

“The Coils of Eternity (part 2)”

II.

“WELL, here we are,” she said, pulling into the driveway, switch off, a profound silence broken by only a slight sougning of the wind through the pines and eucalyptus, and the waves beating against the shore in the distance.

“Wow!” he said as he got out and took it all in. Front light on. “Come on, this is some kind of put-on. It’s some friend’s place, they’re away in Vegas for the weekend. Or you’ve got this realtor friend and the house is up for sale and....there’s no way you’re gonna manage this Pacific Coast Versailles on a high school teacher’s, even assistant principal’s, salary....”

The enormous brass torchier over the massive front entrance of carefully cut granite, with a faint hint of a balcony up above in the darkness, the entire facade brick painted white with a touch of mintish green, but not new either, textured -- almost as if on purpose -- by age, so the patina was rough and irregular, dopped and chaffed, hexagonal windows up above in the shadows, and the house itself going back, back, back....a hint of a garden wall extending out from the house itself.... Richard feeling overwhelmed by the immensity of the place....

“You know,” she said laconically as she opened the door and they walked in to a domed foyer, a lyre-shaped double stairway in front of them in the middle of a kind of well, the walls of the “well” painted with immense scenes of what he took to be ancient Assyria, Akkad, Mohenjo Daro, Harappá, ziggeraunts and winged bulls with human heads, tawny bodies clothed in rich reds and golds, but the images somehow aged and fragile, like the murals at Pompeii, “when my parents died, I came into a little money....”

“I guess so,” he said.

It was the house his parents had always dreamed of, every Sunday afternoon while he was growing up in Chicago driving out to Kenilworth and Highland Park, Winnetka, lusting after houses and the power they represented, his M.D. father never quite making it, always obsessed with accumulating enough to buy everything with cash, not buying their first house until now, out in Sun City. Of course, after his heart attack/retirement. It had to be that way, didn’t it....?

“Who did the murals?”

“I did.”

“Come on!”

“I started out as a design student at the Rhode Island School of Design.”

“I thought you went to Radcliffe.”

“Afterwards....I always had all kinds of problems about career. I was the only child and my father really wanted to have a son with an M.B.A. from the Harvard Business School....I was always this kind of vagabundo....”

“A vagabunda,” he corrected her. “Sounds like my story.” Following her up the stairs past an immense winged sun-disk, winged lions, winged men with hawk-heads, watching the smooth, effortless flow of her legs in what should have been awkwardly high heels but which she wore as if they were tennis shoes. “I was supposed to feel the same kind of desperation my parents felt coming from an immigrant background, but I wasn’t from an immigrant background, my usual Saturday night date was a box seat at Orchestra Hall, Chicago symphony, my ‘hangout’ was Le Petite Gourmet on Michigan Avenue....”

“I used to spend summers in Paris,” she said, waiting at the top of the stairs for him, putting her arm around him now, luxuriating in the feel of the suede as he curved his hand around her hip, “I don’t know what I was supposed to pick up there, some sort of economic mystique....what I picked up was the Louvre itself, especially the ancient Middle East....my big compromise was to go into something as vaguely ‘functional’ as English. And I didn’t feel the need to impress anyone, something inside me always wanting me to just be ME, whatever it was, haecittas, ‘as kingfishers catch fire, dragon flies draw flame....what I do is me: for that I came.’ You know....”

Going down a long high umber-colored corridor now, candleabrum up high above them spaced so that there was just enough light to steer by, giving the place a kind of conscious catacombish feeling about it. Stopping, she was the aggressor, kissing him full on the mouth, holding him tight up against her breasts. Him responding in kind, enjoying the unexpected clove taste in her mouth, her soft hair falling loose now across his hands, unzipping her skirt and stepping out of it so that it was all nylon- and lace- encased sinew. He reacted anxiously to her smooth muscularity and balletic grace, reaching down to the lacey slit at the front of her pantyhose, barely covered by a stretch lace bikini. Her stopping him, starting to walk again, down to the room at the end of the corridor, opening the door....

What had he expected? Lace canopies and a huge white lace bed? Curtains and makeup tables filled with toiletries? But what it was was a large oval-shaped room whose walls weren’t walls at all but rounded glass panels enclosing a semicircular greenhouse, with low, subdued lights in it, and a bed with a soft,

fuzzy-shaggy black bedspread on it right in the middle of the green, exactly skin temperature so the temperature factor disappeared altogether and you were just There. Orchids, clematis, bamboo, papaya, all sorts of huge elephant-eared vines he'd never learned the names of...

Taking off her long silver earrings made up of scores of tiny shimmering silver squares, letting them fall on the black carpeted floor next to the bed. Lights out in the "forest" that surrounded them, closing the door and redundantly locking it, although there was obviously no one else, nothing else in the house to disturb them.

No hesitation now. Taking his clothes off, but she left everything on, lay down and waited for him to do whatever he was going to do, her blonde hair spread out in a nimbus around her head, her arms and breasts enclosed in black lace, her legs veiled in black nylon, totally confident, almost "cold," this was her territory, the waiting center of her life.

No music. Should there be music, he wondered as he took off his socks, then his silly boxer shorts and silly white T-shirt, obviously feeling uncomfortable for a moment, until she lowered the lights from a control panel at the side of the bed. And he came to her hard and ready and carefully pulled off her panties, reached down and began to gently massage her legs....no hurry now, no awkwardness, it was as if they had been doing this for a thousand years together....they were home, this was them, their territory, their instinct.

Mind off totally, shifted into a spidery, wolfish, owlsh automaticness, touching, tasting, her loving everything about him, and he the same with her, finishing once, easily, no "protection." She reached down and started to touch him all over again, oils on a little black cube next to the bed, patchouli, rubbing it all over him. Then she got up for a moment, a little music in the background, Debussy-Satie, but just low enough so that he could barely make it out, didn't even try to start identifying anything.

And he found himself able to start all over again. Eve's body hardly "body" at all, but some sort of lean, sinuous machine, all the tennis and swimming and bicycling she did turning every inch of her into pure curved energy, and, amazingly, her breasts were still full, the nipples wide and pink, obviously kept out of the sun, her skin as pale as paper, all the time wishing he were more "animal" like her, that he wasn't just books and footnotes but pools and running and gyms, so that he could match her grace.

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WHEN he woke up the next morning, after the deepest, most joyous sleep he'd ever had in his life, full of dreams of a childhood he'd never had, patient, supportive mothers and brisk, sunny beaches, sailboats and starfish, receding tides, rich blood-orange sunsets, she was gone.

Which terrified him for a moment, as if he were still the boy in his dreams, abandoned now as he emerged back into reality. The greenhouse panels were open to daylight on top but otherwise the room was windowless. He fumbled around in his pockets, found his watch.

Almost eleven.

First thought, his wife: "She'll have called the cops by now," but, no, she wouldn't. She'd be down at San Fernando State College cleaning out her desk, getting packed, the kids would be home alone watching TV or maybe old Mrs. Gorman, their next door neighbor, would be there baby-sitting for a dollar an hour -- which simply meant she'd be sitting there watching TV with them, pigging up on whatever she could find in the cupboards. And she usually managed to find all of Richard's favorite little things -- little Japanese crackers soaked in sukuyaki sauce, or Japanese dried snacking peas, English butterscotch drops....

Got up, found the bathroom, razor as if waiting for him, performed his morning rituals, pulled on his clothes, opened the door.

The corridor exactly the same as the night before. Just a little light at the end.

"Eve!"

Nothing.

Down the corridor, down the graceful curve of the stairs, everything bathed in sunlight now. It was almost like coming back into the same buoyant optimism of the dream from which he'd just emerged. His dream-mother ought to be waiting for him at the door dressed all in 1920s white. That was one of the odd features of his dreams, he always dreamed "historically," back to the fin de siècle, as if he were walking into Monet's beach-scenes or gardens, across Whistler's Waterloo Bridge, into a sunny Renoir beer-garden. In fact that's where he'd been in his dreams the night before, come to think of it....in/on Monet's "Beach at Calais." The painting that was in the Art Institute in Chicago. For a moment interfaced between Dream and Reality.

And then he smelled the coffee and toast and walked through the immense dining room to his left, a huge round table in the the very middle of the room under a cut glass chandelier, covered with a crocheted tablecloth like the ones his grandmother used to make, mirrored panels all along the walls, French doors that looked out on a curved, sloped garden that ended in bushy boxwoods. In through the door into the kitchen. And there she was in a plain brown caftan and brown leather thonged sandals, her hair all brushed out, abundant, loose and flowing. Actually frying eggs, butter-soaked whole wheat toast already piled up on a white kitchen table covered with a white and yellow striped tablecloth that unconsciously (?) picked up the whole color-scheme of egg-whites and egg-yolks

and butter.

“There’s bacon too, if you want it....”

“No, no, everything’s just....”

Coming over to her, her deftly turning off the burner and putting out her arms to receive him, folding into each other, neither of them ever having felt before that anything had been so “right,” “in order,” “together,” as if their whole lives had been tunnelling toward this gloriously emergent moment, their hands exploring each other’s bodies, grasping and holding, as if to reassure themselves that they were really there and not on the other, dream-side, of reality.

She started to cry, was instantly embarrassed, and then he started to cry too, not embarrassed at all, both of them laughing.

“What’s all this about?” she said, holding on to him, holding on to him, holding on to him, nestling her head down on his chest.

“Les belles choses n’ont qu’un printemps, semons de roses les pas du Temps.” he said, and started to translate, “Beautiful things only last a Springtime...”

“I understand, silly. In fact I think my French is better than my English.” Tears ended now, out of each other’s arms in a deftly choreographed flow. She slid the sunny-side-up eggs on to plates, putting the plates on plaited palm placemats, him somewhat reluctantly sitting down, cut off from her, deep inside him feeling that he needed to keep touching her to simply survive, like she was the Earth, the sole sanity and balance, and to be severed from it was madness and death. Silliness, silliness, silliness, but....

“Like my foreign students. I’ll get someone from Poland who has studied English from grade one, and they’ll say ‘I first saw him yesterday,’ and one of my native speakers will say ‘I first seen him....’ So I actually have been suggesting that we teach English as a Second Language. ‘I seen him,’ that’s practically standard English now....”

“But maybe that’s the way it’s evolving,” he said unseriously.

Her very serious in her return. “What it’s really evolving toward is Pygmalian. Proper Professor Iggins and endemically improper Liza Doolittle. A kind of linguistic class-war.”

He smiled. “You know what we sound like, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Two professors having breakfast!” he laughed, and she came over and sat on his

lap, kissed him open-mouthed, reaching under his shirt and digging her nails into his skin.

“Hey, that hurts!”

“The better to remember me by!” she said, and suddenly IT was there in their midst, the Fact that this whole reality, the sunlight and caftans and hair and sandals and smell of hazelnut-laced coffee and fresh toast and butter and eggs and the wind whipping the bushes around outside, was all as transient as the snapping of fingers, the blinking of eyes, and that that transience was simply an illustration of the even greater transience that surrounded their entire lives, that there was no holding it back, no matter what they did it was rushing inexorably toward its own imploding, internally self-destructing annihilation.

“I suppose I should make a call,” he said abruptly. He got up and dialed his home phone, certainly not expecting Maria del Carmen to be there. But she was.

“Hi.”

“Pero donde estas? Estas totalmente loco, te van a matar un dia, emborrachandose asi...[But where are you. You’re totally crazy, they’re going to kill you some day, getting drunk that way....]”

“I’m in San Francisco,” he said, “last minute impulse. I can’t just leave without saying goodbye to Morris and the gang...”

“Screw them!” she said, “There’s all the packing to do. If you don’t get back here by tonight, te juro, voy a llamar gente para ayudarme, y tu pagas la cuenta, te juro...[I swear, I’m going to call people to help me and you pay the bill, I swear....]”

“OK, OK. But ten years in California, what do you expect me to do, just twist my nose and vanish?”

“You’d better twist your nose and get back here. Ten cuidado conmigo o tu pagarás duro, no soy la esclava de nadie.[be careful with me or you’ll pay dearly, I’m not anyone’s slave.]”

“OK, OK....I’ll see you tonight.”

And she hung up obviously as hard and decisively as she could.

“A really exemplary marriage,” said Eve. And they both laughed, back in each other’s arms again. “What’s this about your drinking?”

“Her fantasy. I think she picked it up from my mother. I really think they’d love me to be a drunk or some kind of drug addict, it’d make everything so much

easier to explain, you wouldn't have to pull in any big concepts, keep it down on the rat-maze level....pure behaviorism....nothing existential....”

“For me, the more complicated, the better. Are you really hungry?”

“Not really.”

“Neither am I. What are we going to do?”

“I think we should....”

“OK,” she said, and took him by the hand. They walked through the dining room, up the stairs.

“All this space!” he said as they passed Akkadians and Sumerians and Babylonians, flying sun-disks and hawk-headed gods, “It's great!”

“My father got some kind of a ‘deal,’ he was always getting some kind of a ‘deal,’ some unpaid bill or something, and they paid him off with this house and he willed it to me and I came out here to sell it and fell in love with it and I've been here ever since. It's a little spooky at night, alone and everything, and I probably should hire some servants, but that seems so un-egalitarian, and you start bringing in ‘outsiders’ and the word gets out that you're all by yourself, you know what I mean. This way it's just another house in the mists....”

“Of time,” he added on as they walked into the central corridor upstairs, kind of the backbone of the whole house, arms around each other, anxious, hungry, unashamed of their hungers.

“Unfortunately,” she added, “I mean 'of time.' Usually I love to see it all pass. I goad it forward like heels into a horse's ribs, but this one time, if I could stop all the clocks and just keep it forever NOW....”

Into the second door from the right, all beige and pink. This was the room he'd expected the first time, as if he could necromantically peer into her soul and see what sorts of things her inner sprit would produce.

A big brass bed covered with a white ruffled comforter, pink satin sculpted drapes around the window, a big antiqued white makeup table over in the corner, an enormous wall-length closet, open accordion doors, the racks filled with rainbows of clothes, shelves on top replete with rows of shoes, a fluffy shaggy pink carpet under foot.

“It's like Bluebeard's castle!” he said.

They let themselves fall down on the bed together, like falling into a pool.

“Bartok. My favorite endless, cacaphonous-romantic opera.”

Which he laughed at.

“I thought I was the only one in the L.A. area who knew about such things....”

“Like Tchaikovsky’s forever unperformed operas,” she smiled, “or the rest of Humperdinck, apart from Hansel and Gretel. I’d like to impressario a Humperdinck festival. Schonberg Hall: Heirat wider Willen, The Konigskinder, Marketenderin...”

“I hate to admit it, but I’ve never heard of them.”

“Nobody has. You can hardly find the scores.”

“So there’s a music room somewhere along the corridor up here?”

“Downstairs.”

“The whole house in the form of a T, right? Another long corridor under the one upstairs, twenty rooms....”

“Twenty two.”

Richard thinking, all this and you still can’t hold back Time for a moment, for a moment filled with all his old dread of everything collectively running down, disintegrating, dissolving, feeling like he was dead, had been dead for a thousand years, already wiped out, erased, and everything he had ever been, felt and thought totally futile, no dent, nick, trace on anything, everything pointless and senseless. He reached forward, held her pulsating warmth against him, the light diffuse, foggy outside, contributing to the general misty sense of universal dissolution....

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SLOWLY taking their clothes off, kissing and touching as they went, little bites and licks and tousling of each other’s hair, as if they both needed to be reassured that they were still there and still happening, her mind filled with old stars and old houses, Mabel Norman and Norma Shearer, Theda Bara and Barry Fitzgerald, Gable, Grable, Garbo, Crawford, The Grand Hotel, Kitty Foyle, old crippled Dietrich fighting with her only daughter just before she died, as bitter as gall, Ava Gardiner living a stone’s throw away from Kensington Gardens just before she died, not really wanting to know who had lived in this house before her, what things had happened in these rooms, on purpose shutting out all that collective past, it was hard enough to deal with the constantly-dissolving Now, both of them naked now, a touch of cold in the room, snuggling under the comforter, her snuggling up to him under his protective arms/wings, hearing Hansel and Gretel

in her head now, Hansel and Gretel in the wood at night , the scene where the angels come out and protect them, “When at night I go to sleep, angels round my bed do keep...”

Keep, weep, sleep.

**2009 Wood Coin: Is Art in the Heart
or Does Art Lie Apart from the Love Issue:
Fox, “The Coils of Eternity (part 2)”**