

I

It's the first day of spring 2001, and Maxine Tarnow, though some still have her in their system as Loeffler, is walking her boys to school. Yes maybe they're past the age where they need an escort, maybe Maxine doesn't want to let go just yet, it's only a couple blocks, it's on her way to work, she enjoys it, so?

This morning, all up and down the streets, what looks like every Callery Pear tree on the Upper West Side has popped overnight into clusters of white pear blossoms. As Maxine watches, sunlight finds its way past rooflines and water tanks to the end of the block and into one particular tree, which all at once is filled with light.

"Mom?" Ziggy in the usual hurry. "Yo."

"Guys, check it out, that tree?"

Otis takes a minute to look. "Awesome, Mom."

"Doesn't suck," Zig agrees. The boys keep going, Maxine regards the tree half a minute more before catching up. At the corner, by reflex, she drifts into a pick so as to stay between them and any driver whose idea of sport is to come around the corner and run you over.

Sunlight reflected from east-facing apartment windows has begun to show up in blurry patterns on the fronts of buildings across the

street. Two-part buses, new on the routes, creep the crosstown blocks like giant insects. Steel shutters are being rolled up, early trucks are double-parking, guys are out with hoses cleaning off their piece of sidewalk. Unsheltered people sleep in doorways, scavengers with huge plastic sacks full of empty beer and soda cans head for the markets to cash them in, work crews wait in front of buildings for the super to show up. Runners are bouncing up and down at the curb waiting for lights to change. Cops are in coffee shops dealing with bagel deficiencies. Kids, parents, and nannies wheeled and afoot are heading in all different directions for schools in the neighborhood. Half the kids seem to be on new Razor scooters, so to the list of things to keep alert for add ambush by rolling aluminum.

The Otto Kugelblitz School occupies three adjoining brownstones between Amsterdam and Columbus, on a cross street *Law & Order* has so far managed not to film on. The school is named for an early psychoanalyst who was expelled from Freud's inner circle because of a recapitulation theory he'd worked out. It seemed to him obvious that the human life span runs through the varieties of mental disorder as understood in his day—the solipsism of infancy, the sexual hysterias of adolescence and entry-level adulthood, the paranoia of middle age, the dementia of late life . . . all working up to death, which at last turns out to be “sanity.”

“Great time to be finding *that* out!” Freud flicking cigar ash at Kugelblitz and ordering him out the door of Berggasse 19, never to return. Kugelblitz shrugged, emigrated to the U.S., settled on the Upper West Side, and built up a practice, soon accumulating a network of high-and-mighty who in some moment of pain or crisis had sought his help. During the fancy-schmancy social occasions he found himself at increasingly, whenever he introduced them to one another as “friends” of his, each would recognize another repaired spirit.

Whatever Kugelblitzian analysis was doing for their brains, some of these patients were getting through the Depression nicely enough to kick in start-up money after a while to found the school, and to duke

Kugelblitz in on the profits, plus creation of a curriculum in which each grade level would be regarded as a different kind of mental condition and managed accordingly. A loony bin with homework, basically.

This morning as always Maxine finds the oversize stoop aswarm with pupils, teachers on wrangler duty, parents and sitters, and younger siblings in strollers. The principal, Bruce Winterslow, acknowledging the equinox in a white suit and panama hat, is working the crowd, all of whom he knows by name and thumbnail bio, patting shoulders, genially attentive, schmoozing or threatening as the need arises.

“Maxi, hi?” Vyrva McElmo, gliding across the porch through the crowd, taking much longer than she has to, a West Coast thing, it seems to Maxine. Vyrva is a sweetheart but not nearly time-obsessed enough. People been known to get their Upper West Side Mom cards pulled for far less than she gets away with.

“I’m like in another scheduling nightmare this afternoon?” she calls from a few strollers away, “nothing too major, well not yet anyway, but at the same time . . .”

“No prob,” just to speed things up a little, “I’ll bring Fiona back to our place, you can come get her whenever.”

“Thanks, really. I’ll try not to be too late.”

“She can always sleep over.”

Before they got to know each other, Maxine would bring out herbal tea, after putting on a pot of coffee for herself, till Vyrva inquired, pleasantly enough, “Like I’m wearing California plates on my butt, or what?” This morning Maxine notes a change from the normal weekday throw-together, what Barbie used to call an Executive Lunch Suit instead of denim overalls, for one thing, hair up instead of in the usual blond braids, and the plastic monarch butterfly earrings replaced by what, diamond studs, zircons? Some appointment later in the day, business matters no doubt, job hunting, maybe another financing expedition?

Vyrva has a degree from Pomona but no day job. She and Justin are transplants, Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley. Justin and a friend from Stan-

ford have a little start-up that somehow managed to glide through the dotcom disaster last year, though not with what you'd call irrational exuberance. So far they've been coming up OK with the tuition at Kugelblitz, not to mention rent for the basement and parlor floors of a brownstone off Riverside, which the first time Maxine saw she had a real-estate envy attack. "Magnificent residence," she pretended to kvell, "maybe I'm in the wrong business?"

"Talk to Bill Gates here," Vyrva nonchalant, "I'm just hangin out, waitin for my stock options to vest? Right, honey?"

California sunshine, snorkel-deep waters, most of the time anyway. Once in a while, though . . . Maxine hasn't been in the business she's in for this long without growing antennas for the unspoken. "Good luck with it, Vyrva," thinking, Whatever it is, and noting a slow California double take as she exits the stoop, kissing her kids on top of their heads on the way past, and resumes the morning commute.

Maxine runs a small fraud-investigating agency down the street, called Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em—she once briefly considered adding "and Jail 'Em," but grasped soon enough how wishful, if not delusional, this would be—in an old bank building, entered by way of a lobby whose ceiling is so high that back before smoking was outlawed sometimes you couldn't even see it. Opened as a temple of finance shortly before the Crash of 1929, in a blind delirium not unlike the recent dotcom bubble, it's been configured and reconfigured over the years since into a drywall palimpsest accommodating wayward schoolkids, hash-pipe dreamers, talent agents, chiropractors, illegal piecework mills, mini-warehouses for who knows what varieties of contraband, and these days, on Maxine's floor, a dating service called Yenta Espresso, the In 'n' Out Travel Agency, the fragrant suite of acupuncturist and herb specialist Dr. Ying, and down the hall at the very end the Vacancy, formerly Packages Unlimited, seldom visited even when it was occupied. Current tenants remember the days when those now chained and padlocked doors were flanked by Uzi-packing gorillas in uniform, who signed for mysterious shipments and deliveries. The chance that automatic-weapons fire might break out

at any minute put a sort of motivational edge on the day, but now the Vacancy just sits there, waiting.

The minute she steps out of the elevator, Maxine can hear Daytona Lorrain down the hall and through the door, set to high-dramatic option, abusing the office phone again. She tiptoes in about the time Daytona screams, "I'll sign them muthafuckin papers then I'm outta here, you wanna be a dad, you take care of that whole shit," and slams the phone down.

"Morning," Maxine chirps in a descending third, sharpening the second note maybe a little.

"Last call for his ass."

Some days it seems like every lowlife in town has Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em on their grease-stained Rolodex. A number of phone messages have piled up on the answering machine, breathers, telemarketers, even a few calls to do with tickets currently active. After some triage on the playback, Maxine returns an anxious call from a whistle-blower at a snack-food company over in Jersey which has been secretly negotiating with ex-employees of Krispy Kreme for the illegal purchase of top-secret temperature and humidity settings on the donut purveyor's "proof box," along with equally classified photos of the donut extruder, which however now seem to be Polaroids of auto parts taken years ago in Queens, Photoshopped and whimsically at that. "I'm beginning to think something's funny about this deal," her contact's voice trembling a little, "maybe not even legit."

"Maybe, Trevor, because it's a criminal act under Title 18?"

"It's an FBI sting operation!" Trevor screams.

"Why would the FBI—"

"Duh-uh? Krispy Kreme? On behalf of their brothers in law enforcement at all levels?"

"All right. I'll talk to them at the Bergen County DA, maybe they've heard something—"

"Wait, wait, somebody's coming, now they saw me, oh! maybe I better—" The line goes dead. Always happens.

She now finds herself reluctantly staring at the latest of she's lost count how many episodes of inventory fraud involving gizmo retailer Dwayne Z. ("Dizzy") Cubitts, known throughout the Tri-State Area for his "Uncle Dizzy" TV commercials, delivered as he is spun around at high speed on some kind of a turntable, like a little kid trying to get high ("Uncle Dizzy! Turns prices around!") schlepping closet organizers, kiwi peelers, laser-assisted wine-bottle openers, pocket rangefinders that scan the lines at the checkout and calculate which is likely to be shortest, audible alarms that attach to your TV remote so you'll never lose it, unless you lose the remote for the alarm also. None of them for sale in stores yet, but they can be seen in action any late night on TV.

Though he has approached the gates of Danbury more than once, Dizzy remains gripped in a fatality for sublegal choices, putting Maxine herself on moral pathways that would make a Grand Canyon burro think twice. The problem being Dizzy's charm, at least a just-off-the-turntable naïveté that Maxine can't quite believe is fake. For the ordinary fraudster, family disruption, public shame, some time in the joint are enough to get them to seek legal if not honest employment. But even among the low-stakes hustlers she is doomed to deal with, Dizzy's learning curve is permanently flatlined.

Since yesterday an Uncle Dizzy's branch manager out on Long Island, some stop on the Ronkonkoma line, has been leaving increasingly disoriented messages. A warehouse situation, inventory irregularities, something a little different, fucking Dizzy, please. When will Maxine be allowed to kick back, become Angela Lansbury, dealing only with class tickets, instead of exiled out here among the dim and overextended?

On her last Uncle Dizzy field visit out there, Maxine came around the corner of a towering stack of cartons and actually collided with whom but Dizzy himself, wearing a Crazy Eddie T-shirt in eye-catching yellow, creeping around behind some auditing team, average age of twelve, their firm being notorious for hiring solvent abusers, videogame addicts, diagnosed cases of impaired critical thinking, and assigning them immediately to asset inventory.

“Dizzy, what.”

“Oops, I did it again, as Britney always sez.”

“Look at this,” stomping up and down the aisles taking and lifting sealed cartons at random. A number of these, to somebody’s surprise maybe, not Maxine’s, seemed, though sealed, to have nothing inside. Gee. “Either I’m Wonder Woman here, or we’re experiencing a little inventory inflation? . . . You don’t want to stack these dummy cartons up too high, Dizzy, one look at the bottom layer and how it *isn’t* buckling under all the weight on top? usually a pretty good tipoff, and, and this kid auditing team, you should really at least let them clear the building *before* you bring the truck up to the loading dock to shift the same set of cartons over to the next fucking *branch store*, see what I’m saying . . .”

“But,” eyes wide as fairground lollipops, “it worked for Crazy Eddie.”

“Crazy Eddie went to jail, Diz. You’re headed for another indictment to add to your collection.”

“Hey, no worries, it’s New York, grand juries here will indict a salami.”

“So . . . right now, what do we do? I should be calling in the SWAT team?”

Dizzy smiled and shrugged. They stood in the cardboard-and-plastic-smelling shadows, and Maxine, whistling “Help Me Rhonda” through her teeth, resisted the urge to run him down with a forklift.

She glares now at Dizzy’s file for as long as she can without opening it. Spiritual exercise. The intercom buzzes. “There’s some Reg somebody here don’t have an appointment?”

Saved. She puts aside the folder, which like a good koan will have failed to make sense anyway. “Well, Reg. Do get your ass on in here. Long time.”

## 2

Couple years in fact. Reg Despard looks considerably hammered at by the interval. He's a documentary guy who began as a movie pirate back in the nineties, going into matinees with a borrowed camcorder to tape first-run features off the screen, from which he then duped cassettes that he sold on the street for a dollar, two sometimes if he thought he could get it, often turning a profit before the movie was through its opening weekend. Professional quality tended to suffer around the edges, noisy filmgoers bringing their lunch in loud paper bags or getting up in the middle of the movie to block the view, often for minutes of running time. Reg's grip on the camcorder not always being that steady, the screen would also wander around in the frame, sometimes slow and dreamy though other times with stunning abruptness. When Reg discovered the zoom feature on his camcorder, there was a lot of zooming in and out for what you'd have to call its own sake, details of human anatomy, extras in crowd scenes, hip-looking cars in the background traffic, so forth. One fateful day in Washington Square, Reg happened to sell one of his cassettes to a professor at NYU who taught film, who next day came running down the street after Reg to ask, out



of breath, if Reg knew how far ahead of the leading edge of this post-modern art form he was working, “with your neo-Brechtian subversion of the diegesis.”

Because this somehow sounded like a pitch for a Christian weight-loss program, Reg’s attention began to drift, but the eager academic persisted, and soon Reg was showing his tapes to doctoral seminars, from which it was only a step to shooting his own pictures. Industrials, music videos for unsigned bands, late-night infomercials for all Maxi knows. Work is work.

“Looks like I’m catching you at a busy time.”

“Seasonal. Passover, Easter week, NCAA playoffs, St. Patrick’s on a Saturday, da yoozh, not a problem, Reg—so what have we got here, a matrimonial?” Some call this brusque, and it has lost Maxine some business. On the other hand, it weeds out the day-trippers.

A wistful head angle, “Not an issue since ’98 . . . wait, ’99?”

“Ah. Down the hall, Yenta Espresso, check it out, coffee dates are their specialty, first latte grosso’s free if you remember to ask Edith for the coupon— OK, Reg, so if it’s nothing domestic . . .”

“It’s this company I’ve been shooting a documentary about? I keep running into . . .” One of those funny looks Maxine by now knows better than to ignore.

“Attitude.”

“Access issues. Too much I’m not being told.”

“And are we talking recent here, or will this mean going back into history, unreadable legacy software, statutes about to run?”

“Nah, this is one of the dotcoms that *didn’t* go under last year in the tech crash. No old software,” half a decibel too quiet, “and maybe no statute of limitations either.”

Uh-oh. “‘Cause see, if all you want’s an asset search, you don’t need a forensic person really, just go on the Internet, LexisNexis, HotBot, AltaVista, if you can keep a trade secret, don’t rule out the Yellow Pages—”

“What I’m really looking for,” solemn more than impatient, “probably won’t be anyplace any search engine can get to.”

“Because . . . what you’re looking for . . .”

“Just normal company records—daybooks, ledgers, logs, tax sheets. But try to have a look, and that’s when it gets weird, everything stashed away far far beyond the reach of LexisNexis.”

“How’s that?”

“Deep Web? No way for surface crawlers to get there, not to mention the encryption and the strange redirects—”

Oh. “Maybe you need more of an IT type to look at this? ’cause I’m not really—”

“Already have one on the case. Eric Outfield, Stuyvesant genius, certified badass, popped at a tender age for computer tampering, trust him totally.”

“Who are these people, then?”

“A computer-security firm downtown called hashslingrz.”

“Heard of them around, yes doing quite well indeed, p/e ratio approaching the science-fictional, hiring all over the place.”

“Which is the angle I want to take. Survive and prosper. Upbeat, right?”

“But . . . wait . . . a movie about hashslingrz? Footage of what, nerds staring at screens?”

“Original script had a lot of car chases, explosions, but somehow the budget . . . I have this tiny advance the company’s kicking in, plus I’m allowed total access, or so I thought till yesterday, which is when I figured I’d better see you.”

“Something in the accounting.”

“Just like to know who I’m working for. I haven’t sold my soul yet—well, maybe a couple bars of rhythm and blues here and there, but I figured I’d better have Eric do some looking around. You know anything about their CEO, Gabriel Ice?”

“Dimly.” Cover stories in the trades. One of the boy billionaires who walked away in one piece when the dotcom fever broke. She can recall

photos, off-white Armani suit, tailor-made beaver fedora, not actually bestowing papal blessings right and left but prepared to should the need arise . . . permission note from his parents instead of a pocket square. “I read as far as I could, I’m not, like, gripped. He makes Bill Gates look charismatic.”

“That’s only his party mask. He has deep resources.”

“You’re suggesting what, mob, covert ops?”

“According to Eric, a purpose on earth written in code none of us can read. Except maybe for 666, which tends to recur. Reminds me, you still have that concealed-carry permit?”

“Licensed to pack, ready to roll, uh-huh . . . why?”

A little evasive, “These people are not . . . what you usually find in the tech world.”

“Like . . .”

“Nowhere near geeky enough, for one thing.”

“That’s . . . it? Reg, in my vast experience, embezzlers don’t need shooting at very often. Some public humiliation usually does the trick.”

“Yeah,” almost apologetic, “but suppose this isn’t embezzlement. Or not only. Suppose there’s something else.”

“Deep. Sinister. And they’re all in on it together.”

“Too paranoid for you?”

“Not me, paranoia’s the garlic in life’s kitchen, right, you can never have too much.”

“So then there shouldn’t be any problem . . .”

“I hate when people say that. But sure, I’ll have a look and let you know.”

“Ah-right! Makes a man feel like Erin Brockovich!”

“Hm. Well, we do come to an awkward question. I guess you aren’t here to hire me or anything, right? Not that I mind working on spec, it’s just that there are ethical angles here, such as ambulance chasing?”

“Don’t you people have an oath? Like if you see fraud in progress—?”

“That was *Fraudbusters*, they had to cancel it, gave people too many ideas. Rachel Weisz wasn’t bad, though.”

“Just sayin that ’cause you’re lookalikes.” Smiling, hands and thumbs up as if framing a shot.

“Why, Reg.”

This was a point you always got to with Reg. First time they met was on a cruise, if you think of “cruise” in maybe more of a specialized way. In the wake of her separation, back in what still isn’t quite The Day, from her then husband, Horst Loeffler, after too many hours indoors with the blinds drawn listening on endless repeat to Stevie Nicks singing “Landslide” on a compilation tape she ignored the rest of, drinking horrible Crown Royal Shirley Temples and chasing them with more grenadine directly from the bottle and going through a bushel per day of Kleenex, Maxine finally allowed her friend Heidi to convince her that a Caribbean cruise would somehow upgrade her mental prognosis. One day she went sniffing down the hall from her office and into the In ’n’ Out Travel Agency, where she found undusted surfaces, beat-up furniture, a disheveled model of an ocean liner that shared a number of design elements with RMS *Titanic*.

“You’re in luck. We’ve just had a . . .” Long pause, no eye contact.

“Cancellation,” suggested Maxine.

“You could say.” The price was irresistible. To anyone in their right mind, too much so.

Her parents were more than happy to look after the boys. Maxine, still runny-nosed, found herself in a taxi with Heidi, who’d come along to see her off, headed for a terminal in Newark or possibly Elizabeth, which seemed to handle mostly freighters, in fact Maxine’s “cruise” ship turned out to be the Hungarian tramp container vessel M/V *Aristide Olt*, sailing under a Marshallese flag of convenience. It wasn’t till her first night out at sea that she learned she’d actually been booked into “AMBO-PEDIA Frolix ’98,” a yearly gathering of the American Borderline Personality Disorder Association. Great fun, who would have dreamt of

canceling? Unless . . . ahhh! She gazed back at Heidi on the pier, possibly having some *schadenfreude*, diminishing into the industrial shoreline, which by now was too far away to swim to.

At the first seating for dinner that evening, she found a crowd in the mood to party, gathered beneath a banner reading *WELCOME BORDERLINES!* The captain appeared nervous and kept finding excuses to spend time under the tablecloth of his table. About every minute and a half, a deejay cued up the semiofficial *AMBOPEdia* anthem, Madonna's "Borderline" (1984), with everybody joining in on the part that goes "O-verthe bor-derlinne!!!" with a peculiar emphasis on the final *n* sound. Some sort of tradition, Maxine imagined.

Later in the evening, she noticed a calmly drifting presence, eyeball stuck to a viewfinder, taping lensworthy targets of opportunity with a Sony VX2000, moving from guest to guest, allowing them to talk or not talk, whatever, and this turned out to be Reg Despard.

Thinking it might be a way out of this possibly horrible mistake she'd made, she tried to follow him on his pathway among the merry-makers. "Hey," after a while, "a stalker, I'm finally in the big time."

"Didn't mean to—"

"No, actually you could help me distract them a little, not feel so self-conscious."

"Wouldn't want to compromise your cred, I'm weeks overdue at the colorist, this whole puttogether here ran me under a hundred bucks at Filene's Basement—"

"Don't think that's what they'll be checkin' out."

Well. When was the last time anybody suggested even this obliquely that she qualified as . . . maybe not arm candy, but arm popcorn maybe? Should she be offended? How little?

Tracking from one group of attendees to another, locating presently a normal-enough-looking citizen with an interest in migratory-bird hunting and conservation stamps, known to collectors as duck stamps, and his perhaps-less-involved wife, Gladys—

“ . . . and my dream is to become the Bill Gross of duck stamps.” Not only federal duck stamps, mind you, but every state issue as well—having wandered with the years into the seductive wetlands of philatelic zealotry, this by-now-shameless completist must have them all, hunters’ and collectors’ versions, artist-signed, remarques, varieties, freaks and errors, governors’ editions . . . “New Mexico! New Mexico issued duck stamps only from 1991 through 1994, ending with the crown jewel of all duck stamps, Robert Steiner’s supernaturally beautiful Green-Winged Teals in flight, of which I happen to own a plate block . . .”

“Which someday,” Gladys announces chirpily, “I am going to take out of its archival plastic, compromise the gum on the back with my slobbering tongue, and use to send in the gas bill.”

“Not valid for postage, honeybunch.”

“You staring at my ring?” A woman in a beige eighties power suit entering the shot.

“Attractive piece. Something . . . familiar . . .”

“I don’t know if you’re a *Dynasty* person, but that time Krystle had to pawn her ring? this is a cubic zirconia knockoff, \$560, retail of course, Irwin always pays retail, being the 301 point 83 in the relationship, I’m just the supportive partner. He drags me to these things every year, and I end up pigging my way into a mid-two-figures dress size ’cause there’s never anybody to talk to.”

“Don’t listen to her, she’s the one who has all two hundred—whatever episodes on Betamax. Focused? you have no idea—sometime in the mid-eighties, she actually changed her *name* to Krystle. A less understanding husband might call this unnatural.”

Reg and Maxine find their way eventually to the onboard casino, where people in ill-fitting tuxedos and gowns are playing roulette and baccarat, chain-smoking, leering back and forth, and grimly waving fistfuls of make-believe money. “Jujubes,” they’re informed, “Generic Undiagnosed James Bond Syndrome, whole different support group. Hasn’t made it into the *DSM* yet, but they’re lobbying, maybe the fifth edition . . .

always welcome here at convention time mostly for the stability, see what I'm saying." Actually, Maxine didn't, but bought a "five-dollar" chip and walked away from the table with enough, had it been real money, for a short trip to Saks if and when she was lucky enough to get back off of this.

At some point a face rosy with drink, fatefully belonging to one Joel Wiener, appears in the viewfinder. "Yeah, I get it, you recognize me from the news coverage, and now I'm just camera fodder, right? even though I was acquitted, in fact for the third time, on charges of that nature." Proceeding to unstopper a lengthy epic of injustice, somehow related to Manhattan real estate, that Maxine has trouble following in all of its nuances. Maybe she should have, it could've saved her some trouble down the line.

Borderlines by the boatload. Eventually Maxine and Reg find a quiet few minutes out on deck watching the Caribbean glide by. Cargo containers tower everywhere, stacked up four or five high. Like being in certain parts of Queens. Not yet mentally all the way on board this cruise, she finds herself wondering how many of the containers are dummies and what the chances might be for some seagoing inventory fraud in progress here.

She notices Reg hasn't made any attempt to get her on videotape. "I didn't have you figured for a borper. Thought you might be staff, like a social director or something." Surprised that it's been, oh, maybe an hour or more since she last thought about the Horst situation, Maxine understands that if she gets so much as a toenail's worth into that subject, Reg's camera will come on again.

The long-standing practice at these AMBOPEDIA get-togethers is to visit literal geographical borderlines, a different one every year. Shopping tours at Mexican *maquiladora* outlets. Gambling-addiction indulgence at the casinos of Stateline, California. Pennsylvania Dutch pig-outs along the Mason-Dixon Line. This year the destination borderline is between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, uneasy with melancholy karma dat-

ing back to the days of the Perejil Massacre, little of which has found its way into the brochure. As the *Aristide Olt* sails into picturesque Manzanillo Bay, things rapidly grow unfocused. No sooner has the ship tied up to the pier at Pepillo Salcedo than passengers preoccupied with large fish are excitedly chartering boats to go out after tarpon. Others, like Joel Wiener, whom real estate has driven from curiosity into obsession, are soon cruising local agencies and being dragged into the fantasies of those from whose motives greed, not to mention fuck-the-yanqui, must not be ruled out.

Folks ashore talk a combination of Kreyòl and Cibaëño. At the end of the pier, souvenir stands have quickly materialized, snack vendors selling yaniqueques and chimichurros, practitioners of voodoo and Santería with spells for sale, purveyors of mamajuana, a Dominican specialty which comes in gigantic glass jars in each of which what looks like a piece of a tree has been marinating in red wine and rum. For a cross-borderline cherry on the sundae, there's also been an authentic *Haitian voodoo love spell* laid on each jar of Dominican mamajuana. "Now you're talking!" cries Reg. He and Maxine join a small group who have begun drinking the stuff and passing jars around, presently finding themselves a few miles out of town at El Sueño Tropical, a half-built and for the moment abandoned luxury hotel, screaming through the corridors, swinging across the courtyard on jungle vines, which have found a purchase overhead, chasing lizards and flamingos not to mention one another, and misbehaving on the moldering king-size beds.

Love, exciting and new, as they used to sing on *The Love Boat*, Heidi was right on the money, this was Just the Ticket all right, though later Maxine would not be so sure of the details.

Picking up memory's remote now, she hits PAUSE, then STOP, then POWER OFF, smiling without visible effort. "Peculiar cruise, Reg."

"You ever hear from any of those folks again?"

"An e-mail now and then, and every holiday season of course



AMBOPEDIA's after me for a donation." She peers at him over the rim of her coffee cup. "Reg, did we ever, um . . ."

"I don't think so, I was mostly with that Leptandra from Indianapolis, and you kept disappearing with the real-estate obsessive."

"Joel Wiener," Maxine's eyeballs, in semi-horrified embarrassment, scanning the ceiling.

"I wasn't gonna bring that up, sorry."

"You heard about them pulling my license. That was indirectly Joel. Who, without meaning to, did me such a mitzvah. Like when I was a CFE I was cute, but a defrocked CFE? I'm irresistible. To a certain type. You can imagine what comes in the door, nothing personal."

The big selling point about a Certified Fraud Examiner gone rogue, she guessed, is a halo of faded morality, a reliable readiness to step outside the law and share the trade secrets of auditors and tax men. Having run into cultists who'd been expelled from their cults, Maxine was afraid for a while it would be that kind of social badlands. But word had gotten around, and soon Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em had more business than ever, more than she could handle. New clients were not of course always as reputable as they'd been in her licensed days. Darkside wannabes oozing out of the damn wallpaper, among them Joel Wiener, for whom she found herself cutting what turned out to be way too much slack.

Regrettably, Joel had somehow forgotten to include in his long recitals of real-estate injustice certain crucial details, such as his habit of committing serial co-op board membership, the beefs resulting over sums entrusted to him, typically, as co-op treasurer, plus the civil RICO indictment in Brooklyn, the wife with a real-estate agenda of her own, "It goes on. Not easy to explain," wiggling all her fingers above her head, "Antennas. I felt comfortable enough about Joel to share a few tricks of the trade. For me, no worse than an IRS guy moonlighting as a tax preparer."

But running her gravely afoul of the ACFE Code of Conduct, which

Maxine in fact had been skating up to and all along the posted edges of for years. This time the ice, without creak or visible darkening, had given beneath her. Enough of the review committee saw conflict of interest, not only once but a pattern, where for Maxine it was, still is for that matter, a no-brainer of a choice between friendship and super-picky guideline adherence.

“Friendship?” Reg is puzzled. “You didn’t even like him.”

“A technical term.”

The stationery the decertification letter came on was pretty fancy, worth more than the message, which was basically fuck you, plus canceling all her privileges at The Eighth Circle, an exclusive CFEs’ club over on Park, with a reminder to return her member’s card and settle her bar tab, which showed a balance. There did seem to be a P.S. at the bottom, however, about filing an appeal. They included forms. This was interesting. This would not go into Accounts Shreddable, not just yet. Alarmingly, what Maxine noticed for the first time was the Association seal, which showed a torch burning violently in front of and slightly above an opened book. What’s this? any minute the pages of this book, maybe allegorically The Law, are about to be set on fire by this burning torch, possibly the Light of Truth? Is somebody trying to say something, the Law in flames here, the terrible inflexible price of Truth . . . That’s it! Secret anarchist code messages!

“Interesting thought, Maxine,” Reg trying to talk her down. “So you filed the appeal?”

Actually, no—as days passed, there were always reasons not to, she couldn’t afford the legal fees, the appeals process could all be just for show, and the fact remained that colleagues she respected had thrown her out on her ear, and did she really want back into that kind of vindictive surroundings. Sort of thing.

“A little oversensitive, these guys,” seems to Reg.

“Can’t blame them. They want us to be the one incorruptible still point in the whole jittery mess, the atomic clock everybody trusts.”

“You said ‘us.’”

“The certificate’s put away in storage, but still hanging on the office wall of my soul.”

“Some rogue.”

“*Bad Accountant*, it’s a series I’m developing, here, I got a script for the pilot, you wanna read it?”

### 3

**T**he past, hey no shit, it's an open invitation to wine abuse. Soon as she hears the elevator doors close behind Reg, Maxine heads for the refrigerator. Where, in this chilled chaos, is the Pinot E-Grigio? "Daytona, we're out of wine again?"

"Ain't me drinkin that shit up."

"Course not, you're more of a Night Train person."

"Ooh. Do I really need wine-ism today?"

"Hey, you're off it so I'm just kidding, right?"

"Therapism!"

"Beg pardon?"

"You think twelve-step people's a lower class than you, always did, you on some spa program, lay around with the seaweed all on your face and shit, you don't even know what it's like—well, and I am telling you . . ." Pausing dramatically.

"You are not going," Maxine prompts.

"I am telling you, it is work, girl."

"Oh, Daytona. Whatever this is, I'm sorry."

So it all comes plotzing forth, the usual emotional cash-flow statement, full of uncollected receivables and bad debts. Bottom line, "Do

not, ever, associate with nobody from Jamaica the island, he thinks joint custody means who brought the ganja.”

“I was lucky with Horst,” Maxine reflects. “Weed never had any effect on him at all.”

“Figures, it’s that white food y’all eat, white bread and that,” paraphrasing Jimi Hendrix, “mayonnaise! All in your brain—every one of y’all, *terminally* honky.” The phone has been blinking patiently. Daytona gets back to work, leaving Maxine to wonder why Rasta drug preferences should have anything to do with Horst. Unless Horst is somehow on her mind, which she can’t say he has been, not that much, not for a while.

Horst. A fourth-generation product of the U.S. Midwest, emotional as a grain elevator, fatally alluring as a Harley knucklehead, indispensable (God help her) as an authentic Maid-Rite when hunger sets in, Horst Loeffler to this day has enjoyed a nearly error-free history of knowing how certain commodities around the world will behave, long enough before they themselves do to have already made a pile by the time Maxine came into the picture, and to watch it keep growing higher while struggling to remain true to some oath he apparently took at thirty, to spend it as fast as it comes in and keep partying for as long as he can hold out.

“So . . . the alimony’s good?” inquired Daytona, her second day on the job.

“Isn’t any.”

“What?” having a good long stare at Maxine.

“Anything I can help you with?”

“That is the craziest crazy-white-chick story I have heard yet.”

“Get out more,” Maxine shrugged.

“You got some problem with a man partying?”

“Of course not, life is a party isn’t it Daytona, yes and Horst was fine with that, but as he happened to think marriage is a party also, well, that’s where we found we had different thoughts.”

“Her name was Jennifer and shit, right?”

“Muriel. Actually.”

By which point—part of the Certified Fraud Examiner skill set being a tendency to look for hidden patterns—Maxine began to wonder . . . might Horst actually have a preference for women named after inexpensive cigars, was there perhaps a Philippa “Philly” Blunt stashed in London he’s playing FTSE with, some alluring Asian arbitrix named Roi-Tan in a cheongsam and one of those little haircuts . . . “But don’t let’s dwell, because Horst is history.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I got the apartment, of course he got the ’59 Impala in cherry condition, but there I go, whining again.”

“Oh, I thought it was this fridge.”

Daytona is an angel of understanding, of course, next to Maxine’s friend Heidi. The first time they really got to sit down and chat about it, after Maxine had gone on at a length that embarrassed even her.

“He called me up,” Heidi pretended to blurt.

Right. “What, Horst? Called . . .”

“He wanted a date?” eyes too wide for total innocence.

“What’d you tell him?”

A perfect beat and a half, then, “Oh, my God, Maxi . . . I’m so sorry?”

“You? and Horst?” It seemed odd, but not much more than that, which Maxine took as a hopeful sign.

But Heidi seemed upset. “God forgive me! All he did was talk about you.”

“Uh-huh. But?”

“He seemed distant.”

“The three-month LIBOR, no doubt.”

Though this discussion did go on, for a school night, quite late, Heidi’s escapade doesn’t rank as high as some offenses Maxine in fact still finds herself brooding about from back in high school—clothes borrowed but never returned, invitations to nonexistent parties, Heidi-arranged hookups with guys Heidi knew were clinically psychopathic.

Sort of thing. By the time they adjourned for exhaustion, it may have disappointed Heidi a little that her mad fling had somehow only found its natural place among other episodes of a continuing domestic series, begun long ago in Chicago, which is where Horst and Maxine originally met.

Maxine, in on some overnight CFE chore, found herself at the bar in the Board of Trade building, the Ceres Cafe, where the physical size of the drinks had long been part of the folklore. It was happy hour. Happy? My goodness. Irish, which for some says it all. You ordered a “mixed drink,” you got this gigantic glass filled up to the brim with, say, whiskey, maybe one or two tiny ice cubes floating in it, then a separate twelve-ounce can of soda, and then a *second glass* to mix it all in. Maxine somehow got in an argument with a local bozo about Deloitte and Touche, which the bozo, who turned out to be Horst, insisted on calling Louche & De Toilet, and by the time they had this sorted, Maxine wasn’t sure she could even stand up let alone find her way back to the hotel, so Horst kindly saw her into a taxi and apparently slipped her his card also. Before she had a chance to deal with her hangover, he was on the phone snake-oiling her into the first of what would be many ill-fated fraud cases.

“Sister in distress, nobody to turn to,” and so forth, Maxine went for the pitch, as she would continue to, took the case, pretty straightforward asset search, routine depositions, almost forgotten till one day there it was in the *Post*, S-S-S-PLOTZVILLE! SERIAL GOLD DIGGER STRIKES AGAIN, HUBBY DUMBFOUNDED.

“Says here it’s the sixth time she’s cashed in this way,” Maxine thoughtfully.

“Six that we know of,” Horst nodded. “That’s not a problem for you, is it?”

“She marries them and—”

“Marriage agrees with some people. It has to be good for something.”

Oooh.

And why, really, go into the list? From check kitters and French-roundoff artistes to get-even dramas that have pinned her revenge detector way over in the blind, forget-but-never-forgive, sooner-or-later-felonious end of the scale, still she kept going for it, every time. Because it was Horst. Fuckin Horst.

“Got another one for you here, you’re Jewish, right?”

“And you’re not.”

“Me? Lutheran. Not sure what kind anymore ’cause it keeps changing.”

“And my own religious background comes up because . . .”

Kashruth fraud in Brooklyn. Seems a goon squad of fake *mashgichim* or kosher supervisors have been making their way around the neighborhoods pulling surprise “inspections” on different shops and restaurants, selling them fancy-looking certificates to put in the window while rooting through their inventory stamping jive-ass *hechshers* or kosher logos on everything. Mad dogs. “Sounds like more of a shakedown racket,” to Maxine. “I just look at books.”

“Thought you might have a rapport.”

“Try Meyer Lansky—no wait, he’s dead.”

So . . . some kind of Lutheran, huh. Way too early for any *shaygetz*-dating issues to arise of course, still, there it was, the outside-your-faith thing. Later on, deep in the first romantic onset, Maxine was to hear a certain amount of wild—for Horst—talk about converting to Judaism. How ironic that “Jew” also rhymes with “clue.” Eventually Horst became aware of prerequisites such as learning Hebrew and getting circumcised, which triggered the sort of rethink you’d expect. Cool with Maxine. If it’s a truth universally acknowledged that Jews don’t proselytize, Horst certainly was and remains a prime argument for why not.

At some point he offered her a consultancy contract. “I could really use you.”

“Hey, anytime,” a piece of lighthearted industry repartee which this time, however, would prove fateful. Later on, post-nup, she grew much more careful with the blurting, reaching, in fact, along toward the



windup there, almost to the point of silence, while Horst sat grimly pecking at a spreadsheet application he'd found in some Software Etc bargain bin, called Luvbux 6.9, totaling up sums in the range Hefty to Whopping he had spent for the sole purpose of getting Maxine to fall silent. To torture himself further, he then opened a feature that would calculate what it had been costing him per minute of silence actually obtained. Aaahh! bummer!

"Once I realized," as Maxine presented it to Heidi, "that if I complained enough, he'd give me whatever I wanted? just to shut me up? well, the romance, I don't know, somehow went out of it for me."

"As a natural kvetch, it got too easy for you, I understand," Heidi cooed. "Horst is such a pushover. The big alexithymic lug. You never saw that about him. Or rather, you—"

"—saw it too late," Maxine joined in on the chorus of. "Yes, Heidi, and yet despite it all sometimes I would almost welcome somebody that accommodating in my life again."

"You, ah, want his number? Horst?"

"You have it?"

"No, uh-uh, I was going to ask you."

They shake their heads at each other. Without needing a mirror, Maxine knows they look like a couple of depraved grandmas. An untypical adjustment to have to make, their roles being usually a little more glamorous. At some point early in their relationship, which has been forever, Maxine understood that she was not the Princess here. Heidi wasn't either, of course, but Heidi didn't know that, in fact she *thought she was* the Princess and furthermore has come over the years to believe that Maxine is the Princess's slightly less attractive *wacky sidekick*. Whatever the story of the moment happens to be, Princess Heidrophobia is always the lead babe while Lady Maxipad is the fastmouthed soubrette, the heavy lifter, the practical elf who comes while the Princess is sleeping or, more typically, distracted, and gets the real work of the princess-ship done.

It probably helped that they both had East European roots, for even

in those days you could still find on the Upper West Side certain long-lived intra-Jewish distinctions being drawn, least enjoyable maybe the one between Hochdeutsch and Ashkenazi. Mothers were known to shanghai their recently eloped children down to Mexico for quickie divorces from young men with promising careers in brokerage or medicine, or from ravishing tomatoes with more brains than the guy they thought they were marrying, whose fatal handicap was a name from the wrong corner of the Diaspora. Something like this happened in fact to Heidi, whose surname, Czornak, set off all kinds of alarms, though the matter didn't get quite as far as the airplane. On that caper it was the Practical Elf who acted as agent and presently bagperson, holding up the Strubels for a sum nicely in excess of what they had initially offered to buy Heidi, the little Polish snip, off. "Galician, actually," Heidi remarked. It was not for her the issue of conscience Maxine had been afraid of, for Evan Strubel turned out to be a feckless putz who lived in reflexive fear of his mother, Helvetia, whose timely entrance that day in a St. John suit and a snappish mood prevented Evan from putting further moves on Maxine herself, is how serious he was about Heidi to begin with. Not that Maxine shared details of young Strubel's perfidy with the Princess, settling for "I think he sees you mostly as a way to get out of the house." Heidi was far, further than Maxine expected, from desolated. They sat at her vast kitchen table counting the Strubels' money, eating ice-cream sandwiches and cackling. Now and then down the line, under the influence of assorted substances, Heidi would relapse into blubbering, "He was the love of my life, that evil bigoted woman destroyed us," for which the Wacky Sidekick would always be there with a witty remark like "Face it, babe, her tits are bigger."

Certain lobes of Heidi's spirit may have been compromised—because Mrs. Strubel had perhaps only casually threatened Mexican divorce, for example, Heidi presently found herself in a struggle with the Spanish tongue rivaling that of Bob Barker at a Miss Universe pageant. The language question in turn spilled over into other areas. Heidi's idea

of the echt Latina seemed to be Natalie Wood in *West Side Story* (1961). It did no good to point out, as Maxine has done again and again with dwindling patience, that Natalie Wood, born Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko, came from a somewhat Russian background and her accent in the picture is possibly closer to Russian than to *boricua*.

Putzboy went on into a Wall Street apprenticeship, and has probably been through several more wives by now. Heidi, relieved to be single, pursued a career in academia, having recently been given tenure at City College in the pop-culture department.

“You totally pulled my meatloaf out of the microwave on that one,” Heidi airily, “don’t think I’m not eternally grateful.”

“What choice did I have, you always thought you were Grace Kelly.”

“Well, I was. Am.”

“Not career Grace Kelly,” Maxine points out. “Only, specifically, *Rear Window* Grace Kelly. Back when we used to surveil the windows across the street.”

“You sure about that? You know what that makes you.”

“Thelma Ritter, yeah, but maybe not. I thought I was Wendell Corey.”

Teen mischief. If there can be haunted houses, there can also be karmically challenged apartment buildings, and the one they liked to spy on, The Deseret, has always made The Dakota look like a Holiday Inn. The place has obsessed Maxine for as long as she can remember. She grew up across the street from where it still looms over the neighborhood, trying to pass as just another stolid example of Upper West Side apartment house, twelve stories and a full square block of sinister clutter—helical fire escapes at each corner, turrets, balconies, gargoyles, scaled and serpentine and fanged creatures in cast iron over the entrances and coiled around the windows. In the central courtyard stands an elaborate fountain, surrounded by a circular driveway big enough to allow a couple of stretch limos to sit there and idle, with room left over for a Rolls-Royce

or two. Film crews come here to shoot features, commercials, series, blasting huge volumes of light into the unappeasable maw of the entranceway, keeping everybody for blocks around up all night. Though Ziggy claims to have a classmate who lives there, it's far from Maxine's social circle, key money even for a studio in The Deseret said to run \$300,000 and up.

At some point back in high school, Maxine and Heidi bought cheap binoculars down on Canal and took to lurking in Maxine's bedroom, sometimes into the early A.M., staring over at the lighted windows across the way, waiting for something to happen. Any appearance of a human figure was a major event. At first Maxine found it romantic, all the mutually disconnected lives going on in parallel—later she came to take more of a what you'd call gothic approach. Other buildings might be haunted, but this one seemed itself the undead thing, the stone zombie, rising only when night fell, stalking unseen through the city to work out its secret compulsions.

The girls kept hatching schemes to sneak in, swanning, or possibly pigeoning, their way up to the gate carrying street Chanel bags and disguised in designer dresses from East Side consignment shops, but never got further than a long, leering vertical scan from an Irish doorman, a glance at a clipboard. "No instructions," shrugging elaborately. "Till I see it on here, you understand what I'm saying," bidding them a peevish good day, the gate clanging shut. When Irish eyes are *not* smiling, you should have a better story or a good pair of running shoes.

This went on until the fitness craze of the eighties, when it dawned on The Deseret management that the pool on the top floor could serve as the focus of a health club, open to visitors, and be good for some nice extra revenue, which is how Maxine was finally allowed upstairs—though, as an outsider or "club member," she still has to go around to the back entrance and take the freight elevator. Heidi has declined to have anything more to do with the place.

“It’s cursed. You notice how early the pool closes, nobody wants to be there at night.”

“Maybe the management don’t want to pay overtime.”

“I heard it’s run by the mob.”

“Which mob exactly, Heidi? And what difference does it make?”

Plenty, as it would turn out.

## 4

Later that afternoon Maxine has an appointment with her emotherapist, who happens to share with Horst an appreciation of silence as one of the world's unpriceable commodities, though maybe not in the same way. Shawn works out of a walk-up near the Holland Tunnel approach. The bio on his Web site refers vaguely to Himalayan wanderings and political exile, but despite claims to an ancient wisdom beyond earthly limits, a five-minute investigation reveals Shawn's only known journey to the East to've been by Greyhound, from his native Southern California, to New York, and not that many years ago. A Leuzinger High School dropout and compulsive surfer, who has taken a certain amount of board-inflicted head trauma while setting records at several beaches for wipeouts in a season, Shawn has in fact never been closer to Tibet than television broadcasts of Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997). That he continues to pay an exorbitant rent on this place and its closetful of twelve identical black Armani suits, speaks less to spiritual authenticity than to a gullibility, otherwise seldom observed, among New Yorkers able to afford his fees.

For a couple of weeks now, Maxine has been showing up for sessions to find her youthful guru increasingly bent out of shape by the

news from Afghanistan. Despite impassioned appeals from around the world, two colossal statues of the Buddha, the tallest standing statues of him in the world, carved in the fifth century from a sandstone cliffside near Bamiyan, have been for a month now dynamited and repeatedly shelled by the Taliban government, till finally being reduced to rubble.

“Fuckin rugriders,” as Shawn expresses it, “‘offensive to Islam’ so blow it up, that’s their solution to everything.”

“Isn’t there something,” Maxine gently recalls, “about if the Buddha’s in your way on the path to enlightenment it’s OK to kill him?”

“Sure, if you’re a Buddhist. These are Wahhabists. They’re pretending it’s spiritual, but it’s political, like they can’t deal with having any competition around.”

“Shawn, I’m sorry. But aren’t you supposed to be above this?”

“Whoa, overattached me. Think about it—all it takes is, like, a idle thumb on a space bar to turn ‘Islam’ into ‘I slam.’”

“Thought-provoking, Shawn.”

A glance at the TAG Heuer on his wrist, “Hope you don’t mind if we run a little short today, *Brady Bunch* marathon, you understand . . . ?” Shawn’s devotion to reruns of the well-known seventies sitcom have drawn comment all up and down his client list. He can footnote certain episodes as other teachers might the sutras, with the three-part family trip to Hawaii seeming to be a particular favorite—the bad-luck tiki, Greg’s near-fatal wipeout, Vincent Price’s cameo as an unstable archaeologist . . .

“I’ve always been more of a Jan-gets-a-wig person myself,” Maxine was once careless enough to admit.

“Interesting, Maxine. You want to, like, talk about it?” Beaming at her with that vacant, perhaps only Californian, the-Universe-is-a-joke-but-you-don’t-get-it smile which so often drives her to un-Buddhist daydreams seething with rage. Maxine doesn’t want to say “airhead” exactly, though she guesses if somebody put a tire gauge in his ear it might read a couple psi below spec.

Later at Kugelblitz, Ziggy gone off to krav maga with Nigel and his

sitter, Maxine picks up Otis and Fiona, who are soon in front of the living-room Tube about to watch *The Aggro Hour*, featuring both of Otis's currently favorite superheroes—Disrespect, notable for his size and attitude, which could be called proactive, and The Contaminator, in civilian life a kid who's obsessively neat about always making his bed and picking up his room but who, when out on duty as TC, becomes a lonely fighter for justice who goes around strewing garbage through disagreeable government agencies, greedy corporations, even entire countries nobody likes much, rerouting waste lines, burying his antagonists beneath mountains of toxic grossness. Trying for poetic justice. Or, as it seems to Maxine, making a big mess.

Fiona is in that valley between powerhouse kid and unpredictable adolescent, having found, long may it wave, an equilibrium that nearly has Maxine wiping her nose here, as she considers on what short notice such calm can be disrupted.

"You're sure," Otis in full being-a-gent mode, "this won't be too violent for you."

Fiona, whose parents actually should consider heartbreaker insurance, bats eyelashes possibly enhanced by a raid on her mom's makeup supplies. "You can tell me not to look."

Maxine, recognizing that girlhood technique of pretending anybody can tell you anything, slides a bowl of health-food Cheetos in front of them, along with two cans of sugar-free soda, and waving *Enjoy*, quits the room.

"Suckers beginnin to get me upset," murmurs Disrespect, as armed personnel carriers and helicopters converge on his person.

ZIGGY COMES IN from krav maga in his usual haze of early-adolescent sex angst. He has a big crush on his instructor, Emma Levin, who's rumored to be ex-Mossad. On the first day of class, his friend Nigel, overinformed and unreflective as always, blurted, "So Ms. Levin, you were what, one of those kidon lady assassins?"



“I could say yes, but then I’d have to kill you,” her voice low, mocking, erogenous. A number of mouths had dropped open. “Nah, guys, sorry to disappoint, just an analyst, worked in an office, when Shabtai Shavit left in ’96, so did I.”

“She’s a looker, huh?” Maxine couldn’t help inquiring.

“Mom, she’s . . .”

After thirty long seconds, “Words fail you.”

There’s also Naftali, the ex-Mossad b.f., who will kill anybody even looks at her sideways, unless maybe it’s a kid who can’t help having some preadolescent longing.

Vyrva calls to say she won’t be there till after supper. Fortunately, you cannot call Fiona a picky child, in fact there’s nothing she won’t eat.

Maxine finishes up the dishes and puts her head in the boys’ room, where she finds them with Fiona intensely attending to a screen on which is unfolding a first-person shooter, with a generous range of weaponry in a cityscape that looks a lot like New York.

“You guys? What have I been saying about violence?”

“We disabled the splatter options, Mom. It’s all good, watch.” Tapping some keys.

A store something like Fairway, with fresh produce displayed out in front. “OK, now keep an eye on this lady here.” Coming down the sidewalk, middle class, respectably turned out, “Enough money to buy groceries, right?”

“Wrong. Check it out.” The woman pauses in front of the grapes, so far in this dewy morning light unmolested, and without the least sign of guilt begins poking around, picking grapes off stems and eating them. She moves on to the plums and nectarines, fondles a number of these, eats some, stashes a couple more in her purse for later, continues early lunch at the berry section, opening up the packaging and stealing strawberries, blueberries and raspberries, scarfing it all down totally without shame. Reaching for a banana.

“What do you say, Mom, good for a hundred points easy, right?”

“She is quite the fresser. But I don’t think—”

Too late—from the shooter’s edge of the screen now emerges the front end of a Heckler & Koch UMP45, which swivels to point at the human pest, and, accompanied by bass-boosted machine-pistol sound effects, blows her away. Clean. She just disappears, not even a stain on the sidewalk. “See? No blood, virtually nonviolent.”

“But stealing fruit, this isn’t a capital offense. And what if a homeless person—”

“No homeless people on the target list,” Fiona assures her. “No kids, babies, dogs, old people—never. We’re out after yup, basically.”

“What Giuliani would call quality-of-life issues,” adds Ziggy.

“I had no idea grouchy old people designed video games.”

“My dad’s partner Lucas designed it,” sez Fiona. “He calls it his valentine to the Big Apple.”

“We’re beta-testing it for him,” Ziggy explains.

“Bearing eight o’clock,” Otis sez, “dig it.”

Adult male in a suit, carrying a briefcase, standing in the middle of the sidewalk traffic screaming at his kid, who looks to be about four or five. The volume level grows abusive, “And if you don’t—” the grown-up raising his hand ominously, “there’ll be *a consequence*.”

“Uh-uh, not today.” Out comes the full auto option again, and presently the screamer is no more, the kid is looking around bewildered, tears still on his little face. The point total in the corner of the screen increments by 500.

“So now he’s all alone in the street, big favor you did him.”

“All we have to do—” Fiona clicking on the kid and dragging him to a window labeled Safe Pickup Zone. “Trustworthy family members,” she explains, “come and pick them up and buy them pizza and bring them home, and their lives from then on are worry-free.”

“Come on,” sez Otis, “let’s just cruise around.” Off they go on a tour of the inexhaustible galleries of New York annoyance, zapping loudmouths on cellular phones, morally self-elevated bicycle riders, moms wheeling twins old enough to walk lounging in twin strollers, “One be-

hind the other, we let them off with a warning, but not this one, look, side by side so nobody can get past? forget it.” Pow! Pow! The twins go flying, all smiles, above New York and into the Kiddy Bin. Passersby are largely oblivious to the sudden disappearances except for Christers, who think it’s the Rapture. “Guys,” Maxine astonished, “I had no idea— Wait, what’s this?” She has spotted a line jumper at a bus stop. Nobody paying attention. H&Kwoman to the rescue! “All right, how do I do this?” Otis is happy to instruct, and before you can say “Be more considerate,” the pushy bitch has been despatched and her children dragged to safety.

“Way to go Mom, that’s a thousand points.”

“Actually, sort of fun.” Scanning the screen for her next target. “Wait, I didn’t say that.” Trying later to put a positive spin on it, Maxine figures maybe it’s a virtual and kid-scale way of getting into the antifraud business . . .

“Hi, Vyrva, come on in.”

“Didn’t think I’d be this late.” Vyrva goes and puts her head in Otis and Ziggy’s room. “Hi, sweetie?” The girl looks up and murmurs hi, Mom, and gets back to yuppicide.

“Oh, look, they’re blowing away New Yorkers, how cute? I mean, nothing personal?”

“You’re good with this—Fiona, virtual murder sort of thing?”

“Oh, it’s bloodless, like Lucas didn’t even write in a splatter option? They think they’re disabling it, but it’s not even there?”

“So,” shrugging away any scold signifiers in face and voice, “a mom-approved first-person shooter.”

“That’s exactly the slogan we’re gonna use in the ads.”

“You’re advertising where, on the Internet?”

“The Deep Web. Down there advertising is like still in its infancy? And the price is what Bob Barker might call ‘right?’” Air quotes, Vyrva’s hair, back in braids, bouncing to and fro.

Maxine reaches a bag of some Fairway coffee blend out of the freezer and pours beans in the grinder. “Watch your ears a minute.” She

grinds the coffee, pours it into a filter in the electric drip unit, hits the power switch.

“So Justin and Lucas are branching into games now.”

“It isn’t really business the way I learned it in college,” Vyrva confides, “at this point life should be serious? The guys are still having too much fun for their age.”

“Oh—male anxiety, yes that’s much better.”

“The game is just a promotional freebie,” Vyrva frowning cute-apologetic. “Our product is still totally DeepArcher?”

“Which is . . .”

“Like ‘departure,’ only you pronounce it DeepArcher?”

“Zen thing,” Maxine guesses.

“Weed thing. Just lately everybody’s been after the source code—the feds, game companies, fuckin Microsoft? all have offers on the table? It’s the security design—like nothing any of these people’ve ever seen, and it’s makin them all crazy.”

“So, today you were out scouting your next round? Who’s the lucky VC this time?”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“What I do. Professionally D and D.”

“Maybe,” Vyrva considers, “we should pinkie-swear?”

Maxine patiently holding out her pinkie, hooking it with Vyrva’s and obtaining eye contact, “Then again—”

“Hey, if you can’t trust another Kugelblitz mom?”

So, with the usual caveats, Maxine keeps her other hand in her pocket with fingers crossed as she solemnly pinkie-swears. “I think we got a preempt today? Even back at the height of the tech bubble, this would be awesome money? And it’s not a VC, it’s another tech company? Big deal this year down in the Alley, hashslingrz?”

Whoopwhoopwhoop. “Yeah . . . think I’ve . . . heard that name. That’s where you were today?”

“All day down there. I’m still, like, vibrateen? He’s a bundle of energy, that guy.”

“Gabriel Ice. He’s made you a big offer to buy, what, this source code?”

Ear to shoulder, one of those long West Coast shrugs, “He sure came up with a impressive piece of change from someplace? Enough to rethink the IPO? We already put the red herring on indefinite hold?”

“Wait a minute, what’s with acquisition fever down the Alley, didn’t all that go belly-up last year with the crash?”

“Not for the managed-security people, they’re making out fiercely at the moment. When everybody’s nervous, all corporate suits can think about is protecting what they’ve got.”

“So you guys’ve been out schmoozing with Gabriel Ice. Can I have your autograph?”

“We went to an afternoon soiree over at his mansion on the East Side? Him and his wife, Tallis, she’s the comptroller at hashslingrz, sits on the board too, I think?”

“And this is an outright buy?”

“All they want is, there’s a part about getting somewhere without leaving a trail. The content, they could care less. It isn’t about the destination or even the trip, really, not for these jokers.”

Maxine is much too familiar by now, even God forbid intimate, with this cover-your-tracks attitude. Next it morphs from innocent greed into some recognizable form of fraud. She wonders if anybody’s ever run a Beneish model on hashslingrz, just to see how ritually slaughtered the public numbers are. Note to self—find the time. “This DeepArcher, Vyrva, it’s what—a place?”

“It’s a journey. Next time you’re over, the boys’ll give you a demo.”

“Good, haven’t seen that Lucas for a while.”

“He hasn’t been around a lot. There’s been, like, issues? He and Justin find any excuse to get into a fight. whether to even sell the source code in the first place. Same old classic dotcom dilemma, be rich forever or make a tarball out of it and post it around for free, and keep their cred and maybe self-esteem as geeks but stay more or less middle income.”

“Sell it or give it away,” some scrutiny, “tough call, Vyrva. Which one wants to do what?”

“Both want to do both,” she sighs.

“Figures. How about you?”

“Oh? Torn? You’ll think it’s just hippyean around, but I’m not that cool with a whole shitload of money crashing into our life right now? That can be so destructive, we know of one or two people back in Palo Alto, it gets ugly and sad so fast, and I’d rather see the guys keepin on with their work, maybe start up something new.” A tilted grin. “Hard for a New York person to understand, sorry.”

“Seen it forever, Vyrva. Direction of flow, in or out, don’t matter, above a critical amount, it’s all bad.”

“Not that I’m living through my husband, OK? I just hate it when the guys argue. They’re in love, for goodness sakes. They put on all this who-are-you-again-dude, but in fact it’s like a couple of skateboarders together? Should I be jealous?”

“What for?”

“You know this kind of old-school movie where there’s these two kids are best friends and one grows up to be a priest and the other turns out to be a mobster, well, that’s Lucas and Justin. Only don’t ask which is which.”

“But say Justin is the priest . . .”

“Well, the one who . . . doesn’t get into a shoot-out at the end.”

“Then Lucas . . .”

Vyrva looks off into the distance, trying for Surf Bunny Gazes at the Sea but revealing instead a look Maxine has seen maybe more of than she wants to. Don’t—don’t put in, she advises herself, despite the all-but-irresistible question arising, Has Vyrva been shtupping, excuse me, “seeing” her husband’s partner on the sly?

“Vyrva, you’re not . . .”

“Not what?”

“Never mind.” Both women then beam elaborately and shrug, one fast, the other slow.

Another unexplored corner here, of which there are already enough. Maxine has only recently for example found out about Vyrva and Beanie Babies. Seems Vyrva's been out running some arbitrage hustle with the trendy stuffed-toy/beanbag hybrids. Soon after their first play date, "Fiona has every Beanie Baby," Otis nodding for emphasis, "in the world." He thought a minute. "Well, every *kind* of Beanie Baby. Every one in the world, that'd be . . . like warehouses and stuff."

As happened off and on with the boys, Maxine was reminded of Horst, this time of his blockhead literalism, and she had to restrain herself from grabbing Otis, slobbering kisses and squashing him like a tube of toothpaste, and so forth.

"Fiona has . . . the Princess Diana Beanie Baby?" she asked instead.

"The'? Good luck, Mom. She's got all the variations, even the BBC Interview Anniversary Edition. Under the bed, all in the closets, they're pushing her out of her room."

"You're saying Fiona's . . . a Beanie Baby person."

"Not her so much," Otis sez, "it's her mom who's totally the obsessive in the house."

Maxine has noticed that at least once a week, as soon as she has Fiona safely delivered at Kugelblitz, Vyrva is off on the 86th Street cross-town bus headed for yet another Beanie Baby transaction. She has compiled a list of retailers on the East Side who get the critters shipped all but directly in from China by way of certain shadowy warehouses adjoining JFK. 'Suckers don't just fall off the truck, they parachute out of the airplane. Vyrva buys them up dirt cheap on the East Side, then rushes back to various West Side toy and variety stores whose delivery schedules she has carefully recorded, sells them for a price somewhat lower than what the stores will pay when their own truck shows up, and everybody pockets the difference. Meantime Fiona, though not much of a collector, gets to keep on accumulating Beanie Babies.

"And that's just short-term," Vyrva has explained, quite, it seems to Maxine, enthusiastically. "Ten, twelve years down the line, college looming, you know what these are gonna be worth to collectors?"

“Lots?” Maxine guesses.

“Uncomputable.”

Ziggy’s not so sure. “Except for one or two special editions,” he points out, “there’s no packaging on Beanie Babies, which is important to collectors, and also means that 99-plus percent are out there loose in the environment, getting trampled, chewed apart and drooled on, lost under the radiator, eaten by mice, in ten years there won’t be one in collectible condition, unless Mrs. McElmo is stashing them in archival plastic someplace besides Fiona’s room. Like dark and temperature-controlled would be nice. But that’ll never occur to her, because it makes too much sense.”

“You’re saying . . .”

“She’s crazy, Mom.”