

The Night They Burned Sacco and Vanzetti

OR

The Fictional Life of Pietro Di Donato

by

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1. Vasto, Italy: 1887.

The bell would ring in the Great Hall today. A baby would appear in the foundling wheel. The director of adoptions was confident of this, for all had appeared in a dream foretelling the event as it always had the night before.

But this. A drowning baby in the wooden box of the wheel. *What can this mean?*

In her dreamworld, all had appeared as if a blessed vision; a beautiful child wrapped in a warm blanket in the compartment of the foundling wheel. But then, it became something else, and the turntable rose on edge to become a splashing waterwheel. She looked on as the compartment containing the newborn approached its apex. “Within moments it will flood with icy water,” she heard herself saying, “Only I can save this baby. I must—I *must!*” She lunged for the newborn. But the more she struggled, the more she was certain that some unknown cruelty this night would not let her hands grasp the infant. Her limbs dragged with exhaustion. She felt her strength and hope draining away. She braced herself, ashamed, helpless. In the morning she tried to remember if she had seen the baby perish—troubling thoughts persisted. What manner of strange omen. . .

Yes. As had been intuited, the ancient bell sounded. Her dark thoughts vanished in a flash, for there was no time to be wasted in rushing downstairs to check the revolving compartment on this sunny but chilled January day. No one could say exactly who was to be given credit for the ingenious device, but it was fashioned into the ancient edifice of the Charity Association of Vasto. Once a palazzo of the ruling d’Avalos family, with its fortified walls and battlements, the landmark on Via Aimone is now known to all in town simply as “the orphanage.”

Giulia's heart was sure to race upon hearing that bell. How many times throughout the years, yet each retained the thrill of the first. What sweet little bambino awaits in the compartment lined with a feather pillow and woolen blanket—they the helpless, the innocent. And she was confident she knew who had rung the bell, for she had been seeing a young girl of perhaps sixteen on the streets and in the marketplace for at least six months now.

Giulia brings up her mental records. Yes, the girl first appeared back in early August. She is always on the lookout for young faces that appear in the town and act as if on their own—on their own and unable to conceal their constant expression of worry. They appear as if from nowhere from distant villages. But some of the unwed young mothers-to-be are of the town or from a nearby borgo, and they become conspicuous over time by their absence from school and church for no apparent reason.

This girl, however, this girl had been looking very swollen and ready to give birth for over a week now. One of the town's midwives has been funneling her information: the girl's name is Angela. She is from a mountain village two days travel due west up in the high foothills of the Maiella, a little town known for its traditional woolen *coperte*—blankets, but especially for its durable black cloth sought by the military throughout Europe. A town called Taranta Peligna.

She pulled the bell chain one last time. It was a concerned alarm. Giulia could feel the girl's worry for her baby she had placed in the wooden turntable, the *ruota degli esposti*—wheel of the exposed. And she is more aware of the girl's anguish than anyone in the town, or its churches, could possibly have been. For she has been working with these girls, crying with these girls, guiding these girls in their spiritual dilemma over the years as few others could have.

—It rang. The *ruota* will have been revolved. The baby would now be within the protective walls of the orphanage. She is also confident that the young mother was dashing away into the maze of twisted narrow streets and alleys. She had chosen to use the wheel. She had been spared the disgrace, the stigma, of looking into the eyes of those who were to take custody of her newborn. In her young mind she was blessedly anonymous. But if only she could have realized that there was no verdict of guilt or shame to be passed down upon her within those walls.

Down in the Great Hall Giulia lays eyes on the child for the first time. Reaching down she looks into the baby's eyes with the gentlest of love. She believes the child to be masculine, but that would be confirmed in the warmth of her apartment upstairs. Giulia swaddles the newborn, whom she believes to be three days old, and gathers up the items the mother has left with such

care. There is also a note pinned to his blanket. In her apartment she makes a list in preparation for the town clerk to register the baby's birth:

—Two woolen caps—one colored and one white with flower patten.

—A third cap of colored cotton.

—Two swaddling bands—one white and one colored.

—Two white gingham baby shirts.

—Two white linen changing pads and one made of ticking.

—A little red cross with a gold choker collar.

—No visible signs on his body and a note that read: *It is hereby requested that the baby be named Geremio. And that he be baptized with the surname of those who have chosen to raise him.*

How well she knows these girls. After all, has not Giulia Camerini been director of adoptions, holding and loving these babies for the past twenty-six years now! And yes, Angela has indeed vanished into the labyrinth of the Middle Ages that is the town's center. She will undoubtedly make her way back to that little village up in the mountains. When the midwife asks the girl her surname, she gives Dadonna, daughter of Agostino. The wise midwife is a good judge of character and believes the girl is telling the truth. This is what the girl had confided: she is from the mountain village; her parents secured passage for her to Vasto by oxcart knowing of the orphanage there; her father works in the town's largest woolen mill, and her mother is cook and housekeeper to the owner of the mill, an important man named Vincenzo Merlino.

Abundant water has made the town on the eastern slopes of the Apennines ideal for the industry. Springs gush from the treeless outcroppings and fissures high above the villaggio—bursting from brutal rock, powering looms in buildings of stone and brick as they gather strength on their winding journey down the mountain to the great Aventine River.

Angela's mother, Filomena, makes the walk up the terraced village lanes defying the mountain's steep inclines to the home of Don Vincenzo, "*il padrone*," the undisputed capo of Taranta. She arrives each morning at six o'clock to fire the large cast-iron kitchen stove shipped all the way from Pescara. Merlino's fine home sits highest up the hillside within the village. But higher still, sited from the town with a distance that suggests special reverence—if not miraculous vision—is her parish church of San Nicola with craggy mountain wall towering

above as God's backdrop. And before entering by the kitchen door each morning, Filomena takes a moment to look up at its wonderful fortress-like *campanile*, or belltower, to thank the Holy Mother and make the sign of the cross. With this her heart would normally be at peace with the blessing of a new day's work.

But something has been weighing greatly on her mind. In recent days she has been addressing a special prayer to San Nicola, known as the Protector of Children. For she is deeply worried that her own daughter was just such a child in need. She moves through her chores in the Merlino kitchen as in a dream; and Sister Gesuina told Filomena, after Mass on the steps last Sunday, that Angela was unable to pay attention to her lessons at school and "wears a constant mask of melancholy" over what is normally her serene, child-like face. Filomena remembers her own stubborn mind at fifteen and knows that questioning her daughter would only drive her deeper into secrecy.

Her ancient intuition though has already told her the truth. She knows in her heart that it was the famous poet who had visited their town some three months earlier. She felt him a strange man. He did not arrive by coach, nor even a small buggy he would have manned himself. He arrived on horseback, outfitted as if rogue scout who had abandoned the military and adopted the dangerous call of the Maiella range he had set out to explore, reverting to predator, as if the mountain itself had cast the sign of the evil eye on the gnomish visitor.

Word spread amongst the women as if by telegraph the very first day he arrived. He must enter the Grotto of the Cavallone, he was heard exclaiming to the mayor in a boastful manner—that it was a marvel of God's imagination in karst and who better than he to enter such a pooled and mysterious place: the Womb of Mother Nature herself!

"I must experience the mysteries of the grotto firsthand," he said, "I have an inspiration for a play in mind which would utilize the caves as a key theatrical setting. One scene in particular, a scene of tragic violence, the mythical struggle between father and son—ancient, pagan, very dramatic," he added in an off-the-cuff manner. With this the women grew anxious. Paying them no mind, the poet continued on:

"For my research I must fully realize the wonders of my Maiella. I must drink in the body of her verdant hillsides on powerful stallion. One must sleep out in the wilds under naked outcropping and awaken before dawn so as to behold her deep golden-rayed penetration—rising,

higher, higher still, until her ecstatic climax emblazoned with the Abruzzese sun of mezzogiorno!”

The women told of how the visitor spoke as if delivering oration on a grand stage. No one in their little town had ever seen a man speak in such a manner.

Even upon his arrival Filomena intuited strong messages of foreboding. The poet was to be the guest of her employer and master of the mills, Don Vincenzo. It had been arranged months earlier by the mayor after receiving d’Annunzio’s first communiqués. She must bite her tongue. The honored guest, the Prince of Montenevoso di Pescara, must not be criticized or become victim of superstitious rumors originating from her kitchen. Her first action was to perform the reading of the tea leaves—this, just one of the many mountain rituals recalled from a past so distant no one can say for sure whence it came, far preceding the Church of Rome, the Apostles, or any one religious influence.

Gabriele d’Annunzio’s true reason for exploring these hills was somewhat obscured, perhaps even to himself. For he carried within a certain need not fully defined. A great curiosity. He could feel the fading echoes of an entire people’s fantastic—even supernatural—ritual of life rooted in these untamable slopes and high pastures.

Yes, he was of Abruzzi, but from the cosmopolitan center of Pescara. What remains safeguarded in these mountains long since decayed in his civilized city. But here, high in the Apennines isolating its people from the rest of the world, *this* is where he must seek it: those bone-chilling secrets of the awesome *Fattura*, that shadowy region of the Cabbala from where emanated prophecy, healing, protection from evil spirits, the influencing of love and hate, communion with the dead and, *il malocchio*—the evil eye, with its cast spells and curses.

Cloaked in conjecture and passed down from generation to generation, often its meaning could only be understood through symbolism. For the symbolic remains true to its origins no matter how many generations have passed from living, laughing, loving, and hating, to distant dead voices moldering in stone crypts.

In these hills you will hear the very old comfort each other. You will also hear of their instruction of the young by revealing the secret power of “the older time.”

*Habits of primitive peoples forever passed away, persist here.*

*Rites long dead and forgotten elsewhere, survive here.*

*Unexplainable signs and symbols long extinct, remain alive here.*

Filomena will safeguard her family by affixing a wax cross to the doorjamb to prevent the entering of evil spirits. But more imminently, the reading of the tea leaves has delivered a confirmation. Danger has arrived.

She steps outside the kitchen door and looks up at her Church of San Nicola making the sign of the cross, resolving to pray as she has never prayed before beseeching San Nicola, and the Holy Mother, that they might protect her child—her Angela.

## 2. We meet Aleck, the early 60s.

“That Dadonna boy. You heard about the filthy magazine, I take it. What kind of parents—I ask you,” said little Sally Owens’ mother, ringleader of the crusade for decency in their town.

“It’s the father. That’s where he gets it,” said Becky Penfield’s mother.

How they loved to whisper about that kid. Well, it was a small community still so it was to be expected. And it will stay this way, small and insular, until the big day when the governor comes all the way out on the Island to break ground on the new state university in another few years.

“Paul Dadonna. That man. He’s simply a disgrace! And that son of his is following *right* in his footsteps—no good. Simply no good!” said the mothers of the other kids at Setauket School—Setauket being an authentic name of the Algonquin Nation (and after all, Sally’s mother was in charge of the costumes each fall for the Setauket Indians Day pageant in the mural-lined auditorium).

“And what’s more, how is it exactly the Dadonna boy is in our school in the first place? You know of course they live out in Mount Sinai. I’d like to know why the boy isn’t in their school out there where he belongs, and I plan on getting to the bottom of it. Yes I *certainly* do—why, I hear the mother and Paul Richter are quite good friends, so I hear. . .”

Apparently the final straw had been just days earlier. Aleck brought a copy of *KNIGHT* magazine into class with him. He felt very special. The editors had sent his father an exclusive advance copy. Everyone was excited when it arrived in the mailbox, but Aleck was beside himself. It contained his dad’s latest steamy fiction: “A Present From Dottie Jackson,” about a

showgirl who contracted syphilis and passed it on to the big mafia boss, Big Tony. It also contained a color centerfold the boys in class drew a bead on right off, giggling and shoving each other. But Aleck was practically oblivious to the photos, gushing on about his father's latest published work, and the fact that the critics in New York said that his father was a great prose writer—"the greatest prose writer of the day," a term none of the other kids knew much about. He performed for his sixth-grade classmates with great theatrics out on the playground behind home plate during the game:

"... like a rabid dog covered in his own, you know, shit, cause syphilis drives you stark raving mad, in the ward with like fifty other raving lunatics pulling the stuffing out of their mattresses trying to eat it. So in the end Big Tony finally dies from it cause these little spirochetes like little maggots! eat holes in your brain—that's the 'present,' see—and he's on the slab in the morgue! and they're doing an autopsy. They cut you wide open and pull out all your guts! and the doctor's sawing the top of his head off with like a hacksaw and he's got this pretty young girl, see, in a white coat, his assistant, and she's wearing this perfume and Big Tony's head is clopping from side to side on the slab and all the doctor can think about is the pretty girl cause her perfume's driving him crazy out of his mind!"

Little Sally Owens saw the whole affair out with two of her friends, also listening on. Sally worked herself up into crocodile tears claiming that it scared her. Miss Darbyshire had Aleck called inside. They walked down the hall in silence. He followed behind single file mingling with Miss Darbyshire's old-lady perfume, powder, and perspiration. Entering the empty classroom, she crossed and sat down behind her desk. He could hear the other kids out on the beautiful grounds in the sunshine and the shouts and yells of the softball game.

Time was flowing, normal fun for the kids out on the field while his moments ground to a stifling halt he felt trapped in. A feeling swept over him before she said a word. It was a mix, a brew of shame, resentment, pride, defiance, and anger. He knew he was being singled out. And it was not right. But he had made a decision well before Miss Darbyshire had sat down: his uncanny ability to not only endure but to prevail, to win via his superior cultural self, was called to action.

He would buttress his rationale for the show and tell he performed out on the playground. Why wouldn't all at school be *thrilled* to see right there in print—and with wonderful artwork too!—his father's, the famous author's, latest splashy fame?



“Aleck, do you know why I called you in early?” Of course he knew. But he wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction.

“No. I don’t think—”

“Well. Some of your classmates were upset by. . .”

He drew immediate satisfaction seeing Miss Darbyshire grow uncomfortable. He could always tell by the way she straightened her back in her chair whenever she was about to administer her special brand of rebuke. But today, it was the simultaneous uplifting of her fantastically oversized breasts that caught his attention right off—breasts that were so different from any he had read about described with such adoration in one of his father’s wonderful stories. She was a rather squattish, square-torsoed woman of over sixty (an almost incalculable age) and he had been fascinated by those breasts since the very first day of school in Miss Darbyshire’s sixth-grade classroom. He speculated daily on the elaborate, girthy brassiere system that was always in place under her blouse no matter the season. He wondered where she would even have bought such a thing . . . perhaps Sweezy’s, all the way over on the South Shore (that’s where his mom took them clothes shopping; either that or Saks in the city on the LIRR). Then he tried to imagine what that looked like without her blouse, and even what it looked like with that system removed altogether, like when she got in her bath.

She had been burdened by these breasts for most of her life, he figured, and he couldn’t see how they could ever have been something she would have been proud of . . . or that could possibly have been desirable to any kind of man—that he was familiar with at least—especially his father. And he was the expert on such matters.

Perhaps, Aleck thought, if she hadn’t had such a terrible thing as these breasts, some man would have wanted to marry her. . . But he had no real way of knowing one way or the other. All he had to go on, was how his mom and dad always had such fun laughing in the kitchen fixing dinner till ten at night over their Four Roses with club soda and a slice of orange and bright red syrupy cherry—his dad pawing at his mom with his big calloused bricklayer hands and his mom pushing him away howling with laughter. “I never wore a bra *in my life!* until these days. I don’t know why—”

“Your perfect breasts pushing up through your crepe-silk dress the night we met in the Taproom. Like covered in snakeskin, Lovey—remember? I think that’s what got me that night.”

“*Honi soit qui mal y pense*, Mr. Dadonna, *honi soit*. . .”

Of course he would never really know. But what he was pretty sure of was that he had already gained the upper hand. Out of nowhere he heard her again. “. . . behind the backstop, and you apparently had a magazine you were showing some of the boys and, other students heard . . . I believe you were describing a story that’s in this magazine, they said. Is this true?”

“Yes I was,” he said after a calculated pause.

“Do you have this magazine?”

“Yes.” Without thinking he made her ask for it rather than reaching for it folded in his back pocket.

“May I see it please?”

He drew it out with a practiced nonchalance and handed it across her desk. She reached for it and began examining the pulpy girly-cover as if she had been handed a death warrant: *KNIGHT The Magazine for the Adult Male*. A plump redhead with very plump breasts reclined on a bed overdone with bolsters, her cheap-looking peach negligee covering barely more than her crotch and bore a pathetically subservient expression of cheap seduction—all for fifty cents.

“You see, Miss Darbyshire, towards the bottom there, in the margin. ‘A new story from Paul Dadonna—America’s most talked about author,’” he said with a kind of enthusiastic, pleasant defiance.

Miss Darbyshire began thumbing through the pages.

“The editors sent us a special advance copy and just last week Ring Cliffs, the big publisher in New York, and on TV! said that my dad was the hottest writer on the stands today. He said he was ‘the modern master of the short story!’ and it really *is* a superb one.”

Miss Darbyshire continued examining the magazine giving no indication she had heard a thing he said. He went on. “It’s on page twenty-six, I think, and they gave it a special spread, in color, original artwork by a professional graphic artist in the city—it covers two pages! . . . It’s really *excellent* artwork.”

It seemed to be a long time before she looked up.

“Tell me, Aleck. You, I believe, are eleven. And your classmates are either eleven or twelve. Would you say that this story—this magazine, is the kind of reading material appropriate for. . .” He knew this would be coming. He knew almost exactly to the word. And now here it was: typical; boring; and worst of all, lacking any kind of imagination. He felt like he was being lectured to by a kindergarten teacher. Here we are again. Dad is being pointed at, singled out as

somehow “wrong.” This was his personal Rubicon. And lately he had been finding himself at its banks more and more often. Don’t back down—don’t give in. Make it right. Make it a *good* thing.

“You should have seen how the other kids enjoyed it, Miss Darbyshire. Everyone thought it was really great laughing and everything and they asked a lot of questions about my dad like who were his friends in Hollywood and have I met any famous movie stars yet and—”

“I’m afraid I don’t see the relevance here, Aleck. I’m not sure I understand your point. Just as your judgment was woefully misguided, so too, in this particular instance, the judgment of the other children was *most* lacking—due to *your* influence, Aleck.”

Closing the magazine her eyes cast down to the tawdry colorful cover. When she spoke again, it was as if she refused to look at him. “I must be frank with you, Aleck. This behavior, your bringing this *disreputable*, most *unacceptable* magazine into school,” gesturing at it, not allowing herself to touch it again as she spoke, “encouraging your classmates to look at it—performing this *disgraceful* . . . story! of your father’s . . . I’m afraid it remains to be seen what shall be done about this, Aleck. It remains to be seen.”

He didn’t know why, but he turned and looked up at the clock above the blackboard—the smooth sweep of its bright red hand. The dreamy afternoon seemed suspended; only occasionally the shouts and yelps were heard by him flowing in the open windows on the sunny spring breeze.

He endured the humiliation. He threw up a sophisticated mix of make-believe listening, acknowledging, even agreeing, while the whole while running a disdainful strain of dismissal behind the already well-polished mask. Miss Darbyshire—frustrated, furious, probably pushed over the edge by his uncanny sense of self charm (but wait!—there was more to it than that: she had long realized that he had no intention, none whatsoever, of changing his ways; and in this institution designed to mold the ideal prototype of the twentieth-century American male youth—*none* could have been a more verboten streak than his brand of defiance), went straight to the principal, Dr. Richter.

This way of his. It must have been what got under the skin of most at Setauket School—most, that is. For he did have a small group of adults in the school, and the community, who thought of Aleck Dadonna in a completely different way. They were smitten by that carefree charm and by his unusual, good looks; a product of his mother’s green eyes and her glossy dark auburn hair

and his father's rich skin and noble profile. He knew who they were and he showed his gratitude by treating them with great respect and warmth. Like an adult.

So you see, it was the mothers; although there were certainly a good number of the men, the veteran flyers who came home after the war to waiting positions as big airline captains with routes to Bonn, Rome and Madrid, who despised the pinko writer with the Italian last name. But for the most part, it was the mothers first to the ramparts defending their kids from the influences of "that family," the Dadonnas.

Because, well, amongst other things, "Dadonna" isn't exactly an American name. It doesn't look or sound like the kind that goes way back to the days of America's forefathers and their blessed little hamlet far out on the North Shore of Long Island, some sixty-five miles or so east of "York City," as its occupiers at that time commonly called it (in honor of the Duke of York, and certainly needed to erase the city's "Dutchy" sounding name it was to replace).

And the boy, Aleck? He doesn't bother giving it much thought—not now at least. The steel-edged gossip won't get to him for a while still. For now he's too busy living each new and thrilling day. That didn't mean, however, that he was not aware of a certain something. He was. It was just that it all came to him as naturally as if it were the salty seaweed smells of the vast Sound, with its metal-gray skies and its stalled summer swelterings.

But maybe that was what bothered people the most. That naturalness. And when his big sister (whom he most certainly worshiped) seemed to gather up all those feelings in the town and would, for what seemed like no reason at all, turn on him in a fraction of a second, berating him in her particularly cruel way (self-centered, conceited little bastard being one of her favorites), how someday he would regret not paying attention in class and taking everything for granted and doing whatever he felt like doing whenever he felt like doing it—not at all like the other boys and girls at Setauket School—then ending her tirade by assuring him that he was "unquestionably" heading for a very rude awakening someday. He wasn't exactly sure why. But the savage anger in her voice, and the bolts of lightning in her azure eyes, upset him to the point of tears every time. For if there was one thing for certain, it was that young Aleck took everything his worldly big sister told him, as if it had just been handed down from the Mount.

### 3. We meet the father.

If you were to ask one of the locals in Port Jeff to describe Paul Dadonna, they'd probably say that he was about six-foot, athletic, lean—dark hair and eyes; that he walked with a jaunty bounce in his step that matched his outgoing, gregarious personality. And they'd definitely tell you how he liked to stop and chat. They'd tell you that all you have to do is catch his eye and you'd end up in a ten-minute conversation over the vegetable section in Bohack's—how he'd go on describing in savory detail how he prepares his sauteed rabe in olive oil and garlic; or especially if you ran into him on the back street. Oh yes, especially on the back street along with his friend the optometrist, Johnny Battista.

But maybe the one description that actually conjured up images—and Classical ones at that—would have come from Old Freida behind the counter at Eberhart's Bakery (Freida was one of the handful of Jews in Port Jeff; she had transplanted out from the Bronx many years earlier when her young husband dropped dead from a heart attack). She'd say, actually she would exclaim, "That Mr. D. He's got a head like a Greek god!—I'm telling you."

Paul felt at home in Port Jeff. It was his oyster. He was drawn to the blue-collar types that for the most part comprised the town. They were native Long Islanders, down to earth working folk, unlike Setauket a few miles farther west on 25A towards the City (Setauket was where the big airline captains and A-bomb scientists all lived).

And most everybody in town who knew him were proud to have their very own celebrity right there on the sidewalks, and in Darling's Stationary where he bought his typing paper and Eikov's Liquors where he bought his jug wine. —And oh yes, certainly in front of the icy display case at Schmelt's Fish Market. That was his very favorite.

But in reality, he wasn't six foot. He was about five-eight or nine. And he wasn't an athlete (although he certainly had been in his pure and youthful Northport days), he just moved like one. His whole presence had a precision of balance, a lightness of step unlike anyone else and people sensed it. He had been slinging block in splattering slippery mortar five, ten, twenty-five stories up since a teenager. He had the combined grace and strength of a fine-tuned athlete and Met ballet star combined. It was something he was unconscious of though.

Maybe nationally, in the national press, he would be painted as a has-been. Articles would appear with titles such as: DOWN FROM MOUNT SINAI CAME THE FORGOTTEN

AUTHOR, or, ONCE UPON A TIME HE CREATED A MASTERPIECE. But here in Port Jefferson he was still someone special, and he worked at keeping that image alive with that self-promoting charisma of his.

For in his mind the big comeback was right around the corner—that big phone call from his agent or an editor or a movie executive or director—that one phone call that would ring in the downstairs hall any day now and change everything. And why not? It had happened once before in his life. It was just a matter of time . . . and a bit of luck. And this time, when he's back on top again, he promised himself he'll get it right—no more booze and dames, no more immature displays throwing cash around at swanky clubs or showing off in shiny new convertibles. After all, he was a lot more mature, had a family to support and the boys to raise; there was also his stepdaughter under his roof along with Kathleen's mother, Mrs. Dean. And how about all that money he wasted on his idiot brothers who he had raised and fed and clothed and spoiled since they were kids. . . He resented it, all of it, bitterly. It made him spit.

And while his youngest son, Aleck, named after his mother's father, Lt. Alexander Richard Dean, was placing his devoted trust in his father, believing him infallible (although, yes, of course he realized his father had his problems, but don't all great artists?), the infallible father was struggling to write that hit comeback he so desperately needed.

And yes, of course, it was about the money. It was always about the money. But there was a far deeper need than the money alone, or even the fame. For you see, it was the only way he knew, his only path to purification. Because he still envisioned himself as pure. Well, at least he had been. And in *his* book there were no halfways, no in-betweens. But if he could come clean in his art; a writer's confessional, of sorts, and bare his Naked Soul. . .

He knew what the Pure Path looked like, and it always led back to his mother and when she married her childhood sweetheart, Geremio, back in the Old Country, in Vasto. She was pure on her wedding night; there was certainly no doubt about that. Each of the eight children had been conceived in the light of His Love and Purity. The question of why he alone should be exempt, un-needing of that same purity in his life, wrangled endlessly in his mind. Simple. It was much easier to go the path of pleasure; to turn away from the years of her loving inculcation: the catechisms; Bible stories; saints and holy cards; special prayers; scapulas; votive candles; her kitchen wall shrine with azure-plaster Holy Mother and colorful framed pictures of a swarthy Christ from the school of Raphael's oh-so-starry indigo night sky. And always, the nightly

prayers bedside on their knees, all in preparation for his Confirmation at San Rocco's. It was inevitable that he would be asking himself someday if she had been right all along. . . Of course she had, he admitted to himself during occasional flashes of candor. You're just too damned stubborn to face it.

So, what's the answer? . . . Well. You only have one. Keep writing. Rewrite the history you fucked up so badly. And while you're at it, you might as well tell them about all that wonderful fun and sex with all those beautiful girls—that's what sells. And the fame. God knows, there's nothing like it. You look like a fool having been famous once and now broke, back on the scaffolds breaking your ass like a goddamned animal.

But he doubted his writing, mocking his own belief that his "scribblings," as he called it, would somehow bring about a kind of absolution, the cleansing he so desperately sought.

His mind swirled with anxious thoughts; a bad mix of revenge and a pathetic craving for the straight path he strayed from so many years earlier.

*The only way . . . The only way.* But for what? Be honest. What you really want is His forgiveness, whom you simply lost faith in.

Yes yes, you renounced him decades ago. But. Still. There are . . . things. Oh, not the stupid things like being blind drunk down at the marina and having that gang of flag-waving yachtsmen knock you and Pete Petri around and throw you off the end of the pier at two in the morning. Or even for getting lit each night at dinnertime and dragging your Kathleen by the hair through hell. All because she was a widow when you met. Yes, that filthy word, the dirtiest word in the world. Because she had had the gall to marry some other man, the corpulent old Dutchman thirty years older than herself—the hotel manager, the soft-handed one—before she was even aware of your existence, the hotshot young author. No. Not for the obvious but—

#### 4. Aleck and his mother.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Aleck waits during his mother's long pause. Something keeps him silent. She pulls in a long expanding breath which staggers a bit. Finally, she begins in a quiet monotone: "The room is cold. With Dickie's small white coffin at one end, the far end of the room. I walk for a long time—knowing, dreading the horror—knowing what I will see when I

get there . . . But . . . the closer I get, as I'm able to see his sweet head raised on the white satin pillow—his face grows more and more withered and gray with each step, terrible, drawn . . . dreadful, but still—"

"I know, Mom . . . but you know; lots of times, dreams, don't really mean anything at all."

"Dearest, I know, you're so right. But . . . do you know even to this day. Often when I wake in the morning, somewhere in that in-between world, I try, but I just can't remember if Dickie is alive, or if it has already happened—if he has already been killed. I know it's something that must happen—but please, not yet; please, give us this day—Give Us This Day . . . And sometimes—it's both. I have him. But I'm going to have to give him up any moment, because I *know* he's dead, but I have him with me smiling his beautiful, precious smile and laughing so hard . . . and kissing my face all over—oh, Dear Lord—Dear Lord help me—"

Kathleen's eyes are swollen and red. Clear liquid runs from her nose; she dabs it almost constantly along with her tears.

She now seems to be looking through the old photo she is holding; far beyond. Her eyes narrow, her breathing becomes calm and even. She begins to recite segments: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. . . Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. . ."

Aleck has dutifully stored all the memories his mother recited to him as he grew up. And these people, who have been dead now for decades, he remembers from his earliest recollections. He has been looking at the cracked photographs mounted on fragile black construction paper and hearing of their intimate lives and their direct quotes, in their archaic speech—the things which stuck in Kathleen's heart like a cherished barb—his whole life, and none deeper than the memories of her fine Southern Gentleman grandpa, her mother's father, the son of the benevolent Master of Black Ankle Plantation.

Such strong adoration for this man. Aleck can feel the sense of security Grandpa Williamson gave his precious "Dolly"—Dolly Dean. The little girl longs for her grandpa and the people who comprised her world. Her world, which was dashed as by a bad dream she was unable to awaken from. Little Dickie, not yet four—her angelic little brother at the center of their lives, their all, their everything—struck down like a dog in the street.

His mother's bedroom is dimly lit. Deep golden shadows blend to black in the far corners. The memories are vivid; they are alive. These lives fill the room. It was not just the two of them



now. Dickie is there also; there with his big sister whom he loves so. And Grandpa and Grandma Williamson are with them. They are there with the granddaughter they cherish, and there with their grandson, Dickie, whom they adore.

Kathleen carefully examines the photographs from 1919, and 1922, and 1932. And there, framed under glass, is the sepia portrait photograph of Lieutenant Alexander R. Dean. The studio backdrop behind him portrays great darkness, pitch-black night, but over his shoulder you can make out luminescent flashes of light through a fog-like world. But rather ironically, the lieutenant's expression is relaxed and composed, his dapper mustache perfectly groomed and the shiny brim of his officer's cap pulled down jauntily, as if unreachable by the flashing dark horrors that rumbled in the distance. And written in fountain pen across the bottom corner, on the right: *To my Dearest Daughter, Lovingly, Daddy*. It is dated. The year is 1918. The photo to Kathleen was signed within weeks of his being killed in action in France, when his canvas covered double-winger struck telegraph wires at night in heavy fog.

Kathleen takes care not to let her tears stain the brittle photos. Feeling helpless, unable to change a destiny past, Aleck rewrites the stories in his head: Dickie would not be run over by a Model T on the streets of Chicago. His mother would always have her grandfather. And of course, her aviator father would come home to her from the Great War—Lieutenant Alexander Richard Dean, the dashing dark-haired Army Air Corps flyer, would come home to his dearest daughter, Kathleen. Aleck keeps his fantasy endings alive. It is the only real thing he can do for those he has grown to love.

But more urgently, somehow, he must rescue his mother from her terrible broken heart—and, from her tattered marriage to his father. Somehow, he must right all these wrongs and almost magically mend his parents in the process. It's a gargantuan task that falls to him alone and he has no choice in the matter. He never has. Richard, his big brother, had never shown even the slightest interest, and besides, now he was off training in Army Intelligence. That was all his parents were "allowed" to know. This of course was a total heartbreak for Paul; he could not even bring himself to mention it with his pals down at Wally's, or especially with his friend and arch bullshit-reactionary nemesis, Moss Mossbacher.

5. Paul's writing room, the late 60s.

Closing the door behind him in the upstairs spare bedroom—once Harriett’s room, now his writing room—he settled in and flipped on the motor of his salmon-pink Selectric. The smooth hum signaled the beginning of creation, and he began batting out some lines that had been floating around in his head for the last few days.

And once the miraculous ball (and miraculous it was, according to that twelve-year-old curiosity of his; and he was as impressed by that ball as one of those deep-Congo cannibals witnessing the supernatural powers of the white-man’s carbine for the first time) slapped the bonded Sphinx typing paper with those luxurious characters, so inky crisp, so precise, his thoughts transformed genie-like becoming destiny he controlled from his fingertips:

*The regrets of our past, as time goes by, weigh as an anchor chained to the heart day by day dragging down. Imperceptibly heavier down to the cold darkness—down to the inescapable. Down, to black oblivion. . .*

He liked it well enough. Not bad not bad, he told himself. He happened to have thumbed through some Conrad the other day. But it wasn’t that. He had already found himself writing these types of lines these days. He stared down at the sheet with the latest incarnation of his attempt to reorder time. Reading it over several times, he wasn’t sure if he truly believed what at first he had thought to be so true. Maybe he wasn’t ready to succumb to those regrets; the worst of which he almost never let surface in his mind. Maybe, goddammit, he would defy the way of things—of life—and refuse to play The Penitent . . . save all that crap for your deathbed—which, by the way, maybe, just maybe there’s a way around. For Chrissake, do you really think you’re going to be the first exception. *Couldst thou make men to live eternally, Or, being dead, raise them to life again?*

Wishful thinkers like you have been scheming since God-knows when in sheer disbelief that the show goes on once you become nothingness. Just another death-obsessed author. Pretty boring stuff. And as we all know, in the writing game, boring is the Kiss of Death.

—Well, if he was destined to join everyone else in that cold oblivion, Mahler’s Ultimate Destination (and let’s be honest; for some comforting reason you find it a bit easier to face knowing that every single somebody-else in the world faces the same shitty end. And no

exceptions! Not mother. Certainly not father. Not faceless Joe Jerk in the street or the president of the U-nited States of America—not even the pope!), it wouldn't be before he had reaped his sweet revenge on *all* the sonsofbitches; and that went double for the effete pricks in the City who had him all washed up. Sure. All of them.

And you know what the patriotic cocksuckers downtown say behind your back: “Isn't that the guy who wrote that book *Christ and the Bricklayers* or something? Sure. That's him. Dadonna. He wound up broke. Now he's back laying bricks. At the university. Better to never taste the good life in the first place, I say . . . What's more, I hear they call him ‘Paul the Red!’”

Let the nobodies talk. Soon as you're back on top again they'll all be bragging, the slobs, how they all know you or how they bought you a beer or waited on you down at Teddy's.

## 6. Couldn't stay Upstate.

And as for the old Port Jeff natives from those early days, hardly any around anymore. Most had never traveled more than twenty miles from their home. Fewer still had ever been into the City, those true-blue American philistines. But they had his number back then alright. He was the fancy writer who had sat it out while the rest, their brave boys and husbands, their sweethearts and brothers, were laying down their lives overseas defeating the Nazis. That's right. He had retreated to the grassy dunes of the North Shore while the war was still on. He wanted seclusion. Just thirty, he had lived ten lives.

They certainly could have stayed Upstate in New Actium after getting married. For the first time in his life he had money and could afford to live wherever he liked. New Actium would have been a fine place to settle down—if, they hadn't met. But they had. And it was that one indelible twist of fate, that one cast of the die that made it out of the question. For the mere mention of the name New Actium, as in the New Actium Hotel and its bloated old manager, Harry Mull, triggered his implacable rage. No. Upstate would never do. He would return to the familiar pull of the boroughs, taking his new wife with him.

Kathleen was fresh and pliable, going along with whatever over-life-sized emotions her new, her second, husband spewed from his guts. She even managed to overlook (well, it was all very new to her at the time) the mortifying embarrassment of the public scenes: in taverns and

restaurants; or in train stations when men would back him into a corner or tail him speaking so all could hear, threatening, calling him a dirty CO sonofabitch—a traitor, coward, the lowest of the low—and barely letting him escape without getting the hell beaten out of him. So they looked farther and farther out on the Island. Then they found her. Kathleen called her their “guiding angel”—in the tiny village of Stony Brook, roadside on 25A in her shed office opposite the railroad station. The sign on the front of the tiny building beneath the gooseneck lamp with green rusted enamel shade read:

AMY ELZON  
—REALTOR—

No sooner had they introduced themselves than she told them with a charming little smile: “I’ve been saving *just* the place for you. I’m not going to say another word about it. I want it to be a real surprise—other than you’re going to fall in love the moment you set eyes on it.”

And how right Amy was. She drove them up through Port Station and out country roads that ran through lush undulating terrain dispersed with sunny open fields and orchards, then descended the North Shore’s steep hills to a hamlet hidden away on the water called Mount Sinai.

She found the opening in the woods and rounded curves through the turning leaves of October until the bleached gray farmhouse came into view. Paul looked to Kathleen. She was glowing. Wonderful! Amy, he had said back then, we’ve found our new home. . .

Strange, because the grayed rundown house—its clapboard beaten through the decades by the unsheltered buffeting of the Sound and baking beachside summers—wasn’t at all the kind of place Kathleen’s former life was accustomed to. However, like Paul she was drawn to its hidden acres with their own beach and the magnetic Sound.

Giving the stalwart old two-and-a-half story structure a quick look, Paul led her around to the backyard with its quiet transition to dune grass and the white sand beach rich with satiny-smooth colored stones: all shades of tan; white; dark glassy gray and black and rosy-pink quartz—and wanting to be immersed in such beauty and feeling the sun-warmed breeze on her cheeks, she spoke from another world.

Kathleen was the strangest of enigmas. There was no explaining her. Her upbringing (Chicago's upper-crust neighborhoods with a black nanny and cook) could never have accounted for such a worship of the mysteries; except that she had always adored it when her Grandpa Williamson read to her from one of his Wordsworth volumes. And was she not of the age of Jack-in-the-pulpits and dragonflies, of garland-streaming nymphs dancing in moonlit meadows? Yes. And he already knew of her very private little-girl stories she wrote with her fountain pen to her father freshly, and gallantly, fallen in the night sky over France. "My daddy died on Armistice Day." Why do little girls with broken hearts resort to fantasies, receding into shadowed woods to live amongst the animals in a thatched-roof cottage, he wondered to himself that first night in the Tap Room of the New Actium. That night was just like any other in a swell hotel full of opportunities to pick up beautiful girls now that he was a celebrity. It could have been any city, any girl, anywhere on one of his book tours. New Actium meant nothing to him.

She poured her heart out to him. Just him? She must have told the same secret thoughts to the dead manager. The thought left him with the ground shifting under his feet. He couldn't catch up with the jealousy which sprang from his being. It shocked him. He would have felt more secure twenty stories above the teaming traffic on scaffolds blotched with slippery-wet mortar.

After all, this love was something new to him, the guinea kid from Hoboken—a truly American girl, a white girl he could call his own yet not fully grasp and, despite his intuitive warnings, could not give up.

He was bewitched by those deep stirrings of hers, her creamy magnolia skin and auburn hair, the perfect beauty mark high up on her left cheek. How she loved to gush forth feelings inspired by brave chickadees and gentle furry creatures, the mysteries of that other world below the surface and the wind rustling the treetops. She knew it was something more than just the wind. And in her mind, it justified her existence—*more* than that, it made sense of her will to go on, giving her an indomitable spirit that feared nothing.

Can't you just feel it, darling? Its gloriousness—the pervasive beauty of it all, is what she had said upon first standing by the Sound that day. It's my secret . . . You'll see. Someday.

Yes, it was all so revealing of who she was; as if a window that only he was permitted to gaze through. And although Paul thought he was drawn solely by his lust of the flesh—yes it was that, of course, because that was all it had ever been—following in the footsteps of his whoremaster

father and recklessly dashing his mother's old-world admonishments of chastity and purity. But there was something else too, something about the intimacy, the heartbreaking sincerity of this woman's thoughts expressed in her rich contralto voice and smelling the dark richness of her auburn hair, which drove his obsession.

She could *never* have laid her life out this fearlessly before any other man. No! You don't believe that even for a second—you can't!

And even in those early days, when they walked at the water's edge and she was composing her innocent poetry, it mingled within that unreachable world of hers. . .

*There is a certain place  
where I must go  
to dwell and know  
there to linger.  
A place of Wind and Tide  
of Marsh grass tall  
where Bird and Fish  
and Fowl may feed.  
Small creatures scurry  
finding haven for a nest  
in this quiet place  
so kindly blest.  
This certain place is where  
no earthly feet have trod  
and where  
if you are very still  
you may hear  
the gentle breath of God.*

Paul had knowledge of the events that had shaped this place; and on occasion would slip into one of his characters and perform for his family as if on a great London stage: “Ours is the result of stupendous forces [*Sweeping extended arm across panorama*] unfathomable to the mind of man. Ought we not cherish our Blessed Home? Yes! I say. This earth of majesty. This seat of Mars. This other Eden, demi-paradise. This fortress built by nature for herself [*Picking up pace with dramatic intensity; voice modulating high, then dropping low and guttural*] against infection and the hand of war—Against the envy of less-happier lands [*Pauses, emotionally reflecting*] This blessed plot—This earth—This realm. This! . . . Mount Sinai. . .”

The kids loved his performances, jumping up and down, hugging his legs and clamoring for more, more! The two boys, that is. The older child, his stepdaughter, Harriett, rarely joined in; and even then somehow did so on her strangely own terms. The strangeness of a strange child.

But as silly as his carryings-on were, it was true. Only a handful millennia ago—during the last great ice epoch of the Northern Hemisphere—the leading edge of the towering sheet (as tall as a thousand feet in some places) ground to a momentous gouging halt creating the basin of what they now call Long Island Sound. Here was the future beachside setting of their roomy old farmhouse with its dormered hip roof and Mount Sinai’s hidden little harbor next door.

The stalled monolith was melting. It carried with it a great drift of rubble; and now its huge cargo was being dropped off, grain by grain, boulder by boulder and every conceivable size rock, stone, and piece of gravel in-between. These moraine makings of the Island—scraped, chipped, rumbled and popped off sedimentary layers fused to bedrock harkening from the cooling molten primordial below—were pushed south with its final dying gouge out into the ocean some twenty miles; someday a practical distance for the coal-fired ferries to cross back and forth to Bridgeport on their daily runs.

The scooped basin filled with seawater melding with the open ocean at its east end. The basin was now an arm of the Atlantic, reaching all the way, the length of the new island it mirrored, to a narrow chunk of granite jutting above New York Harbor: a gargantuan deep shard of chipped arrowhead running north-south roughly thirteen miles and destined to be stolen from its rightful inhabitants some twenty-two thousand years later, seeing as how these reaches deliver the dark heart of the white plunderer so conveniently to the FDR Drive. (Mr. J. P. Morgan Jr. goes one better. For him, a limousine drive from his Centre Island estate to the office was too confining. So in 1917 he has his steam commuter, Navette, built to his exacting specifications.

Designed for both speed and comfort, the innovative design of her twin triple-expansion steam engines speeds him out of Oyster Bay and west some thirty miles or so, then, with a tact due south, down the East River to his Wall Street office. What better way to commute than breakfasting in her sumptuous salon reading the papers and enjoying a cigar with his coffee?)

The body of water he steamed through came to be known as a “sound” by the early English, or perhaps even by the equivalent Dutch word. It lapped the North Shore of the giant boulder-strewn sandbar left behind by the forgotten ice sheet—while the South Shore. . . Well, the South Shore gazed directly towards that infinite Atlantic horizon under-washed by the faint glow of all that carefree queer fun to be had in the far-off twentieth century.

This island, with its fishtail on the East End and plunked off the coast of the continent, was as if created yesterday; and the writer said that was just fine by him—his young terra just that much more removed him from the 450-million-year-old bedrock under his childhood tenement, only seventy-five miles west and up atop the Palisades. The seventy-five miles between those worlds might as well have been a million.

#### 8. Meets Christ in front of Wally’s fish market.

Behind the wheel with time to himself his thoughts drifted. . . How clever that beauty, the Stony Brook professor Xin-Xing in her handsome riding outfit. So precious porcelain-like, so . . . smart. Sex with erudition.

He had been wanting to say something to her more than once now at the fish market, salivating over the sculpture of her perfect buttocks, queued up in front of the iced seafood in the display case—her posing as some sort of paranormal character playing the part of Christ returned. He’d been hearing about it for weeks now from his pals on the back street. But for once he was at a loss to come up with one of his erudite openers. Every time he tried to think of what to say, it fell flat, sounded stupid in his head. It was her aura of supernatural sensuality which had him tongue-tied, shy as if back on the sidewalk in front of his building longing to meet the lusty young German girl sitting on the stoop. What stuck in his mind all these years were the tender blond hairs coating her legs and how they excited him.



No. It was She who had singled *him* out, calling to him in a mellifluous voice he swore was jeweled bells, on the sidewalk in front of Schmelt's Fish Market: "Ahh ardent writing one—have I got a story for you. Might you be interested in the more-or-less elimination of mankind? Because I've chosen you as my scribe to take down all coming events of my long-dreaded Last Judgment."

Perfect! This was right down his alley. Playing along (but also to hedge his bets) he asked her why me?

"Oh, you're always playing God with that salmon-pink IBM of yours; and your creations are quite original, for a change. Really. The state of publishing—"

She scrutinized him from beneath the Mongolian fold of her mysterious eyes for just a few moments longer than comfortable, then said, "I hear all thoughts, writing one. And most of yours . . . well, shall we just say dwell in the cheap and sordid," then, leaning in, "Really Dadonna, you would *dare* to . . . God? But frankly, I find your childish fantasies to be rather touching . . . in addition to most amusing. But to the point—"

"But Madam God"—he surprised himself how easy and natural it felt to say that—"could this actually *be*, I mean, right here in Port Jefferson?"

"Let's get something clear here right off, Dadonna. I am not a shaman, guru, rabbi, Muslim mendicant, Hindu beggar, Nichiren priest, Buddha, Mohamet, ambiguous deity, Baha'u'llah, charismatic cult leader *or* pagan playgirl. I always was, am and will be the Alpha and the Omega, the Self-Existent Cause. I can do anything; and I didn't make miserable man to take any nonsense from him. When the time comes—which isn't far off—on their lousy foreheads will appear the indelible letter 'L,' for liar. Then, the kick-off of Global Disintegration Day events all over the planet will begin—a seven-day countdown, if you like, to the vaporization of the mediocre masses. I'm going to make it a memorable week none of the misbegotten bastards will forget.

Paul asked nervously: "But. Your Godliness, what, what about those of us who believe—and love you!"

"Of *course* you'll be excluded, Dadonna, stop sniveling," as she casually glanced in the mirror of her compact and applied her lipstick. "Only one percent shall be spared; and you can count on being one of the chosen few."

She went on to tell him in beatific detail how she was once again going to eliminate the polluted masses: the liars; cheats; the whole of the swarming tattooed supermarket endomorphs bursting their short-shorts and workout tights; the cruel, mean, covetous, war-loving cold-blooded ones; those with prejudice, hatred, fear and larceny in their hearts—those who have no interest, whatsoever, in being their Brother's Keeper.

"The weak majority have betrayed my Moral Imperative—trashed the Law of Cause and Effect. Yes, that's mine too." She glanced around the store then out the front window to the horde of tourists coming off the ferry over at the marina and said in a daydreamy voice: "I'm looking forward to administering mankind's just comeuppance. Believe me, it's long overdue; but you see, I've always been somewhat of an optimist, believing that man would catch the hang of the free-will thing. Foolish me. When will I learn it simply doesn't work . . . never has.

"So, Dadonna, seeing as how you're available; and seeing as how you've got the right stuff deep down—and that *is* all that counts when it comes to times like this—you are to take down every delicious detail, every jot and tittle . . . for the Cosmic Record. Now I've got to run, I'm meeting your friend Johnny Battista over at the boat ramp. He's baptizing me today and I don't want to keep my followers waiting . . . Believe me, you'll be hearing from me." —What next! And damn if he hadn't noticed Johnny acting strangely holier-than-thou lately. But in these times, and with the quiet little hamlet of Stony Brook next door turned crazy college town, *anything* goes.

All that messiah stuff aside, all that really mattered to him was like he had told Johnny on their way to the fish market last week—that she was one luscious looking China-doll piece of ass, and how he imagined himself in the sweaty crotch of her gaberdine jodhpurs, bouncing—bouncing—bouncing. Then he went on one of his rants over all that John Bircher business about the Yellow Hordes: ". . . Why, her skin is the milkiest of milky white, as though she would transform right back to the Godly ether whence she claims to have come if but a single ray of sunlight were to strike her velvety flesh . . . Still though, I'll admit, there *is* a translucent hue below the surface—right below the surface, but discernable nevertheless—of summery-yellow cream."

He surprised himself. He hadn't figured on *The Girl of My Dreams*, like right off one of those tinny phonograph records when he was a kid, turning out to be one of the ubiquitous-faced

masses swarming the other side of the globe (oh he readily admitted it was *girls girls girls* alright, and always had been; to him women were simply aged animals living out their days the same as any pissy sack of an old man—or as Leonardo would say, “taking food in at one end and excreting it out at the other”). But sonofabitch if this swell-looking young Christ didn’t exude all the *Odoratus Sexualis* he so desperately sought.

But really. How likely was it that this God thing, so hotly kicked about these days, even on the cover of TIME (Is God Dead?) should find itself being played out smack-dab halfway out this jury-rigged island harborside, right now, right here? In Port Jeff!

And to top that (has he gone mad?), actually weighing the possibility that physics professor Madame Xin-Xing Christ, coming out of the half-assed new university next door, could indeed be the Real McCoy!

It was her small but devout clutch of disciples who first started calling her “Madame Christ;” and they seemed to have chosen the back street in front of Schmelt’s Fish Market to spread the Good News of their unusual new messiah. It was where you saw them in pairs on the sidewalk talking to tourists off the ferry and handing out leaflets. But after all, he contemplated, wouldn’t the big return occur at a historically significant site—someplace Classical, you know, Biblical? Rome, for instance, making her entrance through the rarely used Jubilee Bronze Doors of St. Peter’s.

He liked to amuse himself with fantastic and absurd thoughts, which were somehow justified in that they had the naïveté of a twelve-year-old. He pictured the Holy Father faced with a hot young piece—and a Ching-Chang China-girl to boot!—appearing amongst the tourists and faithful on pilgrimage, making her way up to the Papal Altar beneath the Baldachin and standing her ground right before the Throne of Saint Peter as the undisputed (originally *Son* of) God returned. And why not! But. If in the US of A, wouldn’t it be in a big city where this luscious-looking Christ could grab the major headlines? But Stony Brook. Has anything good ever come out of Stony Brook?

His head was full of exciting angles when he noticed Maurice Summers—Port Jeff’s bohemian artist-sculptor-actor fellow traveler—sitting at a table by the front window munching on French fries and watching the passers-by on the sidewalk. “Maurice. Hand me the glasses on the sill there; I think we can see the ramp from here.” Paul focused the binoculars with an

anxious accurateness which told Maurice the author was onto something big. “—There! There she is. The oriental doll is stripped naked as the day she came into the world; and have you ever in your life! seen a body like hers.”

He stared through the binoculars as if lost in a dream, finally saying, “She’s *got* to be God, Maurice, such perfection of sculpted thighs, torso, magnificent buttocks—creamy white skin . . . and God Almighty! It’s Johnny leaning her back to dunk her . . . Jesus Christ! look at those rock-hard torpedoes tucked up to her armpits. I tell you never have I—”

“Hey man. Don’t Bogart them glasses on me—let me have a look. Sounds like a body I’ve got to cast in plaster . . . Oh. Oh yes . . . yes indeed. I’d like to do her in Carrara marble. How right—you—are. But then you always did have the eye . . . Think we can get her to come up to my studio to model for me?”

There was a solemn silence as Maurice drank in one more prolonged act of voyeurism saying, “You know she’s the one from the university who claims to be the long-awaited Messiah returned. I’d be more than happy to put her on a pedestal and worship her.”

“Well Maurice, it’s got to be true. Think about it. If that isn’t what Godly gash looks like, I’d like you to tell me what does!”

“Now-now, Paul. Let’s be respectful. God she might not be; but simply a beautiful woman she certainly is. And that alone calls for some reverence here.”

“Sure, Maurice, whatever you say. But still. I’d gladly give up this life and be ferried away to the poppy fields for just one night in Empyrean devouring the Godly groin of Her Almightyness—Professor Madam Xin-Xing Christ from Stony Brook U. —Here, let me see.”

He focused again and watched her step up out of the water after being submerged. Maurice stared out the window hoping to see something while Paul described how she slipped back into her riding pants, *senza* underwear; her straight, silky-black pubic hair dripping while whisked inward, forming a crest—a perfect, vertical, strange but divine column which left bare flesh exposed on both sides to meet the taught folds at her thighs. Her velvety body glistened with salty harbor water as she addressed the crowd—muscular, bare chested—gesturing to the heavens with her darling, uplifted arms.

“That’s the pose, Maurice! I’ve got it imprinted in my mind’s eye . . . Oh this one’s a doozy alright. Doesn’t miss a trick, brilliant sonofabitch. If she’s willing to strip naked at the marina for

all the tourists up on the ferry railing over there, it's a cinch she'll pose for one of your fine statues. After all, what's higher than art?"

Putting the glasses down, he looked across the table into Maurice's somewhat weak blue eyes with serious intent: "She *told* me she had a great story for me, Maurice. And goddamned if she wasn't right—calls herself 'the Mistress of All Creation.' Brother can you top this! This will be my big comeback, Maurice . . . And to think, right here in our own crummy little tourist town, Port Jefferson!"