

The Creature on the Couch

by Michael Bishop, 1945–

Published: 1991
in »The Ultimate Frankenstein«, no. 2



“Would that you were blind, Dr. Zylstra.” My patient glared at me with watery yellow eyes, out of a mask that accentuated the heavy shelf of his forehead.

“Why?” I knew, and he knew that I knew, but as committed as I am to racking honesty between patient and therapist, it would have been a misstep to confess aloud at our first meeting that his size and appearance terrified me.

“Do you not mock me, sir, with the transparent dissimulation of bewilderment.” Despite its syntax, this remark was not a question, but an archaic variety of command.

“Mr. Goodloss—”

“And do you not interpose the barrier of my surname in a forum that I understand to require friendly self-revelation.”

“I usually call my patients by their first names. It’s just that it takes longer than thirty seconds to—”

"I am sick unto death of barriers, of the spurnings that have been my recurring, but undeserved, lot."

"Vyvyan," I said, using the odd first name that he had printed in bold block letters on his sign-in sheet:

VYVYAN FRANKLIN GOODLOSS.

"Vyvyan, it's my task—actually, it's our *joint* task—to examine minutely your feelings of—"

"Rejection. Abandonment. Expulsion. Am I perforce condemned to address you only by title and cognomen?"

"Patients may call me what they like, so long as it's civil. I wouldn't care to answer to, say, Scheisskopf or Dirty Jer."

"I am ignorant of the manner of address most favored by the main body of your clientele. Do you now banish my ignorance?"

"Some patients call me Dr. Zylstra. Maybe their low self-esteem resists the idea of equality with a powerful authority figure. Some find ways not to call me anything at all."

Vyvyan, however, wanted to resolve the issue quickly. Waves of hostility piled up in ranks behind this effort, but the effort itself was encouraging: patients who take an active role in the therapeutic process are the most likely to bring about lasting improvement.

"By what name do your friends and intimates call you?"

"Jerrold. More rarely, Jerry. I like my full name better than the nickname."

"Because it erects a small wall of formality and so enables you to preserve a sense of your own dignity?"

"Possibly," I said. Who was treating whom here? Vyvyan, looming over me as he did, had imperceptibly reversed our roles, seizing the initiative of interpretation and relegating me to the dependent state of an emotionally impaired care seeker. Ouch.

Vyvyan nodded brusquely at a gold-plated placard on my desk, an object that had been part of my office decor ever since Barbara gave it to me for our fifth wedding anniversary nearly twenty years ago.

PATIENTHOOD IS UBIQUITOUS, reads the placard.

"Do you disclose to me now, Jerrold, the meaning of that cryptic apothegm."

Vyvyan had a gratingly archaic way of speaking, as if he'd just dropped in from a revival of *Peregrine Pickle: The Play*. And, yes, I felt something more than mild unease in his hulking presence.

"The placard means," I said, reading it for the twelve-millionth time, "that you have every right to call me Jerrold."

"Wherefore that right? From what logic does it spring?"

"Who gets the label *patient* is often a cultural, educational, and economic thing, Vyvyan, not a clear reflection of the severity of that person's... *existence pain*. In some ways, in fact, I may be more 'ill' than those coming to me for therapy."

Vyvyan rolled his nicotine-colored eyes. "Oh! cursed employer, who sent me to this forthright charlatan!"

“If you have a problem—” How could anyone who looked and spoke like this huge burlesque of a human being *not* have a problem?—“my job isn’t to wave a wand and make it go magically away.”

“Am I, then, to remain wretched?”

“Wait. Listen. My job is to use my skills to build between us a relationship that will prove therapeutic. It’s the *relationship* that heals, Vyvyan. If you work *with* me, you’ll face your existence pain in ways that counteract your... wretchedness.”

“Excellent.”

“Good,” I said. “What do you want?”



This was neither a casual nor a facetious question. With Vyvyan, it wasn’t even a cloaked expression of the annoyance I felt at having to be in my office long after my posted hours—at eight o’clock on a late November evening when traffic on North Peachtree was sparse and the wind slicing down from the Great Smokies was audibly rattling my office building’s polarized window glass.

What do you want? is my standard ice breaker. I ask it so that my patients will jettison all the nonessential garbage they’ve taken aboard and examine face-on the real conflicts poisoning their lives. Everyone wants something—something beyond a Mercedes-Benz, twenty uninterrupted years of fame, or great nonstop sex—and the honest identification of this want is the beginning of wisdom. It’s also the beginning of a long climb toward health. Was I healthy enough to provide Vyvyan any meaningful help on *his* climb?

I ask because sitting in the same room with him underscored the hard truth of the legend of my placard: PATIENTHOOD IS UBIQUITOUS. Ordinarily, I’m not frightened of my patients. They may fascinate, repulse, exasperate, amuse, bore, worry, discombobulate, or charm me. (In the case of pneumatic females, as I’ve confessed to Barbara, they may even excite my libido.) But only once or twice in my career have I met with a patient who made me fear for my safety. Even the psychotics who came to me did so nonmenacingly, seeing me as a paid compassionator and a validating agent, not as a potentially vengeful judge. Thus, I escaped any hostile acting out of their psychoses.

But I *was* afraid of this Goodloss person.

My fear had two sources. First, as stipulated during some tricky negotiations with Vyvyan’s employer (a friend of my father-in-law), I was meeting him at night, in a virtually empty office building. The security guard in the downstairs lobby would be of no help if Vyvyan attacked me in my sixth-floor suite. Second, Vyvyan was the biggest man I’d ever seen, bigger than the professional wrestler Andre the Giant. He stood at least eight feet tall. Even sitting, as he sat now in my overwhelmed office chair, he towered.

(Why was Vyvyan worried about what to call me? He could call me, with total impunity, whatever he wanted to.)

Vyvyan’s dress did nothing to render him less scary. A beige burn mask (or a tight elastic hood designed to suggest a burn mask) covered his enormous head. His eyes were visible through the mask’s eyeholes; they were too small for his head, as glassy-yellow as an alley cat’s, and so phlegmy that their continuous discharge had left umber-orange tear tracks on either side of his monstrous nose.

His lips showed through an oblong cutout like a pair of helically twisted wisps of licorice, black and oddly glossy.

The tightness of Vyvyan's mask gave me a pretty good idea of the basic shape of his features, which all seemed preternaturally lumpy and swollen. His brow and jaw had such prominence that I wondered if he were suffering, as Abraham Lincoln reputedly had, from acromegaly, the abnormal enlargement of one's face, feet, and hands.

Vyvyan's hands were big enough to support this speculation, but he kept them gloved. Or, rather, mittened. Wool mittens (featuring pine trees and silver sleighbells on a ground of snowy white) like Barbara and I had bought our grandkids last winter. Only their size told against them. Along with the mittens, Vyvyan wore vast denim overalls, a blue-plaid flannel shirt, ebony galoshes with unfastened hasps, and a cream-colored duster such as a cowboy or the driver of an old-time car might have worn. The duster added to, rather than disguised, his bulk.

So I was afraid. Vyvyan could have strangled me or thrown me through a gently quaking pane of glass, and no one would have found my body for hours. Barbara was probably already in bed. Her TV work required a demoralizingly early alarm.

How had I gotten myself into this hazardous fix?

Barbara's father, William Yost, had referred Vyvyan to me, but he had done so through Vyvyan's employer, Van Foxworth, the president of a Norcross-based warehousing firm called CargoCo Unlimited. Vyvyan worked virtually around the clock at a CargoCo storage facility as a stacker and night watchman. In fact, according to my father-in-law, he lived in a room outfitted for him inside this immense, corrugated metal building by Mr. Foxworth himself. He took all his meals in this room, so he'd never have to go out, and ate a strict vegetarian diet. Van Foxworth's nephew, Vinny Fall, delivered his meals via a pass-through from a junk-filled attached office.

The Phantom of the Warehouse, I thought. Apparently, Vyvyan had arrived at this reclusive life style shortly after joining CargoCo in the mid-1970s. Only this kind of thoroughgoing isolation had enabled him to work at all, and now, viewing Mr. Foxworth as his sole friend and benefactor, he insisted on the arrangement.

Of late, though, Vinny Fall had sometimes heard a fearful howling from the warehouse. Several late-night passers-by had also heard it, and the only possible source of the howling was Vyvyan, who, it had become clear, was suffering. On Mr. Foxworth's command, then, Vyvyan had come to me for help.



"I wish to be as others are," he said. "And I wish to have some salvific distinction in my new-found conformity."



That first Thursday night, we felt our way with each other. He told me what he wanted, with no bet-hedging, and I guess he told the truth. I purposely refrained from raising subjects that would plunge him too deep too soon, or suggest that I was in a hurry to conclude and go home to bed. But it didn't seem wrong to ask him point-blank if he were comfortable or to remark on his mask. His comment, "Would that you were blind, Dr. Zylstra," seemed to entitle me.

“Aren’t you warm, Vyvyan?”

“Extremes of temperature affect me far less violently than they do the ordinary—the general—run of men.”

“Big men usually sweat more than smaller ones.” I said this in a bantering way, leaning back in my chair.

“The perspiration drops on your countenance would seem to belie that doubtful observation, Jerrold.”

I wiped my face with a handkerchief. “How’d you burn yourself?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“The burn mask. Was there an occupational fire? Or were you in a vehicle that rolled and burst into flame?”

“I am physically uninjured. I confess to you that I wear my hood not for any wonderful medical purpose but for concealment.”

“Can’t you face me without a mask? Doesn’t it, uh, *interpose* a barrier to therapeutic intimacy?” I fisted my handkerchief.

“You are unready for the shock that would attend my unmasking.”

“I’m a tough guy. I can take it.” What was he trying to tell me? That he resembled the Elephant Man? That he was an AIDS patient with repulsive lesions? That his hood concealed a mangled armature of bone? True, I’d never seen a man his size before, but I doubted that any deformity he had would render me a gibbering loon.

As if mocking me, Vyvyan said, “Tough guys’—doctors of heart and fortitude—do not tremble before their patients.”

I was trembling. Fear had laid siege to me. “I don’t know about that,” I said. “All I know is that tough guys—working patients—don’t run from what they must face. Your hood has to come off, if not tonight then next week.”

Vyvyan’s phlegmy yellow eyes examined my office. “Do not famous physicians of your speciality treat a patient’s existence pain while the sufferer reclines on a... a divan?”

“A divan? Oh, you mean a couch.”

“I bow to your greater knowledge.”

“Freudians like that arrangement—therapist upright in a chair, patient down on the couch. I don’t like it. It creates a hierarchic division on the basis of one’s position in space. Up or down. High or low. And I’m no Freudian, Vyvyan.”

“Do you not presently enforce a similar hierarchic division with the barricade of this desk?” He laid a mitten on it.

“I—But Vyvyan’s observation was on target. I do sometimes hide behind, or draw authority from, my desk. “Do you want me to sit facing you without its protection? If you do, I will.”

“What I instead propose is that you import for our next session a div—I mean, of course, a *couch*—for me to lie upon.”

“But why? I thought—”

“To create a hierarchic division between us that will purge you of feelings of physical inferiority and thus of fear. Maskless, I would dispose myself on it so as to spare you the troublesome sight of my face.”

So he planned to take off his hood. That was progress. He also had a care for *my* psychic health. Patients who concern themselves on first visit with the therapist's emotional well-being are as rare as debutantes in a soup kitchen.

Vyvyan rose. My ceiling made him stoop. He withdrew a paperback book from a pocket on his duster, his mittened hand engulfing it, and placed the book on my desk. I picked it up. It was the first Signet Classic edition of *Frankenstein*, printed in December, 1965, with a childlike cover painting of a blurry goblinessque beast running toward the reader from a copse of moon-entangled trees. The cover's spooky blueness, and the goblin's stick-figure frailty, sent a zigzagging chill down my spine.

"That is my story," he said. "The true history of my career as an animate being—until my long sleep and my second coming."

"This," I said firmly, "is a novel."

"Nay, it is Mrs. Shelley's transcription of a narrative set down in the late seventeen hundreds by a British merchant seaman, Captain Robert Walton. Do you the needful and read it front to back before we talk again." Vyvyan turned toward my door.

"Wait." (But what to say?) "Do you need money for a cab?"

"Oh, I have fare. I husband nearly every penny I earn. But no conveyance will stop for me, especially at night, and so I must go speedily and stealthily afoot to my warehouse apartment. Fare thee well, Jerrold, until our reunion, Thursday week."



I had encountered a delusional schizophrenic with the grandiose conviction that he was the monster forged in the Gothic imagination of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley under the hands of that archetypal mad scientist, Victor Frankenstein.

Some delusional schizophrenics believe they are Jesus Christ, or Joan of Arc, or even Vladimir Lenin in silk and nylon drag. One of my most confused patients insisted that she was Imelda Marcos. I put her on medication, and she soon improved, moving from being Imelda to being Imelda's sister, then Imelda's hairdresser, then a Philippine woman with a shoe fetish, and finally herself.

Vyvyan's delusion withstood the medication on which I placed him that first week. (Vinny Fall filled the prescription and dropped it off for him at the warehouse.) I didn't know if I had prescribed an inadequate dosage for his body mass, or if he had incorporated the delusion so early in life, at such a basic psychosomatic level, that he had *become* what he believed.

Even I was confused. On the night he laid the book on my desk, I had to admit that Vyvyan had all the most telling physical attributes of the manmade giant in Mrs. Shelley's "transcription." Either I must believe that he was in fact this creature, or I must assume that his physique—a coincidence arranged by a whimsical Creator?—had convinced him of his utter identity with it.

The names Vyvyan and Franklin, I saw, were obvious stand-ins for Victor and Frankenstein. But Goodloss mystified me. Was it his real family name or a sardonic one-word gloss on the spiritual serenity of which his appearance had deprived him?

Between our next session, then, I reread *Frankenstein*. I also ordered a couch—a huge leather chaise lounge with a plump headrest and mechanisms for raising and lowering its main cushion. To make room for it, I had my desk moved against one wall and my rubber-tree plant carted into the waiting room.

Vyvyan liked the couch. It wasn't long enough for him to lie on without placing the soles of his galoshes on the rug and crooking his knees upward, but this strange posture didn't seem to annoy or cramp him. And getting his head below mine *did* reduce my unease.

"The burn mask," I said.

He slipped it off. Sitting behind him, I could see only a dense curtain of greasy hair, its blackness like record vinyl and the veins of frost within it like scratches. The head was a phrenologist's wet dream, an oblate globe of bumps and declivities and ridges.

"I should look at you. Otherwise, your gesture means nothing."

"No. Refrain. It was no accident that you sat behind me. Begin you now my therapy. We have a tortuous path to traverse."

I let him have his way. *Frankenstein* in hand, I began asking questions, and we devoted the session to a detailed reconstruction of Vyvyan's life from the last paragraph of the "novel" to his arrival in Atlanta in the early 1970s and his employment by CargoCo Unlimited in May, 1975. A century and a half in hibernation, in an ice cave on the shore of a Norwegian island just within the Arctic Circle, account for the greatest span of this time. Then, a lightning storm awoke him. I could recount his alleged posthibernation travels, including episodes in the American Northwest when startled trappers or wildlife photographers mistook him for a bigfoot, or his harrowing adventures in the Sun Belt states, where concealment was even harder—but all that he said simply reinforced the Frankenstein delusion.

"Vyvyan, your story suggests that you've bought into a myth that negates your personhood. It relieves you of the need to take charge of your own life."

"Is the hour allotted to my therapy nearly spent?"

I checked my watch. "Yeah, I'm afraid it is."

"Do you ready yourself, then, to behold the visage that descends from and mercilessly drives this 'myth'!"

Vyvyan reared up from the couch. Straddling it backwards in an awkward stoop, he looked straight down into my eyes. I gaped. His eyes I'd already seen, but his naked face was a horror. His flesh was tissue-thin. The muscles, veins, ligaments, and bones under it shone through the mottled tissue like props behind a theater scrim. They all seemed to be ceaselessly moving. Equally alarming, Vyvyan's complexion was hideously pied. His chin was the color of uncooked liver. His lips were a moist black; his cheeks either a dull gray or the pale, pebbly yellow of chicken flesh. It was a face seemingly assembled from transparent lumps of feces-toned, blood-perfused, and fat-slimed Play-Doh. One Victor Frankenstein had conducted an insane scavenger hunt to find the needed parts. Vyvyan's head, presumably like the remainder of his body, was the three-dimensional anatomical equivalent of a jigsaw puzzle; a biological hodgepodge.

I made a bleak noise and glanced away.

"I am the very wretch whom I do swear to be. Do you believe me? Do you acknowledge aught that I have told you?"

"Yes," I said, eyes averted: the only word I could get out.

"Then you must counsel me as that weak-souled man's progeny, not merely as the helpless victim of a crude delusion. Do you agree?"

"Yes," I said.

Vyvyan Franklin Goodloss barked, "Good," and left. Huddled there with my eyes shut, I imagined him slipping with a linebacker's grace through the city's tinsel-hung side streets, an ungainly and archaic shadow against Atlanta's shimmering yuletide glitz.



I dealt with Vyvyan from that session onward as if he were who he claimed to be. Heal his assumed identity (I rationalized, pretending to listen to a patient during regular office hours or lying beside my sleeping wife), and *then* you can destroy his grandiose masquerade and heal the obsessed pretender.

I hate lies. I hate false solutions. But with Vyvyan, I decided that indulging his foremost self-deception was the only way to pursue his therapy successfully.



"You're a murderer," I said at the outset of our third session, grateful that he hadn't removed his hood until lying down.

"I have never—he began vehemently. Then a note of pleasure crept into his rumbling voice: "Yes."

"You started to deny it."

"Nay. What I had intended to deny was that I have injured anyone in my post-resurrection persona."

"But Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein* accuses you of murdering three people. It implicates you in the death of two others."

"Yes." I could *hear* the pleasure in this admission.

"So you're a murderer, Vyvyan. Why does that amuse you?"

He sobered. "I am not entertained by the memory. It was indeed I who committed those crimes, but an 'I' deformed toward a fiendish malignity by the one who spurned and betrayed me. In that pitiable incarnation, I killed for revenge. I am no longer that self."

"Revenge is a great motive, but a lousy justification."

"How to frame this?" said Vyvyan, lifting a mittened hand. "I deplore the deaths effected in the unhappy dawn of my being, but one must own that it was a *phase* that I had to pursue to a cathartic end."

"Vyvyan," I rebuked him.

"I was good, but my creator and a small-minded contingent of his fellows—*your* fellows, Jerrold—made me bad."

"You aren't taking responsibility for—"

"Nay, my God-envying father never shouldered the responsibility for *me!* On the one occasion he strove to lighten my lot—not from any native altruism, but in the hope that I would absent myself from Europe and trouble him no more—he tore apart the beastly Eve that he was creating for my solace. Speak not of *my* culpability! Despise the failed Monster Builder of Ingolstadt for his!"

Vyvyan sobbed deep in his barrel-like chest. For reassurance, I touched the pistol under my jacket. Still, I had no confidence that if his hatred of his father, and of humanity in general, provoked an attack on me, mere bullets would turn or even slow him.

“For months, he labored over me,” Vyvyan raged. “For weeks, he perforce gazed down on my pied and uncomely countenance. How did it happen that only *after* the primordial life force racked my frame and kindled a rheumy vision in my eyes, this master scientist—this Promethean genius—saw in me a contemptible monstrosity? Had he labored on me blind? Had he reasoned that, upon awakening, I would plastically transform myself into a voluptuous Cleopatra? Had he, in spite of his Daedalian skills and the overweening ambition of a Roman general, the brain of a pismire and the imagination of a blowfly? Do you now apply yourself to these questions! Do you now confess that I am the unfortunate handiwork of a megalomaniacal halfwit!”

We got little further that night than this denunciation of Victor Frankenstein. If I acknowledged that Vyvyan was the unnatural child of the Swiss chemist (which I did), then I could see the justice of his heartfelt tirade.

I tried to find ore in another vein: “Vyvyan, tell me about your name. Isn’t it a variety of falsehood?”

“Falsehood?”

“I mean, it isn’t really your name. It’s an invention, a game you’ve played with your creator’s initials and also your day-to-day struggle with existence pain.”

“Forgive me my presumptuousness, but *every name is an invention*. Where I part with the general run of humanity is in the demoralizing circumstance that no parent bestowed mine. I had, myself, to invent it. Therefore, I do not regard it as either temporary or deceitful. It is my name as surely, perhaps more surely, as Jerrold Zylstra is yours, for I freely fashioned and self-bestowed it.”

“All right. I see.”

“Vyvyan means *living*. Franklin magnanimously honors the father who denied me. Would you prefer me to answer to perjorative epithets like *monster*, *fiend*, or *demon*?”

“Of course not. And Goodloss? Does it reflect the existential irony that I at first supposed?”

“Perhaps. It additionally means that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is my sister...”



Why had Vyvyan taken to howling in the cavernous solitude of the CargoCo warehouse? After all, if not for this howling, he would not have become my patient.

“I did not realize that this behavior had commenced,” he said. “I howled utterly heedless that I was thus sorrowfully engaged.”

“As someone might absent-mindedly hum?”

“As someone, contemplating suicide, might breathe.”

“Why this year, Vyvyan? Why not last year? Or five years ago? or ten? Or five years from now?”

“How am I to answer you? The predictability of the onset of an acute psychological disorder, I conceive, falls below that of either earthquakes or solar eclipses.”

“And so you’re here.”

“And so, Jerrold, I am here.”



Barbara, a petite woman with an early-morning interview show on our local ABC affiliate, began to resent my Thursday evening sessions with Vyvyan. By the final week in January, I had met with him eight times. The contract drawn up with Mr. Foxworth stipulated that his treatment would run six months; however, he was the only patient with whom I had ever agreed to meet after my posted office hours.

My wife regarded these lost evenings as “stolen.” Thursday had traditionally been the night on which we met with three other couples for bridge and middle-aged chitchat. It also upset her that V.F.—as I referred to Vyvyan at home, to preserve the confidentiality of his case—was apparently a big man with a hot temper, a heavy vein of bitterness, and a history of violent acts. In Barbara, annoyance and concern alternated in strobelike flashes. I stood frozen by the annoyance and blinking before the concern.

“Can’t you switch the sessions to another night?”

“Which one, Barb? I won’t do it on the weekend, when conferences sometimes arise. Every other evening’s taken. Mondays, I’ve got Mental Health League meetings. Tuesdays, I chair our fund raiser for the History Center. Wednesdays, you always—”

“Stop. I get the picture.” And so Barbara would change tacks: “What if this loony V.F. person goes off his nut and—”

“He won’t. And if he does, I have this.” I showed her my pistol in its compact little shoulder holster.

“How creatively macho. Come on, Jerry, do you really think that calms my fears? Can’t you get out of this? Can’t you at least make room for poor old V.F. during regular office hours?”

“Barb, this is a favor for Van Foxworth, your daddy’s longtime friend and associate. It was Dear Bill who got me into this.”

Barbara looked at the ceiling through her bangs. “Thanks, Dad,” she said. She put a hand on my chest. “But you’re having fun with it, aren’t you? *Aren’t you?*”

“It has to be one of the most interesting cases I’ve ever had,” I conceded. “And I may be doing some good.”

“You’d better be,” Barbara said.



“You want to be as others are,” I said during our final January session. “And you want there to be something distinctive about you even as you sink into the American melting pot?”

“Yes.”

“Your height?” (I did not say, although I thought it, *Your pied and misshapen face?*)

“Nay, Jerrold. My height estranges. Or else it elicits, on the part of some, a mercenary ulteriority.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You could probably play basketball. The Hawks would pay you big-time just to ride the bench as a backup center.”

I wasn't trying to be funny. Vyvyan had a raw athleticism that even his clownish wardrobe couldn't disguise. In *Frankenstein*, he had effortlessly scaled the face of Mont Saleve. And the Atlanta Hawks had once dropped a multimillion-dollar contract on a beanpole center averaging less than six points a game.

Vyvyan, who had a TV set in his warehouse room, began to laugh rumblingly. "What meaning does basketball impart to the quotidian rounds of our lives? What meaning *can* it impart?"

"For some, it's a living. A damned good one."

"Passing a ball through an elevated ring set on the horizontal at a predetermined height—"

"Yeah. Ten feet."

"—to produce a score that, if larger than one's competitor's, affords an excuse for noisy self-congratulation."

"Others join in, throwing money, confetti, silk undies. Meaning ensues from the activities to which we attribute meaning."

Vyvyan paused before asking, "Attribute your meaning to dreams?"

"Sure, I think dreams *mean*. They shed light on the details, if not always the causes, of all our waking anxieties."

So Vyvyan told me a dream he'd had some time ago: "By myself, I am a basketball team in an ebony uniform, with a mourning band around my left arm. Several players as bothersome as midges swarm about me in uniforms of many colors—my opponents. The vast arena is shot through with a blinding lambency, and I move within this heavy light like one struggling to swim in the sanctuary of a drowned cathedral.

"A zigzag of lightning cleaves the arena, divesting the golden light of its terrible weight. This is the signal for the contest to begin. I *control*, as a sportscaster in the great hall sepulchrally announces, the opening tip-off, but am unable to bounce the ball on the floor without a midgelike opponent effecting a theft and fleeing from me. This galling pattern recurs and recurs.

"The large vertical squares to which each *basket* is attached—backboards, affirms the sportscaster—are mirrors. I am the only player in the arena who can see his face in these opposing mirrors when I trot, ever more frustrated, toward the one goal or the other. I am odious even to myself, and the invisible spectators in the arena are audibly celebrating my frustration.

"At last, however, I secure the ball. I do not try to advance by the legal method of *dribbling*. Rather, I march toward my goal with the ball held undislodgably under my arm. The mites who attempt to interfere with my march I hurl from me as a bear flings the yelping dogs of a hunting pack. The arena quiets. I am under my goal."

"Go ahead," I urged Vyvyan.

He released a breath. "I am surrounded by flailing defenders. I lift the ball over my head and spring from the floor so that my upper body ripples in the mirror of the backboard. I perform with exultant *savoir-faire* a maneuver known to basketball enthusiasts as a *gorilla dunk*. The backboard disintegrates. A myriad shards, each no larger than a sand grain, cascade down. I tower in ruins of my own making, glittery diamonds on my head and shoulders."

"Wow," I said.

“My dream had an epilogue. The arena experienced darkness. When the lights returned, I again had the ball, but now I faced the other basket. Arrayed against me was a team of only five players, each in gold, each of a stature akin to my own. I began with difficulty to *dribble* the ball through their tenacious defense. Meanwhile, the arena’s spectators jeered my efforts, but with catcalls more jocular than malign.” He paused again. “There the epilogue concluded.”

I said nothing. The dream, at least in tandem with its epilogue, limned a subconscious adjustment that deserved praise. My nape hairs were standing erect. My knuckles were tingling. On the other hand, to analyze the dream for Vyvyan would’ve been to interdict the chance of self-discovery. I sat silent, waiting.

“Have you no oneiromantic exegesis?”

“What about you, Vyvyan? Don’t you have one?”

“I understand my dream, but its meaning comes from the projected symbology rather than from any latent import in the game itself. I still have no wish to achieve my identity as an Atlanta Hawk.”

“Good for you,” I said. We laughed together.



“Vyvyan, are you afraid of dying?”

“I am afraid of *not* dying.”

“Come again.”

“I may not have the capacity to pass from sentience to oblivion.”

“You think you’re immortal?”

“That is my nightmare. It has often stayed my hand when I moved, in either weariness or despair, to destroy myself.”

“You resist killing yourself because you don’t think you’ll be able to? You’ve lost me.”

“My nightmare is that I am *incapable* of dying. Who knows by what arcane methodology my father infused me with the life force? Perhaps I cannot die. Perhaps I can only mutilate or fragment myself, to the devastating end that whatever of me remains, greatly injured or even unrecognizably atomized, continues to throb and feel.”

“God.”

“I no longer postulate Him.”



“What about plastic surgery?”

“Who would perform it?”

“Height reduction through spinal excisions or the removal of leg-bone segments?”

“Again, who would perform these procedures?”

“Then you’ll have to face the world as you are and forgive it for beating up on you.”

“As you do.”

“As I do. *Patienthood is ubiquitous.*“

“If only the world would accommodate itself to me as I am.”

“A child’s wish, Vyvyan.”

"I am so much more than a child that the wish acquires the force of an apostolic bull."

"That way lies delusion or disappointment."

"I am not for myself the source of that which confers meaning. I was, however, such a source for Victor Frankenstein."

"Come again."

"The paradox of my life is that my father found his existential ground in the quest to create me. When I turned out something other than he had fatuously anticipated, he rediscovered this ground in a campaign to thwart and undo me. In at least two ways, then, I gave his life meaning, while he thoughtlessly withheld from me that same indispensable quality. Cursed, cursed creator! Why do I live?"

I waited almost a minute before speaking. "Let me play devil's advocate, Vyvyan. Is Van Foxworth, your employer, any better than Victor Frankenstein, your creator?"

"Mr. Foxworth has not rejected me."

"Isn't he perhaps exploiting you? You're doing the work of three or four people, and he's paying you not much more than minimum wage."

"I am impervious to the peculiar allure of money."

"Are you impervious to the truth that a person may do the right, or the nearly right, for the wrong reasons?"

"I am sensible of the truth that Mr. Foxworth, who has gazed upon my unmasked countenance without rushing to take up a stick, has given me the means to live in a system hostile to the ill-favored."

"By sequestering you in CargoCo's big tin warehouse?"

"What more should he have done? Sought out a professor of the affections to counsel with me?"

"Touché," I said. "A moment ago you asked, 'Why do I live?' It seems—sorry if this seems simplistic—that you live to work."

"And so do you."

"Of course," I said. "Who would want it otherwise?"



"When did you let your patients start piloting a couch again?" asked Barbara, who was visiting during my lunch break.

I was typing up notes from a session that had run long and eating at my desk: a pastrami-on-rye sandwich, a cup of decaffeinated mint tea, and a blueberry yogurt for dessert.

"That? Oh, that's for V.F. And any other patient who feels more comfortable lying down than sitting in a chair."

"Well," Barbara said, "it looks like an aircraft carrier."

"V.F.'s a big fella."

"So you've said. But that must've set you back plenty."

"CargoCo's paying for it. And even if they weren't, it'd be just another tax-deductible office expense."

Barbara put her handbag, a Judith Leiber black karung model that had cost more than the chaise lounge, on the floor, kicked off her high heels, and lay down on the couch.

Sighing, she linked her fingers behind her head and pointed her girlish toes at me. Her legs in their scabbards of coffee-colored nylon were enticing, but I was busy. Because of one overlong morning interview, I'd be fighting all day to catch up.

"Didn't you renounce the couch as part of your methodology?"

"V.F.'s a special case."

"You don't like their stereotypical implications. I don't like their, well, their *extracurricular* implications."

"You didn't always feel that way, Barb."

"We weren't married when I didn't feel that way." She let her nylons whisper together. "Odd that after all this time you should go back on such a crucial promise."

I spooned a last bite from the plastic yogurt cup. "Blame V.F. Blame Foxworth. Blame your father. Or don't blame anyone. It's a *couch*, a piece of furniture. It's entirely innocent."

"It wasn't the couch's innocence I was worried about."

Vanessa Frye, my secretary, buzzed to ask if I were ready to see my next patient. I said yes.

I went to the couch and kissed Barbara on the nose. "I'll see you this evening, okay?"

"No, you probably won't. It's Thursday, Jerry." She swung her legs toward me, put on her shoes, grabbed her karung bag. "Give my regards, when you see him, to the *ill-favored* V.F. 'Bye.'"

She nodded at Mr. Myron as he entered. I took some satisfaction from the fact that he was an elderly man trying to sort out both his guilt and his grief after surviving a car accident that had killed his wife. The attractive woman scheduled after Mr. Myron, after all, would have intensified Barbara's sense of unease.



"Female companionship," I said. "You asked Frankenstein for a woman, a distaff being, with whom to share a South American exile."

"A promise on which he tardily but brutally reneged. Thus were kindled the avenging fires of my outrage."

"He destroyed your woman. You destroyed his friend. Later, you destroyed his woman as well."

"Long ago," Vyvyan said. "Long ago."

"Don't you still wish for... female companionship?"

Vyvyan waved a mitten. "That my father spitefully desolated my Eve before bestowing upon her the quickening force no longer strikes me as an altogether horrid act."

"No? Why not?"

"Because the universe is so made, and each of us within it is so made, that the basic state of each living creature is aloneness. The chasms between persons resist bridging. We may do no more by way of defective consolation than shout at one another. This, in my second coming, I belatedly understand."

“I once had another patient who reached the same conclusion. But he added, *I may be alone in my boat, but it’s always comforting to see the lights of the other boats bobbing nearby.*“

“Very pretty. But a comfort I have seldom been given to know.”

“You no longer even *wish* for female companionship? For sensual contact? For sex?”

Vyvyan laughed. “Do you forgive me my boorish inquiry, but what would you have me do, seek out and unconscionably violate a yeti?” He chuckled again, a brief morose rumble.

“Forgive *my* boorish inquiry, but are you still a, a virgin?”

Vyvyan levered himself up and turned around, his ghastly features disclosed like the rainbow-colored butt of a baboon. His alley-cat’s eyes flickered, his lips writhed sneeringly.

“I do not rise to lures meretriciously designed to accommodate the voyeur casting them.”

I felt pinned to my chair, assaulted. I looked away. “Vyvyan, it isn’t wrong—it’s standard procedure—to discuss the intimate circumstances of your life with your therapist. Otherwise—”

“Otherwise, we might prove ourselves accidental observers of a civility no longer in fashion. Nay, I have already surrendered to a barbarous modernity on far too many fronts. Spare me, importunate man, this additional shame!”

I couldn’t stop him. He banged out of my office with his mask dangling from one hand. As if lame, I followed. He was already in the stairwell. My watch said sixteen minutes remained in our hour. Mr. Foxworth would see to it that I was paid for these minutes, but I still felt cheated.



At noon one week later, Vyvyan telephoned my office to report that he had had a small accident. Nessa Frye, my secretary, patched the call through to me, and Vyvyan said that a crate in a precarious stack of crates had toppled onto his foot, breaking every bone in his left little toe. He spoke in a disturbingly wheezy tone:

“My foot is bound in plaster, and I am unable to locomote without the support of a crutch. Therefore—”

“Vyvyan, I’ll come get you.” He didn’t want to meet with me.

“Nay. I suffer also from a severe catarrh. Thoracic congestion, nasal inflammation—”

Nastily runny eyes, I thought.

“—and a debilitating febricity. I must cancel our appointment this evening and take time to mend.”

“Vyvyan, what if I came to you?”

“Get you home to your fair and angelic wife. I am unfit company for the well.” Abruptly, he rang off.

I buzzed my outer office. “Nessa, come in here, please.”

At my desk, I worried the unspoken burden of Vyvyan’s call. It was a subterfuge, I thought. He was still angry with me for pressing him on matters that his eighteenth-century sense of punctilio viewed as outside the therapeutic province. I was in danger of losing him. His final words, “I am not worthy company

for the well,” seemed to me ominously two-edged, as if he’d overcome the awful conviction that he *couldn’t* die. This was a crisis requiring an unorthodox response. I looked up to find Vanessa Frye looking down.

“That was Mr. Goodloss, a patient psychologically *in extremis*.”

“Yes, sir.” Nessa is a dark-haired, unmarried woman in her early twenties, a weekend student at Georgia State, a psychology major with an intense desire to become a therapist. Her legs, sheathed in *cafe au lait* patterned stockings, reminded me of Barbara’s.

“Mr. Goodloss and I have reached a critical turning point. What he needs, Nessa, is validation for someone other than me or his employer, Mr. Foxworth. He needs to know that an attractive woman—you, for instance—can tolerate, possibly even admire, him.”

“I don’t think I’m following you, Dr. Zylstra.”

“Mr. Goodloss can’t make our session this evening, but I’m going to show him the depth of my concern by going to him. The mountain to Mohammed, so to speak. I’d like you to go with me.”

Without hesitation, Nessa said, “I have a date tonight, but I’ll call Jack and reschedule. This is more important.”

“Bless you. Let me bring you up to speed.”

Nessa had started working for me in early November, a week before Barbara’s father and Mr. Foxworth had petitioned me to take Vyvyan on as a special after-hours client, almost as a humanitarian experiment. She knew that I’d been seeing Vyvyan. She’d read the transcriptions of a couple of our interviews, and she understood that looking at him without his mask would demand courage, self-control, and compassion. A faithful employee and a brilliant psychology student, Nessa agreed, altogether selflessly, to help me.



In my gun-metal-blue Buick Reatta, we arrived in the gravel lot of CargoCo Unlimited shortly before eight o’clock. It was dark and cold, with a shrill February wind sweeping down upon and popping the corrugated tin panels of the stingily spotlighted warehouse. Nessa and I ducked into the attached entry shed—Vinny Fall had dropped a key by my office after a direct telephone request of his uncle—and made our way to both the door and the pass-through window to Vyvyan’s private room. Rats, or gecko-sized cockroaches, scuttled among the shed’s paint-gummed cans and cobwebbed cable spools.

“Vyvyan!” I shouted. “I’ve come for our session! Let me in!”

Although a little slow to respond, Vyvyan tocked the panel on the pass-through aside. A mottled cheek, and a lavender-gray ear like an *al dente* leaf of boiled cabbage, appeared there.

“Why do you not respect my incapacity? Why am I not permitted to withdraw recuperatively?”

“Because I care,” I said. “Let me in.”

To Nessa, I whispered: “Give me a couple of minutes to get him ready. I’ll leave the door cracked. Step in when I whistle.”

Vyvyan, hobbling on a single crutch, admitted me. The cubicle was dominated by a pond-sized quilt-strewn bed; an entertainment center from whose CD player

came the muted strains of a Franz Liszt program symphony, possibly *Faust*; and wall-to-wall, ceiling-high shelves of paper-bound books. Vyvyan's aluminum crutch, I noticed, was as tall as I am.

"*What?*" he barked, uncharacteristically brusque. Well, he hadn't lied. He had both an injured foot and a cold. The protective cast confirmed his broken toe bones; the bluish tinge to the puffy planes of his face, his "catarrh."

"Who put your foot in the cast?"

"A physician brought here by Mr. Foxworth. I wore my mask and lay back peacefully on my bed."

I nodded stupidly. What to say? I said, "Hey, I've been trying to think of jobs that would give you the same freedom from rejection as your CargoCo job, but more personal fulfillment."

Vyvyan gestured me to a bench against one wall, a kind of reading ledge, and collapsed like a demolished building onto his bed.

"Listen." I took a list from my pocket: "Computer programmer. Forest-fire spotter. Coyote trapper. Accountant or tax preparer. Voice-over narrator for films, TV documentaries, and product ads. Copy editor. Rural mail carrier. Telephone operator in a backward one-board town. Baseball statistician. A painter of still lifes. A poet. Or maybe an on-site meteorologist in, say, the Antarctic, Orkneys, or like that. What do you think?"

Vyvyan grunted skeptically.

"There *are* options," I said.

But the truth was that his position with CargoCo, in an isolated semirural warehouse, was just about the perfect job for a humanoid being of his sensibilities and threatening looks. Without submitting to painful plastic surgery and height-reduction procedures, he might *never* find a satisfying level of acceptance in late-twentieth-century America.

"Word processing?" I said. "Radio announcing?"

"Activity is a hollow source of meaning," Vyvyan said, "without a complementary share of a direct affection."

That seemed an appropriate cue. I gave a sharp, mockingbirdlike whistle. Nessa came into Vyvyan's room and sat unflinchingly beside me on the reading ledge.

Vyvyan shot me a fierce look of astonishment and betrayal, then rolled over and covered his head with a feather pillow.

"Please don't hide from me," Nessa said. "This is your place, after all, and you didn't invite me to barge in this way."

He lifted a corner of the pillow. "Nor did I, strictly speaking, Dr. Zylstra." The pillow smothered his head again.

"Dr. Zylstra and I are your support group," Nessa said. "We're here for you, Vyvyan. Completely."

"Mmmmm-mm-mmm."

"With people to talk to, to share your feelings with, your place here at CargoCo might not seem so intolerable," Nessa said. "Better, certainly, than being a lone meteorologist at the South Pole."

Eventually, Vyvyan emerged. He even sat up and faced us.

Nessa was great, a lovely and seductive asset to his treatment. Each potentially dangerous subject that arose, Nessa and he breasted in easy, reciprocally

synchronized exchanges. I was hardly there at all. I was a facilitator and observer. That session lasted not just fifty minutes (the traditional therapeutic hour), but closer to three hours. It was the most productive meeting I'd had with Vyvyan since beginning his treatment.



From that Thursday forward, Nessa attended every session that I had with Vyvyan. It was exactly as Nessa had said: she and I were permanent members of his support group. The love and validation that we jointly afforded him—and that Nessa, in particular, provided by being a strong and accepting female—almost certainly deterred him from risking suicide. It also enabled him to look upon his life at CargoCo as greatly more attractive, comfortable, and, yes, even happy than otherwise.

Vinny Fall reported that we had cured Vyvyan of howling. What's more, Nessa intervened with Mr. Foxworth, via a tactfully written letter, to convince him to increase Vyvyan's salary and benefits and to give him periodic segments of free time in which to rediscover the loveliness and serenity of the natural world. The warehouse was not only socially, but also physically, restrictive, and Vyvyan loved the outdoors—beaches, glaciers, forests, etc.

Cures are always the aim, but not always the outcome, of every tenderly conducted therapeutic process. But with Vyvyan Franklin Goodloss, Nessa and I brought about a cure.

Toward the end of his six-month treatment contract with me, a creature assembled over two centuries ago by a hubristic genius, and heartlessly spurned by that same cruel life-giver, found both his soul and a reliable antidote to the joy-strangling toxin of his existence pain. Nessa and I worked closely and painstakingly with Vyvyan to bring about regeneration and healing. For, if the world will not change, then we must.



The preceding four paragraphs are a transcription of my notes from our penultimate session with Vyvyan. Two days ago, our *last* session took place. It was a catastrophe. I record this epilogue, by the way, from the high-security ward of a hospital where I am recovering from a bullet wound to the left shoulder.

Midway through the session, Nessa said, "I have to tell you both that I'm quitting my job here. Jack's proposed. We'll marry in June and move to Seattle."

Against every expectation, Vyvyan flew into what I can only call a jealous frenzy. He behaved as if driven by bitter memories of the abandonment and betrayals of his late father.

"Do you not forsake me, lovely Vanessa!" he cried. "How, after the harrowing trials we have passed together, may you even consider such a selfish course?"

Reverting to the naked animality of his earlier self, he stood up, seized Nessa with one bare hand, and flipped her onto my chaise lounge with a twist so wrenchingly sudden that she could barely even gasp. With one hand, Vyvyan held her to the couch and, grimacing like a Technicolor gargoyle, began to squeeze his eely fingers about her throat. Nessa's eyes bugged out, filling with a crimson the same alarming shade as her reddening skin.

“No!” I shouted. My pistol vaulted into my hand. I aimed it at Vyvyan’s great ugly head. I was too close to him. He reached out, applied the vise of his free hand to my gun hand, turned the stubby barrel back at me, and, because I was already tightening my trigger finger, shot me about two inches above the heart. Dripping blood, I blundered over my sculpted chrome chair into the wall. The report so startled Vyvyan that he released Nessa and fled.

Ms. Frye, I’m told, is recovering at home. Although I have been falsely accused of trying to murder her, I’m in a variety of recovery myself. It’s slow, however, because I’m desolated by both Vyvyan’s unexpected reversion and the unmerited hostility of my loved ones and friends.

Every person in this ward looks like a hard-bitten felon, and the only TV set seems to be perpetually tuned to some meaningless Atlanta Hawks basketball game, with the volume up as loud as the ward’s guard, a rabid, gum-chewing fan, will permit. A police therapist has come to interview me twice already, but my side of this tragic story seems to annoy him intensely.

The only time Barbara’s visited, she was tight-lipped and cold. I tried to get her to talk, but her eyes kept straying to the elevated TV screen—its picture was flipping vertically—and her answers seemed to fall on me from a judgmental height. Each one hurt. After she’d left, I found a familiar desk placard on my bedside tray, the one she gave as an anniversary gift, the one that shouts, PATIENTHOOD IS UBIQUITOUS.

It would be nice if Vyvyan visited, but he’s a smart guy, and I’d bet my practice he’s gone permanently on the lam.

