Part 1

Pedestrian days

On Sunday afternoon they finally phoned to ask him to work on the screenplay. Dyer had half-expected Cullimore himself to ring; instead, it was the director's personal assistant who made the call. The film was already in production, and both lead and supporting actors were complaining. On the set they must've realized what they were working with. For one thing, the dialogue rarely strayed from the story line. The plot was intricate, unquestionably, but also unyielding; its precision and economy, suffocating. On separate occasions, one of the supporting actors, also a published poet as it happened, had compared the characters to a dungeon and the surface of Mars: uninhabitable. The film was being shot on location. "There's a ticket waiting for you at Los Angeles airport," Cullimore's assistant told Dyer. When asked to repeat her name, she enunciated: "O-di-le." She spoke with an accent. It was the only thing that pleased Dyer that whole day.

He'd spent Sunday morning bobbing in and out of sleep, straddling that border with expert ease. The screenplay was resting open and face down on Patricia's side of the bed (she wouldn't be back for another day). The script had arrived by express post two days earlier; in that time, he'd read only a dozen pages (which was enough to see all that was wrong with it). A brief mention on the first page had captured his attention: the story was set in Montreal. It was where he had gone to university. In his graduating year, he'd taken Cullimore's course: Basic and Applied Screenwriting. What really held Dyer's interest, though, was the name of the female lead. It appeared in the note paper-clipped to the screenplay. As his eyelids twitched in half-sleep, he hovered over scraps of dreams in which the star's face appeared. It was a face whose imperfections pleased him, none more than the wide-set eyes. A mask moulded for the screen. Tessa Silsgaard was not Garbo or

Deneuve but was none the less incomparable. An amalgam of mystery and magnetism harking back to another era.

At noon Dyer awoke fully at last, stomach growling and mind unclouded. Thinking that hunger might sharpen his narrative edge, he put off breakfast and plunged back into the script. He read the same dozen pages as before and, as he ventured deeper into the story, found himself downshifting from reading to browsing. This exercise only seemed to confirm the scale of the task ahead. He let the script drop onto a pillow and took evasive action ("Just for now," he told himself). He tottered into the kitchen. He found some eggs in the fridge and made the last of the coffee in a once-gleaming stove-top espresso maker bought one carefree afternoon in Capri. In his hurry for a caffeine fix, he scalded his tongue. In a single bound he was at the sink and running cold water over the burn. Instantaneous relief. Unmoored from pain, his attention drifted from his contorted stance to the clock on the wall. He did the math (add three hours) and shut off the faucet. On the East Coast it was nearly four.

Sunday afternoon, the parched hills to one side, the glistening towers of the Financial District opposite. He glanced out the window at a familiar red-brick building. Though tired, the Normandie Hotel still caught your eye. Something about it, certainly the arched windows and the medallions above them, hinted at its former splendour. He read a piece in the *Times* once about a movement afoot to convert the Normandie into the country's first pot-friendly hotel. He hadn't caught a whiff of any fumes yet. Dyer had stayed there one night on one of his first trips to Los Angeles something like a decade earlier. Or was it a decade and a half?

How far had he progressed in that time? "You've made it to the other side of the street," he chastised himself and, lips pursed, wondered if he'd spoken aloud.

He turned his attention to the flow of traffic below. Except that it wasn't flowing. It was lethargic, sluggish, syrupy slow, but the adjective that came to him was "desultory." He marched to his desk and made himself reach for a dictionary-thesaurus on the shelf rather than go online. The Cs. The Ds. Destruction. Desuetude. Ah, desultory. "Going from one subject to another, esp. halfheartedly; disconnected, superficial, shifting, unsteady, unmethodical, disorderly, haphazard, erratic." He slammed the fat paperback shut with a scolding thought about wasting time. He hadn't done a thing yet, and he faced a firm Monday nine a.m. deadline. What was more, Dyer couldn't ask his client for an extension since he was probably about to leave town for who knew how long. He stood by his desk as if in the grip of paralysis. He commanded himself to sit.

Disobediently he strode to the bedroom. Propped up on the pillow was the script. Had he left it there? He couldn't recall. He riffled through it, picking pages at random. The woodenness of Cullimore's dialogue was surprising in its variety. Birch alder oak. Peeking from the pages like a bookmark was a note in the director's distinctive penmanship of upswings and nosedives: "Here it is. Your challenge is to inject life into these characters. They must leap off the page and, later, the screen. They need to vibrate and pulsate and make spectators do the same. What can you do?" As a directive, it was vague, but there was no need for elaboration. Dyer was no stranger to Cullimore's unorthodox work methods. He knew he wasn't expected to redraft the script alone in L.A. He would have to be summoned to the set and introduced to the actors before writing a single new line. Days of rewriting

and rehearsing, few and frantic, would follow. The only possible preparation was to read the script and get to know all of its parts, characters dialogue transitions plot points. How these parts came together; how they might be disassembled and reconstituted into something new. He'd have to read it more than once. Though hardly unexpected, this realization caused a kind of fatigue to sweep over him; however, the tiredness didn't engulf Dyer's gratitude. He marvelled at Cullimore's timing, hiring him when he most desperately needed a gig. Surely the man was telepathic. "I'm not psychic, old son," he imagined the director replying, "merely awake."

As grateful as he was to Cullimore, Dyer was leery about changing the script. The director himself had written it and would tolerate only so much tampering. Still, he had to overcome his wariness and do something that would restore not merely the script but his career. If it could still be called that. Also, he was determined to earn a writing credit: it was the only way to climb back into view in the industry. At his age, toiling in obscurity would certainly be pointless, likely counterproductive, perhaps even fatal. Whenever Dyer told himself things like that, he pricked up his ears. Following a well-worn path, his thoughts veered to the money that would come with the job. The figure was magical, but he allowed himself to feel its soothing effect only for a moment. One assignment for Cullimore, however successful the outcome, wasn't going to get him noticed by anyone else in the business. The job of opening doors for him belonged to his agent. But did he still have one? It had been months since Barry had called and longer since he'd opened any doors for Dyer. And wasn't it a fact that Cullimore's job had come directly from Cullimore himself and not from the agent they shared?

Dyer picked up the telephone; although out of practice, his fingertips effortlessly performed a ten-digit dance routine. Agents seldom answered calls (and never on Sunday) but Dyer had his rehearsed message ready. There was a quality in his agent's recorded voice, however, that made Dyer forget his prepared speech. A subterranean and just perceptible haughtiness. After the beep, Dyer released a torrent: "Barry Barry Barry Barry, I was wondering if after so much time I'd remember your name. But, rest assured. I wonder if you remember mine. I won't tell you what it is. I'll let my voice jog your memory. What I will tell you, though, is that I've landed a job, a real one. It's a re-do for Trevor Cullimore. He's already shooting in Montreal. Canada. You remember how he operates, don't you? Insists on house calls. Old-fashioned that way. He requires my presence on the set during principal photography. Don't you love that quaint expression? I fly to Montreal in a couple of days. Let's talk it over before I go. Like yours, my number hasn't changed."

Making the call sparked a sense of resolve that Dyer was determined not to let dribble away. He picked up the script and a red felt-tip marker and dropped into the leather armchair in which, as he told everyone and himself, he did his best work. The first thing his eye fell on—how had he missed it before?—was the title. *Where Saturn Keeps the Years*. Its obscurity was vintage Cullimore. No doubt a literary allusion, or musical, or was it the title of a cosmic fresco by an obscure Flemish master? Definitely not a movie reference. Dyer made a mental note to look it up. For the moment he had no desire to leave the armchair; in fact, he felt too weak to escape its embrace. Whatever its provenance, the title was opaque and lengthy enough to be merely provisional. It would never make it to the credits. Dyer wondered if he should come up with appropriate alternatives. No, he'd let Cullimore make

the request first. All the same, somewhere (where in the brain was the seat of language?) words were beginning to assemble into formation. He sent them scattering by riffling through the script. Some of the pages were dog-eared, others bore smudges or coffee-rings. Clearly, this copy of the script had lived. Then travelled across the continent to land in Dyer's lap with a thud perceptible only to his ears. Now he leafed through it, a seemingly leisurely to-and-fro, but actually unsure where to begin. He was looking for a handle. One word, Venice, caught his eye. It appeared in a line of dialogue, not in the directions. No doubt to the producers' relief, Cullimore's script did not juggle settings as disparate as Mount Royal Park and the Bridge of Sighs. The thought reminded Dyer that Oxford, too, had its own Bridge of Sighs, but he brushed away the reminiscence that went with it.

He turned back a page in search of the name above the block of dialogue. The line about Venice belonged to Lana, Silsgaard's character. She claimed she had always wanted to spend a summer there learning Italian but admitted she had never inched the plan closer to fruition. Venice's unexpected mention in the screenplay triggered a memory more insistent than Oxford. It was where Dyer had first come across Cullimore after taking his course. About two years after. Both were taking time off from the film festival to stroll in the *Giardini Pubblici*. Dyer had written the off-screen narration for a short documentary film on the dance scene in L.A. (first and last foray into documentary); almost on a whim, the director (name now forgotten) had completed and submitted the selection entry form; then, surprisingly, a letter of acceptance turned up in the mail. Why Cullimore was in Venice, Dyer forgot. A new film, most likely, though he might've been attending the art biennial, scouting locations, enjoying a holiday or any number of things.

"How gratifying to see one's students do well," was almost the first thing Cullimore had said to him. The compliment caught Dyer flat-footed. He considered hemming and hawing but couldn't remember how that was done. Cullimore followed with another accolade: "Best film about dance I've ever seen."

Dyer saw the opening and took it: "Seen many?"

"Oh, enough, I'd say."

Neither was accompanied or in a hurry, and they decided to have a drink. They left the gardens and sat at the first terrace they encountered on Via Garibaldi. Open parasols offered protection from the sun's murderous intensity. They stipulated they wanted their lager ice-cold. When the beer arrived, Cullimore took a long draught. "Ah, nothing tops the first sip," he proclaimed and went on to offer more praise about Dyer's film. He confided that if he'd had the body for it, dance not film would have been his career choice. Then he said something unexpected: "I might have a job for you. A rewrite, quite extensive, if you do that sort of thing."

"That's precisely the sort of thing I do."

"I'm genuinely glad to hear it. I remember you had a way with characters. Light years ahead of your classmates. Hope you haven't lost your touch. If anything, judging from the film I saw last night, you've sharpened it."

"That was documentary," Dyer threw out as a challenge, not caring if it undermined his position.

Cullimore gave this a short laugh. "Precisely. Capturing character when the characters are real is… well, let's just say doing it in fiction is a cinch by comparison."

The event was so distant it had been relegated to a biographical footnote. But that was not where it belonged. The chance meeting eventually (that is, four years later) led to Dyer's first feature-film credit. And first fat paycheque. He smiled at the thought of the money he'd made then and the money he'd make now. That was the particularity of working with Cullimore: he always got paid. No other employer of Dyer's in this fickle trade had an unblemished record in that respect. Even on projects that Cullimore failed to bring to production, Dyer was paid. At Cullimore's request he'd once spent two taut months writing a screenplay based on a murder mystery from the nineteen-forties. It had been some years since Cullimore had directed anything for British television, and with *The Case of the Gilded Fly* and its eccentric sleuth Gervase Fen he hoped to make a triumphant comeback both to TV-land and to his homeland. Many things about the project had pleased Dyer. The story was set in Oxford, one of the stops in his and his then bride's recent honeymoon. Also, *The Case of the Gilded Fly* was set in the autumn of nineteen-forty, early enough in the German air bombing campaign to give the characters an electric edge. Especially enjoyable was having to adapt the dialogue from the novel, uncommonly sexually frank for the era. Soon after finishing the script ("The best work I've ever done," he told Cullimore) Dyer discovered that the producer had failed to secure the rights to the novel. His script would never be filmed and was reduced to a line in his resume. Nevertheless, a cheque in the full amount arrived in the mail a few days later. For a long time afterwards he thought of the money as a balm, not quite sting-soothing but comforting all the same. Also, his sense of gratitude swelled whenever fellow scriptwriters recounted stories of being bilked. Though tempted to console them by fabricating his own tales of financial woe, his imagination refused to comply.

Dyer dismissed these musings with a shrug and plunged back into the script. He read several pages, punctuating them with smiles. What he found especially amusing were Cullimore's attempts to inject life into characters through visual cues. No other directors he knew ever inserted camera directions in their scripts. But then few matched Cullimore's passion for putting his own cleverness on display. Dyer underlined these passages as he encountered them: close-ups of eyes, facial twitches (particularly corners of mouths), fidgeting hands, and, most interesting and least persuasive of all, reaction shots barely long enough to be perceptible. Poor Cullimore, trying to create a spark without a flint. Elsewhere he recognized other hallmarks of Cullimore's work. There were vertigo-inducing camera sweeps from macro to micro. Also, unexpected and telescopic shifts from one point of view to another within the same scene; whenever he did this, he reflected the change in perception through subtle shifts in colour or light intensity. (This device had found its most dramatic expression ever in a scene from his most recent film in which the point of view shifted from a normally sighted character to a colour-blind one to a legally blind one.) Repeatedly, Dyer came across directions for shots only a fraction of a second long. "The mind sees things the eye doesn't," Cullimore had said on more than one occasion. He'd said it long ago in the classroom with Dyer, then an eager undergraduate, in attendance. He even wrote about it in a piece published somewhere, possibly *Film Comment*. In response, a critic had dubbed Cullimore "the subliminal *cinéaste*."

Dyer directed his attention back to the script. The Silsgaard character, Lana, offered possibilities. There was a hint of vulnerability and liveliness there that Cullimore could not tease out, neither on the page nor, apparently, on the set. Dyer read a few more pages, and

warmed to Lana or to the person she could—would—become under his guidance. He came to a scene of quickfire dialogue; there was barely a complete sentence on the whole page. His mind strayed from content to form. He didn't care for the look of screenplays. It was a bulimic format. He preferred the bulk of prose. Solid, unassailable blocks interspersed with lines of dialogue ensconced within quotation marks (or "inverted commas" in Cullimore's lingo) as if they were manifestations from an otherwise invisible parallel realm. In appearance, poetry was the most tenuous form. The merest breeze could sweep the sturdiest stanzas off the page. But even the look of poetry was preferable to the standard screenplay.

Despite his resolve Dyer soon reached a point where reading two pages in a row was beyond him. He began to dip into the script randomly, hoping for happy surprises. But all he found was more of the same. Thin characters, but not too thin to be caught in the vise grip of an unrelenting plot. To elicit even casual interest from an audience they would need fortifying. But what could actually be done? Supposing that meditation might provide an answer, Dyer took a deep breath and allowed his eyelids to slide shut. When he opened them again, an hour had passed. His own snoring had awakened him. Time for the revivifying effects of coffee. Even before he got to the kitchen, he remembered there wasn't any left. Instead he made himself of a pot of Lapsang souchong. It was a Taiwanese variety (or Formosan in connoisseurspeak) and was reputed to produce a strong effect. "What does that mean?" Dyer had enquired of the shopkeeper who sold it to him just a few blocks away. "Help you in your work."

Over the next hour the tea failed to live up to its billing. Dyer paced up and down the living-room, his cup in one hand, Cullimore's pages in the other. Unable to make further progress on the script, Dyer dropped it where he was standing. He watched it land with a thud that spread a cloud of dust. He sat at his desk and went online to google Tessa Silsgaard (the expression had entered the language but still sounded fantastically rude, especially if you read it as two words with the break occurring between the o's).

Thousands of clamouring sites rose up in a fraction of a second. He scrolled down for something other than the usual prospects. But nothing caught his interest. Just as he rose from his desk, another wave of fatigue slammed into him. He wondered if it was hunger. Next, looking at the clock, he wondered where the afternoon had gone. He went to the kitchen to study the takeout menus trapped under fridge magnets. Again, nothing caught his interest. He grabbed a handful of menus and tossed it into the recycling bin. What now? There were two or three or four standbys in the neighbourhood; he reviewed them quickly and opted for West 6th (fewer possibilities, but closer) rather than 3rd Street.

As soon as he stepped out, he was tempted to go back upstairs for a hat. It was late afternoon, almost evening, but the sun had lost none of its power. He considered using Cullimore's script, clutched in one hand, as a parasol; instead, he decided to cross the road to the shady side. As he passed the Normandie, he took a few shallow breaths, followed by a deep one. No, not the slightest hint of burning cannabis.

He stopped at the first place he came to: Rhee's Korean Table. As he walked in, Mister Rhee nodded a greeting from the other end of the room, and it was a large room. Several tables. More than half of them already taken. Mister Rhee pointed, chin rather than

finger, to a table by the window. Now it was Dyer's turn to nod. He sat and was about to leaf through the script when he noticed the menu. It shone. He picked it up. It was new. Also, sleek and clean, the riotous misspellings weeded out. Mister Rhee appeared at Dyer's elbow, and placed a hand on it in greeting.

"Patricia not come tonight?"

"She has a show in Watsonville. She'll be back tomorrow night," Dyer said, abruptly remembering how much she'd looked forward to the trip. It was hard to imagine a small gallery in Watsonville provoking such eagerness.

"Solo show?" Mister Rhee said.

"No. But she's showing six new paintings."

"Ah, excellent, excellent. I hope she sell them all. So, few days on your own, yes?"

"Yes, just a few."

"Temporary bachelorhood, not entirely disagreeable condition." Though ungrammatical, Mister Rhee's English occasionally vaulted into sophistication. This always came as a surprise. Dyer's wonder, though, didn't distract him from wondering when the inevitable question would come. It came now: "When you two tying the knot?"

"I like your new menu, Mister Rhee."

"Thank you. I took Patricia advice and hired proofreader. I hope she, too, will be happy with new menu when she see it."

"I'm sure that'll happen soon."

"I want to show you something," he chirped and rushed off. He returned with a soiled copy of "Western Tanager," the Audubon Society's L.A. newsletter. He flipped

through it, and did it again, front to back and back to front. "I brought wrong one," he said. "I always do that."

"What did you want to show me?"

"Red-naped Sapsucker. I saw one."

"Where? Up at Pearblossom Park?"

"No, Pearblossom Park too far away. I not go there. I see bird here."

"Where, here?"

"In street when I come to restaurant in the morning."

Dyer nodded but challenged him: "I don't think they venture into town, Mister Rhee."

"Oh, no, you wrong about that. People see them at Village Green condo."

"And where is that?"

"Rodeo and La Cienaga."

"That comes as news. Welcome news."

"You want to look while you wait for your dinner?" He handed Dyer the Audubon newsletter. "Or you want to order from new menu?"

"You haven't removed my favourite dish from the menu, have you?"

"You not worry, Mistah Dyah." Rhee patted him on the elbow again before disappearing into the kitchen.

Dyer scanned the room, his gaze travelling from table to table to table to his own. For a half-second he wondered where the brochure in his hands had come from. He leafed through it absently. He was greeted by unfamiliar or forgotten plumage and beak markings.

For a delirious moment he was teleported to a field on the edge of a forest in Yorkshire into the body of his seven-year-old self. Beside him stood his father, a giant in a tweed shooting jacket (though he was no hunter) and well-worn wellingtons. In a flutey voice he didn't recognize as his own, he assured his dad that he wanted to learn the names of all of the birds and all of the plants. Not just the names, of course, but everything about them. "Well, Gareth, we're making a start, aren't we?" his father said. Of that thirst for specialized knowledge, Dyer would now concede, only a trace remained. Mister Rhee had returned and was placing, even arranging, small bowls on the table containing things for Dyer to sample while he waited for his bibimbap. Once again, "Western Tanager" changed hands.

"You let me know, you see interesting bird."

"I'll do that, Mister Rhee. I will not fail to do that."

As he waited for his order, he scanned pages of the scripts not yet read. Though flat, the characters were not without interest. "I create my characters only from the finest cardboard," Dyer had once heard Cullimore boast.

When he left the restaurant an hour later, an extraordinary transformation had taken place. Northern clouds had tumbled down and spilled autumn light. Dyer had watched it happen as he inhaled his bibimbap. He berated himself for barely chewing his food, his gaze fixed on the sky. Was insufficiently masticated food the cause of his recurring heartburn? He kept his eyes on the clouds, or rather their rounded wispy edges, which was their most painterly quality. If Patricia were here with her sketchbook, she'd fill pages in a few frenzied moments. As he walked back in the cooling and dimming streets, Dyer's flaring nostrils

caught the scent of rain before the first drops came down. He opened his mouth and took bites out of the humid air. In Los Angeles he had developed a taste for bad weather.

The work Dyer didn't want was in short supply; the work he was after, even scarcer. He sat at his desk, once again re-energized by the afternoon phone call from Montreal. With a nudge at the mouse, he stirred the computer from its day-long nap. Both screens (he needed two monitors for his work) lit up simultaneously. The task ahead was to write the voice-over narration for a corporate video. A short version that would be played on a loop at a trade-show kiosk; a longer version for the web. The client was a wireless telecom service. He imagined the narrator's voice, lush, oily; it made the copy easier to write. At the window, dusk was swarming. He tried to bring his attention back to the screen, but his eyes went to the wallpaper on the second monitor. A pointedly arty photograph of flaking wooden shutters in late afternoon light. He'd taken the picture himself. It brought back fraying memories of the Dordogne, the small towns, his early or mid-twenties. Aimless days doused in sunlight, careless days, impossible now to summon fully. Before facing the computer again he poured himself a small drink, barely a finger. It was the first of who knew how many. Not too many, he cautioned (even raising a finger in mock admonishment). Here too, as in his work, he had learned to pace himself.

Wireless telephone, of course, is radio. He improvised on a single theme, the new golden age of radio. He embroidered it, drew what he hoped were clever parallels between a bygone age and the present. He remembered from some long-forgotten course at university that the telephone was originally a broadcasting medium as much as a means of

conversation. Live music concerts and opera were carried over the wires. He played with that notion, suggesting that the phone of today with its inexhaustible video and audio streams had reclaimed its original purpose. He was going too far, of course, but that was his destination. He wrote with a kind of savagery, punishing the keyboard, at times shaking with it. He produced the first draft without once getting up, overlooking his supposed need for refills. The rest of the evening he honed the words. He polished them. In the end, they attained the sheen of sculpture and reminded him of small marble and soapstone pieces he'd seen in galleries from Los Angeles to San Francisco. He exhaled as if he'd held his breath all evening. Finally, the job was done. He'd just earned next month's rent. In comparative terms, writing for the corporate world earned him little money, but he was grateful for whatever work he could get. What was more, churning out copy kept him writing, and he accepted any assignment that came his way. Including this one. In the morning, after a final read-through, he'd e-mail the piece to the client. With luck, it would come back with only a few requests for edits or, even better, it wouldn't come back at all.

He got up from his ergonomic chair, a gift from Patricia, and stretched. Yawned expansively. With any luck, this job would mark the end of his stint in the grey world of corporate content production. He found himself praying that Cullimore's latest intervention would signal his readmittance to the realm to which he rightly belonged. Under his breath, he repeated "Let me back in, and I'll never leave again" until it became a mantra and he began to rock back and forth on his heels. He had waited for this moment for nearly two years. What would he have done without Lewis, who'd given him his first job writing business copy? Leave Los Angeles? Would he really have left? Had he been that close? Where

would he have gone? At first, when it began to seem he would never again be employed, Dyer had felt almost as grateful to Lewis for the corporate writing gigs he sent his way as he'd been to Cullimore for giving him his first feature-film credit. He'd met Lewis at a scriptwriting seminar given by a Robert McKee clone. Neither was there as a student, but rather as coordinators of the event, for which they got little more than coffee money. They didn't care about the money: as promising screenwriters hoping to make their mark quickly, they were there to meet people in the business. What was remarkable in Lewis's case was how quickly his hopes were extinguished. Less than two years after graduation he told Dyer he was going to take a job with an advertising agency. They kept in touch, the occasional beer, the occasional meal, Lewis for some reason determined to maintain even tenuous contact with the movie industry. Whenever Dyer quizzed him about it, he'd say, "Well, we're friends, aren't we? Who are you going to network with if not your friends?" Four years later, Lewis left the ad agency to create his own firm. By this time, Dyer was seeing much less of him. One day he called his former classmate with something other than a drink or lunch on his mind.

"Christ, it's been ages. You still in L.A.? What's up?"

"I was calling to see if you could use a scribbler."

Lewis immediately hired Dyer; he needed "wordsmithing" to clean up corporate annual reports and press releases. Over the next several months, while Dyer's agent failed to get him a job in his chosen field, Lewis provided more work: Dyer found himself churning out copy for several corporate web sites, sales presentations, and marketing videos. Even

his more-than-a-smattering of Spanish was put to professional advantage. He began to translate content from Lewis's Mexican clients into corporate English.

"Where did you learn the language, man?" Lewis wanted to know. "You're not Spanish, are you?"

"This is L.A. You pick Spanish up by osmosis."

"Why didn't that happen to me?"

Lewis employed a number of freelancers, but only Dyer's work elicited rapturous appreciation from his clients. On two occasions when Lewis was indisposed (flu the first time; over-commitments, the second), he allowed Dyer to deal with clients directly. Again, near-euphoric reactions. From where Dyer sat, that seemed to clinch it in Lewis's mind, and he received a call early one Monday morning from him. What did he think about coming on board as a partner in the firm? Dyer allowed Lewis to describe the terms, the benefits, and other perks. He wasn't interested but told himself he wanted to know fully what it was he was going to turn down. The truth was he was relishing being wanted. Before Dyer could answer, Lewis told him to take a couple of days to think about it, as if he already knew what the answer would be. Dyer did take a couple of days, during which he made frantic telephone calls to his agent: "Barry, get me a gig." "There must be someone who needs his shitty script fixed." "Any crappy job will do." He knew he was going too far but couldn't stop himself. In Barry's place, he wouldn't have called back either. The next number he called was Lewis's.

"I'm glad you called. Let me take you to lunch, and you can give me your answer then. And even if the answer is no, which I guess is a real possibility, we need to meet. I have another job for you."

Of course, the answer was no. He'd keep freelancing for Lewis, if that was all right, but "I can't transmogrify myself into a business partner. Not even yours, buddy." Lewis didn't ask for further explanation. He simply said, "I understand," and gave a Dyer a smile of almost sinister serenity. The matter seemed to be settled but parcels began to arrive in the mail. Dyer unwrapped the first one with foreboding. Inside was a thick paperback. To all appearances, Lewis had sent him a self-help book. The words *Redirect your life* were embossed on the front cover, leaving only enough room for the author's name, which he'd never encountered before. Another book arrived just a few days later. And a third the following week. *Gear up your new career* and *Commit to change* they urged. Dyer didn't mention the books, and neither did Lewis, who continued to send him work and, thirty days net, cheques.

That was then; this was now. Dyer poured himself another shot and went looking for Cullimore's script. Where had he left it? It wasn't on the bed. He returned to the living-room and found it on the floor, steps from his desk.

That Cullimore should be filming in Montreal was really cause for amusement. It was the city where they'd first met. Cullimore was giving a course on screenwriting at McGill University as a visiting instructor. As for Dyer, he was an undergraduate in the school's slender film studies program. So slender, in fact, that film studies wasn't a department in its

own right but a remote enclave within English Studies. The program's embryonic state was one of the things that attracted him. He registered for Cullimore's course as soon as he heard about it, filling the last available spot. All through August of that year, he looked forward to the fall semester and the course on screenwriting. Finally, Labour Day came and went. He arrived early for the first class gunning for the best seat, or the closest available to it. By the time Cullimore strolled in, the poky classroom was full. Twelve, according to Dyer's quick head count. Twelve, his recount confirmed. For a long time, Cullimore didn't address them. Barely looked at them or acknowledged their presence. He rummaged in his briefcase, produced some papers, and shuffled them. Then stuffed them back, shut the case and stowed it under the desk. Meanwhile, Dyer had opened his notebook and started making jottings, as if recording evidence or amassing material for a character sketch. Tan summer suit. Check shirt, blue and white. Close-cropped hair, a hint of the military. Old-fashioned half-rimmed sunglasses. Even a crumpled pocket square. A showcase of unkempt elegance. By the time Cullimore finally removed his shades and looked up, Dyer had filled half a page. He added a final detail. Soggy blue eyes. When it seemed as if Cullimore would make eye contact with all twelve of them before speaking, he broke his silence. As soon as he spoke, it was obvious that he, like Dyer's father, was a Yorkshireman. It was a surprising coincidence but not an outrageous one: as it turned out, they weren't from the same town. By way of introduction the director recited a thumbnail bio, unexpectedly consulting a pocket-sized cue card with a regularity that suggested he'd forgotten much of his past life. He mentioned that he was born and raised in Whitby: "In north-east England, not so very far from Scotland." Dyer's father and, in fact, Dyer himself were originally from Leeds. Not so very far

from Whitby. Much of what he said in that first meeting struck Dyer as captivating and irrelevant. Most surprising of all, there wasn't a single word about Cullimore's credentials, his work for the screen, the stage, the printed page. He asked them why they were interested in screenwriting and said he wouldn't be able to teach them a thing until he was satisfied with their answers. Dyer puzzled over the meaning of this, the first of many enigmatic pronouncements made by Cullimore that semester, and wondered what answer to give.

In the intervening years (twelve, fourteen?), Dyer had run into Cullimore on repeated occasions. Never the same place twice. There was no need to invoke the gods of coincidence to explain these spontaneous meetings. They were less the product of chance than the consequence of belonging to the same profession. They stumbled on each other at film festivals (not just in Venice), awards ceremonies, special screenings, workshops. Did an invisible thread connect them? Dyer had read somewhere that almost everyone possessed an insignificant significant other. A person of no great consequence with whom you entertained a tenuous connection through unplanned encounters in far-flung places. It was a pleasingly allusive theory, except that Cullimore, a prime mover in Dyer's career, completely failed to satisfy the insignificance criterion.

Sometime past eleven the phone twittered. It was Patricia. She told him she'd been thinking about him.

"I miss you, too," he offered.

"Really?"

"Yes. And it's only going to get worse."

Patricia expressed her puzzlement first through silence, then: "What do you mean?"

"I have to fly out Tuesday." He told her about the summons from Cullimore and the brief telephone call from Montreal. "A real gig," he said. "Finally." It was basic script revision, except that this was unusual—"though not for Cullimore"—since production was already under way. Patricia was silent. He sensed her disbelief, unless it was indifference. It was only recently that he'd noticed this change in her. Had she lost all faith in him? Should he ask that question now? No, not on the phone: that would be playing it too safe.

Patricia had seen a luminous quality in him once, and told him so. It was an elusive attribute, this glow, and her two portraits of him failed to capture it. "I'm much better at abstract than figurative, you know that," she'd said, even giving his forearm a reassuring pat. He had responded with a smile, intended to be just as reassuring. Those paintings were like an accusation now, a blow to them both.

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. But like I said, the film's already in production, and Cullimore will expect me to get the job done quickly. I'll probably be back next week. Tell me about your trip."

As was lately the case, her voice on the telephone was halting. She described the drive to Watsonville as long but painless and claimed to like the set-up at the gallery even though it was only a group show. "They put my paintings in the middle of the room."

"Where they're most visible."

"Yep. By the way, you'll love this," she said, "the gallery is located on Sudden Street."

"You're right, I love it. Where are you staying?"

She gave him the name of the hotel, which he instantly forgot, and added that she was looking forward to coming home, her tone darkening to sincerity. The hotel, recommended by the gallery owner, was small and glum, and had a sour smell about it. She said she caught whiffs of it on her clothes and in her hair. She confided that it reminded her of an earlier stage in life, something akin to student days, a condition she wasn't interested in revisiting. Dyer's ears pricked up at that, just catching a scolding tone beneath the words. Few people he knew were as plainspoken as Patricia; when, he wondered, had she learned to be allusive?

They had met through an online ad. He was trying to sell his car; she bought it. This car, a "Honda Ubiquity," she still owned and had used to get to Watsonville. She had no real interest in the gallery or in the town for that matter, but it was an opportunity, another node in her network. Among the many knacks she possessed, Patricia could catch opportunities on the short bounce.

"What time do you get back tomorrow?"

"Oh, late afternoon," Patricia said.

"I'll take you out to dinner to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

"Your show and my new gig."

"Cullimore comes to the rescue once again."

"You said it."

In an effort to prolong his connection with Patricia after hanging up, Dyer played some of the music she liked. He put on headphones (it was nearing midnight) and sat at his desk in the dark listening to Xotox. German techno and industrial bands were what Patricia preferred to listen to when she painted. He had never heard her put on anything else when she worked. Now, her latest canvasses seemed to recreate harsh industrial clanging in bright dissonant colours. Dyer didn't care for the music but found the paintings alluring. Early on, before he'd seen any of her paintings, he asked if her work was figurative or impressionistic. She put on an expression that suggested unfamiliarity with these terms. Then she answered with a shrug and, "You'll have to come and see. Judge for yourself." When he did, just a couple of days later, what he saw were figures adrift in impressionistic backgrounds, enigmatic shapes making an impression on landscapes, jagged spurts of colour erupting from lunar craters, dying suns in dreary skies. A compendium of oddities that stayed with him as if he'd made an effort to commit it all to memory. He got through two minutes of "Mechanische Unruhe," a piece that Patricia praised because "it gets my synapses firing in the right direction" before clicking on stop.

His ears still reverberating, Dyer reached for Cullimore's script once again. Raced through pages picked at random. He saw the craft in it; it was solid; its structure made a pleasing shape. It was almost something you could run your hand over, admiring the finish. The screenplay was concise and professional, compact like a television script, but more ambitious, vast in its scope.

The comparison to television was a mistake: Dyer's thoughts veered away from the job at hand to experiences that were better forgotten. He had once collaborated in the writing of several episodes for a series based on what he himself had called a "clever concept." The show was called *Reality TV* but wasn't. All the same, the title wasn't completely misleading: it was a drama series that followed various characters involved in the production of a reality television show. The clever concept was tired before the end of the first season. With ratings plummeting, the show was not renewed.

There had been money then. It had seemed inexhaustible. He'd been suspicious of the sudden ease with which it came in but thought it would last (or at least didn't think it wouldn't). One evening in Las Vegas he lost thirty thousand dollars in a few hours. "The night is young, the night is young," he kept repeating, but his wife managed to get him out of the casino. More than anything it was his air of unconcern Clara couldn't understand. "Winning big means you can lose big," he said with a smile he himself found hateful. In response, her face turned fierce with bewilderment. "I don't understand you," she said in a pleading tone. "This isn't you. This is not the man I married." Dyer smiled and just managed to suppress a comment about the poverty of her dialogue. He loved his Mexican wife, whom he'd met on holiday in Acapulco. Holiday for him; dutiful family visit for her. Briefly, their bond was intense, apparently inexplicable to anyone who knew him or her. With shocking rapidity it all slipped away, first the money, then the phone calls from producers and his agent. Clara watched, helpless. He fell into a semblance of apathy, and she tried to retrieve him with displays of tenderness and ardour. Her endurance was quickly depleted. They fought. One night Clara struck him. Then hit him again. And again. And again. Dyer caught

her wrist before she landed the next blow. Undeterred, she lashed out with the other hand, her nails cutting him high on the cheek and drawing blood. She gasped and froze. Clearly, it was the sight of blood that had stopped her, but that thought occurred to Dyer much later. In the moment, he could think only how close the cut had come to the eye. Soon after (a matter of days), Clara left. And soon after that a letter came from Veracruz, informing him that their marriage was annulled.

Looking back, he'd thought it would last. After all, it had started well. They had returned to Acapulco to be married. His parents flew down from Ottawa for the ceremony and stayed on for a beach vacation, a kind of second honeymoon, his father said, which struck Dyer as workaholic's joke. As for their own honeymoon, he and Clara had decided on the Midlands and Northern England. Originally, Dyer had suggested Niagara, but only half-jokingly, as it would have given Clara an opportunity to discover his country. But she had no interest in Canada and insisted on seeing his "real country," where he was born, where both his parents were born. They flew from Acapulco to Los Angeles and from LAX to Heathrow. They bypassed London and went directly north. They spent two enchanted days in Oxford. "Enchanted" was not an exaggeration. One afternoon under Hertford Bridge, also known as the Bridge of Sighs, they held a kiss long enough to attract cheering and applause from the normally reticent English. Or were these foreign students? From Oxford they travelled north by train. Their goal was to tramp in Swaledale, Clara's idea after Dyer described this valley to her. From Leicester, where they'd stopped and had a meal with an old friend of Dyer's who was now a research fellow in creative technologies at De Montford University (prompting Clara to ask, both innocently and insultingly, "But what exactly do you do?"), they took a

train to Leeds. Here, too, they made a stop and a pilgrimage of sorts. In a cab they drove by Saint James's University Hospital where Dyer was born. The cabbie, possibly a witty university graduate in literature, pointed out an enclosed field beyond an intersection. "That's Leeds Cemetery, just where Beckett Street and Shakespeare Street meet." Later, they swung by the Agricultural Sciences Building at the University of Leeds where Dyer's father had once taught ("My dad's last job in England before he moved the family to Canada"). Clara also insisted on seeing the house where they had lived.

"I don't remember where it is. I was twelve when we left. D'you realize how long ago that is?"

"Why don't you call your parents and ask them?"

"Clara, it's five in the morning where they are, which by the way is on vacation. Sunny Acapulco, remember?"

They took the TransPennine Express and got off the train in Darlington, where they caught a bus heading west into the Yorkshire Dales. When they weren't shuttered in their room, they went on rambles. The beauty of the surroundings put Dyer into a different state, unknown but not unpleasant. Far from unpleasant. Was it plenitude or torpor? He mentioned it to Clara. She nodded, her gaze marooned in mid-focus, and claimed to be feeling the same thing. "Numb with happiness," Dyer said. Again she nodded, and left it at that. They went from one bed-and-breakfast to another, all unadorned and clean. The picturesque welcome of canopy beds and claw-footed bathtubs. A profusion of local wildflowers greeted them in every room they rented. Dyer recognized cowslips and primroses but kept from putting this expert knowledge on display. They were told by more

than one innkeeper that time stood still in Swaledale. They'd even read it in one or two brochures. He recognized the danger in this. All manner of endeavour and achievement, all ambition, falling away.

"This place is like a heavenly garden. Why did your parents ever leave?"

"I know," Dyer professed and even nodded energetically, but in that moment felt glad he'd also partly grown up elsewhere. "Canada was their America. My dad believed that the best way to move up in life was to move away. So he took a job in Ottawa, at something called an experimental farm. The first time I heard that term, I was twelve or thirteen and I imagined my dad in a laboratory big as a barn, and looking like one too, where he spent his days creating things like two-headed cows and flying pigs. Actually, he was hired by the Canadian government to do something much more down to earth. He was brought over to find new methods of increasing crop yields. His specialty here in Yorkshire was sugar beets. Or 'speciality,' as he would put it. In Ottawa, the sky was the limit, so to speak."

Clara never seemed to get enough of these reminiscences. She and Dyer filled their days with long hikes, over country lanes and tracks in the woods, and birdsong everywhere. The first time they stayed out late, they discovered that darkness didn't fall in this part of the world: it rose, the valley floor darkening long before the sky did. On the way back to the b-and-b, Dyer used his phone to light a path before them.

Of course, it was Clara who got him started on Spanish. During their brief marriage, it was the language she used most at home. She insisted he read Mexican newspapers online and watch the movies of Carlos Reygadas, Alfonso Cuarón, and Antonia Gámez.

"What about Luis Buñuel? Don't you like his work?"

"Who?" said Clara.

Inside a few months he was reading Spanish with relative ease. He spent ten minutes a day copying out paragraphs from *Mi último suspiro*. This he did to entrench what he was learning. Dyer wasn't the kind to learn by osmosis; only genuine application worked in his case. The chapter Buñuel devoted to his likes and dislikes Dyer copied out in full. A love of rain, cloisters, and dwarves. A loathing for statistics, psychology, and the proliferation of information. A love of disguise, solitude, and regular habits.

Shortly after their marriage broke up, Dyer tried to get in touch with Clara. But she seemed to be nowhere. She'd left her job; her uncle refused to say where she'd gone. Maybe back to Mexico. In the end, despite repeated telephone calls, Dyer was unable to track her down. Her disappearance was as mysterious and complete as Vanessa Redgrave's in *Blowup*. The thought came to him even as he was watching that very scene. American Cinematheque was screening a Michelangelo Antonioni retrospective, and Dyer (though he loved the Egyptian Theatre, his favourite location in all of Hollywood) had come out only for *Blowup*. Why? It was the film that had altered the course of his life. The first time he saw it was late one night on television. He was sixteen and a star science student. He had embarked on the same path that had led his father to degrees in plant biology some twenty years before. He had never seen anything by Antonioni and had only ever heard of one Michelangelo; soon he was reading everything about him he could find, and went so far as to ask his father to borrow books from the University of Ottawa library for him. His real education had begun.

Midnight, and there was coolness in the air. From the window came the sound of rustling. Leaves, perhaps. Dyer sat in semi-darkness, Cullimore's screenplay in his lap. He congratulated himself for getting to the last page of the script while keeping skipping to a minimum. An achievement deserving of reward. He poured himself a dram of single malt and took it to the window. The tops of palm trees swished in the wind. Night was when traffic on his street shook off its sluggishness. After the scotch he flossed, brushed, and gargled. In the bedroom he shut off the air-conditioner and opened the window. Moonlight gave his skin had a bluish tinge, not wholesome and not unlike the glow of television. He stretched out in bed; he'd have to sleep alone one more night. He was tired, and his fatigue seemed excessive, indecent somehow. Again he thought about the script, his mind skimming across its icy surface. The story was inaccessible. Without psychological depth, the characters were impenetrable. The story was well-constructed, he could see that, precision parts working together flawlessly. It was an ingenious mechanism. But without vivid characters, the film would never come alive. Dyer had a moment of panic. What could he do? The story was elaborate; making changes to it without compromising its structure was a gargantuan challenge. Still, the screenplay was no more than a string of interconnected vignettes building, inevitably, to a disappointing climax. Apparently, Cullimore had wanted to scout locations; his producers told him he'd have to pay for it himself. In an e-mail Cullimore had confided to Dyer his desire to film a story of contemporary characters grappling with contemporary situations in a setting of cobblestones, horse-drawn carriages in courtyards, and stonework covered in centuries-old soot and crowned by gargoyles. What the director was describing, of course, was Paris. His producers, ever cost-conscious, had

other ideas: the film would be set in Montreal. And because there was no point recreating the setting when it was already available, much of the picture would also be shot in Old Montreal. Interior scenes could be filmed at a large movie studio on an island a bridge away from downtown. Dyer found it on a satellite map online, huge hangar-like buildings surrounded by vast parking lots. A nice clean look, suggesting modern facilities.

He'd forgotten that Montreal itself was an island. Like all elsewheres, it beckoned, even though he'd been there before, experienced it, and made it his home long enough to earn an undergraduate degree. Three years of study that had since turned nebulous, except for one course. One afternoon, the subject of writing and screenwriting inevitably came up, that is, the difference between the two. In a previous meeting, Cullimore had asked them why they were interested in screenwriting. Everyone gave a variant of the same answer: they were aiming for employment in various converging industries, movies, television, gaming. Some planned to stay put (addicted to paying low Montreal rents); others saw their future in Toronto; still others were California-dreaming. Only Dyer's answer ("I'm interested in writing") failed to draw a bored nod from Cullimore. The director made a face as easy to read as Russian subtitles.

"The wrong answer, is it?" Dyer ventured.

"Right or wrong, you certainly have spunk. As it happens, it is the wrong answer. Idiotic even."

Dyer smiled but it was a mask.

"I'm going to give you a special assignment. You're going to do some research on the giants of literature who tried to make it in Hollywood as scriptwriters and failed. You'll find

that even the ones who succeeded failed. Look at Faulkner. The best thing he did in Hollywood was the script for *The Southerner* and he didn't even get a credit for it. Experiences like that, even if you don't have them personally, should prove instructive."

(Had Cullimore just compared him to literary giants?)

"I don't know if you have the potential to write a first-rate novel or a memorable poem," Cullimore went on, "but I think I can recognize literary ambition when I come across it. You'll find that good screenwriters began as screenwriters, or in some cases poor novelists. In other words, they understood how to write for the screen or understood they had no literary talent. If you're interested in writing, you have to shun scriptwriting. Flee it. Yes, scriptwriting has the word 'writing' in it, but don't let that fool you. It is the opposite of writing."

It was an argument he'd heard dozens of times, before and since. It made an impression every time.

Dyer was sleeping but his mind was still racing. The night was punctuated by dreams. He was back in Cullimore's classroom but no longer the star student. Dreams were ridiculously easy to read, which made them either poor material for scriptwriting (his current view) or an excellent source of inspiration (what he used to believe). He began to flit from place to place and found himself in a rowboat. He peered over the side. In the dark water his reflection swam. He admired his face; it was his younger self. The cocky undergraduate. Next he was sitting at a carrel desk at McLennan Library. There were books piled on either side of him. He was taking up Cullimore's challenge and delving into the unhappy lives of famed writers in

Hollywood. He stopped flitting and was now standing at the head of room, in Cullimore's habitual spot, presenting his findings to his classmates. They were one and all disfigured by boredom; still, Dyer plunged into his dissertation. Clearly, Fitzgerald's was the most alarming and instructive case. With his ability to craft unforgettable scenes and bright dialogue, Gatsby's creator seemed a natural for the movies. In fact he struck out in Tinseltown, as in three strikes, you're out. In three separate stints in Hollywood (nineteen-twenty-seven, thirty-one and thirty-seven), Fitzgerald failed to make his mark, earning only a single credit. Faulkner was fairly successful in Hollywood but would never have bothered with the movies if his novels had brought in more than a pittance. Anthony Powell's experience, too, offered a cautionary reminder: he travelled all the way from London to Los Angeles, a long and exhausting expedition in the nineteen-thirties, for a screenwriting job that never materialized. "A good thing, too, according to my dad," Dyer imagined saying in his sleep, "because Powell went on to write a twelve-volume novel my dad likes so much he's read it three times." As so often happened, the sound of his own voice woke Dyer. Sleep speech was the most reliable means of putting an end to an unpleasant dream; unfortunately, it also often woke Patricia. Not tonight, though. Dyer gratefully opened his eyes but was so tired that he tumbled back into a remnant of dream almost immediately. He had a fleeting image of his father at his desk, pen in hand, bent over a notebook. Dyer himself had never read the same book twice and suspected he was a lesser man for it. He supposed he had inherited his talent for writing from his father, who had a number of scholarly articles to his name. They'd appeared in agricultural science journals whose titles Dyer couldn't recall. Many of these articles listed his father as the first author. One particular article had led to the job offer in

Ottawa. It was archived online and available for download. Close and even distant kin sometimes spoke of Dyer as the writer in the family, but it was his father who was the published author.

He awoke in a panic. Worse, a sweaty panic. He'd been away from the business too long; he no longer knew how to go about salvaging a script. He took a deep breath and searched for the calming insult. Found it. "Why don't you try reading it straight through with no skipping, you idiot?" The alarm clock began to blare, and he quashed it. Next he dashed into the kitchen to make the coffee… he'd forgotten to buy. Undeterred, he showered, shaved, stuffed the script into a gleaming black leather briefcase (an unexpected and unwelcome gift from Lewis) and raced out to the best coffeeshop in the area. He was grateful for the sharpness in the early morning air. A frayed blanket of mist covered his corner of Koreatown. Farther off, too, toward downtown, the light was strange, especially for this latitude. Strained through lingering cloud. The streets, West 6th and South Alexandria Avenue, were unnaturally peaceful. Was today a national holiday? He couldn't recall. The coffeeshop was located in Chapman Market, the site of the world's first drive-through grocery store, Patricia once informed him.

"In the fifties?"

"Way before that," she said, but couldn't give him the exact year, or decade.

As soon as Dyer entered the coffeeshop, a distinctive voice began to sing. It came from the speakers by the front window. "Goddam' Europeans!/Take me back to/beautiful England/and the grey, damp filthiness of ages/and battered books/and fog rolling down

behind the mountains/on the graveyards of dead sea captains." He recognized the singer's voice but couldn't summon her name. Dyer had always taken pride in his excellent memory, and any lapse worried him. He smiled at the thought that he had no trouble recalling examples of his memory loss. Where he set down his keys. Why he'd entered a certain room. Who he was going to call when he picked up the phone.

Not sated with the unusual light, he chose a table by the window. He looked round for the owner and spotted her returning from the kitchen. He waved. In response, he got something like an embarrassed smile from Susie. On her way to Dyer's table, she stopped to rearrange some things on the self-serve credenza (though from the looks of it, her face was in greater need of arrangement than the sugar packets and cream jugs).

Susie owned the coffeeshop and was a friend of Patricia's. They'd known each other since grade school, attended the same church. She had inherited her parents' restaurant and converted it from a tatty family diner to an atmospheric tea and coffee hangout. Its name, "In the Mood," was borrowed from Susie's favourite movie. She admitted to watching it a half-dozen times a year. Just like the female lead in that film, Susie seemed to own an endless number of elegant, form-fitting dresses. Evenly split between floral prints and geometric patterns. She generally affected a playful, even at times flirtatious, manner with Dyer. Now she returned to the service counter without stopping to see him. Or bothering to take his order. It left Dyer wondering what form of plague he'd contracted.

He rose and joined her at the counter.

"Hi Susie. Any chance of an espresso?"

"Of course," she said and looked up. But her gaze caromed off his. "So, how are you?"

"You?"

"I'm okay. Is Patty back?" Now she gave him her frankest look.

"This evening. But I'm leaving tomorrow."

"You're leaving?" Flash of incomprehension in the eyes, slight twitch in the corner of the mouth.

"It's for a job. I'm fixing a script, or trying to. The assignment happens to be in Montreal."

"Why there?"

"That's where they're shooting the thing."

"They're already shooting the movie?"

"Yeah. This is sort of an emergency repair job."

She deposited the espresso on the counter between them. "Would you make me another?" Dyer said and downed it in one draught. He made the second espresso last a little longer, but didn't leave the counter. There were no other customers to serve, and Susie, too, stayed where she was. The space between them was filled with a kind of invisible plasma. A fusion of silence and enticing unease.

Finally, she said, "You must be happy. About this new job, I mean. It's what you wanted. You were waiting for it. Anyway."

"Yeah, been waiting a long time." He wanted to add, "Nice to be wanted again," but something warned him to resist the pull of self-deprecation.

Susie's hand rose to her throat and fiddled with the necklace. A slight silver chain with a pendant that recalled an ancient coin. Susie hadn't put on her usual today. Instead, she'd put on a freshly laundered white shirt and dark blue jeans, all just as form-fitting as the dresses she liked to wear. Dyer felt a familiar tug, though never before associated with Susie.

"How long will you be away?"

"Hard to say. Probably not more than a week."

Three customers came in at once.

"When you have a minute, will you bring me a pot of herbal tea?" Dyer took a couple of steps toward his table before adding: "Ginger, if you have it."

He sat and immediately pulled the script from the briefcase. Page one. When Susie brought him the tea ("You're in luck, I had some fresh ginger"), he was already on page twenty-four. She set the tray down and scurried away. The teapot and cup were Wedgwood-lookalike. He poured. He took one two three sips. The tea spread a generous warmth in his chest. Coffee never did that. He sat back and watched cars pull in and out of the parking lot. The sun had finally singed the remaining mist, putting an end to the anomalous Bay Area-like weather. Dyer had been to San Francisco on a couple of occasions for a couple of reasons: Patricia and Hitchcock. Patricia had studied at the School of Fine Art at Academy of Art University and kept in touch with former teachers. As for Hitchcock, he shot his masterpiece in San Francisco. Patricia, too, loved *Vertigo*, especially the driving scenes, up and down steep city streets, an entrancing vertical panorama seen through a windshield. They drove by some of the locations from the movie, the Brocklebank Apartments, the Palace of the

Legion of Honor, and the northwest corner of Lombard and Jones. Unlike Dyer, though, Patricia had no interest in Hitchcock's other films. Not even *Notorious*. Not even *Shadow of a Doubt*.

Enough. He chased away intrusive thoughts with what sounded to his own ears like exasperated sighs; whatever they were, they attracted glances from nearby tables, which had somehow filled up. He plunged back into the script and vowed to keep his head down. Again he found himself drawn to Lana, Tessa Silsgaard's character. He was attracted to the possibilities for development she offered. On re-reading certain scenes, Dyer noticed something new. Lana's husband, Reid, played by Tessa's real-life spouse, Stroud Flemyng, began to seem as inviting an empty vessel as Lana herself. Dyer tried to remember what he knew about Tessa and Flemyng. Swedish and Texan. Married forever. Rarely worked together, if memory served. Classic Cullimore, casting them as wife and husband. That was the extent of Dyer's knowledge, that and a television reporter's long-ago description of them as a "mythic couple." On the first page of the script, Dyer made a note to self: "Silsgaard and Flemyng. Dig."

He drank the last of the tea and went to the counter, wallet in hand. One of the Susie's part-timers was at the cash register. She wore a ring on every finger; thumbs, too. When Dyer returned to the table to collect his things, Susie materialized beside him.

"Are you going?"

"Things to do."

"Okay. Have a safe trip."

She leaned in and gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek. Then her hand flew out and performed a crazed little dance over Dyer's heart before she reasserted control over it. She flashed an embarrassed smile and pulled the door open for him.