



RICH SHAPERO

ISLAND FRUIT REMEDY

A NOVEL

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
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Also by Rich Shapero

Balcony of Fog

Rin, Tongue and Dorner

Arms from the Sea

The Hope We Seek

Too Far

Wild Animus

1

“We float together—unborn twins with shrinking tails and mucid limbs, clasping each other in an inky blur. Your shoulders glisten with garnet bubbles. Around your head, a halo of pearls; and as you nod, crepes of silk, onyx and gleaming, fold and furl. Roll in my arms, and I’ll roll in yours, sheltered, fearless, gloating over our foodless feast; decked in treasure, enthroned together, our ivory serpents twisting between.

“The moment looms. We shudder, we shake. Nestling, squeezing, our artless bodies heave and convulse, and the rapture begins. A helpless frenzy, our violent trance, familiar, expected, but never the same. We curl, we roll—warm, viscous, swaddled in bliss, our oily cocoon, our midnight pool—mated and joined; one, not two.”

In the darkened conference hall, the man’s voice resounded, deep and doughty. A candle flickered, and above it his face

was etched—precision lips, dewy eyes and an earnest brow.

“Those outside— What do they see?”

“What do they know of this secret world, with waxen clouds, with silky fogs and moony glints, wrapped by stars with ductile arms, a Fabergé egg turned outside in. Our matchless home, this singular moment—

“What do they know of our fate, our faith, our Sacred Space?”

Slowly, the lights came up.

Applause started, and a sea of faces appeared, most of them female.

The man on the dais closed his book and pinched out the candle on the lectern. Then he stepped forward and bowed to the clapping crowd as they rose to their feet. His shoulders were broad, his legs long and thin. He tipped like a martini glass without a base as the admiration washed over him, thankful but shy. Some leaned toward him, as if to help him through his unease; others rocked on their heels, carried along in the dance.

He was in his mid twenties. His black hair mounted in a wave above his brow and swept back and around, like a fifties teen idol. His garb too—a sequined ricky jacket with an elastic waist, and cowboy boots—seemed borrowed from another time. As the applause subsided, his eyes turned childish, soft, venturing. A curl dropped over his forehead.

“Thanks,” he said, scanning the faces in the hall, settling on one with a heartstruck cast. “I imagined those words

sounding in darkness,” he spoke directly to her, “and it was kind of you to let me offer them that way.” A freckle-faced woman in the front row had her hands clasped beneath her chin. “It means so much to me,” he focused on her, “that you see something in this ‘idiosyncratic confession,’ as my publisher calls it. He had some reservations.”

Laughter, polite and sympathetic, crawled through the crowd.

“Have a wonderful three days here in Baltimore, and I wish you all prolific and rewarding meditations on your own Sacred Spaces.”

As he removed his lapel mic, the emcee spoke from a corner of the stage, inviting attendees to cue up during the break. “Wood is available to sign *Unborn Twins*,” she said, holding a copy of his novel upside down. Below the dais, books were piled on a table.

Wood hooked his arm over his head and snapped his wrist, like a kid in a cowboy fantasy twirling a rope. Then he descended the stage, sheltering his gaze.

A crowd gathered quickly behind the table. Wood touched his wedding band for luck and safekeeping, and the next moment he was surrounded by women asking questions, eyeing him with fondness and curiosity. Nodding, peeking, shaking hands, taking his seat, Wood felt their collected need. Some had ulterior motives, but most embraced Romance with genuine feeling. Each, like himself, had a hungry heart to nourish, and they sensed he had something of worth to share.



When the van pulled into the drive, Wood's car was there, but Vadette's was not. He thanked the driver and lugged his suitcase to the front door. The house had been built on the sand barrens, but the fog was thick and the dunes were hidden. He had tried Vadette from the hotel, and again from the airport before his flight. Wood imagined she'd be home when he returned. He turned his key in the lock and crossed the threshold.

"Vadette?"

No response.

"Are you here?" Wood pulled off his coat.

The house was chilly. Fog curtained the windows. He strode to the thermostat and turned up the heat. There was a note on the kitchen counter, with a saltshaker on it. When he removed the weight, the note curled in his hand.

"In Mazatlán with Barb," the note read. She'd signed it "V."

He was tired and hungry. When he opened the refrigerator, it was empty. He pulled a pound of burger meat out of the freezer and put it on the counter. It was odd she hadn't left a message on his phone.

He glanced at the note, then removed his phone from his pocket and called her. She didn't answer.

"Nice down there, I expect," he said. "San Diego's fogged in. Call me. I love you."

He made dinner for himself. After that he unpacked his things and transferred a few ideas for his second novel to his computer. As yet, the ideas were scattered, but his feelings for Vadette—missing her and the soleness they shared—helped bring a few of the pieces together. Slowly the new concept was taking shape.

It was a couple of hours before he returned to the counter. He picked up the note and scanned it, frowning. Then he set it down, grabbed his phone and called her again.

This time she answered.

“Hey,” he said warmly.

“What is it?”

“You’re in Mazatlán?”

“I needed a vacation,” Vadette said.

“With Barb.”

“Yes, with Barb. She rented a place for the week.”

“Fiesta time,” Wood said.

“Every day,” Vadette replied matter-of-factly.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. Everyone’s been very friendly.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Saturday.”

He felt like he was intruding.

“Well, have fun. Tell Barb hello for me. And Dave.”

“It’s over for them.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you about it when I get back.”

“Vadette—”

“Saturday, Wood.”

“See you Saturday.”

Wood put the phone down, wondering. She was there at Barb’s request. Vadette needed a break, her job was demanding. He’d been absent a lot himself, promoting his book. However distant their bodies might be, their hearts were together.

He stepped into the living room and sat on the couch. Despite his effort to calm himself, doubts wormed through. For a few months now, Vadette had been distant. Before he left for Baltimore, they’d had a conversation that troubled him. She seemed disoriented. She said she’d been asking questions, questions she couldn’t answer.

Could a rift have opened without his knowing? The idea seemed suddenly real. What was going on in Mazatlán? He watched the fog swirling beyond the picture window, concern mounting.



The next morning, Wood felt queasy, as if he’d spent the night at sea. He shaved and combed his hair, eyeing his worried face in the mirror. Saturday, she said. He put his pants on and opened his laptop. His readers were waiting.

He reviewed an assortment of scenes and moments he’d trialed, circling the larger question. Should he return to the theme of *Unborn Twins*? Did he have any choice?

After an hour, he stopped to eat, still bare-chested. He

returned to his computer, but it was hopeless. He couldn't concentrate.

He retrieved his phone and sat on the bed. He wasn't sure how to voice his concern. *If something's wrong*, he thought, *I should be cautious.*

He rang Vadette's number.

"Are things okay between us?" he asked straightaway.

"We'll talk about it when I get back."

"What's going on?"

"Not now," she said with irritation.

"I got this crazy idea last night—"

He stopped himself and waited for her to respond.

The silence stretched out.

"Can you come home?" Wood said. "I'm missing you."

"I'll be back on Saturday."

He heard her firmness, but his heart denied it.

"With a whisper the Space expands," he said softly. "Love blinds us and swallows the world."

"Please, Wood."

His lips parted. He shook his head. "Saturday then."

And the call ended.

Things were worse than he'd imagined.



The rest of the day, Wood was in a stupor. He stared at the fog, muddled over his notes and fell asleep on the couch.

When he awoke, the fog was thick against the living room window. A stray dog swam toward him, as if suspended in it.

He resisted the temptation to call Vadette, and the week dragged by. Finally Saturday arrived. At the airport, he was early and the plane was late. After a long wait, he caught sight of Vadette emerging from Passport Control.

It was an MGM entrance. She wore a scarlet dress with a wide-brimmed red hat and sunglasses, and was clearing an aisle for herself through the other passengers. Vadette was given to humor, and she was laughing, aware of the attention she was drawing. She recognized him with a wave, chin up, as if she was still in Mazatlán, greeting him from the foredeck of an arriving cruiser.

But as she drew closer her gaze shifted, and when he opened his arms to embrace her, she turned away.

In the car, he tried to start a conversation. Her finger toyed with a rose-gold curl by her neck. She gazed out the window, as if she couldn't hear a word he said. Beneath the chill in her attitude, Wood sensed a note of defiance.

As he pulled into the carport, he spoke harshly, insisting she say something. But a wall had been built, and she remained behind it.

He helped her with her bags. Vadette left the ones she was carrying at the hallway entrance. Wood did likewise and followed her into the bedroom. She removed the red hat and dropped it, top down, on the chair beside the dresser.

“Where did you find that?” he asked.

“It was a present.”

She turned her back to him and removed her clothing. The sight of her naked body made him weak with longing.

“I’m exhausted,” she said half to herself.

She moved past him and drew the drapes. It wasn’t yet dark. Then she stepped to the far side of the bed and crawled beneath the sheets. “Can you get the light?” she said.

Wood regarded her for a long moment, then he threw the switch and darkened the room. The bathroom door was ajar, and the night lamp cast a golden blade through the gap. It crossed the carpet, touching the foot of the bed. He turned and strode into the living room.

Vadette rolled over, sighed and buried her face in the pillow. On the seat of the chair, the red hat trembled. Silently, very slightly, the broad brim shifted. Something that gleamed, the size and shape of a tweezer, emerged from the sweatband. It was a pincer—two opposable fingers. And then the rest of the creature appeared—a scorpion with a pair of small arms, a segmented body and a straightened tail. It scuttled over the hat brim, onto the chair seat and, from there, down the wooden leg to the floor.

The scorpion followed the blade of light across the carpet. It was three inches in length and red-brown, the color of coagulated blood. When it reached the hem of the comforter, it extended its pincers and clung. Its hind claws freed themselves, and the scorpion swung from the hem, tail curling. Then it was climbing the comforter, cresting the camber of

the mattress, crossing the flat plain of the bedding. When it reached the counterpane, it skirted Vadette's elbow and disappeared beneath her pillow.

A moment later Wood returned. He regarded Vadette's motionless body, then removed his clothing and approached the bed.

"Vadette?" he said softly.

She didn't respond. Was she already asleep?

He drew back the covers and slid beside her. Not touching, but very close. He lay still for a moment, then he placed his hand on her hip.

No word or movement.

Was she conscious? If she wasn't—

Wood feared he would aggravate the situation, so he withdrew his hand and lay there, frozen, until sleep found him. Beneath the corner of Vadette's pillow, the scorpion crouched, facing Wood's head, ten inches away.



The next morning, he woke to the sound of the shower. He rose and opened the drapes. Fog. The valley below was lost in it. The sound of the shower ceased. After a minute of silence, he could hear Vadette drying her hair. Then the bathroom door opened and she stepped out with a towel around her. She smiled at him.

Wood drew a pair of briefs from the dresser and pulled them on.

She faced the mirror and brushed her hair, parting it in the middle. The gold strands were tinted carmine and fell in waves to her shoulders. Beneath the dark brows, her eyes showed nothing. Her small breasts trembled with the movement of her arm. He stepped close and circled her middle, feeling her softness. He kissed her cheek.

Vadette opened a drawer to retrieve her lingerie. Then she crossed to the closet and selected a dress. Wood watched in silence while she clothed herself.

Finally she turned. "I'll make some tea," she said, and she stepped through the doorway and down the hall.

Wood put on a pair of pants and found a fresh shirt. As he was buttoning it, the scorpion beneath Vadette's pillow crawled from hiding, scuttling across the comforter. Wood didn't notice. He retrieved a pair of socks from the dresser and sat on the edge of the bed to pull them on. The scorpion disappeared into a fold, then reappeared, headed toward his thigh. As Wood tied his shoes, the scorpion grabbed his pant leg, clinging to the seam, just below the pocket. Wood rose and walked into the dining area, carrying the creature with him.

In the kitchen, Vadette was by the stovetop, lowering a tea ball into the pot.

Wood stood watching for a moment, then sat at the dining room table. There were two napkins, each with a spoon

on top. The scorpion climbed his waistband, onto his shirt, rising beneath his left sleeve and then onto it, making its way toward the elbow.

“Let me help you,” Wood said. As he rose from his chair, the scorpion fell onto the table. It scuttled beneath one of the napkins.

Wood got two mugs from the cupboard, and a carton of half-and-half, and returned to the table with them. Vadette followed with the pot of brewed tea.

“I’ve been unhappy,” she said.

Wood regarded her and nodded. He opened the carton of half-and-half and added some to each mug.

“Very unhappy,” Vadette said, pouring the tea. She didn’t sound unhappy. She was talking about her state of mind before leaving for Mazatlán. When the tea reached the brim of the second cup, she set the pot down. “We have to talk.”

“Well, let’s talk.” Wood threw up his hands. “What’s going on?”

She raised her brows and glanced aside, as if she’d been dreading this moment.

He stood. “You’re treating me like a stranger.”

She didn’t flinch. She was braced for a reaction.

Wood grabbed her waist and pressed her to him.

“I’m not sleeping with you again,” Vadette said.

Wood stared at her, and she at him. The scorpion scuttled from beneath the napkin. It crossed the tabletop, reached one of the mugs and climbed its side.

“I’m moving out,” Vadette said.

“‘We’re finished.’ Just like that?”

“Just like that,” she said.

The scorpion reached the brim, teetered and plunked into the milky fluid, disappearing beneath the surface.

“Why?” Wood asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Try me.”

She shook her head.

Wood eyed her with disbelief. He grabbed the mug with the scorpion in it and brought it to his lips, then set it back down, seething with gall. “I deserve better than this.”

She circled the table to put herself out of reach. “I’m going to be late for work.” She glanced at her watch.

“You’re not leaving.” He followed her.

She stopped in front of the mug with the scorpion in it. “Yes I am.”

She slid her fingers through the mug’s handle and raised it.

“Vadette—” Wood put his hand on her arm.

She shrugged free and drank, and she kept on drinking until there was nothing left. When she lowered it to the table, the mug was empty.

Then she turned on her heel and strode to the front door.



Wood tried to return to his notes. His idea, still vague, was to take the twins forward in time. Achievement would

divide them—wealth, prominence, envy—but they’d find their way back to the Sacred Space. The passages he’d written seemed hollow and false, and the more he read, the worse he felt.

At noon the fog cleared, and he went for a walk on the dunes. Vadette called at the end of the day. She told him she was moving in with Festa, a friend in Solana Beach. She would be back the next evening to get her clothes. He asked if he could see her that night, if they could have dinner together. Vadette declined.

The following evening, she returned. While he watched, she transferred her clothing into suitcases and boxes she’d brought. She refused to talk until her car was loaded, but before she left, there was a brief thaw.

They stood in the doorway, and Wood again asked her why.

She took a breath. “I need more from life.”

“I’m your twin. Whatever you need—”

“You see things the way you’d like them to be,” she said, “not as they are.”

“Vadette—”

“No,” she shook her head, turning away.

He grabbed her arm. “We’ll work it out.”

“Work it out with another woman.”

“I don’t want another woman. I love you.”

She laughed. “You don’t care a thing about me. You don’t know who I am.”

“You’re my other half, my reason for living.”

Vadette closed her eyes. "I can't help it, Wood. Something snapped."

"Go ahead," he said bitterly. "Take your things. I never want to see you again."



Vadette's departure seemed impossible. They'd been blissful together for years, hadn't they?

He phoned her repeatedly during the days that followed. She refused to answer, and when he called Festa she fended him off. Wood was angry, disbelieving. He longed for Vadette's return, imagining things he would do to recapture her affections. There were a hundred questions he would ask her if she gave him the chance. At the end of the fourth day, he drove to Festa's and rang the bell.

Festa came to the door in her bathrobe, pasty and overweight. Before he could say a word, she stepped onto the porch. "She's not here," Festa said.

"Bullshit."

"You're not coming in."

"She's my wife."

"You have to respect her independence now. That's what she wants."

"We've hardly spoken," he said. "What's going on? What is she telling you?"

Festa took a deep breath. She looked like someone who'd

eaten too much at a long meal. “Being single isn’t easy,” she said. “You’ll survive.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Wood said acidly.

“You’ve taken everything from her,” Festa said, relenting. “She has nothing left. She wants to pick up a few more things from your house.” Festa eyed him with agitation. “Maybe tomorrow? Wood—” She folded her arms across her breasts, as if to protect herself. “It’s over. Try to accept that.”



Wood slept till noon the next day. When he rose, he stumbled to the back door and stepped outside, onto the sand barrens. Naked, he circled the house again and again. When he returned inside, he wandered the rooms, still naked, opening closets, pulling things off of shelves, picking through shoe boxes. Photos, gifts, objects they’d found, mementos of special moments and the life they’d built in the Space together— Using furniture he dragged into the living room, he arranged them chronologically. It was the Wood and Vadette Museum. The memories were sure to touch her.

But that night, it was Festa who came, not Vadette. She had a list, and she strode past the Museum without a word. Wood helped her find the items and carry them to her car. Vadette was out of town, she said. But Festa wouldn’t say why or where.

Three days passed, and then Vadette called. She had returned to Solana Beach.

Wood heard a note of tenderness in her voice. He begged to see her. She agreed. Vadette asked him to come to Festa's that evening. To smooth the way, Wood sent her a carefully worded text message pledging himself to the renewal of their marriage, whatever that might mean.

Then he got in his car and headed for the coast. He'd met Vadette in a restaurant near campus five years before. They were both students, struggling to get by.

He parked in front of the restaurant and walked in. It was still a noodle house, and the table was in the same spot. That fateful day, they had both come for lunch. While they were waiting for a table, Wood invited her to join him. He remembered the moment their eyes met. They seemed to recognize each other.

"I'm starving," he'd said.

"Me too," Vadette smiled.

The hunger went farther than lunch. They were both empty in so many ways, lonely and penniless. When the meal was over, she gave him her number.

From the noodle house, Wood drove to his old apartment, recalling the night they had first made love. The building was boxy and drab, but to his sentimental eye, it was a place of sanctity. It was afterward, in the bedroom, he had penned his first lines of love. The feelings outsized him, and the language seemed stilted. But he shared them, and Vadette was moved. From her wonder and tears, she gave it a name.

He arrived at Festa's at 8 p.m. When he knocked, Vadette appeared barefoot, wearing a chemise he had given her on her

birthday three years before. She began to cry as soon as she saw him.

He moved to hug her, but she shook her head.

Did she want to go out? No, she didn't feel up to that. Was she going to invite him in? No, no, she shook her head, tears still falling. So she stood on the threshold with the door open, and he stood on the porch facing her. Wood didn't want to spook her. He tried to act calm, casual.

"Tell me," he said. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," she replied. "It's me. I've changed."

"I can change too."

"You're perfect the way you are," she said. "You made me very happy."

"You're not happy now. What's wrong?"

She turned away.

"All I need is the darkness and you." Wood spoke with the solemn devotion that had infused their love from the start.

Vadette reached her hand out.

He took it.

"I still love you," she said. She was silent for a long moment. "Can we sit in your car?"

"Sure."

They approached the vehicle, but before they reached it, she stopped.

"Here," she said, wiping her eyes. She stood on the gravel drive, facing him. "This is fine."

Something traumatic had happened or was about to happen. Wood could see that now. Her arms were shaking. Her

hands were at her thighs, fingers crookt, nails digging in. She spoke with her face averted.

“I love you,” she said. “I’ll always love you. You know that, don’t you?”

Fresh tears. She stood sobbing quietly to herself, looking so miserable that Wood closed the distance between them to comfort her. He embraced her, put his lips to her cheek. She didn’t flinch. He coaxed her head onto his shoulder. It rested there for a moment, then she turned and buried her grief in his chest.

“I’m with someone else,” she said.

Wood drew back.

The sun setting behind him painted her chemise scarlet. Its silk gleamed like chitin. As he watched, the creases shifted.

“Someone else?” he said.

Vadette quivered. Jointed legs sprang from her middle. Her arm rose, bristling with hairs, scissoring a pair of giant red fingers.

Wood blinked. He was imagining—

The scarlet legs twitched. The joints of her arm clicked as it extended. He shied just in time—the pincers lunged and scissored, trying to shear his head from his neck.

“He’s helping me through this,” the scorpion said.

Her sternites compressed and both arms spread. Vadette’s neck shrank into her body, and the tubes in her mouth pushed out. Wood saw her segmented tail quiver and curl, arching over her head, a giant bent thorn at its end, the hollow tip beaded, dripping with venom.

“I’m sleeping with him,” she said.

The thorn struck Wood full in the chest, driving inside him. He felt the toxin like an electric shock in every nerve of his body. Wrenching free, he staggered back, clutching his pectoral. The pain was terrible. The hellish creature shook its tail and flexed its claws as he stumbled toward his car.



Wood screeched around the curves of Camino Del Mar. By the time he reached the Dieguito bridge, his clothing was drenched. The shock of her words— He’d seen something monstrous. A disguise, a delusion—

The face he saw in the rearview mirror was lathered with sweat, and the eyes were black with dread. On either side of the road behind him, giant scorpions rose, barring his return. The sting was deep. Around the wound, his chest was clenching. He gripped the wheel and forced the accelerator to the floor.

As he pulled into his carport, the spasms spread to his arms and legs. It was a struggle to open the front door. Once inside, he headed for the kitchen, turned on the tap and held his face under it. He was feverish, thirsty. He drank and drank. When he righted himself, he couldn’t find his breath.

Wood reeled into the living room and tore off his shirt. The puncture was bleeding, the flesh around it hot and swollen. He grabbed his phone and collapsed on the sofa,

searching his contacts, the toxins twisting his windpipe, tying his guts in knots. “Herb—” An acquaintance, an endocrinologist at Scripps who’d weathered a devastating infidelity. Someone picked up.

“Herb, it’s Wood.”

“I was just thinking of you.”

Wood did his best to explain. Strangely, Herb took his story in stride.

“Let’s check your pulse,” Herb said.

Wood found it with his fingers and counted.

“Not good,” Herb told him. “How’s the stomach?”

“Awful. I’m going to throw up.”

“You sound like you’re having trouble breathing.”

“I am.”

“Unzip your pants and take a look at your dick.”

Wood did as he said. “My god,” he gasped. “It’s huge.”

“Alright,” Herb said, “here’s what we’re going to do.”

After some deep breathing to reduce Wood’s heart rate, Herb sent him back to the kitchen to wash the wound and apply ice packs to his chest. That would stem the swelling, Herb said, and slow the spread of the venom. Then he had Wood lie on the sofa with his head elevated. By then, Wood was shivering and hearing voices.

“The neurotoxins,” Herb told him, “are fucking with your head.”

Herb shared his own experience. An unexpected attack, more like a serpent’s bite, but the symptoms were similar. “You’ll recover from the wound,” he said. The pain would

pass, and the puncture would heal. But the venom might have long-term effects.

“You’re going to have to know more about the creature that stung you,” Herb said. “And why. There’s no way around that.”



It took three days for the effects of the sting to abate. As mad as Vadette’s transformation seemed, Wood had no choice but to accept it. Herb visited in the evenings. His objectivity, his pipe and knit cardigan, and the wry humor that shook his silver hair, made the injury manageable. Herb still lived with the creature that bit him. Somehow he’d made his peace with her.

“You feel like the offended party right now,” Herb said, “but you probably bear some responsibility for what’s happened. Whether or not you can put the marriage back together, there are questions you need Vadette to answer.”

“I tried,” Wood said.

“You need to try harder.” Herb handed him the phone.

Wood called, but Vadette wouldn’t answer. After a half-dozen attempts, Festa returned the call.

“It’s over,” she said, “O-V-E-R.”

Herb motioned, and Wood passed the phone to him.

“I’m a friend of Wood’s,” Herb told her. “This is difficult

for him, as you might imagine. It would be a great help if you could answer a few questions. Can I put you on the speaker?”

Festa assented.

“Wood and Vadette have a lot of history together,” Herb said. “This relationship she’s formed— How new is it?”

“She met the man in Mazatlán. He’s an American. He lives in L.A.”

“They just met,” Herb said.

“She’s leaving on Friday. She’s moving in with him. She asked me to tell Wood that she’s happy with the clothing and personal items I picked up the other day. She doesn’t need or want anything else. Wood is free to do what he likes with the furniture and their other possessions.”

Herb raised his brows.

“She contacted an attorney yesterday. He’s drawing up divorce papers,” Festa said. “She wishes Wood well, but she doesn’t want to speak to him again. Is that clear enough?”

“We appreciate your candor. These things are hard.”

When the call ended, Herb looked at Wood. “It doesn’t look good.”

“I can’t imagine life without her,” Wood said.

“If she won’t talk to you—” Herb dangled his hands between his knees, his face pinched. “That will make things harder.”



As Herb predicted, the swelling in Wood's chest and groin subsided and the wound began to scab over. But he couldn't put Vadette or the sting out of his mind. The house seemed haunted now. There was pain in the walls, and the Museum was a cavalcade of atrocities. He imagined himself in a different town, a different state. But when he spoke to Herb, the older man cautioned him not to leave.

"You're too weak," Herb said. "The venom is still inside you."

"I have to get out of here," Wood replied.

He called the landlord, explained the situation and begged his way out of the lease, promising he would leave the furniture and kitchen items behind for the next tenant.

Then he found the atlas, opened it on the kitchen table and began to scroll through his phone contacts, looking for a destination. The phone slipped from his hand and struck his big toe. When Wood picked the phone up, a number was ringing.

"Who is this?" a groggy voice answered. "Wood?"

Wood looked at the phone to see who he'd dialed. "Cameron." It had been years since they'd spoken. "I'm calling from San Diego."

"Too long," Cameron said.

"Exactly," Wood answered. He massaged his toe. It was pink. "How's life," he opened the contact, "in Key West."

"Crazy as ever," Cameron said. "How about you?"

"I've been better," Wood said. "You remember Vadette?"

"Sure."

“Our marriage went bust. I’m through here. I’ve always wondered what Key West was like.”

“Your timing’s perfect,” Cameron said. “I’m leaving for Cambodia tomorrow night. You can stay at my place if you like.”

Florida. It would put the whole continent between him and Vadette. The tropics, gators and pirates, sand and foam—The idea seemed farfetched, like a boyhood fantasy. “You’re serious.”

“Why not?” Cameron said. “You’ll be inspired here. The Key’s a magical place.”

2

Wood drove for twenty-seven hours without eating or sleeping. The car's trunk was stuffed, and his clothes were piled on the seats. With the windows up and the air conditioning on, he crossed the state lines in a soap bubble, feeling truly alone.

Outside of Biloxi, he stopped at a roadside diner. He wasn't hungry, but he ordered a cold drink to go. The sun was blistering hot and he was sweating, and when he tossed down the icy liquid, his heart rang like a gong. He staggered to a shady area beside the parking lot and collapsed in the grass.

He reached Tallahassee in the middle of the night and pulled into a campground. Grabbing a coat for ground cover, he tumbled out of the car and slept beneath a tree. Before noon the next day he hit Jacksonville, passed through Miami without stopping, and followed the signage to the Overseas Highway.

He found himself zooming up a ramp into a turquoise sky, then down, down to a place where boats were berthed, a flat raft of land circumscribed by the sea. On the island's far side, another bridge extended. This one skimmed water that was milky green. For the first time since leaving San Diego, Wood lowered his window, feeling a balmy breeze and cool spray. He leaned his head out and squinted, imagining he'd passed from a world that was lethal and dying into one that was fresh and benign.

For three hours, islets appeared one after the other, bridges mounting and dipping like a fun park ride. Finally, as if to herald his arrival, a rosy sun set behind clouds scrolled like pink taffy. But the felicity ended abruptly. His chest began to spasm again. The pain reached his hands and feet, making them twitch. Herb's parting advice had been, "You need to mend," and Wood muttered, "I'll mend here," sending his words into the wind like a prayer.

He crossed the last bridge, landed on Key West and followed the road into Old Town. Amid a maze of narrow streets, he found the small shuttered house and pulled into the drive. His head was throbbing, his stomach in knots. The door key was under the mat.

After a look inside, he lugged a suitcase and an armful of clothing to the bedroom. As he entered, a wave of dizziness broke over him, and the clothes and suitcase fell to the floor. Wood collapsed on the bed and lay there gasping. He regained his feet and stumbled to the bathroom to inspect his wound in the mirror. The scab hadn't cracked, the sting

seemed to be healing. He had to get his mind off the pain.

He returned to the bedroom, picking some clothes from the pile, a pair of stovepipe jeans and a western vest with a two-tone yoke and smile pockets. He struggled them on and left the house. On the sidewalk, he could feel the venom in his veins, hot and glowing like copper wire; but the simple act of putting one foot ahead of the other calmed him. It seemed a triumph his body still worked.

No one would have guessed his condition. His back was straight. He stood tall and looked sure as ever. His prominent cheekbones, straight brows and cloven chin were signs of vigor, as were his brown and muscular arms. In the glancing light, his hair bulged and swirled like the heights of a trunk, as if the burnished locks were about to send boughs in every direction.

The streets were lined with homes from the Victorian era. Their shaded porches, ornate turrets, widow's walks and gingerbread facades were signs of a life removed, fanciful, lenient. As Wood approached the main drag, the crowds grew. Beach bums, tourists in bright clothing, young and collegiate, older and natty, ragged and homeless—

At the corner, he stopped and raised his head, seeing streetlights. When he lowered his gaze, he was peering at a pile of bright confections. Windows, shops. He continued down the block. A tipsy couple passed, a man with a shaved head and a woman with a giant pink ribbon in her hair. The woman grabbed his arm. "Refugio," she winked and pointed.

Wood ignored her. Then the wind blew him into the

street. Cars honked. On the far side, a pink cab was parked by the curb. The driver stood beside it, wearing a skipper's hat, and he tipped the visor as Wood approached. The neon behind him said *Refugio*. The windows were slatted with blinds.

Wood opened the door and stepped inside.

The place was dark and small, but packed. There was music, strumming and shakers, and a latin voice crooning over the babble. The patrons were hunched together, at each other's ears, shouting to be heard. Heads turned to follow him, drawn by the black bouffant, his martini frame and the bare arms and vest.

Wood's throat was tight, his legs brittle as matchsticks. Feeling awkward and watched, he slid onto a vacant stool by the bar. He hadn't been alone in a place like this since his college days. At the mercy of strangers now, he was as far from the Sacred Space as a soul could get.

A bartender turned, small, sleek and busty with blond hair. With a flourish, she raised a goblet and poured pink slush from a blender. She was wearing a bikini top that hid very little.

"It's okay, honey." She glanced at him. "You can look."

"Sorry," he muttered. "I just got here. My woman left me."

"Mine too," the bartender said. "She was a cheater."

Her lips were like mustachios, curving up from the midline, dipping deeply and rising again at the tail. She looked wistful, whimsical, as if she'd lived through her sorrow and come out the far side.

“She was looking for Papaya,” the bartender said.

“Who’s Papaya?”

“Are you thirsty?” she asked.

“What’s that?” He nodded at the drink in her hand.

“An island blush,” she said. “Rum, coconut cream and grenadine.”

“I’ll have one. I’m Wood.”

“I’m Mango. Welcome to the Key.”

He watched while she poured rum and grenadine into the blender. Her arms were finely sculpted, sleek and gently shouldered, and her movements were self-assured. If Mango had been wounded in love, she’d recovered; or found a way to mask the damage.

The blender’s rumble ceased. She poured the slush into a goblet and set it before him. “A few of these,” she said, “and you’ll be back on your feet.”

Wood laughed. As Mango stepped away, he lifted the drink. The glass was cool and round, filling his hand. The crushed ice prickled his tongue, and the coconut cream went down smoothly. It coated his throat and soothed the pain in his chest. When the rum hit his stomach, it warmed his core. *I’ll be alright*, he thought.

“Hey there.” A wet voice purred in his ear.

Wood turned without lowering the goblet. Through the foamy residue he saw an older woman in a faded dress. The bodice was loose and off-center, exposing her wrinkled cleavage. As he lowered his glass, she circled his back with her arm.

“You’re safe with me,” she said.

“Good to know,” Wood replied.

Her hair was pixied and thatched, like a nut-brown swimming cap. She put a gift-wrapped box on the bar, then she pressed against him and kissed his cheek. “One of my boys,” she announced to those nearby.

A man snorted. Another with a beard rolled his eyes. A third in paint-splattered overalls leaned close. “Don’t mind her,” he said.

The old woman had both hands on him now. “I’m your Auntie.”

What luck, Wood thought. “I like having a relation in town.”

“I’m not kidding. Buy me a drink.”

Her features were thick—her nose and lips, her arms and breasts too. Everything about her seemed overinflated.

“Alright,” he nodded. “What’ll it be?”

“One of those.” She eyed his goblet.

Wood waved at Mango. “A blush for Auntie.” He felt the old woman’s breast against his elbow.

“Take care of me,” Auntie said. “I’ll take care of you.”

Mango glared at her, raising her arm, pointing at the door.

Auntie pouted. “No blush?”

Mango shook her head.

The old woman squeezed Wood’s shoulder. “I’ll be around. Don’t you worry.” Then she turned to go.

“Don’t forget this.” Wood handed the gift-wrapped box to her.

She pinched his cheek and took it. Then she edged through the crowd, headed for the door.

When Wood reached for his drink, he noticed a card on the bar. On it was written, "To my favorite, with fondness and gratitude." A man's name was signed.

He guzzled the blush. Above, the ceiling was an electrified forest, tear-shaped bulbs glowing emerald and lime at the ends of varnished branches. Lower down, the walls were painted with boulders, and beyond them was a breaking surf. Three blushes later, the bulbs were pulsing, and he could hear the surf through the music. He was about to order another when he noticed a woman standing beside him.

She was short with a swarthy complexion and blood-red lips. Green hair sprouted from a topknot on her crown. She had a stud in her lower lip and a line of them over one brow. She faced him, her eyes all pupil.

"Going to a square dance?" She touched his vest.

Wood didn't reply.

The woman's fingers crawled onto his bicep.

"I'm tanked," she said, wrinkling her nose. She stood on her toes to inspect him. "Are you a good guy?"

He saw fear in her eyes, like a bird on a branch, about to fly.

"I don't want to walk to my car alone," she said. "Go with me."

As he straightened, the fearful eyes glanced at the door. She seemed in earnest. "Okay," he said, pulling a few bills from his pocket and setting them on the bar.

The woman turned, and Wood followed her through the crowd.

On the sidewalk, she faced him. “I have some for you.” She patted her purse. Her left shoulder was tattooed with a jungle scene. Snakes and lianas wound down her arm.

“Some what?”

“Meth.” She swayed as if a storm was raging around them.

Wood grasped her arm. “You sure you can drive? Which is yours?”

She scanned the street and pointed.

“Thanks,” she said when they reached her car. The door was bashed and the fender was hanging. She looked up and down the street while she fished for her keys.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked.

“Get in. I’ll drive you back.”

Wood did as she said. She started the engine and wove down the street, past Refugio.

“That’s my stop,” Wood said.

“I’m gonna take you home with me.”

Wood stared at the woman, surprised, feeling the gulf between her and Vadette. An urchin, a meth head, sex hatched in a bar— Without warning, the pain came again, sharp and piercing. He looked down, expecting to see blood leaking through his vest.

“What’s your name?” he muttered.

“Piña,” she said.

“Let me out at the corner.”

“You sure?” She put her hand on his leg.

It had gold nails, and there were rings on every finger. Wood could feel its warmth through the cloth. "I'm sure."

Piña pulled over.

"Thanks." He opened the door and stepped out.

As the car sped away, he started back down the street. A minute later, he turned on himself. He was a fool to rate Piña against his wife. Vadette was gone. He was starting life over. He should have let Piña take him home with her.

The idea choked him. *Vadette*— A sob rose in his throat.

Vadette, Vadette— He longed for her and the Sacred Space. Why did she do it? She'd ruined their lives. They would never find a love like that with anyone else.

Something grabbed his vest from behind. Wood turned, seeing a grizzled face, greasy hair, broken teeth and a juddering jaw. No words, just eyes that glared and a liquored breath. He grabbed the drunk's wrists and tore him loose.

"Papaya," the man leered.

Wood continued forward. The man kept pace beside him, dragging his leg.

"Where is she?" the drunk demanded.

Wood pretended he wasn't there.

"Hey," the man snarled. His bloodshot eyes were wide with suspicion.

"I don't know her," Wood said.

"You're lying," the drunk growled. Then he spied two sailors on the sidewalk ahead. He grunted and staggered toward them, waving his arm. "Papaya," he bellowed.

Wood slowed and ducked beneath a shop awning, un-

eager to be accosted again. As he watched, the drunk disappeared down the street, his rankled cry fading. “Papaya, Papaya, Papaya, Papaya.”



The next morning, he unloaded the rest of his clothing and baggage. He'd missed meals for days, but he put food out of his mind and removed his computer and folders of notes from a suitcase, arranging them on the kitchen table. He plugged in the computer and sat down.

The pain from his wound had diminished, but when he entered the world of the twins and their Space, his mind froze. The words seemed foreign, written by someone else. After staring at the screen for an hour, he showered and shaved. Then he put on some shorts and a two-tone bowling shirt and left.

He found himself on Duval, drifting past shops, watching the passersby. He struck up a conversation with a lady at a cigar stand who suggested Las Nubes. The restaurant had a brunch party on an outdoor patio, with live latin music and a view of the water. He thanked her and bought a cigar. Two blocks down the street, the music reached him.

As he entered Las Nubes, Wood saw a man in a pink dress turning sheets of white paper into boat-shaped hats, crowns peaked like sails. Everyone was wearing them. The bobbing heads, with the sea behind them, looked like a toy regatta.

Wood donned his boat hat, strode to the bar and ordered a blush. On the counter beside him, someone had built a tower with playing cards. Drink in hand, he moved through the crowd. Two women stood on the patio together—attractive women, both in bright cottons, dark-eyed and curvaceous.

He was apprehensive, but he remembered Piña. I need to stop acting like a married man, he thought. He was on his own now.

Wood stepped toward the women and stopped before them. He greeted one.

She acted like he wasn't there.

He took a breath, smiled and raised his voice.

At that, the woman launched into a diatribe in Spanish that turned heads. Wood didn't understand a word she was saying. He was speechless, regretful, queasy.

A couple nearby eyed the dress-down with amusement. They had drinks in their hands. When Wood flushed and bowed, they toasted him. He stumbled toward them.

"Beaten, but valiant," the man laughed.

"Fearless," the woman nodded.

"I'm new at this," Wood said.

"No," the woman flared her eyes with mock surprise. She was jet-haired, nervy.

"I'm Tray." Square-jawed and big-chested, the man's lips were straight, but his face was still laughing. His eyes did the job.

"Mamoncillo," she extended her hand. "'Bijou' to you."

Their words were interrupted by the popping of fire-

crackers. Tray cocked his boat hat. On the boardwalk below, bicyclers raced by. Bijou pulled a large crucifix on a chain from beneath her shirt and used it to stir her drink.

“Where’s your wife?” Tray asked.

Wood frowned. Was it that obvious? “San Diego,” he said.
“Or L.A.”

“Separated?”

Wood nodded.

“Anillo de boda,” Tray smiled. “That’s what your señorita was shouting. ‘Wedding ring.’”

Wood looked at the gold band around his third finger.

“Till death do us part,” Bijou said.

“That was the idea.” Wood slid the ring off.

“A commitment,” Bijou said, “some men can’t make.”

Tray groaned. Bijou pinched his side.

Wood slipped the ring into his pant pocket.

They traded some history. Bijou was a registered nurse. She worked at an urgent care clinic. Tray, a bit older than Wood, was a psychologist who did therapy on the Key.

“He’s brilliant,” she told Wood.

Tray nodded, agreeing.

“It’s true,” Bijou said. “Without Tray, the Key would be—”

“Alright,” he laughed, “that’s enough.”

It was Wood’s turn, so he talked about his writing.

“Romance pays the rent,” Tray guessed. “You’re working on something serious?”

“Nothing’s more serious than love.”

“Who reads your books?” Tray asked, deadpan.

“Overweight, frustrated, middle-aged women,” Wood answered.

Their eyes met, and the two men laughed.

“Don’t be mean,” Bijou said.

“That’s what he was thinking,” Wood defended himself. “My readers have one thing in common.” He turned back to Tray. “Their hearts are hungry. Some read to avoid the real thing; for them, words are enough. Others are braver, finding their way with a partner, testing their experience against my own. The bravest seek something unique. They’re the ones I care about most.”

“Unique?” Tray cocked his head.

Wood nodded. “People who seek a love no one before them has ever known.”

Tray was sober now. It was Bijou who was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Tray said.

“You are,” she replied, and she kissed his cheek.

They cruised the buffet together, talking about life on the Key.

“I’m curious,” Wood said. “Why is everything pink?”

Bijou touched her middle. “Pink is the color of new life.”

After they’d eaten, they exchanged phone numbers. As they parted, Tray grasped Wood’s shoulder. “You’re going to find what you’re looking for.”

Bijou turned. “I’m having some friends over on Wednesday. Why don’t you come?” She glanced at Tray. “Maybe Tamarind.” Bijou smiled at Wood. “She’s smart, and she’s a reader.”



An hour before the start time for Bijou's party, Tray called Wood and offered to pick him up. As Wood seated himself, Tray handed him a joint, and they smoked while Tray jetted his sports car with the music at peak. Without a boat hat on, the therapist looked different. The bottom of his face was square, but the top was rounded and blond, an airy crown for the laughing eyes.

"Twenty-two?" he wondered. "You *are* an idealist."

"We had a rare affinity," Wood said.

"I've been with Bijou for six years."

"I knew the moment we met," Wood said. The irony echoed in his ears.

"Love is a striking example of how little reality means to us.' You like Proust?"

Wood shook his head. "Too feeble, too passive."

"Sometimes we act. Sometimes the world acts on us. By the way—" Tray turned a corner and slowed. "Tamarind read your book."

"Good." Wood frowned.

Bijou's house was an old clapboard two-story. When they entered, a dozen friends were gathered around the dining room table, watching a short-haired woman hunched over, reading tarot. Bijou left the gathering and another onlooker joined her. The two women stepped toward them together.

Tamarind was small and slight, but buoyant and keen.

Her hair was dark, and her eyes sticky. She wore a wrap of buff linen, and her breasts were like beans beneath it.

She introduced herself and shook Wood's hand.

"From the west, I see." Tamarind eyed his boots and the buckskin stars woven into his powder blue coat. "The old west." She smiled.

"I came here in a time machine."

Bijou ushered Tray away.

"I love eccentricity." Her eyes softened. "And integrity. Bijou knows. It's a pleasure to meet you. I spent last night and the night before with you and your twin."

Wood saw the problem before him now.

"Should I ask what you think?"

"It was riveting. You created your own paradise." There was a note of envy in Tamarind's voice.

"Last month, those words would have meant a lot to me."

"And now?"

"The reality didn't live up to the fiction."

"Their innocence was endearing." Tamarind raised her hand and guided her hair behind her ear. "Most of us lose that quickly."

"You're in Old Town?"

She nodded. "I'm a yoga instructor. I came here tonight from the Bear Den."

Wood shook his head.

"A nude resort for gay men." She smiled and touched his bolo tie. "You're a character."

Wood drew back.

“I’m sorry.” She buckled her lips. “I’m curious. I can’t help myself.”

He was glad for the attention, but her adhesion rattled him. He escorted her to the tarot reading and broke free. But she kept her eye on him. Whenever he glanced in her direction, she met his gaze. And from time to time, she drew closer. He would be mid-sentence and find her standing beside him, listening as he spoke or laughing when he said something to amuse others.

Bijou had an activity planned. They were going to Malory Square to see a friend of hers do magic tricks, and then they would walk the harbor. Wood went with Tray. The Square was crowded, and a dozen performers vied for attention. One juggled on a high wire, another did acrobatics with trained housecats. There were musicians, a sword swallower, Bible Bill, and the magic show.

As the sun set, Bijou led them along the coast. Boats were coming in, threading the blinking reef buoys. A group of night divers loaded their tanks onto a darkened schooner. The moonless sky, the fading chime of steel drums, the lapping of the tide—

Wood had lagged. Tamarind was walking beside him. Her presumption had vanished. There was a comfortable space between them, and her calm matched the night’s. As they passed a dock light, her features surprised him. The delicate line of her nose, the silky cheek, the shallow between eye and temple. She was a beautiful woman.

The walkway skirted a boat ramp, made private by a

cable. Bijou and the others were ahead, out of sight. Wood stopped by the cable, straddled it and took Tamarind's hand to help her over. They ambled along the dock admiring the yachts, and when they reached a locker, Wood invited her to sit beside him.

"How much did Bijou tell you?" he asked.

"You're separated. Your wife is with another man. The future's uncertain."

"It was sudden," he said. "And painful." Obliquely, metaphorically, he spoke of the baleful thing that had risen against him, of the sting and the venom, and fears that the poison was still inside him.

"*Unborn Twins*— I still believe two people can be that close." Beyond the moored yachts, the moonlit swells rippled.

"It's what we dream of," Tamarind said. "We come into the world crying and hungry. All of us." She drew a breath and shared a crushing disappointment of her own, a passion unreturned, a future unfulfilled. As she spoke, Wood fell in love with her voice. She was hurt, but brave; earnest and wistful. "Sometimes I think I'll never get over him," she said.

Wood turned to her, feeling like a child. Her eyes were soft and full of doubt.

"I need someone like you," he said.

"Do you?"

He nodded. "I really do."

The night's silence filled the space between them. They listened together for what seemed a long while. The torches of fire dancers twirled in the sky above Mallory Square.

He rose and reached for her hand. Tamarind stood without speaking. His lips lifted at the tails, then halted. He tried again, risking a smile.

“Do you want to spend the night with me?” she asked.



They pulled up to her apartment and the engine noise died. Neither spoke. Wood opened the car door without looking at her.

Inside, she led him to a sofa, saying she was going to change and use the bathroom. “Would you like to undress?” she said as she turned.

Wood watched her disappear down the hallway. Then he took a breath, unbuttoned his pants and looked down. It had been through a lot. Would it still work? He buttoned back up and began to pace the room.

Tamarind returned a few minutes later, wearing a sheer peignoir. She could see how troubled he was. She took his hand and steered him back to the sofa. They sat down together, and she removed his shoes.

“You’re nervous,” she said.

He nodded.

He’d had little experience with women before his wife. They’d been one, not two; and now he was half a person. Even those treasured intimacies were suspect. Tamarind was a stranger. Her thoughts, her emotions, her sounds, her scents—

She touched his chest. The sting twinged, and his fear spiked. The changed Vadette, that monstrous specter, was rising before him, mantling his mind. He could see her pincers, her arcing tail. He could feel the thorn's stab and the venom coursing inside him. His pulse faltered, his legs quivered. He planted them and stood.

Tamarind stood with him, confused. Was he leaving?

Wood didn't know. Maybe he was. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

He was dizzy, his brow was damp. He reached for her shoulder. Tamarind braced him, putting her lips to his ear. "You're safe with me," she whispered.

"Am I?" His eyes searched hers.

She found the front of his pants and undid his buttons.

Wood felt her breath on his neck.

"You look ready to me," she said.

Wood tried to laugh. She put her arm around him and led him down the hall, into her bedroom.

He watched while she lit a pair of candles on the dresser. Then she turned, removed her peignoir and stepped closer. She undressed him slowly, without a word. When he was naked, she pressed her body to his.

"I'm lucky," he said, "that I'm with you."

"I'm nervous too."

"Are you?"

She nodded. "The Sacred Space."

He didn't reply.

"I'm worried I won't measure up." She looked into his eyes.

“The problem—” Wood stopped himself.

“Is there a problem?”

“It’s all I know.” He felt like a fool.

Tamarind kissed him. “We’ll be teenagers. We’ll pretend it’s the first time.”

She turned off the lights, stepped toward the bed and pulled back the sheets. Then she crawled onto the mattress and raised her arms to receive him.

Wood approached slowly, put a knee on the bed and lowered himself, reaching for her waist. He felt her hands settle on his back.

“There now,” she whispered.

Her body seemed to soften beneath him.

“Have you ever slept with a Tamarind?” she said.

“You’re the first.”

“I didn’t accept it when I was younger.”

Wood felt her guiding him in.

“But as I ripened,” she said, “I understood.”

Wood kissed her neck.

She put her lips to his ear. “Go on. It’s alright.”

He eased himself deeper.

“Look,” she said.

Wood could feel her fingers at the base of his spine.

“Look around you,” she said.

Was she asking for something? What did she mean?

“Can you see the leaves?” she said.

An inner eye peered, and a night opened up—a night with shifting shadows.

“Can you see the leaves?”

The dark air was hung with sprays, twigs with leaves in double rows, tiny and green, like feathers on an arrow.

“Can you hear?” she whispered.

The feathered sprays hissed in the wind.

“Breathe through your nose,” Tamarind said.

Wood did as she said, and he smelled damp soil.

“Wood and Tamarind,” she whispered. “I’m with you now.” Her voice was aching tender. “Do you see? You’re looking right at me.”

Sprays like scarves, latticed and layered, webs of green—
Hanging among them was a tassel of pods.

“I’m shy,” she said.

The hidden Tamarind hung from a branch in an unseen world. Reticent, tentative.

Wood was baffled. Was the magic in her or the Key? Or had the sting of Vadette so scrambled his senses that he would never see women clearly again? He closed his eyes, parted his lips and drew a slow breath.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “Try me.”

The tassel was still before him, a clutch of fawn-brown pods amid sighing sprays.

“Please,” she said.

He stared, pulse pounding, ardor rising. He reached for a pod.

“Gently,” she whispered.

The pod came loose in his hand. He held it, feeling its velvety surface. He pressed his thumb against it, and the brittle

case broke, fragments clicking. Inside was the fruit, dark and gluey.

“Go ahead,” she said.

He brought it to his lips and licked. The tart pulp met his tongue.

Wood drew back, stunned, and the spell broke. The candles flickered. Her sigh filled the room.

What did it mean? Why was she offering herself? To allay his hunger, for his pleasure in eating?

It was fear he felt, fear and guilt. The guilt of a man breaking faith with his wife. The fear of a man with poison inside him. Fear of disease, fear of not pleasing or not being pleased. Fear of hunger, its danger and the damage it did—

“Wood,” she whispered, calling him back.

A fresh tassel of pods was hanging before him. Leaves were stuck to them. He peeled them away. His years with Vadette—silences, mysteries, deeds and pacts— That belonged to the past. He pulled a velvet pod loose and cracked it open.

His fingers touched the maroon mass. He pinched it, feeling it yield. Dense, sticky— Wood held the fruit to his nose, drawing its scent. Subtle, a mingling of odors he couldn't unbind. Again he touched his tongue to it, and again the tartness. Foreign, piquant, sour and sweet. He savored the taste and licked again. And again and again.

Wood put the sticky mass in his mouth and closed his jaws around it. The sharp flavor drew saliva from beneath his tongue. Tamarind was drowning in it. Her gummy mass was dissolving to syrup. And the creature of flesh? Were her

breasts flattening? Thighs dwindling, hips narrowing, waist shrinking— Tamarind was melting in his mouth.

Wood stifled his relish, trying to preserve her, lifting her up, pushing her against his palate, shifting his tongue to keep his drool away. She gave and gave, sharper and sweeter as she shrank.

A new flavor was waiting at her center, new and unexpected. It stirred him. An inmost taste from the small bit of pulp that remained. Here it was now, terribly tart, unbearably sharp. Wood grew covetous, greedy—

Then the moment arrived. The last fitch slid between his molars, and he clamped and ground it, filling his mouth and mind with Tamarind's essence, consuming her completely. It was as if all that tang, those maddening tastes and gluey textures, had been created expressly for him.

Groaning, heart thumping, Wood closed his eyes, drawing long breaths.

“Did I hurt you?” he muttered.

“Hurt me?”

Her voice reached him, puzzled, astonished.

He turned, hearing the dying hiss, seeing the sprays feather and fade. In the darkness, on the damp earth, two bodies lay.

Still whole and alive, a creature of flesh— Tamarind was curling against him, soft and pliant, as if his greed had pleased her. He felt her hand on his chest, comforting, as if it was he who'd been hurt. Wood was baffled, sated, too drained to think.

They dropped off quickly. Later that night, they woke in each other's arms for a second tasting. And then, just before dawn, there was a third.

He surfaced from sleep. Tamarind's taste was still on his tongue. She shifted beside him, touching his thigh.

"Wood—" She sounded troubled.

"What is it?"

"Will you do something for me?"

"What can I do?"

She whispered in his ear.

"Of course," he said.

But her request was unusual. Unusual for him. He'd never done anything like that with Vadette. He was afraid to ask Tamarind for guidance, so he trusted to guesswork and hoped for the best.

The breeze was still blowing, sprays hissing in darkness. Bunches of pods hung from the boughs—scores of them, and new pods were growing. The Tamarind tree was loaded with fruit, far more, it seemed, than any man could consume.

Wood pulled off the pods in handfuls and crushed them, and as soon as the gluey pulp passed his lips, he reached for more. The words she had spoken, the "something" she wanted—His senses were drowning. The floods of sensation—It was all he could do to swallow them down. His mouth was full to bursting now, and he sucked on the seeds until they were bare.

Then he opened his mouth, and with a shudder and groan, Tamarind's seeds fell into his hands. They were dark

and shiny, and blackish-brown. And in every one, he could see his reflection.

All at once, the wind stopped. The hissing ceased, the leaf sprays hung limp. The tree quivered as if something spiteful had hold of its roots. And then, as Wood watched, the pods fell to the ground. More let go, more and still more, rattling and falling until the wilting canopy was empty.

The room was dark. A window was beaded and dripping. All but one candle had guttered out. Wood whispered Tamarind's name, but she didn't respond.

A buoy horn sounded over a hidden reef.

He closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.



"Wood?" Tray answered.

"I'm at the Plantation," Wood said, "eating lunch. What a night."

"We heard," Tray said.

"Can you join me?"

"I've got a client. You and I should talk. My last session ends at five, if you're free."

"Sure. I need Tamarind's number."

"Let's save that," Tray said. "My office, at five."

Silence.

"Bijou spoke to her," Wood guessed.

"She did. Tamarind had a great time."

“But?”

“At five,” Tray said.

When the call ended, Wood paid for his half-eaten meal and left.



“I’m not your therapist,” Tray said, “but maybe I can help.”

They were in Tray’s office, eight feet apart, sunk in two overstuffed chairs.

“What did she say?” Wood asked.

“She enjoyed your company, like Bijou and I do. You’re sincere, and you can laugh at yourself. I’m guessing she’d like to be a friend. As a lover—” Tray shook his head. “From what she told Bijou, that’s not in the cards.”

“Because?”

“She didn’t think you were interested in her.”

“I had my arms around her all night.” Wood’s tone was bleak. He was expecting news that would hurt him.

“‘He doesn’t want to know who I am.’ Those were her words.”

Wood exhaled.

“Every man’s curse,” Tray said.

Wood saw the sadness in his eyes. He was speaking as one of the afflicted.

“We can’t see beyond ourselves,” Tray said. “I hear that from Bijou.”

“I had,” Wood scowled, “an understanding of love.” He looked at his hands as if something had fallen through them. “I did. Really, I did.”

“I’ve glanced at *Unborn Twins*. I’m going to read it. But I think I get the idea.”

“My marriage was built around the Sacred Space,” Wood said. “Vadette was my other half.” His words sounded absurd, but Tray wasn’t laughing. The sun was sinking behind him.

“Tell me about that,” Tray said.

Wood looked away, finding the place—dark and warm—vacant now, but still alive in his mind. “We were sheltered, protected. One, not two. For five years, the Space kept us together.”

“The struggle,” Tray said, “that so many men and women go through to align their needs and desires— For you and Vadette, it was no effort at all.”

“That’s right. It was easy. Effortless.”

“That sounds wonderful, Wood. What happened?”

“She wouldn’t tell me.”

“Vadette decided it was over on her own.”

“That’s right.”

“Why didn’t she say, ‘I’m unhappy, Wood. The Sacred Space isn’t working. Love isn’t easy for me. I don’t feel like your twin. Let’s talk.’”

“I wish I knew.”

“Would you have listened to her?” Tray asked.

Wood thought about that. His conviction about the Sacred Space had been strong. In many ways, he’d been as wedded to it as he was to Vadette.

“Maybe not,” he said finally.



Wood left Tray’s office feeling hollow inside. His thoughts were gloomy, his attention distracted. He let his feet go where they pleased. They took him to the north side of town, where shops were scattered among one-story homes.

He found himself in front of a restaurant with a Chinese name: Hao Zhidao. Through the doorway, it looked more like a theater than a place to eat. At the rear was a proscenium arch with scrolls and droops painted pink and gold. Diners were seated at tables on the thrust stage beneath.

Wood crossed the threshold. On his right, a painting of an orchard hung on the wall. Beneath it was an empty booth with naugahyde seating. He stepped toward it and sat down. Under the proscenium, at the restaurant’s rear, were two golden doors. They parted, and a woman passed through.

With a stride measured and calm, the waitress approached. She was small and Asian, a modern girl with a layered bob and turquoise nails. Without a word, she set the menu before him, filled his cup with tea, unfolded the napkin and placed it on his knees.

Wood looked at the menu. "Is there something you'd recommend?"

"Our special tonight," the waitress said. "Sizzling Chicken with Wood Ear."

"Food that talks."

"You taste," she said, "and you listen."

"I'll try it."

The waitress bent at the waist as she wrote. Her smile was fixed, her ideograms small and precise. She had a celestial fragrance, and as she departed, it trailed behind her.

She reappeared ten minutes later, head high, with a steaming plate on a silver tray. She lowered the dish before him, and as the meal snapped and sizzled, she removed his chopsticks from the paper casing.

"Thank you," Wood said. "What's your name?"

"Guava."

"This is a wonderful place," he said, looking around.

Lanterns in bamboo cages hung from the ceiling. There was an orchid beside the cash register and a giant folding fan on the wall above the restaurant's entrance. A green mountain with a winding river was painted on it.

When he'd finished eating, Guava returned with her tray. The check was there, along with a fortune cookie. She extended the tray with a solemn expression.

Wood turned the cookie in his hands. Guava stood sentry, watching. He set his thumbs against the cookie's wings and broke it open.

OUR FIRST LOVE IS SELF LOVE, the fortune said.

3

That night Wood's sleep was troubled. He was in the Sacred Space, but it was like a London aquarium during the Blitz. He was trapped inside, tumbled and drowning while the shelling scattered the gems and cracked the shell. Familiar faces watched from a viewing gallery, immune to the havoc—Tray, Bijou, Tamarind and Vadette.

When he awoke the next morning and drew the curtains, he was relieved to see a blue sky. And when he stepped outside, a golden sun warmed his front. Latin music *plinked* from a neighbor's backyard.

Three blocks to the east was a Cuban market. A sign over the awning read "Buen Sabor" and the tables were loaded. Wood wandered among them, touching the fruits, admiring their colors and fragrance, happy for the respite from his troubling thoughts. The fruits were beautifully arranged. Many of them Wood had never seen before.

A big woman was hunched over a pile, and when she straightened, she caught sight of him and grinned. “Do you like these?” she asked, lifting a fruit. It was green and lumpy and as large as a human head.

Wood stepped toward her. “They’re good?” He eyed the fruit in her hands, then grasped another and held it under his nose. It smelled like a citrus. Where the stem had attached, the odor was full; at the opposite end, the perfume was sharp.

“Incredible,” the woman replied.

She was in her fifties, Wood guessed. Six feet in sandals, ball-nosed and brassy, with gray hair and capacious breasts.

“You juice it?”

“Section it,” she said.

His eyes searched hers. “You have some guidance for me.”

She drew back, surprised.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m in trouble. Looking for help.”

“What an earnest young man.” Her brow rumped, considering. “I don’t know you well enough to give you advice. But this fruit would lighten your spirits.” She tapped the citrus he held in his hands.

Wood smiled. “Can you tell me what to do with it?”

She seemed charmed by his smile, and goodwill grew like a bubble around them.

“Well—” Her lids fluttered. “Rinse it, then remove the rind—”

Wood nodded, acutely attentive.

The woman laughed. “Walk me home, and I’ll show you. We’ll take both.”

She reached for her purse, but before she could open it, Wood pulled some cash from his pocket and dropped it in the payment basket. He took her citrus, and holding one under each arm, he led the way out from under the awning.

“This way,” she pointed. And they started down the street together.

Coincidentally, she explained, her name was Pumelo, like the fruit. She was born in Florida. She’d been trained in addiction recovery and managed a food bank on the Key.

“I didn’t know there was one,” Wood said.

“There are always people in need.”

Her faded tunic was roomy and wrinkled, and her large breasts and buttocks joggled inside. When they reached her flat, Wood followed her into the kitchen.

Pumelo placed the two green soccer balls on the cutting board. “You’re going to enjoy this,” she said, eyes glittering. “But first,” she motioned him into her front room, gesturing at the cushions scattered on the floor, “I want to know more about you.”

Wood sat down. Pumelo bound up her woolly locks with a mahogany fork, took a seat across from him and folded her legs beneath her. “Happy chance,” she sighed. “What a striking figure you cut.” She admired his bouffant and the browned legs that emerged from his shorts. “Well now. Start from the beginning. The little Wood. Who had the pleasure of peeling fruit for *him*?”

“I had to fend for myself,” he told her. “My mother was an invalid.”

“Oh my.”

“She couldn’t leave her bed.”

“Poor woman,” she said. “Poor Wood. A child depends on his mother.”

Her candor and empathy made the recounting easier. He told her about his stepfather, about growing up in the oilfields. And when she asked, he explained how he’d come home from school and found his mother dead.

“Poor woman,” she said. “Poor Wood.” Then she smiled. “But you turned out fine. You’ve had your pick of the girls, I’ll bet.”

“I was married,” he said. And when Pumelo asked, he explained how he and Vadette had met, why they didn’t have children, what their life together was like in the beginning and at the end.

“She didn’t just say goodbye,” Wood said.

Pumelo looked into his eyes.

“She found a man she liked better,” he said.

She leaned forward and touched his hand.

Wood thought of himself as a private person, but in his battered condition, his boundaries were gone. Pumelo seemed genuinely caring. So he let her see his shame and humiliation.

“Poor, poor Wood,” she said.

He told her about the Sacred Space, how it had been a heaven for him; and then somehow, without his knowing, it had become less than heaven for Vadette.

“Sometimes,” Pumelo nodded, “when our own needs are

urgent, we can't see anything else.”

“Was I really that blind? Maybe she felt she had to hide the truth from me.”

“Do you think she was lonely?”

Wood considered the idea. “I guess she was.”

“That’s wonderful,” Pumelo said.

“Wonderful?”

“That you can imagine how she felt. I’m proud of you.”

“I didn’t mean to be cruel,” he said.

“I know.” Her eyes were moist. “Poor Wood. Poor wife.”

He nodded slowly. “Poor wife.” It was as if a curtain had been drawn, and he could see through a window he never knew was there.

Pumelo was studying him. Her eyes were deep and misty.

“You really care about me,” Wood said.

“I care about everyone. Trouble is our birthright, Wood. None of us escape it. I took a woman to the shelter this morning. The poor dear hasn’t a nickel. She’s very confused, and there was no one looking out for her. Well—” She patted his knee and rose. “Let’s refresh ourselves. Our fruit will do that.”

Wood followed her into the kitchen. She washed the two giant citrus and removed their ends with a butcher’s knife. Using her stubby fingers, she peeled away the thick rinds and divided each fruit into quarters. Then she pulled the pink sections from their membranes and placed them on a platter. When the job was done, she led him out onto her deck.

They sat together on a bench overlooking the sea. Pumelo

took a glistening section and raised it to Wood's lips. That made him uncomfortable, but she wouldn't be denied. So he let her feed him.

"What do you think?" she asked, wiping his chin with her fingers.

"It's a subtle taste," he said. "Not acid, not sweet. Crisp and clear."

Her eyes met his. She touched his cheek. "I'm a sappy old thing," Pumelo said. "But you can have me, if you like. I won't be disappointed if the answer is no."

The idea was unthinkable. And then, in a moment, it seemed to Wood that it was natural and right. His world, his reality, had changed. It was the perspective of age that he needed, the patience of age, the understanding.

The hem of her tunic was at her thigh. Wood put his hand beneath it. The flesh was warm and expansive. Her eyes were enormous. They saw everything—his simplicity, his mistakes— They were the eyes of a saint, inured to the suffering of others.

"Lonely boy, motherless child," she whispered. "It's so wrong."

Wood embraced her. Her mouth was roomy, her tongue large and smooth. He felt her thighs closing around him. Her pulse was measured and slow, and the throb invaded his chest, mastering his heart, calming it.

She drew back, removed her arms from the tunic and pulled it down, baring her breasts. They were giant globes with bumpy nipples the color of dirt.

“Enjoy them,” she said. “Do whatever you like.”

Wood eyed them nervously.

She took his hand and placed it on one, shuddering with anticipation.

He struggled to oblige her, but his fingers barely moved. His arousal halted in its tracks.

Wood removed his hand.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“You’re treating me like a child.”

“Was it different with your wife?”

“Very different.”

“Wrong, so wrong,” Pumelo said. And then, “If it’s too upsetting, just pretend they aren’t there.” She stroked his head.

Then Pumelo rose. There was a canvas umbrella with a straw mat beneath. She led Wood to it, and the two knelt together. It was like the shade of a small tree. A green lizard scurried behind a planter with lavender flowers. Pumelo stretched out and raised her arms with a gentle hum, welcoming him back to the earth. Wood planted his palms on the mat and lowered himself.

Her lids quivered like moths. Her body spread, dropping him between the loam of her thighs. It was evening, cool and dark, and he was in an orchard. Scents of humus and dew and sap wafted through the branches, and the trees around him were thick with fruit, loaded with lumpy green soccer balls, enough to feed an army of penitents.

Here on this island, an intimate embrace drew the curtain on a world he had never seen or knew existed. An unsheltered

world, open to the elements, with fertile earth and teeming trees and an endless largess of ripe delights.

Wood found a slow rhythm. He was aroused, but his distress was still with him—the shame of being left, along with fresh suspicions about how and why Vadette had turned against him.

“Poor wife, poor Wood,” Pumelo chanted in time with his strokes.

His pleasure mounted and so did his pain. Aching for solace, he poured it into her.

“Wrong, so wrong,” she said. “So very wrong.”

The sap rose. The trees trembled. The boughs drooped as the fruit swelled.

Something was wrong with Pumelo.

At the deep end of his forays, her whole body shook.

Was this how she expressed herself? Was he the cause? He was churning inside, with ardor and sorrow, and as his emotion surged, her shaking became more pronounced—a shudder that persisted for seconds.

Was she feeling his loss, or acting it out?

The whole orchard was quaking now, boughs bent and the fruits enormous, many so heavy they touched the ground. Would he shatter the green world inside her? Her heart was drubbing, faster and faster. She clutched him, pressing him close—

“So wrong,” she moaned, “so wrong, so wrong.”

All at once, Wood knew.

In this act of love, she wasn't just suffering with him. She was trying to help him look into himself.

"Why?" he whimpered. What had he done?

Pumelo hugged him, and as his peak approached, her shudders wove through him. From deep inside her, sections of crystalline fruit tore loose, their fine inner diamonds clashing together, sunbeam and pink, as fresh as the wind blowing over the sea.

"Alone and empty," she whispered. "Poor boy, poor boy—"

The wealth inside her glittered for him, with woe, not joy.

"You were so wrong," she said.

Her words confused him, but her inflection did not. She was faulting him.

"So very wrong." Her pity had turned from his injuries to the conception of love that he'd spawned. That fruit, too, looked bright and clear, but it was pulled from blighted recesses, loosed from bitter membranes, parted from bitter rinds. The lips cringed and the tongue recoiled. A wrong idea. A conception cruel to two, not one.

"So wrong," she shuddered, "so wrong, so wrong—"

A flood of juice broke over him, diamonds and rhomboids crushed, releasing their scathing bounty as his stung heart clenched. Pumelo was there, clenching with him, sharing the squeeze of wrong and remorse.

The Sacred Space was a lie, Wood thought, and he'd locked himself in it. An enormous gulp, but he swallowed it down.

The orchard dissolved. The imagined night faded to day.

When he opened his eyes, he was on a mat beneath a canvas umbrella. The woman he held seemed frail and small, like a tree whose life had gone into its fruit.

Pumelo slid from beneath him and entered the house.

Wood lay back, her warmth still with him. When he touched his chest, he could feel the scab, but the pain had dulled. His flesh was calm, his nerves were quiet.

He raised himself slowly and stared at the sea. The light was reflected on it, and a lone boat was visible, its sails full of wind, tacking aimlessly over the sunlit water.



“I should have known,” Wood said. “There were plenty of signs.”

“Such as?” Tray raised his head.

They were at Bijou’s house, in the second-floor den, seated across from each other. The windows were open, and a breeze blew through.

“She had tantrums,” Wood said. “She broke things.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Whatever she could get her hands on. One night she destroyed the dishes.”

“That upset you?”

Wood shrugged. “Who cares about dishes.”

“When she had a tantrum, did you talk about the reason?”

“Of course.”

“You knew she was discontented.”

Wood nodded. “I knew, but I didn’t take what she said seriously. It didn’t seem important.”

“Because?”

“The love we had made up for everything.”

“If Vadette were here now,” Tray said, “would she agree with that?”

“Obviously not. Toward the end, she was taking long walks by herself. She would return with this puzzled look. As if something had happened—she’d seen something or lost something.”

Tray nodded. “I finished *Unborn Twins*. Before I read it, I’d been asking myself whether a man like you—a creative man inclined to detach himself from reality—might ask for a special kind of devotion from the woman he loves. Would he use his imagination to see things in her that weren’t really there? The novel answered my question.”

“You think the Vadette I married was my creation.”

Tray cocked his head. “I keep hearing that you didn’t know who she was.” His gaze turned inward. “We all trick ourselves. Proust railed against ‘the botched work of amorous illusion.’”

A knock sounded at the door. It opened and Bijou appeared. “Dinner’s in ten.” The door closed, and her footfalls faded.

Wood took a breath. “The Sacred Space was more than a story. It was part of our lives. We spoke as if we were in it. And we acted it out.”

Tray was surprised. “What did you do?”

The ritual had been a guarded secret, but there was no longer anything to protect. So Wood explained.

Vadette would close the drapes, insuring that no light would penetrate the darkness. He turned off the phones and bolted the bedroom door. Then, while she stripped off the bedding and built a nest on the mattress with sheets and quilting, he went to the bathroom and ran a scalding shower. They stood face to face and undressed each other, and once they were naked, they stepped into the spray together and remained there until they were lathered and dripping. Then they covered each other with coconut oil.

They returned to the darkened bedroom and took their positions in the nest together. Then, using lines he’d written, they described the Space to each other from memory. Its walls were curved, swollen, throbbing and gleaming—a cocoon, frilled and flounced, hung with jewels, seeping with mucous or finned with long-armed stars.

They were strangers at first, senseless bodies floating apart with nodded heads. Then slowly they entered each other’s meditation.

Wood reached through the tarry darkness. Her skin was soft and where his fingerpads touched it, guilloche patterns spread. He drew her closer, and she drew him. Closer and closer, until they curled together.

An effortless dance, no leading or following, no give or take. They rolled in a ball, like eels in oil, slicked and jelled, palmed and pressed, molded by love. As their boundaries dissolved, they shivered with pleasure—shivers that printed the darkness with lines that spread like ripples across a pool. And as the ripples thickened, the triumph of the Sacred Space hove into view.

They worshipped at the altar of the final moment: two peaks of pleasure superimposed. Perfect, equal, twin natures aligned and fusing— One sigh, one heave, one buckle, one moan—

And then, there it was: the Sacred Moment.

An infant helpless, quaking with rapture, with love in its heart, love in its soul, love in its bones.

Slowly, slowly, the Moment subsided. The babe blurred and dissolved. The eels parted. Their bodies were human again, discrete; and the living cocoon was blankets and sheets.

Vadette began to sob.

That, too, was part of the ritual. The tears weren't gladness. She sobbed for what they had gained and what they had lost, and she cried for them both. Vadette and the Space were full of mysteries, but this was the deepest.

"Unborn twins," Wood muttered. "A story for fools."

"Or children."

Wood saw the care in Tray's eyes.

"When we're young," Tray said, "we can dream that two really are one."



Wood woke to find a message from Cameron on his phone. “Feeling better? Ready to head home?”

“I like it here,” Wood texted back. “I want to stay.”

An hour later, Cameron called. The assignment in Cambodia had ended, he said, but he was moving to London and the landlord was giving the place to his brother. “Sorry, man. You’ve got till Friday and that’s it.”

Buen Sabor’s pink awning flapped in the breeze. Wood ducked beneath it, ambling among the fruit tables, squeezing a mango, touching a fig, pausing beside a pyramid of pale brown ovoids marked “Sapodilla.” He took one from the top, feeling its felty skin, weighing it in his palm.

“They’re just right,” a woman said.

She wore a pink apron. She smiled as she removed limes from a box.

Wood smiled back. “How can you tell?”

“They speak to me,” she said.

Wood nodded. He held the sapodilla to his ear, regarding the woman. She was big and solidly built. Her dark eyes were kindly, her hair lopped at the earlobes. About my age, he guessed. “This one’s quiet,” he said.

“She’s shy. She doesn’t know you.”

Wood lowered the fruit and turned it in the light between them. “She has an unassuming exterior.”

The woman laughed, drew a knife from her pocket and

unfolded the blade. She took the brown fruit from him, sliced it, peeled the skin off and handed it back.

Wood bit into the pulp. It was sweet and grainy, with a hint of cinnamon. “Wow.”

“They’re all grown locally,” she scanned the tables around them, “by Cuban immigrants. Guava, grapefruit, cashew, caimito—” She pointed with her knife, recognizing them like children in a schoolyard.

“That’s a grapefruit?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“It’s different than any I’ve seen,” he said.

“Fruit is a blessing from God.”

“Really.” Wood took another bite of the sapodilla.

“When they’re hanging on the branches,” she said, “they dream of being eaten.”

He raised his brows. “Sacrificing themselves.”

“It’s no sacrifice,” the woman said. “They’re trusting and wise.” She held up the other half of the sapodilla. “Life has a million ways to reproduce, but the glory goes to the fruit-bearers. They’re gift givers. To everyone. Parakeets, monkeys, iguanas—”

“They want us to eat them and poop their seeds out,” Wood said.

“So they make themselves fragrant and beautiful,” she smiled. “What an idea.”

“It’s a trick.”

“No. It’s a natural generosity that hopes for something in return. It’s love. They love us, and we love them.”

Her words were like music. “What a wonderful thought,” he murmured, letting them soak in. “I’ll have a few of these.” He took a basket and placed four sapodillas in it. “And a papaya.”

“Ah— *La fruta suprema*. We’re out right now.”

“I’m Wood. Let me guess: you’re Sapodilla.”

“No, I’m Mamey.” She folded her knife.

“I used to have one like that.”

“Did you?” she grinned.

“You live in the neighborhood?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Maybe you can help me. I’m looking for a place to rent.”

Mamey looked surprised. “There’s one right around the corner.” She pulled a felt pen from her pocket protector, turned over the sapodilla half, and wrote a number on its skin. “How’s that for luck?”

As he strolled toward Duval, Wood called the landlord. The apartment was available, and he made an appointment to see it. When he disconnected, he was passing a shrimp shack and a tattoo parlor. A short woman stood in the gap between the two, fingering her phone. Wood recognized the fountain of green hair.

He crossed the street, waving as he approached.

Piña recognized him with a lopsided smile. “Did you get home safely?”

“You frightened me,” he admitted. “A lot’s happened since then. My view of women has changed.”

“Is that good?”

“I think so.” He hung his head, duncing himself. “They have lives of their own.”

“How about that.” Piña scowled at her phone.

“I’m sorry I got out of your car.”

She regarded him. “You’ve got the timing. He was a shit-head that night, and he’s a shithead this morning.”

Wood asked for her number, and she gave it to him.

Piña slid her phone into her pocket. “Back to work.” And she disappeared into the tattoo parlor.



The apartment to let was on the top floor of an updated three-story. It had a parking space, a view through one window and was furnished with deco rattan. Wood rented it on the spot.

When he arrived with a load of clothing, he met the tenant with whom he shared the third floor. Their doors faced each other. No sooner had he put the key in his lock, then the door opposite swung open and Mamey stepped out.

He laughed. “I was going to stop by and thank you.”

“How do I look?” She was dressed for a date.

“Beautiful.” Her outfit was brown and her lips were ruby.

She suggested some local eateries and scenic spots on the Key. “I love Taylor Beach and the leaning pines.”

“I want to see that.”

“It’s best at sundown,” she said. “Tomorrow?”

“Thank you. Really.”

The next day, Mamey knocked on his door as the sun was setting. She wore a drab shirt and baggy shorts. On the drive there, she talked about herself. Her parents were Cuban exiles and lived on Islamorada. She had been in the Keys all her life. She loved her family, and she wanted one of her own.

“Babies,” she said. And then, “Do you think perfect love is possible?”

“I used to,” Wood said.

“You’ve been married.”

He nodded. “Technically, I still am.”

Taylor Beach was a place of romance. Its leaning pines seemed drunk with it, the needle sprays trembling. They strolled through the trees, passing couples arm in arm. Mamey watched, her eyes on the women. As they reached the shore, what remained of the sun stained the eastern sky pink. The winds had left ripple patterns in the duff. Where the pines ended, a little girl was turning circles with a bottle of soap, freeing bubbles from her wand—iridescent blue, green and yellow. They were lifted by the breeze and borne out to sea.

Wood faced Mamey, trying to see her as she was, unbiased by any need or desire of his own. He caught her hand, and when she squeezed it, his heart went out to her. She seemed so unassuming, so vulnerable.

“There’s a jetty,” she pointed.

They crossed the sand, clambered onto the rocks and followed the pile out beyond the breaking surf. When they

reached the jetty's end, they stood together with the sea all around them. "I'm so happy here," she said.

Without thinking, Wood's lips approached hers. She turned her face, bashful, accepting the kiss on her cheek.

"You're embarrassing me," she muttered. Wood barely heard. Her cheek was smooth as custard, and its colors in the flare of sun were pink and orange. Her scent was subtle, simple and clean, like bread fresh from the oven. It mingled with the taste of a dozen rare spices, all in small traces.

Her dark eyes met his. "I'm still a girl," she said. "The things a woman feels— They're a mystery to me."

"Woman or girl, your warmth is magnetic. You're beautiful, inside and out."

She bowed her head. "My family's Catholic. I'm following the faith. It might surprise you, or amuse you—"

"What?"

She faced him. "I'm a virgin. I'm saving myself for the man I marry."

He nodded slowly, fighting his feelings. For her, love meant sanctity. Did his failure separate them? The loss of the Sacred Space was, after all, a fall from grace.

"Wood—"

Her expression was earnest. She turned her head, and for a moment he imagined it was the sail of a ship coming about, headed away from him.

"Have you ever had a woman as a friend?" she said.

"I'm not sure."

Mamey turned back to him.

“Maybe I need one,” Wood said.

“I need a friend too. I’m still learning about love.” She laughed. “But I know a lot about fruit.”

The cheer in her eyes stopped his breath. Once again, he felt himself the lucky beneficiary of a generous heart.

“Do you like Chinese food?” he asked.



Hao Zhidao was packed, but Guava was on duty, and she treated Wood like an imperial guest. She knelt beside him, conferring and advising on meal selection, and after she set down the steaming plates, she stood by his shoulder and broke open the paper casing, extending the square ends of the chopsticks toward him while Mamey watched.

“Special treatment,” Mamey observed as the waitress moved away. And they began to eat.

“You stock guavas,” Wood said.

“Whenever we can,” Mamey replied. “An austere fruit that needs careful attention. The raw guava is pasty and astringent, and the little seeds are hard as gravel. You juice it or make a gel and bake it in pastry.”

“The scent is heavenly,” Wood said.

When they’d finished eating, Guava approached with the check on her silver tray, and a fortune—just one.

“What about my guest?” Wood said.

“Her future is known.” Guava extended the tray. “It’s yours that’s in doubt.”

Mamey laughed.

Wood removed the cellophane while the two women watched. He stared at the fortune, then read it aloud.

“TO FIND A NEW LIFE, YOU MUST FORGET WHO YOU ARE.”



When Wood arrived at Refugio, Piña was at the bar talking to Mango. He ordered blushes. “Put a squirt of pineapple in mine,” Piña said. “Where did you get that shirt?” she laughed. He was wearing a blue pajama top.

“I thought you’d like it.”

“I do. The ducktail too.” She reached up and touched his hair.

While they drank, Piña told him about the tattoos she’d inked that day. Then she began asking questions. Wood told her about the breakup and his move to the Key.

“Stabbed in the heart,” Piña said. “I know what that’s like.”

“It hurts to be left.”

“Don’t be so dainty.” Piña wrinkled her nose. “Two-timing stinks. It’s fucked.”

He nodded at her assessment.

She studied him. “You’re trapped in there. Aren’t you.”

“Trapped?”

Piña downed the rest of her blush and set the goblet on the bar. “We’re going to open you up.” She motioned him to follow.

They were halfway to the door when the old woman, Auntie, plowed through the crowd. “Coconuts,” Piña warned. Auntie threw her arms around Wood.

“Leave him alone.” Piña pushed her away.

Auntie elbowed Piña aside and planted a kiss on Wood’s mouth. “My baby.”

Wood wiped his lips. “You’re confused.”

“I’m the one you want,” Auntie exclaimed.

“You witch.” Piña was prying Wood loose, but Auntie kept hold of one arm.

With her free hand, the old woman fished a pen from her purse and scrawled a phone number on his palm.

Wood turned to Piña when they reached the sidewalk. “Who the hell is she?”

“Auntie Coco,” Piña shook her head. “You don’t need that.”

“I’ll say I don’t.” He put his thumb to his palm, but the number wouldn’t rub out.

“Always looking for a guy to keep her pump primed.”

Piña grabbed Wood’s arm and pulled him into an alley. “Here,” she opened her purse, drew a pipe out and lit it. “Try this.”

“What is it?”

“Try it,” she insisted.

Wood did, and the lift-off was instant.

“Powerful,” he said.

“Stubby’s stuff,” she muttered.

“Who’s that?”

“My ex. I loved him, but I hate him now. He was screwing around, like Vadette.”

Wood remembered her plea for an escort to her car. “Is he bothering you?”

Piña nodded. “He’s got a gun.” She raised her thumb and forefinger, with an inch between. “A black one with a little nose.” She drew on the pipe, put it back in her purse and motioned. “Let’s go.”

Duval was mobbed. A squadron of honking scooters tore down it, panicking tourists in a crosswalk and the chickens crossing with them. They passed a man supported by two women, his feet wobbling behind. A crowd had gathered at the Truman intersection. Piña slowed, and the two of them watched as the fire squad carried out an alligator someone had left in a belle époque guesthouse.

Past the fire truck, Piña halted before a stairway. She turned and patted Wood’s chest. “This is our place.”

She led him into the stairwell and up three floors.

As they reached the rooftop, Wood saw people milling before a bar, half of them unclothed. Beyond the bar, beneath potted palms and canvas umbrellas, couples were dancing naked in the humid night air.

He looked at Piña and shook his head.

She pushed him toward a doorway. “In there.”

The changing alcove was like a locker room. Men were removing their clothes or putting them on while the floor tipped beneath them. “I’m high,” he warned, unsure if anyone heard. *Stupid*, he thought, unbuttoning his shirt. He slid off his shorts and his briefs, and hung his things on a hook. Then he stepped back through the doorway, steeling himself.

Piña was exiting a changing room on the other side of the bar. Her naked body was all tight curves and sharp edges. The ink he’d seen on her arm and shoulder was part of a larger tattoo that crossed her breasts, wove over her hips and belly, and wound down both thighs.

“Like my jungle?” Piña turned. “I did the drawing.”

Lianas and serpents writhed over her back. Between her hips, a snake’s head looked out, eyes glaring, its forked tongue curling over her buttocks.

“What are you hiding?” She laughed and caught his wrist, pulling his hand away from his groin. “Let’s dance.”

She dragged him past the DJ, onto the roof deck. The music was latin, frenzied, absurdly cheery. Piña began to shake. Wood ducked his head and shuffled his feet, shifting his hands before him, as if he was waving at someone he didn’t want to meet. She faced him, wide-eyed, tossing her head, making her green fountain thrash. Then she squinted at him and wrinkled her nose.

Wood looked away. He could laugh at himself, but his life

had always been private. He was feeling now how private it was. Could Piña hear his thoughts? She was twirling against him, poking his middle, slapping his rump.

Laughter reached him. Dancers and people seated at tables were turning to watch. Piña was laughing too, still twirling, pointing at him at each rotation. As she gyrated past a table, she grabbed a drink, and as she came around, she threw it in his face.

Wood's reserve burst. He felt the drink dripping down his chin. It was tropical, fruity; he tasted the sweetness, and in a flash, with the laughing eyes on him, he let himself go, jerking his hips and flailing his limbs to the zany music. His head bobbed, his tongue wagged—he was a child again, silly and witless, flinging his body around.

Piña collapsed in his arms. "Let's eat," she said.

They dressed and descended the stairs. She paused on the first-floor landing and pulled out her pipe, and they smoked what was left. When they reached the street, it was heaving like a cruise ship in a tempest.

Piña led the way down Duval to a Cuban place with "Papalote" over the door. They found an empty spot on the bench before one of three long tables. All the walls were sky blue, and a giant kite was painted at the rear, with its tail and string trailing.

"Where are the waiters?" Wood wondered.

Piña shook her head.

And the menus?

“There aren’t any,” she said.

The people seated, Wood realized, were all drinking pink blushes. And they were all staring at him and Piña.

“Go to the kitchen,” she said. “Tell the cooks what we want.”

Wood rose and elbowed his way to the rear. Vats were bubbling on the burners, and large pans of food steamed on racks. Were the cooks on drugs? They were jabbering to each other, but the jabber sounded like baby talk. Wood tried to make himself heard, but what came out was baby talk too. He shouted and pointed at the food.

One of the cooks slopped big portions on a pair of red plates, and Wood carried them out of the kitchen. As he approached, he saw a man slide beside Piña. She was talking loudly and gesturing, and Wood could hear what she was saying.

She was telling the man that she and Wood were going to have sex. She was explaining the things she was going to do, and the things she would have Wood do to her. Everyone at the table was listening. One of them spotted him and hooted. As he set a plate down in front of Piña, she removed her shoe and threw it at the hooter. The man beside her, seeing an opening, pinched her breast. Piña scooped up a handful of refried beans and smeared his face. Wood turned his plate over, dumping its contents on the man’s head.

People at the other tables were standing. Cries, catcalls, and then the food was flying. As Wood pulled Piña to her

feet, the cooks exited the kitchen with vats and pans, throwing fistfuls at the diners. Was any of this really happening? Wood grabbed Piña and hurried her toward the door. Covered in food, they piled into a pink cab.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“Stock Island,” Piña said.

The cab headed east, zooming around bends and through red lights. Old Town vanished, strip malls and chain stores flew past. Then, through the bouncing window, Wood saw boats canted together, docked and weatherworn, with rickety cabins and hobbled booms. The cab crossed Cow Key Bridge, skirting hills of chains and rotting nets. Trucks without tires, suspended on blocks; shacks falling off their foundations; then they were winding through a maze of house trailers.

“Home?” Wood said.

Piña eyed him. “A storm brought me.”

Everything here was broken, coming apart.

Piña shrieked, and the cab halted.

She piled out and Wood followed, seeing a derelict trailer, imagining a hurricane had dropped it there with Piña inside.

“Quiet,” a man barked from a nearby shack.

“Eat shit,” Piña yelled.

Then they were past the door, edging through the cramped space. Dirty dishes filled the sink. Piña parted the damp garments that hung from a makeshift line and led Wood to the rear, stopping before a bed littered with clothing.

Wood grabbed a broom handle to steady himself, seeing

the drawing over the bed. Two giant reptiles twisted together in a web of snakes and vines, like the jungle that covered Piña's body. "Gators."

"Crocs," she corrected.

"Fighting."

"Screwing," she said.

One of the crocs had a heart between its jaws.

Piña reloaded her pipe and they traded tokes, then she removed her food-spattered clothes, helped Wood strip off his, pushed the bed mess onto the floor and fell onto the mattress with him.

"Give me that," she said, grabbing his groin.

Wood giggled, fending her off. Something hard dug at his back. He rolled onto his hip, found a shoe and tossed it aside.

"I'm going to bite you, cut you," Piña said. "Make you bleed."

Her claws scratched his ribs. The stud in her lower lip snagged his chin. "You want some Piña?"

Wood slid his hand up her thigh. "I do."

Piña closed her jaw on his shoulder. The pain was intense.

"I'm going to take you apart," she said. There was blood on her lips.

Wood put his hands to her throat, raising himself, looking down at the fountain of hair. He lowered his face into the spray, breathing her scent, feeling the green shaking around him as Piña tried to free herself.

"Get down here," she gasped.

The tattoo of snakes and lianas crept from her limbs and

encircled his. They were binding him, pulling him down, down to where mold furred the roots and grubs squirmed in the sweating soil. Gnats bit his face, green blades parted. Amid a compass of leaves, he could see the barrel-shaped fruit standing on end. Its skin was spiny, hard to handle.

“In the jungle,” she said, “we use this.”

Piña raised her fist. It gripped a tarnished machete.

“Hack the stalk,” she said.

She swung, and the machete hissed through the air. Wood recoiled.

“Hack,” she rasped, swinging again.

With a grunt, the fruit came loose. “Grab on,” Piña cried. Wood made a fist around hers, and the next hack cut away the fruit’s waxy top. Together, they trimmed its bottom and sides.

“Worth the effort?”

“Oh yeah,” Piña said. “You’ll see.”

A fierce chop split the barrel in two, and then they were huffing together, notching and sawing, making broad slices.

The fruit was as unsubtle inside as out. The pulp was fibrous and pitted. There was juice everywhere. Finally the slippery sections were ready.

“Let’s feed,” she said, closing her eyes.

Wood pushed the fruit into her gaping mouth. She chewed, she swooned. His mind swam, his saliva flowing.

“Open,” she croaked, “open!”

He spread his jaws, and she forced a dripping slice between. Coarse, raw—

The acid tang kerfed his tongue and plugged his nose. The crushed pulp slopped from his jowls, drooling over his chin. Piña, Piña— She was crunching and sweetness and irrepressible juice.

The philodendrons shook, the parrots shrieked. The earth was heaving, and all its orchids and beaked heliconias mouthed along. Sweeping palms, fanning ferns; leaves giant and heart-shaped, waving like elephant ears. With the ginger heads, with the fingering fronds and twitching blades, Wood shook and shook.

Slowly the shaking ended.

The closeness and dimness dissolved. Above, the jungle canopy cracked. Wood felt the wind and saw the sun.

He lay on the jungle floor caked with loam, sticky and stiff, body crawling with flies. Around him, palms were uprooted. The plants were rags, stalks snapped, seedheads dashed, vines in knots. It was fading, but he could still hear it—the roar of the hurricane that had come and gone.



He emerged from oblivion slowly, sensation returning. His leg was bound. Something choked him, circling his neck. Wood moved his arm to feel beneath him, but he had no hand. Had he lost it? Had it fallen asleep? Springs squealed as he shifted, turning onto his hip.

Light shone through a broken window. He was tangled in

the sheets on Pina's bed. He pulled the linen from his throat and raised his head. Alone, in her trailer. She had scraped the food off his shirt and shorts, and draped them over a stool.

Wood used her leaky shower to wash himself. There were teeth marks on his chest and shoulder, and a gash in his hip was crusted with blood. As he dressed, he scanned the drawings pinned to walls and ceiling. Writhing foliage, swollen fruit, beady-eyed reptiles. Over the bed, the two crocs mated in a nest of snakes.

He pulled his phone from his pocket to call for a ride and saw a photo Piña had sent him an hour before. He was sleeping, tangled in the sheets. A shin was visible, the hand from one arm, biceps from the other. The linen was bound round his neck, and his head looked detached. It was like a bomb had gone off and scattered his parts.

“Wide open,” the caption read.



That afternoon, Mamey knocked on Wood's door. She had made a fruit platter of caimitos and figs, and she had a package wrapped in shiny paper and ribbons. Wood removed the wrapping. It was a leather-bound notebook with blank pages and a cornucopia carved on the cover.

“A logbook,” she said.

He touched the horn of plenty. It had been four days since he'd moved his things, with some forwarded mail, from

Cameron's place. He had stood by the window of his new apartment and opened the letter from his publisher. The meager check had driven him back to his computer, but when he reread his notes for the *Unborn Twins* sequel, he knew it was hopeless.

"I'm changing," Wood said. He met Mamey's gaze. "Things are happening to me."

She nodded. "You should write them down."

"Thanks," he said, humbled by the gift. "I will."

After she'd left, he sat at the kitchen table, opened the log to the first page and entered the date. Then he recounted what had happened with Piña.

In the days that followed, Wood recorded the events that led to his flight to Key West and what had happened since his arrival. Along with the events, he set down his thoughts about his failed marriage. How deep was his blindness? How long had Vadette been forlorn? Did the trip to Mazatlán turn her into a scorpion, or had the demon always been with them, lurking in the shadow of his Fabergé egg?

At the end of the week, an envelope arrived by overnight mail. It was from a law firm in L.A. Wood waited until Mamey returned from work and they opened it together. Inside were divorce papers. That night at 4 a.m., Wood rose from sleep. He'd been dreaming that he was with Vadette, speaking his heart to her, and the words were still fresh. He grabbed the logbook and transcribed them.

"In my way, my childish way, I loved you. I still do. Those feelings, those memories will never be erased. Forgive me,

Vadette. The Space was the best I could do. If I'd been a different man—a better one, a smarter one—I might have seen who you were, understood what you needed. I might have given you a real love—the love you deserve.”

As he finished, the tangle of feelings about the man in L.A. returned.

Wood went back to sleep, and when he rose the next morning he transferred what he'd written to a blank sheet of paper. He knocked on Mamey's door and had her read it.

“I think you should send it to her,” she said.

Wood clipped it to the divorce papers. The two of them had breakfast and then walked to the courthouse. Wood signed the documents in front of a notary. After the notary had used his stamp, Wood felt the embossing with his fingers, imagining she might do the same. Then he posted the papers.