

CHAPTER ONE

For Trial Subject One (Martin Eden), a far from perfect day for walking over the Bridge, from Middagh Street to the Amygdala Institute. The silvery rash below mirrors expertly the lability of his own forever-adolescent skin. Adding insult to injury, premature ejaculation of the toothpaste down the drain, with not enough remaining to kill the after-stench of dream-free sleep. Could be taken for an omen but why be lashed to the mainmast of mumbo-jumbo? Such a malevolently sunny morning's been created specifically for men, like One's bullying father, with an obscene zest for life. Yet, like a true snake, it has elected to give its unjustifiable all to somebody like him—purely to taunt said somebody's inhering inability to savor. An injustice, this, very much on the order of, say, Bush-Cheney-RUMPsfeld's toddling off to die entwined in the same bed of roses after having regretlessly sent thousands of kids to their death—in what was once called Mesopotamia, of all places. Beautiful-souled Eden is obliged to concede that the scum is managing yet again to inherit the earth. He tries to saunter up summer-smouldering Essex Street—more of a Grand Boulevard, if you ask me—while at the same time dodging the flip-floppers with their tattooed fedoras and remaining hyper-alert to the one psychotic out of a thousand who might just decide to stab him in the neck simply for staring cross-eyed or refusing to. And with this thought in tow, he is suddenly too weighed down even to limp, much less saunter.

Sits down for a minute in Seward Park—why not? People—people he decrees to be unintentionally sad—deploying their essence no matter what they do whether it's walking, eating breakfast out of aluminum troughlets, talking convincingly to themselves. One office-bound *gal* digging into her tote, looking for what she already knows all too well is there—her selves. A beauty in their aimless walking under the acacias—a certain defensive unawareness of equally aimless prying eyes out to catch essence—haecceity—idiosyncrasy—all right then, mortality (might as well call a spade a spade)—in the act. Here I am—the steps proclaim (all the more beautiful for their graceless plodding)—sure to die and proud of going on in spite of the fact.

He checks the address in his little brown notebook—picked up in Jackson Heights during one of too many self-edificatory jaunts through a city no longer brand new to him—though he knows it by heart. No hope of getting lost and thereby delaying one of too many Moments of Untruth. The shadows pissed by lampposts, parking meters, working stiffs, ginkgo tentacles have an axiomatic clarity. Such would be their shape in a world free of sandbagging contingency. And, hey, isn't that some homeless guy's piss trail migrating toward a sunpatch? And while we're at it isn't *that* a curved-mast post, its sputtering but stalwart bulb coaching (like any press agent worth his salt)—goading—prodding—a plane to parlay the sublime shadow of its trunk into an off-off-off Broadway contract good for, say, two or three chamber plays. But Mr. Trunk clearly has other fish to fry, his vocation of the moment being to defer, compliments of as many as boughs-crippling twists and turns as can be mismanaged, his shameful (because roots-forswearing) ascent into the sky.

Enough, Eden finally barks at whoever—or whatever—is feeding him these conceits, i.e., rebuking him for not coming up with them on his own steam. Who's responsible—the lady rummaging in her tote?

Subject Two (Melanctha Herbert aka Fredi Washington) wonders why it is always the straphangers with already enough trouble making ends meet who must be assaulted by the manhandling panhandlers—while the self-designated rare birds of a feather caged on, say, Upper Fifth, are mercilessly spared. One of them has taken a shine to this particular subway line at this particular time of the morning. Every day he's at his battle station flaunting the three missing fingers of his right hand and every day the sport he professes to coach despite such an affliction changes names, all of which (to make a short story shorter) entitles him to enjoin—that's right, bub, *enjoin*, you heard me right the first time—those lucky enough to be employed, to hurry up and show their gratitude by forking over a little cash or—if there's none, supposedly, to burn—by brandishing a big fat gums-packed smile. Little does he know that for the Melancthas of the world, to smile on demand is an order far too tall to scale.

At Sheridan Square, with which she isn't as familiar as she should be (but didn't Willa write one of her books right around the corner or was it Katherine Anne or Edith or Dreiser?), Melanctha is tempted despite all her hard-won disbeliefs to kneel down in the nearest church and entreat forgiveness for having been the abjectest of parents barring none. But then she remembers to be advised that—that—that—well, that prayers are always answered in the order in which they were received. Hold on for the next available operator.

Tossing his cigarette to inject a little street theater into the hailing of a taxi on Park, Subject Three (John Gabriel Borkman, or MacGabe, as he is known to his victims) wonders whether it is the worst thing of all that may in fact happen: he'll come back cured, but with no prospects to come back to, a sorry business at his ripe old middle age. Having himself perpetrated so much outsourcing, maybe his partners will have seen fit to play that good old white-shoe game of Outsource the Outsourcer—to Saturn's rings, say, or some planetesimal yet to be catalogued. He wouldn't put it past them. But they must know he's irreplaceable—the very first of his kind—but what kind is that?—to have recognized that what the super-rich currently crave are nothing less than once-in-a-lifetime experiences (which leave no taxable trace)—not Dark Age tangibles (which have a bad habit of doing the opposite).

Subject Four (Moirá Shearer née Allegra Cohen) stretches her legs (once beautiful for what they could invoke) at 110th and Broadway, of all places, just before she boards the M104. A few feet from the kiosk, against the backdrop of Riverside's sylphides looking to all the unseeing world like elms, a low-impact drug deal is being concluded with exemplary tact. She is reminded preposterously hence all too plausibly of the wedding *divertissement pas de deux* in Mr. B's *Midsummer Night's Dream*—specifically the moment (don't make like you don't know the one: there's a fine line, my good man, between the otherworldliness connoted by not knowing a damn thing about the things of the world and dumb-ass brute ignorance) when the ballerina's left hand—Shearer's hand!—is, as if effortlessly, extended backward under her right

arm (twice in the piece!) suavely sure of its retrieval by her cavalier. Smiling radiantly (onstage habits die harder than any others) into the stonefaced bus-driver's blue eyes, she inserts her MetroCard in the slot, a little brutally for an ex-prima. Astonishedly (or is it astonishingly) he smiles back, his ticlike overblinking all at once high-priestly and then some, since it reminds her of Balanchine's.

From her window seat, she studies the driver. Look, he's still smiling. Has he recognized her? Is he by any chance a fan of the sanguinic Shearer of *Concerto Barocco*, *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, *Apollo*, *Serenade*, *Divertimento No. 15*, *Bugaku*, *Mozartiana*, *The Four Temperaments* and best of all *La Sonnambula*? Fans are a poison/antidote—a pharmakon!—to which she's still addicted even if, in confirming her talent, they establish its limits and the breadth of its misuse. They seduce her, the little devils, into surrendering posthumous validation without bound for a fatefully minuscule niche as a “dancer's dancer”—no designation more smarmily detestable—in the overrated here and now. And nothing—or almost nothing—more exhausting than this hunger for the more, more and still more which such encounters leave in their wide wake. Though maybe he's just a guy who, without knowing it, goes for the superannuated gamine type and wants to fuck her—imagine!—its supreme incarnation.

Borkman's soon-to-be ex- has of course been his severest critic: too much merger-and-acquisitions mania and too many morning-after spinoffs. Every new acquisition utilized to narcotize him, or so she insists, to the pain—no, the excruciation—of having to child-rear its predecessor. Until it, too, became a dead weight, his mirror image qua grim reaper. According to the missus, working from inside a core of corporate coherence is self-coincidence and for him, self-coincidence is death—a cancer of unknown origin. Only during the dealmaking process did the teratoma of selfhood go vociferously into remission, and not a minute too soon. Or was it somebody else who'd made that diagnosis?

Subject Five (just Cantor, if you please, maestro: he loathes his first name and the middle one is even worse, or at least no better), thirty-seven-year-old mathematician and HIV-positivist since the mid-nineties, is wary of letting himself in for yet another bout of *rehabilitation*—the word being an especial target of his loathing. A lifer in that department and by no means proud of the fact, he much prefers, to *therapist*, the exquisitely crude *angedkok* (Eskimo for *shaman*), so much more manly, primal, enigmatic—in a word, monopolar—don't you think? Besides, an *angedkok's* body is all eyes. Given his mix of feelings, mostly shades of dread, he decides it would be a good—all right then, a therapeutic—idea to bicycle down to the clinic, or whatever it was, and thereby work off some prejudicial, premonitory steam.

All the way down deeply mournful West End, the air is crisp, even a wee bit chilly—what his father in lighter moments used to call (but what *did* he call it?: they'd always been too much at loggerheads to resort to banter)—though it's far too early for a foretaste of autumn—of . . . of . . . of . . . *Mother nature's fall collection*. Oops! there he goes again, succumbing to the old unstraightness, crookedness, i.e., *gayness* (detestable designation!)—to what that arch busybody cum know-it-all J.P. Sartre, referring to Genet, his favor-

ite JO buddy, called, at least in translation, homosexual archness. He doesn't mind—as long as the foretaste doesn't last too long. But is he as affected by sights and smells—things outside thought—as he would have rumor have it? Is he porous to the world, and therefore real? He never feels real. Not even the diagnosis of Envy disease can quite . . . *realize* him. Yet suddenly the thrill of outpacing everybody around him (and at his age)—no matter what the mode of locomotion—does what several lifetimes' rehab couldn't—it makes the question of realness irrelevant. All that matters is his life's work—proving Hilbert's lemma. Thing is, the exaltation makes him want to laugh (before everybody else starts laughing at his abject failure to do so)—retch—lose his balance. Exaltation always makes him think . . . stupidly. He'll never learn. So what if he has his life's work—his . . . *making* to come home to (just stick it in the mentalist microwave and *voilà!*). No need to get all mock-epical about it. Everybody, after all, is a maker—even if the only thing she ends up making is a big stink or a molehill out of a mountain or a pass or a faux pas or a scene in the men's room.

Thing is, his life's work smells vastly different from everybody else's. For it is competing not just with the work of this or that more productive (because devoutly heterosexual?) colleague, or with his own work (after all, he's already chalked up a few feathers to his untenured cap) or with unrelated activities (like that bereavement trip to San Diego) but with everything else under the sun. Everything under the sun—and the sun itself—contests its primacy. His work, aka his very being, is competing with the Work of one infinitely prolific success-ridden Rival. And to give the lie to whoever insists said Rival gets everything the easy way He has a horde of imbecile detractors all ready and willing to demonstrate that His lucky-stardom is the bruised fruit of titanic struggle. All bases are covered by—for—said Rival. And as if things aren't invidious enough, Cantor's very making is being bludgeoned by the ghost of the process as it would—should—be unfolding, under the baton not of some tone-deaf hack like him but of a bona fide maestro like the Rival, so as to issue, way way ahead of schedule and well under budget, in a pluperfection unscarred by the vulgarity of drafts and redactions and extruded incorrigible and full-blown as from the unwrinkled brow of Zeus. And what about all the things bought in the name of psychic enrichment—like a ballet ticket or a rollerball pen? Acquired, they immediately dwarf the Work—sorry, the work—out of existence. Eat him out of house and home, so to speak. Buying—consuming—he signs the warrant of his own self-deletion.

Thing is, he has this most unMarxist bad habit of wanting to convert—no, transmogrify—doings into things before (long before) they *are* doings. End products are what his kind mightily covets—end products to spare him the wear-and-tear of a beginning. Since when he pretends to be at work he can't quite locate, much less capture himself. He eludes himself. Is he making anything—more to the point, is he himself anything—while in process, with nothing full-blown and incorrigible to show? But isn't having nothing to show, fly-blown or otherwise, precisely the thew and sinew—the very gist—of the making. Isn't all that nothingness what makes doing so much worth doing?

Yet he has the funny feeling that such thoughts are at this very moment

being had or are about to be had by somebody else, to whom they belong by much more divine right. And that the somebody else—rather, the Some Body Else—has the very same feeling. Some Body with whose path his is slowly converging . . .

So is there any point in joining this trial? After all, Five's envy (like magic as practiced by Evans-Pritchard's Azande) is so organically woven into the texture of his being (make that the fabric of his tripes) as to be inextricable. Most of all, he envies people who make no bones about harboring stark preferences—A, say, rather than B and C—without feeling in any way disqualified—eroded—ablated—minimized by the severed connection with B and C. But disqualified for what precisely? He likes nothing better than to stew around in the juices of everyday routine as lusciously described by average joes and josephines. What compares with overhearing on public buses—and aren't such revelations (far more obscene than confessions, say, of how shit feels when extruded from the anus with an all-too-rare effortlessness or the penis when penetrating some orifice just a wee bit too deeply) *made* to be overheard? It is the eavesdropper—Cantor—who gives them life. They have no existence otherwise (*but does he really believe they have no existence otherwise or is the workflow doing the believing for him? or is there a somebody feeding him the workflow's believing and if so shouldn't that somebody be feeding the workflow to a more worthy—a more relevant—opponent—somebody else in the trial, say?*). But by the same token, some of those josephines tend to so overstate their case—or rather, so overshriek it—as to put all ambient eavesdroppers, whatever their level of mastery, out of business and make their vocation a thing of the remote past. He likes to hear about what kind of sandwiches they pack for the beach, and where there was a sale on thongs and how many times they intend to see that new film with Meryl Schwartz—why, he positively swills, Sturges style, in the ale of their mediocrity (a term he'd never dream of using pejoratively: how could he when he is not just daunted but intimidated out of his skin by its force?—and this is not—he repeats, is *not*—a populist pose). Their preferences—rather, the depiction of their preferences—is almost edible—no, it *is* edible and knowing a tasty dish when he smelled one, Five invariably helps himself to seconds and—depending on where and when he or they get off—even to thirds and fourths. *His* (oddball) likes, on the other hand—wandering in multistoried shopping malls, watching Lifetime Movie Network soapers—engender disidentity.

Here and now, riding his bike en route to overhaul is giving him the courage to own his preferences. Preferences far more shameful-shameless than the preference for men. The preference for Horton Mall in San Diego, for example. Precepting one summer, he took the bus in from Imperial Beach simply to stand at the highest level and listen to the piped-in “classical” music eternalize the moment. How? By laying bare the non-hearing of each and every bargain hunter. So that filet of Chopin lite, though very much of the mall, became otherworldly by virtue of resolute consumer indifference, hence more poignant than it had any right to be.

On those wonderful, unavowable mall afternoons, the piped-in soundtrack, unheard by everybody else, consumed all other noises. The music

embodied the *blindness* of all those buyers and sellers and gawkers for it was music meant to be unheard, and by remaining unheard it became the embodiment of time passing, of lives passing, never to be retrieved. The meaning of the music was its unheeded warning—that all bargain hunters should stop dead in their tracks and take a good hard look at themselves in the mirror of the moment before it was too late for crocodile tears. Just as the meaning of a shot in a Hitchcock movie always lay (*always?!*) not in what was in the frame but in the fact that what was in the frame had been missed by somebody who was looking but not seeing what his professional duty required him to see.

But enough about making and envying, getting and spending. What better time to *take in* the spectacle of men modeling, on runways of sparkling asphalt, the latest crazes? And here's the catch, he thinks: each specimen the least bit desirable seems to be inventing this season's look, on his very own . . . recognizance (wrong word, but just too irresistibly neoclassical to ignore), from scratch, without outside influence—seems to be erecting his very own version of the temple of virility—virility so dour—even dire—as to become a kind of ethical stance. The effect of discounting the obvious—that fashion's just mimicry run wild—is laceration pure and simple. Each time a specimen proclaims his independent invention of The Look, he inflicts a fresh wound. Wasn't it Auden, that prideful old fruit, who said Homosexuality is Envy? Shrugging, and in shrugging almost colliding with a Mack, Cantor decides to let the dictum stand, as he cuts across Fifty-Ninth Street to Third Avenue under the girdership—the tutelage—of the Queensborough Bridge, as a subject for further research.

Borkman sinks into the back seat, the taxi smelling of sweat laced with cat piss—or what he imagines cat piss must smell like after a few days in Midtown. The wife, in the way of wives, holds him responsible for the struggles of the older boy. He tries to establish a special friendship with the cabby (possibly an Arab), because the older boy has been one, and maybe still is. And calling him an Arab makes short work of him—rolls him away on a gurney of diminishment—of obliteration. How useful labels are for cutting everything—especially everybody—down to size—forestalling comprehension until the crack of doom. Is Borkman thinking all this? Are you kidding? He tries to joke about Bush's lordly and heroic assumption of full responsibility for his latest Katrina (abominable conditions at Walter Reed's outpatient outhouses), as if all the blame weren't in fact layable on Boy George's blood-stained doorstep and his alone. The driver doesn't react. This stance, if stance it is, reminds him of the older boy's when Borkman decides to go savagely ironical about his success as a parent (the savagery costs him little since failure at run-of-the-mill things like fatherhood is exalting: proves he's a great man with a great man's flaws). At such times, his son routinely refuses to honor the "brutal honesty" behind the words, professing to take them at face value.

And he, in turn, takes his son's enthusiasm about bartending in a Greenpoint bistro as sheer provocation played for all it's worth and simulated solely to get his goat, since the boy surely knows by now that he's incapable of cheering him on. Correct him if he's wrong, but haven't its victims already deemed Borkman's failure as a father unmodifiable—definitively irrevocable—*once*

and for all. It doesn't matter in the least whether he's forgiven or condemned—just as long as that failure can be archived away “for the duration” as a bad joke. But the older boy won't let him off so easy. No matter how roundly the father embraces failure, the son resolutely refuses to play by the rules of disability *qua fait accompli*. His refusal—his failure!—to give up on Borkman becomes the deadliest provocation of all. How can the boy expect anything from a father who's many a time proclaimed that his real children are his start-ups—his spinoffs—his . . . inversions? Haven't his crimes against nature earned him the right to consider himself horrifically beyond redemption?

Is mockery of his own inadequacy no longer an acceptable bad-joke substitute for fatherly competence? In any case, he's way too old to have to handle a kid who insists on perpetrating, deadpan, the unspeakable good deed of giving him yet another chance. His self-made failure must remain fluid, facultative, reversible—as long, that is, as such charitable leeway has the capacity to enrage the recipient. Borkman is loathsome, true, but not loathsome enough, alas, to have the right to consider himself dishonorably exempted from any hands-on effort—i.e., the pretense thereof—to vacate his suspended sentence.

It has been over a year since the death of Subject Two's only son. True, she's been in pain but maybe not enough to merit that *formal feeling* Amherst's favorite son warbled about so morbid-merrily. Or maybe it's the wrong kind of pain. The boy is dead yet Bush and his gang are very much alive and kicking, each anticipating quite a bidding war for his veteran's guide to waging war by proxy. Stuff happens—but not to the RUMPsfields of the world. And while we're at it, How could she have ever believed in Kerry who made such wretchedly inept—worse, *cowardly*—use of his hero's credentials? apologizing for his post-combat anti-war stance thirty years before as “over the top”? How could outrage, honestly earned on the battlefield, not be? How forgive such a spineless concession where none was required?

At the corner of Greenwich Avenue and Jane, already stinking of lunch-time garlic, Melanctha looks at her watch and realizes there's plenty of time for a quick takeout from the emporium on what must be Hudson. She rips her number out of the dispenser and, while waiting to be called, admires the steaming delicacies. Her son would have been about the age of the handsome, even noble-looking Hispanic behind the counter, a quiver of fun-loving insolence around the full mouth and flared nostrils.

Amputation of the right arm, including the shoulder, simply because the vest's ceramic plates didn't cover him there. Too little money for armor, while unaccounted-for billions are being handed over to Halliburton and vile Blackwater's Erik the Prince. Followed by amputation of his right leg below the knee compliments of a bomb that exploded in a dead dog. She's pleased there's been a drop in the number of black enlistees. But she must avoid haranguing anybody who'll listen the way she did in the beginning. She'll save her rage for the next Military Families Speak Out meeting, two weeks from tomorrow. Most of all, she has to stop thinking—worse, thinking she has to be thinking—about Building 18.

Come to think of it, she's about the same age as the woman just before her on line who, though she sports a very expensive blouse and a wedding

ring as (discreetly) big as Fitzgerald's Ritz, is chatting with the counterman un-class-consciously—even maternally. Things are going along swimmingly in other words, as, per her tactful directions, he packs one container with paella and another with Cajun shrimp and still another with steamed asparagus. And particularly noteworthy is the fact that she trusts him so implicitly that all the while he's busy provisioning she doesn't interrupt his talk about wife and daughter and the upcoming trip to the Dominican Republic. She isn't even watching what he's doing. If you please, the great lady's gaze is on Him the Person as he goes about expertly satisfying the needs of a genial regular. Jorge, she calls him, pronouncing the name correctly. Fact is, Two is quite entranced by their camaraderie. She is already burrowing deep inside its labyrinth. Yet from a subliminal drop in the lady's attention, suddenly she knows the camaraderie's a fragile creature, and doesn't want anything to destroy it. After all, it's partly her creation. For a second, she panics on behalf of this Jorge, her son. She dreads the lady's impatience and is convinced if only he had seen fit to allow it, she could have related all the information about the wife and the daughter and Santo Domingo and the stopover in Albuquerque, or is it Santa Fe, long before Milady's boredom, or, worse, her irritation at this menial's presumption, set in. Yet Milady seems to have recaptured her motherliness. It is only when, immediately upgraded to countess, She asks, whimsically, for some of the chicken meatballs parmesan that things start going downhill and the spell is broken—so abruptly that for a moment Two believes it is she herself who, through her intrusive eavesdropping, has broken it. Fact of the matter is he hasn't been packing them quite the way the Countess explicitly indicated or meant to. "I told you," she complains: "a few meatballs then some sauce, then a little garnish, then a few more meatballs, then some more sauce." Clearly, she is no longer interested in Santa Fe, much less in wife and daughter. And so cogent is her irritation, compared with the previous solicitude, that it immediately relegates Jorge and his entire clan, even the family dog (Pepe?), back to the sub-sub-basement of being from which it was most unwise of her to let them emerge unchaperoned. He has lese-majestically soiled her produce, which is now the whole show.

So, Two, whatever she *lavished* (Milady's word) on Jorge turns out to have had nothing to do with genuine interest—she simply enjoyed ladling out a little convivial small talk to one of the otherwise—and rightly—invisible. Will she ever find it in her heart to forgive his half-humanity for leading her astray? Attention eavesdroppers: The only commerce that mattered after all was not that between him and her but the commerce between her and the meatballs, with Jorge the expendable middleman.

The customer has immigrated in medium-to-high dudgeon to the baked-goods section, giving Two the opportunity to say, "That woman was impossible, just impossible." But Jorge, mute, looks unappreciative. He's not ready to stand with her on the wrong side of the tracks, i.e., the right side of the barricades. He forces himself to smile but his flaring nostrils are thinking very different thoughts, at least as far as she's concerned. Does he believe it's useless to try to make her understand that the countess was operating in heuristic "as if" mode? What Two witnessed was how the countess would behave if she

were a bitch, which clearly couldn't be further from the truth, since who in her right mind would want to be so straitjacketed beyond appeal? Instead, what she'd given was a master class in odiousness to enable others to learn from her example (heuristic, remember) and refrain. It was all cautionary—designed to inoculate victims and perpetrators alike against outbreaks of the real thing. It was all about Eve and the serpent, poison as remedy, remedy as poison, poison never more poisonous than as remedy, remedy never more remedial than as poison. It was, this little actor's studio presentation (Off-off was already expressing interest), the countess's vehicle for establishing that she was the exact opposite of a bitch—for demonstrating that she knew firsthand, from the gut, the extent of the irreparable injury such bitchery could inflict. Since, pursuant to Bayes' theorem, there was always somebody bound to *turn bitch* in circumstances where meatballs were ladled out and compacted, it might as well be her or somebody like her, who could enact the bitchery as something devoutly to be shunned. To wit, there was no more reliable curator of the unspeakable than the Countess Pharmakon.

Minutes later, Two finds herself out on the pavement, without being able to remember quite how she got there. Simple: excruciation hustled her out of danger—was her mode of locomotion. She's carrying a paper bag with what looks like a bill neatly stapled to its lips, so she must have paid. She needs to get her bearings before ascending the stoop of the Amygdala Institute. She stares: at a bare stuccoed wall. She wants at least one of the pigeons flapping above to mar the whiteness with its shadow. But as the shadow doesn't intervene, she experiences sadness. Yet, with sadness comes the inevitable sensation that the non-intervention has achieved an even bigger, and better, marring.

Subject One, Eden, Envy-free, isn't sure what he feels about being the sole subject entering the trial under false pretenses. He didn't expect to meet up with Mabuse so soon, even if it has already been three years since the old man was laid to rest. Must he remember: When his father, a much-decorated Korean War veteran, was diagnosed with stomach cancer he was chosen to participate in an experimental-drug trial at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Carlsbad, north of San Diego (who is providing this circumstantial information, and to whom? he wonders). His stark ineligibility, due to a lymphoma in remission and poor bladder function, was brushed aside as a mere inconvenience. Florid and flatulent, Fritz Mabuse made it clear he was a strong—no, the perfect—candidate—pumping him full of that most toxic of all experimental drugs, hope. Like Eden's father, Mabuse had gotten in through the cracks (which the VA system made as large as possible), inventing medical credentials, conveniently irretrievable, all down the line. *It had all come out in the trial.* As each pencil-pushing stooge obviously assumed he'd been thoroughly vetted at the previous checkpoint, the worm was able to make it through them all without let. And toward the end Pop was hospitalized not because the cancer warranted it but because unbeknownst to anybody Mabuse had enrolled him in another trial, where he ended up receiving, in the six days before his death, no less than seventy-three infusions of Pispordal, a microniche drug for a very rare scrotal malignancy, all compliments of Pharmakon, Inc., the doctor's patron, which was hoping to cash in, follow-

ing approval, on its off-label use for a much more widespread and potentially profitable condition, iatrogenic depression.

On just another beautiful summer day in downtown San Diego—the kind of day when Martin felt it was nothing less than his civic duty to not just gawk at the deep blue sky but prove worthy of it—Mabuse pleaded guilty to doctoring his father’s medical data and to criminally negligent homicide. Eleven months later (same courthouse, different courtroom), he was let off with—what was it?—three years of community service because he’d dutifully blown or promised to blow the whistle on Pharmakon’s top crooks. Intent on murder, One followed Mabuse into a bar in Little Italy, maybe (now that he’d seen New York) the world’s Littlest Italy, then followed him out, ultimately losing him on India Street. And here he is, Eden thinks, back in the trials business and, armed with a new nose, jaw, hairline, and name: Straynge, once again subsidized by the most respected companies—or, as Pop would have said, *outfits*—in the business.

So, Mabuse MacStraynge has resurfaced and Eden has succeeded in finding him. At long last, he is a smashing success—and at something monumental, if only to him. Though he feels no envy for successes bigger than his. And what success story isn’t? Yet he is suddenly very much afraid, here in New York, the city of winners, of being cured of his . . . failure, *armament* and *scepter*—permanently. Who is putting words like *armament* and *scepter* in my mouth? Eden wonders. That is, if he could wonder. But take heart, one success does not a Winner make. After all, didn’t he vow, many a time (without exactly thinking it—much less, *thinking it through*), under the skirts of the eucalypti on the Coronado public golf course, and anywhere else he could shadily lay his rangy carcass, that even if he managed to do Mabuse in royally, he’d never abandon his arduously earned stance as Failure, as Loser? He will maintain an unrelentingly grateful grip on that stance and if his new stance, of master bounty hunter, refuses to civilly cohabit with the old Eden, then it will simply have to learn, and fast, how to do so. No matter how much in demand he becomes, his allegiance will always be to the failure years. He will never jilt failure at the first delusive sign of success. You have his wordless word on that.

He’ll resolutely refuse, blandishments notwithstanding, to look back on those years as constituting nothing more than a now-irrelevant interim. Failure is the best and biggest wonder drug, better than any Mabuse brazenly pumped unmonitored into his father pre-corpse: it has allowed him to make the condescenders, the patronizers, cower. In pretending to chitchat with the better off, a demographic that comprises just about everybody, he in fact compels them to bear witness to a wicked self-dialogue through which he declaims past them to the point where they can’t be sure whether it is he or they who are target of a frenzied abasement. They always know, these stooges, that when Eden’s around, homicidal hostility can’t be far behind only they can’t quite locate it or fix its target. As his best teacher (Eden himself!) once said—high above the Pacific in the Santa Barbara cemetery, a few feet from his father’s well-tended grave—failure certainly had—has—its privileges. But by getting closer to Straynge he is losing his authority. Things are falling into place too easily, he feels too well-disposed even toward the women whose

breasts are tumbling out of their blouses at every streetcorner but who manage nonetheless to look primly affronted at every chops-licking leer, etc. He is becoming too much at home in this, the Boobozy Era.

Borkman alights in front of the Flatiron Building, even if it has too many unpleasant associations: once upon a time he had a disastrously protracted affair with a blowsily neurotic medical editor whose corner office on the penultimate floor served as site of their trysts. But what neighborhood doesn't have its ghosts clamoring for attention? He needs to walk because he can't help thinking about the older boy's attempt to strangle his mother—or rather, his mother's anxiety—a little over a month ago and he can do so only in the open air. How explain that its rancid upsurge was in the best interest of the victim? With his arms around her tiny throat, he demanded she admit she'd forced him to play tennis in high school, when all he cared about was football, and consequently ruined his life. Both their psychopharmacologist and their lawyer concurred: the boy was dangerous. He was therefore ordered—no, directed—to lie in wait for his son, then call 911. The police would arrive, and forcibly restrained, he'd be taken to the nearest hospital for transfer to Payne Whitney in White Plains.

So Borkman did as he was told for a change: for a master serial acquirer he could be surprisingly passive. He was to wait up for the boy, all night if necessary, so as to catch him in the act of being post-matricidal. Pity for his big blond blue-eyed bounty was strictly optional. He tried the *Journal* but the thought of being caught in the act of shameless absorption in something other than the boy's fate made him toss it aside. On the other hand, he couldn't just sit there making a great show of being gaplessly alert.

He made sure the lighting wasn't too ominous, and that the front door was unlocked. But now that he'd proved to the experts he could set an expert trap, wasn't that enough? He couldn't help feeling that all of this preparation was a mere test of his competence in the abstract. There was to be no exercise of that competence out in the world of troubled sons and hyperanxious mothers. Able to stand it no longer, he went upstairs and called the boy's partner/boss (far more boss than partner), asking if he knew what his employee/co-partner had tried to do to his own mother that very morning. Surprisingly, the partner/boss said yes: he not only knew but had taken the time to extract a promise that such hijinks would never repeat themselves. And the words sounded immune to refutation, not just now but for all time. Though he knew in his old bones that any solid guarantee of the boy's never laying a hand on his mother again, however authoritative, could easily be abrogated. In fact, the guarantee positively cried out for a reprise. And it was deep inside the guarantee's gut that the reprise would get its start. He knew from his own experience in the business world where untarnishable reputations were wiped out in a minute that guarantees came across as airtight only this side of perpetration. Once the deed was done, their futility would prove not only self-evident but, according to tabloid protocol, absolutely necessary. If *Never again!* had become mere genocide-unfriendly boilerplate, what did his little chamber calamity have to hope for? The only convincing calamities were those that had been decreed unplayable by well-informed bystanders.