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I have rewritten this story countless times and I am still uncertain whether I have described the events the way they really happened. My recollection of the first week of my stay at the Shaman Lake is relatively clear, but later events become more and more obscure. The last night especially is blurred in my mind. As if the snow storm were still swarming around me, peeling the skin off my face and tearing out the pupils of my eyes.

I still wake up nights with a scream, drowning in my own sweat. Pressing my palms to the sides of my head, I try to protect my ears from the deafening shriek of the wind blowing through the broken windows. Only after a long moment, when the nightmare begins to dissolve, do I venture to open my eyes. I stare unbelievably at the bright and friendly sliver of the moon and try desperately to convince myself that what I see behind the window is the reality, and the white fury that continues to shake my limbs and numb my senses is nothing but a reflection of a distant memory.

I have just finished writing the last version of my story.

But it doesn't prevent me from torturing myself about the truth what I've told. Is there any truth in it? Or any meaning, at the very least? Perhaps the whole nightmare never happened. Maybe the entire horrifying experience was nothing but the hallucination of a man on the verge of losing his mind.

Is it possible?

It might be. Already then, toward the end of my stay at the Peterson House, I was no longer capable of telling the difference between reality and imagination.

But does it really matter?

Even if everything that I've described is just the product of my feverish mind its sickening tangibility has been as powerful as the most brutal and unbending reality for me. Some pictures of the last night appear before my eyes in cruel clarity, sending shivers throughout my whole being. On sight in particular sears my mind with almost unbearable pain. The sight of the bright screen of my PC and the flickering words:

***NO ONE IS TO BLAME***

## CHAPTER ONE

I'm a good storyteller.

It's not just my own opinion. Some of the critics have said so, and none of them has ever written otherwise. I'm not saying that the reviews have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic, but certainly they haven't been devastating. Only once was I given a really nasty review. One moronic scribbler wondered why I chose to pollute the language with these monstrosities, suggesting that I should have learned proper English before I started writing. But the man is known as a raging, venomous anti-Semite, and certainly has no idea what good literature is. After all, I've lived in the United States for twenty odd years and my English is at least as good as his. I'm certain that he found out about English not being my mother tongue from the customary CV at the book's jacket and not from my writing.

But I cannot deny that I'm not a native speaker.

As a matter of fact I have no mother tongue. After so many years away from Israel my Hebrew, to say the least, is rusty. Once or twice, mostly out of curiosity whether I could pull it off, I've written a short story in Hebrew, but my mind was working in English and the labor of translating my thoughts was too much. My Polish is nothing to speak of either. I can read and express myself quite adequately, but I can't recall that I've ever written anything more than a postcard in Polish.

Just another word about the reviews. Insulting ones like this low-life's have been rare, and I have never developed a full-blown antipathy toward the critics. I don't regard them as my personal foes, and I don't subscribe to all those nasty clichés—for example, that all critics are frustrated would-be writers exacting revenge for their failure by destroying the real writers. I'm quite aware of the fact that my writing doesn't merit serious attention, and I was always thankful for anything that has been written about me.

Six years ago I succeeded in publishing my first book, *The Ax*. When it appeared on the shelves I'd spend hours in bookstores, hovering nervously round the mystery and horror section, watching like a hawk anyone who passed nearby. If one happened to pick up my book and glance at its back cover, my heart would begin to pound as if I was about to collapse. I could hardly keep myself from approaching, grasping the person's shoulder and uttering: "How do you like it? I wrote this book. Would you like me to sign a copy for you?"

Not anymore.

I still get very excited when a new book appears in the stores, but nowadays a PR agency arranges the meetings with my readers, and it has become a well-orchestrated production. No more chance encounters in local bookstores.

Up to now I've written seven horror novels.

Perhaps I've given the impression that I don't like what I do, but that's far from the truth. I do enjoy spinning a plot full of suspense and surprising twists. I like creating demented and tormented souls that eliminate each other in the most horrifying ways. But I don't have any illusions regarding the literary value of my writing. It's not total trash because it's well written, but in a literary sense it's of rather limited value.

I have no doubt that I can write something more meaningful I have the talent to write an authentic novel, deep and insightful. To be one of the few foreign-born writers recognized as a leading novelist in the U.S.—that is my dream. "The author, though born in a non-English-speaking country, has set new standards in revealing the hidden layers of meaning in the language." I've read some such remark in one of the literary periodicals, and I wouldn't mind it if someone said as much about one of my books. But

I'm aware that this is impossible. Language has always been of secondary importance to me. I never spend much time choosing the words or refining the structure of my sentences. My metaphors are far from being subtle or even particularly original, and the melody and rhythm of the written language are rather obscure ideas to me. For some reason, I've always felt that too much of these ingredients might cloud my narrative, but I guess I'll have to correct this when I start working on something more serious.

Anyway, until now I've never found the time to write a serious novel. Something has always come up, and I've had to write another book with blood dripping from almost every line and the stench of death rising from every page.

My third novel, *Down the Drain*, became a bestseller. It made the New York Times bestseller list and stayed there for four consecutive weeks. It was also my first real financial success. Though my two previous books had made it possible for me to quit my job as an editor in a small press of technical manuals, it was only thanks to *Down the Drain* that I became the possessor of a substantial bank account. I decided that it was high time for a significant shift in my writing career. I didn't have to worry about money anymore, and could now write a novel for those chosen few of exquisite taste and probing intellect. But before I'd had time to sit myself down in front of my PC, most of the money was gone—I had bought a nice two-bedroom apartment on Central Park West and a relatively new black Porsche convertible, and made half-a-year-long trip in the Far East. I wouldn't say that I was broke, but in order to maintain my newly acquired high standard of living I had to temporarily postpone my aspirations of entering the Pantheon of Literature, and concentrate on the horrors I had been writing up till then. In a record time of ten months I finished two novels *Evil's Game* and *The Murderer's Eye*. Both of them sold well, and my dwindling means were sufficiently replenished.

It was soon after *The Murderer's Eye* was published that I met Michelle.

It happened on a promotion tour. I was invited to give a lecture at a women's literary club in New Orleans. The moment I laid eyes on her, before we had even exchanged one word, something happened to me. Something that I believed happened only in old Hollywood movies and cheap romantic novels, and would never happen to me—I fell madly in love. As I stared at her I felt my throat tightening, and for a long while I couldn't utter a word. I don't know how I managed to rouse myself from my stupor and continue the lecture. As a matter of fact I had lost the thread of my argument and began to stammer so badly that I had to read from the notes I'd prepared beforehand (which I never do). Throughout the lecture I tried desperately not to look in her direction, but my eyes refused to obey me and traveled toward her time after time.

I had never before seen such beauty.

I forgot about the promotion tour and stayed in New Orleans. We spent two weeks together, and my love grew stronger with each passing day. When I had to go back to New York, I asked her to come with me. I was the happiest man in the world when she said yes. For a long time, being completely preoccupied with my newfound love, I didn't write even a single word. Almost a whole year passed before I felt the urge to write again. But when the need finally came it was so overwhelming that everything else ceased to exist for me.

Even Michelle.

Not that I stopped loving her, although I had discovered some unnerving, weird features about her, which began to cast a dark shadow on our life together. In those days writing became a sort of asylum for me. Sitting in front of my PC, concentrating on my new novel, I didn't have to deal with the complexities of her soul and the problems deriving from them. I even entertained the dream of becoming a serious novelist again, but I couldn't think of any worthwhile subject to write about. All the plots I had been

spinning in my head were the same morbid and bloody tales involving vicious and demented killers and their no less demented victims.

I shared my creative difficulties with Brian.

"Why don't you write something about yourself?" he suggested.

"About myself?" I laughed. "I'm thirty-seven years old. Too young to write memoirs. What could I possibly say about my life that might be of any interest?"

"You'd be surprised. For instance, you could write some kind of an autobiography. Or rather a pseudo-autobiography. Something surrealistic, full of horrid nightmares and frightening hallucinations. A story that takes place mainly in the troubled mind of a half-crazed writer."

"My nightmares are between me and myself. They are of no concern to anyone else."

"And what have you been writing about until now? Aren't they your nightmares?"

"No. Everything has been borrowed from others."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

He looked at me doubtfully and smiled. "If you say so." After a moment's thought he added, "I have another suggestion."

"Which is..?"

"Why don't you look for your roots? They say the most profound literature has its genesis in a writer's roots."

"After so many years in the business don't tell me that you still believe it." I grinned.

He grinned back at me.

Another month of hard work went by, and I still didn't have a clue what to write about. I'd spent hours upon hours in front of my PC, starting something that seemed promising, deleting it after a day or so, then starting something else.

In my desperation I reconsidered Brian's suggestions, and they seemed more acceptable than I'd thought at first. Maybe I should write some sort of autobiography? If I searched my soul and examined my life under a magnifying glass, I might find the material for a novel of greater literary value than my usual stuff. I could also do some research on my family background and my Jewish origins. Why not? Ethnic subjects and searching for one's roots were quite trendy these days. A lot of authors had done the same. Paul Auster, for example. Brian had once brought *me The Invention of Solitude*. Yes, if Auster could write an autobiography before he had written anything else, why shouldn't I? I also had a profound idea or two, which I could share with my readers. My roots are...

What are my roots? Where do my origins lie?

Certainly not in Poland. I'd left there when I was two years old and remembered nothing of it. For fourteen years I lived in Israel and at the age of sixteen I came to the United States. I have lived here ever since, but people are still asking me where I'm from. It's not just because of my accent, I guess—almost everyone in New York has a funny accent. It's more on account of my general behavior—my manners, the way I order in a restaurant, or hold a cigarette, or even the way I leaf through a newspaper. Probably everything about me betrays my foreign origin.

After prolonged deliberation I decided to start my journey into the troubled soul of the artist in Israel, there to look for the material that would go into the Great Novel of My Life.

The night before I left, I realized to my surprise that I had no feelings for Israel. No longing for its landscapes, no yearning for the time of my childhood, no expectation of meeting my past. No nostalgia at all. Furthermore, when I recalled the places and the people I had known in my youth I felt a violent repulsion. A small voice inside me cried: "Don't go there, Richard. The whole idea is preposterous. You find nothing there." It

was a rather baffling sensation; after all, I didn't remember my childhood in Israel as being particularly unhappy. I disregarded the voice. I was willing to try anything on behalf of my future greatness.

Michelle refused to join me this time, and I flew alone.

The first few days I toured the country restlessly, searching for that something which would spark the creative fire in me.

Nothing happened.

Nothing that appeared in front of my eyes evoked any special feeling in me. I didn't even experience the thrill of a tourist visiting somewhere for the first time. After all I had been to all these places, and the fact that I hadn't seen them for two decades didn't seem to matter. Their familiarity didn't comfort me either, and most of the time I felt oddly estranged.

I looked up some friends from the old days and managed to locate Avi Maimon. We met one evening in *Schneider*, a small pub on Ben-Yehudah Street.

"You haven't changed!" he exclaimed when he saw me. "Haven't changed a bit. I would have recognized you anywhere."

"You haven't changed either," I replied, even though he had developed a considerable potbelly and suffered from serious loss on the top of his head, which he tried to conceal by elaborately styling the leftovers. Looking at him made me feel good about myself.

"So, what do you do for living?" he asked when we were served our drinks.

"I write books," I said, modestly casting down my eyes.

"Writing?" he repeated with an air of contempt. "Can you make a living out of it?"

Before I could reply, he began telling me enthusiastically about the computerized water pump plant he'd built with his own two hands.

"Listen to me, Richard," he uttered, grabbing my shirt, "I've been considering the American market for a long time. But I need someone who knows the country. Someone I can trust. Do you catch my drift? We can make it big time over there. You don't have to know much about water pumps. Whatever there is to know, I can teach you in a week. You could make money."

"I'm making money!" I said defensively.

"Writing?" he laughed. "Come on! I'm talking millions! Let's say... I'll be fair... ten percent! What do you say? I'll make it fifteen. You can always write for fun."

I was about to show him a picture of my Porsche, but after some thought I gave it up. Maimon, my childhood bosom buddy, ceased to interest me, and any need to impress him vanished completely. He continued to blabber on about the vast marketing possibilities for water pumps in America. I heard his voice, but the words escaped me—I'd channeled my concentration in the direction of the cute little waitress who was serving our drinks.

After this fiasco I considered going back home, but something (probably my stubbornness, which no doubt merited a better cause) kept me there. For a while longer I continued my search, but gradually I let it drop. I hadn't completely forgotten what my quest was about, but I couldn't force myself to go on. I had begun spending most of my days on the Sheraton beach and my evenings in the pubs and nightclubs of old Tel Aviv. Curiously, I didn't have any misgivings about it. I had met a couple of interesting guys and they became my drinking buddies. So as not to sound like an idiot in our casual talks over a drink, I started reading the newspapers and watching the newsreels on TV. Without having noticed it, I wasn't estranged any more. These weren't the roots I'd been looking for, but I began to feel at home.

Maybe, after a fashion, I was still on my quest?

I missed Michelle.

Before I left we'd had a big fight. As a matter of fact we'd been fighting a lot lately. That was probably the main reason for prolonging my stay in Israel. Both of us could benefit from a few weeks' separation. I welcomed the first couple of days away from her with a sense of relief, but toward the end of the week I'd already begun to miss her. Especially at nights. I would wake up longing for her embrace, and when I touched the cold sheet beside me I'd be ready to catch the next flight home.

I had an unconsummated one-night-stand.

When the pressure became unbearable I picked up the pretty waitress from *Schneider* whom I had befriended during my regular visits there. I was burning with desire when I brought her to my room, but when we landed naked in bed I couldn't do a thing. Michelle's beautiful face appeared in front of my eyes and my urge evaporated instantly. Suddenly the girl seemed ugly and unappetizing. Her chatter had become stupid and her bashful giggling irritated me. A poor substitute for my love. I excused myself, saying that I had drunk too much, and sent her home. After that I stopped looking for substitutes and contented myself with making love to the specter of my Michelle.

Although I longed for her constantly I still didn't go home; I was still waiting for inspiration to strike. A week later it finally did. I once again felt an irresistible urge to sit down in front of my computer and write. After reading in the newspaper about a Hebrew University professor who'd been arrested because of his contacts with some terrorist group, I got an idea for a political thriller. The protagonist of my novel would be an aging professor who falls madly in love with a beautiful foreign exchange student, unaware that she's a terrorist using him to carry out her lethal mission. It was just the germ of an idea, not especially original or exciting. I'd had this kind of ideas by the dozen, and usually dismissed them after a moment's thought. But feeling the urge I decided to stick to it. I hoped that once I started writing I'd be able to produce something more meaningful.

Perhaps Tel Aviv would be my Paris?

The other evening in *Schneider* I had run into Jackie Duke (Yaakov Rozen in his former incarnation). Duke was a businessman who divided his time between Israel and the United States.

He had a flat in my building in Manhattan. We had been quite close once, and before I met Michelle we frequently used to cruise the bars of Manhattan together. He is a devoted hunter and travels the world looking for game. Dozens of stuffed animal heads decorate the walls of his New York apartment. I'd joined him once on a wild turkey hunt that ended in near-disaster for me. It was probably my fault—I had strayed away from the group and lost my way in the woods. Suddenly I heard a blast and felt a terrible pain in my lower back. A moment later I saw Duke's horrified face. Fifteen tiny pellets had to be removed from my butt. I hadn't spoken to him since.

Even now, three years after this unfortunate event, I fidgeted uneasily on my stool when he approached me at the bar, offering to buy me a drink. I knew he'd always been an open admirer of mine and had read every book I'd ever written. After all I could hardly blame him for what had happened to me, so I stayed. We both avoided talking about the accident.

I told him that I intended to write a book here.

"Yes?" he said. "Do you know I have a place in Tel Aviv?"

"Where?"

"On Hayarkon Street, near the Dan Hotel. If you want it, it's yours for at least half a year."

"But you're staying there now, aren't you?"

"I'm going back to New York."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"How much is the rent?"

"Come on, Ricky!" he patted me on the shoulder. "I'm not going to charge you. A signed copy of your new book would be more than enough."

The next day I left the hotel and moved into Duke's apartment. In one of the closets I found a double-barreled shotgun. The moment I saw it I had an impulse to throw it into the sea, but after a moment's thought I left it where it was. It would have been a childish act of revenge. Duke, no doubt, had had his share of sleepless nights because of that one impetuous shot. His generous offer proved it clearly enough—I knew him to be a shrewd businessman who wouldn't have passed up the opportunity to make an easy buck if he hadn't felt guilty.

To this day I can't forgive myself for not throwing away that accursed gun.

A friend of mine offered me a slightly used PC. He was asking practically nothing, so I drove to Jerusalem to pick it up. After we'd concluded the deal I bought him lunch in one of the restaurants in the *Mishkanot Sha'ananim* district. When we left the restaurant I saw something that entirely changed my writing plans. In the window of a small gallery a bronze nude dancer was on display. My heart missed a beat—she had Michelle's face and body! I was ready to buy the piece right away, but first I wanted to see other works by the sculptor. The gallery owner refused to disclose his address, but I wouldn't give up and kept pestering him for almost two hours. Finally he relented and gave me the sculptor's phone number. The sculptor's name was Richard Shiloh.

I called Shiloh the very next morning, and he invited me to his studio in Ramleh, a small town near Tel Aviv. I stared in astonishment at his bronze nudes. Most of them had the same features.

Michelle's features.

"Do you work with a model?" I finally asked.

"Sometimes," Shiloh replied.

"Always the same model?"

"No."

"So how come...?" I didn't finish my question but he understood what I'd been about to ask.

"Almost every artist carries a vision in his mind, which he tries to recreate in his art," he said. "I guess this is my vision."

"She exists," I whispered.

Shiloh raised his brow questioningly, but I didn't explain what I meant.

I bought three statues from him—the dancer I'd seen in the Jerusalem gallery and two smaller nudes. I paid him the full price with no argument, knowing that a big chunk of the money would be going to the gallery as commission. That had been my agreement with the gallery owner when he gave me the phone number. That same night I called Michelle and begged her to join me in Israel for hours. She refused. I couldn't bear the separation anymore, and two days later I boarded a flight to New York. I guess it's needless to mention that during my entire stay in Israel I hadn't written a word. But at home I started writing a day after my arrival. During my absence Michelle's behavior had become even stranger, and once again I found refuge in my PC.

The next novel took me ten agonizing months (with Michelle accounting for a considerable part of the agony), but I definitely had a winner. *Good Times Bad Times* differed somewhat from my previous books. It wasn't a clear-cut horror novel—though it had a lot of blood-curdling moments, the horror was a bit less obvious and more sophisticated. No, it wasn't the Great Novel I'd had in mind. It wasn't John Le-Carre, but it was definitely the best I'd ever written. I was very pleased with myself, and the public obviously shared my enthusiasm—this book also made the New York Times bestseller

list the month it was issued. Once again I was thinking of serious writing. My latest novel proved I could do it.

I caught Duke at the last moment before he left for Bangkok, took the key to his Tel Aviv flat, and went to my travel agent to book a flight to Israel. On the agent's desk I found a leaflet extolling the charms of a spot in upstate New York. I fell in love with the place just from looking at the picture. Despite his best efforts the lousy photographer hadn't succeeded in diminishing the beauty of the colonial house standing on the shore of a silvery lake, surrounded by an autumnal forest. For a moment I considered changing my plans and renting this house instead of flying to Israel. But I stuck to my original choice after all. Shaman Lake was too close to Manhattan. I'd only be able to create another horror story there. In order to write something else I needed not only psychological distance from my present existence, but physical distance as well.

This time I'd succeeded in convincing Michelle to come with me. Her aversion to travel was so strong, it seemed to verge on some kind of mental disorder. Not just traveling abroad. Sometimes I had trouble even getting her out of the house. I had to use all my persuasive tactics to get her to change her mind about coming to Israel. I guess the threat that I might stay there for half a year or more did the trick.

Two days after our arrival I got a phone call from Brian.

"Where are you, you son-of-a-bitch?!" he shouted.

"In Tel Aviv."

"Don't be a smartass! I know where I'm calling! Did you forget?"

"What?"

"Los Angeles, you idiot!"

I'd completely forgotten.

In two days I was supposed to deliver a lecture at some fancy country club. Half its members were in the movies, and Brian's big hope was to sell one of my books to Hollywood. In his mind my appearing there was of crucial importance to his plans.

"Why don't you ever tell me when you leave the country?" he continued to rage. "Do I always have to be a fucking detective to find you? I want you back on the first flight!"

"Can't you...?"

"No! I can't anything!" he cut me short. "I want you back right now, or you can start looking for another publisher!"

Michelle flatly refused to join me and I had to fly alone. I was gone for four days.

Four days in which my entire world was shattered.

I have no problem in describing the most morbid scenes; after all, they're the main ingredient in my stories. I'm at ease with the most horrendous atrocities, I've described quite a number of them in my books. But when I recall what I saw when I came back from Los Angeles, words seem to lose their meaning. No, I cannot describe what I saw, nor tell what I felt at that moment. And not because these things are indescribable.

I can't do it.

OK, I'll stick to the bare facts.

Michelle...

Michelle was lying on the floor of my study. Dead... Her beautiful face was shredded and torn apart. She was holding a double-barreled shotgun in her frozen palms. The one I hadn't thrown into the sea.

I must have collapsed by the corpse, for the next thing I remember is the white ceiling of a hospital room. For some reason I remember the smell. It was the smell of Jambalaya, a Cajun fish dish, so sickening in its intensity that I almost threw up. I failed to understand how on earth an Israeli hospital could smell like a New Orleans joint. I dragged myself from bed and tried to open the window. I couldn't, so I grabbed a chair



and broke the glass. Two orderlies appeared a moment later and tied me to the bed. I was given some shots, and after that I don't remember a thing.

Oh yes, I vaguely recall Brian's face.

Nearly a week passed before I began to notice what was happening around me. By then I was already in a small private institution in Westchester, upstate New York. I was suffering from an acute mental breakdown. Later on I found out that Brian had come to Israel, released me from the psychiatric ward in Ichilov hospital, and brought me to this place in a catatonic state.

That's where I met Greg.

Gregory Greenberg won me over in the first five minutes of our first session. He was an ex-Israeli too, maybe two or three years older than me, so we immediately found common ground. His empathy, lacking even a trace of the patronizing arrogance so typical of most of his colleagues, was very reassuring. When he spoke to me in his quiet voice, with just a hint of a Russian accent, a stoic tranquillity enveloped my troubled soul. The pain was pushed away into some dark corner of my mind, and I was able to look upon my life without flinching. Until then I had never talked about myself nor used autobiographic materials in my books. Well, I'm always ready to brag about my successes, but the mishaps and failures I keep to myself. With Greg, without shame or embarrassment, I let go of everything that had been bottled up inside me for almost thirty-eight years.

I told him everything.

Almost.

Yes, those forty-five minutes we'd spend together every other afternoon for a period of three months gave me so much. I felt that I was cleansing my soul of all the trash it had accumulated over so many years. This sense of well-being would linger on for two hours or so. Then the enchantment would slowly fade away, and I'd slide back into the dark pit of paralyzing depression, like a junky as the drug dissolves in his veins. Brutal in their clarity, pictures of a faceless head drowning in a pool of blood would flood my mind wave after wave, flushing away my hard-won serenity.

Ninety-two days passed before Greg decided that I was no longer a threat to myself and could leave the sanatorium.

I had to continue my drug treatment and the therapy sessions for a while longer. We would meet three times a week in Greg's private clinic on West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, a few blocks from my apartment. I could live by myself and perform most of the daily tasks, as long as they didn't require too much concentration on my part. My behavior gradually became quite normal—anybody who hadn't heard about the traumatic event would have had to have a very keen eye to tell that something was wrong with me. Nevertheless I wasn't well at all, and definitely needed those sessions. Almost every night my nightmares would keep me awake. Now and then I also had rather curious blackouts. I would suddenly find myself in strange places without knowing how I'd gotten there. Once, for instance, I left Greg's clinic to meet Brian at the Carnegie Deli on 58<sup>th</sup> Street. I had covered over ninety blocks by the time I woke up and found myself in the heart of Harlem. Fortunately this gap in my memory didn't cost me much. Only some bruises and the loss of my wallet.

Above all I couldn't write.

Our frequent sessions had probably become some sort of a substitute for my writing. At first they'd been regular sessions. I would sit in front of him in a leather armchair, the big, mahogany desk between us creating an atmosphere of professional distance (he would even suck on a pipe occasionally), while the small tape recorder captured my words for Greg, apparently to be analyzed later on. After a time Greg had abandoned the paraphernalia of his profession, and we'd meet in a small coffee shop in his building.

Sitting at a table and drinking an espresso coffee, looking through the big window at the people out in the street, we would talk for hours.

We actually became friends.

I really don't know what brought about this change in his attitude, what made him deviate from the rigid pattern of a noncommittal relationship between a psychiatrist and his patient. Perhaps he'd come to the conclusion that friendship between us would be a better therapy for me? No, it doesn't seem to be the right explanation—Greg is a psychiatrist of the old Freudian school, who believes that an emotional detachment from the patient is essential for therapy. Well, probably my being a writer did the trick. Once, when we had been talking about my writing, he told me that as a student he'd attempted to translate Mayakovsky's poems from Russian into English. Yes, that might have been his reason for changing the rules of the psychiatric game—my creativity evoked a need in him to befriend me, believing that he would still be able to maintain his professional objectivity.

Even though we met as friends, we would still talk mostly about me. As a matter of fact, I talked and he listened. I would tell him about every little thing that had ever bothered me in the past, was bothering me in the present, or might bother me in the future. From time to time he would say a word, guiding the conversation in an almost imperceptible way on a track that interested him. But he never tried to force me to talk about something I didn't want to. If he saw that I was reluctant to discuss a subject he'd brought up, he would drop it immediately.

One day, though, he deviated from his customary manner and asked me abruptly: "Tell me Richard, don't you think it's high time we discussed the circumstances of Michelle's suicide?"

I felt as if he'd punched me right in the heart.

Her name had been reverberating in my mind since the day she died. But to hear it spoken out in the open, albeit by the man who had become my mentor and guide in the darkness of my troubled soul, was too much for me. For a moment I thought I was going to collapse with a severe anxiety attack. It was the very first time that Greg had ever confronted me with a direct and brutal question about a subject I had begun to consider almost taboo. We had touched upon this matter obliquely once or twice in our sessions, but I would immediately start talking about something else.

It was as if I'd been trying with all my might to erase Michelle from memory. But if that was my desire, I hadn't succeeded, and whenever I was alone, especially during the long autumn and winter nights, I couldn't think about anything else. The sight of her golden head, with a bloody mess where the face should have been, constantly appeared in front of my eyes. The cold body lying on the plastic sheets, spread out on the floor of my study, had been haunting my memories, leaving no room for any other picture. As a matter of fact it wasn't just a memory. It was something far beyond mere recollection—the pictures I saw were sometimes so sharp and tangible that I could almost smell the sweet, sickening stench of drying blood, and my stomach would immediately turn over. For a moment I would forget that it was only a nightmare and leap back with a cry, looking frantically for a way out of the room. The hallucination would fade away slowly, and I would find myself in my bed, teeth chattering in terror.

I must have asked myself why she did it a million times. I've already granted that Michelle was strange. I'm not trying to say that she was totally demented, or that she'd lost her grip on reality. No, not at all. Her oddities were still within the boundaries of what I presumed to be normal. Yes, they were very unsettling for me, but I wouldn't call them abnormal. Her unwillingness to leave the house, for example. Or her compulsive tidiness. But who am I to talk about others being compulsive? There's no one more compulsive than me.

At the beginning her oddities hadn't bothered me much. Moreover, I was happy to discover there were some flaws in her. Before I became used to her exquisite beauty I'd had difficulty just holding her in my arms. I kept asking myself in the utmost disbelief, what have I done to deserve her. What has this unearthly creature found in me? Yes, those strange traits made her less perfect and more human, and they made it easier for me to love her.

Quite some time elapsed before they began to irritate me. By then I already knew about her detestation of psychiatrists and other experts in matters of the mind and soul, and I was reluctant to propose a visit to any of them. I'd mentioned it once in an oblique and, in my opinion, delicate way. She'd become so hysterical that I dropped the subject immediately and never mentioned it again. Not directly anyway. But I hinted more than a few times that if matters didn't change, we would have to separate. I didn't mean it, of course. It was just an idle threat, meant to prod her into seeking professional help. She knew that. I'm convinced that she knew how deeply I was in love with her, and whatever I said, I said it out of mere frustration. She knew I could never leave her.

Maybe she'd stopped loving me?

Then why hadn't she just left me? Why did she take this way out? Was I the one who drove her to despair? Did I push her to her death? I shudder in contrition when I recall my terrible outbursts of anger. At those moments I would lose my senses and hurl the most bitter and hurtful words at her. Was that the reason? No, impossible! I don't know even one loving couple that never fights at all. And when you fight you sometimes say things you wish you'd never said. But our fights never lasted long, and I was always first to ask forgiveness. After all, my love for her never diminished, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to put up with her weirdness for two years. The night before I'd left Israel for the lecture in Los Angeles we fought again, but afterwards we made love and her embraces were more passionate than ever. Before we fell asleep I looked into her face and it seemed so calm and content. I'm convinced that I saw genuine happiness in it. No, I hadn't noticed even a sign of what was to come.

No sign at all.

I couldn't bring myself to talk about her death. Not even with Greg. I wouldn't bring up the subject myself. Ever.

It took me awhile to regain my composure. When the anxiety began to disappear, a trace of anger crept into my heart. I was cross with him for breaking his own rules.

"What is there to discuss?" I spat through clenched teeth. "It might be a trifle difficult to psychoanalyze the corpse, don't you agree? So let's drop it. OK?"

"OK," he nodded.

He sipped his coffee, staring out the window in silence.

For a long while I was silent too, letting my anger build up almost to the boiling point. I came close to bursting, but I waited for him to say something first so I could let out the steam. Several minutes passed and still he wouldn't open his mouth. My rage began to turn into uneasiness.

"We did talk about her," I finally said. "I did let you know, back there at the institute, whatever there was to know about her death. Don't you remember?"

"Whatever you say, Richard," he smiled. "If you still don't feel at ease talking about it, we don't have to."

"But you remember, don't you?"

He continued to smile without replying.

"Remember?" I persisted.

"We didn't exactly discuss it," he said after awhile. "As I recall, you related the bare facts in two short sentences. We couldn't analyze the causes that drove her to suicide in depth. You were in very poor mental shape at the time."

"And now I'm supposed to be in good shape?"

"What do you think about it, Richard?"

I gritted my teeth.

Greg had never used this irritating what-do-you-think-about-it technique before. He probably noticed that my anger was being rekindled.

"Don't you feel the need to talk about it?" he asked hastily. "To understand why she did it? I know you blame yourself."

"Maybe I'm trying to put it behind me."

"So that's what it is!" he sarcastically exclaimed. "Can you explain how you're going about it to me?"

"Why? Is it so ridiculous?"

"Frankly? A bit. But perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps you're in possession of some kind of putting-behind-you technique I'm not aware of. Why don't you explain the process to me?"

Once again I was furious.

All I wanted to do was to get up and leave without saying another word. I had been so comfortable with him up till now. Our talks had given me such peace of mind. Why would he destroy it now? I could barely force myself to stay.

"Well, doctor," I said, hiding my anger behind a sarcastic grin, "You tell me. Why is what I've said so ridiculous? What's wrong with me?"

"You really want to hear it?"

"Yes."

"Well... You're not putting it behind you. You're forcing yourself to forget."

"Semantics," I waved my hand.

"No, it isn't. Putting something behind you doesn't necessarily mean forgetting it. It means that you let your memories slowly fade away. Without a struggle. But you've got quite a battle on your hands trying to get rid of yours. Isn't that so?" I didn't reply and he continued: "Yes, Richard, you're trying to stifle your memories. You've buried them behind a wall of silence. You seem to think that if you don't talk about them, they'll eventually go away, right? But let me tell you, those memories have embedded their powerful talons in your soul, and they'll never let go. To get rid of them the way you're trying to is a labor of Sisyphus, and that boulder you're pushing up the hill is bound to crush you some day."

"Are you talking about so-called repressed memories?"

"No, I'm talking about so-called mind-fucking."

I couldn't help but smile. That was what I liked about him. He almost never used supercilious professional terms. Not that I had any trouble understanding them—I'd taken a basic psychology course in college, and I was quite familiar with the jargon. As a matter of fact I'd used it frequently enough in my novels, and since the critics hadn't pointed out any flaws or mistakes in their reviews, I gather that I'd used it quite properly. But Greg's everyday, unpretentious language appealed to me much more than the learned gibberish of his colleagues who presumed to maintain a distance from their patients.

"But let's drop it," he said, "I can see that this matter still upsets you. I don't want to push you."

"OK," I nodded.

"One suggestion though, before we drop it for good."

"Yes?"

"Why don't you write about it?"

"You must be kidding!" I uttered, nervously lighting a cigarette. "You know perfectly well that I can't write."

"Come on! If you only tried, you might find that it's not so difficult. I'm not saying you should write a five-hundred page novel. Do something that requires much less of a commitment. Write about you and Michelle. About your relations."

"Writing about her is less of a commitment?"

"You think about her constantly anyway, don't you?"

I didn't reply.

"When I said less of a commitment," he continued, "I meant the writing itself. Write down your thoughts. Nothing organized. Just whatever comes to mind. Since no one has to read it, you can put everything down on paper any way you want."

"On screen."

"OK, on screen," he smiled. "In my mind a writer uses a pen and paper. He sits in a shabby, dark attic and tries to warm his frozen fingers by the flickering flame of a candle."

"And has tuberculosis, of course," I laughed.

"Of course."

"I'm not sure I can do it," I said, after a moment's thought. "It takes me hours to write a two-sentence letter, and afterwards I feel like dying."

"That's because a letter requires very organized thinking. I meant something untrammelled, like... like talking, for example. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"The mere thought of entering my study, where I spent so many hours with Michelle..."

"Why don't you go somewhere?"

"To Israel?" I sneered bitterly.

"You've told me about this spot. In upstate New York, I believe. Before you decided on Israel you were thinking of going there."

"Oh yes, Shaman Lake."

"Right!" he nodded vigorously. "That's the place. I've heard a good deal about it. It's supposed to be very beautiful. Especially now, in the fall."

In my mind I saw the lake sparkling with gold and silver in the evening sunlight, surrounded by a forest of ageless trees.

"Is there anything special you have to do now?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Good. Then you should go there. A change of scenery might do you a load of good. I'd go there myself if I could. To feast my weary eyes on nature in the wild. To rest my aching ears from the noise of the city for a while. You'll see the matter in a different perspective, I can promise you that."

"Well... maybe you're right."

"Maybe? Definitely I'm right. Even if you don't write a word there, I'm sure you'll come back a changed man."

The idea began to appeal to me.

New York in autumn and winter can be the most depressing place in the world. Even the soundest person could lose his mind during these seasons. And I hadn't been very sound lately. At Shaman Lake, in this natural Garden of Eden (if the pictures on the leaflet were telling the truth), I might be able to put together the shattered pieces of my soul.

"I'll do it!" I declared. "Perhaps I will be able to write something there. Who knows, maybe even a novel?"

"No, that's not what I meant," he said hastily. "I wasn't talking about creative writing. For that you need to be more stable than you are now. I was thinking more along the line of... of observations... random associations. That kind of stuff."

"I know what you mean. I was just joking. I'm not going to burden myself with a lot of work.

"Do a lot of hiking in the woods."

"Maybe I'll try some fishing. Though it seems a very boring occupation."

"Sometimes boredom is very efficient therapy," laughed Greg, "Which is why we prescribe basket-weaving to our basket-cases." I smiled and he added, "And most important of all—sleep. Sleep as much as you can."

"And from time to time I'll write a bit."

"That's the spirit!"

"OK."

The next morning I called my travel agent to ask whether the old Peterson House was available. An hour later he returned my call and informed me that a couple of young honeymooners was presently occupying it, but that they were due to check out the following Monday. The house could then be at my disposal for the rest of the autumn and the entire winter. I told him to make a reservation for the duration. I spent the rest of the week in sporting goods stores, looking for equipment.

As is my wont, I bought stuff that would carry me through the harshest Himalayan winter. I also purchased a nice collection of fishing rods. Since I'd never done any fishing before, I spent two long hours in the company of a helpful but talkative salesman, listening to his elaborate explanations concerning the use of each rod. His interminable lecture, larded with a lot of obscure professional terms, bored me almost to death. But I forced myself to listen and even asked a lot of questions that a person of average intelligence probably wouldn't have, because I could see the amusement in his eyes.

My enthusiasm at the prospect of staying in the Peterson House till the end of winter grew with every passing minute, and I counted the days slowly dragging by with mounting impatience. At night I would put myself to sleep thinking about the wonderful time I was going to spend there. I pictured myself lying with half-shut eyes in a tiny boat, swaying slightly on the lake's tranquil waters, lazily basking in the soft warmth of the autumn sun. Or I would see myself in front of a burning fireplace with a drink in my hand, listening to the sweet strains of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. Outside a terrible snowstorm would be raging, but the hammering of its blows against the sturdy walls of the house would only enhance the sense of warm serenity inside.

The fact that I would be alone the whole time didn't bother me at all. I'm a rather outgoing person, I make friends easily, and I don't mind enjoying myself in good company. But solitude doesn't frighten me either, and I don't panic when I have to be alone for any length of time. As a matter of fact there are times when I prefer to be by myself. When I'm writing, for example. Before I'd met Michelle weeks on end would go by when the only face I saw was my reflection in the mirror while shaving. In my present quasi-stable mental state, the seclusion of Shaman Lake was very appealing. And the lake was only a few hours' drive from New York, after all, so if the solitude did become a burden, I could always go back home.

The night before I left, I had the strangest dream.

I was hiking through a dark forest, full of ominous shadows and scary sounds, forcing my way through the dense and tangled undergrowth, my feet sinking into a soft, squishy bed of rotting leaves. Suddenly I saw a twelve-year-old girl sitting on a fallen tree trunk. When she heard my footsteps approaching, she raised her head from a book open in her lap. She brushed back a rebellious lock of raven-black hair and exposed her white teeth in a radiant smile.

"What are you reading, girl?" I asked.

"Don't you recognize it?" she said, handing me the book.

I took it and glanced inside. The book had no pages, only a black videocassette between the covers.

"I can't read it," I complained.

"No problem."

She began unreeling the tape out of the cassette and the black ribbon began to pile up at her feet.

Suddenly I noticed that my feet weren't planted in leaves anymore, but in a bed of tangled magnetic tape. When I raised my head I saw that the forest had been transformed into a phantom city of miniature ruins that barely came to my shoulders. On closer inspection it turned out to be a painted cardboard model of Hayarkon Street in Tel Aviv.

The girl stood up in front of me, placing her hands on her narrow hips. Her smile had turned into a scornful scowl.

"Do you recognize it now?" she asked. "You wrote it yourself, didn't you?"

"I've never written about Tel Aviv."

"So what?"

I'm dreaming, I thought.

"And what does this dream mean?" she asked.

"That's supposed to be my line."

"But you're so slow!" she uttered with contempt. "I've lost patience with you."

The next day I woke up before dawn.

I lay in bed in a stupor, trying to force the dream to continue, hoping that if I dreamt on to the end, I might understand its meaning. But as the minutes passed sleep faded, and the remains of the dream disappeared along with it. I succeeded in recreating the girl and putting all sorts of elaborate thoughts and philosophical sentences into her mouth, but I was already aware that this was no longer a dream, but only the confused reflections of a sluggish mind.

After awhile longer I abandoned the attempt and got up.

In a short time I'd packed the stuff I'd bought into my Mazarati, leaving behind half of it. (I forgot to mention that after *Good Times Bad Times* I'd switched from Porsche to Mazarati; I'd noticed that Porsche is the most popular Wall Street car, and though I do like to appear successful, I didn't want anyone to think I was a sleazy broker.) At six o'clock sharp I was ready to leave. As a matter of fact, I could have stayed in bed for another two hours. Whoever was renting the house probably wouldn't be ready to leave before noon, and I had to allow some time for the caretakers to prepare it for my arrival. But I was ever so eager to leave the city behind, and I just couldn't wait anymore. I wasn't planning to speed; I was going to drive slowly and enjoy the scenery. In any event, I never speed, and in my hands the Mazarati is a complete waste. Sixty, sixty-five, that's my limit. Yes, I was going to take my time and drive all the way up to Shaman Lake at a leisurely pace, pulling over now and then to watch autumn taking over the world. I would stop at a back-road diner, order a cup of coffee, and if the waitress was young and pretty I might flirt with her innocently.

The sky was a brilliant blue, without a trace of cloud, and the sun gently caressed my face. It was one of those glorious autumn days which New Yorkers are rewarded with for their misery during the rest of the year. The drive with the top down was as perfect as I'd imagined. Even the two diners fulfilled my expectations. In one of them I discovered, to my utmost pleasure, an espresso-coffee machine, and in the other I ate a juicy steak, almost rare, just the way I like it. The waitresses in both places were nothing to speak of, but I didn't let that affect my sense of well-being.

I arrived in *Independence* about noon.

I was supposed to visit the local tourist agency, to hand over my voucher and pick up the key to the front door, but I didn't feel like stopping in the dreary town. Anyway,

there should be a spare key under the doormat on the front porch, as my agent had informed me, and the local tourist agent would be visiting me later on. Inhaling the smell of fallen leaves deep into my lungs, I drove the last three miles from the town to the lake on a dirt road winding among ancient trees, dressed in their colorful autumn garb. Nothing has a greater effect on my senses than the smells of late autumn. For some reason the heavy odor of disintegration and decay intoxicates me much more than the pungent fragrance of newborn life in spring. The excitement and joy people express at the sight of nature's blossoming in April and May has always seemed somewhat overblown to me. Yes, there's something phony in the sublime way we welcome newborn babies or puppies, or flower buds. I wouldn't go so far as to say they're repulsive, I like them well enough, but this sentimentality... this mushiness... Now, as for myself, I'm an autumn man. Or rather I used to be. Why this has changed is part of my story. Anyway, I used to love watching the pouring rain and listening to the howling wind and crackling thunder. And when a bright, shining ray of sun would break through the dark clouds, it was the most glorious of moments for me.

I was driving almost at a walking pace, intoxicated by the sights and smells. By nature I'm a city dweller, but seeing all this beauty around me I suddenly felt that I could live in these woods forever. Well, maybe not forever, but for a long, long time anyway, without missing what I'd left behind. The sight of the lake, suddenly emerging from behind a dense wall of trees, surpassed everything I'd been hoping for. I stopped in the middle of the road, without bothering to park the car in the old wooden shack beside the house, and slowly climbed the five stairs to the porch. I sat in the squeaky rocking chair and stared out at the water.

I can't tell how long I sat there. The light breeze was dallying with the sunshine on the water, and tiny ripples of silver and blue and green broke into flashes of gold and red and yellow, splashing gently against the sturdy beams of the porch. I watched this dance of colors and listened to the lake's soft music, and for once, after a very long time, I was happy.

Really happy.

The wind turned colder and brought me to my feet. I found the key under the doormat and opened the front door.

Suddenly I froze.

My heart was pounding and the blood was rushing through my veins as if I was about to explode. I could hardly control my breathing.

I would write!

Yes, at that moment I was absolutely convinced that I was ready. Not just ready—I was in a frenzy to start right away. My fingertips throbbed with the nervous tingling so familiar to me from better days. All I wanted to do was to sit at my computer, place my hands on the keyboard, and watch the black letters on the bright screen combine into words. Words that would form sentences and paragraphs, and tell whatever I had to tell. I really didn't care what it would be. It didn't have to be the Great Novel I'd been dreaming about. Another horror story would do just fine.

As long as I could write.

But first I had to settle into the house. I drove the Mazzarati into the crumbling garage and impatiently started unpacking my stuff. I dragged everything into the living room and left it in a pile in the middle of the floor. Right away I began to install the PC in front of the big French window overlooking the lake. I placed my stereo set and the collection of my favorite discs on a shelf within hand's reach. (It's easier for me to concentrate with the proper background music.) The hiking and fishing equipment I stuffed into the small closet beside the kitchen, then I raced up the stairs with my



personal belongings. I entered the bedroom and was about to toss everything on the wooden double bed.

At that moment I froze again.

I was instantly gripped by a burning desire. Two stark naked, attractive youngsters were copulating passionately in front of my startled eyes. The stuff I'd been holding fell out of my hands as I stared at them open-mouthed. I could see the exhilaration in the girl's pretty face and I could hear her panting. I tried to back away but my legs refused to budge, as if they'd been nailed to the floor. There was no way I could take my eyes off this arousing sight. I began to notice insignificant details, like the tiny red rose tattooed on the girl's white, upraised butt, the pink polish peeling from her toenails, or the blanching of her knees pressed against the hard mattress. I could see the small, brownish mole on the guy's muscular, rapidly heaving stomach and the glistening perspiration on his powerful neck and shoulders. With the tattered remains of my decency I desperately tried not to peek at the spot where their bodies intermingled, but I couldn't avoid noticing that he'd deviated from the regular route. Evidently this was doing nothing to diminish his spouse's ecstatic joy.

It took some time but I finally managed to break away from this scene and tiptoed toward the door. When I touched the knob, I sent another glance backward over my shoulder.

The bed was empty.

I stared at it paralyzed with astonishment. Biting my lips in anticipation, I prayed for the wonderfully explicit vision to reappear. But some time went by and nothing happened. I leaned heavily against the wall and shut my eyes, trying to understand what had triggered this hallucination. Perhaps it had been my travel agent's casual remark about the honeymooners who'd rented the house before me? Yes, that had probably stuck in the back of my mind and—combined with my almost yearlong celibacy—had evoked this erotic vision, accompanied by a powerful erection.

I needed a stiff drink.

Leaving my stuff where it had fallen, I left the room and went down the stairs. I didn't find anything in the pantry but, luckily, I'd brought a bottle of fine Polish vodka with me. I found an open can of tomato juice in the refrigerator, which gave me the idea for a nice, soothing Bloody Mary. The preparation of this cocktail has therapeutic properties in itself. I mixed the liquids and the spices in a glass pitcher I'd found in one of the drawers, trying to disregard the slight tremor in my hands. Once again I tried to revive the titillating fantasy. After awhile I succeeded in picturing the couple in my mind, but it was just a dim memory, lacking the vivid, three-dimensional tangibility of what I'd seen before—as if they had actually been in the bedroom. I could have sworn that I'd even smelled the odors of their lovemaking!

At that moment I heard the faint rumble of a car engine. I shrugged off my futile daydreams and walked out onto the porch with a Bloody Mary in my hand. A black-and-white police cruiser was rolling slowly toward the house. Two men in khaki uniforms and eight-gallon hats stepped out and began approaching. The younger of the two, a chubby, blond man in his early thirties, quickened his pace at the sight of me and traversed the five steps up the porch in two bounds. Smiling broadly he held out his soft hand.

"Mister Richard Gold?"

I nodded.

"The writer?"

This time I nodded more vigorously and returned his smile.

"It's really you!" he exclaimed. "I recognized your face. You look exactly like your picture on the cover of your books. When I saw the name on the registration form in the

office, it didn't even occur to me that it might be the author I admire so much. The Richard Gold!" He shook my hand, turning to the older man behind him. "Would you believe it, Al? This is Richard Gold himself." He turned back to me. "It's a great honor, Mister Gold. Really. I've read all your books. Wait till I tell Sheila. She's my wife, you know, and she's also a great fan of yours. She'll be green with envy when she hears that I was the first one to greet you here."

It was the kind of welcome that would have evoked warm feelings in even the most vehement opponent of admiration and lavish praise. And I myself have always liked being admired.

"Are you the local sheriff?" I inquired.

"No, he is," he replied. "I'm only the deputy. The name's White, Billy White, at your service." I turned my eyes to the older representative of the law, and the deputy added, "Meet the sheriff, Mister Gold. Sheriff Al Strom."

The sheriff stepped up closer and shook my hand. A thin smile cracked his dark, leathery face.

"Nice meeting you, Mister Gold," he said. "Billy gave me one of your books to read."

"Which one?"

"The last one, I believe," he replied, glancing uncertainly at his deputy. "Right?"

"Yes, the last one," Billy nodded, "*Good Times Bad Times*."

"Did you like it?" I asked, anticipating another compliment.

"Well... It was cleverly written, no doubt," he answered evasively. "One could enjoy it, even without being a great admirer of that kind of literature."

It was obviously one of those dubious, compensatory compliments that someone pays an artist to disguise a basic lack of enthusiasm for his work. But I took it at face value and showed my teeth in a big smile. After all, I wasn't a fan of the genre either, and had read almost none of my competitors' books.

"Did you come here to work, Mister Gold?" asked Billy.

"You can drop the Mister," I said.

The smile on the deputy's round face almost squeezed his small eyes shut. At that moment he looked like a pink piglet beaming with pleasure.

"What should I call you then?" he asked.

"Anything you like, as long as you don't call me Dick." The old, tasteless joke made him burst into loud laughter, as if it was a pun of outstanding originality. I became even fonder of him.

"Would you like something to drink, gentlemen?" I asked. "I've just mixed a pitcher of Bloody Mary and I wouldn't mind knocking it down in your company."

"Thank you, Richard," said Billy, "but I'm driving. And as a representative of the law, I can't allow myself to be caught driving under the influence."

"Who'd arrest you?"

"That's true," he laughed. "Thanks anyway... Maybe some other time."

"I'll have some," said sheriff Strom.

I went inside and brought out the pitcher and another glass for him.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit, gentlemen?" I asked, filling the sheriff's glass with the thick, reddish liquid. "I hope I haven't violated any regulations while passing through town."

"Nothing of the sort," said Billy. "We came by to see if everything was OK. If you needed anything. The Mastersons—the couple who were here before you—they left only an hour or so before your arrival, so we didn't have time to prepare the house for your stay. I hope they didn't leave too much of a mess."

"Well, I was expecting a visit from the local agent," I said in good-humored surprise, "but I didn't think that the law here took care of these things."

"Besides being the deputy I run the agency together with Sheila. In a small place like this almost everybody wears two hats."

"I see. Well, the house is fine. The Mastersons seem to have been a neat enough couple, and as far as I could see, they've left everything in order. Even the bed was made."

"I don't know how much they used that bed," Billy guffawed, winking at me. "They were outdoors people, and whatever a newlywed couple is supposed to do in bed they did out on the beach and in the woods. A pity, but I didn't get to see it personally. When we have honeymooners the property is off-limits, to allow them as much privacy as possible. But the kids in town..." he sneered, "You know how kids talk."

Suddenly I had a weird sensation.

"Tell me, Billy," I said, "You did see them, didn't you?"

"Sure. Why do you ask?"

"Wasn't the bride a small, shapely brunette... you know, the Hispanic type? And the groom was a big, blond guy—one of these iron-pumping hulks?"

Billy looked at me suspiciously.

"How did you know that?" he cried. "You couldn't possibly have seen them. They left quite awhile before you arrived. And as far as I know, they live in Buffalo... You came from New York, right?" I nodded. "So you couldn't have seen them on your way here, either."

I made no reply.

The sheriff drew closer and looked straight into my eyes for a moment. The trace of a sarcastic smile stretched his thin lips, but his black eyes remained serious.

"You've seen them right here," he said, "In the house. Isn't that so?"

I nodded.

"It's the lake," he muttered, "and the house. Sometimes they make people see things."

"What things?"

"Things that other people can't see."

"What are you talking about, sheriff?"

"Come on, Al!" Billy protested angrily. "Cut the crap! Don't scare away our guest with your Indian superstitions." He turned to me and said apologetically, "Al has Indian blood in his veins. He likes to brag about his Blackfeet origins and has quite a collection of scary fables about this place, which he probably doesn't believe himself."

"It would take some doing to scare me off with ghost stories," I laughed. "Scary fables are the stuff of my livelihood, after all."

"Yes, that's right," he nodded with an air of relief. "I was cross with him, because I thought for a moment that... You know how funny people can get when they hear rumors of ghosts. The toughest skeptic would think twice before renting a haunted house. It has happened, you know. We've had people who left the house before the end of their lease, without even asking for the rest of their money back. And not because they'd seen a ghost or anything like that. No sir! Just because someone had told them that the lake was haunted. I wouldn't want to see you leave on account of Al's silly stories."

"No way," I said. "If the house was really haunted, I'd regard it as an unexpected bonus. I hope you won't raise the rent for my being so open." Billy laughed and I turned to the sheriff: "Do you really know legends connected with this place?"

"Yeah," he nodded.

"I thought you didn't like horror and mystery stories," I sneered.

"I don't like those sort of books. Most of them are banal and repetitious. As if the writers were all lacking in imagination and had to copy each other. But here..."

He didn't finish the sentence and looked around.

"But here what?" I urged him to continue.

"Here you don't need imagination."

"Things simply happen?"

He replied with a curt shrug.

"Are you implying that you actually do know about ghosts in this house?" I persisted.

"Are you interested in these sorts of legends?" he replied with a question of his own.

"Very much."

"I thought you preferred to invent your own."

"As a matter of fact, I don't. I prefer to base my stories on things that have actually happened, or on existing legends. Maybe one of these days you'll be kind enough to come here and tell me some of the stories you know?"

His smile broadened and some more wrinkles creased his brown face. "Why not? How about this weekend, or the one after?"

"Whenever you like. I'd be really grateful."

"It's a date." He turned to Billy. "I think we should be heading on, and let Richard go on with whatever he was doing."

"Just a minute."

Billy ran to the cruiser, and a moment later he came back carrying a copy of *Good Times Bad Times* in his hand.

"I happened to have it around," he said. "I'd be eternally grateful if you signed it for me."

"Gladly. Do you have a pen?"

"Of course!"

He handed me his pen.

"To whom shall I dedicate it? Sheila and you?"

"Screw Sheila. If she wants an autographed book, she should bring her own copy."

He watched closely as I inscribed my customary dedication. A grateful smile appeared in his eyes when I closed with the words: "To my dear friend, Billy White."

"Thank you, Richard!" he exclaimed with unmasked enthusiasm.

"It's OK."

"Sheila was supposed to come by and clean up. But since you're already here, we'll let you settle in. I'll tell her to be here tomorrow morning. How about it?"

"Not too early, I trust."

"Don't worry. She won't bother you. She has her own set of keys, and she'll do everything quiet as a ghost," he winked, and I laughed politely. "When you get up, the house will be clean as a whistle."

They left.

I refilled my glass and scanned the landscape, but the sense of bliss that had come over me when I saw it for the first time had been somewhat diminished. Sheriff Strom's remarks had had a rather chilling effect on me. I guess I'd been exaggerating when I told Billy that I would welcome the existence of ghosts in Peterson House as a bonus. Morbid legends about cursed souls and haunted houses have never bothered me at all. I'm a confirmed atheist. Although I had written such paranormal trash once or twice, that didn't mean I believed in it. But I couldn't disregard the resemblance between the actors in my erotic hallucination and the real honeymooners. This resemblance set me to thinking, and at that moment I wasn't so sure of my disbelief. Was I actually going to witness supernatural phenomena?

A sudden wave of confusion flooded my brain.

How on earth could I have considered the resemblance of the couple in my daydream to the Mastersons as something beyond the normal, even for a moment? Obviously, in my vision the girl was bound to have a gorgeous figure and a pretty face, and the man

was going to be a muscular, well-endowed hunk. Why would someone like me—young, healthy, and of relatively sound mind—fantasize about a fat and flabby Juliet copulating with a balding, pot-bellied Romeo? The fact that the man was fair and the girl dark, like the Mastersons, shouldn't have bothered me either. After all, that description could fit millions of American couples.

I emptied the pitcher into my glass and hurried to the living room. I'd wasted enough time mulling over this mystical nonsense. It was high time for me to start writing. I sat down in front of my PC and glanced at the lake glistening in the afternoon sunlight.

No, I wouldn't begin with anything serious. Nothing I'd have liked to leave for posterity. I was going to write just a few sentences at first... Banal sentences. Just to feel the cool, soothing touch of the keys beneath my fingertips. To witness the miracle of the words being transferred from my brain onto the screen, and to see them joining together into meaningful sentences.

Yes, this would put my thoughts in order and set my creative juices flowing. Each sentence would serve as a catalyst for the next. And the next, and the next. Then I could start spinning the plot and shaping the characters. The faceless shadows that had been roaming my mind without sense or purpose would acquire the clear-cut features of real people. People with well-defined characters and aspirations. They would start to act, react and interact, and blaze a path through the plot with their actions. The plot would re-define them and trigger changes in them. And, in the process, they would become profound and complex human beings. I still didn't have a clue what I was going to write about, but I knew that the moment I started, the ideas would immediately appear. I placed my fingers on the keyboard and shut my eyes.

And then it came to me.

I was going to write the novel based on my life. Not an autobiography. I would write about someone like me. An artist. Maybe a writer, or a playwright. A painter, perhaps. Well, I could decide later on. Anyway, the protagonist's girlfriend would commit suicide and the story would describe his fate, with its agonizing attempts to decipher the mystery of his lover's death. It would be a surrealistic story, and reality would be so entangled with the protagonist's visions and fantasies that it would be impossible to tell which was which. There would also be an element of horror, of course. And perhaps some paranormal occurrences.

I carefully removed the plastic cover from the monitor and turned on the PC. But just as I was about to type the first words, I noticed a few spots of what looked like rust in the corner of the screen. A fist grabbed my heart and squeezed viciously. I shut my eyes to combat the wave of anxiety that almost knocked me down.

When I finally opened them, I saw the tall hotel buildings along Hayarkon Street outside the window. A warm, humid breeze off the Mediterranean was blowing into my sweaty face. I looked around me, and my anxiety soared sky-high. I was in Duke's Tel Aviv apartment. The walls, the floor and the furniture were covered with plastic sheets.

Michelle was lying in the middle of the floor.

Her gorgeous body was wrapped in a long black dress. The one she used to wear on special occasions. She was holding the double-barreled shotgun in her hands.

I couldn't see her face.

She had no face, only a horrible mess of torn flesh, crushed bone and black blood clots. Her hair had lost its golden sheen and clustered around her skull in dirty-gray lumps. I leaped screaming to my feet. My head was spinning, and I felt about to collapse. Trying to steady myself I leaned heavily against the monitor. I felt a sickening wetness on

my fingers and savagely jerked my hand away. A few drops of Michelle's blood had splattered onto the screen.