11

I woke in the grip of a death sweat. Defenseless against my own racking fears. A pause at the center of my being. I lacked the will and physical strength to get out of bed and move through the dark house, clutching walls and stair rails. To feel my way, reinhabit my body, re-enter the world. Sweat trickled down my ribs. The digital reading on the clock-radio was 3:51. Always odd numbers at times like this. What does it mean? Is death odd-numbered? Are there life-enhancing numbers, other numbers charged with menace? Babette murmured in her sleep and I moved close, breathing her heat.

Finally I slept, to be awakened by the smell of burning toast. That would be Steffie. She burns toast often, at any hour, intentionally. She loves the smell, she is addicted; it's her treasured scent. It satisfies her in ways wood smoke cannot, or snuffed candles, or the odor of explosive powder drifting down the street from firecrackers set off on the Fourth. She has evolved orders of preference. Burnt rye, burnt white, so on.

I put on my robe and went downstairs. I was always putting on a bathrobe and going somewhere to talk seriously to a child. Babette was with her in the kitchen. It startled me. I thought she was still in bed.

"Want some toast?" Steffie said.

"I'll be fifty-one next week."

"That's not old, is it?"

"I've felt the same for twenty-five years."

"Bad. How old is my mother?"

"She's still young. She was only twenty when we were married the first time."

“Is she younger than Baba?”

“About the same. Just so you don’t think I’m one of those men who keeps finding younger women.”

I wasn’t sure whether my replies were meant for Steffie or Babette. This happens in the kitchen, where the levels of data are numerous and deep, as Murray might say.

“Is she still in the CIA?” Steffie said.

“We’re not supposed to talk about that. She’s just a contract agent anyway.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s what people do today for a second income.”

“What exactly does she do?” Babette said.

“She gets a phone call from Brazil. That activates her.”

“Then what?”

“She carries money in a suitcase the length and breadth of Latin America.”

“That’s all? I could do that.”

“Sometimes they send her books to review.”

“Have I met her?” Babette said.

“No.”

“Do I know her name?”

“Dana Breedlove.”

Steffie’s lips formed the words as I spoke them.

“You’re not planning to eat that, are you?” I said to her.

“I always eat my toast.”

The phone rang and I picked it up. A woman’s voice delivered a high-performance hello. It said it was computer-generated, part of a marketing survey aimed at determining current levels of consumer desire. It said it would ask a series of questions, pausing after each to give me a chance to reply.

I gave the phone to Steffie. When it became clear that she was occupied with the synthesized voice, I spoke to Babette in low tones.

“She liked to plot.”

“Who?”

“Dana. She liked to get me involved in things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Factions. Playing certain friends against other friends. Household plots, faculty plots.”

“Sounds like ordinary stuff.”

“She spoke English to me, Spanish or Portuguese to the telephone.”

Steffie twisted around, used her free hand to pull her sweater away from her body, enabling her to read the label.

“Virgin acrylic,” she said into the phone.

Babette checked the label on her sweater. A soft rain began to fall.

“How does it feel being nearly fifty-one?” she said.

“No different from fifty.”

“Except one is even, one is odd,” she pointed out.

That night, in Murray’s off-white room, after a spectacular meal of Cornish hen in the shape of a frog, prepared on a two-burner hot plate, we moved from our metal folding chairs to the bunk bed for coffee.

“When I was a sportswriter,” Murray said, “I traveled constantly, lived in planes and hotels and stadium smoke, never got to feel at home in my own apartment. Now I have a place.”

“You’ve done wonders,” Babette said, her gaze sweeping desperately across the room.

“It’s small, it’s dark, it’s plain,” he said in a self-satisfied way. “A container for thought.”

I gestured toward the old four-story building on several acres across the street. “Do you get any noise from the insane asylum?”

“You mean beatings and shrieks? It’s interesting that people still call it the insane asylum. It must be the striking architecture, the high steep roof, the tall chimneys, the columns, the little flourishes here and there that are either quaint or sinister—I can’t make up my mind. It doesn’t look like a rest home or psychiatric facility. It looks like an insane asylum.”

His trousers were going shiny at the knees.

“I’m sorry you didn’t bring the kids. I want to get to know small kids. This is the society of kids. I tell my students they’re already too old to figure importantly in the making of society. Minute by minute they’re beginning to diverge from each other. ‘Even as we sit here,’ I tell them, ‘you are spinning out from the core, becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass-producers of culture. Kids are a true universal. But you’re well beyond that, already beginning to drift, to feel estranged from the products you consume. Who are they designed for? What is your place in the marketing scheme? Once you’re out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity.’ Then I tap my pencil on the table to indicate time passing ominously.”

Because we were seated on the bed, Murray had to lean well forward, looking past the coffee cup poised in my hand, in order to address Babette.

“How many children do you have, all told?”

She appeared to pause.

“There’s Wilder, of course. There’s Denise.”

Murray sipped his coffee, trying to look at her, sideways, with the cup at his lower lip.

“There’s Eugene, who’s living with his daddy this year in Western Australia. Eugene is eight. His daddy does research in the outback. His daddy is also Wilder’s daddy.”

“The boy is growing up without television,” I said, “which may make him worth talking to, Murray, as a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush, intelligent and literate but deprived of the deeper codes and messages that mark his species as unique.”

“TV is a problem only if you’ve forgotten how to look and listen,” Murray said. “My students and I discuss this all the time. They’re beginning to feel they ought to turn against the medium, exactly as an earlier generation turned against their parents and their country. I tell them they have to learn to look as children again. Root out content. Find the codes and messages, to use your phrase, Jack.”

“What do they say to that?”

“Television is just another name for junk mail. But I tell them I can’t accept that. I tell them I’ve been sitting in this room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes. A great and humbling experience, let me tell you. Close to mystical.”

“What’s your conclusion?”

He crossed his legs primly and sat with the cup in his lap, smiling straight ahead.

“Waves and radiation,” he said. “I’ve come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It’s like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way. I’m very enthused, Jack.”

He looked at me, still smiling in a half sneaky way.

“You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world birth, it welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound. I ask my students, ‘What more do you want?’ Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. ‘Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.’ The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust.”

“But your students don’t agree.”

“Worse than junk mail. Television is the death throes of human consciousness, according to them. They’re ashamed of their television past. They want to talk about movies.”

He got up and refilled our cups.

“How do you know so much?” Babette said.

“I’m from New York.”

“The more you talk, the sneakier you look, as if you’re trying to put something over on us.”

“The best talk is seductive.”

“Have you ever been married?” she said.

“Once, briefly. I was covering the Jets, the Mets and the Nets. How odd a figure I must seem to you now, a solitary crank who maroons himself with a TV set and dozens of stacks of dust-jacketed comic books. Don’t think I wouldn’t appreciate a dramatic visit between two and three in the morning,” he told her, “from an intelligent woman in spike heels and a slit skirt, with high-impact accessories.”

It was drizzling as we walked home, my arm around her waist. The streets were empty. Along Elm all the stores were dark, the two banks were dimly lit, the neon spectacles in the window of the optical shop cast a gimmicky light on the sidewalk.

Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex.

“I know I forget things,” she said, “but I didn’t know it was so obvious.”

“It isn’t.”

“Did you hear Denise? When was it, last week?”

“Denise is smart and tough. No one else notices.”

“I dial a number on the phone and forget who I’m calling. I go to the store and forget what to buy. Someone will tell me something, I’ll forget it, they’ll tell me again, I’ll forget it, they’ll tell me again, showing a funny-looking smile.”

“We all forget,” I said.

“I forget names, faces, phone numbers, addresses, appointments, instructions, directions.”

“It’s something that’s just been happening, more or less to everyone.”

“I forget that Steffie doesn’t like to be called Stephanie. Sometimes I call her Denise. I forget where I’ve parked the car and then for a long, long moment I forget what the car looks like.”

“Forgetfulness has gotten into the air and water. It’s entered the food chain.”

“Maybe it’s the gum I chew. Is that too farfetched?”

“Maybe it’s something else.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re taking something besides chewing gum.”

“Where did you get that idea?”

“I got it secondhand from Steffie.”

“Who did Steffie get it from?”

“Denise.”

She paused, conceding the possibility that if Denise is the source of a rumor or theory, it could very well be true.

“What does Denise say I’m taking?”

“I wanted to ask you before I asked her.”

“To the best of my knowledge, Jack, I’m not taking anything that could account for my memory lapses. On the other hand I’m not old, I haven’t suffered an injury to the head and there’s nothing in my family background except tipped uteruses.”

“You’re saying maybe Denise is right.”

“We can’t rule it out.”

“You’re saying maybe you’re taking something that has the side effect of impairing memory.”

“Either I’m taking something and I don’t remember or I’m not taking something and I don’t remember. My life is either/or. Either I chew regular gum or I chew sugarless gum. Either I chew gum or I smoke. Either I smoke or I gain weight. Either I gain weight or I run up the stadium steps.”

“Sounds like a boring life.”

“I hope it lasts forever,” she said.

Soon the streets were covered with leaves. Leaves came tumbling and scraping down the pitched roofs. There were periods in every day when a stiff wind blew, baring the trees further, and retired men appeared in the backyards, on the small lawns out front, carrying rakes with curved teeth. Black bags were arrayed at the curbstone in lopsided rows.

A series of frightened children appeared at our door for their Halloween treats.