
Opening Extract from...

The Mulberry Bush

Written by Charles McCarry

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THE MULBERRY BUSH

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Prologue

On a midsummer day in January, Luz Aguilar, the love of my life and the only child of the legendary Alejandro Aguilar, martyr of the revolution, and I met for the first time at first light in a rose garden in Los Bosques de Palermo. The vast park was empty. Dew sparkled on the roses. Beyond its gates, felt but unseen and still abed, Buenos Aires stirred and coughed as it awakened. As Luz approached, details of her face came into focus. I saw the color of her eyes, glimpsed the even teeth beneath her upper lip, her piquant face, her dark hair, which gathered the light. Short skirt. Memorable legs. She squinted into the sun, trying to make me out. She had been told I would be carrying a copy of the financial newspaper *Clarin* in my left hand and wearing a Brigade of Guards necktie—the one with the broad diagonal red and navy blue stripes.

As scripted, we bumped into each other lightly as we passed, and then murmured the sign and countersign:

Me: *"Un hermoso día, señorita."*
Luz: *"Buenos Aires es siempre soleada, señor."*

For operational reasons I had studied Spanish with a Honduran tutor. Argentineans are famous for their linguistic snobbery. She looked at me as if I were speaking her mother tongue with an Inuit accent.

Like the citizens of many great capitals, the *porteños,* as people who live in or around Buenos Aires are called, have their own way of speaking the language. Among other peculiarities, they habitually use the formal *usted* and almost never call even the closest relatives or friends *tu,* but address them instead with the archaic *vos.*

In English—I knew she spoke it fluently—I said, "Follow me."

She did as she was told. Luz was already a marginal asset of the intelligence service I worked for, ostensibly because she held a minor post in her country's foreign ministry but actually because she had grown up with her father's terrorist friends, many of whom remained persons of interest. Because it is the business of an intelligence service to stay in with the outs no matter how odious the outs might be. Because we wanted to keep tabs on her honorary uncles and aunts who were still terrorists in their hearts—sleepers waiting to be reawakened by a messiah waving a red flag. Because in their imagination, this savior would resemble Luz's late father, Alejandro Aguilar, the One—enemy of mankind, murderer, traitor, hero of the romantic left.

Actually, for the final weeks of his time on Earth, Alejandro was systematically betraying the revolution to its enemies. At that point I knew little about him and did not need to know more, or so I then thought. He died before Luz was old enough to be trusted with the truth. It was also good for his cover that Luz's mother, herself a beauty, had been disappeared. It was said that she had been thrown out of an airplane, probably after being tortured until her bones broke. Even now, as I would later learn, Luz dreamed of her, naked and falling, falling in cold darkness, hearing the airplane's throbbing engines, smelling the sea, not knowing until impact the exact moment when she would hit the frigid water and die.

Once a month Luz met her Yanqui case officer and handed over a thumb drive loaded with useless information. For this, and because Headquarters was partly responsible for her father's early and violent and famous demise, we paid her a monthly stipend, in cash, that covered her hairdresser, her clothes and shoes, her beautician, her wine, her holidays, her impulses. And theoretically bound her to us because she signed for every payment with a thumbprint and this gave us the power to denounce her as a traitor to her country or to her father's memory. This was not a diabolical threat that applied to Luz alone because she was who she was. It was standard procedure—just the way we did the thing we did.

Thanks to her upbringing among people who played at danger, Luz knew enough tradecraft by the time she was ten to realize that if she was ever caught leaving a clandestine meeting with a blackened thumb, this treasonous smudge would be all the evidence military intelligence or the national police would need to gang rape her while they waterboarded her and administered electric shocks to her genitalia before locking her up for life or dropping her from an airplane into the Atlantic Ocean. The federal police and military intelligence were no longer supposed to do such things now that democracy had been restored, but who knew when they might revive old habits, or if they had ever really given them up?

Owing to our good relations with the Argentinean intelligence services, Luz had less to fear from exposure than she imagined. Nevertheless, the memories and the fear with which she had grown up lingered within her. Headquarters didn't require her to take large risks. Like the superfluous ingredient in a recipe, she was being reserved for another purpose.

I led her to a coffee bar where they were just rolling up the shutter. We sat down at a corner table. For the moment we were alone except for the cashier and the skinny kid who ran the coffee machine. For show, still following the script, Luz smiled at me as if for a lover just home from the sea. She squeezed my hand and passed me her monthly flash drive. She had downloaded onto this drive an entire digital folder of the useless

gibberish that is generated daily by the inconsequential ministry of an irrelevant government. The moment it touched my fingers, its new life as a valuable commodity began—valuable not because it had any actual value, but because it was secret and because it was purloined. I would pouch it to Headquarters. Some wretch in Virginia would be required to translate it, another wretch to read it and yet another wretch to analyze it, and yet more wretches tasked to follow up on the analysis. The value of secrets, like the value of money, is in the mind. A strip of paper the exact size of a hundred-dollar bill is worth nothing in itself, but smear it with green ink and the portrait of a dead president and presto, it's worth two tennis shoes.

While we drank our coffee we talked about movies for the benefit of eavesdroppers. I claimed to admire the work of a certain radical Argentinean director. In riposte Luz quoted the pope on the subject of Mel Gibson's S-and-M epic about Jesus of Nazareth: "It is as it was." Despite this readiness to quote the Holy Father, Luz was no Catholic. Her father and mother had immersed themselves in their roles as godless Communists, so their child was raised as a heathen as part of their cover. Still, a small gold cross nestled in her cleavage.

I scratched my right ear with my left forefinger—a signal, absurd like all tradecraft, that it was time to break contact. Luz got out her stamp pad, which was disguised as a compact, and surreptitiously inked her thumb. I handed her the receipt and she thumb-printed it. I gave her a foil packet containing an alcohol swab with which to clean the ink off her thumb. She smiled a tiny smile at this small gallantry. Then she picked up the folded *Clarín*, in which her money was cleverly concealed, and rose from the table.

In the mirror behind the coffee bar as she walked away, Luz noticed my eyes glued to her bottom, and she gave me, in the mirror, the same minimal smile as before.

Much later, she told me that the thought that brought a smile to her lips was *Possibilities.*

Two minds with but a single thought.

1

Although I am, for the time being, hiding something from you when I put the matter so simply, I became a spy because my father before me was a spy. He was recruited during his final semester in New Haven. Being chosen in this way was the culminating honor of an early life filled with promise. He had been a star athlete at school, he was a popular man on campus. He posted good marks, was tapped for one of the more desirable secret societies, held his liquor and his tongue, smiled when the situation warranted it. He was presentable in an all-American way, and even the prettiest Seven Sisters girls would not have refused a proposal of marriage if he made one. He was a fine tennis player and a fairly good midfielder in lacrosse. In other words, he was the whole package.

In those days, as the Cold War waxed, many of Headquarters's most alert talent spotters were professors at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale and at smaller eastern colleges that specialized in producing a type that thought alike, spoke alike, and behaved with predictability. Though I suppose he had his suspicions, Father never knew which of his mentors recommended him or why exactly he had been singled out. It didn't really matter. He had

been tapped for membership in the most exclusive fraternity in American life, and that was enough for him to know. He accepted the invitation to go undercover without a moment's hesitation.

The Korean War was in progress, and to his surprise, Headquarters sent him to the Marine Corps instead of straight into the heart of darkness as he had hoped and expected. No one told him the reason for this detour (he assumed it was just a detour), and mindful that he was being watched by invisible judges, he did not ask. He completed officer candidate training at Quantico with his usual brio and was commissioned in the Marine Corps reserves as a second lieutenant. His commission was, in the jargon of the intelligence community, a "genuine-false" credential—that is to say, the commission was genuine, but its purpose, its only purpose, was to provide him with a convincing résumé.

While the other new second lieutenants with whom he had trained went off to risk their lives in the mud and snows of Korea, Father was sent into quarantine at a secret installation on a locked-down military base in Virginia. There he was trained in the techniques of espionage and absorbed into the culture of the craft, which was not so very different from the culture of the secret society to which he had been elected at Yale—or for that matter, from that of a summer camp of the Boy Scouts of America. The Plantation, as this installation was called, was an incubator, a place so closely guarded, so profoundly secure that not even his real name was at risk. He and his fellow trainees were called by their "funny," i.e., fictitious, names. They were told that even the instructors did not know their true identities. Father and his classmates were assured in many small ways that they were now on the definitive inside, immunized against risk or even visibility—safe, protected, nonexpendable. Glamorous.

Meanwhile, one in every four of Father's Quantico classmates were being killed or maimed on the battlefields of Korea. In later years the gnawing guilt he felt about his own escape from combat tended to emerge

in fits of anger, usually after the third martini. Suddenly he would become a different person—angry, loud, wild-eyed. Mother called these drunken tantrums "the escape of the lout." She hated these non-U outbursts, and over the years decided, as his career spun downward and their marriage crumbled, that the lout was the real him.

I don't really know what, if anything, the ghosts of dead or mutilated classmates had to do with the first step in Father's self-destruction, but it began with something he did at the Plantation. The training course for apprentice spies was a game, something like military maneuvers, with a clueless rabble of students pitted against a disciplined, battle-tested Wehrmacht of instructors in a series of exercises that the Wehrmacht always won. The pedagogical goal was to teach the students, through repeated failure and humiliation and constructive criticism, to learn from their mistakes, and like children learning to talk, to master tradecraft by absorption rather than by precept.

The emphasis was on the tried-and-true: proven methods brought desired results, reckless innovation bred disaster. The final exercise in the cycle was a mock operation in which the students attempted to penetrate a Wehrmacht target and neutralize it without arousing suspicion. It was a given that the students would fail to achieve this impossible objective, be captured by the Wehrmacht, be interrogated with realistic brutality, and in some cases be broken and give up their service, their country, and their honor, and be weeded out before it was too late.

For my father, this contrived failure, this suspension of his natural worth, no matter how brief, was a bitter pill to swallow. His upbringing and his education had endowed him with a belief in his own value, in his natural invulnerability. No one could be his puppeteer, no one could touch him without his permission—especially not those who were not his equals and could never be his equals. The instructors, or some of them, affected the manner of the underworld: tough talk, uncouth accents, Neanderthal politics, contempt for hapless rich kids, a manner

that suggested that their street smarts were a hell of a lot more useful than the dead language of literacy the neophytes had learned in Ivy League classrooms.

Father, along with other students—these young men were not where they were because they were stupid—understood that the outcome was designed to humble the students. He decided to teach the instructors a lesson about the danger of making false assumptions. What happened next became part of Headquarters lore. Under Father's leadership, a core of the smartest students turned themselves into a gang and put together an operational plan to turn the tables on the instructors. In a preemptive strike, the students captured the instructors, interrogated them, broke a couple of them, and infuriated all the rest.

The chief instructor, a revered figure who had done great things behind enemy lines in World War II, was gagged and tied to a chair and denied bathroom privileges, a standard interrogation technique. He fouled his pants. When his gag was removed he shouted that Father had a lot to learn about playing the game. With maddening insouciance Father replied that the chief instructor had just learned that playing the game was a matter of not always playing the game.

This anecdote was passed on to me years later by a lofty superior, a friend and admirer of the chief instructor, who had known Father at the Plantation and who had prudently refused to take part in the coup Father engineered. Father himself never mentioned the episode to me, or for that matter, anything else having to do with his work. His early education had taught him to keep secrets from those who had no natural right to know them.

Father's schoolboy prank, which placed so many assumptions in question, split Headquarters into two camps. The old guard wanted to fire him and blackball him from all other employment that normally was reserved for men of his social class in the outside world. The positive thinkers and those with a sense of humor, a minority at Headquarters but

at the time a powerful one because it included an imaginative director, thought that Father was exactly the kind of young fellow Headquarters needed—unafraid and smart and daring and, above all, creative.

He was retained, even promoted a little ahead of time. Had he been as smart as his admirers thought he was, he would have at that point resigned with his laurels intact and gone back to the real world. Apparently he liked the glow he now gave off as a result of his wonderful joke, because he elected to remain inside. This was a fateful decision. For the rest of his career his admirers pushed him into assignments where they believed he would shine. But when he got to where he was going, the chief of station almost always was an avenger of the chief instructor who saw Father's arrival in his shop as an opportunity to put out the bastard's lights.

Consequently, Father never became the star at Headquarters or in the field that he had been for that brief moment at the Plantation, or before that in college, home, and school. It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons why a man who seems destined to succeed fails to live up to expectations. Father could have dispelled the mystery by telling his own rollicking story at dinner parties, but he never emerged from his tomb of discretion to set the record straight.

Never apologize, never explain, he counseled me, his only child, over and over again. I listened to this precept, and as you will learn, it cost me, in the end, almost as much as it had cost him.

My mother also paid a steep price for his folly. She married Father expecting to become, in due course, the wife of the Director, dining with the world's most powerful men and playing bridge and gossiping on the telephone with their wives. It was Father's fault that this did not happen. He had misled her into marriage, he had betrayed her in a way that was a hundred times worse than adultery. Obviously he had something wrong with him, a skeleton in his closet, a genetic defect he had failed to disclose to her. He was imperfect. He had hidden this from her. He

deserved no sympathy. The important thing to her, the central fact of her life, was her own crushing disappointment.

Another of my superiors, who had known Father in his youth and afterward shunned him as damaged goods, summed it up with cruel brevity.

"Your old man," he said, "was all sizzle and no steak."

Maybe so.

Father was what he was, and like so many others in all walks of life, he is remembered for his worst or best moments, depending on your point of view. He was living proof that there are no second acts in American lives. If in fact he was incompetent except for that one brief Fitzgeraldian flash of brilliance when he was twenty-three years old, he had plenty of company.

My own experience of the world of intelligence and the wider world is this: 90 percent of the workforce feigns effort, and of the 10 percent who do put their hearts and minds into the job, no more than one in ten is any damn good.

My own ambition—and I had no illusions about my chances of success—was to do one great thing to clean up Father's reputation before I used up my life and its opportunities.

Like father, like Quixote.

Father crashed and burned for good when he was about twenty years into his blighted career. His own opportunities, as we have seen, were severely limited. Over time, his fitness reports portrayed his work as acceptable, nothing more, and he had risen in rank in step with those findings. Promotion at Headquarters tends to be fairly rapid in the early years. Headquarters does not use military rank, but most intelligence officers (there were very few women on board in Father's time) reach a level equivalent to the military rank of major by their early thirties. Some advance to the equivalent of colonel around their fortieth birthday, and then, for most, promotion stops.

At forty-five Father was posted to Moscow, an assignment in which he had almost no chance of succeeding. He spoke no Russian and had no background in Soviet affairs or expertise in communism, which he regarded as a sham religion, modeled on Christianity, that was mainly interested in controlling the poor as a means of accumulating wealth.

At the time, Father's civil service pay grade was that of a lieutenant colonel, the tombstone rank of officers who are neither successes nor failures. The Moscow assignment would be his last before he was shooed out the door. He knew this, and the knowledge that the end was in sight plunged him into a midlife crisis. He who had once, long ago, been a somebody in the fabulous somewhere of his famous university, had become a nobody. His colleagues regarded him as a drone. His wife treated him as if he were invisible and hadn't granted him access to her body in fifteen years. Other Headquarters wives, who seemed to smell this rejection upon him, treated him like a eunuch. His friends had surpassed him and fallen away.

He and his only son, myself, had barely a nodding acquaintance. I imagine him, three sheets to the wind after the fourth martini and all alone in his bugged, shabby, underheated Moscow flat, uttering a loud *Fuck it!* into the empty air and deciding to wing it in whatever time and identity he had left.

In the months that followed, he drank too much at diplomatic receptions and often showed up at the office smelling of booze and seemingly incapacitated by hangovers. The chief of station ignored him but sometimes gave him a meaningless assignment. When tasked to meet a potential asset, a female Muslim from Kazakhstan in whom the station had no real interest, he embraced her on the street and kissed her moistly on the cheeks and (or so it was said) squeezed her left breast. She fled in outrage and was never seen again.

He slept with the first sparrow, or trained sex specialist, the KGB put in his way, and was photographed by hidden cameras committing Kama

Sutraian acts with her and two of her coworkers, one of whom was male. Father himself told me this story during the brief moments toward the end of his life when after years of estrangement, we became friends. After the encounter with the sparrows, he knew that he had not seen the last of the KGB. In his fertile mind, a plan took shape—he would entrap the Russians who were trying to entrap him. In one last prank, he would turn the tables on them and on his own service and make his enemies at Headquarters shit *their* pants.

He began to take long, lonely nighttime walks, knowing that the Russians would take notice and see an opportunity. They would follow him, watch him, and in due course attempt to hook him. What fun.

To record the approach of the apparatchiks, he wired and miked himself and wore on his tie clip a tiny camera that took clear pictures in very dim light. All of this gear was his own property, not the station's. He had bought it in a spyware store in a Virginia mall before leaving for Moscow. His plan worked. He was followed, monitored, watched by teams of sidewalk men wearing overcoats that resembled grocery bags with sleeves attached and fur hats like sawed-off shakos pulled down to their eyebrows. In his who-gives-a-shit state of mind, all this amused him tremendously. His intention, fueled by alcohol and disdain for his tormentors at Headquarters and the sheer boredom of having operated at 10 percent of capacity for twenty years, was that this joke would be the way his world would end: not with a howl but with a giggle.

The KGB's approach came as he sat on a park bench at two in the morning under a flickering light standard. Snow was falling, fat flakes of it tinted yellow by the artificial light. He knew, of course, that there was someone behind him, someone with a different tread and a different feel from the usual gumshoes who shadowed him, and he had chosen this bench because there was light enough for his camera, and because the snow-muffled silence was perfect for his microphone. Father crossed his legs, took off his fur hat, and scratched his head, coughed, as if signaling

the all clear to a contact. When after a long interval no contact appeared, a Russian sat down beside him. He had an un-Slavic face—shaggy eyebrows, large brown eyes, nose like a doge.

"May I join you?" he asked in competent American English.

Father grunted and offered him the silver flask of bourbon he had stowed in an overcoat pocket. The Russian drank it down like vodka. He coughed and made a face.

"*Awful* stuff."

Father said, "True, but it gets the job done."

The Russian chuckled. He said, "I am called Vadim."

Father said, "Bob"—not his true name, but Vadim already knew that.

"I have brought the photographs you ordered," Vadim said, and handed over a large envelope.

It was already addressed to my mother in McLean, and bore the correct Russian postage.

"Very kind of you," Father said, tapping the sealed envelope with a forefinger but not opening it. "How much do I owe you?"

Vadim waved a hand in dismissal of this small favor.

"Our pleasure," he said.

With a smile, Father said, "Mine, actually."

It began to snow more heavily. Vadim's hat and overcoat were coated with the stuff, so that with his great nose he looked like an emaciated snowman.

At length Father said, "Maybe you'd like to come to the point before they have to shovel us out, Vadim."

"I would like to ask for a favor in return for the photographs but I do not want to be misunderstood," Vadim said. "You can refuse of course, but it is a small thing."

"Don't worry," said Father. "Spit it out."

"I have great difficulty remembering American names because they are such a hodgepodge of names from all over the world—English, German,

Spanish, African, Arabic, Jewish, who can count them all? So what I was wondering was this. You work in the American embassy, so could you possibly obtain a copy of the embassy telephone book for me?"

In his first days at the Plantation, Father had learned that this approach had been a fishhook of recruiters since the invention of the telephone: bring me this trivial little thing and Topsy will grow.

Father said, "The phone book? Why?"

Vadim laughed apologetically. "It's a silly hobby, Bob, but I collect foreign telephone books. They fascinate me. Like novels."

"You like character-driven stories, is that it?"

"Something like that. I just like telephone books. There's a certain romance to them. By the way, I happen to have Natasha's phone number in case you would like to have it."

"I'd love to have it. Natasha has an amazing twat. It *squeezes*. Do you happen to have that number on you? "

"Unfortunately, not at the moment. But I could bring it next time we meet."

"Sounds good," Father said. "When and where would that be, our next meeting?"

Vadim named a different Moscow park. "Same time, eleven minutes after the hour, a week from tonight."

Vadim took back the envelope containing the pictures. "I will keep this for you so the snow will not blur the ink," he said.

"Do take good care of it until we meet again," Father said.

Father played Vadim for the rest of the winter, recording every second, every word of all their meetings with his trick ring and tie clip, but without delivering the embassy phone book or any other secret or official U.S. government document or tidbit of information.

Gradually, subtly, he turned their conversations around, so that by the end of April, Father had become the seducer and Vadim the reluctant virgin. Father offered the Russian the turncoat's equivalent of marriage:

legal sex, security, safety, a new name, escape into a happier, easier life in which the other person paid all the bills and, in case the union did not work out, made a down payment of half his net wealth.

Father had always been good at recruitment. Even the clique that had ruined his career conceded him that. Vadim, whether he was playing a role or playing it straight, wavered like a man who knew that his grip on his most precious possession, his virtue, was loosening with every encounter in the dark and haunted parks where the two men met in the small hours of the morning.

Finally Vadim said maybe, but first he wanted to talk to someone higher up in the chain of command than Father, someone who could make promises that could be kept. Father had not informed the chief of station or anyone else in the Moscow station about this off-the-books operation. Keeping his own counsel had been no great feat, since almost no one in the station or the embassy or in the American community, not even fellow old Blues, had the slightest interest in talking to a drunken outcast like him.

Because the case officer manuals for the KGB and Headquarters and practically every other secret espionage service in the world contain the same hoary truths about handling potential traitors, Father understood that Vadim's behavior—he was a little too compliant, a little too willing to part his knees—was likely to be a theatrical exercise. Routine skepticism suggested that Vadim's masters had seen an opportunity to penetrate Headquarters, to dump a mother lode of false information on the American service, to have a good laugh at the stupid Americans' expense.

That was the beauty of Father's prank. It would present the clique that ran Headquarters, the people who had banished Father into outer darkness, with an all but irresistible temptation. Whichever course they followed, they could never know if they had missed a bet or brought a disaster down upon themselves. In either case, they would remember

Father, they would remember what they had done to him, they would never be rid of him.

As retaliation goes, it's hard to do better than that.

On a night when the silence in Sokolniki Park was so heavy that it seemed that it made you imagine you could seize it like fabric between thumb and forefinger, Father looked deep into Vadim's eyes, which in the feeble light seemed as large as a horse's eyes, and said, "My friend, this flirtation has gone on long enough. This is the moment of truth. Decide now or we forget the whole thing."

He laid an encouraging hand on Vadim's coat sleeve and said, "Do what's best for you and your family, my friend, whatever that is."

Vadim tried to speak but like a stutterer reaching in vain for a word he can pronounce without inviting ridicule, he stood mute.

Father shrugged and said, "OK. It's been good to know you."

Then he spun on his heel and walked away.

In a voice that cracked, Vadim said, "Wait."

By then, however, Father had turned his back and stepped behind yet another curtain of falling snow. Because they were reading with different eyes from the same sheet of music, both men understood that this was not the end. Whether Vadim was behaving honestly (a possibility, after all) or dissembling, he would not, could not back off. If he honestly wanted to defect, he was already so compromised that he was a candidate for the KGB's standard penalty for treason: to be placed naked in a coffin and cremated alive. If, on the other hand, he was under orders to feign defection and was this close to success, he would have to go through with the operation.

Time would tell. Father and Vadim had the means to get in touch with each other. All either man had to do was chalk the Russian letter that looks like a mirror image of *R* on a certain lamppost on Tverskaya Ulitsa and they would meet at the time and place agreed upon.

Father was ready first thing the following morning to spring his joke on the chief of station. He asked the chief's secretary for an appointment.

In an expressionless voice she said, "I'll tell him you want to see him."

This happened on a Tuesday. It was Friday, during the last minutes of the workday, when the chief, a famously foulmouthed man who bore the Dickensian name of Amzi Strange, sent for him.

Amzi Strange had never smiled in Father's presence, nor did he smile now.

In a toneless voice he said, "What?"

Father handed him a bulging manila folder. Skilled bureaucrat that he was, he had organized a meticulous file on his mock operation.

Amzi Strange said, "What's this supposed to be?"

Father said, "I think you should read it, and read it yourself instead of handing it off to someone else, and then if you want to talk about it, we can talk."

Strange tossed the file into his in-basket and said, "Right. We're done."

It took Amzi Strange more than two weeks to read the file. He called Father on a Sunday at seven in the morning and said, in his grating voice, "My office. Now."

The chief was already at his desk when Father arrived. He did not invite his visitor to sit down.

He said, "Have you completely lost your mind?"

Father said, "I don't think so, Amzi, but if I have, I guess I'd be the last to know."

The Vadim file lay on the Strange's otherwise bare desk. He tapped it with a forefinger.

"This is real? It's not some kind of sick joke?"

"It's genuine."

"You've been meeting a KGB officer clandestinely, in public parks in the middle of the night, and playing along with a recruitment pitch for two fucking months without telling me, without telling anybody what you were up to, with no authorization from Headquarters and without its knowledge?"

"Yep."

"'Yep?' *Yep,* you frigging imbecile? Why? What in God's name were you thinking?"

"I didn't know we acted in God's name in this business," Father said. "But to answer your question, I was thinking that we had a good chance to turn this guy—I still think we will be able to do that if we play him right, and that that would be a feather in the station's cap, inasmuch as we've recruited not one single local asset in the year and a half you've been in charge here. Or for many years before."

"Thanks for sharing," Strange said. "You never wondered if this target you found with such ingenuity was a dangle, that this was a KGB operation, a threat to security, a quick feel?"

"Why yes, Amzi, those possibilities did cross my mind. But there was the other possibility, the one where with a little help from us, he could become a threat to *their* security."

"Pretty fucking slim possibility. So I ask you again, why didn't you let somebody know that you were singlehandedly putting at risk every single operation we're running and every single officer in this station, not to mention the family jewels back home?"

"I just did that."

"After the fact. I ask you again, what were you *thinking*? Tell me. Please help me understand."

"Basically, I was trying to keep busy," Father said. "You haven't asked me to do so much as to sharpen a pencil in the months I've been here, so I figured you'd be unsympathetic to any project I proposed. On this particular one, you'd tell me to cease and desist."

"You're fuckin' A I would have."

"And besides that, Amzi, I have no reason to care whether you like this or not. It's an opportunity to run an asset inside Lubyanka—"

"There is no Lubyanka anymore, my dear fellow. They've moved to the country."

"Well then, I guess Vadim would have to commute, supposing you and Headquarters have the guts to consider this, to take a chance."

"What chance, you fucking nutcase?"

"Amzi, really. Instead of hurling obscenities at me you should be thinking about the benefits you might reap."

"Benefits? Like what for example? Dismissal? Disgrace?"

"If all goes well, admiration of the nation, possibly a medal, almost surely a promotion—branch chief, chief of division, eventually. I'm on my way out. You can run this op, reap the glory, without ever mentioning my name."

Amzi Strange locked eyes with Father. Neither man yielded. By his own account, Father was calm, in control, enjoying himself. Strange was red in the face, breathing audibly, teeth clenched.

Trusting his voice at last, he said, "You're so fucking right about being on your way out. Get your sorry ass out of here. You're toast."

2

Father had committed the ultimate Washington sin of baring the ass of the Establishment. His Moscow prank made his betters look foolish, exposed the hesitancy of an agency that was chartered to be bold, and made it the jest of the month at Georgetown dinner parties. At Headquarters, a full internal investigation began. Amzi Strange was summoned home to be debriefed by the inspector general, who was in charge of this exercise. The IG operated on the assumption that everyone at Headquarters except him was a potential if not an actual double agent controlled by the intelligence service of a hostile power. Father thought that the IG was a psychopath in desperate need of treatment. The IG thought that Father was a dangerous saboteur who should long since have been fired—or, better yet, prosecuted for his antics at the Plantation.

Downfall in Washington among the mighty and the obscure alike typically stems from a trivial incident. In a cubbyhole outside the Oval Office, a president undergoes fellatio by a woman not his wife or discusses ways to cover up a Keystone Kops burglary, and thereby provides his enemies with an opportunity to destroy him without revealing their real purpose,

which is to reverse the outcome of an election they lost but should have won if the voters had not been deceived by the political Beelzebub they feel it is their moral duty to overthrow.

The same rule applies to more humble figures, like Father, who discomfit the elite. Whether you are carrying out a coup d'état or the shaming of a nobody, it is essential that you be perceived as the virtuous avenger, and that your victim to be unmasked as the evil person he is and always has been.

In Father's case, kangaroo justice was swift and thorough. He was reduced two civil service grades in rank, fired for cause, and threatened with prosecution for violation of federal espionage laws and for cheating on his expense account. Father was not deprived of his pension, a pittance based on a percentage of his pay and his years of service, but the IG ruled that he had to wait until he reached retirement age to start collecting it. Meanwhile he had no income, and as a result of the divorce, few assets.

He was unemployable in any profession where Headquarters had friends. Former colleagues who had gone into business as government contractors shunned him. So did everyone else he had ever known at Headquarters. He was a fluent writer, but he soon discovered there was no market for his memoirs (which in any case would have to be cleared by Headquarters before publication), so he wrote a comic novel about undercover life, casting the leading character, based on himself, as the Little Tramp of espionage. The manuscript was rejected by twenty different publishers, none of whom read past page ten because they saw nothing funny about the unspeakable doings of the satanic thugs who, they devoutly believed, worked at Headquarters.

Finally, when Father was down to his last few dollars, he got a job working for a shady private investigator, but he had been a spy by trade, not a cop, so this didn't work out and he was let go after the probationary period. In letters to me he joked about buying a used taxicab and becoming a mobile philosopher.

As I have already reported, he and my mother, who was a lawyer at a backwater government agency, had led separate lives for many years. She had long since stopped accompanying him on foreign assignments, so I hardly ever saw him after the age of twelve, though he wrote me monthly letters and every summer he and I got together for two weeks wherever he happened to be posted. We went on safari in Tanganyika (I shot a kudu), hiked in the Himalayas, toured three-star restaurants in France. Among other ancient ruins, we visited Angkor Wat and the Taj Mahal and the ruined architecture of the Roman Near East, sailed in the Mediterranean and dived in the Red Sea.

He had real affection for me, I now realize. He made an effort to be amusing. Little shit that I was, I never laughed at his jokes.

When he was home he and Mother slept, while the marriage endured, in separate bedrooms and dined in silence. They never went out as a couple. Mother had an active social life, Father had none in the United States outside of bars. It all ended when, after his return from Moscow, he showed up at the house with his luggage. Mother shut the door in his face. From the Headquarters grapevine she had heard all about his latest outrage. She wanted no part of his disgrace, and besides, because of his heartless neglect, she had fallen in love with someone else.

Under the terms of an estate plan, executed years before, when my parents were still on speaking terms, the house was in her name, and Father's bank accounts were held jointly with her. Mother's own name—she was a lawyer, after all—was the only one on the bank accounts in which she deposited her earnings and the profits on the stocks and bonds she had inherited from her parents. When they divorced, she was awarded alimony and somewhat more than half of what remained of Father's paltry wealth.

When the final decree was handed down, I was studying in Beirut, and when I asked Mother over the telephone what Father was going to do now, she said, "I really have no idea. Maybe roam the world naked with his begging bowl."

In a way, Mother's quip about the begging bowl came true. Father was not left naked by the combination of disgrace and divorce, but he had exhausted his savings and sold everything of value that he still owned. After Mother and his lawyer took their share of the spoils—including, in Mother's case, thirty-six months of alimony in advance—he was literally penniless. He had three years to wait for his pension to start, and even after that happened, he would be left after taxes and alimony with a net annual income that was only slightly above the poverty line. Meanwhile he was well below it with no prospect of escape because the job market was closed to him. He applied for positions for which he was well qualified—he spoke four languages, had contacts all over the world, and was a capable manager—but never received a reply.

He bagged groceries at the Safeway where Mother's friends shopped, washed dishes in a restaurant and cars in a car wash. He begged for coins on the street, ate in soup kitchens, slept in shelters for the homeless in winter and in doorways in warm weather, and sometimes when the police were rounding up vagrants, spent a night in jail. He stopped writing to me, maybe because he couldn't afford the postage.

All this I learned later on. Mother, my only source of information about him, never mentioned Father in her breezy notes, invariably dashed off on tasteful blank greeting cards from the gift shop of the National Gallery of Art. The handwriting on these missives was slightly askew, as if she had written to me while waiting for traffic lights to change on commutes to and from the office.

Although I knew he was in trouble and adrift, I had little idea what was happening to Father—for all I knew he was dead or in prison—and to be truthful, I was not interested in knowing more. He was long gone from my life. Except for our annual quality time together, he had been absent since I was twelve years old. In theory I knew he loved me, or wanted to love me, but I gave him little encouragement and almost no thought. His face flickered in my memory as if I only had seen it, like that of a

passerby, for a split second. I seldom bothered to read his letters, though I always opened them promptly to see if money was enclosed. Usually I found a twenty, or at Christmas and birthdays, a fifty. The bills were always fresh from the bank, crisp and new and good to smell. I seldom answered his letters. They were, I thought, false, contrived, presumptuous because the intimacy between us that they suggested did not exist and had never existed.

A couple of years passed before I completed my studies and went back to America. I had a knack for languages. Because I spoke and read and after a fashion wrote Arabic and Hebrew and three major Persian languages spoken in Iran and Afghanistan and had lived among Muslims in the Near East and knew a few who were educated and well placed, I was deluged with job offers from multinational corporations and government agencies. Billions were being poured into the war on terrorism, and everyone in Washington, it seemed, wanted to listen in on the enemies of the United States or interrogate them. Among other degrees—I prolonged adolescence for as long as I could—I had a PhD in Islamic studies and a passing acquaintance with a few people who counted in Muslim countries. My ambition was to teach languages and Islamic history and culture at a reputable small college and live in a large gingerbreaded Victorian brick house with a good-looking, good-natured, intelligent wife whose appetite for sex was as insatiable as my own and who wanted no kids.

Soon after I got off the plane in New York, a former professor introduced me to a friend, ostensibly a venture capitalist, who wined and dined me and one night offered me a handsome salary, a rent-free apartment in Washington, a leased car, and the opportunity to travel a lot and do good in the world and for myself in return for, as he put it, encouraging in their own languages certain persons in the Middle East to look kindly on his firm.

We were dining, just the two of us, in a New York restaurant where dinner for two cost five hundred dollars even if you ordered the second-best wine.

I had about as much interest in accepting this offer as of lying down on the FDR Drive at rush hour. However, my connection with Father had not left me in a state of total naïveté, so after listening to his pitch I said, "By the way, what's the name of your firm? You've never mentioned it."

"Actually it doesn't have a name, just a reputation. Ambiguity is an asset in my business."

"I see. Does your nameless firm ever do business with a large ambiguous enterprise with headquarters in northern Virginia?"

He smiled. "You ask the right questions," he said. "That's one of the things I like about you."

But he didn't answer the question.

I said, "Let me ask you this, then. Do you know who my father is?"

"I know a little about him. Very able man, as I understand it. A bit too able for some tastes, some say, and that was the problem."

At that point in the conversation, knowing the little I knew but also knowing what was coming next, I should have laid my silverware on my plate, dropped my napkin on the tablecloth, and left. Instead, because I had been living on kebab for a long time and I wanted to finish this elegant meal.

My suitor smiled. I had given him the key to my room.

"Be patient," he said. "There are better ways than taxable salary to be compensated for good work."

I told him I needed time to consider the offer.

As we parted on the sidewalk I said, "These people who talk about my father. Do you think they know how he can be found?"

"Let me get back to you on that," he replied.

A few days later he called me with the answer to my question.

A couple of weeks after that I found Father outside the Metro station at Gallery Place. He was begging for coins. He had stationed himself at the top of the escalator. When he saw me rise like an apparition from the underground, he took an exaggerated step backward

and, still kidding, looked furtively right and left, as if seeking an escape route.

He was dressed in stained corduroy trousers, runover sneakers, tattered golf cap, worn-out tweed blazer torn at the shoulder. He carried a large khaki rucksack that was much the worse for wear. It was the same one he had bought for our two-week climbing expedition in the Alps when I was sixteen. I still owned its duplicate. I realized that the rucksack contained all his worldly goods—sleeping bag and overcoat, clothes and whatever other street person's essentials he carried around with him because he had no other place to keep them. He had lost weight, he had grown a full beard or let it grow for want of a razor. He looked beyond me, as if expecting someone more interesting to rise into view.

I said, "Hello, Father."

He said, "Hi. Is this encounter a stroke of fate or are you acting on information?"

"Someone told me you might be here at this time of day."

"Anyone I know?"

"He says not."

"He would say that. How do you know this person?"

"A friend introduced us."

"In that case," Father said, "beware. What time is it?"

I looked at my watch, an entry-level Rolex he had given me as a graduation present when I was eighteen. "Quarter after twelve."

"Have a seat over there, will you, and give me half an hour to work the crowd. That's why I'm here, to catch the lunchtime rush. Then *we*'ll have lunch."

Despite the threadbare affect, he was behaving as if he still wore a tailor-made suit and shirt, a Sulka tie and Allen Edmonds shoes, and would be taking me to the Metropolitan Club for the midday meal. I sat down on a bench and watched him beg. He was good at it. He looked like what he was, a former somebody who had had a great fall. Most people gave him

quarters. A few who perhaps saw him for what he used to be or what he was now or what they themselves might become, handed him dollar bills.

When the crowd dwindled, we walked down to Constitution Avenue, where lunch wagons were lined up at the curb near the National Gallery. He ordered two of the fat spicy hot dogs that Washingtonians call half-smokes, two bags of chips, and two bottles of spring water. When I tried to pay, he pushed my hand aside and counted out the money in quarters. We found a bench on the Mall and ate our half-smokes and Fritos in silence. Father gathered up our empty bags and plastic bottles and threw them into an overflowing trash basket.

He said, "So what prompted you to look me up?"

"Curiosity. Concern."

"In that order?"

"I haven't sorted that out."

Father spread his hands. "Well, here I am. Don't leap to conclusions. This is not such a bad life once you get over the surprise of having ended up a derelict. Simplicity, the absence of possessions, really does have more good points than bad. I used to think that was goody-goody bullshit, but it's true."

"You don't miss anything about the old life?"

"Hot showers, tennis, king-size beds with warm female bodies in them. Cleanliness. Being dirty all the time is an itchy way of life."

"You look thinner. Do you get enough food?"

"Oh, yes. Do-gooders supply plenty of day-old bread and soup and canned beans and venison—Park Service hunters secretly shoot the deer in Rock Creek Park at night and give the meat to the shelters. They say it's beef stew—otherwise the bums won't eat it. The experience is something like wandering bare-ass with a begging bowl in India, except not many people in this culture mistake the homeless for holy men."

"Funny you should say that about the begging bowl. Mother made a similar reference."

He lifted his eyebrows but made no comment.

I said, "What about conversation, the company of the like-minded?"

"Actually I never ran into many like-minded people," Father said. "But you might be surprised. Some of these outcasts are credentialed. A larger percentage are crazy, of course, but the demented can sound learned, and some of them *are* learned. You run into alcoholic ex-professors, disbarred lawyers, drug-addict doctors who have lost their licenses for selling prescriptions to pushers or jumping on their female patients, a few former wheeler-dealers who owe the Mob money. All sorts, all of them interesting in a one–dinner party kind of way."

"You don't mind living without money?"

"But I don't live without it. On a sunny day—never beg in the rain, son—I can make fifty bucks. That's where I stop. For one thing, fifty dollars' worth of quarters weighs a lot. That's one reason to spend them right away. Also, because of the addicts, it can be dangerous to go to sleep with money in your pocket. I work the crowd in different locations—Dupont Circle and the Zoo are good—two or three days a week, depending on the take, and have more than I can spend, tax free. You can buy cooked food and canned stuff and salads in supermarkets, so I eat a healthful diet. I have no expenses, no wants, no mortgage. No family obligations. No possessions anyone would want to steal. All very liberating. I'm sorry to have cut you off without a penny, but you look like you're doing all right."

Father was perfectly relaxed, as he always had been, and for the first time since early childhood I saw him for what he really was. As if some sort of psychic curtain had been pulled aside, I realized that I had disliked and resented him as an adolescent because, as I saw it, he had left Mother and me. Rejected us. Rejected me in particular. I wanted to pay him back, to let him know that there was no chance, none whatsoever, that he would ever recover the love he had forfeited. His only child would never come back to him. Take *that,* you bastard!

Seeing Father as he was now and always had been, watching as his original face became ever more visible through the grime and the beard, I realized all of a sudden how deeply I loved him and what powerful reasons I had to do so. He had put up with me when I was at my worst. Long before I was a man, he had treated me like a man. He might not have made a man of me, but he equipped me to make a man of myself without once letting me know what he was doing. Now he was showing me how to lose everything with effortless grace.

This was—I am going to come right out and say this—a religious moment. Something came over me. Some invisible savior in whom I had never believed had laid his invisible hands upon me. Mixed with this total stranger of a thought was a sudden resolution: now that I had found my father, I wanted never to let him go. On the spot and in this mystical moment I decided to take the job in Washington that the venture capitalist had offered me.

I said, "Look, there's something I want to tell you."

Father nodded amiably. *Go right ahead.*

"I'm taking a job in Washington," I said.

"Congratulations. May you be happy in your work."

"Here's the thing. I'll have a good-size apartment. I hope you'll move in with me."

"Oh, my," Father said.

He didn't ask who I was going to be working for or what I was going to be doing. After a moment he looked me in the eyes again.

"The prodigal to the rescue," he said. "How good of you to invite me. I am touched. But really, I think not."

"Why not?"

"We just got through discussing that. I am otherwise engaged."

"Don't worry about being a burden to me," I said.

"Why would I worry about that? You were a burden to me. But really, I couldn't. I don't want to. I'm where I want to be."

"Jesus!"

Father grinned. "I hate to ask," he said, "but have you found Jesus? Is that what's going on here?"

"Not even a brush contact," I replied.

"'A brush contact.' You remember the lingo, I see."

"Actually I remember almost everything you ever tried to teach me in spite of my best efforts to ignore it. You won't change your mind?"

"No. But thank you."

Clearly this was his last word.

I said, "I hope you don't rule out our staying in touch."

"Of course not. Maybe I'll drop by every now and again for a shower and the use of your washing machine. But let me make the moves. I have no fixed abode, so finding me may not be a simple matter."

I scribbled my cell phone number on a scrap of paper.

Father took the number and buttoned it into a pocket.

"Thanks, I'll keep this," he said. "But it's hard to find a pay phone nowadays, so actually calling you might be a problem."

He held out his hand. The nails were rimmed with black. I knew I might never see him again. I did not take his hand, but instead embraced him. He hugged me back, patted me consolingly on the back. The rancid smell of him, so different from the mingled scents of Roger & Gallet shampoo, fresh air, and Tanqueray No. Ten gin that I had known so well, was memorable. I wondered what passersby made of this spectacle of a derelict and a weeping young man locked in an embrace. After a moment, Father disentangled us.

He said, "Awfully good to see you."

And then he turned on his heel and walked away—purposefully, quickly, but not hurriedly. It was not in his genes to hurry.

Soon after this, I moved to Washington and on my lunch hours checked out the Metro stations where he might be begging, but never found him. He never called the cell phone number I had given him.

In early winter on a day after a heavy snowfall, I received a call from the police, who had found my cell phone number in the pocket of a street person who had been stabbed to death as he slept in the doorway of a building not far from the Capitol. I went to the morgue and identified the body. I had never before seen his naked body. When I had imagined him as a corpse, he was always lying in dim light in a coffin, fully dressed, wearing his habitual half-smile. Now, in the bluish fluorescent light, his deeply peaceful face looked quite Christ-like—something like the talismanic photographs of Che Guevara's face after he was slain in Bolivia by friends of Headquarters.

With the help of the staff of a congressman who was a member of Father's Yale society, I arranged for his ashes to be placed in the columbarium in Arlington National Cemetery. The urn was carried to its niche by an honor guard of frozen-faced young soldiers wearing dress-blue uniforms. A chaplain read from scripture. I did not listen to the words. A recording of "Taps" was played.

I was the only mourner. I had bought a funeral notice in the *Washington Post* and informed a silent Mother of his death by telephone. She did not show up, and neither did anyone from Headquarters or his secret society or anywhere else from the lost city of his past. I placed the urn in its niche, and as I did so, my unconscious mind, if that's what the agent of these visions was, provided me with another surprise.

Without warning, rage took possession of me. I shook with the palsy of it. The diffident chaplain looked at me with alarm, so I guess my face was contorted—red, possibly, wet with tears certainly. I could no more control what was happening to me than I could have controlled a fall from the top of the Empire State Building. I uttered a loud sob, then another and another—not because I was grief-stricken, but because I felt uncontrollable anger. I had never experienced anything like this before, but I immediately recognized it for what it was, the internal savage bursting out of the cave.

This time a different being had come up behind me and laid another kind of hands upon me. I wanted revenge. I hungered for it. I cared for nothing else.

This was what those bastards had done to my father to avenge a joke—a fucking *joke*!

In an act that would have been unimaginable to me before I met my real self that day, I swore on Father's ashes that I would make Headquarters pay. I would make it my life's purpose to make it pay.