It was she who answered, “Get the fuck out of here, you twisted pervert!”

The voice might have belonged to a girl or to a boy. In any case, it telegraphed consent to whatever was being done to it, so Vincent backed away. On a whim, he called out, “Watch out for dwarfs!”

The response was a brief cessation, after which they resumed.

“So,” said Mina, dabbing the latte foam from her pretty mouth. “You caught two people having sex on a hot day behind a building on Venice Beach. That doesn't strike me as all that unusual, Vincent.”

“I guess you had to be there,” he said. “There was something really feral about it. The sounds they were making...”

"You've been known to make some pretty feral sounds yourself," she said. "Sex is always freaky when you're not doing it."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Like I said, you had to be there. Anyhow, thanks for making time for the coffee. What's on your docket this afternoon?"

They had met at the Starbucks in the Beverly Center, kitty-corner from the doctor's entrance to Cedars Sinai. Vincent had come to check in on Kasi, and had been very surprised to discover she'd been discharged earlier that day. Mina was on duty in the pediatric unit, so he'd stopped in to ask her for coffee.

"I'm observing surgery on one of my kids," she replied. "A very rare condition. He has two hearts. Or...I should say, one and a half hearts. One is more or less fully developed and is doing the work of keeping him alive, but the second one is a kind of dwarf organ and causing all sorts of problems. So they're going to try and remove it, but it's tricky, because they're joined like Siamese twins."

"Jesus," he said. "How often do you see that?"

"Once in a blue moon. The surgery will take hours. So what happened to your patient? You said she was discharged."

"Yes, and I'm really surprised they didn't consult me."

"Are you?" Mina said, absently.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You seem distant."

"I'm all right," she said. "But we need to talk."

"Uh-oh. All right. When? Dinner?"

"Not tonight, Vincent. I'll be trashed after this surgery. I'll call you, okay?" She finished the latte and stood up. "I'd better get back. Thanks for the coffee."

"My pleasure," said Vincent. "Why don't you call me when you

get home. I'd like to hear some more about that dream."

"I will...if I'm up to it." She leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "The crazy thing is...I'm not sure it was a dream."

## 5

Kasi arrived at Jack Flynn's place at 3:28 PM that afternoon. He buzzed her in through the security gate after expressing surprise about the unannounced visit. The handgun was deep in her handbag, beneath a rolled up pair of pantyhose and a mustard color scarf she wore when it was windy or wanted to look like a movie star pretending anonymity. There was nothing in her head that resembled a coherent plan for the gun's use, and yet its weight in her bag gave her a deep and melodramatic sense of purpose. She was tipsy and reckless from the wine. White wine in the daytime did this to her. The sugar, maybe. She felt as brittle as spun candy.

"Hello, kitty," Jack said from his threshold. He was shirtless and wearing khaki dockers. "They sprung you pretty fast. What did the doctors say?"

"That you cracked my skull," she replied, slipping by him.

"Maybe you're not as hard-headed as I thought you were," he said. "Why'd they let you out?"

"The x-rays from this morning were clean. The doctor said he'd never seen a fracture heal that quickly. Kind of a miracle, I guess...and good news for you, too, huh, tough guy?"

"The good news is that you're intact, baby. Would you like a cup of mint tea. Fresh mint from the, uh, herb garden."

"Why not?" she replied, and strode past him into the house.

Kasi set the handbag down on the floor beside the bar, where he'd be less likely to pick it up. Then she walked over to the big, double-paned glass patio doors and pressed the pads of her fingers against the very place where her skull had split. Years before, in a slump not long after arriving in Los Angeles, she'd been talked into taking the basic Dianetics course offered by the Church of Scientology. Most of what they'd shoveled her she'd long since left behind, but one habit remained. Scientologists believed that there was a kind of ongoing psychic current between an injured person and the object responsible for her pain, and that if not "grounded," it could continue to exert negative influence. Therefore, if you bumped your head on an overhanging shelf, you were to turn around and "do a contact" with the shelf by touching it and thus neutralizing its power.

She had been taught that it was a kind of homeopathy: the thing that hurts you can also heal you, and this made sense to her in some primitive, intuitive way, so she needed to touch the window, and maybe this was also why she needed to touch Jack. Still, she bristled when he came behind her and curled his fingers around her arms.

"Was that a shiver?" he whispered. "Nice to see I still give you goose pimples."

"I'm supposed to avoid strenuous activity, Jack."

"Well, then, relax and let me do the exercise."

She turned to face him and did a little tango step to get clear of the glass, then planted her palm in the center of his chest and gave a little push. "This is it, Jack. After this, I won't see you again."

"Oh, goodie. Nasty break-up sex."



"You're such a prick," she said. "You don't even care. You can pick up the phone and have another one like me here in an hour."

"Oh, I care, Kasi. You're special. That little beauty mark just above your pretty mouth. The cat's eyes. The way your tongue slips into my ass. It's just that I get a monthly inoculation against attachment of any kind. It's my own sort of twelve-step program."

"Oh, yeah. Maybe I should sign up."

"No girls allowed. See, uh, you're the disease."

He took her hand from his sternum and began to kiss her fingertips. For a moment she let him, fascinated and disgusted by her own weakness. Then she tore herself away and headed for her handbag, having decided that if she got out now she could escape without doing irreparable harm.

"I called a lawyer," she said. "You'll be hearing from him. I know you'll do the right thing by me. Battery is a serious charge."

"Don't make me laugh, Kasi. You blew any credibility you might've had when you did that naughty web spread. You're a classic vampire. A jury would take a dog's word before it would take yours."

"Go get a dog to lick your ass, then," she said, bending over to pick up the handbag, giving him just enough bait. In three seconds his mass was on her and the yellow Lycra skirt was up over her hips. He took her to her knees, laid his head between her shoulder blades, pressed her cheek against the cool, black ebony finish on the side of the bar. He was hard as a nightstick when he entered her. Jack was always hard. Some exotic cocktail of rhino horn and Viagra he sprinkled on his Wheaties. And she was always ready, no matter how shitty he'd been to her, and that made her sick, and the whole time he

was fucking her, even when the spasm shook her body, she had her right hand thrust inside the handbag and her fingers wrapped around the gun grip, and she waited until he was ready, and until she had turned over and let him back inside for the finish, to put the muzzle against the hairless crown of his big, soft head and say,

“C’mon, Jack, you motherfucker. Spit. Spit in me. Give it to me one more time before I kill you.”

“What the fuck?” he said, pulling out of her. “No way. You don’t deserve it. Go ahead and shoot.”

She wanted so badly to pull the trigger, but didn’t.

It was almost ridiculously easy for him to get the gun from her. The movies made it look so natural to pull a trigger, but it wasn’t at all natural, because no matter how crazed you are, something in you knows that the world will become a very small place if you do. He was still hard when he stood up. He placed his foot on her chest to keep her from moving, and took a moment to admire the gun before aiming it at her heart. Just then, nothing would have pleased her more than for him to shoot. She could already feel herself floating away.

Instead, he took the gun in his other hand and brought the grip down hard on the Tiffany crystal bowl he kept on the bar, the one filled with hard candies and lollipops. The big, leaded shards went flying along with the candies, some landing on her belly and at her side. Keeping the weight of his foot on her breast, he stooped to pick up a jagged piece in the shape of a star. With a laugh she thought sure was a prelude to her own horrible disfigurement, he set the gun on the bar, took hold of the loose foreskin only now beginning to sheath over the head of his uncircumcised penis, and sawed into it

with the rough edge of the star-shaped fragment. He did this without screaming, and when the last thread of skin had yielded to the knife and her yellow dress was already soaked with blood, he tossed the foreskin onto her chest and said,

“Just that much skin, baby, between beauty and the beast.”

## 6

Vincent's four o' clock, one of his few male patients, did show up. The man, an estimator for Paramount Pictures, suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder and was unable to complete even the simplest task unless he accomplished it in precisely the amount of time he'd allotted. If the work proved more or less time-consuming than expected, he suffered severe panic attacks, and had to start all over again. As a consequence, he'd lost both his wife and his hair.

Today, the man—his name was Teddy—was especially fretful, but Vincent was preoccupied and only half-listened to the usual recital of minutiae that filled and commanded poor Teddy's mind. At one point, he did find himself wondering how the same genome responsible for Leonardo Da Vinci could possibly have created a man whose day could be ruined by turning in a cost report in which he'd inadvertently failed to put the grand total in boldface. Then Vincent answered his own question: the great are no less obsessive; they're simply able to discriminate between grand and petty obsessions. For Teddy, all obsessions were created equal.

Vincent wasn't sure where the matters on his own mind would fall on such a scale. One of them—the certainty that his woman was emotionally involved with another man—was as old as the race. The ancestral engine of a man's sexual jealousy was the fear that he'd be

stuck with parenting a child that was not of his own seed, or of the seed of a different tribe, for such children become father-killers. In the primal days of sperm competition, this dread must have been ever-present, deep enough to leave a scar on the collective psyche. Now, in the modern world, with all things less authentic and most fears just pale shadows of the original fear, the horror of false paternity had been displaced by the more quotidian fear that another man's cock had displaced yours, that another man's jism had mixed with yours, that your woman had opened the door for a stranger.

The second matter on Vincent's mind was weightier, if weight was measured by a thing's impact on the world outside of oneself. Something was happening out there. He wasn't ready to say *what* or *why* it was, but he knew it was. The gap between his certainty and the reportable evidence made him feel like a man in the grip of a religious vision, and that wasn't a comfortable place for a rational man to be. He knew that if he told another psychiatrist of his feelings, they'd suggest he might be flirting with a psychotic break. Yet he was considering just that. On his desk pad he'd written the number of his old professor and doctoral advisor at UCLA, and planned to call that number when his session was over.

At 5:03, Vincent found himself alone in the office, with only the foggiest memory of having seen his patient out the door. His office was in a single story unit at the corner of Larchmont and Beverly Boulevards that shared an open court with those of a dentist, a podiatrist, and a spiritual advisor. On most days, Vincent left the courtyard door (which led into a small waiting room outside the office) open between appointments, so that the air and sunlight could flow in from outside. And so, he was surprised but not confounded

when he looked up at the sound of rustling fabric and saw that Susan Coyle had slipped in and was standing at his threshold.

“Susan,” he said quietly. “This is a surprise...”

“It’s a surprise to me, too, Dr. Beck. I was driving, and I—I dunno. Force of habit, maybe.”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea, Susan. Your claim is still--”

“I know. I really screwed things up for you. That’s partly why I’m...why I wanted to...it was like the steering wheel had a mind of its own. Does that ever happen to you?”

He got up from the desk and walked to where she stood.

“Why don’t we sit out here...in the waiting room. I don’t think I’m in violation of the order there. It’s a public space.”

He motioned her toward a loveseat upholstered in lime green linen. She sat and crossed her legs. He noticed that she crossed the right over the left without a thought. She wore a denim skirt with a hem four inches above the knee, and seemed entirely comfortable with the display of skin. As his patient, she’d worn jeans or slacks, as if to say that no one wanted to see a legless woman in a skirt.

He sat in the armchair opposite her. “How’s your leg?”

“It’s amazing what they can do with prosthetics these days, isn’t it?” she answered, and then laughed. “It’s fine. It’s been fine ever since you...ever since that day. You cured me, Dr. Beck. Only then, I didn’t want to be cured. I wanted to feel like I was desirable even as a gimp. Even as a freak. And I was...to you. Only that made me angry, and then I... God, I was so fucked up. I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Susan, so you don’t need to apologize. Both the law and the code of medical ethics are clear on that. I broke the rules. I answered for it. That’s why the rules are there.”

“Oh, you mean because I was the vulnerable patient and you were the all-powerful doctor? That’s such PC bullshit. I wanted it to happen from, like, the first session, Dr. Beck. I seduced you.”

“Doesn’t matter, Susan. I let myself be seduced.”

“Well, anyhow, I wanted you to know that I’m sorry for all the pain I caused. No man should suffer for making a woman happy.”

Vincent laughed. “Now that’s a quote for the ages.”

“And there’s something else. Another reason I wanted to see you. Actually, two reasons.”

“I can’t see you as a patient.”

“Can you see me as a friend?”

With a reflexive raising of the eyebrows, Vincent turned away and rested his chin on his fist. His own anger hadn’t yet cooled. At the same time, he found himself aroused by her presence, her scent, and by her contrition, and saw where things could go.

“Why don’t you give me an idea of what’s on your mind, let me think about it, and call you. We can do a phone consultation.”

She uncrossed her legs, then re-crossed them opposite way and began to push her fingers forcefully through her luxuriant light brown hair, a self-caress that Vincent had long associated with women who wanted to be wanted. “I live alone,” she said. “I kicked the last man out two years ago. But I’ve had...visitors. You see, I’ve had these visitors and I want to know how to make them go away... but then I’m not sure I want them to go away...and mostly I want to know that I’m not going crazy again because I can’t afford to be.”

“You can’t afford to be crazy?”

“Not at three-hundred dollars and hour. And not with my career finally on the rebound.”

"Fair enough," he said. "Who are the visitors?"

"You're not going to believe me," she said.

"Try me."

"Well, for one, little tiny men."

Vincent drew a deep breath.

"In your dreams?" he asked.

"In my dreams...and in other places."

"Describe them to me. How tiny?"

"Like the size of a newborn baby. But old. Kind of like Benjamin Button. Maybe not that old. Like Rumpelstiltskin. Wrinkly. But then I guess newborn babies are wrinkly, too."

"Go on. Are they dressed? Clothed?"

"Yeah. Some kind of smocks or tunics. And little red caps."

"Are they friendly?"

"*Very* friendly," she said. "But also kind of nasty. They push each other out of the way like puppies at a food dish. Selfish."

"Out of the way of what?" Vincent asked, though he knew.

"Of me."

"So these are erotic dreams?"

"I'll say. But they're more than dreams. They're incredibly real. They come when I'm just falling asleep or just waking up. That's weird enough. What's got me really freaked is that the other day I was washing a dish and I saw one of them scamper across the kitchen floor from the corner of my eye. I read that one sign of a psychotic break is when dream images stay around when you're awake."

"Out of the corner of your eye? You've never seen them straight on? At least not when you were fully conscious?"

"No. I don't even really see them 'straight on' in my dreams."



“That’s interesting. I’d say you only *really* need to worry if you look straight at the dwarf and the dwarf looks straight back at you.”

“Why?”

“Because then it evidences a separate consciousness. So either you’ve displaced a portion of the self...*your* self...in an imaginary object, which might be one indication of a break, or—“

“Or what, Doctor Beck?”

“Or there really is a tiny man on your kitchen floor.”

She laughed through her distress and shook her hair into her face, as if aware of the camera. That was something actresses did, and something Vincent found neurotic but irresistibly cute. The image of Susan Coyle, prone on the loveseat, skirt up, legs apart and high heels resting on the floor on either side of it entered his mind.

“Tell me: which one would be worse?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered. “But I’m going to let you in on something. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t do this, but something is going on and I want you to know that you’re not losing your mind.”

“That would be nice.”

“You are not the only one having these dreams. Seeing these creatures. Your description matches at least two others.”

Her jaw went visibly slack.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “What the fuck does *that* mean?”

Now *he* laughed through the tension.

“I wish I knew, Susan. There *are* such things as mass hallucinations. A good example of them are what they call ‘ABC’s.’ Alien Big Cats. People in suburban developments report seeing panther-like animals in back yards and parking lots. The police are called. The local media pick up on it. And once the story attains a certain

'legitimacy,' it's as if other people feel 'permitted' to see them, too. As if they were there all along on the other side of a door we normally keep closed. That's why I asked whether you'd seen these little guys head-on. Shamans talk about how you can see the other world from the corners of your eyes."

"But I didn't know until you told me that there were others...so, how would I 'catch' this thing...this mass hallucination?"

"That's the million dollar question, Susan. How this is being induced. A few isolated cases aren't enough to call it collective hysteria. The APA would cite too many ordinary things that could account for the shared experience."

"Like what things?"

"Well, for example, we all see the same movies and the same television commercials. You know, the animators at Disney put one-frame shots of a naked Princess Jasmine into the video release of 'Aladdin'...a twenty-fourth of a second is way too fast to enter consciousness, but they had pre-adolescent boys in a lather about it."

"So you're saying this could be some kind of 'implant'? Like a subliminal message to the women of L.A.?"

"It's possible. But I doubt it," he replied.

"Why do you doubt it?"

"Because I've seen them, too."

"Ah-ha," she observed. "So they're bi-sexual horny dwarfs."

"They haven't hit on me yet," he said. "What I've seen is much more transitory...evanescent. Flashes and blurs. But enough that when I hear others describe them, it seems familiar. So I'll tell you what, Susan. I want you to keep a journal. Write down dates, times,

locations, and circumstances. As much detail as you can recall. If the vision comes, let yourself go all the way into it, knowing that you're not going to fall down to rabbit hole. And let's talk in a week."

Vincent stood, feeling he needed to end the conversation now. She did likewise and smoothed her skirt. He moved toward the door to show her out, and she raised her palm.

"Wait," she said, clearing her throat. "There's something else."

He turned to her, and saw that her hand was shaking.

"Something not as...crazy. But scarier. I live, you know, in Brentwood. On Bundy, right near where the O.J. murder happened. It's an eight unit building with an open garage underneath, so after I park I have to walk out and up the stairs to the entrance."

"Okay. Go on."

"Well, three times—at least three—in the last two weeks there's been this bag lady there. At least I think it's a lady. Wrapped in I don't know how many layers of smelly rags, so you can't really be sure. She whistles 'Strangers In The Night,' and when she walks, she drags her right leg as if she were lame. She waits for me, I know it."

"What makes you sure she's waiting? Maybe she just likes the neighborhood."

"Because the last time I saw her, she said my name. She said, 'Susan' in this soft high voice, and then she took out a pair of scissors and made like she was cutting a cord or something."

"Did you call the police?"

"Yeah. They said they'd cruise Bundy for a few nights and try to scare her away. They said there's been a problem with homeless people ever since they drove them out of Santa Monica."

"And has she been back since?"

“No,” she said. “But I know something’s wrong.”

“Well,” Vincent said. “Trust your instincts.”

He knew immediately that it had sounded cold.

In what pretended to be an involuntary gesture, she pulled her shoulders back to highlight her beautifully doctored breasts, and he glimpsed the nipples through the open weave of her pink top.

“Goodbye, Susan,” he said, extending his hand.

“Goodbye, Doctor Beck,” she said, clasping it firmly. “Thanks for the reassurance. And thanks for seeing me. *A bientot.*”

## 7

On Monday evening at 7:53, after six hours in surgery, the boy with the Siamese heart died on the operating table. He had gone into shock as they were closing him up after having successfully removed the dwarf organ, and then, like a street of small shops on the edge of evening, his systems began to shut down one by one and nothing a team of fourteen world-class medical minds could do would stop it.

Afterwards, Mina stood staring numbly at the tiny mutant organ, sitting in a pool of watery blood in the surgical tray. It was broken, she thought, like the hearts of lovelorn cartoon characters. The outer edge was softly rounded, almost bulbous, but the inner edge—the side that had attached itself parasitically to the boy's working heart—had the contour of a human profile. A face. An old man's fallen face, so much like that of an infant. Mina shuddered and felt a coldness in her own breast, because she was stricken by the loss of the boy, because the face in the little heart terrified her, and because she feared that seeing the fractal forms of dream images in the shape of an ordinary object meant that she was going nuts.

She stood there, motionless, for five or ten minutes. Nobody bothered her. Surgical teams understand the attachment doctors sometimes develop in spite of themselves. But after a time, one of the nurses put her hands gently on Mina's shoulders and steered her toward wash-up. Another patient was coming in.

Mina cried for fifteen minutes in the parking structure. Just as she was finally about to pull out, her pager beeped. She fished it out of her handbag and checked the number, expecting Vincent. It was the free clinic. Her pulse began to race for reasons that she did not want to admit even to herself. She had just lost a patient. She was grieving. Only a bad person would think about sex and strange flesh at a time like this. And it wouldn't be Dr. Pappas anyway.

She called the clinic and was told that the pediatrician normally on duty Monday night had called in with the flu. Could Mina take the shift in exchange for a Wednesday? Mina said yes, even though she was utterly exhausted, because she could not say no, and then, just before hanging up, she asked:

“Who else is on tonight?”

“Dr. Weiner, Dr. Pak, and Dr. Pappas,” said the nurse receptionist. “The A-Team.”

Kasi wandered Mulholland Drive like a vagabond, all the way to Benedict Canyon, Jack Flynn's blood on her yellow dress and Jack Flynn's semen running down her thighs. It was hot, so hot, but her skin was like ice. She was not even sure she had a pulse, and was afraid to feel for one.

Her car was back at the gates, where it had run out of gas within a minute of starting. She never bothered to look at the gas gauge unless she was passing by a gas station, and even then she sometimes took a gamble that she could get home on fumes.

She had come to one of those places in life where everything changes, usually for the worse. She was a failed actress, a failed mother, a failed daughter, and everything she'd ever dreamed of was

now irretrievably out of reach. It was a good time to get off the wheel of pain if she wanted to. Too bad that a leap into the canyon chaparral would probably do no more than sprain her ankle. Too bad that failed actresses no longer jumped to their deaths from the letters of the HOLLYWOOD sign. Too bad Jack had her gun.

After mutilating himself, Jack had gone into something she had assumed was shock. She'd wrapped ice cubes in a washcloth and ministered to his wound until the bleeding slowed, and she had called his personal and highly discrete physician, Doctor Al. Then he had roared at her to get out, and threatened her with her own gun. One way or another, she and Jack were over, and since she had come for that result, she ought to have felt some closure. The sick thing was that all she really wanted to do was go back, and that's why she kept walking: to get enough escape velocity that return would not be an option. Other than this, she had no plans and no destination.

A sleek Ferrari shot by, ruffling her skirt, followed shortly by a Lincoln with darkly tinted windows. Nobody was going to stop. A pretty woman stumbling down Mulholland with blood on her dress and whorish make-up on her tear-reddened eyes was as taboo as anything got in Los Angeles. Anyone who did stop would catch her disease, an affliction Hollywood feared even more than AIDS. Kasi bore the virus of failure like a sacrificial goat sent into the wilderness.

She heard the ambulance siren start up and echo off the big houses perched atop the scrubby summits on either side of the road. She heard it diminish as the driver made what must have been a turn down Laurel Canyon Boulevard en route to Cedars Sinai. Wouldn't it be funny if they put him in the same room. She looked up and saw a beautiful copper-haired young girl on a balcony in a bikini, and

suddenly all she wanted was to be with her daughter, or to be her daughter's age again, or in some way to fold herself into her. After another quarter mile, Kasi had indulged all the morose reflection on the state of her life she could stand, and called her mother to beg a ride, saying only that she'd run out of gas. She sat down on a roadside bench, and after crying a bit more, she also called Dr. Beck.

"Do you want me to pick you up?" Vincent asked.

"No. My mother is coming," Kasi replied.

"That's good."

"Actually, it's not, but I know what you mean."

"You said you were cold. It's a hundred and three degrees out there, so you could be in mild shock. You've had a concussion, too. I want you to call me as soon as you get to your mom's, okay?"

"Okay."

"And I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay, Dr. Beck. I'll see you."

"And Kasi—"

"Yes, Dr. Beck?"

"Getting free isn't supposed to be easy. But it isn't impossible either. Hang in. There's a *you* out there that's all the things you were meant to be before anybody told you different. It's waiting for you to move into, like a new house, but you don't get the keys until you've moved out of the old one."

"I think it's gonna be a fixer-upper," she said, with a sad laugh.

Evening came to Los Angeles without offering relief, a dimming of the light but not of the heat. Vincent had laid down for a late afternoon siesta on his client couch and awakened at twilight with



sweat on his brow and the odd feeling of half-thereness that comes with sleeping in the afternoon. He remembered speaking to Kasi, and seeing Susan Coyle, but as if these things had occurred on another day, and perhaps to another person. This made him feel so ill at ease that he closed his eyes again, hoping that if he allowed his brain to complete its sleep cycle, he'd awaken in a world he recognized.

This wasn't to happen. Although he fell quickly back into a borderline sleep state, the uncanny silence in the open courtyard kept him semi-vigilant. The birds of the California night, usually animated at this time, were mute. There was no wind, and therefore no tinkling of Larchmont Village's ubiquitous wind chimes. The air was laden with jasmine, but the scent had a spoiled, overripe quality.

Five minutes later, just as the hand of sleep had begun to cool his brow, the earthquake came. It began with a strident thump far below the surface, then shimmied up the fault line. The solid oak beams in the ceiling above Vincent's head bowed as if made of soft rubber. The roof itself appeared to shift, and a bookshelf holding three hundred pounds of reference books came crashing down, missing the couch by inches. Vincent sat bolt upright, but he did not move and did not breathe, because sitting five feet away in the armchair he occupied during sessions was a very small man in a leather tunic and a red cap. His face, gnarled and tumescent, seemed as vegetal as it was human. His fingernails were caked with soil.

"Careful what you wish for, fool," said the little man.

"I didn't wish for you," said Vincent.

"In a way, you did," said the dwarf. "I can take you to the other side. I can even show you what it's like to be a woman, hee-hee."

“If you know my mind so well,” said Vincent, “then I must have projected you.”

“Of course you did,” said the visitor. “But that doesn’t mean what you think it means. I’m not some figment. *J’exist*. Pinch me.”

“You came with the quake, didn’t you?”

“The curtains have to open before the show can begin.”

“You come through the cracks?”

“The cracks are how the light gets it.”

“Well, are you going to enlighten me?” Vincent asked, growing impatient because he could not seem to escape his dream state.

“First the dark, then the light,” said the gnome. “Follow me.”

The creature propelled himself from the chair, dove down into the space beneath Vincent’s big mahogany desk, which had been a bequest of his father, and disappeared. Vincent swung his legs off the couch, rubbed his eyes, and went to the desk, crouching down for a look. The little alcove beneath the desk had been a favorite play place when he was little. The cave of mysteries, he’d called it: the entrance to his father’s world of Cuban cigars and women with scarlet lips. Years later, after he’d inherited it and placed it in his first office, a girlfriend had crawled into the space and fellated him while he sat working on a case file. So it was still a cave of mysteries.

The dwarf had vanished, but the alcove was no longer an alcove. It was an underworld entrance, an oversized mole hole threaded with gnarled roots and smelling of damp soil. Vincent sat back on the floor and waited for it to disappear along with his strange, hypnapompic state. At least now, he had some sense of the causal factors behind his patients’ visions, albeit no understanding of the bio-chemistry.

The visitations came on the edge of waking and in the aftermath of seismic activity. Could the trigger be electro-magnetic? Were hallucinogenic “vapors” of some sort released when the earth shook and opened fissures? Wasn’t that what some thought had occurred in the ancient initiatory temple at Eleusis? Hadn’t studies of Toltec shamanism shown that the same psychoactive plants, when ingested by people with a shared culture, produced the same visions? Could Los Angeles be experiencing an electrochemically induced eruption from its kinky collective unconscious? And if so, why now?

But the tunnel did not disappear, and so Vincent was left with possibilities he did not wish to consider.

He got up, walked to the window, and gathered the California twilight into his brain. The sounds of the post-quake world came back to him. There were car alarms going off everywhere, sirens in the street, and he noticed that the power in the Hancock Park neighborhood just one block west was out. It had been a good-sized earthquake. Not devastating, but maybe as high as 5.0.

The hole in the earth was still there when he returned to the desk, but it was beginning to fade, and he could see the pillar and wheels of his desk chair through the black soil. He reached in, scraped his fingernails over the earthen walls, and brought them back dirty. Two worlds were interleaved, right before his eyes. In which world would he find himself if he crawled through? Would he come out on the other side of his desk, or wind up like Gulliver among the Lilliputians? The tunnel faded more, and Vincent decided without forethought that he had to explore before it was gone.

He crawled in.