

Remains to Be Seen

NightScape

by David Morrell, 1943–

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*To Henry James,
who showed new ways in which tales of terror could be written
and the human secrets they could hide.*

*This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune,
often the surfeits of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the
sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity, fools by
heavenly compulsion.*

Introduction

My mother didn't like bedroom doors. Hated them, in fact. As I grew up, whenever we moved from apartment to apartment (sometimes above bars), almost the first thing she did was remove the bedroom doors. One reason for this, I suspect, is that she wanted to convert a normally private space into an area so public that my stepfather would feel uncomfortable making sexual overtures, knowing that I would hear everything where I lay close-by in a doorless bedroom.

As it was, I heard plenty, for my mother suffered from nightmares, and I was often kept awake by her frightened murmurs, fidgets, and groans as she fought horrors in her sleep. She never talked about these persistent nightly onslaughts (and it wasn't a household where I felt comfortable asking), but from what she blurted while asleep, I gather it often had something to do with fire. That's the major reason she took the doors off the bedrooms, I believe: fear. For most people, closing a bedroom door before they go to sleep creates a feeling of security, of safe boundaries. But for my mother, that closed door made her feel imprisoned. Smothered. Trapped. As far as she was concerned, whatever haunted her in her sleep might in fact have been creeping along the hallway out there, crouching, about to pounce. Better to leave the door open so that she might hear the threat coming and be ready for it.

Although I never knew the content of her nightmares, I did learn the actual horrors she'd survived, for without prompting, she often told me about them (this was usually after my stepfather had picked a dinner-hour family fight so that he could storm away and play poker with his brothers). My mother's name was Beatrice, and whenever I think about her dismal life, I'm reminded of a contrasting Beatrice, Dante's representation of beauty and truth. My mother lied about her age, so it's difficult to reconstruct when the waking nightmare began, sometime around 1910 on a farm in southern Ontario, Canada, when the area had as many horses as automobiles. Her mother died giving birth to her. Her father married his dead wife's sister (to some, this is a form of incest). The new wife blamed my mother for her sister's death. My mother had an older sibling, Estelle, who could do no wrong in the eyes of the stepmother. In contrast, the stepmother decided that my mother couldn't do anything right. The consequences were frequent, severe beatings. My mother described one occasion on which she hid all day under a porch while her stepmother waited with a club. She described another occasion on which she and Estelle put on their best clothes to go to a party. As they stepped from the farmhouse, their stepmother stalked toward them with a dead maggoty groundhog she'd found and threw it at my mother, splattering her dress. Meanwhile, Estelle was permitted to get into a buggy and ride off to the party (my mother loved her sister and never stopped mourning that Estelle died young from breast cancer). Somewhere in these accounts, never explained, only furtively alluded to, was a reference to being terrorized in the night, something about a fire.

The upshot of this hell was that, when my mother was sixteen, she fled to a convent, where she somehow managed to remain until she was of legal age. She then moved to a city a hundred miles away, supported herself by working in factories and also using her considerable skills as a dressmaker (to see her use a sewing machine was a joy). Eventually, she met my father, George, who was an RAF bombardier assigned to train Canadian airmen for World War II. In 1943, soon after I was born, he was re-assigned to active status in Britain and was shot down during a bombing raid over France. Or so I was told as a child. The truth was inadvertently revealed to me when I was 27 and my mother made a casual stunning comment. In actuality, my father had survived. Wounded but having parachuted safely into a field, he was discovered by the French resistance and smuggled across the English channel to an RAF hospital, where he wrote letters to my mother and died from pneumonia. To try to repress her painful memories, my mother got rid of everything he left behind, his clothes, their marriage license, his letters, everything except a cigarette lighter and a very few photographs.

Then came more tough times. Trying to support the two of us in the final years of the war, my mother took in as many dressmaking jobs as she could manage. In our two-room, ground-floor apartment, she fell sick on the Thanksgiving of my second year. I still remember how fiery red her face was and how impossible amounts of sweat kept streaming from it. I sat next to her on the bed, using an entire box of Kleenex to mop her cheeks. When hunger finally insisted, I climbed onto the kitchen table to the turkey my mother had taken from the oven just before she'd collapsed on the bed. A physician who lived down the street happened to walk past our window and look in at me on the table, clawing meat from the turkey. A half hour later, my mother was in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. The disease that had felled her, an acute strep skin infection known as erysipelas, was potentially fatal and extremely contagious, but even though I had practically bathed myself in her sweat while I blotted her cheeks with tissue after tissue of Kleenex, I never got sick.

She spent weeks in the hospital, and subsequently, unable to support the two of us while remaining home and taking care of me, she made a difficult choice. I was around four, and I still remember the family friend who had a car and who took us for a ride in the country. We came to a remote, gothic-looking building, where children played on swings and slides. Invited to join them, I eagerly accepted, only to interrupt my laughter to look behind me and see my mother getting into the car and driving away. You may have guessed that the building was an orphanage. My mother claims I was there only a couple of months, but I seem to recall the passage of seasons and feel as if I was there a year, during which I twice attempted to escape. Eventually, my mother remarried and reclaimed me, but I never got over the sense that I might have been adopted, and I never got along with my stepfather, who disliked children and who on one occasion struck my face with his fingers curved like claws, ripping my mouth open. In *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, I described how the fights between him and my mother were so frightening that at night I put a pillow under my covers, hoping to make it look as if I was there while I slept under the bed. The bedroom door had, of course, been removed.

That brings me to this collection, whose title *NightScape* is appropriate to what I've just told you. By and large, the kind of tales an author writes are metaphors for the scars in the nooks and crannies of his/her psyche. In my youth, thrillers and horror stories (both in print and on the screen) provided an escape from my nightmarish reality. Is it any wonder that, as an adult obsessed with being a writer, I would compulsively turn to the types of stories that provided an escape when I was a child? Perhaps I'm eager to provide an escape for others. Or perhaps I'm still trying to escape from my past.

In any case, when I was rereading and arranging these tales, I was struck by a common theme. I was startled, in fact, to recognize it. When I wrote each story, I didn't realize how important a factor this theme was throughout my work: the obsession and determination I just alluded to. In most of these stories, a character gets an idea in his head, a hook in his emotions, a need that has to be fulfilled, and he does everything possible to carry through, no matter how difficult. Truly, this emphasis on determination was a revelation to me, although probably not to my family and friends. It got me wondering *why*, and it led me to poignant memories about my mother, who died when she was 80 (maybe she was a little younger or older-as I said, she lied about her age) and whose genes should have allowed her to live to the functioning 98 years that her father and stepmother did if not for the lung cancer that finished her (she never smoked, but my stepfather did, compulsively).

If I had to select a solitary memory about my mother, it would be this. My stepfather seldom failed to destroy a holiday. On Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, and Easter, just as my mother (who hated to cook) was about to set a big meal on the table, he would pick a fight and leave. My mother and I would sit across from one another, trying to enjoy dinner. Usually, she was sobbing. And this is what she would say to me: "David, you can be anything you want to be as long as you work hard enough." Again and again, at every ruined family occasion. "David, you can be anything you want to be as long as you work hard enough."

Experience shows that isn't true. A person can work brutally hard every long day until death and still not achieve anything. I'm reminded of when I was a professor of American literature and taught the theme of naturalism in the works of Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. Basically, naturalism can be defined as "pessimistic determinism," a compact way of saying that we're environmentally and biologically doomed for the worst. Although naturalism insists there is no God, the American version of it can be traced back to the Calvinistic sense of being damned that came to America with its early New England settlers. Calvinists believe that human beings are too unworthy and despicable to earn salvation. Only God's mercy can save us. Call it luck. And Lord knows, luck has a lot to do with getting along comfortably in life. We all know people who worked hard all their days and never got their just desserts. But even the colonial Calvinists believed that, against the logic of their fatalistic religion, we still couldn't give up working and trying.

That was my mother's attitude. Life had dealt her shock after shock. I think she hated every aspect of her existence. I think she hated being a woman (I'll explain in a few paragraphs). A week before my mother died, my wife asked her what she would have done differently if she could go through her life again.

"I wouldn't have gotten married," my mother said.

"But then you wouldn't have had David."

"What you don't have and don't know you'd have had," she said, "you don't miss."

In my mother's experience, sex meant emotional pain. She was taught that, by being born, she had caused her own mother's death. Marrying my father, who was an Anglican while my mother was a Catholic, she caused life-long tension with her stepmother, a Catholic who believed that marrying out of the faith was a sin. I've always had a sense of a deeper source of tension between her and her stepmother, and I wonder if that wasn't caused by pregnancy before marriage, conception out of wedlock, a grievous social taboo in those days. Then shortly after my birth, the already considerable emotional pain was followed by an even greater one-my father's death.

All related to sex and its consequences. I think my mother wished she'd been a man. I also suspect that if she'd lived during our less judgmental age, she'd have been far more content inasmuch as she was probably, without knowing it, gay.

"David, you can be anything you want to be as long as you work hard enough."

Yes and no. Determination was the mainspring of my mother's existence. The obsession to make something of herself, to survive her past and achieve something in her future, was what kept her going. Sometimes, she had as many as three jobs: upholstering furniture in a factory, then mowing lawns, then making buttons in the basement until midnight. So that she could buy a house and stop living over bars. So that she could have a degree of comfort and possibly a relief from fear. In many ways, she achieved her goals. But she was never really happy, and as her persistent nightmares indicated, she really never got over her fears.

You can be anything you want to be as long as you work hard enough.

She instilled that into me. Work? Hell, if it's only a matter of work, let's roll up our sleeves. No big deal. All it takes is obsession, discipline, and determination. Which might be a good description of what it takes to be a writer. In the obsession of the characters in *NightScape*, I recognize myself. I recognize my youth. I recognize my *mother's* youth.

And the absence of bedroom doors.

With slight exaggeration, the events in this story actually happened. In the late 1980s, I flew from Iowa City to Ottawa, Canada, to attend that year's World Fantasy Convention (a wonderful opportunity for writers and fans to mingle). I remember it as an interminable journey. During a long layover in Toronto's airport, I dug into a book I'd brought along, a history of the Vatican, that I needed to do research for a thriller I was writing. *The League of Night and Fog*. Fighting fatigue and weary eyelids, I resolutely turned the pages and suddenly straightened when I came across the fascinating real events, only tangentially about the Vatican, that form the basis for what you're about to read. If you're tempted to say I've got a sick imagination, remember that history is much sicker. A few years later, Robert Bloch asked me to write a story for an anthology he was putting together, *Psycho-Paths*. Wondering what kind of weird tale the legendary creator of

Psycho might find amusing, I remembered Toronto's airport and what I'd read about Argentina's dictator Juan Peron.

"On my honor, Your Excellency!" Carlos clicked his heels together and jerked his right arm upward, outward, clenching his fist in a salute.

"More than your honor! Your life, Carlos! Swear it on your life!"

"My life, Your Excellency! I swear it!"

The Great Man nodded, his dark eyes burning. His once robust face had shrunk around his cheekbones, giving him a grimace of perpetual sorrow. His pencil-thin mustache, formerly as dark as his eyes, was now gray, his once swarthy skin now sallow. Even if a miracle occurred and His Excellency's forces were able to crush the rebellion, Carlos knew that the strain of the past month's worsening crisis would leave the marks of its ravages upon his leader.

But of course the miracle would not occur. Already the rattle of machine guns from the outskirts of the city intensified. The echo of explosions rumbled over rooftops. The shimmer of fires reflected off dense black smoke in the night.

A frantic bodyguard approached, his bandoleer slapping against his chest, his rifle clutched so rigidly his knuckles were white. "Your Excellency, you have to leave now! The rebels have broken through!"

But the Great Man hesitated. "On your life, Carlos. Remember, you swore it."

"I'll never disappoint you."

"I know." The Great Man clasped his shoulders. "You never have. You never will."

Carlos swelled with pride, but sadness squeezed his heart. The gunfire and explosions reminded him of the massive fireworks that had celebrated the Great Man's inauguration. Now the golden years were over. Despondent, he followed his leader toward a truck, its rear compartment capped by a tarpaulin.

A crate lay on the cobblestoned courtyard. It was wooden, eight feet long, four feet wide. The Great Man squinted at it. His gaunt cheeks rippling, he clenched his teeth and nodded in command. Six soldiers stepped forward, three on each side, and hastily lifted the crate. It tilted. Something inside thumped.

"Gently!" His Excellency ordered.

Straining with its bulk, glancing fearfully toward the shots that approached the heart of the city, the soldiers slid the crate inside the truck. One yanked down a section of the tarpaulin. Another raised the creaky back hatch. The Great Man himself snapped the lockpins into place.

"Your Excellency, please! We have to go!" the bodyguard implored.

An explosion shook windows.

The Great Man seemed not to have heard. He continued to stare at the truck.

"Your Excellency!"

The Great Man blinked and turned toward the bodyguard. "Of course." He scanned the flame-haloed outskirts of the city. "We must leave. But one day... one day we'll return." He pivoted toward Carlos. "Do your duty. You have the itinerary.

When I'm able, I'll contact you." Flanked by bodyguards, he rushed toward his armored limousine.

"But Your Excellency, aren't you coming with me?" Carlos asked.

Racing, the Great Man shouted back. "No! Separately, we have a greater chance of confusing the rebels! We have to mislead them! Remember, Carlos! On your life!"

With a final look at the truck, the Great Man surged into his limousine, guards charging after him. As the car roared out of the palace courtyard, speeding southward from the direction of the attack, Carlos felt suddenly empty. But at once he remembered his vow. "You heard His Excellency! We must go!"

Men snapped to attention. Carlos scrambled into the truck. A sergeant slid behind the steering wheel. The truck raced eastward, a jeep before and behind it, each filled with soldiers clutching automatic weapons.

They'd gone five blocks when a rebel patrol attacked. The front jeep blew apart, fragments of metal and flaming bodies twisting through the air. The truck's driver jerked the steering wheel, skidding around the wreckage. Gunfire shattered the windshield. Glass showered. The driver gasped, his brains erupting from the back of his skull. While the truck kept moving, Carlos lunged past the shuddering corpse, shoved open the driver's door, and thrust the dead sergeant onto the street. The body bounced and hit a wall. Stomping the accelerator, Carlos rammed through a wooden barricade, gripping the steering wheel with his right hand while using his left hand to fire his pistol through the shattered windshield.

He and the remaining jeep swerved around a gloomy warehouse, raced along the murky waterfront, and screeched to a stop beside the only ship still in port. Its frightened crew flinched from nearby gunfire and scurried down the gangplank toward the truck. They yanked the crate from the back. Again something thumped.

"Gently!" Carlos ordered.

Heeding the nearby gunshots more than his command, they dropped the crate on a sling and shouted orders to someone on deck. A motor whined. A derrick raised the crate. A rope broke. Carlos felt his heart lurch as the crate dangled halfway out of the sling. But it kept rising. He held his breath while it swung toward the freighter and slammed onto the deck.

An explosion followed a moment afterward as, a block from the freighter, a building erupted in a thunderous blaze. The freighter's crew raced up the gangplank, Carlos and his men rushing after them, the gangplank beginning to rise.

Already the freighter was moving. Scraping from the dock, it mustered speed. Ghostly reflections from the fires in the city guided it toward the harbor's exit.

Carlos barked orders to his men—to remove the tarpaulins from the fifty-caliber machine guns at the bow and stern. As they armed the weapons, he tensely watched the freighter's crew repair the sling and lower the crate through an open hatch. Sweating, he waited for the shout from below that would signal the crate's safe arrival in the hold.

Only then did he feel the ache of tension drain from his shoulders. He wiped sweat from his brow. The first stage of his mission had been completed. For now,

he had nothing to do except wait until he reached his next destination and then wait again for further orders from his Excellency.

Behind him, a woman whispered his name.

“Maria?” He turned.

Beaming, she hurried toward him: short, with ebony hair and copper skin, handsome more than beautiful. Her pregnancy emphasized her stocky build. Her strong-boned features suggested faithfulness and endurance.

They embraced. During the previous hectic week, Carlos hadn't seen his wife at all. Despite his devotion to the Great Man, he'd felt the strain of being separated from her—a strain that must have shown, for the Great Man had finally told him to send Maria a message asking her to meet him on this freighter. Carlos had been overwhelmed by the Great Man's consideration.

“Is it over? Are we safe?” Maria asked.

“For now.” Carlos kissed her.

“But His Excellency didn't come with you?”

“No. He plans to meet us later.”

“And the crate?”

“What about it?”

“Why is it so important that you had to bring it here under guard?”

“His Excellency never said. I would never have been so bold as to ask. But it must have tremendous value.”

“For him to entrust it to you, to ask you to risk your life to protect it? By all the saints, yes, it must have tremendous value!”

Maria gazed worshipfully into his eyes.

At three a.m., in a cabin that the Great Man had arranged for them, Carlos made love to his wife. Hearing her moan beneath him, he felt a pang of concern for his benefactor. He prayed that the Great Man had escaped from the city and would contact him soon. His wife thrust a final time against him and went to sleep with a patient sigh as if proud that her marital duty had been accomplished.

Obedience, Carlos thought. Of all the virtues, obedience is the greatest.

At dawn, he was startled awake by a soldier pounding on the cabin's door. “Rebel boats!”

“Maria, stay here!”

The two-hour battle was fierce, so much so that Carlos didn't realize he'd been wounded in his left arm as he manned the stern's cannon after the soldier at the trigger was sprayed by machine-gun fire.

The freighter, too, sustained damage. But the rebel boats were repelled. The crate was protected. The mission continued.

As one of his men bandaged his bleeding arm, Carlos ignored the throbbing pain, concentrating on a message that the radio operator had given him. His Excellency had escaped from the city and was fleeing through the mountains.

“May God be with him,” Carlos said.

But the radio operator looked troubled.

“What is it? What haven't you told me?” Carlos asked.

“The boats that attacked us. I monitored their radio transmissions. They knew His Excellency was in the mountains. They knew *before* they attacked us.”

Carlos frowned.

The radio operator continued. "If they knew His Excellency wasn't on board, why were they so determined to attack us?"

"I have no idea," Carlos said.

But he lied. He did have an idea.

The crate, he thought.

In the hold's fish-stinking darkness, Carlos aimed his flashlight toward the wooden planks that formed the crate. Pensive, he walked around it, examining every detail. A bottom corner had been splintered—not surprising, given the rough way the crew had brought it aboard. But fortunately no bullets had pierced the wooden planks. He leaned against a damp bulkhead and stared in puzzlement at the crate.

What's in it? he wondered.

Twenty minutes later, while he continued to stare at the crate, a crew member brought a radio message.

Carlos aimed his flashlight at the sheet of paper. *Escape from the mountains accomplished. Avoid first destination. Proceed to checkpoint two. Instructions will follow. Remember, on your life.*

Carlos nodded to the messenger. He folded the piece of paper and tucked it into a pocket. Pushing away from the bulkhead, he fully intended to follow the crew member from the hold.

But he couldn't resist the impulse to aim his flashlight at the crate.

"Your arm!" Maria said when Carlos at last emerged onto the deck. "Does it hurt?"

Carlos shrugged and repressed a wince.

"You mustn't strain yourself. You need to rest."

"I'll rest when His Excellency reclaims his property."

"Whatever it is," Maria said. "Do you think it's gold or jewels? Rare coins? Priceless paintings?"

"Secret documents, most likely. It's none of my business. Tomorrow evening, thank God, my responsibility ends."

But the Great Man wasn't waiting when the freighter docked at the neutral port that was checkpoint two. Instead a nervous messenger raced up the gangplank. Wiping his brow, he blurted that although His Excellency had reached a neighboring country, the rebels persisted in chasing him. "He can't risk coming to the freighter. He asks you to proceed to checkpoint three."

"Three days to the north?" Carlos subdued his disappointment. He'd looked forward to showing the Great Man how well he'd done his duty.

"His Excellency said to remind you—you vowed on your honor."

"On my life!" Carlos straightened. "I was with him from the beginning. When he and I were frightened peasants, determined to topple the tyrant, I swore allegiance. I'll never disappoint him."

That night while the freighter was still in port, a rebel squad disguised as stevedores snuck on board and nearly succeeded in reaching the hold before a vigilant soldier sounded an alarm. In the furious gun battle, Carlos lost five members of his team. All eight invaders were killed. But not before a grenade was thrown into the hold.

The explosion filled Carlos with panic. He emptied his submachine gun into the rebel who'd thrown the grenade. He rushed down to the hold, aimed his flashlight, and was shocked to discover that the grenade had detonated fifteen feet from the crate. Shrapnel had splintered its wooded slats. A jagged hole gaped in the side.

Carlos felt smothered. He drew trembling fingers along the damaged wood. If the contents entrusted to him had been destroyed, how could he explain his failure to His Excellency?

I swore to protect! Fear made Carlos stiffen. What if the shrapnel had stayed hot enough to smolder inside the crate? What if the contents were secret documents and they burst into flames?

Grabbing a crowbar, he jammed it beneath the lid. Nails screamed. Wood snapped. He jerked the lid up, desperate to peer inside, to make sure there wasn't a fire. What he saw made him gasp.

A footstep scraped behind him. Slamming the lid shut, he drew his pistol and spun.

Maria emerged from shadows. Caught by the beam of his flashlight, she frowned. "Are you all right?"

Carlos exhaled. "I almost..." Shaking, he holstered his pistol. "Never creep up behind me."

"But the shooting. I felt so worried."

"Go back to our cabin. Try to sleep."

"Come with me. You need to rest."

"No."

"What did you find when you opened the crate?"

"You're mistaken, Maria. I didn't open it."

"But I saw you..."

"It's dark down here. My flashlight must have cast shadows and tricked your eyes."

"But I heard you slam down the lid."

"No, you heard me lose my balance and fall against the crate. I didn't open it! Go back to our cabin! Do what I tell you!"

With a plaintive look, Maria obeyed. As the echo of her footsteps dwindled, the flashlight revealed her pregnant silhouette. At the top of murky metal stairs, the hatch banged shut behind her.

Carlos forced himself to wait. Finally certain that she was gone, he turned again toward the crate and slowly lifted the lid. Before he'd been interrupted, he'd had a quick glimpse of the contents, enough to verify that there wasn't a fire, although he didn't dare tell Maria what was in there for fear she'd reveal the secret. Because what he'd seen had been more startling than a fire.

The coffin was made of burnished copper, its gleaming surface marred by pockmarks from shrapnel.

His knees faltered. Fighting dizziness, he leaned down to inspect the desecration. With a sharp breath of satisfaction, he decided the damage was superficial. The coffin had not been penetrated.

But what about the body?

Yes, the body.

It was none of his business. The Great Man hadn't seen fit to let him know what he'd pledged his life to protect. No doubt, His Excellency had his reasons.

Carlos subdued his intense curiosity, lowered the lid, and resecured it. He'd exceeded his authority, granted. But for a just motive. To protect what had been entrusted to him. His duty had been honored. The coffin wasn't in danger for the moment. He could have its copper made smooth again. He could replace the crate with one that hadn't been damaged. His Excellency would never know that Carlos had almost failed.

But the mystery still wasn't solved. The ultimate questions remained. Why were the rebels so determined to destroy the crate? Who was in the coffin?

Burdened with responsibility, Carlos climbed from the hold and ordered a crewman, "Bring down a mattress and blankets. A thermos of coffee. Food. A lantern." He told Maria, "I'll be staying in the hold tonight. *Every* night until His Excellency reclaims what's his."

"No! It's damp down there! The air smells foul! You'll get sick!"

"I made a vow! I've tripled the guards on deck! No one but me is allowed down there! Not even you!"

Three awful days later, Carlos shuffled from the hold. Unshaven, gaunt, and feverish, he squinted through blurred vision toward the northern neutral port that was checkpoint three. But again His Excellency wasn't waiting. Another distraught messenger rushed on board. "It's worse than we feared. The rebels are determined to hunt him to the ends of the earth. They've cut off his route here. He has to keep running. These are your new instructions." Shuddering, Carlos studied them. "To *Europe?*"

"Marseilles. That's the only chance to complete the mission."

Carlos wavered.

"His Excellency said to remind you. You swore on your life."

Carlos trembled. "My oath was solemn. Not just my life. My *soul*."

In the hold, enduring turbulence, nausea, and delirium, Carlos felt more compelled. During the seemingly endless route across the Atlantic, the crate and its contents beckoned. The coffin—his only companion—drew him. As his lantern hissed and his wounded arm throbbled, he paced before his obligation. The crate. The coffin. The corpse. Whose?

At last, he couldn't resist. Again he grabbed the crowbar. Again he pried up the wooden lid. Leaning down, trembling, he fingered the catches on the coffin's seam, released them, and pushed upward, gradually revealing...

The secret.

This time, he gasped not from surprise but reverence. His knees wavered. He almost knelt.

Before Her Majesty.

The patroness of her people. The blessed mother of her country. How many days—and far into how many nights—had she made herself available to her people, allowing endless streams of petitioners to come to her, dispensing food, comfort, and hope? How many times had she interceded with His Excellency for the poor and homeless whom she'd described as her shirtless ones? The Church had called her a saint. The people had called her a God-send.

Her works of mercy had been equalled only by her beauty. Tall, trim, and statuesque, with graceful contours and stunning features, she embodied perfection. Her blonde hair—rare among her people—emphasized her uniqueness, her locks so golden, so radiant they seemed a halo.

The cancer that ravaged her uterus had been both a real and symbolic abomination. How could someone so giving, so emotionally fertile, have been brought down by a disease that attacked her female essence? God had turned His back on His special creation. The world would not see her likes again.

The people mourned, His Excellency more so. He grieved so hard that he felt compelled to preserve her memory in the flesh, to capture her beauty for as long as science could make possible. No one knew for sure the process involved. Rumor had it that he'd sent for the world's greatest embalmer, the mortician who'd been entrusted with the corpse of the secular god of the Soviets, Lenin himself. It was said that the Great Man had instructed the embalmer to use all his skills to preserve Her Majesty forever as she had been in life. Her blood had been replaced with alcohol. Glycerine, at one hundred and forty degrees Fahrenheit, had been pumped through her tissues. Her corpse had been immersed in secret chemicals. Even more secret techniques had preserved her organs. Although her skin had tightened somewhat, it glistened with a radiance greater than she'd had in life. Her blonde hair and red lips were resplendent.

Carlos froze with awe. The rumors were true. Her Majesty had been made eternal. He cringed with expectation that she would open her eyes and speak.

In turmoil, he remembered the rest of the tragedy. Her Majesty's death had begun the Great Man's downfall. He'd tried to maintain his power without her, but the people—always demanding, always ungrateful—had turned against him. It didn't matter that His Excellency had planned future social reforms while his wife had soothed social woes merely from day to day. From the people's point of view, the good of now was greater than that of soon. When a rabblouser had promised immediate paradise, a new revolution toppled the Great Man's government.

Now Carlos understood why the rebels were so determined to destroy the crate. To eradicate all vestiges of the Great Man's rule, they had to destroy not only His Excellency but the immortalized remains of the Great Man's love and source of his power, the goddess of her country.

Burdened with greater responsibility, Carlos bowed his head in worship. An hour having seemed like a minute, he lowered the coffin's lid and resecured the top of the crate. He trembled with reverence. During the turbulent voyage across the Atlantic, he twice gave in to temptation, raised the lids from the crate and the coffin, and studied the treasure entrusted to him. The miracle continued. Her Majesty remained as lifelike as ever.

Soon the Great Man will have you back. Carlos thought.

But His Excellency wasn't waiting when the freighter docked at Marseilles. Yet another frantic messenger hurried aboard, reporting that their leader was still being chased, delivering new instructions. He frowned at Carlos's beard-stubbed cheeks, flushed skin, and hollow eyes. "But are you well enough? Perhaps someone else should—"

"I vowed to His Excellency! I *must* complete the mission!"

When Maria privately objected that he *wasn't* well, he told her, "You don't understand what's involved!"

Distressed, he arranged for the crate to be unloaded from the freighter and placed in a truck. Under guard, it was driven to a secret airstrip, from where the crate was flown to Italy and placed on a train bound for Rome. Three times, rebel teams attempted to intercept it, but Carlos was watchful. The teams were destroyed, although at the cost of several of his men.

He paced in front of the crate in an otherwise empty boxcar. How had the rebels anticipated the itinerary? As the train reached Rome, he was forced to conclude that there was a spy. One of His Excellency's advisers must be passing information to the rebels. The itinerary had to be modified.

As scheduled, the crate was rushed to a warehouse. But twelve hours later, Carlos had it moved to the basement of a church and two days later to a storage room in a mortuary. After an uneventful week, only then was it taken to its intended destination, an abandoned villa outside Rome. Carlos hoped that his variation of the schedule had confused the rebels into thinking that the entire itinerary had been altered. Further variations tempted him, but he had to insure that His Excellency could get in touch with him and, more important, rejoin Her Majesty.

The villa was in disrepair, decrepit, depressing. The stained-glass windows were cracked. The lights didn't work. Cobwebs floated from the great hall's ceiling. In the middle of the immense dusty marble floor, the crate lay surrounded by candles, so Carlos could see to aim if any of the ruin's numerous rats dared to approach the crate and its sacred contents. His men patrolled the grounds, guarding the mansion's entrances, while Maria had orders to remain in an upper-floor bedroom.

Periodically Carlos opened the crate and the coffin to remind himself of the reason for his sacrifice, of his need for constant vigilance.

His vision of the blessed mystery became increasingly profound. Her Majesty seemed ever more lifelike, beatific, radiant. The illusion was overwhelming—she wasn't dead but merely sleeping.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd bathed. His hair and beard were shaggy. His garments were wrinkled and filthy. As he slumped in a musty chair, unable to fight exhaustion, his chin on his chest, his gunhand drooping, he vaguely recalled a time when his dreams had been restful. But now he had only nightmares, assaulted by ghosts.

A scrape of metal jerked him awake. A footstep on marble made him spin. His skill defeated his sleep-clouded eyes. He shot repeatedly, roared in triumph, and rushed toward the enemy who'd brazenly violated Her Majesty's sanctum. Preparing to deliver a just-to-be-certain shot to the head, he gaped down at Maria unmoving in a pool of blood, every bullet having pierced her pregnancy.

He shrieked until his throat seized shut.

Maria was buried behind the villa in one of its numerous untended gardens. He couldn't risk sending for a priest, who in spite of a bribe would no doubt inform the authorities about the killing. What was more, to leave the villa to take his wife to a church and then a graveyard was out of the question. At all extremes, his duty remained. Her Majesty had to be guarded. Weeping, he patted his shovel on

the dirt that covered Maria's corpse. He knelt and planted a single flower, a yellow rose, her favorite.

His grief was mixed with anger. "You were told to stay upstairs! You had your orders just as I have mine! Why didn't you listen? How many times did I tell you? Obedience is the greatest virtue!"

Holding back sobs, he returned to the villa's great hall, relieved the guards who had taken his place, and commanded them to remain outside. He locked the great hall's door and wearily approached the crate to open the coffin, wavering before Her Majesty. Her blonde hair glowed. Her red lips glistened. Her sensuous cheeks were translucent.

"Now you understand how solemnly I swore. On my soul. I sacrificed my wife for you. I killed my unborn child. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. Sleep in peace. Never fear. No matter the cost, I will always protect you."

His tears dropped onto her forehead. Her eyelids seemed to flicker. He inhaled sharply. But he was only imagining, he told himself. The movement had simply been the shimmer of light through his misted eyes.

He wiped the tears from her forehead. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty." He tried to resist but couldn't. He kissed her brow where the tears had fallen.

A messenger at last arrived. After restless nights of sleeping beside the crate, Carlos sighed, anticipating that the Great Man had escaped and intended to reclaim his treasure. At the same time, he surprised himself by regretting that his mission had come to an end. It hadn't, however. With an odd relief, he learned that the Great Man was still being chased. Carlos studied his new instructions. To take the crate to Madrid.

"His Excellency is obliged to you for your loyalty," the messenger said. "He told me to tell you he won't forget."

Carlos fought to still his trembling hands, tugged at his unkempt beard, and brushed back his shaggy hair. "It's my privilege to be the Great Man's servant. No sacrifice is too burdensome."

"You're an inspiration. His Excellency heard about the unfortunate loss of your wife. He sends his deep condolences."

Carlos gestured in grief as well as devotion.

But devotion to whom? he wondered. "As I said, any sacrifice."

In Madrid, he noticed Her Majesty's lips move and knew he had to feed her.

Three months later, having been ordered to move the crate to Lisbon, he knew that Her Majesty would be cold en route and covered her with a blanket.

Six months later, having relocated in Brussels, he knew that Her Majesty would have trouble breathing in the coffin and ordered his men to bring him an electric drill.

Finally the message arrived. *Escape accomplished. Faithful friend, your obligation is at an end. Directions enclosed. With heartfelt thanks and immense anticipation, I ask you to return what is mine.*

Yours?

Carlos turned to Her Majesty and sobbed.

The motorcade fishtailed up the snowy road that approached the chateau outside Geneva. The Great Man waited anxiously, breathing frost as he paced the driveway. Pressing his chilled hands under the crate, he helped his servants carry

it through the opened double door. Impatient, he ordered it placed in the steeple-roofed living room and commanded everyone to leave, except for the genius mortician who had used his secret skills to preserve the Great Man's love and who now had been summoned to validate the results of his promise.

Each breathed quickly, ready with crowbars to raise the crate's lid but finding that it wasn't secure. Distressed, they reached to open the coffin but discovered that it wasn't locked.

Her Majesty looked astonishingly lifelike, even more than the genius had guaranteed.

But a hole had been drilled in the lid of her coffin.

There was a matching hole in her skull, the drill having gone too deep.

And rotten food bulged from her mouth.

And brains and blood covered her face.

Carlos lay on top of her, a bullet hole in his skull, a pistol in his hand, a beatific expression on his face.

