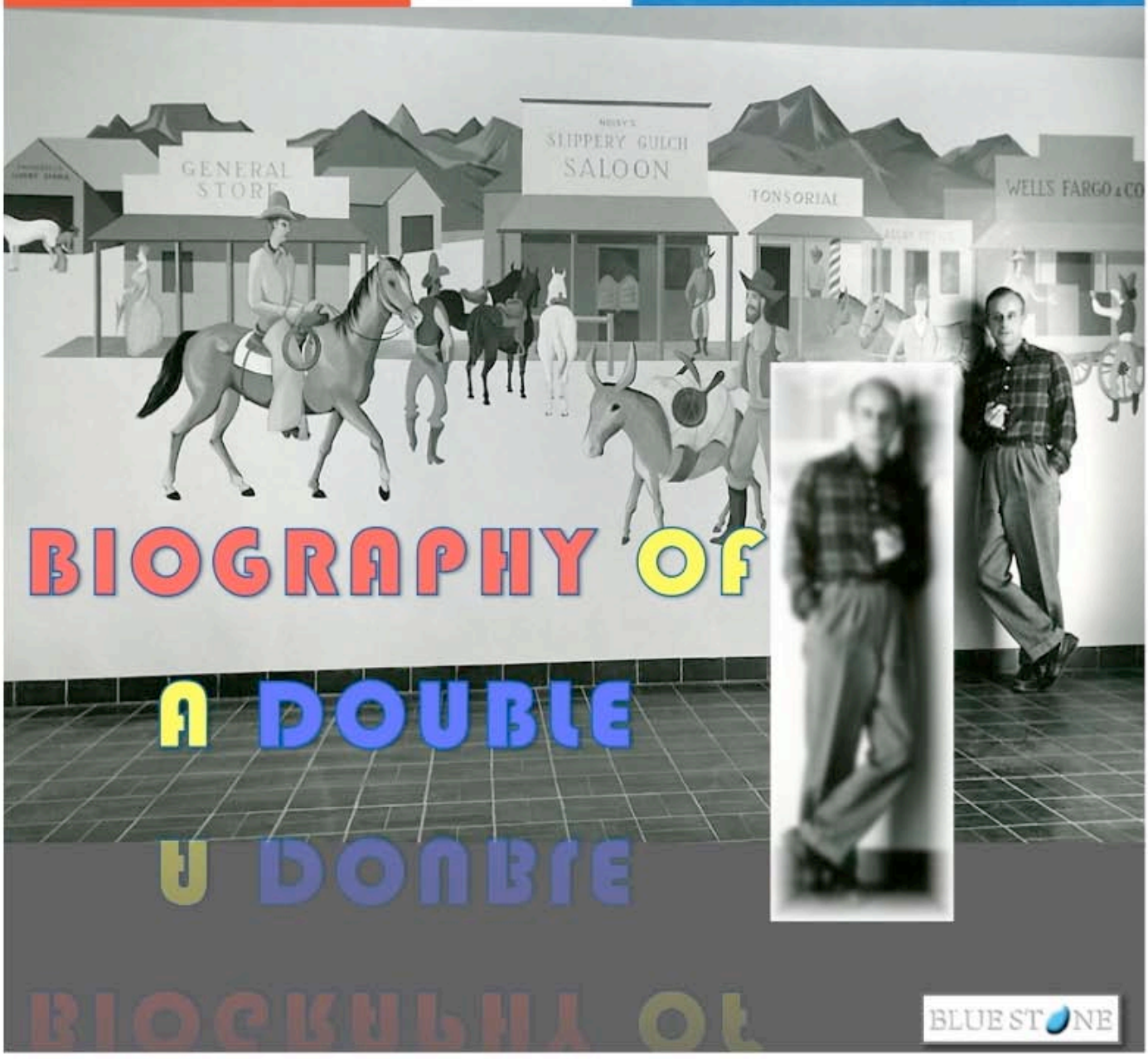
John Skolle



BIOGRAPHY OF A DOUBLE

BLUE STONE

STORIES

from

"BIOGRAPHY OF A DOUBLE"

In his biography, John Skolle tells his own story through Jan, his double. Skolle's actual first name was Hanns, until he became an American citizen in 1929.

BOHEMIA, 1903—1923

Bohemian circus of Hann's childhood

At the time of WWI, Jan left the Czech area of Kladno, in Bohemia, where he was brought up in his father's circus - and was sent to school in Leipzig, Germany, and then attended the Kunst Akademie, the Fine Arts. Meanwhile, his father had opened a school of acrobatics in Prague. The host family he stayed with in Leipzig had taken on a young orphan, Hilda, as a maid. She soon became Jan's first love. Right after the end of the war Germany was all hunger and chaos. In spite of the situation, Jan met young artists at the Café Am Ring.

Blood on the Streets

Max Schwimmer, a strictly non—academic painter rebuked Jan : "Here you are, comfortably reading *The Critique of Pure Reason* while your fellow students are risking their lives fighting for social justice in the street."

Schwimmer wagged his finger menacingly.

“There is only one answer, that of the poster over there : PEACE THROUGH REVOLUTION! The government is supposed to uphold Law and Order. What a mockery! Look at it! It is the task of the revolution to establish Order and Justice… to lead us to an honest future! Let us put Kant’s Reason to work and fight for his Eternal Peace!”

The fiery Schwimmer wasn’t bluffing. He practiced what he preached and gladly went to jail for it. As an afterthought, he asked Jan :

“Do you know how to handle a machine gun?”

Somewhat startled, Jan said : “No.”

With his compelling personality this slight, undernourished man talked Jan into joining the noble cause in front of the Thomaskirche beside the monument of Johann Sebastian Bach who had played the organ in this venerable church.

There were no head—on collisions, just skirmishes with patrols sneaking forward now and then from door to door along the housefronts down the street. They usually retreated in a hurry when caught in a crossfire, reassuring Jan and his companions that they were not alone.

One day the church choir commanded their attention with a splendid rendition of Martin Luther’s hymn *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* until their reverie was rudely interrupted as snipers’ bullets smacked into the surrounding masonry.

Days and weeks dragged on between long periods of boredom and moments of nerve—racking excitement. The revolution drifted into civil war and decadence.

There was hardly anything to eat. The bread was mostly sawdust.

Drugs were easily available and very cheap, as were prostitutes, and the *Puppenjungen* in the homosexual brothels. For *voyeurs* there were specialties such as demonstrations of lesbian gratification, acts of flagellation, ladies enjoying the intimate attention of dogs. There was no need to pay for the observation of conventional copulation since it could be seen almost anywhere in alleys, public parks and doorways free of charge.

Meanwhile, tanks and artillery had been drawn up in the Augustusplatz to blast the Workers’ Syndicate. The slaughter was appalling. Prisoners were indiscriminately forced against a wall and shot. As usual, the suppressive measures of the counter—revolution were worse than the revolution itself.

Jan had plenty of time to think sitting beside Johann Sebastian Bach in front of the Thomaskirche. The vista of the bullet—scarred

houses down the street didn't raise his spirit any more than did the occasional remarks of his neighbors. One of the gunners, engrossed in studying a cookbook, inquired of his comrades : "Did you know that the best way to determine the freshness of a dead fish is by its clear, bright, bulging eyes?"

Gallows humor.

They crouched on the stone steps, always too cold or too wet or both, withdrawn from the world. It took a sharp warning from behind one of the buttresses to alert them to the present.

"Look out!... Over there! Among those trees!... Fire!"

What a way to earn a bowl of watery potato soup! His only joy was thinking of Hilda. And all at once the absurdity of fighting militarism with a machine gun dawned on him.

The next day he had diarrhea.

The day after that he quit being a hero.

Hilda's Fate

Hilda knew what Jan had been doing. However, in her isolation in the shelter of the kindly Krauses she was hardly aware of the political events outside. To be sure, she suffered from malnutrition like everyone else and cringed at the sound of gunfire and the thought that Jan was out there, exposed to it, but when he returned to embrace her all worries vanished…

For once the sun came out. There were none of the 'signs' Hilda dreaded. She was glad that Jan attended classes regularly at the academy, and he spared her from mentioning the sight of the previous night's fighting on his way to school : corpses that remained hardly human considering how neat the carcasses of animals had looked in butcher shops before the war… and those of prostrate figures with no visible injuries, apparently asleep, but so desperately close to the ground as only the dead can be. By noon, on his way back, the sanitation department had done its job and the streets were clean and cleared of debris as if nothing had happened the night before.

How fortunate they were to be together in their attic. Let them kill each other out there, they thought, but leave us alone as we drift peacefully along the palm—lined shore to Assuan in our heavenly felucca.

Hilda was a mere child when Herr Zimmermann had her on his books in the orphanage. He had forgotten about her until the Krauses came to apply for permission to take care of her, more as a

member of the family than as a maid. It was at that moment, when he looked up from his desk and saw Hilda before him in the flesh, that he realized what an agreeable addition she would be to any household, including his own. In his capacity as supervisor of the orphanage it was his duty to keep track of the youngsters in his charge among whom little Hilda, given a few years of development, certainly would become the most attractive. His job was to supervise. Thus, simply in the line of duty, a few days later he decided to pay the Krauses a respectful visit.

On the side, Herr Zimmermann had amassed a small fortune on the black market supplying hard—to—get merchandise such as firewood, coal, shoes, underwear, eggs, vegetables, milk for new—born babes… True, on the surface things looked grim, unless you knew your way around as Herr Zimmermann had learned to do. In his humanitarian pursuits things were actually looking up!

Jan returned to the house full of excitement. He could hardly wait to talk to Hilda. When they were by themselves at last, he asked : “Is there something different about me since you saw me this morning?”

She looked at him with mock severity.

“Yes. You are even thinner than you were then.”

“No, no, that isn’t what I mean. Try again.”

“Something good has happened. I can see it in your eyes!”

“Exactly. Something good has happened, and what’s more, I have become someone important!”

“That’s nothing new. You always were to me.”

“Ah, the difference is that now I am important also to the world at large!”

Cautiously, Hilda inquired : “In what way?”

“In the following way. As you know I have been working night after night on a series of wood engravings, passionate interpretations of what goes on around us… attempts to express the existing chaos… all the sound and fury…”

“To a better purpose than revenge.”

“Right. Now wait till you hear the rest of it. This afternoon I ran into Bernstein at the Ring and asked him if we could go to his office because I had something to show him. He agreed, and I presented my prints to him, all thirty of them. He examined them slowly without a word, slowly went through them once more, backward, and decided then and there that he would publish them with alternating pages of my poetry!”

What a joy it was to see Hilda’s radiant smile!

Jan was in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Hilda sat at the table in the dining room polishing the silver. Frau Krause, who happened to be in the hallway, opened the front door. A smooth voice introduced itself politely as “Herr Zimmermann, in connection with a matter of official business.”

“Official business?”

Frau Krause sounded puzzled.

“Then you had better speak to my husband. Come in. I shall call him.”

Herr Zimmermann stepped inside.

There followed a conventional exchange of greetings when Herr Krause appeared. He conducted the visitor past the open door of the dining room to his study from which, fragments of conversation, or rather bits and pieces of a monologue could be heard about “profound regrets” and “new regulations… out of my hands, of course…nothing personal… unavoidable orders from higher up… To make a long story short, Fraülein Hilda, charming girl… due to circumstances beyond my control… unfortunate failure to acquit herself of the required period of compulsory education… Off the record : this new government… hum, the less said the better…Personally… all for leaving well enough alone… avoid interfering with her present status. However, in the opinion of the committee… in her best interest to return to the orphanage briefly, just *pro forma*, you understand, for a review of her case… perhaps enrol her in a trade school… gain a higher rating for future employment…”

Hilda had not failed to catch a glimpse of Zimmermann as he passed the dining room, nor had she missed the implication of his falsehoods. The miasma of bureaucratic jargon, forms in triplicate… Zimmermann’s crass self—interest…overwhelmed her. Seeing herself once more condemned to his ‘supervision’, reason deserted her. She panicked. Blindly, she rose from the table in the dining room, ran down the hallway into the kitchen, past Jan, through the rear door onto the balcony and over the railing to land on the pavement below with a sickening thud.

Jan had tried to stop her in the crucial instant when she passed him, but fate was quicker. In the seconds it took him to run down the three flights of stairs, pandemonium broke loose while Hilda lay still and crumpled next to the garbage cans, the hem of her skirt feebly fluttering in the wind.

She was kept alive in the hospital overnight and once regained a glimmer of consciousness, long enough to whisper : “I wish I hadn’t done it… I wish I hadn’t done it…”

Heads or Tails

As I look at Jan, the scars of his first love have healed, but the experience had wrenched his personality and set it in a mold of doubt and skepticism which he could never, subsequently, alter.

Politically, for all their efforts toward the establishment of a democratic government, the men of the Weimar Republic received no more encouragement from the United States than they did from their European neighbors. (...) The French sent troops to occupy the Rhineland upon charges that the German treaty commitments had not been met. The ensuing general strike in the industrial Ruhr crippled the economy completely (...).

It was at this point in his lowest state of depression that a new perspective presented itself to Jan with the appearance of Uncle Paul, a personage familiar to him only through picture postcards to his father once or twice a year with interesting foreign stamps. He had casually arrived in Prague from abroad and had decided to extend his meanderings to a visit with Jan in Leipzig. A man of few words, a tall, dark figure with a peculiar crablike gait in a tailored suit of the finest material. Everything about him seemed to be lopsided, not only in the way he walked but the way he looked at you and the world in general. He neither made references to himself nor asked questions. Weimar meant nothing to him outside of Goethe, Schiller, Herder, Liszt, and war and revolution left him cold. He spoke halting German mixed with English, French and Portuguese. One of the first things he did was to buy Jan some decent clothes, a pair of shoes, and a number of luxury items including a bag of apples. Somewhere along the line he had developed an intense dislike of women. Whenever a shopgirl approached him to offer her services in a store he thanked her politely and requested to deal with the manager. Socially, he had no interest in meeting anyone, male or female. The only place he wanted to see was the Zoo where his observations revealed a keen knowledge of the wild animals. During long walks when he made sparse mention of magnificent deadly snakes he had encountered, or of mud—eating Indians on expeditions he had made along the backwaters of the upper Amazon, or of the rigors of sub—zero camping in the Canadian Rockies, it transpired that Uncle Paul was an expert woodsman trained to survive in solitude as well as among the regular attendants of the nightlife of London, Monte Carlo or Rio de Janeiro…

Queer duck, Uncle Paul – looking for lobster, caviar, champagne when one was lucky to snare a turnip in the postwar Germany of 1923!

Most of Jan's friends were mature beyond their years, many of them disillusioned. Uncle Paul was the very antithesis of these intellectuals who were going down with the ship. There hadn't been anything like the battle of the Somme or the butchery of Verdun in Uncle Paul's Brazil. In his hotel room over a bottle of *schnaps* he remarked candidly : "There doesn't seem to be much opportunity here for a chap like you."

Opportunity… a business term seldom heard anymore in these parts.

"For an artist," said Jan, "there still is the possibility of becoming recognized sooner or later if he can starve it out long enough. I don't know anything about business. At the moment even almighty business seems to be *kaput* along with everything else."

Uncle Paul had a habit of hesitating sometimes so long before replying that it often made one wonder if he had heard what was said. A sign of caution? Fear of getting mixed up in something he wished to ignore? Methodical, courteous, fanatically independent, he kowtowed to no one and lived in utter disregard of narrow conventions. Refilling the glasses, he said : "Perhaps things are not quite as bad in other parts of the world… may even be better somewhere else. I don't give a damn about business myself… Buying and selling. Very dull. I like to win or lose right now."

Jan's work was being shown with that of other young painters at the museum. A Pyrrhic victory. He could hardly afford to buy paints or pay his room rent. What was he to do? Return to Prague? It would never be the same again without the circus.

Absent—mindedly Uncle Paul poured himself another drink.

"If there is nothing to hold you here I may be able to help you get out of this blind alley."

The offer was made in his usual take—it or leave—it manner without any show of enthusiasm. Jan didn't quite know how to take it.

"Do you have any particular solution in mind?"

Uncle Paul gave his glass a few slow turns on the table before he tossed off the brandy.

"Well, I am not going to stick around here much longer, I am sure of that. If you think you would like to try your luck elsewhere…"

When no further explanation was forthcoming, Jan asked: "Where do you think you will go from here?"

There was such a long silence this time that he thought the older man had dropped the whole thing until he replied with a frown : "At the moment I don't know myself," and after a brief visit to the bathroom : "Perhaps to North or South America."

It was not Jan's place to decide, but his preference was for the U.S., and suddenly the gambling instinct took hold of Uncle Paul.

"Yes, North or South America. England hasn't recovered from the war yet. I have just come from there… Here" – rummaging in his trouser pockets – "let's take this half—crown and toss for it. Heads we go to New York, Tails we go to Brazil! How about it?"

Before Jan had anything to say in the matter Uncle Paul flipped the coin, deftly caught it in the palm of his right hand and clapped his left hand over it.

"Alright, here is our future!"

After a few tense moments he exposed the coin for their mutual inspection.

"Heads! That means we are going to New York. Are you game?"

Tossing that coin had done more for Uncle Paul's morale than half a dozen jolts of *schnaps*. He immediately began to make plans for an early departure.

"There are a few formalities to be taken care of. You will have to get your father's approval and apply for a passport right away. I shall make the arrangements for our passage and loan you the money for your steamship ticket."

This avalanche of new developments made Jan ask himself if going to America could be that easy. Would Karel* agree to let him leave with Uncle Paul on a gamble? Traveling in a caravan from Kladno to Presov or Nowy Taro was one thing. New York, literally, was heading for a New World.

"We will go to Prague together before we leave… *Prost!*"

They did go to Prague together and briefly to Kladno where nothing remained of the circus except the rusty farm machinery among the weeds in the courtyard of the old winter quarters. Karel kept saying 'Yes' to everything. He had lost the will to assert himself. 'Yes, Paul will do what he can for you… Yes, there is nothing to worry about.'

*Hermann, actually

Jan's mother was still as beautiful as ever with her black—diamond eyes, her sharp—ridged aristocratic nose and the slightly disdainful mouth that could instantly soften into a smile unless she was 'in one of her moods' when she sat blankly staring into space. How often Jan and Marte had made fun of her, snapping their fingers under her nose, asking where she had been when she came to the surface from whatever depths she had returned. Then she would be offended and predict : 'You'll be sorry when I am gone.' They had been young and insensitive then, and, yes, they were

heartbroken when she was gone. Even now she was visibly succumbing to her incipient melancholia.

Marte had given up the trapeze and the horses and was showing promise as a serious actress…

Jan thought about the tearful parting from his family now that he found himself on a one—class ocean liner out of Hamburg bound for New York. Uncle Paul introduced him to the rudiments of chess while a group of Gypsies of the Sinti clan invaded the lounge and pushed tables, chairs and other alien obstructions out of the way to squat comfortably on the floor of this unfamiliar campsite to chat, sing and tell fortunes. In contrast to the undisguised curiosity they aroused, the Sinti were sublimely indifferent to the passengers and crew. Jan was drawn to them and easily made friends with the young men. Uncle Paul discouraged closer contact. There had been a few incidents with the *gaje*. He was told not to get mixed up in anything that wasn't his concern. Jan was furious. He wanted to declare openly : "Granted, I am only a *didikai*, but even being merely part—Gypsy is enough to make my blood boil when I think of the abuse they have had to take : a people among whom murder, robbery, prostitution were unknown, and a war between the Kalderash and the Lowara – the coppersmiths and the horse traders – would be unthinkable. Is it any wonder that, after all the persecutions they have been through, they think nothing of selling an old nag to a *gajo* after planting a couple of worms in the horse's nostrils to make it prance and snort like a two—year old? The Authorities try to force the Rom to settle down. Wherever we went with our mud show these sane Authorities saw to it that we never stayed in any locality for more than forty—eight hours! To think that the best guide to the worldwide migrations of the most peaceful people on earth is their record of deportations!"

Meanwhile, Uncle Paul maintained the same reserve with the Sinti that he did with women, and Jan suspected for the first time that his antisocial relative might be one of those tragic rarities : a tribal member ostracized for a serious offense by a Romany *kris* – a traditional gathering of elders – elected to mete out fines and punishment. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why he did not teach Jan chess in the ordinary way by explaining principles and tactics in a friendly and dispassionate manner but kept beating him from the start, letting him figure out by himself why he never got beyond the opening moves. It seemed needlessly inconsiderate. This cutthroat method was nothing personal. It came to the fore whenever he took on an inferior player. There was a disproportionate satisfaction in these easy victories somehow

unbecoming a master at the game. Surely as a seasoned player, a friend and partner of champions like Marshall, he could derive little pride in demolishing rank beginners. Was this failing due to a deep—rooted need to assert himself? On the ship he polished off all comers along with stiff competition from some very strong Poles. As it happened, no occasion presented itself to observe his reaction to a defeat.

For all his excellence in chess, and probably in other fields, there was something bitterly unhappy about this man in his guarded seclusion.

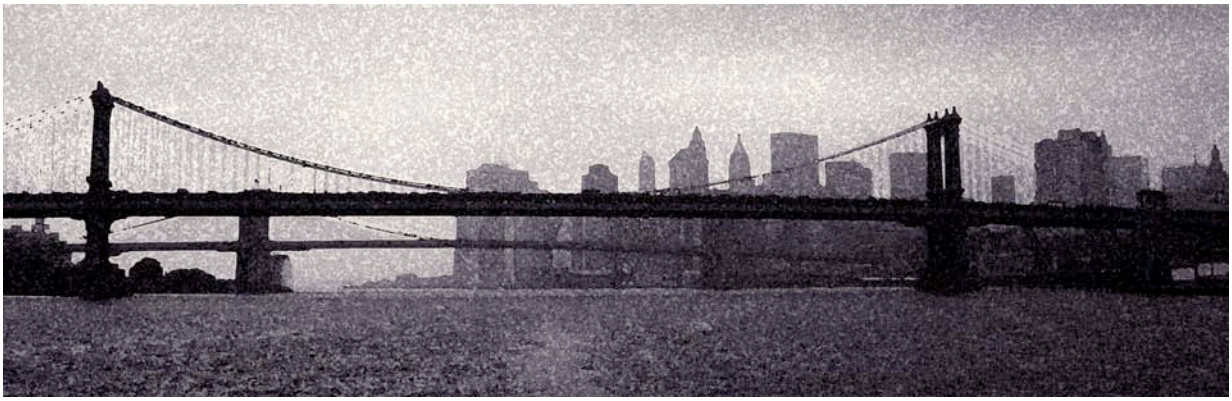
Gypsies are not renowned as seafarers. They are not discoverers of new continents but wanderers over those that have been found, forever hoping that the next place will offer more promise of a good life than the last one.

After one look at the rolling ocean on the second day out they all became seasick and retreated to their bunks from which they did not emerge again until the day of debarcation. Once in calmer water, still wan and shaky, they lined the railing with the rest of the passengers to catch a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, but even their sharp eyes could not penetrate the dense fog as the ship inched, hooting, toward its berth in Hoboken.

AMERICA, 1920s

Manhattan

As Jan looked out of the porthole the next morning a gray drizzle obscured the waterfront. Bells rang on board, loudspeakers croaked garbled announcements… Later, launches eased alongside of the ship to take the new arrivals to Ellis Island where Health, Immigration and Customs officials awaited them. It was all quite painless. A routine operation with, here and there, a nice human touch. The Gypsies had never known men in uniform to be so patient and polite. With the last barrier behind them after all the confusion of this official business they reassembled to pick up their bundles and accordions and head back to the launches and across the bay to the tip of Manhattan and a tumultuous welcome by friends and relatives amidst a wild round of *chardas* in the pouring rain.



Manhattan Five, Phil Skolle

There was no welcoming committee for Jan and Uncle Paul. He led the way underground to a subway platform. A train shot into the station from the darkness. People elbowed their way out through the sliding doors while others pushed in. The coach was full of bleary—eyed passengers slouched in opposite rows on benches under garish posters which promised the looks of Adonis to men if they bought the advertised hair tonic, and peachy skin with the use of certain cosmetics for goddesses who were not among these people who sat listlessly masticating as the train restarted with a deafening roar to deposit the transatlantic travellers at 27th Street and Mill's Hotel for Men.

In a room devoid of charm Uncle Paul handed Jan 120 dollars with the advice: "The first thing you do is to find a job… anything you think you can do. Once you have a job, rent a room for yourself nearby. After that, never move and change jobs at the same time. If one thing doesn't work out, try another. Here is today's paper : *Help Wanted* – nine columns of it! Take your pick."

The categories most in demand were salesmen, live—wires and trouble—shooters. Live—wires? Trouble—shooters? Not in his pocket dictionary. He knew he couldn't sell anything. That limited the field.

On the second day he was given a chance by Feinstein & Son : Advertising Twine, on Grand Street, a commercial section in lower Manhattan of grim brick buildings with steel fire escapes on the outside.

(…)

Uncle Paul soon left New York. Said he would keep in touch. After four months Jan got a $3.00 raise. In the meantime he tried

to improve his situation by taking samples of his work to various galleries where he received indulgent smiles. The exhibitions he saw were mostly European imitations or sentimental realism with a few notable exceptions : American masters like Albert Ryder and George Catlin, and among contemporary painters Peter Blume and Charles Demuth. It was difficult to meet kindred spirits. There were no cafés along the Boulevards, in fact there were no boulevards, no promenades. People didn't walk anywhere as part of the joy of living. They hurried in all directions to meet deadlines.

Among the places Jan explored was the J.B. Neumann Gallery. Here the owner received him with delight as a visitor familiar with the Swiss painter he was showing, whose work he was so desperately trying to sell, seeing how exorbitant rents were on 57th Street in the late 20s. Neumann, a respected art dealer from Berlin, was no pioneer and Paul Klee almost totally unknown in New York.

(…)

One of the most disturbing observations Jan made was that, in a country free from military oppression, free from revolution, rival factions nevertheless murdered each other at an alarming rate, not as a result of political, economic, sociological conflicts, but over whiskey and beer. The leaders of these factions were not the likes of Emperor William… The battles they fought in New York, Chicago, San Francisco were master-minded by Hymie Weiss, Mc Gurn and Al Capone to mention only a few of those who derived hundreds of millions of dollars in profits annually from bootlegging, gambling, prostitution, racetrack frauds and protection rackets.

Hanns (John), New York,1927

(…)

Jan showed a portfolio of his watercolors to the proprietor of an uptown gallery who was known as The Friend of the Artists. Alas, even *he* offered no encouragement.

"Very interesting," he said, "but it won't sell. There is something you ought to know : the first thing you have to do to get anywhere in New York is to create a legend, no matter how good you are."

Jan had left his portfolio on a table to look at the current exhibition when a tall, stylish gentleman entered the gallery and also proceeded to look around. Having viewed the work displayed on the walls, he turned to the portfolio on the table and idly examined its content while the owner of the gallery hovered nearby.

"Whose work is this?" inquired the gentleman.

The Friend of the Artists readily supplied the information that it belonged to a young man who had recently come to New York from abroad.

"A very promising artist with a distinctive approach, don't you think? It so happens that he is in the gallery at this moment."

Introductions were made.

"Are you going to have an exhibition here?" asked the gentleman as he looked through the portfolio once again. The titles and prices were marked on the back.

"I am trying to make some useful contacts to have a show," Jan said. "So far my work has been turned down, here and elsewhere, as unsaleable."

"Unsaleable? I wouldn't say that. I would like to buy this one," he declared and made out a check to Jan. Before he left with his purchase he asked : "Am I to understand that this is your first sale in this country?"

"Yes, it is."

"In that case, would you give me the pleasure of writing on the bottom of the mat something like 'Dedicated to my first patron in the United States' – my name is on the check."

The Friend of the Artists watched the procedure with a benevolent smile, wrapped the painting with special care and bowed the visitor to the door.

"Remarkable man," he said to Jan. "True *connoisseur*… great collector with impeccable taste… instantly recognizes work of exceptional merit : Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair*… By the way, would you like me to cash his check for you?"

"Ah, yes, that would be fine."

He went to the cash register, counted out the bills, and handed them to Jan who noticed with embarrassment that there was something wrong with the transaction.

"I am sorry, there must be a mistake. This is not the full amount Mr. Crowninshield paid me."

"Well, no," said the Friend of the Artists. "Since the sale was consummated in the gallery, there is the usual deduction of forty percent."

"Even after you refused to handle my work?" Jan objected. "And when the check was made out to me? Not to the gallery?"

The telephone rang.

"Excuse me."

The Friend of the Artists was about to be engaged in an endless conversation.

PARIS — CÔTE D'AZUR, 1939

The Modigliani Anecdote

"Mademoiselle Armand has a dank little studio to let, and last week she came crying to me about *un Monsieur Modigliani* who had moved into it some years ago – about twenty years ago to be exact, long before I came to Cagnes. He was *un très beau garçon*, she told me, but he had no money. '*Eh bien*, Madame, I am not an *artiste*. But I try to earn an honest living, so, after three months, I go to see Monsieur Modigliani to ask him if he could not pay me at least part of the rent. He is very sorry, he says. He still has no money, but he is expecting some from Paris, from *un* Monsieur Zborowski. Later, I try again to collect the rent. This time he walks across the litter on the floor and turns around a large painting that is leaning against the wall. 'Mademoiselle Armand,' he says, 'if you wish, you can have this in payment for the rent I owe you.' It is a long and narrow painting of a female figure the color of an apricot, all disjointed with squinty eyes and a neck *that* long, and I tell Monsieur Modigliani : '*Ah, non, pas ça!* I will wait until you receive the money to pay me the rent.' And now this Monsieur *américain* comes and shows me a clipping from the *New York Times* with a reproduction of that same horrible painting that has been sold at an auction for 100,000 dollars! I cannot believe it, but the Monsieur *américain* shows me the amount printed in the newspaper, so it *ees* true!' "

A terrible blow to a pathological miser like Mademoiselle Armand who hoards remnants of string in a corner closet of her house, all carefully sorted and labelled according to their respective length, down to one little bundle of extra—short scraps marked *Plus bon à rien* – no longer good for anything.

360° fresco in Cagnes. Picture taken by Freud's son.

Herr Bauer

Jan first met him at a party in Nice in those hectic and uncertain days shortly before the war when the majority of the foreign residents of the French Riviera were bent on making the most of an agreeable way of life which was bound to come to a sticky end in the near future.

A few of the German and Jewish refugees who could afford it had drifted down to the South of France. They told grisly tales of police brutality and persecution, but Bauer, though he let it be known that he, too, was a refugee, never indulged in sensational revelation. This conservative attitude was in keeping with his judicious and well—balanced personality. He was one of those rare people who radiate confidence in better things to come, one of those people whose alert countenance suggests broad knowledge and varied interests.

There is something immensely gratifying about an intelligent face, especially when softened by the light of humor. Bauer had such a face, a face both keen and kindly, devoid of any signs of prejudice or meanness. His outward appearance, enhanced by faultlessly tailored suits, elegant neckties and expensive shoes, was that of the continental gentleman.

Everyone knew and liked Bauer, and Bauer was very fond of people. In the circumstances, no one was surprised to find him at every genial gathering up and down the coast. He had beautiful manners and spoke fluent French. When called upon to entertain,

he never failed to tell an amusing story. Among his most endearing characteristics was a warm—hearted generosity. He was always ready to help, always ready to give encouraging advice to those who asked for it. He never came to anyone's house empty—handed; never, that is, without a *bouquet* of flowers or a bottle of rare vintage wine. There were those who abused his kindness, who kept borrowing money from him and called him a bit daft into the bargain. But he appeared unaware of this. He merely chuckled when someone warned him against opportunists. The only fault one could find with Bauer was that, now and then, in the middle of the wildest gaiety, he would retreat to a dark corner and remain by himself for the rest of the evening in melancholy meditation.

The party at which Jan first met him took place in the residential section of Cimiez, above Nice, in a pink villa with a breath—taking view of the Bay of the Angels. The host and hostess, Mr. and Mrs. Weinstein of Berlin, received their guests near the bar by the swimming pool under a bright full moon and rows of twinkling Chinese lanterns. They were gentle people, patrons of the arts; Jan knew most of their friends : Rankin, the American biologist on sabbatical leave; Van der Holst, the Dutch sculptor who fashioned monsters out of bits of wire, fabric, string and driftwood; Ostrakhov, a dispossessed cattle baron from the Ukraine; Rollo Deering, the Englishman who had irrefutable proof of a vast treasure in Brazil and who assured everyone that "all it takes to find it is money." There was Annette, the model; Sigrun, the poetess; Gupta, a Hindu from Calcutta who was plotting the downfall of the British Empire. Also present were a number of perfectly respectable but dull people, and Gibson – pronounced *Jeepsong* by the French contingent – a veteran alcoholic of the Côte d'Azur.

Jan was talking to Annette when Bauer came up to the bar. She asked Jan who he was but he didn't know at the time. Maria Weinstein introduced them. He immediately turned on the charm and before Jan knew it he was doing as smooth a tango with Annette as Jan had seen this side of Monte Carlo. Watching them was such a pleasure that Jan didn't mind his cutting in. When they returned he urged them both to join him for a drink. His current lady—love came tripping up and linked her arm into his. They all made themselves comfortable among the cannas and the roses.

"What a lovely garden!" Annette commented. "Imagine all the work that has gone into it!"

"Yes," said Bauer, "it reminds me of the man who was digging and weeding in the neglected garden of a vicarage when the vicar came by and said : 'It is wonderful what the hand of man can do

with a piece of earth with the aid of Divine Providence' – to which the gardener replied : 'Sir, you should have seen this place when Divine Providence had it all to itself!' "

"Silly boy!" jibed Bauer's paramour – who could not have been more wrong, for Bauer was anything but silly. The mere fact that he never talked about himself indicated a high degree of intelligence.

Since it was not the custom to ask personal questions, no one knew anything about Bauer's background nor what, precisely, he was doing in the South of France. This led to gossip and speculation. What some interpreted as secretiveness, others lauded as discretion. Curiosity, rather than ill—will, prompted the gossip. The amiable Bauer could hardly be suspected of leading a double life. If there was anything shady about him, then he, of all the adventurers who lived by their wits, certainly was the most refined. He readily entered into the spirit of any amusing absurdity and delighted in discussing subjects and personalities that were tabu in Hitler's Germany : Schönberg, surrealism, Hermann Hesse, Palestine… He steered clear of politics. He never got into those heated discussions over insoluble issues which leave one with such an empty and hopeless feeling. He was out to enjoy life, and, judging by the number of ravishing girls who flocked to his side, he succeeded very well.

When Gupta's wife, Ashvani, appeared at the edge of the swimming pool to dance, Bauer knew all about the ancient legend of Hanuman, the Monkey God, who ordered his hordes to bridge the gap between India and Ceylon in order to aid Prince Rama in the rescue of his beloved, Sita, from the clutches of the demon Ravana.

Ashvani danced the theme with subtle mastery. The contrast of the graceful movements of her lithe and sensuous body with the fierce monkey mask she wore created a sensational effect.

There was much drinking, lively conversation and delicious food. The Weinstein party was a *succès fou*.

Bauer and Jan became good friends. The German refugee was well—informed about the arts and cultural history and talked with ease about all aspects of civilized life without being in the least pompous. Nor did he show any of the petty caution which makes some people hesitate to indulge in the more abandoned phase of a party in the small hours of the morning. His natural inclination was to devote himself to a night's carousing to the dizzy end.

The girls adored Bauer. He had the patience to listen forever to their nonsensical chatter and to take seriously their little daily tragedies while he observed the tantalizing attributes – the painted eyes, the softly pouting lips, the little lies and phony gestures – that make some women eternally fascinating.

Bauer and Jan met at the casino, at parties, concerts, exhibitions. The new friend always had something intelligent to say, he was often full of enthusiasm about an obscure book, always good for a laugh. There was nothing more stimulating than an afternoon in Bauer's company. He had the ability to reassure one of the importance of nonutilitarian interests, of the value of wit and imagination, knowledge for its own sake, irony and conversation. His money, wherever it came from, was not a power in his hands, nor a means to impress people. He spent it freely, as freely on his comforts as on charities and whims. In the presence of his kindliness and his brilliant mind one never dreamed that there was a darker side to Bauer. And yet there were those moments of depression. How could they be explained? Jan reasoned that they were none of his business, that the most logical explanation was a woman in his past. On the other hand, his present associations with women were utterly devoid of desperation and did not suggest that he was trying to forget any of them. Perhaps his sudden moods were no more than momentary reflections upon the short duration of life, the frailty of human existence. Perhaps they were merely hangovers.

One morning as Jan walked down Boulevard Victor—Hugo he caught sight of Bauer a short distance ahead of him. His first impulse was to catch up with him. Then he noticed the woman by Bauer's side. There was nothing unusual about seeing the man in the company of a lady. What struck Jan was that she was not his type. He was deferential toward her in spite of her thick ankles, and he walked beside her with an unmistakably sheepish air. Now, Jan had seen Bauer help a dishevelled old woman cross the street with the utmost gallantry. This one seemed neither in need of help nor attractive. He couldn't imagine where she fit in.

Five minutes later they met at the bank. Bauer greeted Jan cordially as the latter joined the queue at the window next to his. His line moved faster than Bauer's. By the time it took him to stash away the money he had withdrawn Jan judged it to be an inordinately large amount. He waved goodbye to him with some embarrassment, Jan thought. He had not introduced him to his female companion.

The next day he came to Jan's place, bearing a bottle of Veuve Cliquot.

"What is the occasion?" Jan asked. "Your birthday? Or Peace For Our Time?"

“Nothing of the sort,” said Bauer. “I feel I owe you an apology. I realize that I was frightfully rude when I saw you yesterday. Too preoccupied with worldly affairs, I am afraid. Please forgive me.”

Jan got the nearest thing to champagne glasses he possessed. Bauer popped the cork and they drank his favourite toast : “Over the hot sands.”

Bauer bubbled over with amusing small talk while they lowered the bottle. Before he left he made Jan promise to meet him at a party later that week. Jan put away the glasses and wondered why he had not said a word about the woman who had been with him in the bank.

Not that he was seriously concerned. Bauer was his friend. He had no reason to suspect that he was engaged in anything secretive or illegal.

Then Gupta put that flea in his ear. He had run into him on the Promenade des Anglais. They rented a couple of deck chairs and sat in the sun, facing the bay. Presently, Gupta said in his whiny, humourless way : “You are seeing lately a lot of Bauer” – adding, with a slow, cunning look : “I advise being careful.”

“Careful? What do you mean? Why should I be careful?”

“Perhaps you don’t know these things,” Gupta said. “Living in perpetual uncertainty, as we do, one becomes more observant of imminent danger.”

This still didn’t answer his question. Jan asked him : “What in the world are you talking about?”

Gupta shrugged his shoulders and spread the palms of his hands.

“This Bauer, he is outwardly all smiles, but yesterday I see him with another man, not smiling, sitting in the back at the Café Carnot.”

“So,” Jan said, “what’s unusual about that?”

Gupta looked pained.

“Unusual is the other man,” he emphasized, as one would with an idiot. “Bauer’s superior, I presume. He is German, and very angry, and Bauer, he is very pale.”

Jan didn’t believe a word of it.

“Gupta, for Shiva’s sake, are you trying to tell me that Bauer is some kind of a spy?”

“I am not saying anything.” said the Hindu.

Jan was furious.

“Not saying anything? You have just about demolished Bauer!”

He took his leave and called Annette to come and have a drink with him around five.

She looked lovely in a falsely casual cocktail dress. After a routine flirtation of ten minutes Jan asked her pointblank: “What do you think of Bauer?”

Her long lashes fluttered briefly.

“Bauer?” she repeated, as if she couldn’t recall the name, then: “Oh, yes, I like him. Don’t you? I think he is very amusing.”

Jan wasn’t quite satisfied with her bland attitude. He stroked her wrist and tried again.

“You haven’t ever had a funny feeling about him?”

Innocence is the condition which some women can convey most successfully with the least effort. Annette was one of those. She looked at Jan wide—eyed.

“A funny feeling? In what way?”

He told her about his conversation with Gupta. She listened with growing interest. When Jan had finished, she said: “Perhaps I shouldn’t tell you this, but one day last summer I had to go to the Préfecture de Police. I had lost my birth certificate and they gave me the old run—around from one office to the other. It was hot and I was tired. Anyway, I was going down a long corridor and there, coming out of one of the private offices, was Bauer. I am sure he saw me, but I had the impression that he did not wish to be recognized. He looked worried, perhaps because he was with a stern-looking man, an official of some sort. I haven’t the slightest idea what business Bauer had with such an official. All I can say is that he didn’t seem to be happy.”

For the first time a shadow of doubt crossed Jan’s mind. Could it be that Bauer played some sort of a double game after all?

Jan next saw him at an informal affair in Van der Holst’s studio. Some of the sculptor’s “monsters” hung from the ceiling. The walls were covered with extravagant paintings and the shelves crammed with books in five languages. At one end of the room stood a huge table laden with exotic dishes and a great bowl of rice. Several of the guests, male and female, were improvising dances to the African music which emanated from a phonograph in the sink. In the darker recesses of the studio semi—nudes reclined on colorful pillows among bottles and incense. Rankin was softening up Sigrun with barely veiled biological talk while two newcomers exchanged notes on their escape from Germany. The dancers swayed to the jungle rhythm and Jeepsong wandered hither and thither among the crowd in an advanced state of beatitude.

“Ah, mon cher!” Bauer hailed Jan from his corner. “Welcome to the bacchanalian feast! I can highly recommend the *rijstafel* Van der Holst has made for us. Help yourself and come on over.”

It seemed incredible that this carefree fellow had been hobnobbing with political extremists; incredible that there should be anything questionable about a man who so obviously loved life, good food and cheerful company.

The party lasted until four in the morning. In the measure in which inhibitions were shed, hidden opinions and observations came to the surface. It was while Ostrakhov was doing a kasatzka with Bauer that Abie Reichmann, the painter, came up to Jan to whisper in his ear: "Stay away from that friend of yours. He is a dangerous character."

Bauer, a dangerous character? He turned to Reichmann.

"What kind of a dangerous character?"

The painter didn't hear Jan as he strode away.

Following Van der Holst's party the rumor spread that Bauer was a German agent. Jan felt sick about the whole thing; sick because suspicion – unjustified in his opinion – had gained ground so rapidly; sick because so decent a fellow as Bauer had become the victim of a vicious whispering campaign.

Did he know what was going on? Jan had no way of telling. He was as friendly as ever towards him, but he didn't look well and some of his natural gaiety was missing when they met. Jan debated with himself whether to ask him outright if he knew what was being said about him, then, in the end decided to let things take their course. Little by little Bauer was dropped by his friends until he found himself completely ostracized. But now it hardly seemed to matter. The social life of the Côte d'Azur was petering out. A pall of fear descended upon the playground of Europe. Many of the foreign residents left hurriedly for their respective homelands. Hitler's armies invaded Poland. Soon, Holland and Belgium were smashed. Northern France was occupied, leaving the Maginot Line in the rear. Like a man—made plague, years of terror and brutality darkened the world.

It was some time after the war before Jan had an opportunity to return to the south of France. The turquoise Mediterranean had not changed, but there were ugly pillboxes among the orange trees, the cost of living had gone up and people were less cordial. He was wary of going back to his old haunts, cautious even of inquiring about his old friends. They had undoubtedly changed, even as he had in the intervening years.

He sat in this mood of indecision on the terrace of the Hotel Négresco when someone came up from behind him and placed a

small hand against his cheek. Out of the corner of his eye he recognized a familiar figure.

"Annette! I am so glad to see you!"

She sat down beside him, the same as ever, perhaps even more beautiful than before now that she had become a little more mature. For a few minutes they just looked at each other, happy about this sudden encounter after the war years. With the help of several drinks they revived the bright days and the reckless nights they had enjoyed together; the picnics in the hills near Roquebillière, the outings to Villefranche and Cannes, the carnivals in Nice, the endless parties.

"Did you know that Rankin's system worked? The biological approach, I mean? He and Sigrun got married," Annette informed him. "And Ostrakhov – do you remember him? He went to Australia to raise sheep. The Weinsteins have settled in England, and Rollo had a windfall and organized an expedition to look for his treasure in Brazil. Of course, no one has heard from him since, but I am sure he will turn up again one of these days."

"What ever happened to Bauer?" Jan asked Annette.

She didn't hesitate this time. She remembered him very well, with a guilty feeling, as he did.

"That's a sad story," she said. "Bauer was among the first to be singled out by the Gestapo at the time of the Occupation. He was shot without trial. You see, Gupta was right. Bauer was a German agent, assigned to furnish data on refugees. But he began to appreciate good company, and the easy life of the Riviera undermined his Nazi orientation. Instead of giving harmful information about the people he encountered, he learned to love them. This, the Gestapo could not condone. He had failed in his mission, and he was forced to pay the penalty."

Street Crime

The Gay Paree of the (long departed) American tourists had become a City of Fear. Food was scarce. Nerves were on edge. No one could be trusted, not even one's next—door neighbor. As for the man in the street, he was likely to be a member of the Fifth Column – not that anyone knew what the other four columns were.

The nights became particularly trying with the blackouts and the greatly restricted communications systems. Crime was on the increase, and Jan felt vaguely uneasy homeward bound in the dark on one occasion as he crossed the Avenue du Maine, ordinarily alive with commercial traffic and now so still. He hadn't walked more than a hundred yards along the deserted Rue de Vaugirard when he

was startled by a movement behind him. Instinctively, he dodged aside, just in time to allow a young woman to brush past him at a run, her hair wildly dishevelled, one stocking corkscrewed around her ankle… Right on her heels a thin rat—faced man whizzed by, bent on catching up with her.

He did, under a street lamp, as Jan retreated into a doorway beyond the dim circle of light.

The rat—faced man wore a checkered cap and cheap pointed shoes. He sprang at the woman and cuffed her with both fists until she reeled under his blows like a rag doll. He kicked her in the stomach and tore her dress. She spat at him and clawed his face, screaming : "*T'as pas encore fini, ordure?... Merde, alors!...*"

The racket aroused the entire neighborhood. One by one the wooden shutters of the nearby houses were folded back and sleepy figures in nightshirts peered from the windows.

Slowly, a cyclist had come pedalling down the street. Seeing a lady in distress, he jumped off his bike, strode up to the pimp, and yanked him around away from the girl, wanting to know : "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The man simply ignored the intruder – who wasn't too keen to get into a fight anyway, and so, shrugging his shoulders, continued to pedal on down the street while the rat—faced man renewed his attack. He grabbed the girl by the hair, dragged her across the street, and banged her head against a corrugated iron shopfront. Stunned, she slid to the sidewalk, limp and bleeding.

By this time the man himself showed signs of exhaustion as he stepped back to survey his handiwork.

Little by little the girl regained her senses. She struggled to her feet and staggered toward her tormentor. He watched her, smirking. What was she up to? Try to beg his forgiveness? If not, another blow would finish her off. Instead, with one lightning move, she reached into her purse and plunged a pair of scissors into the side of his neck.

He stood, rigid, for two seconds, then, stiff as a board, crashed backward onto the pavement.

He had never uttered a word.

She slipped the scissors back into her purse, dabbed at her hair, and vanished around the corner.

A few moments later two workmen came upon the bundle lying in the middle of the street.

"That's odd," said the first one. "I thought it was a heap of trash, but it's a man."

The other bent down to examine the prostrate form more closely.

"Yes, and what's more, the man is dead."

They looked at each other.

"*Une affaire du milieu, hein?* – gangster stuff ?"

His companion nodded in agreement.

"Let's get out of here."

One by one the spectators, too, withdrew, closed the shutters and went back to bed.

THE WEST, 1940s

Hank

The switchboard operator had left a message in Jan's pigeonhole requesting him to call Hank, giving a local number.

Hank?

He hadn't thought about him since those drunken Wild West tales he had told of shooting Mexicans in Texas. Not exactly a bosom pal of his. Now that he was here, he could hardly ignore him.

He called the number Hank had left. The phone came to life after the first ring.

"Yeah."

"Hank?"

"Yeah."

"What are you up to?"

"Wahll, I don't rightly know meself."

"That sounds bad."

"Wahll, lemmeteya : seems like you ceen't hardly trust your own mother no more… Here I was on the bus headn for California and somebody steal my wallet, see, so I thought I'd stop over'n see if you cin hepp me out."

"Where are you?"

"By this phone booth here in the bus station. Sure glad you called."

"How did you know where to reach me?"

"Old Ed, at the ranch in New Mexico, he told me where you was at."

Too bad.

"All right. Stay where you are. I'll come down as soon as my class is over."

Hank hadn't changed. Same greasy hat, same flannel shirt, same swagger, three—day old beard.

"Where's your suitcase?"

"This is it."

A cardboard box held together by a string. His hard—luck story was neither here nor there. The question was what to do with him. For the time being, Jan put him up at his place and gave him breakfast and dinner. In the morning he dropped Hank off at the end of the local bus line about three miles away so he could go into town to look for a job. Perhaps the want—ads in the paper or the employment agencies would come up with something.

At five—thirty in the afternoon Jan picked him up again at the bus stop. Every day the routine was the same.

"Any luck?"

"Not yet."

Hank knew his way around with cattle and cowboy—type horses, but he had an unfortunate manner and a temperament he couldn't hide.

"Did you go to the Cattle Growers Association as I suggested?"

"Nothing there."

"What about the Riding Stables?"

"Naw… All that fancy stuff : pancake saddles… posting…riding crops…"

"And the race track?"

"More cracked—up jocks on the waitin' list than they know what to do with."

"I can't think of anything else… unless you want to make a little money posing for my art classes… just as you are. Do you think you could sit still long enough with a break every ten or fifteen minutes?"

"I could try."

John Skolle as a cowboy, 1943

To the Eastern girls Hank was a revelation : a *real* cowboy, not just another tame dude ranch wrangler. He did a fine job posing and threw in a few rope tricks during intermissions. Also, Jan remembered something else.

"There is one more place you could check out for a job."

“What place is that?”

“The big cattle feed lot at the other end of town.”

Hank took the bus, only to return discouraged once more that afternoon.

“They need help alright,” he said, “but the foreman noticed the grooves on my boots from wearing spurs, so he told me they didn’t hire range riders. He said ‘they don’t last on a feed lot – ain’t worth the paperwork to sign ’em on.”

All the same, Hank wanted to go into town again on the following day and Jan drove to the bus stop to meet him at five—thirty as usual, but this time Hank didn’t show up. For three days running Jan drove back, waiting for the later buses, too. Hank never returned from town, nor did he leave another message at the school.

It wasn’t until some months later, during his summer vacation in Santa Fe, when Jan mentioned Hank’s visit and subsequent disappearance, that Ed shed some light on the mystery.

“He never got in touch with you again?” Ed asked.

“No, not even about his cardboard box. I still have it. What do you suppose happened to him?”

“I am surprised you don’t know.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because he had his picture up in all the post offices.”

“He did?”

“Yes, among the mug shots of wanted men.”

“Wanted for what?”

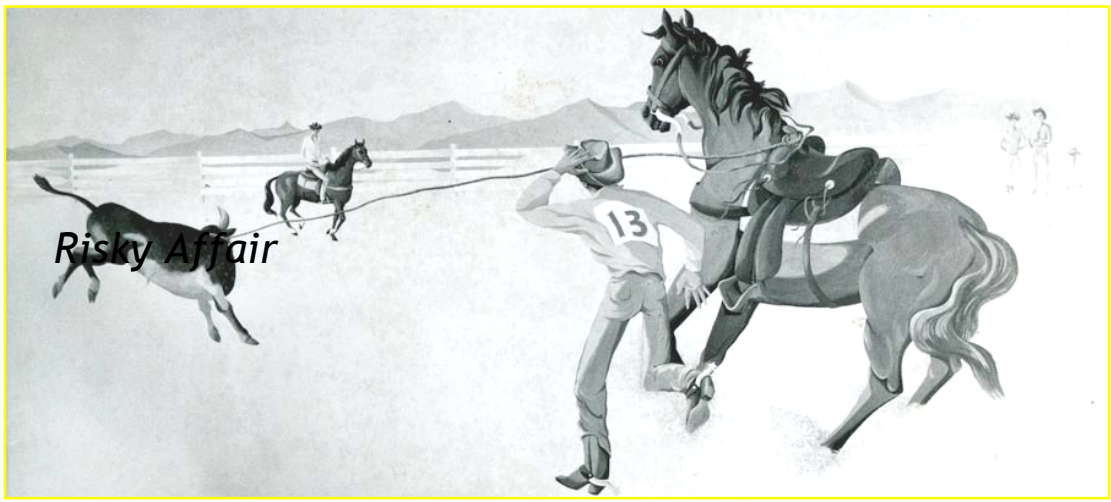
“Murder.”

So he wasn’t a phony. He had meant what he bragged about.

“Did they catch up with him?”

“Not only that. He was offered room and board in the penitentiary.”

Since Jan had heard nothing about all this, he assumed that even in his darkest hours Hank had never thought of involving his benefactor in the case against him, nor let on about his modelling career at the posh Girls School.



The social whirl peaked during the mild winter season amidst swim meets, tennis tournaments and horse shows at the school. In addition, there were activities at the resorts and in the private mansions around Harrington, the Randons' with its multi—million dollar Old Masters among them a must on the cocktail circuit into which Jan was unavoidably drawn as a result of the occasional exhibitions of the work he turned out between classes in his isolated cottage in the desert. The Randons had attended the reception at the gallery where he had his latest show, he in a mood of mild disdain, she with "Ohs" and "Ahs".

Was it authentic interest, or an opportunity to oppose her husband's conservatism that made Cynthia buy one of his paintings? It didn't really matter. It was just a good thing to happen. She was a fine painter herself and had shown a remarkable understanding of art in past conversations. She was also very good company and damned attractive. Jan had made no bones about the way he felt about her. Still, when she inquired if he would take on a few private students, his cautious response was that he had so little time, reminding himself not to let his own painting schedule fall apart.

"What I had in mind," Cynthia explained, "was not any lengthy tutoring, but criticism of work already done… something like short discussions once a week."

"Where would be a suitable place to have such discussions?" Jan asked. "In the art department at school?"

"That's a possibility, although *school* sounds rather dull. What about your studio?"

Jan hesitated to commit himself.

"What about your husband? He has a reputation of being insanely jealous."

"Jealous? That's too complimentary. Possessive is more to the point. There is no reason to worry about that because Frances Denham would love to join us for criticism of *her* work."

So they decided to meet for an hour every Thursday afternoon at four.

Cynthia's first reaction to Jan's cottage at the end of the bumpy desert trail was : "You do keep to yourself when you want to, don't you? There isn't even a telephone!"

"But there are lots of good books," Frances noted, "and the light is excellent."

Jan agreed.

"After all the hubbub at school it's a relief to return to this quiet place for my own work. At the moment I am doing all these

preliminary sketches for a mural at the Saguaro Inn. Alright, now let's see what you have brought along."

The informal gatherings were so productive that they usually lasted close to two hours and often ended with invitations to lunch or dinner at the Randons' or the Denhams' house during the week. Between classes the ladies faithfully applied suggestions and principles that had been discussed, noticing the improvement in their work with great satisfaction.

This happy routine could have gone on indefinitely if Frances had not run into domestic difficulties which forced her to drop out after five weeks because a sick child demanded all her attention.

"She is quite broken up about it," Cynthia said when Jan met her one day at a coffee shop.

"I am very sorry to hear this. It will probably be the end of our art classes. What do you think?"

"I don't know."

He felt immensely drawn to Cynthia. At the same time he didn't want to get himself into a tangle of wild emotions and hopeless circumstances that could only end in grief. The main problem was Howard Randon.

"Now that we have started this, it will be an awful let—down not to have you come to the cottage," Jan confessed. "We can hardly go on as usual. Apart from everything else, I doubt that I could keep my mind on art being alone with you."

Cynthia thoughtfully sipped her coffee.

"We could give it a try."

Of course, it was not *as usual* when she came to his studio on the following Thursday. Instead of discussing art, they talked about themselves, over a cocktail.

Jan was neither a calculating opportunist nor a Calvinist trained to resist temptation. He was apt to succumb to it when it presented itself, knowing the price one had to pay and that, in the world at large, all the best things in life were very expensive.

He ought to have been more cautious, kept his hormones in check. (…)

Over a second drink Cynthia brushed her marriage aside. According to her it was never more than a matter of convenience. In the classic manner of errant wives she added that there had been no marital intimacy for years. There were no children, and she had no interest in having any. For all her provocative anatomy, Cynthia was no baby—machine. Of Howard she said : "He only loves his Cessna."

This time they parted with a conspiratorial kiss.

The next time they spent the art class in bed together, and this became a more durable arrangement than the original commitment.

On the surface, life continued as before with Jan's work progressing on schedule and the occasional evenings at the Randons', now enlivened by a greater vivacity on Cynthia's part.

"I think we need a little change! Let's go out to dinner somewhere!"

Howard was perfectly agreeable.

"Where would you like to go, darling?"

"Not the Country Club. There's that Chinese place you like… or we could try the new Spanish restaurant out of town with the flamenco dancers everyone is talking about."

So here they were, the three of them on the front seat with Howard at the wheel of is convertible and Cynthia's thigh warmly pressed against Jan's. It was then that he had the first hint of the gratification she derived from the inherent danger of the situation.

Shortly after his return to the cottage on a hot summer afternoon Cynthia drove up unexpectedly.

"Are you decent?" she inquired as he opened the door.

"Always, except on Thursdays," he answered. "What brings you here on a Tuesday?"

By the irresistible instinct mentioned above, something like a horizontal pull of gravity, he maneuvered her toward the couch, but she said : "No, I can't stay now. Will you be free tomorrow night?"

"Yes. What do you have in mind?"

"I shall tell you tomorrow. It will be late, about eleven o'clock."

What kind of a new wrinkle was this?

The next evening Jan was beginning to wonder if there had been a misunderstanding, but around midnight she drove up.

"Can we go in your car?"

"Certainly. Where are we going?"

"On a little trip into the country."

"How do you happen to be on your own?"

"Howard had to leave for a convention in Washington. He will be away for a week. This gives us a chance to see something I am sure you will appreciate. It lasts only a short time, perhaps no more than a single night. Many people don't even know about it."

Jan didn't want to belittle her act, so he merely asked which direction to take when they left the house.

They followed the winding road up Apache Canyon, then branched off onto the open expanse of a mesa among the surrounding mountains. There they parked the car near some *palo verde* trees and wandered across the tableland, criss—crossing between prickle pear cacti and cholla among the giant saguaros until Cynthia's flashlight revealed what she was looking for : a cactus three or four feet high on scraggly stems, very ordinary compared to the spectacular larger species, but this night—blooming cereus was the more remarkable to behold as it unfolded its magnificent blossoms in the darkness for no one to see.

In silence they walked farther and farther over the desert from one of the widely—spaced plants to the next, hypnotized by the heady scent. He felt strongly aroused. She was abstracted and unresponsive. At last they returned to the car and slowly drove away, still in a daze after the rare treat.

Before they reached the highway, a moving object on the right caught their attention. A moment later, directly ahead of them, a mountain lion loped across the road in the glare of the headlamps.

Instantly, Cynthia demanded : "Stop the car!"

Jan pulled over to the side of the road. She got out and, taking his hand, led him into a gully. Among the rocks, she urged him to the ground beside her.

"Cynthia! Not here! Don't you realize that a place like this is full of rattlesnakes?"

She was ecstatic.

Howard returned from Washington with good news. Everything had turned out fine. New contracts, more money. They had dinner together again and the Thursday trysts continued in an atmosphere of calm security.

Jan had become conscious of the fact that, even in his desert retreat, there never was a period of more than ten minutes without a motor droning or snorting on the ground or in the sky. He was not too much aware of it while absorbed in his work, and at other times he willed himself to ignore it. However, on one particular Thursday, he was startled out of his wits when something approached overhead with an alarming roar. He rushed to the window, Cynthia by his side… An airplane zoomed over the cottage at treetop level. He expected it to crash instantly. Cynthia, on the contrary, quite unruffled, observed : "Oh, it's only Howard in his Cessna."

Jan could not command the same detachment.

"Only Howard in his Cessna? How can you be so unconcerned? It means we are doomed! What are we going to do now?"

"Nothing. How could he know that we are here?"

"By your Mercedes parked in full view outside."

"That's nothing to worry about. He knows about my art lessons."

"And probably suspects more, especially now after observing that my art class consists of exactly one student."

"There you go again with your negative thinking… Kiss me… Come back to bed."

Shattered as he was, it took a special effort to continue to function after a type of *coitus interruptus* he had not experienced before.

The next time he saw Cynthia, he asked her : "Has Howard said anything about his surprise visit?"

"What visit?"

"His aerial reconnaissance… buzzing over the cottage!"

"Of course not. Stop imagining things. It may interest you to know that he thought I was doing much better with my oils when I showed him the one with the foreground and the horses you had put in. He wants to take us to his Chinese restaurant for dinner next week."

It was an excellent dinner, and Howard suave and pleasant, full of Washington—inspired anecdotes over the Sweet and Sour Pork. Nevertheless, there could be no doubt that he knew what was going on. The most unnerving part of it was that he didn't show any signs of it.

On the return trip to the house a change of mood came over him, evident not so much by his withdrawal from the conversation as by the incidents that occurred. They could not be explained as negligence or spells of absent—mindedness in such an expert driver. Grim—faced, lanky Howard Randon with his millions and his ulcers had deliberately run through two red lights against the heavy evening traffic.

Did this belong to Jan's weakness of "imagining things"?

No, not when it happened again on two subsequent occasions, the latest one being a very near miss, if one could call it that. Howard, it became clear, was playing his own chilling version of Russian roulette, not with himself alone at stake, but the lives of his passengers and those of any hapless motorists who entered an intersection on a green light at the precise moment that he came barrelling through at full speed in disregard of their right—of—way.

This was where Jan, half paranoid already, drew the line. His stomach had turned over once too often, and now *he* felt that he had to get away from it all. To be sure, he couldn't run away from himself, but any move would be better than standing – or sitting – still.

He was busy finishing his mural for the Saguaro Inn and had not seen the Randons for two weeks when he came across the report about the smashup in the newspaper. Reading between the lines, it was clear that Howard's game of going through red traffic lights had become a compulsive habit with him even when he was driving by himself. He had been returning from one of his annual corporation meetings when the accident occurred. He had come out of it alive. The innocent victim was crushed to death.

AFRICA, 1950s—1960s

Haunted Ruins

On this fortunate island, where all manner of delicious fruits and vegetables grew in abundance, evil did not readily enter one's mind, but Yussuf offered a word of caution.

"You have seen the house of the Arab trader Ahmed bin Mohammed, known as Tippu Dib, who was so helpful to Livingston. Right here in Zanzibar—Town many of his slaves were buried alive in the foundation of his house. It was a custom supposed to bring good luck. His house, and every one of the palaces we have seen, is haunted, especially the Palace of Dunga."

Half amused, half skeptical and horrified, Jan thought about this off and on during his working hours, vividly remembering the Palace of Dunga, the largest of the ruins with those endless colonnades and stairways choked by monstrous roots and creepers, the broken arches and crumbling walls of what was left of the stronghold of Mwenyi Mkuu who held court in the great assembly halls among his retinue of a thousand sycophants.

"There were thousands more during orgies that lasted for weeks." Yussuf had told him. It was on such occasions of debauchery that the tyrant ordered personal enemies he spotted among his guests to be brought before him so that he could engage them in conversation and prick them with his dagger until they slowly bled to death. To this day African mothers reminded their children of Mwenyi Mkuu when they didn't behave themselves.

"At night," Yussuf insisted, "all these palaces are full of ghosts."

"What kind of ghosts are they?"

"In the Palace of Dunga it is a beautiful woman guarded by a large black dog."

“Has anyone ever seen her? Or any of the other ghosts that haunt the palaces?”

“Yes,” said Yussuf, “but those who saw them did not live to tell what they had seen. They themselves became ghosts and now can be heard to moan and groan in the dark along with all the earlier victims.”

Jan didn’t know what to think of all this. Those ruins certainly appeared to be charged with wickedness. Plain superstition? The fear among the people was very real. An idea took shape in his mind. He would set out to test the stories he had heard.

Just then there were rumors of widespread smuggling and Yussuf didn’t turn up for the next three weeks, a period when nothing seemed to go right. Jack had trouble with some of the men at the shop, Jan had a tiff in the shark market with a dealer he had always admired for the princely manner he maintained in conducting his malodorous business. They were in pleasant conversation on an exceedingly humid day and Jan was fighting off the flies as best he could when the man turned on him rudely.

“Don’t do that!” he commanded as Jan kept swatting away.

“Why not?”

“Because you are disturbing the flies!”

Disturbing the flies? In Yussuf’s absence it took Jack to explain the man’s meaning.

“The butchers and fishmongers find flies useful in preserving their perishable wares. They believe that as long as the flies suck out the moisture, they help the process of preservation until the dryness defeats the maggots, and the meat or the fish will keep instead of rot.”

When Yussuf reappeared, Jan wasted no time in telling him about his intention of getting to the bottom of the ghost stories.

“What would happen if I spent a night in the Palace of Dunga to see if I could meet the beautiful lady with the black dog?”

“You would not return.”

After that the subject didn’t come up again during the heavy rains in April and May. In the meantime there was always more to learn. Everyone knew that no one on the island drove a red car out of respect for the Sultan and his Humber Hawk, but few apart from Yussuf could explain the existence of the solitary pampered horse of Zanzibar : living proof of the reincarnation of Zuljinah, Imam Hussein’s white mount, the only survivor of the tragedy at Karbala which occurred thirteen centuries ago.

Then, one day, Jan mentioned that he had decided to go through with his plan to investigate the mystery of the Palace of Dunga.

The curtain came down immediately.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

By ten—thirty the next evening the sticky heat was unbearable. He got on is bicycle and pedalled out of town eastward along the deserted road to the edge of the ruins eight miles away. There he left his bike leaning against a coconut palm and gingerly followed an overgrown path toward the center of the Palace of Dunga. Every step he took in the spongy decay underfoot was a risk. The place had been spooky enough in broad daylight. Now he understood why no one would go near it at night. During the day the stillness had been absolute. In the dark there were signs and sounds of life everywhere – some, perhaps, signals announcing the intruder?

Beyond the dilapidated gate he made his way through the dense undergrowth over the remains of winding stairways and toppled pillars to one of the courtyards, brushing spiderwebs out of his face, alert to any movement ahead. Within walls held in the grip of towering banyan trees were several intricately chiselled tombs, their stone surface five feet above the ground. He scanned one of them with is flashlight, cleared away the debris of vegetable matter, and swung up on top of the tomb in preparation for his vigil.

Moon and stars were obscured by scudding clouds. Birds roosting among the shiny leaves on upper branches of the trees made clucking and rustling sounds along with the cooing and gurgling that emanated from the inner ledges of the walls. There was the hooting of an owl : an evil omen, and almost inaudible but none the less alarming sounds nearby, and even the silence held its dangers.

From time to time he switched on his torch to make sure that scorpions and cobras kept their distance. Bats fluttered out of total blackness and sometimes a ray of moonlight among the shifting clouds created shapes where nothing had been before.

His perch was no place to fall asleep, not that he felt inclined to do so. An occasional bloodcurdling screech kept him well awake.

The mosquitoes were fierce.

As the night wore on he imagined all kinds of perils, but there was no apparition, no sign of a ghost ; nor did he hear the swish of pangas or the screams of torture. This did not ease the long hours of fear when the mere drop of a chip of mortar dislodged by some crawling creature added an extra strain to his already frayed nerves and, even in the soggy heat, sent cold shivers down his spine.

Eventually the moon dipped behind the tall mass of the Jozany Forest, leaving him in the pitch—dark, and then at least a faint glimmer of light redefined the broad leaves and the tangled creepers around him.

Dawn.

He had survived the ordeal and made his point. Stiff and wet from perspiration and humidity he descended from the stone slab of the tomb, struggled through the underbrush to his bike, and rode back to town.

No sooner had he fallen asleep in his sagging bed at the Zamalik than he was shaken awake and a stern voice demanded: “Did you go to the Palace of Dunga last night?”

Yussuf!

He was too exhausted to say more than “Yes.” But Yussuf wasn’t put off that easily.

“How long did you stay there?”

“Through midnight until dawn.”

“Where did you spend the night?”

“On top of a tomb in one of the main courtyards.”

“What did you do?”

“Wait for a ghost to appear.”

“Did you see one?”

“No.”

“Did anything happen?”

"No."

Yussuf sat smoking a cigarette. After a long silence he said: "It was very foolish of you to do this." – whereupon he stomped out of the room and slammed the door.

For the moment Jan was in no condition to worry about it. Only later that morning, when two cups of strong coffee had cleared his head, did Yussuf's ill—timed visit come into focus, and the more he thought about it, the more apprehensive he became. He had made no significant discovery in the haunted palace and come away from it without ill effects. That seemed to be the end of it. Then it suddenly occurred to him that he wasn't out of the woods yet. In having made a fool of Yussuf, he had lost a friend and antagonized *his* friends.

"And not only that," Jack reminded him when Jan sought his advice. "By now the story of your caper will be known throughout the Arab Quarter, and the fact that an infidel has disproved one of their cherished superstitions will not be forgiven. You have tempted fate, and fate can still strike back. The Arabs will want to keep their legend intact. Their story can still have a happy ending if you come to grief."

Disturbing, and true. They were quick with the knife. The streets were very narrow. There was no lock on the door to his room.

"What do you think I ought to do?"

"Move out of the Arab Quarter at once. Take one of your Africans along with you. You'd better stay with me until you can find a safer place than the Zamalik."

FRANCE, 1960s

The Mirage *(from a letter to Phil Skolle in the 70s)*

After the exhibition on the theme of the mirage at UNM, I took the paintings to Paris, thinking I might have an exhibition of them there. Nothing came of that. There had been no problem in taking the paintings to France. But to get them out again on the return trip to New York turned into a big complication. They were in wooden crates, and at first it seemed as if the Customs officials were just going to ask a few routine questions about them.

All was well until they asked : " What kind of paintings are they ?"

I told them innocently that they were paintings of a mirage. And suddenly the entire place was electrified.

“The Mirage, you say ? We will have to open the crates at once !”

They all gathered around, very unfriendly and menacing. They turned everything upside down, they had me well surrounded.

What was happening ? They had to call the Security Officers. Questions were fired at me from all sides. Not only questions. Commands !

“*Vos papiers !*”

“How did you enter France ?”

“As a tourist.”

“Oh !”

Everything suddenly had a sinister connotation.

“Did you have any accomplices ?”

“Accomplices ? No. What for ?”

“That’s what we intend to find out.”

“You came here from New York ?”

“Yes.”

“Do you live in New York ?”

“No.”

“Oh ! Where do you live ?”

“In Santa Fe, New Mexico.”

“*Ah ! Le Mexique… Un peintre voyageur ?…*”

It finally dawned on me that they had confused my paintings of the mirages of the Sahara with the deadly fighter plane – called the Mirages – they were producing ! They let me go “This time…”, as they put it. There was nothing they could do with my fantasies.”

Mexico, 1970s

Pelican Island

Between sessions of teaching, when he would be surrounded for months by students, Jan had taken refuge repeatedly in the tranquillity of an unspoiled stretch of the Mexican coast, the

habitat of seabirds and wild animals, and each time he had returned to this hideaway, he was intrigued by an island far offshore, a mere spot on the horizon just a shade darker than the sea, so insignificant that it was not marked on any map and, indeed, so small that half the time it remained invisible from the mainland. Only now, once again, in the late afternoon sun, it briefly glowed like a speck of pure gold.

Jan carefully rationed the twenty gallons of drinking water he carried in his small stationwagon so that he could extend his stay in the wilderness to the maximum. There was no fresh water elsewhere along the coast for a hundred miles, nothing but exotic vegetation bearing juicy fruits and pods and berries that were bound to send the uninitiated into a delirium.

From where the road ended at the last village fifty miles back it took four hours of cautious driving to reach his campsite. Often not a single fishtruck came along the rough desert trail for a week, and the Indians from an island farther north avoided strangers.

A cloud of dust rising from the desert floor a few miles away announced two heavy trucks. When they came to a halt nearby, two men launched one of the boats they carried while others unloaded equipment and provisions under a hastily improvised shelter.

After six days with only coyotes and pelicans for company the fishermen were a welcome surprise. That evening one of them came to invite Jan to share some of their first catch. Barefoot, pants rolled up, unshaven, they were a tough—looking lot, yet almost formally polite. A red—snapper stew simmered over a fire in their camp. They introduced themselves as Paco, Pedro, Chico and El Tigre. The latter's high cheekbones, slanted eyes and bristly mustache truly made him appear like one of the big cats. Their powerful trucks were equipped with refrigerators that could hold large quantities of fish – and the beer they offered along with generous shots of rum. Jan wondered if they knew anything about the little island that had puzzled him for so long. They had a short discussion among themselves and asked him about its exact location. He told them as well as he could and added that it glowed at sundown as if it were on fire.

"Ah" – Chico recognized it – "Isla de los Pelicanos! There is nothing there, but if you'll come fishing with us tomorrow we can show it to you."

Before the party was over they had all become brothers.

At six o'clock the next morning the sea was like a sheet of glass and all the fishermen were singing as the engine sprang to life. Half an hour later the helmsman could barely stay on course in the wild cross—currents. The boat was constantly kept from completing a roll by counter—waves that smacked it back in the opposite direction, and now and then a mass of water built up right across the bow, creating the effect of the boat ramming into a brick wall. The singing had stopped. Everyone was drenched to the skin and all hands on board had to start bailing. The pitching was such that the boat's screw rose clear out of the water with a frightful clatter every few minutes. Chances were that, sooner or later, the long narrow craft would break in two right amidships on the crest of a wave.

At last they reached a cove on the leeward side of the island. There were no pelicans in sight but hundreds of sea lions plunged from rocks to cavort, barking, in the shallows around the boat. They were enormous beasts, glad of a diversion, it seemed. To the weary seafarers the first concern was to get ashore and shed every stitch of salt—soaked clothing to dry it, and themselves, in the blazing sun. To their dismay, swarms of mosquitoes covered them in an instant from head to foot and clogged their eyes, ears and noses so that they had to retrieve their wet garments to cover their

The abandoned dope plane, Sea of cortez, '70s

faces, leaving mere slits to find their way from the pebble beach upward through the boulders to a plateau with a small volcanic cone, the whole no more than four hundred yards across. There was nothing extraordinary about it, except for something that didn't belong in the landscape. To one side of the volcanic cone stood a single—engine airplane, very recently cracked up by all the signs. The ground was deeply scarred where the plane had spun around on touching down. The landing gear had buckled under the impact, one of the wheels had snapped off and rolled into a cactus patch, the propeller was busted and the left wing had been sheared off. Even so, it was a miracle that the pilot had brought the plane down among the loose rocks on such an unlikely landing strip, not nearly long enough, with cliffs dropping off into the sea all around. And this raised the question: Where *was* the pilot?

Warily, they approached. The first thing they noticed was that the man had come out of it alive. Under the remaining wing, which leaned from the fuselage with its tip to the ground, he had dug a hole and lined it with a plastic bag held down by stones around the rim, evidently in the hope of collecting what he could of the nightly moisture. He had even dropped a metal bolt into the bag to induce condensation.

As the door of the cockpit swung forlornly on its hinges in the wind, Chico looked inside. The others asked him what he saw.

"Nothing. Just a bunch of papers. Here's the pilot's name : Raul Serna. Has a postbox in Los Angeles."

Paco, the youngest, stuck his head in, too.

"What's that funny smell?"

"The smell of the cargo he was carrying."

"What cargo?"

"Dope."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I've smelled it before."

"Then where *is* the dope?"

"Quien sabe, hombre?"

Pedro set out to investigate the area around the volcano while the others sat down in the shade under the wing to examine the papers.

"What beats me," said Paco, "is this: If the man got away why didn't he take his papers with him?"

"Because," Chico enlightened him, "the papers are phony, and he didn't need them anymore. This identity was good for one trip only. The next time he will be somebody else."

"How did he get away from the island? Do you think he had a rubber raft on board?"

"I doubt it, and even if he had, he probably wouldn't have made it to the mainland."

"What about the Kuni Indians?"

"The kindest thing they could have done for him would have been to leave him alone."

When Pedro returned from his tour of inspection they all gathered around him to find out if he had seen anything interesting.

"Not the pilot or a body," he said, "if that's what you mean, but under a ledge on the northside of the volcano I found six five—gallon cans of aviation gasoline. Funny, here is all that fuel for an airplane but no water for the guy who landed it."

As soon as the wind let up momentarily the fishermen cruised around in the vicinity of the island and got together a fair catch. Then the storm blew up again in earnest and they decided to head back to shore. It was very rough going. The coast didn't seem to come any closer as the boat pitched and rolled worse than ever. Within the slick rising banks of the waves swift shadows with triangular fins and white bellies raced alongside.

At daybreak the next morning El Tigre came to say that they were off again. Would Jan keep an eye on their camp while they were gone?

"Si como no!"

"Then help yourself to coffee and the eggs and beans we've left for your breakfast on our stove."

They took off in a great hurry in the larger of the two boats. It promised to be a beautiful day. Toward noon Jan went along the beach to do a little fishing of his own and caught two elegant *sierras* for his lunch. Unfortunately this beautiful day, too, soured. By mid—afternoon a new storm howled in all its fury. Jan hoped that the fishermen would find shelter somewhere along the coast instead of having to ride it out in the open sea. He made sure that everything in their camp was properly tied down, then retreated to his car. Rocking and bumping inside of it in the gale, he listened to the rush and thunder of the breakers until he couldn't take the confined space any longer and struggled down to the beach once more on the lookout for his friends.

By now it was getting dark, a factor that added to the problem of navigation since there were no guiding lights anywhere along the coast. Then, as suddenly as it had sprung up, the wind died down. Ever so faintly at first and from far away the droning of

a motor came across the water. In another twenty minutes the boat ran up onto the beach.

The men were very quiet and utterly worn out. As far as Jan could tall they hadn't caught any fish. Apparently the trip had been a fiasco.

"Didn't you have any luck before the weather fouled up?"

"We didn't do any fishing," Pedro said flatly.

"Why not?"

"Let's have a drink and we'll tell you."

Three drinks later they came out of shock. They hadn't done any fishing because, when they left in the morning, they set course straight for Pelican Island. Once there, they immediately went to work salvaging the engine of the wrecked aircraft. That job alone took a bit of doing, and so did lugging the motor down the escarpment and on to the boat.

"By this time," El Tigre continued, "it was blowing hard enough to knock us off our feet. We finally got the engine stowed on board and were just getting under way in that sea when another plane comes over to blast us with a machine gun. It was only because they were tossed around in the air as much as we were in the water that they failed to kill us."

He poured himself another drink.

"Let me show you something."

They went down to the boat with a flashlight.

"Look, this is how close they came!"

There were several deep notches in the port gunwale where bullets had missed the fishermen by inches.

"We are packing up and getting out of here, tonight!" El Tigre said. "We'll try to make it across the desert in the dark with dim lights. You'd better follow us while the going is good, at least as far as the village. That plane is bound to come back after us again."