

“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”

– Aristotle

YEAR 4.00

It all started with a trip to Bolinas. Irma had invited him out to spend a few days. She'd even arranged a ride. The driver was Grendel. Or Gretel. Hungarian she said. Or Czech, her thick accent convincing, blond showing dark at the roots, in her late forties, good looking in a world weary sort of way, but much too animated for him, even after a second latte. She'd never been to Bolinas before but the map showed Hwy 1 up the coast as the way to go. What did he know? Except that Irma had taken a different route, by way of Fairfax, the last time he'd been out, saying something to the effect that no one in their right mind took the scenic drive.

The car, a filthy green rust bucket, sagged at the right rear like it had been in a dog fight and lost. It belonged to an acquaintance of Gretel Grendel's who was letting her borrow it for the day. She'd claimed to have driven everywhere in Budapest. Or Prague, from whence she had flown several weeks earlier, on a whim, quit her job, withdrawn all her savings, to fly to San Francisco, and now had to get to Bolinas to meet up with a friend of an old friend who might help her out because her purse had been stolen so she was broke and desperate, all of which she'd related with the air of maniacal optimism.

There'd obviously been no traffic when she drove the streets of Budapest, or Prague, because she seemed intent on hitting the multitude of fenders and obstructions that confounded her attempts to steer in a straight line. He applied the phantom brake so often that he'd ended up with a cramp in his good leg.

Maybe in Eastern Europe you can drive and sightsee at the same time, but on the West Coast the drivers are very serious about getting to where they are going and one did not slow to a crawl to marvel at the fact that they were crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. Not to mention that he'd felt like he was on a guided tour. *Of her life!* That made her all the more erratic of a driver because at times the vehemence of her account required that she remove both hands from the steering wheel.

He felt relieved when they'd left the freeway and joined a slow moving stream of traffic taking the twisty climb up the wooded hillside, and relaxed a little, trying to wrap his head around whatever possessed him to accept Irma's

offer. Things were not that bad, or as bad as she'd heard. But by the time Grendel Gretel became uncontrollably excited at catching flashes of the sparkling blue Pacific on the horizon and they'd entered the switchback curves descending into Stinson Beach, he began worrying again and, pretty soon, fearing for his life.

More than once he thought they were going to fly off the cliff onto the rocks and crashing surf below which might have also suddenly occurred to Gretel Grendel by the way she'd gripped the steering wheel. He had suggested that she "use the brakes!" at the top of his lungs just to make sure she heard him and fully appreciated the extent of his panic. Fortunately she was open to suggestion and they made it safely to Irma's where he had to be pried out of the passenger's seat.

Now, several days later, he was hitchhiking on the shoulder of Hwy 128 outside of Cloverdale, a small burg in Northern California, putting his life in the hands of strangers again. In a silver grey sharkskin suit over a lime green Banlon polo shirt, he was, however, no one's idea of the tin man. He'd been forced to quit smoking, and that made him even more of a son of a bitch.

A logging truck lumbered by. From where he was standing on the dusty pullout at the side of the two-lane country highway, he could see the yellowing hillside and its dark green crown of live oaks. Behind it he imagined the main drag where he'd stepped off the bus. He was heading west, to Elk, and getting there wasn't going to be easy.

The county transit driver had been helpful. "You can't get there from here, not with public transportation." He'd just missed his connection with the MTA up to Ukiah, a place he'd heard about only because backwards it spelled *haiku*. And he was handed a printed schedule that told him that the next bus through was in about four hours. "Or you can do what just about everyone else does, hitch a ride."

He'd slogged north along the boulevard with the understanding from the driver that it was a walk, meaning a distance. The early May sun had heated up midmorning just enough to make him sweat. His left leg, broken in two places and held together with pins, had yet to be put to an extreme test, and he'd lost his cane, somewhere, in his travels. By the time he got to the Burger Ranch Drive-in, a landmark the bus driver said would be near his destination, the tingling in his toes told him that his foot was about to go numb. He'd stopped to rest at one of the outdoor picnic tables, dropping his shoulder bag

carefully to the ground between his grey dress shoes, loafers actually, not exactly made for walking distances.

Angela had given him the old leather laptop bag when they'd finally packed up the house on Balboa, a year ago now. It held, among other things, his iPad, the iPhone he regularly kept forgetting to charge and presently dead, or unconscious, a copy of Ian Blake's recently published *Ode To Sunset*, the medical encyclopedia's printout of the symptoms to his still not completely diagnosed condition, and two amber plastic bottles of his medication, only one of them being for pain.

The pill was finally kicking in and a warm buzz blocked the throb of ache in his shinbone. Cars whizzed by like he was part of the scenery. He was beginning to feel like part of the scenery, a silver milepost, flashing a thumb at approaching vehicles. No one even slowed down, a few drivers giving him the curious onceover.

He was stressed enough to think that he could really use a cigarette. To be encased in the fuzzy cocoon of the pain killer and chill with a nicotine stick. Yeah. But the doctor had told him, "You're at the edge of emphysema. Keep it up and your lungs will be useless." That had been the second doctor, no, there was a doctor before that, the third doctor he'd seen after leaving the hospital. Six months previous, give or take a few weeks.

He watched the tall figure scoot across to his side of the highway and approach at a youthful trot. He made out a young man with a mass of dreds and sparse beard, small backpack slung over one shoulder. The youngster seemingly in a hurry passed with a nod. "Been here long?"

He shrugged. "Probably not. Just feels like it." He hoped he didn't sound too stoned.

"Cool," was the response, and continuing down the road a couple hundred feet, the kid stopped and faced the oncoming traffic, hitching, too.

He'd never imagined he'd be thumbing rides again, *au pous* as the French would have it. He'd done a bunch of that after his second year at IU. He was attending a summer program at the university in Pau, ostensibly to learn French. That summer turned into six months of bumming around Spain and southern France, not officially dropping out, but a serious consideration. He'd fallen in with some friends from the university and one day, out of boredom and excess energy, they ended up taking a trip to Palma. That was where he met Sheila. It seemed fated, he'd been planning to visit Majorca anyway.

Then, as now, his survival depended on his selfishness. That hadn't changed. He was on the island to breathe air in the same space that Robert Graves once had. He was broke again and the cash infusion, after a desperate call to Indianapolis, was slow to arrive.

He'd hooked up with Sheila at a hotel bar in Palma. She was there with a group of minor literati led by the puckish Brit, Adam Sanders, painter among poets. The way she'd looked at him from across the packed hotel bar was an invitation to come talk to her.

Someone in the group had procured some Turkish heroin. They were all going to go up to the room, discreetly in ones and twos, and get high. Sanders and the guy with the stuff went first.

He knew that if she followed and got stoned, he would lose a temporary lifeline. Temporary, until he got the money wire, long enough not to be evicted, and someone whose generosity he could count on. They were the last of the set at the table mainly because much of what had been going on had not reached into the depth of their conversation.

He'd leaned forward and kissed her, a little awkwardly, not that it was unanticipated. "I have a better idea," he'd said.

"Let's go up to my room," she'd said.

A pickup truck angled off the road behind him and raised a large plume of dirty beige dust. He turned to watch as it braked to a stop. The kid loped toward the vehicle, an older model, battered cab, pipe frame and mesh protecting the rear window, modified flatbed, utility box bolted across the rear of the cab and attached to it by a long chain, a large, tawny brown mastiff. The passenger door swung open and an arm waved and beckoned. He started walking toward the pickup, the discomfort of his leg hobbling him.

The youngster paused with his foot on the step-up to the raised cab nodding in assent and then turned to say, "Sorry, man, no more room in the cab."

A head, a teenage girl's, peeked from the cab. "Sorry. Unless you want to ride in the back with Lupus."

The dog's lowered head, bared teeth, and alert posture was not very welcoming.

"Ok, no problem."

One of the stickers on the square pipe that served as rear bumper caught his eye. He'd seen it before. *Question Authority*. The truck left a cloud of dust in its wake.

It might be productive, he mused, if more intelligent and thoughtful people questioned authority, but it's likely to be some dumbass and his equally dumbass girlfriend, and their dumbass friends, otherwise known as The Stupid Revolution. That was the extent of his disappointment.

He knew hitching was often the luck of the draw. You were either stuck in the middle of nowhere for hours or first ride, best ride, straight to your destination. Like poetry, random, each poem its own proving ground, its own diversion, its unique ride. *"Sometimes you get it right the first time and then spend the rest of your life proving it to yourself."* He couldn't remember who'd said that, not that he was all that intent on playing *Author!Author!*

The time his car spun out in a snow bank on his way home for winter break. The snowfall had turned into an ice storm, jackknifing semis on the Interstate. He'd ended up hitching from Bloomington to Indianapolis in the middle of a blizzard. No one would stop and he was frozen stiff like he'd been bitten by an ice snake. Hitchhiking into the past. "Tangled up in blue how truly alone are you." He was making some of it up. That shadow is my shape where I used to stand.

Bright sun hid behind a pile of cumulus momentarily, the clouds separating and joining much as ice flows in the Arctic Sea, light leaking along edges, the meandering masses of white separating and reforming on a vast field of blue. At my age, he thought, I should look at loneliness and acknowledge it instead of denying. Look back to the past. Can it offer any reassurance that I will not be forever alone? This was years in the making. What if anything had changed?

"Lousy poet."

That was all he remembered before the pain took over. That and "She's my wife." He couldn't help wondering if it was literary criticism or just a prejudice against poets.

Wendy crying and repeating "I'm so sorry, Carl, I'm so sorry." But that was later, the blinding white light in the emergency room, her woeful face, and he might have dreamt that.

He'd been surprised, touched by Courtney's providing a place for him to convalesce after he was released from the hospital. But then they were al-

most family, going way back to when she was a little girl, the daughter of Sheila's friend from Princeton, the painter Sally Laroche, née Mander. Sally had settled in Oakland, on Broadway near the old Treadwell Mansion where the College of Arts and Crafts was located. Courtney was four or five when she'd declared that she intended to marry him. Of course everyone thought that was just darling, but why a rogue like Carl Wendt? Back nearly twenty five hazy years ago. He realized at one point, or it was pointed out to him, that there were unresolved feelings and father figure fixations, particularly evident in the stormy relationship with her mother.

Her father, who had divorced Sally when Courtney was just a baby, had over the years become very wealthy as a developer of architecturally unique communities, most famously as the designer of the tornado proof home, an idea he'd come upon while contemplating a plastic champagne cork.

The concept and subsequent development outside of Oklahoma City had been slammed in the local press as glorified bunkers and prairie dog settlements until a Finger of God monster cut a mile wide swath through the area and shredded everything in its path except for the shiny concrete and glass mounds built by Eugene Laroche.

Laroche assuaged his abandonment guilt by showering money and expensive gifts on his daughter which essentially turned her into a confused spoiled brat. Then that time, she was probably sixteen, drunk, at one of her mother's frisky art crowd parties, she tried to seduce him, going so far as to stick her tongue down his throat and grabbing the pump handle, and which he fended off with a conscientiousness aplomb he didn't realize he possessed. Around that time, he still recalled with regret, he was on the outs with Sheila and the inevitability of separation hung in the air like a bad odor. Courtney, after that rebuff, always seemed a little uncomfortable or awkward around him, not that he saw much of her as his orbit, more and more, revolved around his engagements and interests in the city.

Sally died of an aneurism while Courtney was away at Santa Cruz. He'd seen her at the funeral, thinking how much she resembled her mother, bright but troubled. The jet-setting architect was too busy to make it that day so he never had a chance to meet the guy and tell him what a prick he was for abandoning his daughter.

Laroche probably figured the generous trust fund he had set up for her was enough. Fortunately there were old family friends. He knew that she'd lived with Sheila, Sierra by then, and Jerry for a while. Occasionally he would

run into her at the odd art show or literary function, and one time, very drunk but keeping her hands and tongue to herself, she announced to him that she was writing. Poetry, some criticism. He had been caught by surprise, vaguely but not overly enthusiastically congratulating her. She never offered to show him her work. And he never asked to see it.

She'd prepared the spare bedroom that had been her office for him. It had a foldout couch. She was living with David Bloom in a little house on Russell. "Just down the street from where Jack lived with Neal and Carolyn," she liked to remind him. David Bloom got the teaching job at NAIF. Stoddard was out.

Maybe that was the problem. Actually, there was no maybe about it. That was the problem. Bloom was an autocratic little egotist, a citer of rules, definitions, proprietary or otherwise, a walking encyclopedia of arcane and irrelevant trivia that posed as scholarship, hardly a breaker of rules. What good was it if you had a photographic memory but couldn't interpret what you were remembering? Short-sighted, what Woody Allen had already said about intellectuals, totally brilliant but without a clue.

Sure, Stoddard was a drunk, but he also had an intuitive feel for what made great literature. As a poet, his efforts resonated, workman-like, with an understanding of his lineage and craft. Drink was destroying his ability to represent that unique sensibility. There's that warm glow and instant gratification of alcohol versus the slow and intermittent doubt plagued appreciation of having perfected the art. After a while, spirits alone fuel the feeble flame as sole and soul consolation. He understood that quite well. He had said as much in his article, *Failure of Nerve in the American Literary Landscape*, published in *JOAN, Journal of American Nephrology*, a venue Nora had suggested as having deep pockets and a no-brainer for someone with his rep.

What was it his own doctor had said, "Your liver's got more scars than a knife fighter"? That was one of the reasons he was off the sauce, unimaginable as that was, because the medication he was taking impacted his liver functions, and combined with booze, would effectively destroy it. He didn't think his love of drink should be suicidal.

But the problem, the real problem, was the unflattering, nay, vicious, review he had written of *Ugly & Disappointing*, David Bloom's so-called guide to modern poetry published by Knopf.

The review had appeared in an obscure online literary journal, *Boiling Point*, edited by a young woman who was an adjunct professor at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, so he had no idea of who might even read it. It was one of the many miscellaneous literary sites whose stock and trade was the indie book scene publishing self congratulatory puff pieces by beardless pretenders and MFA grads. It came as a fawning request for an essay on poetics, a book review, even a poem, anything with his byline. And it paid, an honorarium, but money all the same. He'd been desperate.

The unfortunate set of circumstances included the request for the review arriving around the time he'd picked up a comp copy of Bloom's book at Nora's, always his backup mail drop when he was on the fly, so to speak, and for six months, including all of that summer and early fall of the previous year, loose as a goose on the loose, he had had to avail himself of a variety of places to bed down, and in one of those temporary layovers, he had found time to read the purported guide and, given his humor, such as it was, due to his circumstances, it had struck him as narrow minded and shallow, as if it were the reread of a graduate thesis, and he had vented his spleen in no uncertain terms nor had he minced words, and, this being before he got his own internet connected device, hit the send button on the computer in Nora's office, not thinking twice, only remembering with annoyance Bloom's leveraging him into a reading he hadn't particularly cared to do, though had he not he might not have hooked up with the heartbreaking ball-busting Grace Niklia which was either a good thing or bad thing depending on the day he thought back on that particularly intense time in his life, and had all but forgotten about the hit piece he had written on Bloom's book until sometime after the first of the year when *Boiling Point* finally got around to publishing it, and by then he was well ensconced in Courtney and David's home. Nora, who read it over his shoulder while he was writing it, had warned, "That's going to come back and bite you."

Bloom didn't take it too well. There were points of contention, of course. He had not held back, one of his visceral skills being cutting invective. Titled *Caveat Poetae* he started by stating the warning. *Anytime one comes across a book that purports to be a 'guide to modern poetry,' as this turd does, alarm bells should sound and the snake oil detector should be flashing Beware! Beware!*

Questioning the author's credibility only twisted the knife.

Once into the text of this depressingly uninformed self-nominated guide, it becomes immediately evident that the author knows very little about modern American poetry or modern poetry, in general. There is no substantive grasp of the complexity and depth of the modern (putatively post-modern) esthetic in poetry. He should have left it at that and not enlarged the compass of his displeasure.

The poets cited are American Kennel Club breeds who sniff and tag within an exclusive poet park made up of friends and associates from academe, sycophants, and professorial recommendations.

And, as was inevitable when the vitriol came to a boil, he took his hobbyhorse for a ride.

The fog shroud of New Criticism envelopes academic thinking about American poetry to this day, entrenched and resistant to the obvious revolution that resonated through the early decades of the last century and reanimated by the recognition of a counter-culture in post-war mid-century, a revolution that effectively dislodged the Anglo boot heel from American Literature's metaphorical throat to allow the voicing of a unique native gestalt. The literary oligarchy has been demeaning that reality ever since in the guise of maintaining some sort of literary standard based on the misguided presumption of Anglo superiority with its championing of Eliot clones. They are in denial that a linguistic and cultural drift has occurred, particularly the further one is removed from the thrall of the ivory towers of the East. The effects of this shift are evident in the distinctive American poetries emerging from diverse language origins whose grounding esthetic is no longer under the thumb of the imperial glot.

Then, as a disgruntled elder bemoaning the gullibility of the younger generation: A degree in literature, an MFA in writing is merely the platform upon which to build one's education. The real education begins once all that has been put behind as necessary but not entirely useful. Yet some authors who pass themselves off as some kind of authority on modern poetry have not moved on to discover the genuine American poetry written outside the purview of academic institutions, and whose undereducated opinions carry with them the stale closed air of the classroom, the seminar, the workshop. Class and privilege allow access, and the iron ivy of the Anglo-American hegemony is pervasive in inserting its stooges in positions of erroneous and biased punditry.

Never did the thought enter his mind that he'd end up living in close quarters with someone he'd eviscerated in print.

It is vain and ignorant to think that one can encapsulate the breadth and depth of modern poetry in a volume of less than 200 pages replete with extra wide margins. This vacuous cerebral foam is merely a prop giving the illusion of substance, essentially a dreary, tediously long essay that treads water but does not do a lot of actual swimming. Perhaps the only section of any interest, which should have been titled "Poets Behaving Badly," is one that winks at the prevalent cronyism among poetry contest judges as if that were the only grounds to be distrustful of elitist cliques. The world of practicing poets is a byzantine labyrinth worthy of Dante's circles of Hell. Poetry fortunately is unaffected by the scrabbling self-devouring narcissism of the engines of its creation. It may take years, centuries even, for the truly great examples of poetic psyche to be considered or reconsidered.

He had pulled his punches in the wrap-up, considering the gutting he had inflicted in the body of the text. At least that was the way he saw it.

The reliance on tradition is a useful stage from which the contemporary can tap into the greater underlying consciousness and perform the poetry of the future in a guise that is timely. No one really goes to a performance and says "great proscenium!" This ostensible guide to modern poetry unfortunately lists only the stage hands and producers, the actors are hardly ever mentioned.

He regretted that what he had written was an indiscretion, not so much because of what he had said, but how it affected the atmosphere in the cramped quarters on Russell.

His armpits had begun to pool, a trickle down the ribcage. He slung the silver suitcoat over one shoulder, and nonchalantly showed his thumb to the passing traffic. Maybe it was the arresting synthetic green of his shirt. A dusty older model four-door tentatively found the shoulder of the road a little ways past him and pulled to a stop. He had been right in the middle of a train of consideration that, as a poet, his expectations should be no less, that people give him money, and women throw their pussies at him. Or that strangers stop and offer him a ride.

Opening the passenger side door, he peered at the driver, cartons and boxes piled in the back seat indicating that he was a salesman of some sort, and said "Thanks for stopping."

“I’m going as far as Booneville. Where you headed?” He was a round headed man with a little nub of a chin, in his thirties, maybe, a smudge of mustache over a set of full lips, hair neatly parted on the right, possibly Hispanic though light-skinned.

“I’m trying to get to Elk.” He waited for the man to remove a sales binder and papers from the seat.

“Well, I’ll get you part of the way at least.”

Once he was belted, the car shot out onto the highway. The driver side-glanced. “Car breakdown?”

“Uh, no, I caught the bus as far as Cloverdale.”

“Oh yeah, a lot of people do that. Usually kids. Though I did pickup an old lady once. She must have been in her seventies. An old back-to-the-earth type, hippie. There are a lot of them hiding out in the woods in these parts. Pretty harmless, most of them. Unless they’re growing dope and then you never know, probably packing. I’ve picked up guys reeking of weed, stink like a skunk or something.” The driver shook his head and took a bite of the ice cream bar he was holding. There was a box of them in the center console, and as evidenced by the empty wrappers, he’d gone through about half the box.

“Some of them will even give you blow jobs. The hippie chicks, I mean.” And a further qualification: “So I’ve heard.” The driver licked his fingers of the ice cream’s sticky residue, his glance expecting a reaction.

Wouldn’t you know it, there’s always somebody who wants to sniff out your sexuality. He had been there before. Hang out in bars long enough and it was bound to happen. And Frisco? As Johnny Mathias used to sing, “*Chances are. . .*” When he was younger, hardly a day went by when he wasn’t hit on by men, and women, regularly. But never in a car, and by the driver. The predictability of the next few moments was a familiar déjà vu.

“Do you like men?”

“Not intimately, no. Do I look like someone who does?”

“I’m only asking because not many people in these parts dress the way you are. Or carry a purse.”

“It’s not a purse, it’s a bag. I use it to carry my stuff. I don’t have a car that I can just toss my things in the backseat or in the trunk.”

“Got a gun in there?”

“No, but I’ve got a book of poems. That’s just about as deadly.”

“Poems?!” The driver spit as if he’d spoken a dirty word. “You read poems?!”

“Yeah, I’m a poet, you pretty much have to. I mean, some poets don’t read poetry and still they write it, but it shows.”

“Is that so? A poet. Are you sure you don’t like men? That’s what I heard about poets.”

“No, there are actually some poets who prefer the split tail.”

“What’s your name?”

“Carl Wendt.”

“Never heard of you.”

“Oh, do you know a lot of poets?”

The driver frowned calling a mental effort to the fore. “Nope.” Then with a quick sideways glance, “What kind of money do you make doing that? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“From writing poetry? Zilch. It’s being a poet that makes you the money, but you have to have a good hustle. You have to make your living off your rep.”

“Oh yeah? How do you do that?”

“Any number of ways. One is by being outspoken or doing something outrageous so that people will remember your name. There are grants, and awards, and residencies, lecturing to college classes and writer’s retreats, teaching writing workshops, speaking at Rotary luncheons. And poetry prizes. I was awarded the 2009 Pillsbury Prize just this last January.”

“For baking?”

“No, for my contribution to American literature.” He thought to add “such as it is” but it was a personal cynicism he needn’t inflict on anyone.

“No shit? They have a prize for that?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty common. There are all kinds of prizes for that kind of thing. Some poets, that’s all they do is go after prizes. It keeps them so busy they hardly have time to write poetry.”

“Can’t be much competition, I mean, who writes poetry anymore?”

“You can’t imagine what the competition is like, even in your most extravagant moment. It’s a blood bath. Poets turn into back stabbing creeps just to get their name in print.”

“Seriously? I always pictured poets as a bunch of guys bitch slapping each other with limp wrists.”

“Like cats, they’ve got claws. Two things you need to be a successful poet, a knife to stab people in the back with, and knee pads for the amount of

time you'll spend kneeling in front of someone's crotch. And bad poetry? You'll never step into that endless shit stream twice."

"Eeeuw! Why'd anyone want to be a poet then?"

"For the perks."

"Perks? They better be good."

"Sex. Unlimited opportunity for getting laid."

"Really?!"

"Oh yeah, I know guys who claim to be poets just for the sex. They write a handful of poems that makes them sound like they're the sensitive type. Women in particular fall for that shit, and these poseurs take advantage. It has nothing to do with poetry and everything to do with the ulterior motive."

"So, ah, you must have got your fair share," the driver said unwrapping another ice cream bar. "I mean, I'm just sayin', you know."

Once, years ago, he'd attended an open reading at St. Mark's Church when he lived in New York City. It had been a free-for-all. One guy even got up and read his wallet, driver's license, social security, business and membership cards, the like. And he got laughs. Another poet, this one with obvious name recognition, got up and read a poem titled *Poets I'd Like To Fuck* which included the names of well known contemporary poets, both male and female, as well as a few mighty ancestors. It was a very funny shtick and he had the poetry audience, mostly friends and cohorts, some of them poets named in the poem, in stitches.

He had borrowed the concept and improved on it a bit. He would declaim the alphabet and pick a woman's name that started with the particular letter in sequence and improvise their sexual experience based on what the name suggested. The last time he'd used that routine which he'd titled *Twenty Six Women I Have Slept With* was a number of years ago, and the reception had been coolly correct. It had done nothing to dispel the rumor that he was a male chauvinist pig.

"Yeah, can't complain." The driver wanted details but that wasn't going to happen. Still Franny came to mind, a nurse he'd met when he brought a friend who'd been stabbed outside a bar on Second Avenue into the ER at Bellevue. That should have brought up a pleasant memory of Franny as a frisky compact woman with straw blond hair, but instead it called up the time he'd been sitting in a coffee house in the East Village and some homeless guy tried to strangle him with a ratty grey scarf. He remembered the scarf specifi-

cally. Fortunately his table mates had pulled the guy off, and then the police came. Also distinctly, the memory of the one patrolman asking him where he was from, and when he answered Indiana, the cop had suggested “Why don’t you go back there.”

“Oh, yeah?” The driver cast a wary eyed side glance, half finished ice cream bar in hand.

“Yeah, I probably have an entire alphabet of women I’ve slept with, and while it may have been fun at the time, looking back I think I missed some opportunities for a meaningful relationship.” Val’s name swam up into his consciousness. He hadn’t meant to conjure her name, more proof of her haunting even a year later. She had occupied his physical space and his emotional state far too long and painfully to let go. She would always inhabit a part of his being, as an aftertaste of guilt-wracked regret.

He didn’t want to think about Wendy, either. She had saved his life, but in the worst way possible. “But here’s a bit of free advice, a pity fuck always turns to shit.”

The driver discarded the empty wrapper on the console and nodded as if he’d received the transmission of sage advice.

He laughed at himself yet the set of his mouth also indicated that he had said as much as he was going to say on the subject, now that the x had been taken out of sex, and he turned his attention to the passing landscape.

The dusty blue car followed the climbing road in a series of switchbacks, the forested land on either side creating a canopy through which the mounting sun cast its dapples, flickers of hypnotizing light accompanied by the swaying motion of the vehicle’s swing through the curves, all conducive to the dance of reverie.