



Ten

The rehearsal was held at the college, in one of those basement rooms that still made Edward nervous with intimations of rising water. At one end was a raised stage with a curtain and on the floor in front, a few rows of seats. Some performers were on stage, but Edward was surprised to see several more take up positions in the audience.

“It’s a play within a play,” Kara explained. “Some actors are rehearsing at the start, and other are waiting their turn.” She waved to a leggy young couple, all angles and floppy hair, who were sitting restless in the front row. “And then we come in. We’re not actors, at all, we’re fictional characters, and we’re to have masks or really heavy, stylized make up, whatever Josh decides will be best under the lights. We want our story told, so we push the

actors' play off the stage and put on our own story, instead. Pirandello was considered very advanced and strange in his day."

Edward smiled and shrugged. The recent peculiarities of his own life made even this plot seem plausible.

"Ian, Kara, Julie, Dylan, Pete, ready for your entrance? Julie, you have the dolls?" This was Josh, the director, a thin, energetic man with a lot of curly graying hair that covered the top of his head and wound around his ears before descending to his chin. He was dressed in a black t-shirt with an octopus printed on it, faded jeans, and sandals. He seemed keyed up and nervous.

"I have to run. Sit here," Kara said, pressing Edward's hand. Then she darted to the hallway.

"Places, everyone," Josh called and sat down in the wings, whereupon Edward was surprised to see two other men wander on stage and begin talking about lighting, before being joined by yet a third man who entered through the back and proceeded to go over everything Josh had done. After a few minutes Edward realized that this was the director within the play, a supposition confirmed when Josh rose from his place to correct some bit of business.

The actors rearranged themselves on stage; some returned to the seats, and Edward was just beginning to be restless when the back doors opened for the noisy and disruptive "Characters." Kara had done something new to her hair, pulling it back with a ribbon, and she walked differently, too, swinging her hips in an outlandish manner and giving the "Director" such an arch, suggestive look that Edward was half out of his seat.

All the actors on and off the stage stared at her, and he was afraid that she had made some terrible gaff. Then, after a bit of dialogue from the Father and the Director, she broke into a song to accompany the steps of an unfamiliar dance that caused the actors, the real actors, that is, not the Characters, to stretch their arms toward her in an alarming gesture half supplicating, half demanding. Josh clapped his hands to stop the action.

“Very nice, very nice, Kara, but try it slower. The directions call for a ‘slow foxtrot.’ You’re still a little fast. And cast, closer, closer to her. You see a part in her, Ashley, the part of a lifetime.”

Laughter at this, before they started again: The Father and Kara arguing, then her song, slower with a touch of melancholy that pierced Edward’s heart. It was as if her illness, vanquished, had reappeared to haunt a silly song about Chu-Chin-Chow, transforming it into something rare and moving. And she, herself, was another person, this Stepdaughter character, rude, unhappy, rebellious _ completely convincing and irresistibly seductive. Now that he was over the surprise of a theatrical entertainment so different from anything he remembered, Edward was fascinated. Kara seemed as joyful as a bird released from the banding nets, breaking into song, dance, or argument, happy in everything. With a sense of unease, he realized that this talent must have been there all along, sleeping or suppressed with no possible outlet.

When she’d told him that she would never leave, Edward had been shocked though he hadn’t taken her seriously; the proposition was too bizarre. But in the rehearsal space, he saw Kara in a different light; she was a person with gifts which, like the Characters, might demand attention and just this setting.

“You were marvelous,” he said when the rehearsal was finished. Kara’s hair was damp with sweat and her face was flushed with effort.

“Did you like it? Did you really like it?”

“I liked you a lot. The play _” he hesitated. In fact, he didn’t approve of quite a bit of it, and he didn’t think the other actors were up to Kara’s level. “_ is kind of strange. Understandable,” he added, “But strange.”

“That’s what I think, too. But such fun.” She smiled and waved to the others, before taking Edward’s arm and leaning affectionately against his shoulder. Although she had been busy for most of three hours, she seemed full of energy. They’d get a pizza _ did he like that? _ and go home. Maybe see some people at the restaurant _ he needed to meet people

and make the contacts essential to get papers. Like Hector and Maria, Kara seemed to know a good deal about documents. This was useful knowledge, harmless in itself, but suggestive to Edward of permanence, of a commitment to now, to *after*. Exhilarated by the rehearsal, Kara did not notice his reservations and unease, but chattered on about friends he was “sure to like” and explained various details of the production: the lighting, which would be dramatic; the costumes, early twentieth century, some authentic; the music, actual period recordings!

Edward studied her bright, animated face and her obvious happiness weakened his anxiety. He leaned his head against hers and laughed at the stories of theatrical misadventures, missed cues, and silly flubs that carried them to a small, crowded establishment much like the coffee and sandwich shops Hector favored. This one smelled of spices and sauces, and soon they were seated before a vast disk of bread, cheese, and tomatoes, neatly divided into long triangles. He had hoped to eat with Kara alone, but various members of the cast kept dropping by, pulling up chairs, helping themselves to the pizza or contributing new ones with ever more complex toppings, when Kara suddenly looked across the room. “There’s Austin! Hi, Austin.”

The big dark man waved, and a moment later, he was sitting down at their table with what looked like a whole loaf of bread stuffed with sauce and meatballs. “How’s it going, Kara?” He nodded to Edward as if he’s forgotten his name.

“Super,” she said, swallowing the last of their pizza and wiping her mouth. “It’s going great. Josh was actually *pleased* today.”

Austin laughed as if he knew exactly how rare this was, and at this hint of intimacy Edward could scarcely conceal his dislike. Besides, there was something about the man’s appearance, something beyond his massive frame and his heavy, serious face. Something from *before*? With a kind of psychic lurch, Edward felt the pizza parlor with the noisy clientele and bustling waiters, even Austin, begin to thin out, as if there were something behind them, as if it were not a case of *before and after* at all, but of visible and invisible or before and just behind.

“I think we should go, Kara,” he said abruptly.

“Don’t rush away on my account,” said Austin. “You might want to hear about rehearsal, too.”

“I was there,” Edward said.

“You get around. Time on your hands?” Something in his voice suggested he knew all about Edward’s long hours and precarious position.

“It’s Edward’s day off,” Kara said quickly. “He wants to make the most of it.”

Austin gave an unpleasant smile, prelude to a quarrel, but Edward’s brief glimpse of instability had unsettled him so much that he simply wanted out. “Come on, Kara.” Edward stood up and turned to leave. Behind him, he heard Kara making a half apology and promising to see him at the Gallows.

Outside, Edward thrust his hands in his pockets and walked quickly with his head down.

“You weren’t very polite to Austin,” she said. “And you know Old Stock black people are very touchy _ so much ancient history.”

“No one invited him.”

“People do that here. They see friends, they join them. It’s no big deal. Besides, he’s been very kind. I wanted you to be nice to him, Edward, because he helped me get my papers. He has contacts. We’ll have to find someone else now.” She put her hand on his arm, but Edward shrugged it off.

“I don’t need papers.”

“So you want to keep working in a restaurant with one eye out for the INS?”

Edward turned and faced her. “I want to go home,” he said. “I want us to go back.”

She stopped on the side walk, her hair bright under a street light, her face passionate. “I told you last night, I’m not going back. I thought you understood. I’m happy here. Can’t you understand that?”

“You can’t just stay.”

“Why can’t I? I had no one before except you and now you’ve come. Now you’re here. Oh, Edward, we can be so happy. I know we can.”

She projected an unexpected intensity, as if he’d never before seen the whole surprising force of her eager, loving, demanding personality. Though he was tempted to argue and sure he would win _ long term, her plan was clearly impossible _ he sensed it might be fatal to push their quarrel just now. Trying to keep his voice quiet and calm, he said, “I’m in a different situation. You know I had my parents, friends, work I loved.”

“But you came.” Her voice rose, bringing echoes of the Step Daughter. “You came. Why did you come if you didn’t love me?”

“You know I love you. Why else would I have taken the risk? I wasn’t sick. I was happy enough before. I came only because of you.”

“I know that. I know that,” she said. “I do. It’s just not that simple. Please, you haven’t been here that long, and things have been hard for you. Just give it a chance. Stay with me for a while. You’ll be happy, you’ll see,” she pleaded, and Edward found himself weakening. Time, time might work both ways. She might change his mind, but equally, he might convince her. He might. He would.

“It means starting again entirely,” he said.

“That’s why you need papers. You *can* start again, better, happier. You’ll see. It takes a while. I felt the same way at first. I thought I’d made a terrible mistake, but I hadn’t. And you haven’t either. I know you haven’t.” She clutched his arm, her face intent, and, loving her, he smiled, though he knew now that she was a good performer and thought that he should take whatever she said with some caution.

“Let’s go back to your room.” He nuzzled the top of her head.

She took his arm, and, passing into the shadow of a street tree, he leaned over and kissed her. In her embrace, it was easy to suppress the unsettling moments in the pizza shop, the uneasy sense that he recognized Austin, even his creeping dislike of Ancient Hartford. There was only Kara, and in her room they found happiness.

For some time afterwards, they fell into an easy pattern. The weather was becoming warmer, and, without much money, they spent their time walking in the parks or exploring the city. By unspoken but mutual agreement, they avoided the topics that were in the back of their minds, papers and permanence, preferring to enjoy the good weather, health, a transient happiness. Edward found that having a routine helped. The work at the restaurant was hard, but he liked his co-workers and enjoyed Hector's stories about the auto body shop which was every bit as dubious as its owners. Gradually, his previous life grew more and more remote with memories of the city, his life, even his family, overlaid by an increasingly vivid present, comprised of Kara and work and new friends and entertainments. He found himself less often sensing water below some patch of dry ground, or hearing the whisper of reeds while crossing a parking lot, or detecting the vibration of the tide turbines under the throb of rush hour traffic.

He might well have adapted had they not begun venturing further afield. There was, Kara said, a wonderful furniture shop that was a great treat to visit. It was on the way to the Highlands, which caused Edward to hesitate, but Kara said they could take the bus, and one Monday morning, he found himself in a giant vehicle shaped like a bread box that wheezed and groaned at every stop.

"Fun," said Kara.

Edward nodded. The city streets looked different from high up and they moved quite fast, not as fast as the cleaning crew's van, but well beyond a walking pace. They passed the park with the gold dome of the capitol rising behind the trees, the station with the rail line, and the pylons and rush of the interstate. Edward craned his neck to try to spot Joseph's encampment but saw only a few scraps of plastic flapping in the perpetual breeze created by the motors, before they climbed a long, gradient lined with what Kara said were corporate buildings and passed a giant, pale stone Old Style temple. Edward had walked out this way when he first arrived, and he was enjoying the ride until they reached the top of one hill and began a descent toward a second town without tall buildings and with many more trees than

the city. Perhaps it was that nearly unbroken greenery at roof level or the dark and vaguely distorting tinting of the bus windows, but for the first time in quite a while, he began to feel that reality was porous, that everything around him, the road, the buildings, the solid trunks of the trees, was wavering and dissolving.

“Is it hot in here?” he asked Kara.

“A bit. Shall we get out and walk? It’s only a few more blocks.”

They stepped down onto a broad sidewalk where the sharp, bright sun reflected off the cement and glittered in the windows like river light.

“You’ve been working too hard,” said Kara, for he actually staggered a little.

“No, just, I don’t know. An odd turn. *Water passing over.*”

“What an odd phrase,” said Kara and she started walking north.

They passed a little commercial block with a coffee shop and big, complicated wooden houses, some with turrets and dormers and big-bellied porches carrying signs for doctors’ and lawyers’ offices. Stopped at one traffic light, they could see far down hill _ water somewhere at the bottom for sure, Edward felt _ and then, rising behind the town, the Highlands. He was dizzy again, but Kara took no notice, talking as she was of the shop, which sold all contemporary construction, though there were, further out, shops with real antiques. Very, very old. “Imagine that,” she said. “Centuries earlier.”

Edward tried to smile and focused on the motors, the sidewalk, the familiar green of the lawns, some with tulips, thick and fleshy, flaunting sexy reds, oranges, and yellows. *I’ll be fine*, he thought, *as long as I don’t look north. No Highlands. Just the city.* But he sensed that the bus had followed the track of the Raised Road well beyond the city he knew, that they were in unknown territory. Maybe that was why everything seemed vague and wavering to him, although whenever Kara said, “There’s a deli” or “I like that house with the shutters,” the objects would come into focus and the streetscape regain its coherence.

“We’re almost there,” she said.

“How did you find this place?”

“I came out with Meghan. She has a friend in West Hartford. We’re almost there, next block.” She hurried with eagerness, and Edward followed, the pale buildings and flourishing trees streaming by him, blending together like reeds in rain until they reached a low, buff brick building with display windows crammed with furniture.

Double glass doors that triggered a bell brought them inside a vast storehouse, where couches, tables, chairs, desks, cabinets, and chests of all sorts in a variety of styles, painted, stained, polished, plain, ornamented, padded, or metallic, were arranged in artful little groupings. There were lamps, too, all lit and glowing softly on polished surfaces and deepening the velvets and silks of the cushions. A wealth of little ornaments sat on the tables and pictures hung on partial and moveable walls, so that one passed from one small “room” to the next, each forming a little vignette to tempt free spending clients to take everything home.

“I just love this,” said Kara. “I want a room with furniture just like this.” She patted a small sofa with plump cushions and a curved back, all covered in a wild floral of tulips and leaves.

Edward felt cold suddenly. There was something familiar about _ what? His eyes were drawn to the flowers and leaves, oak leaves, an ancient species common here. And tulips. He had a fleeting impression, too faint to quite qualify as a memory, of Kara with a scarf? Was it a scarf? A textile of some sort draped over her shoulders, the tulips too red against her own bright hair.

She had moved on to something she called a *secretary* with a deep reddish stain. “Look at this. It’s a reproduction of a really early piece, a museum piece. You know, I’ve been to the museum here. Overwhelming. We must go. You’ll love it.”

Edward nodded though he doubted he would if the museum produced the same chilly nausea as the shop. Kara, entranced, did not notice his discomfort, and he was calculating how soon they could leave, when an elderly man emerged from the back of the building. He was pale and stooped, with short white hair and tinted glasses.

“May I help you?”

“We’re just admiring,” Edward said, hoping Kara would take this as a signal to go. Instead, she turned and smiled.

“Everything’s lovely,” she said.

“Is that Ms. Wistley?” the old man asked. “I thought so. These sun glasses are such a nuisance, but I’ve had a cataract removed.”

“You had mentioned,” said Kara. “Did that go well?”

“Yes, yes, indeed, thank you. Another one in six months. Good to see you again.”

When Kara introduced them, Al Mynd put out a large, reddish hand, bigger and stronger than his shrunken body would suggest. Behind the dark glasses, Edward caught a glimpse of a cold blue eye and felt another inward chill. This man was familiar; he’d known him and disliked him, though recognition lay somewhere below the level of memory.

“Anything special today, my dear?”

“Everything,” said Kara, and Mr. Mynd laughed.

“I have a little something,” he said in the confidential, almost flirtatious tone men often adopted with Kara. “Just for you.”

They moved toward another section of the shop, while Edward pretended an interest in an elaborate fake window with a shade, under drapes, some sort of top decoration, and side panels, all in different materials and patterns, as if light and air were enemies to be fended off with lustrous textiles. Faint snatches of Kara’s and Mynd’s conversation drifted around carved wooden screens, and giant vases with convoluted designs of flowers and dragons, lamps with writhing metal stands.

“...expensive, but so pretty.”

“A discontinued print. I could maybe...”

“You make it hard to refuse...” Laughter.

The shop darkened and Edward felt dizzy as the floor rocked beneath him like a river barge. He heard the ring of boots on metal, before Kara was beside him again, holding a small, nicely framed picture in her hands like a talisman.

“Look at this!”

It was a black and white photograph of a woman with large, light eyes, sharp cheekbones and much upswept hair. “She was a famous actress,” Kara said, “and she was born here. Imagine.”

“Very nice. Listen, I feel so warm in here. I’ll wait for you outside. Don’t rush,” he added. “I know you enjoy poking around.”

On the sidewalk, he took gulps of the cool, motor scented air. The main street was clear and perfectly solid. *I must have picked up some bug*, Edward thought. *The restaurant exposes you to all sorts of colds*. He sauntered down a little cross street as he waited, but he hadn’t gone more than a dozen yards before he began to feel uneasy again. His vision seemed cloudy and vaguely distorted, as if he were looking at the trees and houses under water or through some thick distorting glass. He turned around; all normal on the main street. *I am in a strange place*, he thought; *somewhere I have never been, not before*. He returned to the shop and sat anchored safely on the edge of the long ornamental planter until Kara came out, her photo in a little paper packet.

He didn’t ask the question until they were back in the city and walking through the park. From far down one of the rolling green lawns, they heard the carrousel music and a skateboard rattling along a path.

“Do you ever feel that you recognize people here?”

Her eyes slid away. “What do you mean? Of course, I recognize people.”

“I meant before you know them. When you first meet them or even first see them, you have a reaction, you like them or don’t, as if you’ve known them before _ that’s what I mean.”

“Like déjà vu?”

“Sort of but isn’t that events, places? I meant people.”

“I don’t think so.” She looked away toward the brownstone monument arch in a way he found evasive. “Like who?” she asked after a moment. “Who have you thought you recognized?”

“Well, the old man in the shop for one. Does he seem familiar to you?”

“Of course. I’ve met him several times. He always saves some little thing for me.”

She gave the complacent smile of a pretty woman used to favoritism.

“He seems familiar to me,” said Edward stubbornly.

“And you remember where_?”

“No. Just that I once knew him *before*, I think that’s it.”

“When you’re here longer,” Kara said, “you won’t remember.”

“Ah, so you’ve had it happen.”

“But it’s not true, you know. People look the same, is all. There’s no reason to think _ I mean, how could it be?”

“We’re not the only ones,” Edward said. “You know that. And Joseph says _”

“Joseph’s not one of us.”

“No, I don’t think so, but that you and are unique isn’t plausible, either.”

“None of this is plausible; it just happened,” Kara said, but she changed the subject, and in the coming days Edward noticed that she was careful to avoid all mention of *before* and all discussion of the odd psychic states that sometimes afflicted them.