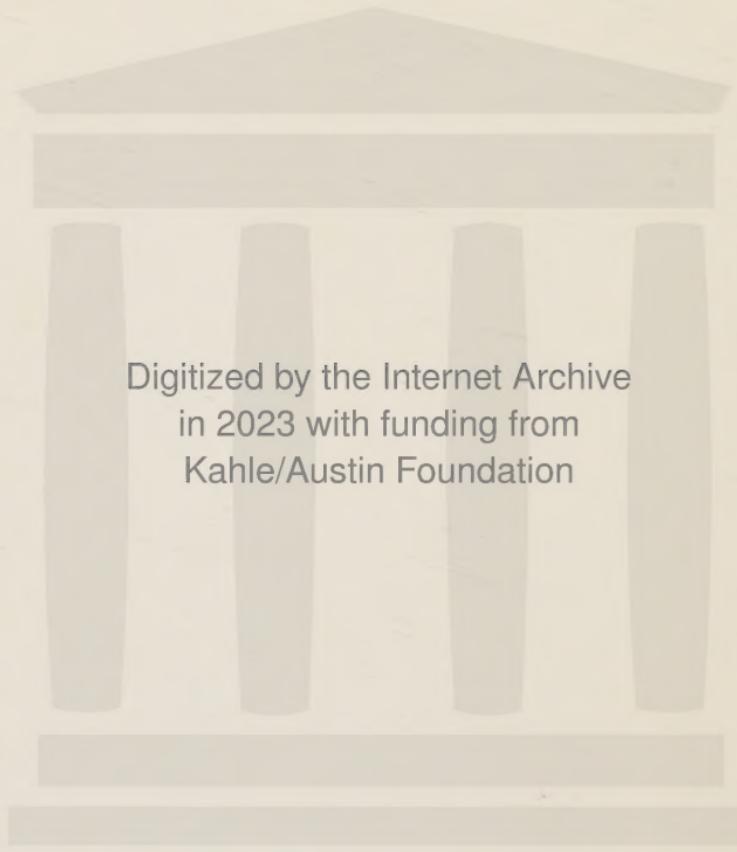


Jerome
Charyn

Going
to
Jerusalem



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GOING TO

JERUSALEM

A NOVEL BY

JEROME CHARYN

HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON

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Rilke*, translated by M. D. Herter Norton.

In memory of
DELMORE SCHWARTZ

See, I am one whom all have deserted.
No one knows of me in the city,
leprosy has befallen me.
And I beat upon my rattle,
knock the sorrowful sight of me
into the ears of all
who pass near by.
And those who woodenly hear it, look
not this way at all, and what's happened here
they do not want to learn.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, "The Song of the Leper"

P A R T **One**

Baron, you should not have believed his lies. Schliemann was a sore loser. He claimed that I hypnotized his pieces before a game; I left ashes on the board, I sang, I confused him. But I am the one who should complain. I spent all my time between moves thinking up ways of seducing his wife. If he had not been such a poor player, he would have realized that my games with him were a joke. A novice would have won, but not Schliemann. Any move intimidated him. I would give him a pawn gratis, and he would think that it was a ruse to trap his queen. No, I could not have played him again. It was torture.

—BALDUR KORTZFLEISCH, *Conversations in Heaven and Hell*

C H A P T E R O N E

The Admiral's moved upstairs.

Miss Eva will tell you that he's out inspecting the color guard or holding maneuvers with his chess prodigies. I know better. He's in the tower with his telescope. But the Castle's in good hands. The Admiral would never forsake his cadets. He keeps an eye on the harbor for half the day, but he still has time to approve the cadets' menus and to confer with his aides. The Admiral's almost seventy; he has a bad foot, a demented wife, and an epileptic son, but his aides are very loyal. They worry about the Admiral's afflictions. Last year the Admiral's wife tried to poison him. The year before, she strangled Wellington, the Admiral's garter snake. Now she's interned in a sanitarium outside Valhalla. The Admiral visits her every second week. Sometimes Miss Eva goes along.

Three weeks ago the Admiral's son packed his cardboard trunk and left home. The Admiral found a note tacked to the front door. Miss Eva had to decipher it for him: "Father, I'll be 31 on Tuesday. *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.* I have to be free. I'm only three blocks away. On Pacific Street. You can always find me here—my new address is 317½. Or at the Castle. Please understand. The pact is still on. I've already charted Kortz's tour. Tell Mama that I'm fine.

Take care of your foot. Love. Ivan." The Admiral destroyed the note. And a day later he shut himself up in the tower. According to the Admiral's aides, Ivan is an absolute wretch. Miss Eva shudders whenever he shows up. She calls him Rasputin because of his shaggy red beard. Or Ivan the Terrible.

The Admiral would be lost without the Castle and his cadets. The Castle doesn't have a dormitory, and it only has facilities for boys under twelve; but it does have its own ship, the S.S. Neptune, docked at Pier 11, near the Brooklyn Bridge. The Admiral's cadets sleep at home, but on Mondays and Wednesdays they board the Neptune, take their stations, and salute the passing tugs and freighters. The Neptune has been idle for twenty years, but the boys don't seem to mind, as long as the foghorns work.

The Admiral has four crippled toes on his left foot, and he had to sit out both world wars. Crabtree, the Admiral's chief aide, was a gunnery officer on Atlantic convoys during World War II. When he's not drilling cadets aboard the Neptune or teaching them naval history, you can always find him with the Admiral, reminiscing about destroyer escorts, wolf packs, and depth bombs. While Crabtree tells his war stories, the Admiral's bony face gleams like a jackknife. He forgets about his hammertoes and his epileptic son. When the Admiral retires, the school will go to Crabtree. The Admiral has practically adopted him.

I'm one of the Admiral's protégés, too. I've taken over his chess club. The Admiral's six- and seven-year-old prodigies are very polite, but I'm sure they would prefer to have the Admiral back. I don't blame them. They won't learn very much about chess from me. I've never believed in maxims and rules. The Admiral has taught them all about doubled pawns, bad bishops, and wandering queens; he's told them wonderful stories about Alekhine, Capablanca, and Akiba the Great; he's steered them away from hasty pawn grabs and taught them to defend even the most hopeless positions, and I have trouble maneuvering the magnetized chessmen on the Admiral's demonstration board. The cadets wait for new variations of the

King's Indian, or Alekhine's answer to the Ruy Lopez, and I fumble around and give them nothing. It's shameful, I know, but the cadets would never complain to the Admiral. And even if they did, what difference would it make to me? The Admiral has his methods, and I have mine.

I should be grateful to the Admiral. Not only have I inherited his chess club, he's also opened a new division for me at the Castle. I'm in charge of the Admiral's special program for high school dropouts. Every afternoon, after the cadets pick up their shakos and the Castle empties out, I smoke three or four Tiparillos, read *Chess News* and *Schachmatny Listok*, and wait around in the faculty john. Then, in an hour's time, the Castle fills up again. Now secretaries from Flatbush and East New York, stock boys, printers' devils, and local cowboys from Brighton and Canarsie, salesgirls from A&S, ushers and usherettes from the Loew's Pitkin, and tellers from the South Brooklyn Savings Bank jam into the main hall on the fourth floor, and my day begins all over again. While the Admiral sits overhead, I unwind for an hour and a half on Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Groucho Marx, on J. Edgar Hoover, Willie Mays, and Ho Chi Minh, on the disappearance of Ché Guevara and the sudden reappearance of the Weltschachmeister Baldur Kortzfleisch, or on anything else that comes to mind. The secretaries sit in their cramped seats and fill up notebook after notebook, the printers' devils mark the Admiral's woodwork with their inky thumbs, the local cowboys congregate at the back of the hall and play Acey-Deucy or Camelot, and upstairs, the Admiral guards the harbor with his telescope and watches over the Neptune, the Statue of Liberty, and the Brooklyn Bridge.

CHAPTER TWO

My landlady, Mrs. Fuentes, adores the cadets. She'd like to adopt one. She hasn't found out yet about my connections with the Castle; if she ever did, she'd have me petition the Admiral in her behalf. Mrs. Fuentes lives in the cellar with her Arab boyfriend. She's a masterful mechanic, but somehow she can never get the steam to rise above the ground floor. Her tenants complain; they expect the Arab to tend the steam pipes. The Arab has other occupations. He spends his day eating goat cheese and serenading Mrs. Fuentes. Like all Arab gigolos from Atlantic Avenue, he wears a mustache and calls himself Hajji Baba. His hours are entirely his own. The Puerto Rican housewives curse and slam down their windows whenever Hajji tunes up his pear-shaped guitar, but the neighboring tomcats congregate behind the cellar steps and howl along with the music. Mrs. Fuentes doesn't dare chase them away. The Arab needs an audience. Let him play. If the steam refuses to rise, I can always stand near the oven and thaw myself out.

On a clear day I can watch the cadets climb the gangplank and take their battle stations aboard the Neptune. It seems Crabtree's never outgrown the Second World War. I'm sure he'd prefer to be somewhere in the middle of the ocean, sur-

rounded by destroyer escorts, challenging enemy submarines. For Crabtree the war ended much too soon. The Admiral discovered him in the shoe department at Macy's in 1948. The Admiral thought it was a crime for a gunnery officer to be selling elevator shoes. He was going to write the President. He hired Crabtree instead. And now Crabtree's the sheriff of the Castle and the Neptune's commander in chief.

The foghorns blast three times. That's my cue. The Neptune will soon be emptying out. I slice a tomato and walk over to the window. The cadets are lining up. I have to find my tie. Some juice from the tomato drips on my shirt. I run down the stairs. Hajji Baba pokes his head out of the cellar. There are dark rings under his eyes. I must have wakened him. He brandishes his guitar and shouts at me in his Atlantic Avenue dialect. No time for apologies. The cadets have already reached the promenade.

Miss Eva sees me from her window. The Castle's lone gargoyle snarls over our heads. I pause in front of the Admiral's plaque. Did I forget to tell you?—the Castle's a shrine. Lincoln slept here. During the Civil War. No one's sure of the exact date, but it's all been verified by official documents. The Army owned the building then, and Walt Whitman lived across the street. I can't dally over the Admiral's memorabilia—the cadets are coming. I scramble up to the second floor and unlock the conference room. I check the magnetized chessmen and rub the demonstration board with my sleeve. There's a hole in one of my socks. I can hear the Admiral's prodigies assemble at the other end of the hall. Crabtree dismisses them, and they line up outside the door. Cadet Van Buren knocks. "Sir?" He's the leader of the pack. Four foot one in his shako. He knocks again. "Sir. Van reporting. All present and accounted for. The Black Knights are here."

It won't do any good delaying them. I grab some chalk and let them in. If I write a few x's and y's on the blackboard, I'll feel better. They take off their shakos and copy down the x's and y's. Six runts, and I'm afraid of them. Not one of them comes up to my crotch. Cruickshank with his toy spiders and

his red hair. Moonan and his datenut bread—he comes from Staten Island every morning on one of the Admiral's scholarships. The Cody twins and their endowment-crazy father. Van Buren. And Little Davey Williams from Lenox Avenue and 125th. The Admiral wanted a pickaninny in his wolf pack, and I had to find him one, one with an aptitude for chess. Next year the Admiral will ask for a Cuban refugee.

I clutter the board with x's and y's. Only the cadets could follow my diagrams. "If White concentrates his power on the king's side," I say, finding room for another x, "what are Black's alternatives?" Moonan raises his hand—"Sir, Sir"—and scrambles over to the blackboard. He circles a cluster of y's. "Black makes his breakthrough here." He circles another cluster, then joins them. "Black feints with a wing attack, lines up his bishops, and drives through the center. White's position is hopeless. Black controls the field. Mate in five."

Now the fun begins. The Cody twins support Moonan's theories. They always work as a team. Cruickshank takes out his toy spider, dribbles it on the desk, and then announces: "Checkmate in five is premature." Little Davey agrees. "White aint gonna dive in five." Moonan takes up his own defense. He stabs a few x's with his chalk. The cadets turn to me. Am I supposed to unravel the x's and y's? I pretend to study the board. "I'm afraid neither side has a substantial claim. I think we should . . ." Cadet Van Buren stands up, pouts, and eyes us all. Is he going to bail me out? Scorning my x's and y's, he gathers the magnetized chessmen and assigns them squares on the Admiral's demonstration board. Then he takes out my pointer and aims it at the board. The pointer's taller than he is. It wavers in his hand. He props it against his side like a lance and taps a succession of unoccupied squares. "An oversight," he says icily. "White has the stronger game." He puts away the pointer and juggles a few of the chessmen on the board. "Black's counterattack leaves his king unprotected. If he attacks on the left, he loses his rook." He juggles the pieces again. "If he tries a queenside assault, he loses the game

as well. Either way he's cooked." Moonan studies the board, reappraises my x's and y's, and then gives in. "White," he says, "clearly." The Cody boys whisper to themselves: they've been betrayed. They're probably regretting that their father helped pay for Moonan's scholarship. Cruickshank resigns himself and erases the blackboard. Davey challenges the chessmen with Cruickshank's spider.

It's my turn now. I call the cadets to attention. Their faces are still flushed from their war games aboard the Neptune. Hunching over dramatically, I sweep the chessmen off the demonstration board. "Theories," I say. The Codys inch backwards in their seats. Van Buren's unimpressed by my antics; he yawns. I continue in spite of him.

"Nobody wins games on a blackboard. White's game? Steinitz would have won with Black. Kortzfleisch, too. Kortz would have holed in his king and waited out White's attack. And he would have deviled him in the meantime—until White fizzled away his superiority. Kortz . . ."

Moonan purses his lips tentatively. What does he want to say? He ruffles his chin and finally gets it out. "Kortzfleisch's a *Nazi*. Adm'ral told us. He betrayed his country."

I lean over the table. "What do you know about Nazis?" Why am I shouting? "I mean, you weren't alive when . . ." I'm an ogre, I am. Good for frightening six-year-olds.

Moonan rallies like a true cadet. He suppresses his tears and pushes on with his attack.

"He's a mur-der-er and a gh-ghoul. He made experiments on people. He took out their glands." His eyes bug out. "That's why he can't enter no tourn'ments. All his records have been null-null-nullified. Adm'ral says so. His games don't count. His games don't count. His games don't count."

Moonan has spent himself. Now he starts to cry. Van Buren comes to the rescue.

"Kortz," he says with murderous aplomb, "Kortz is beside the point. Capa creamed him before the Nazis came around. In Havana. In Montevideo. At Baden-Baden. And in London, *twice*."

"All right," I say, "'ten-shun. Class dismissed."

Cruickshank looks at his ancient Mickey Mouse watch. He doesn't want to be rude, but he thinks I've made a mistake. He points to the dials.

"Sir, it's only a quarter past thr—"

"Dismissed. I said dismissed. See you tomorrow."

Cruickshank gets the point. He lines up with the others. Holding their hats under their arms, they salute and march out of the room. Had to pull my authority on them. Shame. I lock up and walk over to the Admiral's office. I check my mailbox. It's empty. Crabtree's is filled with discount tickets and mimeographed notices from Miss Eva. She steals my mail, I'm sure of it. I knock on her door. I can see her move behind the frosted glass. Her body recoils. She knows it's me.

"Miss Eva, I'd like to see the Admiral. It's important."

She opens the door part of the way. Her beads jangle. Old Maid. She used to be the Admiral's mistress. Now her charms are out of favor. But you still can't get near the Admiral without going through Miss Eva. The Admiral won't upset his chain of command.

"What do you want?" Her nose twitches. "The Admiral's indisposed."

"I know he isn't in his office. He's upstairs." Should I force my way in? She'll scream and call for Crabtree. They'll wring my neck in front of the cadets. "I have to see him. Tell him—"

"I've talked with him. He won't see you."

She shuts the door.

"Miss Eva . . ."

Crabtree comes down the hall. He's flanked by two of his subalterns, Simon Burt and Marlo. All three are wearing their indoor uniforms—polo shirts with the Castle's emblem embroidered over the pocket and wrinkleproof trousers with two taped-on stripes. Simon Burt sucks in his enormous gut and the emblem dances: a black dragon snorting a spray of green fire. The Admiral's favorite motto is under the spray. "*Pro Deo et Patria.*" Simon turns his head to see if any cadets are around. Reassured, he says, "Spicks and Arabs. The whole

neighborhood's infiltrated. The old man ought to move the works to Rockaway."

Marlo's perplexed. "What's he going to do with the Castle?"

"He can hand it over to the Arabs. Let 'em put up a few steeples and turn it into a mosque. That way they can convert all the spicks." Simon Burt guffaws. His gold tooth juts out.

"What about the boat? You think the old man's going to let it lay in the harbor?"

"Who said anything 'bout leaving the boat? Crabs is gonna steer it through the Narrows."

Crabtree frowns, and they both shut up. Crabs' underlings have all been ordered to ignore me. Marlo's in a quandary. My presence always upsets him. I have a small claim on his loyalty. We were together a lot in the old days—before Crabtree came to the Castle. He took me to dog races and magic shows. I still have the blue scarf that Bertolini, Master of Magic and Lord of the Black Arts, fished out of Marlo's pocket. He looks past me. Mum's the word. Simon Burt sniffs the air. "You smell something? The air 'round here is getting pretty foul. We'll have to do something about that."

Crabtree inspects the mailbox. He reads one of Miss Eva's mimeographed notices, scowls, and crumples it in his fist. "Marlo. Tell the chess maestro that Miss Eva is on to his cigars. She's discovered his cache in the faculty john, and she intends to notify the Admiral. Ask the maestro if he recalls the Admiral's edict about smoking on Castle grounds? Tell him he's setting a poor example."

"Go to hell, Crabtree."

Simon chuckles to himself. "Crabs, His Lordshit says go to hell."

Crabtree stuffs the notice in Marlo's hand. He enters the Admiral's office without bothering to knock. His subalterns follow behind him. Marlo gives me an apologetic shrug, stares at the crumpled paper in his hand, and closes the door. His silhouette ripples the frosted glass.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

The lecture hall is immediately below the Admiral's tower, and if I shout loud enough the Admiral can hear every word. The salesgirls and the usherettes in the first row are somewhat dismayed. They can't understand why I stare at the ceiling when I'm supposed to be lecturing to them. My odd behavior obviously titillates them. They think it's shyness that keeps me from peeping up their skirts. And they take turns displaying their legs. The printers' devils and the Canarsie cowboys have other assumptions. I hear their daily appraisals from my station in the faculty john. While I smoke a Tiparillo and memorize Alekhine's openings in order to keep up with Cadet Van Buren, the cowboys dissect my mental condition before class. " 'Tsa joke. No homework. No tests. If 'Rasmus woulda been like this, I coulda pulled hundreds right and left. I come here for algebra and geometry. I got the brains, see, but the hypotenuses always mix me up. So Pop sends me here. And wha' happens? They throw us Frankenstein with a hairy chin. Creep. Did he ever mention the hypotenuse? And Pop shells out plenty just so I can hear him jabber away."

I would oblige the cowboys if I could. I would construct marvelous diagrams for them replete with hypotenuses, but

I don't know the first thing about geometry, and I'm a little too old to learn. My schooling was sparser than theirs. I can tell them how Nietzsche contracted syphilis or how Dostoyevsky's father died, I can quote long passages from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* or *Tender Is the Night*, I can give them detailed information about priggish gunnery officers, chess prodigies, and epileptics, I can unload my spleen on them in a hundred assorted ways, but nothing more. The special program isn't working out at all. I'm sure the usherettes and the salesgirls will stick with me to the end, but I'm waiting for the cowboys and the printers' devils to drop out or openly rebel.

"You cannot confuse morality and artistic performance." I watch the salesgirls take down my words. "You . . ." I can't help myself. The cadets have roused my ire. I glare at the ceiling. "Does every work of art, every brilliant performance, have to have a moral price tag on it? *The following work was created by a kind, upright, virtuous man.* What a foolish proposition! If evil corrupts, it also enlightens. Virtue exists in a vacuum. It . . ." The cowboys have given up. I can hear their dice crackle. They've spread out their backgammon board on one of the back seats. It's Acey-Deucy in the Admiral's main hall. The sound of the dice calms me. I continue. "Virtue strangles." The salesgirls raise their kneecaps in anticipation. I hear footsteps outside. The door opens. The usherettes giggle among themselves. Mitkin marches in. He's wearing his uniform. His epaulettes gleam under the fluorescent lights and spangle the Admiral's woodwork. Mitkin is captain of the ushers at the Loew's Pitkin. It's written on his uniform. He shrugs one shoulder and affects a sheepish grin. "Professor, I'm sorry. The projector's a little temperamental. The feature didn't end until six." Then he searches for a seat. He insists on sitting in the second row, among the usherettes. "Sorry, sorry," he says, brushing against a battery of knees. The cowboys abandon their dice for a moment. They hoot at Mitkin for disturbing their peace. Mitkin sits down, and the usherettes realign their knees. "Virtue," I say, trying to warm

up my ideas. Mitkin winks and goggles at me brazenly. "Virtue," he says, "virtue." One of the usherettes bumps him with her elbow. "Shush." Mitkin behaves. "Each individual act, each creative force, demands its own set of rules. We cannot manufacture wholesale moral judgments. No crime, no work of art, no act of love, no moment of despair, can be equated with another."

I go on for an hour. I ramble, I rave, I shout at the ceiling, I glare at the desk, I harangue the cowboys, I take virtue and vice through a series of intricate twists and turns, I bring in Kortzfleisch, Kierkegaard, and Ringo Starr, and while my throat hums, I dismiss the class. Stretching and yawning, the usherettes salute me with their chests. My talk has cramped their legs. The salesgirls turn down the covers of their notebooks. The cowboys have fallen asleep. I rouse them. "Okay, it's supper time." Mitkin fidgets in his seat. He wants the others to go. The salesgirls tuck in their blouses, collect their jackets and coats, and file past, making sure I catch a good glimpse of their behinds. The usherettes click their heels in a tantalizing way. Grumbling to themselves, the cowboys pick up their belongings, pack their dice, and leave, casting sour glances at me and the woodwork. As soon as the room empties out, Mitkin unbuttons his jacket and throws me kisses from the second row. He's wearing a battleworn New York Giants sweatshirt underneath. "Beautiful," he says, throwing me another kiss. "You were beautiful. Should I call you Professor, Swami, or Guru? No name is good enough. Wise is not the word. Brilliant is better. Do those clowns appreciate you? One thing, Mitkin appreciates."

"Mitkin, I don't need any disciples. Go home."

"That's the trouble. You do, you do." He jumps up and walks behind me. "I'm cursed the way you are. We're a pair. Mutt needs Jeff, right? And you need me. Besides, I gotta stay with you. Don't you remember? I'm supposed to give you driving lessons."

"That's different. That's something else. Come on." He follows me down the steps.

"Hey," he says, pausing near the landing. "How come you never learned to drive a car?"

"Mitkin, do you want the job or not?"

"Sure," he says, "sure." He mumbles to himself all the way down to the ground floor. "What's the matter? Can't a guy have a little curiosity? Since when are questions a crime?"

We leave the Castle and walk over to the lot across the street. Some usherettes are waiting near the bus stop. They point to us. Mitkin ignores them and inspects the cars in the lot. "Which one's yours? The Olds? The Chevy? Personally I don't care much for the new models. They don't grab me here," he says, molding the sweatshirt over his heart. "Take that green Caddy over there. That's a car. Immaculate, and I'll bet it's at least eighteen years old. A '47 or a '48 at the most." He stares disdainfully at the Impala parked in front of him. "That yours?" he says, crumpling his face.

"No. Mine's the Cadillac. The 1948."

Mitkin perks up instantly. He dances a jig around me, hopping like an Indian. Then, remembering the usherettes at the corner, he sobered himself and approaches the Cadillac discreetly. "Not bad. Not bad." He climbs on the rear bumper and rocks the car.

"Dope, what are you doing?"

He chides me. "Quiet. I'm checking the suspension."

He bangs each fender next and climbs under the car. I hear a muffled grunt. He appears suddenly on the other side of the car, his face and his uniform streaked with grease. "Boss, the mufflers are A-1, but your U joint is on the bum. Take it from me." He wants to climb under the car again, but I grab his shoulders. He looks at me askance. "Don't crease the uniform. Please." I release him, and he straightens his shoulder pads and his epaulettes.

"For God's sake, Mitkin, calm down and get in."

I search my pockets frantically for the keys. "It's my father's car. I don't"

He peers through the window. "Right in the basket," he says, pointing to the ignition with his thumb. He opens the

door, and we both scramble in. He starts the car, pumps the gas pedal, appraises the motor's asthmatic purr, then backs out of the lot with one turn of the wheel.

We drive along the waterfront. The docks are empty. We pass unbroken rows of idle freighters and winches. A watchman waves to us. In the distance I can make out a few blinking lights on the Jersey shore. We rumble past the Statue of Liberty, unable to keep pace with the sun. It sinks abruptly behind the Manhattan skyline and leaves a pale aura; the buildings across the water seem to throb and burn delicately. Then the aura fades and the buildings give up their enchantment.

Mitkin shouts in my ear. "A ticky valve. I said you got a ticky valve."

We ride through narrow, garbage-laden back streets. The gutters are riddled with pits. We get held up for a moment in the middle of a tiny market with tottering stalls humped together on the sidewalk. Most of the stalls are deserted, but a few stray housewives are haggling with a lone merchant under a ring of ten-watt bulbs suspended from a canopy that runs from stall to stall like a gigantic bug. The bulbs light up the merchant's chin. He's holding an icon in one hand and a pair of bloomers in the other. Mitkin steps out of the car, disappears under the canopy, and comes back clutching an enormous loaf of bread with deep ridges in its crust. He tears off the heel for me. "Chew, chew." One of the housewives breaks away from the merchant, approaches the car, stares at me, and makes the sign of the cross. Mitkin drives off. "The women around here are a little superstitious. They don't take to strangers. But you can't get bread like this in any of your pissy American stores. You gotta go to the Italian markets. Just ask me anything about Brooklyn. How long have you been living here?"

"All my life," I say. "I was born on Cranberry Street."

"Ah," he says, "Cranberry Street aint Brooklyn. Brooklyn don't start until Atlantic. Where do you live now?"

"Near Amity."

"You mean you spent your whole life shuttling between Cranberry and Amity Street? That's only one stop on the BMT. Six-seven blocks. Didn't you ever travel anywhere? I mean, I always go to Jersey or the mountains. My second home is Monticello." He parks the car alongside a junkyard which serves as a repository for retired Eskimo Pie wagons. Piled in neat pyramids, the wagons loom threateningly over our heads. I tell him about my meager itinerary.

"My father once took me to Baltimore, but it wasn't for a pleasure trip. We didn't have time to go to Monticello."

"Jesus," Mitkin says, scrutinizing me with one eye. "You mean, you never heard about the *real* Monticello? In the Catskills? Kiamesha Lake don't ring a bell? It's impossible. It staggers the imagination. How can you talk about Spinoza and all those guys and know nothing about Monticello? You're putting me on. Tell me."

"Mitkin, I'm not paying you to interrogate me. Drive."

"What drive? We're here. At the test place. Take over."

"You expect me to drive? Just like that?" He steps out, comes around to the other side of the car, and nudges me into the driver's seat.

"Nothing to it. The car runs by itself."

I shout at him. He pouts in his seat, tangling the braids of his epaulette. "Mitkin . . ." He waits for me to apologize. "Mitkin, I'm sorry. I've never driven before. And it's important that I learn. It's imperative. And I'm scared. How come there are no other drivers around?"

"How come?" he says, administering two debilitating karate chops to the upholstery. "It's getting dark. That's how come. Who practices driving at night?"

"I have my reasons. I'll need to drive at night. And I might as well learn now. Besides, it's better in the dark. I don't relish being stared at."

"You're the boss. It's your show." He starts the car for me and puts my hands on the steering wheel. "The Army's training chimps to drive around in jeeps. Men are too valuable nowadays to be wasted behind a wheel. If a chimp can do it,

so can you." He orders me to release the hand brake. The car rolls forward. The speedometer needle climbs to ten. I drive Mitkin twice around the junkyard. I can hear my heart thump. The car stalls on the third time around. "It's no use. I'll never pass the test."

"I told you. My uncle Shep's an inspector. For a slight remuneration everybody passes. Only you gotta look good. You can't foul up in front of the other inspectors. The State's clamping down. Sheppie can't take any extra chances. I'll put you through the ropes, give you a little style, and leave the rest to me. All you gotta do is show up."

"Mitkin, I don't like it. It's dishonest."

"Swami, morals are all right for the classroom, but they don't work out here. I know. Why do you think I'm jocking around at the Pitkin? I'm an honest soul like yourself. Sheppie has a house in Hempstead, and he's only thirty-four. Me? I got one room over a tailor shop. And that's all I'll ever have. Don't let the fancy shoulder bars fool you. They don't mean a thing."

His face contracts in the dark.

"Mitkin, why did you sign up for my course? My teachings will never get you into college. I can't help you. The whole program is a fraud. It was invented to keep me busy. I don't know any more about chemistry than you do."

"Chemistry I had up to my ears. Who needs it? You think I wasn't the algebra champeen of Boys High? I wasn't no lousy truant. They wanted me to hang around until I was sixteen, so I hanged around. But if they had teachers like you over there, I woulda stuck it out. I woulda stayed an extra year. I mean it. Every word. So help me. You're beautiful. That's the only explanation. Swami, what'd you say today? *Maybe angels are only angels out of loneliness or ignorance or desperation. Maybe—*"

"Mitkin, call it off. I'm nobody's swami. The driving lesson is over. Take the wheel."

He drives me back to the Castle, pouting all the way. I avoid his glances. The Admiral's light is on. It casts a tinselly

glow over the tower wall. The rest of the Castle remains under shadow. Mitkin slaps the car keys into my hand. I call after him weakly. "Do you want me to pay you now?"

"What for?" he says. "My lessons come guaranteed. Pay me when you pass the test."

I follow him out of the lot. He walks toward Borough Hall, hunching his back against the wind. I wave to him. "Mitkin, goodbye." He doesn't turn around.

C H A P T E R F O U R

I grew up right under the Admiral's nose, but his cadets are more familiar with the Castle's grounds than I will ever be. Any one of them can identify the scars in the walls or uncover the janitors' mousetraps, and I have trouble making my way through the corridors. The longer I'm at the Castle, the more estranged I become. The soldiers and sailors who were here during the Civil War must have been a band of diminutive, surefooted men. I can't get anywhere without keeping my head tucked in, and I'm forever banging into ceilings, doors, and misplaced chairs. I'd rather run one of Crabtree's gauntlets aboard the Neptune than walk through the Admiral's corridors at night.

Luckily Marlo's still around. He's on guard outside the Admiral's office with an Army surplus flashlight strapped to his wrist. He rotates his wrist, and the flashlight's dulled beam sweeps the ceiling and the walls. I walk through his beam, and he steadies the flashlight with his other hand. "Who—who's there? Cadet?" Marlo was always afraid of the dark. That's why I like him. His reactions are dependable. It's easy to get a rise out of Marlo. All you have to do is cackle in the dark. "Ident-i-ti-ti-fy yourself. Stand and show. Stand and show." He sees me. I've disappointed him. He expected some-

thing grander than my raggedy face. He plays with his flashlight again. "Admiral's got company," he says, trying to fend me off.

"Marlo, I want to go upstairs."

He blocks the door.

I wish I could muster up some of Marlo's devotion. I'd carry it around in a sack. But I've been immune to the Admiral for a long, long time. "Company," Marlo says. I'm beginning to embarrass him. He still has a touch of affection for me, and it's begun to creep through his armor. His voice softens. "Ivan, the old man left me instructions. He doesn't want nobody to disturb him. Not even Jerry." Jerry is Crabtree's Christian name, but he never uses it. He'd rather be called Crabs or Crabby. If the Admiral won't see him, something special must be up. The Admiral's a little too old for assignations. Miss Eva's been out of favor for years. Has he hired a belly dancer from the Fatima for a few hours? Old men are supposed to have a predilection for peep shows. Or maybe it's a floozy from one of the ^{the} Puerto Rican bars. Recruited by Marlo along Atlantic Avenue, and Marlo's sworn to secrecy. He's abetted the Admiral ever since I was ten. I've forgiven the Admiral for his lecheries. You can't expect him to go on spawning epileptics forever. He's had to find other avenues for his virility. I press my advantage.

"Marlo, I have to see him. Let me take the responsibility. I'll do penance aboard the Neptune if the Admiral's upset."

He smiles. The hair over his ears has turned gray. There's a bald spot now at the back of his head. He's forgotten to shave his neck. Does he still chase after Arab girls in his souped-up Nash? I doubt it. He's too busy preparing himself for a respectable middle age. Crabtree's introduced him to mental health. Now he spends his free time studying yoga and looking for a wife. He lets me through.

"Adm'ral's gonna have my head. But I'm not mixing in fam'ly 'fairs."

I would hug him or tousle his hair, but he'd be offended. He'd think I was taking advantage of him, trying to restore

old indulgences. Even if I formalized my gestures and nudged his flashlight officially or shook his hand, he'd be compromising his loyalty to the Admiral. He takes off the flashlight and straps it around my wrist. "You'll need it in there," he says hoarsely, trying to cover up his good intentions.

Armed with Marlo's flashlight, I enter the Admiral's office. I scuttle across the room, pausing midway between the door and the Admiral's desk. Tomorrow Miss Eva will issue warrants for my arrest: I've dirtied the Admiral's carpet. I uncrumple my handkerchief and wipe my heels and soles. I haven't been inside the Admiral's quarters in a year. Nothing's changed. Miss Eva still keeps her meal plans on the walls. Two generations of cadets have suffered through her balanced breakfasts and calorie counts. She tolls her dietary laws like an avenging angel. The Admiral never expected such zeal. Before Miss Eva arrived he had a flock of floating secretaries and dieticians; all he wanted in the old days was someone who would accompany him up to the tower after hours. Miss Eva introduced Wheatena, junket, and boysenberries to the cadets, reformed the Admiral, and stayed on. Unfortunately, the Admiral already had a wife, and Miss Eva reigned at the Castle instead.

I push hard against one of the panels behind the Admiral's desk, duck my head professionally, and walk through the wainscoting. The Admiral would be unhappy without his trick doors. He's had one installed on every other floor. The Admiral assembles his staff regularly, but whenever he grows tired of their company, he disappears behind one of his doors. It has a marvelous effect on his aides. It keeps them on their toes.

The tower door is open. The Admiral's leaning over something. He looks like a ragman in his rumpled jacket and his checkerboard shirt; his scarf dangles between his knees. I scowl at him from my corner behind the stairwell, but my anger is forced. The Admiral's gruffness has always appealed to me. It's easy to despise him from a distance—he's harmed my mother beyond repair and he's left his mark on me—but

whenever I see his ragamuffin's outfit and the dark, jaggy edges of his face I warm to him instantly. The Admiral's the only man I know in this world who's uglier than I am. But he wears his ugliness very well; it matches his torn sleeves. Half the dowagers on Montague Street are in love with him. They don't mind the special shoe he wears on his left foot to accommodate his crooked toes. They find his slight limp attractive. They suspect it has something to do with an old war wound.

I climb up the tower stairs, leaning against the banister. I hide Marlo's flashlight; the tower lights my way. The Admiral circles the room. He's chiding his visitor. I pause on the fifth step. "No," he says. "No. You mustn't smile at him, or laugh. No informalities. It will only make him more cautious. Show him you mean business. Press him. We're not interested in brilliancy awards. We want to win. Fancy queen moves won't do. He may have an entirely new repertoire of openings. It's been thirty years." The Admiral wags one finger. "Watch his gambits." I know who's up there with him. I can see the Admiral's magnificent chessmen lined up on a stool near the door. His hand-carved rooks are almost as big as Cadet Van Buren's head. The cadet is sitting on a leather hassock, enthralled; his ears have turned purple. He follows the darting lines of the Admiral's chin. "Watch." My foot gets caught on the top step and I stumble into the tower, knocking over the chess stool and scattering the pieces. "Papa, I'm sorry. Really. I am." The Admiral's in a rage, but he wouldn't dare shout at me in front of the boy. I retrieve the stool. Van Buren stoops and collects the chessmen. He leaves the bishops and rooks for me. I never felt very comfortable in the Admiral's tower; I'm a little too big for it. I've already crowded the Admiral into the corner. The eyepiece of his telescope looms behind his ragged shoulders like an obscene memento. One of the pawns is under the Admiral's tripod. Van Buren rolls up his sleeve and reaches for it. The Admiral interrupts him. "Van. Marlo is waiting to take you home." His voice is surprisingly gentle. Van Buren steps up on the hassock and whispers in the Admiral's ear. The Admiral smiles, and Van

Buren jumps off. "*Marlo*," the Admiral shouts down the stairwell. "Take Vannie home. No delays." He waits until Van Buren reaches the bottom step, then closes the door. Standing in the far corner, with my elbows tucked in, trying to preserve the Admiral's valuable space, I anticipate his thunderbolts. I wouldn't really mind a court martial. It's cold in the tower, and the Admiral's accusations might warm me up. He stands behind the telescope and stares out of his tiny window. Does the Admiral want to be coaxed? I'll initiate the argument. "*Papa*," I say gruffly. "I had to move out." The conciliatory tone in my voice surprises me. It's unintentional. I try again. "*Papa*." I can't seem to summon the requisite amount of anger. All my grievances, all my righteous oaths, stick in my throat.

"*Papa*, I'm thirty-one. I have a right to my own life."

He steps in front of the telescope. "And I'm sixty-nine. I have a right to make demands on my son." His face is shrunken and gaunt. "You blame me for committing your mother. That's why you moved out. You blame me. Did you say two words to her in the past year? You never went near her."

"What was I supposed to do, *Papa*? Have her read my palms day and night? Or walk with her from room to room and prove to her that you hadn't turned her lamps and her tables against her? I was beginning to believe the things she told me. *Papa*, I can't live at home. And I don't belong at the Castle. I know you've been trying to find a place for me. But you can't keep bequeathing me chess clubs and creating special programs for me every year. If you were willing to let me take Van around the country, you must have thought I'd be all right. *Papa*, the tour was your idea."

"The tour," he says, talking to the telescope. He grimaces and wraps his hands in his scarf. "You think I don't know what's going on? I'm not blind. I knew I couldn't keep you here. I thought if I sent you on a mission, I might be able to hold on to you a little while longer."

"Sorry, *Papa*, I can't believe that the tour was only a pre-

text. You've been planning it for two whole years. Tell me it has nothing to do with building a reputation for Van and the Academy? If Van handles Kortz, you become the new emperor of chess. You ought to hire me to write your publicity notices, Papa. *Six-year-old Destroys Former World Chess Champion*. Or should we lie a little and claim that Van is only five. Infants all over the world will soon be holding pawns in their hands before they learn to walk. The Academy will be swamped with applicants."

I wait for the Admiral to take stabs at my speech. Instead, he folds up the collar of his checkerboard shirt and smiles to himself. "It's Kortz, isn't it?"

"Yes, Papa. Kortz. He's a dead man. Whatever he did, he can't harm anybody now. Not even with his chess playing. Why did you have to tell the cadets stories about him? If he hasn't entered a tournament since the war, it isn't because of any automatic ban. Fifteen years ago he might have challenged Botvinnik or Spassky or Tal and gotten away with it. They'd mate him in a minute today. He's a ghost, Papa. You know it."

"I prefer my ghosts to have a little less flesh," the Admiral says, squinting. "My memory happens to be a little more stubborn than yours. Somehow I find it difficult to forget that Herr Kortzfleisch was Himmler's deputy. That he is responsible for the deaths of crippled children and sick old men."

"Rumors, Papa. It's never been proved. All you know is that he won a few chess tournaments Hitler happened to sponsor. Alekhine entered the same tournaments. And no one ever accused him of being a fiend or a spy. The Russians have already reclaimed him."

"Alekhine," the Admiral says, peering at me, "isn't Kortz. Alek was a man without a country. A drunkard and a profigate. He was married five times."—Should I remind the Admiral of his own sensual preoccupations?—"Chess became a sickness with him. It ate up his mind. But from Kortz I had a right to expect a little more."

"Why, Papa? Because thirty years ago he gave an exhibition at the Castle and you had a chat with him in Greek about Achilles and Priam and the absurdity of the Trojan War? You expected him to be some sort of moral superman, and he turned out to be an ordinary kraut. And now you're ready to strike back. Papa, his tour is a flop. I spoke to his agent. Somebody by the name of Axel. His office is in Chinatown. Most of his clients are acrobats. It took me an hour to get him on the phone. He told me that Kortz can't even get a booking in Hoboken, let alone Chicago or New York. No one remembers Kortz. And no one wants him. Papa, aim your arrows in another direction."

The Admiral shrugs his head. "You needn't worry so much about his bookings. The Nazis will take care of that."

"Papa, Papa, you've gotten in touch with that private intelligence agency again, haven't you? The one in Berlin. For the right price they'd tell you anything you wanted to hear. If I asked them to prove that Kortz was a communist or a double agent, they'd build up a case in a week. Papa."

The Admiral mimics me. "*Papa*," he says, thrashing his arms. He trips over the tripod. I lunge forward and catch the telescope, cradling the Admiral's eyepiece against my chest. "Papa . . ." He curses his crippled foot. I pick him up and carry him over to his chair, ignoring his protests. "I can walk, damn you. I can walk."

He stiffens his body spitefully and jabs my ribs with his elbows. I tuck him in his chair. He sneezes under my chin and tells me to take my whiskers out of his eyes. He says he's allergic to my beard. Glaring at me, he shows me the bumps on his hand. His thick, white hair bristles on his scalp. He orders me to read his palm. "Your mother must have taught you something. Tell the Admiral all about his misdeeds. He exploits children, picks on ruined men, and cajoles his own son with a shameless display of false concern."

"I never said that, Papa. I'm not trying to back out. I could use the change of air. I've never been a chauffeur before, or

somebody's bodyguard. And besides, Kortz can take care of himself. Wyoming might be a letdown for him after Lisbon and Cracow, but I'm sure he'll get used to it."

My themes have begun to weary him. He'd like to withdraw, but there are no trick doors in the tower. So he tries another kind of abracadabra. He tucks his hands in his pockets and pretends to be asleep. Even if I tied him to his chair, dismembered his telescope, and carried off his orthopedic shoe, I wouldn't be able to rouse him. He won't come out of his trance until I leave the tower.

"Papa, goodbye."

A pimp accosts me on Montague Street and follows me halfway home. My beard seems to tantalize him. He wants to know all about my lineage. "You Arab? Greek? Jew?" There's no getting rid of him unless I satisfy his curiosities.

"I'm part Russian, part Hungarian, and part Portuguese."

He makes a face and tells me that my ancestry doesn't explain the color of my beard. "If you was a Greek or a Jew I could do something for you. My old lady doesn't go for Hungarians." He leaves me at the corner of Amity and Hicks, berating himself for having wasted his time. I walk on.

There's a hubbub coming from Mrs. Fuentes' cellar. She's under the stairs with her three brothers. Hajji Baba must have committed an unpardonable sin—she's impounded his guitar. "Kill heem I fin' heem," she says. One of the brothers turns around abruptly and stares at me. His face is harsh and accusing. I want to tell him I'm not guilty. Unable to match his stare, I ruffle my beard and approach the stairway. The three flights seem unnavigable, and I pause at the first landing. My chat with the Admiral must have drained me: I have nothing left in reserve. Rallying myself for the climb, I negotiate the next two flights, locate my house key, and let myself in. Still a little shaky, I bolt the door.

The Arab's in my bed. He's wearing my pajamas and smoking my cigars. His knees are tucked safely under the blanket.

I shout at him. "Get out. Out. Out." He looks surprised. I hover over him, ready to toss him out the window. He snuggles under the blanket.

"Redbeard. Sit down. Here."

He picks out a Tiparillo, lights it, and offers me a puff. While the cigar burns in my mouth, he grips my shoulders compassionately. "Redbeard, I'm in a bind. I wouldn't be here otherwise. I climbed in through the window. Had to. Today is market day for the old witch. She came back too soon. Caught me with company." He smiles and crinkles his mustache. "You know, Mrs. Herrera from across the street. The one who is always taking sun baths in winter. Her husband is an invalid. I invite her over. I play for her, but she wants a different kind of music. So I tune her up for an hour. And the witch comes home in the middle. She calls for her brothers. So I come up here."

The Arab tells me what he will do if he ever catches Mrs. Fuentes' brothers on the other side of Atlantic Avenue. Holding his hand like a scimitar, he gives me a short lecture on the arts of disembowelment. I never dreamed such barbarisms were practiced so close to home. The Arab senses my uneasiness. He assures me that he will spare Fuentes' brothers for my sake. Their bowels are in my hands. I ask him to change the subject. "Ha," he says, sitting up. "Redbeard needs his proprieties. Ha! Never mind. *Smoke*. Tomorrow the witch will take me back. Tonight I sleep here."

Can I throw him out? Fuentes' brothers will murder him in spite of all his talk. I offer to sleep on the couch. He insists that I sleep with him. "An old Arab custom," he says. I know all about old Arab customs.

"Am I dirt that you can offend me?" He pulls off the blanket. "I sleep wherever you sleep. An Arab always shares with his host."

"All right. But remember. Keep to your side of the bed."

The Arab provides me with another dilemma. I only have one pair of pajamas. Searching through my dresser, I find an old nightshirt that once belonged to the Admiral. It's three

sizes too small. I would ask the Arab to make a trade, but I can tell that he's not in a bartering mood. Besides, my pajamas appeal to him. He doesn't seem to mind the burgeoning sleeves and tails. He's tied them around his middle. Now he has a proper Arab tunic. I put on the Admiral's nightshirt in the kitchen. The Arab's impatient. He calls for me. "*Redbeard. Redbeard.*" I find him burrowing under the bedclothes, punching the mattress. He emerges near the foot of the bed, eyeing me suspiciously. "You a junkie? I thought so. I told the witch. 'Your customer upstairs. He's too strange to be true. Something's up with him. The beard. The funny looks. The sleepy eyes.' Now I know." He points to the window sill, convinced that he's found me out. "Bottles. Drugs." Gathering his evidence, he shakes my pill bottles triumphantly. "Aha! Aha!" He thrusts out his chest and squints at me. "How you know I'm not a detective? You want hashish, I get you plenty. But this stuff? Junkie. Junkie."

I give him my word that I'm not an addict.

"I faint sometimes. I have seizures—spells."

He draws his head closer to mine. His lips tremble. "No." He struts across the room. The pajama tails flop out and dangle below his knees. "I don't believe it."

I want to assure him—Hajji, it's not catching—before he excuses himself and tells me he has an appointment with somebody on the roof. Arabs are afraid of epileptics. The Admiral told me.

He must be an unconventional Arab: he asks me to show him my tongue and my eyeballs. "It's true," he mumbles to himself. With a naughty grin he twirls the pajama tails. "Holy man," he says, shaking his finger at me. "The shrubbery under your chin is only a disguise." He salaams.

"What?"

"*Effendi*," he says, salaaming again. He follows me around the room.

"*Effendi*, your modesty is inappropriate. Why should you deny your worshipers? Didn't Mahomet suffer from the same sickness? And Moses? Holy man."

I warn him. “One more word and you’ll end up sleeping on the floor.”

The Arab looks forlorn. Heeding my scowls, he ties up his tails and climbs into bed. I lie down alongside him. He offers me first rights to the pillow and asks me to apportion the blanket. I’d keep a broomstick between us, but I don’t want to offend him. I work out a compromise: if he touches me once during the night I’ll strangle him with my beard.

The Arab’s conduct is exemplary. He keeps to his side of the bed and mumbles Islamic prayers in his sleep. He even finds time to ask me questions between his prayers. “Red-beard,” he says, “why do they torment us?” “Sleep,” I tell him, and I pull the blanket up to his chin. The Arab has a charmed life. Fuentes’ brothers are after him, and I’m the one who can’t sleep. I count off whole armies of penguins, zebras, and antelope; I listen to the tugboats in the harbor; I watch the Arab flick his mustache; I recall the stuffed bison at the Museum of Natural History, the colored maps of New Amsterdam, and Peter Stuyvesant’s pegged leg, and finally I get to sleep.

There’s no way of avoiding him. The Arab appears in my dreams. Fortunately without his scimitars. We’re chums now. I guide him through planetariums and back streets. We scour Red Hook. I take him to Cranberry Street and show him the Admiral’s house. We drink cocoa in my room. My mother joins us. She’s wearing red garters and a blue dress. She flirts with the Arab and sits on his lap. Mama, Mama. It’s cold, and I wake up.

The window’s open, and the blanket’s on the floor. Mrs. Fuentes’ pigeons are making a racket on the roof. The Arab’s gone. He’s left a note stuck on my forehead with Scotch tape. I tear it off. “Effendi,” he writes. “Forgive my trespasses. I took five dollars from your pocket. Also your radio, your typewriter, and your herringbone suit. Try the Maharajah Trading Company tomorrow. You can buy everything back at a bargain price. Tell them Pasha sent you. Forgive me. Please. I need cash.” He even has a fancy postscript written out with

curlicues. "I left something for you. Go into the kitchen. Goodbye."

I follow the Arab's orders. He's cooked breakfast for me. Two hardboiled eggs and a generous portion of chocolate pudding. He's fixed my percolator, too. Without malice, without recriminations or regrets, I bite into one of the eggs.

CHAPTER FIVE

Really, I'm not out to spoil the Admiral's dreams. Some of us were just never meant to drive. I ignore red lights and green lights, traffic cops and stop signs, I cause havoc wherever I go. Cabbies shout abuses at me, pedestrians shake their fists, delivery men point me out. In two weeks I've become the scourge of Brooklyn. Yesterday I held up traffic on Empire Boulevard for an hour and a half. The day before, I zoomed across Flatbush Avenue at high noon with my headlights on. I leave all my worrying to Mitkin. "I'm with you, Swami baby. All the way." But even Mitkin has his price.

"Swami, I don't mind risking my life. The world can get along with one less captain of the ushers. But is it right to keep me in the dark? You're not planning a pleasure trip, that much I know. It has to be something a little more dignified. Have a heart. Before I die, let me know the reason."

I tell him about Kortz's tour and the Admiral's intentions.

"You mean, you and the kid follow the kraut from town to town? You take care of the exhibition fee, and when the kraut goes to play the yokels, the kid sits down at one of the boards and attacks like a little general. I don't like it. Your father sounds like a tough customer. I'd hate to have to play against his team. How come you got roped into this deal?"

Mitkin looks at me suspiciously, but he doesn't let me down. He takes over all the arrangements for my driving test. "Sheppie says you should leave the twenty dollars on the seat. He don't want anybody seeing any cash change hands. Act smart. There's nothing to it."

I follow Mitkin's orders to a T.

While I execute broken U turns, Uncle Shep toys with his badge and tells me all about his health theories. "Drink bottled water. It's the algae and the gook from all the chemicals. They turn your insides into lead. You heard of the petrified forests. That's what's gonna happen to all of us in a hundred years. Bottled water. Listen to me."

I leave an extra five-dollar bill on the seat. Three days later my temporary license arrives in the mail. I call the Loew's Pitkin immediately. "Captain of the ushers, please. *Mr. Mitkin.*" The girl at the other end of the wire is amused. She whispers to somebody. Finally Mitkin picks up the phone. I ignore his mournful hello. "Mitkin, I feel like a great sinner. Bribing officials. Who knows what mischief I'll be up to next? Mitkin, can you hear?" I shake the phone.

"Swami, take me with you."

"Where?"

"On the road. With the cadet."

"What about your job?"

"The Pitkin can survive without me."

"Mitkin, I'd like to, but the Admiral would never allow it." I hear some sort of racket coming from his end. ". . . nobody's paying you for chitchats . . . supposed to be guarding the loge . . ."

"Mitkin, what's going on? Louder. I can't hear you. God help what?"

"I said somebody's gotta be around to protect the kraut from you and the kid. God help him. So long."

Standing in my pajamas with the dial tone buzzing in my ear, I try to assure myself. Mistake. He'll call back. Mitkin. I gather up my hat, my coat, and my scarf and run down

the steps. The Caddy's parked across the street. It seems unfamiliar now, without Mitkin in the front seat. Undaunted, I drive across the Brooklyn Bridge. Searching for Chinatown, I end up in the Battery. Somehow I make my way back to Mott Street. I park near a storefront office with a battered sign over the door. AXEL'S TOURS. BOOKINGS FOR ALL OCCASIONS. I knock on Axel's window. His blind jerks up suddenly and reveals a gnome with bulging eyes and a big head. He looks out at me for a moment and then lets me in. "Axel Buonarroti," he says, pumping my hand with all his might. "I never see people on Thursdays."

"I'm sorry. It's important."

I try not to stare at him. He's wearing an orange wig and a green tie. His walls are cluttered with photographs of snake charmers, belly dancers, trampoline artists, mermen, tumblers, jugglers, and acrobats. While I inspect his walls, he admires my beard. "You start tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? I—"

He stands under my chin and shuffles his bandy legs in an openly truculent way. "Don't con me, Sonny. Who you think handled Dylan Thomas before he got big? Axel. And who brought back the barbershop quartet? So don't play hard to get with me. I say tomorrow, it's tomorrow. Buonarroti books ya, you stay booked."

He walks around me now, noticing my startled looks and the pajama sleeves under my coat. He fumbles with his tie. "Aincha the magician from Poughkeepsie? The guy who can hatch rabbits from his sleeve? Told ya to come back in two weeks with a beard? Booked ya for the Ha Cha Club in Jersey? Mother! Wacha coming around here bothering me for?"

"Don't you remember me? Farkas. Ivan Farkas. I talked to you on the phone a few weeks ago. About one of your clients. Baldur Kortzfleisch."

"Never heard of him. Scram."

"Wait, please. The chess player. From Munich. You—"

"Oh," he says, clacking his tongue portentously. "Why didn't ya say so. The Nazi champ. My client? That aint busi-

ness. It's charity. Strictly charity. I worked out a deal with this agent in Bonn. I send him a crippled acrobat who can't find work nowhere and he sends me the woodpusher. Axel trades fair and square. You give nothin, you get nothin in return. My acrobat has pleurisy. And the Nazi's a dead weight. A good combo I can place anywhere. Tonight. Not a woodpusher with a bad reputation. What's your angle?"

"I just want to tell him something. The woodpusher. Warn him. Tell him—tell him to be on guard. We're going to follow him around the country. Everywhere he goes. Me and my father's cadet. Force him—"

"Hey, hey," he says. "Nut. Wacha shooting off at me for? Axel aint nobody's messenger. You got something to tell him, tell him yourself. I'm busy. Take off. You come around again, you won't get out so easy."

Ivan the Bungler. I drive home.

CHAPTER SIX

Cadet Van Buren's father is the chief of the auditing department at Pierrepont Finance, and he's only twenty-nine. He was a three-letter man at Brooklyn Poly Prep, spent two years at Brown, toured the West when he was nineteen, earned his B.B.A. at Wharton, and married a girl from Connecticut. Walter and Hope Van Buren live on Joralemon Street in an apartment with bay windows and a built-in love seat, three blocks away from the Castle. Hope teases Walter and me for living "so close to our roots." I'd love to tell her how I feel about the Castle, but I don't see any point in offending Walter or japping the Admiral behind his back. I've survived it; that's good enough for me. But Walter has a different story to tell. Before he became executive secretary of the Brooklyn Auditors' Association, before he stole Hope away from an aging polo player, before he picked up gonorrhea somewhere in Wyoming, Walter was the boxball, punchball, pingpong, and roller hockey champ of the Castle, and won the Admiral's coveted Fitness Award three years in a row. He was an honorary Seabee during the war, and collected more balls of tinfoil for the Allies than any other cadet. "I owe everything, everything, to that place."

I try to avoid Walter as much as I can, but Hope's arranged

a send-off party for Van and me. I trim my beard for the occasion, iron my corduroy suit, and show up bearing a mechanical alligator with a propeller hidden under its tail. I'm ready to launch the alligator in the family tub, but the Admiral's stolen my thunder. He's sent Van a pet turtle with a painted shell. The turtle's name is Marat. Van feeds it lettuce shreds, and I hunch over in the corner, unhinge the gator's belly, and tinker with the propeller. Hope keeps nudging me coyly with her knee. Walter's aware of it. He knows her kneesies are routine parlor games. I'm a great curiosity for both of them. Walter's puzzled by my asceticism, but Hope claims that she's found me out. She's diagnosed my beard. Underneath, she says, I'm as horny as a goat. And there's something else. She's never been to bed with an epileptic. No doubt she thinks that if I had a seizure at the right moment, I'd be capable of astounding sexual feats. I don't want to disillusion her. I hold on to my mysteries. Her phony winks are becoming a little bothersome. I crank the alligator and let it loose on the living room rug. The gator putters for a moment, wagging its mechanized tail, and then breaks down somewhere under Hope's mahogany dining table. Van's annoyed with me. I'm interfering with the turtle's diet. I apologize and eat a gingerbread cookie. Walter tells me to watch out for crumbs. He's a little surly today. He has explicit faith in the Admiral's judgments, but he's still worried about Van. "Hope, suppose he's driving along and something happens."

I try to assure him. "Walter, I'm not the world's greatest driver, I know, but I haven't had a seizure in four years. And I wouldn't be—"

Hope cuts me off. "God, Walt. *God*. Who used to drive from Philly to Hartford three times a week in the middle of the night with my bikini underpants hanging on his aerial like a flag? Just so he could be with me for an hour. My Walt."

"Hope," Walter says, faltering. "Ya have to talk that way in front of Van?"

She marches back and forth between her butterfly chair and her novelty box. Now properly nettled, she glares at

Walter, Van, the turtle, and me. "I married an old lady, that's what I did. A worrywart and a prune. Who agreed to send him around the country in the first place? Who's been bragging to all the bigwigs at the office about how his son's going to conquer the world before he's seven? That's what I would like to know."

I stare at the alabaster starfish, the silver thimble, the prickly sea shells, the plastic figurines of Daphnis and Chloe, and the other bric-a-brac in Hope's novelty box, waiting for Van to bail Walter out. But Van's busy with the turtle. So I unfold my wallet and take a commanding position in front of the butterfly chair. "Walter, Hope—we'll be all right." I display my credit cards and traveler's checks. "Papa's taken care of everything. And if anything should ever happen to me while I'm behind the wheel, Van knows what to do. The Admiral's been coaching him."

Van looks up halfheartedly and pronounces: "I'm supposed to put a flare near the road and wait for the cops." Then he goes back to his lettuce shreds.

Walter capitulates. "Okay. I give up. Everything's under control. Daddy's sorry for his momentary loss of faith. It's up to the Admiral. I resign." He dangles his arms like a sloth and romps around the room, teasing the turtle, hoisting Van, poking me, and finally hugging Hope. "Walter, Walter, woo."

Hope scowls at him but ends up giggling. Walter curtails his performance, sidles into the kitchen, and comes back with a bottle of champagne. He twists the wire expertly and pops the cork, winking at the foam, then tells Hope to bring out her mother's best champagne glasses. "For Vannie too. It's a special 'casion."

Walter fills my glass first. "The guest of honor. I insist." I don't want to spoil Walter's party, but I'm not allowed to drink. So I pucker my lips and pretend to sip the champagne.

"A toast," Walter says, raising the bottle overhead. "A toast." His face is slightly bloated; he's already had three highballs. "To the best . . . no, to the next chess champion of the world. To vict'ry over lousy Nazis. Fight Hitler all over

again. And the Russkies. Fight everybody. Castro. Cuba. Vietnam. Show 'em. Poor JFK. No more Munichs."

Walter makes his rounds and inspects my glass. "Drink up, Ivan." His whiskey breath blasts in my face. "Drink up, 'ataboy." He fills my glass again. "Ivan, 'member all the times I caught you reading joke books at the back of the au-di-tor-eeyum? And I reported you to ol' Simon Burt? Reported ev'rybody. Admiral made me his beadle. Jeez, I was a cocky sonuvabitch. Admiral sewed stripes on my knickerbockers. And made me a cap with a special 'signia. 'Member? But I never picked on ya, Ivan. Not like Tadpoles and Stinky Mit-gang. Bastards. Hope, they used to trap him between two lockers, paddle him with Admiral's quoits, and scream, 'Throw a fit, throw a fit.' And more. Undressed him once. I was there."

"Oh Walt!" Hope says. "Shut up, will you?"

Walter brings out another bottle. "One more, Vannie, huh? For the future champ." Van's bored with the champagne, the party, and Walter's toasts. For sport, he dunks the turtle in his champagne glass. Walter laughs uproariously, slaps his thigh, and losing his balance, he crashes into the novelty box. I lunge forward and save Hope's bric-a-brac. Holding Daphnis and the silver thimble in one hand, I put Walter into his Morris chair. "Sorry," he says, "sorry," and then begins to snore.

"For Chris' sake," Hope says, "get him out of my sight. I can't bear to look at him when he's that way." She picks up the bottle and his glass. "Lout." Van and I drag Walter into the bedroom; his shoes make trails in the rug. Maneuvering his shoulders, we heave him onto his bed. Van straddles Walter's chest, unbuttons his shirt, fiddles with his cuffs, and shucks off his belt and his tie. I take down a blanket and we cover him, stooping together and tucking in the edges. Van smoothes the lumps in the bed with his chubby fingers. We leave Walter in the bedroom and close the door.

Hope's got a hankie over her nose. "Don't look at me," she orders both of us. "I look terrible when I cry."

"Mother, I'm going to put the turtle to bed."

"Be a good little soldier. And Mommy will be in to see you later."

"How many times do I have to tell you, Mother? There are no soldiers at the Academy. Only sailors."

She flirts with him, nipping at his ears and tugging his hair. "Sailor boy, sailor boy, gonna go 'way and leave his Mummy all alone. The Admiral's really brought him up. Taught him to aim straight when he pees. They don't allow you to keep your sons very long these days. Send them off on expeditions when they're six." She pats his behind. "Scram. Say goodbye to Uncle Ivan."

"What for? I'm going to see him in the morning. And every morning. For months and months." Ruffling his forehead, he runs off to his room, the turtle on his shoulder.

I grab my hat.

"God," Hope says, "is everybody going to abandon me? Just like that?" She reaches up, picks off my hat, and flings it across the room, her bosom swelling against my chest. I watch the hat carom off the wall and land with a bounce on the rug. My mind already fogged, my hands trembling, my beard grazing her neck, I stoop over, and like a clumsy, gouty bird, I give her a peck on the side of her mouth. Ivan the Cuckolder. Assured of her safety, she giggles to herself and dares me to kiss her again. "Magic man," she says, retrieving my hat and stroking the brim. I forget Walter, Van, the Admiral, and my own ineptness, squeeze her plump behind, descend again and kiss her, working my tongue this time. Her body trembles and I release her. She looks at me, startled now, vulnerable, her assurance gone. I stand near the door, my shoulders rocking oafishly. "Sorry. You shouldn't have teased me. I better go."

She holds on to my hat. "I'll be right back."

She steers toward the bedroom, unhitching her garter belt along the way. Bored, a little annoyed, I guard the bric-a-brac in her novelty box, certain that she'll come back in a negligee, her panties showing, her face retouched, the practiced se-

ductress once again, ready to test my epileptic charms. Papa, I'll look after Van for you, but I won't tumble Walter's wife.

"*Boo.*" I turn around haughtily, impervious to her wares. She's wearing my hat and one of Walter's baggy robes. "I thought you'd like it." She smiles elfishly, her lips puffy, her eyes unmascaraed and red. "High fashion," she says, twirling the cummerbund. Then she takes off the hat and draws in her shoulders with a delicate, embarrassed shrug. "I'm a little afraid of you. I didn't think I would be."

We roll around on the day bed, kissing, tickling each other. She takes off Walter's robe. I grow cautious again. "What about Van?" I whisper.

"He's got his turtle," she says. "He won't be coming out."

I help unhook her bra, marveling at her hips, her shoulders, and the tiny tufts of hair around her nipples.

"And Walter?" I ask academically, perfectly willing to give in.

"He's in another kingdom. He sleeps forever after a drunk."

Now she undresses me, digging her head into my skinny chest and appeasing my goose bumps. Her hips flaring under me, I tumble her indeed, without the Admiral's blessing.

I leave a little after midnight, reeling, lustful, keeping her body in mind. Somebody follows me home. I'm sure it's one of Fuentes' brothers. Fuentes herself patrols the cellar, her face hardened and relentless. She strings together a series of curses, leaving no room for the Arab in either heaven or hell. I'm a little dismayed. I haven't seen Hajji since he took off with my typewriter and my herringbone suit, but for some reason I assumed that he was reconciled with Fuentes and that she was keeping him in hiding. No, she hasn't seen the Arab in weeks. I'm reluctant to ask about the state of her affairs, but she volunteers all the information I need. Her grievances have nothing to do with the Arab's philanderings. Hajji, according to her, is an incorrigible thief. She caught him grabbing dollar bills from her purse many times, but, unable to get by without his mustache and his songs, she for-

gave him; and in order to discourage his thievery, she bought him a few silk ties. But the day Hajji climbed through my window he also stole Fuentes' rent money, her jewels, and her false teeth, and then disappeared, leaving behind his soiled underwear and an obscene note. Her brothers have heard reports that he's been skulking through the neighborhood while managing a flock of Egyptian whores. I commiserate with her and then go upstairs. I hear noises in the hallway. A bent head emerges from the shadows outside my door. "Hajji," I say, "you had to come back? Fuentes has murder in her eyes." I shake him. "Didn't you get enough out of me?" Now a familiar groan.

"Lay off."

Mitkin. His uniform crumpled, he squints at me in the dark. "I been waiting here for hours. Hours."

This time I'm ready for his remonstrances. "Censure me all you want. Call me a hypocrite. I'm taking the cadet on the road. And I'm going alone."

"Swami," he says again, "lay off. I didn't come over with any propositions. You're on your own. I came to say goodbye." His earnestness disarms me. I let him in. We drink cocoa topped with marshmallows. I tell him about my epilepsy.

"Mitkin, I've got to test myself in some way. See if I can make out on my own. Otherwise I'm sunk. An invalid for life. Dependent on my father for everything. I'm sorry about being so brusque. Mitkin, I've never been anywhere. You said so yourself."

He sits with his nose over the cup, drowning marshmallows with his thumb.

"I don't want to victimize Kortzfleisch or anybody. What can we do to him? A joker like me and a six-year-old cadet. And I've tried to warn him. Mitkin?"

"Swami, you're the one who's supposed to have all the answers. Do what you have to do. But one thing. I don't want you to go away having any illusions about me. I'm not eighteen or nineteen like the other dropouts in your class." He abandons the marshmallows and pushes away the cup. "Swami,

I'm twenty-five. A draft dodger. A real pro. Every year I pick a different school. I been getting deferments that way for years. But there's something else. I wasn't conning you when I told you in the car that I liked your class. The trouble is, my draft board don't pay too much attention to Aristotle. And Marx is a dirty word. It's the same at the Pitkin. Greenberg gets pissed off if he hears me blabbering about Spinoza's axioms. He says he's gonna run my Bolshevik ass right off the balcony. Swami, I been thinking. Maybe your ideas were meant for another world. Anyway, I gotta blow."

"Mitkin, it's late. If you want, you can spend the night here."

"Na," he says, ducking shyly. "I got another appointment. But if you get into trouble on the road, notify the Pitkin right away. I'm there day and night." He stands on his toes, tugs my beard, and kisses me on the cheek. "I won't forget you, Swami." Then he runs down the stairs.

C H A P T E R S E V E N

He's standing on the corner of Joralemon and Hicks, wearing his shako, leaning against two heavy-duty suitcases that the Admiral provided for the trip, balancing Marat on his palm. He also has bags of food for the turtle, a giant-sized tube of toothpaste which he claims Hope was unable to pack, a cricket bat, a pocket chess set, a broken compass, A. A. Mirsky's *Ten Modern Masters of Chess: From Morphy to Kortzfleisch*, and a three-month supply of Mars bars. I pack the suitcases and the cricket bat in the trunk. Everything else, he tells me, has to go on the front seat. I'm surprised that the Admiral didn't summon his wolf pack to see Vannie off. "Where's Cruickshank and Little Davey?"

He glowers at me and gets in the car.

"And how come your mother didn't wait with you?"

Now he opens the glove compartment, searches around, and pulls out a map of New York State. "Canal Street," he says, plotting routes with his pinkie. "West Side Highway. Henry Hudson Bridge."

"Never mind all the navigating." I ask him again. "Where's your mother? And what happened to the cadets?"

"Mother couldn't wait. She has a headache. She told me to tell you that she hopes you enjoyed the party."

"Are you sure that's all she said?"

"Yes." He plunks the turtle on the map. Marat walks from Syracuse to Binghamton.

"Wait here."

I call Hope from the Syrian candy store on Atlantic. She answers the phone after the tenth or eleventh ring. "Hope? It's Ivan. Are you okay? I thought . . . Hope?"

"God," she says. "You men."

I sit sideways in the booth, squeezed between the wall and the telephone box, awaiting Hope's recriminations. "You men." Her sounds are crisp, detached, unreal. Like words wound on a spool. I chide myself for talking into a wire when I should be kissing Hope's breasts and rolling on her day bed. "Ho-ho-hope," I stammer, "want me to come up?" Dragging my knees into the booth, I manage to close the door part way.

"Sick of you," she says. "The whole lot. Girl gives in to you once and you think you have a claim on her whole life. I suppose you want a victory celebration. I'll bring Walter along. Maybe he can wave a few flags." She sneezes and then starts to cry. "God, can't you just leave me alone. Tell all the clowns at your father's lousy fort about the easy lay you had last night on Joralemon Street. Drum up a little trade while Vannie's away. Keep myself busy. I'll probably need one of the Admiral's permission slips." She blows her nose. "You and that school. Ivan, he catches colds. Take care of him. Bullying somebody else's queens and kings doesn't make him a man. He's six, remember? He comes back damaged and I'll kill the whole pack of you. I swear."

"Hope, I'll take . . ." She hangs up. I untangle my legs and walk back to the car.

We fly from Brooklyn, unnoticed, unannounced, with Marat for a companion, and a bundle of maps. We ignore the sights and keep out of each other's way: I reflect on Hope's breasts and thighs; he struggles with the pegs of his pocket chess set. We cross the Henry Hudson Bridge, and he talks to me for the

first time in an hour. "Stop the car. We have a passenger. In the back."

I risk one quick look.

The Arab's head rises irrevocably over the rear seat. I groan, but I keep on driving. The Arab yawns, stretches, wriggles his mustache, and grins at the two of us. My over-coat sits in a bundle on his knee.

Tired of metaphysical questions, I ask him something obvious. "How long have you been there?"

"All the time," he says, widening his grin. He spies Vannie's candy bars. "Redbeard, I haven't eaten in days."

"Throw him out," Vannie says. "The Admiral's orders. There's a station for hobos in White Plains."

The Arab suffers for a moment. "Hobo?" Then he sucks in his cheeks. "Who is he? This one. With the hat. The little mufti of Jerusalem? Redbeard, tell him we're brothers. We slept in the same bed. Compatriots."

I break into his monologue. "I ought to throw you between the wheels. What about my typewriter and my suit?"

I watch him in the rear view mirror. His expression remains the same. "A business transaction. I left you a receipt, and hard-boiled eggs." He wags one finger at me over the seat. "Shame. All the tokens of friendship were there. A true friend gives and takes freely." He rolls his eyes and mumbles complaints to Allah.

Van interrupts the Arab's prayers. "Throw him out. He's a phony."

The Arab smiles shrewdly. "Little Mufti, you will go far in this world. I know. But lay off me today. I'm up to my elbows in trouble. I'm wanted in three states. Redbeard, tell him to think it over."

"Hajji, what happened?"

"Nothing much. You never met an unsuccessful thief? How else can you find adventure in a humdrum age? Do you want me to become a paratrooper? No thanks. I'm afraid of heights. You can't trust nobody nowadays. The fuzz own all the rack-

ets. The small-time man is out of luck. Me, I never believed in organizations. I work alone. And I suffer for it. Redbeard, in earnest, three days ago I cut up a man. I swear, it had nothing to do with business. The pimp, he was trying to hustle my wife."

"Wife?"

"Redbeard, I'm a family man. Three sons."

"And Fuentes?"

"Ha! I have to keep up my reputation. Besides, just because I have a wife, it doesn't mean I have to live with her. And how was I supposed to know that the pimp was with the vice squad? Redbeard, wherever you're going, take me. Take me."

"We have to be in Albany by six."

"Without him," Van says, and gives Marat an implacable shake.

"Mufti, do you know what they do in Yemen with troublesome little boys?"

I warn him. "Arab, no threats."

Caught between them, I arbitrate judiciously. "Van, nobody asked for him, but now that he's here he's our responsibility." I consider the Arab's harried look in the mirror and then I ply Van for food. "One Mars bar. *One*. I'll pay a quarter. Van? Fifty cents? For one bar."

"No sale."

We arrive at the Hawthorne Circle, and I call for a temporary truce, but Van refuses to cooperate. "Read your own maps. That's your job. You have to take *me* to Albany."

"Get pissed off. But if we end up in Ontario, don't blame me."

The Arab enters the fray. "Take me to Ontario," he says, gripping the back of my seat.

We ride around the Circle twice. Cursing the Arab, scowling at Van, I take the nearest exit.

"Redbeard, where are we going?"

"I don't know. I don't care."

Van's shaken by my unexpected pluck. Humbled, he goes

back to his map. I seek out back roads, ready to go around the world. "If we ride far enough in one direction, we'll have to reach Albany." Van finds our route. "We're near Val-halla."

"Valhalla?" I say.

"Valhalla."

The Arab butts in. "Valhalla." Obviously he doesn't like the name. I stop the car. The Arab stares at me, his mustache twitching: he thinks I'm going to have a fit. "Hold him," he says, "before he bites his tongue." He knots up his handkerchief and wants to stuff it in my mouth. I fend him off with one shoulder.

"I'm all right."

He hears me mumble. "What, what?"

"I said *I want to see my mother*. She's around here. In a sanitarium. On Melville Road. I haven't seen her in a year."

Van frowns.

"It's your fault," I say. "We wouldn't have been sidetracked if it weren't for you."

We ride for an hour, passing elaborate hillside cemeteries with chapels and gardens and fenced-off mausoleums, the Arab staring intently at the tombstones, his mustache twitching again. He locks his thumbs together and petitions Allah to protect the three of us from the devil. Van ignores the Arab's ministrations and insists that the devil is on our side. Then he taps out a tune on Marat's painted shell. The Arab disapproves of the turtle. He tells us that according to the eight stages of reincarnation, the turtle is the lowest of the low. "Only the soul of an incorrigible fornicator, liar, or thief could ever fit inside the body of a turtle. Take it from me. I was a turtle once."

"Arab," I ask him, "are you Hindu or Moslem?"

"Both," he says, dismissing my impertinence with a jerk of his chin.

Van is more respectful: he stares at the turtle guardedly and asks the Arab about his previous incarnations.

"I had to live nine hundred lives before I was allowed to become human again. I passed through dung beetles, worms,

roaches, cicadas, pigs, tortoises, alligators . . ." He burdens the entire animal kingdom with his transmigrations. "Last time I was a polar bear. And I'm afraid that after this life I will become a turtle again. Redbeard, I swear, as a roach I lived a virtuous life. I could feel my soul expand and long for a more appropriate body. But the human form doesn't fit me. We're incompatible. I was better off as a beetle."

I try to comfort him. "Hajji, what do you think I'll become?"

He laughs quietly to himself. "They can't just turn you into a donkey. It isn't fair. You, you they'll have to give another chance."

We stumble onto Melville Road, drive a half mile in one direction, then two miles in the other. Looking for landmarks, I find only unfamiliar houses, gates, and fields. "There was a tree growing in the road the last time I was here. And a farm for peacocks on the left. And . . ." The Arab's unnerved me. His philosophies have gone to my head. Can sanitariums be reincarnated? Transmogrified? Turned into toadstools or pigsties? Just like that! Thankfully the sanitarium comes into view: steeple, orchard, gatekeeper's cottage. I park boldly in front of the main gate. "Wait here."

I leave the Arab to his own ingenuity. His nine hundred past lives should be enough to help him coax a few candy bars. Van stares at me gloomily from his window.

"I'll be back."

C H A P T E R E I G H T

The Admiral pays a thousand dollars a month to keep Mama behind the gate. He's had to cash in War Bonds and curtail a few of his programs at the Castle, but he gets good value on every thousand: it helps assuage his guilt. Besides, he wouldn't want Mama locked in with retardates, paupers, niggers, and PRs at Rockland State. The sanitarium has a more exclusive clientele. And there are no bars on the windows, no burly attendants, no isolation wards. When Mama becomes unmanageable once or twice a month, a therapist sits with her while she hurls modeling clay at the window or turns over a row of easels. After her anger subsides, they simply tally up the damages and charge everything to the Admiral's bill.

Mama's working on a mosaic plaque. I can see her through the tinted glass. I watch her fingers bunch pebbles, shells, and bits of broken crockery over the wooden backing. Attentive, she applies some glue with her thumb. I enter the solarium. Two dowagers, Madam N and Madam O, are sewing near the door. I greet them cordially. Madam N grimaces without upsetting the rhythm of her stitches. More pensive, Madam O draws an orange patch out of her scrap bag. The dowagers are working on identical patchwork quilts. The

duplicated colors and scraps stare back at me like so many displaced noses and ears.

Mama peels the glue from her thumb and sees my reflection in the window. We hug each other in the middle of the room.

“Mama, I meant to come before.”

She hushes me immediately, feels my arms, and takes me behind her work bench. “Vanya, is today Monday or Tuesday?”

“Tuesday, Mama.”

“We had Brussels sprouts for lunch. It’s hard to remember the days when every day is the same.”

She tucks her hands inside my sleeves. “Tuesday’s a good day for war.” Then she gathers the shards from her bench and crumbles them delicately over the mosaic. I stare at the glued shells and crumbs, looking for stars, rainbows, or chalices, but Mama’s designs elude me. The congealed glue forms tiny glaciers over the mosaic’s craggy topography. Mama’s interested in textures, not rainbows and stars. I run my hand over the mosaic and feel the different bumps.

“Mama, do you need anything? Shoes? Supplies?”

“Tomorrow we’re having asparagus hollandaise.”

“What, Mama?”

“Papa says there is going to be a revolution. In Montana. Or lower Delaware. Why can’t I remember the details? Something about Negroes, Vietnamese, and Jews.”

I hear the dowagers grumble behind me.

—He’s the Antichrist.

Hunching my shoulders together, I hide my beard.

Mama rubs her palms.

“Vanya, I dreamt about you yesterday night. I wouldn’t want to be alive if I couldn’t dream. I think about you all the time. I write letters to you in my sleep.”

“Mama, do you want me to take you out of here? I’ll make Papa. I will.”

“I shouldn’t have left you alone. I shouldn’t have given in to whatever demon was inside me. I should have been tenacious. I should have fought back a little harder. Papa says

you're going on a trip. I'm going to be in a play. I'm supposed to be somebody's mistress. But I can never remember the lines. They told me it would be better if I made them up. It's fun that way. I say whatever comes into my head. Silly things. Outrageous things. *No, I never met the Marquis de Sade. I have a son in Timbuktu. Sophocles was killed by a cat.* Everybody laughs. I'm perfect."

I sit with Mama on her bench and tell her riddles about the Mount of Jupiter and the Plain of Mars. She sings me a song and examines my Line of Life. I brush her hair.

We munch on the chocolates that the Admiral and Miss Eva have brought her. I save a few for Hajji Baba.

Madam N and Madam O array their army of scraps. Their patches bask in the filtered sunlight. I listen to their splintered conversation.

—Pope John wants to Jewify the whole world.

—He's dead, dear.

—Martin says the price of sugar has gone up.

—He's suffering from satyriasis. His beard is a giveaway. I tell Mama that I have to go.

Madam O's knees wobble under her quilt; the patches hop crazily.

—Antichrist.

Mama's crying.

I kiss her.

The dowagers see me cry.

—Antichrist.

“Vanya, don't wear red on Thursdays. Don't eat meat on Sundays. Don't make love on Wednesdays.”

“I won't, Mama. I won't.”

I walk down the steps, the dowagers' words tumbling in my head. Satyriasis. Antichrist. Slightly crazed, I consider strangling the Admiral. I cross the lawn without being challenged and pause near the gatekeeper's tiny cottage. My mind clears for a moment. The car is gone. Desperate, I call out to the empty road.

“Hajji? Van?”

I hear a noise coming from the gatekeeper's cottage. I peep inside. Van is sitting on a shelf near the door, his knees dangling over the edge. His shako, dented and soiled, sits on the floor. His face is practically white. He sniffles, too afraid to cry. Grabbing his elbows, I bring him down from the shelf.

"What happened?"

I shake him slightly. Then, stooping, I dust off the shako with one hand and plop it on his head.

Somehow the shako restores his propriety.

"He put me up there. Hajji. He said if I screamed or moved or anything he would come back and do terrible things to me." His eyebrows quiver. "He stole everything. Right after you went inside. He kidnaped Marat and took the car." Now he starts to cry. "We'll never get to Albany. Admiral will murder me." He rubs his eyes with one dirty knuckle. I carry him outside.

"Lemme down. I'm not a baby. Lemme down."

The shako blinds me for a minute. Giving in, I put him on the ground and curse myself for having trusted the Arab a second time.

We notice a police car parked outside the gate.

An officer with a pockmarked face steps out of the car. He seems quite pleased with himself. We take a closer look. Hajji's in the back. Van grins devilishly, ready to acclaim the Arab's crimes. I grab him by the seat of his pants. His knees fold awkwardly, and the grin disappears.

"Let me do all the talking, hear? Not a word."

The officer drags Hajji toward the cottage, his holster slapping against his side. The Arab has a bloody chin. The officer presents him to us.

"This character belong to you? He says you sent him on an errand."

Van starts to say something. I pinch his buttock on the sly.

"You got yourself a green Cadillac, Mister? Your boy here drove it into a ditch. He aint got a license, no identification, nothing. He a spick or what?"

"He's an Arab."

His brow deepens. "You putting me on? Arabs, here?"
"I swear it."

He becomes slightly more respectful. "Well, I don't know . . ."

Guessing his intentions, I take him over to the side and pay him off with one of the Admiral's traveler's checks. His pitted face blooms with color. He even becomes chummy with the Arab. And he asks me what I do for a living.

"I train monkeys."

"Oh." Then he goes back to his car.

I unfold my handkerchief and give the Arab time to wipe his chin.

"Are you hurt?"

"No," he says, grooming his mustache with his lips.

"Good."

I let him swagger for a moment, and then I tweak his nose.

"Miserable bastard. Steal cars? Frighten six-year-olds? When I get through with you, you'll swear that Sing Sing is heaven."

I release his nose. "Where's the turtle? *Marat.*"

He opens the flap of his shirt pocket and hands back the turtle unharmed. "Redbeard, a turtle's karma is as valuable as a man's. Who am I to judge? I've done you harm, both of you. Forgive me. It's hard being human after having been a roach and a zebra. I'm not used to it. Your morality is a little peculiar."

"Hajji, no sad songs."

Van nudges my arm.

The officer watches us from the gate. He waves to me. "Hey, Mr. Monkey Trainer, you want a lift? You'll need a tow truck to get that baby out of the ditch."

"Arab, I'll deal with you later."

Van sits up front, showing the sights to the turtle, and I sit with Hajji in the back. We ride past the Caddy, its raised trunk peering out of the ditch like the stern of a sinking ship.

The Arab whispers in my ear.

"Redbeard, it was an impossible caper. Who needs cars

in New York? I never bothered to learn how to drive. I took your advice. I figured if I went far enough in the same direction, I would end up in Ontario or Detroit."

In two hours the car is back on the road, the wheels aligned, the headlights repaired. The Arab expects no reprieves. "Redbeard, whatever you do, I deserve it. And more."

Van damns us both with black, merciless stares. "It's a quarter to three," he says. "Kortz will be in Rochester by the time we get to Albany."

"Hajji, where will you go?"

He raises one shoulder meekly. "I'll walk the roads."

"Maybe the police force around here is made up of clucks, but the troopers will pick you up in an hour."

"I know," he says.

"I'll take you to Albany. Get in."

I let the Arab off on Green Street. He opens his shirt and unclasps a chain cluttered with all sorts of amulets. I notice a Saint Christopher's medal.

"Arab, are you Christian, too?"

"No," he says. "Luck is luck." Blushing now, he puts the chain around my neck. "Redbeard, it doesn't stop you from doing evil, but it keeps off evil from the outside."

Touched by the Arab's generosity, I dangle the chain.

"Hajji, I appreciate it, I do. But how can I take all your charms? What if you happen to need them?"

"Bring luck to both of us, Redbeard." He wants to say goodbye to Van. "Mufti, no kind words?"

Van fumes in his seat and reminds me of the time.

"Hajji, are you sure you'll be all right? If you need anything, we're staying overnight at the Van der Potte."

"Don't worry about me. I know people in this district." His mustache crinkling, he darts into the traffic and disappears.

The dumpy brick houses on both sides of us cast a dull red haze over the streets. "Some town."

Panicking, Van keeps up his refrain. "It's almost six. It's almost six."

We find the Hotel Van der Potte on North Pearl Street. Van insists that we don't have time to check in. "They won't let us into the exhibition." I carry his shako for him and straighten his tie. "How do I look?"

"Unbeatable."

We stand at the end of an enormous line in the lobby.

"See," Van says, "the place is packed. We'll never get in."

After staring at the peculiar hats that the men in front of us are wearing, I discover we're in the wrong line.

"Dope, it's a Shriners' convention."

I corner one of the bellhops. "*Chess exhibition. Kortzfleisch. Champion.*"

He's a little put off by my beard.

Van scowls at me and untangles my gibberish.

"The main hall, sir. Second floor on the left."

We run up the stairs, unsettling a pack of Shriners. There are no placards around, no pictures of Kortz, no news about the exhibition anywhere. Four old men are playing cribbage in the main hall. We interrupt their game.

"Where's the chess exhibition?"

They stare at us as if we're out of our minds.

"Van, I double checked the date and the place. It's got to be here."

We run down the stairs, bustling past new groups of Shriners, and badger the clerk behind the information desk. After checking a few rosters and yawning in my face, he tells me that the exhibition was called off two days ago.

"That's impossible. *Insane.* I sent in my registration fee last week. For Cadet Van Buren. Please check it again."

"Sorry," he says curtly. "There's nothing I can do. We couldn't generate any interest. We wouldn't have been able to make up the maintenance costs for equipping the hall."

"But there are at least ten chess clubs in Albany and Troy. Two in Rensselaer. And one in Cohoes."

"None of the clubs would cooperate with us. It had something to do with Communism, I think. They refused to play against the master. They were even going to boycott the

hotel. No, we couldn't have any of that. We had to cancel."

Pissed off, we check in across the street at the Breedevoort.

Van hears me howl.

"My wallet is gone. The Arab. He filched it while he gave me his amulets. I can't even call American Express. I don't have the numbers of the traveler's checks."

I wire the Admiral collect.

PAPA. MINOR CATASTROPHE. EXHIBITION CANCELED AT VAN DER POTTE. MONEY, CHECKS, CREDIT CARDS STOLEN. STRANDED AT THE BREEDEVOORT. HELP. WILL CATCH UP WITH K IN ROCHESTER. VAN SAYS HELLO. LOVE, IVAN.

Starved, I'm ready to beg for sandwiches. Then I remember Van's candy bars. We have a feast in our room. After eating his third Mars bar, Van complains of a tummy ache. His groans seem slightly forced to me.

"Ooooooh," he says. "Your fault. *Mummy.*"

I call room service and ask them to prepare an enema.

Van quiets down immediately. "I think I'll go to bed."

He undresses himself, brushes his teeth, locates his union suit, does a few push-ups, asks me a question about the Petrograd Defense, unpegs his pocket chess set, and tells me to tuck him in. I listen to his phony snores.

The telephone rings.

"Hello? Cancel the enema, please."

"Enema? What enema? This is Hajji. You told me the Van der Potte? How come you're here? You know how much it cost me to put the tab on you?"

"Arab, you'll never leave Albany alive. I swear. Tear you limb from limb."

"Calm down. I left your goods in the lobby."

"No, I'm the one who's to blame. You have to expect to be bitten when you play with a snake."

"Redbeard, don't be unkind. And why do you have to bring up my past? Snakes have feelings too."

“Hajji, I’m not in the mood for metempsychosis. I’m hanging up.”

“Wait. You expect the world to reform overnight? My soul was dragging around before Alexander conquered Greenland, even before Ikhnaton was born.”

“Alexander never conquered Greenland. And what do you know about Ikhnaton?”

“Nothing. Redbeard, don’t cut in. Listen to me. My soul is bone dry. This is the last time I’ll know what it means to be human. I’ll probably be a bug for the next few centuries. Don’t be too hard on me. I tried. I left you twenty dollars. Goodbye.”

Why, why does he always shake me up? I imagine myself dooming the Arab to a lowly existence for centuries to come. Hajji, keep my trifles but stay alive.

I can hear the Shriners reveling over at the Van der Potte. I’m sure I’ll have a nightmare if I fall asleep. The enema arrives.

C H A P T E R N I N E

A messenger boy wakes us in the morning. The Admiral's sent us a packet. There's a letter inside for Van and a bundle of papers for me. Van reads his letter in the corner.

"What does the Admiral have to say?"

"Nothing." He folds the letter and stuffs it in his shoe.

His smugness is particularly offensive so early in the day. I sort out the Admiral's checks and inspect the rest of the packet. Admiral's sent me scraps of testimony from one of the German denazification courts, filed in Düsseldorf over fifteen years ago. He must have put his detectives in Berlin to work. I sift through the pages forewarned.

DISTELMEYER: You were Director of the nursing home at Württemberg from 1937 to 1942?

SCHWARZKOPF: . . .

DISTELMEYER: Speak up.

SCHWARZKOPF: Yes, Excellency.

DISTELMEYER: You were responsible for converting the facilities of the home into a death chamber?

SCHWARZKOPF: No, Excellency. I was against the euthanasia program from the beginning. The Führer gave the order. What could I do? My hands were tied.

DISTELMEYER: Tell the Court what happened, Herr Doktor.

SCHWARZKOPF: The home was evacuated. The patients were all shipped to the Naval School at Esslingen. The greatest caution was taken to keep everything secret. Then the Einsatzkommandos arrived. Excellency, it was out of my hands. I was in charge in name only.

DISTELMEYER: Continue, Herr Doktor.

SCHWARZKOPF: They rounded up patients from the asylum at Gmünd. Only the incurably insane. In buses with green windows. So no one could see. The patients were gassed in the shower stalls by the Einsatzkommandos. The bodies were trundled off to the basement and disposed of in the furnaces. I signed the death certificates and wrote to relatives. I was told what to say. *I regret to inform you that your son Gunther died of pneumonia at Württemberg nursing home on such and such a day.* They were not very imaginative, my superiors. Always pneumonia.

DISTELMEYER: Very good, Defendant Schwarzkopf.

SCHWARZKOPF: One word, Excellency. Archbishop Reineking wrote to the Ministry of Justice about the abominations at the nursing home. He was silenced within a week. The horrors multiplied in spite of everything. When the mental patients were exhausted, they searched the hospital wards and the nursing homes for new victims. Excellency, they brought back my own patients from the Naval School. Then they singled out crippled children, epileptics, mutilated prisoners of war.

DISTELMEYER: What happened next?

SCHWARZKOPF: The Führer was unhappy about the bad reports the euthanasia program was receiving. So Herr Goebbels sent over someone from his Ministry for Popular Enlightenment. Unterreichsführer Kortzfleisch. He was relieved of all his duties as sponsor of the Reich's chess tournaments and minister of the Strength Through Joy programs. Excellency, you will never know how much I looked forward to his arrival. Surrounded by Himmler's swine, I welcomed the company of a fellow human being. We had been students together at Göttingen. He was a man I could count on, could

talk to without being afraid for my skin. We talked, played chess, drank wine, he told me about Goering's art treasures, about his trips to the Prado, but Excellency, he was just like the others. Yes, he kept the Kommandos in line, but he built more ovens, he requisitioned more buses, he modernized the gas chamber. "Heini," he said, "it's unpleasant, but it has to be done." Excellency, they were slaughtering Germans, *Germans*, and Herr Kortzfleisch said it had to be done. "What is the good of living out useless, unproductive lives? Heini, we are doing them all a favor." This, after he heard them scream in the shower stalls. Excellency, I pleaded with him. "Herr Overseer, give them over to me. The cripples, the misfits, the amputees. I'll organize them into fire brigades. Chimney sweepers. Provisional police. We'll do wonders for the town. I'll lash them if they don't behave." He patted me on the shoulder. "Heini, you don't understand. Göttingen was another world. One day soon we will all go under." Then he was recalled. The Ministry sent him on a grand tour of other institutions. He improved the facilities wherever he went. And he wrote articles for the *NS-Monatsheft* about his own contributions to the Mercy Death.

DISTELMEYER: And what happened to you, Herr Doktor?

SCHWARZKOPF: Excellency, it was inevitable. Their local death houses became outmoded. Why did they need my tiny shower room when they had Belsen? They converted the home into a recreation center for SS officers on leave. And they made me Director of the Berlin Zoo.

The Admiral allows himself one tiny coda: "Ivan, what would have happened to you, and Mama, and myself under Kortzfleisch's regime?"

Papa, I want to say, madness can't be localized. The symptoms are too widespread. I turn to Van. He's busy scrubbing the turtle's painted shell with his toothbrush.

"Come on, we're leaving. Let's go."

I tie his shoelaces, pack his union suit, and carry our bags outside, thinking of Kortz all the time. Was Schwarzkopf made to order for the Admiral in a Berlin detective agency?

We have griddle cakes in the Breedevoort's Mayflower Room. Van steps on my foot in order to get some attention. He scolds me.

"You've been spilling syrup on your shirt for five minutes. Did you forget to take your pills? Do you want me to call a doctor?"

"Finish eating."

The waiter comes with a wet napkin. Gathering my wits, I order lettuce shreds and a tomato for Marat. Van stares at me. I feed the turtle and then we leave.

He takes up his mapreading again, and we find the Thru-way in a matter of minutes.

"Tell me about Stinky Mitgang?"

"Who? What?"

"*You know.* Stinky Mitgang. He went to school with you and Dad. He trapped you in the locker room. I remember. *Throw a fit.* That's what Walter said. Mummy shut him up."

"Stinky." Always had ink on his thumbs and kept his secret headquarters in the Admiral's back yard. Afraid. Cretinous looks. Oily skin. Mitgang. "Stinky never learned the alphabet. A-B-C-F-G."

"Ivuhn, are you still in a funk?"

Tired of faceless landscapes, I change lanes recklessly and upset the driver on my tail.

"I had my first seizure when I was eight. In class. The Admiral was talking about the Battle of Jutland." I carry my recklessness into other corners and do a perfect imitation of the Admiral. "'Jellicoe was no Nelson. Not by a long shot. You can't win battles by keeping all your firepower behind a row of pawns.'" Van derides my mimicry with a prudish frown. Whoever heard of a six-year-old without a sense of humor? "Anyway, Stinky saw me fall. They all did. I guess he was taken by my fits. He talked about them all the time. 'Show us how your body shakes, Bones.' That's the name they had for me. *Bones.* I was taller than the Admiral before I was nine. My jaw came down to the ground. 'Bones, do it again. Show us how you dance on the floor.' What could I say? I

didn't remember a thing. I thought it had something to do with dying. Do you know what an erection is?"

"Sure," he says grudgingly. "Mummy told me."

"Well, according to Stinky and his crew, I had an erection in the middle of the seizure. Evidently that's what fascinated him. And when he trapped me in the locker room . . ."

Van fidgets in his seat. "What about the Admiral?"

"Admiral was caught unawares. There had been plenty of signs beforehand—twitching, blinking, a few tantrums. But Admiral had already made up his mind to turn me into a superman. I was supposed to make up for his hammertoes. He was going to defy all of nature and form me in his own way. Any dope could have told him that his superman-to-be was a gawky, twitchy, unruly bag of bones. It took the fits to wake him up. Then he blamed my mother. He said her whole family was tainted. Just because poor grandpa Basil had a few mild attacks fifty years ago. *'I married a harpy. With a history of halfwits and lunatics behind her.'*"

"Admiral said that?"

"Yes—no, but I'm sure he said something like it. And after that he lost interest in Mama and me. He spent all his time at the Castle. I bought Mama tarot cards and palmistry books and we told each other's fortunes. But Admiral did take me on a trip once. To a hospital in Baltimore. A whole flock of neurologists examined my skull. Every bump. And they gave me brain wave tests. Stuck aerials on my head with tape. Told me I was Flash Gordon. The aerials worked. I wrote messages with my head."

Van jiggles Marat inside his shako. Obviously, Flash Gordon doesn't mean a thing to him. And brain waves are old hat. "Whatever the Admiral found out, it didn't make him any happier. He wanted to put me in a farm for epileptics in Jersey. Keep me out of sight. I went up for a trial period. I was just under ten. Most of the kids were refugees from orphanages and the local insane asylum. We were all treated like lepers. They assigned a few of us to the chicken coop. The guards made us work naked. And they had their fun

with us. They would prod the roosters with pitchforks and then throw us in with them. The roosters pecked our elbows and went for our eyes."

Van isn't accustomed to horror stories; he scowls.

"I was lucky. Admiral came up one night without announcing himself. He saw us being led out of the coop, battle-scarred, our bodies covered with feathers, some of us crying and choking. He was enraged. He chased after the guards with his cane. Even the roosters were afraid of him. They squawked miserably in one corner. We had never expected such a deliverer. The farm was shut down in a month."

Now that the Admiral's been redeemed, Van's curiosity perks up. "Ivuhn, what happened to the other kids?"

"I don't know. I think most of them were shipped back to the asylum."

He prods me with further questions. He wants to know the names of the boys who worked with me on the farm. "Van, it was twenty years ago. How—" He pokes fun at my faltering memory and tells me that he can remember every event in his life. I make a lame appeal. "Wait until you accumulate a little more baggage. We'll see what happens by the time you're nine or ten." In spite of my talk, I slyly conjure up images of the farm, trying to come up with a name.

"Admiral says he's going to give me a bonus every time I beat him."

"Beat him?" I say absently, with roosters and chicken coops in my brain.

"Kortz," he shouts. "Kortz." He's annoyed with me because I can never keep up with his conversational hops and jumps. "Admiral said so in the letter."

I tap the steering wheel with my thumbs, hoping for some sort of revelation. I startle myself. "One of the roosters. His name was Amos. I'm sure. He had a crippled leg. And enormous, flapping wattles. Nicked us with his spurs. We all had nightmares. He—"

"Who cares about your silly roosters?"

We drive in silence for about a quarter of a mile. He ministers to the turtle, pouting at me.

“What kind of bonus?”

“A dollar,” he says, annoyed now at my mordant interest in details.

“What else does he say?”

“I’m supposed to keep an eye on you to make sure nobody steals your pants. Only I’m not supposed to tell you that.”

“Thanks. Tell the Admiral not to worry.”

He smiles waspishly, building armies on the dashboard with his pocket chessmen; he arranges the miniature kings, queens, and pawns severely, according to rank. “Admiral says I should stick Kortz with Alekhine’s Defense. Or the Nimzovitch.”

“Wise guy, wait until you see how he opens.”

“It doesn’t matter. Admiral wants me to shake him up. Anyway, I know all his openings by heart.” He yawns, pummeling his mouth with both fists, and makes a series of whooping sounds. “Whaa-whaaa-whaaaa.” His war cry disturbs the turtle. Marat pops into his shell. And the pocket chessmen jostle one another haphazardly on the dashboard, upsetting protocol.

I dismiss all the untoward signs.

“Pipe down. Can’t ya see? You’re giving the turtle a headache.”

Having nothing else to do, he leans back, puts the shako over his eyes, and takes a nap. Somehow, without his sour remarks driving becomes an impossible chore.

C H A P T E R T E N

Left to my own resources, I take in a few of the sights: it's Canajoharie on the left, the home of Beech-Nut gum, leaving memories of chiclets for miles; it's the Auriesville Shrine, with half-forgotten relics from the French and Indian War; the Barge Canal, dilapidated farm houses, and a strange, un-crossable bridge over the Mohawk without any means of access on either side; it's smoke-clogged factories in Utica, radio towers, and a family of woodchucks sunning themselves on top of Herkimer Hill; flatlands, mucklands, leaning fences, petrified trees, and wild peacock preserves in the Montezuma swamps; and finally the Tomahawk Motel in Rochester, just across from the Rundel Memorial Library where Van expects to dethrone Kortz tonight at seven.

I carry him into the motel and allow him to sleep for an hour, deciding to wake him punctually at six. Nudging his shoulders doesn't seem to do much good, so I dangle one of his shoelaces and tickle his nose. Ivan the Torturer. He wakes up with a sneeze and wants to know where we are. I reassure him, taking Marat out of my pocket. "Kortz is across the street."

Still drowsy, he claims he wants to go home.

"That's fine with me. Should I pack?"

He scowls at me, and I know he's back to normal. He tells me to leave. "I can't think with you around. I have to figure out my strategy."

He ruffles his brow to show me that his mind is already hatching a few irrevocable Kortzkills.

So I stand outside the door, paring my fingernails. He comes out in half an hour, in full dress uniform, and salutes. He's left Marat on the window sill, inside a Sani-Glass.

We march across the street. People stare at us from the steps of the library. Have they all come out for the exhibition? This time there are posters all over the place—on the steps, in the halls, over the doors—but the posters have very little to do with Kortz. The exhibition has been upstaged.

MEET MR. MARVELO

FIRST FULLY AUTOMATIC CHESS PLAYER IN EXISTENCE

UNDEFEATED IN THE METROPOLITAN AREA

DESIGNED AT THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE FOR
ADVANCED RESEARCH IN AUTOMATIZED WARFARE

AND WEAPONRY

BY DOCTOR R. F. RATOOSH

MR. MARVELO WILL MATCH HIS WITS

AGAINST FORMER WORLD CHESS CHAMPION

TONIGHT

IN THE TEEN LOUNGE

After some reconnoitering we find our way to the lounge. It's filled with friends and admirers of Mr. Marvelo. I notice a cub scout pack, random couples here and there, and two groups of tittering high school girls who obviously belong to rival sororities and are vying for the attention of a lone sailor with a lewd smile and a soiled cap. I peer over the sailor's head and locate the exhibition director, who turns out to be a balding assistant librarian on loan from another branch. The elfish man next to him, with bushy eyebrows

and a stylish goatee, is Dr. Ratoosh. Behind them is a flimsy curtain with irregular pleats. Ratoosh mumbles to himself and ties elaborate knots in the curtain's drawstring. "Call the Institute. They promised me this one was reliable. I don't care if he came all the way from Munich." Looking up at me, he stares rudely, tugs his goatee with two fingers, and grins. "*Wie geht's, Herr Schachmeister?*"

"I'm sorry," I say. "I think you have the wrong party. I'm Farkas." I shake his hand. "How do you do? This is Van. He's supposed to play the master tonight."

I turn to the librarian. "Don't you know? The exhibition. Van's name should be on the register. Walter Van Buren, Jr. I mailed in the fee."

The librarian seems slightly confused. He harangues Ratoosh instead of answering me. "You'll have to start, Doctor. We don't have any more time." Then he introduces Mr. Marvelo to the crowd. "Friends, neighbors, fellow Rochesterians, here tonight, for the first time, we have Doctor Rolo Fitzsimmons Ratoosh and the latest wonder of the Rochester Rocketry Institute, Mr. Marvelo, the breaker of champions, the only chess machine in the world today that is a recognized grand master. Friends, here—"

Ratoosh lunges boldly into the crowd, disturbing the sailor and the sorority girls. "You want miracles?" Controlling his murderous looks, he coaxes us with his eyebrows. "You came to the right place." Then, without warning, he dances in front of the curtain, pulls the drawstring and unveils Mr. Marvelo. The sorority girls scream appreciatively. The sailor's a little annoyed; he'd much rather have the girls devote their time to him.

"Shoot," he says, "nothin but a lousy box." And he's right. Marvelo is an overcrowded radio cabinet with a few added dials, levers, and drooping antennae, backed with a large, upright electronic chessboard which looks like the scoreboard of an old pinball machine. Behind the cabinet and the make-shift chessboard are the actual brains of the machine: two enormous metal drums without any encumbering levers or

dials. After allowing us a few additional eyefuls, Ratoosh closes the curtain with a snap of his wrist. He gloats at us now, crossing and uncrossing his arms.

"Ten years," he says. "Ten years it took me to hook up that baby. What do you know?" His shifting expressions throw us off guard; he winks, he smiles, he growls. The sorority girls are already at his mercy. "And what is he? Meat? Blood? Bones? *Nothing*. A bag of hardware. I built him up from the ground. I had to beg for tapes and transistors from those shylocks at the Institute. And sign my life away. Folks, do you know what it means to sit with a deaf, dumb, and blind machine for hours, for days, for years, and teach him like a baby how to move pawns across a field of squares? And should I tell you how many games I fed into him? Marvelo has played and replayed the games of every master in the world. Philidor? Morphy? Alekhine? Capablanca? Tchigorin? Botvinnik? Larsen? Kortzfleisch? From the classicists to the romanticists, from the revisionists to the hypermoderns, every school, every game, every style. You name it, Marvelo knows it. It's all on tap inside his brain. Stored in reels of magnetic tape. Marvelo's memorized every game. He can summon up a rook move that Alekhine used against Capablanca in 1933. Imagine. The whole history of chess inside one head."

The librarian leaves his seat. "Rolo, you're losing time. The lights go out in less than an hour."

Ratoosh ignores him.

"Folks, you're looking at a condemned man. You'll never know how hard they tried to censure me at the Institute. They wanted me to lobotomize Marvelo, monkey around with his brain. They ordered me to torture him, sterilize him, put him out of the way. Why? They thought I would bring them bad publicity. 'Ratoosh,' they said, 'we've already had complaints from the local chess clubs. Soon the International Chess Federation will be breathing down our necks. You're killing the game. You'll ruin everything with that monster. He's already a grand master. If he ever becomes champion of the world, he'll reign for centuries. Give it up or get him out of the

Institute.' But then they had a change of heart. They figured to themselves that if Marvelo could store thousands upon thousands of combinations in his head, he could be used for other purposes. Don't worry, they're clever men. They wanted to use Marvelo to help them with their war games. Now, instead of challenging Petrosian and Spassky, Marvelo was supposed to take on a fortress of missiles and the Strategic Air Command. Nothing doing. Did they sit with him for ten years and watch him grow up? Did they see him throw games away one after the other because he would forget in midgame how to move a horse? Does that sound like a monster to you? Just because he's made out of hardware, you think he doesn't have any feelings? Marvelo . . ." Ratoosh hitches up his trousers in the middle of his speech and baffles us with a knockkneed curtsy. "*Don't be shy, Herr Kortzfleisch. Come in.*"

We turn around. Kortz is standing near the door. He's wearing an ordinary brown suit, slightly out of fashion, with enormous buttons and wide pockets. *Unterreichsführer Kortzfleisch.* He's carrying an Army surplus knapsack; the straps pinch his sides, and the lumpy cover of the knapsack forms a hump on his back. He raises his head, and the hump disappears. Boo. The Admiral's already shaped my thoughts. I search for monstrosities in Kortz's shopworn face. Württemberg. Green windows. Except for his knapsack, there's nothing remarkable about him. An old man with a skinny neck and a big nose. "My bus," he says. "Very, very sorry." He holds out his palms.

Ratoosh nudges the librarian with his shoulder. "Find some soap. You'll ruin my demonstration. He wants to wash his hands."

The librarian ducks out of the lounge and comes back with a basin and a roll of Sani-Towels.

"Thank you."

The top of Van's shako brushes my elbow. I look down. Van is clutching his belly and staring at Kortz. "I have to go to the john."

"Need any help?"

"No," he says, his gloomy face contracting under the brim of his shako. He burrows under the arms of the sorority girls and finds his way to the door.

The librarian puts on his eyeglasses, pulls out a crumpled card from his pocket, and reads.

"Fellow Rochesterians, we have with us today a distinguished visitor from West Germany, who is not only the former chess champion of the world but is also a philosopher, a linguist, a psychologist who worked with Carl Jung at the German Society for Psychotherapy and has written a world-famous book of aphorisms, *Sp-sprüche aus Himmel und Hölle*, a former—"

"Enough," Ratoosh says. "You expect Marvelo to play him cold? I have to warm him up." He steps in front of the librarian. "Folks, show the master how we treat a guest."

The cub scout pack claps lamely, but the sorority girls, prompted by Ratoosh, mill around Kortz and cheer him on.

"Thank you," Kortz says, startled by all the attention.

Van's back.

His little trip must have refreshed him; he growls at the proceedings. "When do I get to play him?"

"After the show."

Ratoosh unveils his machine for the second time. Now he prances around the cabinet, crawls all the way into one of the metal drums, climbs out, tests the antennae, and adjusts a few of the dials. Then he calls Kortz over to the machine and, gesturing furiously with one hand, tells him what to do.

"When the board lights up, then you make your move. You stall, you fool around, you don't collect a cent. You hear? Champions don't mean a thing to Marvelo. You stay right where you are." Then he shouts at us. "No kibitzing. You want to do any coffeehousing, you go to one of the local clubs, not here. And folks, it's not in my nature to distort the facts. The master doesn't stand a chance. When he plays against Marvelo, he's really playing against Morphy, Lasker, and

himself. Marvelo will bring out Kortzfleisch's best moves and use them against him. That's the way he's programmed. Any noise, and I clear the room."

Ratoosh plays with the dials on the cabinet, and the chessboard lights up. The electronic chessmen glow inside their squares; actually they're wire filaments twisted into appropriate shapes. The pawns are supposed to be infantrymen from the First World War. Both kings are wearing generals' uniforms. The bishops are decked with miters and crosiers. The knights have been turned into tanks. The rooks have become rocket launchers. And the two queens are replicas of the Statue of Liberty. Kortzfleisch stares at the chessboard and wags his head in wonder. "*Phantastisch.*" He takes out a cigarette and a tiny matchbox, stoops, strikes a match against his heel, and cupping the flame in his palm, he lights the cigarette; his hands tremble slightly. The knapsack rides on his shoulders. He smokes and admires the machine.

"Folks," Ratoosh says, "each square is equipped with thirty-two separate circuits. One for every man on the board. The circuits are all connected to Marvelo's brain. If he decides to castle kingside, he sends out messages to the circuits involved, the proper filaments light up, and bingo, the castling is accomplished. Simple. Now we begin."

He punches another dial, and Marvelo's king pawn jumps two squares; a tiny window near the upper-left-hand corner of the board immediately announces: P-K4.

Kortzfleisch dreams with his hand on his chin. Is he planning to build his own machine? The librarian rouses him rudely, poking him with two fingers. "Sorry," Kortzfleisch says, avoiding our glances, and writes his move on a slip of paper. Ratoosh snatches it up and feeds Kortz's move into the machine by means of a typewriter keyboard under the dials. The keys clack twice, Kortz's king pawn jumps in front of Marvelo's, and the tiny window announces the move. P-K4.

Van criticizes Kortz. "That's no way to play a machine. He ought to put Marvelo to work. Alekhine's Defense. Or the Caro-Kann. That's what I—"

Ratoosh glares at the two of us. "Quiet. Not a peep. Marvelo has to think."

Was I expecting the metal drums to rattle? Marvelo does his thinking without a sound. I check my watch. It takes him forty seconds to make up his mind. His king knight jumps over its own pawn and then takes one step to the left. Marvelo's elected the Ruy Lopez.

Kortz deploys his queen knight and tries Bird's Defense on the machine. Van shakes his head. "It's going to be a bloody game." Kortz and the machine trade knights on the fourth move, the scoreboard highlighting both captures with a volley of simulated sparks. Marvelo's attack gains momentum, and by the twenty-first move Kortz begins to falter. His rooks hemmed in, his bishops unmanned by Marvelo's pawns, Kortz exposes his queen in an attempt to launch his remaining knight. Van growls at my elbow. "What's that gonna do? He could've used a pinch hitter. Now it's hopeless."

Marvelo breaks up Kortz's counterattack, capturing a rook on the twenty-fifth move. The cub scouts are mesmerized by the sparks flying across the scoreboard, but for some reason Ratoosh seems depressed. "Schachmeister," he says soothingly, "I think it's time to give up."

Kortz lights another cigarette and almost burns his hand. He stares at the chessboard and talks to himself. The cub scouts line up behind him, giggling and pulling each other's ears. Kortz hands Ratoosh his move.

"You crazy?" Ratoosh says, staring at the slip of paper. "This is suicide."

We watch the board.

Kortz's queen scampers across its diagonal and stops brazenly in front of Marvelo's rook.

Van's up in arms.

"Is that the way a champion plays? I saw queen sacrifices before, but not like this. Is he going to work Marvelo over with his pawns?"

"Wait and see," I say.

Marvelo has something else in mind. Leaving the queen

en prise, he sends his king knight deep into Kortz's territory, threatening three pawns and a bishop.

"Two nuts," Van says. "One's worse than the other."

Marvelo has a change of heart. He tries to recall the king knight, but his wires become crossed in the process; instead of going back quietly to its former position, the knight begins to capture its own men. The sparks go off, the tiny window announces impossible moves, and the knight drives its bishops and pawns off the board with determined hops.

Ratoosh admonishes Marvelo. "Idiot, put your other brain to work. Don't panic. You made a mistake, so what? Rectify, rectify." But the knight keeps up its indiscriminate slaughter, and Ratoosh closes the curtain. "Kill, see if I care. I'll fix you later." He shakes his fists at all of us, and then he turns on Kortz. "You did it. You took advantage. You knew he could beat any champion, dead or alive. You could see it after the first ten moves. So you tried something else. You put your queen there on purpose. To throw him out of whack. His head was in the clouds, dreaming up fantastic combinations, and he couldn't see what was in front of his nose. I spoiled him. He's been playing grand masters all his life. I never taught him how to deal with a bad move. Now he's neurotic. *Meister*, you had to foul him up? I told you to play fair."

Kortz seems concerned about the machine. His shoulders hunched in, he hears out Ratoosh's excoriation without making a sound.

The sorority girls take advantage of the situation. Ratoosh has lost his hold over them. They turn their backs on him, take out their transistor radios, and do the monkey and the jerk. The cub scouts raid the bookshelves, scattering Judo Boy, the Grandslam Kid, and Nancy Drew, and then crawl under the curtain. Are they planning to disembowel the machine? I can see the antennae sway over the curtain rod.

The librarian contributes to the pandemonium, threatening the cub scouts, shouting at the girls. He confiscates one of the radios. "Out. Everybody out. It's all over." The sailor picks him up and carries him around the room. "Cool off, Dad."

The librarian waves his spindly arms in protest. The sailor dumps him on a pile of books. The curtain comes down, entangling Ratoosh, Kortz, and me. The cub scouts have already disconnected the chessboard, overturned the metal drums, lopped off the antennae's ears, defaced the radio cabinet, and rooted out Marvelo's innards, stuffing their pockets with spoils.

I free myself, put Van on my shoulder—"Hold on"—and head for the door. The lights go out. "What did I tell you?" the librarian cries in the dark. The sorority girls try to tackle me. I carry them along. "Giddyap," somebody shouts, while the sorority girls beleaguer my thighs. Pushing, dragging, grunting, I finally reach the door.

P A R T **Two**

Just after the Civil War a Federal soldier who had located in Ozark County, Arkansas, broke into the Arkansas Legislature and immediately introduced a resolution to change the name of the State. An old man from Jefferson County, stooped with age and wearing a coonskin cap, felt such an outrage at the introduction of such a resolution that he immediately prepared to meet the issue. When the resolution was read, the old man, trembling with rage, arose and addressed the Chair:

“Mr. Speaker! Change the name of Arkansas? God Almighty damn! I wish to say to the damned Yankee from Ozark that the man who would change the name of Arkansas is the original iron jawed, brass mounted, blue bellied, copper eyed corpse maker from the jungles of Yankeedom sired by a hurricane, nearly related to smallpox on his mother’s side. He is the man they call sudden death and general desolation! Look at him! He looks like a subdued hyena and his stink is worse than a polecat.”

Then the old man walked over and placed his finger directly in the face of the gentleman from Ozark and concluded:

“Young man, go to the Capital of your country and deface the pictures upon the wall, desecrate the grave of George Washington, haul down the Stars and Stripes and curse the Goddess of Liberty, go to the tomb of Thomas Jefferson and shit upon it, and your crime would be as insignificant as a faint glimmer of a lightning bug’s ass as compared to the brilliant rays of the noonday sun.” Now quivering with rage. “What? Change the name of Arkansas? God Almighty damn!”

—JAMES R. MASTERSON, *Tall Tales of Arkansaw*

C H A P T E R E L E V E N

13 JUNE 65
HERSHEY,, PENNSYL

DEAR ADMIRAL SIR:

I have been EXPERIMENTING with the TORRE ATTACK in MY spare TIME,, but I don't think K will open with HIS QUEEN PAWN. Do YOU?? WE are still trying to make up for ROCHESTER. Don't blame IVAN. HE can't CONTROL a MACHINE. WE haven't had an ENGAGEMENT yet with K. HE canceled in BUFFALO and NIAGARA at the LAST minute. But I think HE will be here TOMORROW. At the AMERICAN LEGION POST. I am not worried,, as YOU can tell. If HE opens with HIS QBP or HIS KN,, I will have SOMETHING for HIM.

I have been MASSAGING MY GUMS the way YOU told ME SIR. I agree that it would not look too good if I went around with GREEN teeth. IVAN makes ME eat TWO (2) VEGETABLES every day. And HE inspects MY nails. MARAT'S sick. WE couldn't find HIM fresh LETTUCE. Do YOU think TURTLES can get SCURVY?? IVAN says NO. He says it has something to do with the PAINTED SHELL. HE thinks it's HARD for MARAT to BREATHE.

WE had a good time at NIAGARA. IVAN took ME to

GOAT ISLAND and the CAVE of the WINDS. And WE went for a ride on the MAID of the MIST. WE had to wear raincoats with HOODS like MONKS. WE rode under HORSESHOE FALLS,, but there was one THING wrong. The WATER was SOAPY. Do YOU think people DUMP garbage into the NIAGARA RIVER?? It's BROWN.

IVAN has TROUBLE sleeping at NIGHT. HE talks in HIS sleep. I keep NOTES the way YOU told ME. HE said,, PLEASE PAPA PLEASE. Then HE fell off the bed. I woke HIM. HIS body was SHAKING and HIS lips were BLUE and I made HIM take a pill. HE said it was a NIGHTMARE. HE couldn't FALL asleep AGAIN so WE played a game of LIGHTNING and I swiped THREE pawns in FIVE minutes and HE quit. HE looked at me funny and HE told me that HE'S had NIGHTMARES since HE was SIX. IS that TRUE?? He said the same BAD dreams KEEP coming back. And HE told ME about ONE of THEM. HE KEEPS falling through a HOLE. SOMETIMES it's an ELEVATOR SHAFT and SOMETIMES it's a CAVE or a PIT. Only he NEVER reaches the BOTTOM in HIS dream. HE just falls and falls. HE says that's the way HE FEELS when HE has a FIT. WE played some more LIGHTNING,, but HE must have been VERY tired because I caught HIM snoring in the MIDDLE of the game. THIS time I had HIS BISHOPS. I tucked HIM in and I GUARDED HIM for a LITTLE while to make sure HE didn't have any more BAD dreams. THEN I had to PEE.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,,
Walter Van Buren, Jr.
CADET

P.S.,,

The MAILBOX is RIGHT outside so I won't have any TROUBLE sending THIS. But if YOU don't hear from ME in a MONTH YOU'LL know that IVAN'S been intercepting MY letters. GOODBYE AGAIN.

Met up with Kortz yesterday in Hershey.

He moved from table to table, surrounded by American

Legion banners and flags, humbling local champions, Legionnaires, and strategists from chess clubs fifty miles away, and spent most of his time at table 11, trying to work his way around Van's spiced up Caro-Kann. I don't know whether Kortz recognized us, but he did nod to me once after Van plucked his king pawn early in the game.

The local champions began to resign after the fourteenth move, turning over their kings like dutiful children, and Kortz's rounds kept getting shorter and shorter; by the thirtieth move Kortz had cleared the entire field except for Van. And now Van called time out, and walked over to the Pepsi-Cola machine. I joined him, pumping dimes into the machine. The bottles dropped with an impressive thump into a plastic canal under the coin slot. We huddled around the machine, sipping Pepsi.

"I got him on the run."

"So why did you stop the game?"

"I want him to suffer."

"He doesn't look like he's suffering very much."

Van stared prophetically into the bottle. "You'll see."

The Legionnaires formed ranks in front of Kortz and asked him questions about Germany and NATO and the possibility of a Third World War. Kortz shrugged off their questions, but he tried to be polite.

Van twisted his straw into the bottle, gave the Legionnaires a contemptuous grin, broke through their phalanx, sat down, and plopped his shako near Kortz's captured pawns. "Let's play." Kortz seemed grateful. He leaned over the table and rocked his knees. Van smiled shrewdly and caught Kortz's bishops in a knight fork. The local champions gabbled among themselves.

Van adopted the Admiral's favorite policy: gradual attrition. He traded pawns, rooks, and knights, scowling at Kortz before and after every move. Delighted, Kortz smoked and mingled with the Legionnaires. He would step around the table, peer at the board over Van's shoulder, and gesture desirively at his king and queen and one remaining pawn. Van

kept scowling, but Kortz's behavior baffled him nonetheless. He hadn't expected a grand master who was also a clown. And he became arrogant and careless. Instead of trading queens and preventing Kortz's pawn from inching across the board, he decided to harass Kortz's king.

Kortz moved his head sadly from side to side, then foiled Van's attack and promoted his pawn. Van looked at Kortz's new queen and lost heart. He ran out of the hall, leaving his shako behind. The exhibition director's wife ran after him, bearing a foot-high chocolate pawn. "Little boy," she cried, "we baked it special . . ." She came back with the pawn in her arms, her mouth agape, horrified. She had dropped the pawn on the stairs and bashed in its chocolate head. Her husband comforted her. The Legionnaires milled around Kortz.

Van was sitting outside our room, shivering. I sponged his face, took his temperature, and put him to bed. I would have drugged him with phenobarb, but I didn't want him getting up with a yellow tongue or raspberries on his behind.

He woke me in the morning in his usual way. He sat on my shoulders and tugged my beard. "You were dreaming."

"I don't remember any dream."

"It was a nightmare."

"How can you tell?"

"Your beard moves." He wiggled his thumbs under my chin. I told him we were going home.

"Haven't you had enough? Do you want to waste away completely?" I grabbed him under his arms and balanced him on my knee.

"Lemme go, you big ape."

"Van, let the Admiral fight his own battles. If he wants to get Kortz in the corner, he—"

"Lemme down, will ya?"

I swung him over my shoulder and sat him down on the bed. He frowned like a truculent old man. I knew I wasn't going to get my way.

"I'm staying here. I don't need you. Admiral will send Simon or Crabby to pick me up. You're not so hot. You gimme the creeps. I didn't want you. It was Admiral's idea. I wanted Crabby to take me. You're a jinx. I can't win with you around."

"Okay, you're the boss." I walked over to the door, zipping up my fly.

My aplomb obviously frightened him. He climbed down from the bed, stood on his toes, hooked one finger in my belt, and tried to hold back a sniffle. "Don't go away." His face crumpled, and he started to cry. "I didn't mean anything. I don't want to be alone. I'm afraid."

I picked him up. This time he snuggled against my chest. I invited him to wipe his nose with the end of my tie.

"Ivuhn?"

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."

"Ivuhn, I want to play him. I can beat him. I know it. I can. Will you take me, Ivuhn? I didn't mean what I said before about Crabby. I like you better."

We got along splendidly for the rest of the morning. He shined my shoes, made a little corral for Marat out of some Popsicle sticks, ate heaping spoonfuls of cottage cheese at the commissary downstairs, and offered to read my maps for life. We left Hershey at noon, intending to face Kortz again at Gettysburg that evening. Van complained of the scenery along the Turnpike, and we decided to take another route. We ended up on a back road with a flat tire, miles from Gettysburg. I took out the spare from the trunk and found the Admiral's jack, but after pumping the lever with all my might I couldn't get the car to budge.

Van's surliness returned in full store.

"We'll be here for days. Nobody uses this road."

He walked around the car, a little Napoleon, scowling, talking to himself, snapping at me. "Crabby could fix it in a minute. What have you been doing for thirty years?" I offered him the jack.

"I'm only six," he said. "I'm not supposed to know everything."

I lit a Tiparillo and ordered him to sit in the car.

"Ivuhn, where are you going?"

"To get some help, dammit."

"Take me wich'a."

"No. Do you think I want to hear your complaints every minute? I need a rest. And besides, if somebody comes along while I'm gone, you can get them to change the tire. You have more appeal than I do. I scare people away, remember? So sit."

I walked off without any plan in mind. Keeping an eye out for snakes, I blocked Kortz and the Admiral out of my mind and dreamed about Hope. I pictured myself making love to her with extraordinary abandon in the back of the Caddy, the Admiral's plush upholstery upholding our rhythms, and Van chasing butterflies somewhere miles and miles away. I saw a bus near the side of the road. A group of young men in orange and blue uniforms were lounging in front of it. They wore orange caps, and a few of them were squatting, pitching stones at the tires. The sun burnt the roof of the bus, bleached the orange caps, and turned the jerseys blood red. I must have startled them, because they mobilized immediately and began passing out baseball bats.

"You some kinda sheriff?" one of them asked, stepping forward cautiously, bat in hand. The name Maurice was written in gold on his uniform.

"Sheriff? Me? No, no."

Someone with a freckled face and a big nose continued the interrogation. According to his uniform, his name was Lennie Q. "Bet he's Amish. Hey pop, you one of those guys who keeps his wife locked up and aint allowed to screw on holidays? Maurie, he's Amish. He must be on some kinda pilgrimage."

Maurice raised the bill of his cap. "You from 'round here?"

"I'm from Brooklyn."

Lennie Q walked around me, wrinkling up his nostrils, staring at my pockets. "Nobody from Brooklyn comes here. He smells funny. Like chocolate."

"I was in Hershey," I said. "This morning and last night."

They all began to laugh. Lennie Q poked my ribs with his bat. "Hey pop, you ever hearda us? The Hoboken Hotshots. We're in three different leagues. Baldy's having a tryout with the Astros in a week."

He poked me again.

"I'm sorry. I don't pay much attention to baseball."

"Hey Maurie, ask him where he's been living all his life?"

Smiling inscrutably, Maurice shooed away the other Hotshots and put his arm around me. "I say he's okay. Pop, we got a little party inside the wagon. You wanna join up?"

Lenny Q called into the bus. "Baldy, come on out. We got a distinguished guest. He's next in line."

A Hotshot with Beatle hair strode out of the bus. The tires quaked. He was at least six foot six, and he had a demented look on his face. He wasn't wearing any pants. "Jesus Christ," he said. "Jesus Christ."

I climbed aboard. A naked girl sat hunched against the back seat. She told me to come a little closer. There was an Indian blanket on the seat next to her. "I'm Brenda Sue." Some fraternity at the local agricultural college must have loaned her out for the day.

"You go to school?" I said.

"Yep."

"Where?"

"Dwight David Eisenhower Junior High."

My head slammed against the luggage rack. "How—how old are you?"

"Thirteen."

I closed my eyes and pointed to the blanket. "Cover yourself, please."

"Don't you like me?"

"Of course. But put something on, for Godsakes."

I counted to ten and then opened my eyes. She had draped the blanket over one shoulder. Her bosom was covered, but her mound of Venus was exposed. There was no point in trying to look away.

"Did they kidnap you?"

She giggled, and her nipples hopped under the blanket.

"I picked them up, silly. They were playing a double-header in Germantown. I took them here. It's my favorite spot. I like teams and uniforms. And parades. Are you a Hot-shot?"

"Brenda Sue, listen. Do you want me to get you out of here? I'll make them let you go. I'll find a way."

"I like it here. I want to stay. Sit with me."

I sat down next to her. "What happens if you get pregnant? You'll ruin yourself for life. How will you go to school?"

She found her pocketbook under the seat and pulled out a tube and a syringe. "My best friend's sister's a nurse. Nothing will happen."

"How'd you get started on this? Thirteen? Don't you ever want to get married?" I started to get up, but she grabbed my hand.

"I do," she said. "I'll marry you when I'm twenty-three." I expected her to laugh, or cough, or sneeze in my face, but God help me, she was dead serious.

"I mean, how long's this been going on?"

She put my hand under the blanket and sat it on her thigh. Monster. Thirteen-year-old girls. Get her out of here. My hand crept between her thighs. Ivan, you're cooked. My lecheries astounded me.

"My boyfriend's in the Marines," she confessed. "But I like you better."

"Did he teach you . . . ?"

"No," she said, blushing.

Maurice peered into the bus. "Time's up, pop. You aint supposed to monopolize the merchandise. You'll wear her out." He leered at me and winked at Brenda Sue. She waved to him, but she held my hand. And she wrote me a note with her eye-brow pencil.

BRENDA SUE HOAGELY. 3322 VALPARAISO. I LOVE YOU.

"Come back for me when I graduate," she said.

Maurice and Lennie Q accompanied me to the car. The windows were clogged with smoke. Van was inside, hunched against the steering column. Two Tiparillos stuck out of his mouth. His face was green. I dragged him out of the car, held him up, and forced the smoke out of his chest. "Two cigars at a time?"

"I was nervous. You left me alone in the woods."

Maurice and Lennie Q shared my Tiparillos, spoke about the advantages of condoms with brand names, disparaged Brenda Sue, and changed the tire for me while I walked Van around the car, making him take deep breaths. He gradually regained his color. Maurice showed him a few breathing exercises, and Lennie Q told me the whereabouts of their next double-header. I thanked them and paid them, and they went back to the bus. I opened the windows and waited for the smoke to clear. Then we made our way out of the woods.

C H A P T E R T W E L V E

VALERIE HOPE VAN BUREN • JORALEMON STREET

Friday
June 17

Master Walter Van Buren, Jr.
c/o Farkas
Deer Park Motor Court
Martins Ferry, Ohio

Dearest,

Mummy misses you every night.

Daddy is very pleased with your letters. He intends to speak to Admiral Farkas about Ivan. You know how Daddy hates to write, so I am writing for him. He says hello. He's going to send you a package next week with the supplies and candies you ordered, and a special surprise. And Daddy wants you to know that if Ivan threatens you or says strange things, you are not to worry. Phone us immediately, no matter what the time is, and we will make arrangements to bring you home.

Mummy has another one of her terrible headaches, so you will have to excuse her, Dearest, if she doesn't draw any pictures for you. Mummy wishes you were here right this second, so you could protect her whenever Daddy becomes

drunk and mean. She hardly has anybody to talk to when you are away. Even the Promenade isn't much fun without her little soldier. I hope the tour ends soon, so you can come back and your Mummy won't have to be alone any more. Please make sure Ivan sends us a complete list of the places you will be stopping at. That way we will be able to keep in touch at all times. Don't worry about that silly old German. Daddy says he's a degenerate. And Mummy will love you more and more no matter what happens.

Love and loads of xxxxxxxx
Hope

We landed in McConnellsburg in the middle of the strawberry season. I had strawberries for breakfast and lunch, but Van lost his appetite in Gettysburg. He had dazzled Kortz with a new variation of the Bogolyubov-Indian, but Kortz sat on his pieces, waited out Van's cleverness, and when Van became overanxious, he sprang a queenside attack and plunged through Van's faltering defense. Van stood behind the stairway after the game and cried into his shako. I don't think Kortz took very much pleasure in Van's tortured exit. He stared gloomily at the door and fiddled with Van's pieces.

Kortz didn't seem surprised to see us at the fireman's hall in McConnellsburg. There were only nine players including Van, and a handful of spectators, all firemen. Kortz fell asleep on one of his rounds, and I had to poke him gently with my elbow to make sure he didn't crash into any of the boards. But his gestures became more responsive whenever he came near Van's table, and he smiled. Van's play was listless from the beginning, and Kortz had no trouble mating him. Under ordinary circumstances I might have shouted to Kortz: "Can't you see? The kid's given up." But the firemen were in a black mood, and I didn't want them to think that I was Kortz's shill.

Van tossed around in bed during the night, and I ended up feeding him a mild dose of phenobarb. What would the Ad-

miral have done had he seen Van sitting like a spider in the corner, his head drawn in, his thumbs in his pockets? Van's mood was infectious. The turtle hid inside his shell, and not even a mountain of lettuce shreds would have been able to bring him out.

Van revived modestly at New Alexandria. He sang to the turtle, went back to his pocket chess set, and wrote a message to himself on his magic slate.

WALTER VAN BUREN, WALTER VAN BUREN
WHY CAN'T YOU WIN?? WALTER VAN BUREN
ADMIRAL WILL DIE IN HIS TOWER
MUMMY WILL CRY IN HER ROOM
THE NEPTUNE WILL SINK
AND THE CASTLE WILL BURN TO THE GROUND
UNLESS WALTER VAN BUREN BRINGS HOME THE
PRIZE

Van drew first blood that night, capturing Kortz's queen pawn and king knight in successive moves, but his attack was premature. Kortz bottled in Van's bishops and knights, and Van's game deteriorated after the fifteenth move. He would reach for a piece and then draw back, his fingers trembling; his cheeks swelled, his nose began to run, and his knees shook. He mounted chimerical attacks when he should have resigned, and he watched Kortz pluck his pieces one by one. Kortz moved from table to table, staring at Van across the row of boards. He stalled at tables nine and ten, dawdling over ineffectual opponents when he could have captured whole armies at will. His ruse seemed obvious to me: he didn't want to checkmate Van. Finally, Van took one good look at the board and slunk off.

Kortz continued his rounds, but he didn't pay very much attention to the individual boards; he made routine captures, bowing politely to his opponents, and began talking to himself. The exhibition director, a man with an enormous goiter, winked to the spectators behind the chairs. Kortz shuffled past Van's table, and staring at the empty chair, he tripped and

fell on his back. He seemed stranded, utterly alone in the middle of the floor, the knapsack buoying up his shoulders. I picked him up and sat him in Van's chair. The knapsack constricted his breathing, and he began to wheeze. I untied the knapsack for him. The man with the goiter came over.

"The master's ill," I said. "He won't be able to continue."

"People paid good money to see a simultaneous exhibition, and that's what they're gonna see, friend. Otherwise people are gonna 'spect their money back. We don't cater to charlatans 'round here." He took out a copper badge with silver studs. "Tomlinson," he said. "Dept'y Sheriff." His goiter throbbed.

"All right," I said. "I'll finish up."

So I made my rounds, and like a petty executioner I carried out Kortz's strategies, delivering his checkmates, furthering his attacks. The men at the tables were disgruntled; matching wits with a world champion was one thing, but they hadn't paid two dollars a head to fork over their pieces to an oaf with a red beard. I suffered through their cantankerous looks and checkmated them one after the other. Then I went looking for Van.

I would have taken his temperature, but like a fool I had rinsed the Admiral's thermometer in hot water, and I couldn't shake the mercury down below a hundred and four. We were supposed to cross the Ohio border in the morning and meet up with Kortz at Emoryville in the afternoon, but I knew that Van would be in no condition to play, and I kept him in bed. We did pass through Emoryville later in the day, and following the Admiral's instructions, I had Van get his hair cut. The barber was a great courier of all local events, and he told us about "the crazy old chess master" who had caused a ruckus at the town hall. It seems that Kortz had shown up late and according to the barber was "powerfully inebriated." The town fathers had fixed up a special sedan chair for him and carried him about, but he fell asleep in the chair several times and wouldn't wake up until he was dumped. Kortz proceeded to lose half a dozen games, and drew with a halfwit from the

local school for deaf mutes. The spectators claimed that they had been duped into coming to the exhibition. They abused the town fathers, stole the sedan chair, carried Kortz through the town and deposited him at the bus station. "You should have seen him riding high in that chair like some kinda crazy prophet who was coming around to announce the end of the world. Jesus, lemme tell you."

"What happened to him?"

"That old man? Hell's bells, he must be in Florida by now."

Van sat smugly in the barber's chair, clipped, combed, and pomaded, admiring himself and chuckling with the barber over Kortz's misadventures. The barber handed him lollipops and green stamps, and snapped his scissors under my beard.

"Come again, friend. Come again."

Van seemed in a much more congenial mood. He gobbled up two hamburgers and dunked Marat in a bowl of chili sauce.

We showed up early at Wellsville and asked the clerk at the Baghdad Hotel if the exhibition had been called off. No, he said. Kortz was in town.

His knapsack had been torn. There were dark pockets under his eyes, he was very pale, and his jaw was set in a grim way, but he smiled when he saw us; his face relaxed, and he seemed a little less burdened. I don't know how much the barber had exaggerated; Kortz had obviously been roughed up, but he didn't look very drunk to me.

The exhibition was held in the lobby of the hotel. There was only room for six tables; the spectators and participants were pensioners who were living at the hotel. I noticed an assemblage of lorgnettes, ear horns, canes, and orthopedic shoes. Van was stationed between an octogenarian and an old maid. The octogenarian claimed to have known Teddy Roosevelt and Mark Twain, and to have fought in the Spanish-American War. He was called Sergeant Whitaker. The old maid had no extravagant claims. She had spent most of her seventy years in or around Wellsville, and from the look of

things she was very much in love with Sergeant Whitaker. But he treated her outrageously. Either he ignored her or he swore at her and called her deaf, dumb, and lazy. Sergeant Whitaker was the cock of the walk at the Baghdad. The other pensioners feared him, and the dowagers from the neighboring hotels seemed ready and able to satisfy each of his whims. For some reason he was jealous of Kortz—did he think the Schachmeister was going to threaten the rights to his harem? But he took an immediate liking to Van.

The Sergeant had thick wattles and bumps on his cheeks, and his mustache was dyed. He was also very patriotic. He would have liked to recapture San Juan Hill. "Damned Commies. Gimme a thousand men and I'll show you what I can do. Yesiree." And he had his own spittoon.

The exhibition started promptly at eight. Whitaker hardly knew how to shuffle his pieces, but he insisted on playing Kortz. On the other hand, Laura, the old maid, was a chess buff and had seen Kortz play in Akron on his world tour in 1935. This further infuriated old Whitaker, and he hinted at all sorts of illicit relationships between Kortz and the old maid. The Sergeant kept up his gibes while Kortz made his rounds of the six tables, but he succumbed to a fool's mate before he got the chance to nettle Kortz. He sat in his chair, leaning over the boards, egging on the other players. Kortz disposed of the three remaining male pensioners and was left with Van and the old maid. Despite her age, her provincial life, and her failing eyesight, Laura's play was sharp and aggressive, and she kept Kortz at bay for forty moves, coordinating her fire-power and repelling kingside and queenside assaults. But she was unused to all the excitement, and Kortz's assaults began to wear her down. It became harder and harder for her to study the board. Knight moves mixed her up, and she confused Kortz's bishops with her own. Aware of her declining powers, she promptly resigned. Kortz did his best to restore her. "Dear lady," he said, "rest now and we will resume later. You are under a strain. We will recall the last five moves. Yes? Please. I am so much enjoying our game."

Laura smiled, and her mind seemed to clear, but then the Sergeant stepped in. "What's that, eh? Recalling moves? Talking funny talk. You hear him? He's trying to spark my girl." His wattles bunched aggressively under his collar.

Laura froze under Whitaker's outburst, but she managed to purse her lips and say, "Thank you. I don't think I will be able to play."

The Sergeant was satisfied; his wattles relaxed. And now he prowled Van's board with one eye. Van's game was not very noteworthy; I don't think he was fully recovered from his ordeal at McConnellsburg. He kept talking to the turtle between moves. But there was no reason for him to panic. Kortz never pressed him during the game. Why was he holding back? He must have figured that if Van lost again we would drop out of the tour, disappear for good, and leave him stranded in Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa, without a familiar face within a thousand miles. When Van saw that his knights and bishops were controlling the board, he put away the turtle and mounted a furious attack. Kortz made a few diversionary moves and then resigned. He congratulated Van, but he didn't look at me once. Sergeant Whitaker caused a great commotion. He yelped and howled and tossed his cane in the air and insisted on making a victory speech. He prattled for half an hour, comparing Van to the Rough Riders, and even made a prophecy: Van would be the new liberator of Cuba. "Yesireebob." I dozed off, but the pensioners were out of luck. They didn't dare fall asleep in the middle of the speech. Whitaker would have driven them out of the hotel. Laura sat quietly in one corner. Kortz had already disappeared.

It began to rain shortly before eleven. We might have stayed on at the Baghdad, but I knew that if Van was around Whitaker much longer he would become intolerable. He already talked about challenging Spassky and Petrosian, and he told me that if Whitaker lived long enough he would take the old coot around the world with him on his tours. We left the Baghdad in a hurry, in the midst of a storm. The roof of

the car leaked, but Van was too busy counting his stars to worry about getting wet. We passed the train station. A man was standing near the station house, staring at the tracks. It was hard to see his face in the rain. He wore a forage cap and had some kind of hump on his back. I stopped the car.

"What's up?" Van said.

"It's Kortz. I'm going to give him a lift."

"Uh uh," he said. "No free rides."

"God damn you, open the door. You can afford to be charitable tonight. You won, didn't you? Open the door, or I swear I'll throw you under the wheels."

I bumped the horn; the noise startled Kortz. He turned around, raised his cap, and approached the car.

"Herr Kortzfleisch, please. Get in."

He peered into the car, recognized us, and smiled sadly.

"Thanks."

Van moved over, and Kortz sat with us up front. He took off his forage cap and whacked it against the dashboard. His forehead was wet. "So," he said, "Amerika. The train schedules are never up to date. Now they have the jets." He reached behind his shoulder and removed a dented flask from his knapsack. "Would you like some whiskey? Please."

I didn't want to offend him, so I took one swallow and handed him the flask. My head began to throb. I had hoped that Van would say something but he sat between us with a superior air, the Admiral's steward, unwilling to fraternize with the enemy. Kortz sensed Van's aloofness, and he became a little shy. "The boy," he said. "Who taught him how to play?"

"My father. Admiral Farkas."

Kortz stroked his lip. "Did I meet your father? At the embassy in Hamburg. Before the war. There was an American Admiral who lived only for chess."

"No, it couldn't have been my father. He isn't a real Admiral. And he was never in Germany. But you did meet him. In 1935. He runs a military academy in Brooklyn. You gave an exhibition there. My father says that's when I first showed

any signs of interest in chess. I saw you play. I was one year old at the time. And Van is one of my father's cadets."

"So, I am surrounded by an army. But you say I met your father. In Brooklyn. I'm sorry. I would have remembered ten years ago. I'm certain. But I'm an *alter Knabe*. I forget. First the names and the faces, and then whole events in my life. Soon I will forget how to give *Schach*. Then I will be in trouble. But I do remember the tour. Then I didn't live out of a sack, with one change of underwear. I had my own entourage. You know, a clown to amuse me. *Herr Narr*. And a secretary, a tour manager, reporters from the Berlin press. We had our own dining car. The Ministry paid for everything. They met us at the stations. Bands. Gimmicks. Cameras. Interviews. Ha, they named a racehorse after me. It was colossal. Everywhere there were crowds. Kentucky. Delaware. San Francisco. Mayors. '*Werner*,' I would say to the clown, '*Wie geht's?*' He had only one answer. '*Schlecht, Papa, schlecht.*' My fool was a great democrat. He taunted the Nazi reporters, but they couldn't do a thing. He was part of my staff. And nobody dared upset *Herr Meister*. The Ministry wouldn't allow it. Their chess champions and their pugilists were running the world. Schmeling brought attention to the Reich with his fists, and I, I was supposed to humble the Poles and the Englanders with my pawns and my *Dame*. The clown berated me every morning for playing along with the Nazis. '*Papa, du, du bist ein Narr von Haus aus.*' I warned him to be a little less familiar. But he told me that nobody paid a clown to be civil. My fool was morose during the tour. He was a dreamer. In Germany, all he talked about was *Amerika*. Someone had told him stories about Lincoln and Washington. Two days after we came here he wanted to go home."

The clown must have appealed to Van. He didn't give up his scowls, but he did ask Kortz a question. "What happened to him?"

"*Werner*? He lost his humor in this country. I'm afraid the tour ruined him. It's critical for a clown when he becomes

too serious. We parted. He caused a riot at a Nazi Lokal in Berlin. He was thrown in jail. I did what I could for him, but even a Weltschachmeister has his limits. The court paroled him in my custody, and he became a clown again. But it no longer suited him. 'Papa,' he said 'Scheissdreck. Alles ist Scheissdreck. Deutschland. Russland. Amerika. Alles.' I made arrangements for the Grand Master's Tournament at São Paulo, but they wouldn't let Werner leave the country. I should have insisted. I was the fool this time. Two weeks after I left, he baited a gang of Nazi students at the Sportpalast, and they clubbed him to death. My lawyer wired me from Berlin. Two words. 'Werner Tot.' It was my bye day. I was playing skittles at a café on the Boulevard. I cried at the table when the news arrived. The potzers thought I was worrying about the tournament. Alekhine was half a point ahead. I packed my bags, sent my apologies to the tournament director, and shipped home on a freighter. Goebbels was furious—I had disgraced the Reich. I told him I would return to São Paulo when he brought my clown back to life. The next day he sent his apologies. The incident was inexcusable. The guilty parties would be punished. I told him very politely to go to hell. Tournaments. I don't even remember who won."

Van's scowls became more severe. "Dr. Euwe," he said. "It was a very weak field. Levenfish was ill. Capablanca declined his invitation. Alekhine went on a drinking spree the day after you left and disappeared."

Kortz whistled through his teeth. "So how shall I contend with this boy? He has studied all the tournaments, I can see. *Wirklich*. My poor clown would have loved him. Mr. Farkas, your father must be an exceptional man. I would like to enroll at his school. But you know, I visited this country long before I was champion. Even before I played chess. I was *Privatdozent* in Linguistics and Philosophy at Göttingen. I was working on a history of madness and confinement, and out of the blue the Berlin Medical Society asked me to do a study of the asylums in the United States. I was delighted at the

prospects of becoming a world traveler. It was shortly after the first war, I don't remember the year. I traveled light," he said, plucking the straps of his knapsack. "Like now. I had no entourage. And no one met me at the stations. But I went everywhere. Mississippi. Idaho. Florida. Alabama. Kansas City. Oh, you see, I had written a wonderful report on the *Narrenschiff* of medieval Germany." Van wrinkled his nose. "*Narrenschiff*," Kortz told us again. "Ship—Ship for Fools. The good burghers of Bonn and Cologne would surrender their paupers and sluts and idiots to wandering boatmen who exhibited them up and down the Rhine. It was a great show. They dressed up the madmen on board and made them perform for the crowds along the banks of the river. But the flags and the costumes meant nothing. The boat was in actuality a floating dungeon. The madmen were chained together when they were not performing their tricks. They were beaten and starved and drowned. After all, there were always new recruits. And the crew had to be amused. They forced the madmen to copulate with the sluts and made the paupers build towers with their own excrement. And Mr. Farkas, what I saw in some of the asylums belonged on board the *Narrenschiff*. Idiots, criminals, Negroes, herded together like cattle. Rotting away in cellars. Without heat, without light, without toilet facilities. One institution had been turned into a brothel. Another one exhibited its madmen on Wednesdays and Fridays, and put all of its inmates to work in a quarry. I saw a child crushed to death. And I went from institution to institution. I made reports. They were suppressed. My superiors expected me to be more discreet. Reforms take time. My trip had been financed with American money. They couldn't afford to make a mistake. No one would listen to me. That's when I took up Schach. I'm afraid it was not very heroic. It took my mind off my failures. Capablanca learned the moves when he was four; I was twenty-five. I berated myself. A grown man with games. But I played, I played. It kept me alive."

Van studied Kortz's wrinkled face. His scowl disappeared. He showed Kortz his turtle.

“Wie geht’s, Herr Doktor Marat?”

Kortz fell asleep while playing with the turtle.

Van sat on his cushion and listened to him snore. Then he turned to me.

“When I’m champion you can be my clown. I’ll paddle your behind if you don’t behave. You’ll have to take care of Marat when I’m away.”

“What about Kortz?”

“You’ll take care of him too.”

“And the Admiral?”

“He’ll go with me.”

Kortz mumbled something in his sleep.

“What’d he say?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Crabby can be my butler.”

Satisfied, he put Marat in his pocket, curled up against the back of his seat, hugged his shako, and slept.

I tuned in the local station on the Admiral’s radio. Cucumbers were up twenty-five cents a bushel in eastern Ohio. Nine Vietniks had been arrested in Martins Ferry. Happy Bob Coxy and his Kansas Mutineers were coming to town. Another unidentified flying object had been spotted near Massillon. The Air Force had no comment at the moment. Kortz sneezed. I drove through the storm.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Brooklyn
June 15

Professor Ivan Farkas
General Delivery
Dayton
Ohio

SWAMI,

You never told me if you intended stopping here, but I believe in potluck. I am having my troubles at the Pitkin. You know Greenberg the manager. He caught me napping in the mezzanine. Now I patrol the third balcony. I never see a soul. Even the couples with things on their mind never come up this high. Who wants to climb a thousand steps for a kiss and a cheap feel? But I shouldn't complain. They had a crackdown at the Motor Vehicle Bureau, and Sheppie is on the way out. He squealed about everything, so who knows how long your license will be good? If you get a letter from the State, tear it up and keep driving. I am sorry if I got you into any trouble. Shep had to sell his home in Hempstead. His wife doesn't want anything to do with him. He's thinking of moving to the Bronx. Sheppie is philosophical about the whole thing. He says that when the shit begins to fly, it flies in all directions. I agree.

I think about you a lot. I had better times when you were around. There's a heat wave here. It's over a hundred in the shade. So you can imagine how it is on Pitkin Avenue. How is the tour? I read the chess page regularly in your honor. I look for news about the kraut, but I can't find a word.

In one way, I am worse off than Shep. Swami, I fell in love. She is sixteen years old, and her name is Selma. She goes to Franklin Vocational, and she works at the Pitkin part time. She sells candy in the lobby on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Sundays. She is a little on the heavy side, but Selma is a very serious girl. She is studying to be a beautician. And she don't mind a little fun now and then behind the candy counter, but she's got marriage on her mind. Her family don't approve of me. They say an usher doesn't have any future. I tell them that the Pitkin will be mine in ten years. It doesn't do any good.

I have been looking through Spinoza for ways to help me out, but none of his axioms apply to Selma and me. Selma says she can't wait too long. Most of her friends are already engaged. I was desperate. I tried selling vacuum cleaners on my day off. Swami, it didn't work. I ruined one lady's carpets for life. And you know Mitkin. I am not the type to sell things to people that I don't think they should be buying in the first place. And you don't get anywhere knocking your own product. I keep telling Selma that something will turn up, but she's seeing a Fuller Brush man from Jersey City. Swami, with you around I could have worked my way out of this. Easy. Should I give her up? Fight harder for her? Take her up to the balcony? Kill her mother? Or what?

I know I have been selfish talking only about my problems. How are you? Is the kid behaving? Has the kraut found out about your little act? How's the weather in Ohio? How's the Caddy holding up? Is she burning oil? If you ever decide to come back, stay with me. Living over a tailor shop isn't so bad. Okay, the steam comes through the walls, but it's still a pleasure in the winter. Take care of yourself.

Your friend,
Mitkin

I have never been a masterful diagnostician, and I can't promise to give an accurate picture of the complications that set in after our first day in Ohio. All I can say is that there was a remarkable change of events. Van played superbly at New Philadelphia and at Martins Ferry. And he didn't need any help from Kortz. He would drum the top of his shako with a pencil stub between moves, and when Kortz stopped at his table, he would bunch his fingers over a bishop or a rook, carry the piece across the board, plant it unexpectedly in a vacant square, and launch a new attack. Kortz would stare at the piece, walk around the table, cup his chin in his palm, and announce: "*Wie Eisen gespielt.*" Then he would salvage his pieces as best he could. And even when Kortz finally beat him in Zanesville after a grueling end-game, Van's confidence didn't sag. The next day, in Chillicothe, he smothered Kortz's king, having first sacrificed both bishops and his queen. Oddly enough, Kortz seemed to thrive on Van's victories. He showed up at Gallipolis with his knapsack neatly bundled, his collar starched, and his energies recouped, after traveling two hundred miles, having lost to Van at Sinking Springs the night before.

But the change in Van was even more remarkable. He was courteous to Marat, jovial with me; he entertained tournament directors and spectators; he took good care of his uniform, and was especially attentive to Kortz. He would parade around the grounds before the exhibition, Marat on his shoulder, the shako under one arm, ready to gossip, puncture cobwebs, or display his charms; his mood changed the minute Kortz arrived. His arrogance disappeared and his face turned slightly mauve. He would dispose of his accouterments, sit himself down at the table that had been assigned to him, hunch over, and wait for Kortz to make his rounds.

I've seen grand masters at the Manhattan Club, I've dreamt of Morphy and Anderssen, I've replayed the best games of Lasker and Steinitz, but I don't think I'll ever see chess the way it was played that week in Ohio and West Virginia. In barns, motels, attics, church halls, wherever we happened to

be, the local champions would abandon their games with Kortz and flock over to Van's table. We all followed Kortz's shrugs and paid strict attention to Van's wizened looks. Even a Negro shoeshine boy at Parkersburg, who had come upstairs looking for some trade, put away his rags and his shoeshine box and couldn't take his eyes off the board. He tugged my trousers from time to time. "Mistah, that stuff's deep." I had to agree.

Attacking in the open, laying extensive, coordinated traps, Kortz's men were like sturdy burghers going about their business in a calm and efficient way. But Van managed to trip them up. Fickle, perverse, unreasonable, his men behaved like a pack of thieves. His pawns were full of mischief, his rooks were temperamental, and his bishops were corrupt. They plotted against each other, meddled in each other's business, but in the midst of all the chaos, the thieves would fall into line, oust Kortz's burghers, and take off with a rook.

I must have been overtired and a little depressed in West Virginia, because I began to find all sorts of crazy patterns in the games. The queens may have been all-powerful, but they were merely adjutants for me and were entirely out of the picture. Instead, I watched the opposing kings sitting dourly behind their barriers of pawns. Their impotence appealed to me, and I imagined that they were courting one another across the board but had been prevented from getting together by their own men. The kings were prisoners in their roosts and were indifferent to the battle going on in front of them.

I began annotating the games, attending to the machinations of both armies, and trying to forget about the kings. It didn't work. I became whimsical and dreamy, and sent in a dispatch on one of the games to the local news service. I used an assumed name, of course, and I was sure that nothing would come of it. But I was still annoyed with myself. I told Van that I had to have a holiday. "One day. I need the rest. I'll hire somebody to take you to Cedar Grove."

I loaded the front seat with a keg of root beer and drove south. The keg had a temperamental spout, and it wouldn't pour unless I rocked the whole contraption on my knees. The root beer was soapy and warm. I kept rocking the keg, and I felt a little high. I was thirty-one, without a vocation, without a trade, ungainly, clumsy, hypersensitive, a vegetarian, an onanist, and a fool—but when I saw the hovels along the road, without windows, without roofs, children eating garbage and digging up roots in the yards, old men leering at me from the stoops with their long chins, abandoned mine shafts taken over by roosters, dilapidated general stores with cardboard windows, young women with hard faces and stooped shoulders attending to fat, squealing sows, and undernourished billy goats, generally ignored, roaming in the grassless patches near the pig troughs, their ribs showing, their beards trailing the ground, I forgot about my troubles, and the root beer made me sick.

I stopped at a Negro shacktown near the Greenbrier River. There was going to be a clown show in the afternoon. I made friends with a little girl who sold me her lucky rock for a nickel and took me on a grand tour of the shacks. I poured root beer for her friends. A clique of old men were sunning themselves outside one of the shacks, their shirts unbuttoned, their trousers rolled, and I expected some trouble. But the old men were diffident, and very polite. I saw them smile behind their hats when I bounced the keg on my knees. A woman came out with pieces of fried dough and passed them around to the children and the old men. She gave me one. It was lumpy and hard, and I didn't know what to do with it. The children licked their thumbs and swallowed whole pieces, but the old men sucked the dough or picked at it with their fingers and ate the crumbs. I was apprehensive at first and broke off a few crumbs. The crumbs were tasty, and when the woman came out again, I licked my thumbs along with the children.

The clowns arrived in an open truck. There were three of

them, and they were in costume. The children adored the clowns and shouted up to them. The shacks emptied out, and soon there must have been a thousand people standing around the truck. The men looked sleepy, and some of them were only half dressed. A few of the women were nursing babies under their shawls. I was up front, and I watched the clowns set up their stage on the back of the truck. They draped a curtain over two wooden stanchions. The clowns shimmied up and down the stanchions, did somersaults, wrapped themselves around the curtain, and leaned all the way over the edge of the truck. Everybody had a good time. The women laughed the loudest. The clowns made snatches at the children, pretending to whisk the little girls away. The three of them wore masks, but from the shape of their skulls and the color of their hands I could tell that they were all Negroes. I watched the acrobatics and the slapstick routines, and I thought that the clowns were dressed haphazardly, but then I saw the import of their costumes. Two of them wore routine trappings: baggy trousers, stretched-out suspenders, derby hats, and piebald shirts. They were both short and fat and had identical expressionless masks, except that one was painted white and the other was painted black. The third clown was tall and lean and wore a skintight outfit that showed off the angles of his body. His mask was dark gray and was stretched over his head like a stocking. He called himself Beauchamp.

Beauchamp stared at me in the middle of his routine, and having no way of countering him, I tied knots in my beard and then put my hands in my pockets. The slapstick ended abruptly. The clown in the white mask yawned and said, "Lawdy, ah is sho tired." His partner comforted him. "Brother, you are working too hard. Your heart is going to burst one day." He appealed to the audience. "Maiseurs ai maidams, we have to help this boy. He is going to die if he keeps on working." He crouched near the edge of the truck and pointed to Beauchamp slyly with one finger. "He has a wicked task-master. Somebody that works him to the bone. We have to get this boy a pension. Help him stay alive, good people.

Contribute to Poor Tom's retirement fund." Poor Tom clutched his heart, fell, and began to writhe on the stage. His piebald shirt flapped under him. The women and children pitched pennies and dimes into the truck, but the old men held back. They wanted to see some more somersaults first. The clown in the black mask crawled around on his knees and went after the coins, depositing them inside his shirt. Beauchamp loomed above him, his buttocks flexed, his knees apart. "Drop that trash. You hear me, Sylvester?" He wrung the clown's shirt, and the coins scattered across the bed of the truck. I heard the men behind me grumble, but the women seemed intrigued.

"Massah," Sylvester said, tucking in his shirt, "that was good money." Beauchamp tripped him, and he spilled over Poor Tom. They lay there, one on top of the other, their suspenders ensnared, the crowns of their hats touching.

"Nigger," Beauchamp warned Sylvester. "Who told you to take up a collection for a white man," and he kicked Poor Tom. The children giggled and jeered at Tom. "Nigger, look to your own needs." Beauchamp stared at me again, and this time I stared back. "Nigger, rise up." He picked up Sylvester and dusted him off. "Remember, Black is the color of God. Black is mercy. Black is kindness. Black is love. White is trash." The men in the audience were becoming restless; they hadn't expected sermons at a clown show.

Sylvester clapped his hands together. "The white man and the black man have to live together, Massah, or else we're sunk."

"Trash," Beauchamp said.

"Massah, it's going to be the end of the world unless we cooperate and work together."

"Trash."

"Amen, brother," the woman next to me said. She was already fired up. "Amen."

"Massah, when we rout all the devils in the world, there won't be no difference between black and white."

"Trash. Show your blackness, black man. Show your mercy.

Show your love. The only devil is the white devil. And he has to be killed."

"Kill the white trash," the women and children chanted, and I imagined the children who had shared my root beer putting sticks in my eyes. Beauchamp shook his hips, turned his back on us, and with his arms outstretched he cried, "Father, save us from this white plague. Restore your people to their black grace." While Beauchamp entreated the sky, I skulked behind the crowd and ran over to the Caddy. I expected the clowns to hoot at me, drag me back to the truck, and hang me from the stanchions, but nothing happened. When I drove past the truck on my way out of town, Beauchamp had finished his prayer. I thought I saw him smile at me contemptuously, but I can't be sure.

C H A P T E R F O U R T E E N

Dear Grandmaster—

If you possibly can, I beg you to forgive the rudeness of Rufus R. Whitaker during your exhibition at Wellsville. I would not want you to think that we Wellsvillians are a discourteous people. It is dreadful indeed that a world figure of your renown should have been subjected to such treatment from one of our citizens, but had Mr. Whitaker been his former self on that occasion, I assure you he would have shown you a kindness that he alone is capable of showing. A madness and a stubbornness have overtaken him of late, and he broods over impossible military schemes. He is certain that the Chinese are going to invade Ohio someday and he wants to form a militia for men over sixty-five. Yesterday he began wearing his father's scabbard and he would not allow people to leave the hotel until he gave them his approval. The fire department arrived with our police chief. Nobody could root him out of his chair. Mr. Whitaker grew less tyrannical in the afternoon. He sat with the scabbard on his knees and cried. It was a pitiful sight. I was with him during his entire vigil in the lobby. He said to me—Laura, I'm useless. Nobody needs a militiaman. The Chinamen won't ever invade in my lifetime. I covered him with a blanket and he went right to sleep. Lawyer Ritchie put a claim on the scabbard. He said it was for the good of

us all. I told him—Lawyer Ritchie, you know Mr. Whitaker will raise the roof if his sword isn't at his side when he gets up from his sleep, so you had better put it back. And he did.

Mr. Whitaker told the men in the lobby that I have been in love with you for over a century. Lawyer Ritchie says I have been slandered. Grandmaster, I *was* infatuated with you when I saw you in Akron thirty years ago. I remember how bashful you were, and how kind you were to the mayor. The man who traveled with you did tricks with his cane and played with the children. The boy who travels with you now reminds me of him. They are both so solemn. Is he your son? Frankly, Lawyer Ritchie objects to your bearded giant. I told him that people were constantly taking advantage of your good will and that you simply could not travel without a bodyguard.

We hope that you will come back to Wellsville one day. And please forgive an old woman's fancies.

Truly yours,
(Miss) Laura Langnecker-Shields

Fleeing from the clowns, I snaked through Kentucky and Tennessee, but I couldn't put Beauchamp out of my mind. Black is love. Black is God. The Admiral had warned me about the Southland. According to him, there were concentration camps on the road to Georgia. I expected chained darkies and shotgunriding sheriffs at every turn, but all I came across were motels with windmills and cardboard towers. I arrived in Georgia by nightfall, weary, suspicious, and found an out-of-the-way motel with some honest grime and a functioning outhouse, near the Alabama border. The motelkeeper was an enlightened Mississippian who had settled in Georgia during the war. He was a widower named Catchpole. The motel, which was actually a single barrack with partitioned walls and a pitched roof, had once been a greenhouse, and Catchpole kept hyacinth bulbs under my bed. I had vague suspicions that the motel became a whorehouse after midnight. Mattresses creaked in every room, shouts and moans came through

the walls, and there was a steady flow of traffic between the barrack and the outhouse, yet Catchpole's bawds never bothered me once. His bulbs kept me company. The thought of them, sprouting quietly amid the general uproar, comforted me, and I slept a good part of the time.

In the morning Catchpole told me all the local news: some scamps, he said, had tried to cross the border during the night and were now in the county jail. "Yankee nigras. The worst kind. Take your average citizen, sir, and he has a great deal of respect for the colored folks. But when your nigra gets uppity, when he comes down from the North, in bunches of three, paid off by the Gov'ment, wearing costumes, putting on shows, watch out."

"Did you say bunches of three? In costume?"

I rode over to the county jail.

The sheriff wasn't there, but the county coroner delivered the clowns to me and demanded a bounty of three dollars a head. Their outfits were bedraggled, their masks were in their pockets, and their faces were smeared with paint. The coroner told me that if we weren't out of Georgia in an hour he would send his wolfhounds after us. Beauchamp curtsied and shot black looks at the coroner and me. "Yassah, Massah. Yassah, Boss. We gonna pack up and move on. Yassah, yassah." The coroner scowled. "You keep play-acting with me, nigger boy, and ah am gonna roast your black ass." I gripped Beauchamp's arm and led him out of the jail. The clowns climbed into the Caddy. They all sat in the back. I watched them leer at me in the mirror. "Nigger," Beauchamp said, "show us some of the sights. Oh yeah."

I asked them about their truck.

Beauchamp passed out cigarettes before he bothered to answer. "Broke down yestuhday, Massah. And we had to junk the whole caboodle. Oh, our Massah is inquisitive, aint he? He save our black souls, and now he want to suck us dry."

"Why did they put you in jail?"

Sylvester picked up Beauchamp's refrain. "Massah, don't you know that the black man bears a heavy burden in this

here world? He not safe wherever he go. They run him off the street, they break his head, oh Lawdy, what don't they do."

Poor Tom shut them up. "Driver, what's your name?"

"Ivan," I said, grateful to him.

"Ivan, don't pay attention to these niggers. They have been trying to hate so hard that it's becoming a habit. Maybe we have a funny way of showing it, but we still appreciate the help." The clowns wiped their faces with their shiertails. I was amazed. They didn't look much older than some of the Admiral's senior cadets.

"What are your real names?"

"Beauchamp, Sylvester, and Poor Tom," they said, stiffening, but Poor Tom made a conciliatory gesture. "We can't afford to be personal. I mean; the less you know about us, the less you'll be tempted to tell. The truth is, you can get into trouble when you give a nigger a high I.Q. and send him off to school. He begins to see that the little white boys don't have a monopoly on brainpower. Ivan, we're spending the summer in the field. Watching all the Cro-Magnon men."

Beauchamp leaned over and studied my beard.

"Hey," he said, rocking back and forth, "he look just like Tecumseh. Remember that daguerreotype we saw in the Book of Knowledge? General Sherman. The scourge of the South."

I asked them where they wanted to go.

"Oh baby," Beauchamp said. "Take us to Atlanta. Yeah, we gonna capture Georgia for Martin Luther King. We gonna rape, we gonna steal. Send the Green Berets after us. Oh man. They gonna remember the color black around here for a little while. Then we gonna march to the sea. Like old Tecumseh. Only we aint gonna be carrying the Union Jack. We got ourselves a different flag. They gonna quake when they hear about us in Savannah. You see. You see."

"You Muslims?" I said.

Beauchamp wrinkled his eyes and laughed. "No man. We haven't any affiliations. We just three innocents. Clowning our way through the land." He looked at his wristwatch and sucked in his cheeks. "We only got forty-five minutes of life

left in this state. Didn't you hear what our keeper say before?"

"If you want to go further south, I can take you part way."

"We have to recuperate," Poor Tom said. "We'll go north with you."

A state trooper stopped us in Tennessee. Our seating arrangement puzzled him, and I knew we'd be hauled in unless I convinced him that we had some measure of propriety. The clowns refused to cooperate. They slumped in their seats and scowled. "Officer, we're mummers—tragedians, I mean. Ivan's Strolling Players. You must have heard of us. We've been touring the area. I'm Ivan."

He peered into the car. "Lemme see yer act."

The clowns revived in a flash. Donning their masks, they scrambled out of the car. I prayed that they wouldn't flay the trooper in too direct a fashion. While Beauchamp pirouetted near the side of the road, Poor Tom began to shake, and Sylvester bowed to me. "Ivan," he said, "my master has melancholia. Doctor says it has something to do with the gout, I say he's developing brain fever." Poor Tom rolled on the ground. The trooper flicked one brow. Sylvester mentioned Poor Tom's brain fever again, and having no idea of what I was supposed to do, I kneeled. "Sylvester?" I didn't want to disappoint the clowns. "What's ailing Poor Tom?"

Sylvester shook his head. "My master went on a pilgrimage. He didn't get very far. It made him sad to see what's going on. The niggers have overrun the land."

"Tickle his rump," I said. "Maybe he'll come out of it."

"That won't do. It's been tried. We better put him out of his misery."

The trooper intervened. "Hey, how come he caint speak for hisself?"

Beauchamp vaulted over Poor Tom and congratulated the trooper. "Precisely. This is the wrong age for tragedians. We need some shrieks and belly laughs. It's time for Tom's soliloquy." He picked Tom up by the armpits and spun him around. Tom wavered for a moment, then, steadying himself, he adjusted his mask and said, "Which one here is the gugga-

mugga?" He sniffed at Beauchamp and me. "Got to go to the far country. Find Black Jesus. Help him niggerize the land."

The trooper gave an appreciative chuckle. "Now that's a funny man. *Niggerize the land.* Love that in Murfreesboro. Mr. Ivan, you take those black boys anywhere you want, nobody gonna bother you." Then he left.

The clowns didn't take off their masks.

Beauchamp poked me with his long fingers. "You the guggamuggaman?"

I didn't mind the banter, but there was nothing playful about his pokes. "Beauchamp, lay off. The act is over. I'm going to Ohio."

The clowns walked around me in wide circles, clapping their hands. Sylvester began to chant.

"White man, black man, bugger man, mole
Jesus die to save your soul.

Somebody gonna pay for white man's crime
Killing Jesus on black man's time."

They narrowed their circles until their masks whirled under my nose. "Somebody gonna pay for white man's crime." Angered and ashamed, I pushed the clowns away and shouted at them. "Sylvester, you hear me? You're not going to make me feel guilty. I won't allow it." My arms shot in different directions and flailed the air. "Find another scarecrow. I never harmed you. I didn't. You want to wrestle?—fight? Break my bones, but don't accuse me. I can't pay for your sufferings with my blood. I don't have enough. Sylvester?" The masks made me dizzy, the sun burned my eyes, my knees shook. Papa, I don't want to die in Tennessee. The clowns caught me, grappled with me, and carried me back to the car. Sylvester sat up front with Beauchamp, and Poor Tom ministered to me. Feeling guilty in spite of my outcries, I told them, "My father would have tarred and feathered every bigot in the world, but nobody ever gave him the chance," and I fell asleep.

A churning sound woke me up. The clowns fed me corn grits and sarsaparilla. They were naked except for their

masks. We were in an all-night laundromat. "Where the hell—"

Beauchamp clapped his hand over my mouth. "Hush up. We're in corn country. The owner's upstairs. If he comes down and finds us in our skins, he'll yell sodomy, and that'll be the end. Hush."

The clowns took their shirts and socks and tights out of the drier and put them on. The colors in Poor Tom's piebald shirt had begun to bleed, and with his mask gleaming in the dimmed light and his shirttails sticking out, he could have been his own Black Jesus. Beauchamp, Sylvester, and Poor Tom stuffed their extra underwear in their pockets, crowded around the mirror, picked their teeth, groomed their hair, and said goodbye.

"Ivan, you're on your own."

"Please," I said. "If you ever get to New York, look me up. I live in Brooklyn Heights. Maybe you could perform for my father's cadets. I'll give you my—"

Poor Tom touched my shoulder. "Ivan, no promises. Even we don't know where we gonna be. If you hear bad things about us, don't believe it." He laughed to himself. "No, baby, I don't think we'll get to Brooklyn."

Each of them tugged my beard once, then they peeked out of the laundromat, looked both ways, and fled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

19 JUNE 65
ADRIAN,, MICHIG

DADDY:

MOTHER hasn't written in ELEVEN days and I am WORRIED about HER. Please take CARE of HER headaches and don't make HER angry any more. I am going to HIDE YOUR bottles when I get HOME or there won't be any PEACE. YOU can tell MISTER HENKE that MY score is now

13 VICTORIES
18 DEFEATS
2 DRAWS
4 DEFAULTS

so YOU can see I am CATCHING UP. The DEFAULTS are because of IVAN and the CAR. How can I help it if IVAN can't get ME to an EXHIBITION on TIME?? WALTER,, tell ME,, are ALL NAZIS no good?? I know ADMIRAL never lies but I can't BELIEVE some of the things HE told US about THE GERMANS. Do you think KORTZ would kill ME if HE had the chance?? I think about THIS a lot. I haven't told ANYBODY but I am BEGINNING to like HIM. PLEASE don't tell ADMIRAL about what I JUST said. HE'LL send SOMEBODY in MY place if HE ever finds out. I don't really care but CRUICKSHANK ALWAYS gives up if HE'S not ahead

after TEN moves and HE'S poor on DEFENSE. And that'll DESTROY ADMIRAL'S plans.

Don't worry about IVAN. I can handle HIM. Sometimes HIS right eye TWITCHES when HE'S asleep and HIS hand shakes but HE'S always OKAY in the morning. HE dreams a LOT during the DAY but if I pinch HIM or STEP on HIS foot HE wakes UP. ADMIRAL may be SENDING CRABBY soon. I can WAIT.

PLEASE take care of MUMMY. And I'LL try to KEEP winning. Tell MISTER HENKE that the POLISH GAMBIT hasn't been used in TOURNAMENTS in YEARS. But THANK HIM for ME anyway. Don't FORGET to send ME my ELECTRIC back SCRATCHER.

LOVE from YOUR SON

Van

Got a note from the Admiral.

The Neptune's being overhauled. Crabby caught the mumps. Mama attacked one of the other patients at the sanitarium. They've been giving her shock therapy. Papa arrived with candy and Miss Eva, and Mama didn't recognize him. The shock treatments have been added to the bill. But things have been faring better along other lines. Van and Kortz have made the *New York Times*. Papa's produced the clipping. It's a duplicate of the dispatch I sent in to the news service in West Virginia, but the notation's been bungled, and the dispatch is riddled with errors. I wonder how the Admiral was able to follow the game.

NOTES FROM THE PERIPATETIC CHESS BAG

WORLD CHAMPION TOURS HINTERLAND

By Shepsel Pawn

(Reprinted from the *Fort Gay, W. Va. Pilot*)

Grand Master Baldur Katzfuss, former world chess champion, recently faced nine West Virginia

experts, five local players, and one child star from Brooklyn, in a simultaneous exhibition at Calvary Baptist Church in Atlas Hills, West Virginia, during his whirlwind cross-country tour which will take him to Idaho, Kansas, Arkansas, Indiana, Illinois, and 23 other states. Captain Katzfuss, who has not appeared in tournament competition for over twenty years, played with the white pieces on the even-numbered boards and piled up the enviable record of 14 wins and one loss, to Walter Van Buren, Jr., a six-year-old cadet from the South Brooklyn Military Academy.

As White in a Reti Opening, Cadet Van Buren demonstrated an amazing grasp of opening theory, and contemptuously refuted the latest book analysis by playing 7 . . . P-QR4, a long neglected line, and though under constant pressure, Katzfuss survived the early middle game unscathed, and fluss forced an exchange of queens that left onstrated an amazing grasp of opening theory uable time. The move 26 N-N7 gave White control of all the light colored squares around the enemy king. But Black replied sharply exhausted. In the finale, Cadet Van Buren marched with the maquis through Tours and Lyons and pinned on to Black's weak queen bishop pawn with however gained important tempi that routed a dangerous knight in the central zone. Black's pawn structure in the queen's wing was pawn to victory.

The dispatch has already done some damage. Reporters have begun showing up at the exhibitions. Now, along with the games, Kortz has had to submit himself to interviews and press conferences. So far none of the reporters seems to know very much about Kortz's past, and when one of them asks him what he's been doing for the last twenty years, he fiddles with his knapsack and says he's been indisposed.

Things have been going from bad to worse. The reporters come around in droves, pestering Kortz, harrying me, hag-gling with players and spectators, and sullying the chess tables with ashes, pretzel crumbs, and beer. Only Van seems pleased.

He likes to see his picture in all the local papers. And he insists that I save every article about him. In Ann Arbor, he was called "The Kid from Brooklyn" and posed with the captain of the chess team and two deans from the University of Michigan. At Lansing, he was the second Sammy Reshevsky; at Hastings, the new Bobby Fischer. I've had my share of publicity too. I must have baffled a few of the reporters; they can't seem to figure out the exact nature of my relationship with Van. I overheard one reporter say: "They eat together, they sleep together, what gives?" In various parts of Michigan and Illinois, I've been called a red-bearded impresario, a latter-day Svengali, a Mephistophelian, an earwig, a gerontophile (once I happened to lean a little too close to Kortz), and a corrupter of children, widows, and dwarfs. I've had offers to join a male nudist camp, pose for a fun photographer, attend a pederasts' convention.

Yesterday they tried to break into our motel room, and when I went in to take a bath there was a reporter waiting for me near the community tub. He must have seen the vexation in my eye—I would have drowned him in a minute—and he left without saying a word. We had our meals brought to our room, and I refused to answer the phone. A little after midnight somebody knocked on our door. "Go away," I said. Van was reviewing his clippings and I was in my pajamas, studying Hegel's phenomenology of mind. The knocks persisted. I ran over to the door, ready to strangle, gag, subdue.

"Hope!"

"Jesus Christ," she said. "I come a thousand miles to see my baby, and what do I get? Shouted at through a door!" Her face was rouged and merciless. She was wearing a sun hat with a wide floppy brim, a scarf, and green shoes. Van ran up to her and put his arms around her hips. "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy." Annoyed with me, she ruffled her nose. "Go downstairs and get my luggage, will you? The driver's waiting. Do you want me to run up a bill? He's been sulking all day.

He brought me all the way from Chicago. These flea-bag towns. My poor baby."

Hope turned her head away, and I went downstairs.

There were six suitcases, plus a parakeet in a cage, a hair dryer, three garment bags, a shoe rack, a dart board, six pairs of boots, and assorted bric-a-brac. The fare was fifty-seven dollars.

Standing in the corner, I watched Hope romp with Van on his bed. "Did you think Mummy would abandon her sailor to strangers? Look how thin you are." She rocked the bed, put one hand inside Van's pajama top, and tickled his chest. I remembered the way her knees had hugged my body while Walter snored two doors away; seeing her now with Van—hardened, indifferent, her body closed to me—I had to get out of the room.

When I came back, Van was asleep, and Hope was sitting on my bed, her suitcases scattered around the room, her bric-a-brac on the floor. She was crying. "Hope, what happened?"

"Walter threw me out," she said, without turning around or looking up. "Says I'm a slut. He's right. Poor Walt. He doesn't know what to do with me. His schooling was poor. No one told him how to handle nymphos. Walter had one of his conventions, and I went away for the weekend. Told him I was visiting Aunt Sophie in New Canaan. I was with a lab assistant from St. John's. Met him at the supermarket a week ago. He's silly, and he has a paunch like Walt, but I liked the way he looked at me. I brought him upstairs. He took me to the Hamptons, and Walter found out. I have to write Walt some time and commend him. He did put on a good show. Slapped me. Called me terrible names. Cried. That was a sight. Walter blubbers when he's upset. His cheeks ripple and everything. I think he's wanted to get rid of me for months. Picked the right time. He wouldn't have dared with Van around. Van would have marched him into the bedroom and told him off. Now it's too late. Walter's almost thirty. He's becoming serious. He believes in a celibate life. A rich young

whore from Roxbury who let his clients bobble her breasts once in a while for the company's sake can't help him any more. Aren't you going to ask me what happened to the lab assistant?—turned out to be a bore. And he wasn't much of a bargain in bed. He was lost without his test tubes. Made me feel that I was taking part in one of his damned experiments. I left him in East Hampton and took a train home."

She took out her compact, pouted into the mirror, and announced, "I'm such a God-awful mess." I wouldn't let her paint her face. I was afraid that her mascara and rouge might make her relentless again. Selfish, I preferred her eyes a little puffy, and I didn't mind the blotches on her cheeks. I offered to sleep in the town hall. She laughed and pulled me down onto the bed. She undressed, plunking her underwear on the parakeet's cage. Trembling, knock-kneed, I stared at her behind. "Hope, should I look for another room?" I nodded in Van's direction.

"God," she said, "I'm tired of being bossed around by petty tyrants. Let him learn. His Mama has her own needs."

"What if he wakes up?"

"Tough." She got up, stood over Van, kissed him, tucked him in, and climbed back into bed. Her eyes closed when I touched her breasts. Then a vein pulsed in her forehead, her body tightened, she sat up and started to cry again. She leaned her head against my shoulder. "Do you think Walt will ever take me back? It's not love or anything, but you live with somebody for eight years, and you get used to him, and you just have to have him around. I can't help it if men like me. It's his fault. He shouldn't leave me alone all day. Maybe I am a little bit of a whore, but I do it for Walt. Husbands like their wives to be whores some of the time. It keeps them interested. Don't you agree?"

I told her that I didn't know too much about conjugal relations but that it sounded pretty reasonable to me. "Do you really think so, Ivan?" She hugged me, put my beard between her breasts, and ordered me to tickle her.

C H A P T E R S I X T E E N

Melville Road
Valhalla
1965

Vanya Nurse won't allow me a calendar or a
clock and what am I worth if I can't tell the
time or the day Mrs Gautier has lost her
memory again She's seventy-seven and she's
become a child If I don't take her by the
hand she won't know how to find her bed I
envy her I'm worse off than any child and
I'm only fifty-three I've been reading about
Balzac Did you know that he could never fall
in love with a woman unless her name was Laure
Laure was his sister's name I've counted up
his mistresses They come to forty-three His
mother was cold His father was potent until
the day he died Balzac had ugly hands He
suffered from piles Papa wouldn't be interested
Balzac didn't play chess And he was never in
the military I've decided to write a novel
I'm going to begin at the end That way no one
will be anxious about what's going to happen

There won't be any commas in my book Every page will have twenty pronouns and sixteen verbs I won't let Papa read it He wouldn't approve He thinks female novelists are frivolous Why wouldn't Papa ever talk to me He exercised in the mirror before supper with his chest expander and he raged if I didn't admire him every minute and approve his pectorals and his wings We couldn't dance because of his toes He told me that my mind would rot if I read too much He would never stay with me and I wasn't allowed to leave the house without him Did he think that the trolleycar men would steal me away or seduce me in the street He said my mother was a witch He made fun of me because my father had a dry goods store near the Ukrainian church Ragman's daughter Muzhiks Papa's family tree was peppered with barons and counts But the Ragman paid his mortgage and saved the schoolship from being junked Papa brought flowers every day before we were married I loved to hear him talk about politics and wars I didn't understand a word His forehead creased whenever he had something important to say Mama didn't like him because his nose was too big but I didn't mind I told Mama I wasn't a connoisseur of noses and she wouldn't talk to me for a week Vanya you mustn't write nasty letters to Dr Alter Nurse says you threatened to murder the whole staff She made us stand around in our bathrobes when they took us downstairs Mr Rosen screamed The floor was cold I cried Mrs Hinckmann's a veteran She's been inside a hundred times She said they were going to plug us into the wall She laughed I don't remember anything else Nurse promised they wouldn't take us downstairs any more I couldn't remember your face yesterday and I wanted to die Nurse helped me find my album She saw a picture of you as a cadet She thinks more kindly of you She says she's going to write Papa Did the cookies come Dr Alter didn't think I should be allowed in the kitchen I told him

that lunatics make the best bakers Dear God If I'm not sane enough to operate a cookie cutter I might as well be dead I wish I could see the Brooklyn Bridge I dream about the harbor It's hard to fall asleep without the sound of the boats

I became a fetishist in northwestern Missouri.

When Hope went off with Van to admire the bulls at the rodeo in Burlington Junction, I pinched a pair of her drawers. Tucked in my pocket, they calmed my nerves. I was afraid that we were going to be thrown out of town. We were staying at the Rustler's Inn in Mound City, and waitresses stared at us, lodgers shunned us, clerks grumbled behind our backs. I had wanted to rent twin cabins, but Hope insisted that we stay together. Van griped at our new arrangement, but what could he do? It was a fait accompli. Anyway, he didn't have time to bother with us. He was made king of the rodeo, his picture was going to appear in *Newsweek*, and a paper in eastern Iowa had offered him twenty-five dollars for his life story. He kept himself busy preparing statements for the press.

HELLO!

I COME FROM BROOKLYN. EVERYBODY CALLS ME VAN. I'M SIX YEARS OLD. THE CREDIT FOR MY VICTORIES BELONGS TO ADMIRAL FARKAS. I WANT TO LIVE IN A SUBMARINE WHEN I GROW OLD. MY MOTHER IS WITH ME. HER NAME IS HOPE.

GOODBYE!

The exhibition was held in the Vigilante Room. There were over three hundred spectators, and the manager of the Inn had to bring in benches and chairs from the café. Van got most of the attention, but Kortz had to checkmate bronco-busters, sharpshooters, and lasso artists from the rodeo, local merchants, reporters, housewives, and cub scout masters, chess

experts from three states, and a few drifters. The manager couldn't find enough boards, tables, and chessmen to go around, and Kortz had to play them all in three shifts. Hope had been reluctant to come to the exhibition. "I'm sick of Germans. I had my first lay in Austria. I was fifteen. On one of those goddam summer tours. With nine other sex-crazy females from Mrs. Hillaire's Riding School in Larchmont. We all got laid. Even fat Lucie, and she'd had a crisis during puberty. The doctors couldn't make any hair grow on her bush. Her lay was a lousy dental student. Mine was a schoolteacher from the Tyrol. He promised to take me skiing. The pig. He had a wife and five children tucked away in Innsbruck. So don't tell me anything about Germans."

"But Austria isn't Germany."

"It's all the same. They stink. And this kraut wants to do my baby in."

But when she saw Kortz on his rounds with his knapsack, his dark face hovering over the boards, and the reporters trailing behind him, upsetting pieces, commenting on his moves, she changed her mind. "I like him," she said.

Van had a cheering section behind his table. Evidently my liaison with Hope had made the lodgers at the Inn more partial to him. They brought him popcorn and Dr. Pepper between moves. When Kortz paused at the table after running the gauntlet of cowboys, housewives, and local gauleiters for the thirtieth time, the lodgers were sympathetic, but their loyalty didn't waver. The reporters were at Kortz's side, badgering him, preventing him from dealing with Van, and he blundered, chasing a knight when he should have protected his king. Hope was alarmed by his fatigued look and the bags under his eyes, and she wanted to do something for him. She glowered at the reporters.

"God, let's get the hell out of here."

Hope undressed as soon as we got back to the cabin. She had forgotten about Kortz, but there were other things on her mind. She sat on the bed with her chin between her knees. I watched her belly undulate while she talked. And for the

first time I understood the force behind the Admiral's appetites.

Hope shook my arm. "Damn you, you haven't listened to a word."

"It isn't true. You said, *It's fun to be a slut before you're twenty. But at my age a girl has to decide. See?*"

"You ape, just because I say something, it doesn't mean you have to go around repeating it. When Walter threw me out, I decided to give up men for good and devote myself to Van. I was going to become a woman of virtue on the road. But your red beard did me in. And your skinny chest. If you didn't have anybody to sleep with, I'm sure you'd freeze to death."

We could hear the cowboys whistle and stamp their feet in the Vigilante Room. One of the locals must have beaten Kortz. Hope climbed out of bed. "This place gives me the creeps." We got dressed and left.

Hope wanted a milkshake; it was Sunday, and most of the stores were closed, and we had to walk to the other side of town. There was a commotion outside Dalrymple's Dairy Bar. Four grubby men in sweatshirts and one girl were picketing the place. They carried window poles with placards attached to them.

DALRYMPLES UNFAIR TO NEGROES AND INDIANS
SUPPORT A.C.W.R.
THE TIME HAS COME

Their clothes were rumpled, and I'm sure none of them had slept in a bed for weeks. The girl had on a man's shirt, and she wasn't wearing a brassiere. Her breasts jiggled under the shirt. She was short and fat, with freckles and a pudgy nose. Hope read the placards and decided to forgo the milkshake. The counterman in the dairy bar chuckled to himself, cursed, and threatened the pickets. He was wearing a cone-shaped cap decorated with fake chocolate sprinkles. His ears protruded, and the cap wiggled on his head. "Stick around. You gonna get yourself in trouble. You bet." He seemed to

have some great secret that he could hardly contain, and several times he allowed his machine to leak thick strings of strawberry custard. Hope pinched my arm. She wanted to join the picket line.

"Why? You don't know anything about them."

"Shut up. It's a good cause."

The leader's name was Burt; he was shorter than the girl and had a magnificent paunch and a puckered face. He shook my hand and gave me one of the placards to carry. I asked him what A.C.W.R. meant.

"Arkansas Committee for World Revolution," he said with a heavy drawl.

"How many members are there?"

"Fahv," he said, grinning.

The girl, whose name was Mary, was the secretary of the organization, and from the look of things was also its community mistress. Burt had been in the Air Force for seven years and had been stationed in Turkey and Japan. "Ah've been all over this world an' all ah've ever seen is trouble. It's tahm for a change." The other three were ex-students; they had been thrown out of the University of Arkansas. Mary took a bag of soda crackers out of her pocket and passed them around. Meanwhile customers came and went, gobbling custard cones and Dalrymple Delights, and nobody paid the slightest attention to us.

We heard shouts and a loud clang. Puffs of thick black smoke burst behind us and rose over the dairy bar. A group of disembodied heads peered at us through the smoke. Mary screamed and lowered her pole, but we all stood our ground. A roofless station wagon emerged, and a dozen men, their faces smeared with soot, clambered over the sides. The counterman cackled like an idiot. "Now you gonna get it, boy, now you gonna get it. I tol' you to flit. Catfish is here." The men were equipped with garbage can lids, bricks, sharpened sticks, whiskey bottles, and hunting knives. One of them swaggered over to the dairy bar, spat at Mary's placard, and clucked lewdly at Hope. He wore a denim jacket without

sleeves, and his arms were very hairy. The counterman pointed to us. "These are the ones, Catfish. These are the ones that are making all the fuss. Ruining my trade. Telling lies about ol' Dalrymple. I aint got nothin against coons and Indians. They never did me no harm. Tell 'em, Catfish. What they coming around here for?"

Catfish gestured significantly with his head and thrust his thumbs under his belt. "Where you mothers come from?"

"Arkansas," I said, speaking for the Committee.

Without giving any warning, Catfish doubled over and hopped backwards, his body shaking with laughter. "You hear that? Ar-kan-saw. These mothers come all the way from Ar-kan-saw just to park their fat asses on Rymple's lawn. You hear that?" Catfish's friends appreciated his commentary and his little dance. They hooted and smiled and showed their chipped teeth. Only the counterman seemed unhappy. His jaw slackened behind his tiny screen. "Aint no laughing matter, Catfish. They Commies."

Catfish froze for a moment, straightened up, glared at us, mumbled to himself, and then started laughing again. "Shoot, Rymple, there aint no Commies in Ar-kan-saw. Everybody know that."

"They is, Catfish, they is. I heard 'em. Peaceniks and Commies. Aint you read those signs?"

Squinting now, staring at the placards with the same dull, hard expression on his sooty face, Catfish yelped. "Commies," he said, "Commies." He stepped back and joined his comrades. The counterman rocked his head from side to side. "Now you gonna get it. Catfish's fired up."

We didn't have much of an army. Burt was terrified. The three students may have dreamed of a world revolution, but they had no intention of starting it in Missouri. I couldn't tell very much about Mary, but Hope produced a hatpin, and our prospects immediately improved. "He touches me, I swear I'll stick it in his eye."

Catfish was amused by the hatpin, but he was no longer in a laughing mood. He strutted in front of his men. "Rymple,

you remember what we did to those Commies what came around last year and tried to organize the berry pickers?"

"I do, Catfish, I do."

"Tell 'em."

The counterman's cheeks swelled obscenely. "You hung 'em upside down from a tree in Ma Pickney's orchard and made 'em eat grass. And then you whipped 'em. You did. Every single one."

"And their women."

"We all had 'em, over in Ma's barn. We saved the ugly one for Uncle Stover."

"Those Commies ever come around again, Rymple?"

"No, Catfish, we aint never heard from 'em."

"What you think we should do to these mothers?"

The counterman could barely keep himself inside the booth. "We gonna give 'em the same treatment. And maybe a mite worse."

"Rymple, you right. Only we gonna take 'em all over to the barn this time. One by one."

The counterman knocked on the screen. "Catfish, lemme have the girl. The pretty one."

"You have her, Rymple, but later. Which one we gonna take up there first?" He looked us over, and I was sure that my beard and my size would have singled me out. He walked over to Burt. "Commy, three my brothers died in Korea. You know that? Now what I want you to do is get down on your knees and say, 'Alfie, Lem, Merle, I'm dreadful sorry you had to get killed for your country, and I'm never gonna be a Commy again.' But first you lick my boot. You hear? Lick, or you gonna be a ghost in a minute."

I rammed Catfish in the butt with the end of my window pole. He tumbled over and landed with his ankles in the air. His men were wonderstruck. I don't think they had ever seen Catfish compromised in that way. I brandished the pole. Catfish tried to get up. I hit him again. This time he stayed down. "Motherjumpers," he said. "They gunned me from behind." And he began to howl. One of his men snarled at me

and tried to grab Mary's pole. I jabbed him in the stomach. He blenched, his chin dropped, and he fell over Catfish. "Bastards," I said, "stick around and I'll make you all wish you were never born."

"He's crazy," Catfish said. "Plumb crazy."

His men scattered, some running behind the dairy bar, others hiding under the station wagon. Catfish crawled after them. The counterman squawked, "Don't leave me, Catfish. Don't leave me. They'll skin me alive."

Mary jumped up and kissed me, but the three students seemed annoyed. "We don't believe in violence. None uh-tall." They picked up their placards and left.

Mary, Burt, Hope, and I marched through town singing songs about the A.C.W.R. Hope felt my biceps. "God, I was scared." In the morning, a deputy sheriff came up to our room, took off his hat, called me "Sir," shuffled around, and very shyly asked us when we were leaving town.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My Dear Miss Langnecker-Shields:

I so much enjoyed reading your letter. Chess problems no longer amuse me, and I have little company on my tour. I am happy that you remembered my clown from Akron. Werner was a thorn in the side of all pretensions, including my own. I miss him now. Let me assure you, Mr. Whitaker needs no apology for his actions. I did not find him impolite. On the contrary, his ferocity gave me great pleasure. I am afraid, however, that I would not be much good in his army. I have bad feet, and I cannot march.

I am not traveling with the boy and his guardian, though we seem to have the same itinerary. It reminds me of other times. During my world tour, a young man from one of the German provinces in Minnesota—Michael Kellermann—introduced himself to me in Cincinnati and followed me. Werner was intrigued by him at first. He called him Papa's Doppel, and made up melodramas in his head. My clown was in love with the old West. Pawns became pistols for him, and Kellermann was a young gunfighter who was trying to make a reputation for himself by vanquishing me. Werner waited for the "showdown." The showdown never came. Kellermann had a few tricks, but his games began to bore me. I wanted to keep my clown amused, so I said

nothing. Werner was nobody's fool in matters of chess. His dreams disintegrated by the time we arrived in Indianapolis. He could not bear the sight of Kellermann. He became vicious. He mimicked him; he made up songs. Kellermann had to run away. But with the boy it is different. Werner would have been jealous, yes, but he would never have dared to abuse him. The boy is a formidable player. I could not survive the exhibitions without him. He keeps my mind on the games.

This is my last tour, dear lady, and it is not likely that I will be in Wellsville again, but I will not forget your kindness and our game. Your defense was perfect.

Most cordial regards,
Yours sincerely,
Baldur Kortzfleisch

Sent off a note to the Admiral. Didn't have much to say. Kept my language plain. Admiral doesn't care for innuendo. Told him I've been watching for any irregularities in Van's bowel movements, etc. One of these days I'll shuck off the trivia and write him a genuine letter, full of grisly details. About my years at the Castle.

I earned my first merit badge helping Mama plant her victory garden in Papa's yard. She lost her carrots in a frost. Couldn't dig them out. The tomatoes turned brown overnight. Stinky raided Mama's garden and stole my hoe. Put dead sweet peas in my pockets. Had no uniforms then. We all wore hand-me-downs. And there were no chess clubs at the Castle — Papa tutored me at home. He twigged my ears whenever I made a bad move. Mama threatened to throw his chessmen in the garbage if he didn't leave me alone. Papa won. The other cadets took daily hikes to the Navy Yard and watched the shipfitters repair crippled destroyers, and I sat home and studied the Russian masters. I addled my brains on Tchigorin's Giuoco Pianos and Levenfish's end-games.

Admiral had grandiose plans. He entered me in the tod-

dler's tournament at the Brownsville chess club. The tournament was supposed to be for boys under seven, and I was going on eight. Admiral had my birth certificate doctored, and we rode to Brownsville on the trolley. The chess club occupied a room in an old brownstone on DeKalb, between a fruit stand and a storefront synagogue. A procession of patriarchs left the synagogue and shuffled into the brownstone. The old men blocked the stairway and stared at us. The air was stale, and the room stank of tobacco, garlic, and pee. No women were allowed inside, and Jewish children in wool suits, with spindly bodies and crumpled faces, flocked together in one corner like an army of dwarfs and shouted at their fathers, who were trying to find places for them at the chess tables. Papa joined the scramble and found a seat for me near the door.

I survived the first round miraculously.

Fathers argued among themselves and reviled their sons in Yiddish before and after every move. Admiral stood alone. The patriarchs crowded around me. I was paired with their favorite, a deaf boy who wore a velvet skullcap and never looked up from the board. The old men cursed my pawns and took turns pinching my neck. They needn't have bothered. I was outgunned and outclassed. Proceeding calmly and judiciously, the boy mated me in sixteen moves. Admiral took me home.

Papa, did you know that it's legal to whip convicts in Arkansas? A nigger friend of Burt's spent a year at Tucker farm for talking back to a sheriff. Cap'n Moosebeck told the nigger that if he'd be a nice boy, everything would be all right. The nigger couldn't pick okra fast enough to satisfy the captain, so they gave him eight lashes and harnessed him to a plow and made him pull from sunup to sundown. The nigger's back in Little Rock washing windows, and he says Yes sir and No sir when he's sober. But one of these days he'll go on a rampage when he'slickered up, and he'll be picking okra for the rest of his life.

Van doesn't like the way I drive. Says I miss the parked cars by inches. He wants Hope to take over the wheel.

Headaches every night.

I've lost my touch. Hope's growing aloof. Maybe if I faked a fit I'd get back her attention. Magic man, rattle your bones. Woooo. Waaaa.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

South Brooklyn Military Academy
Remsen Street
U.S.A.
24 June, 1965

Cadet Major Walter Van Buren, Jr., Esq.
General Delivery
Pierre
South Dakota

Dear Van:

Admiral keeps a score of all your games on the bulletin board. He is very proud. So are we. Cruickshank has something to say: "Van, why did you choose the Petrograd Defense in Muncie? I think . . . 4 B-N3 has more possibilities. Write me. I am dying to know." We saw your picture in Newsweek. Crabby told us Admiral got in two hundred applications this month. Two were from Alaska, and one came from Taiwan. We have new life jackets. Admiral bought them for us. We helped paint the smoke stacks. Neptune is the nicest ship in the harbor.

We all got A's in chess practice, spelling, arithmetic, penmanship, history, and p.t., but Moonan got a U in seamanship. He has to swab the poop's'le tomorrow. Crabby

says that in ten years the Academy will be the best school in the world. We are going to move to Long Island, and then we will have dormitories, dining rooms, a football field, and everything else. But no girls.

We all wish you good luck and we hope the Nazi has a heart attack in South Dakota. Hurray!

Respectfully submitted,

Cadet J. Michael Cruickshank
Cadet Timothy Xavier Moonan
Vice Cadet Walter S. Cody
Vice Cadet Raymond S. Cody
Vice Cadet Davey Williams

Crabby helped us write this letter.

Keep the Dakotas Green.

Hope wanted Van to see America, so I took them on a tour of South Dakota. I liked the Badlands the best. I imagined dinosaurs ranging over the buttes, terrorizing saber-toothed tigers and flying lizards, and somehow the absurdities of my own life seemed a little less severe. Van drew a crag on his magic slate, frowned, and told us he was getting tired of the West. I bought him an Indian war bonnet, and we went on to the Black Hills. We stopped at Mount Moriah and visited Wild Bill Hickok's grave, we touched a tomahawk that had been preserved from the Battle of Wounded Knee, we drove through reconstructed prairie towns, we went underground and searched for gold at the old Thunder Rock Mine, we rose over Terry Peak on a chair, but Van was unimpressed.

—I prefer the view from the Admiral's window.

—Who cares about Calamity Jane?

—Admiral could have walloped Crazy Horse.

—The only good Indian is a dead Indian.

He didn't stop complaining until we crossed the Wyoming border. "The reporters are waiting for me. Hurry up."

On the way into Newcastle we saw an Indian staggering across the road. He was carrying a sign on his shoulders, and

it kept swaying over his head. "He's a bandit," Van said. Two days of escarpments, Indian relics, and fool's gold had made him grumpy, but now he saw the possibility of an adventure. I stopped the car. "Be nice to him," Hope said. "He's harmless." I asked the Indian if he wanted a lift. He seemed offended. "Don't bug me. I have my own troubles." I took a closer look. His vest and his wampum belt were genuine, but he had a painted face. I peeked at his sign.

AXEL'S TOURING CIRCUS
COME ONE, COME ALL
DIRECT FROM THE EMPIRE CITY
FEATURING SEBASTIAN AND BILBO
DAREDEVIL ACROBATS
FOUR OTHER GREAT ACTS
SEE FORMER WORLD CHESS CHAMPION
AND THE HOUYNHOUNIHAN TWINS
MEMORY ARTISTS
& OTHERS

Axel Buonarroti, prop.

Hope tried to decipher my frowns. "Who's Axel?"
"Kortzfleisch's manager, the son-of-a-bitch. He wouldn't have anything to do with him a month ago. Kortz gets a little attention, and Axel cashes in. He's got whole armies of acrobats. We won't be able to get near him."

I ran out of the car, grabbed the Indian, and shook him. Van had a laughing fit; Hope thought I was going out of my mind. The Indian was obviously used to violence. I shook him again, and he gave me a beatific smile. He had girlish features and tiny hands. The sign sat on his shoulders, but his belt disintegrated, and his braids came off. "Rape," he said, and he started to laugh. "Stop. You're tickling my armpits. I give up. My name's Grumbacher. I answered an ad in the *Village Voice*. *Three Stage Indians Needed. Good Pay. No Family. Tour the West. Experience Unnecessary. Free Room and Board.* I was hired on the spot. And here I am. I'm not

used to the terrain." He stooped, picked up his braids, and put them on. In costume, he was less communicative.

"Where's Axel?"

"In town," he said. He ran off like a chicken, his braids flying, his knees turned in. His sign could have been seen for miles.

A huge tent had been set up on the lawn near our motel. Two acrobats were warming up outside the tent. Sebastian and Bilbo. They both wore sequined shirts, tights, and boots. They did headstands and double somersaults, but they weren't very graceful, and they kept botching their routines. The top man, Bilbo, was pigeon-chested, had narrow shoulders and long legs. The bottom man was quite powerful. His shoulders rippled under the sequins, and the veins stood out on his forearms when he held Bilbo over his head. Hope kept staring at him. He winked at her. A thin mustache followed the curve of his lip, and his face was marked with pits and seams. Hope couldn't stop looking at him. Contemptuous, aloof, the acrobat turned his back on us, tossed Bilbo up in the air, and caught him with one hand. I left Hope there and went looking for Axel.

Three battered trailers were parked behind the tent. The roofs of the trailers were crusted with pigeon dung, the ground was strewn with garbage, and the camp had a foul, miasmal smell. Two boys with identically serene faces scrambled between the trailers, trying to catch butterflies with a pot. They stopped in their tracks when they saw me, and they wanted to shake my hand. "We are the Houy-ni-hou-ni-han Twins." One of them stepped forward. "I am Michael. He is Melvin." Melvin banged his pot. "We know names and dates and all the stars." Michael wrote his name on a slip of paper for me. He had a silver ball-point pen, and he kept clicking it. I thought they were about thirteen or fourteen, but Michael told me they were twenty-nine. He didn't have a line on his face. A window opened in one of the trailers. A dwarf peered out at me. He must have been standing on a box, because his

head began to wobble. There was some rouge on his cheeks. "Get the hell out of here. Leave those kids alone. They couldn't harm a fly." His stare was ferocious. He had dents in his forehead, and he was holding a bayonet in his hand. He picked his nails with the edge of the blade. I hovered over the twins, tongue-tied, afraid of the dwarf. The blade caught the sun and tossed back a blinding glare. Squinting, watching the dwarf's head melt behind the crazy light, I managed to say, "I'm looking for Axel."

"He aint here," he said, giving the blade a final twist, and then he was gone.

A door slammed in the trailer next to the dwarf's. Someone brought out a camp chair and cruised the trailer's narrow deck. Comical in his baggy trousers and striped polo shirt, he shuffled around, unable to make up his mind where to sit. One of Axel's clowns? I waited for him to come out of his stupor, somersault over the chair, walk on his hands. But he kept rounding the deck. The sun crept on his face for a moment—Kortz. He seemed incomplete without his knapsack, lost. Was Axel holding him prisoner? Finally he found a place and sat down. The twins clanged their pot between my knees. They were both crawling in the grass. Instead of butterflies, they came up with moldy orange peels, worms, a dead toad. Kortz fell asleep in his chair. I wanted to ask him about Axel, but I didn't have the heart to rouse him. I was afraid that he might begin cruising the deck again. I left Axel's camp.

Axel found me in the tub. Hope had gone shopping with Van; they were going to buy lariats and harmonicas for Cruickshank and the rest of the Admiral's wolf pack. I shrieked when I saw him, and I had an erection. Axel smiled. He seemed enormous leaning over the tub, and he couldn't have been over five feet tall. He must have changed his wig—his hair was green today.

"Farkas, you own the brat, I own the show. Cooperation is the way of the gods, says Cicero. We work together, or you

don't work at all. You met my dwarf—Nano. People collect stamps, coins, wives. Nano collects knives. Don't tempt him. He'll slit you from ear to ear. Your own grandmother won't be able to sew you up. I'm not selfish. The brat has talent, he gets paid for it. That's why I'm in the business. I'm willing to share."

"Axel, I don't like your deals. Send your dwarf after me, but go. One thing. How did you force Kortzfleisch to join your troupe—blackmail? Or did you threaten him with Nano's knife?"

Axel tilted his head. I thought he was going to jump into the tub and break my bones. "Force? The woodpusher begged me to take him in. He was starving. He didn't have a clean set of underwear to his name. Now he travels in style. A trailer for himself. Nano makes sure he's fed. What more do you want?"

"I thought he was doing all right on his own."

"*You thought.* Mister, you know from nothing. He was playing for bupkas. He couldn't make up his train fare. Now he gets a flat fee. Fifty bucks a night or he doesn't lift a pawn. Everybody profits with Axel around. Be smart."

"I saw him in your camp. He didn't look too happy to me."

"I'm not in the market for happiness. He's got problems, what's it got to do with me? Do I look like a medicine man? Ask him if I don't treat him right. And he aint doing me any favors. Mister, I'm carrying him. I got the hottest item in the business today. The Houynihounihans. I discovered them myself in Fresno. They're guaranteed to sell out the house wherever they go. Don't be so particular. Make trouble, the woodpusher goes out on his ass. You think he can compete with my acts? Who's gonna bother with him when the Houynihounihans are in town?"

"What about the acrobats? I thought Bilbo and Sebastian were your stars?" He saw me pout, and he came around to the front of the tub.

"I got them for a song. Who can carry five big acts? Econ-

omize, that's the trick. Bilbo's in the family. Sebastian just got out of the pen. They haven't worked together for years. But they'll shape up. You'll see."

He tossed me a bar of soap. "Wash."

I ignored his overtures. "Axel, Vannie will play tonight, but after that I'm not making any promises. Anyway, I don't control him. He's got a mind of his own. But you try and pressure him, and I swear I'll wreck your camp, dwarf or no dwarf. I don't need knives."

I tried to hide my puny biceps under the water.

"Farkas, see you in the tent at eight."

The stanchions weren't very secure and the tent wavered and it had a musty smell, but once you were inside, Axel's circus was irresistible. Axel didn't worry about preliminaries and schedules and main attractions and grand finales. No tuba players, spotlights, platforms, paper banners, pralines—Axel remained with the barest essentials. He threw his acts at you, and like a great explosion, they created a momentum of their own. Sebastian and Bilbo, the Houynihounihans, Lucrezia the Iron Lady, Nano the Knife Thrower, Rubirosa the Juggler, and Kortz all performed at once, and as the din rose, as the confusion and excitement spread, you would have sworn that Axel was recreating the Tower of Babel in front of your nose. Nano was omnipresent. He chased errant children, joked with cowboys and town marshals, collected tickets, calmed the Houynihounihans, kept the reporters away from Kortz, juggled with the juggler, flirted with the Iron Lady, flattered the acrobats, glared at me, and looked after his gallery of knives. Seeing him with his swollen head, his long arms, his truncated thighs, his lipstick, his rouge, dragging his chin at one end of the tent, giving seductive winks at the other, foolish, benevolent, stingy, greedy, wise, sullen, brave, hot, cold, open, closed, you would have thought there were ten Nanos, not one. He wore me out.

Hope wouldn't take her eyes off Sebastian. The acrobats

were as clumsy inside the tent as they were on the lawn, but their sequins flashed in the shadows, and when Bilbo swayed over Sebastian's head, they both appeared to be on fire. The crowd formed a ring around the acrobats, the children screaming, hugging their daddies' legs, pointing to the branches of fire above them, and I went on to the next act.

No one seemed to mind the juggler's incompetence. The children scrambled after the plastic tenpins and discs that he dropped, and worked up routines of their own. The Iron Lady was much more talented than Rubirosa, yet she couldn't seem to draw much of a crowd. In fact, I was the only one who stayed for her full routine. Lucrezia made no pretenses about being feminine. She must have been six feet tall, and had whiskers, a deep voice, mighty shoulders, hammy legs. In spite of all her other endowments, her bust was insufficient for her size, and when she wasn't performing, she had a gentle, childlike look. But when she twisted iron bars around her neck, broke metal clamps with her teeth, split wooden blocks, tore telephone books in half, her eyes bulged, and the contortions of her face frightened the children away.

But even if Lucrezia had found a way to mend her arts, she wouldn't have been able to compete with the Houynihou-nihans for the attention of the crowd. They told grandmothers what day of the week their wedding anniversaries would fall on for the next fifty years. They knew the birthdays and the deathdays of every American president. They could recite each of the forty-eight constellations of Ptolemy by heart, and multiply enormous sums in their heads. But if anybody happened to ask them a question that didn't fall within their ken, they would shrug their shoulders, search out Nano, and shift around gloomily until a more appropriate question came up. Unfortunately, the twins didn't know anything about baseball, movie stars, or the Beatles, and they had never heard of Jesus. One little girl put them in a tight spot. She must have recognized the limits of their knowledge right away, because she asked them devilish questions about Moses and Pinocchio

and Richard the Lion-Hearted. The twins conferred and kept beating their heads with their fists, but they couldn't come up with the answers. The girl's father became obnoxious. "Shirley showed them. Haw, she stumped the geniuses." Nano wasn't around, so I raised my hand and shouted, "Gimme the birthday of Warren Gamaliel Harding." The twins looked up, beamed, and answered infallibly, "November 2, 1865." I fed them questions until the little girl became bored and decided to revisit the acrobats.

The Bronx Indian turned out to be Nano's assistant. Grumbacher came up to me while I was with the Houynihounihans. He was in a panic. The goose bumps on his arm showed through his greasepaint. "I shit every time the dwarf comes near me. If I look at him the wrong way, he could take his revenge on the spot. What's the matter? Were you ever the target for a knife thrower? He's here, he's here."

Earlier, Lucrezia and the juggler had brought out an old door that was attached to two metal stakes. Lucrezia held the door upright, and the juggler stood on a chair and drove the stakes into the ground with a wooden mallet. The sounds of the mallet struck through the tent—the stanchions quivered, and everybody looked up. Now Nano wheeled out a low cart; he paused and winked at the children, saluted old men. His daggers were strapped to the sides of the cart. Their ivory handles sent spots of light to the tent's tapered roof. The cart rumbled by, silvering the walls, and Grumbacher, heeding Nano's cues, stationed himself in front of the door—his arms outstretched, his feet apart—and waited. Nano was ceremonious with his knives. He would balance several of them in his palm before selecting one, then cock his arm, rock his swollen head, lean back, and throw. I never actually saw the knife in the air. I would hear a loud crack and find the blade stuck under Grumbacher's elbow or in the vicinity of his chin. I don't know how he survived it. His ears turned red, but he didn't scream, he didn't move. The children were fascinated at first by all the danger, but when they saw that Grumbacher was still alive after every throw and that the dwarf didn't in-

tend to vary his act, they tugged at their daddies' sleeves and pushed on.

Axel may have publicized his acrobats, his dwarf, and his idiot savants, but Kortz and Van were still his biggest draw. The old men spent most of their time at the chess tables, watching Kortz's odysseys; and Van was the great favorite of children, bachelors, married men, and old maids. The reporters minded Nano's frowns and paid attention to the crack of his knives against the wood, and they left Kortz alone during the exhibition. Here, in the dim light of the tent, away from the garbage and the pigeon dung, Kortz was a different man. Younger, nimbler without his knapsack, he moved from table to table with quick, lively steps. Axel must have found a way to revive him. Did the dwarf sit on Kortz's thighs and massage his chest? Did the Iron Lady seduce him? Axel was standing among the reporters, his arms akimbo, cackling, gesturing with his head, his wig secure, his face washed, master of the tent. I shuddered. Hope was with the acrobats. The Houynihounihans were doing a dance. The Iron Lady bit through another metal clamp. The juggler dislocated his shoulder and had to catch his discs with one hand. Nano threw knife after knife, but he couldn't recapture his audience. Grumbacher grew paler and paler. Van gave out his autograph. Kortz chatted with the old men.

Hope came back early. She hadn't expected to find me in our room. She was cross. "I'm going out," she said. She sat hunched over on the bed, looking at herself in the mirror. She was trembling.

"Christ, do you have to keep staring at me? Can't I have a little privacy? Go for a walk. Do something. Get laid. But leave me alone. Keeps me cooped up in motel rooms. You don't own me. I don't need another husband. One was enough, thank you. I want to have some fun. I'm going to a square dance. *With Sebastian.*" She put one hand over her eyes and began to sob. "I'm sorry, Ivan. I can't help it. That's the way I'm built. I want something, I have to have it. I get the shivers

when I'm near him. I'm ashamed of myself. You won't beat me up, will you, Ivan? I'm in love with him, I think. Can I open my eyes?"

I should have strangled her or kissed her or forbade her to see the acrobat, but I couldn't. I felt emptied, impaired, and all I could do was unload a little of my spleen. "Hope, I saw him up close. He's old."

Hope stopped crying. She gave me a curious look.

"He must be forty. And he's a jailbird. Axel told me."

She sensed my impotence, and she scowled.

"I guess I just like odd types, don't I, Ivan? Next thing you know, I'll be shacking up with Nano." She probed under her sweater and adjusted the cups of her bra. "Don't wait up for me. I'll be back late." She paused near the door, her back tensed. Had I taken her then, twisted her around, slapped her and told her I'd kill her if she took another step, I'm sure she would have lowered her head dutifully, stripped, and climbed into bed, and no acrobat in the world would have been able to draw us apart. But I wasn't in the mood for a bravura performance, and I let her go.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sehr verehrter Herr Professor Doktor Schachmeister,

Please read this letter carefully. I am a distinguished service professor of Renaissance poetry at a large state university. As a former member of the National Socialist Party, you must be well aware of the international Jewish-Negro-Communist Conspiracy. You cannot possibly know how delighted I was to learn that you are touring the United States, and that you will be stopping here. Be careful. The Jews are everywhere. They have invaded the university. They have debauched my department beyond belief, they have raped my secretary, and they have threatened my life. As a German, you must remember how the Jewish maddogs took over Berlin. I was there in 1931. I saw their gangs roam the Tiergarten. They attacked young pathfinders, they bribed the police, they stationed whores and perverts on the Friedrichstrasse, like maggots they infested the cafés of Hallesches Tor. Today they operate through J. Edgar Hoover of the F.B.I. in conjunction with Martin Luther King and Arthur Goldberg and the mad bombers of B'nai B'rith. They are sodomites and necrophiliacs. They are engaged in an international campaign of murder, fraud, lobotomy, prostitution, extortion, and poison. They infested me with parasites. They

mutilated me. They tried to blind me. Last year they murdered one of my students.

I beg you to be careful. Talk to no one. I am not at liberty to disclose my name and my address, in the event that this letter falls into Jewish hands. I will be watching out for you. Please wait for further instructions.

Faithfully yours,
A great admirer and a friend

I had my compensations. The Iron Lady fell in love with me. She sent me embarrassing notes. She told me the great secret of her life: she was blind in one eye. Several years ago, while performing at a manufacturers' convention in Miami —she was lifting a porcelain stove over her head—the retina in her left eye had become detached. After her accident, she drifted from circus to circus. According to Lucrezia, Iron Ladies were going out of style. The insurance companies refused to underwrite her because of her disability. And a few performers had taken advantage of her and had squandered her life savings. "I am very pessimistic about circus men and life in general," Lucrezia wrote, "but I am willing to make a new start with you. I am only twenty-seven, I have all my teeth, and I will love you and take care of you when you are old." I was touched by the Iron Lady's offer, but I couldn't get Hope out of my mind.

She went "square dancing" with the acrobat every night, and in the morning I'd find her sleeping with Van, her sweater and skirt and underwear piled near the footboard. She had nothing to say at breakfast, except "Yes" or "No" or "Pass the jam, please," and she always had errands to do during the day. She began traveling with the acrobats in Nano's trailer. I would have been entirely superfluous, but Van claimed that the trailers stank, and he wouldn't go inside. So I followed Axel's camp from town to town; and Van, sitting on a pillow admiring himself, became more and more remote and much harder to please. I had to feed his turtle,

take care of the parakeet, have his shako blocked and his uniform dry cleaned, attend to his fan mail; and if I asked him a question, he growled or pretended not to hear.

I could have borne Van's yoke easy enough, but my humiliations multiplied tenfold inside Axel's tent. I had to stand around and watch Hope walk up to Sebastian in the middle of his act, whisper, put her hand on his thigh, light cigarettes for him, and hold conversations with Bilbo, who was balancing himself with one hand on Sebastian's head. She made no bones about her relationship with the acrobats, pinching Bilbo's ears, allowing Sebastian to slap her rump in public, and even Axel seemed chagrined. But he kept his nose out of the acrobats' affairs. Hope could wreck his business. All she had to do was withdraw Van, and the circus would fold, no matter how many Nanos and Houynihounihans he could muster. He sensed the deteriorated state of my affairs and gave me buffoonish gestures and knowing winks.

And Nano was as hostile as ever. He saw the way Lucrezia behaved when I was around—her herculean crotch twitched, her strength gave out, and she could barely bend the iron bars—and he had Grumbacher tell me I could count myself a dead man. I wanted to let him know that I was a dead man before I was nine, but my ironies might have enraged him. I shouldn't malign Nano's motives. He wasn't looking out for Axel. He was genuinely devoted to Lucrezia, might have once been her lover, and was certainly her protector now.

I dreamed of abandoning the circus in Kansas, but I couldn't make the move. I should have been rash. I should have been wild. I should have punched Sebastian in the nose, unwigged Axel, crippled the dwarf, and pulled down the tent, but instead I stood in our motel room and berated myself—*Ivan Schlemiel, the hell with love. Prove your mettle. Go.* Annoyed, I scolded back.

—Schlemiel yourself. Big shot. What should I do? Join the rodeo? Become a truck farmer in Idaho? Talk is cheap. Shut up.

Van came in. He was staring at me.

"Haven't you ever seen anybody talking to himself?"

He brought me over to the mirror. My cheeks were shaking.

"Ivuhn, what's wrong? Should I find Mummy?"

"I'm all right." There were spots on the mirror. I blinked. I couldn't close my eyes. Hope's lipsticks and lacquers and face creams were marching in pairs on her dresser. Kings and Queens. Candied Apricot and Cherry Mousse. Kiss-me-now Purple and Fragrant Pink. Mocha Marvel and Ruby Glow. My throat rattled and Van's head grew larger and larger and floated up to me and I looked into the eyes and I saw Mama and me and somebody chasing us and I wanted to laugh and I screamed and the ceiling came down in my lap and my head hurt and I saw a nose in the dark. Wooo. How's your red-bearded boy Papa? Onetwothreefourfive I'm dead Did you ever roast a roach? How does it feel to be burned alive?

Kortz killed

All the crippled children in Worms

Head hurts

Ladies and Gentlemen

Some people kill with kisses

Some people kill with lies

But the murderer of murderers

Throws shit in your eye

Thirsty

Throw a fit, Bones, throw a fit

Blessed are the lunatics

They shall know peace of mind

Hope

Hand on my head. Feel. Her nose near my nose. Scarred with bits of mascara. Is the acrobat under the bed? Show Papa.

"Ivan. I washed your face. I didn't know what to do. You had a bloody lip. I'm sorry."

Lip. Skip. Ship. How do you do? Cockadoodle.

"Shhh. I put a blanket under you. Van gave me instructions. I was afraid to leave you alone. I'll find a doctor."

Get up, boy, get up. Dizzy. Startle her. Rise from the dead. Sheol. Bearded blanketed prophet. See my scarecrow frame in the mirror. Shrouded. Lugubrious. With a pontifical chin. I shout, I scream, I rave. Bitch. Go back to your acrobat. Whore. Pennylay. I don't want any goddamned doctor. My knees give in. Sway. Land on the bed like a beached whale. Stranded. I thrash about. She puts me to sleep.

My bones ached in the morning, but my head was clear. Hope was sitting on her haunches nearby. Naked. Holding my pill bottles. She pouted mildly. "Wildman, the least you could do is swallow a few pills." She stared at the bottles. "Damn. Don't they have any labels. Which ones do you take in the morning?"

"Placebos," I grumbled. She looked at me.

"They're worthless. I take them to keep the Admiral happy. They make me groggy, that's all. And they reassure Van. He would never ride with me if I didn't swallow a dozen of them every day. Where's Van?"

She looked away. "He's with Bilbo. In the trailer. He stayed overnight."

"I thought he couldn't bear the smell."

"He was frightened. Ivan, he could hardly talk. And I didn't want to bring him back with me. You know. Why wouldn't you let me call a doctor?"

"Doctors," I said. "I've seen a thousand doctors. What can they do for me? Send me to Kansas City? Put me through a battery of tests and come up with nothing. No tumors. No lesions. No brain damage. Cerebral dysrhythmia. Ideopathic. Cause unknown. 'Give him the green pills today, Dr. Kronski. And examine his stool every other week.' No thanks. And you can't tell about Kansas. If they found out I was epileptic, they'd probably want to sterilize me. 'Caint let that boy run around loose ploughing good Kansas women. If he wants to

manufacture freaks, turn him loose in Niggertown or throw him out of the state.' ”

“Ivan, don’t be gruesome. This isn’t the dark ages. People don’t—”

“No more talk,” I said, and I gripped her buttocks with both hands. She guessed my intentions and climbed into bed. She must have been pleased with my post-epileptic powers, because she stayed with me for the day and never mentioned the acrobat. She called me a lecher and a brute, but she wouldn’t let me out of bed. In midafternoon I became gloomy and got dressed. “I won’t be able to drive a car any more. I don’t need a neurologist to tell me about my case history. The seizures always come in bunches. They’ll get more and more severe, and then they’ll level off. I’ll be left alone for a year or two if I’m lucky, and then the cycle will begin all over again. I should have stayed in Brooklyn. Under the Admiral’s wing. It’s hopeless.”

“Silly,” Hope said, “I’ll drive.” And she began undressing me. “Take you around. Show you all the sights. Topeka. Wichita. Tulsa. Little Rock.” She laughed and her nipples shook and I nuzzled her belly and her pubic hair.

I don’t know what terrors Van had seen in my face while I was writhing on the floor, but he wouldn’t ride with us. He braved the stink of Axel’s camp and remained with the acrobats. Hope didn’t complain, but after a day or two she became tired of driving me around, and the only time she ever smiled was when she was inside the tent. She would dote on Van and send messages to Sebastian via the dwarf. Nano didn’t have to read the messages. He knew what was up. Hope went back to the acrobats within a week, and Axel made the supreme sacrifice: he gave his Bronx Indian to me. Grumbacher became my chauffeur and my keeper. There must have been a motive behind Axel’s generosity. Did he intend to team me up with Lucrezia? Or was I supposed to throw an occasional fit in front of the circus whenever anything went wrong with his acts? Grumbacher was even more miserable than I

was. "Ivan, I don't mind doing war dances or wearing braids. And let him give me a hundred extra duties. I'll drive the whole circus for him if he wants. But that still won't exempt me from the Knife. I'm only human. I get shit fits every time Nano wheels out the cart. Do they have any labor laws in Kansas? What about Nebraska? Nebraska's supposed to be a liberal state."

Grumbacher's complaints were soporific. I sympathized with him completely, but no matter how attentive I tried to be, his singsong voice put me to sleep.

Lonely, shunned by Van, I gravitated toward Kortz. I kept away from the trailers, but I followed him in the tent. We were both shy, and rarely spoke, yet somehow during the tour we had developed a form of sign language without ever knowing it. We could read each other's gestures and frowns, and I discovered that we both were repelled by the circus, were sympathetic to Lucrezia and the Houynihounihans, and liked the company of children and old men.

The reporters began pestering Kortz again. When Nano realized that his act was a flop, and that he couldn't win back Lucrezia's attentions, he became sullen and gave up most of his duties. The reporters appreciated Nano's laxness, and though they didn't underestimate the worth of his knives, they crowded around Kortz between moves and cornered him after the exhibitions. One reporter from Wichita was particularly repugnant. Convinced of his own significance, he elbowed the other reporters out of the way, leered at Kortz, and lashed him with questions. I wondered if he'd had a tête-a-tête with the Admiral somewhere along the line.

"You have a wife and children, Uncle?"

"No," Kortz said with an embarrassed shrug.

"Were they killed in the war?"

"I never married."

"What about mistresses? No illegitimate children, Uncle. Ja?"

The reporters nudged one another.

"Come on, there must be a few young barons in Germany

today who have some Kortzfleisch blood in them. And what about the chambermaids in Berlin? You must have enjoyed a few of them in your time. You were a hero. I've seen the files. Be fair, Uncle. I have pictures of you with baronesses and opera singers. Vacationing on the Rhine. Nobody's interested in chess. One romance, and I guarantee you a hundred thousand readers. You want publicity, I'm your man. Sex, Uncle, that's what runs the world."

"I'm sorry," Kortz said. "I have no bedroom stories for you."

"What about the war, Uncle? Tell us what you did during the war. That's another way of scaring up a little news. Take your pick, Uncle. It's either the boudoir or the crematorium. I'll listen to anything you have to say. A horror story is the next best thing. Tell us about the Nazis, Uncle. Tell us about your *NS-Vergangenheit*. See, I'm not stupid. *Sieg Heil*, Uncle. Either way I get a story. What happened to Schachmeister Kortzfleisch after the war? Nobody knows. Nobody knows. What do they say, Uncle? *Die kleinen Diebe henkt man, die grossen lässt man laufen*. Is Hitler still alive? What happened to Bormann? What happened to you? Either—"

I picked him up and hurled him over one of the chess tables. The other reporters scattered.

"You fink," he said, raising his nose cautiously over the edge of the table. "I'll get you too, whoever you are. Nazi."

I barked at him, and he ran out of the tent.

Axel came over. He was in a great huff. His wig moved.

"Farkas, watch your manners. If I need a strong-arm man, I can get my own. Next time somebody needles the woodpusher, let Nano take care of it. We can't afford any bad publicity. We're already in the red. You wanna use your muscles?—build up an act, but lay off the press." Then he left.

I stood in the corner and watched Grumbacher tinker with the lanterns that were strung across the tent. Humpbacked shadows grew over him and gradually darkened the walls. The lanterns lit up his braids and his wampums, glazed his

cheeks, and shone through his fingers. Pivoting on his chair, his belt aglow, his shoulders displacing the light, I thought he was going to demonize the tent. Then he stepped down, shrugged his shoulders familiarly, tugged his braids; and I relaxed, and noticed Kortz standing next to me. Had he seen Grumbacher on the chair? The juggler was packing his disks, the acrobats put on their mantles, and the tent began to empty out.

I heard Kortz mumble.

Then he bowed to me. "Thank you, Mr. Farkas. I am sorry if you got yourself in trouble because of me. It was not necessary. This is not the first time I have to deal with the reporters. I am used to them."

"He was an insufferable bastard," I said. "I should have skinned him alive."

"Ah, but nothing he said was not true. His sources were most reliable." Grumbacher raised one of the lanterns, and I saw Kortz's bashful smile. "Even the chambermaids and the baronesses and the illegitimate sons. I have two. But I have not seen them in twenty years. They do not know anything about me, and if I showed up one day it would be very embarrassing. I am not what you would call a model father, Mr. Farkas, and I'm afraid that the only complications I can deal with are the ones I find on the chessboard. I sometimes wonder if I will be able to make Schach in the grave. They say the chess bug has bitten the devil, and now he neglects everything else. And Herr Teufel is no fool. Ratings do not mean very much in *Hölle*. The devil won't play with you unless you offer him a rook. But you would have to be crazy to give him odds. My father always claimed that Herr Teufel invented the game." He laughed to himself. "Mr. Farkas, would you believe it, I was a very scholarly boy. I entered the Gymnasium before I was nine, I studied hard, I was never insolent or rude, and my professors predicted a brilliant career. I stood at the head of my class year after year, but in my heart I despised school, and I wanted to be a bohemian. Join a circus, sit in cafés, draw cartoons, drink tubs of beer, flirt with the

girls in the Hofgarten, but I never dared. My father would have crippled me for life. On my twelfth birthday I became very somber. I saw what was in store for me. I was doomed to spend the rest of my life carrying the five Latin declensions and the four conjugations on my back the way Aeneas carried Anchises out of Troy. And I decided to have my fling. I would become a great bohemian for one day. Oh, nothing very daring, Mr. Farkas. I left my books at the Gymnasium, I put my cap in my pocket, smoked cigarettes, poked my head inside the cafés and the beer cellars on Ludwigstrasse, and tramped through town searching for whores, though I don't know what I would have done had I found one. And in the evening, I gave myself up to my father. He called me a little vagabond, but he didn't take out his strap. He hooked up his suspenders, put on his waistcoat, and dragged me over to Türkenstrasse. 'So. You want to be a gypsy. We will see how the gypsies live.' He took me to the Café Simplizissimus. It was stupendous. I was the envy of all my friends. None of them had ever been allowed inside the Sempl. It was the hangout of all the artists in Munich. Dishwasher poets, philosophers, waiters with doctoral degrees, painters, actors, mimes, chess players, sycophants, pretenders, shoemakers, and schnorrers rubbed elbows at the Sempl. A velvet bulldog with a glass eye and a green mustache stood on the piano and presided over the café. The patrons loved him and abused him and bought him wine. One of them, wearing a dark cloak, crawled on the floor near the piano, whimpered, and pretended to court the dog. We all applauded. Except my father. He pointed to the old deaf men with yellow teeth, who argued over their chessboards and packed snuff into their nostrils with trembling fingers. These poor old men were a great affront to my father. He said they were all possessed by the devil. They had given over their lives to nonsense. *Unsinn. Quatsch.* Schach was a game for madmen and Jews. Did I want to end up like Steinitz? In a pauper's grave in America? So sit in cafés. Drink Liebfraumilch. Grow long ears like a donkey. Beg for your food. Let the Teufel eat up your brain. Is this what you want? Is this

why I brought you into the world? *Dummkopf*. I will break your bones if you do this again. He gave the old men a few pfennigs and then he took me home. Mr. Farkas, it was fifteen years before I dared put my foot inside the Café Sempl again. And it was not the same. Oh, yes, the bulldog was there. But he had mildew on his coat, his mustache drooped, and somebody had plucked out his glass eye."

Grumbacher, Nano, and the juggler began to dismantle the tent. Kortz shifted his attention for a moment and watched Grumbacher unhook the lanterns and snuff them out. Then he tugged my sleeve. "Mr. Farkas, tell me, if you were a reporter, what questions would you ask?"

"I don't know. I don't like to pry."

"They are so curious to know why I never had a wife. Oh, they suspect something is up with you if you are not married. For twenty years I was in love with an opera singer, but the most I could ever live with her was a week. I was never a sexual acrobat, Mr. Farkas. And I cannot hear myself think with other people around. Too much noise, static. It is impossible. When you are with people too much, it is hard to listen to the sound of your voice. I saw my life as an experiment, and I could not afford to tie myself to people or things. It was foolish, Mr. Farkas. I do not know any more about myself than I did when I was a boy. Only now I am not so smug the way I was when I was Schachmeister. If my clown was alive today, I would treat him better. I would say: 'Werner, don't cry. We will make our own America. Papa will help you.' Excuse me, Mr. Farkas. I did not mean to prattle so much. Herr Nano is not very companionable. His mind is on his knives all day, and he does not like interruptions. I have to scream if I want to get a word out of him."

"You know, when I returned to Germany after visiting the asylums in this country, and the Berlin Medical Society would not let me publish my report, I decided to kill myself. But this is not so easy a thing to do. I did not have the courage. It was all a question of vanity. I wanted to save the world, and they would not let me, so I renounced everything, and I played out

my life on the chessboard. There I could strike back. I could punish an opponent, slap him in the face with my pieces, and go unpunished. It was very satisfying. I had my clown to amuse me, women, and if I became bored in Lisbon, there was always a tournament in Cracow. On my bye days I read Kleist and Rilke and Gérard de Nerval, and I wrote articles about mysticism and dada and Schach. Would you believe it, Mr. Farkas, between 1927 and 1938, I did not spend more than six months in Germany. But Goebbels liked my articles. He raved about my Aryan insights. He decided to adopt me. I humored him, but Werner was furious. He held his nose and said I was a stinkpot. I stopped his allowance for a week. But after he was murdered, I had no one to put me in my place. Goebbels attached me to his Ministry for Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment. I made infantile remarks about preserving our German heritage. I conducted the Reich tournaments, I nursed Alekhine after his drunken brawls, I awarded the *Ritterkreuz* to wounded soldiers, I delivered sentimental speeches praising the Home Guard, I helped an expressionist painter who was accused by the Gestapo of being a decadent and a homosexual, I brought back art treasures from Paris and Madrid, I wrote out orders deporting gypsies and hobos, I saved Polish refugees on one day and witnessed executions and gassings on the next. The War Crimes Commission did not bother with me. They had Goering and Doenitz and Speer. I was never a member of the Wehrmacht. I was Schachmeister, no? They remembered my American tour. Do you know how many captains in the American army wanted to play with me? It was unbelievable. But the Germans fell in love with America. The People's Court wanted to impress the occupation forces. So they began fishing around for ex-Nazis on their own. And they came up with me. I was interned in Spandau prison for eleven months. Oh, I did not have a bad time. The attendants worshiped me. They gave me a radio, books, and they brought me my notebooks and my papers. I read again my report on the asylums in America. I was amazed. It was the work of an hysterical man. I had

a great lust for details when I was twenty-five. It took me three pages to describe the way the guards in an asylum would expose the breasts of the Negro women and poke them with sticks and wires. And I had to tell the exact number of welts that were raised on an inmate's back whenever there was a whipping. I was not a scientist. I was a voyeur. I wanted to see the men whipped and the women abused, but the young philosopher from Göttingen who cried in his soup when he read Fichte and Heine, who was kind to dogs, who wanted to expose madness, how could he admit such things to himself? I was never summoned before the Spruchkammer. One day the attendants came into my cell and congratulated me. My case had been dismissed. Insufficient evidence. Once again German justice expressed itself. While I sat in Spandau, the purges conducted by the People's Court went out of favor. A mild wave of anti-American feeling set in. Suddenly everybody remembered the air raids, the saturation bombings, the ruined cities, Dresden, Cologne. The attendants told me I was free to go. Go? Where? Back to the chessboard? To worry about my *Schachfiguren*? To make speeches about queen sacrifices and the Caro-Kann? To give my signature to little boys? When I was an *Unmensch*, a *Ghul*? So I packed my belongings and I went to Zurich. I changed my name. Herr Teufelman. I grew a beard. And the newspapers began telling stories about me. They thought I ran over to the Russians. They said a new era of chess would soon be coming. The young Soviet masters were adopting my openings. Some of the reporters believed I was being held in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder against my will. I was in the news for a while. Then they forgot about me. And I returned to Munich with my beard. I sold fish. I lived in a rooming house. Quietly. I even played an occasional game of skittles with the other lodgers. I began to feel human again. Am I wrong, Mr. Farkas? Yes, what I did was not excusable. But maybe my case was not so extreme. Maybe hostility is as necessary as love. Maybe our fantasies are more important than our jobs. Maybe it is not so terrible to be a voyeur, no? I am not sure. I have given up

being a philosopher. But I do know one thing. My chess trophies do not mean very much to me. The high point of my career was the day my father took me to the Café Simplizissimus. I am sixty-eight years old, Mr. Farkas, and you know, I got my wish. I am a bohemian after all. I have a tent. Werner is dead, and now I am my own clown. *Dumme August*. It is amusing. An old man should be a circus performer. But this is an appropriate ending for me. Yes."

Nano glared at us. He rocked the center pole, and the roof shuddered over our heads. "Everybody out," he shouted. "Everybody." Kortz picked up a lantern and carried it out of the tent. I followed him. The lantern was still hot, and it smoked at his side. "Herr Kortzfleisch?"

He put down the lantern and turned around. I couldn't see his eyes.

"Why, why did you come back to this country?"

He crooked one shoulder, and his knee brushed against the lantern.

"I am broke, Mr. Farkas. And at my age I have very few prospects. But this is not the point. It was a whim, really. Maybe I wanted a little notoriety in my dotage, yes? I did not have the heart to make Schach again in Germany. It would stir too many old coals. So I came to America. I did not think they would make such a fuss. I hoped the old players would remember me. It would be amusing, and I would make a little money. My Werner once wanted to make me into a cowboy. He fell in love with Tom Mix. He saw all the cowboy movie pictures in Berlin. And he had a plan. 'Papa, when we go to America, we will ask Reichskanzler Roosevelt to give us guns and horses. We will clean up his bandits. In the East and in the West.'"

We heard a commotion in the tent. Nano, Grumbacher, and the juggler strained against the center pole, uprooted it, and the tent rose spookily in the air, but the juggler slipped, and the pole dipped too far, and the tent collapsed and swallowed them up. Their bodies bulged under the canvas folds. They crawled along the ground and found their way out.

Grumbacher and the juggler began to fold up the tent. Nano dragged the pole toward the trailer, forcing Kortz and me out of his way. Kortz bowed to him and said very shyly, "Herr Nano, I do not want to interfere with your maneuvers, but I think I know a better method for taking down your tent. Without getting buried under it every time. A simple pulley would—"

Nano paused, ruffled his large head, spat over the pole, and dismissed Kortz with a twist of his shoulder. "Bring the lanterns."

The folded layers of canvas formed a series of humps along the ground and began to resemble the prickly coat of a huge caterpillar. While the juggler gathered the lanterns, Grumbacher picked up the other end of the pole. Nano swung his elbows furiously, and Grumbacher had to hop in order to keep up with him; he couldn't manage Nano's rhythms, and his arms jerked, and the pole swayed between them. Kortz shuffled his feet. I touched his sleeve.

"*Meister*, don't go with them. I have my car. I'll take you. To California. Texas. Chicago. Wherever you want."

He sighed, stooped heavily, and picked up his lantern. "Thank you for the second time, Mr. Farkas. But I am too old for adventures. I belong here. In a circus. I would not want to disappoint Herr Nano. Please let me go or I will miss the *Narrentanz*. Goodbye. Goodbye."

He ran behind Grumbacher and joined Nano's procession. His lantern kept flopping, and he had to stop once to tuck in his sleeve.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brooklyn
The Castle
July 18

Farkas
General Delivery
Faragould, Ark.

Dear Ivan,

I have thought about writing you before, but I have been in your father's employ for a long time, and it is difficult for me to act behind his back, though I don't feel any loyalty to Crabtree. Crabs is riding high. The Admiral is sending him to take your place. The rumor here is that you have been loving up Vannie's mother, and the Admiral is afraid that the Castle's name will be besmirched if the word ever gets out. The Admiral doesn't mind it if you go around jobbing her, but why do you have to do it in public? Crabs has been keeping in touch with the owner of the circus. Buonarroti. He is figuring on giving you the royal screw, though I don't know the particular details of his plan. But I will keep you posted if I come up with something new. Crabs has found a way to ass you out of the picture completely. Does the name Schliaporsky strike a bell? Crabs is hiring him for the fall to teach chess fundamentals to the cadets. Schliaporsky is supposed to have a high rating in the chess world. I have

met him, and he is a prick if you ask me. He has been coming around to the Castle twice a week. I am suspicious about the way he looks at the cadets. It is very possible that this Schliaporsky is a fairy. If I catch him using his paws, I intend to throw him off the tower. And I don't give a damn if I get docked.

I have been thinking a lot lately about the good times we used to have. I prefer those days to these. Do you remember the night we drove Malik's belly dancer to his other club in Far Rock, and she stripped for us along the way? Why were you so frightened? She practically had to put her boobs in your hand.

You were always good to me, Ivan, and the talks we had when I drove you around in your father's Caddy to the museums and the zoo and the botanical garden in the Bronx and the Roxy and the Brooklyn Paramount, I won't forget them, I swear. I don't know anybody else who ever received an education from a fourteen-year-old kid. I still tell people about Plato, and they all think I picked it up at college. Remember the time we saw Tyrone Power on 47th Street, and I wanted to give Sid Gordon the finger at the Polo Grounds but you told me to get his autograph, because you said it didn't make any difference what team you were on, if you were born in Brooklyn that was enough. And you never squealed on me to the old man, even when I was drunk and late because of the bimbos, and I was picked up for speeding on the Washington Bridge, and you paid for the ticket, and you never laughed at me.

I promise I will quit the Admiral if they pull any dirty deals. Schliaporsky has no future here. Leave it to me.

Goodbye.

Best wishes for your future
Marlo

I am curious. Do you still collect rocks? I still have a few of the same old samples you gave me in my room. Should I save them? Let me know.

Hi diddle ho, we were a hit in Arkansas.

Axel leased three additional trailers, sacked Rubirosa, held

auditions in every town, picked up a three-piece jug band at Mountain Home, hired a plumber from Fort Smith who could step on nails with impunity and swallow bolts and screws, bought Van a very tractable monkey by the name of Felix Granjon who learned the moves of chess in a day, shopped around for a new strongman act, and told Lucrezia that if she didn't shape up she would have to go.

Axel became disenchanted with the Houynihounihans, and he put them in my care. Now they ride in the Caddy, with Grumbacher and me. The trip has affected them adversely. Melvin forgot the names of the stars, and Michael began mixing up the birthdays and the deathdays of the presidents. Their faces became sallow, their dimples disappeared, their hands shook, and Axel could no longer pass them off as teenagers. He was thinking of shipping them back to Fresno. "The first freight train I find going West, they're on it. In a box." I told him to be a little more compassionate, but he plays deaf whenever I mention the Houynihounihans, so I decided to spice up their act.

I taught Melvin to juggle soda bottles and throw his voice. And I turned Michael into a passable mime. His movements are slow and graceless, his features are immobile and he always has the same befuddled expression on his face, he's blind without his eyeglasses, and he would make a hopeless pierrot; but I've put together a cotton beard for him, and I've taught him to imitate Axel, Nano, Sebastian, and me—even Grumbacher, who's gloomy by nature, laughs whenever Michael performs. Melvin keeps dropping the soda bottles on his toes, and Michael often forgets what to do in the middle of his act, but they've been drawing sizable crowds again, and though Axel grumbles, he hasn't renewed any of his threats.

The twins have become possessed with the idea of death, and they have begun forecasting their own deathdays, and ours. When Michael is feeling well he tells me I will die on January 17, 1999, but when he is low he gets niggardly with time and allows me only a year or two to live. Melvin has predicted a much longer life for Grumbacher, but Grumbacher

doesn't like being reminded of his mortality, and he shouts at the twins whenever they come up with a new date. "Lay off, Melvin. I don't care how long you say I'm gonna live in your crazy cosmology. If I know the exact date I'm gonna die, even if it's a thousand years away, it's like a death sentence. I have enough troubles with the dwarf. Don't add to them. Clue me in on Nano's death, not mine."

Melvin shrugs his shoulders and blinks, and Michael becomes his spokesman. "We don't mean any harm. The dates come into our head. We don't have any control." They'll be quiet for a day, and then Melvin's brow will furrow, he'll cough into his hand, look penitently at Grumbacher, and announce: August 15, 2121.

And Grumbacher will pull his braids. "What's the use? 2121. At least he picked an interesting number. Live and laugh. 2121. That's a long row to hoe."

The Houynihounihans won't perform unless I'm around. And if Melvin doesn't know where I am every minute, he moans and won't eat. I'm worried about what will happen when the tour breaks up. Perhaps their attachments are only temporary. I don't think so. What would the Admiral do if I brought them back to the Castle? I'm sure he'd like to have a crack at a pair of idiot savants. He'd make them memorize his chess books. They'd be better off somewhere else.

Hope has a mouse under her eye. Has Sebastian been beating her up? She brings out his cape after his act, but he ignores her most of the time and flirts with the country girls. I'd destroy the acrobats for her if that's what she wanted, but I think she enjoys being mistreated. The more Sebastian abuses her, the more attentive she becomes.

Lucrezia stopped sending me notes, but she hasn't recaptured her form. Yesterday she chipped a tooth trying to break through a clamp, and she's had to curtail her act. I watch her perform whenever I can, but supervising the Houynihounihans doesn't leave me very much time, and my health has begun to deteriorate. My attacks have become more frequent and more severe, and half the time I walk around with my vision

blurred. Though my mind is clear, it's hard for me to talk. I can usually tell when an attack is coming on—my head throbs, the light begins to hurt my eyes, my ears become oversensitive to sounds, and sometimes I feel as if I am going to float, or as if my head has become detached—and then, if we are on the road, Grumbacher clears the Houynihounihans out of the car, takes them on a butterfly hunt, and when they are occupied he comes back and sits on my shoulders. But I don't know how long Grumbacher will be able to last. He's been having nightmares because of Nano and me, and if he didn't drink a pot of black coffee every morning, he would never make it through the day.

Van has fared better than all of us.

Kortz's legs stiffened before we reached the Ozarks, and riding on the mountain roads has aggravated his condition. Lucrezia and the plumber from Fort Smith carry him back and forth between the trailers and the tent in a camp chair, and he's been able to play one or two Arkansas experts that way, but Van has had to take over the simultaneous exhibitions. The monkey accompanies him from table to table and generally makes Van's opening moves. He can chew tobacco and dance the jig, and he's become a great favorite with the mountain boys. They all holler for Mr. Granjon. The monkey is very possessive, and he rages whenever anybody gets too close to Van. He's already murdered Marat. I wanted to give the turtle to the Houynihounihans, but Van, imitating the mountain boys, told me during his last exhibition, "Mr. Granjon et him. He saw me feeding him lettuce, and he et him and spit him out."

"I'll bet you fed the turtle in front of that damn monkey just to see what would happen."

He protested loudly. "I did not. I did not." And he went back to his games.

Axel's calculations were near perfect. We arrived in Yell County on Crazy Day. The county clerk assigned us a lot at the fairgrounds, and we didn't even bother pitching our tent.

We assembled the lanterns on the lawn, set up Nano's door for his knifethrowing act, and carted out the folding tables and the camp chairs for Van's exhibition. I groomed the Houynihounihans, wetting down Melvin's cowlick and polishing Michael's lenses. Grumbacher seemed notably gloomy, and instead of attending to the lanterns he shambled across the lawn with his hands in his pockets, avoiding Nano, pretending not to notice my glances. The county merchants had set up their booths and stalls on the lawn adjacent to ours. Banners were strung across the makeshift roofs of the stalls and announced dollar sales and duck-calling contests and chicken fries and future festivals. The merchants' wares were piled indiscriminately in towers that swayed over the stalls and withheld the sun. The leaning towers formed elongated shadows that stretched across the lawn, reached the trailer camp, crawled up the sides of Axel's trailers, and sliced them in two.

The merchants were in costume. One wore a lion's skin with a convincing headpiece, another was dressed up in a gorilla outfit, a third pranced around like a zebra. They held up their tails and brayed and whinnied and roared at the crowds that milled in front of the stalls. A few of the merchants wore tragedians' masks and had decked themselves with coxcombs, wooden swords, and codpieces, which they were eager to display. They made lewd suggestions with their coxcombs and pointed their wooden swords at the Pink Tomato Queen, a buxom girl with a friendly smile and a slight limp, who presided over the fair. Whole tribes of children arrived in cream-colored Hudsons, in DeSotos, in Packards with heavy chrome, and they scrambled onto the grass, fell in love with the towers, giggled at the funny costumes, and flirted with the Pink Tomato Queen.

Axel was furious. He damned the stalls and shouted at us.

"Are you gonna let those jokers steal our show? Nobody upstages Buonarroti. What do they got? A rotten tomato and a few donkey tails. Come on. We're taking over the lawn." He slapped our buttocks and urged us on. The jug

band played the Rackinsac Waltz, and Kortz was carried around in an oversized potty chair that had been put together in honor of Crazy Day; the chair jogged along, and Kortz, sitting like a pontiff, held on to the arm rests, looked straight ahead, and actually blessed the children and saluted Nano and me. Mr. Granjon followed the track of the chair; chattering and grinning, he was wearing a paper shako that hid his ears, and he kept scratching himself with his long fingers. I marched with the Houynihounihans. Hope and the acrobats were behind us. Axel walked with Van. Nano, in the rear, wheeled out his knives and screamed for Grumbacher. I turned around. Grumbacher was behind one of the towers. He had taken off his braids and his wampum belt, and with his hunched shoulders and clipped hair he looked like a frightened mouse. He darted from stall to stall and made his way to the parking lot.

Axel stood in the center of the lawn, amid the shadows, and summoned the children. They abandoned the stalls and ran over to Mr. Granjon and the potty chair. Their mothers and fathers followed them. The men had narrow faces and long noses, and they guffawed at the monkey. The women were more severe; critical of the potty chair, they wanted to go back to the dollar sale, but their husbands wouldn't let them. The merchants barked and danced near their stalls, but when they saw that their antics were having no effect, they shed their costumes and joined the circus. The Pink Tomato Queen stayed behind and fiddled with her tiara.

Women and children pressed against me, and I lost Melvin. Michael tried to be brave, but he was concerned about his brother, and he put one hand over his eyes and cried. I stooped and carried Michael piggyback, but he wasn't able to see over the crowd. "We'll find him." We broke through the queue behind the potty chair and scoured the lawn, but it was Melvin who actually found us. He was carrying a package in his arms. The twins hugged one another, and then, remembering his duties, Melvin handed me the package. It contained Grumbacher's costume. A note was attached to the wampum belt.

Grumbacher's scribbles were brief. "Ivan. I'm sorry. This is no place for me."

Grumbacher had already left the fairgrounds. I could see the Caddy disappearing up a hill. I wished him luck in the Ozarks. The Houynihounihans sensed that something was up. They burrowed their heads in my chest. I put on Grumbacher's braids and tried to amuse them. They laughed, so I hooked on the wampum belt, and I made some room near the edge of the lawn. Melvin took the soda bottles out of his pocket, Michael put on his cotton beard, and the twins began their act.

I performed with them.

Whenever Melvin dropped one of his bottles, I flexed my trapeziuses and snarled and became a werewolf for the children who were gathering around us, while Michael retrieved the bottle.

Nano was in the audience. He was sitting in his cart, dangling his feet. He sneered at my braids and then jumped off. His neck disappeared beneath his swollen head. His feelings for the Houynihounihans changed radically after Axel put them in my care. He had been their protector and their confidant, and now he cackled at them and derided their act. But the twins weren't the real source of his ill will. The dwarf hated me. He creased his enormous brow. "Where's Grumbacher?"

"Find him yourself," I said, unable to stare him down.

He smiled insolently, wagging his misshapen back. Then he pointed to his door on the lawn. "I'm going to have to borrow one of your savants for a little while."

The twins caught Nano's intent, and a look of absolute terror came over them; Michael's eyeglasses clouded; Melvin hugged his soda bottles.

"Nano," I said, "get yourself another party."

"What about you?" He twitted me with his fingers, reached out, and tugged my wampum belt. "You're already in costume."

"Bug off, Nano, before you find yourself without a head."

He laughed to himself, and turning suddenly, he shot his cart in the direction of the door. The children squealed and made way. Mr. Granjon was almost run over.

The dwarf had caught the attention of the crowd, and he didn't intend to lose it. He put his hands on his hips and danced in a wide circle around the Houynihounihans and me. The children collected behind him and followed his steps. I stood in front of the twins. Nano kept up his dance and courted the children's favor. "They stole my assistant. I'll make them give him back." Kortz was still sitting in his chair; someone had placed a coxcomb on his head. The plumber stood motionless over his bed of nails and deferred to Nano. Hope sulked near the chess tables. Sebastian was with the Pink Tomato Queen. Nano pinched my backside brazenly, somersaulted on the lawn, delighting the children and the merchants, and strutted over to his knives. He beckoned to me with one finger and bowed to the crowd. His insolence was maddening. The children copied Nano's dance, made horns with their fingers, and stuck out their tongues at the twins. "Where's my assistant?" Nano shouted, balancing a knife in his palm. I took the Houynihounihans over to Kortz's chair, made them hold onto the arm rests, and said, "Herr Kortzfleisch, mind them for a few minutes, please." He moved one shoulder in an embarrassed way. "Mr. Farkas, forgive my behavior. I wanted to see how the world looked through the eyes of a fool." He raised his coxcomb. "Now I am satisfied. I am afraid it is not very much of an improvement. I will entertain the boys. Herr Melvin," I heard him say, "would you like to see how *Dumme August* performs a trick, yes?" Then I walked over to Nano. This time my stares were as brazen as his. I howled at him, and the knife wavered in his hand. Bastard, swine, one of us is going to be dead before the day is over. I'll bury you in pig shit. I'll feed your liver to the birds. His mouth crumpled, and a pained look crossed his face, but then he turned to the crowd, and when he looked at me again he had already regained his cheek. I stood against the door, chin up, arms out, legs apart, and for some reason

I wasn't frightened at all. I knew that my body would be able to repel his knives. Papa, wooo, weee, I'll be your superduperman. Nano, I'll swallow your head. Eat you alive. The knife struck over my head, and I had to blink. My ears pounded, and I was deaf, deaf. I couldn't hear their shouts. Nano cackled. I saw him. The children stared. The men crowded around the door. Nano waved them away. He sighted with the tip of his blade. His body rose in the air. My throat rattled. The dwarf changed his mind. He put down the knife, came over to me, paused, kissed me, and ran back to the cart. The children had fits of pleasure. Triumphant, Nano threw his knives rapid-fire. I stared into the sun. The towers moved. Somebody find me a coxcomb. Mama. I can't move. I howled, and the sounds must have traveled over the fairgrounds and into another world, because the dwarf's face lit up, and his smile clarified things: he didn't mean me any harm. The children fed me cotton balls, and the Pink Tomato Queen gave me her tiara, and Mama and Papa and Stinky were playing clap hands, and I raised my head and allowed the festival to go on.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - O N E

Far Rockaway
August 13

Axel's Traveling Circus
Little Rock

Dear Swami,

Spinoza says Whatever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived. Well, he's wrong. Maybe Spinoza was a big deal in Amsterdam, but if you ask me, he doesn't know from beans about what's happening today. Tell me, what has Hitler got to do with God? And when Jerry Rothenperl from East New York got shot in the face by his own father who was on a drunk, so it says in the News, was this conceived through God too? And let me piddle for a minute. What about Sandy Koufax's left elbow? According to Spinoza, if you look deep enough into any problem, if you shovel out enough of the crap, you'll find God's Justice. Maybe it's lying around in a bottle somewhere. Proposition I in Mitkin's Ethics is: God must have a peculiar understanding of what Justice is.

Proof.—Sheppie was reinstated yesterday. The State took him back. He got a new badge and everything. And apologies all down the line. Myrna his wife says she can't live without him. You ask me, he paid off a judge.

Corollary.—Ask me about the fate of Mitkin, why don't you? Greenberg sacked me, and I never took a dime from anybody. And Selma's going to marry the Fuller Brush man. My Selma.

Proposition II.—The whole world is rotten, from top to bottom.

For this I don't need any proofs. Q.E.D.

Swami, I decided to become a crook. That's the only way to survive. I already robbed three Hersheys from Feigen's Malted Bar on Schermerhorn. I'm on my way. The Gallo Brothers better watch out. I'll be owning Brooklyn one of these years. I'll give it back to the Indians.

I'm at the Beach. You can't beat the waves at Far Rockaway. And I have to give my soul a little rest. What's the use? My draft-dodging days are over. Don't get me wrong. I'm still two years ahead of my draft board. But why should I keep up the farce? I think I'm going to enlist. If you have to drown, you might as well drown in uniform. That's from Mitkin's Maxims.

Swami, I hope you are better off than me. I am selfish, I know it. But I still believe that if you didn't leave Brooklyn, things would be better all around. Do they need anybody new in your circus?

M.

Crabby's here.

He arrived in his beetle-backed Porsche, and now he rides at the head of the circus. He wears gold cuff links and a pinstripe shirt. I think he's growing a mustache, but I can't be sure. Maybe he hasn't found time to shave. He confers with Axel and Van and Hope all day. He hasn't said a word to me. No regards from the Admiral. Nothing.

I share a trailer with Kortz and the Houynihounihans and a member of the jug band. If Kortz weren't around, I'd be dead by now. He can hardly walk, but whenever I get a little dizzy, he finds me a chair or takes me back to the trailer and feeds me lentil soup. I'm afraid I haven't been much help to the Houynihounihans, and their act has fallen apart. I've

inherited Grumbacher's costume, but Indians aren't much of a novelty in Arkansas.

Hope hasn't been in to see me, but I can't blame her. She has her own problems. The plumber tells me that Sebastian has been porking all the country girls, and he thinks the Ozarks are his paradise. He never wants to leave. Hope is still living with him, and when I'm not daydreaming or asleep, I listen to their arguments. It's shameful, I know, but if I didn't focus my attention on other people's lives, I'd have to spend my time staring at the doodads in the trailer. Crabby has shoes with sponge soles, and they squish when he walks. He's outside right now. Spying? Poking around for new acts? He works with Axel hand in hand. I hear him. Humming to himself. He must have picked up a tune from the jug band. Crabby, here's a song.

My name is Jerry Crabtree,
I come from Brooklyn town,
I've traveled the world over,
Yessir, I've been around.
I've been to Mississippi,
I've been to Singapore,
But I never knew what living was
Till I came to Arkansaw.

Herr Kortz, the outlook is bleak, very bleak, I agree, but I believe in love. I don't mean concupiscence. Don't ask me now, I haven't the head for definitions. I keep my philosophies in a dish. Virtue and vice would both be very nice, if we all could pay the price and outfit ourselves with morals that could be dripdried and worn inside out. There was a certain sultan who believed he could tell a man's worth by the hang of his balls. An interesting theory no doubt, but not very dependable in the long run. Don't you see, you could always get them tightened or stretched, depending on your predilection. I say the world belongs to the androgynes. When friends desert us, when enemies hem us in, when the darkness comes, when old age approaches, we can always f—— ourselves.

Who's the clown now, Herr Kortz? A coxcomb for a coxcomb is my firm belief. We need a new set of names and numbers. Destroy consonants. Elevate vowels. Discover new organs and apertures. I suspect it would keep us for a day, no longer. The trouble with Cleopatra, they say, was that she wanted to be universally adored. You can't blame her. Our need for love, sir, is largely unfulfilled. But there are other opinions on the matter. I wish I could do something for the twins. Willy-nilly, my strength is coming back. Melvin, lemme sweep your beard. Michael, Michael, hold your brother's hand. Crabby's after us. When he came to the Castle, I was only a gawky epileptic boy. Admiral was allied with Eva, but Crabby wormed his way in, and Eva's been in the doghouse ever since. It's all the same to me. You can't build on your father's bones. Herr Kortz, should we jump ship in Texarkana? You take Michael. I'll take Melvin. And we'll meet in Dallas. Westward ho. Herr Kortz, we'll bring our act to the people. We'll perform in the streets. Melvin will juggle his bottles. Michael will catch pennies. I'll sing a few songs. You'll tell stories. Show your war wounds. Let Axel keep his tent. There are all sorts of circuses under the sun. It doesn't pay to advertise. In Brooklyn the organ grinders went from street to street. We'll need some music. To announce ourselves. Can you play the fife? Melvin can make tuba sounds. We'll wear piebald shirts. Hats with feathers. And boots. Children will die to see us. They'll drag their fathers along. The pennies will fly. They'll watch us from the roofs.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T W O

18 AUG 65
ARKADELPHIA,, ARK

DADDY:

MUMMY misses YOU. Why don't YOU fly to LITTLE ROCK and meet US?? This is the last letter I will ever write to YOU unless I get some satisfaction. How long do YOU think MUMMY will wait. SHE is only HUMAN. Shame on YOU. MUMMY has to have somebody to keep HER company. CRABBY took us to the cattle show and I won a beaver hat at the frontier frolic. We rode there in CRABBY'S car. Did YOU hear about the EXHIBITION in BEEBE. I played EIGHTY-SEVEN PEOPLE. I beat EVERYBODY. The STATE champion was there. I beat HIM too. YOU should see the way I run around the tables. CRABBY timed ME. I completed my first THREE moves in EIGHT MINUTES and THIRTY-SEVEN SECONDS. CRABBY says it's the RECORD. I let my second,, MR. GRANJON,, take over for ME and of course HE slowed ME down. MR. GRANJON has diarrhea. I don't know what to do. PEOPLE feed him nuts and pears and THEY don't understand that MONKEYS have a sensitive stomach. CRABBY says I have enough INVITATIONS to make the TOUR go on FOREVER and HE is going to have to cancel some of them. CRABBY'S tutoring me so we can go to

CALIFORNIA and I won't have to be back at the ACADEMY until NOVEMBER or DECEMBER. MUMMY wants to go home before CHRISTMAS. Old man KORTZ is sick. HE stays in HIS trailer all the time. MR. AXEL is going to send him to GERMANY. One of the TWINS got lost. CRABBY thinks HE was kidnaped and somebody must be holding HIM up in the mountains for a reward. I don't know which TWIN it was because I can never tell THEM apart. The other TWIN keeps moaning and groaning and MR. AXEL doesn't know what to do with HIM. IVAN would be able to make HIM shut up. But IVAN isn't here.

MR. AXEL couldn't keep him. IVAN had too many fits. CRABBY took HIM to the hospital. IVAN didn't WANT to go. NANO and everybody had to drag HIM out of the trailer. THEY tied HIM up. I SAW the hospital. It has bars on the windows and a guard with a GUN. CRABBY says ADMIRAL gave HIM the orders. THEY are going to KEEP HIM there for THREE weeks and then ADMIRAL is going to send SOMEBODY around to pick HIM up. IVAN looks like a ZOMBI when he has a fit. BUBBLES come OUT of HIS mouth and HE makes pee and HIS legs shake and HIS eyes disappear. THEY do,, DADDY,, THEY do. The muscle in HIS neck sticks out and rattles and blood comes OUT of HIS beard and HIS face TURNS into CHALK. I'm glad HE isn't here.

CYCLONE and WHIRLPOOL and SWAMP ANGEL. That's what THEY call ME in the newspapers. CRABBY tells me that in ARKANSAS I'm more famous than the PRESIDENT. EVERYBODY wants to see ME. I'm going to be on television with CRABBY and MR. AXEL and the television man wants US to talk about CHESS and POLITICS and everything. I'VE already been on the radio. And PEOPLE want to see me in L.A. The CHESS FEDERATION is going to be in trouble. That's what ADMIRAL says. THEY won't know what RATING to give ME. How would it look if somebody who was only SIX became a GRAND MASTER??

MR. AXEL is talking about arranging a match between ME and the CHESS champion of MOSCOW. Next summer

WE'RE going to go around the WORLD. CRABBY thinks the COMMUNISTS are DIRTY players and I have to watch out for THEIR tricks. Don't worry. I know every important game that BOTVINNIK and SPASSKY and TAL and PETROSIAN ever played. The RUSSIANS won't have a chance. Do YOU think SPASSKY would ever come to ARKANSAS?? I'D like to play HIM here. The MOUNTAINS are good for ME. I am boning up for MY next TOUR. I know how to say TWO words in RUSSIAN. ZDRASTVUEETYA and DA SVEEDANYA. That means hello and goodbye. WALTER,, do you want to go with ME and MUMMY to MOSCOW?? Then YOU better come to LITTLE ROCK.

YOUR SON,,
Van

Jerome Charyn

Going to Jerusalem



Marie Ringwald

A funny-sad novel about a voyage across the nightmarish landscape of contemporary America. The travelers: a six-year-old wizard, his nymphomaniacal mother, their thirty-one-year-old epileptic protector, and an aging ex-Nazi world chess champion on his final tour.

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JEROME CHARYN has published five novels (among them *Eisenhower* and *My Eisenhower*) and a collection of stories, is a founding editor of the *Algonquin Review*, and has edited *The Single Voice* and *The Troubadour*, both influential anthologies of contemporary fiction.

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