

Pussibilities ...

“Pussibilities. The plan’s got pussibilities, that’s what it’s got.” Foxy was adamant.

“Pussibilities? Foxy, you mean possibilities?” Owl Man’s inquiry was gentle in the extreme.

“Listen, Owl Man. You’re not the only one on the planet that’s got wordability. My head’s full of these goodies. Someone told me once, at one of those clinics I go to for pillzapoppin, that I got me a head full of word salad. I kinda’ liked that, you know. Only thing is, they just shake their heads when I ask for poppy-seed dressing, don’t seem to get what I’m talking about at all. It’s my favorite you know, when you can’t get cherry-apricot dressing, I always ask for poppy seed. It’s what my Footsies’ got, you know?”

“Your cat has poppyseed dressing?” Heron Man asked.

“Listen, Heron, if this plan’s gonna’ work you got to pay closer attention than you been doing. Tell him, Owl.” Foxy was using her hand that was not holding the bag as a conductor might when doing a climactic Tchaikovskovian passage.

“Well,” said Owl Man, beginning to conduct right along with Foxy, “I gather she means that her cat Footsie has some quite unique abilities and that in her thinking this through, it was only Mr. Moto that was the missing pussibility, so to speak. Is that right, Foxy?”

“Dead on, Owl Man. You sure know how to please a lady! Now, Moto, do you see where you fit into this scheme? Is this a big enough hint?” Foxy walked up to the mountain himself, and handed the colorful bag to Mr. Moto who took it without question.

“Soon as Fex steps out of Ling’s door, I got the bag. Ain’t no one mess with that bag when Moto’s got it, even if it’s not a guy bag. May get some ribbin’ bout it, but no one gonna mess. No one ever messes with Moto.” For a big man, it was almost graceful the way Mr. Moto did a pirouette as if remembering some

far off ballet lesson from his childhood, which no one could quite imagine. Trying to imagine it gave Owl Man pause, and for the first time, he failed to tap out a few notes memorializing the scene.

“It’s brilliant,” cooed Coe, rather taken with himself as if he was preparing for an encore.

“It’s the missing piece,” chimed Sal, smiling for the first time.

“Any more possibilities?” Heron Man threw the question into the air just to see what would happen next.

Sally wants a Corvette, Fex wants a Rolls ...

“Wait a minute. I think we got a problem with all these ‘possibilities’ you’re talkin’ about.” Coo was scratching his head with rapid strokes, like a cat going after a flea.

“Whatsa matter, Coo? Gotta use the sandbox?” After Sal’s momentary epiphany of joy, he had reverted to his default mode of snide sarcasm.

“Shut up, Sal. Listen up.” Coo was not yielding his newly-minted authority without a fight. “We’re gonna need to charter a friggin’ Greyhound bus for this heist. Mr. Moto alone is gonna need a Hummer. Or a dump truck.” Coo paused. “Or maybe he drives Fex’s Lincoln?”

“Nobody drives that Lincoln ‘cept me, and it ain’t gonna be no getaway car. Besides, the tranny slips a little. It needs a lot of babyin’. Right, baby?” Fex looked to Heather for support.

“That’s right, baby.”

For being so upfront and outsized, Fex and Heather were doing a lot of babying, thought Owl Man, though he made no comment.

In any event, Heather agreed with Fex “a hunnert and ten per cent.” She didn’t want the big Lincoln to be used as a getaway car any more than Fex did. The thought of that huge Detroit bucket sloshing around corners, jumping curbs, knocking over garbage cans, crates of tomatoes, watermelons or chickens, flying over the steep Seattle intersections, sparks shooting from the rear bumper—like in the movies—didn’t work for Heather. She wanted something classy for her getaway. A Jaguar, maybe. Or a Bentley. Something fit for a Baroness.

But Coo did have a point. They would have to work the kinks out of the transportation plan, considering all the actors in the drama.

“Don’t forget, Coo, I’ll still be workin’ at the bank. I gotta stay behind to do damage control, erase whatever tracks I can.” Sal was being unusually level-headed.

“Yeah, but that still leaves Fex, Heather, Sally, me, Owl Man, Heron Man, Foxy and Mr. Moto, don’t it?” Coo was showing another burst of organizational

brilliance. “Or should we all just scatter and run like a bunch of juvenile delinquents?” Now Coo was starting to lapse into sarcasm, like Sal, suggesting that power might be going to his head.

“No,” asserted Sally suddenly. “We gotta have suitable transportation, like proper criminals. I want a Corvette, OK, Sal?”

“Hey,” shouted Fex, “if Sally gets a Corvette, then Heather and me get a Rolls.”

Soon all but Owl Man, Heron Man and Mr. Moto were busy discussing car makes, colors, models, features. Some insisted on four-wheel drive. Others preferred front-wheel drive. Everyone agreed that a GPS display was essential, in case they got lost during the getaway. Foxy said she didn’t drive any more so she didn’t care, although she thought a side-mounted hydraulic lift for her wheelchair would be nice, so maybe a late-model conversion van would do. And she did like those roll-up sun-shades that you could have a picnic under, and the ladder going up the back to adjust the satellite dish on top.

Heron Man took a deep breath and looked out the window. A tugboat was pulling a garbage barge and a noisy gang of seagulls cackled along behind. They would follow it out to sea if necessary, to get at the rich spoils within. When he turned back toward the room, he saw about the same level of order and discipline as there was among the seagulls following the barge.

Finally he spoke loudly, and somewhat reprovably: “We haven’t even discussed how we’re going to bankroll this operation and already you’re spending half the federal budget. We might as well just dig a tunnel into Fort Knox with teaspoons and camp shovels. Can you just get a grip for a few seconds?”

Everybody was stunned into silence.

“What’s eatin’ him?” Sal was the first to break the ice.

“Boy, what’s with Heron Man all of a sudden?”

“Jerk.”

The comments were starting to fly.

“You want me to break his face, Foxy?”

“No, Mr. Moto. He’s got a point. We’re gettin’ ahead of ourselves.”

“Yeah, we are,” Coo agreed.

“I wasn’t talkin’ about us, I was talkin’ about me.” Foxy seemed to be sliding into the other personalities again.

Owl Man had been watching this whole spectacle. It seemed as if he was actually enjoying it. And despite the uproar, he had managed to type some notes. Now he put the laptop aside, stood up and approached Sally. She looked at him with alarm, as if he was going to seize her in his talons and carry her off to his nest in an old mossy oak.

“Sally, I wonder if you’d be willing to bring the meeting back to order by singing something for us all, perhaps the same note you sang before? Or something of your own choosing?”

“You mean my scream?”

“Whatever you sang before Sally, the second time, not the first. The note that sounded like it came from an angel.”

Sally’s face softened, and a golden sheen seemed to radiate from her glistening hair, like a halo. She stood and cleared her throat.

Sally's note ...

Can a squeak be melodious? A scream sonorous? A screech plangent? Owl Man tapped these questions into his computer, all the while thinking it must be so, and trying to describe the luminous tendrils that wrapped themselves around the entire group under the hypnotic spell cast by Sally's glorious song, if song it was, a spell that held delicious possibilities, as Owl Man noted, requiring only that the group itself wear ear plugs during the heist.

It simply wouldn't do to have everyone waft off into a swoon as they were doing at this very moment.

Sally continued to hit ever-higher notes, causing Owl Man to wave at Heron Man trying to get his attention; but Heron Man was in no less a swoon than the others. Only Owl Man's tapping at the keyboard kept him grounded just enough to know he had to call a halt before the entire crew was taken up in some resplendent rapture which would be unlikely to make headlines the next day in the *Seattle Times*.

"Enough Sally! Enough!" Owl Man's shouting and foot stomping broke through the wondrous feat and at last Sally's song wound down.

It was Fex who spoke, just as Owl Man was about to put forth a dangerous question.

"Bird brain," Fex snorted into the air, still heavy with overtones from Sally's vocal exhibition, recovering his typical demotion of those he addressed, "I've taken you as some woolly egg-head at best, so how come you are promoting crime? It makes no sense. Answer me that, will you?"

"At your service, Fex." Owl Man replied, always the gentleman. "It may make no sense, Fex, but it makes a scrumptious story. That's why we don't call it a robbery, or burglary, or a hold-up—those are newspaper words. But *heist*. Now there's a *story word* for you. Heist. Listen to it. Say it, Fex."

Fex took on the challenge and in his deepest bellow, came out with a marvelous rendition of the word, which he then repeated, and kept at it, whereupon Heron Man, as if he held a baton in front of an orchestra, began

gesturing for the others to join in Fex's rendering of what became something of a group *lieder*:

A heist, a heist, a heisting we will go

A heist, a heist, a heisting don't you know

A heist, a heist, a heisting our cup of tea

A heist, a heist, a heisting then we flee

Fex seemed to have discovered a latent talent, and was about to launch into a second verse, but it was his mother's sequel that "stole the show," as Owl Man duly noted.

Foxy's jig ...

In the blink of an eye, or, as the Germans would have it, *einen augenblick*—which takes longer to say than the phenomenon did to unfold—there flashed across Foxy's face a far-off look, as if distant memories of a youth long past, or of towering heights left un-scaled, were unreeling before her mind's eye. Then she seemed to turn a corner in her soul. Her face suddenly contorted into what Heron Man frankly regarded as a demonic scowl. But before he or any of the others could even form a single word Foxy had drawn herself up to her full stature, filled her lungs with air and begun to sing. As the words poured out of her, she simultaneously started dancing in the manner of a sailor's jig.

Heron Man snapped to attention and began waving his conductor's baton in double-time. His inner metronome ticked furiously. The chorus in the background, anchored by Fex's resonant bass, hummed along. All fingers snapped time in flawless syncopation, all voices harmonized, to Foxy's delirious whirling jig and her captivating lyric, which she was inventing as she went along. Heather moved sinuously, in counterpoint to Foxy's jig, while Sally sang the high notes, soaring over the enchanted chorus.

When she had finished, Foxy threw herself onto the couch, which had been vacated during her performance.

"Whew. Oh, my."

When the others realized what had just happened they spontaneously burst into applause. All except Fex, that is, who seemed curiously subdued.

"She's a regular Shirley MacLaine, ain't she?" he said.

Heron Man stepped between Fex and his mother and began complimenting Fex.

"Fex, that was wonderful. What a powerful voice you have. It sounded like a lion roaring on the savanna. The zebras shaking in their skins. Elephants trumpeting alarm. Hyenas running, their tails between their legs."

"Zebras, huh? Shakin' in their skins? Me roarin' like a lion? You really think so, Heron Man?"

“Absolutely, Fex. I think you’ve just revealed another talent, one that might just push this little gambit over the edge and into deep clover, bring home the bacon, drive in the winning run, deliver the mail.” Heron Man was groping for the right metaphor.

“Knock out punch,” offered Fex.

“That’s it, Fex. Knock out punch. That’s what I wanted to say.”

“Punch and Judy, you mean.” That was Sal.

Fex and Sal started shadow-boxing, dodging and feinting like ring-boxers. Heron Man looked at Heather and Sally, who were glowing beatifically. Even Coo was ignoring the horseplay between Fex and Sal, and was grinning idiotically, whistling Foxy’s tune. Mr. Moto stood at the door, impassive, feet spread, hands behind his back, in the classic “at ease” military posture. But his eyes darted back and forth, alert, gauging any potential threat to Foxy.

Meanwhile, Owl Man had sat down next to Foxy on the couch.

Mr. Moto tensed for a moment, but Foxy seemed unconcerned, so he relaxed slightly.

Owl Man whispered something in Foxy’s ear.

“Oh, please, Owl Man. I don’t want you to fight any duels on my account ... Would you really?”

Only afterwards, in the quiet of his writer’s study and while writing in his journal, was Owl Man able to retrieve the words to Foxy’s song, and then only after a deep meditation took him back to that inimitable performance. Here is the journal entry:

“I cannot begin to describe, to do justice, to Foxy’s transfiguration today at the *Come Ye Heather*. I was stunned, I think, as much as anyone. Here lies my tattered copy of the DSM-IV—useless drivel. Of course one could say that Foxy suffers from multiple personality disorder, or that she hears ‘voices,’ like any other schizophrenic. The DSM-IV goes on and on. But the clinical cases pale when placed next to what I observed today. I may as well have been witnessing Teresa of Avila, before Bernini. Or Franz Liszt playing the Mephisto Waltz. Or Paganini soaring through the Devil’s Trill. No, no, no. The DSM-IV will not do.

But something like Butler's *Lives of the Saints* might suffice ... ”

At this point the journal entry was broken off, and the lyrics to Foxy's song were inserted.

FOXY'S SONG:

Oh, heist me up to the mast, boys, heist me up to the mast
Don't let the captain see anything
Don't let the bosun e'en he-ar me sing ... and then
Boost the boxes of dough, boys, boost the boxes of dough
For its lots of boxes of dough for old Foxy and Fex—her—boy.

The journal entry resumed: “Foxy surprised everyone by changing the meter. Also, the last three words—Fex, her and boy—were extended, like whole notes amidst a thicket of eighth notes. Fex's tune was marvelous indeed, but what Foxy produced was something timeless, the kind of song that, had it not been invented on the spot, you would say was a ‘national favorite.’ Something everyone knew and sang, something like, ‘Take me out to the ball game.’”

Foxy's voices ...

For years Foxy had carried on a lively, black-market trade of sorts with her voices. In its general features, the daily din resembled a protection racket, like the one she had attempted when Mr. Moto was young and brash, although in the case of Foxy's voices *she* was the customer. Faced with their perpetual hounding, their threats and insults, she would meekly pay off the voices with her attention and deference, and they would protect her, as it were, from total breakdown. They kept her company when she was lonely, offered opinions when she had none of her own, provided convenient distractions when she wanted to avoid some unpleasant realization, and otherwise entertained her with their antics. That's why she couldn't tolerate television—it was too much like watching her own mental background and she would go into overload.

The few people who knew Foxy well—Fex, Mr. Moto, and a few of her long-term loan customers—knew about the voices, but she was often enough lucid that people generally left her alone. “We get along OK,” she would say aloud to herself, referring to the voices, during the occasional respite from their sniping. The one exception to the snipers, of course, was the *concurring voice*, which Foxy was at pains to cultivate as a close companion.

But since she had met Owl Man something different was happening. The voices still delivered their usual harangues and dire warnings, uncovered sinister plots, muttered the usual suspicions, the shrill farragos. But now, the image of Owl Man interposed itself between Foxy and the voices, as if to defend her from ungallant marauders.

“He said he would fight a duel for me. Said he would “run ‘em through” if they even so much as made a snide remark. Ohhh, that Owl Man, what a gentleman. Knows how to treat a lady.”

“You ain't no lady,” one of the voices shriled. “You're just an old biddy.”

Normally, Foxy would crumble before this standard-issue attack, this normal, everyday snipe, retreating into the corner where the concurring voice would console her. But today was different. Today Foxy came back strong.

“What’re you talkin’ about? Didn’t you see Owl Man and how he treated me? I’m a lady.”

“You ain’t no lady,” the voice reiterated, though not as certain as before.

“They said I was a princess in a past life.” Foxy was gaining ground here. “And now Owl Man proves it. Why, he even has a scar across his face from a duel he fought in the Bobo ... Bodolungie ... Foxy couldn’t get the correct pronunciation of *Bois de Boulogne*, even though she had flashed out several sentences in perfect French that day on the houseboat, more conclusive proof of her elevated station in a past life.

“He proves it, don’t he?” Foxy still needed a little convincing, but the concurring voice quickly stepped into the dispute and tipped the scales.

“Sure, it does, Foxy. Proves it pretty as punch.” The concurring voice was unfailingly supportive, though not always adept with the King’s English.

“Ya see? Foxy ain’t no dummy.”

“You’re a dummy, all right, Foxy,” said the voice, “and that’s all there is to it.”

Foxy was starting to get bored with this voice.

“Ah, git outta here and go stuff it!” she said.

With this unexpectedly swift counter-punch from Foxy, the voice suddenly folded and disappeared. Even the concurring voice left the scene, and Foxy was left alone with no one to talk to but Owl Man.

“Now, then, Owl Man, it’s just you and me. You may kiss my hand if you like.”

And the Owl Man of Foxy’s imagination did just that, sweeping his plumed hat in a grand arc as he bowed, taking her dainty hand, and kissing it gallantly, delicately.

The voices did not bother her for the rest of the day and throughout the night, as Owl Man’s presence lingered. A few times the voices attempted some cowardly incursions, like skittish hyenas approaching a glowing campfire, but were frightened away by the sharp crack of Owl Man’s musket-like voice rattling in the dark. A smell of gunpowder filled the air, keeping the evil spirits at bay

until dawn approached.

During the vigil, Foxy lay sleeping at Owl Man's feet, undisturbed, like a lady, like a baby.

The sun rose again and Owl Man vanished into the light.

Trying to formulate a plan ...

“Foxy, dear, if anyone made so much as a snide remark in your direction, I’d run them through. Yes, I would. It’s just a total shame that your performance was not recorded in full-blown 3D. We’ll just have to make do with the version we have from the camcorder on my laptop. Which reminds me,” Owl Man said, as he got himself up off the couch. “I’d best turn it off now.”

“You recorded her?” The question came from Fex, who stepped in front of Owl Man, blocking his progress. “Without her knowing? Without any of us knowing? That ain’t legal, is it?” Fex’s hands had found their way to his hips and he rotated his upper body as if doing a threat gesture of the sort a football lineman might do.

“Fex, my dear man, *legal* is hardly the issue here. Everything is part of the plan, including this movie. I don’t think HIPPA forms cover what we are doing. Although, by a very broad stretch of the imagination, not that I’m opposed to broad stretches mind you, it’s rather our sort of business as writers, you know. We could consider this to be a therapy of sorts, you being victims and all of a patently abusive financial system, and the plan could be considered simply a recovery operation. If this goes well, we might even begin recovery groups, you know, something like Heisters Anonymous—HA! they could call it!”

Here, Heron Man stepped in, feeling that there was little hope of corralling Owl Man’s oration once it started to go in too many directions.

“A date, Owl Man, it’s a date we need now, the date of this recovery, as you call it. Let’s set the date. Sal, can you help us do this, you knowing the bank’s innards so to speak? Is there a specific date coming up that would be best?”

“Black Friday,” shouted Sal, “the day after Thanksgiving. The bank will be full of shoppers carrying packages, and everyone will be harried and distracted. It adds to the cover.” Sal’s sudden serious tone forced all eyes upon him.

“Will the money men be delivering that day, Sal?” Fex, hands still hipped, turned slightly in Sal’s direction and waited for Sal’s reply. Everyone was waiting and Sal was taking his time, enjoying the spotlight.

“It’s just so incredibly perfect! Yes, the money-men will come—they come twice! We do the second delivery, which is the larger of the two and I know exactly at what time they will come. It’s perfect!” Sal was hammering home the point and his smile left no doubt as to his satisfaction with himself.

“I can’t do it then.” Foxy said this so casually everyone took a double take.

“Mom, what the hell are you saying?” It was Fex who dropped his hands from his hips as if wilting a bit. Had he called Foxy “Mom” since he was a kid?

“What do you mean you can’t?” Fex was looking at her with wide disbelieving eyes.

“I have an appointment.” Foxy once again delivered this line so casually, it brought to Owl Man’s mind the image of a floozie, chewing gum, and filing her nails, a *Chicago* moll, just tellin’ it like it is. He tapped the keys on his laptop.

“With who?” Fex was now looming over his mother. He was not prepared to hear her answer.

“Not with a who. With a what.”

Foxy reveals her secret plan ...

Everyone froze. Then, one by one, as if on cue, each head did a slow pan toward Foxy, who seemed forty years younger than she had when she arrived. Somehow she had produced a stick of bubble gum, as well as a nail file. Normally her nails were dirty stubs but today they were gleaming with red polish. Fex did a double-take.

“What the—?” he muttered. “Where did you—? What’s goin’ on?”

Foxy ignored him.

“And besides,” Fex continued, “what are you talkin’ about anyway—an appointment with a ‘what’? What kinda crazy talk is that?”

Fex was giving voice to the questions and doubts of the entire group.

But Foxy just stood there, hips slanted, feet pointed inward, one elbow planted on her hip to provide a sort of table for the manicure she was giving herself.

“A Tommy gun,” she finally said dramatically.

“Are you kiddin’ me? You got an appointment with a Tommy gun? For the heist? I wouldn’t let you take a friggin’ cap gun into that bank. You’re outta your ever-lovin’ mind.” Fex resumed his hands-on-hips posture of indignation.

“Yep. Mr. Moto found it for me. Knows a guy. It’s clean. Serial numbers filed off. Good price. The guy needs cash. Already made the appointment. Black Friday.”

“How do you know the guy’s not a rat?”

“Mr. Moto knows him. That means *he* knows Mr. Moto. Ain’t that insurance enough? You don’t think the guy’s gonna risk all his fingers just to put the finger on us, do ya?” She popped a fresh chunk of gum into her mouth, worked it into a soft mass and blew a bubble.

“Uh, Foxy? Do you know how to shoot a Tommy gun?” Heron Man was being as delicate as he could.

“I don’t need to know how. Mr. Moto will put the bullets in for me, then I’ll aim and pull the trigger.” Foxy was unruffled. “Bonnie did it. Clyde did it.

Why can't I?"

"For one thing, you ain't Bonnie." Fex was getting agitated. It was that old creeping feeling of dread he had experienced many times, when faced with his mother's labile mood swings. "For another thing, she's dead," he continued. "They plugged her. You got that? They shot her full of holes, like a pin-cushion. They shot Clyde full of holes. He's dead too." Fex was fidgeting visibly, as he revisited in his mind unpleasant scenes from childhood. Like the time he saw Mr. Moto heaving a limp body into a dumpster in a back alley, shortly after he had overheard Foxy tell Mr. Moto to "take care of it."

Owl Man felt the tension, rising toward hysteria, in Fex, whose hands had migrated away from his hips and were now pressed against his ribs as he hugged himself tightly and rocked back and forth.

"That's a lovely idea, Foxy," Owl Man interjected. "But perhaps Mr. Moto could persuade his friend to show you the Tommy gun a few days *before* the heist. That way you would have a chance to do some target shooting with it, adjust the sights, test the re-coil, savor the smell of gunpowder and so forth."

Foxy stopped chewing her gum for a moment, as she considered Owl Man's suggestion.

Then, slipping back into his French swordsman accent, Owl Man said, "And, if Mademoiselle Renard would be so kind, perhaps I could accompany her to the ... shooting range, do you call it? Perhaps Mademoiselle could teach me how to shoot *la mitrailleuse dangereuse?*"

"Ou, là, là, Monsieur l'Hibou. Que vous êtes gallant! Mais biensûr je voudrais vous démontrer l'emploi de la mitrailleuse dangereuse et formidable!"

Foxy was actually rattling on in French!

Owl Man bowed deeply toward her. Fex turned his back in disgust. General consternation filled the room. No one could account for this incomprehensible outburst in a foreign language. Heron Man had heard strange reports about foreigners suddenly speaking foreign languages fluently after traumatic car accidents abroad, and the like. But he had no rational explanation for this, not that he was a rationalist. Neither was anyone else in the room,

apparently.

“What gives?” said Sal under his breath to Heather.

“Maybe it’s a past-life steppin’ up to the plate,” offered Heather helpfully, who read the astrology column in the Enquirer every day.

“Hey,” whispered Sally. “I bet Owl Man’s a ventriloquist.”

“Bullshit. He can’t even work his own tongue, let alone Foxy’s.” Fex’s disparagement of Owl Man’s powers of speech was nearly as crazy as Foxy’s behavior.

A low murmur circulated around the room as different hypotheses were floated, evaluated and discarded.

Heron Man approached Owl Man, who had just risen from his courteous bow. “Did you get that on the mini-cam?” he whispered, while Foxy freshened up her red lipstick.

“Got it,” replied Owl Man.

Once again, it was Coo who stepped forward, into the awkward silence that now settled like a sudden chill over the room.

“Now, about that date—Black Friday. I like it. And I been thinkin’ about that camera. Maybe Owl Man’s got the right idea. Maybe we need to film this heist so we can do our own editing, our own sound, our own production values and all. Ya know?” Coo looked around the room, then went on. “Set up the camera angles the way we want ‘em. I don’t like my profile anyway. And I hate them security cameras. They give me the creeps. Too blurry. No sound. Lousy angles.”

Coo had been reading technical articles and reviews in Variety Magazine of late. Everyone seemed impressed.

Owl Man nodded to Coo approvingly. “That’s good, Coo, very helpful. Shows you’re thinking.”

Coo blushed. “Yeah, I been readin’ some, ya know?”

After pausing to make sure he had everyone’s attention, Owl Man then resumed conducting the meeting in his normal, stentorian voice. Everyone was listening, even Foxy.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve been looking into video production possibilities for some time now. I may have located a suitable camera crew to film this heist, or at least the juicy parts of it, the ‘highlights,’ so to speak.”

He was about to go further when the sound of boots clomping along the dock brought his exposition to a halt. The footsteps approached Berth #27 and stopped. Suddenly there came an emphatic pounding on the door. The hinges rattled metallically as the door jumped in its frame.

Owl Man was alert, head rotating, eyes wide and blinking. For a moment it almost seemed that his head had swiveled 180 degrees and he was looking directly behind himself toward the door.

“Yeah? Who is it?” Fex yelled. Then he said to Coo, “Coo. Go answer it. And make sure it ain’t the Feds.”

Coo hurried to the door. Owl Man held out his arm and stopped Coo in mid-stride.

“Wait, Coo. Let me get that. I think I know who it is.”

Tully and Jasmine arrive at the houseboat ...

“Tully, my good man. You made it.” Owl Man opened his arms in a grand gesture of welcome, stepping aside to usher in Tully and his lovely assistant, whose name he had forgotten under the pressure of gazing at her bounty: a carrier of coffees in one hand and a carrier of donuts in the other.

“Well, Owl, an order’s an order, I’ve learned that much at least in these 63 years. Give me some credit. And do you know that next Thursday’s me birthday? You make sure you come to the shop—everything is on me the whole day. I must be losing me mind, but give back, you know, good for the soul and all that. Make sure you are there, Owl, may need help blowin’ out me candles, sixty-four of the buggers, hard believing it, you ask me. Hey, lassie, put the carriers down there on the table. Take a load off. Ain’t she the pretty one, Owl?”

Owl Man observed her breasty bounty with a large smile and nod in Tully’s direction as she set about unloading the carriers and everyone gathered ‘round to partake of the delightful delicacies and special brews.

“I rather imagine it will be quite crowded, then, with you offering free coffee and all.” Owl Man stroked at his beard. “Tully, you may just have solved a little dilemma we had brewed up.” Owl Man reached in and took one of the cups labeled *Macchiato*, his favorite, along with a caramel-marshmallow hazel nut éclair, one of Tully’s own inventions.

“You’re not shy about cameras, are you, Tully? I mean movie cameras. You know, film.” Owl Man’s inquiry stopped everyone’s chewing and sipping as all eyes went to Tully.

“You gonna film me blowin’ me candles out then?” Tully took his eyes off his assistant’s endowments, puffed up his chest, stood taller than before, nodding his head up and down. “I like it, I like it,” he announced.

“It’s settled, then. Next Thursday.” Owl Man turned back to his computer, set his coffee and éclair down, and began keying the laptop, his smile broadening ever fuller as he pecked away. “Yes, that’s it,” he shouted, as he tapped the last key with a flourish.

Jasmine likes “old guys” ...

Meanwhile, Tully held forth before the rapt conspirators, who promptly forgot about the pending heist as he regaled them with tales of his youth on the cobbled streets of Glasgow. Like Fex, he too enjoyed an audience, and they listened to him spinning yarn, as if entranced.

All except Owl Man, that is, who had heard the stories many times before. Sitting at the small dining table and apart from the others, he was still flushed with excitement over having clinched a crucial scene for his novel. Exuding an air of satisfaction, he reached for the last portion of éclair and was about to polish it off when he felt something soft rubbing against his left elbow. The sensation it produced—if indeed “it” was what he thought it was—foreshadowed a different kind of excitement, a different kind of clinch.

“Hi.” A smoky voice whispered into Owl Man’s left ear. “I’m done with my shift for the day. Tully’s letting me off early.”

Owl Man dropped the éclair remnant onto his laptop, scattering crumbs and bits of frosting among the keys. He nearly jumped off his chair with surprise when he turned and saw how close Tully’s assistant was, the one whose name he couldn’t remember.

“I’m Jasmine,” she said, as if she had seen his consternation and was throwing him a life preserver. “You forgot my name. That’s OK. I forget things all the time.”

Jasmine’s helpful explanation gave Owl Man just enough time to blow the crumbs off the keyboard and to think up a witty reply.

Which would have been fine, except that the witty reply never came. What came instead was the insistent sensation at his left elbow and the fertile stream of fantasies that surged through Owl Man’s brain like jets of ... well, like jets.

“I’m a writer too,” she explained.

“Oh, really?” Owl Man was now precisely divided—cleaved, as it were—between the racing of his mind and the racing of his body. One portion of his awareness—the upper part—flowed excitedly toward the fact that Jasmine was a

writer, which might possibly open up a world of portents. The other portion, which was quickly gaining ascendancy over the first, flowed into the fact that she was very much a woman, and that her softness, which brought with it a world of quite different portents, was still pressing against his left elbow.

For the first time in his life, Owl Man actually stuttered.

“Um, I, I, uh, um.” The problem was that his rapidly diminishing consciousness was about to dissolve altogether, going through that primordial phase-shift from discrete, crystalline thought—the icy, Apollonian ideal of German academics—into wild, Dionysian saps and juices surging through his body—the ambrosia of artists and poets ... and madmen.

“I like old guys.” Jasmine had thrown him another conversational life preserver, buying him time.

“They turn me on, especially writers,” she added.

Owl Man felt the hair on the back of his neck being casually spooled around one of Jasmine’s fingers. Or was it the gentle, considerate tightening of the hangman’s noose?

Suddenly he found himself thinking about the professor in the old von Sternberg film, “The Blue Angel.” But he jerked himself back to the present, as if with a leash.

“You do? I mean, they do?”

“Yeah. I’m writing a novel. You too?”

“Uh, yes, yes, I am. I mean, we are.”

“We?”

“Yes, Heron Man and I.”

“You mean you have a co-writer? A two-some? Wow, that’s cool.”

“Yeah, it’s a real turn-on.” Owl Man mentally slapped himself, but he had blurted out the unfortunate colloquialism before he could catch himself.

“Yeah, I can imagine. I’ve never tried a three-some. That would be too cool.”

Owl Man was almost derailed by this sudden, owl-like assonance from Jasmine—too cool—this stream of vowels that almost sucked him into the nimbus

of primeval, animal-rooted super-consciousness that occasionally came over him in ways that were often disconcerting.

Instead, he struggled to avail himself of this brief conversational pause to discover a welcome crumb still clinging to the “B” key on his laptop. He blew again, grateful for the resulting delay.

“Wow, powerful lungs. Cool, cool,” whispered Jasmine. There it was again, that haunting owl sound. The twisting finger continued to spool more strands of Owl Man’s hair. As it did its gentle work, the finger brushed rhythmically against his neck.

“Maybe we could work together, Owl Man.”

“Sure. Uh, I mean, what do you mean?”

“Get together sometime, after work. You could come to my place. Go over my manuscript. You could give me some pointers. I could give you some pointers. Maybe we could write a scene of our own. Something hot. Wouldn’t that be cool?”

At this point Owl Man conceived a sudden, overwhelming urge to bolt, rushing either to the front door or the head, whichever was closer. Instead he turned to Jasmine and looked at her. That may have been a mistake.

Tully was still talking and gesturing, an old-time storyteller with lungs of leather and a head full of steam. His audience was still captivated. All Tully lacked was a bottle of single malt.

Owl Man noticed the dark blue tattoo on the side of Jasmine’s neck—a Chinese character. He had a passing familiarity with common Chinese ideograms, and immediately recognized this one as the character for “Love.” It looked like two human figures caught in an embrace, arms and legs tangled in some impossible, Tantric yoga position, with beads of sweat flying off their heads.

The five silver rings piercing the outside ridge of her right ear sparkled in the filtered light permeating the *Come Ye Heather* like a mist. The earrings seemed to Owl Man, in that moment, like tiny beacons in the dark, lighthouses on rocky shoals, flashing warning signals to unwary mariners, lest they run aground. Nevertheless, and against all sea-faring wisdom, he steered a course directly into

those warning lights, dead ahead.

His pulse accelerated alarmingly when Jasmine slipped a piece of paper into his pocket, lingering for one second before she withdrew her hand.

Owl Man blinked. Yes, his heart was racing, yet paradoxically his pupils were dilated—owl-like—and this, in spite of the light. Adding to the paradox was his breathing, which was deep and slow. A short, blank-verse poem began forming in the back of his mind:

What an awesome creature, methinks, is man,
A curious, unruly beast. He essays to fly
Through the air while yet in chains.
There he struggles aloft, though his tail
Lags eternally behind.

Now they were close, Owl Man and Jasmine, heads almost touching. Timeless Wisdom sat face-to-face with the timeless Dancing Girl, who embodied a wisdom of her own. A shadow of wings passed over Owl Man's face, as he looked upon Jasmine the way a Great Horned Owl might look upon a succulent mouse in a barn full of straw.

"That's my phone number," she said sweetly.

"I see," replied Owl Man, clicking open the calendar on his computer.

Owl Man makes a date ...

Owl Man stared intently at his screen and announced, “I’ve put you down for Saturday next at 7:00 PM.”

“Don’t ever just put me down, my tweet,” Jasmine cooed. “Make it bold, in italics, and in red, ‘cause it’s gonna be a red-letter day, I mean, night. And don’t forget the exclamation point. A nice reminder of what I’m thinking on.”

As Owl Man made the suggestive textual changes, his eyes fluttered and finally closed as he breathed in Jasmine’s perfume, itself clearly brewed from *Jasminum officinale*, the “poet’s jasmine,” setting Owl Man’s mind a-tumble with words trying to come together, hook up, conjoin, yet breaking apart just as quick. As he was falling into a reverie on that high school grammar expression that had caused such a twitter—the copulative conjunction—his train of thought, if indeed it be thought at all, was derailed.

“Owl, I hate to break up this tête-à-tête, but I got to get the lassie back. Her shift is up and I ain’t paying no o’vertime.” Tully’s shout had the desired effect, as Owl Man’s eyes snapped opened and Jasmine jumped up. She took the empty carriers Tully was holding out to her. “See ya Thursday then, Owl, and I’ll be in me full dress kilt for the filmin’. Hell, I’ll even bring me Claymore.”

Owl Man was taking in Jasmine’s full *chassé* as Tully led their exit. Owl Man’s mind was far away from the business at hand to which Fex now called everyone’s attention.

“What’s with this fucking film thing? I thought we were doing a simple bank job.” Fex was at full bellow, his tremolo shaking the whole houseboat.

“It’s not a fucking film,” Owl Man offered, his mind not yet on point. “That would be entirely different. Perhaps we can discuss that later. This is a *distracto* film, if I may coin a phrase, and why not? Coining phrases is rather my cup of tea, you might say, although why you might say it I have no idea. The film, dear Fex, is designed to add a further layer of distraction to what we have already planned. Think of it as a safeguard, an insurance policy, a kind of protection, a—”

“But shouldn’t we practice, or rehearse or something?” It was Sally’s

wavering voice interrupting Owl Man. But Owl Man rarely stayed interrupted for long.

“Practice? Rehearse? Not a bit of it. Spoils the juice you know. No, we do this cold turkey, as they say, although why they say it has never been clear. You must think of yourselves, all of you, as a theater group, filming on location, and using the purest of pure Stanislavski method—we improvise. But not just improvise. By the time the big day rolls around, you will have imagined into your parts so thoroughly you will be the characters we are writing you to be. That’s the ticket, so to speak—imagination. You all understand this, don’t you?”

Owl Man introduces the Stanislavski method ...

At first, Owl Man's question was greeted with puzzled silence.

"Now what's he talkin' about?" Sally whispered to Heather.

"Beats me," Heather whispered in return.

Then Fex's face started wrinkling and twisting as if it were possessed by a will other than his own, or as if it had only been recently grafted onto Fex's real face beneath. Owl Man watched in fascination, waiting to see if the face would speak, and if it did, whether it would speak in plain English or with some thick Carpathian accent.

For a second the face said nothing. Then it fairly exploded.

"You fucking idiot, Owl Man! Are you crazy? Are you're goin' all airy-fairy on us again? What the hell are you tryin' to pull now? Another stunt? Are you gonna be the wizard now and wave a wand or somethin'? Turn us all into Santa's elves? Dress us all in tutus? Where's your pointed hat? I can't believe—"

The image of Fex in a tutu was too much for Sal, who began snorting with laughter. The contagion was beginning to spread, disrupting the meeting yet again, when Heron Man clapped his hands so sharply it sounded like a gunshot.

"That's enough," he shouted into the rising din.

Fex stopped short in his tirade, though the grafted face was still contorted, still moving, as if bolts of electricity were still shooting through it like a passing lightning storm.

"Owl Man is just trying to prod you people, trying to wake you up, teach you something," said Heron Man. "This is a big-time heist we're planning here. Is it too difficult to try imagining something for once, instead of just popping off like a bunch of meatheads?"

Sally started sniffing.

"Can you put your little dramas aside for a change and try to see the bigger picture? Owl Man is doing you a big favor. All of you. And you too, Fex—especially you. He wants you to make it to the big time. He wants this caper to work. He even wants you to fix that goddamned Lincoln you're always cry-

babying about.”

Fex actually looked as if he was considering what Heron Man had just said, the alien face finally quiescent.

“Yeah, I don’t know, maybe you’re right, Heron Man. Maybe we oughta listen to Owl Man after all. I just don’t like his bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit, Fex.” Owl Man had resumed his tutorial. “Stanislavski is one of the greatest teachers of acting in the history of film. As I said, there’s a whole school named after him.”

“What’s it called,” chimed in Sal, “Stanislavski Tech?”

Owl Man ignored the gibe.

“It’s called the ‘Stanislavski method,’ and I’ve studied it. I think it’s the best bet for us to pull off this heist without six months of planning.”

“Why don’t I just machine-gun everybody and we take the money?” Foxy was still thinking about her upcoming Tommy-gun deal.

“My dear Foxy,” Owl Man soothed, “I’m sure that your machine-gunning skills would be more than adequate to kill everyone in the bank lobby. But don’t forget, Madame, that we’ll be in the lobby too. There’s too much of a chance that we’ll get shot along with the others.”

“Well, it’s just a thought. But I could do it. Bonnie did it. Clyde did it.”

Foxy seemed to be having trouble distinguishing herself from Bonnie and Clyde, despite Fex’s previous clarifications on the matter.

“No, Foxy. For this caper we’re going to need your brilliant mind. Maybe several of them.” Owl Man winked at Foxy and her eyes glittered in response.

“Well ... ” Heather began. She had been thinking about all this, and was tentatively taking the floor. “Maybe what Owl Man is sayin’ is, like, if I’m gonna be the Baroness, then I gotta *be* the Baroness. Is that right, Owl Man?”

Owl Man nodded solemnly.

“Yeah, that’s it,” said Sally. “Yeah, yeah, I think I get it. If I’m gonna be your personal secretary, Heather, then I gotta *be* your personal secretary.”

Then, to everyone’s surprise, Mr. Moto spoke up suddenly.

“If I take the bag from Fex, then I gotta *be* the bag. Right?”

Owl Man hesitated a split-second, then quickly reinforced Mr. Moto's perception. "Excellent, Mr. Moto. That's it exactly."

Soon everyone was excitedly talking about their role and trying out improvised lines, moodily retreating into corners then whirling about to face the center of the room, transformed and in character, voicing forth as if they were players at the Globe Theatre under Shakespeare. Even Fex was getting into the act, forgetting himself for the time being.

Owl Man looked at Heron Man and smiled. He turned the laptop so that the mini-cam faced the group. A tiny red light glowed, indicating that the camera was recording. The hard drive whirred quietly at 3600 RPM, deftly spooling the entire, chaotic yet masterful performance onto its precision magnetic disc.

The Owl glanced down at the machine. This was one occasion, he thought, where the computer came close to fulfilling, if only for a few moments, a fraction of its creative promise. He couldn't wait to see the results of the recorded mayhem, later in the evening.

Owl Man distracted by thoughts of Jasmine ...

Owl Man spent the early part of the evening watching and re-watching his webcam's video of the afternoon's chaotic drama. He had to admit it had all worked out better than planned, in itself not difficult, as there had been no plan. The whole idea was a spontaneous *tour de farce* as it were. Nonetheless, he was pleased.

He'd sent a copy off to Heron Man and knew that he was likely at this very moment doing the same as he. In a way, Heron Man had to pay even closer attention since he would be the director on heist day. That clap that brought everyone to attention was pure directorial bluster, but it worked. So he could count on Heron Man, which was a good thing because he could not count on himself at the moment, as he kept being distracted by thoughts of Jasmine. Not *thoughts*, exactly, more like unbidden intrusions of pure desire; yet, not desire exactly, more like pure lust. Is there such a thing as *pure* lust? But unlike other times, in which he could follow the hint of such a thread into deeper waters of speculative psychology and inquisitive philosophy, even here a new salvo of *barrage de Jasmine* had him catching his breath, jerking his head, and having to force his attention back to the video, which he now had to watch *again* from the beginning. He let out an audible sigh.

He was getting tired and excited at the same time, the mix becoming a heady brew to which he added a couple of jiggers of single malt, the last of his cask-strength Macallan, which delight, momentarily at least, washed away all other thoughts, all other everything, in that pure glow of liquid gloaming, and finally, washing away consciousness itself as Owl Man drifted off to sleep, slumped in his chair.

Owl Man's Computer Diary—3 AM ...

Jasmine, Jasmine, Jasmine. This night-blooming fragrance has filled the garden of my soul. Thus, I sit here tonight—or is it yet the dawn?—replete with longing. Now I know why Odysseus lashed himself to the mast, that he might drink in—with full-throated, lusty drafts—the intoxicating elixir, the terrifying beauty, of the Sirens' honey-sweet, shipwreck-inducing songs.

What have I wrought, with my petty writer's greed for the word, the word, the word? Little did I know that words carried such an abundance of life, that I would fall in love with my own creation. Presumption! Arrogant fool! Now that Jasmine has burst fully-armed from my forehead, I see a beauteous creature, a warrior maiden—persuasive, eloquent. Swaying entire armies to her aims, she presides over the courtroom of my soul. She wields a strange, angelic power with her beauty.

Or was she generated out of the fertile, white-foamed sea? A goddess? A nymph? A mermaid? Perhaps she is really a silkie, this fair Jasmine, hiding her true seal's skin in a closet somewhere in Seattle, taunting me—she, fully human, fully animal; I, half-human, half-animal—as she awaits the day when again she will don that seal's skin and slip back into the sea?

My reason cries, "Surely I am only a pathetic old man and she is only my illusion. Surely I am going mad." But then I hear a stout reply. "No!" cries my heart. "She is a writer! A novelist! Plus, she has a nice body! She is no concoction of my mind. She is alive, a fit opponent to match my wits in a love-duel of enchanted words! Yes! A word-duel of love!"

I will stamp my foot and lunge, saying to her, "Avast!" and she will parry my thrust with "Ribbons." I thrust again with "Thrum," which she brushes mockingly aside with "Keening!" "Vibrate!" I shout. "Surge!" she replies. "Belfry!" then "Beast!" and back and forth it goes. She stings my arm with "Nettles," but I rally with "Dandelion!" The battle is pitched! We slide and feint. Then, exhausted, she will fall laughing into my arms. I will drop my rapier on the floor and, holding her close to my breast, cry out from my depths, "Oh heart, thou

ardent beast, wouldst thou not then be still?"

*And slowly I will lift her into the air ... and slowly carry her to ... to her ...
to her bed-chamber where ... we shall*

.....

At this point the journal entry is broken off. Finally spent, Owl Man had dropped off to sleep again with his head on his laptop, nose pressing against the "Period" key, lining several pages with rows of dots until, finally, the battery ran out of juice. Owl Man, all the while, had fallen into dreaming of swords and moats, wherein as he would recall in the morning he had prevailed against impossible odds.