

September

(1)

Dusk. Mist. Perfect for this night. The way the fog haloed the streetlights, diffusing their beams, sending them drifting to the sidewalk like feathers. The union of mist and dusk gave everything a gritty intensity, blurring the edges between the light and the darkness. The coarse, damp, swirling air. The decrepit neighborhood. Anticipation. All whisked together into the moment. It was the kind of night Autumn would choose to bring a society into the world.

For as long as she could remember, she wanted to feel at the center of something, at the heart of a thing larger than life, and from the moment last spring when Gaston and Lyle first suggested forming a society, she latched onto the idea as that thing. This was the night to carve out a niche: the six of them moving forward into the unknown with only artistic skill to cut the way. Too romantic or dreamy a thought? Well, screw realism. The world was too coldly realistic. Let passion hold sway.

She walked past the shrouded houses and the vacant lots that divided the residential section of Prue from “The Roughie”: a three block strip of bars, dingy diners, and sagging buildings rented out to art students as studios by college-town landlords. The area had become a student haven almost from the moment the North American University of Fine Arts — or NAUFA — opened its doors. Here the air was always intense, the byproduct of ruin and rot. Signs had no reason for being here, another plus in Autumn’s mind. If you didn’t know where

you were going, you didn't belong here. Like the Lick and Poke. Just a plain brown door set a yard inside a plum-colored stone façade with blurred neon signs burning behind glass blocks. Autumn went in and steered past the bar and its huddled crowd of drinkers, heading down the corridor to the back room. Chet, Lyle, and Mary occupied a table to the side of the empty stage, and when she sat down, Chet tossed a copy of the *Artisan*, the campus newspaper, onto the middle of the table. Hands outstretched, beer foaming over the lip of his mug, he said, "If we're raising a *secret* society, why is word of the initiation rite splashed about in this rag?"

Autumn picked up the paper.

"Third item from the top, second column," said Chet.

"The initiation rite of Societe de l'Esprit Artistique will be held on Friday, 21 September 1999, nine o'clock p.m. Nothing's splashed. It's a quiet announcement. So people know we exist."

"Why do we want them to know?"

"What good would it do to form a society that no one knows exists?" Autumn caught the eye of a waitress and lifted Lyle's mug.

"I may only be an illiterate painter, and Mary, as our writer-in-residence, may correct me if I'm wrong, but 'secret' means something no one else knows about, doesn't it?"

"Not in this case," said Lyle. "We're not talking about forming an order like the Golden Dawn. We want an artistic society in the German Romantic mold. They were called "secret societies" because not anyone could join, and the works created by the members went public first under the name of the society, not the individual. Only later, when the societies disbanded or the members reached a certain level of recognition, did the works get individual attention. Groups of that sort were known all over Europe. Anyhow, patrons of the day were aware of them. We're going to want people to know us in the same way, and, for that to happen, they have to know we exist. Pique their curiosity."

Chet grunted and gulped at his beer. "Where the hell's Gaston? What's his take on all this?"

“He was going to Montreal earlier today,” Lyle said. “Maybe he got held up. He wanted to do a little research on the rituals and things that societies performed.”

“So, there are five of us, right?” Chet asked. “The four of us and Gaston?”

“Don’t forget Patrick,” Mary said, picking up the paper and re-reading the announcement. “He can’t shut up about this society; he’s so excited.”

“And you’re not?” Autumn asked.

Mary shrugged. “I don’t get the same charge out of it that all of you seem to, but it’s okay.”

Autumn felt the anger rise up through her chest to her throat. So, Mary wasn’t excited about the society. No surprise there. Mary Han was like the good part of Prue and the University: she had to project the appropriate image; she was attending an art school, so she had to be an artist of some sort. Mary only comprehended the beauty of the surface because that was her plane of existence, what she valued: a delicate-as-scrimshaw posture; two brown, Chinese-American shaped dollops for eyes; and skin, as well as poetry, that was as soft and powdery as flour. She wasn’t like others in the group, not made of the same artistic stuff, bred from the same artistic bones. They were, to borrow Lyle’s term, Romantics ... in different ways: Gaston — genius in its purest form; Lyle — the living incarnation of the *Peanuts* character Schroeder; Chet — stoutly devoted to his paints and his pints. Then there was this Patrick Mallard person. Who the hell was he other than Mary’s lover?

Chet and Lyle turned the conversation into a debate over what the society’s rituals should be, and Mary waved them into a pause. “All this talk about rites and dark rooms and stuff sounds so weird and cliché-ish,” she said. “It doesn’t have feeling.”

“But that’s what we’re trying to get,” Lyle said. “A feeling, a sense that we belong to a bonded group. All societies had ritual.”

“Maybe back in the Middle Ages, but not today. All that stuff just gets in the way of creating.”

“How so?” Chet asked.

“Well, look. You say you want us to work on things, write and paint things. Well, if we spend all our time doing this hocus-pocus kind of stuff, then we have to get back in a creative frame of mind afterward. The rituals just take us out of the mood we have to be in to create.”

Lyle pointed his finger at Mary. “That’s it, right there. That’s why we’re debating. We want to come up with a ritual to enhance that mood, not destroy it.”

“I just don’t see the point of it. If you want to create a mood, put on a song. This occult stuff just isn’t real. I like to write about real things, things that make a person feel something, an emotion, like ... love for instance.”

“Then,” said Autumn, “maybe you should write about being in love with yourself. Call it ‘To Stroking — An Ode.’” She gave the comment time to settle in on everyone at the table. “Oh, I’m sorry. You said you wanted to write about something that would make you feel. My mistake.”

Mary went stiff, and Chet wagged his finger toward Autumn. “Temper, temper, Autumn-girl. Let’s keep our tongues a bit more dull, shall we? This is an important meeting.”

“Yeah, so damn important that Gaston can’t even show up. And where’s this gung-ho Patrick I keep hearing about? If he’s so excited, why hasn’t he hauled his golden ass down here? In his place we have Mary Poppins who doesn’t even know what a society is let alone want to be a part of one.” She gulped the rest of the beer and slammed the glass down on the table. “Forget it. We can’t do this until we’re all here and we’re all into it, and it pisses me off that we’re not. I’m going home.”

“Autumn...” Lyle started.

“No, don’t ‘Autumn’ me. When everyone’s ready to do this thing right, when everyone’s serious about what’s going on, you let me know!”

The anger followed her out of the bar and nagged her all the way up Bloom Street to the apartment. She went in, undressed, and got into bed. Why was Mary with the group if she hated what societies involved? Why did everyone put up with such casual attitudes? Didn’t anyone else see what this society could be? Didn’t they care as much as she did? Why did she care so much

about any of it? And how did she get like this? The questions circled around her brain until the anger spun away. She dozed off into an uneasy sleep until a tapping from across the room snapped her out of it. She raised her head off the pillow as the bedroom door creaked open, and Lyle's head appeared in the dim crack of light. "Is it safe?"

"Yeah."

He stepped inside and closed the door quietly. "You're in bed? At least you'll be rested for the first day of classes."

"Dammit! I forgot to set my alarm."

"What time's your first class?"

"Eleven."

"I see. And you forgot to set your alarm because you were riddled with guilt about the way you acted tonight, right? You made Mary cry, you know."

"Good. She's damn lucky I didn't tear what passes for her tacky heart right out of her chest. 'Writer-in-residence.' Chet had way too much to drink."

Lyle took a seat on the corner of the bed. "So, she's not Wordsworth, but she's not bad. She had some suggestions about a libretto I'm working on, and the stuff she wrote is pretty good."

"I'll be sure to get her autograph when it's performed."

"The point is we better all try to get along. In a little more than two weeks we'll be society fellows. Speaking of which, you should've hung around a little bit longer and saved yourself — and all of us — a taste of your rage. Gaston showed up about a half an hour after you left, and we got some things settled."

"You want to climb on in under the covers and tell me?"

"Please! You're speaking to the monk of the group, appointed by Gaston to be the keeper of the instrument of initiation for Societe de l'Esprit Artistique."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Ah, that's privileged information, not to be discussed with every harlot who invites you

into her bed. Anyway Gaston drove me over here to pick up some piano string he got for me, and I thought I'd see if you'd calmed down any."

"I have."

"Well then, since my mission's accomplished, I'll go."

"You're sure you wouldn't rather stay with me?"

"My first class is at nine tomorrow, sorry."

He went, but Autumn couldn't go back to sleep. She focused on the shaft of light coming into the room through the thin space between the door and the doorpost, then on the steady stream of aimless guitar chords. She got up, threw on a man's extra-large, flannel shirt and traced the sound to the living room.

Gaston sat on the wide wooden bench built into the bay window, one foot braced against the far frame, the other leg swaying like a metronome. The washed out light from the street lamp brushed across him, occasionally flashing off the bobbing tuning knobs. He managed to gather the random notes into something coherent, and the sound changed, becoming Irish and light, like a fairy dance. Autumn took a seat on the couch and listened as he repeated the complex passage more smoothly.

"What's that you're playing?"

"It's called Epona. Patrick showed it to me one night while you were back in Pittsburgh."

"Over the summer?"

He nodded. "Probably about a month ago. I'd forgotten about it 'til now."

"You're playing a song filled with sub-rhythms and quick changes after only hearing it once a month ago?"

"Yeah."

"You suck."

"It's not as hard as it sounds. Get your guitar and try it."

"It's not hard for you, but I'll try it for an hour and not get the opening bars right. Then I'll get so pissed off I'll end up pushing you out the window, and I can't afford the rent for this

place by myself. No thanks.”

He shrugged and retreated back into his space – this state that only he knew how to reach. When they first met, Autumn suspected him of retreating there to get beyond the reach of everyone. But he insisted that he didn’t “go” anywhere, that his level of concentration didn’t differ from the concentration every good musician employed. He had always been that sort of man: a genius of creativity who was truly convinced that he was average and that everyone could do what he did. But he had never been average. She remembered listening to him play in the clubs and bars on Pittsburgh’s Southside, watching him take requests for an hour — everything from jazz to blues to rock — and play each one flawlessly. Then later, when she first came to stay with him, they worked out this game of musical Bonnie and Clyde: she would cajole club-goers into betting her that Gaston could play any song they named. Classical pieces, show tunes, dusty big band songs poured out of his guitar. They never lost. They ate with that money. He was twenty; she, nineteen.

No wonder she had fallen in love with him then, this genius whose music she heard in her head while they made love. Four years later she was still in love with him, maybe more so because he had the good sense even that young, to end the affair. She winced at that word; it really wasn’t right. “Affair” made their relationship sound equal when their coupling had all the equality of a 72-0 football score. She had been more like his number-one groupie. Once the relationship ended and the friendship began, the gap between them narrowed, and she gladly settled for that. She had too much ego to take another crack at a relationship with a genius.

Gaston never batted an eye when she brought up the idea about going to NAUFA. He simply said, “Sounds cool,” and came along. While she went to school, he pulled in the money by playing in clubs, sometimes locally, but most often in Montreal.

Despite their history together, she never quite made it into his space. She understood that place to be a perfect pocket of deep passion for him, a place that he searched for in bits and pieces in the real world. Within a month of coming to upstate New York, he found a chunk of that place in Montreal. Within a year he had mastered Canadian French, mastered the musical

styles of the Québécois, and fled to the city as often as he could. When he couldn't be there, he brought the nexus of Montreal back to Prue in little ways, such as insisting that the society be known by the French version of its name. That intermingling of his space and his world served as a conduit and a governor for the incredible passion that lay like an aquafer in the man. He remained the only person, place or thing in the world that made her feel wide-eyed and in awe.

"You hungry?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay, so what'll it be? Do I make a midnight breakfast for two or push you out that window?"

"Eggs'll be cool, if you're up to it."

"Good choice."

(2)

The fall term began on a day as fine as Quinn Gravesend could hope for in early September: a crisp blue sky and a steady breeze that had the trees shaking their leaves like they were laughing in places. The air moving into the classroom through the window had lost the wilted, sense-dulling feel that comes with the sultriness of summer, and, instead, it marched in with a fresh snap. This was the way the first day of the term should be: a day of no surprises, the kind of day where one could find excitement in the anticipation of knowing that what is expected is right on schedule.

Gravesend stood at the window near the head of the class, his back to the door. Students filed in behind him, and he felt first their eyes and then their thoughts probing the fact that he was not expected to be standing at the window ten minutes before the start of class. They'll grow accustomed to it. He smiled and amended his previous thought: the first day of the term should not hold surprises for a member of the faculty. Students, however, should find surprise in ready quantities.

There came the last burst of commotion as the stragglers and the fashionably-late took their seats. Still, Gravesend didn't move from the window; he waited until the room became

quiet. Nothing measures the mettle of a class as the length of time it takes them to notice the professor is waiting for them to hush. It was an old-fashioned method, and granted, in this day and age when collegiate manners and protocol had gone the way of the turntable and the record album, perhaps the method wasn't quite as accurate as it once had been. Still, it was a fair court.

This class settled rather quickly. With an expected rush of anticipation, Gravesend left the window and the waving trees and strolled to the lectern resting on the front desk. There he raised his head for his first view of the group. There were twelve: fresh student faces like eggs in a carton awaiting painting for Easter before being laid out for the hunt. Every semester they came to be made in this way, their faces holding the same expression. Only their clothes changed. This group consisted of tie-dyes, rugby shirts, jeans, a ruffled blouse, and three unkempt fashions lumped, Gravesend supposed, in the modern style he still thought of as "grunge." Standard wrapping for standard packages, the products of two years of a good undergraduate education in the rudiments and technology of composing music.

Gravesend leaned forward, elbows resting on the chipped, wood veneer box and smiled an expectant smile. A colleague once defended the practice of lecturing with his eyes closed by saying that after twenty years very little remained to be seen. Gravesend saw it another way: a professor is poorer for sailing through the first day of the term blind. The best part of the semester is that first day, cracking and freeing those eggs made from the shelled conformity of their earlier education. No, the first class of the term was the one class that was too good to miss.

He took a deep breath. "The composition of music is a hunt for a mythical beast. Therefore, I want you to tell me all that you know about hunting mythical beasts."

The first cracks appeared in several egg faces. Two of the more anal students made worried checks of their schedules to be sure they were in the correct classroom. Gravesend looked directly into the eyes of the sole student in the front row, the girl in the pristine ruffled blouse with the starched brown eyes to match.

"Ms...?"

"Green. Charlotte Green."

“Ms. Green, what do you know about hunting mythical beasts?”

“Well, you’d have to be pretty imaginative for one thing.” Her answer drew laughs from several people in the room. Gravesend was impressed. Perhaps this group wasn’t as dull as it looked.

“Very well said, Ms. Green, and correct. But please, add to that answer that one must also be prepared — for anything.”

As if on cue, every student opened a notebook and jotted down a note. The note. If anything were to doom education specifically and thinking in general it would be this endless fascination with note taking. Jotters, Gravesend called them, diseased to the point of delusion. As if they could transcribe meaning by scribbling. More often than not, the jotters missed the whole tenor of the lecture. He wasn’t about to let this group stain with ink the keen edge Ms. Green just showed. He came out from behind the lectern and leaned against the edge of the desk, not a yard from the first row of seats.

“Be prepared. The motto of the Boy Scouts and the most useful advice a person can take to heart. You have all come up through the ranks of the music program. How many of you feel prepared for this class?”

Several students raised their hands. Others, sensing the trap, remained still.

“Prepared for what? The ancient hunter, about to embark on the chase after his not-so-mythical beast, certainly had his tools ready: weapons, butchery utensils, supplies, water. Much like that hunter from ancient times, you sit here before me today, *prepared*. You are armed with your knowledge, your skill, and your endless hours of practice on various instruments. You no doubt could pass an exam on the compositional techniques of composers ranging from Mozart to McCartney with flying colors. But is that all it takes?

“The ancient hunter’s preparation was not limited to the gathering of tools, but it included the ritual to gather the spirit. A hunt was more than a search for food; it was a spiritual undertaking, and every step in that hunt had a higher meaning that carried nearly impossible stakes. ‘All well and good,’ you are saying to yourselves right now. ‘I’ll remember that, Mr.

Gravesend, if I have to answer an anthropology question on Jeopardy tonight.’ If words to that effect have passed through your head in the last five minutes,” a sweeping glance revealed some startled faces, “then I suggest you think with a bit more depth.

“No doubt, your compositional theory courses have supplied you with all the physical tools you will need to engage in your own personal hunt for that mythical beast we call music. But in this course, Philosophy of Composition, we will explore the spiritual side of the hunt. The ritual.”

Gravesend was making some headway against the jotters. Two particularly dogged students were still writing; most, however, had given up. A few even looked interested. He left the desk and plunged into the middle of the room, coming to a halt between the two jotters. Ms. Green and another student near the front turned their heads to follow him with their eyes. Everyone else, including the two pillars of note taking, froze.

“The first question becomes, then, what is meant by these metaphors: mythical beast? spiritual side? Ritual? Mythical beast, I have already defined for you; it is your music, your own creations, the *anima* alive inside your breast, usually forced into the more common appellation: potential. You are at once the hunter and the beast. The beast must be flushed out before it can be slain. So too, the music must be wrenched out of you before it can be composed. Thus, the metaphor. Now, what is meant by the metaphor implied by the word ritual?”

Tapered fingers appeared at the head of the row, waving like a flag of torn flesh on the corner of the lectern.

“Yes, Ms. Green.”

“Ritual would be how we call out the beast, how we get the music out.”

“In order to...?”

Her fingers fluttered in mid-air, groping for the answer not coming into her head. Gravesend made his way back to the front of the class and turned to her with deliberate confidence that the correct answer would be forthcoming. He held her in his gaze until the muscles in her face began to quiver. The mind is a muscle as well, Gravesend thought; it must be

broken down in order to rebuild it as a stronger and wiser mass.

“Much of what we do is ritual, yet to what end?” He resumed his posture against the edge of the desk and gazed up at the ceiling, stroking the short, white bristles of beard on his chin, beginning his mental count to thirty ... his allotment of time for the class to dwell on any question before receiving another prod.

But a voice from the back of the room broke his count at nine. “The end would be unlocking the soul, which is what ritual does. So, the metaphor states that in order to search for the music inside us and to bring it out, we need to look into our souls, or our spiritual side, as you called it.”

Gravesend stopped mid-stroke and directed his gaze toward the back of the room.

“Mr...?”

“Lyle Glasser.”

“Mr. Glasser,” he repeated, making a mental note to be aware of this fellow; he was a sharp one, more so because Gravesend hadn’t marked him as sharp in his opening estimate of the class. Sleepers appear not to be sharp, but more often than not Gravesend picked them out. But he had passed over this student, one of the rugby-shirters. He returned Gravesend’s gaze with an impassive expression but an intensity that was magnified by round, wire-rimmed glasses.

“Excellent, Mr. Glasser. That’s exactly what we will be doing in this class: probing our souls and discovering what beasts lurk therein. And, if we’re lucky, we may discover a few ways to lure the beast out into the open where it can be handled through music. At any rate, we’ll be taking our first steps on that hunt. When you come to class on Thursday, I want each of you to submit a cassette tape on which you’ll have recorded a musical interpretation of your soul.”

There was a long silence, then a flurry of questions:

“How long?”

“What instruments?”

“What specific type of music?”

Gravesend fended off the blows with upraised hands. “Far be it for me to put limitations

on your soul-searching. That's the province of your minds and hearts, not mine. All I ask is that you put your name on your tape, purely for reasons of return. That's all. Good day to you!"

He swept out of the room, letting the door swish shut behind him. An exhilarated breath escaped his lips. The first class of the semester was always the peak of the mountain, especially as he got older. And Gravesend felt old indeed. It would be a long descent toward Christmas, but now he looked forward to his office and a cup of tea.

Mrs. Bourgione, the Music faculty secretary, handed Gravesend a note as soon as he came through the door. "Dean Oughterard called a moment ago. He wants to see you as soon as you can make it, so don't get comfortable."

"Did he mention what he wanted?"

"No, but he made the call himself, and he had a sweet sound in his voice."

Gravesend groaned, and he kept at it inwardly as he made his way down to the first floor and the office marked *Dean of the School of Music*. After the requisite delay by the secretary, he was ushered into the spacious office wrapped in glass on two sides for the view, then covered with insipid plastic blinds to obstruct the same view.

Dean Oughterard was a slight man whose attempts at informality consisted of wearing plaid ties rather than solids with his conservative suits. He doled out his Deanship from behind his desk with the traditional range of expressions: from corporate-firm in debate to piously apologetic when in need of a favor. Gravesend knew the university chain of command well enough to understand that deans were often caught in the verbal crossfire between senior administrators and faculty. Deans fell in the middle, having to endure the complaints of both sides, and the result was a group of ear-strained, academic orphans. For this visit, Oughterard assumed an apologetic expression with a hint of desperation, and it was the latter that Gravesend feared most.

"I took a call this morning that concerned you, Quinn."

"A student or parent is complaining already?"

"Nothing that easily dismissed. The call came from Antoinette D'Abonne. It seems the

Home Society is gearing up for its visiting season, and your house is on the top of the list. Congratulations.” The Dean lowered his head and raised his hand. “Before you say anything, let me state that I did everything in my power to get you off the hook again. But Madame D’Abonne has had your house marked for the past few years, and I’ve somehow managed to steer her away from you. This time she just wouldn’t be deterred. At the first sign of resistance from me, she played her trump card, dropping dark hints about slamming the lid of her late husband’s substantial coffer on the hand of the School of Music.”

“What possible reason does that woman have to be interested in my house of all places? There isn’t anything spectacular about it.”

“On the contrary. It’s a beautiful home. And, even if it were a two-room box, it contains a mystery.”

“What mystery?”

“An article about you that mentioned a room you haven’t entered since you composed your last piece.”

“That article was published in 1980! Julia had died just a few years before that. Does Madame D’Abonne think people’s lives don’t change? That a person would stay out of any room in his own home for nineteen years?”

“So, you do use that room? It’ll open for the tour?”

Gravesend shifted his jaw back and forth. “That’s beside the point.”

“No, Quinn, that’s exactly the point. It’s that kind of trivial mystery that would keep Madame D’Abonne’s interest fired for nearly two decades. And finally, if your home didn’t have a mystery room, if it didn’t have anything else, it has you, Quinn. And in a town of so many successful artists who teach here, you are the crown jewel.”

“Spare me your flattery, please.”

“That isn’t flattery; it’s truth. Modesty aside, you’re the most influential composer of classical music in the last half of the century. Period.”

“I haven’t composed a piece of music since the 1970s.”

“That makes no difference. In the eyes of the Antoinette D’Abonnes of the world, you rank supreme.”

“Eyes! You don’t know how right you are! The last thing I want or need is to host a dinner party for a group of pseudo-social voyeurs who get their jollies by pushing their noses into other people’s closets and discussing what they see for an age afterward! How could you agree to setting such people on me? They want a mystery? Why not investigate what happened to that art professor, Shero Bosellini, when he disappeared back in the 70s?”

The desperation in the Dean's expression became more pronounced. “They’ll never find an answer to that and besides, Bosellini kept a lousy house. Look, I agreed because the whole affair will endear the School of Music to this University's most generous benefactor, and that endears the School of Music to the Chancellor.”

“This all belongs in the School of Dance, you know.” Gravesend rose. “Of one thing you can be sure: neither D’Abonne nor any of her social chippies are getting a look at any room I wish to keep closed. I won’t have my private life open to public debate.”

“There’s no reason why you should. Here’s the guest list she faxed over.” He handed Gravesend a piece of paper.

“Your name is here.”

“Yes, at my insistence. It’s the least I could do. You shouldn’t be stuck with shouldering the burden of hosting this alone.” His voice dropped to the level of an undertaker. “If I may touch on a sensitive subject for a moment, will this be the first gathering at your home since Julia passed away?”

Gravesend nodded. “With all good luck, it will also be the last.”

“Drinks at six then, on Friday the 21st, followed by dinner and a tour of the house. It won’t be so bad, Quinn.”

That phrase – “It won’t be so bad, Quinn” – skipped around his brain throughout the day, tagging along on his evening walk. He reached the mid-point – a grassy hillock crowned by a stone nearly twice his height and set in the center of the summit – and stepped around the stone.

The St. Lawrence River came into view. As a rule, he only paused here for a quick view and a breather, but the Dean's words had changed to music: two different musical sequences bending together to meet, harmonize, and create a perfect circle. Notes gathered to the theme of completion and emptiness in his head, swirling and then dying, like the lonely silence in a recently deserted ballroom.

He leaned against the monolith, warm with the heat of the afternoon sun. The notes slowed in tempo and became regal. Images followed, images of the stone as an ancient boundary mark and the river as the border of unknown lands beyond. Quite a metaphor for life, thought Gravesend, even his own life. If he turned and looked back at his life, what would he see? A good life, one that afforded him a place at the top by any measurement one would care to use: age, accomplishment, stature, money. Indeed, his was a tall life.

The notes changed with the last thought, becoming dirge-like, as if playing for all the dying things he saw giving way at the moment. The day. His summer routine. His life, so much closer to its coda than its overture. And yet, somewhere behind the somber and funereal notes, he discerned another sound, a very faint but pervasive note of joy. It was jarring and off-kilter, like laughter in a funeral home filled with mourners. Laughter that was entirely inappropriate and socially embarrassing, and yet, beneath that, refreshing and relieving.

The sense of completion stayed a steady course through the fleeting musical notes and unbidden images. The sense of being inside a circle around this time and place in his life intrigued him. What enabled this walk, such a routine act in his day, to trigger the sense of being on the brink of a critical point in life? Never before had he heard the epiphanic voices that seem to make occasional visits to everyone's ears and whisper that life was about to radically change course. When he composed the first notes of *The Julia Suite* — indeed, when he first talked with Julia — he heard no notes to clue him into how that composition and that woman would grip and frame his life. When he first read the newspaper accounts of the plans to construct the North American University of Fine Arts, he sensed nothing that would have given him an inkling to how linked he was to become to the school. He did realize that his life would change at the

moment the doctor announced that Julia's cancer was beyond cure, but only a fool wouldn't recognize such a life-shifting event as that.

The notes in his head faded off one by one until only a single sound remained: a B note played very high up on the scale, tapped out consistently in mezzo piano. He knew the note, recognized it from two decades ago when one of his composition students suggested he listen to a Pink Floyd piece entitled "Echoes." The work opened on that note and in the very same way he felt it playing in his head now, unwavering, like a lighthouse. A perfect beginning, he had thought. That's what he told the student, adding that the note remained the only worthwhile thing he found in that backwash of noise the student had called "musical composition at its most innovative."

"Good," Gravesend thought, "I recognize the note and have a feeling that I'm headed for a radical change in life. Bloody well wonderful. But why now? And what does the sensation demand I do about it? Seek a major life change? Ridiculous. One cannot go about *making* a life change. Laying that aside for a moment, I went through an irrevocable life change when Julia died. No sensation, no matter how strong, will change that."

He watched the river flow by, thinking that he could retire. Every spring he decided to retire, then changed his mind sometime around the end of term. This early in September the thought became appealing again as he spied out the school year from the long end, but a sense of duty always suppressed the notion. Although the thought of rocking Oughterard's this-is-best-because-I-know-best expression with a retirement announcement effective January 1 brought Gravesend a moment of delicious enjoyment, the Canadian in him vetoed such an act. It would not be fair or appropriate.

He could compose again. Perhaps begin a new work to fit this new feeling or time? No. He was done with that, or rather, composing was done with him. A twenty-three-year old iron is too cold to strike. The notes in his head had nothing to do with actual compositions. They were the same notes that he had always heard and felt in response to everything he perceived from the time he was a boy: a sort of sixth sense, interpreting both the seen and the intuitive world via

music. Random notes came to him in his younger days as the musical potential in every animate and inanimate facet of life. They remained, aged like him, until they sounded like mocking shadows, ghosts of notes that could have, at one time, perhaps been collected and collated into a composition but now would never see a score.

The best course of action, Gravesend decided, was to let the note and the sounds be. He had no idea what purpose they intended, if they had any purpose at all, and he wasn't likely to reach home before dark if he didn't start walking very soon.

He disengaged himself from the stone with a lurch, causing a sharp pain to shoot up his back. Sixty-three was not a pliable, stone-leaning age, but thank God it wasn't a macho one either. He didn't have to care what others thought of his manhood. He could hobble if he liked, and so he did, down the hill toward home, thinking of dinner and an early bedtime with a good book. B notes be damned.

(3)

Night on the 21st came late with the sun bleeding in pink, orange and red hues all along the horizon. Wind moved in off the river in wavy rushes rattling by the window of Lyle's studio apartment, a third floor attic in an old house. The decor inside stood in counterpoint to the changing weather outside. Four candelabra with six candles each threw out the majority of the light from their perches around the room: atop the grand piano, on the shelf below the window, on the wire and blotter rack that served as a night stand, and on the stove in the kitchenette. Inside and outside, Autumn approved.

Everyone had dressed with some sort of distinction. Behind the piano sat Lyle in formal wear, complete with white gloves and tails, his face moving in and out of shadows so that it never was completely revealed or hidden. He tinkered with the piano keys, mixing together ethereal sounds. Beside him stood Gaston in a long brown robe with a monstrous hood that covered the whole of his head and shaded all of his face but his chin. He had come in character: Gaston the father-confessor, the shaman-priest. Chet rested on the page-turner's seat to Lyle's right, his burly frame slung with paint-spattered jeans and sweater; even his canvas sneakers

were globbed with paint dribbles. Mary and a tall, wiry man with an English accent and a cloth bag stood beside the piano. Both of them were dressed in black turtlenecks and jeans.

And Autumn, standing apart from the group at the piano caught a glimpse of herself in the room's only mirror and declared herself in sync with the spirit and the sense of the room. The effect she wanted was sylvan: a draping, cape-like top of hunter green, edged in lace that hung like leaves from her sleeves. Tight green leggings ran up beneath the cape and down into black, high-heeled boots. The curls of her hair spilled down between her shoulder blades and under the influence of the guttering golden glow of the candles, the auburn shade deepened to the color of wine.

She moved in closer to the piano as Chet said to Mary, "You and your friend chose the right color for the occasion. This place looks like a morgue on Halloween."

The man offered his hand. "Patrick Mallard."

"Chet Kunzler. And if there's a bottle in that bag, you'll be my friend, too." He nooked open a corner of the bag and peered in. "Champagne? Ah! May I call you Pat?"

Lyle kept repeating the phrase he was playing in an attempt to find an exit. Unable to do so, he softened the bars with each run, hoping to fade them out of existence. Finally at a signal from Gaston, he just stopped and swiveled around. "Okay. So, what's next?"

Gaston set the candelabrum on the piano beside several note cards and a gold-plated paten. "Time to start. I'll conduct. Lyle, you'll assist. Could all of you move around to form a half circle in front of me?"

When they were in position, Gaston took up the pile of cards and consulted the first one. "I'll begin with a quote from C. Kerényi's essay entitled Prolegomena: *If cosmos is understood in the Greek sense that everything spiritual, and our compulsion towards the spiritual, are an essential part of the cosmos, then here,*" he paused and made eye contact with each person in front of him, "*we have the cosmos meeting with itself.*"

Gaston shuffled to the next card. "Now, I'll read a description of our purpose, as written by candidate for membership, Lyle Glasser: *All of us came to this university to learn and*

advance our skills in our chosen arts. That's what the studies, professors, and performances are meant to do. But there's another quality to art that seems to have been lost to the mechanics of education. It goes beyond our physical talents to an awareness of and marriage to the spirit behind art, the mystical presence attending the creation of every composition. The Romantics, because of their very nature, were keenly aware of this presence, and they formed societies to draw the spirit of art closer to the surface so that it was there beside them as they composed and critiqued what each of them was striving to create. That is our purpose, to bring our artistic selves into closer contact with the spirit of art and assist in each other's creations. Rituals, such as this initiation rite, do that. We share a communion with the past and the future, a communion of who we are and what we have committed ourselves to doing.

“Therefore, here in this room, on the 21st of September, in the year 1999, I declare the formation of Societe de l'Esprit Artistique: to advance the growth of each member in the art of his or her choice, to encourage and draw from each other's raw inspirations and ideas in order to mold and create living works, and to realize our artistic role as the bridge between the unseen and the visible.”

Gaston flipped to the next card. “The next step is the recitation of the litany to reaffirm the principles that will guide the Society. Respond ‘Aye’ to each phrase. Do you wish to be initiated into Societe de l'Esprit Artistique?”

“Aye.”

“You are then charged with advancing each member's work through the sharing of thought and spirit. Do you make such an oath by seeking initiation still?”

“Aye.”

“You are charged with sharing yourself and your work with the Society and promoting those works under its name during membership. Do you make such an oath by seeking initiation still?”

“Aye.”

“You are charged with not revealing the membership, the inner workings of the Society

and its members' discussions, works in progress, or ideas to any who have not been initiated. Do you make such an oath by seeking initiation still?"

"Aye."

"As all present have sworn themselves to the principles of the Society, let the initiation passage begin."

Gaston placed the note cards on the piano and motioned for Lyle to take up the candle as he lifted the paten and stamp. He pulled back his hood, revealing his face for the first time. "As the Ovate of Societe de l'Esprit Artistique, I declare that I seek initiation still and accept the sign of the society and creativity." Lyle poured some of the wax onto the paten. Gaston dipped the stamp in the wax and immediately applied it to his forehead. He removed the stamp, leaving a wax impression of the crescent moon on his skin. Then he pulled the hood forward, and his face disappeared in its folds.

"Lyle Thomas Glasser." Lyle moved in front of him. "Seek you initiation still?"

"Aye."

"Then accept the sign of the society and creativity." The wax poured, Gaston set the stamp to Lyle's forehead, after which, Lyle resumed his place beside Gaston, who called the rest of them forward:

"Autumn Seanna Gilhain."

"Chester Kunzler."

"Mary Han."

"Patrick Stuart Mallard."

Patrick stood nearly six inches taller than Gaston, and when he bent to accept the mark, Autumn did a double-take. Was it her imagination or did he genuflect on one knee rather than bend? That was not a gesture she expected from Mary's lover, and she stared after him as he resumed his place in the semi-circle.

"The purpose has been read," Gaston said, "the oaths sworn, the initiation rite completed. Let the work of the Society begin."

“I call for a toast,” said Chet. “A round of the best stuff befitting this occasion.”

Patrick opened his bottle of champagne first, followed by Chet’s bottle. By the time the group dipped into Autumn’s wine, midnight was approaching, and the rites took on a mellower, less inhibited air. Chet, who had brought an easel and canvas, declared it too constraining and began to paint the wall on one side of the window. Mary, who had been sitting upright on the corner of the bed, peeled off her turtleneck and laid back, her skin aglow in the candlelight, offset by a black bra. She continued to write in the notebook. Lyle sat at the piano, Gaston had his guitar, and Patrick worked with his pennywhistle as the three of them tried to pull together an original arrangement.

Autumn had her guitar as well, but she didn’t join them. She sat in a far corner, trying out a melody of her own, but the room had grown hot. The fumes of Chet’s paints, Mary’s unexpected exhibition, and the tinkering of the group at the piano became agitating, and the magic she felt in the early part of the night began to fade. She tried the tune once more, but when she misplayed a phrase near the middle, she rose without a word and went out into the night.

(4)

Gravesend hated pettiness. There should be no place for it in a life too short for most of the good things. Why waste precious time on the irrelevant bad? But even he had to admit at this moment, as The Home Society seated themselves around his dining room table to indulge in dinner, pettiness had a place.

He did all that Oughterard could ask. Throughout cocktails, he played the gracious host, putting forward his best effort to be accommodating and charming at the same time. Not an easy task by any means in the face of the fifteen members of the decor Gestapo, spearheaded by the inimitable Antoinette D’Abonne.

“Inimitable” was the first word that sprang to Gravesend’s mind, followed closely by “swooping.” After that, the mental descriptions went downhill. D’Abonne had a relentless habit of answering the simplest questions with what she called “pearled words.” Earlier in the evening,

when asked by a new member in the Home Society why she began the group, D'Abonne replied, with complete sobriety, "I felt my hand must contribute at least a minor stitch to the ever-spinning loom that produces the tapestry of our university and community." Gravesend recalled her commenting after her husband's funeral that not enough people used pearled words anymore, a social deficit for which Gravesend felt truly thankful.

And there didn't seem to be enough linguistic oysters in the world to produce the string of words D'Abonne could let fly when describing the Home Society. Members devoted themselves to the joys of the decorated house. To that end they toured houses "in season" — that is to say in the spring and the fall as well as a special to-do at Christmastime — on both sides of the river. The tours consisted of drinks, a room-by-room viewing guided by the owner, a catered dinner (paid for by the Society) and then an after-dinner review at a less-organized, more informal pace. This last segment often proved to be the most torturous for the owner. He or she may be called upon repeatedly to explain why a certain piece of art came to be displayed as it was or why a chair had been placed in a corner instead of around a table, and so forth. Now in its fifteenth year, the Home Society had become something of an institution. And like all institutions, it was tolerated with good cheer, usually forced, and would remain so for as long as the late Monsieur Emile D'Abonne continued to be more generous to the university dead than all other living benefactors combined.

By dinner, the tour had severely taxed Gravesend's patience and graciousness. Twice, D'Abonne asked about the locked door on the second floor. Both times Gravesend pretended not to hear her, and when she suggested in a more enunciated and shrill voice that they had missed a room, Gravesend promptly replied, "Not at all, Madame; the dining room will be our final stop." The comment drew a laugh and temporarily silenced D'Abonne, but Gravesend's whole attitude became porcupinish.

Revenge, however, awaited him at table. The Home Society graciously allowed the host to choose the menu, although that honor came heavily seasoned with hints that Madame D'Abonne's French blood and bias were strongest in matters of food and drink. With that in

mind, Gravesend smiled as the potato and leek soup was followed by grilled duck in plum sauce. The side dish was corn, and English tarts comprised dessert. Drinks consisted of the finest Burgundy and Chardonnay wines New York's Finger Lakes region could produce.

D'Abonne, who sat to the right of Gravesend, had regained the use of her tongue and was holding forth on the subject of the painting on the north wall of the dining room. The avid attention the two women to Gravesend's left and the man on D'Abonne's right were paying her, marked them as either new to the area or candidates for full membership in the Home Society, perhaps both. The painting depicted two men standing *en garde* with a writing quill and a paint brush across a river. Above them floated a host of seraphim with horns and lyre, and a ribbon coming from the mouth of the middle angel bore the legend, "*Mets la maudite chose au beau milieu du fleuve et t'en fais.*"

"Magnifique!" cried D'Abonne. "The entire painting, but especially the statement, is a wonderful tribute to the wife of Mortimer Howell, one of the University's founders of course. It is art with just the right amount of good-natured mischievousness. Do you not agree, Mr. Williams?"

The man blushed and replied in a low voice, "The soul of the painting is beyond me, I'm afraid, Madame. I don't speak much French."

The corners of the lady's mouth turned southward, and her expression told the world that Mr. Williams had just sealed his exclusion from the Home Society. "Mr. Gravesend, perhaps you would be good enough to explain?"

"Certainly, Madame. The North American University of Fine Arts was founded by Mr. Russell Moss, an American poet and literary critic, seen holding the quill on the right, and Mr. Mortimer Howell, a Canadian art patron and musical manuscript collector who holds the brush. Both men wanted to found a college specifically for students in pursuit of a degree in the fine arts, but they quarreled incessantly over where that university should be located; Mr. Moss wanted it in New York and Mr. Howell argued for Montreal. After one meeting, both gentlemen carried their argument outside to the car that had arrived to pick up Mr. Howell. While the driver

opened the back door and waited as the two gentlemen continued to argue, Mrs. Howell reportedly leaned across the seat and called out, 'Put the damn thing in the middle of the river and be done with it.' That is the translation of the phrase from the angel, and the genesis of the idea to put the university in both countries. The Schools of Music, Writing, and Sculpture are here in Prue, and the Schools of Painting, Theatre, and Dance are across the St. Lawrence River in Newtown, Ontario. On the island in the river are the library, dormitories, student center and faculty and student dining halls. Only footbridges connect the island with both banks of the river. The bridges were donated by the U.S. and Canadian governments and can be crossed without customs checks. As far as we know, our university is unique in this arrangement."

"As it is in other ways ..." D'Abonne's attention wandered and alighted on a storm brewing at the center of the table concerning the rose upholstery patterns on the chairs in the adjoining sitting room. Now that he was paying attention, Gravesend heard four or five mini-debates popping up around the table. Somewhere along the course of the debates, the participants threw glances in Gravesend's direction, eager glances of the seeker to the guru. The final push toward the after-dinner inquisition had begun, and Gravesend, suddenly, couldn't face it. Excusing himself to take care of a problem arising in the kitchen, he left the table, plucked an old jacket and a battered tweed cap from hooks on the basement door and went out through the cellar entrance into the night.

He walked to no place in particular, allowing the wind to wrap him up in arms of damp silk and soothe his jangling nerves. Some things never change; he couldn't remember a single party in his life from which he hadn't "fled," as Julia used to call it. He hated crowds in close quarters. Crowds were so intense, growing into entities unto themselves like tornadoes, sweeping up individuals and gaining force until they dominated the room, whipping at people who only preferred a bit of solitude and quiet conversation. It was a trait he picked up from his father. Gravesend could take crowds as long as he could separate himself via a classroom desk or stage piano. The Home Society, however, made separation impossible. He shrugged as he walked. Let Oughterard handle them.

He had no idea how long or how far he had walked until a steel column rose up in front of him, twisting with switchback angles. The piece, entitled *The Beginnings of Creativity*, stood beside the entrance gate to the University, bringing Gravesend to a halt. The gate was two miles from his house. He was calm but tired. Instead of turning around and trudging home, he decided to go to his office and call a cab.

He passed beneath the arches of the gate and started down the path leading to the Music building. The wind carried distant sounds, adding them to the echo of his own footfalls, and one of the sounds Gravesend recognized as an acoustic guitar. He didn't know the music, but immediately he noted that the guitarist was using a heavy hand to play a song that demanded a light and delicate touch.

The sound broke off, followed by a single-word outburst: "Shit!"

Gravesend kept walking, and ten yards on a young woman materialized seated on a bench, one leg tucked beneath her, the other planted firmly on the ground. For a moment, she reminded him of the fairytales he read as a child in which woodland elves would step out from the forest dressed in flowing clothes the color of trees and flowing hair decorated with leaves and flowers. So she appeared to have done, even though no forests were about, and Gravesend could not recall ever reading about an elf that cursed its own music. She bent over the guitar in such a way that her face was obscured from view.

The song broke down near the middle again, and she let out what sounded like a growl. She tossed her head with enough force to dislodge two leaves, which promptly skittered away into the darkness. Gravesend noted how pale her face was, and before he could judge whether she was pretty or not, she spotted him standing on the path. If it were possible for a person sitting in her position to jump, she did.

"My apologies," said Gravesend. "I didn't intend to startle you."

Instead of replying, she turned back to the guitar and made another attempt at playing the song.

"If you don't mind my asking, what's the name of the piece you're playing?"

“Epona.”

“Are you learning it for a class?”

“No.” This time the song broke down only a few bars in.

“Was the piece originally done on guitar?”

She lifted her head again. “Look, what the hell is this? If you’re looking for sex, try the apartments on Chaucer Street. Or is it your job to prowl the college annoying the shit out of people trying to play some music?”

“I’m sorry, no. I’m questioning you out of habit, I suppose. I’m Quinn Gravesend, Professor of Music, and I was thinking that the difficulty you’re having with that song might be the result of the instrument you’re playing.”

“No, my difficulty is the result of the fact that I suck.” She closed her eyes. “Sorry. I’m frustrated.”

“Indeed. But don’t judge yourself too quickly. Do you know what instrument the original song was written for, Miss...?”

“Autumn Gilhain. Dulcimer, I think.”

“In that case, Miss Gilhain, a piano may serve you better than a guitar. The tone would be closer to the original. Hearing the song in a similar tone will help you to learn it.”

“Maybe, but I didn’t have a piano on me when I came out here tonight.”

“Quite right. Still, there is the piano lab in the music building and a good piano in the student practice studio. You could also ask one of your music professors. Many of us have pianos in our offices.”

“Um-hmm.” She fingered the guitar slowly, working her way through the sequence of notes.

“Well then, good evening and good luck,” said Gravesend, but she didn’t reply. He continued on down the path.

(5)

The first tangible result of Societe de l'Esprit Artistique is evident in Lyle's apartment,

25½ Davis Street. A cassette demo, roughly taped with two microphones, holds close to eleven minutes of music written and recorded by Lyle (piano), Gaston (guitar) and Patrick (pennywhistle and some sort of percussion, perhaps a pot?). There are places where they play together and breaks for individual instrumentation. What's surprising is that the finest moments in the work are all parts they play together. Despite the fact that Gaston and Lyle have played together often, neither has ever played with Patrick, whose style and approach is so very different. I would think the shining moments would have been the individual sections. But there it is: the musical version of a fried egg in a salad. Somehow, it works.

But the most impressive effort tonight is the mural Chet painted on the far wall of the room. The first half from the south wall to the window is done in black, red and copper tones against the whitewashed block: a hunt scene, primitive in the way that all raw art is primitive; the bulky coat that hides the svelte form. The painting seems like a cross between the Bayeux Tapestry and animal paintings found on the walls inside of European caves. On the window, which is surrounded by a misty swirl of grey, like fog, he painted a poem by Mary:

*Through this shifting world's maze
we race, but stop—
The sound of the horn delays
the chase. To crops
we're called, our dreams to raise.*

On the other side is a lush growth of vines in soft greens and black earth under an azure sky. The work steals emotion from the viewer but gives back more than it takes. Whether or not this adds or detracts from the work, Chet is sound asleep on the floor in front of it, having given his all. Lyle is on his bed talking softly to Gaston. Mary and Patrick are gone.

And what contribution did Autumn make to the Society's first night? She tried and failed to learn Epona, and swore at a complete stranger. In other words, about what she contributes to art every night. In lieu of few artistic achievements, this record will be my contribution, but a silent one since I can't tell anyone about it because of that oath of silence, but more than

anything I want to record all that happens here. This group of people — at the very least Gaston, Lyle and Chet — will one future day mean quite a lot to the artistic world. That is when I will make my contribution to the group. A society member, not some half-assed critic or student looking for a doctoral dissertation, will give a first-hand account of their growth, of who they were and how they came to their recognition. But for now, this record of a secret society will remain the secret seed buried within me.

