



Copyright © 2012

by Tad Crawford

All Rights Reserved

To see the celestial unicorn is to gain divine wisdom. Touching that shining horn heals every ailment. Diseases vanish, poisons are made powerless, and lost parts of the body grow back with vigor. Heroes, sages, adventurers of all sorts seek the unicorn. And yet they call the divine beast invisible, a creature of the mind, a myth. Let lesser men beware their choices, hesitate before challenges and journeys. The ocean depths, the caves within the earth, the dark fastnesses of endless forests, and the typhoons that rend the air bring death to all but the great. In foreign lands beyond the reckoning of our maps, I shall succeed where all others have failed.

From the log of Cheng Ho, admiral of the western seas,
voyage of the fifth armada

Copyright © 2012
by Tad Crawford
All Rights Reserved

2

Copyright © 2012

by Tad Crawford

All Rights Reserved

The one-eyed man's kindly dark-brown pupil was surrounded by creases in his skin that I imagined had been shaped by smiles and looks of concern. He could have illustrated an ad for the miracles of plastic surgery, because his lone eye looked out from the center of his forehead without any hint of scarring from an operation. A tall man, close to seven feet, he wore a towering white hat to mark his authority over the dozens of people sweating before ovens, boiling pots, and frying pans. Waiters balancing trays rushed in and out, and I savored the scent of the delicious cuisine and wondered how the Mafia could employ such an expert chef to run this extensive kitchen.

The chef shed his white apron and hat and gestured for me to follow him. Dark hair grew in furry clusters on his naked body,

and I realized that I too wore nothing. I must have forgotten to dress when I left the apartment that morning, but I had no recollection of waking, looking in drawers and closets for clothes, or even of my usual breakfast of milk and cereal. Fortunately, no one gave us a second look as I hurried after him in the busy excitement of the kitchen. He led me through a door, down a hallway decorated with scenes of gondolas and ancient buildings reflected in the water that would one day swallow Venice like a large fish preying on a smaller one, and at last opened a frosted glass door and brought me into a steam room with benches of worn marble.

Hot, billowing mist filled the room. I could see the bottom half of a man of more normal size dipping a wooden ladle in a bucket and pouring water that sizzled on the scalding rocks in a heater. A white splint covered his right forearm, and he poured with his left hand. The chef picked up a white towel, and I did the same. When he sat on the towel instead of wrapping it about his waist, I did that too.

“Comfortable?” asked my host.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I replied, feeling the heat draw sweat from every pore. The other man had stopped wetting the stones and vanished into the steam on the highest level of the marble seats. The chef and I remained on the lowest level. I could see his eye studying me through the clouds of steam.

“I hope you don’t mind the informal surroundings.”

“Not at all,” I assured him. I wanted to be agreeable and make a good impression, although I wasn’t certain why.

He rubbed one hand over his large jaw with its dark stubble of whiskers and the other over the glistening bald dome of his skull.

“You know why I like it here?”

“It’s a nice room,” I said, not wanting to show that I had no idea. “Very old, elegant . . .”

“Because it’s like the kitchen.”

“Yes.”

“Hot. I’ve come to like the heat. I’ve spent my entire career in what might as well be a furnace. Hot as hell,” he said with a grin. “But what you have to realize is that after a few years, you don’t feel it the same way. You acclimate. What once seemed scorching becomes comforting and familiar. The nice thing about the steam room is that it’s quiet.”

“Not as hectic as the kitchen,” I said.

“It’s a good place to consider things.”

“Yes?” I tried to be affirmative, but I could hear the question in my tone.

“Yes, all sorts of things.” He closed his eye and squeezed his forehead in his hand. “There’s so much to think about, and it’s not always clear. But you know this.”

“What are you thinking about now?” I asked.

“Of course, your dossier for one thing.”

“My dossier.” The odd-sounding word made me uneasy. It belonged to bureaucrats, apparatchiks who cared only for the great machine of the state.

“I reviewed it carefully. I appreciate,” he said with a nod of his head, “the thoroughness with which you filled out our questionnaire.”

I couldn’t remember filling out anything.

“You don’t have the dossier here?”

“No no. It’s kept with the files. The key point is that you want the job.”

“Of course,” I answered, concealing that I didn’t know what job he meant.

“To be second in command is no easy thing.”

“Ha!” This jeering interjection came from the man hidden in the steamy heights.

The chef waved an open palm to show that I should ignore the intrusion.

“Why is it,” he asked, “so difficult to be second?”

“Everybody wants to be the boss,” I said.

“Do you?”

What answer did he want? I couldn’t take long to respond, because he would see my uncertainty.

“At the right time.”

“Oh my!” This from the invisible man above us.

“And what time is this?” the chef asked encouragingly.

“Time for a change,” I said.

“Yes, certainly. You wouldn’t be here otherwise. And I am sorry to hear about your troubles.”

“Which troubles?” I asked.

“At work,” he nodded, “and at home too.”

“I’m hoping for the best.”

“Good, very good. And how long have you been interested in this position?”

“Since I first heard about it.”

“How did you hear about it?” he asked.

“I listen very carefully.”

Did I see the brow above that single eye wrinkle in the briefest frown? Had I jeopardized my chance of getting the job? I couldn’t be sure, but he continued.

“What did you feel when you imagined applying for the position? When you had the fantasy of actually being a member of our staff?”

“It was a thrill I can’t quite describe. And, to be truthful, I was a bit afraid, because the position is challenging. I know I can do it, but something new and important like this frightened me.”

“How many years were you at the CIA?”

I hadn’t the faintest idea, but I had to answer.

“The limit.”

“That’s good. What did you like best about the training?”

“I can’t imagine a more thorough training. Everything was covered, and I mean everything,” I repeated, stressing the word.

“In particular, what in your training prepared you to be a sous-chef?”

Then I realized that “CIA” referred to the Culinary Institute of America. I had visited the school once, many years ago. I hoped I could use the little information I recalled to my advantage.

“I know innumerable recipes by heart. Of course, I’m able to oversee efficient meal preparation and presentations for large parties.”

“Are you sure? Even if the executive chef is occupied by his other duties?”

“Yes, on my own.” An irresistible thought occurred to me, and I added, “In fact, the executive chef on board the ship suffered from seasickness. I often had to take full charge of the galley. And on those tour ships, we served more than five hundred people in a sitting.”

“What ship?” He looked alarmed. “You didn’t mention any ship in the questionnaire.”

Would one lie cost me the position? I had never worked on a ship, but the specificity of the seasickness made me feel compelled to speak.

“Where did the questionnaire ask about ships? I don’t remember that part.”

“You had to fill in your work history. Of course, it didn’t say anything about ships in particular.”

“That’s it, then.”

“That’s what?”

“My mind is very literal. If you say ‘to purchase and guide the preparation of meals for a thousand people,’ that’s what I do. I don’t worry about the bigger picture. For example, I wouldn’t be thinking whether the dining room belonged to a world-class restaurant, a cruise ship, a college cafeteria, or a soup kitchen for the poor. I would only be thinking about ingredients. How will I get them? What will they cost? When can they be delivered? Is my staff on hand sufficient for the task? Can we meet our deadline? On and on like that. That’s why I work well as the second in command. You, as the executive chef, might have a far larger view of the whole process, but at least I can be counted on to get my work done.”

“You seem to have a fascination with ships.” The chef frowned and a sullen pout inflated his lips.

“I do like ships,” I said, not seeing how this could do any harm.

“He likes ships!” The voice from above returned, loudly and derisively.

“We don’t like water here,” the chef said fiercely, his eyelid blinking in a nervous shudder.

“But what about the steam?” I asked, with a dreadful sense of everything having taken an unexpected turn for the worse.

“Making water into steam demonstrates the power of heat,” said the chef. “Boiling water is no problem. We have certain objections to ice, but at the bottom of it all the frozen wasteland has much in common with the burning desert. So we serve our sodas and alcoholic drinks in tumblers brimming with ice cubes.”

“What if a customer asks for a glass of water?”

“For reasons of commerce,” the chef replied with disdain, “we serve the glass of water. However, the heart of the kitchen is fire. Fire allows us to prepare our alligator in sauce piquante, our roasted hazelnut-marinated ostrich in shitake mushrooms, and our tuna with turnips in saffron sauce. Fire is the great transformer, the engine of change. When you ask to work in my kitchen, you enter the cauldron. When the fire has done its work, only the essence remains.”

For the first time, doubt entered my mind. Did I really want this job? The chef’s beliefs struck me as . . . unusual, even extreme. I wasn’t certain what he meant or where this might lead. I tried to remember my current job, the office where I went every day. Nothing came to mind, but surely I worked. Whatever my job, it might be better than this. However, the chef’s manner changed.

“It’s always good to have a frank exchange of views,” he said with an avuncular smile.

“Yes, of course.”

“And he did us a good turn,” said the voice of the hidden man in the top tier.

“Yes, you’ve already helped us out,” the chef agreed. “We have a long memory when it comes to people who help us . . .”

“And also people who get in our way,” added the voice from above.

“What makes you want to leave your present position?” the chef asked.

“After going a long way in a certain direction,” I answered, “I want to explore more of the compass.”

“But you’re an account executive. Not an unimportant position. And to switch from a marketing agency to cuisine, even with your credentials from the CIA . . . You have to admit it’s unusual.”

He made me aware of some important facts. I could barely imagine myself as an account executive at a marketing agency, but I must have said this on the questionnaire.

“I’m not excited in the way I was when I started. To be part of a well-run kitchen, that would be different. It’s the smoke and mirrors that I can’t stand. How can bolstering this product or that ever make a difference?”

“He wants to make a difference!” The voice above us repeated my words with contempt. “Soon he’ll want to make the world a better place.”

“Working from recipes, even inventing some of my own,” I went on without letting the unseen speaker disturb me, “overseeing the cooking and serving of artfully arranged dishes, contributing to nourishment and pleasure—that’s what I want to do.”

“Yes, I could be convinced that you’re the one,” the chef said with a shine in his eye. “But, tell me, do you have any questions for me? About what we do here? Or the benefits of the position?”

“I am curious about the benefits, and the salary of course.”

The chef gave a careful list of the benefits, which included vacation, sick days, personal days, holidays, unforeseen weather days, unspecified emergency days, and a lot of other things to which I paid less attention. These included details of plans for health insurance, workers’ compensation, disability insurance, and unemployment insurance. Perhaps they could protect me against every risk, but would any of these plans improve my life today, this instant?

The chef caught the drift of my unspoken thoughts.

“The life insurance, of course, would go to your wife. Enough to give her peace of mind and security during a difficult time of grief and transition. Unless, of course, you’d rather designate a different beneficiary. I know from your answers to some of the more . . . private parts of the questionnaire that your married life isn’t all you might hope.”

“I don’t see what bearing that has on whether I’m offered the job.”

“Enough of that,” the chef said with a heartiness that I found contrived. “Any more questions about the position?”

“I would be the only sous-chef?”

“You mean the only second in command?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely. Our kitchen doesn’t require more, though you’ll have to use delicacy with the pastry chef. In the offi-

cial hierarchy, you would rank above him. But we don't want him feeling out of sorts while he works on his confections. You might think of him as the ruler of his own domain, although his pleasures are ultimately encompassed within our menu."

"Yes, I see what you mean."

"He sees." The derisive voice broke in. "He's eager for the role of second in command. Not a thought for the difficulties, for always being under somebody's thumb."

I had been in the steam room too long. The heat had siphoned away my strength. I felt light-headed. If I didn't leave soon, I might collapse. The chef peered into the steam, and I heard stirring on the uppermost marble bench. The man descended from the gray mists, naked as the chef and myself, a white towel in his left hand. Now that I could see all of him, I measured him to be about my height and weight. In fact, he had my general body type—muscular across the chest and shoulders but flabby around the middle. Nothing that a well-tailored suit couldn't conceal. He shaved his head. His face, indeed all his skin, had a paleness that might have been called angelic if not for a perpetual sneer that made him look quite nasty.

"What happened?" I asked, gesturing toward the splint.

"I had a fall. What's it to you?"

I decided to ignore his tone. "I hope it heals quickly."

"Do you mind keeping your sentiments to yourself?" he asked. "Just because my arm got broken doesn't mean I've lost my pride."

I noticed that the chef fell silent. The Mafia ran this resort, not just the restaurant, but the casino and hotel too. Even in

my heat-induced daze, I suspected the man before me to be a capo, perhaps the boss of the whole complex. He looked to be between thirty-five and forty, my equal in age if little else. I didn't reply to him. The heat had sapped me, and I had no idea what I might say that would please him.

"So," the man continued, looking me up and down, "you're the one who scammed the power company?"

I nodded my head. Hard as it may be to believe, I'd forgotten that I had gone undercover to help the authorities. I couldn't remember which authorities, but they had connections to the power company and had helped me to lower the electric bills for the entire resort. This ploy had led directly to my interview. If I could get the position as sous-chef, there would no end to the useful information I could gather and pass on to the authorities. Why I would want to do this I couldn't say, after such a long sweat in the steam room. What benefit I would gain also eluded me. At least I would be taking the side of established order, the rule of reason and morality, against men such as the one who stood before me.

"I could make you a lot of money," he said. "I have plenty of friends, big men in business. If I say the word, they'd jump to be your clients. They'll pay me a third of what they save in power bills. I'll pass a quarter of that on to you. You could be a very rich man."

He frightened me, a visceral chill that made me shiver in spite of the heat. He cared nothing for the law, only for himself and his will to have power and pleasure. To him I might as well be an insect, something to let live if useful and crush under-foot if not. If I didn't want to help, he might kill me without a

second thought. If I did help him, I knew I would move in a downward spiral through scheme after scheme of his devising.

He reached out his hands to rest on my shoulders. As he drew closer, I could see the points of golden fire in his green-gray irises. He ran his hands up my slippery skin and began to rub the tops and then the bottoms of my ears between his thumbs and forefingers.

“He’s afraid,” the man called to the chef.

The words relieved me. Not what they meant, but simply to have sound in the room. I couldn’t remember hearing with such clarity and intensity, but the heat had obviously altered my senses. He caressed my lobes a few moments longer. His gentle touch made the shells of my ears tingle with a pleasure that reached into the canals.

Stepping back, the man shook his head. I knew then that I wouldn’t be offered the position as sous-chef. But to me his gesture meant more than that, as if he’d made some comment on my life and who I had become. Feeling his rejection, I lost my fear of him. Suddenly I wanted to enter his world and feel again that pleasurable touch on my ears. For a moment I believed that the authorities, with their familiar demands, offered nothing compared to his criminal schemes.

“Did you really think you could fool us?” he asked.

My usual glibness vanished. “I . . . I . . .”

“We have informants. We know more than you could ever imagine. And we have our ways of handling matters.”

“I just want to change careers,” I finally managed to say, uncertain how this naked man might harm me but convinced that I faced the gravest peril.

“I’m sure you want that. You probably want to fix your little marriage too, almost as much as you want to break it up. But I’m talking about what you did to me.” He tapped an index finger to his chest. “We murder for less than that. So what do you say? The big companies pay a third of what they save, and I pay you a quarter of that. Have we got a deal?”

I had been so compliant—eager to help the authorities, hopeful to be given the position of sous-chef. But I had had enough of taking sides. Suddenly I just wanted to be left alone.

“No,” I answered.

His expression didn’t change. He picked up a towel and wrapped it around his waist with a gravitas worthy of a Roman senator being draped in his toga.

“Get out,” he said, then turned abruptly and exited through the frosted glass door.

The chef and I looked at one another. He had shrunk and looked more like a normal man of six feet or a little under. He rose and wrapped himself in his towel.

“What a shame,” the chef said. “I was ready to ask for your references and have you fill in a W-9. We could have run a quick background check and made you the offer. You’d have been one of us.”

I took my towel and tucked one end over the other to hold it around my soft middle.

“Thanks,” I said, “for everything.”

“He took it badly when you said you liked ships.”

“Hasn’t he ever gone on a cruise?” I asked, trying to remember where I left my clothes. I wanted to leave as soon as

I could, but I'd need my clothes. I tried to recall what I'd put on that morning, but I couldn't.

"I don't hate ships all that much, but I had to put on a good show for him." The chef said this and stood to face me just as the man had. If anything, I looked down slightly into that dark and contemplative eye of his. He blinked and kept on looking at me. At last he seemed to have made up his mind. "If you don't find it intrusive, I'd like to make a suggestion."

"You said I would be second in command, but you're not in command yourself. He's in command." I pointed an accusing finger toward the door where the man had exited.

"He commands the complex, but I command the kitchen. Anyway, may I make a suggestion?"

"Sure, and then tell me where my clothes are." I realized the room had cooled despite the mists that still hung in the air.

"You must never reveal me as the source of this information. It would be," he paused, his eye fixed on me, "indelicate for me, prejudicial. Will you promise?"

"I promise." After all, whom could I tell?

"There is a shop that sells model ships. It's run by a man whom it would be worthwhile for you to meet."

"Worthwhile in what way?"

The chef smiled. "I can't say. It's just a feeling I have. Maybe you'll even get a ship for yourself. If anyone asks how you found the shop, just say you discovered it on the Internet. Don't mention me. Will you do that?"

"Maybe."

"Do it as an adventure, for fun. What do you say?"

“Okay, I’ll go.”

“Let me tell you where to find it.” He came forward and whispered in my ear. Although my body had cooled and I felt better, the heat had affected my senses. The air from his lips touched my ear, but instead of words I heard modulations of a high-pitched tone. I don’t know how to describe it better, but it possessed a beauty that I opened to and let enter me. As the tone vibrated in my ear, my spine began to vibrate in sympathy until an intense pleasure flowed up into the chamber of my skull. When the chef stepped back, I heard the skin of his feet brushing on the tiles of the damp floor.

“But where is it?” I asked.

He studied me.

“Are you always so literal?” he finally asked.

“I didn’t hear—that’s all.”

“I’m going to ask you a riddle.”

“I don’t like riddles.”

“In any case, I don’t want you to give me an answer. If you want the key to a riddle, just think of a recipe with a missing ingredient. That’s the mystery of it. If you think you know the answer, don’t be so certain. If you’re in doubt, try to taste the answer. I’m sure that makes no sense, right?”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Good. In the end, every riddle works in a similar way. It supplies what is missing. It discovers a new part and makes a whole.”

“I’m not really up to it.”

“As I said, I don’t want you to give me an answer. It’s merely something to think about.”

“Then shoot away,” I conceded, since he seemed determined to tell me.

“What number is even and odd—”

“That’s ridiculous.” I cut him off. “There is no such number.”

“I’m not done yet.” He looked offended. “What number is even and odd, and zero as well? If you can answer this riddle, be careful at crossroads.”

“Are you kidding? I live in a city. Every intersection is a crossroads. Anyway, I’m already careful. I watch the lights. I wait my turn. I let cars go first.”

“By the way,” he went on, “you said on the questionnaire that you have a great sense of humor. I wouldn’t quarrel with most of your answers, but I’m dubious about that one. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I haven’t seen any evidence of it.”

“I’m not getting the job, so it can’t make much difference.”

“I’m going to have to start all over again with the interviewing process. It’s an annoyance, a distraction from proper management of the kitchen. A bit of humor might smooth things over. It’s so unpredictable. It might take us in any direction.”

“Once,” I said, “I knew a woman who looked at leaves and saw the faces of people.”

“Is that funny?”

“Maybe she was crazy,” I said.

“Did it amuse you at the time?”

“At the time I thought she could see the invisible. She seemed to see so much more than I did. I admired her for that. Now I think she might have been lonely, imagining people

who never existed. But she saw the face of the sun and animals. No matter how long I looked, I only saw leaves, sunlit on one side, darker green on the other, clustered close like shingles on a roof, or sometimes alone and silhouetted against the blue sky and the sun-pierced white of drifting clouds.”

The chef pursed his lips. “For myself, I’m sorry you didn’t get the job. I would have liked to have you around. Maybe we could have been friends.”

I felt an obscure sadness at his words, but I didn’t know why or how to respond.

“Can you get my clothes now?”

“Follow me,” he said as we stepped back into the hallway.

We entered a room next to the steam room, full of tall gray lockers. I didn’t remember having been in there, but the chef opened a locker and I could see familiar clothes. I rubbed the towel back and forth on my head to dry my hair, then quickly ran it over the rest of my body. Khaki pants, a long-sleeved blue shirt with a button-down collar, beige canvas sneakers that I treasured because I had worn ones like them as a kid—quickly I slipped into my clothes.

The chef opened another locker and dressed himself completely in white: white underclothes, white pants and shirt, a long white apron, and another towering white hat. Only his boots, which looked like army issue, were black. He found a pen and wrote studiously on a small card.

“This is the address.”

He meant for the shop with the model ships.

“But what is the name of the man you want me to meet? How do you know him?” I asked these questions as we walked

back along the corridor decorated with the wallpaper of Venetian scenes. I wondered how the chef and his boss could tolerate these watery vistas of lagoons and canals.

“His name has changed since I knew him, and it doesn’t matter anyway. He knew my father. Once, a long time ago, he and my father did something very brave—or perhaps very foolish—together. If he takes a liking to you, you’ll probably hear the story.”

We passed through the dining room, quiet now in the afternoon, the round tables draped with peach-colored tablecloths and the silver and crystal set in readiness for the rush of the evening meal.

Outside the front door, beneath the downward gaze of the gargoyles guarding the golden doorway, he extended his hand to me.

I gave him a firm grip, wondering what the frame would look like if he ever needed an eyeglass for his single eye. Perhaps he could wear a monocle, like a miner’s light piercing ahead into the darkness.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Let me know what happens,” he said, as I turned away to go down the flight of wide steps leading to the boulevard.

When I heard him say that, I had a moment of outrage. After all, I had come here for a job, not empathy. I had an urge to turn both him and his boss in to the authorities. I could imagine what kind of corruption had made this organization rich enough to buy the restaurant, hotel, and casino, and how they skimmed cash off the top and ran illegal scams to line their pockets even

further. No doubt they owned other resorts in other cities, even in other countries. Their influence spread like cancer, outlaw cells that cared for nothing but their own triumph.

But which authorities would I turn them in to, and for what? With my foot in midair above the next step, I felt a frisson, like the painful pleasure of a little shock, palpate my heart. Suddenly I wanted the chef to know what would become of me. I turned to wave, but he had already vanished into the interior of the complex.

Copyright © 2012
by Tad Crawford
All Rights Reserved

Copyright © 2012
by Tad Crawford
All Rights Reserved



Copyright © 2012

“*I* wrote him a letter,” the strange woman said to me. She looked in her late thirties, about my age, slender and smallish. When she spoke, she emphasized every word and her gray eyes took on a steely gleam behind her horn-rimmed glasses. “I told him exactly what I thought of him. No edits. No prisoners. Nothing left out.”

I had no idea who she was or who she was talking about. In the large room around us a storm of people moved turbulently back and forth, a lot of them dressed up in tuxes and glittering gowns. They carried presents, and I had the feeling I must be at a birthday party. But for whom?

“I left the letter on the dining room table. He won’t know what hit him. It’ll be like going from grade school to college.

No high school in between. Or trying to speak English when you don't know a word of it. You get it?"

I nodded, wondering why she had focused on me.

"Because a marriage isn't like a date. It's not like ten years of dating. You know that, right?"

Why did she keep probing me and making me lift my head up and down in agreement? If she continued, my neck muscles would tire and my head would droop to my chest.

"In the end, I told him, everything is about expectations. What we wanted at one time. What we hoped for but didn't happen. What we hope for now. That's the truth, isn't it?"

My head nodded. I gave a sidelong glance to watch the elegantly dressed people piling gifts on a long table covered with a scarlet tablecloth. The packages had been beautifully wrapped with expensive papers and multicolored ribbons tied in elaborate knots. I wanted to ask her whose celebration this was, but she rushed ahead.

"You know why I wrote to him? Because I can't fully express myself if I speak. Or I should say he doesn't listen to me, not to the most important things. He has no ear for nuance. But he can come back to the letter as many times as he needs to. If he wants to, that is."

I didn't remember having said a word in this conversation. She could certainly speak, but she wanted to be better understood. I had the sudden fear that I might fail her in the same way he had.

"I said to him that once I dreamed of what could happen between us. How I wanted to unfold from within myself and wanted him to do the same. Only that didn't happen. I could

blame myself or blame him. You think it makes any difference who's wrong?"

"In a relationship—" I started, eager to hear my own voice.

"A letter is more permanent," she interrupted, repeating herself. "A letter can be read again and again. He can think about the subtleties of what I wrote, of our life together. I told him how I had cared for him. How I had loved him. That what I wanted when we met I still want today." She placed a hand on my forearm and held it tightly. Her eyes looked intently into mine. "I want a lover. I want someone to confide in, someone to explore with, a father for my children, a life mate whose passion ignites mine as we go forward together. Do you think I'll ever have any of that with him?"

"I don't—"

"I won't," she answered herself with a twisting of her lips. "You know what I say? Remember to remember. I don't want to forget that he and I had good times together, especially at the start. I don't want to feel sad. I don't want to think of our time together as the unhappy decade, the wasted years. Much better to say that we drifted apart."

"That happens," I managed to say.

"No," she said.

"No?"

"You'd like it if I said he and I were equally guilty, equally innocent. But that's not how I feel."

She'd trapped me. I had to admire the way she had maneuvered me so I appeared to take his side against her.

"We married in our late twenties. As the years passed, I felt myself changing. I looked inside myself. Who was I? What parts of me might develop? How would I grow? But he remained the

man I married. Exactly, unchangingly the same. People don't grow apart if one of them isn't growing. Then, sometime in the last year, I began to have the peculiar feeling that I had married someone much younger than myself. That I had reached the age of thirty-seven and would continue to grow older, but my husband would always be twentysomething. No matter how many years or decades would pass. If his face wrinkled and his hair turned white, he'd still be a youth. Happy with repetition—a dinner out at a nice restaurant now and again, an occasional show, the opera once a year, sex on Sunday mornings, and then the sports channel in the afternoon.”

I could enjoy those same pleasures. I didn't want her to think me shallow, so I kept it to myself.

“I can't wait anymore,” she said in a voice both fierce and plaintive.

“You shouldn't,” I encouraged her.

She studied me as if I were a specimen exhibiting behavior impossible for its species. Resolving her momentary doubt, whatever it was, she forged ahead.

“It's not just the biological clock, although it's constantly running. Lessening the odds. I never thought he'd make me wait so long for children. His doubts, his career, his financial fears, and on and on with his reasons. Finally we tried. What do you think? Do children come from biology or love? You tell me.”

“Well—”

“So we tried and tried. We try and try. Sex on a schedule, every position designed for procreation.”

“No more Sunday mornings,” I said sadly, wondering if they had a big-screen TV for the sports.

“Anyway, he didn’t strike me as ready to father, to be a father. He kept the focus on himself, his little needs, his little life. I offered him something bigger, but he had to be the sole attraction. Can you get me a refill?”

She held up her thin-stemmed glass. I took it and started into the mass of celebrants. These people looked like athletes, young and strong. Joyful. I saw a woman in a pink satin gown hurrying toward me through the crowd.

“We didn’t expect you.”

I recollected an invitation I had politely declined.

“A change of plans. I hope . . .”

“It’s no problem at all.” She lifted herself up to kiss me on both cheeks. Her skin was smooth. She had a hint of fragrance that made me feel as if a soft breeze had come through groves of fruit trees. Plucking the glass from my hand, she waved it in the air. A waiter appeared with a tray of champagne. I took two glasses, wondering if I should go back to the strange woman or try to escape. If I furtively went to the far side of the room, she might seek me out and make a scene. That I couldn’t bear.

“Thanks,” I said, wanting to ask whose party this was. But I felt I should know, and I certainly didn’t want to reveal my ignorance.

“I see who you’re talking to,” the woman in pink said, bringing her lips almost close enough to my ear to whisper. “Keep up the good work.”

With that she turned and moved quickly back into the scrum of guests. I looked at the champagne bubbling in the hollow flutes of the glasses. Carefully I made my way toward the strange woman who, I now noticed, looked plain in her

white blouse and gray skirt. She also looked older than almost everyone else in the room.

“You came back,” she said, not sounding especially pleased. I realized that she might not have been expecting my return. In any case, she took a glass from my hand and half emptied it.

“What was I saying?”

This annoyed me. I didn’t want to listen to her, but if I did listen to her, she could at least keep track of her own story.

“About sex on a schedule,” I said, thinking I always listen for too long. I don’t know the polite formulas, the deft excuses people use to slip away.

“Is that all you ever think about?” she demanded. “Sex? Surely I talked about other things as well.”

Her accusation stung me. She gulped more champagne, and I wondered how many glasses had preceded this one.

“Schedules, biological clocks—what do you care?” she asked.

How had this conversation begun? Why had I listened to her at all? For that matter, why had the woman in pink encouraged me to continue it?

“Should I care?” I asked.

She regarded me uncertainly. Then, without answering, she continued.

“It’s not just the biological clock. There’s an inner clock too. I need a companion who can go beyond where he and I went. Someone who welcomes exploration, who values the new, the possible. Are you like that?”

“What do you think?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“I’d have to give it some thought.”

She shook her head.

“That’s what he said about the dance lessons. I bought him a gift coupon for a series. Five dances in ten lessons—fox-trot, waltz, salsa, rumba, and tango. I really looked forward to going. It was the first time in years I’d been excited about doing something with him. When I asked him to free up one night a week, he said he’d give it some thought. I asked a few times, but then I didn’t ask anymore. Maybe you think it’s nothing. Maybe he has two left feet, doesn’t like to move, or hates lessons. But for me it was the end. I offered him a little bit of joy, a little bit of fun. He couldn’t even say yes. That’s when I started writing the letter.”

She sounded sad.

“It might be the beginning,” I stumbled. “Once he understands, he might take action, change. You never know.”

She shook her head.

“Not him. It’s better this way. Do you dance?” she asked, looking me up and down.

On a small stage near the table heaped high with presents, a jazz quartet had begun to play.

“No, not really.”

She sighed. The story about the dance classes had taken something out of her. I liked her better this way.

“I don’t need pity,” she said sharply, in response to my expression.

“No, of course not.”

“Certainly not from you.”

I decided not to reply.

“What did you get him?” she asked after brooding for a few moments.

“It’s over there,” I lied, nodding my head in the direction of the laden table.

“But what is it? I mean, he has everything. It took me forever to figure out what to buy.”

“It’s totally useless,” I answered.

“And it is . . .” She smiled to show me how she labored to pull an answer out of me.

“It’s nothing, insignificant to someone like him,” I said, and switched the focus to her. “What did you get him?”

“A life insurance policy. I paid the first premium.”

My face must have shown disbelief and a bit of horror.

“Come on,” she said, “it’s his birthday, so he’s a year older. I made a joke. Talk about something really useless—extra money to spend after you’re dead. He’ll think it’s hilarious.”

“He could throw a lavish wake,” I said, getting into the spirit of her joke, “and invite all the people he’ll never see again. But you must know him better than I do.”

“I knew him from before,” she said significantly.

We fell silent again. The noise of the party had risen, and I felt that our silence must be especially noticeable.

“You’re not drinking your champagne,” she observed at last.

This made me nervous, and I lifted the champagne glass to my lips.

“What do you think of first impressions?” she asked at last.

“It can take time to get comfortable and act like yourself. Sometimes you have to go slowly.”

“But if you’re looking for the right person, you can’t wait too long. In my marriage, I waited way too long.”

“That’s a lot different from a first impression.”

“If you’re going to make a mistake,” she said, looking at me with that intense gaze, “it’s better to make it sooner. Then you move on, meet someone else. You have a lot more chances.”

“It can be sad,” I replied, “to be always moving from one person to another. Never giving anyone a real try.”

“You know why I came over to talk with you?”

I shook my head.

“Your ears. I liked your ears. And it’s been . . . interesting to talk with you. But I don’t feel that you and I have the right chemistry. Maybe you’d be a nice friend, but I have a lot of friends. I’m going to say good night and do some more circulating.”

She offered me her hand, but I didn’t take it.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said. “You hurt me.”

She looked straight at me then dropped her hand.

“I don’t play that game anymore,” she replied, turning away. After a few steps she tossed back over her shoulder, “Enjoy the party.”

I can’t explain what happened next. I don’t believe I drank a lot of champagne, though maybe I did. Perhaps what she said hurt me more than I realized. I woke up in a bathroom stall with my hands on the oval rim of a toilet. I vomited again and again, pulling up an evil-smelling yellow liquid from what felt like the bottom of my intestines. Eight, nine, ten purges poured out of me like the boisterous jet of a fountain. At last the convulsions in my gut stopped, and I clung exhausted to the toilet, my

nostrils breathing in the nauseating scent and my eyes staring at the yellow waste as if to find meaning in this apparition.

“Are you okay in there?”

The voice roused me from my stupor. I spit a few times and reached up to flush the toilet.

“Yeah.” With an effort I pulled myself to a kneeling position, the floor tiles hard on my knees.

“The Romans used to do that for fun.” The man had a jovial, cultured voice. “After a few courses, they’d tickle the throat with a feather to make room for more.”

I used the toilet for support to stand up. Twisting open the bolt lock, I pushed through the metal door to get to a sink. The man stood at the end of a row of half a dozen sinks. He was dressed more formally than the other people at the party. As I bent forward to cup water to my face, I glimpsed his white silk bow tie, black tailcoat, and sparkling patent leather shoes. I rinsed my mouth several times but couldn’t completely rid myself of the acidic aftertaste.

“This champagne we’re drinking tonight—it’s lovely,” he went on as he handed me a cloth hand towel to dry my face. “Moët and Chandon. I toured the caves there once, many years ago. Before his campaigns, Napoléon would visit to stock up. In fact, he stopped there before the disaster in Russia. Can you imagine the terrible retreat from Moscow, stumbling men in uniforms of rags freezing by the thousands while the emperor sips champagne in his cozy tent?”

Another wave of nausea swept through me and I bent over the sink until it passed.

“There, there.” The man placed an arm around my waist to support me. “We have to get a taxi to take you home.”

My legs didn’t respond well as the floor shifted beneath me.

“Keep your equilibrium,” my companion said.

I could hear the party, the din of overlapping voices and the cool, impervious sound of the jazz quartet. He guided me away and soon we were walking hip to hip down a short flight of steps to the street.

“Take a few aspirin before you go to bed,” he advised, looming above the door of the taxi. I fumbled with the seat belt, and he leaned across me to lock it in place. Standing again, he added, “Tell the driver where you live.”

I did and soon found myself sitting at my dining table. The layout of my apartment is efficient: a hallway with a coat closet, a pass-through from the kitchen to the round dining table in the living room, the master bedroom and a second bedroom on either side of the living room. In front of me, on the table, I saw a business-size envelope with my name neatly handwritten in a pale-blue ink. I recognized my wife’s handwriting but lacked the volition to move my arms and reveal whatever might be inside.

I let my head sag forward to rest in my hands. My eyes looked down at the envelope. I closed them for the peace of not seeing. There are a few moments every day when a feeling like this, of wanting to be absent from wherever I am, takes me over. It may be depression, but it’s quiet and calm, like a considerate guest visiting in my home. I certainly don’t mind it enough to take any mood-elevating drugs.

I tried to make sense of why my wife would leave a letter for me. She'd be home eventually and could tell me whatever she wanted. She didn't make a habit of leaving me notes. In fact, she had never left me one before.

I closed my eyes briefly to contemplate how unfair the evening had been. I must have been drinking, but I had no recollection of the pleasure of my inebriation. I only remembered being sick in the toilet, and now my breath disgusted me and my dizzy head throbbed painfully.

I had a fleeting desire to turn on the television and use the remote to flip through the channels. But I would have to get up to find the remote. Anyway, sooner or later I had to read the letter. Carefully I lifted the sealed flap and pulled the thick sheets of paper from within. It began simply:

"I'm leaving. Any letter that starts that way is hard to write. Certainly this one is. When we married, we vowed to be together always, but what happened to the man I married? I feel like I'm living with someone I don't know, a stranger. Certainly not the man I promised 'to have and to hold until death do us part.'"

There was a lot more to read, but I neatly folded the letter and returned it to the envelope. Something had been wrong, but it had been elusive. I guess I ignored it and shouldn't have. But I could hardly weigh it all now. The man said to take some aspirin, but that would mean walking to the bathroom. I felt too sick to understand what her leaving meant to me. I wouldn't be able to pay the rent. That I knew, because she earned more than I did, and we had been scrupulous in apportioning our expenses. No more marriage, a cheaper apartment, maybe searching for a job that paid more. My whole life would change.

At last I rose and walked slowly to the bathroom, filled a glass of water, washed down two aspirin, and brushed my teeth. On my way back I picked up the remote from the worn brown leather couch and sat again with the letter in front of me. I clicked on the television, moving quickly from one channel to another. Whatever the show, the sound hurt my ears and I quickly turned it off.

I took the letter from the envelope again and began to read carefully through the three pages filled with her finely shaped script. It all had a familiarity, a finality. It didn't sound open to discussion or negotiation. I hadn't grown up. I would never make a good father. She couldn't waste more time hoping for me to change. She gave a few examples, including my drinking too much on our tenth anniversary and acting, as she put it, like a "frat boy." When I finished reading the letter for a second time, I knew she would never come back. Despite my throbbing head and churning stomach, I felt the loneliness of this apartment without her, of my life without her.

I heard a key turning in the lock of the door. It made no sense—she wouldn't be coming back and no one else had a key. I stood and faced the door, my hand on the wall to support me. When the door opened, I saw the strange woman who had talked so much and then dismissed me at the party.

"You got home okay?"

"Yes," I answered.

She came forward.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You drank too much. Feeling better?"

"A little, but how did you get a key?"