

Hugh Fox

“The Coils of Eternity (part 5)”

V.

“HI, Eve. This is Richard. I’m in town, over at Stein’s place — you remember him, chemistry — in Ladera Heights. I’m on my way to one of those independent publishing conventions in San Francisco. Maurey talked me into a visit, and we went over to the university and I wheedled your number out of the secretary in the alumni office...

“I suppose there hasn’t been a day in the last thirty years that I haven’t thought about you, lots of days a lot of time....My address is still excruciatingly simple, the English Department, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York, one-three-three-four-six.... I love you. Take care....”

He hung up.

“I hope she’s all right, nasty flu going around,” said Stein, looking up from the evening paper which he read through as carefully as if he was going to have to take a test on it the following day.

Retired now from the university for five years, his whole universe had contracted down to newspapers and magazines and putting together albums of old pictures, scrapbooks of clippings, files of his old articles that had appeared in chemistry journals.

And just six months earlier they’d taken out a cancerous chunk of his lower bowel.

Seventy-four, eleven years older than Richard. Only Richard hadn’t noticed the difference at all three decades earlier when they palled around, when Richard was still teaching at Loyola, and they had gone off into the desert in search of ancient petroglyphs and arrowheads and spear-points (which they usually found on the edges of dried lakes, mute records of successive glacial/interglacial ages), or hiked around up at Great Bear Lake, or surfed, or played tennis on the university courts.

Now, though, seventy-four seemed like a hundred-and-four. It seemed like it was all over for Stein. Nothing to do. Just the big old house and lots of memories. Kids both up and down the coast, but very little contact with them.

“She’s probably just out,” Richard said to Stein after a moment, concealing the spike of fear that shot through his heart.

Stein’s wife Miriam came in from the lanai with a basket of flowers in one hand. She’d never been a beauty. A big pimply nose and too-beady eyes, bad skin, widow’s hump at fifty, but now in her mid-seventies looking matriarchal and grand, her skin clear, not particularly wrinkled, her face and carriage taking on a certain long-suffering regal grandeur.

“Cheer up the table a little. We could use a little cheering up around here,” she said, going under the sink in the kitchen and pulling out a big Meissenish flowered vase, filling it with water and sticking the speckled tiger lilies and regular lilies and big, overdone, over-lush poppies into it, clunking it down on the table.

“Looks great,” said Richard to Miriam, then back to Maurey.

“I don’t know why I still run for the Board of I.I.P....”

“Which means?” asked Miriam, adding a little fern and some sprigs of anise in with the flowers, filling the vase out, her movements all deft, easy expertise, in spite of the fact that she frequently complained of “the crippling effects” of arthritis.

“International Independent Publishers....which, ‘translated,’ means ‘small, non-commercial presses,’ not necessarily losers, though. Look at Papier-Maché press, over a million copies of When I Grow Old I Shall Wear Purple.”

Maurey smiling, looking down at his baggy pants and shirt, flat, loose old leather loafers “When I grow old I shall wear....what would you call these....rags?”

“Well, if you’d iron things. I would, I always did, but....” Miriam holding out the hands that had been arranging flowers with such virtuosity.

“Well, at least I can get dressed up tonight,” said Maurey, “I want to take you out to a new place in the Marina — Lord Jim’s. Very exotic, your kind of place.”

“I saw the movie,” said Richard.

“Movie?”

“Conrad. Lord Jim. It was like a trip down to Belém or Cartagena....”

“Whatever you say,” smiled Maurey, getting up, patting Richard on the back, “you know how I am, anything outside of Chemistry....and even that’s changing so fast that....,” going off down toward his room, as he disappeared through the doorway, out of earshot.

Miriam whispering. “He’s got this monster inferiority complex, mainly because of the kids. They always treat him like a dummy....”

“That’s what he was saying yesterday,” said Richard.

Miriam gave one last touch to the flowers. “Wear what you want tonight. He just likes to dress up. It makes him feel part of something again....I don’t know exactly what.”

“No, I’ll get in to the swing of things,” said Richard.

He started down the nearest corridor. The house was immense and full of corridors and bedrooms, workrooms, a rec room with a pool table and some old slot machines, a computer room, a pool in the middle atrium. They’d had five kids and back then it had seemed small to him, but now its immense emptiness was heavy and oppressive. There were never enough lights on and today it was cloudy and on the edge of rain. He felt rolled up in a heavy yarn of shadows, trapped in shadowy nets in endless tunnels inside a vast subterranean cave.

But then, as he opened the door into his guest bedroom, what had been Lisa’s room, very wide and plush, all ecru and satiny, a big grey dressing table topped by a huge makeup mirror, theatrically rimmed with bright white lights, it was like a lithe, blonde, ethereal “presence” slowly took form beside him and he wasn’t alone but, like they said in Bolivia, “bien acompañado/well accompanied.”

Still there, as he got out of his own blue baggy trousers and matching baggy shirt and put on his favorite white shirt filled with a discreet grey grid, like spaced-out graph paper.

Eve. But not the Eve of thirty years before. Eve thirty years after.

There but not there. His imagination slowly beginning to reconstruct her, cell by imaginary cell....

Eve would still be blonde. And “flawless,” whatever treatments and diets and creams and exercises it took. She was all inner-directed Will. Would be one of those older women you see now and then who look twenty from the back, forty from the front, but, in reality, are hitting their seventies. Mistinguette, Josephine Baker, Anaïs Nin....

What would she be now? Something like sixty-five, maybe a little more. A little older than himself, and he was sixty-three now, longing to retire, and he could, if he leaned on Lorna’s more-than-ample earnings as an M.D. But he was so fiscally conservative, “a genuine tightwad,” according to his second-oldest daughter from the second bunch (Pokey/Penelope, the graphics whiz in New York). Always figuring he’d better be able to get along OK on just his salary, you never knew what the future might bring.

Not that he and Lorna weren’t OK. They were. But all the dragonfly electricity of the first few years was spent now and the marriage had become mainly routine, comfortable but still routine, like your favorite old shoes and favorite old clothes....did he really want to think this one out to its conclusions? When the old shoes and clothes got old enough, what did you do with them, huh?

Inertia. Most of what he did was sheer inertia. You get on paths, trajectories, and it's easier to keep on them than to desviar....how would you translate desviar? Swerve? Swerve out of the way.

Going into his old black leather suitcase and pulling out his fanciest tie, a gift from his youngest son, Robbie. Structure, that's all he ever thought about, "I need some new socks, I need some new shorts....," shirts, sunglasses. That was Robbie's middle name — I-Need-Some-New. And his mother always indulged him.

Luckier with his daughters than his sons. Richard III down in New Orleans gone jambalaya Basin Street native (sauvage). Maybe they'd talk a little at Christmas or Easter, maybe not. Still bitter about the divorce. Maria del Carmen, The Great Poisoner. And the irony was that she was at Colgate now too and they'd pass each other on the campus maybe a couple of times a week, and he would have been glad to say hello — after all, they had all of the Bolivian past between them. He almost felt like an Indian/Proto-Mediterranean himself by now. And the drip she'd married in the Physics department with his heavy, thick German accent, what did she have in common with him, but what seemed a mutual contempt for Richard?!?!

Jealous, that's what they were. That's what he figured. Lorna with her one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand a year galled everyone. And for a pathologist she was underpaid. Maybe it was true, like she always said, if she'd been male instead of female....

After he'd first moved to Colgate, he'd written to Eve. Two letters that came back. MOVED. NO FORWARDING ADDRESS. And he'd had a little prostate problem, they'd done a fine-needle biopsy, nothing cellularly wrong, told him to drink a lot of cranberry juice, and, the old, white-haired country-doctor-type urologist (who reminded Richard of his father) had coughed a little, looked down at the floor and said "And I don't want to know anything about your sex life, but the prostate is a gland, after all, and if you don't use it, then...."

Richard somewhat devastated by the move to upper state New York, immediately missing the ease of Southern California. Growing to hate the drive he had to make every day from Oneida to Hamilton, now that the cold was coming on (late October). Groaning at the menace of the heavy snows that he knew were coming and would keep coming and through which he was going to have to drive — at least four days a week. Eight trips. Hating the way Maria del Carmen had (predictably) arranged it. Hating himself for (predictably) giving in just to avoid any elevation in the level of hostility that chronically existed between them.

And missing Eve.

He'd laugh at himself at how he missed her. Missed her ankles and the smooth lines of her legs, missed not only by the smooth intensity of the way she'd made love but by the holistic intensity of her encyclopedic interests, the munificence of her tastes, as if the palatial dimensions of her house were merely an extension of her capacious soul,

everything so “right” and “in place,” “grand”; but at the same time somehow “understated.”

She never really left him, as if some ghostly her followed him through his days and stretched out next to him at night, flowed like a subterranean river into his dreams.

But then Lorna’s needs slowly took over front stage center. Ghosts weren’t enough. Or maybe he wasn’t “developed” enough to merely live in Memory. And Lorna’s needs too were so urgent and desperate he sometimes felt like he was being railroaded onto tracks and routes that he wouldn’t really have taken if he’d stood back and really looked and thought about it. But he didn’t. For the first time in his life he turned plastic. And perhaps, he thought, his plasticity was the result of that last night and following day with Eve. She had activated needs in him that up to then he had never even been aware he had. And if she wasn’t there to fulfill them....

Lorna and he slowly became friends, then buddies, then a “couple.”

Nothing intended.

Only, why hadn’t Eve written him, ever? The music she’d played that last day, Lili Boulanger; he found himself in record stores special-ordering whatever he could find, listening to it and wondering how many lost geniuses like Lili Boulanger had been lost entirely, the whole concept of art and artists so fragile, everyone making art tending to slip back into the anonymity of a cave artist making an imprint of his hand on a cave wall....and then, like at Altamira, the cave is re-found, the air of the Twentieth century rushes in and a hundred-thousand years of creative impulses preserved begins to instantly fade.

Richard standing in front of the mirror in Lisa’s room, adjusting his tie.

Simple dark grey stripes with a hint of a red center-line on a lighter grey background. Grey tweed jacket. Grey cap. Some sort of ersatz English country look that, somehow, was/had become him.

His mother’s doing, probably, from the time he was born dressing him in English tweeds. As if, somehow, there were some sort of platonic noble English tweedy Form that was the prototype for all the noble English tweed-types in this (lower) world.

How would Eve’s voice be now? Old-lady throaty, deep alto? And her hands? He could just see the walls of bottles of lotions and creams she’d lotioned and creamed her hands up with over the years.

Giving a hard, mercilessly critical look at himself, the extra weight, the almost permanent look of anguish on his face, his dry, albeit scrupulously clean, hair, jowls and a touch of pot-belly. Not too wrinkled though. All that cabbage and vitamin C. And he always walked wherever he could, instead of driving.

Looking in the mirror and imagining her beside him, her blonde and his grey, her in all her svelteness, taking him in hand: “No more little extra cappucino-breaks and swirled brownies, chocolate-chip scones, pecan pies and maxi-size chocolate-chip oatmeal cookies....start thinking endive, cabbage and tomatoes, you’re going to have an awful lot of all three....”

Smiling a well-oiled Sir John Falstaff smile.

She had a tremendous urge toward Order. Old age/disintegration would have been Disorder for her; she would have done all things possible to push it back as long and as vigorously as she could.

Right now, for this occasion, she’d be wearing a light brown yoke-necked cotton blouson, loose and ample, and a matching skirt and brown sandals with just a touch of heel, discreet gold disk earrings.

And he’d turn to her and she would fold into his arms.

“I love you, I really do.”

“And I love you too.”

“We should have never split.”

Her hand up to his mouth.

“Shhh....”

Maurey outside the door. “Ready yet? Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Eve totally there for a moment, and then gone. Only not entirely. Still a hum, a “presence” in the air.

“I’ve got reservations. You know how it is. Everything’s so ‘crowded’ these days,” said Maurey as he came into the room.

Looked great. An almost white, wide-lapelled suit with a shirt full of red palm-trees and rainbow-colored cockatoos, his flat, wide, usually sad face beaming now, playing the one role he loved most — the host, giver instead of taker, master of ceremonies, especially when the ceremonies were of his own.

“You look great!” he said.

“You too.”

Richard hadn't noticed the Panama hat in Maurey's hand, holding it as he was, almost behind his back, only now, as they walked down the hall back toward the kitchen, he put it on.

"A gift from David," his oldest son, head of Pediatrics at Our Lady of the Angeles in Hollywood. "What do you think?"

"It's YOU!" lied Richard, thinking, it's you if you want to be a farsante/clown.

"At first I thought it looked a little silly, but Miriam likes it, so who am I to go against popular demand," laughing, laughing at himself, laughing at the world, laughing in celebration for the fact that, above all else, in spite of his loneliness and feeling of isolation and his paranoias and fears, he was still alive.

"I think it looks 'cute,'" Eve whispering into Richard's ear, "ridiculous, but cute."

Richard almost saying, "Eve says it looks cute," but it would have been too much for Maurey to handle.

Miriam in the kitchen waiting for them, very elegant in a dark, plum, nicely draped, yoke-necked dress and matching stole.

"It's drizzling again," she said, "but I hate to take raincoats and umbrellas. If this gets spotted it'll make an interesting pattern. You know, the 'cruder,' more primitive, the better...."

"It's great as long as the whole hill doesn't slide down into the valley," said Maurey.

They went out the kitchen door, downstairs into the garage, a work area in the back well-stocked with electric saws and planers and drillers, where Maurey made (more like "had made" than "made") little bird houses and fences for the backyard, decorative spindled triangles for around the eaves of the house.

Into their old black Cadillac. Another story associated with that. Maurey's son, David, had been leasing it and someone had run into him and they had three different insurance policies, and....

Richard in the back seat feeling anxious as Maurey beeped the garage door open and they slid out into the street and he could barely see L.A. spread out around and below them. It wasn't a drizzle but a downpour.

Eve like a ghostly muffler wrapped around Richard's neck, whispering in his ear, "Just relax, my sweet, everything will be fine, Maurey's a tiger behind the wheel....."

Smiling to himself, feeling almost schizophrenic. Maybe he could use a little Haldol....Claserel....the stronger the pill, the better the hallucination that called for it....

Lord Jim's, just what he'd expected. All kinds of tackles and barrells all over the place, rough barnwood/old ship-planking walls, fake palm trees growing out of every corner. He and Eve had used to go to a place called Pieces of Eight down close to where they were now. Same idea. Only thirty years earlier, in the middle of his pirate years, all the Caribbean trappings had seemed somehow "real."

Almost keeping a space for Eve at the table. Wanting to get up and call her again. Maybe she was back by now. Maybe he could jump ship. A.W.O.L. Disappear right now. Go out for a smoke and disappear forever into her arms. And he didn't care how old or how young either of them was. The flesh didn't count, what counted was the energies wrapped inside the flesh, immortal diamonds wrapped in their poor, fallible, oh, so mortal wrappings.

Miriam wiping her hair and face with a couple of napkins as they sat down.

"It never used to rain like this," she said.

Asking Richard, as she re-fluffed out her hair and added a little daub of deep plum lipstick to her lips, "How do I look?"

"Great!" he said, "great dress."

"I hate to even tell you how much I paid. Neiman Marcus. I 'hover' like a hawk at the ends of seasons, waiting for the prices to go down...."

Another story.

Maurey a little miffed, censoring. "It's all so overpriced to begin with! The markup is ridiculous. You're doing them a favor to take it off their hands...."

"Two hundred," she whispered, "down from," a long pause, dramatic effect, "two thousand."

"See....who cares....what did I tell you...."

Richard ordering a Guava Gulp, gin and guava "in a custom-made guava-shaped glass," the menu read, which Maurey assured him was a treat: "...I could drink 'm all night."

Miriam went up and got a stack of postcards with colored snapshots of the place all over the front.

"For the kids!" she explained. Although their youngest "kid" was thirty-two.

For the grandchildren.

Why not just say, "Because I want to! I love to send out postcards!?"

Maurey launched into a long lament about how everyone ignored him and how much he'd given everyone over the years, and how they still saw him more as a bank than a father (only he didn't charge interest/ maybe he should), and how long was he going to be around anyhow, for god's sake, the grandchildren needed a solid grandfather and grandmother to be around, what the hell was wrong with the world, in which family ties were all so monetary and stretched-thin, hardly visible, too bad he wasn't born back in prehistoric times when family was family and a man was a man....

Richard was hardly there at the table. His mind wandering back through the years, he and Eve in L.A., down in Venice, this coffee shop they always stopped in for cupcakes and coffee and then they'd go and walk along the oceanside and watch the skaters and walk down on the sand and watch the surfers, or lie in each other's arms like babes in the woods, babes on the sand....

That's when the real ties had been formed. The real love of ages, in those endless hours of innocence under the sun, caressed by the wind.