

The Roberts

by Michael Blumlein

Michael Blumlein's novels include *The Movement of Mountains, X, Y*, and most recently, *The Healer*. Some of his short fiction was collected in *The Brains of Rats*, but he's probably due for a new collection soon. Longtime readers of *F&SF* will no doubt remember his stories "Revenge" (April 1998), "Bestseller" (Feb. 1990), "Paul and Me" (Oct/Nov. 1997), and "Fidelity: A Primer" (Sept. 2000). His "Know How, Can Do," which first appeared in our Dec. 2001 issue, is currently reprinted on our Website. Mr. Blumlein says that his new Website, www.michaelblumlein.com, will be up and running by the time you read this. But don't go rushing now to check it out. First, settle in and enjoy this magnificent, edgy, and inventive new novella.

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Long before Grace, before Claire and Felicity, before the two men who wrecked his life, there was him and him alone, Robert Fairchild, first and only child of June and Lawrence, warm and cozy in his mother's womb. He was two weeks overdue at birth, as though reluctant to leave that precious, corpuscular, sharply scented, deeply calming place—determined, as it were, to remain attached. When at last his mother, weary of a tenacity that at other, less pressing, times she would come to admire, served notice and forced him out, young Robert, shocked and indignant, cried a storm.

His father was a physicist, an academic devoted to his work, highly respected by his colleagues and rarely at home. He was raised by his mother, who adored him, and he learned, as many sons do, that love bears the face and the stamp of a woman.

He excelled in school and, following in the footsteps of his father, chose mathematics as a career. But midway through college he was bitten by another bug and abandoned math for art. First painting, which proved beyond his grasp, then sculpture, which tantalized him. Sadly, his work was never more than mediocre; some of it, by any standard, his own included, was outright ugly. And these were not the days when ugly was beautiful. These were the days when beautiful was beautiful, and beauty reigned supreme.

His failure was discouraging, all the more because he expected to succeed, as he had all his life until then. He lost confidence in himself, a

new experience, and on the heels of this his spirits spiraled down. Eventually, he decided to drop out of school. But on the way to deliver his letter of resignation, he ran into a fellow student—literally collided with her. She was standing at the edge of the sidewalk, a sketchpad open, a pencil in hand, utterly absorbed in the rendering of an old stone building for one of her classes.

Her name was Claire. The class was architecture. Their collision marked the beginning of a love affair that lasted just a few short years, but of a career, for Robert, that lasted a lifetime. Everything that was unattainable and wrong in his work as a sculptor was uncannily right in his work, first as a student, then apprentice, architect, as if some slight, but fatal, flaw in his eye, or his compass, had been corrected. For this he credited Claire. She was his first great love. Through her he found his calling. Through her he learned, not incidentally, how sweet and vivifying love could be. She restored his confidence. She invigorated him and inspired his earliest work. In the brief time they were together she gave him everything, it seemed, a man could want, and when at length she left him, citing his self-centeredness and preference for work over her, she gave him something new, the devastating side of love, the heartache and the sorrow. For what she said was true, he had poured his love for her into his work, to a fault, neglecting the real live person. It was a terrible mistake, which he vowed never to repeat. He had a contempt for mistakes, rivaled only by—as an aspiring young architect—his contempt for repetition.

After Claire left, he had an awful time. Guilt, anger, loneliness, self-recrimination, despair: the usual stuff. He couldn't work, and that was worst of all, because his career was just beginning, and he needed work to feel like a man, to feel worth anything. And then in a freak accident he lost an eye, and what had seemed bad suddenly got worse. An architect without an eye? How about a bird without a wing? A singer without a throat? He felt castrated.

He couldn't see, or thought he couldn't see. Everything seemed flat and drab and lifeless. There were ways to adjust and compensate, but he wasn't into adjustment, not just yet, he was into bitterness and self-pity, which were new to him and gave him a kind of poisonous satisfaction. It was during this time that he met Julian Taborz, a bioengineer and fledgling entrepreneur, and they began a collaboration that was to culminate in the invention of Pakki-flex®, the so-called "living skin." But that was years away, and at the time there was a real question just how long Robert would last. He was working for a firm, but his work was uninspired. He was getting stress-induced rashes, which itched and boiled and crawled along his skin like a plague. At length he was put on notice as a poor performer, but he

couldn't seem to correct himself. With each passing month, the world of architecture, which he adored, seemed to slip further from his grasp. Then he met Felicity, who changed his life.

Felicity was an oculist, which was a little like being a jeweler. She had long, expressive fingers, slate blue eyes, and a sweet ironic laugh. She gave Robert, not his first fake eye, but his first good one, that didn't announce itself from a mile off, bulging like a tumor from its socket, making him look bug-eyed and cartoonish, or half bug-eyed, which was worse. He had developed the habit of averting his face, or, alternatively, whipping off his omnipresent sunglasses and confronting strangers, forcing them to choose where to look and where not to look, willfully inviting their uneasiness, fascination, and disgust. These were angry, spiteful days, and Felicity put them to rest. It was a matter of craftsmanship, which she had in abundance, but equally, it was a matter of caring and empathy, of listening to a client, connecting with him, giving him the look, the picture of himself, he wanted. Felicity had that talent too, and Robert fell for her like a fish for water.

The day she gave him his eye, in a little box, then helped him put it in, then stood beside him at the mirror, proud, almost protective, he was overcome with emotion. He asked if he could see her again. Gently, she refused. He asked if he could at least call her, and she gave him her business card and said, if he was having trouble with his eye, of course. He waited two weeks, then made an appointment. She made some minor adjustments, and a month later he was back. Eventually, against her better judgment, she agreed to go out on a date with him. He took her home and showed her the design of a building that, he professed, she had inspired, a frothy concoction of steel and glass, his first new design in many moons. She didn't know quite what to make of it, nor of his attention. He seemed so needy, starved for something she was not at all sure that she, or anyone, could provide. At the same time she was flattered. Several weeks later he showed her another building, also inspired by her, then another, and so it went, until at length he wore her down, overcoming her resistance. He was only a man after all, and if he insisted that she was heaven on earth, who was she to disagree? Putting wariness aside, burying suspicion, she stopped withholding herself, and from there the laws of chemistry, physics, and biology (which, in the absence of compelling forces to the contrary, favored attraction), kicked in. She was already in some ways attached to him, and now that attachment grew. She looked forward to his company. She cared how he felt. And eventually the day arrived when she could no longer deny, nor had any wish to deny, that as near as she could tell, she was in love.

It was evident in every facet of her life. At work, on the street, in the car, the kitchen, the living room, in bed. Robert was as fine a lover as she had known, attentive, responsive, creative, energetic, kind. Unlike many men, he did not despise or fear women, but rather he exalted them, on the whole a more forgivable offense. Felicity was sun and moon to him, and when they were together, he couldn't get enough of her, which made up for his tendency to be with her rather less, now that she desired him, than she would have liked. Thanks to her, his career was on the upswing. The drought of ideas had ended (the rashes as well), and he was now working for himself, working feverishly, frequently missing meals and spending the night—and sometimes two or three nights on end—at the office. Six months after they moved in together he won his first major commission and in quick succession several more, each of which required that he travel. Not uncommonly, he was gone for a week at a time. As his business grew, his travel time increased, until he was away nearly as much as he was home. By this point the press had caught wind of him, “the one-eyed architect,” in their thirst for copy suggesting that his missing eye conferred a singular and authentic vision, like an extra sense. Privately, Robert would never allow himself to submit to such nonsense; publicly, he was shrewdly dismissive. Celebrity agreed with him and was good for business. He gave interviews. Clients flocked to him. Taxis, airports, and his drafting table saw him more and more; Felicity, less and less.

His love for her never wavered, but it was subsumed by a greater love, and she learned how it felt to be demoted. From sun and moon she went to being but a planet. Sometimes visible, sometimes not, like Venus or Mercury. And like Venus and Mercury, she had no moons to orbit her, and none on the way, because Robert didn't want any. And so, after many years together, she left him, and for the second time in his life he was alone.

For a while he did all right. Professionally, he was thriving, and he had the occasional confectionary fling. In addition, the long collaboration with Julian Taborz had finally reached fruition. Pakki-flex was now on the market, and it was revolutionizing the construction of buildings. A bio-epidermic membrane applied to a matrix of polycarbon activating thread, the “living skin” took the place of traditional roofs and siding. It was responsive to the elements, thickening in winter cold and summer heat, thinning in milder weather. It also changed color, both inside and out: its exterior surface responded to ambient temperature and light; its interior, (if desired), to the prevailing moods of the building's inhabitants. Neither surface required a protective coating, be it shingle, tar, slate, tile, varnish or paint, which was a big money saver. It was flexible, it was durable, it was economical, but its biggest selling point was that it mended itself. The Domome, an

award-winning, one-of-a-kind, trophy home topped by a soaring, onion-shaped, Pakki-flex dome, which Robert designed and built for a wealthy patron of the arts, was a consummate example of the product's strengths. It was also an example, hitherto unknown, of its fatal weakness.

Pakki-flex was composed, in part, of cells—living cells, as living cells were needed for it to work its magic. The immunocompetence of these cells, the mechanism by which they protected themselves from harm and guarded the surrounding extra-cellular environment, had been enhanced. In the parlance of the lab these were vigilante cells. Like vigilantes, they were well-armed, and like vigilantes, easily triggered. This served well for incursions of external agents and provocateurs, such as wind, rain, sleet, ice, ultraviolet radiation, rodents, bolts of lightning, and flying objects. It served less well when directed inward, and indeed, this same property made the cells susceptible to internal corruption and self-attack. Three months after moving in, on the night of a banquet to entertain their hundred closest friends and celebrate their newest acquisition, the proud owners of the Domome noticed a small bubble in the dome. Over the course of the evening the bubble grew and slowly filled with a pale yellow fluid, which, save for its size, bore a remarkable resemblance to the common blister. By the time dessert was being served (a wonderfully evoked whipped cream, meringue and rum eclair), it encompassed most of the ceiling. The gracious guests, fearful of slighting their hosts, did not begin to flee until the fluid began to drip, and most, mercifully, were well on their way when, with a groan followed by a deep, bassoon-like ripping sound, the waters of the blister burst. As one of the departing guests ruefully remarked, it was as if the house, mimicking the inaugural mood within it, were giving birth.

In the succeeding weeks other reports trickled in. Of ceilings and roofs that puckered but also fissured, ulcerated and cracked. Of walls and siding that peeled, scaled and sloughed off in fat, translucent flakes. The “living skin” was acting, it appeared, as skin did, troubled skin that is, and the culprit, or the cause, seemed to be those residents who suffered skin conditions. Somehow they were triggering these untoward effects. And their conditions were not necessarily active ones; in certain cases, they were not even known. Some of the afflicted had problems lurking in the genome that would not appear until later in life; some had infections acquired in childhood or early adulthood that were dormant and might never appear but were present nonetheless. Others had conditions that came and went; others, conditions so benign as to go unnoticed. All in all, there were a great many occupants with the potential to interact with Pakki-flex and do it harm, and while most who could did not, there was no way of knowing ahead of time who might. At the very least, it seemed to require prolonged daily contact between man and material, which is why the effect had not

been noted earlier.

The first lawsuit was settled out of court. The remainder, lumped into a class action suit, dragged on for years and ultimately came near to bankrupting poor Robert. Far worse, though, was the damage to his reputation. In professional circles, where the only thing more enjoyable than one's own success was a rival's fall from grace, Pakki-flex became known as "Fairchild's Folly." He lost business. He lost face. The rashes and welts that had plagued him earlier in his life recurred.

It is a common truth that misfortune causes some to rise, others to crack. Robert experienced a slow, steady, painful decline. He tried to work but instead found himself staring at the wall or out the window of his office at the city far below, his city, bustling with the construction of new buildings, fine buildings, but none of *his* buildings. He stared and wondered what had happened. How had he ended up here, in this gloomy, sad, unfortunate and unproductive place? More to the point, how could he get out? The work he'd done, the joy and the pleasure of it, and the recognition he'd received, seemed of a different life and time.

He had dreams of Claire and of Felicity, and he would wake from them feeling old and tired, like a building past its prime. But every so often he would have a different dream, with a different woman in it, nameless, faceless even, but nonetheless familiar to him, the way a certain childhood scent is familiar, deep beneath the skin familiar, rudimentary, intense, longed for yet unknown. These dreams were like whispers, flickers in the dark, and he would often wake from them with a glimmer of hope. And in time, after a number of such dreams, it occurred to him what should have been obvious before. He needed help. Not to put too fine a point on it, but he needed a woman.

In the past it had never been hard for him to meet women, and it wasn't hard now. Women liked him, and what was not to like in a man so charming, so attractive, so victimized by circumstance and so willing—indeed so poised—to put it all behind and reestablish himself? Above all, he liked women, as opposed to disliking them, or distrusting them, or, god forbid, despising them, which for many women was a disincentive to forming a relationship with a man. Robert not only liked the idea of women, he liked the fact of them, he liked to be around and beside them and face to face with them, he liked their company, their loving nature, their adaptability, their strength, their subtlety of thought. Women were the brick and mortar, the bedrock, of his world.

Every woman was beautiful to him, each in her own unique and

special way. Throughout his life this had been a constant, a source of pleasure and comfort to him, as dependable as breathing, as thought. Or it had been. Now, strangely, this was not entirely the case. Something, it seemed, had changed. Their beauty was still there, but it was beauty in the broad sense, the general sense, the way a forest is beautiful, or a field of waving grass is beautiful, whereas any single tree or stalk, on close inspection, might be flawed. He met women and to his dismay noticed first and foremost their imperfections. This one was too loud, this one too quiet, this one too tall or too short, too bossy, too brassy, too demure. It was as if his vision had changed again, suddenly and inexplicably, so that instead of seeing with one eye, he was seeing with less than an eye. He was seeing through a veil. He was seeing wrong.

He wondered if something had happened to them, to women. Something on a global, catastrophic scale. The idea was not so preposterous, for it was the age of such calamities, mind-numbing environmental cataclysms, often of worldwide proportion. Maybe something in the water or the air had affected women, marring their essential beauty and attractiveness, maybe something in the Earth itself, in the core, a cooling in the red-hot center, the planet's heart, and a subsequent attenuation in the surrounding magnetic fields, a weakening of the poles, a loosening of the forces of attraction. Something to explain this curious, horrific loss. And there were such reports—one could find reports of anything, and especially of disasters—but they did not explain why the birth rate continued to rise, or how men, from even his most casual observation, continued to lust after women. It seemed that he alone was afflicted.

He searched for reasons why. He changed his diet. He started exercising more. He visited a health food store and left with a CD of excruciating postures and meditative chants, along with an armful of pills. He tried everything he could think of and looked everywhere except one place, and then one night he looked there, where a good many others had looked before him and a few had even survived. The mirror.

What he saw was a man in his late thirties, a handsome man with a thick head of hair, strong chin, expressive lips, and a puzzled, somewhat desperate look on his face. The look was centered in the eyes, whose incongruity he had long since grown accustomed to but which now seemed new and disturbing, as though they were at odds with each other, in conflict, the one dull and imbecilic, the other bright and accusatory, although the more he looked the more it seemed to be the reverse, that the fake eye, the prosthesis, was boring into the good eye, the true one, challenging it to see clearer, to see better, to see properly.

He thought of work, which had given him such pleasure in the past and which now was so problematic. He thought of Felicity and Claire, both of whom had left him because of his inability to find the proper balance between work and love. Or more precisely, between love of work and love of them. A fine distinction: love, he had found, did not parcel out easily. When it flowed, it had a tendency to overflow, it spilled from one cup effortlessly into another. When there was love, there was enough for all ... at least this had been his experience. But not theirs, which made him wonder if perhaps he was confusing love with something else. Euphoria? Hunger? Self-indulgence? Perhaps he had loved, not too much, but too much on his own terms.

It was humbling, especially because he never intended to cause hurt or suffering. But it did seem to happen, and it hurt him in return, and if he could have changed, he would have, and now, by a stroke of luck, or fate, it seemed he had. Finding fault with women was a way to keep from getting involved with them. It was a way to protect them from him, the moral equivalent of wearing a condom. A man had to feel good about wearing a condom. He had to feel good about having morals. And Robert did.

Unfortunately, there remained the problem of not being able to work. Of lacking motivation, inspiration, and desire. And to that there seemed but one solution. For while men were the builders, women were the miracle workers. And so he pressed on.

The weeks went by, stretched into months. He lost track of the number of ads he answered, and of the women who'd answered his, and of dates he'd been on, and of emails and phone calls. He had never met so many women in so short a time in his life—wonderful women, exceptional women, nightmares—and never felt so discouraged. It was Julian, finally, who came to his rescue. There was only so much a friend could bear before intervening.

They met over coffee in a diner by the waterfront, where waitresses on roller skates had once served drive-in cars. Time had not been kind to the building, and in the current frenzy of urban renewal it ran the risk of getting a makeover, when what it needed was either to be razed completely or left to die a slow, dignified death of its own funky charm. Julian wore his signature black turtleneck, pleated polyester pants, and tasseled loafers. His walnut-colored hair half hid his ears, softening the boxy geekiness of his thick-framed glasses. Being a lab rat with little money to begin with, he had suffered less than Robert financially when Pakki-flex imploded. Being constitutionally optimistic (a near prerequisite in the world of science and particularly of the lab), he had suffered less emotionally as well. He had

followed Robert's decline with both sympathy and chagrin, offering various well-meaning and sometimes outlandish pieces of advice culled from chat rooms, blogs, immersible realities and the like, where he got much of his information, including information about the opposite sex. Women themselves, in the flesh, were more a mystery to him. But all mysteries, sooner or later, yielded to science and technology. This he firmly believed. And science and technology were nothing if not concrete.

"I know a guy," he said.

"A guy?"

"Used to work in the lab next door to me. Now he works for himself. Bit of an oddball. But he knows what he's doing."

"What's that?"

"He's a parthenogeneticist."

Good God, thought Roger. Had it come to that? The idea had crossed his mind, but it seemed too dangerous and risky. It also raised questions about his own august self. In a word, it was humiliating.

"I don't think so, Julian."

"Why not?"

He listed his reasons.

Julian suggested that he was overreacting. The process succeeded much more often than not. Though of course there were no guarantees.

Robert was skeptical. He was also intrigued. "Does he have a catalogue?"

"No. No catalogue."

"But he has his own line."

Julian shook his head. "He only does custom work. Like you. He's not into mass production."

"Not exactly like me."

Julian shrugged. "Build a house, build a man."

And Robert thought, why not? He'd give it a try. He'd make a man, by which, of course, he meant a woman. What did he have to lose?

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The man's name was Stanovic. He worked out of his home, a loft on the second floor of a warehouse in what was once the industrial part of town. It was meant to be a live/work space for artists, but few artists could afford it. Stanovic, who worked in the medium of flesh and blood, could. He met Robert on the street, checked his ID to make sure he was who he said he was, then led him through a heavy steel door up a flight of wooden stairs that creaked beneath his weight, most of which was centered in his chest and shoulders, which were broad as barrels, and his ample belly, which strained like a racehorse against the rein of his belt. He had a pale complexion, close-cropped hair, and sunken snow blue eyes. Beefy forearms and fingers fat as sausages. Had they passed on the street, Robert would have pegged him for a wrestler, a policeman, or a bureaucrat.

At the top of the stairs he stopped and drew a folded white handkerchief from his pocket, using it to wipe the beads of sweat on his forehead and neck that had accumulated from the climb. He then proceeded down a short hall to a door that opened into a room that had all the hallmarks of a bachelor pad. Against one wall was a seaweed green velveteen couch and beside it a faux leather recliner. Together they faced a plasma flat screen the size of a hockey rink. A low glass table littered with dog-eared magazines, stained papers, and plastic discs sat atop a shag carpet the color of mud. There were two other doors in the room, one in a long wall that did not reach the ceiling and seemed more a partition. Stanovic made his way to the other door, where he paused, then, speaking over his shoulder as though to avoid the effort or inconvenience of turning, offered Robert a beer. It was early in the day, and Robert was not an early drinker, but in the interest of bonhomie he accepted. Stanovic disappeared, and a minute later returned with two tall, frosted glasses. He handed one to Robert.

"Talking is thirsty work," he said, presumably a forecast, for as yet he had said scarcely anything. Lifting his glass, he took a long hard swallow. "You have the advance?"

He spoke with an accent. German? No, warmer, more southerly. Balkan maybe. Robert, who had built a hospital in the ruins of Sarajevo, handed him an envelope, which contained a tidy sum in mostly borrowed

cash, the first, if all went well, of three installments.

“Maybe I should tell you why I’m here,” he said.

Stanovic glanced in the envelope and at the same time raised a hand to silence him. “Please. I will speak first. Afterwards, if you have something to say, you will tell me. We will listen to you.”

Another pull on the glass, followed by a fastidious, almost dainty, patting of the lips with his handkerchief.

“First, I know why you’re here. There is only one reason why anyone is here, including myself. Second, you must prepare yourself for serious work. We do not go on picnic. No, my friend. The harder you work, the better the result, the more satisfactory. Anything less and there will be disappointment. That I promise you. One hundred percent promise, and I tell you why. It’s easy to make someone from scratch. No big deal. No problem. It was easy enough the old-fashioned way, and it’s easier now. The trick is to make the right someone, and the trick of that is to know what you want. And that, my friend, takes work. And why is that? I tell you. Because you may know what you want, but then you may only think you know, and on deeper inspection, deeper searching of the soul, you may discover that you don’t know nearly enough. So that is what we work on, what you know and what you don’t know you know and what you need to know, and what you think you know but is really mistake. And I tell you why we do this, because if we don’t, we end up with a mediocre product. Something shiny maybe, but it scratches in a minute, and in a minute more it falls apart. And then who’s happy? Not you. Not me. What a waste, eh? It belongs in the swimming pool.” He paused, then gave a chuckle. “You know what I mean, the swimming pool?”

Robert shook his head.

“You look around, you’ll see. People swimming, going nowhere. Like fishes in tank. And not just these fishes, but what they swim in. It’s a pool....” He hesitated, knitting his brows. “Can I say a cesspool? A cesspool of mediocre fishes.”

It was unclear to Robert what he was referring to. The world at large? The masses, disdain for which was not uncommon among professionals, especially thwarted, marginalized ones? Or did he mean his own particular world, the world of parthenogenetics, and if so, Robert wondered how he could say, much less know, that most creations were second-rate. Supposedly, manmade, designer humans were indistinguishable from

natural born ones, but maybe they weren't. Maybe there was some telltale sign that was obvious to someone in the business, hidden to everyone else. Now that he thought about it, there were designer lines of humans, like designer shoes or designer clothes, with certain recurring and recognizable features and traits. Viewed separately, in the company of natural humans, a single such individual might not stand out, but viewed together, as in a collection, they were clearly related, variations on a theme, the theme of utility, say, athleticism, prurience, geekiness, smarts.

"I have no interest in making automatons," Stanovic said with contempt. "If what you want is that, someone to do what you say and nothing else, to wait your table, take off your shoes and socks and then her panties, you go to someone else. Same deal if all you want is pretty face. Anyone can make this person. It's hack work. I have better things to do with my time."

What those things were he did not disclose, and the tenor of his voice did not invite inquiry. He finished what remained of his beer, which seemed to calm him.

"Here you get better than that. More spirit, more roundness, more character, more unique. An original person. You know what I mean original? Someone you want to see more than once. Again and again and again you want to see this person. Maybe you can't think of anything else."

Robert liked the idea, though it sounded a bit extreme. "I'm not sure I want to be obsessed."

Stanovic shrugged, as though this were out of his hands.

"I want to love her," Robert said simply, "and I want her to love me. And inspire me. And not be hurt by me. That's key."

"You want someone impervious to hurt?"

"Not impervious, but resilient, and strong."

"You want a woman."

"Yes. Of course. I've said that." Only after the words were out of his mouth did he realize that it was not a question so much as a recommendation.

"Women are difficult."

“To make?”

“Yes.”

“More difficult than men?”

“Men are difficult too. We do better with women. We have a higher success rate. Better results.”

“Why is that?” asked Robert, and for this received a lecture in the fundamentals of filigree mo-bi, which Stanovic was more than happy to dispense and which quickly blossomed into something so labyrinthine and obtuse that it could have come from the workshop, the very kitchen, of Mother Nature herself. Robert was impressed, though truth to tell, he had his own theory, which, frankly, he preferred. To wit: women had so many strengths to begin with, so many virtues and so few inherent flaws, that in making one, you were bound to be close to perfection. This seemed only common sense. How close depended, he presumed, on making as few mistakes as possible.

Upon hearing this, Stanovic stared at him, as though wondering what hole this sad, benighted creature had crawled out of, and whether to repeat himself and whether it would matter.

“You are an architect?”

“Yes.”

“You build for people?”

“That’s right.”

“Women as well as men?”

“Yes. Both.”

“And you talk to them, these women? You meet with them? You get to know?”

“Of course.”

He seemed to find this hard to believe, given what he had just heard, but he had a scientist’s curiosity, and he studied Robert as he might a

conundrum or thorny biologic puzzle. Slowly, his expression changed from incredulity to amusement and then, remarkably, appreciation.

He raised his glass. “We make a toast. To you, my friend, and all you desire. To beauty and truth. To everything you want and nothing you don’t want. To satisfaction and hard work.”

It took three weeks, three grueling, intensive, invasive, exhausting weeks. Robert had no idea how much he would be called upon to unearth, process, and decide. He thought he knew, for example, how he wanted his creation to look, which was the easiest part, the appearance, and he did, but he didn’t know nearly enough. After spending just a few hours with Stanovic, he understood what it was like for his own clients, trying to put an idea and a vision—for a dream house, say—into words. His personal vision had eyes and lips and limbs and shape, but she was also a feeling, and this feeling, rather than sharpening her features, made her harder to define, as if to observe her too closely changed her, blurred her, made her more intangible and abstract. It was not that she was vague but rather elusive, her personality most of all. Affectionate, cheerful, playful, intelligent ... these were words he used to describe her, and they did and at the same time missed the mark. It wasn’t that they lacked meaning but that their meaning was relative, subjective, open to interpretation and therefore imprecise. It was like being a foreigner with a limited vocabulary. A million different women could be spun from his words.

Stanovic was used to this in his clients and had ways to get a more detailed, exact, and specific picture. Some of these involved instruments that he attached to the body. Some involved deep, internal probes. He used drugs to unlock Robert’s unconscious and other drugs to keep that unconscious from babbling incomprehensibly, to prevent it, in effect, from running amok. He used retrievable cortical and limbic retroviruses to identify and reproduce embedded engrams, and memory magnets to extract fluid neuronal circuits and fixed ganglionic nexi, the so-called “cloudburst webs.” His goal was to get at Robert’s core, the essence of who he was, and work from that, inside out, as it were. This required a certain shaking up of the parts. As an architect Robert understood: a building got built from the bottom up, not the top down. Even so, he dreaded these sessions. They left him feeling raw, weak, and disoriented, and it took him days to recover and feel himself again.

As if this weren’t enough, he had homework to do as well. Chins and cheeks and hips and breasts and skin tone and skin type and hair and height and weight and musculature to look at, gaits and postures and mannerisms to peruse, voices to listen to, laughter to hear, smells—of the

mouth, the neck, the belly, the privates—to sample. But hardest of all, by far, were the personalities, which he was given to assess and which he also concocted on his own and had to interact with in simulated sessions. Hundreds of them, until his head was ready to burst, thousands, like swatches of paint, selecting, rejecting, revising, until he could barely tell one from the other and was ready to accept—or dismiss—they all.

Finally, though, the work was done. Stanovic had what he needed, and Robert had nothing more to do but wait. He passed the time walking around the city, making a circuit of its neighborhoods and taking in all the new construction, which stirred up feelings of excitement, envy, and appreciation, along with the deep and chilling fear of being left behind. He loved his city and longed to build something for it, something timeless and fine. It seemed impossible that he never would, much less that he would never design and build any building whatsoever, except for the fact that he wasn't able to, and no one was asking for him. With Stanovic there was hope, but it was a sliver of hope. Still, with each passing day he found himself clinging to it ever more fiercely.

At last the call came, and as before, Stanovic met him at the front door. He looked tired and out of sorts, and save for a curt "Come in," he didn't speak. For a second Robert panicked, fearing something awful. His mind raced as they climbed the stairs. Trapped behind Stanovic's plodding, silent bulk, he had ample time to second-guess himself and spin disturbing fantasies.

Finally they reached the top and then the living room, where Stanovic told him to wait, disappearing through the door in the long wall. The room smelled of stale beer. There were empty bottles on the table. The television was on but muted. On the couch was a rumpled yellow blanket and a lumpy pillow.

A minute later Stanovic returned.

"She's a little shy. They're all a little shy at first."

He called through the door, and at length, noiselessly, she appeared. Stanovic did not attempt to hide his pleasure. Nor his admiration. All trace of weariness was gone.

Robert took her in at a single glance and opened his mouth to say something—introduce himself, welcome her, anything—but found he couldn't speak. She was too beautiful to speak to. Stunningly, heart-stoppingly beautiful. Composure was simply not an option.

“Meet Grace,” said Stanovic, the name that Robert had chosen for her. He held out his hand, palm upturned, and with a patriarch’s pride and the gentlest, most tender of gestures, presented her. “Grace, meet Robert.”

* * * *

—2—

It is one of the imponderables of a man’s life that not every woman he loves sees fit to love him back. Robert loved Grace from the moment he laid eyes on her, but this was no guarantee that Grace would love Robert. Stanovic had warned him of this, and several anxious weeks passed before he could say with any certainty that she did. How did he know? How does any man know? By the looks she gave him, by the lift in her voice when he entered the room, by the way she couldn’t keep her hands to herself or take her eyes off him. And by the words she whispered, and how, like a colt, she nuzzled against his neck, and like a rabbit, she nibbled his ear. And by the happiness he felt, the elation, the euphoria, the relief.

How to describe her? He couldn’t, not really, except in this way: she was beautiful—in mind, body and spirit—to a degree that she made every woman around her beautiful, and at the same time every woman paled before her; she surpassed them all. He longed to be with her and only her, and she longed to be with him. This made life easy, for togetherness was something they could achieve. They slept together, ate together, whiled away their time together. They took a trip to the desert, where they hiked and baked in the heat together; to Rome, where they sat in cafés and explored the ancient streets together; to the mountains, where they climbed a peak and stood atop the world. Each day, impossibly, they fell deeper in love. And little by little, what was dead inside of Robert, or dormant, began to stir.

* * * *

There was a piece of undeveloped land not far from Robert’s office, one of the few left in the city. It was a site he had always coveted (he and every architect in town): three flat acres south of the city’s heart, at the edge of a long, bifurcated inlet of the ocean, empty save for weeds, unused railroad tracks, and two abandoned wharves. Over the years he had envisioned any number of projects blossoming here—housing, a hospital, a corporate headquarters, a park—every one of them a pipedream, as the land was not for sale. Still, it never failed to excite his imagination ... never,

that is, until his imagination went south. For more than a year he had avoided the site, as it did him more harm than good. It was a stone in his chest, this place, a reminder of better times, and he would have continued to give it a wide berth had not Grace requested to see it. He agreed, for her.

The day they chose, in early fall, broke warm and sunny. The blue of the sky was rivaled only by the deeper, steelier blue of the water. Fancying a picnic, Grace brought cheese and a bottle of wine; Robert, at her insistence, carried a blanket. Much of the rusty fence that surrounded the site was down or missing, as were signs forbidding entrance. There were several well-worn paths, used primarily by birders. Grace chose one, but after a short while she veered off into the weeds and waist-high grass, searching for something more private. Robert followed stoically, halting when she did, in a clearing near the water.

“How about here?”

“Fine.”

She waited for him to spread the blanket.

“Robert?”

“Yes?”

“Is something the matter?”

It was a struggle for him. The site stirred up feelings he preferred not to face.

“Do you want to spread that thing?”

He spread it.

Grace sat down, depositing her canvas bag. The city surrounded them on three sides—skyscrapers to the north, homes and warehouses to the south and west—but from the blanket these were invisible. She stretched out her legs.

“This is nice.”

Robert, who had remained standing, gave a wooden nod.

“Our own little hiding place.”

“It’s hardly hidden.”

“It is from down here.”

He glanced at her.

“Come sit.”

“I used to think of all the things I could do with this place. All the things I could build. It was like an invitation, a magnet, for my dreams.”

She reached for his hand.

“Not that I could ever do anything about them. Still, it was fun.”

“You felt free.”

He looked around, shrugged, then sat.

“Cheese?” she asked.

He didn’t answer.

She poured some wine into a plastic cup, which they shared. After a while she lay down, arms at her sides, eyes closed. She wore a halter top and shorts. Her skin was smooth and tawny. Her great bushel of hair pillowed her head, shining like a halo. Robert began to lose himself in her face.

“We could be the only people left on Earth,” she said dreamily. “This could be our last day together.”

“Don’t say that.”

She turned on her side. “What would you do?”

“What I am.”

“You’d look at me?”

He nodded.

“What else?”

“Make love to you.”

She smiled. “What else?”

When he didn't answer, she told him to lie back and close his eyes.

“What do you see?” she asked.

“The backs of my eyes.”

“What do you feel?”

He took a moment. “Warm.”

“I'm going to tell you how I feel. Happy. Grateful. Lucky. Beautiful. Alive. In love.”

“That's a lot of things.”

“I'm a complicated person.”

After a time he said, “I see something else.”

She waited.

“It's hard to describe.”

She waited longer.

“I'm not sure that I can.”

It was a building in the form of a fountain, made entirely of glass and erupting from the ground like a geyser, in what seemed a froth of light. It was fixed in place but also fluid, gravity-defying, straining against the constraints of space and time. And the way it played with light, concentrating it, reflecting it, diffusing it. It seemed spun half of reality, half of dream. He had never seen or imagined anything like it.

He sat up and opened his eyes. He blinked and rubbed them, but the vision remained. It was pulsing now, which was the beating, the pounding, of his heart. He got to his feet and started walking.

“Robert?”

He didn't answer.

Maybe, she thought, he hadn't heard. She called again, then rose.

He was halfway to the car, and Grace wondered if he was going to stop. Clearly, he was possessed by something, and having lived and waited with him for this moment, this spark, she felt a quiver of excitement. She was pleased to see him so engrossed and engaged, as pleased as anyone who in the blink of an eye becomes an afterthought. Forgiveness flowed through her like honey, and like honey, forgiving him for leaving her behind without a word was sweet. It was a new experience for her, being left, and she was not a person quick to judge or take offense. Especially not toward a man for whom she felt such love. If it happened again, she would figure out what to do. She was made to think for herself, just as she was made, with craftsmanlike precision, not to be hurt.

* * * *

From that day forward Robert overflowed with ideas. New ideas, bold ideas, crazy, romantic, incredible ideas, bubbling out of him, pouring, gushing, like being in the love for the first time. And everybody loves a lover. And everybody wants a piece. He starting getting jobs again, small jobs at first. Then bigger ones. Before long he was up to his neck in work.

He worked seven days a week, as much as he could at home. Typically he labored deep into the night, breaking for dinner, which Grace cooked, and often for an hour or two in the afternoon, when he and she would do something together, take a walk, explore a neighborhood, pull the curtains and make love. Occasionally he would break in the morning too, roused by the sound of her moving in the house, distracted by the thought of her, the smell of her, which he could summon even in her absence, her smile, her warmth, her sweet and loving nature, her embrace.

It was a wonderful thing to be working again, to be noticed and sought out. More wonderful in some ways than his initial success. He was older and wiser. He appreciated what he had, all the more for knowing how quickly and utterly it could be gone. He felt lucky: if birth (whether by natural means or by nature once removed), was a miracle, then rebirth was nothing less than an act of grace.

It would have been hard to say who was happier. Robert had the happiness of a man, inexplicably crippled, restored to health. A man from

whom the curse (and who had uttered it? and by what power? what right?) was lifted, gone. Grace had the happiness of the lover at her beloved's good fortune, the satisfaction of having been part and parcel of that good fortune, the joy in the knowledge of the strength of love and all that love can achieve. She was so good at loving, so generous, so thorough and complete. If love were a violin, she played it with the finest tone, the deepest understanding, the most impeccable technique. There was nothing that rivaled it in her world, nor would it be contained. Like a rain-swollen river will spill beyond its banks, her love spilled beyond the principal object of her affection. She loved animals. She loved music. She loved puzzles, children, shoes, and conversation. She was also very fond of books.

In this she resembled Robert's mother, an avid, indiscriminate reader, and the resemblance went further, for Grace was also fond of reading in bed, waiting for Robert to join her, and also in a certain armchair, with a curved upholstered back that had been in the family for generations. His grandmother had owned it, then his mother, who had passed it on to him. It sat in a corner of his house, waiting for someone like Grace, who fit it perfectly, and a lasting image for him was of her in the chair, lost in a book, lifting her head and gazing out the window, pondering something she had just read, perhaps relating it to herself, perhaps to him. She had a past, in the sense that she had memories, and she also lacked a past, in the sense that these memories were artificial; they had been given to her. Like all memories, there were gaps that had to be bridged. And like all memories, they gave birth to new thoughts and memories, and they were colored by her state of mind, which they also contributed to. Some, of course, stood out more than others. Once, when Robert was watching her unseen from a doorway, her head bent, her hair hanging loose about her face, she lifted a hand and unconsciously began twirling a lock around a finger. This was a physical memory, a memory of the body, and it made him smile, and he felt a great wave of affection, for it was something his mother used to do.

But these moments, of simply watching and enjoying her, were rare. As his star rose, he didn't have time for them. He worked late. He traveled extensively. He was gone nearly as much as he was home.

It was a busy life, too busy, and he told her so again and again, as though by acknowledging it, he could mitigate the consequences. He missed her, sometimes desperately. He wished it were different, but what could he do?

And what could Grace do but look after herself when he was away and welcome him back on his return? He was in the grip of something, and she admired him for it, and sometimes pitied him too. And the pity made

her love him more, but respect him, perhaps, a little less. It was an oversight, no doubt, in her design. That, or—heaven forbid—a flaw, and she sought to mend it with kindness.

“I wish it were different too,” she told him one night. He had just returned from a month-long absence. “But it isn’t. Let’s be honest.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“But I am.”

“What I mean is, it’s okay. I understand. I get it.”

Robert was exhausted, but her frankness and acceptance always had a way of reviving him. “You do?”

“Yes. Of course. I’m happy for you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Grace. That’s the last thing I want to do.”

“Don’t be silly. How can you hurt me?”

“By neglecting you.”

“Are you?”

“I worry about it.”

“I know you do.”

“I worry that you’ll get tired of waiting. That you’ll get bored.”

“And if I did?”

“I worry that you’d leave me.”

“I won’t.”

“It’s happened before.”

She looked surprised. “Has it? I don’t recall ever having left.”

“Not you.”

“Well then. You see? You’re worrying for nothing.”

These bouts of insecurity were not new to her. They happened frequently after prolonged absences, and she understood his need for reassurance.

“You know how much I depend on you,” he said.

She stroked his arm and kissed him on the cheek and followed that with a tender look that somehow ended at his artificial eye, which stared at her sphinx-like. She had an urge to pluck it out, which seemed scandalous, and then make love to him, which was long overdue and seemed like fun.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said.

His mind, involuntarily, had drifted from thoughts of her to work. “For getting the Eisenmenger commission?”

“No, baby. For knowing your blind spot.”

It took him a second to recover, which he did magnificently. “Which one?”

She smiled.

“I have so many.”

“Not really.”

“I love it when you smile.”

“Just one or two.”

“Like taking you for granted.”

A moment passed.

“Do you?” she asked mildly.

“No. I don’t. I don’t mean to. But I get busy. I forget. Sometimes it just happens.”

“Do you have another woman, Robert?”

The question took him by surprise. He was shocked and dismayed.
“No. Never.”

“I’d understand it if you did.”

“I don’t. And what do you mean, you’d understand?”

“Don’t get angry. You like women.”

“I like you.”

What she meant was he liked attention and love. And as good as she was at providing these, as custom-made and streamlined for the purpose, she was only one person. This seemed fairly obvious to her, and it gave her an idea how to ease the tension and guilt he felt for being absent so much, but it would take some planning and time. Meanwhile, there was more pressing business, which she grasped with her keen, intuitive, state-of-the-art, female mind.

She draped an arm around his neck and laid her lips, her hot breath, against his ear. “You know, we’ve never made love completely naked.”

“Sure we have.”

She shook her head, transfixed by his eye, its cool ceramic machine-like stare, while her fingers toyed with the topmost button of his shirt. “I mean completely. Without anything on. Anything not ours. Anything we weren’t born with.”

It seemed a strange comment, and when he understood what she meant, an even stranger request. Reluctantly, he agreed to it, and when the eye was out, he struggled not to feel self-conscious, with the result that he broke out in a rash. This happened on occasion, these stress-induced eruptions, and this one was worse than most. Within minutes his face and neck were covered with hot and itchy welts. Ordinarily, he took medication for something this severe, without which the rash could last for hours. But this time Grace intervened. She brought him ice, which she applied with a sure and gentle hand, and spoke to him in the most soothing and hypnotic of voices. And for the first time in memory, the welts faded on their own. Or rather they faded under the ministry of Grace. And in the wake of this, this miracle, he was overcome with gratitude and love for her. She was showing sides of herself that he’d neither seen nor imagined, and he didn’t want to

lose her and knew that, despite himself, he was on a path that might. And he made a vow, silent but absolute, that he would not repeat his past mistakes. He would do whatever it took to keep her, and if this meant giving more of himself, he would give more. And if this somehow proved beyond him (as self-improvement, in the surest hands, could), he would give of himself, and, if necessary, give of himself profoundly, in some other way.

These words would come back to haunt him, but that night—and the following days and nights—he couldn't have done more to live up to them. He was with Grace as much as humanly possible, putting all but the most urgent business aside. He discovered, or rediscovered, how fine love was, and how finer it was to be the lover than the beloved, to give than receive, and how being the recipient, the beloved, that was great too. Everything was great, and when he returned to work, there was greatness there, in his insight, vision, and execution, how everything just flowed. Not a problem in the world, other than missing Grace, which he compensated for by calling her incessantly when he was on the road and making time to be with her when he was home.

But one day he missed a date, which he compounded by forgetting to call. A week later, it happened again, and that night he didn't come home until after she had gone to bed. Little by little the futon in his office began to see more use. Increasingly, they communicated by email or phone. And before long, like an untended field, life had reverted to what it was.

It wasn't that he didn't want to be with her. He did, sometimes more than he could bear. But work wouldn't allow it, and he couldn't say no to work. It had a power over him that he dared not deny. Yet things could not go on the way they were. This he knew with certainty. Something had to be done or he would lose his Grace, just as sure as he had lost the others. Her birthday was approaching, and perhaps an answer lay there.

What, he wondered, could that answer be? Something more than words, vain hopes and hollow vows, here one day, gone the next. Something real, lasting, tangible, concrete. An offering, he thought, a gift to show that he understood what she was going through, that he sympathized, that he apologized, and above all, that he loved her and wanted to set things right. What kind of gift could do all that? Was there something that she needed? Wanted? That was paramount. What did his Grace, his poor, neglected, beloved Grace, want? In the whole wide world what did she want more than anything?

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to him, Grace—with all the wisdom, incentive and desire of a woman put on Earth to love her man and to help

him in times of trouble, a woman with a job to do, a woman, like all the best women, without a selfish bone in her body—was hatching a birthday plan of her own.

* * * *

The day arrived. Robert could barely contain his excitement. He had found the perfect gift. He knew he had. It wasn't cheap, and it hadn't been easy to arrange, which in the end made it even better. He took Grace out to dinner, an elegant, candlelit affair, and could scarcely keep from telling her. For Grace it was a new experience. She had never had a birthday before and was on unfamiliar ground. On the one hand, she didn't understand the fuss; on the other, she liked the feeling of being special, one of a kind, the flattery, the compliment, the harmless deceit. Robert was in high spirits, and she liked that too, save for a certain stridency in his manner, a tautness in his otherwise handsome and fluid charm, like a violin string tuned a quarter tone sharp. She worried a little about this gift of his and the expectation attached to it. She would have to do more, and possibly a good deal more, than merely like it.

Dinner was a tour de force of taste and presentation, and for dessert there was a frosted heart-shaped cake. When it came, with a single candle planted in its center, the other diners glanced over, most taking care not to stare. Robert invited Grace to make a wish.

She gave him a blank look.

"It's a tradition," he explained.

She didn't know of it, which was no great cause for alarm. There were gaps in her knowledge, like missing teeth in an otherwise fully functional comb. A simulated upbringing, however thorough, did not compare to a real one, which in dedicated hands was known to be error- and trouble-free.

"I don't have a wish."

"Everybody has a wish."

"I have what I want."

"Everything?"

It was a game. Now she understood. A strange one, where he seemed to be inviting her dissatisfaction.

“Do you love me?” she asked.

“More than I can say.”

“Then yes. The answer’s yes. I do.”

Between them the candle’s flame burned soft and straight, while little blobs of rosy wax accumulated at its base, so that it seemed that a hole was appearing in the heart.

“Everybody’s waiting,” Robert whispered.

She glanced around. He was right. The room seemed poised for her reply, the men especially, as though they had more at stake than the women, a greater need to believe in this granting-of-wish tradition. It was also possible—and from their avid expressions she thought it likely—that what they really desired, these men, desired most, was that the women believe in it.

“You’re asking for something I don’t have,” she said softly.

“No wishes? No hopes? Not one?”

She hoped for happiness. She hoped for fun. She hoped that he would stop pestering her and that love would rule the world.

“There. Shall I tell you?”

His hand shot up, palm outward, as though to ward her off. “No. Don’t. It won’t come true if you do.” A moment passed, and then he smiled. “But I think I know.”

“I hope you do.”

They held each other’s eyes, and Grace found she had another wish, that the two of them could be spirited away instantly. She chided herself for being greedy.

“The candle,” said Robert.

“Yes?”

“Blow it out.”

She did, to hearty applause.

Later, he took her home, halting just inside the door, where he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her. "I love you, Grace. Happy birthday. It's time, I do believe, for your present."

"I have a present for you."

"For me? Why?"

"Because I love you too, silly."

He shook his head in wonder and affection. Who was he to deserve such a woman? How lucky could one man be? He asked her to close her eyes, then left the room. A minute later, heart thumping, he returned with his gift. He took a moment to admire it and another to rid himself of a final, lingering doubt, the smallest—really, the most trivial—of misgivings.

"You can open them now."

She did, then did more, her eyes widening, her jaw dropping, her hands rising to her mouth. She made a sound. Amazement vied with disbelief.

"Surprise!" cried Robert.

"It's ... it's...."

"What?"

Him. It was him. Same face, same body, same everything.

Robert was beaming. "Happy birthday."

"Happy birthday," his duplicate repeated in the exact same voice.

Grace was speechless.

"Do you like it?"

She nodded.

The absence of audible appreciation suggested that, in fact, she

might not. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You don't."

"No ... no ... I do. I love it. It's perfect. It's just...."

"What?"

Funny. It was funny. Hilarious even. She wanted to laugh but of course she couldn't. Instead she said, in all honesty, "It's a beautiful gift. You know me better than anyone."

"But?"

"But nothing. You're amazing, Robert. It's like you read my mind."

"Did I?"

"Like a telepath." She had to deal with her own doubt now, which had not been present previously. Fortunately, having been built, on general principle, to resist doubt's corrosive influence, this did not take long.

"My turn now," she announced brightly. "Wait here."

She started out of the room, then stopped, gesturing toward the duplicate. "Does he have a name?"

"Ask him," said Robert.

"Do you have a name?"

"Robert," he said.

Grace stared at him, then at Robert, then back. "You wait too."

"We'll have to work on the name," Robert said after she'd gone.

His duplicate was about to reply, when Grace returned. "Close your eyes. Both of you."

"You didn't have to get me anything," said Robert. "You really didn't. Not on *your* birthday."

“I like presents,” said the other Robert.

“No peeking,” said Grace, bringing her gift into the room. Like his, hers wasn’t cheap, but at the time she ordered it, then picked it up, it seemed worth every penny. Now, with Robert’s gift to her, it seemed worth a little less, and also, paradoxically, a little more.

“You can open them now.”

Robert did, then gasped.

Robert No. 2 burst out laughing.

As instructed, Grace’s gift stepped forward and extended his hand to Robert. “Hello. I’m pleased to meet you.”

Several seconds passed before Robert did the decent thing and took the hand.

“What fun,” said Robert No. 2.

“I didn’t get your name,” said Robert.

“Let me guess,” said No. 2.

“Quiet,” barked Robert, and for an instant the two of them locked eyes.

“Please don’t fight,” said Grace.

The new addition seemed to share her sentiment. He placed himself between the two men, and to Grace the effect was overwhelming. Her eyes seemed to be playing tricks on her. She felt dizzy.

“I’m sorry,” the new man told Robert. “I should have introduced myself right off.” He paused, then grinned. “But really. Do I have to?”

* * * *

—3—

Strictly speaking, the three of them were not identical. Robert No. 2, who insisted on being called No. 1, differed from Robert No. 3, who didn’t

care what he was called as long as everybody got along, for the simple reason that he was created by the original Robert and designed to be as close to the original as possible. No. 3 started out with the same raw materials but was created by Grace (who herself was created by Robert), and while she did everything in her not inconsiderable power to duplicate her man, there were differences. Some were unavoidable; others, cautiously planned. And while she never would have been so crass or unfeeling or boastful to speak it aloud, in the quiet of her heart she did allow herself a touch of pride in having made, in her modest opinion, improvements.

No. 3 was more talkative than 1 or 2. He was more accommodating, more domestic, more attuned to others than himself. Good for a chat over tea or coffee. Good for a drive. Good for watching TV sit-coms or dramas with.

No. 2 was more project-oriented. He liked to do things more than talk about them. He had ambitions. He liked to stay busy. Barely a day went by that he didn't wake up with a plan.

The two of them shared a room and got along surprisingly well. More importantly, they got along with Grace, and she got along with them. They enjoyed each other as a threesome, and Grace enjoyed each of them individually. She and No. 3 liked to talk—about books, music, people, almost anything—and go for walks, or else stay at home and putter around the house. She and No. 2 (or No.1, as he would have it) also went on walks, but they were walks with a purpose, more along the lines of outings with a clear end in mind. They went to movies. They attended public events. One of these led them to join a political campaign. Another, to enroll in a tennis class.

Initially, she'd been concerned that she would feel overwhelmed. And certainly she was busy, sometimes too busy, but the Roberts could and did take care of themselves. Her real concern was that Robert would feel this way, that he would have a negative reaction to the sudden doubling of bodies in the house, feel cramped, or worse, claustrophobic. But after several months there was little sign that he did. True, he tended to avoid the men, but this was because, he explained, they were meant for her. They couldn't very well do their job if he kept intruding. When they did cross paths, he was cordial, although it was always a little strange. Especially with No. 2, who as often as not met him with a smug, self-satisfied grin, as though in possession of some secret joke. Robert was always a little testy and guarded around 2.

As for letting them do their job, he was less successful than he might have been. Instead of spending less time with Grace, which his (and her) gift was expressedly meant to facilitate, he spent more, hovering around her on one pretext or another, as though the last thing in the world he wanted was to leave. It was the classic story: relieved of obligation, he felt free to be himself, and that self wanted nothing more than what it had in its possession all along. His desire for Grace was greater than ever. She had never appealed to him more.

But work appealed to him too, and in time his attention returned to it. The men, of course, were meant for him as much as her; they were his gift too. They allowed him the freedom to work if and when and how he wanted. And what he wanted, at a certain point, was to submerge himself in work, to give himself up to it completely. And he did, surrendering in much the same way, at other times, he surrendered to women.

Julian was back in his life, with a new pitch. Or rather a recycled version of an old one. Pakki-flex had been a disaster, and both of them had suffered, though Robert, having more invested in nearly every way, had suffered more. For a while Julian had tried to solve the problem of Pakki-flex's instability, but eventually he gave up. In his hands, at least, it would not be solved. Shortly afterwards, he left the world of the lab altogether, exchanging it for the world of business. The rigor of science was replaced by the rigor of the marketplace. The language was different, but the skill set was similar. He had been moving in this direction for quite some time.

He got a job with a venture capitalist firm, scouting and evaluating biotech startups. Pakki-flex remained a thorn in his side, and from time to time he thought of the buildings that had been built with it, wondering if there weren't something that could be done with them. Most of the public ones had been torn down as either nuisances, liabilities, or outright hazards, but a few of the homes, now abandoned, remained standing. Every so often some journalist with nothing better to do wrote an article about them. Most were disparaging, but recently Julian had come across something different and unusual. The writer had a background in design, and he wrote of the Pakki-flex buildings as a cultural phenomenon, objects not necessarily to be lived in or to be considered as having practical, literal use. Rather, they should be understood as figures of speech, as emblems—icons even—of a social life and need that transcended utility. A sort of biosemiotic imperative. Works of form, not function; of flux, not stasis. Works, essentially, of art.

There were links from the article to websites with photographs of

existing Pakki-flex homes, all in various stages of puckering, sloughing, and weepage. The one that caught Julian's attention was a ranch house in Southern California at the edge of the Mojave desert. Beside it was a flashing neon sign announcing tours through "The Nightmare House" by a former resident, a bona fide survivor, who had "lived through Hell." On an adjacent plot was a standard cinder-block home with a more hastily constructed sign: "See the Amazing Three-headed Chicken!" With a click you could watch a twenty-second clip of the Pakki-flex do its thing for a busload of amazed tourists and with another click order tickets. Since its inception the website had gotten an astonishing fifty thousand hits.

Julian stared for a long time at the screen. He made some notes, and over the course of the next few weeks he made more. He talked to people, then flew to several major cities and talked to more people: city planners, private developers, art and museum directors, philanthropic organizations. Back home he met with realtors and consulted his firm's tax attorney. At length he put together a proposal, sat on it for a week, reworked it, waited, reworked it again, and finally presented it to his partners. They were not wholly unprepared, having been memoed, but they were a bit taken aback by the scope of what he conceived. Being prudent men, they took a good long while getting back to him.

When they did, Julian put in a call to Robert. He had a business proposition, and there was no one else he'd remotely considered for the job. Robert agreed to meet but warned him that, whatever it was, he wouldn't possibly be able to accept. He had more business than he knew what to do with, including a project in Brazil and another in Dubai. Julian was unfazed, and two weeks later they met in Robert's office. Located in the heart of town, it was spacious, neat, airy, and six hundred feet off the ground. The view from it, to the south and east, once sweeping, had been progressively pinched by competing high-rises. The sky was now represented by vertical slits of blue. There was a shadowy quality to the light that had not been present previously, and less reason to look outside, as if the eye had been requested—indeed, had been required—to turn inward.

After exchanging pleasantries, Julian wasted little time.

"We need a house to house a house," he said smoothly, concealing his pleasure at the obviously rehearsed line. He pulled a photo from his briefcase and handed it to Robert. "This house."

It was the Domome.

"I thought they tore it down."

"Nope. Didn't."

Robert stared at the photo, then looked up. "What kind of house?"

"A big one." Julian paused. There had been a slight alteration in his manner since his change of career. A dramatizing. He was, in addition to everything else, a salesman now.

"A museum, Robert."

"A museum."

"Yes."

"For what?"

"For the Domome. For Pakki-flex. For you, Robert. For art."

"An art museum."

"Yes. Art and architecture. The Domome will be the centerpiece."

"Ridiculous."

"It's not."

"No?"

"No. Not at all."

Robert considered for a moment. "It's not only ridiculous, Julian. It's unseemly. It's also idiotic. And, I should add, insane."

Julian, of course, had expected this. Robert more than anyone had been wounded by the Pakki-flex debacle, and he wouldn't be keen on reminding people of it, much less bringing one of the actual homes back into the public eye. Never mind that the Domome, with or without Pakki-flex, was a stunning piece of architecture. It had failed as a home. An architect juggled form and function, function and form, and he succeeded only by melding both. It was almost the worst criticism imaginable for a building to be considered solely a work of art.

This was the first hurdle for Julian, and it helped to know how much of himself Robert had put into the Domome and how hard it had been for him to see it fail. Judging by his reaction to the photograph, he was still attached to it.

“It’s a beautiful building. It deserves to be seen. To be shown.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why? Because it has a flaw? Because it doesn’t function the way you meant it to? There’re plenty of buildings that don’t, or that did but don’t anymore. Stonehenge. The Parthenon. The Catacombs. They’ve all outlived their usefulness, but only if you define usefulness in one narrow and rigid way. And who does? No one. It’s insulting to these works. They have so much to offer beside what they were built for. They’re windows into a time and place. Into art and politics and technology. They represent themselves, but they also represent a world view.”

“You’ve been doing some reading, Julian.”

“The Domome used to be a building, now it’s that and also a comment on buildings. It’s historically and culturally and aesthetically interesting. It doesn’t have to house people, any more than the Baths of Caracalla have to give people baths.”

“I’d hardly put it on a par with the Baths of Caracalla. Or any of those monuments. With all due respect to your sudden erudition.”

“But wouldn’t you like to try your hand?”

“At what? Building a monument to myself?”

“To an idea, Robert. A phenomenon. A vision. Of tomorrow.”

“So you think we should rechristen Fairchild’s Folly. Is that what you’re suggesting? Along the lines of what? Fairchild’s Future? Fairchild’s Favor to Humanity? His Forward-Thinking? The Feather in his Cap? Or maybe we should be more honest and not try to rewrite history. Stick with Fairchild’s Fumble. His Failure. Fairchild’s Flop.”

“Forget the Domome. I’m talking about something else. Something different. A new way of looking. A new perception. If you don’t want to call it a museum or a monument, fine. Don’t. Call it whatever you like. Or don’t call it anything. Call it an opportunity. A dream. A chance.”

“As in second chance.”

“As in chance of a lifetime.”

It wasn't quite that, Robert told himself. But it wasn't nothing.

“All right. Tell me what you have in mind.”

“I'm not an architect.”

“But you have an idea.”

Julian shrugged. “Something special.”

Robert waited for a bit more detail. Julian, however, appeared to believe that he had done his part.

“Something special,” Robert said.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“What?”

“Special and ... what else?”

Julian thought for a moment. “Distinctive.”

“Distinctive.”

“Yes. And original.”

“Of course.”

“Different from everything else.”

“You want something different.”

“Yes.”

“Unusual.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“Unique? Would you go that far?”

“Yes. Exactly. I would. Something unique.”

Robert nodded and stroked his chin. So far he had learned next to nothing. He might as well have been talking to a stump.

“That’s very helpful. Very useful. Thank you. You said big. How big?”

“Up to you.”

He sincerely doubted this. “What’s the budget? Who’s in charge? Where’s the money coming from? Public? Private? Both?”

“Private,” said Julian. “Although I expect tax incentives.” He gave Robert some rough numbers. “We have a group of investors. Fiduciary decisions rest with them. Artistic ones with you.”

“Why do they want a museum? These investors. Apart, I know, from how vital it is to preserve and showcase my fiasco. What’s in it for them?”

“They’re very wealthy people. They want to spread some of that wealth. Give back to the community.”

“Tax write-offs.”

“Sure.”

“Land swaps?”

Julian shrugged. “I’m not at liberty.”

“Do you have a site?”

This was arguably the most important detail of all, and Julian was uncharacteristically coy. “I think you’re going to like it.”

“Where is it?”

“If you could choose a place—anyplace ... any city, any site—where would it be?”

Robert felt a flutter in his chest.

Julian stuffed his hands in his pockets and casually strolled to the window.

"If you're talking about what I think you're talking about, you can't see it," said Robert. "Not anymore."

"Too bad."

"I don't know. I got tired of staring at it. It was a tease."

"You can't have everything, I guess. Not every time."

"Unfortunately, it's not available."

Julian turned to face him. "No? What makes you say that?"

"I've checked. Believe me."

"Interesting. When I checked, it was." He paused, theatrically. "We've made an offer. I expect a counter-offer any day."

Robert was stunned. An inner voice warned him not to get his hopes up. The list of obstacles to such a project was long.

"The city..." he began, starting with the first and foremost, but Julian cut him off.

"Is behind us. More museums, more tourists. More privately funded museums, less drain on the public coffers. More privately funded museums designed by a world-renowned, native son ... what could be better? You'll be a hero. Civic pride is going to pop."

Robert was not quite convinced. "I know who owns that piece of land. They haven't wanted to sell it for fifty years. What makes you think they'll sell it now?"

"Robert. Let me ask you something, and I mean no disrespect. Are you a businessman?"

"I try to be."

"Of course. But on a scale of one to ten, what would you say? One

being someone who loves to wheel and deal, ten being someone who loves to doodle and dream and do just about anything else.”

“I don’t see myself as a number.”

“Exactly. The people I’m working with, they don’t have money by accident. If they want the deal to happen, chances are it will. You can tell me all the reasons that it won’t, but why bother? It’s yours if you want it, Robert. It’s been yours ever since I’ve known you.”

The words hung in the air, and after a while Robert joined Julian at the window. The building that blocked the view was tall and sleek and rectangular, like a trailer stood on end. It was far from the worst of the new buildings. It wasn’t ugly, just boring. It brought nothing to the skyline but another box.

“Want to take a drive?” asked Julian.

Robert didn’t need a drive. He could see the site as clear as day. And the building he would build, he could see that too. It formed itself in his mind just as it had the day Grace inspired it.

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s.”

* * * *

How and where he found the time for it, with all his other work, he never knew, but he did, squeezing, coaxing, milking, wheedling, teasing every second. When he finally came up for air, three months had passed. He couldn’t remember the last time he and Grace had spent an evening—or even much more than an hour—together. They made a date, but at the last minute, when Robert No. 2, who of late was sporting a beret and calling himself *Róbert*, an affectation calculated, it seemed, to annoy his progenitor (which it did), fell ill, she had to cancel. This led to a quarrel the following morning, Robert accusing No. 2 of obstruction and manipulation. Not to his face but to Grace, who found herself in the strange and challenging position of defending a man against himself.

“He was sick,” she said.

“Conveniently,” observed Robert.

“I don’t know why you say that. He had a rash. You get rashes.”

“Yes. And I take care of them myself. And they go away.”

“He had welts all over his body.”

“On his face?”

“Yes.”

Robert conceded that welts on the face were no picnic. “He should have come to me.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I have medicine.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant why would he come to you when it’s clear you don’t like him? What would be the point?”

“I like him. I made him.”

“You don’t like No. 3 either.”

“No. 3’s scared of me.”

“Not really. He just prefers to be around people who are nice to him.”

Three, thought Robert, was a poster boy for nice. “So then how come he likes to be around No. 2?”

“*Róbert’s* nice to him. The two of them are friends. Good friends.”

“I can’t imagine what he sees in him.”

She gave him a look. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Then I’d say the same thing you see in yourself.”

“Now that’s a scary thought.”

She suffered this with the thinnest of smiles, remaining silent until his attempt at humor all but hung itself. They were not, Robert felt, off to the very best of starts.

He tried a different approach. "Are they nice to you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I care. Because that's what they're for."

"Yes. They are. Always."

"You don't ever feel left out?"

"Why would I feel that?"

"I don't know. Two of them, one of you?"

She shrugged.

"You do," he said.

"It's not like that. The three of us, we're a family. We come together. We go our separate ways. We interact." This seemed the spice of life to her, its very essence, and when he didn't respond, when he just stood and looked at her, she had a sudden, jolt-like thought. "Maybe it's you who feels left out."

The image of 2's face, swollen with welts, rose up in Robert's mind, vivid and visceral, and he wondered if Grace had touched him with her soft and tender hands, touched him and healed him, and his stomach clenched, for he knew she had.

"I did last night," he said softly. "Not that I had any right."

"I'm sorry," she said. And she was. "Maybe there should be two of me."

This drew a smile. "It's good to see you, Grace."

"It's good to see you."

They were in the living room, facing each other, and now it became clear how desperate they were to connect. But they were shy, like young lovers, each afraid to make the wrong move. Robert felt he'd somehow failed Grace. To Grace the only failure would have been not to do what both of them so plainly wanted.

The boys were downstairs and occupied. There was really no reason for restraint. Grace was the first to take action. She held out her hand. Robert hesitated, not from reluctance to take it but from relief, and from wanting to savor the moment, the full meaning and impact of reconciliation and love. When at last he slid his palm into hers, he felt a shiver down his spine. They embraced, and shortly thereafter retired to the bedroom.

To Robert it seemed like a lifetime since they'd made love. Grace was unquestionably the most beautiful, responsive woman he'd ever known. He was instantly aroused and began to kiss her, beginning at her face and moving slowly and meticulously downward, as though to possess her, inch by intoxicating inch. Her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her belly ... her skin impossibly soft and warm and sensual. She spread her legs to him, and he slipped his head between them, ever so gently caressing her tender parts with his tongue and lips. She quivered, then started to heave, and he pulled back, quivering a little himself, feverish now, aching to enter her. As he proposed to do just that, he noted a mark on one of her thighs. Somehow he had missed it earlier. It appeared to be a bruise, but it didn't seem to hurt her. In fact, she didn't even know it was there, until he pointed it out. In retrospect, this was a mistake, for if he hadn't, he could have made up his own story as to how it appeared. She could have bumped herself. Strained and popped a blood vessel. But once mentioned, it could no longer be ignored.

"It's a hickey," said Grace, craning her neck to see it. "I guess."

"You guess."

"Seems like one."

"From whom?"

"Robert," she said.

"Me? I don't remember."

Silently, she swore. It got so confusing sometimes: even though they acted differently, when all was said and done, the three of them were extremely alike. Especially Robert and Robert's Robert, the Robert he had given her. "I mean Robert No. 1. I mean 2. *Róbert*."

The blood drained from Robert's face. "You two have been having sex?"

Grace was still aroused, and given the choice between fulfillment and frustration, she much preferred the former. "Can we maybe talk about this later?"

He looked at her, confused and hurt, and it was clear there was no possibility of deferring the discussion. As his penis shriveled, at a rate only slightly less than it had grown (what a marvel, thought Grace, and what a pity to say good-bye), she sat up. In response to the cold look in his eyes, she covered herself with a sheet. She didn't quite understand the fuss.

"Isn't that why you gave him to me? Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I wanted you to have someone to talk to. To do things with when I wasn't around."

"This is a thing."

"It's not the sort of thing I had in mind."

"But you made him. He's just like you. He is you, Robert. If you like it, why wouldn't he?"

"*He* is not the point."

"No? Then what is?"

"You are. I am."

She drew a breath and slowly let it out. "Okay. That's nice. You're right. I can deal with that." She held out her arms to him, as though the healing could now commence.

But no.

"How was it?" he asked dully.

Several exceedingly unpleasant seconds elapsed.

"Was it good? Did he say he loved you? What did you reply, Grace? Did you pant? Did you moan? Did you purr?"

"Stop."

“I’m trying to understand.”

“You’re not.”

“Understand and empathize. Experience it from your point of view. Because strange to say, I think I already know his.”

“You act as if I betrayed you. But I was only being myself. And you’re the one who made me. I was only being who you made.”

“Well then maybe I should have made somebody else.”

It was a terrible thing to say, but Grace refused to be blamed. “Don’t say that. It makes me think you don’t love me.”

“I adore you,” he said miserably, and he knew right then, as well as he knew anything, that Robert No. 2 had said the same. And he knew how he had touched her, and kissed her, and fucked her. And he knew how she had fucked him. And the look on her face afterwards, the softness, the flush, the radiance, he knew that too, and how she had floated around the house, disturbing nothing, as if in a dream.

“Don’t be jealous, Robert. When I’m with him, it just reminds me what a good man you are. It makes me love you more than ever.” Suddenly, there were tears in her eyes. “As if I could.”

Dear God, thought Robert, what had he wrought? He was helpless before her. As his soft little mushroom began to stir, he realized it was pointless to be jealous. If he wanted Grace to himself, he had to make himself available. Either that or get rid of the competition. Would it be called murder or suicide, he wondered, if one killed one’s duplicate? Or perhaps, he thought, brightening, it would simply be seen as a very late—and eminently reasonable—abortion.

* * * *

As much as he possibly could, Robert steered clear of his rival, and when he couldn’t, when they passed on the stairs or in a hall, he ignored him. As a strategy for improved relations, this was not well-conceived. Eventually, he realized its futility and, swallowing his pride, he went to No. 2 to talk things out.

Two received him coolly. He’d been ill-treated; no one, least of all a Robert, liked to be ignored. He did, however, understand the reasons. He

knew about jealousy and possessiveness and how they fed on each other and grew until they drove out all else, turning a man into a slave, thwarting love and kindness, poisoning the mind and heart. They were a sign, he believed, of insecurity, a lack, not a surfeit, of love. He suggested, somewhat cryptically, that Robert expand his thinking, look beyond Grace and learn to love himself more. With that he excused himself, leaving much unanswered and unsaid.

It was a troubling conversation, which Robert tried to parse in the days that followed. Two had made no concessions. Notably, he had not agreed to stop seeing Grace. Rather, he had put the burden on Robert, who, it must be said, did not bear it well. He remained jealous, though to his credit he tried to keep it to himself. He was about as successful as most jealous men were, and Grace had the fortune of being the principal beneficiary of his triumph.

She was in the kitchen one evening, sifting through their latest argument, when Robert No. 3 entered the room. The two of them often made dinner together. It was something they shared, the pleasure of giving pleasure, in this case, the pleasure of preparing and serving food.

Tonight she was making a chicken and vegetable casserole, and No.3 grabbed a paring knife and joined in. He asked about her day, and eventually the conversation turned to their living situation. The Robert Wars, as 3 liked to call them. He wondered what, if anything, Grace was going to do.

“I know you’ve talked to them,” he said.

“Till I’m blue.”

“Any progress?”

She sighed. “What’s that?”

“Have you thought of moving out?”

“Why would I do that?”

“To take a break. Get away.”

“I don’t want to move.”

“Of course not. But look how miserable you are.”

She was. "It shows?"

"Like a news report."

"They're acting like children."

"Like brats."

"Like apes."

No. 3 smiled. "Maybe if they would just beat their chests and bellow. Get it over with."

"They do."

"Brutes," he said, sounding faintly amused.

"If they would only do it outside. Then at least I wouldn't have to watch. Now *that* would be progress."

"Like I said, a little separation...."

He was dicing a carrot, each cut measured and precise. Fussy almost. Like Robert, Grace thought, with his cut-up cardboard project models, built to perfection. Like and unlike.

"You do trigger them," he said.

"Do I?"

"Well I know I don't."

"They trigger themselves."

"Bang bang."

"They do."

"Men in close quarters. What can you do? It's either love or hate."

Some hair had come loose and fallen into her face, and she pushed it back, tucking it behind an ear. Almost immediately it worked its way free, and again she pushed it back, and then again, as though soothed

by—indeed, as if dependent on—the repetition.

“What was it like before?” No. 3 asked.

“Before? What do you mean?”

“Before we arrived. What was it like then?”

“That was ages ago.”

“Were you happy?”

“Sure.”

“Lonely?”

She thought about it. “It’s hard to remember.”

She wasn’t being evasive. For No. 3 too, and also for *Róbert*, the past was often vague and difficult to recall. In real time the three of them had only been alive a short while; in a sense, they were infants. New experiences piled up and quickly overshadowed older ones. “Now” was sharp; “then” went in and out of focus. As if time itself was unstable and couldn’t settle down.

“Maybe I was. Sometimes. A little. But I managed. It was okay. Things usually are.”

“So you wouldn’t mind if it was like that again?”

“Like what?”

“Living with Robert.”

“I do live with him.” She glanced at 3. Something wasn’t being said. “What’s this about?” Tick tick tick, and then she got it. “*You’re* the one who wants to move out.”

“I want to do what’s best for you.”

“It’s not.”

“Then forgive me.”

“Or for Robert.”

“Are you sure?”

She wasn't. “Have you talked about this with No. 2?”

A smile flickered across his face at her use of that name. It was no mere slip of the tongue. He knew how her mind worked, being an echo of that mind. She was upset, and in response was establishing, or attempting to establish, her position in the pecking order, her place.

“*Róbert*,” he said, gently correcting her, “agrees. Both of us want to do what's best for you. It is, after all, why we're here.”

He stopped what he was doing and turned to her, his big brown eyes soft and round. “I worry that we're a burden on you, Grace. That we're taking up too much of you. Interfering somehow. Getting in the way.”

“The way of what?”

“Your happiness. What else?”

The words were right, but something didn't ring true. She frowned, and No. 3 was quick to respond. “Now look what I've done. I've given you wrinkles.”

He kissed his fingers and transferred the kiss to her forehead. In a solicitous voice he said, “You and Robert had another fight, didn't you?”

“We talked, if that's what you mean.”

“Jealousy is such a blight.”

“It's stupid.”

Three sighed. “It is. And we are. Stupid. Men, I mean. We get jealous so easily. It seems to run in our blood. Jealousy and hurt and vindictiveness. I wish I'd been born a woman. Like you, Grace. I wish I'd been born like you.”

She felt that he was making fun of her. “I'm sorry you're not happy with the job I did.”

“It never occurred to you to make me female?”

“Not once.”

“I would have still been Robert. Or as close to him, or nearly as close, as I am now. And I do feel close to him. I truly do. I know how much it hurts him when he fights with you. And when he knows that you’ve been with *Róbert*. It’s a terrible feeling when the one you love loves someone else.”

“He gave me *Róbert*. It was his idea. And I don’t love someone else. There is no someone else. I love Robert. I love all of you.”

“So much love. It’s your gift, Grace. A woman’s gift.”

She glared at him. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s something I read. Men have a different muscle. It’s why we worship you. Why we can’t get enough. Why we have to run away.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

“Not what I want. What I read.”

“Not very nice.”

“I agree. Personally, I have the utmost respect for women. I have the utmost respect for you, Grace.” He returned to his dicing, then paused and gave her a peck on the cheek. “I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean it. You did a fabulous job with me. I wouldn’t be here, and I certainly wouldn’t be the man I am, if it wasn’t for you.”

“Or Robert.”

“Both of you. I owe my life to you. And four ... what can I say? Four is just a brilliant number.”

It was another jab. “Four was unplanned.”

“Planning’s overrated. Sometimes it’s best to leave things to chance. Just think if there’d been only three of us.”

Just then *Róbert* entered the kitchen. No. 3 looked up instantly, a smile on his face, and it struck Grace how often this happened, that he looked up smiling, especially with *Róbert*. This time the smile was returned,

and Grace felt the hairs on her neck stand up. They were looking at each other in just the way she looked at Robert when she was full of love for him. The way he sometimes looked at her.

“What’s for dinner?” *Róbert* asked.

She and No. 3 started to reply simultaneously. Both halted, then Grace untied her apron and laid it on the counter. Three was wrong to think that men had the market on jealousy. She was amazed at herself, to feel such a thing. She hadn’t thought herself capable. Then again, it wasn’t so surprising, considering who had made her. Barring the stab of it, and the way it constricted her chest and filled her mind with the most wild, improbable, and terrible thoughts, it was a lot like love. She wanted to scratch somebody’s eyes out.

“Vegetables,” she told *Róbert*. “And chicken. Your favorite meal. Cooked by your favorite cook.”

“Cooks,” he said.

“Whatever.”

She told No. 3 she’d think about what he’d said. She seemed to recall Robert’s extolling the virtues of the triangle, explaining how it was the strongest, most reliable, sturdiest shape. Retreating upstairs, she pondered this, concluding that he would have thought differently—and in all likelihood would never have made such a claim—had he been forced to build with humans.

* * * *

Meanwhile, across town, Robert was supervising a crew of humans, who were earning his lasting respect for the incredibly difficult job they were doing. The shell of the museum, two hundred feet in diameter and three hundred and fifty feet tall, was in place, and into it the crew was lowering the Domome, all in one piece. There was a modest breeze, which sang through the taut cables of the five mammoth cranes and added a note of urgency to the procedure. Though nominally in charge, Robert was completely dependent on the skill of the crane operators, and he stood at a safe distance, watching anxiously. It would have been far easier for the house to have been disassembled, trucked in, and reassembled, but its Pakki-flex sheath might not have survived intact. Furthermore, there were no openings in the shell big enough for anything but the smallest section of the house to fit through. Robert had envisioned (and designed) an

enclosure that, save for an entrance and an exit door, was one continuous and inviolate envelope, immutable as it were, in contrast to (and comment on) the house itself, whose Pakki-flex dome and walls mutated seemingly at will. It was cylindrical in shape and constructed of hundreds of panels of glass, each of which spanned the full height of the museum. They were staggered in front and behind one another and joined by a perpendicular glass weld, and each curved ever so slightly outward, so that the mouth of the cylinder gently spread as it rose, like a fountain. The glass was lightly frosted, denser in some parts than others, which gave it the appearance of dappled foam. It was thick and impenetrable, except of course to light. Or possibly a heavy object, such as a swinging building, which the crane operators were doing their utmost to control. The obvious alternative—to build the museum around the house—had been the subject of intense debate and ultimately opposed by the project's structural engineers, although now Robert wished he'd been more insistent. On the other hand, it was a remarkable thing to see, his house being slowly swallowed by the great maw of glass.

Finally it was down, or nearly down, hovering a foot or two above its elevated concrete pallet, previously poured, while the ground crew awaited Robert's instructions to position it. When that task was done, the front door of the house aligned with the museum's entrance door—giving what he hoped would be a diorama-like, keyhole effect—it was quitting time, and the workers fled, leaving Robert alone.

The sun was sinking, and its long light poured through the western curve of the museum, passing through the glass on the opposite wall but also reflecting off it. The upper reaches of the museum, already a buttery gold, blazed brighter, as if from a newfound source of light. From where he stood it seemed that the sun, in addition to setting, was rising. There could have been two or even three suns in the sky. Gradually, the light thickened, until the whole interior of the museum—now a deep, rich honey color—glowed. It was almost palpable. Robert, who had conceived, designed, and even, to a certain degree, foreseen these effects, had not foreseen how striking they would be. Nor how moved he would feel. It was as though he were immersed in radiance, bathed and baptized by a power, a benevolence, beyond what he knew. For an instant he felt a shift—a dilation—in consciousness. This creation of his was grounded in reality and at the same time suggested a higher reality, a greater, loftier one. The way a person could be at a particular time and place, a particular moment, in his life, and then, triggered by the least of things—a sound, a scent, a random thought—be somewhere else entirely. There were worlds upon worlds, worlds within worlds ... wasn't this what architecture, at its best, hinted at?

He entered the Domome, which was shielded but not exempt from the light show overhead. He had the sense of being underwater. The light appeared to ripple as it fell across the floor. Shadows shifted, edges softened, doors and windows seemed to have double lives. He made a full transit of the house, beginning in the main wing, moving quickly through the living quarters and ending in the dome room. Like all the others, it was empty. The air was slightly stale, and as the sound of his footsteps died, he glanced at the dome, half-expecting it to respond to his presence, to quiver, shrink, pucker, collapse. But it was motionless, as graceful and flawless as the day it was created. There was no hint of its history, though in his own mind it was painfully clear. After the ill-fated dinner party, reported at excruciating length by a sensation-hungry, gleeful press, the humiliated owners had slapped him with a high profile and crippling lawsuit. Recalling that difficult time, he wondered for perhaps the hundredth time just how wise it was to refer to it intentionally, to make it, indeed, the centerpiece of this endeavor. Julian liked to say that success was built on failure, and in the lab, the marketplace of ideas, this, no doubt, was true. But in the marketplace of taste? Of art? Better perhaps, certainly more realistic, to view failure as a chance for success, an opportunity but no guarantee. People had to be ready. Things had to fall into place. Luck was involved.

Much, he believed, depended on the Domome itself, which presently, being uninhabited, was inert. They were interviewing prospective residents, and now that the house was in place, they could start to screen them actively. Only some would be able to trigger the Pakki-flex, and a far fewer would have the emotional makeup and temperament to be on more or less permanent display. Many sought attention without knowing the price of attention. Some became bloated with it, some nervous, some depressed and withdrawn. The optimal candidate had to be stable, and steady under pressure. Outgoing, communicable and enthusiastic. Intelligence, while not critical, was a definite plus.

So far the prospects were not good, and as he left the Domome and then the museum, he tried to imagine who would possibly welcome such a job. Julian had suggested he design someone for the purpose, but Robert, who had designed everything else, felt that would be extreme. Already the project bordered on the grandiose.

He reached his car as the sun was about to disappear. The museum shone like a ruby and seemed indeed to be emerging from the ground, just as he had first imagined it, a jewel in the process of extrusion, of birth, from Mother Earth. It seemed made of man and nature both, of man's nature, his best and truest aspirations, and Robert felt a chill. He had achieved something here. There was no denying it. Something of note. Would it

stand the test of time? That was out of his hands. But at this moment—this hour, this day—it stood a more important and stringent test: his own. He felt an odd mixture of humility and elation, and he wanted to share it with someone, and that someone was Grace.

But Grace in all likelihood was home. And he didn't want to go home. With the veiled affronts he was certain to encounter there, the cloak and dagger looks, the various and sundry assaults on his equanimity and peace of mind, home was the last place he wanted to go.

For the second time in as many weeks he became conscious of his missing eye. No. 2, who liked to hover just past the edge of his vision on that side, as if to emphasize his disability, had made a joke about it. Something clever and seemingly harmless, such that even Grace had smiled. He didn't like No. 2. He hadn't from the start. He found him self-serving, aggressive, egotistical and pompous. When he thought of 2, he thought of something low to the ground. When he looked at him, he saw a lesser man.

On the face of things this was absurd. Except for the eye, the two of them were the same, in every conceivable way. He had told Grace, before being cuckolded, that he felt awkward around 2, uneasy, that he didn't feel himself. This was true enough (and more now than ever), but the deeper truth was that he felt himself in the extreme, himself magnified, caricatured, stripped and exposed.

He got in his car and drove around aimlessly, ending up, as he so often did these days, at his office. He called Grace, who didn't pick up, and was left with a recording of her cheerful, fluted voice, which under the circumstances sounded derisive and mocking. He read through the applications of a dozen new candidates, a grueling and arid experience, then got out his blanket and pillow. The futon stared at him like the cold eye of a fish on ice. Daybreak was a lifetime away. The night promised to be a long one.

Some weeks later, he and Grace went for a drive. Things simply could not go on the way they were. It was early autumn, sunny and cool, and they left the city in the afternoon for a nearby woods, what remained of a much larger forest. Conversation was limited to small talk, wedged like a struggling alpine plant between blocks of silence. Robert was so full of things to say, so full of feelings, he didn't know where or how to begin. Excitement at the museum's imminent completion, anticipation as to how it would be received, nervousness, confidence, uncertainty, pride ... these and more occupied his mind, and along with them, shading, infiltrating,

underscoring everything, were his feelings for Grace. And what, at this troubled point, he could only hope were hers for him. More intricate and complex than any piece of architecture, any building.

As for Grace, she was determined to enjoy herself, which at the moment meant thinking as little as possible. The small and great things she had on her mind, the trivial and the consequential, could wait. She had a desire, if not a need, for more immediate and tangible pleasures.

She rolled the window down and let the wind fill her face. It was a joy to be on the road. She loved the city, but it had begun to oppress her, particularly her small corner of it, bounded by the walls of her home and the men within those walls. She had been designed to love, and love she did, but this didn't stop her from having other feelings, and at present, flawed creature that she was, she was feeling over-Roberted.

So what, she had to ask, was she doing in the car? It was a question that even the most obdurately thought-averse of women might profitably consider. Was there something she was trying to prove? To prevent? To save? As a matter of habit, she did not put a great deal of store in the hidden mind, but lately she'd been having dreams—scary, exhilarating dreams—of flight.

They drove north then west, past the suburbs and the cow and horse farms, up and over one ridge then another, into a valley at the base of a small mountain, thick with pines, madrones and oaks and cut by a lazy stream. The air was dry but pungent. A gentle breeze stirred the tops of the trees.

They left the car at the head of a dirt path and started off on foot. The silence they had commandeered while driving still possessed them, although now, in the bosom of Nature and Her lively arboreal choir, it was less fraught. They walked abreast, at times brushing shoulders, until at length Robert took Grace's hand. The trail steepened, and they came to a downed tree, where they stopped to catch their breaths.

The section of the tree that had blocked the trail had been sawed out and removed, while the remainder had been left where it had fallen. On the downhill side the long, hefty trunk lay on the slope as straight as a pipe, looking much the same as it must have when it stood, save for the gentlest of undulations at its fracture points. Its bark looked like the bark on living trees, as bark resisted change, unlike the wood beneath it, which was slowly melting into the ground. On the uphill side, looming above them, sat the root ball, a tangled mass of feeder and anchor roots bridged by clods

of dirt, now covered with a blush of moss and overrun with vines and creepers. It had been a year or two since the tree had fallen. One home—to jays, squirrels, hawks and other high-dwelling creatures—had been lost, but a new one—to towhees, sparrows and mice—had been created. This was the world of the forest.

In the world of construction, there was also loss. Of the old, or, in the case of building from scratch, on undisturbed land, the loss of nature. How one responded to that loss could define a career. One could no longer despise and bully nature and seek to bury her, at least not overtly. Having been tamed, she could now be duly praised, promoted, and loved. But love came in different flavors and styles, and sometimes it came in a form that seemed distorted, the very opposite of what it purported to be. There were architects who spoke of warmth and harmony and built abominations. Others were more honest. For the museum Robert had sought to do justice to a great many things: the city, the materials, the environment, the times, and above all, his belief that human beings were put on Earth to delight and inspire one another. The dance of light through glass, the upswinging cathedral-like enclosure, the exterior reflection of other buildings, and of the water and the sky ... all were meant to convey, if not deliver, this message. Life, however carefully planned, was full of surprises. This was another of his beliefs, a corollary of the first, and throughout the design process he had strived to give it voice, guided by intuition and love of his craft and of his city and of nature, and also love of human beings, and of one in particular, and he longed to know what she thought.

“Have you seen it?” he asked, breaking their long silence.

Grace had no need to ask what he meant. “Yes. Of course. I can see it from the bedroom window.”

“But lately. Have you seen it lately?”

“Yes. I look at it every day.”

“Up close? Have you seen it up close?”

“That too,” she said, smiling. “I also use binoculars.”

He’d seen the binoculars and had wondered what they were for. Now, like a supplicant, he waited, not only for her opinion but also, and perhaps more importantly, her praise.

“It’s beautiful. It’s the finest thing you’ve ever done.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. I love it.”

He could scarcely contain his happiness. “That’s good. That’s very good.” He looked away from her, fighting back emotion, then back. “Thank you.”

“Why? You’re the one who designed it. Thank yourself.”

“You inspired it. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

She was surprised, particularly considering how things had been of late. “Have you decided who’s going to live in it?”

“No. Not yet.”

She had some thoughts on the matter, but for the moment kept them to herself. Instead, she returned to the museum, which was vivid in her mind. The way it seemed to explode from the ground, like a vent of steam, thrusting itself upward ... it seemed so male to her, so attention-grabbing, so Robertesque, and while it thrilled her to look at it, she wondered what role she could possibly have played in its conception.

“How did I inspire it? What about me?”

“Everything.”

“For example.”

“All of you. Every bit. Top to bottom, inside out.” He paused, conscious of how lame he sounded. “It’s hard to put into words.”

But words were what she wanted, specific and concrete, as though the deed itself were not enough. She waited, while Robert struggled to untie his tongue.

Eventually he said, “I built it for you.”

“For me?” This seemed unlikely.

“For both of us. But you were always there, at the back of my mind. I wanted you to like it. I always want you to like what I do.”

She had a curious reaction to this. At first she thought him rather pathetic, child-like without the virtue of being a child. But then she remembered who she was.

“I miss you, Robert.”

“I miss you, too.”

“Come home. Come be with me again.”

“I can’t. I’m not strong enough. Or uninhibited enough. Or something.”

“I’ve stopped sleeping with him.”

He stiffened. It wasn’t the sex, not in and of itself. It was the sex plus everything else.

“He must be lonely.” The thought gave him a certain amount of pleasure, though less than he would have guessed. Less, it seemed, than it should.

Grace considered how to proceed. In point of fact, she hadn’t really stopped, not in the strict sense of the word, the absolute, unequivocal, lock the door and throw away the key sense, not in *that* sense, but she had stopped for now. *Róbert* (or R Prime, his current nom de guerre) didn’t like it, but that was *Róbert*: like all the Roberts, he preferred things his way. And who knew the future? It was prudent, she felt, to keep an open mind.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” she replied.

“Do you love him, Grace?”

The question shocked her. “I love you.”

He wanted to believe her. She could read it all over his face. And the uncertainty, and the wariness, she could read that too.

“Tell me something, Robert. When you made me, you made me so I wouldn’t be hurt by you. So I couldn’t be. But it hurts to see you suffer. It hurts to see you sad. Why didn’t you make me immune to that, too?”

He had no answer, except that he had done his best. Perhaps some hurts were inherent to being human.

Grace considered this. It seemed plausible. On the other hand, wasn't it equally inherent to being human that humans—including the makers of humans—would aspire to more?

"Maybe next time," she said.

He glanced at her sharply.

She was teasing.

He was not amused. "There won't be a next time. I promise you."

"Which means what, Robert? You're happy with what you've got? You're giving up? Slinking away?"

"I'm happy."

"You don't look happy."

"Give me a minute."

It took less. And she didn't really see his face because she was in his arms. But she felt it, the happiness. And she had a revelation: some hurts just had to be fixed after the fact. They brought out the best in people, and that's why they existed. As reminders, as opportunities, to do good. To come together. To mend differences. To love.

* * * *

—4—

The opening of the museum, scheduled for late October, was delayed by more than a month. It was rare that any building was ever completed on time—it seemed against some natural law—although in this case the structure itself (and everything connected to it: exhibits and displays, security, landscaping, parking) was finished well in advance. Staff had been hired, uniforms created (using a fully tested, nonreactive Pakki-flex congener spun into a "skin on skin" fabric, producing a wonderful, shimmering, moiré effect), but at the last minute, at the architect's insistence, who himself was following the sage, if not brilliant, advice of his most beloved, there was a change. The couple who had been selected to inhabit the Domome was asked to step down in favor of another couple, who, nepotism aside, was really the perfect choice. It was several weeks

before the house responded, and the new occupants were deemed acceptable. This was not wholly unexpected, but, all things considered, it was a huge relief.

October in the city was a time of cloud-studded skies, mild temperatures and gorgeous, golden light. By contrast, December was the season of rain, and the day of the opening dawned drizzly and gray. As he stood at his bedroom window, dressing and rehearsing the few words he would say, unable to see through the heavy curtain of sprinkle and mist, Robert worried that the museum would not show itself to advantage on such a dreary day. He worried about the Domome too, which after all was just a house. What made it different, elevated it (if that was the word), was the Pakki-flex, and Pakki-flex was fickle: perhaps this would be the day that it did nothing, that it chose to take a rest. And if it did, could the house alone justify itself as the centerpiece of such a hullabaloo? Nothing like this had ever been done before, not on this scale. And for good reason, he thought.

He was no stranger to ribbon-cuttings, nor to the pressures and anxieties attending them, which typically he shouldered alone. Today, however, he had an ally, and at a sound he turned from the window, and there she was. Her hair was up; she wore a new dress. His worries and apprehensions didn't stand a chance, scattering like autumn leaves at the sight of her.

"God, you're beautiful."

She smiled, lifting her chin.

"You make me weak."

"Weak?"

"In the knees."

"It's a big day," she said.

They stood there, drinking each other in, all else—the bigness of the day, the weather, the time—forgotten. He crossed the room and laid his hand on her shoulder, which was bare, and gently traced the contour of her neck as it curved ever so gracefully upward toward her face. To Grace the touch was like an electric current. She felt it to the tip of her toes.

They exchanged a glance.

“No?” he asked.

She was half a second slow in responding.

“I can deal with no.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Yes meaning what? No?”

“No,” she said, draping her arms around his neck and pulling him close. “Yes meaning yes.”

Fifteen minutes later, after dressing again and straightening up, they hurried out the door. They were just in time for the festivities, arriving as the mayor was stepping to the microphone. Flanking him were the directors of the city’s departments of planning, preservation and the arts, various underlings, several leading architects, and Julian with two of his partners. The media, along with a moderate crowd, were also there. Considering everyone who wanted a share of the credit, the ceremony was mercifully brief. Near the end of the speeches the rain slowed, then stopped altogether, and the sky began to lift. At the moment the ribbon was cut, the sun put in an appearance, and as the crowd surged forward, it struck the museum with a broad swath of light. The glass seemed to catch fire, which spread from panel to panel and then shot upward, until the museum was wreathed in pale, shimmering, amber light. A gasp went up from the crowd. A few of them glanced at Robert.

And the Domome ... what more could he have asked or hoped for? As the galleries and balconies filled, and the sun played peek-a-boo, creating one felicity after another with the museum’s walls, the dome, as if on cue, began to pucker, as though the air beneath it were liquefying and being brought to a boil. As the pucker grew, a hush came over the crowd, every eye fixed on the steadily enlarging bubble. When it covered most of the dome and seemed on the very brink of bursting, a rent appeared in it, narrow at first, slit-sized, like a long paper cut. Wrinkles appeared on the surface of the bubble, which, remarkably, retained its shape and did not deflate. There was a collective intake of air, oohs and aaahs, followed by sustained applause.

As if in response, the rent widened, revealing first one man, then another, beneath the dome in the room below. Both, in formal wear, were looking up, taking in the sea of faces trained on them, and if one seemed more pleased with the attention, more in love with it, it didn’t show. They had

their arms around each other, and high above them, Robert slipped his around Grace. He was as happy as he'd ever been. He had his masterpiece. He had Grace. In the world there was nothing he wanted more.

For Grace it was hardly different. She had everything she wanted: her man, her man's happiness, his love. She also had the museum's key. Robert had left a copy of it in plain view on a table at home, and after several days, assuming it was there for a reason, she took it. Nothing was ever said.

The applause grew louder, and it was joined by whistles and cheers. And now the two men were smiling, and now they were waving. And Grace, having threaded her arm around Robert, gave him a loving squeeze, and with her other hand, her free one, she waved back.