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Another Threnody of Hope

Desert Island

The tide was advancing and the waves, although only a few feet tall, now threatened Hal's beach towel. He lay face up in the shade of a large umbrella jammed into the sand, but the afternoon sun had moved the shadow almost completely off his body. The air was comfortably warm, but cooler now. As usual, the ocean sunset was going to be elemental—a huge yellow disc sliding behind a razor-blue edge.

Hal sat up abruptly, rubbing his eyes. "Where am I?"

Farther from the water, canvas deck chairs were arrayed in the sand. On the nearest one, Josef looked up from his book.

"Us?"

"Me," Hal said. "Where the hell is this?"

Josef went back to his book. "You mean us. It's New York. Manhattan."

Hal looked at the beach, which wrapped back around them on both sides. The island was very small.

"How could it be?" he said.

Josef snorted, still reading. "You would prefer Bali?"

"I just want to know where— Why do you always give me a hard time? What did I do to you?"

Josef put down his book, splayed open, and raised his glasses to squint at the other man. "You really want to know?"

Hal grimaced. “No.” He glanced back at the setting sun. “Was I unconscious?”

“Well, passed out,” Josef said. “Comatose. Oblivious, you might say. Unconscious, yes. Eyes closed. Breath deep, slow, and regular. No rapid eye movements. Complete loss of tonus.”

“Always the sarcasm,” said Hal.

“Oh, and you were out. Did I say dead to the world?”

“You have so little respect for people,” said Hal.

Josef looked around elaborately. “What people?”

Hal lay back down. The shade had moved too far, so he covered his eyes with his arm. “In Kuala Lumpur I met the princess and dined with the emperor.”

A perfectly formed curler broke lazily along the beach.

“I was a prized commodity,” Hal continued. “Hors d’oeuvres were named after me.”

“Yes, you talked a lot while you were delirious,” said Josef.

“I’ve never been delirious! I’d know if I were delirious.”

“Don’t we all?”

Another wave rolled in, as perfect as the last. The sand fizzed quietly.

“In Rangoon,” said Hal, “—or was it Tashkent?—I rode in the royal carriage, down the esplanade, and the crowd cheered me like a conquering hero.”

Josef put his book down again and sat up. “Did you dream that?” He sounded genuinely interested.

“What a stupid question!”

“You have such a colorful background,” said Josef. “I often wonder what color your foreground is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you’re more than a little transparent at times.”

“Transparent? Is that an insult? Are you mocking me?”

Josef smiled. “I may be seeing through you a little.”

Hal snorted. “That’s a laugh. You’ve never seen anything clearly.”

[Josef to the reader: *Seeing is believing.*]

“And what’s so especially clear to you?” Josef said aloud. “What do you know that everybody else has to guess about?”

Hal said nothing.

Josef went on: “What’s your secret information we’re all supposed to hold our breaths for? What’s your Message, Hal?”

Hal remained silent, staring into his forearm. Sparkles played inside his eyelids.

“Well?” said Josef. “Come on, Hal, spit it out. We’re all waiting. We’re all ears. That is, he’s all ears.” He waited. “We’re all agog.” Hal didn’t speak. “Eh? Well? Yes?”

Hal sat up and looked at the other man. “How can I ever explain it to you? I saw, I mean inside, in my—my mind’s eye, a kind of, well, truth, that isn’t the same as, isn’t like what you usually mean by truth, I mean—it just is true, you know? That is, you just know it. It’s like you don’t have to think about it: you just know.”

“You just know. In your mind’s eye.”

“Yes!” Hal said. “You can tell. You see yourself knowing it, and you can tell you’re knowing something that’s true, without thinking about it. You don’t have to, you know, like analyze it, or, I mean, with rationales and proofs and, well, dialectics, postulates, corollaries. You know.”

“So articulate! Why don’t you just say you know something without thinking.”

“Right!”

“How,” said Josef, “can you know something without thinking?”

“I don’t know.”

They both were still while the sun moved half a diameter closer to the ocean.

“That’s it?” said Josef.

“What’s what?” said Hal.

“That’s your big presentation?”

“Well, that’s—it’s what I experienced.”

Josef opened his book and then closed it. “This is your vision of ‘Life among the Humans?’”

“It’s just what it is. It’s not a vision.”

“That’s true enough. Not much evidence of insight.”

“I told you,” Hal said, “I don’t have visions. I’m not like you, with your, your—your damned *perceptions*.”

“Haven’t any colorful ideas ever crossed your mind?”

Hal thought. “We drove across the desert—”

“Yes—”

“Ran out of gas—”

“Too bad.”

“Had to sit in the car waiting for somebody to come along and bail us out. But nobody came.”

After a long while Josef said, “How’d you get back?”

Hal jumped, as if someone had poked him in the ribs. “Oh, somebody came by eventually. But it was so hot. I mean, blazing sun, no clouds, no shade, much hotter than this, and that damn black car sitting in the middle of it.”

“That’s terrible.”

Hal mopped his brow dramatically. “God, it was hot. We just sat there and sweltered. It was so hot, you couldn’t move, you couldn’t do anything but just breathe, and sit there.”

“And sweat.”

“No, not really. I mean it was hot so yes, you sweated, obviously, but it was so hot your sweat just disappeared, as fast as you could sweat it.” Hal paused, remembering, and looked at his hands. “It was really hot, you know, not just like a hot day, not like when you think, ‘This is too hot.’ I couldn’t believe it.”

“That’s horrible. Must have been really bad, out there. All day like that.”

Hal wriggled into a cross-legged position on the beach towel. “Wasn’t all day, but yeah, it was pretty bad. We just sat there and thought, ‘When is somebody gonna come along,’ you know? And bail us out? God.”

“I know,” Josef said. “That’s terrible. It’s too bad the car wasn’t, um, white, or something, you know? Lighter, more reflective, so it wouldn’t be so hot. Soaking up the sun.”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Hal. “But you know, it was so damn hot even if the car’d been white even, wouldn’t have really made it any cooler. Nothing could have cooled it off out there. Could have had ten white cars, and it’d still been unbelievably hot.”

“Yeah?” Josef frowned. “How’d having more cars would have made it cooler?”

“Whaddya mean?” said Hal.

“You said ten cars would have made it cooler.”

“No, I didn’t say that. I said ten cars wouldn’t have been any cooler at all.” Hal frowned, too. “It was hot, anyway.”

“Ten cars wouldn’t make any difference,” said Josef. “It’d be just as hot. You must have meant ten times cooler or something.”

“Don’t tell me what I meant. I never said ten cars like that.”

“Did too. You said, ‘Ten white cars wouldn’t have made it cooler.’”

Hal shook his head. “Well, they wouldn’t have.”

“Right.”

“And I didn’t say it like that anyway.”

Josef wagged his finger. “You said it. I heard you say it—ten white cars.”

“Why are you harping on this? I know what I said.” Hal put his head in his hands. “I’m not talking cars anymore.”

“Don’t deny it.”

“I’m not denying anything. I know what I said.”

“That’s a small miracle.”

“Lay off it, will you?”

Josef spread his arms wide and made a little bow. “Well, booga woola.”

Hal gaped. “What?”

Josef smiled confidently and said, “Wogga mumbaloola. Stumpo lavaleema pooka.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Mindaloobian porga furbish,” Josef continued. “Squando.” He paused again and then spoke in a conspiratorial tone, “Broggle?”

Hal grimaced. “Oh for Christ sake! Having one of your fits?”

“Havin’ a fit,” said Josef. “If the shoe fits.”

“You’re outrageous.”

“Got you off it a little, though,” said Josef.

“Why do you do that?”

“Why do I do anything? I do all kinds of things.”

“Like babbling incoherently in front of people? In front of him?”

“Who? God?”

“Sure, right,” said Hal. “Not God. Him. You know.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “*Reader.*”

“Oh. Sure, in front of all of us. But not like babbling. More like—well—like, gun to the head, muzzle in mouth, finger on trigger, trembling, perspiring, biting against the hard steel, fitting the sight into

the groove in the upper palate, drooling a little down the barrel, trying to focus on the hammer so close, poised, chamber positioned, rim-fire brass casing round the slug, nestled at the breech, blunt tip soft and ready, black powder compressed in a little pellet of chaos, packed into the cartridge like peat in a tiny flower pot, the acrid taste of bluing on the tongue, of ancient powder burns, the salty sulfurous smell, the cold metal sweating in the reversed hand, the tiny give of the trigger against the thumb, the diamond texture on the handle, the cold stripe against the palm, between the wooden grips, the hard heavy weight awkwardly tiring, urging the final twitch of thumb, the tiny click as the ratchet releases, the inaudible sproing of the hammer-spring—”

Hal was on his feet. “Enough! My God, you go on so.”

Josef stared at him. “And you just put a stop to it.”

Neither man spoke.

“Ratiocinator,” said Josef.

“What were *you* putting a stop to?” Hal said.

“Well, that’s really just patronizing.”

“No, really, I’m interested.”

“Sure,” said Josef.

“Please. Do continue.”

“I haven’t quite figured out the three of us, whether it’s one schizophrenic guy or a bunch of actual people.”

“But you actually did try to kill yourself?” said Hal.

“Well, yup.”

“What did you do?”

“What did I do?”

“What did you do to kill yourself?” said Hal.

“You’re asking me what did I do?”

“Yeah, obviously you did something—”

“Something.”

“To kill yourself—”

“To kill myself.”

“Right,” said Hal. “What did you do?”

“I can’t believe you’re asking me that.”

“I can’t believe you’re repeating everything I say.”

Josef glared. “What the hell difference does it make what I did? What do you care what I did?”

“I’m not asking because I care. I’m asking because it may be helpful to talk about it.”

Josef got up from the deck chair and put his hands on his hips. “Well, it won’t be,” he said.

“How can you be so sure?”

“For Christ sake, I did it, not you! I know what I did, and I find it upsetting, alright?” Josef turned away and stared at the horizon.

Hal took a step toward him. “It upsets you?”

“And I don’t particularly feel like talking about it, OK?” He turned to face Hal. “I mean, if you don’t mind too much,” he added sarcastically.

“But it does upset you,” said Hal.

“So what if it upsets me?”

“Don’t you see that talking about it is part of getting better?”

“That’s bullshit.”

“It’s catharsis.”

“I’ll get better? You’re sure of that?”

“Well, you should.”

Josef waved his hands in exasperation. “I honestly don’t think you have the faintest idea what ‘better’ even is.”

“But you’ll know. I don’t have to know. How should I know? Everybody knows.” He paused, but Josef said nothing. “Better is happier, more successful.”

Josef frowned. “If I get better, then I won’t screw up, right?”

“Right.”

“And if I don’t screw up, I might try to kill myself and get it right, right? If I don’t screw up again, right?”

Hal nodded.

“You want me dead?” said Josef. [To the reader: *That’s a laugh.*]

“Of course not,” said Hal.

“Of course not. You already said you don’t care why I did it. And now you want to save my life?”

“It sounds to me like you’re kind of turning things around here, don’t you think?”

Josef waved his arms again. “Me turning things around? You’re the one

who likes to screw things up, not me. You keep up these questions so I can't get away from the things that upset me, and then when I get upset you tell me I'm not supposed to mind."

"Well, that's basically right, but—"

"Seems to me, getting upset and minding are the same damn thing. [Josef to the reader: *Rotationist*.]

Both men stared at each other while the waves rolled in, too small for surfing, but big enough to qualify as surf.

Hal spoke. "We've tried to get past this chapter before, haven't we?"

"This chapter?" Josef looked back at his book, lying in the sand by the deck chair.

"The point where you can't face these issues that bother you."

"Look, Hal, this isn't a novel, it's a desert island. [Josef to the reader: *It says so in the subtitle, right?*]

[Hal to the reader: *You stay out of this*.] "Changing the subject doesn't change anything—you know that."

"Hey, look. You know damn well that *how* I tried to kill myself—and that's saying I did actually try—happens to be a topic of discussion I don't particularly like to get into, OK? And it doesn't have a damn thing to do with whatever may have gotten me into that situation."

"What situation?"

"That I wanted to kill myself! The reason behind my actions, obviously."

"Well, that's what we're trying to get at, isn't it?"

"That's what you're trying to get at, I think, not me."

Hal's shoulders drooped. "Look, why do you bother going through all this if you're not going to cooperate? You know *I* can't do anything for *you*—*you* have to do it for *yourself*."

"I can't believe you just said that."

"Oh, Jesus. Never mind."

"OK."

They stood without moving, and then Hal repositioned his umbrella so the big towel was in shade again. Josef returned to his deck chair and picked up his book, but he didn't open it. The waves roared quietly, and the sand made soft frying sounds.

Hal spoke first. "You want to go on?"

Josef didn't look up. "That's a loaded question."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"You tell me," said Hal.

"I'll just go on," said Josef.

"Fine."

There was a long silence, and then Hal said, "Well?"

Josef looked at him. "You just gonna wait for me, right?"

"Unless you have a better idea. It's your nickel."

"Right," said Josef. "You wait. I'll go on. Sound familiar?"

"Sure, I guess so."

Josef waved his hands at the sky and rolled his eyes. He turned to face Hal. "You wouldn't recognize yourself if he came up and bit your face, would you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I rest my case."

"We're letting it get fairly hostile today, aren't we?"

Josef frowned. "Yeah. Sure we are. Sorry. My fault. My apologies. My nickel. I bow to your superior sophistries."

"You were talking about why you killed yourself."

"I didn't kill myself. Only tried to. Allegedly tried to."

"But why? It's the why we want to get at, if you're up to it."

"My nickel, my suicide, my business."

"What?"

"My business. My nickel."

"I don't think I'm getting you."

"Right. You're not. Just my nickel."

"What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say, Hal, is this: I am trying to say that this whole game you are playing is a cesspool of self-indulgence—your self-indulgence—and you oughta be picking up on this yourself one of these days, without my help."

Hal tried to smile. "Don't you think suicide is self-indulgent?"

"Sure it is," said Josef. "But it's a solo performance. You have to drag other people into yours."

"No I don't."

“Do.”

“So therapy feels like suicide then?”

“You want to talk about suicide. You want to talk about reasons for suicide—”

“Your reasons,” said Hal.

“You want to turn everything into a product of something else.”

“I what?”

Josef swung his legs over the side of the deck chair and pointed at Hal. “You ever see a brain? A real, live brain?”

“In medical school—”

“It was alive? In somebody’s head?”

“It was in Dissection. A cadaver.”

Josef spread his hands as if to say, So there you are. He stood and went round the deck chair and began speaking to it, as if perhaps to a cadaver lying there.

“Take a deep breath,” Josef said to the corpse. “Close your eyes. Let your mind clear, thoughts fall away. Your pulse slows. The black behind your eyelids is sparkling, like it always does. Look past the sparkles, into the smoke. The heartbeat slows, oxygen consumption goes down, tiny synchronous pulsations wave from hemisphere to hemisphere, with occipital to frontal trends. Anaerobic metabolism diminishes, breath slows, breath volume drops, body temperature stabilizes, peripheral blood flow eases up.”

Hal watched curiously.

Josef said to the corpse, “Something is forming past the smoke.”

Hal waited.

Josef went on. “Digestion slows, cortical blood flow increases, blood pressure falls, hands spontaneously describe the appropriate mudras. You can see it now, with a wonderful clarity, the whole room, the furniture, the window, the clock, poised inside, through the eyelids, like seeing through walls. Are your eyes open? Did you remember this? The contact of pure knowledge directly with the naked mind without intervening mechanism of sense— cognition.”

“Ignition?” said Hal.

Josef waved his hand over the cadaver. “We get these now and then,” he said gently. “Even the room is a marvel this way. Such a marvel.”

He stopped speaking and stared down at the empty deck chair. “And there are times when it isn’t like that at all.”

Hal waited, but Josef lay back down on the chair.

“I don’t think I understand, but go on,” said Hal.

“No, that’s it. I’ve said it. You got what you want, but believe me, it doesn’t make any difference.”

“It’s interesting, though,” said Hal. “Seeing through your eyelids. You should continue. Tell me the relevance, is all.”

“I can’t. It’s too late.”

“Sure you can.”

“Can’t. It would spoil it.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, Hal, I don’t think so. It’s so much bigger than you are. Than any of us. All of us.”

“Oh, come on, come on,” said Hal.

“It’s a long story.”

“Well?”

“I was in the courtyard, looking up at the house,” said Josef. “It was my house.”

“And?”

“I saw the men on the rooftop, capering about as if—drunk on some wild nepenthe.”

“You were seriously polluted yourself, Josef,” said Hal. “Not all that very long ago, if you recall,” he added, in a broad aside.

“The walls became transparent. I saw through them, into the mist, like before, like—”

“Go on.”

“I could see through the mist. Everyone was laughing. There were people, and they were laughing and smiling, beckoning to me, and—and—”

“Go on.”

“And—floating.” Josef looked out at the ocean, and then put his head in his hands.

“That upsets you?” said Hal.

Josef looked up. “No, I—they were floating intentionally. And I—I could see how. Like three feet in the air. They were just there.”

“Yes. Really?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! What do you think, I’m making this up? Three feet in the air, dammit. And somehow I just knew.”

“How they did it?”

“How who did what?”

“How they floated?”

Josef was suddenly very calm. “Yes, I knew how. And I could do it.”

“And then you did it with them? All of you together?”

“Together?” Josef said. “No—they weren’t real. But the knowledge was. I knew how, and I tried it, and—and—”

“Go on.”

“It worked.”

“It worked?” said Hal. “You floated?”

Josef nodded.

Hal stared. “You levitated?”

Josef nodded again. “Just that once.”

Hal was on his feet. “Can you still do it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not? Don’t you remember?”

“Oh, I remember.”

“But it doesn’t work any more?”

“It works. But I can’t do it.”

“You can’t, or won’t?”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t?”

“I can’t make myself.” Josef jammed his hands into his pockets, and then pulled them out again. He looked around for some place to put them, then gave up and let his arms hang at his sides.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. God!” Josef sat down on the deck chair. “We aren’t in control, are we?”

“You’ll forgive me,” said Hal, “but this seems too convenient.”

Josef glared at him. “Convenient?”

“That it worked then,” said Hal, “but you can’t demonstrate it now. How can you expect me to believe you?”

“I don’t. But I did. And now I can’t. Quite.”

“But you seriously do think you floated?”

“Yes, I think I floated. I know I did.”

“And you, ah, can’t do it anymore.”

Josef pouted. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“But you should!”

“It’s too—It makes me feel like a rock, like a mound of dirt, like a goddamn anvil, a lumbering pachyderm for God’s sake. A wall of mud, a pile of—”

“OK, OK. Take it easy. You can stop.”

Josef settled down.

“Do you remember anything else?” said Hal.

“It came to me in the dream,” said Josef. “You were on horseback, railing against an unseen foe. You danced about, too, but with your épée. Never did see what you were fighting.”

“You couldn’t see?”

“No, you couldn’t.”

“Why do you have dreams about me?”

“Are there other dreams?”

Hal mused. “A man is standing on one foot. A bright light is shining out of the doorway behind him. He falls to his knees. The light goes out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Josef.

“It not supposed to mean anything.”

“Then why say it?”

“It just came to me.”

“Where does that stuff come from?” said Josef.

“From inside. From the dark.”

“From the light.”

“What do you know about the light?”

“Sorry,” said Josef, embarrassed again. “Nothing.”

“People are drawn to you because you’re smaller than I am,” said Hal.

Josef emitted a short, explosive laugh. “People don’t even know I exist!”

“Small people are cute, lovable,” said Hal.

“I don’t exist—never did exist—”

“Like dolls, like toys, pets, ashtrays,” said Hal.

“You know what does?” said Josef.

“What does what?”

“What does exist?”

“What?”

Josef waved at the beach and ocean. “That stuff. Out there.”

Hal pointed at the sand, the beach towel, his shoes. “This?”

Josef was gazing at the sky. “It’s busy.” He shook his head. “You know, frantically busy, roaring, screaming, growling, creeping.”

“What, you mean nature?”

“Are B-52s nature?”

“In a way.”

“You know they’re up there, flying around, 708 of them, or something, right now, as we speak, while he just sits there reading.”

“That’s not very profound,” said Hal.

“The bugs are out there, too,” said Josef. “There are ninety-three million six-hundred thousand termites crawling around in every half acre, under the dirt, lifting tiny grains like boulders, moving and building channels through the dark moist ground. Through the peat.”

“Disgusting, even,” said Hal.

“The peat and the poop,” said Josef. “The damn little hadrons and leptons, too.”

Hal fidgeted and looked around randomly. “Abstruse,” he said.

“Swirling vaguely at hyper-speed around probability wells,” said Josef.

Hal suppressed a yawn. The sun was getting very low. “Is it soup yet?”

“Subatomic particles, wave-forms flashing blindly in and out of existence, fluctuations of the vacuum state of the quantum field. Busy, busy, busy.”

“At this moment,” Hal muttered to himself, “half the world is in darkness.”

“Planets circling suns,” said Josef. “Moons circling their planets, space junk from techno-states circling planets, bombers, balloons, blimps, blippos, baleen whales, blandishments, brazen buffoons.”

Hal was counting on his fingers. “So about, say, one quarter of the people are adults in bed, and probably, say, at least ten percent are making it right now. Or even, conservatively, say, one percent.”

“Blatant poltroons. Pewter spittoons.”

Hal continued figuring. “The rest of us are sitting around while a

hundred million people are humping and bumping simultaneously.” He turned back to Josef. “I see what you mean. Busy, busy.”

“I’m trying to express some insight concerning the nature of things, the incessant activity of the world,” said Josef. “The oceans are evaporating, the air is condensing, the jet stream is bulging down over North America, and you turn it into something ridiculous.”

“Sex is ridiculous? Now who’s the humorless one?”

“A hundred million people? Bumping? Bumping? It casts the attention down, not out, or inside, or— or— up—”

Hal stiffened and a shadow swept across his face. “Up?”

Josef paused, embarrassed again, and looked down. “Well, in,” he mumbled. “I mean out.”

Hal was becoming angry. “Up? Up, you say?”

Josef’s voice was almost inaudible over the soft surf. “I, well, you know.”

But Hal was furious. “Up? Jesus Christ! You’ll stop at nothing!”

“I’m sorry.”

“God God God!” said Hal. “Just give me a goddamn break!” He glared at Josef and then said, ominously, “Watch yourself.”

Josef’s head was still down. “I apologize,” he said.

Hal glared at him. “Remember our agreement.”

“I will. I’m sorry.”

“Hah!”

“I really am sorry.” Josef’s eyes were wet, and he blotted away a tear on his cheek. “Please excuse me.”

Hal stamped his foot, but it made no sound. He looked down at the sand and stamped again, and shook his head. “Life is so damn difficult when things aren’t going perfectly.”

Josef looked down at his own feet and wiggled his toes. “One of us has to be a visionary,” he whispered.

The sun had moved all the way to the ocean, just touching the edge of it like a balloon balanced on a knife-edge. A figure was coming toward them across the sand, a woman. She was carrying a tray with plates and little jars.

It was Betty. She walked up to the two men and grinned broadly at them, first one, and then the other. She held out the tray.

“Anyone want some hot buttered toast?” she said.

The Living Room

Hal sat on the rug; Josef stretched out in the easy chair, his feet up on a leather-covered footstool. Betty stood by the fireplace with a tray of toast and several little jam jars. The living room was cozy, but large enough for a small party. The fireplace was well-used, although there was no fire.

Hal looked at Josef excitedly, his eyes wide with surprise. "You what?" he said.

Josef shuffled his feet, feigning remorse. In a sullen little-boy voice he said, "I didn't do it, and I won't do it again."

Hal dropped his gaze and began examining the andirons in the fireplace.

Betty started forward between the two men, holding out her tray. "Anybody want some hot buttered toast?"

Josef looked hungrily at the toast, and savored its appealing aroma. "I'd love some."

Betty handed Josef a plate with slices on it. He accepted it gratefully, leaned back in the easy chair, and took a bite of toast. "Did we ask for this?" he said.

Betty shrugged and smiled. "I just thought you might be getting the urge for a snack."

"Well, that's very thoughtful of you," said Josef. He munched for a while and then added, "Thanks. It's very good."

Betty went over to Hal and held out the tray. "Hal?"

Hal continued studying the fireplace accessories.

"You want some?" Betty said.

Hal looked up, as if seeing her for the first time. "Eh? What?"

Josef looked over at them and started to say something, and then stopped.

Betty repeated her offer patiently. "Hal, would you like a piece of toast?"

Hal was staring at her. "Oh, yeah. Sure." He slowly took a slice of toast from her tray. It already had jam on it.

Still eating, Josef said, "Boy, a simple thing like toast really hits the spot when you haven't had anything for a while." He paused to swallow. "When you get caught up in things." He finished off one piece, and set the plate in his lap. One more slice of toast remained. "When things change," he added.

“Can we finish what we were doing?” Hal said.

“What was that?” said Josef.

“You were—”

“I was?” said Josef.

“No, I was—”

“You were?”

“We—I forget.”

“So do I,” said Josef, with finality.

Betty set her tray on the coffee table. “Well, I think I remember,” she said brightly.

Hal groaned softly. “Please, Betty, we’re having a conversation.”

“It’s OK, Betty,” said Josef. “It wasn’t anything.”

Hal glared at him. “The hell it wasn’t!” He paused. “What was it?”

“I think you were—” Betty began.

Hal cut her off. “Please! How can I remember if you keep interrupting?”

“Was I interrupting?”

“No, you weren’t,” said Josef.

“You keep out of this,” Hal snapped.

“Out of what?”

“Out of this conversation I’m having with—” Hal groped mentally. “With—Beatrice.”

Betty frowned and drooped her head.

Josef said, “Oh. I thought you and I were talking about something.”

“We were,” said Hal. “And I’m trying to remember what it was.”

Betty said, “Well, I’m not going to stand here like a hitching post while you act like God almighty.” She busied herself with the tray, fixing up some more slices with jam, spreading it neatly with a silver butter knife.

Hal looked back into the fireplace and sulked, still trying to remember something that must have been important.

Josef finished his third piece of toast, carefully set the plate on the end table, and slowly sat up straight. He looked around the room and sighed. Then he stood up and walked over to Hal and leaned against the mantelpiece.

“Hal,” he said resolutely, “I think I’m going to go for it.”

Hal looked away. “Leave me alone.”

Josef watched Hal mope, now hunkered down on the thick throw rug. Then he said, "I've decided."

"Great," said Hal.

"I'm gonna go for it."

"Well, you can leave me out of it."

"No, Hal. I want to tell you why."

"I don't. Don't tell me anything."

"I'm going to float, Hal. I'm going to look through walls and see what's over there, on the other side."

Hal put his head in his hands. "Shut up! You promised!"

"Three feet up, Hal!" said Josef.

"You promised!" Hal cried.

"I'm breaking my promise," said Josef. "You deserve to know." He turned to Betty. "There's got to be more to this than just what Hal happens to know, doesn't there?"

She looked up from the coffee table. "Yes, I'm sure there is."

Josef turned back to Hal. "So just listen to me, will you?"

Hal jammed his fingers into his ears, shouted "No!" and began humming.

"You're acting like a jerk," said Josef.

"You calling me a jerk?" said Hal, his fingers still in his ears.

"Hal, I—"

Hal jumped to his feet and turned to glare at Josef, his face only a few inches away. Josef recoiled a little, but held his ground.

"I could tell you what you're trying to do," said Hal, "but I don't want to pull your flimsy little rug out from under you, understand? I could rip your pathetic ethereal world-view to shreds in a minute, but I don't, see, because I still have some hope you might get it together. So don't push it, Josef. Don't make me do something we'll both regret."

"I won't," said Josef.

"It's better that way," said Hal, quietly.

"That's your opinion, of course," said Josef.

"True."

"That's it, then, is it?"

"Yes," said Hal. "Someday we'll forget all of this."

"Yes."

“You’ll thank me in the end.”

“I’m sure,” said Josef.

“Cela suffit.”

“Indeed.”

“It’s all for the best,” said Hal. He was getting into the rhythm of it.

“There’s a little more toast and jam here,” said Betty.

Josef made a stop gesture and said, “Not this time, but thank you.”

Hal reached for a slice, and Betty held out the plate. “It’s not hot anymore,” she said.

Hal took a bite.

“I could go make some more,” said Betty.

Hal grimaced. “No, no, not necessary.” He glanced at Josef, but Josef was gone.

“What’s to forget?” asked Hal, looking around. Betty recoiled a little and moved away from the coffee table.

“What’s to remember?” Hal continued. He walked to the easy chair and bent to examine it more closely. “I remember history as a list of events, but they’re all the same, like cuts of beef in a market. Why add things to the list? It’s not my list anyway. I’m not shopping for myself.”

Hal stopped and looked back at the fireplace. Betty stood to one side, watching him warily.

“What a stupid metaphor,” said Hal. He looked all around the room again. “Josef?” He took a step toward Betty. “Josef?” he said again.

Betty said nothing, but began to examine everything in the room, pausing her gaze on each piece of furniture, one after the other.

“Where is he?” said Hal. “Is he gone?” He turned to Betty and demanded, “Where is Josef?”

Betty was startled and looked even more concerned. “I don’t know,” she said. “He’s, um, left, I guess. I don’t know.”

“Left?” said Hal. “But where? I didn’t see him go, did you?” Betty was mute. “Is he really gone? He’s really gone? He really is gone.”

“I think he is,” Betty said, softly. Then she called out, timidly, “Josef? Are you there? Are you here?”

“I knew he’d slip away,” said Hal. “Hah. He’s really gone?”

Betty shrugged. “Gone. I don’t see him anywhere. Do you see him?”

“Of course I don’t see him! Why would I be looking for him if I could see him!” Hal cupped his hands and shouted, “Josef! Josef!”

Betty joined in. “Josef! Josef!”

They both waited in silence, hoping for the sound of Josef, perhaps.

“He must have gone,” said Betty.

“He went.”

“Gone where?” said Betty. “I can’t imagine where he’d go. There’s nowhere to go.”

“Oh, he’s alright,” said Hal.

“You can’t run away from it,” said Betty. “There’s nowhere to run.”

“He’s not run away,” said Hal.

“Then where?”

“He’s gone. He’s killed himself. Damn! I was supposed to help him. I promised! Damn! What could I do?” Hal was close to tears, and his lip trembled. His eyes were becoming red.

Betty went to him and put her arm around his shoulders. They were shaking.

“We had a deal,” said Hal.

“There, there,” said Betty.

“He sneaked away, didn’t he? He sneaked away and committed suicide, like before.” Hal looked at Betty, and she saw the tears on his cheeks.

“Now, now,” she said.

“The bastard.”

“There, now.”

“Why didn’t he stay? Why did he have to do this now, when we were just coming to an understanding?”

“Come, come,” said Betty.

“I can’t bear it,” said Hal. Betty stroked his head. “I didn’t want it to end this way.”

“Here, here,” said Betty.

Hal pulled away and grabbed Betty’s shoulders. “What are you saying?” he yelled.

“Now, now,” said Betty, looking fearful.

“What in God’s name are you saying?” Hal shouted.

Betty took a step backward, her face contorted.

Desert Island

The little surf was rolling slowly along the sand, and the blue sky was bright with mid-day sunlight. Two deck chairs were set up facing the ocean, and Hal was sitting on one of them. The other was tilted over, partially sunk into the sand.

In the distance, an old man with a cane slowly made his way along the water line. The rest of the beach was deserted.

Hal raised himself up and fiddled with the beach chair, pulling it into a more upright position. He had a yellow writing tablet in his lap.

“I didn’t do anything,” Hal said, to no one in particular. “I tried my best. It was inevitable.”

He settled back into the chair, legs spread on either side of it. He glanced down and saw Josef’s book lying in the sand between the deck chairs.

“His type always comes to a mysterious end.” Hal watched the waves and the old man with the cane, slowly coming closer.

“I did enjoy his company, in a kind of a way, now and then. When he wasn’t too difficult.” He paused. “When it wasn’t too difficult—” He paused again. “I did try, but I didn’t do anything really wrong. It was wrong of him, though, to disappear like that.”

The old man was closer now, and over the gently roaring surf Hal could just make out an unsteady voice calling, “Josef!”

“I dreamed I saw Josef—floating. Levitating, like a damn Arabian magician, only no carpet.”

“Josef?” called the old man. “Are you out there?” His voice drifted on the surf like mist.

“He floated into my bedroom, can you believe it, and floated over the foot of my bed, and said— He said, ‘I remembered how.’” I laughed at him.

“What’s the point of levitating, really? I mean, what good is it? It doesn’t make you a better person, does it? It just strains the damn imagination. It puts your back up against the wall and says, ‘You think you know how it works? You think you know a single damn thing about anything at all? Then look at this! Take a good look at this, kiddo, because you don’t know nuttin’!’ And then they float up into the air like balloons, and you look up at ‘em like a jerk, and they just float away, smiling and laughing—”

The old man could be heard more clearly, now. “Josef! I want to talk to you!”

Hal crossed and uncrossed his legs. “But he told me how he did it. In the dream, I mean. That is, he tried to tell me. He explained it, sort of, and I thought I could follow it. He saw through the veil.” Hal laughed. “He met Sir Gawain! Goddamn looney! Jesus!”

The old man was waving his cane at the sea. “I want to tell you something!” he called. A trio of gulls flew past, low over the surf, just skimming the water.

“I can’t quite get it right,” said Hal. “I may have missed something. He explained it very patiently, but I got something crossed up, or left something out, or something. Something.” He rubbed his hands on his pants for a minute. “I don’t know. These things make me crazy. I just want to help people, you know? I can clarify things by asking the right question, help bring on a little catharsis—a little bullshit.”

“Josef?” said the old man.

[Hal to the reader: *That’s his father. Josef’s. Thinks he saw him in the sky. God, this has gone too far.*] “Old man! Hey, old man!”

The old man turned, seeing Hal for the first time. “Whaddya want?”

“Nothing,” said Hal. “Just thought you wanted to talk.”

“I do want to talk,” the old man said. “But not to you. I’m trying to find Josef.”

“Who isn’t?” said Hal. “What else is new?”

“What?” said the old man. “I can’t hear you, boy.”

“Never mind.”

“What?”

“Never! Mind!”

The old man turned back to the sea.

Hal picked up his writing tablet and looked at the ruled yellow pages. “I wonder where Betty went.”

He found his ballpoint in the sand by the deck chair, and started to write something. [Hal to the reader: *I was writing to pass the time, just a kind of informal dithyramb, wondering where it all leads. Then I thought, why not write to Josef, just to collect my thoughts. I thought, I could put my ideas down on paper, and give them a direction, a style, by making up a kind of imaginary letter to my old friend Josef.*]

Hal jumped up, angrily stamping away from the chair. “Damn! He just kicks back and bumps himself off like a thief in the night—and we all wait around for him, while he—his —father over there calls his name over the surf all day long. The conceit! The arrogance!”

Hal stomped back to the deck chair, writing tablet in hand, and sat back down. “One day, the same day.” He scribbled as he spoke.

“Dear Josef, I hope this letter finds you—it seems strange, writing after—Let me start over.

“I envied the— your dreams, your vision. I know you could see through your eyelids, that time, that it was real, part of my, my perceptions, you might say—I think I said that—but it felt unfamiliar, and you went on with such, shall we say, not finesse certainly, with, Betty said, uh, ‘finality.’

“Wait; I’ve mixed my prepositions here—” Hal erased and crossed things out.

“But it’s not the levitation,” Hal said, turning over another yellow page. “God knows, certainly any trick of the light—any parlor trick—you couldn’t get this much interest worked up, you would just go around it, not, uh, think, uh, try to ascertain permanent affiliations, God knows, some kind of damn mystic visions, God knows, wounds in the side, hanging, gazing down through sloe eyes, gazing, grazing, the goats, the—oh. Goats.

“But I digress. Josef is gone. Have you seen Betty? I apologize.

“I’m writing to you, aren’t I? It was never for me to talk to you, face to face, with such an unfamiliar familiarity. They play with words, too, those two, I mean you and—and—Betty.

“Wait, Josef—but I have seen things, Josef, I have traveled all these years, well, some years, and then—One day, I remember, there was light, gleaming over the grave as he said, gleaming, gazing, fields of waving fresh grass, sunlight, the sky, the twilight—I think by now nearly everyone knows what twilights can do.

“Was it then, after you left, I remembered you? I never forgave your damned questions, your preposterous posturings, yes, your business, even your crepitations, like damn ticking viruses in my blood, these temporal questions, these incessant insinuations of sequence historicity linearity diminuendo.”

Hal stopped writing and looked up at the sky. He frowned, read some of his writing, and looked up again.

“I saw Betty in the moon, coming down over a cornfield, with you. You danced, sang, passed the hat. We all—cheered.”

[Hal to the reader: *They bowed, we loved them, those light-hearted, intrepid performers, their giddy charm cheered us and warmed our hearts and gave a tiny direction to time. We all sang then, and raised our steins high, all in the high times; those were good times; remember the speeches? God, the speeches, swirling into the crevices of our brains, among the convolutions, the whorls, stirring the blood.*]

Hal continued reading as he wrote. “The blood. Yes, well, you could have made the first move, you know. I forgive you for that. I think I do. I do, yes, I do. ‘Forgiveness is the treacle of the—Forgiveness giveth unto the masses the vision of—’

“Let me start over. Envy and avarice and acrimony are all beneath me. I graze I mean gaze down at them with disdain. Hal is above such base emotions. I am supposed to be the one who explains. I love my children.”

[Hal to the reader: *Did the rest of this letter get through? Was there a breakdown among the letter carriers? The caryatids? The katydids? I look down, gaze down at them singing in the tall grasses, gazing down from my own lofty perch. I can afford to be magnanimous. We all have to carry our own victims.*]

Hal read aloud from his manuscript. “What do we do? We go on, right? We carry on, we flourish our tattered capes in the grey ocean wind. We leap about on the beaches like clowns drunk on the opium of history. We jump and fall, we hurl ourselves from high places, we crash headlong against the sea wall like the surf, we crush our own skulls between the boulders, under the weight of the buried and blackened synagogues and cathedrals, under the weight of earth, crushed underfoot by these spastic clowns, these screaming fools who light their way to dusky death.

“I digress.” Hal laughed a little. “Let me start again. I apologize. I repel when I would cajole. I detest wheedling. I rise above these issues, these partisans, these caucuses. I must go, on.”

Hal’s voice had become a little shrill, with a touch of tremolo. “Where are you, Josef? Have you seen Gawain? I know you have. Have you seen Betty?”

Hal stopped reading and writing. He continued to look down at his yellow pad for a long time. Then he looked up at the sky and said, “Sand.”

He sat in silence for a minute and then wrote, "Very truly yours, Hal."

He put the tablet back in the sand by the deck chair and folded his hands in his lap. The sound of the waves was endless and drifted into his ears and through his mind like waves of prairie grass or the rustling of crinoline. He looked back up at the sky, and it was still only early afternoon.

"I can't stop dreaming about you," he said.



The old man had shuffled closer, up to the beach towel that was almost completely buried. He dropped his cane and stood up straight and looked over at Hal sitting on the deck chair. Then he turned away and faced the ocean.

Hal didn't move. He seemed not to be breathing.

The old man took off his hat and dropped it in the sand. His long white hair drifted in the wind as he shrugged out of the big black overcoat. Then he reached up and pulled off his hair, a wig, and threw it down alongside the coat and hat. He reached into a pocket in his baggy jeans and withdrew a towel, and began to rub his face, removing layers of makeup and theatrical appliances.

When he turned and faced Hal, anyone could see it was Betty, no longer wearing her disguise. She took a few steps toward the deck chairs, stopped, and then turned back to the sea again. She felt the salt air on her skin, and was glad to be rid of the greasepaint.

[Betty to the reader: *It's a relief not to be anyone anymore. But you deserve some explanation.*]

Betty walked away from Hal and the chairs and the beach blanket. When they were just small in the distance, she said, "Don't laugh. This isn't funny." She was talking only to the reader now, without pretense of story or drama, or even context.

"Don't laugh. This is the way the world ends."

She waited while a flock of gulls swooped along the beach, crying raucously.

"Civilizations don't collapse," she continued. "They gracefully sag in a long, silent slide under the feet of their successors. You catch a glimpse of something, and you spend your whole life chasing it down. And sometimes it disappears—And sometimes it explodes in your face."

“And sometimes it just drags you slowly down, like Rome, like Minoa, like a Mycenaean artifact in the muds of Bodrum, until your heart breaks.

“But it can gleam in the dark distance, like a red glowing puff on a cigarette, like your mother’s sister waiting to tell you something you never knew, about yourself, about your family, about how everyone always talked, discreetly, about your family, about your mother and you her child, and you never knew, and it couldn’t have been your fault, and everyone else must have misunderstood.

“You know what I mean.

“Anyway, who cares?

“Kindness is the noblest of human virtues. All these comings and goings are nothing more than a distraction.

“Would anyone like some hot buttered toast?”

Betty stood patiently in the sand, waiting for the reader to reply.