

Chapter 56

Moon Pearl Finds Solace at the Seashore
And Braves the Lions in an Ancient Arena

Jake had a house in Southampton, which proved to be a seaside town out at the eastern end of Long Island, two hours' drive from the city. The house was in a private street, one of several leading down to the beach from a road called Gin Lane, and Margaret fell in love with it at once. It stood behind tall box hedges, and was surrounded by a lawn so mathematically level, green and even Margaret had difficulty believing it was made of real grass. There was a swimming pool behind the house—empty when they first arrived—and a scattering of trees and shrubs to make the lawn more interesting, and a badminton court. Inside the house everything was cool seaside white and cream, the drapes and upholstery all in green, yellow and orange. A corridor leading from the dining-room and kitchen to the bedrooms and sitting-rooms was lined with photographs and mementos from Jake's career: Jake with President Kennedy, Jake with Marilyn Monroe, Jake with both the Nixons, Jake with a famous baseball player holding his bat, Jake with movie stars in tuxedos or golfing outfits, posters and playbills of Jake's shows, Jake with the casts of his shows, Jake accepting awards.

Two minutes walk down the road and over some tufted dunes was the beach: clean white sand stretching away east and west, perfectly empty (this was well before Memorial Day), and of course the sea. The sea, almost as quickly as the house, captured Margaret's heart.

Margaret had spent all her life in inland cities. Father had always meant to take them to Beidaihe, Beijing's main seaside resort, but had never found the time. Up to this point in her life she knew nothing of the sea but the crowded public beaches Johnny Liu and Maisie patronized. The beach at the end of Ocean Drive was quite different. Here she could be alone with the sea, watch its colors, listen to its voice, stroll on the smooth shining sand between dunes and waterline out of sight of the human world altogether. And in the house, in the bright airy house, she could hear the sea still, very faintly, sighing and murmuring on the outermost edge of consciousness.

They first went to the house during a warm spell at the end of April. Margaret's schedule—most especially a marathon recording session for a full *Traviata*, in which everything had gone wrong five times over—had not allowed her a proper honeymoon, but there was a two-week stretch at the end of the season when she had no engagements, and no very pressing rehearsal to do for coming engagements, and Jake took her out there one Wednesday morning when the roads were clear, driving the car he kept in a parking garage beneath the Fifth Avenue apartment. He had had servants living in the house all winter, a shy couple from one of the Central American countries, Maria officially cook, Rogelio officially chauffeur as soon as he passed his test (he had tried four times), and the two of them sharing all other duties as best they saw fit. They were dark, stocky people in the aboriginal mold, uncouth-looking at a first glance; but when the bags had been unloaded and Margaret's tour of the house completed, they stepped out of the kitchen together with a lovely basket of flowers they had prepared for her. Rogelio had woven the basket himself using twigs taken from the bushes at the end of the lane, and his wife had grown the flowers in window-boxes on the patio outside their own apartment. Awkward in their little ceremony, they giggled and blushed, welcoming her as the new bride.

"Thank you, thank you," said Margaret. "I know I shall be happy here. Such a beautiful house!"

This late honeymoon was brief and quite private. They walked the beach, as far as Cooper's Neck and Flying Point. They ate lobster at the American and Long Island Duck in Le Chef. Together they sampled the

latest exercise fad: rollerblading. Margaret mastered the essentials in half a day, and they cruised up and down Ocean Drive together, Jake—an irredeemably uncoordinated person when not in bed—holding on to her for balance, the two of them laughing, laughing, quaffing great gulps of the clear seaside air.

And they socialized. Southampton in the summer, Margaret learned, was full of famous and glamorous people, who all kept houses there, but few arrived before June. Those few who did, and with whom Jake was on terms, paid courtesy calls, and were called on in turn.

There were two or three parties, but they were quiet, casual affairs. The first, and therefore the one Margaret remembered most vividly, was at the house of a famous novelist named Joel Kaplan, a virile-looking but white-haired Jewish man a few years older than Jake, and most of the participants were of that faith and generation, all old friends from Jake's Broadway days. The principal exception was a lady pop singer lately turned movie star, and even more lately director, who had a terrifying reputation for perfectionism and the acquisition of men twenty years her junior. This person was known to everybody, to the whole world indeed, simply as Jennifer. On this occasion she was without a partner, and won Margaret quickly with her charm and plain-spokenness, and the two of them sat off on a sofa most of the evening talking about voice production and recording contracts.

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Jake's friends fell into two distinct categories. Margaret thought of them to herself as the White Heads and—using a phrase she had heard Jake use, though not in this context—the Air Heads.

The White Heads were almost all writers of one sort or another: playwrights, script writers for the movies, song writers, novelists. Jake had known these people for decades, since the time of his own great successes. He rarely did business with them now. Few of them were, in fact, very active. Most had made their names long ago, like Jake, and were content now to live on their royalties or investments, keeping their names alive with an occasional book review, or a piece in *New Yorker*, or

a revival, or perhaps putting out a well-turned, well-reviewed, little-read novel every five years. They lived either in Manhattan or out at the east end of Long Island. Some lived in Manhattan year-round; some lived out on the Island year round; some summered on the Island and wintered in Manhattan; and Joel Kaplan, famously eccentric, wintered on the Island and summered in Manhattan. Practically all of them were Jewish, though none took the religion of their ancestors very seriously, for all Margaret could see. Their houses and apartments were untidy and full of books. The men smoked pipes, or not at all, wore corduroy trousers and button-up cardigans in winter, khaki slacks and smocks in summer. The women chain-smoked Nat Sherman cigarettes and wore pants suits year-round. Men and women alike drank liquor in quantities that seemed to Margaret astounding, though they never seemed to get drunk. They all had a difficult, allusive way of speaking that Margaret often could not follow, and made jokes she had to have explained to her. For these reasons she never quite felt at ease with them, though she knew Jake liked their company for nostalgic reasons. Towards her they were courteous and considerate, often plying her with questions about her country, which they had all visited at some point, but which none of them seemed to know anything at all about. Most had a good, if not deep, knowledge of opera, and listened in to the Saturday broadcasts from the Met even if they kept up no subscription. Margaret thought any one of them could get a few lines into “Un bel di” or “Che gelida manina”, though of course with no vocal quality to speak of. None of the men ever made himself a pest to Margaret, though she thought she often recognized the glimmer of lust when they were speaking with her. The greatest danger she experienced from them was their habit of recommending books for her to read—or, worse yet, actually lending her books. Margaret had only a slow command of written English, and it would have required several years of uninterrupted effort for her to get through all the books that she was urged to read that spring and summer in Southampton. She could not even keep clear in her mind who had pressed which book on her, and lived in fear that she might be asked out of the blue for an opinion on something someone supposed she had read on his recommendation.

“Smile sweetly, say you thought it was marvelous, and ask ’em to get you another drink,” advised Jake, himself a keen reader.

The Air Heads were a younger crowd. They were active in show business, though in most cases not at the highest levels. The men tended to be agents, producers or lounge singers; the women actresses, dancers, or assistants of various kinds, attached in some way or other to the men. Jake was involved with these people because he helped finance some of their productions. *Dabbling*, he called it, *dabbling in show business. Keeping my hand in.*

“There’s a line in one of Van Gogh’s letters to his brother,” explained Jake once while they were lounging by the pool at Southampton. “Something about ‘the joy that comes over a man when he has found his work.’ Well, show business is my work and my joy. I can’t leave it alone. It doesn’t need me any more, but I still need it.”

Margaret could see that he really liked the company of the Air Heads, too, for reasons quite different from those that bound him to the White Heads. That latter was shared background, shared youth, shared humor. This was the fizz and glitter of fashion and style, being in touch (though mostly at one remove) with names that everyone knew, that were on movie posters and TV credits, that filled the gossip columns. This was what kept Jake alive, kept him young, or at any rate younger than his age.

Margaret herself found the Air Heads easier to mix with than the White Heads. Their conversation was lighter, their vocabularies smaller, and they never recommended—nor, so far as she could tell, read—any books at all. None of them went to the opera. “Bellini”, to these people, was the name of a drink—peach juice in champagne. A lot of them lived on the west coast, where Jake also kept a house, a house Margaret never saw. They all exercised constantly—several were familiar with the Iron Bride—and the younger ones all had very beautiful bodies. They lived in a cloud of easy-going eroticism, changing partners often. They touched each other all the time: stroking, patting, caressing, with what precise import Margaret could never quite calculate, such open intimacies being quite outside her experience and alien to her background. They did not drink much liquor; but when they did drink, they got helplessly drunk

right away, and flushed and talked far too loud and laughed far too much and made disgraceful suggestions to her—not only the men, either.

“Takes a woman to please a woman,” breathed one young beauty into Margaret’s ear during a pool party at the Southampton house one evening in June. Margaret had a cotton jacket on over her bikini—in spite of repeated and extravagant compliments from Jake, she had always felt direly self-conscious wearing the bikini alone—and had been getting a lot of the touching and stroking, and one or two frank passes. This one took her unawares, however. The beauty was five years her junior, at least, with a sensational figure, lovely straight blonde hair, and a minor career in daytime TV.

“I’m afraid I’m not interested in that sort of thing at all,” she responded.

“Poor old Jake then,” said the girl inexplicably, staggering away.

Other than Jake himself, the only person who seemed equally at ease with both the White Heads and the Air Heads was Jennifer. Margaret thought that in fact Jennifer would be at ease anywhere at all. Jennifer’s self-assurance was as solid and indestructible as the Great Wall. She seemed to have known Jake for twenty years, and they were buddies in the American style, with many private jokes and familiar mock insults. Margaret thought at first that they must have had an affair at some time in the distant past; but both, asked separately, denied it. Jennifer had her own house in Southampton; a marvelous old folly right behind the dunes, built on a circular floor plan and rising four stories high, to look directly out over the ocean. Margaret happened to be out on tour on both the occasions Jennifer threw a party, so she was never inside Jennifer’s house, but Jennifer was at most of the parties Jake attended and soon took Margaret under her wing, showing her drink and food etiquette, teaching her how to avoid the worst nuisances among the party guests, filling her in on all relevant gossip.

After the first honeymoon excursion in April the Southampton house was in Margaret’s mind all that spring and summer when she was not in residence. She was only able to actually be there four times, and for only a few days each time. She was in Europe for much of the season, working the open-air festivals in Italy and those northern houses that gave sum-

mer performances. All the while, wherever she found herself, the airy white house behind the box hedges glowed as a cool, comforting presence in her mind. It was as well that it did; for this was the summer of the clagues.

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It happened first in the English town of Brighton. This, too, was a seaside town, though quite a different one from Southampton. It was a favorite resort of the London middle classes, with many small hotels and restaurants, a pier and a crowded beach, the pleasure palace of a nineteenth-century Prince Regent, and a municipal council always fearful that the reputation of sedate gentility the town had held on to against all odds might be overwhelmed by a proletarian tide. As part of their endless campaign to retain the affections of the southern English bourgeoisie, the city fathers had instituted an opera festival for the second week of June, and Colman had booked her in the previous summer as Mozart's Countess. It was a part Margaret could have sung in her sleep; and Brighton was only a stopover on the way to the European festivals, so she had invested no great effort in preparation.

The first performance was routine, the inexpert, out-of-season audience applauding in the wrong places and failing to notice the singers' errors. At the second performance, however, there was a rowdy element in the balcony of the small old theater. They seemed particularly intent on embarrassing Margaret, and in fact first made their presence known in "Porgi, amor", her cavatina. Fortunately it was one of the first arias Margaret had ever mastered, and this was an audience she did not need to impress—most of them were sufficiently impressed to find themselves attending an opera at all—so she sang on automatic pilot, trying without success to make out the faces of the catcallers through the glare of the stage lights. They started up again each time she appeared, gaining in boldness each time, quite spoiling the first act finale. The other singers were furious.

"Bloody skinheads," said Figaro to Margaret. "They don't like you because you're Chinese." He went on to explain that there was now a

public debate in Britain about giving citizenship to the people of Hong Kong, for the benefit of those of them who might not want to live under Communist rule after 1997, and that right-wing fringe groups had been demonstrating against the proposal.

“Though God knows what they’re doing in a Mozart performance,” he added.

Whatever they were doing, they were soon stopped from doing it. Responding to complaints from either the audience or the performers, management had the hooligans ejected after the second act. Margaret delivered a fine, uninterrupted “Dov’è sono” and the Count was outwitted and Susanna’s honor preserved without further incident.

Margaret would have forgotten the whole silly business—all kinds of unaccountable things occur at opera performances—had it not started up again in Europe.

It did not happen right away. She sang Gilda in Amsterdam and Mimi in Düsseldorf with no disturbance, then flew back to New York for a week, during which time she said nothing about the Brighton disturbance.

Then, at Stuttgart, the business repeated itself, even down to the position of the troublemakers in the hall. They were not so loud this time, but it was an opera Margaret was not very secure with—Rossini’s *Cenerentola*, one of her old mezzo parts from what she thought of as her pre-*Capuleti* career, with a tessitura even lower than she remembered—and she lost her place once or twice under the distraction before the rowdies were escorted out. The house was very nice about it, both the general manager and the conductor coming down to her dressing room after the performance to apologize. Neither spoke good English, but their sincerity was plain.

“*So anstössig!* In Italy, perhaps, but here—*unverzeilich*. Zere are no claques in Chermany.”

The word “claque” seemed to be international. It now began following Margaret round southern Europe. At Bregenz Festival in Austria, held on a stage built out over Lake Constance, the most spectacular setting Margaret had yet seen, the claque was relentless. Here they were up against an audience of real opera-lovers, though, who had paid top dollar for their tickets, and they met some spirited resistance. A considerable fight

broke out in the audience and the performance had to be stopped while marshals came in to settle matters. Even after the fight there was still some catcalling at Margaret; but the audience had the last word, applauding her loud and long at the end—quite unjustifiably, she knew, as her singing had been below par.

Back in New York, she learned that her troubles had been in the newspapers. Jake and his friends were sympathetic, but counseled stoicism.

“That’s life on the stage,” said Jennifer at one of the Southampton parties. “That’s life with an audience. You just have to stare them down. All show business is really just lion-taming: either you win the fuckers’ hearts, or they eat you.”

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Late summer Margaret had an Italian tour. She knew she now had a small but enthusiastic following in Italy. They had christened her “La Cinesa” [the Chinese lady], and made her first CD a considerable success in the peninsula, and even begun to send her fan mail in care of the recording company (somewhat to Margaret’s distress, as she could read handwritten Italian only with difficulty). From this she supposed that whatever grudge it was that this small minority of opera-goers in Britain and Germany might have against her would not appear in Italy; or, if it appeared, that it would not be tolerated. She therefore crossed the Alps with relief, and prepared for her first appearance at the festival in Ravenna.

The Ravenna performance was held in the open, in one of the town’s piazzas. It was a concert, herself and three other singers—mezzo, tenor, baritone—all first or second rank Italian stars. Margaret was to sing the *romanza* from *I Capuleti*, “Ah, fors’ è lui” from *Traviata*, “Ah! non credea mirarti” from *Sonnambula* and, with all three of the others together, the quartet “Bella figlia dell’amore” from *Rigoletto*. In reserve for encores she had “Vissi d’arte” and the rondò “Nacqui all’affanno” from *Cenerentola*. The claque started up at once, in the *Capuleti* *romanza*, and gave her no peace even in the quartet. They were less obvious than they had been north of the Alps, picking on the most difficult passages to

disturb her, pushing the rest of the audience just as far as they could without being ejected—almost (the thought occurred to Margaret for the first time) as if it were the *same* claque, honing their act.

None of the other performers took it very seriously. They were all bel canto war-horses from the Italian circuit, who had trodden every creaking board of every house from Catania to Milan, and were schooled by long custom to ignore rowdy loggionisti up to the point where their lives were actually in danger. There was not one of them who did not think a sore throat ten times more terrifying than a hostile claque.

At Spoleto it was the same: calling, hissing and slow handclapping at critical points in the performance, all from one small section of the audience. Now Margaret felt sure this was a single traveling claque; and with this came the realization that such a thing could have been organized and financed by only one person. She determined to ignore it, to sing through it, but it began to wear on her nerves none the less. Not so much the noise itself—though that was evil enough, especially the hissing—as the anticipation of it, standing waiting for one’s cue, looking out at the dim ranks of faces beyond the lights, knowing that the claque was there, judging its moment, waiting to pounce.

There were two performances at Spoleto. In the second, the claque was as bold as it had yet been in Italy, drawing some reaction from the audience, but again subsiding before any actual fighting broke out. Margaret spoke to the festival director; but this was Italy, and the director was satisfied to have got to the overture without a walkout by the orchestra, the stage hands, the electricians or dressers, and without disappointed fans having ripped out his seats because the tenor missed a high C. He shrugged big shrugs, smiled embarrassed smiles, and said there was nothing to be done, the loggionisti would always have the last word.

“But I don’t believe these *are* regular loggionisti,” explained Margaret. “It’s an organized claque.”

“Per’aps you should ’ire a counter claque,” suggested the director.

“Then there would just be twice as much noise from their yelling at each other. Nobody would hear me sing at all.”

The director thought this a great joke, and laughed heartily. “Ah, sì, davvero, questo è il mondo dell’opera!”

At Verona she was able to counterattack for once. This was another open-air performance, held in the dramatic ruins of the first-century coliseum. Here Margaret was singing a role completely new to her, one she had rehearsed for relentlessly before leaving New York, badgering Old Shi for extra lessons, spending hours poring over the full orchestra score. It was the title role in Cherubini's *Medea*, a dismal tale of a vengeful woman in ancient Greece. The calling and slow-handclapping had begun early in the first act, been hushed down a couple of times but always started up again.

Margaret was not, in fact, singing at her best, having suffered a slight summer cold since Spoleto. At the very end of that first act *Medea* confronts her lover, Jason, who is preparing to marry another woman. She pleads for his love, and repeatedly accuses him of cruelty. The scene contains several dramatic high notes, one of which Margaret rather conspicuously missed. The claque, of course, seized on this. They were on their feet shouting, stamping, jabbing down with their thumbs in a gesture older than the amphitheater itself, as old as their civilization. Since the flat note had been heard by everyone, they had the support of the regular loggionisti this time, and between them they might have torn the ancient structure apart had not the audience contained a high proportion of tourists who sat grinning through the uproar, taking it all as part of the show. *Opera in Italy*, they were thinking to themselves in English, German and Japanese. *This is the real thing! Lions and Christians!* Even so, the noise went on for some minutes. Margaret looked appealingly to Jason, but Jason only shrugged. *You dropped the note, you pay the price*, said his shrug. She turned to the conductor, but he would not even look at her. Embarrassed, he was pretending to scrutinize his score. Margaret could see a vigorous argument going on offstage between King Creon and his Captain of the Guard, with much hand talk; but she could not hear the words, and this being Italy it might as well have been about performance fees or the local soccer team as the justice or otherwise of the treatment she was getting from the claque.

Margaret looked out past the stage lights, across the ancient arena, where gladiators had fought and died two thousand years before. Up above the tiered seats rising on every side she could make out the remains

of the outer walls in the distance, black and majestic against the dark sky. The neutral element of the audience, the tourists, were smiling, enjoying the disturbance. It was all entertainment to them. Others, she could see, were shouting back at the claque, even shaking fists at them. The claque itself was concentrated over towards her left. They were standing, giving her the thumbs-down, shouting. Through the glare of the lights she could make out some of the nearer faces. There were women among them, she was surprised to see, and one or two who looked like orientals.

William! Now she felt certain. This was his new revenge. She had run from him when she learned his true nature, and this was his revenge. How on earth had he organized it, so far from home? But of course, travel was no problem for him—perhaps he himself was even there in the claque—and to hire a few roughs to hiss and stamp at the opera would be very little inconvenience for him. It could be done in any town. Or he could—as she believed was the case—just do it once, hire a group of bullies in one place, then fly them round Europe on a chartered plane. Round the world, if he pleased. Damn William—she could never escape him. She had been naive to think that all could be cleared between them. Of course it could not be, could not ever be. . . . *forgiveness is more difficult for us Chinese than for any other people. So very difficult!* Too difficult for William, clearly. And now this was his new revenge for the new wrong she had done him; but she did not doubt he still bore the ancient grudge too, for his father and mother. Damn him!

Cornered and helpless, Margaret retreated into cold, purposeless rage. She stepped forward to the front of the stage and stood there with her hands on her hips, peering through the glare at the claque. Jennifer's advice came to mind: *You just have to stare them down.* Well, she would stare—and chastise, too. When their noise allowed it she intended to curse them—in her own language, perhaps, the language she knew best to curse in—what did it matter? They were just working for pay, they would not be deterred by anything she said. She might as well vent. At least these barbarians would learn that the daughter of a PLA man cannot have her will broken by hired mercenaries.

As it happened, however, and before the noise had sufficiently subsided, the conductor tapped his lectern, made a call to the orchestra, and

the music started up again. Hearing the music, the claque subsided. The orchestra had backed off a few measures, and proceeded to play through the section Margaret had just sung, perhaps in order to give her a chance to get back into the role. By chance, the next word Medea was required to sing was *crudele!*—"cruel man". Still there at stage front, arms akimbo, staring down the claque, Margaret found herself picked up by the music, carried into the libretto she knew so well, still cold with rage, but a singer, a professional, with a role to play and notes to sing. Almost without thought she uttered the word, bringing it up with full chest register, hurling it out into the shadowy mass of pale faces beyond the lights.

"Crudele!"

The reaction astonished her. Everyone seemed to stand at once, causing a peculiar visual illusion of the entire arena, the earth herself, tilting towards the stage. A mighty shouted roar rolled down the tiers of seats, striking the stage with the force of a thunderclap. For an instant Margaret was terrified; then she saw from the nearer faces that they were applauding her, clapping their hands in the air above their heads, and the roar, repeated again and again, was *Brava! Brava la Cinesa!* Seat cushions pattered on to the stage around her, thrown from the audience—a mark of approval in this house, she had been forewarned. Jason himself was applauding, grinning and nodding encouragement at her. Offstage the King, his daughter, and the comprimarios were all clapping and calling *Brava! Brava!* The conductor himself was smiling now, no longer embarrassed. Margaret's rage all melted in the warmth, the peculiar hot rush of primitive animal love that only stage performers know. She took the rest of the performance in stride, though working carefully with her top. The claque attempted one or two more interruptions, but were at once booed down by the rest of the audience, and at the end the curtain calls (so she thought of them, though on this open stage there was no curtain) lasted half an hour.

Glowing from her vindication at Verona, Margaret supposed the claque would give no further trouble. It was with a sinking heart that she heard the hissing start up again in Venice, in Parma and in Rome. It wore her down, and in Pesaro—where Vinnie Cinelli kept a house, and Rossini had been born—it finally became too much. She heard her voice wobbling in the cavatina, even before the claque had made itself known.

Straining to compensate, she began sharpening her high notes; then the claque started up, and were merciless, and the loggionisti joined in, and Margaret called for her understudy at the end of the first act.

Vinnie was working the southern hemisphere but Margaret had taken up his standing invitation of hospitality at his home, on the sea coast a few miles from the town. Vinnie's wife Nella had been at the performance. Very well accustomed to the ups and downs of operatic careers, Nella soothed and consoled.

"Barbarians," she said, and added some more Italian words Margaret could not catch. "It is organized, you can be sure. You have an enemy. Your enemy is organizing these disturbances. You must find out who it is, this enemy, and shame him."

"I know who it is," said Margaret. "He has no shame. He has nothing to lose."

Margaret was supposed to have one more engagement, in Naples, but she could not face the claque. She canceled, called Colman to tell him, and took the first flight she could find back to New York.

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Margaret took an ordinary cab from the airport, not having thought to book a car. Halfway across Queens the cab breasted a rise and the night-time profile of Manhattan Island came into view in all its splendor. Seeing it, Margaret felt great relief. This was her home. Here were such friends as she had: Johnny Liu, Colman, Professor Shi. Here was Jake with his sharp sardonic humor and unflappable worldliness. Here was the Met, where she had first entered the broad public consciousness. The myriad lights of Manhattan seemed to be greeting her, welcoming her. She approached the city now as many another—many millions of others—had come before her: with hope and relief, putting behind her the arbitrary cruelties of the Old World.

It was past midnight when she reached the apartment on Fifth Avenue. The cab driver—who knew very well the connection between a Fifth Avenue address and the opportunity for a fat tip—and the night doorman helped unload her bags, getting them all into the elevator for

her. She rode up alone, but regretted having done so almost as soon as the elevator was under way, thinking it much more likely than not—this was early September—that Jake would be at the Southampton house. She had not called to tell him she was breaking off the tour; indeed, she had not called him at all, never having acquired the American notion of social telephoning, regarding the instrument merely as a business device. Well, she could get someone to help bring the bags out of the elevator—the doormen could always find assistance for that sort of thing.

Margaret left the elevator door locked open and walked through the lobby into the living room. From the corridor at the far end she could see a light. Jake was home after all then. She felt glad, looking forward to his presence, wanting to dissolve the pain and rancor of Europe in his worldliness—hear him diminish it by telling anecdotes of hostile audiences his own shows had faced, failures he had endured.

As Margaret turned into the corridor she heard the toilet flush in the bathroom at the other end. Something, some sixth sense, made her stop. A girl came out of the bathroom. She was a black girl, slender and well-formed, not much older than twenty, and entirely naked.

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“It’s tough for me,” Jake said. “You being away so much. I mean, hey, Maggie—I’m a social animal. Around people all the time. What am I gonna do, after being all evening at a party with wall to wall beautiful chicks? Go home and fondle my dongle? No, I’m not going to do that.”

“But you knew about my career when we got married. You knew I’d have to travel.”

“Yeah, I knew.” Jake made a little laugh and shook his head. He was standing by the living-room window looking out, hands in the pockets of his dressing-gown. This was six o’clock in the morning, the sky brightening, the city beginning to come alive below them, the Park all shrouded in mist. The black girl had dressed and gone home, crossing the apartment with great aplomb under the circumstances, not looking at Margaret at all.

“How many?” asked Margaret.

“Huh?”

“How many have there been? This summer—since we got married. Don’t tell me that was the only one.”

“I can’t help it,” Jake said. “I’m really sorry, sweetheart. Really sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. But I just can’t help it. I see a pretty face, and, kerpow. I’m gone. It’s always been the same. The pattern of my life.”

“How many, Jake?”

“Oh, hell. Three, four. All right, four. That’s my life, babe. The whole pattern of my life.”

“But you told me you felt differently for me. All that stuff about ‘home is the sailor, home from sea’. The eagle finding his nest, or whatever it was.

When he fancies he is past love,
It is then he meets his last love,
And he loves her as he’s never loved before.

What happened to all that?”

“Wow. You’re a born singer.” Jake laughed, not very authentically. “I’m sure I only played that to you once, and you remember every goddam word.”

“Remembering the words of songs is my job. Don’t change the subject. You told me all those things—so sincere, touching my heart—and then, when I’m out of the country, you’re doing *tongfang* with black girls.”

“Hey.” Jake had his hands up. “Blackness has nothing to do with it. We’re a multicultural society now. That’s all behind us. I’m an equal opportunity philanderer.”

“Stop trying to make a joke of everything. I was having a terrible time in Europe. Now I’ve got a full schedule in the States to prepare for. And you. . . you’re doing this. . . Oh!” Margaret began to cry, sitting down abruptly on the sofa.

Jake came to sit with her, and took up her hand in his. Margaret did not resist.

“Maggie, sweetheart. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I’m trying to improve

myself, truly I am. Please, give me a chance. It's the worst side of my nature, I know. I shouldn't yield to it."

"Yes," snuffled Margaret. "What about Ring Poncho? How can you explain this to him?"

Jake laughed. "I don't have to explain things to the Rinpoche. He already knows them. He'll tell me my mind is a drunken monkey, and I have to lock up the liquor cabinet."

"What? I don't understand that."

"Neither do I, honey. When I do, I'll be a better person. But it's a long hard road."

"It seems it's going to be hard on me, too."

"No more than I can help, babe. Look: you're in town now for a few months, right?"

"Mmm, three trips to Chicago. Concert in San Francisco. Give me a tissue, please?"

Jake went to fetch a box of tissues from the bathroom. In his absence, Margaret reflected. The horror of that first realization had ebbed, and she was beginning to think clearly. What Jake had said had some reason to it, she had to admit. He was sexually very vigorous, remarkably so for his age, and certainly it must be difficult for him when she was away. To that degree she was willing to excuse him.

Her tendency (Margaret was aware) was anyway to give him the benefit of the doubt. She could not dislike Jake, or feel any strong resentment against him. He was what he was, that was all. Those words that had charmed her so had been spoken quite sincerely, she understood that. But Jake's sincerity was existential and momentary. Like the Air Heads he liked to be with, like all the show-business types, Jake lived by and for the zeitgeist, ever turning and twisting to catch the shifting currents of public taste, of fashion. For them there were not, could not be permanent values; only the mood of the moment. And to catch that mood they had to feel it, to *feel* it, or else they could not transmit and amplify it. That was the peculiar sincerity of show business. You couldn't fake it, not if you wanted to be really successful. You had to feel, truly feel, every damn fool trivial emotion the great American public felt. And a month later, when they were feeling something different, you had to feel that with them, too.

She herself (Margaret reflected) was not part of that, and never could be. Even now, even at this turning point, when her marriage had been struck by an earthquake—even now part of her mind was thinking about her voice, about the two big new roles she had to learn for the season: *Lucia* at the Met, in staggered performances from October through to January, Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* in Chicago, likewise spaced out from November to February. The San Francisco concert in February was all old stuff. Of the two new roles, *Lucia* was technically the more challenging, with a famous mad scene in which—this being *bel canto*—all the madness had to be expressed musically, the acting dimension requiring nothing much more than wandering around the stage abstractedly with a bloody dagger. *La Gioconda* was quite different, a mathematician's opera (she wondered if William knew of it), with six precisely-balanced roles, one for each of the six vocal categories, each allotted a fine aria, and duets for all the most harmonious of the fifteen possible pairings. That was her, that was Margaret Han: a singer, in her blood and bones, in every cell of her body, a singer of music that had endured for decades or centuries, music that owed nothing to the taste of the moment, that would never die.

Never die: like the earth itself, like the sea. Now she yearned for Southampton, for the airy quiet house, the slow movements of the sea.

When Jake returned he sat with her again and dabbed at her cheeks with a tissue, though in fact her tears had already dried. Margaret herself took the responsibility for blowing her nose. When that was done she said: "I want to go to Southampton, Jake. Let's go to Southampton. Can we go today?"