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NEWEST PRESS

A MYSTERY BY

Michael Boughn



# **BUSINESS AS USUAL**

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*No bison were harmed in the making of this book.*

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For Elizabeth, finally



# 01

MONDAY, AUGUST 23, 1993

*Bernie Donatello held his breath and jiggled the accelerator pedal.* The old truck coughed, jerked, and almost stalled. He yanked his foot off and jammed the clutch in, then tried it again, easing down on the pedal as he slipped the clutch out, praying mechanically, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, blessed is the fruit of thy womb . . .” His forehead was beaded with sweat, his jaw rigid. The muscles in his right leg were so tight they almost cramped. The truck lurched, coughed, then finally caught and jerked forward, easing out of the dark tunnel mouth of the bridge.

A cone of light flooded the doorway of the empty Customs shed as the truck inched past. Bernie caught a glimpse in the mirror of a uniformed man lurking in the shadows. The truck hiccuped again, faltered, then slid forward, finally slipping out of the bridge like a sick worm oozing out of a metal hole into the wet Canadian night. He hauled the steering wheel to the left, turning the rig toward Bridge Street, checking his mirrors again to make sure the trailer was okay. As the end of the rig cleared the bridge, he saw a shadow flit through the light and disappear into the shed.

Bernie started breathing again. He didn’t know what worried him more — the old rig breaking down, or getting jammed in the little bridge. He knew just how it would feel — he’d run it through his mind so many times — the screech of metal on metal as the rig suddenly jerked to a stop. He’d be trapped like a rat. It was bad enough worrying about the damned guard without having to worry about breaking down or getting stuck. What the hell would he do then? Jump out and run for it, he figured — hightail it back to America

and leave the damn truck for Sal to worry about. It would serve the son of bitch right, too.

He breathed deeply, trying to slow down his racing heart. The headlights reflected off the puddles on the greasy black asphalt of Bridge Street. A sharp pain shot through his stomach, and he got that funny taste in his mouth. How much longer could he take this? Every time he came across, it was the same damn thing. It didn't matter what Sal told him about it all being fixed. It didn't even matter how many times he made the trip and nothing happened. A million things could go wrong. The truck could get jammed up. Or break down, more likely. They could change the Customs guy, put him on another shift at the last minute. Then what would happen? Bernie would eat it big time, that's what. And Sal would be gone so fast, all you'd see was a little dust cloud, like in those cartoons.

8

He thought about being taken under the ground. He tried not to, but he couldn't help it. Ever since that time he and Edie took the bus up to Toronto, he couldn't get that picture out of his head. He hated going on the bus because he knew they'd get hassled, but she was worried about him drinking up there and she didn't want to take the car. She'd put her foot down and that was that. He was right, though. They always stopped you when you were on the bus.

That time the cops had made everybody line up with their bags, then brought out a big old mangy German shepherd. When it got to the punks in front of him and Edie, it went nuts. Turns out they had reefer in their wallets. How dumb was that? He'd watched the Customs cops handcuff them and lead them down some steps into a big dark hole in the concrete. He figured it was some kind of lockup they had down there, underground. It was spooky to think they might take him down there. Like going down to Hell, except it was probably cold and damp.

He caught a red light and stopped, the brakes squealing in the night. In the yellow light of a street lamp, his watch read 3 AM on the nose. So far so good. He took off his cap and ran his hand through his thinning hair. The engine surged, then dropped. He nursed the accelerator pedal, trying to keep the diesel flowing. It almost stalled, but he managed to nurse it along till the light changed. He eased the

rig forward again, working through the gears. How many times had he told Sal he needed to do something about the injectors? Fifty? A hundred?

He started to relax a bit. That was the worst of it, that first part. He'd like to see Sal do that some time, take some of his own risks for a change. He'd been working for the Sal almost twenty-five years now, ever since the s.o.b. came up from Jersey to run the garbage operation for Stephano. A lot of years. A lot of damn garbage. The first time he saw Sal walking across the yard, it would have been, what? May? June? '73? He was skinnier then, and had more hair. Bernie was new to the job, just got his Class A. That was back when old Jack Smith sold the place, when it was still a legit operation — no muscle, no toxics — and Sal came out and told them all what the deal was, more or less.

A lot of guys had left then. Not Bernie, though. What was the big deal, anyway? Half the guys he grew up with on the west side of Buffalo were into something crooked. That's just the way things were. You had to make a living. And as long as Bernie got to drive the truck, he didn't care what Sal Marino was up to.

That was the year he and Edie got married too. 1973. Or was it '74? After all those years, all the "favours" he'd done for Sal Marino, you'd think he'd give Bernie a break now, what with Edie in the hospital. Maybe dying right now, for all he knew.

Son of a bitch. Bernie's throat got tight and his eyes got hot. It wasn't fair, damn it. All the weird shifts he'd pulled for Sal over the years, all the shit he'd put up with, and the bastard wouldn't let him off the hook one night — tonight, of all nights. He could see her there, where he'd left her, pale and yellow-looking, her thin body gasping for breath. What would he do without her?

Worse, what would Arlene do? She'd always been so close to her mother. Edie had been so proud of Arlene when she got into that nursing program last year. What would the kid do without her mother? It would just be the two of them then, him and Arlene, and Bernie didn't know how he could handle that.

God, he needed to be with her. He needed it bad, and Sal just didn't give a shit. Like, "I'm sorry, Bernie, but Joey's sick," was

enough. So what if Joey's sick? Hire somebody else. Drive the friggin' thing yourself.

Hell, Joey probably wasn't even really sick. But he was Frankie's guy. Him and Lou and that whole bunch of tough assholes. Ever since Sal had got hooked up with that slick little creep Frankie, with his Mercedes and his thousand-dollar suits, the whole place had started to go to hell in a handbasket. What Sal needed with those jerks was something Bernie could never figure out.

10 He pushed the rig up Bridge Street headed west through the ratty edge of the city — beat-up little stucco houses squeezed between muffler shops and run-down video stores, warehouses, and equipment rental yards surrounded by steel mesh and razor wire. It was a side of Niagara Falls tourists never saw — unless they were looking for some out-of-the-way table-dancing joint. Bernie used to do that sometimes with the old crew from work. Before Frankie. Before Edie got sick. Nice-looking girls, those French girls. They really took it all off, too. Not like that place up in Kenmore where they had to keep a G-string on. Right on your table, too.

Too many years, he thought. Too damn many years to get stuck doing this tonight. He'd seen a lot of changes in the years he'd driven for Sal. Not that anybody told him anything, but he saw stuff. He'd known from the beginning that Sal was a made guy, but so what? That was no big deal. Everybody knew what was happening, and when Sal had asked him to dump a load here or there, Bernie didn't ask any questions. It wasn't his business. It was a job. He just did what he was told. And Sal had been good to him. He'd always had work and the paycheck was there every week. That's all he'd ever cared about.

But things were different now. Greed, Bernie thought. It's not enough they're making a good living hauling waste. Sal's got to get into toxics. Then they get busted for that operation down in Jamestown, and he's got to get more money. Then he's putting money out on the street with Frankie, and whatever else those guys are up to. More, more, there's always got to be more. And who gets pushed out on the limb? Who has to take the risks? Not Frankie's boys, that's for sure.

The lights of the truck lit up a billboard by the side of the road with a big picture of some smiling guy. All teeth and twinkly eyes.

He looked like a politician, Bernie thought, with one of those phony smiles they all had, and the words “Ontario — Oriented for Business” beside him. Yeah, bent over, Bernie thought, laughing out loud at his joke. Those guys are all the same. Canadian. American. It didn’t matter. You could tell one a mile away. Either kissing ass or getting their asses kissed. That’s the only thing they know.

Sal was like that, too. He pretended he gave you stuff because he was a big-hearted guy — like those scrawny turkeys he passed out last Christmas. Industrial turkeys. No — utility, that was it, utility turkeys. Missing wings and shit. He probably got them for a buck apiece from some connection he had. Or boosted them from the Salvation Army soup kitchen. Big generous Sal Marino, the *capo*. But the reason he really did it was because he figured you owed him then. You never knew when he’d pull that you-owe-me shit out of his hat. Like this run. Oriented for business. Bent over, that was good.

He pushed on through the city, feeling more relaxed. Bernie didn’t mind this part of the haul so much. It was ugly and sometimes it made him sad wondering where the kids played, but he couldn’t see much of it in the dark anyway. He was just happy it was flat. Once he got out on Pelham Road the hills started, and the truck was just too damn old for that kind of work. Buffalo was okay, or Niagara Falls. They were flat. The truck, a fifteen-year-old long-nosed Jimmy, had seen better days. A lot of them. It could still handle those roads. But the hills on the escarpment were a whole different kettle of fish.

Maybe he’d just dump the stuff like did last time. That would cut at least four or five hours off the trip, maybe more. He could be back at the hospital by six, maybe earlier. Who’d know, anyway? Frankie? To hell with Frankie. He didn’t work for Frankie. What was Frankie doing poking around this business anyway? It was none of his damned business. If Sal had a problem with it, let *him* say something. Frankie was nobody to Bernie, just another punk with fancy clothes and an expensive car. He thought he was hot shit, but he was just a punk.

It wasn’t like Bernie did it all the time. Once before he hadn’t made the trip all the way out to the quarry. But that was it, the only time. That was a couple of weeks ago, when Edie suddenly took a turn for the worse. It’s just that he was worried sick about her and Arlene.

Especially Arlene. There wasn't much he could do for Edie now, except be there to hold her hand when she passed. The doctors said it was all through her insides now, eating her up. She probably wouldn't ever wake up again. But Arlene, she needed him.

And he needed to be there, damn it. So what if it had been three weeks? Where the hell did Sal get off saying she was going to hang on forever? She was dying, for Christ's sake. You can't hurry that. It's not a time-clock thing. Sal should know that. He should know better than to treat his people this way.

12

"Up yours, Frankie," he muttered. "Asshole." He looked at his watch again, shook his head, and pushed down on the accelerator.

Farmland gave way again to houses and small, decrepit commercial strips that marched across the land like the ice once had, obliterating the world they encountered as surely as the glaciers. The road angled sharply downward and a huge black mouth appeared out of the night in front of him, the tunnel under the Canal. Down and down the road went, and he could feel it all up there right over his head, waiting to cave in. Just like in that movie Arlene took him to a couple of nights ago. Except he didn't think he stood much chance of getting rescued if it happened here. Even if Sly Stallone was around somewhere. He laughed nervously at that — Sly Stallone in Welland, Ontario — yeah, sure. Then, just when he thought he couldn't take it any more, the road turned up and, after a few minutes, he could see the tunnel mouth ahead outlined in the light of streetlamps.

Emerging into the night on the other side of the canal, he followed the road to where it ended at the 406. There he turned onto the freeway. Bernie hated this brief stretch of highway. It felt so vulnerable, so open, even though he knew there were no weigh stations and that it was only a couple of miles until he could get back onto the smaller roads. You could never tell when some eager beaver cop might be cruising it and notice his plates. If he ever got stopped and they asked for papers, it'd be all over.

It started raining again and he turned on the windshield wipers. There were so many damn lights, anybody could see his plates. The *whack whack whack* of the blades slapping back the rain took his mind off his fear. The Glendale exit came up quickly. He drove down

the ramp, turned left at the light, drove past a mall, then headed east on 89.

It was a bad night. When he wasn't worrying about Edie, he was thinking about Frankie. He couldn't get rid of the picture in his head of Frankie standing there all smartass in the yard in his fancy suit. What a punk. Where did he get off threatening Bernie? It was none of his damn business what Bernie did. He could take the whole rig up to Toronto and dump the load on Yonge Street outside that theatre Edie dragged him to, and it still wouldn't be that asshole's business.

He ought to talk to Sal about it, tell him what he heard around the yard. He would've if he weren't so pissed at Sal for making him do this run. Frankie was out of control. The talk around the yard was he had some action going on under the table. Sal wouldn't be too happy about that if he found out. He might even whack the punk. Now there was a happy thought. Bernie smiled. If only he could figure out some way to let Sal know about Frankie, without finding out Bernie had dumped that load on the road. How the hell did Frankie know about that, anyway?

He turned onto Pelham Road and came to the hill country. Right away the truck started to lose speed as it strained up the first of the inclines that ran along the top of the escarpment, the remains of the moraines left by the retreating glaciers. It used to be all vineyards along here. Grapes, grapes, and more grapes. Lately, though, instead of rows of vines, there were rows of tract houses. It made Bernie nervous because it seemed like every time he made the trip there were more people around — more houses, more cars, more chances to get caught. He hoped to hell Sal got some other deal worked out soon, because he didn't think he could take much more of this.

The truck was having a hard time now. Bernie was barely able to pick up enough speed on the downhill stretches to make it to the top of the next hill. He'd told Sal a hundred times the truck was no good for this run. The least he could do was get new fuel injectors. One of these days the pile of junk was going to break down — pop a universal or lose the clutch. Then what would he do, stuck out in the middle of nowhere in a foreign country with no papers and a hot load?

You'd think Sal would care about something like that. But no, all Sal Marino cared about these days was the almighty buck. Bottom line, that was his favorite expression. Bottom line this, bottom line that. A businessman's gotta look after the bottom line, he told Bernie after the last trip when Bernie told him how worried he was about the truck. And the bottom line is, I can't afford no new truck.

Well, shove this up your bottom line, Bernie muttered in the dark, holding the accelerator pedal to the floor as the red needle dropped further and further. What about respect? What about honour? That used to be the bottom line — respect, honour. Now everybody was a fucking businessman. It's my bottom line that'll end up in some Canadian joint if they catch me up here. Then what would Arlene do?

The whole thing stank. Ever since the Feds busted up the operation down in Jamestown, where they used to dump the stuff, it had been one thing after another. Jamestown was a sweet deal. Sal owned the landfill down there. He could dump anything he wanted, no problem, and it didn't cost him a nickel. The word was he had some Fed in his pocket, a U.S. Attorney or something, and some of those EPA guys. When that went, the next thing you know Sal's got this harebrained scheme going with those wiseguys in Hamilton to run this stuff across the border and up to the quarry.

It was great for Sal, as long as it worked. A few bucks for the border guards, the cost of gas, and the rest was profit. A load like this, Bernie figured, had to be worth forty or fifty Gs. Maybe more. That's a nice little profit for Sal. But whose neck was on the line? Not Sal's. And not Frankie's, that's for damn sure. Bernie's, that's whose. And with Edie dying and Arlene needing him. Bottom line. And then that stupid little shit Frankie had to get on his case.

The sobs came up out of nowhere and he couldn't hold them back. It scared him. His eyes filled with tears and his chest heaved. Going around a curve he almost ran the truck off the road. He pulled onto the shoulder and stopped. In the dark cab he buried his battered face in both hands and sobbed convulsively, while the truck chugged and throbbed. The sobs wracked his body and floated out to blend with the cries of the crickets and cicadas in the warm August night. He

sat like that for five minutes before straightening up and pulling himself together. The sobbing slowed and then stopped. He stared out the windshield. The clouds were breaking up as the front passed through. It was getting cooler and he could see the full moon flashing from behind the clouds.

He took a couple of deep breaths and put the truck back into gear, slowly driving along the road until he reached a cross street. A few darkened farmhouses huddled in the night off the road. At the cross street he made a right turn, heading north. His eyes strained to see into the night, looking for some place where he could pull over and dump the load without waking up a sleeping dog. He was so intent that he didn't see the car that turned onto the road after him, its headlights off. After a bit, he pulled over to the side of the road and switched off the ignition. The sounds of the night rushed in and engulfed him. He took a deep breath and reached for the door handle, then froze when car lights came around a bend in the road in front of him.

A big old beat-up Chevy slowed down as it neared the truck. Drawing up next to him, it stopped in the middle of the road and the driver, a guy with white hair and glasses, stuck his head out the window and looked up at the cab. Bernie rolled down the window and stuck his head out.

"Morning," he said.

"You okay?" the man asked. "You broke down? You need a lift somewheres?"

"I'm okay. I was falling asleep. I just pulled over to grab a nap. Thanks anyway."

"No problem," the man replied, though he didn't sound convinced. He slowly pulled away.

Bernie watched the taillights in the rear view mirror until they disappeared. Then he opened the door and climbed down out of the cab. Walking to the rear of the rig, he pulled on his work gloves, unhooked a large hose, one end of which he fixed to a spigot on the trailer. Hauling the free end of the hose into the ditch that ran by the road, he returned to the trailer. He opened the lid of a metal box and removed a large wrench that he fitted on to the valve stem at

the top of the spigot. He pulled on the wrench, opening the valve, and liquid began to pour out of the truck, through the hose, and into the ditch.

Anywhere else, the fluid that poured out the truck might have just been soaked up by the earth. A million years before this night, though, this land had been weighted down by thousands of feet of glittering ice. Five hundred million years before that, it had been at the bottom of the sea. Now it rose sharply from the banks of Lake Erie to the south and Lake Ontario to the north to form a plateau — the Salina Plain, crisscrossed with alternating pockets of rich earth and heavy clay left by the advance and retreat of the glaciers across the limestone, shale, and sandstone laid down on the ancient seabed.

16

The fluid rushed out of the trailer and over the rain-soaked clay, following the downward slope of the plain toward the rich vineyards spread out below the line of trees just to the north.

Bernie didn't notice the darkened car pull out of the driveway a half-kilometre back up the road and slowly approach the truck. His thoughts were on the other side of the border, in a hospital room in Buffalo where a pale, unconscious woman lay hooked up to tubes and wires that led to machines with flashing lights and bags of fluids. The rush of the liquid pouring through the large hose masked the hushed sound of car doors opening and closing. Only when the voice came out of the night behind him did he realize he wasn't alone.

“What the hell are you doing, Bernie?” the voice asked quietly.

Bernie jumped and spun around, his eyes wide with fear. Then he recognized the speaker.

“Jesus, Lou,” he shouted. “You scared the hell out of me. What are you doing here? Jesus Christ, you scared the hell out of me.” His hand went up to his chest.

Lou was tall and cadaverous, with a long scar running down his right cheek. His face was frozen in a perpetual frown, as if he found the world a constant source of irritation and disappointment. His partner was shorter and compact. He wasn't smiling either.

“I asked you a question, Bernie. What are you doing? What did Frankie tell you? Are you stupid? Or deaf? You didn't hear him? Turn that thing off.” He gestured toward the hose.

The driver regained his composure. "Fuck Frankie," he spat out. "I don't work for that little jerk. I work for Sal. If Frankie's got a beef with me, he can take it up with Sal." For all his rage, his voice was tinged with fear. His right hand rested on the free end of the wrench. "What the hell are you doing here? Are you following me?"

"Turn it off, Bernie," Lou repeated quietly. "Now."

"Get out of here, Lou, this ain't your business. It ain't Frankie's business. I'm doing what I gotta do. You got no right to be following me. Or telling me what to do. I work for Sal, not you."

"I'm going to ask you once more nice, Bernie. Then Jimmie is going to have to come over there and turn it off for you. You don't want that, okay? So just turn it off."

Bernie slipped the wrench off the valve stem, slapping it in his gloved hand.

"You punks stay away from me," he said. "You stay away from my truck. This has got nothing to do with you or Frankie."

Lou slipped his left hand under his windbreaker. It came out holding a gun. The blue steel glinted coldly in the moonlight that flashed through the drifting clouds. He pointed it casually at the driver. "Drop the wrench and move," he said quietly.

Bernie's shoulders sagged and his arms fell to his sides. Tears came to his eyes and he began to sob again.

"Jesus, Bernie," Lou muttered with disgust, shaking his head. He lowered the gun and stepped forward, reaching for the wrench.

Before he could grab it, the driver swung it hard at him, connecting high on the arm that held the gun. Something cracked. Lou grunted in pain and fell back as the gun dropped to the ground. Bernie tried to go for it, but was off-balance from the force of his swing. Before he could recover, the other man had jumped him and the two of them staggered and then fell together into the ditch where they wrestled for the wrench.

Covered in mud, they rolled around hitting at each other, struggling for control of the tool, while Lou sat on the ground rocking in pain and holding his smashed arm. Arms rose and fell. Somewhere in the distance, a dog began to bark crazily. Finally the wrench rose, briefly illuminated in the light of the suddenly visible moon, and fell

with a thud. And again. And again. Then all was quiet except for the distant dog.

A mud-covered figure rose from the ditch and stood there with the wrench in his hand. "You stupid little fuck," he shouted, and kicked the man still lying in the ditch. The dog howled. Jimmy Ducks turned to the figure sitting in the road. "Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay? He got me right on the elbow. I think he busted something. Did you kill him?"

"Yeah, I think so." Jimmie Ducks looked down and prodded the still figure with his foot. It didn't move. "Now what are we gonna do?"

"Bring that wrench over here and shut this fucking thing off."

Jimmie Ducks struggled up out of the muddy ditch and limped over to the trailer. He put the wrench on the valve stem and, turning it, stopped the flow of liquid.

"Check the trap," Lou said. "See if it's okay."

The other man moved along the trailer. He reached up under the frame and felt around. "Jeez, what a mess," he muttered. Dirt and flakes of rusted metal fell to the ground.

The moon disappeared again, and fat raindrops began to hit the ground.

"Not there, stupid, more towards the front," Lou said. "And make it quick. It's starting to rain again."

The other man moved his hand over years of caked-on grease and road dirt.

"I've got it," he said finally. He twisted something free from its attachment to the underside of the trailer and brought it out. It was a small metal box. Its shiny surface reflected the moonlight that flickered through the passing clouds, marred only by a keyhole at the edge of the lid.

"It seems okay. You got the key?"

"No, I don't got the key, you idiot. Why the hell would I have the key? Frankie just said to make sure it was okay. Put it back."

Lou struggled to his feet, grimacing with pain. Holding his right arm tightly against his body with his left hand, he walked over to the trailer and leaned against it. The rain was starting to come down

harder now. The moon disappeared. Lightning flashed in the distance. The roar of thunder followed a few seconds later.

“Jesus, this hurts. You know any first aid?”

Jimmie Ducks looked up from under the trailer where he was trying to reattach the metal box. “No. But Fat Al told me they got free health care here.”

Lou just glared at him. “Help me get to the car. We gotta call Frankie.”

When the other man finally got the box reattached, he stood and walked over to Lou, brushing himself off.

As they started back to their car through the rain, the liquid from the tanker flowed away over the hard clay. Some of it reached a small stream just north. The stream was turgid with water from the new downpours to the south, and the fluid from the tanker joined the runoff from the thunderstorms, continuing its journey downhill toward the immense inland sea that lay ahead of it. Some of it eventually diverted into another ditch that ran along the edge of a vineyard, where it soaked into the soft, fertile ground. The rest of it flowed on, pouring over the grey cliffs of the escarpment, rushing into Lake Ontario.

Lou looked over at the ditch as he limped by, aided by his companion.

“Jesus, Bernie,” he said to the figure lying quietly in the mud. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

## 02

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 25, 1993

*David Sanders stuck his head in the lab and saw Claire Dumont bent over a microscope, her back to the door. His first response, as usual, was a shudder. No matter how many times he came here, the bleak, windowless room never failed to make him feel like he was buried alive. It also reminded him of being an undergraduate and having to take courses that he always just barely passed.*

“There you all are,” he’d once declaimed to Claire in the pub after two or three pints, “locked up and cut off from the very world you’re proposing to explain.” She’d nodded and smiled tolerantly, as she usually did when he got onto that topic.

Still, he thought, as bleak as it was, she looked great, even from behind. He liked watching her when she didn’t know. In the middle of the night, when he woke up sweating, he’d watch her breathe. Sometimes she made a kind of whistling noise, and sometimes she’d whimper as her eyes moved rapidly behind her closed lids.

She fiddled with the instrument’s knobs, looking up only to make notes on a pad beside her. He relished each gesture, thinking of different ways he might write them.

“Hi,” she said, her eyes still glued to the instrument.

“How did you do that?” he asked, stepping through the door. “How did you know I was there?”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, without looking up. “You’re on my turf, poet. We know everything that goes on here.”

He laughed.

She made a few final notes on the pad and turned to face him. “And don’t you forget it.” Her straight dark hair was cut to shoulder

length, framing a longish face with a large Gallic nose. She smiled at him menacingly, but he found it hard to take her seriously given the generosity of her mouth and the warmth of her dark eyes. “I know everything about you, Sanders.” She looked thoughtful. “Well, everything that’s worth knowing.” She wiggled her thick eyebrows at him. “Which is probably considerably less than you might imagine.”

“Well, if you know so damn much,” he said, “how come I’ve been sitting in the coffee shop waiting for you for the last forty minutes?”

Her face fell. “Oh no, I forgot. Oh, David, I’m so sorry. I just got completely caught up in this stuff. I lost all track of time.” She looked at her watch, shaking her head in disbelief. “I’ll be done in a minute.” She looked at him imploringly. “I just have to finish this one thing. Can you wait?”

“Depends,” he said. “What are you working on?”

“It’s part of some supplemental support stuff for the grant. ARIO is hounding me for the figures so they can finish processing the materials and issue a cheque.” She grimaced. “Can you hang on for another ten minutes? Please?”

He looked thoughtfully around the room, dragging out the moment as long as he could. Finally he shrugged his shoulders. “Sure,” he said. Then added, “But you’re going to owe me.”

“Owe you what?”

“I’ll let you know. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, deal,” she said, smiling at him. “Make yourself at home.”

“Home?” he said, looking around the lab.

“No wisecracks. And behave yourself.”

David strolled between rows of tables, looking at tools and instruments, beakers and tubes and slides. He wasn’t bad with a wrench and a screwdriver, but this stuff was incomprehensible to him. It reminded him of pictures he’d seen of medieval torture chambers. In this case, he thought, the world was the victim, and Claire the interrogator, wrenching secrets and confessions from its savaged body. He stopped and picked up a thing with scales and pointers on it, wondering what the hell it was for. He tried to fit it around his arm.

“Don’t touch,” Claire said, without looking at him.

He stuck his tongue out at her. "You said I should make myself at home."

"And don't stick your tongue out at me."

"How do you do that?" he demanded again. "I want to know how you do that."

When she ignored him, he turned back to his investigations. "What's this?" he asked, looking at a large circular metal object. He fiddled with a latch that held the lid down, then flipped a switch. Something began spinning. "Got any carrots?" he asked.

22

Claire sighed, and turned around. "It's a centrifuge, David. And if you don't stop bothering me, we'll never get out of here."

"Now there's a great premise for a Samuel Beckett play," he said. "You and me, stuck in here forever, waiting for Godot. Who, if he did show up, would be immediately dissected and stuck in this thing." He nodded toward the centrifuge.

Claire shook her head and turned back to the scope. David wandered further down the table. He stopped and watched her for a while, thinking maybe now was the time to give her the doodad he'd picked up last night at the mall. He'd planned to give it to her over coffee, but this seemed a better opportunity in a way. Reaching into the nylon book bag that hung from his shoulder, he pulled out a paper sack. He removed a box from the bag, opened it, and took out a long golden cylinder that tapered to a rounded point. He twisted the thick end and it began to hum and vibrate.

"What do you do with this," he asked, holding it out toward Claire.

Just as she turned around to see what he was fooling with now, Ruth Kendall walked into the room. "Hi, Cl . . ." the young woman started to say. The three of them froze, their collective attention now focussed on the humming object David held out toward Claire.

Ruth suddenly turned bright red. "Oh, . . . I . . . uh . . ." she said. "I didn't mean to . . . I'm sorry."

Claire looked from the vibrator, to Ruth, to David, and back to the little gold machine humming away steadily in his had. "What the . . . ?" she started to ask.

David calmly turned the machine off and placed it on the lab

table in the midst of some other tools. The two women stood staring at him.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “Good to see you, Ruth. It’s been a while. Never a dull moment around here, eh?” He grinned. Ruth was smaller than Claire, with delicate, almost childlike features. David found her attractive, though she wasn’t what he thought of as his type. Too delicate. Still, watching her blush was kind of a turn-on.

Ruth, ten years younger than the other two, still hadn’t found her voice. Finally Claire said, “Never a dull moment, indeed.” She shot David what he thought of as one of her dagger looks. Her eyes got kind of buggy, and her lips narrowed and tensed.

He shrugged.

“How are you, Ruth?” she asked, turning back to the young woman. “Don’t mind him. He’s one of the lab animals. I let him out of his cage for exercise every once in a while and then regret it. What’s up?”

Ruth glanced at David. Then, obviously deciding that the safest way forward was just to pretend she hadn’t seen anything, turned to Claire. “Well,” she said, smiling, “I just wanted to know how the grant was going. I’m trying to get organized for when school starts and was wondering when you wanted me to start.”

How do you get to be that . . . perky, David wondered. He found it a little appalling. Was it really possible that someone could get to the point of being a grad student these days and still be that untouched by the world? He wondered abstractly what it would be like to have sex with her.

Claire explained the delay and told her she’d call her back when she had news — Monday, she hoped. After Ruth had left, Claire turned on David. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

“Hey, I just found it on the table and wondered what it was,” he said innocently. “Isn’t it one of your tools?”

“David Sanders . . .,” she started. Then she began laughing. “What the hell am I going to do with you?”

“Put me back in my cage,” he said. He made some monkey noises and scratched himself. He picked up the vibrator, turned it on, and

took a step toward her. “You can come in with me and do some tests.”

“You get that thing the hell away from me. Where did you get that? Jesus. This is going to be all over campus.”

“I wish,” he said. “Your reputation could use a little tarnishing. As hard as I’ve tried the last year, I don’t think I’ve made a scratch on it. Unfortunately, I think Ruth has already forgotten everything. Massive denial. I could see it on her face. How could she possibly explain seeing her hero, the wonderful, perfect Professor Dumont, playing with a sex toy in her lab?”

24

“I was not playing with anything,” Claire said. “I’ll get you for this, Sanders.”

“Oh boy, I can’t wait,” David said, brandishing the vibrator like a sword. “Come on. I got this for you — well, for us. It’s a present. I had to go to the mall last night to get a new pair of jeans, and I happened to pass by this store — Nite Delite or Hidden Pleasures, some catchy name like that, you know, rubber underwear, handcuffs, fun stuff — and I thought, hey, I bet Claire would like one of those.”

“You actually went into one of those places? That is gross. You want to know where you can put that thing?”

“Hey, tell me. You’re a pervert, you know that? I love it.”

“I’m a pervert? Jesus. Poor Ruth.”

“Okay. I’m sorry Ruth saw. That was an accident.” He turned the machine off and placed it in its wrappings, putting it all back in his bag. “I just needed to do something to lighten up a bit. It was an impulse thing.” He sighed. “I thought you’d think it was funny. I could use a laugh.”

“You still haven’t heard?” Claire asked.

“No. Two weeks till classes start, and I still don’t know if I’m even going to be teaching. I feel like beating the crap out of somebody. I go around obsessing all day. I can barely concentrate to write.”

It was four years since David had finished his dissertation — a four-hundred-page narratological analysis of *Tristram Shandy* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* — and he was no closer to getting a full-time job now than he was then. The “market”, as they called it these days, was as dry as a sub-Saharan well, and getting worse as more cuts this year

were being piled onto cuts that were still being made from the year before. It didn't help that he'd been out of school for a while and was competing with kids six or seven years younger than him.

"So instead you bought me a vibrator?" she asked. "This is how you sublimate your aggression? How sweet of you to think of me."

"It was that or the handcuffs."

"Good choice," she said. "I'm sorry. I really am. Have you talked to Ratcliffe?"

"Jesus, I've written him three notes, called him and left messages on his machine twice in the last week. All that stuff he ignored. Then this morning I cornered him in the mailroom and point blank asked him what the story was and he still wouldn't say. What a weasel. He's the one I should use the handcuffs on." He patted his bag.

Claire did a double take. "You didn't . . ."

David smiled. "I could cuff him and the new Harvard guy together down in the basement somewhere. And sodomize them with the vibrator. That'd be a good way to go out, eh? Something to remember during the years I'm living in poverty paying back my student loans. It would make it all worth it."

"David, don't even joke about that. It's not funny."

"It's August already. What the hell am I supposed to do?" An edge of hysteria was creeping into his voice. Claire walked over and touched his face.

"Hey," she said. "It'll be okay, you know. Whatever happens, it'll be okay. I'm sure he's just overwhelmed right now."

"Please don't ask me to feel sorry for Ratsass, okay?"

"I wish you wouldn't call him that," she said. "He's my colleague, and now every time I see him I have to keep reminding myself not to call him Ratsass." She smiled. "At the last minute all the departments got told they had to cut another three per cent from this year's budget. He's under incredible pressure too."

David was silent.

"Well, how about the party on Saturday? Have you thought about that? That might cheer you up. Barry will be there."

"I don't know, Claire. I don't think I can take it."

"Can't, or won't?"

“Those faculty parties make me crazy. You know that. Ratsass will be there. And the new guy from Harvard.” He said the word “Harvard” with immense contempt.

“Come on, David. Stop feeling so sorry for yourself. You made choices. If you’d stayed in school like this new guy instead of running off to Jamaica to have your adventures and barroom brawls, you’d probably have a job too. You can’t blame other people for that.”

26

A phone rang somewhere. Claire walked over to her purse and extracted a cell phone. David took a deep breath and let it out. He knew she was right about the party. What was the big deal, after all? So he had a few drinks and bit his tongue for a couple of hours. Sometimes they even had pretty good beer at those things. And it was free, a not inconsiderable attraction. It was the only benefit he got out of this job. He’d been known to fill his coat pockets with bottles on the way out. Ratsass, as he happily referred to the Discipline Officer — wouldn’t Foucault have a ball with that? — would probably not even notice he was there, much less talk to him. He could try sucking up to the chair of the English Department, a woman named Abramson. Not bad-looking, if a little on the up-tight side. And if Claire was right and Barry O’Neill was going to be there too, it might not be so bad. If he could keep from picking a fight with the Harvard creep. Then again, why *shouldn’t* he pick a fight with the Harvard creep? That might make the whole thing worthwhile.

What he wouldn’t give for a cigarette right now. His mouth started to water at the thought. He couldn’t believe he still felt like that after a whole year without them.

When she hung up the phone and turned toward him to pick up the party discussion, he raised his right hand, the first two fingers making a v. “Peace. I’ll think about it.” He smiled.

“Well, don’t do me any favours, buddy,” she said. “I’m not really used to having to beg men to go to parties with me. Anyway, I have to beg off the coffee now. I’m sorry. That was Philippe. He’s got a problem. I have to go out there.” Claire had a small private lab licensed by the Province. Philippe Beaujour was one of her major clients, as well as a financial and spiritual backer. In the year, more or less, during

which David and Claire had been seeing each other, David had heard a lot about Philippe but never actually met him. He didn't know whether he wanted to or not.

"What kind of a problem?" he asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Her mood had changed completely. "Some kind of blight in one of his vineyards. He wasn't very specific and he was pretty upset, so I couldn't understand everything he was saying." Her attention was already shifting gears, moving to deal with this new problem. David imagined he could see her mind beginning to check off lists of what she was going to need. "It sounds like overnight he lost a bunch of vines. They were fine one day, and the next they just started dying off. Very strange."

"Why so strange?" he asked automatically.

"It's the way they're dying and the fact that a whole bunch of vines are suddenly going at the same time. *Vinifera* vines don't usually die the way Philippe's describing. There are certain things — diseases, insects, mildew, whatever — that are known to kill vines, but what he described just doesn't fit. It sounds utterly bizarre."

"Well, hey, let's go. Time's a-wastin'."

She looked at him quizzically. "Who invited you?" she asked.

"Hey, you stood me up for coffee and now you're bailing out on our make-up date. The least you can do is take me with you."

She cocked her head to one side and looked at him. He loved it when she did that. He wanted to go over and kiss her.

"Okay," she said. "Here." She walked over to a cabinet, opened it, and pulled out a metal box, which she held out to him. "Make yourself useful. You take the specimen kit. I've got to put that stuff away. Damn. When am I ever going to get the time to finish this grant material?"

He watched her file the slides and sort and stack the papers.

"Isn't there a restaurant out there? Maybe we could have lunch," he suggested. "Dutch."

"Is there any other way?" She looked around, making sure everything was in its place. "I wish I had time to go home and change," she said, slipping out of the lab coat. She was wearing trousers made out of some soft, flowing material — it looked like silk to David, but

what did he know? — in shades of brown and beige, and a loose-fitting beige blouse. “Oh, well.”

The dog day heat hit them in the face. A slight breeze ruffled the trees, but did little to dispel the heavy air. It had been like this for days. Being from the west, David found it particularly oppressive. He’d been in Ontario on and off for almost nine years, but he still couldn’t get used to it. The air outside had the same temperature and water content as his body and it made him feel like he couldn’t tell where his body started and the world began. It was weird, like trying to breathe under water. He sucked in lungfuls of the moist air. Massive banks of cumulus clouds were rolling in from the west over the escarpment, bringing some hope of relief. So far, though, no rain had materialized.

28

“My car or yours?” David asked. His twelve-year-old Cavalier was parked in the outer lot.

“You’re kidding, right?” Claire said. They loaded the specimen kit in the trunk of her Acura and headed over to 5th Street on Glendale and Pelham, then north to 81. The road cut along the top of the escarpment. Signs announced they were travelling on Ontario’s Wine Route.

Claire opened the tape holder, took out a tape of Glenn Gould playing Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, and slipped it in the tape deck. The air conditioning cooled down the car’s interior, and the music mellowed them both. David watched the fields roll by, ripe with late summer’s perfections, as the perfect music filled the car. He fiddled with the case for a while, watching the fields of corn and canola lining the road give way to vineyards. Then he placed it on the dash. “So, what’s Philippe’s story, anyway?” he asked casually.

“That’s not where it goes, David,” she said.

“What?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“The tape case. That’s not where it goes.” She glanced over.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, picking it up and returning it to the holder. “What’s the big deal? You’re just going to put the tape back in a couple of minutes anyway.”

“That’s not the point. It doesn’t go there.”

David sighed.

The two-lane road wound on through the vineyards that spread across the rolling hills. The vines, clinging to staked wires, were heavy with clusters of grapes in the late summer sun.

“What’s your sudden interest in Philippe?” she asked, a slight smile playing across her face.

“You’re really going to make me grovel, aren’t you?” he said.

Claire laughed. “It *is* kind of fun. Especially after being attacked by a vibrator.”

“You think *that* was the attack? Hah, just wait.”

“David,” she said. He glanced at her out the corner of his eye, trying to read her tone.

She was quiet for a while, then, “Not much to tell, really. His family made wine for generations. In France and later Algeria. Then in the mid-eighties, he came here on a vacation and discovered this place. Those were heady days. Do you remember that Baby Duck stuff? People were still drinking that and pretending it was wine. But they were starting to look for something more serious. They were digging up the old *lubresca* vines and putting in *vinifera*. It was all very exciting. Revolutionary, to hear him talk about it. Nobody knew what the limits were. He says he fell in love. With the spirit. And the potential. I guess it was pretty different from Europe. So he invested some money in Niagara Bench Vineyards and got himself hired as the winemaker. Now they’re winning gold medals in Europe.”

Heading west now, more and more vineyards crowded up against the little road. Beyond them, the forest ran along the face of the escarpment. Claire turned south on Victoria, then down one of the concession roads. David was silent, wondering about the kind of man who could choose the path Claire described, and be so successful at it.

As they climbed the hill, the winery grounds came into view. A renovated century farmhouse stood in the middle of the vineyards. Next to it, a more modern building, all oak and glass, was surrounded by a deck where diners sat in the sun.

Claire drove around behind the buildings and parked in the shade of a huge maple. There was a slight breeze. Shadows rippled lightly across the gravel. She turned to him, dead serious now.

“This account — and my relationship with Philippe — mean a

lot to me,” she said. He could tell she meant it. “So be nice, okay? No surprises, please. Leave your sex toys in the car.”

David shrugged and tried to look innocent. “Who, me?”

“Do I have to search you, Sanders? I mean it.”

He thought about asking her to go ahead, search him. That would be fun. Then, seeing the look on her face, thought better of it. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll be good. Cross my heart.” He crossed his heart and held up three fingers of his right hand. “Scout’s honour.”

“Yeah, well, you better be.”

30

They got out of the car and walked across the gravel lot toward another renovated building — an old carriage house — behind the farmhouse. The antique exterior contained a totally new interior. Someone had obviously put a lot of money into the renovation. Everything was top of the line, as far as David could tell. The trim, the doors. The old oak rafters had been left exposed, the space divided elegantly, comfortably. They passed through a reception area, now deserted, and down a short hall.

David didn’t know what to expect, really. He had no image of Philippe. Whenever he tried to picture him he always turned into Gérard Depardieu. Some part of him wanted the Frenchman to be kind of goofy like that. Or maybe . . . what? Like a businessman, sort of dull and grey. With hornrimmed glasses and thin white hair. Well, his hair was white, all right. David could see that as soon as they walked into his office. The door was open and Claire knocked on the jamb. Philippe Beaujour sat behind a large oak desk, its top clear except for a fountain pen, a framed photograph, and two books. His back was to the door and he was poring over another book he held in his lap. The first thing David noticed — after the hair — was how many books there were. They were neatly organized in a beautiful oak bookcase that took up one whole wall.

“Philippe,” Claire said. The man in the chair spun around and looked over the top of a pair of reading glasses. Upon seeing Claire, a large smile spread across his face.

“Ah, Claire,” he said, putting the book on the desk and standing up. He came around the desk, embraced her, his lips brushing both of her cheeks.

David stood awkwardly, until Claire finally pulled away.

“Philippe, I’d like you to meet David Sanders,” she said formally, “and David, this is Philippe Beaujour.”

It really couldn’t be worse, David thought. The bookcase was a wonder. He’d had time only to glance at the books, but even in that moment had seen some Mallarmé, caught a glimpse of some Artaud, some Ponge, some Hocquard, and a stretch of Robbe-Grillet novels. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw in that moment some Deleuze and Lyotard, too — in French. There were also books on botany and viniculture, and a few shelves with glass doors given over to empty wine bottles displayed like trophies.

So he wasn’t grey and dull. And he sure as hell wasn’t goofy-looking. Actually, he looked like Sam Shepard and was at least six-three. He smiled warmly, offering his hand. David valiantly smiled up and shook firmly. Oh God, he thought. Nor did the wedding ring on Beaujour’s left hand make him feel any better.

“I have heard so much about you from Claire,” Philippe was saying as David continued to smile. “I wish the occasion were different. I would love to sit and talk about books with you. Claire told me you did your dissertation on Thomas Pynchon. I love Pynchon. But as you no doubt know, there’s a bit of an emergency here.”

“Books,” David said, feeling inane as he said it. “Yeah, that would be great.” Then, “I’ve heard a lot about you, too.”

“Would either of you care for some coffee? I’m not sure where Adele is but I could get together something for you.”

When they both declined, he turned to Claire. “Why don’t you sit down and I’ll tell you what I know.” He gestured toward two chairs that faced his desk.

They all sat. Two days before, he started, he’d been doing his daily tour of the vineyards when he’d noticed the trouble. Some vines near the small creek bed that fed into Twenty Mile Creek appeared wilted. The leaves seemed to be losing their vigour. He’d checked for pests, but could find nothing — no grubs, no mites, no beetles, nothing. Nor was there any evidence of mildew, though given how dry the summer had been up until the recent storms, that seemed unlikely in any case. No odium, no rot. He just couldn’t figure it out.

When he'd gone back yesterday, it was worse. Leaves were starting to turn brown and fall off the vines. Ten plants were compromised. Then this morning, another seven. That's when he'd called Claire. He'd been poring over his books in the meantime, trying to find some clue as to what was going on, but none of them were any help. The only thing he could think of was poison, but who would poison his vines? It didn't make sense.

Claire wanted to see the vines right away. Philippe offered to drive, so they all went out and crowded into the front seat of his pickup, Claire sandwiched between the two men. She held the specimen box on her lap. They drove silently along some back roads, through acres of vines all in neat rows. There was no air conditioning in the truck, and soon they were all sweating in the heat. David was acutely aware of his body rubbing against Claire's. He wondered if Philippe was too. Suddenly Philippe pulled the truck over to the side of the road.

"Here," he said, opening his door. They were at the top of a hill looking down over the north face. The hill, planted with vines, fell to some woods which stretched down to a plain. In the far distance, Lake Ontario shimmered in the midday sun, a vast inland sea. Way off along the north shore, David thought he could make out the towers of Toronto blurred in the heat. Then he decided it was probably Oakville.

The vineyard was bounded by a road to the east and a shallow gully which cut in from the west, then turned back. South, the gully stretched back up the bench toward the top of the escarpment. Most of the vines looked lush and green, but where they ran along the gully, the vine leaves were brown and withered. Some barely ripe bunches of grapes lay on the ground.

Claire whistled. "Wow. I've never seen anything like it," she said. "You're absolutely right, Philippe. Nothing I know about would cause damage like that." She turned toward him. "In two days?"

He nodded. "I fear that it will spread, whatever it is."

"Damn," she said. "If I'd known I was going to wind up out here, I'd have worn jeans. And boots."

"We could go back to the house," Philippe said. "Perhaps Madeleine has something you could wear."

“No,” Claire said. “It’ll be okay.” She rolled up the sleeves of her blouse, then stooped down and rolled the bottoms of her pantlegs up above her knees. She stood up and took a few experimental steps into the damp, cultivated soil of the vineyard, then stopped. Her shoes started to sink into the muddy soil. “Shit,” she muttered, then leaned down and slipped off her flats. “Here David, I’ll trade you,” she said handing him the shoes. She took the specimen case from him and took another step, wiggling her toes in the mud. “Feels kind of good,” she said looking back at them.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” David asked. “You don’t know what you’re standing in.”

“Those shoes cost me a hundred and eighty dollars,” she said. “I’ll take my chances.”

She walked gingerly in bare feet over to the sick vines. David couldn’t tell whether she looked ridiculous or sexy. Watching her bare feet sink into the mud was a real turn-on.

She set the case down, opened it, and removed latex gloves. She pulled them on, then squatted down and began to put samples of leaves and soil in small jars which she reinserted in neat rows into the case.

The two men stood in silence, watching her methodically work her way down the row of vines. “You are close, no?” Philippe finally asked him as they stood watching her work with a precise and determined efficiency.

“Very close.”

The Frenchman smiled. “Ah. You are lucky. She is a wonderful woman. Brilliant. And you are a writer, no?”

“Yes. Novels. Some poetry. And sometimes I teach.”

“A poet! *C’est bon!* Poetry and science, they are mates.” He thought for a moment. “And wine is their child,” he said, smiling at his conceit.

David couldn’t figure him out. He was obviously trying hard to make a connection, but David couldn’t shake the feeling that his interest in Claire went beyond the purely professional. Guys like Philippe always made him a little nervous, anyway. He thought Claire’s father must have been like this. The ghost father, in the flesh.

“That’s nice,” David said. “Do you mind if I use that?”

“Consider it a gift, my friend.”

They watched Claire stand and walk to a new location. Her feet were coated in mud. She pushed a strand of hair from her face with the back of her hand.

“Madeleine — my wife — and I have known her now for five years. We like her very much. She deserves someone who cares about her.”

“Five years, eh?”

34

“Yes, I met her at a conference at the university. She was new there. She had presented a paper on the morphology of some new fungal infestations in *vinifera* vines. That was a bad year — a cold wet summer — and I had been struggling with some of the very diseases she spoke of. After her talk, we compared notes. I realized right away that she would be of great use.”

David watched the Frenchman’s eyes follow Claire as he spoke of her. Her bare legs flashed in the sunlight, and when she squatted down, her pants pulled tightly around her bum.

They had immediately hit it off, Philippe said. When he’d told Madeleine about the young woman he had met, she insisted on having her over for dinner. They had all been friends ever since. Claire, he told David, was in some ways like a daughter to them. In fact, it was Philippe who had encouraged her to start her consulting business. Her expertise was invaluable not just to Philippe, but to other vintners in the area. He thought that she could do much better for herself outside the university — they paid so poorly here, and treated professors with such disrespect. But he’d been unable to get her to give up teaching, something she loved dearly. He believed in her enough, though, that he had helped finance her lab and set up her business.

“You will excuse me?” he said to David. “I want to talk to her for a minute.” Watching them, David felt some strange stirring in his chest. Claire picked up her sample box, and together she and Philippe walked over to the gully. She seemed small and fragile standing next to the tall Frenchman, with her bare, mud-covered feet. David went to join them, stepping from dry spot to dry spot, trying to keep his sandals as clean as possible. “I won’t know until I do some tests,” she was saying, “but I don’t see how it could be anything else.”

“What?” David asked.

“Some kind of toxin. An herbicide, or defoliant.”

“You mean like Agent Orange?”

“Look — all along the watercourse here.” She pointed at the vegetation that lined the gully in both directions. “It’s not just the vines that have been affected.”

“But how,” Philippe asked. “Why?”

David followed the direction of Claire’s gesture and saw the devastation wrought along the gully. All along its stretch, grasses and weeds were dead or dying. “It could have been an accident. Maybe some farmer spilled something and was too busy or too scared to report it or deal with it.”

“Maybe,” Claire said. She reached up again with her gloved hand and pushed her hair back, leaving a streak of mud on her forehead. “It looks like it might have been washed down here in those thunderstorms the other night. It came down pretty heavily. That would have diluted it some. And here, where the gully flattens out and swerves toward the vines, it would have overflowed if there was enough rain.”

“There was a lot of rain,” Philippe said. “I was worried about the grapes.”

“Or maybe,” David said, “somebody’s been dumping up there.”

“That’s crazy,” Philippe said. “Who would do something like that?”

“David is a writer,” Claire said, stooping down to get some earth into a bottle. “It’s kind of like his job to think up crazy stuff.”

“Hey, it’s not that crazy. Hell, they use waste oil saturated with dioxin to spray on dirt roads to keep the dust down.”

“That’s in the States,” Claire said, standing up. “Arkansas or Missouri or somewhere like that. I don’t think that’s common practice up here.”

“Yeah, well, what about Hydro?” David shot back. It had just been discovered that the giant utility had been dumping various heavy metals and poisons into Lake Ontario for decades.

Claire looked at him. “And what’s that got to do with our situation exactly, David?”

Nothing. He'd just slipped into the old argument without even thinking. "Well, my point stands. It's not so crazy, that's all."

People are able to go on, David had once told her, only because they are wrapped in illusions, cocooned from the true perilousness of their condition. Burning rain forests, melting ice caps, poisoned water supplies. Just the other day there had been a piece in the paper about mutant frogs in the wetlands of northern Minnesota. The authorities had dealt with it by giving the local people bottled water, telling them not to drink the tap water. *That was crazy.*

36

But even if people woke up one day and all the trees were dead and the sky had turned orange and there was water lapping at their doorsteps from the melting ice caps, he was convinced that still wouldn't be enough to wake them up. Who wants to give up not just their wealth, or their job, or their level of comfort — but reality, *their* reality?

That was the problem. It was like Ruth in the lab. When you see something you don't want to see, just pretend you didn't see it. It was part of some kind of law. David called it the Law of Ontological Inertia. Lives in motion along certain paths tend to stay in motion along precisely those paths. Unless some terrific force intervenes. Also known, he said, as business as usual.

David looked up the gully to where it disappeared in a stand of hardwood. He imagined he could see a path of dying trees and thought about trying to follow the flow back up the hill to the source of the spill. What would he find? An empty drum lying in a gully? Or a body, maybe? Full of bulletholes, or choked and drowned in poisons. Probably some guilty farmer trying to hide his criminal neglect. Who knew?

There was a story here, a mystery waiting to be unraveled, he thought. Maybe, if he could get a line on it, he could write it up and sell it to one of the big daily papers in Toronto. Or better yet, a magazine. The wine angle was a good one. Everybody was crazy about the wine industry these days. And he could work Philippe in. Do a profile or something. People would love to read about a guy like him. Sooner or later, one of the novels would sell. But in the meantime, there were other ways to make money from writing, and this seemed like a real opportunity.

He raised it with Claire when they got back to the winery. She'd wanted to get to her lab right away, but he'd insisted that since they were there they have lunch before heading back.

"But look at me, David." She stood outside the pickup truck back at the office. Her pantlegs were still rolled up, as were her sleeves. Mud was caked up to her ankles and streaked on her face.

David reached over and pulled a piece of leaf out of her hair. "I think you look beautiful — like some kind of nature goddess. What do you think, Philippe?"

"You remind me of the women from my village. Gorgeous."

"Okay, guys, that's enough. I might faint if you keep it up."

Claire washed off her feet with a hose around the side of the office, then went inside and cleaned up in the bathroom. When she returned, the mud was gone, she had fresh lipstick on, and she was once again shod in her expensive and immaculate shoes. She invited Philippe to have lunch with them, but he had too much work to do. David tried to look disappointed. Philippe said goodbye, kissing Claire again and firmly shaking David's hand, then disappeared behind the buildings.

A woman led them to a table on the deck and left them with menus.

"I'm thinking this might make a great story," David said. "This whole wine thing is really hot right now. And so is ecological contamination. Put them together, and it's dynamite."

Claire was dubious. "I really doubt there's much of a story, David. Some farmer drops a drum of weed killer off the back of his truck and it breaks open. He gets scared and decides to pretend it never happened. You think anyone will really want to read about that?"

"Yeah, well, maybe. I'm not convinced, though. But even that could be a good story. It all depends on how you write it. Why is he scared? Or why is he more scared of the government than he is of the damage the pesticide might do?"

The woman who walked up to serve them was young with long blonde hair flowing over her shoulders and on to her well-developed chest. Her crepe skirt and tight spandex top left little to the imagination.

“Professor Sanders?” she asked, smiling broadly at David.

“Oh, hi,” David said. He tried not to stare. She beamed at him, seemingly oblivious to Claire, who watched their exchange with some amusement.

“I was in your Children’s Lit class last fall,” the girl said, the statement rising to a question mark. “I really enjoyed it.” David felt a little flushed.

“Are you blushing?” Claire asked, when the girl swooshed and bounced away with their orders. “You are, aren’t you? Where’s that little toy thing? Is it in your bag?” She twisted around looking for David’s bag.

David’s colour rose a bit more. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey what? You’re not worried about your reputation, are you? I thought her excitement at encountering her professor was a heart warming testament to the value of higher education.”

“What do you mean?” David asked, trying to sound innocent.

“Oh, come on. You practically undressed her while she was standing there. Not that that would have been a big job. She was just about to fall out of that top. Children’s Literature. How fitting. What did you do, read her bedtime stories? Was that before or after Diana? Or during?”

“There were a hundred and fifty students in that class. I don’t even remember her.” Claire looked skeptical. “Well,” he said, “barely, anyway.”

“Barely, indeed. And what part of her exactly do you barely remember? Or was that remember barely?”

When she returned with their drinks, David tried to keep his eyes locked on Claire who chuckled at his obvious effort.

“Bzzzzzzz,” she said.

He actually remembered the student quite well. She hadn’t been among the brightest students in the class, but she’d always sat in the front row fiddling with the buttons on her blouse.

“Well,” he said, “I have to admit there were a couple of times there when I thought about writing my MP and proposing her chest be declared a national monument. Not really a park or anything, but like a national treasure.”

“What?” Claire said.

“You know, preserved in their pristine form for posterity. Put ’em on a plaque somewhere.”

“David Sanders, you are a sexist pig.”

“Hey, look who’s talking — bzzzzzzzz.”

The food, when it arrived, was delicious. Claire had a Caesar salad which a young man made at the table with real anchovies and egg. David, having determined they didn’t do burgers, settled for a fancy version of a chicken club. They each had a glass of the Dry Riesling. Large maples overhung the deck, shading the diners. The vista spread down to the lake just visible in the distance. The cold, crisp wine tasted all the more delicious in the muggy August heat.

He looked out over the vineyards and forests and sipped his wine. “It’s wild, isn’t it?” he said finally. “I mean, whatever the story is. You take one event, one sign, like those dead vines, and it radiates backwards and forwards to reveal and create whole worlds that are utterly different from anything we know. So what if it’s a farmer. A farmer might as well be an alien to us. A life form we know nothing about, but might contact by decoding the signs. Encoded in those dead vines could be not just the moment the drum fell off his truck, but all the events that led up to that moment. Maybe he had a fight with his wife and so he didn’t secure the drum right. Or maybe he was hung over because his daughter got married last night — or died in a car crash — and he was blasted. Endless chains of proliferating, interconnected events, hopes, dreams, sorrows, joys, pain, the whole human mess locked up in that one moment, that one sign — ten dead vines screaming decipher this, sucker. Like one eddy has the information of the whole river tied up in it, from beginning to end.”

“I feel a scientific metaphor coming on,” Claire said. “You know how much I hate it when you throw poetry at me disguised as science.”

David laughed.

“Seriously, though,” she said. “It may be interesting to you, or maybe even me, but do you think a magazine is going to buy that?”

He shrugged. “How long will it take you to find out what it is?”

“Tomorrow, probably. But maybe Friday.”

She lifted her wineglass and let the sunlight flow through the exquisite straw-coloured liquid. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Philippe called it the child of poetry and science."

"I'll bet he did. Did he tell you I was like a daughter to him and Madeleine?"

"His very words. I think he thought I was jealous."

"And were you?" she asked, sipping the wine and looking at him over the rim of the glass.

"Ah, the green-eyed monster. Othello and Desdemona. Thou tyrant, tyrant jealousy, thou tyrant of the mind. Is that what you mean?"

40

She laughed. "You know what I mean."

"Let me put it this way. While I wasn't about to strangle you for losing your handkerchief, I was maybe a little bit worried that you might be entertaining naughty thoughts about a tall, good-looking French guy, when your naughty thoughts should be entertained about me. Did he ever come onto you?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because he strikes me as the kind of guy who couldn't keep it at home, even if he wanted to. And I don't get the feeling that he wants to."

"First of all, it's none of your business," she said. "And even if it was, nothing happened."

Something about the tone of her voice left David uneasy. They looked at each other, silent for the moment. The murmur of the other diners blended with the constant chirrup of the cicadas. A breeze had sprung up off the lake, cooling down the sticky air, bringing some blessed relief from the heat. It ruffled her hair, and as he watched her, he thought how perfect that was, as if the world couldn't get any better.

And then, suddenly, it was Terry's place in Negril. It was strange how there was never any leaving it behind. Each moment seemed so pristine, but it was always connected to every other moment, dragging not only the past with it, but the future. Just like he'd been saying about whatever happened to the grapevines. That day had been a great day, too. Not only had he written through a difficult part of

the book, but he had suddenly seen his way to the end. Like Cortez in Keats' sonnet, he'd thought, looking out at the Pacific. Except it was really Balboa, as the footnotes all told you. "Silent upon a peak in Darien." Anyway, whoever it was, the rest of the book had spread out for him the same way, vast and specific. All he had to do was walk on down.

He'd bummed some weed from Terry and gone down to the beach to celebrate by watching the sun set. There are times when things are so perfect it hurts, so perfect the perfection itself is like a terrific wound. Watching the sun set over the water that night, the palms swaying in the trade winds, etched against the coral sky, the air heavy with the fragrance of the sea, he'd thought, it can't get any better. And two days later he was in a hospital in Kingston, his gut trussed up like a stuffed turkey.

"Where'd you go?" Claire asked. "Are you okay?"

"Sorry. I'm fine. Listen, I've got to work tonight. But you'll let me know what you find out, right? I'm serious about finding the story in this. Even if it's some doofus farmer with slippery fingers who can't hang onto his pesticide. That could be a story too."

"Herbicide."

"Whatever. See, I need you. We could do it together. Kind of like Nick and Nora."

"You mean those *Thin Man* movies? Who was that?"

"William Powell and Myrna Loy," David said. "It was great. They drank prodigious, inhuman quantities of alcohol with no guilt or regret. Martinis for breakfast. And lived in magnificent hotel suites that were bigger than any house I've ever lived in. And solved mysteries. Does it get any better? We can be a kind of postmodern version. PM Nick and Nora. It'll be fun."

"How about you be Nora," she said, "and I'll be Nick?"

He laughed. "Sure. As long as we don't have to cross-dress. My legs look terrible in skirts." He held one up for her inspection.

It was her turn to laugh. "What'll we do for a dog? Didn't they have a dog? A jumpy little thing?"

"Asta. This the postmodern version. There is no dog. Dog is dead."

Claire groaned.

“Okay,” David went on, “how about Charlie?” Charlie was his cat. He’d been named after Charles Manson by the friend who first brought him to David’s apartment. He’d spent the whole trip there screaming and throwing himself wildly against the walls of the cardboard box he was being transported in, communicating a murderous rage to his chauffeur. The name stuck.

Claire suggested Charlie could do Asta in drag, dressed up as a dog.

“Sure. And we’ll get really witty and throw off brilliant one-liners at a moment’s notice.”

42

“Oh God, anything but that. I’m too tired to be witty. And I will be too tired for a long time.”

The sun was low in the sky when they got back to the university. Claire dropped David off at his car and headed over to her business lab. She wanted to get started on the analyses of the specimens she’d collected so she could let Philippe know what was going on as soon as possible.

David went into the Leacock Building and caught the elevator up to the fifth floor. A bleak brick highrise, it was the spawn of late-sixties public institution architectural thinking, meant, David was convinced, to crush its users beneath the weight of its indifference to their humanity. The long corridors were empty. Faculty members had plastered the doors to their offices with cartoons, posters, notices of conferences, and calls for journal articles which only barely and ineffectually humanized the starkness of the space.

He stopped in front of a door with the words “Corrigan — History” on it. He had no office of his own. Each time his contract was picked up again, he’d get assigned to the office of some faculty member who was on sabbatical. That meant he spent each semester sitting at some stranger’s desk, surrounded by their books, while they were off in Provence or Rome or New York writing their next book at the university’s expense.

He thought of it as a form of torture. He was worried about how tedious his anger was becoming, but found himself constantly provoked by the unconscious cruelties that punctuated his existence. Nor did it matter that some part of him was actually grateful to have

some space — any space away from the cramped basement apartment where he slept and sometimes ate. He was still holding onto the key to Corrigan's office — she was an associate professor in the history department currently staying with her family in Tuscany for the year — until he knew for sure whether he would get a class.

He sat down at the desk that dominated the small room. Opening the bottom drawer, he pulled out a bottle of Wild Turkey and a glass and poured a couple of fingers. He swallowed some whiskey, then pulled a notebook out of his book bag. He saw the paper bag, and pulled that out as well, removing the golden vibrator which he sat up on its end in front of him. He raised his glass to it, poured a little of the bourbon out on the floor, and downed what was left. He poured some more, then opened his notebook and began to write. He wrote quickly, occasionally sipping whiskey. When the glass was empty, he poured some more. His hand itched to hold a cigarette. Finally he stopped writing, stood up, and paced around the cramped space. He stared out the window at the escarpment lit by the evening sun, walked some more, then sat and wrote again.

He did that until the fading light got so faint he couldn't see well enough to write anymore. He switched on the overheads, but the fluorescent lights made him feel sick. He turned them off again, poured some more whiskey, and watched the daylight dim until it disappeared altogether and he was left sitting alone in the darkness with the golden phallus gleaming dully on the desk.