

PAGES FROM XERXES NOTEBOOK

I met Zavy Vandor through a casual friend of mine by the name of Maya Steuben. These names proved to be aliases that came to light during the police investigation. Maya first introduced herself to me by that name so that is how I continue to think of her.

Even as I try to recall Zavy's face, its memory eludes me, and that is odd because his physical appearance reminds me of one of those impossibly handsome young models one sees on the pages of *Vanity Fair*, tall and tanned with thick black shining hair and an aura that turns heads when he walks into a room, a celebrity no doubt but one difficult to name. Boyish and virile at the same time. He seemed to enter a party and leave it as quickly as an apparition — suddenly in your face, then off to another conversation. Face and eyes hard to fix. Much like Maya herself, as when she lit up a doorway, only she appeared to be somewhat older, her features still sharp and well defined. She and I first became acquainted on a Saturday afternoon at the Met as I browsed through an exhibition of Persian art. I was nagged by the thought that I had seen her before and the more I knew of her I learned that I probably had. I suppose it could be said that we started dating after that afternoon but our times together were infrequent enough that we really couldn't have called ourselves a couple. She would be unavailable; I would be traveling. In between we ran into each other unexpectedly now and then at the opera and theater, art shows and public events, occasionally at restaurants, charity galas and cocktail parties of mutual acquaintances.

My father left my younger sister and me with generous trusts and designated me as the administrator of a modest foundation that insured me a lifetime of open invitations

to as many charities as I chose to endow. I was never left without places to go or clever and gifted people who wanted to entertain me or introduce me to beautiful women or to influential friends who provided me tickets to plays, concerts, public events and ball games. I knew the mayors not only of New York but those of most of the surrounding urban conclaves, many of the city's sports figures, men of power and men with yachts and multiple homes in exotic places. I myself kept low key. I was already rich and felt no need to be famous. I am basically a loner, have inherited no particular talent, knew that fact early in my life and let my adolescent fantasies go.

On occasions of chance meetings I often found Maya typically on the arms of older men, well known and prominent, but not necessarily famous or notorious enough that you might have heard about them often on the nightly news or seen them in the society arranged photographs of *Town and Country*. I would put her age in the early forties but I surmised from her demeanor and our conversations that she was no doubt much older. Though we were together over the span of about three years I never felt I knew her that well. She was coy, even secretive that way.

Neither of us seemed bothered by our arrangement. I wasn't. I valued the surprise of seeing her again. The enchantment of a first date without the formalities. Besides, I had the option of other lady friends who shared my points of view about the smorgasbord of singlehood in the great city of loose commitments.

For the time being, I am writing this commentary in the journal I keep for sharing thoughts and feelings with my psychiatrist who suggests that writing them down on a daily basis may lead to some peace of mind concerning my relationship with her. I have never thought of keeping a journal or seeing a psychiatrist until now. I don't know if it

will do any good. I am not keen on advice. Having lived through two family tragedies and knowing my way around Wall Street and the financial markets for over twenty-five years, I will only listen to advice if I ask for it. I have never read a recommended self-help book I liked or whose subject I had not already experienced on my own or about which I didn't know far more about than the author. I wrote off most of psychiatry and the few self-help books I read merely as other varieties of marketing.

Maya lived in an upscale high rise off Central Park. By most standards in that part of the city her space was not that large or unique: three bedrooms, a small den and library that served as an office, two full elaborate baths and a roomy half bath for guests, a well-designed living room with a fireplace, a balcony off the guest bedroom made into a small sun porch and a very workable kitchen. She could throw a small but lively cocktail party there. Her view faced west across the park from the 17th floor so that she could witness the arrival and change of the seasons. The appointments though were lavish with a collector's mix of artwork, most of it contemporary. The only piece of Middle Eastern art of the kind she and I were mutually admiring on the day we first met was a large Persian tapestry hung behind her desk. An ordinary piece, I thought, old but not of great value. Surprising, given the pieces of Japanese and African art in her place that looked to be quite pricey.

Regardless of the single Persian tapestry, I had already assumed at first glance that Maya was Middle Eastern. In fact, given where we met, I wondered if she might actually be Iranian, an ethnic group that produces great beauties, at least to my eye. She had the slightly darker skin for it, jet ink black hair combed just above her shoulders in various styles, a smaller, fine boned stature and a very becoming smile. Her eyes were

the color of polished jade stones that reflected light. Unlike Zady who was come and go, she ruled most gatherings once the crowd divided into cliques. The first time I saw Maya and Zady together was in a private room before a benefit concert. Thereafter, I tended to run into Zady whenever by chance I bumped into her, one of those ongoing coincidences that seem to occur after you meet someone for the first time and then begin to see them everywhere. When I mentioned this to her on our first real date, she smiled and told me Zady was an interior designer and that the two of them shared a number of clients.

Our first chat grew from that extended conversation on the bench at the exhibit. As we checked the time and prepared to leave, I told her I would like to see more of her. I asked her to lunch the following day, a Wednesday, but she already had a full schedule. We agreed to meet the following Wednesday at Tavern On The Green since we both planned to be in the general vicinity of the park at the same time.

Over lunch we went through the usual getting-to-know-you conversation.

"Maya," I said, "tell me about yourself. You look to be a career woman, a professional. I'm curious, if not just being nosy."

She laughed as she usually did. No holding her back. Whatever I said seemed to tickle her.

"Oh my, Steven. Where to begin? I do a lot of things. I suppose I could say I consider myself to be a professional assistant. I'm a can-do person for all kinds of people. I help them decorate their penthouses, suggest how they should dress for this occasion or that, make travel plans for them, find colleges for their children, even write speeches for them. I help them throw parties. The poor things. I don't know what they'd do without me. And they don't either."

She laughed into the crook of her elbow.

"I even act as a companion. Many of my clients are widowed or divorced or in between relationships. Or just old and lonely. Women also who don't wish to travel alone. An older professional or business man might want to take a date to a dinner, a gala, an art show, a cocktail party and don't have anyone to ask. They want a lady sitting next to them at a dinner who can engage in conversation without embarrassing them. I can help a woman make decisions about money, about what kind of car to buy, apartment to rent and so on. They come to me because I'm known to be world-wise. And I have a lot of fun running around with them and meeting a lot of people in the process and learning more and more about the world as I go along. And you?"

Her slight accent made me want to keep hearing her speak but I said:

"Nothing to match yours. My day job is financial counseling. Most of my clients are old friends. After I earned an MBA in finance from the Wharton School I did the usual apprenticeship with two major firms, made a lot of mistakes trying to go into business on my own, eventually with other hopefuls did fairly well at it, and finally decided I knew enough about the financial world that I could do my best work helping others of my own kind and, well, play with their money. In today's terms, I'm just another trust baby and I don't mind it so much. My sister lives in Santa Barbara now and loves it out there. I'm more of a big city guy. I particularly love this city for all that it has to offer. I'm afraid I won't be able to get all of it in before I drop off the radar."

"I know what you mean," she smiled. "I've pretty much seen all I want to see for now of other countries. I'm busy enough as it is without going abroad."

"Were you born in the states?"

"No, actually, I don't know where I was born. I was adopted by an older Swiss couple living in Brussels. I was told my biological parents were a mix of Spanish and French or possibly Basque. They said they didn't know for certain and told me not to spend a lot of time worrying about it because no records could be found. They took very good care of me. I studied at the Sorbonne. I wanted to major in art and be a sculptor but once I found I didn't have the natural talent I decided that I could have an equally artistic life as a business woman. You know, just being with and around artistic people, absorbing their energy and creativity. So much to absorb. My adoptive folks are deceased. Both gone by the time I reached twenty-five."

"That's a shame. My mother died when I was very young. Dad died when he was only a few years older than I am now. He never remarried. So I spent my high school years in a boarding school, then went on to Yale and Wharton. I'm not complaining. I'm living a fine and privileged life."

"Aren't we lucky then."

"Yes, we are. I never have to remind myself. I do my best to pass some of my good luck along. At the same time, I don't believe in wearing hair shirts."

She looked down at her plate and I thought I saw a shadow cross her face or it might have only been a cloud passing over the glass awning. Then she looked up and said:

"Neither do I. I do what I can and then move on."

From there we talked nonstop about art and movies and books and before we knew it we were running late to our afternoon appointments.

As she hurried away, she shouted, "Let's do this again," and waved

her briefcase up to the trees. It was a breezy day and I so enjoyed watching her hair flourish in the wind, her long black trench coat swirl behind her, belts askew, that I wanted to charge after her, take her hand and say, "Let's take the rest of the day off," but I decided to hold back and slow down. Through the years I'd had many women friends, gotten close a few times but finally decided I didn't want a married life. There were so many young and fresh and interesting women arriving in New York every day that I couldn't give up my freedom to settle on just one. I found too that many of them felt the same way as I did about the men they dated. We were having fun and interesting lives and weren't looking for any interruptions. Despite my apparently poor gene pool, I was a healthy forty-seven year old man living a healthy lifestyle and hoping to live it to the hilt. I didn't see any reason to apply the breaks. Whenever a lady friend offered to share her pleasures with me, I always thought of our coupling as a gift.

After meeting Zavy for the first time I formed an impression of him as something of a shadowy person, troubled in some way under the cover of his bonhomie. He seemed more hit-and-miss than Maya. I had a sense that they spent a lot time together than as business acquaintances. There seemed a familiarity they shared with one another. Projects they talked about, just the two of them, teasing, hugging, bumping shoulders. He was often leaving her apartment as I was arriving, usually in good spirits, grinning, bright faced. Zandor, I believe, is a Hungarian surname, and I know other Eastern Europeans who have his skin color. Like Maya, he had no true discernable accent, just a mere hint of coming from somewhere else, no definite dialect I could catch. His handshake was strong, youthful, dry and warm. Good blood pressure, I suppose, though

I've been told that's not really so. Warm hand, warm heart doesn't always apply. I envied him without knowing exactly why.

At intermissions, in the middle of crowds sipping their wine or chit chatting, I noticed small groups of attractive women of all ages gathered around him. On one occasion as he passed two young ladies holding plastic flutes of Champagne, I heard one of them nod at him and say, "Well, hello again there, Zexy." I was jealous and wished it was me whom the smart looking young woman admired. I felt a bit dull and boorish around him.

It wasn't like me to be jealous of the women I dated. Comme ci, comme ça. Sure, any time I have an intimate connection with a woman whose company I enjoy I feel the usual possessiveness of the occasional lover. One always wants to be the shooting star. I usually can shrug those feelings off. All's fair in love and jealousy. Being alone but free is the path I've chosen. I prefer casual lovers who neither ask for nor give any kind of commitment nor ask for or pledge absolute loyalty. The only promise I request and vice versa is that they protect themselves sexually or, if we would have a more than casual relationship, we get regular blood tests together. That's been my standard of care. In the case of Maya and Zavy, it seemed they held an unusual closeness, enjoyed a bond that Maya and I didn't share. A way about them when they were together, a relaxed, comfortable air as if they were the very best of old friends. I shouldn't have but I did feel left out.

Especially true when I spotted her taking Zavy by the arm at soirees and intermissions at theaters and galas when she was not my date and introducing him to

dignitaries and high society types. My only solace was that she was only introducing him to middle-aged and older women I supposed were her clients.

There was an incident within a few months after we first became intimate that first fed my paranoia about Zavy and her. A conversation — or was it a celebration? — I overheard accidentally a few months later after helping myself into her apartment before taking her to the theater. It continued to trouble me. Until then, the memory of our first night together in her bedroom I gave the status of the eighth wonder of the world.

My question mark appeared not long after she had voluntarily handed me a key to her apartment one weekend after I had flown back to New York late in the afternoon from a meeting in Los Angeles with a former university friend who had become involved in a start up film production company. He and a group of friends were looking for a financial manager they could trust. Previously, they had been burned by the Hollywood bunch and burned badly. The meeting was for me hard to watch, a lot of shouting and table pounding, listening to and having to swallow my thoughts about their naive and self-serving comments. I hadn't yet decided to offer them a proposal. I really didn't need the work, so I could pick and choose. I'm not the kind of guy who can plop down on a beach and gaze at the ocean or spend my days chasing a little white ball. I need to be in the mix, whatever the mix at the heart of the business world might be at the time or in the current drumbeat of politics. But I admit to returning to the city feeling a bit low afterwards at seeing friends compete and fight over this petty point or that and discouraged about my fellow human beings in general. While nothing was more exciting to me than the city on a bright busy sunny day, not too many things were more grim and smelly as a humid afternoon of clouds and rain in Upper Manhattan. On the upside, I had

a date with Maya that night, a simple plan to take in a Woody Allen movie and have a light dinner at a nouvelle cuisine place just off Second Avenue. Word was the decor was interesting and the food tasty. An original wine list and witty waiters.

By early evening the rain had stopped and Maya and I decided, umbrellas in hand, to walk to the movie and the restaurant. Maya was unusually quiet and subdued which echoed my mood and though the new place did cheer us with its bright colors, paintings and lively table talk throughout, both of us seemed to be fighting a little malaise.

When we returned to Maya's apartment, we stood at the door, looking fondly at each other, waiting for a goodnight kiss and a warm hug. Occasionally, she invited me in for a cognac or a glass of port and then drowsy from the evening's activities I would peck her sweet mouth one more time and leave.

This night after we got off the elevator, the first night we became lovers, she unlocked the door and opened it slightly before turning around.

"Steven, you know," she said. "I've decided to take tomorrow off. Why don't you just sleep over and we can spend tomorrow doing nothing. It's supposed to clear up and I just want to get out and browse. Come in, won't you? I'm not ready to call it an evening."

"That's fine with me. As you can see, I don't have any of my things."

"Oh, you don't need them. I keep a supply. You can take the guest room and enjoy the solarium when you wake. Make yourself feel at home. There's a television on the bathroom wall. Go ahead and shower if you want, brush your teeth, whatever you need to do. The drawers in the chest are stocked."

"Well, then," I said. "Let the real night begin."

I had seen her bedroom before but never spent more than a few minutes there. It was roomy and red. She had a nice seating area and she brought us a snifter of cognac. We sat on the sofa that faced a small fireplace and propped our feet on the two ottomans. I wore the black Japanese robe that lay folded on the seat by my bathroom vanity. We began with small kisses and touches and then allowed our sexual dragons out of their cages. It was three a.m. before we turned out the lights and fell asleep holding one another.

Her body felt fragile and light in my arms and her hair held a fragrance I could have inhaled forever. The room was quiet and full of peace. The shattered glass spirits of the day fell aside and we slept until mid-morning. She looked as lovely waking as she had striding unclothed out of her bath. She seemed perfectly comfortable and relaxed in the nude. Her skin overall looked more like a smooth suntan than that of a person of color. I thought her more youthful looking with her clothes off than on.

The next morning as I turned to leave, she took my elbow and swung me back in front of her.

"Why don't I just give you a key? You know, we ladies, are sometimes in the middle of things and it can be awkward to stop and open the door. I know that you wouldn't..." she said as she handed me the key, "but please never stop by without calling first. And then have Danny, he's usually the day time doorman, or it could also be Richard, call up to announce that you are here."

"It's a deal. And you're right. That's something I would do anyway."

I thought we would see more of each other after that. We didn't. The pattern of coming and going continued as it had before. When we met in public we nodded and

smiled in a friendly way and turned back towards our other guests or friends which wouldn't have usually put me off but for some reason around her I didn't feel my usual self-confidence. Then either she or I would call out of nowhere and ask about the possibility of getting together.

My sister and I shared a small villa in Jamaica and a house in Key West. I took Maya there once for a long weekend but she made excuses when I asked her about going to Jamaica. We took a trip later on to attend a renewal of vows of some friends of mine in Scottsdale in the middle of a February cold spell and then to Malibu for another long weekend that summer.

I didn't mind the arrangement. The amount of time we spent together fit me fine, no obligations, no expectations. Each time we met our relationship took on new colors and light.

Then there was the strange moment I write about above when I happened into her apartment, I think, by mistake. Danny, the doorman, wasn't there that evening and a younger, taller man stood behind the reception counter. He was on the phone as I arrived, put his hand over the receiver and raised his eyebrows as if asking a question.

"I'm here for Maya Steuben," I said. "Will you please let her know I'm in the lobby?"

He hesitated and then said, "You can go right up. I'm sure it will be all right."

"But..." I started to say. He had already resumed his telephone conversation and didn't appear to be willing to pay further attention to me. I hesitated again for a second and decided to go up anyway. I would talk to her later about what I thought was a security breach. She was expecting me so I let it go. We needed to grab a taxi to the

Lincoln Center sooner rather than later and be on our way so I thought perhaps if I rang the bell at her apartment she'd be ready and waiting.

I found her door slightly ajar.

"Maya?" I called out.

No answer.

I called out again. Nothing.

I carefully pushed the door open, took a quick peek inside and, finding no one in the living room, quietly stepped in.

I shouted a warning, "Maya!" but there was no answer.

I heard voices coming from the direction of her office. I felt she knew me well enough that she wouldn't mind me helping myself to a seat. Instead, I walked to the panoramic windows in the alcove that overlooked the park. The entire wall was made of three wide glass panels crowned with a semicircle of multicolored leaded glass. I loved her view, the room, its scent, the mixture of flowers, incense and cumin. There were three seating areas, one with a sofa, chairs and a black Japanese secretary; the second, a sectional in front of the red streaked marble fireplace, a Queen Ann chair and footstool, and the semicircular alcove facing the park. I cocked my ear to try to catch the voices and finally decided to go ahead and sit in the cushioned spindle chair by the secretary. There was a pad of parchment paper on the opened lid, a black desk pen and stand. It appeared that Maya had begun to write a letter or a note but had been interrupted. The words were written in Arabic, a language I can neither speak nor understand but recognize as Arabic script.

Sitting there, I was close to her office and could hear a woman's voice begin to rise as if in a chant or exhortation. It was Maya's.

"Xerxes!" I heard her shout. "You are the most beautiful man in existence. Women will worship you and men will honor you until the end of time..."

Her words trailed off as she must have moved away from the door. I could still hear her speaking in that chanting rhythm but not her words. Suddenly she opened the door and stepped out as if in a hurry to get something, then stopped quickly, looking surprised and a little off guard as she spotted me. Her eyes widened, then she laughed.

"Steven, but you are early. Zavy and I are in here just kidding around. I must have lost track of time. But wait, he is on his way out."

Zavy immediately showed up behind her, looking a little flushed, and in the process of rushing himself into a dinner jacket.

"Ah, hello, Steven. Sorry. I'm at fault here. We got lost in some dining room plans," he said, raising a roll of drawings in the air. "A private joke about our client. Please excuse me though. I didn't mean to keep you and Maya from your evening."

I felt foolish and that I had intruded. As Zavy was leaving, Maya returned to her bedroom and put on an overcoat, took my hand and we left for the play. She didn't offer any kind of explanation. I wondered whether or not she knew I had overheard her. She didn't mention the incident later except to apologize again for being late. I didn't bring up the subject either. It was not a matter that needed discussion but left me curious. What in the world?

Later, I did ask around about Zavy. None of my friends knew much more about him than I did. He was a friend of Maya's. He worked with her on some of her

decorating projects. That's all they knew. New York is a big place but people who move in the same circles generally know a little about each other. Wherever I saw Maya, I frequently saw Zavy in the same vicinity.

That's what I knew. Like Maya, Zavy was usually surrounded by a small crowd, mostly women and in the middle of what looked like lively conversations. Yet, to me he remained an unknown. I had to assume he belonged to an alliance of interior designers, a crowd I had little to do with. I wanted to let the prior incident at Maya's go, but it stuck with me. The Arabic writing, for one thing. The smell of cumin, Middle Eastern spices in her apartment. Cumin is used in a lot of ethnic foods. Yet I wondered. I had decided not to call her for a while. I didn't want to get involved in anything complicated. I even thought about a private detective. I didn't want to waste my time with a woman who was not as interested in me as I was in her. No, I decided, how dumb. And there was always a possibility she would discover what I was up to and think I had been snooping.

The Christmas season in New York is a favorite time for me. After my mother's passing, our family Christmases became much smaller and less lavish. In addition to losing our mother, my sister and I felt we had lost much more, a way of life and many of the traditions that went along with it. As young children we had had elaborate Christmas trees and plenty of thoughtful gifts, usually attended to by the housekeepers, maids and cooks who saw to it that our large Connecticut home was brightly decorated, warm and full of the scents of potpourri and candle wax, boxes of Christmas truffles, candy canes and homemade fudge. So it comes every year as a rather sad nostalgic season for me. Getting older, I look forward to the lunches and parties, events at Radio City Music Hall, Rockefeller Plaza, the Fifth Avenue stores, sidewalk carolers, lamplight sparkle, the

hustle-bustle of the shoppers, sacred concerts and carillons at Trinity Cathedral, the whole Christmas experience, minus religion, a hoax as far as I was concerned, an annoyance my father never tried to press on us.

The second week in December Maya called after a two-month hiatus from our date nights. I thought she'd moved on. I'd left her several telephone messages. Sent her flowers with a "Missing you," note. No *repondez-vous*. Didn't run into her around town. I wanted to stop by but knew she wouldn't like me doing that. Then:

"Steven!" she said almost shouting over the phone, seemingly amazed she had caught me. "Where have you been? I've missed you. Off on wild and crazy adventures I hope."

"Crazy for sure but not so wild. Thinking of you in the meantime."

"So nice to hear a kind word. I have been busy, too busy and, I must admit, lonely for your company."

"Likewise, Maya. And I've been looking forward to a cheerful Christmas. I'm ready to ring the bells and sip the eggnog."

"So glad you said that. I've been thinking about the day last year when you and I went shopping for one of my cocktail dresses. So much fun. You are a patient man. And of such good taste too."

"I do remember. A busy afternoon, rushing here, rushing there. But we found it. The perfect color and style. You were stunning in it."

"Yes, I still have it and will wear it again. Sad, isn't it, one can't recapture the past. But I've been thinking, why not go shopping with a man who likes to shop? I have

a lot of clients and friends to buy for this year and I was wondering if you'd be up to another several days of doing the Christmas rounds. Are you in the spirit this year?"

"Absolutely. It's been on my mind."

"Such a relief. I was hoping you'd be in a positive mood. Get yourself away from all that dry, boring paperwork and get some Christmas cheer in you."

"Exactly."

We not only spent Christmas together but New Years and several parties after that. Maya and I took turns spending the night and cooking for one another. And the big shocker — she sprung a surprise fiftieth birthday party for me with our mutual acquaintances, a small but party-going crowd. I didn't have a clue. Two days later I needed to fly to London and our wonderful holiday ended with the lovely Maya clinging to me as I left her apartment. I called her from the airport to let her know I wanted to cancel the trip, grab a taxi and be standing again at her door when she returned from her appointments.

"Steven, how sweet. I am going to be very busy and so are you. You must go. I'll have you in my thoughts and my heart. Please call me as soon as you can when you get back."

I did. There was no answer and no announcement on her answering machine. The phone rang on and on. Three days later there was a recorded message that her phone had been disconnected. I looked out the window of my apartment and felt a sense of helplessness, a sensation I'm not attuned to. My usual mode of defense in such situations is to get out the door and take action, action of any kind.

It had snowed heavily during my trip and the temperature had fallen into the wet 20's with a howling wind through the skyscraper canyons. On a nicer day I might have walked to her apartment. I called a taxi instead. I was suddenly in a hurry.

Danny was the doorman that day. Maya told me he was a retired army enlisted man. He looked young for a man who might be that age. Seeing him always gave me a sense of order and security. He stood rugged in his uniform, long coat and military-style billed hat, his smile brief and courteous.

"Good morning, Mr. Stewart. Taxi today. I don't blame you."

"Feels bitter. And I'm just back from London."

"It's been like this for a week."

He opened the outer door and nodded me in. Phillipe, the concierge at the front desk, a smaller, older balding man at the desk, looked up at me from his paperwork through his wire frame glasses and shot me a weak acknowledgement. He looked pale and older than I remembered.

"I'm here to see Maya," I said.

His thick dark eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"You haven't heard?" he asked in a subdued tone, removing and folding his glasses.

"Meaning...? You see, I've been away."

"Mr. Stewart, I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you. I know you saw each other rather often. But, Mr. Stewart, in your absence, Miss Steuben has passed away."

Phillipe was not one to joke. That coming from anyone would have been way out of line in any case. I stood with my hands on the counter staring directly at him in vacant disbelief. Blood rushed to my head and I could hear my heart drumming in my ears.

"I don't feel well. I need to sit down," I said. "I feel like I'm going to fall over."

Phillipe rounded the counter and through the swinging half door. He took me by the elbow and led me to one of the easy chairs in the lobby living room and helped me into an easy chair by the front windows.

"I'm totally dumbfounded," I said. "What in the..."

Phillipe stood back and folded his hands on the vest of his suit.

"Mr. Stewart, she was found by the maid still in her gown in the bedcovers. I don't know all the details but I've heard it was not an easy passing. It appears she was in a great deal of pain."

"Were the police called in?"

"Well, the ambulance first. The police later."

"Was there anything in the paper about it?"

"No sir. We looked for something for several days but nothing appeared. I did overhear some talk in the office. Apparently, it might have been stomach cancer."

"Stomach cancer? That's very strange. The last time I saw her she looked very fit. Bright faced and healthy. Not too many weeks ago, she threw me a party. No clue at all she was having problems. We had an early dinner the night before I left at the Four Seasons. She seemed fine. More than fine. Radiant."

"A blow to all of us. Of course, she was one to keep to herself. Not a woman of many words. People coming and going, but generally not more than a polite greeting and smile."

"I really don't know what to think. Did she have any relatives?"

"I've told you all I know. The apartment remains as is. The police went through it."

"Can you take me up? I have my own key."

"It hasn't been marked as a crime scene. But there is a special lock on the door. I think the police installed it. No one here has a key for it."

"Phillipe, the words 'in shock' have never suited me. I suppose though that's how I feel. Maya and I were, as is said, close, very close in our own way."

I went back to my apartment and made some calls. No one, not even our mutual friends and clients who might have seen us together from time to time had heard anything. They too seem flabbergasted.

I cancelled my appointments for the next several days and sat in my apartment brooding, pacing, unable to sit still. I drank more than my normal ration of cocktail hour Scotches, started pouring shots mid-morning, slept, drank some more. I felt myself sliding into a somnolent shadow much like despair. And I felt afraid. Unusual for me. I'm used to being involved with death and people dying, my mother, then my father, men and women who trusted me to help them with their fortunes and their estates, working too with their heirs, holding their hands and hearts as they grieved or as they fought. They often told me I was the messenger of more comfort and good advice than any preacher, attorney, good uncle or rabbi.

"But *this*, Maya," I said out loud to her, "this — I can't handle it."

When I finally returned to my office and my appointments as I knew I must, I was not fully present. How could I be? I have a small but effective staff, an older woman who serves as an executive assistant — I hate the "girl Friday" idea; a retired accountant who keeps my books neat down to the last digit and my estate on the right side of the IRS and a young man with a security broker's license to work with me on the day-to-day job of dealing with the markets. The overall office is not an elaborate affair but fully equipped. My personal space is much like a living room. I never liked working out of my apartment or within the confines of a traditional office.

As I sat at my desk I couldn't get over the thought that Maya could just die like that from a cancer that never seemed apparent to the naked eye. I supposed it could happen, but so many of my clients over the years have died of all kinds of diseases, accidents, old age. Two of them died by a self-inflicted gun shots directly into the heart. Others drank themselves to death. Except for the occasional sudden coronary, I've usually had some prior notice that they were not doing well health wise. But with Maya there was no sign at all.

"Something's just not right," I said out loud to myself. I decided to give my Yalie roommate a call. We hadn't seen each other often in the last few years but when we did it was old times right after his first grin. He was a partner in a large law firm and into Democratic politics big time and currently a member of the Citizen's Crime Commission. First name, Russ.

"Hey, brother," I said, when he answered his phone. "How's goes it?"

"Ah, it's you, my long lost friend. I thought you had died and gone to purgatory."

"I haven't yet but it's a certainty — that place, or worse. Hey, let me cut through it. I know you're busy and this isn't just a friendly hello. We can catch up another day. I'm in great need of some information."

"I don't do insider trading."

"Ha! Ha! You said a funny. No, this isn't a laughing matter. I'm actually very upset at the moment. Seriously. A very close friend of mine died suddenly a few weeks ago when I was off in London. It's been a kick in the gut. Doesn't feel right. I'm at a loss."

"That's not you at all. Anybody I know?"

"Well, I've introduced the two of you a couple of times. Dark hair, petite, olive complexion..."

"Sure. I think I last saw the two of you at Koch's inaugural. She's a real beauty. Was, I guess I should say. What was her name?"

"Maya Steuben."

"Didn't catch it, I guess."

"She ran a business out of her apartment as a kind of personal assistant. There are several around the country, male and female. A lot out in Hollywood. They take care of all types of odds and ends for people who are too busy with their careers to attend to the details of everyday busywork or never have the time or the savvy to keep up with fashion and so forth. She told me she helped out a lot with interior decorating, wardrobe, travel arrangements, those kinds of things. She really knew how to throw a party. Had a great one for my fiftieth."

"I know. We did get an invitation. Couldn't make it. Tried to. Sorry about that. Sorry about her. A girlfriend. Right?"

"Well, yes and no. You know me. I don't like to be tied down."

"Jenny and I have talked about that. Decided you're not the type to settle for one dish when you can have smorgasbord. I think you told me that. Or I heard it in a movie. Anyway, what can I do to help?"

"I've been wondering. It doesn't feel right. A few weeks ago she was going a hundred miles an hour. Next, I'm told she's died of stomach cancer. I've watched people dying of cancer. They don't look anything like she did. There's a lock on her apartment door the concierge at her building says was put there by the police. It makes me think there's more to it."

"Hmmm. For sure, that's not SOP."

"I wonder if there was an autopsy. The concierge told me too that there was nothing in the paper about it."

"As you know, there wouldn't be. Unless a friend or relative put one there. She wasn't famous, was she?"

"No. Seen around town a lot. I haven't heard about a funeral or memorial service."

"Well, if you're asking if there's anything more to it, I can check it out. At least find out that much. Being on the crime commission, you know."

"Hey, I'd really appreciate whatever you can find out. I'm just feeling lousy about it. I really want to know something, anything."

"I'll check back with you."

I hung up the phone and went for a long walk. Usually, I could come up with a number of scenarios but in Maya's case I was totally stumped. The very next day I had a call out of nowhere at my condo from NYPD that baffled me further and not connected in any way to my conversation with Russ.

"Hello," I said.

"Is this Steven?" a man with a loud, gruff voice asked.

"Who's calling?"

"My name is Tom Stroud. I'm a detective with NYPD. I have a coupla' questions for ya's."

"Sir," I said. "I really don't know who you are. Why don't you give me your phone number and I'll call you back. I'm wary of someone calling me out of the blue like this."

In fact, I had a silent home phone number.

"Do it sooner rather than later, okay? Time's important here."

"I'll call right back. Understand. You could be anybody."

"Gotcha. Right away. This is urgent."

"Okay. Hang up and I'll call through the general police department number. I can reach you that way, right?"

"Yeah, you can. If they screw up the transfer, keep trying. Okay? Got something to write with? Here's the number to call."

They put me right through to him.

"So," he said, "you are Steven? Steven who?"

"Steven Stewart."

"Okay, Mr. Stewart, here's why I'm calling. Does the name Xerxes mean anything to you?"

"Well, I do know that Xerxes I was the Persian king who founded the Persian Empire. That's about it."

He didn't get the joke.

"No, no. I mean a person. Probably a guy."

"No. I don't know anyone by that name. Why do you ask?"

"This is gonna sound a bit strange. A few days ago a pedestrian walking on 57th Street between Fifth and Sixth spotted a notebook on the sidewalk near a waste can there. About 6:45 in the evening. It's just one of those cheap black and white notebooks college kids take notes in and stuff. Says, 'Composition Notebook,' on the cover. This person got curious, picked it up and started thumbing through it. There was a fresh bloody fingerprint on one of the pages. He read a bit of it here and there and thought whoever wrote it was having some problems. So he brought it in. Now on inside back cover is a note —scribbled like — says, 'Call Steven,' and your phone number. Know anything about this?"

My private phone number? I went down a quick list .

Xerxes. Maya. Zavy. *"Xerxes, you are the most beautiful man in existence..."*

I hesitated.

"Detective, give me a minute. I'm thinking."

I stayed silent, then said, "No, not really. Sorry, but nothing comes to mind."

"Why would this person have your telephone number?"

I explained my business and the fact that I had numerous clients. Many of them had extended families and acquaintances and that any one of them might have given out my general business number for a lot of different reasons. But not this one.

"Keep my number handy, will you?" Detective Stroud said. "I don't think this is going to come to much. What piques our interest is the bloodstain. I may need to call you back."

"Fine. You have my personal number. Here's my office number."

He called again three days later. I was watching the evening news.

"Mr. Stewart. Here's another name for you. Do you know anyone by the name of Xavier?"

I stood up from my chair and poured myself a straight Scotch at the bar. My hand shook slightly as I held the glass.

"I don't. Offhand. Why do you ask?"

"We did a fingerprint check based on the blood stain on that notebook. It matched up with a guy named Xavier DeBrun. Followed up on that name but had no picture. We're looking into it. Let me ask you another question. Do you know a lady by the name of Maya Steuben?"

I could only sit quietly.

"You still there Mister Stewart?"

"Yes, yes I am. I do know that name. I have been seeing Maya off and on for the last three years. I understand she died a few weeks ago."

"What do you mean you *understand*?"

I told him about returning from my London trip and what Phillipe had said.

"Okay, then. That makes sense."

"Detective, I'm curious. How did you come to connect me with Maya?"

"Its complicated. I checked you out in the system and that triggered a note from up top. It seems one of our investigative squads found your fingerprint on the leg of a secretary desk in this lady's apartment. They want you to come in for a couple questions."

"I don't remember ever having given anyone my fingerprint. I've never been arrested or booked."

"Most people have at one time or another. They just forget."

"Never mind. I have no problem with coming in to answer questions. I'm curious myself about what happened to Maya. Phillipe — he's the concierge at her building — told me she died of stomach cancer. I have my doubts. There was no sign at all that she might have been ill. We planned to get together soon after I came back. I called her apartment several times but there was no answer and her answering machine seemed to have been turned off. Finally, I took a taxi to her apartment...and you know the rest. I'm surprised there weren't more of my fingerprints in her apartment."

Detective Stroud paused.

"Mr. Stewart, let me call you back tomorrow morning. I'll let you know some times in the next few days when we can have an investigator discuss this matter with you."

"I'll be available whenever you can set a date."

The appointment was made for the following Friday afternoon. I was seated in a small room with a worktable, a chair on each side. The lighting was dim but not

particularly repressive. There was a small serving table with bottled water and a stack of clear plastic glasses on one side. Within a few minutes the door opened and a woman dressed in a tweed sports jacket, light blue denims and desert boots walked in with a nod and slight smile and set her clipboard and several files on the table between us.

"Mr. Stewart?" she said holding out her hand.

I stood and we shook.

"Please have a seat. I hope this won't take long. I do need to get some basic info first."

We sat and she jotted down a brief summary of my particulars. As I watched her write, I noticed she was a meticulous note taker and her penmanship looked extremely neat, very clear and upright, almost like print.

I'd put her in her mid-thirties. Her skin was tanned, a bit rugged, and there was a scar on one side of her mouth that ran sideways to the edge of her chin. It pulled her mouth downward slightly when she spoke.

"Mr. Stewart — by the way, I'm Detective Guidry — I just have a few questions about your relationship with Maya Steuben. I understand you and she saw each other fairly often?"

I explained.

"I see. So you would have been in her apartment from time to time."

"Yes."

"Were you intimate?"

"Yes."

"So, you would spend the night?"

"Rarely. But on occasion. We were both very busy with our daily routines. We didn't have any kind of formal commitment. Not significant others. Just good friends who were attracted to each other. We had several interests in common, art, music, the theater, film, history. We shared a special interest in antiquities, whether they be books, furniture, artworks, especially from the Middle East. Just liked the look and intricacy of that period I suppose you could say."

"And when was the last time you can recall spending the night?"

"Actually, only about three weeks ago. New Year's Day night. The night before the day before I left for London."

"And how long were you gone?"

"Twelve days, exactly. I landed back at Kennedy February 19th. I've been here since."

She took me through my schedule, where I'd been since returning, whom I'd been with.

"So, you've been back about three weeks now."

"Yes. After I learned about her 'passing' if that's what it was. I stayed home in my apartment for several days."

"Doing?"

"Mostly getting drunk and not answering the phone."

"So you didn't go to your office?"

"Not for several days. I was — am — devastated. I had to get my bearings."

"Tell me, what was she like?" she asked, sliding over a studio photograph Maya might have used for promotional purposes.

"Just like that photograph. Strikingly beautiful, outgoing, smart, articulate, bubbly, fun."

She pulled the photograph back.

"Mr. Stewart, is there, are there, people in London, clients, friends, who can vouch for your whereabouts during that time?"

"Oh, yes. Many. I cram in a lot of appointments during my trips, lunches, dinners, meetings. I own a flat in Mayfair. I try to allow time for my friends. It's a home away from home. I go to the theater when I have tickets or someone offers to take me."

She smiled slightly.

"Humm...must be nice. Did you go to the theater this trip?"

"Yes. Saw Starlight Express. Andrew Lloyd Weber. At the Apollo."

"How was it?"

"Fabulous. Doesn't matter, though. I like them all. I myself am not talented in any way. Except, I hope, when it comes to estate planning and investing. Can't sing. Can't dance."

Got a little laugh out of her.

"Me either. Some people have it but most don't"

"It's a shame."

"Mr. Stewart, did she ever confide in you about her past, her childhood, family, education, concerns."

"Pretty circumspect overall. Told me she had been adopted. Sounds they were a well-to-do couple. Told me she studied at the Sorbonne. Art, then business. Very

general. Maybe even a little evasive. We didn't dwell on her past or the details of her life either way. Just enjoyed the here and now."

We discussed how she seemed to me before I left, her appearance, her health, her disposition.

She leafed through the file.

"Did she ever mention a man by the name of Xavier?"

"Well, actually, she didn't need to. Detective Stroud asked me that and I didn't put two and two together until after we talked. She had a very close acquaintance, Zavy Vandor. I suppose Zavy is a nickname that might have come from Xavier. I just now thought of it. 'X' can sound like 'Z'."

I shrugged. She thought for a moment and flipped more pages.

"Okay, then. That's all I have for now."

She stood up.

"Thanks for your time. Will you be in town for a while?"

"About a month."

"I may need to call you again."

"Please do. Detective, I don't feel right about what I've been told about her. I'm not convinced about the reason I've been given about the cause of her death."

"If I learn anything that I can pass along," she said, "I'll be in touch."

When I returned home, there was a message from Russ on my answering machine.

"Steven...Russell here. I've got some information for you. Jenny and I are leaving for the Hampton's in a few minutes. Call my office Monday and let's set up a time for lunch, maybe Wednesday or Thursday. Talk to you next week."

There is a little place on Restaurant Row where Russ and I go when we have private matters to discuss. He loves their osso buco which he shouldn't be having because his belly now hangs over his belt and Jenny is on him to get rid of it. The restaurant is on the basement level, no windows, and offers a nondescript entry down a set of steps halfway hidden in shadows. The booths are separated by tall wooden partitions that mute conversation as does the constant rhythms of piped-in jazz music. We joke about playing cops and robbers and sit near the kitchen entrance in case a Mafia hit man might show up at the front door and charge down the aisle to take us out.

Russ's secretary called me Monday afternoon before I had a chance to call his office and confirmed a lunch date there on Wednesday at 11:30.

"Hope you don't mind," he said, as I hung my overcoat on the hook attached to the booth partition and slid across the smooth old wooden bench. "I ordered you one of your double doubles," he smiled. He had already started on his, a double Scotch. I spotted a file next to the salt and pepper shakers.

I let go a huff of relief as I looked over at him. I loved this guy. He could kid a grin out of a man on death row. I guess that's why he was such a great litigator.

"How was the weekend?" I asked.

"Cold. Cold, but nice. Just Jenny and I. We needed one. I womped up a pot of chili. That, a fire, and peace and quiet."

"You've done well. Happy marriage, a Rhodes Scholar for a son and a Ph.D. daughter with a growing practice."

"We helped get them through their teendom. I wasn't so sure about Catherine. I kept telling her, 'Don't go looking for trouble. It's going to find you anyway'. Proud of her though. She could be making big bucks in the city. But she likes working with sexually abused kids. I'm proud of her."

"No doubt."

His face waned serious and he leaned on his elbow.

"You still don't miss having a family?"

"No, I really don't. My sister, Denise, and I are still on good terms and when we meet up we enjoy one another's company but even as kids we went our own ways: different nannies, different schools. I prefer being on my own. I guess that's just how I'm made up."

"Just so you don't go and get lonely and strange on us."

"Maybe I'm already strange, set in my ways. I don't think I'm heading in the direction of Scroogeville. Not yet anyway."

"Not that I've noticed. Hey, why don't we order, eat and then talk? I'm starving."

"I thought you'd say that. Always do better on a full stomach."

"That's my take on it. And I do have a 2:30."

Russ had his usual and I a bowl of chili. I poked at it. They served a tasty chili but it was flavorless to me that day. When he finished, Russ pushed his plate aside and the waiter lifted it away. He pulled his file in front of him and sipped at what was left of his Scotch.

"How about you sit back a minute and relax. You've been sitting on the edge of that bench since you walked in. Jittery. You don't look so good."

"I feel rotten."

"No doubt. Okay, let's take a look. Number one. No one has as yet officially ID'd the remains, much less claimed them. There is a waiting period. Then the city can decide whether or not to autopsy. To date, there has been no determination of cause of death. However they put me through to the coroner and we had a chat. It would appear from outward signs, signs I know nothing about, that it's a possibility—just a possibility—that she might have been poisoned."

"God."

"There's more. Now, Maya Steuben is a legal name. She doesn't have a driver's license. They did find a passport. The police searched her apartment and didn't find any drugs or weapons. Several books and papers in Arabic. When they did a background check they discovered that she had been given political asylum several years ago. So they're looking into that. She has used other aliases and somehow obtained credit cards under them. One was Linda Long. This was before her papers went through. Looks like she's an Iranian national. Actual name might have been Pahlavi."

"I knew it," I said.

"How would you know that?"

"Just the way she looked. Her accent. Either that or Eastern European. I've met several Iranians over the years. They're very clever businessmen. The women as well. Not uncommon to run into them in Europe. England. Great beauties, some of them."

"I remember her from that one meeting that she was."

For whatever reason, I felt betrayed. Maya had not been straight with me.

"That was the Shah's family name. Pahlavi," I said. "Not that she might have been directly related. He was the head of the House of Pahlavi. That might be a connection. Who knows? Anyone connected him was on the outs once the Ayatollah took over."

"Well, that's what I have for now. I'll keep digging. I have good contacts. So does the firm."

After he left, I called the office and told them I wouldn't be in. There was a phone message on my answering machine at the apartment.

"Mr. Stewart, this is Detective Guidry, NYPD. We're wondering if you can come back in and look at something for us. Please give me a call at this number."

Detective Guidry was not in but a male detective who answered the phone knew why she was calling and I arranged for me to meet with her the next afternoon. They led me to the same small interrogation room. She breezed in with a pot of coffee and set it on the side table.

"Hello, again. No need to get up. I really appreciate your giving us the time. Might be an hour or so. I've got some bottled water coming. The coffee's actually for me. But I'll share. Haven't had a cup since this morning. Do you need the john or anything?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Back in a minute." She poured herself coffee into a Styrofoam cup and left.

When she returned I spotted the composition book Detective Stroud mentioned on the phone on the top of her files. There were copies on some of the pages.

"I think Detective Stroud asked you about this notebook. What we were wondering was if you could read over these copies of a few pages and see if anything at all jumps out at you. The written portion's not that long and you'll see your first name and phone number inside on the back cover. I won't be far away. If you need anything or have a question just open the door and stick your head out. Someone will be with you right off. Want a cup?"

"Sure. And some water."

"Put on these gloves. Any allergy to latex?"

"No."

"We don't want any prints on these copies. The notebook itself is dirty from being tossed onto the sidewalk and being picked up by the guy who turned it in."

She laid the notebook and gloves in front of me and left with her files which had gone from one to three and grown into a four-inch stack.

I sat for a while just looking at it. It was smudged with street grime. I really didn't want to touch it. I slipped on the gloves, turned the notebook this way and that, thumbed the pages and looked for my name and phone number. Seeing them scribbled there by an unknown hand frightened me. The handwriting was extremely neat and the letters well formed on the first few pages. As I read along the handwriting became more and more disorganized until the writer's hand drifted downward and outside the blue lines. The notebook read:

Tuesday 11:11 PM MAMA, UNCLE DARIUS HAS BEEN PESTERING ME AGAIN TO GO BACK INTO MODELING AND WORK AT THE ADVERTISING AGENCY. BUT I REMEMBER YOUR DAYS AT THE STUDIO, MAKE UP STREAKING IN THE HEAT, YOUR BODY PINCHED AND POKED AT, YOUR EYES BURNING UNDER THE LIGHTS. I'M SORRY BUT I HAVE TO BE OUT AND ABOUT, SEE PEOPLE TALKING AND LAUGHING, BURY MYSELF IN THE CROWD. BUT UNCLE DARIUS TELLS ME I'M WASTING MY YOUTH. HE SAYS SOME DAY I'LL BE TOO OLD AND THEN I'LL WISH I HAD. HE SAYS I NEED TO MAKE AS MUCH MONEY AS I CAN SO I CAN ENJOY MY OLD AGE. I REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. I DON'T THINK HE UNDERSTANDS. WE HAVE PLENTY OF MONEY. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO TELL HIM JUST TO LEAVE US ALONE.

Wednesday.11:11 P.M. MAMA, YESTERDAY I RESUMED MY WORSHIP OF WOMEN. YOUR OLD FRIEND, LUPE, ARRANGED FOR ME TO VISIT A YOUNG WIFE ON THE UPPER WEST SIDE WHO WAS GREATLY DISTRESSED AND UNHAPPY. LUPE WANTS ME TO REDO MY WARDROBE AGAIN JUST FOR THIS ONE LADY. LUPE BOUGHT ME A NICE BRIEFCASE FOR STARTERS AND FILLED IT WITH THE USUALS AND SOME NEW ITEMS SHE SAYS WILL ENHANCE A YOUNG WOMAN'S PLEASURE. SHE HELPED ME PICK OUT SOME SUITS AND TIES AND WE BOUGHT FOUR DIFFERENT PAIRS OF DRESS SHOES. THIS WOMAN HAS A DYNAMITE PENTHOUSE. THE FURNITURE IS JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY AND THE CARPETS OF VARIOUS STYLES, VERY COLORFUL, CHINESE, PERSIAN AND CUSTOMMADE ORIGINALS. I

HOPE YOU WERE ABLE TO TELL UNCLE DARIAS TO LEAVE ME ALONE. WE KNOW WHAT WE'RE DOING. I HOPE YOU DIDN'T TELL HIM ABOUT OUR LINE OF WORK. HE'S TOO OLD FASHIONED. I IGNORED HIM AND FOLLOWED LUPE'S ADVICE. I THOUGHT THE WOMAN WAS AWFULLY YOUNG TO BE HAVING THE PROBLEMS SHE'S BEEN HAVING. I SAW A PICTURE OF HER HUSBAND AND HE DOES LOOK A LITTLE OLD TO BE MARRIED TO SUCH A YOUNG, BEAUTIFUL WOMAN. I SPENT TWO HOURS WITH HER AND SHE SHOUTED, "Oh Zavy, Oh Zavy," SEVERAL TIMES. WHEN I FINISHED, SHE SAID, "OH HONEY, YOU WERE SO WONDERFUL, HONEY," AND HANDED ME TEN ONE HUNDRED DOLLAR BILLS. I GAVE TWO HUNDRED TO LUPE AND PUT THE REST IN THE DEPOSIT BOX. I'M GLAD YOU MADE DUPLICATE KEYS. THE WOMAN WANTS ME BACK TWICE A WEEK AND SHE SAYS SHE HAS A FRIEND WHO IS ALSO INTERESTED. MAYBE, SHE SAID, THERE COULD BE THE THREE OF US. THE BEST PART IS THAT SHE DOESN'T WANT ME TO SPEND THE NIGHT. JUST A COUPLE OF HOURS.

Saturday 11:11 PM MAMA, MAMA...WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO YOU?

Monday 11:11 PM MAMA, A FRIGHTENING THING HAPPENED TODAY. I CAN'T SLEEP NOW AND I COULDN'T EAT ANY DINNER BECAUSE OF IT. IT'S UNCLE DARIUS. HE DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT YOU YET. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO TELL HIM. MAMA, I MADE A BIG MISTAKE AND I'M SORRY. YOU TOLD ME NOT TO GET INVOLVED WITH UNCLE DARIUS BUT HE'S BEEN SO INSISTENT. I AGREED TO DO ONE OF HIS SHOOTS, AND AFTERWARDS,

AFTER EVERYONE ELSE LEFT FOR LUNCH, HE CORNERED ME IN THE DRESSING ROOM AND TRIED TO KISS ME ON THE MOUTH AND NECK AND PRESSED HIMSELF AGAINST ME. "I JUST CAN'T WAIT ANYMORE, XERXES, I JUST CAN'T WAIT," HE KEPT SHOUTING. IT WAS SO GROSTESQUE. PURE TORTURE. SHEER HELL. HE WAS HUFFING AND PUFFING AND GRABBING AT ME. AS I SAID THE OTHER DAY, HE'S BEEN ACTING STRANGE FOR ABOUT TWO WEEKS. MOPING AROUND, OUT OF SORTS. HE KEEPS MAKING LITTLE REMARKS ABOUT MY ASS AND MY EYES. HERE I WAS, MY SHIRT OVER MY SHOULDER, SLACKS PULLED UP AROUND MY HIPS BUT STILL UNZIPPED, WIPING MY MAKEUP OFF, AND THE MAN I HAVE BEEN CALLING UNCLE ALL THESE YEARS SNEAKS UP FROM BEHIND ME, WHISPERS MY NAME SOFTLY, "XERXES,... XERXES," UNZIPS HIS SLACKS AND PULLS IT OUT. I STRUGGLED AWAY FROM HIM AND KEPT SAYING, "NO UNCLE DARIUS, NO. WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU. YOU'RE ACTING SCHIZO." BUT HIS EYES LOOKED SO SAD THAT I REACHED BACK TO HUG HIM AFTER I PUSHED HIM AWAY AS A CONSOLATION BUT IT WAS A MISTAKE AND HE JUST WENT WILD ON ME AND WRESTLED ME TO THE FLOOR, TRYING TO SHOVE HIS HANDS INSIDE THE BACK OF MY SLACKS. HE FELT SO POWERFUL FOR AN OLDER GUY AND WE FOUGHT SO HARD HE SCRATCHED MY SHOULDER AND MY BACK. I FINALLY BROKE FREE, STOOD UP, I'M SURE, LOOKING TOTALLY PUZZLED AND UPSET, GRABBED MY THINGS AND RAN INTO THE HALL NEAR THE ELEVATOR. I COULDN'T EAT ANYTHING SO I JUST WALKED AND WALKED, LIKE I DO, AND WAS A

HALF HOUR LATE FOR THE AFTERNOON SHOOT. I COULD SEE UNCLE DARIUS HAD BEEN CRYING AND MAGDA KEPT RUBBING HIS SHOULDER AND LOOKING AT ME, LOOKING AT ME AS THOUGH I HAD WRONGED HIM IN SOME WAY. I TOLD THEM I FELT ILL AND COULDN'T WORK AND THEN GOT OUT OF THERE, RAN STRAIGHT TO YOUR PLACE, BUT YOU WEREN'T THERE ANYMORE...I MEAN LIVE THERE... MAMA, MAMA, WHAT DID THEY DO TO YOU? WHY DID THEY DO THIS THING? I CRAWLED UNDER THE COFFEE TABLE AND WAITED BUT YOU NEVER WOKE. I CALLED YOUR NAME BUT YOU DIDN'T MOVE, MAMA. I WAS TOO AFRAID TO TOUCH YOU. YOU LOOKED SO SAD AND GRAY. I AM SO CONFUSED, MAMA. THERE IS ANOTHER SHOOT ON THURSDAY AT THE AD AGENCY AND I'M AFRAID TO GO. IT'S SO LATE, MAMA, AND I FEEL VERY STRANGE. I ONLY WANT TO HEAR YOUR VOICE.

12 PM MAMA, MAMA, YOUR FACE! I SEE IT WHEREVER I GO.

Tuesday 11:11 PM MAMA, IT IS OVER FOR ME NOW THAT YOU ARE GONE. I WISH YOU COULD RETURN TO EARTH. I MISS YOU, MAMA. I'M VERY AFRAID. I KEEP LOOKING OUT MY WINDOW TO SEE IF THEY ARE COMING TO GET ME. THE TWO MEN. THE TWO MEN WHO ATTACKED ME AT THE WOMAN'S PENTHOUSE TODAY. LET ME SLOW DOWN, THINK CLEARLY. LET ME START FROM THE BEGINNING: I WAS SO UPSET ABOUT YOU AND STILL UPSET ABOUT UNCLE DARIUS. I COULDN'T SLEEP AND I WAS THROWING UP AND LATE FOR MY APPT. THEN I RAN INTO THAT CRAZY STREET PREACHER WHO'S ALWAYS EMBARRASSING ME, YELLING

AT ME IN THE STREET THAT HE KNOWS WHO I AM, HE KNOWS WHAT I DO AND I WILL GO TO HELLFIRE. "WHORE," HE KEPT YELLING. "WHORE," AGAIN AND AGAIN. I BARELY MADE IT TO MY APPT, AND THE LADY WHO'D BEEN WAITING FOR ME SAID, "LET'S JUST TALK. I CAN SEE YOU'RE UPSET. YOU'RE AS WHITE AS A MIME." SO I KNELT BY HER CHAIR AND LAID MY HEAD ON HER LAP AND CRIED A LONG WHILE. SHE BRUSHED MY HAIR WITH HER FINGERTIPS, RUBBED THE BACK OF MY NECK AND SAID MAYBE I SHOULD GO SOMEWHERE WITH HER OVER THE WEEKEND. I GOT MYSELF CALMED DOWN AND ATE A BOWL OF CHICKEN SOUP AT THE DELI ON THE WAY HOME AND FELT BETTER. I TOOK ANOTHER SHOWER, PUT ON FRESH CLOTHES AND COLOGNE AND MADE IT IN TIME FOR MY 7 O'CLOCK APPT. THIS IS THE WOMAN WHO WAS MY FIRST CUSTOMER AND SHE SAYS SHE IS IN LOVE WITH ME BUT SHE DOESN'T HAVE THE COURAGE TO CHANGE HER LIFE. I DIDN'T TELL HER I WASN'T IN LOVE WITH HER. I JUST SMILED. SHE IS EXTREMELY BEAUTIFUL AND I WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO APPLYING HER TREATMENT. I HAD JUST UNDRESSED HER AND PUT ON SOME NEW AGE MUSIC AND WAS GETTING READY TO GIVE HER A LIGHT MASSAGE, AND GET HER EXCITED, WHEN WE HEARD A DOOR OPEN. "QUICK, ZAVY" SHE WHISPERED, "HIDE IN THE WALK-IN CLOSET." I JUMPED UP AND HID BEHIND THE CLOTHES IN THERE. IT'S ALMOST AS BIG AS HER BEDROOM. I COULD HEAR HEAVY FOOTSTEPS. "OPEN UP, JEANNINE, GODDAMMIT, OPEN IT UP. I KNOW YOU'VE GOT SOMEBODY IN THERE," ONE OF THE MEN SHOUTED. "FRANK,

WHAT ON EARTH IS THE MATTER WITH YOU?" SHE ASKED IN A SWEET BUT SHAKEY VOICE. "I'M JUST TRYING TO TAKE A LITTLE NAP SO I'LL BE FRESH AND PRETTY FOR YOU TONIGHT AT THE GALA." "LET ME IN, JEANNINE, YOU LITTLE BITCH. LET ME IN, GODDAMNIT. I'VE GOT A PRIVATE DETECTIVE WITH ME AND I'VE GOT PICTURES AND I KNOW HE'S IN THERE BECAUSE WE WERE WATCHING ON A CAMERA IN YOUR ROOM FROM DOWN THE HALL." THEN I HEARD A LOUD, CRASHING NOISE AND THE WOMAN SCREAMED AND THE SOUND OF THE DOOR BEING SMASHED OPEN. HER HUSBAND AND ANOTHER MAN YANKED OPEN THE CLOSET DOOR, RUMMAGED THROUGH THE CLOTHES RACKS. I WAS HIDING IN A CORNER BEHIND THE SHOE RACKS. THEY GRABBED ME AND YANKED ME OUT IN FRONT OF HER. "JUST GIVE ME FIVE MINUTES WITH THE GUY, THAT'S ALL. I WANT, JUST FIVE MINUTES," HER HUSBAND KEPT SHOUTING. HE DIDN'T LOOK QUITE AS OLD AS HE DID IN THE PICTURE AND HIS ARMS WERE AS HARD AS LIGHTPOLES. THEY DRAGGED ME INTO THE KITCHEN AND BOUNCED ME OFF THE COUNTER. THE HUSBAND GRABBED A BOTTLE OPENER OUT OF A DRAWER AND CAME AFTER ME WITH THE SHARP PART AND KEPT SAYING, "THAT FACE, I'M GOING TO MAKE HAMBURGER OUT OF YOUR PRETTY FACE. JUST LET ME AT IT." THE WOMAN RAN SCREAMING INTO THE KITCHEN. "NO, FRANK, NO. OH FOR GODSAKES, FRANK. PLEASE, WE CAN TALK," AND JUMPED ON HER HUSBAND'S BACK. HE SWUNG HER OFF INTO THE CORNER AND THE OTHER MAN AND THE HUSBAND STARTED WRESTLING TO HOLD HER

DOWN AND SHE BIT HER HUSBAND ON THE EAR, BIT HIM HARD ENOUGH SO THAT IT BLED, AND HE SAID, "BITCH, YOU'VE DONE IT NOW." I CRAWLED OUT OF THE KITCHEN WHILE THEY WERE WRESTLING AND THROWING HER AROUND AND RAN TO THE BEDROOM TO GRAB MY CLOTHES AND SWEEPED THEM INTO A BALL AND RAN NAKED DOWN THE HALL. "HE'S GETTING AWAY, HE'S GETTING AWAY," THE OTHER MAN YELLED. I SLIPPED INTO THE STAIRWELL EXIT AND RAN DOWN SEVERAL FLOORS BEFORE STOPPING ON A LANDING AND PULLED ON MY SHIRT AND SLACKS. MY SHOES AND SOCKS AND BRIEFCASE ARE STILL THERE. THANK GOD, I DON'T HAVE MY NAME ON ANY OF THAT STUFF. BUT MAMA, I'M STILL SHAKING. I'M SHAKING ALL OVER. I'M AFRAID TO LEAVE MY APARTMENT. I'M AFRAID I'M FALLING APART. CAN'T YOU HELP ME, MAMA?

Friday 2:22 A.M. BAD DREAM, MAMA. BAD, BAD DREAM. I'M SITTING ON A THRONE IN THE ARCHEMENID TEMPLE DRESSED IN ARMOR AND WEARING A HELMET. I HAVE A SPEAR IN ONE HAND AND A SCEPTER IN THE OTHER. I AM BEING WORSHIPPED BY A CROWD OF WOMEN. THEY ARE BOWING TO ME AND CHANTING, "O XERXES...O XERXES, YOU ARE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MAN IN EXISTENCE, KING OF PERSIA AND THE WORLD BEYOND." BUT MAMA, THEY ARE ALL VERY OLD. THEY HAVE NO TEETH AND THEIR HAIR IS THIN AND STRINGY. I CAN'T MOVE INSIDE MY ARMOR. I HAVE NO FEELING. THE FLESH AROUND MY TEETH AND MY EYES HAS DISAPPEARED. MY EYES ARE TWO BLINKING RED LIGHTS. THE

TEMPLE IS CAST IN LIGHT BLUE AND THE BLUE IS UNDULATING LIKE THE OCEAN, AS THOUGH I AM BENEATH IT. UNCLE DARIUS COMES IN, DRESSED LIKE A ROMAN SOLDIER OR A SYRIAN. HE IS POINTING AT ME WITH A SPEAR AND LAUGHING, LAUGHING BECAUSE HE HAS ME CORNERED. HE STAGGERS OVER AND STABS ME IN THE SIDE THROUGH MY ARMOR. IT'S NOT ARMOR AT ALL, JUST PAPER, PAPIERMACHE. AND WHEN HE STABS ME, AND PULLS BACK THE SPEAR, STILL LAUGHING, STILL POINTING, ALL THAT COMES OUT IS STUFFING, LIKE THE STUFFING IN A SOFA. AND AFTER THE STUFFING, A TRAIL OF SAWDUST SPILLS IN A THIN LINE OUT OF MY SIDE: DUST MAMA, NOTHING BUT DUST...

The passage ended there trailing into a scribbled downward line. When I finished reading, I could only shake my head. It seemed so bizarre. How could the man I knew as Zavy Vandor be so different than the person writing in the notebook. The entire group of entries seemed ridiculous, laughable, preposterous, disconnected. Yet my hands were shaking. I felt nauseous. The bloody fingerprint was a smear at the bottom of the inside cover. After a few minutes I went to the door, opened it and walked out into the general office. Detective Guidry stood by the window and was talking to another detective. She glanced over at me.

"Be with you in a sec.," she said.

I walked back to the table and stood there feeling paralyzed. I could only stare at the opened notebook.

"What do you make of it?" she said, sticking her head in the doorway.

"You may want to have a seat," I said. "I'm just going to sit down here and think."

She sat across from me and pulled the notebook across the table to look at it.

"Two things," I said after exhaling. "One, use of the name, Xerxes. Two, the fact that my first name and phone number are jotted down inside the back cover. Detective Stroud asked me last week if I knew a man named Xavier de Brun."

"Right."

I repeated Maya's use of Xerxes that I overheard in her apartment that early evening when she was meeting in her office with Zavy.

"You said you were sitting on a chair by her secretary."

"Yes. I noticed what looked like a letter she was writing that happened to be in Arabic. Which surprised me. She told me her birth parents might have been a mix of Hispanic or French or even Basque. I sat there on the chair beside the secretary because it was convenient at that moment."

"Which would explain your fingerprint on the leg of the secretary."

"Probably. I was no doubt fidgeting. I thought she was running late and we needed to be at the theater. My hands were probably here, there and everywhere on the secretary. I'm not used to waiting."

"Back to the notebook. So you think whoever wrote in this notebook, a person calling himself Xerxes, might be also be known as Xavier de Brun?"

"Except I knew him as Zavy Vandor, an interior decorator, who worked with Maya. At least, I made the connection just now. Except, I can't imagine Zavy being the person who would write this type of gibberish or who would be involved in the

commotion that's being described here. It sounds insane. Like the writer is delusional, having a breakdown."

"Believe me, I've read and seen many things a lot crazier than this."

"I'll bet."

"What else?" she said, staring at the ceiling. "Oh, yes...do you know anything about this Darius character? Any idea of who he might be?"

"Total blank on that name. I mean, since we're talking about someone who calls himself Xerxes, as far as Persian history is concerned, Xerxes was the son of Darius who married the daughter of Cyrus The Great. Between the two of them they created the early Persian empire. I've studied a little Persian history. I'm a fan of antiquity. Just the basics of early Persian history."

"Okay. That's all I have for now. Well, I hope you'll call me if anything else comes to mind, any detail that might help us identify this person or figure out why the notebook happens to have blood on it. It could be nothing. I really don't know why the department is spending so much time on this."

The next several days I stayed late in the office catching up on my paperwork and returning phone calls. I enjoy my work and helping my clients solve problems. I feel I'm enhancing their wellbeing, their peace of mind. As for mine at that moment, I didn't feel I had any. I hoped the work would relax me as it often did, the rhythm of it, the details, the mechanics. I forced myself to concentrate. Just as I was getting ready to call Russ, he phoned me.

"Hey, bud. Whatcha' up to?"

"Waiting to hear from you."

"I was afraid of that. I wanted to have enough information put together for you that might help us put a period on this paragraph."

"More like a chapter."

"Either way. How 'bout we meet up at the Yale Club tomorrow for lunch."

"I'll be there. If I still look a bit ragged, it's because haven't been able to sleep much."

"You're taking this very hard, I know. Go to the gym and give it hell, take a hot shower, a couple of cognacs, read a bit in bed, and you'll drift off. Works for me."

I look forward to having lunch at the Yale Club, especially in the winter, though I've never felt I belong. I think of it as another old man's club. That day there was a fire going. The paneled wood added to the warmth and the sense of safe haven the place can offer. I needed some unmitigated escapism.

We hurried through a salad lunch, both of us I think eager to get to whatever Russ had to report.

"This is going to be tough on you, Steven," he said, opening his folder and leafing through it, eyeing me over the top edge. "You know your Persian history, right?"

"Some. More than most."

"Let me start with this. Seems like since ancient times there's been a small group of elites in the culture. Might even be called a cult. Think of its members more or less like the cardinals in the Catholic Church. The idea of apostolic succession. Passing along the magic spirits in the holy water. Practicing the rituals and rites. Or maybe like the Order of the Knights Templar. Except for the open violence. A secret society of the anointed. Royal blood. It continued I understand through the time of the Shah and then

went underground. When they heard the Ayatollah was returning, many of them who had the means to get out of the country did, as fast as they could, leaving most of their property behind but taking their money with them, the bulk of which they had already stashed away in Switzerland or in overseas investments of various kinds or assets hidden under different personal names and business entities, trusts and the like. But the old Ayatollah, he wasn't going to let them get away with it. So, since the revolution, he's been sending hit squads into our country and all over Europe to find them, kidnap them, bring them back, or shake them down and kill them once his agents could find the money and figure out a way to get it back into Iran. Of course, this takes years. Money transfers. False identities, on and on. Your lady friend here might very well have been from one of those families."

"Odd. You would think she would go into hiding, not be running around in the open in New York City."

"They call it hiding in plain sight. She would have been a bit younger at the time of the revolution. She has probably changed her appearance somewhat. It looks like she made a point to ally herself with very prominent people. In exile, the Shah continued to have many supporters here. Bankers, CEO's, wealthy businessmen. They probably were hiding some of the family fortune all along."

"Why then would she want to hang out with me? I'm fairly well off, sure, but not a Kennedy or a Rockefeller, or a heavy hitter on Wall Street ."

"This next act could be the part that hurts."

"You mean, she was only playing cuddly with me for show," I said, preempting him.

"Well, Steven, maybe yes. That's a real possibility."

"She used me."

"Maybe she did, maybe she didn't. You'll never know. If this information is true, she may have used you as a cover. To hide out with people powerful enough to keep an eye on her, keep her safe. Or heck, maybe she just liked you. You'll never know...Now that's just one theory. Here's another."

I was already beginning to feel a bit numb, numb and then angry. I could feel my ears burning red. The waiter stopped by to pour the rest of the Merlot we ordered with our lobster salads. I had only taken a few sips from my glass. I was going out that night with Riki, a younger woman who worked as a manager at Saks. She was a bright light in any man's dark night and the March nights here had been pretty grim and wet so far. That being the case, I wanted to be with a woman whom I knew would help me take my mind on the subject, at least for the night. We were going to see the movie, "A Passage To India," and then to dinner at a cozy Austrian restaurant she introduced me to. I wanted to be as up as she always seemed to be. I rarely drank alcohol at lunch anyway. It left me drowsy and sluggish and only wanting to nap the rest of the afternoon.

"Go right ahead," Russ told the waiter. "I'm going to need a little more internal support for this one. Nervous drinking, they call it."

He flipped open another file.

"Now Maya didn't own or pay rent for her apartment. It was owned by a private trust," he said. "In a way, this is how Zavy Vandor might fit in. You see, they believe, I mean, my sources believe, that he is actually Maya's son."

I looked over at him and must have smiled slightly.

"What's that about?" he asked.

"I was afraid Zavy might have been Maya's lover."

Russ let go one of his famous roof shaking laughs.

"You just kill me. I don't know what's wrong with you. You're sick, you know that."

He shook his head.

"Now then, sit tight," he said. "Here comes some 'worsen' news."

"What could be *worsen* than what's happened to Maya?"

"Wait and see. There's another scenario that might be more likely. I don't know how they got to this possibility. They were being pretty oblique.

Hold on. It's somewhere in my notes."

He flipped through the pages in his file.

"Here it is. The theory is that this trust is the brainchild of four, maybe five big time players here in the city. They haven't been able to identify them. At least, that's what they say. If they have, they're not telling. But let me ask you this first. Did you every notice any guys hanging around the lobby like bellmen or at the front desk who were maybe part timers, not regular staff?"

"I wasn't there often enough to know who was and who wasn't regular staff. Except for Phillipe. He acted like he was born there."

Russ chuckled and held up his palm to stop me.

Then I could see and hear again the new concierge on the telephone. "*You can go right up. I'm sure it will be all right,*" he said.

"One of the theories," Russ said, "is that these guys in the trust set her up to be their personal concubine."

He looked over at me for a reaction. I sat frozen.

"They might have been taking turns sharing her favors," he went on. "She was attractive, worldly, someone they could trust to be quiet and, in exchange for money and security, willing to service them and keep her mouth shut. In return, they would protect her and give her and her son a nice life. They may have also employed bodyguards to keep track of her and also to be on the lookout for agents of NAJA. That's the secret police who took over after SAVAK, the henchmen the shah used. Sounds pretty far out but still in line with the ayatollahs wanting to get the money back to Iran."

I couldn't keep up with all that. I was fixated on the trust.

"So you mean...she was their personal whore."

"That's a bit harsh, Steven. I suppose you could put it like that. In addition, maybe on the side — I doubt if the trust knew, or maybe they did, and didn't care — maybe on the side it seems that she was also procuring the wives of some of these guys, and probably the wives of some of their friends, for Zavy. In other words, a mother and son team. She was acting as the madam for his gigolo. And maybe vice versa. Except as far as the trust itself was concerned, they would think that she was only supposed to be sleeping exclusively with them. Taking turns, or whatever. To be sure she stayed healthy. You know what I mean, wasn't passing along any strange germs. Her procuring for Zavy may have been an extracurricular activity. And you were her perfect pick as her cover. You're known as pretty straight shooter. I mean that as a compliment. So, bottom line, they're thinking she might have been using her connections to find wealthy women

for this Zavy guy. They found out and didn't like it. Didn't like what she was doing at all. Could have blown their confidentiality. Could have accidentally exposed them. Or could be that the revolutionary Iranians finally caught up with her."

I leaned on my elbow and covered my mouth. I didn't know what to think or say.

"That does hurt," I finally said. I thought of all the times I watched her taking Zavy through the crowd and introducing him. *Hello there, Zexy*. His client base.

"So," I said, clearing my throat. "Somebody must have got jealous or they found out and thought it was too dangerous. They were willing to trust her but not him. Too many players. Involving Zavy may have put them at risk. They were afraid he might say something off hand. Spoil their little setup."

"Seems like that might be the case. Jealous, or threatened enough to take her out. They aren't calling it a homicide yet. But as for this business about your fingerprint on the secretary, the rest of the apartment was wiped clean. Whomever it was who did this to her just happened to miss that one fingerprint when they did their triple check. She and her date that night drank some wine. There was evidence of that. A little slosh here and there. But all the wine glasses were sparkling clean on her curio shelf when the police arrived. The maid was the one who found her. She swore she hadn't touched a thing."

"I've met the maid. A little lady from Uruguay. I can't picture her drinking out of the bottle."

"Not likely. Wouldn't last long in a place like that. More likely maybe put something nasty in her early morning orange juice. Anyway, the sheets and blankets were in such a tangle they speculate that she must have been in a great deal of pain. And

one more thing. There was also a partial print on the brass front door knob. It matches the bloody fingerprint on the notebook. Xavier de Brun."

I could see the words neatly printed on that one page in the notebook. "*Mama, your face...*" I could see him now. If Xerxes and Zavy were the same person, Zavy was the first to find her dead, panicked and got the hell out of there.

"And nothing yet about Zavy? His whereabouts?" I asked.

"Nothing. They don't even know where he lives."

"So, what now?"

"I'm not sure. It's a complex world out there. That's all I know.

I don't try to figure it out anymore. It's beyond me. Crazy and stupid and unpredictable. But if there's anything else..."

I held up my hand.

"You know what? I'm done. Finished. Kaput. That's enough. Either way. I'm moving on."

"I would agree. Let's get out of here. And let's promise, next time we meet, it's going to be at a party where everybody's laughing and acting silly."

"That's a deal," I said and we shook on it across the table.

Russ started to get up then dropped back down. He hung his head and propped his chin on his fist, pinched his mouth tight. I noticed he was starting to look a bit older.

"Steven, I've been through a few things too. The practice. The politicians. I run into some pretty rough stuff. That world out there, the one I think she came from, is pretty damn weird. It's scary. Those mullahs are totally nuts. Delusional. The Shah was no philanthropist. Who knows? It could have even been his blood hounds. This

concubine business is mostly speculation. Likely, the truth will never be known. Unless the kid shows up and spills the beans. As for me, I think he's probably already dead. Dragged off and dumped somewhere. And these money guys think they can get away with just about anything. Given all that, whatever the circumstances, Maya had some real guts. You might think about cutting her a little slack."

That night Riki and I sat close and cheeky at the movie. We both loved Merchant-Ivory films. The cinematography was superb, as always. Poor Aziz, the main character, was wrongly accused of sexually assaulting a visiting Englishwoman on a misguided day trip he arranged for his guests to see some caves he thought would be of interest. By the time his misadventure was fully sorted out and Aziz exonerated, he had suffered a great loss of dignity and his innocence as well. I could connect with how he felt. In fact I felt outraged at how he had been treated by the bigoted British masters of the Raj.

After the movie, Riki and I sat quietly before dinner looking at one another, taking each other in. We shared some good times between us. She isn't the most sophisticated woman I know or the best educated. She happens to be one of those people who naturally likes who she is and could care less about what anybody else thinks of her. In the chill of winter that night Riki embodied everything I found memorable about the glory and glow of spring and the rampant joy of summertime with her short blond haircut, quirky smile, devil blue eyes — a real life apparition seated across from me in the light of the ornamental lantern on the tabletop. I could feel that I had locked up the spirit of my usual optimism since hearing Maya's news. Riki, I thought, might be the key to unlocking that heavy dark door.

"Are you with us tonight?" she asked.

"A little distracted. A busy day. I just need to transition. I've been thinking too about colonialism."

"That will get you thinking. We, I mean, the Europeans, the Brits, sure have caused those people a lot of pain."

"I see you've been reading."

"I do that from time to time."

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. A lot on my mind. And I've been sitting here trying to remember. Where did you say you're from originally?"

"Along with everything else? That's what you've been thinking?"

That helped to break the ice. The way she said it. We shared a laugh that brought us back into being partners in mischief.

"A lot on my mind."

"I get it. But I'll fess up. If you must know. Greater Des Moines, Iowa," she grinned, showing the charming tangle of her front teeth.

Instead of a full course dinner we ordered a large helping of oysters on the half shell, an easy-to-digest salad and two rounds of fishbowl sized Cabernets. By the time we finished and did some catching up, it was late. Her goodnight kiss outside the restaurant was joyfully fervent and deeply appreciated. I promised to call her again soon. I waved down a cab, helped her in and blew her another kiss. When the taxi disappeared around the corner I decided I needed a long walk. The cold night air cleared my sinuses and lifted some of the heaviness I'd been carrying around.

Just inside the door of my apartment I slipped off my shoes and stockings and relished the comfort of my bare feet in the soft carpet. I clicked on the fireplace with the remote, poured a cognac and took it over by the window. The window rose from the floor to the ceiling and swept across the entire length of the wall looking out over the fantasy of Manhattan. I swirled the cognac in the sparkling crystal of the glass and relished a deep first swallow that slid to the bottom of my soul. Maya's stunning face immediately came to mind. The sudden tears that followed confused me, whether anger, hurt, sadness, I couldn't imagine. Goddamn it though, I'd allowed myself to fall in love with her.